When e-mail started to take off in the 1990s, more than one pundit predicted the death of the phone call, as well as the early demise of writing and social interaction. These last two are in fact thriving, thanks to the Internet, and with the proliferation of cellular technology, phones are now entrenched as a ubiquitous part of the cultural landscape. (It’s becoming unusual to see someone walking down the street without a cellphone glued to one ear.) As I’ve argued numerous times before in this space, the importance of a cultural phenomenon is directly related to the number of new words and phrases that surround it, and telephony terms are multiplying with rabbitlike intensity.

For starters, consider cellphone types. It really wasn’t all that long ago that cellphones did one thing and one thing only: handle voice calls. Now cellphones are being crammed with all kinds of nonvoice features: a phone that also plays MP3s is called a music phone; a phone that has a built-in digital camera is a camera phone; a phone that includes PDA-like features—a mobile operating system, an organizer, e-mail, local storage, and so on—is called a smartphone.

With the latest phones you get not only MP3 players and cameras but also built-in Wi-Fi or Bluetooth, text messaging, memory card slots, and more. These everything-but-the-kitchen-sink phones are called hybrid phones, all-in-one phones, or, my favorite, Swiss Army phones.

Content rules, as always, and many of the newest phones can sync up with a PC to get digital music, ring tones, images, and other content. You could call this “downloading,” because it involves data being sent to the phone. However, many people prefer to reserve the term downloading for obtaining data from a remote source.

For content sent to a phone from a PC, the up-and-coming neologism is sideloading. Beyond that, isn’t it true that cellphones don’t really do a good job with most nonvoice content? Yes, a lack of storage space and poor picture quality are common complaints, as is the dreaded click-and-wait experience that comes with a Web-enabled cellphone’s mobile browser. (That is, with a regular connection, you don’t usually notice the time it takes for a Web page to download after you click on its link, but that wait is intolerable—and expensive—on a cellular connection.)

We’re starting to see hybrid phones with multitigabyte hard drives (to hold more MP3s) and multimegapixel cameras (to take better pictures). Still, even with the current models, lots of people like their all-in-one devices because they let them avoid the islands of content problem that results from having to use separate devices for different kinds of content, such as having all their pictures on a digital camera and all their music on an MP3 player. (They prefer, one supposes, the “continent of content” that’s available with an all-in-one phone.)

Cellular isn’t the only telephony game in town, of course. POTS (plain old telephone service) continues to evolve, as does the language surrounding it. For example, one of the perils of life in a typical cube farm (the collection of cubicles in an office) is privacy, particularly when talking on the phone. To help, companies are coming up with innovative ways to enhance voice privacy. One company, Sonare (owned by Herman Miller, the company that invented the cubicle), makes a voice privacy device called Babble for your cubicle that hides your conversation among multiple samples of your voice played over small speakers. Playing a sound to reduce or eliminate the ability of others to hear something is called soundmasking.

Few people enjoy dealing with call centers and their annoying “press 1 to do this, press 2 to do that” systems that so often lead us astray. To help speed the navigation of call center hierarchies, many companies are turning to voice recognition systems that use call steering algorithms to route calls based on natural language input. These systems usually rely on keyword spotting, which uses certain words or phrases to dictate where the caller is sent. In the future, companies hope to install emotion detectors that can sense the caller’s emotional state (the defaults probably being frustration and anger).

Finally, have you ever been on a bad date and wished someone would call you with some urgent task that required your immediate attention? Wish no more: Cellular providers Cingular Wireless LLC and Virgin Mobile USA now offer rescue call services that ring your cellphone at a preset time and supply you with a script to make it appear that you’ve received an emergency call. (Cingular’s service is called, memorably, Escape-A-Date.)

More usefully, many people are now promoting ICE (in case of emergency) numbers. The idea is that you program an emergency contact number into your cellphone under the name “ICE.” That way, police or paramedics would just have to look up the ICE entry in your phone to contact that person. Now that is a true rescue call.

**Call Me, Ishmael**

JOHN HERSEY

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