

MEDIA ARCHAEOLOGY — DEBORAH YUN

I have just written the foreword to Deborah Yun's fabulous photographic study of payphones [\[Link\]](#) [\[Link\]](#)



Portland Oregon

Maybe they were never quite where you wanted them to be, but away from home, out of the office or workplace, seeking anonymity perhaps, or simply without a phone and needing to make a call, the payphone offered its services. Now they are so little needed; mobile phones have taken over.

Without serious reflection, I have begun in the past tense: this is what public pay phones were. Deborah Yun's photos carry the narrative of the end of the pay phone.

Mobile phones accompany us. Payphones offered a convenience on the street: to stop and make a call in our comings and goings. In this, though fixed in place, payphones were part of our experience of mobility, as, indeed, are mobile phones. Located media devices, payphones and mobile phones are features of our engagement with place, with the street, street flow, comings and goings, encounters. In extending our reach, connecting us even globally, phones have become essential prostheses, material appendages to our modern selves.

The mobile phone stays within reach, within our personal space. When we lose it, we might typically experience a personal loss, even though the phone may well be less than a year old and is exactly the same as millions of others. On the street the payphone may draw more or less attention to itself, being a subject of more, or typically less, respect in the hands of its users. Rarely, after but a short time of use, few standard payphones remain looking exactly alike. Attached advertisements, graffiti, wear and tear, minor acts of vandalism, litter and grime, odors of specific and nonspecific origin, all accumulated through everyday use, added individuality to each payphone. And, of course, payphones were all different by virtue of being fixed in different places. There are payphones I know where I grew up in the north of England that have been there for as long as I remember and probably for decades more. Payphones were part of the landscape.

Now the evolution of media is bringing about their disappearance. Not quite yet: some hang on, little cared for, and empty hutches and booths remain. There will always be some: internet enabled in an airport, for example. But the neglect, rot and ruin is terminal;

we have moved on.

We are encouraged to forget the materiality of media and their instruments and devices. The digital coding of our messaging may seem abstract and disembodied in contrast to the physical translation and transformations of analogue media, where our vocal cords move the air in micro vibrations that are picked up by a diaphragm and converted into electrical impulses carried down a cable. The words carried down the line, and for which, of course, we acquire our phones, may seem to have no tangible or recognizable material form, other than what we might understand by the description I have just given. And however much we understand the technology of telephony, the ideal is transparency, where we don't notice the medium. We don't want or need to know about the medium as mechanism. It seems a problem, a dysfunctional feature of a phone, interference or distraction when we notice the crackle of a poor line. And we certainly don't wish to notice during conversation that the handset of a public payphone is sticky from we know not what. And while the physical allure of a device such as the iPhone is so much part of its design – touch interface

through the dark gloss of glass, the rapid cycle of innovation in consumer electronics guarantees that desire and obsolescence will soon lead to the purchase of another.

Deborah Yun's wonderful photographs testify eloquently and profoundly to this materiality of media. Here are the material textures of the way one particular medium, telephony, still inhabits our everyday lives. We are directed to see what we overlook, the matter that carries the message. Here, unpacked for us in its quotidian banality, is the material expression of the relationship at the heart of all communication and information – signal and noise, the messages sent out by virtue only of all that carries them. And in the demise of this particular system of mobile telephony, the noise is rising. Deborah has us contemplate the sedimentary accretions and local associations, the ghostly figures in the background, passing by, the architectures and locales.

And more. Deborah presents us with images captured digitally on her own mobile iPhone, and those, the black and white series, produced through conventional film and silver chemistry. The juxtaposition of

analogue and digital is, of course, so appropriate to the changing forms of mobile telephony. The photographs themselves witness the palpable materiality of media in the grain and pixel, the viewpoint of lens, the processing and manipulation of both silver chemistry and digital sensor data, and their delivery through print in this book before us.

We are invited to consider the implications of these metamorphoses as the future takes hold and the past recedes into junk on a street. This is the *media archaeology* of the public pay phone.



smoke buddy