

## How much is a pay phone call these days, anyway?

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Charles Birkhead, Macrovision, Inc. ([www.macrovis.com](http://www.macrovis.com))



I don't even know. I've used a pay phone once in the last 15 years when I was running a grocery errand for my wife and forgot the list she gave me along with my cell phone. I stood there peering at the phone in front of the 7-Eleven to find out how much change I needed (35 cents, at that time.)

I was flipping channels the other night and saw a scene from *The Deer Hunter* where Christopher Walken, as a G.I. in Saigon, is trying to call his girlfriend in Clairton, Pennsylvania. ("That's Clairton, operator, C-L-A-I-R-T-ON.") He finally gives up and walks away as two G.I.s in back of him start fighting each other for the phone.

Today, pay phones scatter the landscape like forgotten relics from another civilization. Not like, actually, they are relics from another civilization.

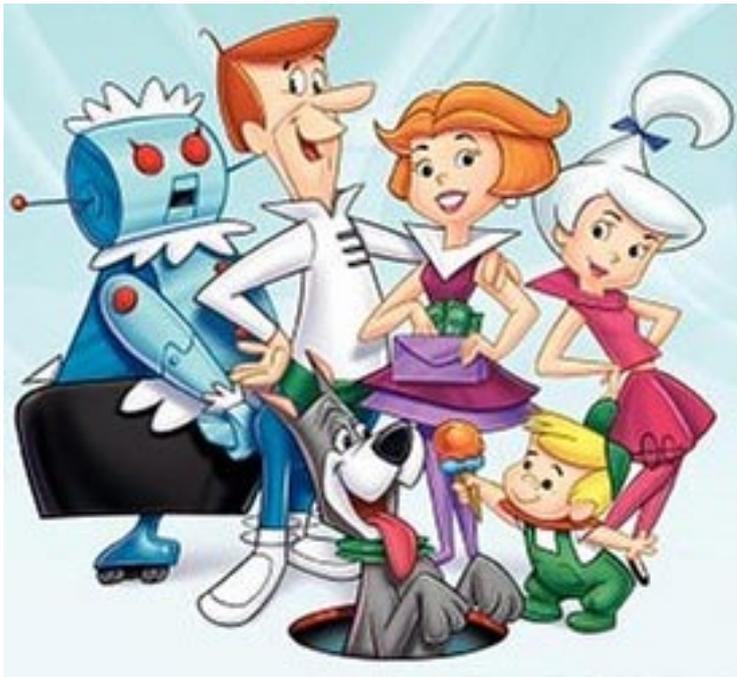
Here's a video from the mid-1960s of how people would communicate in the 1990s:

Aren't you sorry you got rid of your land line? (And, as all you felons out there know, you have to call your bail bondsman from a land line.)

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### Technology Will Free Us From

#### Work

Remember those predictions of the future with the flying cars and space travel via cold-storage hibernation? A popular topic was how advances in technology would give us so much more leisure time in the future. Those of us of a certain age may recall the 1960s cartoon series, *The Jetsons*. The Jetsons lived in the futuristic utopia of 2062. Housekeeping is done by a robot maid, handling chores not otherwise rendered trivial by the home's numerous push-button Space Age-envisioned conveniences. George Jetson's workweek is typical of his era: three hours a day, three days a week. (Hey, sounds like mine! You, too?)

I was driving home from work recently (after my 3 hours was up) when my Art Director pinged me via a text message that a layout I wanted to look at was ready. Since I still had half an hour to go before I got home to my laptop, I pulled over and looked at it on the 4.3" display on my smart phone, called him to request a revision, and had the corrected version waiting for me on my laptop when I got home to e-mail to my client. Just one example of how technology has actually freed us to work. Any time. Anywhere.

ECN recently ran a [story from Reuters](#) [1] titled, "Not getting enough sleep? Turn off the technology!", about how dependence on televisions, cell phones and laptops may be costing Americans dearly — in lack of sleep. "Cell phones and computers, which make our lives more productive and enjoyable, may be abused to the point that they contribute to getting less sleep at night, leaving millions of Americans functioning poorly the next day," Russell Rosenberg, the vice chairman of the Washington DC-based National Sleep Foundation (NSF), said in a statement.

Well, one person's abuse is another person's use. I doubt that article is going to make many people say to themselves, "You know, he's right. I won't check my e-mails before I go to sleep and first thing when I wake up. And I won't answer any calls or texts that come in during the night. And I'll turn the TV and the X-Box off, too." Fat chance.

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### Visual Overload?

Sure there is. How can there not be, since so many of the benefits of semiconductor and wireless technology depend on seeing? Flat screens have made information display available everywhere, from cell phones to PCs to digital signage to telemedicine, where wireless communications and high-definition imaging can provide preventive health care at low-cost.

It's always amusing to watch a movie made decades – or even just a few years ago – to see how dated it is by the technology used in it, especially monitors. One of the few that got it right – sort of – was 1968's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, with its ubiquitous flat screens.

The flat screens were actually rear-projection screens whose projection speeds were synchronized with the main cameras during scene takes. You can still occasionally see some rear-projection TVs still in use, and how immense they are compared to today's super-slim, LED-backlit LCD TVs. Just don't go trying to rent a movie to play on then on a piece of plastic from a bricks-and-mortar store like Blockbuster. My son works at the last one in our area, and that's closing in April.

By the way, it costs 50 cents now to make most local calls on a pay phone in the U.S. If you can find one that's still operational.

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