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21 years of Neighbourhood Watch across the UK

Sir David Brown, Chairman, Motorola Ltd

Communications Technology - The Key To The Door

A speech given by Sir David Brown, Chairman, Motorola Ltd, at the National Neighbourhood Watch Conference on 22nd March 2003

Chairman, Secretary of State, ladies and gentlemen, good morning.

Thank you, Chairman, for your kind words of introduction. And thank you for the opportunity to address your conference. I regard it as a privilege and an honour. The more so because, unlike so very many of you, I am not a public safety practitioner. I am an engineer and an industrialist.

An engineer and an industrialist who shares your passion for making our neighbourhoods safer. And one who wants to see the technology which is the product of his profession brought fully to bear on that challenge.

Now it's true that I work for the company that makes more emergency services radios that any other company in the world. And Robert Louis Stevenson spoke the truth when he said that 'Everybody lives by selling something'. But I'm not going to try to sell you Motorola's products - not today anyway. Rather, it's a thought that I want to sell you.

The thought that communications technology has come of age too. It's everywhere. The public feels an easy familiarity with it. Yet we are only just beginning to use it to improve community safety. The thought that making more use of communications technology could make a big difference to Neighbourhood Watch members. An immediate difference. The thought that, at a time when Neighbourhood Watch is coming of age, modern communications technology could be the key to the door.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. I should begin at the beginning with the coming of age of communications technology. It's hard to know when telecommunications was born. Or rather, it had so many births. The heliograph of ancient Greece, using mirrors to reflect the sun to send coded messages. The mechanical telegraph, first used in France during the Napoleonic Wars. The electronic telegraph, using the code invented by Samuel Morse in 1836. All were important milestones. We could choose any of them - or indeed any of a hundred others - as the birth of telecommunications.

But the one I choose was the invention of a contemporary of Stevenson. A Scot called Alexander Graham Bell. His invention of the telephone in 1876 changed the world, and it's changing it still. Yet his invention was serendipitous. He thought he had invented a better telegraph. Indeed he titled his 1876 patent 'Improvements In Telegraphy'. He reflected on that moment later in life, and said:

"Leave the beaten track occasionally and drive into the woods. Every time you do so you will be certain to find something that you have never seen before. Follow it up, explore all around it and, before you know it, you will have something worth thinking about to occupy your mind. All really big discoveries are the results of thought."

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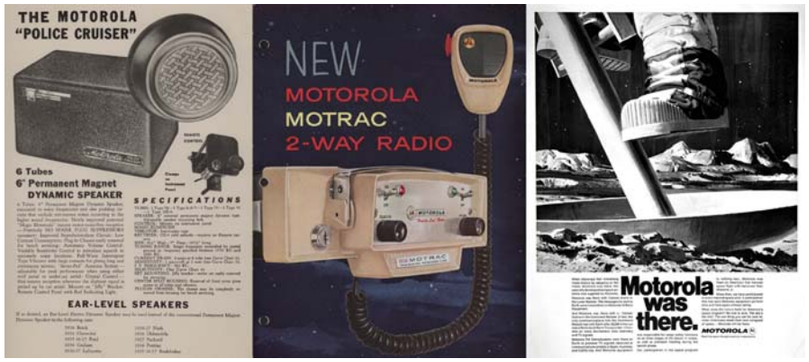
Communications technology - making communities safer



Motorola has been at the heart of communications technology development for 75 years

Well, Bell's thought opened up a world of opportunities for us to explore. Telephony took to the airwaves in the early 1900's. Motorola made its first two-way radios for police cars in 1947. The first two-way pocket radios came in 1959. Ten years later, Motorola's two-way radios landed on the moon with Neil Armstrong.

Today, two-way radios are commonplace. No emergency services officer would be without one. And in the digital world of Airwave, every officer in the country can be linked into a single, integrated network. The rest of us have benefited directly from this technological progress too.

Mobile phones arrived in this country in 1985. Who would have thought that, in less than 20 years, 49 million people in Britain would be using them? And who would have thought that very often they would be using them not for the primary purpose for which they were engineered - talking and listening - but for sending text messages from the keys of one mobile phone to the display screen of another.

Who would have thought that a method of communication based on codes and abbreviations - a method which harks back to the telegraph - would be in vogue today? That the age-old codes like SWALK, written on the backs of envelopes to mean 'sealed with a loving kiss', would enjoy a renaissance as keystrokes on mobile phones meaning 'sent with a loving kiss'?

On Valentine's Day this year, 78 million text messages were sent in the UK. That's more Valentine's Day text messages than there are people. And those Valentine's Day text messages outnumbered Valentine's Day cards by six to one.

Today's lovelorn don't stay at home waiting for the postman to call. Or sit by the phone waiting for it to ring. Because the phone is in their pocket. Wherever they are. That's a measure of our easy familiarity with modern communications technology.

Now the 'what if?' What if we bring together that 'easy familiarity' we feel with personal communications, and the public safety attributes of two-way emergency services radios? And put that combination in the hands of Neighbourhood Watch members? A story that began in 1991 suggests the answer to that question.

A thief went into a shop in Wolverhampton and stole an item of clothing. When the store detective stopped him, he assaulted the store detective and ran off. The store detective chased after him, on his own, because he had no means of letting the other shop staff or the police know what was going on. Eventually he cornered the thief on a bus. The bus driver and some local shopkeepers called the police. After a violent struggle, the thief was arrested.

The story ended well - but it might not have done. It might have ended in tragedy. Afterwards people reflected that the store detective's situation was starkly different to that of police officers in a similar situation. They would have had a personal radio, which they could have used to call for help.

So the West Midlands Police, the Wolverhampton Chamber of Commerce, and the Home Office Safer Cities Project worked together to launch a scheme called 'Retail Radio Link'. Starting in 1992, two-way radios were given to shopkeepers, to link them with each other and, of course, with the police.

In its early days, Retail Radio Link was used to tackle intimidation of shop staff by thieves. Then to tackle theft itself. Then to reunite lost children with their parents.The Wolverhampton scheme became a model. Within a year, Coventry and Birmingham had introduced similar schemes. Then Ilford, Croydon and Woolwich. That seed-thought in 1991 has blossomed into 300 or so Retail Radio Link schemes today, as far afield as Tayside in Scotland and Camborne in Cornwall.

These schemes have been well-studied, as you can imagine. By the Home Office, the police, and universities. All conclude that Retail Radio Links are effective in reducing crime. That much is to be expected. But they offer two other conclusions which I suggest are highly significant.

The first is the cohesive effect that Retail Radio Links have. A Home Office report published in 1994 commented on the 'great cooperation and team spirit that a radio link system can create'.

The second is the way in which these schemes dramatically reduce people's fear of crime. For instance, a study by the Home Office Police Research Group in 1994 found that 48% of retail staff had a reduced fear of crime. And Leicester University's Centre for the Study of Public Order found in a 1995 study that 60% of retail staff had become less concerned about crime.

Yet the studies like these also tell us that Retail Radio Links increase people's awareness of crime. How can people be more aware of crime, and be less fearful of crime, at the same time? Because knowledge dispels fear. And in doing so, it increases a community's sense of well-being.

So it is unsurprising that, before long, other, non-retail communities wanted radio link schemes. The first was in Coventry, in 1993. It was used by the Cathedral and the University in the City centre, and by public sector and voluntary sector employees across a much wider area. It was called 'Community Radio Link'. Then came 'Business Radio Link' in 1995, for people working on commercial premises more generally than retail.

In 1998, another important chapter in this story began. Radio links began to help people in their homes. On three housing estates in West Bromwich, the local tenants' and residents' association, the council housing department, the shopkeepers and the police teamed up to develop a scheme called 'CATCH'. The acronym stands for Community Action Tackling Crime and Harassment.

CATCH was a departure from the other schemes in another significant way. It used very simple two-way radios - quite different from the sophisticated police radios which were adapted for the other schemes. These CATCH radios had an everyday look and feel to them, and they required nearly no training in their use.

In fact, they were as straightforward as a telephone. But, unlike a telephone, there were no phone numbers to remember; no dialling delay; no engaged tone; just one button connected you with everybody else, all at the same time; and it could go with you wherever you went.

CATCH caught on, in all sorts of ways. Including, for example, in tackling the travelling thieves who targeted the elderly, by posing as 'officials' on the doorstep. CATCH, in its turn, inspired other schemes. In Rotherham, for example, the South Yorkshire Police Authority piloted a scheme in 2001 to target crime hotspots.

It put those simple 'everyday' radios into the hands of neighbourhood wardens, workers in the youth services, community development and environmental health, ordinary members of the community and, of course, police officers.

Over a decade of connecting business and communities' with two-way radios

Police using Motorola two-way radios as a link to Neighbourhood Watch members

The scheme, called Radio-Linx, operated in difficult areas, frequented by the suppliers of controlled drugs, and with rising crime figures. Yet, consistent with all the earlier studies, the statistics showed that Radio-Linx had reduced the fear of crime markedly.

So much has developed from that one thought in Wolverhampton nearly twelve years ago. An exploration after the style of Alexander Graham Bell, indeed. If he could have witnessed it, he would have smiled, no doubt.

But are we now in a position to answer the question I posed earlier? What if we put modern communications technology in the hands of Neighbourhood Watch members? Yes - and no.

Yes, because we can be confident that Neighbourhood Watch members will become even more effective in helping to reduce crime; to reduce the fear of crime; and to increase the sense of well-being in their neighbourhoods.

And no, because how can we know what the future holds, for Neighbourhood Watch and for communications technology? Both will continue to develop, at an ever-increasing pace.

But the benefits that we know will flow are more than enough, surely, to persuade us to uncover the future benefits that we cannot yet see. The question, then, is how to realise those benefits? It's the kind of question that confronts industrialists every day. So here's my answer.

There are three imperatives. First, harness the communications technology that already exists. It isn't necessary to take a technology risk. The technology doesn't need inventing. It is there now - waiting for us to use it.

Communications technology is one of Neighbourhood Watch's assets. But it is an under-worked asset. We should work it harder. Not only radio technology - I've dwelt on radio because that's the technology I know the best - but all communications technology.

Second, innovate ever-more quickly. The faster we try out new ideas, the faster we gain knowledge. And it's that knowledge that will increase our advantage against those who threaten the well-being of our neighbourhoods.

And third, create effective partnerships. The success story that is Radio-Linx depended from its very beginnings twelve years ago on partnerships. As does every worthwhile endeavour.

Keep extending the family of Neighbourhood Watch partners. Including of course, within industry. All of us care deeply about our communities. That's something with which I know my many thousands of Motorola colleagues in Britain would agree unreservedly.

I began by saying that I thought that, at Neighbourhood Watch's coming of age, communications technology could be the key to the door.

Chairman, let's put the key in the door; open the door; and, together, go through it.

Thank you.

Motorola's new National Neighbourhood Watch two-way radio