The promising of phones in hand

The promise of mobile has led to the growth of cell phones as a key feature of our daily lives. However, this growth has also brought about concerns regarding the impact of these devices on our lives and relationships.

The proliferation of cell phones has led to a shift in communication, with people using phones to keep in touch with friends, family, and colleagues. However, this shift has also led to concerns about the impact of phone use on our mental health and relationships.

One concern is that the constant use of cell phones can lead to addiction, with people becoming increasingly reliant on their devices. This can lead to a lack of face-to-face interaction and a decrease in the quality of relationships.

Another concern is the impact of cell phones on our health. Studies have shown that excessive phone use can lead to physical symptoms such as headaches and eye strain.

The proliferation of cell phones has also led to concerns about the impact of phone use on our work. With the rise of remote work, people are spending more time on their devices, which can lead to decreased productivity and a lack of work-life balance.

In conclusion, while cell phones have brought about many benefits, they also present challenges that need to be addressed. It is important to find a balance between the use of cell phones and other forms of communication to ensure a healthy and fulfilling life.

Christine Rosen

Our Cell Phones, Ourselves
COMMUNICATION DELINQUENTS

The ease of mobile communication does not guarantee positive results for all those who use it, of course, and the list of unintended negative consequences from cell phone use continues to grow. The BBC world service reported in 2001, “senior Islamic figures in Singapore have ruled that Muslim men cannot divorce their wives by sending text messages over their mobile phones.” (Muslims can divorce their wives by saying the word “talaq,” which means “I divorce you,” three times).

Concerns about the dangers of cell phone use while driving have dominated public discussion of cell phone risks. A 2001 study by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimated that “54 percent of drivers ‘usually’ have some type of wireless phone in their vehicle with them” and that this translates into approximately 600,000 drivers “actively using cell phones at any one time” on the road. Women and drivers in the suburbs were found to talk and drive more often, and the highest national use rates were observed for drivers of vans and sport utility vehicles. New York, New Jersey, and Washington, D.C. all require drivers to use hands-free technology (headsets or speakers) when talking on the cell.

Cell phones can also play host to viruses, real and virtual. A 2003 study presented at the American Society for Microbiology’s conference on infectious disease found that twelve percent of the cell phones used by medical personnel in an Israeli hospital were contaminated with bacteria. (Another recent cell phone-related health research result, purporting a link between cell phone use and decreased sperm counts, has been deemed inconclusive.) The first computer virus specifically targeting cell phones was found in late June. As The Guardian reported recently, anti-virus manufacturers believe “the mobile phone now mirrors how the Net has developed over the past two or three years—blighted with viruses as people got faster connections and downloaded more information.”

With technology comes addiction, and applicable neologisms have entered the lexicon—such as “crackberry,” which describes the dependence exhibited by some BlackBerry wireless users. In a 2001 article in New York magazine about feuding couples, one dueling duo, Dave and Brooke, traded barbs about her wireless addictions. “I use it when I’m walking down the street,” Brooke said proudly. “She was checking her voice mail in the middle of a Seder!” was Dave’s exasperated response. “Under the table!” Brooke clarified. A recent survey conducted by the Hospital of Seoul National University found that “3 out of 10 Korean high school students who carry mobile phones are reported to be addicted” to them. Many reported feeling anxious without their phones and many displayed symptoms of repetitive stress injury from obsessive text messaging.

Technology has also led to further incursions on personal privacy. Several websites now offer “candid photography,” peeping-Tom pictures taken in locker rooms, bathrooms, and dressing rooms by unscrupulous owners of cell phone cameras. Camera phones pose a potentially daunting challenge to privacy and security; unlike old-fashioned cameras, which could be confiscated and the film destroyed, digital cameras, including those on cell phones, allow users to send images instantaneously to any e-mail address. The images can be stored indefinitely, and the evidence that a picture was ever taken can be destroyed.

WILL YOU PLEASE BE QUIET, PLEASE?

Certain public interactions carry with them certain unspoken rules of behavior. When approaching a grocery store checkout line, you queue behind the last person in line and wait your turn. On the subway, you make way for passengers entering and exiting the cars. Riding on the train, you expect the interruptions of the ticket taker and the periodic crackling blare of station announcements. What you never used to expect, but must now endure, is the auditory abrasion of a stranger arguing about how much he does, indeed, owe to his landlord. I’ve heard business deals, lovers’ quarrels, and the most unsavory gossip. I’ve listened to strangers discuss in excruciating detail their own and others’ embarrassing medical conditions; I’ve heard the details of recent real estate purchases, job triumphs, and awful dates. (The only thing I haven’t heard is phone sex, but perhaps it is only a matter of time.) We are no longer overhearing, which implies accidentally stumbling upon a situation where two people are talking in presumed privacy. Now we are all simply hearing. The result is a world where social space is overtaken by anonymous, unavoidable background noise—a quotidian narration that even in its more interesting moments rarely rises above the tone of a penny dreadful. It seems almost cruel, in this context, that Motorola’s trademarked slogan for its wireless products is “Intelligence Everywhere.”

Why do these cell phone conversations bother us more than listening to two strangers chatter in person about their evening plans or listening to a parent scold a recalcitrant child? Those conversations are quantitatively greater, since we hear both sides of the discussion—so why are they nevertheless experienced as qualitatively different? Perhaps it is because cell phone users harbor illusions about being alone or assume a degree of privacy that the circumstances don’t actually allow. Because cell phone talkers are not interacting with the world around them, they come to believe that the world around them isn’t really there and surely shouldn’t intrude. And when the cell phone user commandeers the space by talking, he or she sends a very clear message to others that they are powerless to insist on their own use of the space. It is a passive-aggressive but extremely effective tactic.
we cannot simply blame it on the phone. the section of this article expresses the idea that the advent of smartphones has led to an increase in social isolation and decreased face-to-face interaction. the author suggests that while smartphones provide a means to stay connected, they also contribute to the problem of social isolation. the article notes that the trend of checking one's phone over dinner and during conversations has become common. the author concludes that while technology has its benefits, it is important to be mindful of how we use it and to foster meaningful interactions with others.

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Worse, the etiquette experts offer diversions rather than standards, encouraging alternatives to calling that nevertheless still succeed in removing people from the social space. "Use text messaging," is number 7 on Whitmore's Ten Tips for the Cell Phone Savvy.

These attempts at etiquette training also evade another reality: the decline of accepted standards for social behavior. In each of us lurks the possibility of a Jekyll-and-Hyde-like transformation, its trigger the imposition of some arbitrary rule. The problem is that, in the twenty-first century, with the breakdown of hierarchies and manners, all social rules are arbitrary. "I don't think we have to worry about people being rude intentionally," Whitmore told Wireless Week. "Most of us simply haven't come to grips with the new responsibilities wireless technologies demand." But this seems foolishly optimistic. A psychologist quoted in a story by UPI recently noted the "baffling sense of entitlement" demonstrated by citizens in the wireless world. "They don't get sheepish when shushed," he marveled. "You're the rude one." And contra Ms. Whitmore, there is intention at work in this behavior, even if it is not intentional rudeness. It is the intentional removal of oneself from the social situation in public space. This removal, as sociologists have long shown, is something more serious than a mere manners lapse. It amounts to a radical disengagement from the public sphere.

**SPECTATOR SPORT**

We know that the reasons people give for owning cell phones are largely practical—convenience and safety. But the reason we answer them whenever they ring is a question better left to sociology and psychology. In works such as Behavior in Public Spaces, Relations in Public, and Interaction Ritual, the great sociologist Erving Goffman mapped the myriad possibilities of human interaction in social space, and his observations take on a new relevance in our cell phone world. Crucial to Goffman's analysis was the notion that in social situations where strangers must interact, the individual is obliged to "come into play" upon entering the situation and to stay "in play" while in the situation. Failure to demonstrate this presence sends a clear message to others of one's hostility or disrespect for the social gathering. It effectively turns them into "non-persons." Like the piqued lover who rebuffs her partner's attempt to caress her, the person who removes himself from the social situation is sending a clear message to those around him: I don't need you.

Although Goffman wrote in the era before cell phones, he might have judged their use as a "subordinate activity," a way to pass the time such as reading or doodling that could and should be set aside when the dominant activity resumes. Within social space, we are allowed to perform a range of these secondary activities, but they must not impose upon the social group as a whole or require so much attention that they remove us from the social situation altogether. The opposite appears to be true today. The group is expected never to impinge upon—indeed, it is expected to tacitly endorse by enduring—the individual's right to withdraw from social space by whatever means he or she chooses: cell phones, BlackBerrys, iPods, DVDs screened on laptop computers. These devices are all used as a means to refuse to be "in" the social space; they are technological cold shoulders that are worse than older forms of subordinate activity in that they impose visually and auditorily on others. Cell phones are not the only culprits here. A member of my family, traveling recently on the Amtrak train from New York, was shocked to realize that the man sitting in front of her was watching a pornographic movie on his laptop computer—a movie whose raunchy scenes were reflected in the train window and thus clearly visible to her. We have allowed what should be subordinate activities in social space to become dominant.

One of the groups Goffman studied keenly were mental patients many of them residents at St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington, D.C., and his comparisons often draw on the remarkable disconnect between the behavior of people in normal society and those who had been institutionalized for mental illness. It is striking in revisiting Goffman's work how often people who use cell phones seem to be acting more like the people in the asylum than the ones in respectable society. Goffman describes "occult involvements," for example, as any activity that undermines others' ability to feel engaged in social space. "When an individual is perceived in an occult involvement, observers may not only sense that they are not able to claim him at the moment," Goffman notes, "but also feel that the offender's complete activity up till then has been falsely taken as a sign of participation with them, that all along he has been alienated from their world." Who hasn't observed someone sitting quietly, apparently observing the rules of social space, only to launch into loud conversation as soon as the cell phone rings? This is the pretense of social participation Goffman observed in patients at St. Elizabeth's.

Goffman called those who declined to respond to social overtures as being "out of contact," and said "this state is often felt to be full evidence that he is very sick indeed, that he is, in fact, cut off from all contact with the world around him." To be accessible meant to be available in the particular social setting and to act appropriately. Today, of course, being accessible means answering your cell phone, which brings you in contact with your caller, but "out of contact" in the physical social situation, be it a crosstown bus, a train, an airplane, or simply walking down the street.
TALK AND CONVERSATION

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But as trust is being built and bolstered moment by moment between individuals, public trust among strangers in social settings is eroding. We are strengthening and increasing our interactions with the people we already know at the expense of those who we do not. The result, according to Kenneth Gergen, is “the erosion of face-to-face community, a coherent and centered sense of self, moral bearings, depth of relationship, and the uprooting of meaning from material context: such are the dangers of absent presence.”

No term captures this paradoxical state more ably than the word “roam,” which appears on your phone when you leave an area bristling with wireless towers and go into the wilds of the less well connected. The word appears when your cell phone is looking for a way to connect you, but the real definition of roam is “to go from place to place without purpose or direction,” which has more suggestive implications. It suggests that we have allowed our phones to become the link to our purpose and the symbol of our status—without its signal we lack direction. Roaming was a word whose previous use was largely confined to describing the activities of herds of cattle. In her report on the use of mobile phones throughout the world, Sadie Plant noted, “according to the Oxford English Dictionary, one of the earliest uses of the word ‘mobile’ was in association with the Latin phrase mobile vulgus, the excitable crowd,” whence comes our word “mob.”

Convenience and safety—the two reasons people give for why they have (or “need”) cell phones—are legitimate reasons for using wireless technology; but they are not neutral. Convenience is the major justification for fast food, but its overzealous consumption has something to do with our national obesity “epidemic.” Safety spawned a bewildering range of anti-bacterial products and the overzealous prescription of antibiotics—which in turn led to disease-resistant bacteria.

One possible solution would be to treat cell phone use the way we now treat tobacco use. Public spaces in America were once littered with spittoons and the residue of the chewing tobacco that filled them, despite the disgust the practice fostered. Social norms eventually rendered public spitting déclassé. Similarly, it was not so long ago that cigarette smoking was something people did everywhere—in movie theaters, restaurants, trains, and airplanes. Non-smokers often had a hard time finding refuge from the clouds of nicotine. Today, we ban smoking in all but designated areas. Currently, cell phone users enjoy the same privileges smokers once enjoyed, but there is no reason we cannot reverse the trend. Yale University bans cell phones in some of its libraries, and Amtrak’s introduction of “quiet cars” on some of its routes has been eagerly embraced by commuters. Perhaps one day we will exchange quiet cars for wireless cars, and the majority of public space will revert to the quietly disconnected. In doing so, we might partially reclaim something higher even than healthy lungs: civility.

This reclaiming of social space could have considerable consequences. As sociologist de Gournay has noted, “the telephone is a device ill suited to listening . . . it is more appropriate for exchanging information.” Considering Americans’ obsession with information—we are, after all, the “information society”—it is useful to draw the distinction. Just as there is a distinction between information and knowledge, there is a vast difference between conversation and talk.

Conversation (as opposed to “talk”) is to genuine sociability what courtship (as opposed to “hooking up”) is to romance. And the technologies that mediate these distinctions are important: the cell phone exchange of information is a distant relative of formal conversation, just as the Internet chat room is a far less compelling place to become intimate with another person than a formal date. In both cases, however, we have convinced ourselves as a culture that these alternatives are just as good as the formalities—that they are, in fact, improvements upon them.

“A conversation has a life of its own and makes demands on its own behalf,” Goffman wrote. “It is a little social system with its own boundary-making tendencies; it is a little patch of commitment and loyalty with its own heroes and its own villains.” According to census data, the percentage of Americans who live alone is the highest it has ever been in our country’s history, making a return to genuine sociability and conversation more important than ever. Cell phones provide us with a new, but not necessarily superior means of communicating with each other. They encourage talk, not conversation. They link us to those we know, but remove us from the strangers who surround us in public space. Our constant accessibility and frequent exchange of information is undeniably useful. But it would be a terrible irony if “being connected” required or encouraged a disconnection from community life—an erosion of the spontaneous encounters and everyday decencies that make society both civilized and tolerable.