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Left Behind

A fond farewell to 209 once-common things that are either obsolete or well on the way

By Anna Jane Grossman
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In his 1970 book, *Future Shock*, futurist Alvin Toffler warned that the last few decades of the 20th century would bring a widespread physical and psychological overload. "When we lived in an agrarian world as peasants, life was set by the seasons, and things were slow. Terribly slow," says Toffler. "You still had the same plot of land your whole life. Your son's life wasn't going to be that different than your father's." A drastically accelerating world, he predicted, was more than humans would be able to process.

Nearly 40 years later, things have changed dramatically -- but aside from the annoyance of having to learn a new cellphone every six months, we all seem to be holding up surprisingly well. When The Washington Post Magazine asked experts, celebrities and average Joes to cast their minds back to objects, habits and paradigms that have been left behind just in the past couple of decades, we came up with those that follow.

Future shock? That's what we got when we [asked teens to talk about what they thought has become passe in their lifetimes.](#)

Truly 'Blind' Dates

b. when Adam met Eve -- d. 2000s

Smoke and mirrors have long had a place in romance. For ages, we've made ourselves up and shaved ourselves down; we've surgically enhanced the things we can and covered up the things we can't. We've courted each other in the forgiving light of candles and become experts in various scripted untruths: Yes, it was good for me. Really, I've never felt this way before. No, you don't look fat.

In the beginning, courtship on the Internet extended this trend. It was the place where, literally and figuratively, no one knew you were a dog. No longer. Now, if a friend sets you up with someone, and you don't automatically Google that person, check his or her "relationship" status on Facebook and do a quick vetting via Cheaternews.com (the modern answer to stocks and pillories), one might question if you are really fit to date at all. Meanwhile, Internet daters have sites such as Truedater.com, where those deceived by photos taken from *juuust* the right angle can report to the masses

that Mr. Right on Match.com is, in the flesh, actually Mr. Fat, Married and Ten Years Older.

Mix Tapes

b. 1963 -- d. 1990s

These plastic gems once acted like aural diaries. Painstakingly recorded from the radio or other people's music libraries and then labeled with loopy script or scribbled drawings, mix tapes -- which made it possible to listen to a customized set of songs without having to put money in a jukebox or hop off the couch mid make-out session -- defined our breakups, our summers, our crushes. They gave every 15-year-old the ability to play deejay and album-cover artist without leaving the bedroom.

Niggling matters such as illegal duplication and copyright infringement never entered the mind of your common mix-tape maestro. Those were simpler times -- and there were more subtle laws to abide. (As the music-snob protagonist mused in Nick Hornby's novel *High Fidelity*: "You can't have white music and black music together, unless the white music sounds like black music, and you can't have two tracks by the same artist side by side, unless you've done the whole thing in pairs.")

But mix-tape making, like the audiocassette itself (which is now more than 40 years old), has become a relic. It's been replaced by the burning of CD compilations and the trading of MP3 playlists -- neither of which involves the creative cookery of manually assembling a tape track by track or, ahem, the artistic aplomb that went into the homemade packaging. These other formats also lack the ephemeral quality of a self-recorded 90-minute Maxell -- unless many copies were made (each slowly dubbed by hand), a broken or lost mix tape was not easy to replace.

One thing, though, will likely never change: the nomenclature, which gets recalled every time a rap deejay bundles together his latest collection of singles. Says Universal Republic Records president Monte Lipman: "Cassettes may be gone, but we have mix tapes in other configurations now. And, no matter what the medium, I think 'mix tapes' is what they'll always be called."

Land Lines

b. late 1870s -- d. early 2000s

The click of the rotary dial, the blinking red hold button, the cord that could be stretched and then painstakingly detangled -- oh, the magic of a technology that had allowed us, for the first time, to whisper into the ear of someone on the other side of the world.

Sure, the device had its flaws (long distance charges, busy signals, necks strained from cradling receivers), but it was an instrument that lent itself to a slew of rituals that today seem quaint, from the college student pulling the receiver into the hallway for privacy to the frantic lover searching for pay-phone change a la Dustin Hoffman in "The Graduate." And what would sitcom writers have done if it weren't for answering machine tapes and all the inevitably embarrassing messages they recorded?

But answering machines have become almost as archaic as answering services, and voice mail will be next to go, thanks to services such as SimulScribe, which can convert voice messages into e-mails. Talking on a land line at all is becoming increasingly rare, especially to a generation that crowned its first national texting champion last April. (A 13-year-old won after typing a 151-character phrase in 42 seconds.) Many teens report that they can't recall when they last used their home phone, let alone memorized a number -- an art that, much like dialing with fingers other than the thumb, is all but forgotten.

Pay phones, on the way out for years, are heading toward extinction. Last December, AT&T announced that it will completely exit the industry by the end of this year. All in all, there are less than half as many coin-chuggers nationwide as there were in 2000, according to the Federal Communications Commission. And even rarer are phone booths. In all of the Washington area, there is only one left.

Let's just hope Superman knows where it is.

Short Basketball Shorts

b. 1936 -- d. 2003

The practice of playing games in retro uniforms is common in basketball now; it gives teams another jersey to sell at the concession stands. But last December, in a game against the Boston Celtics, the Los Angeles Lakers took it one step further -- they wore throwback shorts. As in short shorts. For anyone who has mourned the days when a player's full legs were as conspicuous as his tats, it was a moment of glory.

A brief one. The Lakers immediately fell behind. Despite a halftime change to the usual baggy, floor-scraping uniforms, the players were so shellshocked from the sight of their upper thighs that they lost.

"I don't know what it feels like to wear a thong," said Kobe Bryant after the game. "But I imagine it feels something like what we had on in the first half. I felt violated. I felt naked."

How times have changed. Since Michael Jordan first showed up in the NBA with an extra couple of inches on his shorts, basketball bottoms have been steadily creeping lower -- and the look quickly was adopted by players nationwide. The last holdout was Utah Jazz point guard John Stockton, who remained loyal to the short-short look. When he retired in 2003, so did the era of visible knees.

Doing Nothing at the Office

b. 1853 -- d. mid-1990s

The 20th century's best minds might have brought us many wonders fantastic (Decaf soy lattes! Shoulder-fired missiles! Plastic!), but what is truly stunning is the number of office hours Americans clocked during those same years doing . . . nothing much. Taking a cigarette break could sometimes nudge the minute hand a little. The water cooler was also created for this purpose. And paper clips. But in those many empty moments between tasks, much time was spent staring into space.

The patron saint of office inaction could be Herman Melville's *Bartleby the scrivener*, who sloughed off the responsibilities of his job in the dead letter office with a succinct, "I would prefer not to." But in some professions, downtime was practically a requirement of the job, and higher-ups would charge underlings with figuring out how to use it.

"When I started in the early '80s, there were word-processing centers," recalls attorney Howard Gutman, a partner at Williams & Connolly. "A 120-page brief could take two hours, and one mistake and you'd have to do it over again. Printing places would vie for business by having beds and food. If you were a young lawyer, sitting and waiting there really was your job."

Idle time's death knell was the Internet, which created a way to fill every moment while giving the appearance of productivity. The joys of making wastebasket two-pointers and using Scotch tape to extract nasal blackheads pale when compared with the minute-hand-massaging possibilities of Craigslist and YouTube. According to Nielsen ratings, the average American visits more than 2,000 Web pages a month while on the clock; surveys by Vault.com suggest that close to 90 percent of workers spend part of their day doing Internet browsing that's unrelated to work.

Cigarettes

b. 1800s -- d. 2008

Adieu, smoking. It made news worldwide when New York City banned it in restaurants in 2002. When the District followed four years later, much of the world likely chalked it up to more puritanical Americanism -- another quirk of a country with fluoridated water and wars packaged with catchy slogans. How else could you possibly pick someone up at a bar? But on January 1 of this year, the City of Light itself started popping Nicorette. Paris, once a place where a diet of espresso and Gitanes was *comme il faut*, has banned smoking in all restaurants, bars and theaters. *Mon Dieu!*

The cigarette's history is so intertwined with sex and reckless youth that it's hard to imagine a world that's completely

"no smoking." And yet, so many tobacco-related cultural markers have become distant memories: the monogrammed cigarette case, the Holly Golightly-esque holder, the kindergarten class charged with making ashtrays out of clay.

Not that this is a bad thing. We are tasting our food better than ever and can now awake after a night of bar hopping without smelling like the love child of Bette Davis and Popeye. It's also hard to argue with laws that will likely decrease the country's cases of emphysema and lung cancer (as well as leukemia, cataracts, pneumonia, premature births, abdominal aortic aneurysms -- we'd go on, but we've been allotted only a few thousand words for this article).

Unfortunately, the global population of cigarette fiends isn't necessarily dwindling. Westerners may be slapping on nicotine patches, but the number of smokers in poorer places in the world continues to grow. The American Cancer Society estimates that there are 1.3 billion smokers worldwide and that number will hit 2 billion by 2030.

It's almost enough to drive you to drink.

Phone Sex

b. late 1870s -- d. mid-1990s

Once, the number of words you could type per minute was impressive only to an employer. Today, the hunt-and-pecker is seriously handicapped in a much more personal arena: sex.

Thanks to instant- and text-messaging, phone sex is going the way of the VHS. There are just too many advantages to being an SMS or AIM Casanova. You need not worry about phone bills or eavesdropping roommates; images can be swapped quickly or even live; and most IM and text sex can be pursued right at the dinner table or office desk, under the guise of getting homework assignments or checking the human rights situation in China. It's also low effort (even orgasm requires little but holding down a couple of vowel keys and hitting return, then gracefully exiting the situation with a quick BRB or TTYL) and can be saved for later enjoyment (control + c, control + v and voila).

Some are taking it a few steps further. With virtual reality programs such as Second Life, people create avatars of themselves and go on to have illicit affairs and even long-term relationships, often conducted solely with staccato onscreen messages.

Of course, a certain level of intimacy is lost. Giggles are gone; pauses all the more fraught. (Is he transported by passion . . . or IMing another girl concurrently?)

While it's doubtful these media could ever threaten the popularity of the actual act, there's no shortage of people eager to experiment with them. According to a survey conducted in Canada for the site Campuskiss.com, more college students take part in instant-messenger sex than in any kind of telephonic sex.

Because love means never having to say, "Can you hear me now?"

Getting Lost

b. dawn of man -- d. 1990s

In 1983, President Ronald Reagan decreed that the Global Positioning System, theretofore the provenance of the military, would be open to the public. Little did the Gipper know that this decision would affect the lives of untold numbers of couples, all habitually deadlocked on whether to ask for directions.

In an era where "MapQuest" is a verb, having no sense of direction or ability to read a map have become excusable flaws. You can almost count on having a GPS nearby. The technology-focused market research company Forward Concepts reports that 171 million units were shipped last year and more than three times as many will ship in 2011. Though most of the devices are embedded in cars and phones, they're also helping people keep track of meandering pets, kids and impaired adults.

But, if life truly is about the journey and not the destination, losing "lost" could be a real loss. Consider the ramifications on Western culture had the technology popped up sooner. Would there be *The Odyssey*? Columbus

might've actually found the Orient ("Make the next legal U-turn").

Losing sight of our meandering ways and the connections made with people during unexpected sojourns may be the biggest loss of all. What happened to directions scribbled on cocktail napkins? Or, for that matter, spontaneity? Used to be half the joy of a family trip was spreading out the map on the dash, strapping the dog to the roof and admitting you had no way to answer the age-old question: "Are we there yet?"

On the flip side, depending on what GPS voice features your device offers, today you may be able to avoid familial conflict by letting Mr. T tell the kids exactly how far there is to go.

Cash

b. pre-600 B.C. -- d. early 2000s

Take a good whiff of a greenback -- if you actually have one in your wallet, that is. The aroma might just take you back to a time of savings passbooks (in lieu of online banking), rolling quarters (instead of hitting the Coinstar machine) and trips to Europe when you could actually afford a madeleine.

What we know about the dollar is shifting almost faster than the exchange rate. Pennies now cost more than a cent to make. And even the color that launched a dozen nicknames -- the green stuff, the long green, lettuce, cabbage -- is dated. The new 20s are kind of pinkish and periwinkle, and the new fives are . . . um, does anyone still use bills besides 20s?

A new edition of Monopoly has completely done away with colored money. As if the banker's job weren't sweet enough, she now gets to go all Arthur Andersen on her opponents, inserting players' "credit cards" in a hand-held machine, checking a balance, which only she can see, and then deducting monies paid to a property's owner or adding that \$2 million earned for passing Go. (Dollar amounts have been seriously adjusted for inflation.)

Not that credit cards are long for this world. Thanks to technology being tested in several states, a simple tap of a cellphone will likely be the way your average shopper will pay for things in coming years. After that, the next logical development would seem to be a technology that automatically deducts funds from our checking accounts when we simply think about what we want to buy. Wait -- isn't that what the Internet is for?

Body Hair

b. early man (very hairy!) -- d. 2000s

Getting ready for a date once involved little more than a blow dryer, a razor and a handful of products that could be found at the drugstore (or the grocery store, if you were one of those mayonnaise people). In the past decade, however, that primping might mean spending several hours and more than a few dollars on professional services: eyebrow threading, lip bleaching, armpit-hair waxing, bikini-line laser removal . . . even those little fluffy fellas near the hairline are likely to get pulled. Male hair isn't safe, either. The men's razor market is estimated to have grown more than 25 percent since 2001, and not all those blades are being used on faces: According to personal care product manufacturers Church & Dwight, three of 10 men ages 18 to 34 regularly remove hair from their bodies.

Indeed, hair as a whole has grown out of favor. Tom Selleck's hair, both facial and pectoral, was once considered both hot and completely unironic; Madonna's eyebrows circa 1984 could've woven half a dozen wigs. But it's been a long time since a celebrity's hair was her defining characteristic, a la Farrah Fawcett, Crystal Gayle or Jennifer Aniston. Today, it's the lack thereof (see Britney Spears or Bruce Willis) that seems to garner stars the most notice.

"It's just cheaper and simpler to remove body hair today than it was 10 or 20 years ago. And the products that were available 20 years ago are far superior today," says Roman Shuster, a research analyst with Euromonitor International, a company that tracks industry trends. "More young people are waiting longer to have children, so they have more time and money to spend on things like hair removal."

It's all enough to make one wonder what great things we might accomplish if the energy funneled into modern depilatory techniques could be redirected.

Having the Blues

b. time immemorial -- d. 1990s

When Bobby McFerrin sang "Don't Worry, Be Happy," in 1988, Americans took it as an order. So much so, points out Charles Barber, author of the new book *Comfortably Numb: How Psychiatry Is Medicating a Nation*, that, in 2005, more money was spent on the anti-depressant drug Zoloft than on Tide.

"Kids today are growing up with drugs being advertised on TV like toothpaste, and so are being instilled with the idea that you can rid yourself of untoward emotions," says Barber. Today, with anti-depressants even more refined, marketed and available, crying into your pillow while blaring Leonard Cohen and reading *Anna Karenina* has become a kind of crime.

Is the world a better place? It's hard to say. What's clear is that we have a better understanding of the chemical causes of certain emotions -- a greater sense of why our brains work the way they do. While this is a good thing for those of us wondering why a happy childhood nevertheless resulted in years of mild malaise and head shrinkage, it's great news for anyone whose life has been completely paralyzed by depression and uncontrollable emotions.

And, for what it's worth, sadness had an awfully good run before its current exile to Elba. "In the 1800s, Thomas Carlyle talked about how happiness was really only a few hundred years old. Before that, people were too busy trying to survive and fight off Cossacks to even think about emotions, let alone the idea of being 'happy,'" says Barber.

QUOTABLE

"Real people going on game shows. When we were kids, we'd watch 'The Price is Right,' and the contestant would have curlers in her hair -- she'd look like your neighbor next door. Real people got a chance to shine. Now, everyone comes out of some stupid mold from a moronic casting director's idea of what is exciting to watch. All the reality is removed."

-- *Rosie O'Donnell*

"Drawing tables have become obsolete. As have bridge tables, enamel-topped kitchen tables and turntables."

-- *Milton Glaser, graphic designer*

"Maureen Dowd."

-- *Ann Coulter, conservative commentator*

"I see people who are constantly text-messaging. I still like to pick up the phone and talk to someone, and that's how I continue to conduct business. I'm on the phone a lot, and I see a lot of people in my office every day."

-- *Donald Trump*

"Stove-top percolators are collector's items."

-- *Robert F. Nelson, president and CEO of the National Coffee Association*

"Focus groups. They're toast. They never worked, really. Only the top pros understood them. Mostly, they were used to persuade the boss to do what you wanted to do anyway."

-- *Seth Godin, marketing expert*

"I miss competence. There's a lot of incompetence in this industry. Knowing how to write, how to play, sing, perform. Just knowing how to do the gig. Instead, they have all kinds of tools to make people sound better and keep them in key. But I probably sound like an old grouch. Maybe I'm the thing that's obsolete."

-- *Billy Joel*

"Handwritten 'dupes' -- the checks that the server writes customers' orders on, and then a carbon copy would be handed to the kitchen. All that is done by computers now. I have a bit of nostalgia for the sense of detail it allowed, because computers can't be so detailed as a handwritten request. The written reservation book is also gone for good. I still look over ours from the beginning and laugh at how difficult it must have been. But it was free."

-- *Ellen Kassoff Gray, co-owner of Equinox restaurant*

"Fifteen years ago, if you didn't have a baked Alaska or cherry jubilee on the menu, you couldn't consider yourself a French restaurant. Today, you can't find hardly any of these things. I miss flambe. And lobster thermidor! And anything that involves innards is hard to come by now."

-- *Tim Zagat, co-founder of Zagat Survey*

"Network nightly news broadcasts as a source of common information and national unity. Opinions differed, but Americans began thinking with the same images and facts in mind, brought to them by experienced journalists. If you cared about national or world affairs, you scheduled dinner before or after the nightly serving of Cronkite, Rather, Brokaw or Jennings."

-- *Madeleine K. Albright, former secretary of state*

"Computerized design has become a really great, really user-friendly resource, but the drawings often have more of the personality of the program than of the programmer. I still love hand-drawn floor plans."

-- *Thom Filicia, interior designer*

"Smoking allowed in restaurants, and the small portions and odd plating of nouvelle cuisine -- just a little bit of food on a big white plate. Portion sizes have definitely gotten larger and plating more natural."

-- *Laurent Tourondel, executive chef of BLT Steak Bistro*

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