For a long time after computers began operating with graphical interfaces, text was still the primary carrier of meaning. Technological developments again spurred a shift in modes of expression. With larger numbers of people accessing the Internet via smartphones, the type of writing that blogs required became more cumbersome. Small keyboards that were real or virtual led to shorter messages and to a text message–specific shorthand that to the consternation of many traditionalists spread beyond telephone use. In addition to questionable spelling and pared down written communication, the use of telephones to access social media also increased private, individual ownership of communication devices. Whereas computers were often shared, telephones most often had only one user. Customization and possessiveness, both less possible and less likely among people with little disposable income, grew as prices dropped, leading to wider access to call-only cell phones and, ultimately, to smartphones.

The push from computer use to smart phone use runs both parallel to and a bit behind the shift away from landlines to cellular telephones. Cell phones felt different from house phones because people began having telephone numbers to themselves. They could be contacted more often and in less mediated ways. Having a personal phone number that could accompany one at all times, even with a change in residence or relocation outside the original area code, helped people become attached to the devices that were attached to their numbers. This connection and identification with their gadgets and with the new ability to be reached on the go eventually led to people constantly carrying communication devices and becoming reliant on them. The devices themselves, their ubiquity, and rapid technological advances helped
drive the move away from traditional telephone conversation and from conventionally written messages online.

Blogs and their close relatives fit the hypertext category that N. Katherine Hayles discussed in her 2004 article (Hayles “Print is Flat, Code is Deep”). While some feel traditional in their autobiographical or diary-like impulses, most also take advantage of possibilities related specifically to hypertexts. Self-defining writing can be supplemented by any number of available sites containing an amount of information that for most practical purposes is limitless. These links can work like grossly expanded footnotes, forgoing the need to explain particular ideas or situations and allowing readers to maintain direct connection to the narrative if they choose to do so. Hayles’s attention to hypertext accurately predicts a shift away from straight narrative to what, in its nascent form, might be best described as either a supplemented narrative or a new thing unto itself. The decision about which name to use for these phenomena seems to depend on the balance. A text that is mostly narrative can be easily connected with traditional written autobiographical forms. However, a preponderance of links creates something else altogether. The Internet “is inherently participatory—not just interactive, in the sense that it responds to your commands, but an instigator constantly encouraging you to comment, to contribute, to join in” (Rose 2011, 2–3). Perhaps the new result is a minilibrary, initially directing patrons’ perusal, yet unable to predict their ultimate paths. Perhaps it’s an event managed by centrifugal force, holding a consistent core while attracting or losing objects near the edges of its reach. In any case, these spaces for additions also open spaces for substitutions. While technology, such as the digital camera, telephone, tablet, and laptop changed to allow the possibility of giving narratives multiple appendages via hypertext, it also created the ability to add or substitute pictorial information for writing.

In online autobiography, photographs have moved from supplementing narrative to often standing in for it. Traditional blogs evolved so that pictures accented or explained material in the writer’s vision and thoughts. Later, a confluence of technology, cultural shifts, and changes in the media landscape combined to ensure that pictures played a larger role in online posts. As cellular phones became nearly ubiquitous, they also changed so that even the most rudimentary ones included cameras. With phones making constant availability and contact expected and cameras allowing image transmission, sending photographs became a quicker way to be in touch than writing was. Telephone cameras and computing power provided a broader swath of the American public with access to fairly sophisticated, easily portable technology. The quality of photographs taken with telephones rivaled or exceeded the quality of those taken by low-cost digital cameras. The phones themselves provided a simple means to store photos locally, move them to a computer,