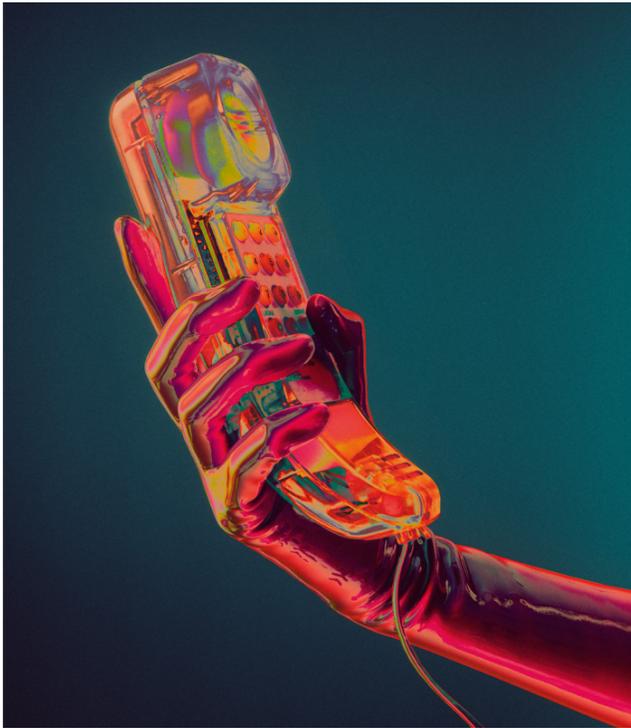


3.1 Custom Ringtones

(ESSAY)



A relic forever silenced.

Every few years, reflections begin on a new batch of trends that have made the revolution from cool to uncool to historical—and then, maybe, back to cool again. Why are those kids on Instagram embracing the Juicy tracksuits that were so gauche in 2002? What about *pedal pushers*? But some trends don't get a second chance: Why, pray, did we ever spend our hard-earned money (or more likely, our parents') on ringtones for our cell phones?

When cell phones first came out, and you finally got one, you wanted to do everything you could to draw attention

to it. Custom ringtones were first popularized by a nation of early tech adopters: Japan. The Digital Minimo D319, released in 1996, allowed owners to write their own custom ringtone ditties using the keypad. It was an instant smash: A book explaining how to mimic popular songs on a keypad sold over 3.5 million copies.

The first polyphonic ringtone—meaning it could play more than one note at a time—was featured on the Nokia 3510 in 2002. The advent of Truetones a few years later, actual snippets of songs rather than re-recorded versions of them, helped buoy the record industry through the Napster years. An MP3 file of a song cost 99 cents. But a fraction of the same song packaged as a ringtone could be sold for \$2.99, three times as much.

In 2004, *Billboard* launched a ringtone chart, and the Recording Institute Association of America distributed Gold and Platinum records for ringtone sales for the first time in 2006. Five years later, in her “Video Phone” single, Beyoncé was offering a handsome stranger the opportunity to pick his own ringtone when she saved his number on her phone. By the end of the decade, they were a multibillion-dollar business.

With the smartphones of today, it's possible to make any song into a ringtone via Apple Music or other apps. So why is it such an eye-rolling rarity to hear a custom ringtone?

Perhaps they became cringe around the time cell phones stopped being fun and started being annoying. These days, a phone call most often means either bad news or that a robot wants to talk to you. Also, in the words of one Reddit user, a custom ringtone is a great way to start “hating your favorite song.”

It seems unlikely that phones will never not be addictive, spying black holes. So maybe, unlike Juicy tracksuits, custom ringtones will stay crumpled in the dustbin of trend history.

Words
STEPHANIE
D'ARC TAYLOR

The ascendancy of virtual memory.

If a picture is worth a thousand words, then our smartphones are equipped to turn us into novelists within minutes. The average American currently has 582 photos saved on their cell phone, plus 13 unused phone apps, 83 bookmarked websites, 21 desktop icons and 210 gigabytes of cloud storage.

Digital hoarding is a sneaky problem—it's like physical hoarding, but because most of it takes place in the virtual ether, it's difficult to quantify until we start receiving cloud storage upgrade alerts or we're told we're running out of space on our phones while we're trying to take a photograph.

Amassing emails, bookmarking webpages, keeping duplicate files, maintaining text messages that date back years and taking an exorbitant number of photographs are all signs of digital hoarding.

Sound like you? It's most of us. Our cloud systems have essentially become cyber junk drawers. When a new photo is just the press of a thumb away, an email can be used as a receipt and most of our communication takes place via text, it's difficult to choose a detailed digital culling over the siren song of a simple storage upgrade. But how do we navigate all this stuff—and what does the device clutter do to our stress levels, not to mention our memories?

Technology has adapted to mitigate our data deluge. Phone and computer operating systems have installed keyword search functions for emails and text messages, and intelligent curation on smartphones arranges our best shots and alerts us to notable memories from our photo library. The demand for personal photo organizers is booming, and the work can also be offloaded onto any number of specialized apps.

Even if we're comfortable with technology or with strangers cherry-picking our most cherished digital souvenirs, the very act of taking too many

pictures in order to remember a moment could be altering our ability to be in or to even recall the moment. Reliance on technology to document our lives—known as cognitive offloading—has been shown to distract us and change the way we remember experiences, because we're not truly paying attention. What we're left with are beautiful but hollow images lacking in emotional connection.

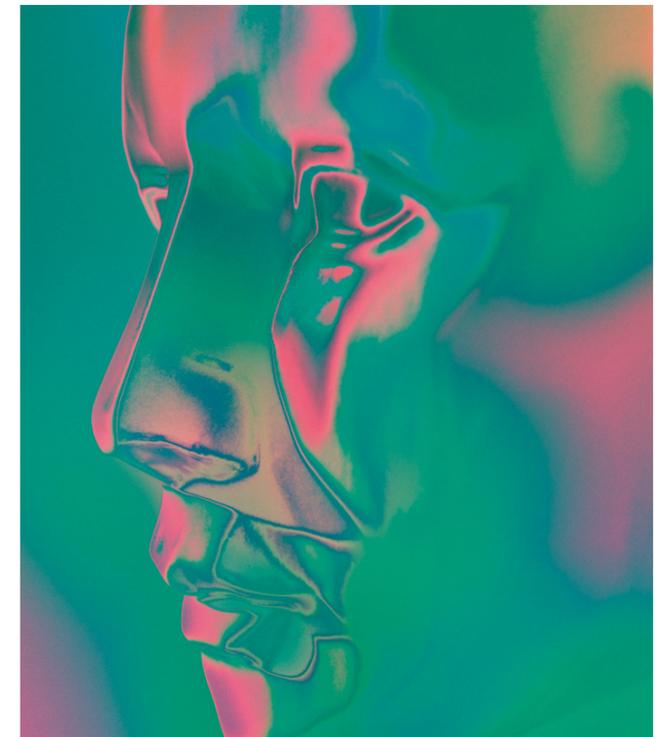
The pendulum swings both ways, though—when was the last time you memorized a phone number, wrote on a paper calendar or read a physical map?

Smartphones can provide helpful cognitive shortcuts. Intentional photo taking can enhance enjoyment and leave behind cherished keepsakes for later generations. It's now up to us to draw the line at what in our lives is remembered by our physical versus virtual brains. Perhaps the phrase should be altered, for future reference: A thousand pictures are worth a digital legacy.

Words
KATIE CALAUTTI

3.2 Digital Hoarding

(ESSAY)



It's hard to imagine now, but the internet was once envisioned as a democratic feminist utopia—a place to escape the restrictions of a physical body. In 1991, a collective of radical feminist academics published the influential Cyberfeminist Manifesto. "The future is unmanned," they wrote, declaring themselves "saboteurs of big daddy mainframe."



An intentionally archaic device.

In 2014, back when the iPhone 5 was the hot tech of the moment, an image of Rihanna began circulating online. The singer had been photographed walking out of a bar in New York talking on a basic flip phone. It struck a chord: To see one of the most famous—and arguably coolest—women in the world rejecting constant internet connection gave the dumb phone, as they’ve become known, cachet.

The internet-less phone never went out of production, and in recent years, as smartphones have encroached ever more on our time, sales of old-school phones have risen in tandem, driven by a consumer desire to be less dependent on apps, 4G and Wi-Fi. The prospect might initially elicit alarm (being off-line while out of the house is becoming less and less feasible), but the rewards are unarguably appealing: The gift of extra time usually given over to scrolling through Instagram, Twitter or the news cycle; greater attention to the moment and the people around you. There’s also the allure of withdrawing your data from the world, of making yourself untraceable, less constantly come-at-able for advertisers. One start-up has taken the idea of the dumb phone to the extreme. For just \$12, the No-Phone—a solid plastic block—offers a handheld “surrogate” fake phone for people with screen addictions. Will our desire for connection be assuaged by a stress ball shaped like a phone? It seems unlikely.

Other companies are coming up with a middle ground. The Light Phone is a “minimal” smartphone “designed to be used as little as possible.” It has no social media, news, email or internet functions, just call, SMS, a music player and an alarm. But at \$299 (or

\$30 a month), you’re essentially paying for the appearance of a smartphone with the capabilities of a Nokia 3210 (the original dumb phone) at 10 times the cost. Buying a product to solve an addiction to another product is a capitalist solution to a capitalist problem—one purposefully created by power-hungry tech companies.

Perhaps even the dumb phone is a Band-Aid over a bullet hole. After all, the world is now designed around smartphones, and unless you are Rihanna, to opt out of that system is socially and logistically

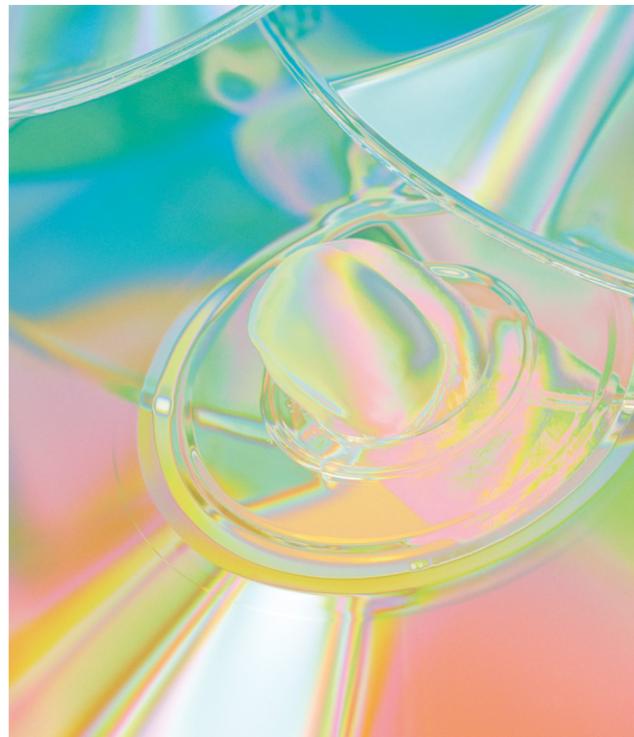
self-obstructive. Until big tech is properly regulated, it’s up to us to adjust our relationship to smartphones and to regain control over our own time: Delete your apps, take up a new hobby, practice not checking emails outside of working hours. You can use the smartphone—it doesn’t have to use you.

Words
BAYA SIMONS

3.3

Dumb Phones

(ESSAY)



Lately, visiting my parents sets my teeth on edge. Both are 70, progressively harder of hearing and prolific WhatsApp users. These elements combined mean that they have their phone notifications turned to extra loud, the noise clanging throughout the house and aggressively cutting through moments of peace. Mom marauds about with her iPhone dangling from her neck on a lanyard, shout-dictating into it as if she were sending a telegram in the 1920s: “LOVELY TO SEE YOU. PERIOD. ALL WELL HERE. PERIOD. KISS KISS. PERIOD.”

It’s no surprise that in March 2020, at the beginning of the pandemic, WhatsApp saw a 40% jump in usage. Even my aunt, a lifelong Luddite who once had to be persuaded to even get a phone, decided to acquiesce in the absence of other options during the lockdowns. Though this seemed decidedly against the natural order of things, before we knew it we had established our own version of what now feels like a pillar of modern family life: the WhatsApp group.

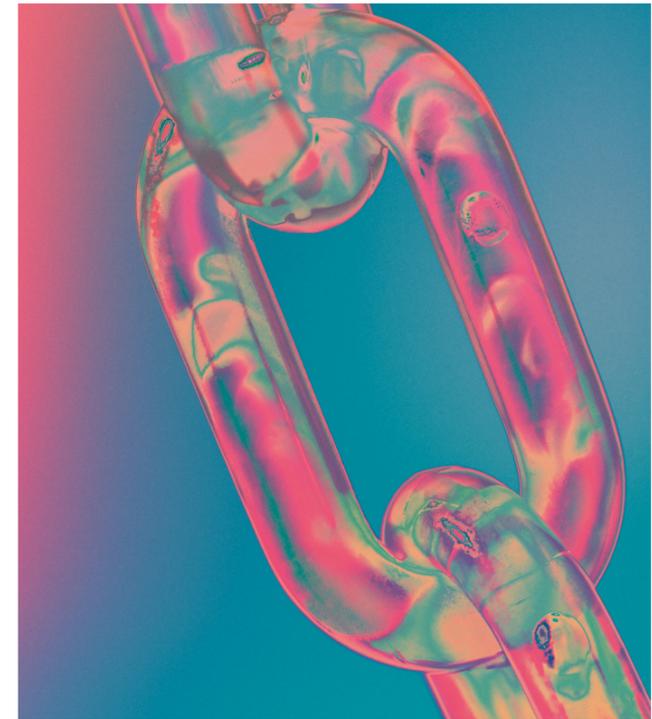
Most people have found these virtual recreations to be a great source of comfort in these trying times. Certainly, the mundanity of everyday chitchat—photographs of my dad’s endless jigsaws, my cousins’ cats, even toddler toilet talk—has taken on emotional significance, mimicking the dynamics and tone of our real-life reunions. I remember the comfort I took as a child, for example, half-listening to my aunts murmuring about things like ancestors or hats or seersucker, like a radio providing background noise. The same can be said for a family WhatsApp group: Even if you’re not paying attention, it’s comfort enough just by virtue of being there.

An all-new family institution.

3.4

Family Chats

(ESSAY)



Yet for all the camaraderie, navigating the complexities of family relationships and intergenerational differences over subjects like, say, politics can still be as loaded on-screen as at the dinner table. A friend described descending into an explosive row with her sister. “There is no room for subtlety or nuance in WhatsApp. What could have been a conversation, or even a lively debate, turned into a virtual slanging match immediately.”

Whatever your own experience, spare a thought for those who are struggling to even get

the basics right. Earlier in 2021, Twitter was ablaze with a story about one family WhatsApp group, whose creator took his father, Peter, to task about never responding to any messages. It transpired he had actually added a plumber named Peter who had fixed his washing machine in 2013 and who had sat in the group silently for six months.

Words
JOHN OVANS