

# When Only Birds Could Twitter

I miss the days of the postcards and the rotary phone, but I'm not giving up my WiFi.

By John Blumenthal



A passenger checks her mobile phone at the Kamaraj domestic airport in Chennai, India, **May 25, 2020**.  
Photo: arun sankar/Agence France-Presse/Getty Images

Here I am at Los Angeles International Airport, standing in line to board a flight to New York. Almost everyone in the area is glued to a cellphone, texting, emailing, posting and engaging in the other magical but mostly mindless activities. I'm not criticizing them, because I'm doing the same thing.

When I was a kid, my family had two rotary phones. Dialing was agonizingly slow—you stuck your finger into a round slot and moved it toward the stopper, then watched it slowly return to where it had started. They weren't really portable because they were attached to outlets in the wall. Our rotaries were eventually replaced by the miraculous touch tone, equipped with a simple push-button dial and a longer receiver cord, which, depending on its length, allowed you to talk and walk short distances without destroying drywall.

There was no texting. If you wanted to send words to someone, you had to type or handwrite a letter and mail it. You navigated with paper maps which, when unfolded, were the size of tablecloths. The word "friend" was a noun. Tweeting was the language of birds.

Sometimes I can't recall how I occupied myself while waiting for a plane or standing in line. Often I stared into space or sighed impatiently if a checkout line was stalled by somebody paying with pennies. Sometimes I struck up a conversation.

On the other hand, I wasn't annoyed if there was no WiFi, and I didn't panic if my battery died while Google Maps was guiding me through the middle of nowhere. I didn't waste hours on [Facebook](#) or [Twitter](#), commenting on the pets and opinions of people I didn't really know. I didn't meet my wife on a dating site. The only screen we stared at was a TV and that was rationed. When my grandparents called, we talked without distraction. Now, when I FaceTime with my 2-year old grandson, he's more interested in the device.

In retrospect, watching that rotary phone take forever didn't make me particularly impatient, and the idea of taking it outside never occurred to me. Sending a letter via snail mail and running out to the mailbox every day to see if there was an envelope addressed to me was kind of a thrill. Snapping photos with my Brownie camera, bringing the film roll to be developed, and then spending a few days wondering whether they would be sharp or blurry was also kind of exciting. We even liked slide shows and mailed postcards when we traveled. Using the Dewey Decimal System to find a book at the library sometimes resembled a scavenger hunt.

Yes, sometimes I miss that simpler time, but I could never go back. Once you have a smartphone, you can't live without it.

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