



Microwave Surfing

Don't Drop That Cell Phone!

■ Rajeev Bansal ^{id}

*The Solid State, however, kept
its grains
Of Microstructure coarsely
veiled until
X-ray diffraction pierced
the Crystal Planes
That roofed the giddy Dance,
the taut Quadrille
Where Silicon and Carbon
Atoms will
Like Valencies, four-figured,
hand in hand
With common Ions and Rare
Earths to fill
The lattices of Matter, Glass or
Sand,
With tiny Excitations,
quantitatively grand.*

—John Updike [1]

This ode to solid-state devices was quoted in the preface to a special issue [1] of *Scientific American*, which reported on the remarkable history of the transistor, invented in 1947 at Bell Laboratories. One of the articles in [1] led to the following quiz question [2] in the

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Digital Object Identifier 10.1109/MMM.2024.3363688
Date of current version: 9 April 2024



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inaugural issue of the *IEEE Microwave Magazine* in March 2000.

If a digital cell phone were made with vacuum tubes instead of transistors, it would be as large as
a) a microwave oven
b) a minivan

c) a British telephone booth
d) the Washington Monument.

The correct answer is (d), the Washington Monument, which, at over 555 ft, is still the tallest stone structure in the world [3].

Of course, propelled by Moore's law, cell phones have continued to pack in more and more transistors into the same physical envelope over the ensuing decades. Recently, thanks to a book [4] I received as a Christmas gift, I had the chance to revisit the issue of a hypothetical cell phone made of vacuum tubes. Randall Munroe, a former

Editor's Note: An earlier version of this column appeared originally in the April 2024 issue of *IEEE Antennas and Propagation Magazine*.

NASA engineer, takes up the question in *What If?* 2 [4], the sequel to his best-seller *What If?*

Munroe [4] notes that the Universal Automatic Computer (UNIVAC), the first vacuum-tube-based commercial computer, was the size of a room to accommodate its 5,000 vacuum tubes. An iPhone 12 has nearly 12 billion transistors. If those transistors were replaced with vacuum tubes, using the same packing density as the UNIVAC, “the phone would be about the size of *five* city blocks when resting on one edge” [4]. (To compare apples to apples, one should note that a “typical” city block is around 300 ft long [5],

so the Washington Monument lying sideways will be less than two city blocks.)

An additional complication with our vacuum tube-based iPhone 12 is the heat it will generate. Munroe points out [4] that the 7AK7 tubes used by UNIVAC consumed several watts of energy per tube. Extrapolating that to our 12 billion-tube phone results in some 100 GW of heat dissipation, raising the temperature of the phone to around 1,800 °C. Since that is above the melting point of granite, such a hot phone (assuming it did not somehow self-destruct), if dropped, would “melt its way through the Earth’s crust” [4].

References

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Digital Object Identifier 10.1109/MMM.2024.3372739