

# The Washington Post

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/08/07/AR2010080702848.html>

## Texting generation doesn't share boomers' taste for talk

Jane Beard and Jeffrey Davis didn't realize how little they speak to their children by phone until they called AT&T to switch plans. The customer service agent was breathless. The Silver Spring couple had accumulated 28,700 unused minutes.

"None of the kids call us back! They will not call you back," said Beard, a former actress who with her husband coaches business leaders on public speaking.

A generation of e-mailing, followed by an explosion in texting, has pushed the telephone conversation into serious decline, creating new tensions between baby boomers and millennials -- those in their teens, 20s and early 30s.

Nearly all age groups are spending less time talking on the phone; boomers in their mid-50s and early 60s are the only ones still yakking as they did when Ma Bell was America's communications queen. But the fall of the call is driven by 18- to 34-year-olds, whose average monthly voice minutes have plunged from about 1,200 to 900 in the past two years, according to research by Nielsen. Texting among 18- to 24-year-olds has more than doubled in the same period, from an average of 600 messages a month two years ago to more than 1,400 texts a month, according to Nielsen.

Young people say they avoid voice calls because the immediacy of a phone call strips them of the control that they have over the arguably less-intimate pleasures of texting, e-mailing, Facebooking or tweeting. They even complain that phone calls are by their nature impolite, more of an interruption than the blip of an arriving text.

Kevin Loker, 20, a rising junior at George Mason University, said he and his school friends rarely just call someone, for fear of being seen as rude or intrusive. First, they text to make an appointment to talk. "They'll write, 'Can I call you at such-and-such time?'" said Loker, executive editor of [Connect2Mason.com](http://Connect2Mason.com), a student media site.

"People want to be polite. I feel like, in general, people my age are not as quick on their feet to just talk on the phone."

The bias against unexpected phone calls stems in good part from the way texting and e-mail have conditioned young people to be cautious

about how they communicate when they are not face to face, experts say.

[Deborah Tannen](#), a linguistics professor at Georgetown University who studies how people converse in everyday life, said older generations misinterpret the way younger people use their cellphones. "One student told me that it takes her days to call her parents back and the parents thought she was intentionally putting them off," she said. "But the parents didn't get it. It's the medium. With e-mails, you're at the computer, writing a paper. With phone calls, it's a dedicated block of time." Tannen, 65, worries that texting may fall victim one day to the same neglect that phone calls now face. Her generation's feelings, she said, are perfectly captured in a recent New Yorker magazine cartoon that shows two older, balding men sitting at a bar. The caption reads: "I used to call people, then I got into e-mailing, then texting, and now I just ignore everyone."

Ethan Seidel, rabbi of Tifereth Israel synagogue in the District, can't get many of his congregants younger than 35 on the telephone. Seidel, 52, often invites young, new members to his family's home for welcome dinners, but his gesture too often doesn't even merit return calls. "One member seemed only slightly apologetic for not returning the call," Seidel said. "I was floored by that. They say, 'I never answer the phone anymore.'"

One of Seidel's congregants, Lianna Levine Reisner, 26, a development director at a nonprofit group, said her peers have phone gripes of their own about their elders. "My parents call and leave voice mails. They do that a lot," she said. "I might listen and realize they're not saying anything other than just, 'Call me.' I am not much of a phone talker."

Not only are people making fewer calls, but they are also having shorter conversations when they do call. The average length of a cellphone call has dropped from 2.38 minutes in 1993 to 1.81 minutes in 2009, according to industry data. And between 2005 and 2009, as the number of minutes people spent talking on cellphones inched up, the number of cellphone messages containing text or multimedia content ballooned by 1,840 percent.

Land lines are disappearing. Verizon, the nation's second-largest land line carrier behind AT&T, says its hard-wired phone connections have dropped from 50 million in 2005 to 31 million this year.

"Here's the issue: We don't want to talk with each other most of the time," said [Naomi Baron](#), an American University linguistics professor who published a paper in June

called "**Control Freaks**," dissecting how Americans communicate online and on mobile devices. "In a very profound way, our lives changed when the remote control was first introduced: You didn't have to watch what you didn't want to watch."

The difference in communications preferences has created a palpable perception gap between young adults and their parents. Beard said that when her niece, Lindsay Spencer, 20, "is in classes at the University of Maryland, I'll never hear from her -- until she comes over to do the laundry. We text multiple times a day. Otherwise, I wouldn't have a clue [what's going on] in her life."

Spencer, who was raised by Beard and Davis, said Beard's perception is skewed. "I think I call her more than I text," she said in a rare phone interview.

But Beard is understanding about the change in ways of conversing. "Parents are like, 'They're controlling who they talk to,' " she said, "but so did we when we screened people with answering machines."

Not all parents are quite that open to new ways. "My mom gets offended," said Muggaga Kintu, 32, an administrative assistant at Walter Reed Army Medical Center who prefers texting or calling on his own time, when he's not around patients. "She thinks I don't want to hear from her, and that's not the case. The other day, she called me when I was at work, and I told her, 'Instead of calling me, can you text me?' She said, 'What? You don't like to hear from me? You don't like the sound of my voice.' "

Reisner said her parents intrude on her day with questions they deem urgent but in her reality are not. "My dad calls asking me about the details of my travel plans, and they're not in my head, they're in some *e-mail*, so I say, 'I will e-mail you everything,'" she said. "I know my parents are offended. I've asked my mom not to call me during the workday if it's just to chat. We came to an agreement. I know she felt bad. She wanted to feel connected to me."

Answering a phone call requires a certain amount of psychological energy, she said. "I put it off because there's something confrontational about someone calling you," she said. "You have to gear up for it."

Sometimes Reisner gets phone calls from other synagogue members asking her to take on leadership roles, but the calls go straight to voice mail. She wishes that she could respond by e-mail. That way, in true Washington fashion, she could calibrate a more careful response instead of being put on the spot.

At Tifereth Israel, the waning popularity of phone calls has become such a controversial issue that Seidel fired off an essay in the

synagogue's April bulletin, lamenting that no one calls him back anymore.

About 10 people, he said, hadn't returned his calls so far this year. Technology, he said in an actual phone call, was diluting his rabbinical status.