

The Smartphone Dehumanizer

I recently took a trip to Yosemite and was both shocked and disappointed by what I saw. No, not the landscape, which remains as visually striking as ever, but at the actions of the people who visited the world famous natural wonder. The new reality of the smartphone had invaded and distorted the poster child for nature's beauty, a nature experience John Muir described thusly, "Only by going alone in silence, without baggage, can one truly get into the heart of the wilderness. All other travel is mere dust and hotels and baggage and chatter." Was John referring to the future world of smartphone travel?

I'll get back to the disheartening nature of my Yosemite experience in a moment. For ages the priest class of scientists have stated unequivocally that the innate human need to survive cannot be suppressed. It is my contention that the smartphone has actually done something so wrong to the human brain that humans now regularly do things that are in defiance of the act of the now questionable law self-preservation.

When the cellphone arrived on the scene en mass a mere fifteen years ago, the world was altered forever in ways both good and bad. The emergency call from the side of the road was no longer a hike to the nearest gas station. One could now call mom after reaching the summit of Everest - a questionable extension of the device's use at best. But with the freedom to call mom from the super market also came the freedom to call mom from the movie theater during the movie, or call mom from bathroom while on a the toilet, or take a call while driving, a call from mom who just couldn't find her glasses. The cellphone world of instant communication was blessing and curse, and so it is with most forms of technology.

Initially many complained about the horrifying behavior of those who would go on to see the use of the cellphone at any time and any place as their divine right; museums, busses, planes readying to take off, even during sex - the phone's ring must be answered as if every call is a call from God himself. As a society we barely got out of cellphone diapers when the smartphone hit. The smartphone, while seemingly an innocent transition from the cellphone, was a giant leap forward in the direction of the removal of the self-preservation barrier. The smartphone, from my perspective would define the moment in which humans cared more for what was on the two inch LCD screen than their survival.

Consider the case of Alexander Heit, 22, who died shortly after an April 3, 2013 crash caused by distracted driving while texting. The exchange on his phone at the time of the crash: "ya that's coo lol no worries" followed by, "hey man, I had to run out for like an hour" followed by, "sounds good my man see you soon ill tw." This was from the screen shot taken from his smartphone right before he crashed his car. Is there anything in this exchange what warrants immediacy? Anything at all? This young man's need to survive, was overcome by a screen demanding he respond to, "I had to run out for like

an hour.” This is something what was inconceivable a twenty years ago. In the not so distant past, the mental state of the human race would not have seen the idea of needing to respond to a communication of this sort as important, and yet, it was so important for Alexander to respond with, “sounds good my man see you soon ill tw,” that he was willing to *die* in order to send that very text. Think about that...

The smartphone has become a frightening version of the security blanket. I see people riding bicycles with the phone in one hand, drivers with the phone in one hand, treadmill runners with the phone in one hand, children in the park with the phone in one hand; one hand is for living life, the other now clings to what many feel gives them life. It is held onto like a lifeline in supermarkets, banks, movie theaters and even the locker room at my gym! There was a time when the phone was not allowed in the locker room at my gym (three years ago), for both the “consideration of others” reasons and for the most obvious reason of all; photos taken of unsuspecting members. The action of using a phone in the locker room was grounds for expulsion from the gym itself, and yet, now, there is no policy regarding smartphone use at all. People seem to be oblivious to my concern about winding up on a site for people who love locker-room-naked-candid. In fact, when I asked the management about the policy I was scoffed at, and this is no neighborhood gym, but a very expensive chain. The smartphone has entirely rewritten thousands of years of established moral codes in a matter of a couple of years.

We have all seen this obvious and unacceptable free-fall in moral behavior sense the cellphone came on the scene. Even the realm of science seems to indicate there might be a connection. An MIT study showed that magnetic waves call alter peoples moral judgments. When magnetic waves were applied to the right TPJ, located at the brain’s surface above and behind the right ear, one’s moral judgement system was altered - oddly enough the area where the phone is placed. Could this be the reason why folks speaking on the cellphone are amongst the rudest, most selfish people on the planet?

One gets into a very dodgy realm when deciding to rely on science as the sole system of defining what “is” and what “isn’t,” when it comes to anything, let alone technology of this sort. Experiments that refute the cellphone industry’s contention that all cellphones are safe will be hard to come by, as funding to demonize a gazillion dollar industry is not easily forthcoming. But some studies taken on by a few folks here and there seem to indicate that the real dangers of using the smartphone are not overcome by the survival instinct.

When one speaks with folks who are self-reflective many will say, “eh, I know this thing isn’t healthy,” or “I know it distracts me” and yet, they continue to use it undeterred - drug addicts I knew used to say same things. The machine they know so little about is doing things to people, both physically and spiritually, and yet folks don’t seem to care that they are like an experimental lab rat in a billions phone using experiment. Using the phone exposes one to varying levels of energy, from the battery itself to the power needed to send and receive signals from the relay system, power a mere twenty years

ago no one would have experienced bombarding their head in this manner - I wonder about a crowd with dozens of phones side by side and the energy present.

I seem to recall an era in the 1900's when scientists of all sorts were blasting anything they could with all forms of radiation to see what would happen. Gamma rays, radio waves, x-rays were used to bombard DNA, bacteria, animals, plants and who knows what else. Some with horrifying results, like the radiation experiments undertaken on humans by the government during the nuclear age. Others, like those of José Manuel Rodríguez Delgado, bear a striking similarity to the whole smartphone scenario we are mired in today. Delgado developed a device called Stimoceiver, a radio which joined a stimulator of brain waves with a receiver which monitored E.E.G. waves and sent them back on separate radio channel which could then be used to alter human behavior. He found he could successfully control human behavior, even the actions of a wild bull, using his machine. Seems to me the power used to drive the smartphone is having an effect similar to Mr. Delgado's device on the way in which the brain interacts with the reality it creates.

In one study researchers from the National Institutes of Health found that less than an hour of cellphone use can speed up brain activity in the area closest to the phone's antenna, another study I read about showed intense heating going on in the brain after very brief use. This can't be healthy, just on the surface it seems contrary to a millennia of human survival processes to suddenly expose the brain to this kind of energy attack from a piece of technology so one can text "sounds good my man see you soon ill tw" before they crash their car. Two students, Maria Ritter and Wasgan Wolski, received a regional award for young researchers, reports the Schwäbische Zeitung of March 7, 2005 when they tested blood cells after they were exposed to a cellphone for only twenty seconds. After using the mobile phone it was clearly visible that the red blood cells lumped together in "rolls of coins."

One very interesting study on brain glucose levels suggests a disconcerting problem, "in healthy participants and compared with no exposure, 50-minute cell phone exposure was associated with increased brain glucose metabolism in the region closest to the antenna." Yikes, I'm not sure I want my brain blood glucose level altered, and my moral compass altered, and my brain heated and my my blood cells lumping together, and yet this is not an issue for billions of people, oh, did I just say "billions?" Billions of people using the phones without a concern for their safety or mine?

Even the NY Times ran a story in 2010, prior to the security blanket reality of the iphone world, where the title suggest concern about the cellphone's safety, "*Should You Be Snuggling With Your Cellphone?*" The word "snuggle" suggests sleeping with it close by; putting it in a bra, a pocket by the heart, holding it for hours on end. In this article much of the focus was about cancer, but the problem here is sometime back the world of health concerns were reduced to a "does it cause cancer" talking point, rather than "does it cause problems in the body that one might wish to avoid." like say, eliminating

the need for survival? So we're stuck with stories and studies that often state things like, "well the research isn't conclusive" or "there is no direct correlation to cancer," and things are often left at that, ignoring the reality of what I am seeing in my world - human behavior is very different then it was a few years ago.

Self-preservation is a key to human evolution. While on the planet we humans have continued to persevere in a climate which is often very harsh. Folks managed to find ways to survive in the Sahara, Siberia, The Amazon and even in the Midwest. Humans survived plagues, the crusades, countless governments, wars and more wars and even the world of the family dynamic. But something has come along to challenge that system of survival in a matter of a few years. I have seen things beyond inexplicable in the world of the smartphone addiction. Recently I watched a young man who was standing by the side of an eight-lane Los Angeles city street (40mph average speed) check his phone at the curb. Then he walked out onto the road to get into his car, stopping at the door, in the path of speeding traffic, some drivers texting and while driving, and began to type a text. I was astonished, traffic in Los Angeles is at best dangerous, at worst it is a war zone free for all, and this young man decided it was safer to stand in the middle of traffic and text, then to do it at the curb not five seconds earlier.

While in the gym locker room last week a 30ish man was speaking about the traffic ticket he received. The traffic officer gave him a ticket for having both headphones in his ears while talking on the phone. He genuinely could not understand why this was an issue, he had never "thought" about the headphones in his ears being an issue. I was taken aback, again, Los Angeles driving hell was safer to him *without* the ability to hear what was going on around him then with the ability to hear sirens, horns or screaming bicyclists. How can this be?

The texting driving problem exhibits the addictive nature of the phone which is the most troubling. I see two things in the car-smartphone reality that do not bode well for us all. One, the attention span of the average human is now less than two minutes, and I believe this is due to the rewiring of the brain from using this machine. At each light I wait at I can see when a person finally gives in to the urge to check with the phone, now less than the time it takes for the light to change over. It is remarkable how often I see someone sitting in the normal driving position and then, fifteen seconds prior the light changing, they begin the smart phone ritual, occasionally missing the light altogether - often they repeat the ritual at the next few lights. The second thing I have learned, the need to survive is less than the need to check the phone in any given moment, as evidenced by the weaving, erratic driving, the incomprehensible stopping and so on in the car no matter the speed, location or conditions of the road.

The car is a three thousand pound weapon. You can kill another and or yourself if you cannot negotiate the physics of a car. In America we hand out a license to drive to anyone who can identify the two pedals and the windshield. People who drive do not have to know the slightest thing about the physics of car and few do. Yet, they feel they

can negotiate this potential killer with ease while using the smartphone. In a room with one hundred people, not one person, not one, will feel that texting and driving is safe, and yet, most of those same people will do it often. The cognitive dissonance is the issue here, how can people “know” that something goes against their ability to survive and yet, gleefully indulge in it? Even drug addicts use more common sense with their addiction. In fact, it is clear to me the phone in one’s possession is as addictive as any narcotic. I don’t think there are any studies to prove this, but having spent some time around addicts of varying sorts, I can safely say that smartphone people demonstrate the same characteristics of those addicted to any drug, only they indulge every few seconds, as opposed to even the most ardent addict. Watch how often someone checks the phone, notice how they feel the need to respond to each communication immediately. Notice the relief they demonstrate when they send a text or answer the phone, as opposed to when they don’t address the phone’s alert immediately.

The most shocking and inexplicable example of the end of the survival instinct due to the smartphone is the story of Ahmed Assem. Assem, an Egyptian man was shot by a sniper he was filming with his smartphone, a sniper who was firing into the very same crowd Ahmed was standing in! Ten years ago sniper fire meant run, now it means record and post to facebook?

Which leads me back to Yosemite and my experience of the world famous national park. What I saw were people viewing the Disneyland of natural parks through their smartphone, encouraging their blood to roll up like coins, altering their brain blood glucose, changing their moral compass in the face of this magnificence. Instead of taking in the five sense wonder that is the majestic beauty of nature at its finest, people were viewing it on their two inch lcd screen. Instead of breathing in the wonderment of the valley, they were recording digital memories of an experience they were not having because they were too busy taking instagram photos. Instead of being in the moment, they were posting photos to their facebook page so they can tell their friends of the experience they would have had had they not been looking at the world through a two inch monitor. Ansel Adams, the definer of nature photography, set up shots for days, *feeling* the world of nature and attempting to express that feeling in a 2d image. Folks on my trip were snapping photos of anything and everything simply because they now seem to view their lives as an event to be seen after the fact, instead of one lived in the moment. This is progress? Can folks who are raised on this smartphone’s tit actually live a life, rather than record a life they haven’t lived appropriately?

In a story that fits somehow into this piece but I’m not sure how, I was looking for the address of a local Sushi restaurant when I happened on a Yelp review, one reviewer posted, clearly from his smartphone, “...I’ve been waiting twenty minutes and haven’t got my food yet, this place sucks.” The most inexplicable smartphone scenario can be seen in Billy Connolly’s very funny Route 66 travel program, where Billy receives a healing from a Native American Shaman who feels it is appropriate to answer the phone while performing the healing.

Viewing the world through the screen and the constant looking down at the screen has produced a very curious and deeply depressing thing, the reduction in the field of view. I have noticed that folks walking, or driving, while using the smartphone have reduced their field of view to about 80 degrees. At one time, way back in the 80's, folks had a field of view that was close to 180 degrees including a very decent peripheral view in working order, for those without vision issues. On top of that people had a sense of the world behind them, the cars, other humans walking, the muggers stalking them were within the range of the intuitive system of senses and sight. Now it seems the world of a smartphone user is just what is right in front of them. I find that people who look up from the phone are prone to crashing into others or fixed objects as they act like people with macular degeneration. People often look up from the phone, shocked, even disoriented by the world around them, as if they awake from a momentary trance to find they are not where they thought they were. Youtube is full of recorded incidents of cellphone "fails," people failing to properly interact with the world their body is in due to smartphone screen induced myopia. And this is okay with these folks, stumbling, crashing, disorientation is now a perfectly acceptable way to walk through life.

The multitask has been taken to levels unthinkable five years ago. Folks seem to never be where they are. One woman I see at the gym is riding the bike, watching the TV, talking on the phone and scrolling. What is she doing? She'd say "multitasking" and I said she's doing several things badly. People order food while taking cellphone meetings, people take meetings while texting mom, people grab the phone while shagging their mate, people text while riding a bike in a major traffic areas and people wander through the majestic beauty of Yosemite oblivious to anything but the phone in their hand. This madness, absolute madness.

Communications with people, living people, other human beings like me, is now primarily being done through an agent. Consider this, way back, say in the 80's and further back, we talked with each other directly either in person, or through a connection that put a relatively full spectrum of ourselves in contact - the analog phone. These connections let the full range of expression come through, inflection, feeling, sixth sense, emotion etc. a distinction akin to vinyl music vs. the CD, live vs. recorded. We used writing as well, but it was mostly well thought out correspondence and the delivery mechanism was done without alteration (we didn't write out fleeting thoughts for the world to see). Now our words, our feelings, our images are all delivered through an agent, a soulless third party, who takes what we intend to say and reduces it to a digital representation packet then transfers that "information packet" through a network, to another third party device which it then reassembles for us to hear or see.

Companies are agenting our interactions through soulless machines, corporate machines that even confer with government agency machines on every "digital information packet" sent before it gets to us. If I had come to you twenty five years ago and said, "everything you express in a communication will be agented by a third party,

you will no longer connect directly with people, but via corporate and government exchanges who will see to it your information is delivered,” would you have accepted this? And yet we have. The smartphone invasion has turned my intimate conversations with my loved one into a corporate property governed by each companies complex “terms of service,” and subject to shareholder whims and notions of morality. Your communications are owned, at least in part, if not fully, by the agencies that deliver them and are vetted by an unknown number of agencies prior to you ever receiving them. Oh sure, it happens in a flash, so what’s the big deal? Are my communications altered in some way? What if a key word in my communication was altered, say the word “now” was turned into the word “then,” or a “yes” was turned into “no,” how would I even know? Will the third party ever decide to ban, edit or expunge my communications, or my access to other’s communications?

Now google glass...

All of this makes me depressed, the world that existed prior y2k is gone, it is now a figment of my imagination. I can live with most of it, oddly enough I find the death of the survival instinct somewhat amusing. I actually laughed when I saw the video of the woman take a plunge into the fountain in the shopping mall while texting preparing this piece. I’m glad the government clings to Alexander Heit’s last text as if it will save the world from implosion. I can find some humor in the sadness of it all, but what I can’t live with is the way in which this thing has altered the world of my in person human interactions. It is now common for me to stand and speak with someone, in person, while they continually check the phone for more important messages then the ones coming from my mouth. Many of my interactions remind me of exchanges I had with drug addicts, always feeling I’m the intermission between hits. It occurred to me the other day that this is the greatest insult ever levied on me.

While having a fifteen minute conversation with my friend of thirty years, he looked at his smartphone four times. Each time his actions said to me, in no uncertain terms, “if you were not in front of me you’d be more important.” It was clear he was saying, “a text from you would be addressed right now, but the fact that you are standing here in front of me is less imperative.” Then, he actually answered the Motorhead ringtone to take a call to which he answered by saying, “who’s this?” It was then I knew the physical me was no longer a viable option in the relationship, the digital me was more important, in fact, the digital everyone was more important to him: the text me, the facebook me, the email me, the instagram me, the twitter me, the cellphone to cellphone call me. Sadly I don’t use a cellphone, don’t use facebook, twitter, text, or anything in which people communicate with now, except email - I have a traditional landline which I’m sure infuriates the phone company. Where does that leave me, foolishly longing for the days in which I talked, interacted, connected with people in Rockwellian way? I have lost the ability to enjoy that emotional bond I got when I bellyache laughed with another, as that great joy in life has now been replaced with typing “lol?”

Albert Einstein: “I fear the day that technology will surpass our human interaction. The world will have a generation of idiots.”

**a remarkable bit of kismet is associated with this article. Upon finishing it, I took the dog for a walk and to my chagrin a woman had crashed her car into a neighboring house, “distracted while driving...” was the official cause.

By Allen Ritter, This article is copyrighted 2012. You are not free to publish this work without contacting the author first at a_ritter@rocketmail.com