



Does “E.T. Phone Home” Mean Anything To The Tech Generation?

Julie R. Bryan April 18, 2016 Looking Ahead

In 1982, the world fell in love with an alien who used a touchtone phone as the inspiration for making an interstellar call to his home planet. In heartwarming fashion only possible through a Steven Spielberg movie, we watched the cutest, ugly, wrinkled, brown creature eat candy, ride bikes, and take what is now considered obsolete technology (phone wires, a Speak ‘n Spell, and a turntable) to make a high-tech signaling machine. A year later, in WarGames, Matthew Broderick used a discarded soda can tab to “hack” a dial tone on a public pay phone. It is hard to imagine how these scenes would play out in pop culture created today.

Touchtone phones and landlines have largely become a relic of the analog era. Only 30-odd years after E.T., our world is blanketed with cellular technology and wireless internet access, making land line telephones a thing of the past. Today’s high school seniors have likely never even seen a phone with a coiled cord attached to a kitchen wall. There is no need to call the phone lady to hear that familiar phrase “at the tone, the time will be...” and phone books are no longer at hand to boost a toddler up at the table. Technology has raced past the baby boomers, and cell phones or smart phones have become an increasingly affordable technology, with increasingly reliable networks. The wide availability of cell phones has driven many people to forego the expense of a home phone and use only a cell phone as a contact number.

But is there value to keeping a landline telephone? The most obvious reason to keep a landline is for emergencies. If your cell phone dies and your power goes out, a landline phone may be your only way to seek help if you need it. In addition, a landline is the only way emergency services can track your precise location. A call to 911 from a cell phone won’t automatically provide your address to emergency services. And, some security systems require a landline for proper installation. It may be that phone lines are not installed in newly developed residential areas in the future, however, and it is likely that technology will soon catch up and provide a way to address these issues without the need for keeping land line phones.

But there are other reasons for keeping a landline or at least some internet-based home phone. Privacy issues raised by this tech-driven world can be addressed by keeping a home phone number. Almost all websites, whether used for business, home, shopping, or gaming, require a contact phone number be entered on the site to register, even for free sites. Entering your cell number could risk that number being disclosed to third party vendors, or discovered if a hacker gets into a database of one of those sites. And even if you are on a secure website, such as your bank or credit card company site, you may not want those calls coming to your cell phone. The interconnectedness of our phones, computers, and televisions are convenient and sometimes mesmerizing, and the cost for such convenience could be our privacy. Personal information being leaked, hacked, or otherwise disseminated to the world of opportunists and criminals is a serious concern for us all in the digital age, and we must find ways of protecting ourselves. Perhaps a simple way of protecting at least one aspect of our lives—our personal cell phones—would be to have another number to use for non-personal calls to keep your cell phone free of spam calls, political calls, surveys, or other unwanted contact.

In a world where we are dependent on digital technology in a way not contemplated by the universe that brought E.T. to us in the 1980s, it may also be nice to remove your cell phone and other technology from your bedroom, keeping it a tech-free zone full of only books, magazines and picture albums, with a landline or internet-based home phone there only for emergencies. Call it a retro, pre-digital age utopian ideal, but we can all agree that a little less dependence on electronics is a good thing, at least once in a while.