

"How the Loss of the Landline Is Changing Family Life" by Julia Cho (2019)

My tween will never know the sound of me calling her name from another room after the phone rings. She'll never sit on our kitchen floor, refrigerator humming in the background, twisting a cord around her finger while talking to her best friend. I'll get it, He's not here right now, and It's for you are all phrases that are on their way out of the modern domestic vernacular. According to the federal government, the majority of American homes now use cellphones exclusively. "We don't even have a landline anymore," people began to say proudly as the new millennium progressed. But this came with a quieter, secondary loss—the loss of the shared social space of the family landline.

"The shared family phone served as an anchor for home," says Luke Fernandez, a visiting computer-science professor at Weber State University and a co-author of *Bored, Lonely, Angry, Stupid: Feelings About Technology, From the Telegraph to Twitter*. "Home is where you could be reached, and where you needed to go to pick up your messages." With smartphones, Fernandez says, "we have gained mobility and privacy. But the value of the home has been diminished, as has its capacity to guide and monitor family behavior and perhaps bind families more closely together."

The home telephone was a communal invention from the outset. "When the telephone rang, friends and family gathered 'round, as mesmerized by its magic flow of electrons as they would later be by the radio," according to *Once Upon a Telephone*, a lighthearted 1994 social history of the technology. After the advent of the telephone, in the late 19th century, and through the mid-20th century, callers relied on switchboard operators who knew their customers' voices, party lines were shared by neighbors (who would often eavesdrop on one another's conversations), and phone books functioned as a sort of map of a community.

The early telephone's bulky size and fixed location in the home made a phone call an occasion—often referred to in early advertisements as a "visit" by the person initiating the call. (One woman quoted in *Once Upon a Telephone* recalls the phone as having the "stature of a Shinto shrine" in her childhood home.) There was phone furniture—wooden vanities that housed phones in hallways of homes, and benches built for the speaker to sit on so they could give their full attention to the call. Even as people were defying time and space by speaking with someone miles away, they were firmly grounded in the space of the home, where the phone was attached to the wall.

Over the course of the 20th century, phones grew smaller, easier to use, and therefore less mystical and remarkable in their household presence. And with the spread of cordless phones in the 1980s, calls became more private. But even then, when making a call to another household's landline, you never knew who would pick up. For those of us who grew up with a shared family phone, calling friends usually meant first speaking with their parents, and answering calls meant speaking with any number of our parents' acquaintances on a regular basis. With practice, I was capable of addressing everyone from a telemarketer to my mother's boss to my older brother's friend—not to mention any relative who happened to call. Beyond developing conversational skills, the family phone asked its users to be patient and participate in one another's lives.

Cellphones, which came on the market in the '80s and gained popularity in the '90s, rendered all of this obsolete as they displaced landlines. When kids today call "home," they may actually be calling one parent and bypassing the other; friends and bosses and telemarketers (if they get through) usually reach exactly the person they are hoping to speak with. Who will be on the other end of the line is no longer a mystery.

What's more, the calls, texts, and emails that pass through cellphones (and computers and tablets) can now be kept private from family members. "It keeps everybody separate in their own little techno-cocoons," says Larry Rosen, a retired psychology professor at California State University at Dominguez Hills and a co-author of *The Distracted Mind: Ancient Brains in a High-Tech World*. Whereas early landlines united family members gathered in a single room, cellphones now silo them.

Cheryl Muller, a 59-year-old artist living in Brooklyn, raised her two sons, now 30 and 27, during the transition from landline to cellphone. "I do remember the shift from calling out 'It's for you,' and being aware of their friends calling, and then asking them what the call was about, to pretty much ... silence," she says. Caroline Coleman, 54, a writer in New York City whose children grew up during the same transition, recalls how at age 10 her son got a call from a man with a deep voice. "I was horrified. I asked who it was—and it was his first classmate whose voice had changed," she said. "When you get cells, you lose that connection."

These days, this dynamic is also often reversed. A shared family phone meant that kids overheard some of their parents' conversations, providing a window into their

relationships, but today, children frequently see a parent silently staring at a screen, fingers tapping, occasionally furrowing a brow or chuckling. “Sometimes there are people that I’ve never even heard of that you’re texting,” my 11-year old once told me. Sherry Turkle, a professor at MIT and the author of *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, has described this as “the new silences of family life.”

Central to the smartphone’s pull is the fact that it is not just a phone. The original telephone was designed exclusively for the back-and-forth rhythm of speaking and listening, while today’s phones perform that function and so many others. “When it was just a phone, you could only have one conversation at a time,” says Mary Ellen Love, a teacher in New Jersey who raised two sons—22 and 24—during the landline era, and is now raising an 11-year-old daughter named Grace. “Now Grace can look at [her phone] and be involved in five conversations in a second.”

“Nobody had separation-anxiety issues when they walked out of the house without their [landline] phone,” says Catherine Steiner-Adair, a clinical psychologist and a co-author of *The Big Disconnect: Protecting Childhood and Family Relationships in the Digital Age*. “Nobody used to say that their princess phone was their life. It’s not your phone—it’s the news, it’s YouTube, it’s your bank account, it’s shopping ... You can engage in every aspect of your life, and some of that is wonderful.”

Meanwhile, the physical medium of communication has shifted from telephone poles, visually linking individual homes, to the elusive air. The environment of each call has shifted from a living room or a kitchen to anywhere, and as a result, callers spend time placing each other: In the early days of the phone, they often asked, “Are you there?,” but now they have graduated to “Where are you?” When people look up after whiling away time in their virtual homes—their homepages, their home screens—they must adjust back to their physical surroundings. “You don’t lose yourself in the same way when you’re talking on the phone on the wall,” says Steiner-Adair. “You don’t lose your sense of where you are in time and space.”

Plenty of people don’t lament the passing of the family phone. Michael Muller, the 27-year-old son of Cheryl, the artist in Brooklyn, says he enjoys the constant proximity of a cellphone and prefers texting over calling, which he says people only use when they want to “extract an answer.” “Text is so much easier to take as much time as you want to think about it,” he told me. If he has kids, he’s not sure he’ll get a landline for his family to share.

Even in its infancy, the telephone wasn't always celebrated. Its rise prompted a London editor in the late 19th century to ask, "What will become of the privacy of life? What will become of the sanctity of the domestic hearth?" Some viewed the phone as supernatural (they struggled to understand how sound could travel through wire) or impractical (aboveground phone lines in the early days were often highly obtrusive). When people first shouted into phones, they felt awkward, as though they were performing.

Even as the family phone recedes into history a century and a half later, we can preserve the togetherness it promoted in other ways. Rosen, the psychology professor, says that "creating special family time is really critical," and Turkle writes of the importance of device-free "sacred" spaces in the home. The family phone was hardly a necessary ingredient for family bonding.

And perhaps the spirit of the family phone can live on. Margaret Klein, an educational researcher living in New Jersey and a mother of three girls, ages 6, 9, and 11, has tried to ease into giving her daughters their own phones. Her girls share a stripped-down cellphone with no internet access, and call it "the family phone." When her oldest went to a ballet program in Manhattan this summer, she brought it. Klein's 9-year-old has used it a few times to text her camp friends. But "it always goes back and lives in its place at the end of the day," she tells me—right next to their landline in the living room.

Indeed, even as smartphones have taken over, some people stand by their landlines. "I mainly want to keep it because it works when there is no power," says Peter Eavis, a New York City-based journalist in his 50s and a father of two. "And as a veteran of 9/11, an actual NYC blackout, Hurricane Irene, and Superstorm Sandy, it gives me comfort."

But Eavis's landline is on its way to being an anomaly, and a generation of children who never had one are coming of age. Eventually, for those who enjoyed—or at least grew accustomed to—the sound of a communal phone ringing in their homes, a moment of silence will be in order.