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Life in the Cellular Age

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Scientists around the world are noting a change in the human body. The average human being now has a more powerful and accurate thumb. Why? As Edward Tenner, author of *Our Own Devices: How Technology Remakes Humanity*, explains, this phenomenon can be traced to the use of those tiny buttons on PDAs and cell phones. We are now using our famed opposable thumbs like no previous generation.

As Tenner reports, the current generation of young people in Japan are called the *oyayubi sedai* — the Thumb Generation. The trend is not limited to Japan. Just look at the next American teenager you see.

Fully a quarter of all Americans now use cell phones as the exclusive phone and have no land lines at all. A technology that is barely 20 years old has radically reshaped the way we live and communicate — and the pattern is different among generations.

On Christmas Day, [National Public Radio](#) featured a fascinating report on “[Three Generations’ Use of Cell Phones](#).” The report, available in both audio and partial transcript here, is an excellent piece of cultural observation. The report’s focus on a young teenager is especially insightful.

“Americans spend, on average, seven hours a month talking on their cell phones, but that figure doesn’t capture how much the cell phone has become a part of our lives,” the report begins. “It is, as one researcher put it, “a second skin”—itchy at times and prone to blemishes but something that increasingly we can’t imagine living without.”

More:

Quite simply, the cell phone has altered what it means to make a phone call.

“You call a person and not a place, and that makes all the difference,” says Richard Ling, a senior researcher with Telenor, a Norwegian telecommunications firm. The cell phone, untethered to a fixed location, enables “micro-coordination,” he says.

The cell phone is changing the way we view time, argues reporter Eric Weiner:

In other words, we can make plans on the fly. What used to be a firm appointment is now something softer and constantly open to negotiation. Researchers have found that people with cell phones are more likely to be late for appointments than people without—a phenomenon they are just beginning to understand. If we can always call to say we’re running late, then we are never actually late. We’re simply renegotiating our estimated arrival time.

In his final analysis, Weiner argues: “Like them or not, cell phones are fast evolving from luxury to necessity. Opting out of the cell-phone universe is becoming less of a viable option.” As James Katz of Rutgers University adds, “You’re a problem for other people if you don’t have a mobile phone.”

In the audio segment reported by Chana Joffe-Walt, three generations of one Seattle family are considered — a grandmother, mother, and 14 year-old daughter. Their respective understandings of the cell phone are very revealing.

The grandmother was given a phone for safety reasons, but gave it back. She simply did not want to use it. The land line phone is just fine for her.

The mom uses the phone as an organizer for the family. In many homes, Mom's cell phone is now the nexus of family communications — sort of an air traffic control, emergency broadcasting system, and counseling service combined in a little box of wires.

The real user of the cell phone is the 14-year-old daughter. Teenagers now live on cell phones, Joffe-Walt explains — but they are now more likely to “text” each other than to make a call. In any event, the imperative is to communicate *all* the time about *everything*.

As Joffe-Walt reports:

“When you’re 14, there are rules to the cell phone starting with you need to have one. . . Always answer that phone, take your phone everywhere, do not turn it off not even in the movies or while you’re sleeping. And folks, please, know the correct phone medium for the kind of conversation you’d like to have. Most importantly, communicate constantly, where you are, what you’re doing, who you talked to last, what you’re wearing, what you’ll wear tomorrow and what just happened 30 seconds earlier.”

Well, it turns out that Molly Tokuda, the 14-year-old featured in the story, ran up some unauthorized bills and had her phone confiscated by mom. As Joffe-Walt concludes, “Barb [Mom] is not worried about Molly’s survival. She says it may just be that a cell phone is a freedom Molly’s too young to handle. Grandma Tokuda says a cell phone is a freedom, she doesn’t want. And at the moment, neither grandma nor Molly have one.”

Edward Tenner reminds us that our technologies shape our lives, and sometimes even our bodies. The cell phone has become an essential instrument of our hypermodern age. It has also become a hallmark of adolescent and young adult life. Parents should follow the example of Molly’s mom and set limits for teenagers and children. Something of importance is lost when young people think that what happens on the cell phone is more important than what is happening around them.

UPDATE: We discussed this issue on Thursday’s edition of *The Albert Mohler Program* [listen [here](#)]. I appreciated the callers who added much to the program.

I mentioned this article on the air: “[Our Cell Phones, Ourselves](#),” by Christine Rosen in *The New Atlantis*, No. 6, Summer 2004.

