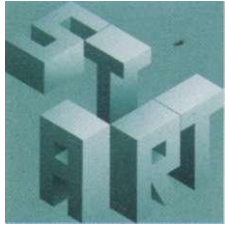


CLIVE THOMPSON

The Phone Call Is Dead

How text messaging is threatening—and preserving!—the telephone conversation.



MY PHONE BILLS are shrinking. Not, unfortunately, in cost. I mean they're getting shorter. I recently found an old bill from a decade ago; it was fully 15 pages long, because back then I was making a ton of calls—about 20 long-distance ones a day. Today my bills are a meager two or three pages, at most. Odds are this has happened to you, too. According to Nielsen, the average number of mobile phone calls we make is dropping every year, after hitting a peak in 2007. And our calls are getting shorter: In 2005 they averaged three minutes in length; now they're almost half that. We're moving, in other words, toward a fascinating cultural transition: the death of the telephone call. This shift is particularly stark among the young. Some college students I know go days without talking into their smartphones at all. I was recently hanging out with a twentysomething entrepreneur who fumbled around for 30 seconds trying to find the option that actually let him dial someone. ¹ This generation doesn't make phone calls, because everyone is in constant, lightweight contact in so many other ways: texting, chatting, and social-network messaging. And we don't just have more options than we used to. We have better ones: These new forms of communication have exposed the fact that the voice call is badly designed. It *deserves* to die. Consider: If I suddenly decide I want to dial you up, I have no way of knowing whether you're busy, and you have no idea why I'm calling. We have to open Schrodinger's box every time, having a conversation to figure out whether it's OK to have a conversation. Plus, voice calls are emotionally high-bandwidth, which is why it's so weirdly exhausting to be interrupted by one. (We apparently find voicemail even more excruciating: Studies show that more than a fifth of


all voice messages are never listened to.)

The telephone, in other words, doesn't provide any information about status, so we are constantly interrupting one another. The other tools at our disposal are more polite. Instant messaging lets us detect whether our friends are busy without our bugging them, and texting lets us ping one another asynchronously. (Plus, we can spend more time thinking about what we want to say.) For all the hue and cry about becoming an "always on" society, we're actually moving away from the demand that everyone be available immediately.

In fact, the newfangled media that's currently supplanting the phone call might be the only thing that helps preserve it. Most people I know coordinate important calls in advance using email, text messaging, or chat (r u busy?). An unscheduled call that rings on my phone fails the conversational Turing test: It's almost certainly junk, so I ignore it. (Unless it's you, Mom!)

Indeed, I predict that as this sort of hybrid coordination evolves, it will produce a steep power law in the way we use voice calls. We'll still make fewer, as most of our former phone time will migrate to other media. But the calls we do make will be longer, reserved for the sort of deep discussion that the medium does best.

Our handsets could also use a serious redesign. If they showed our status—are you free to talk?—it would vastly streamline the act of calling. And as video-chatting becomes more common, enabled by the new iPhone and other devices, we might see the growth of persistent telepresence, leaving video-chat open all day so we can speak to a spouse or colleague spontaneously. (Some Skype users already do this.)

Or, to put it another way, we'll call less but talk more. 

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