

In the spring of 2013, a class of students learning about literacy and technology at Oregon State University became curious about the role cell phones, and especially smartphones, play in our everyday lives. We knew that 96% of undergraduates and graduate students own a cell phone. Fifty-six percent of American adults own a smartphone. And 31% of smartphone owners use their phone as their primary method of accessing the Web. But we wanted to know more about how people feel about their cell phones and about how people believe cell phones affect their lives. How much power do they have? How much power do we grant them? What do we think about how cell phones have changed our relationships to school, work, the world, ourselves, and each other? So we started asking questions -- questions like Does your smartphone help you to say I love you? Does your smartphone give you more or less control over your social life? Does your smartphone make you any smarter? In all, we sat down with over 65 people, including many students, and asked over 20 questions about their relationships with their cell phones, and recorded their responses with our own cell phones. These are some of their comments.

Title: Does your Smartphone Make you any Smarter?

A film by
ENG 495/595, Language, Technology, and Culture
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So, does your smartphone make you any smarter?

Umm...

Umm...

Umm...

Umm...

Ehhh... Uhh...

Umm...

(sigh).

(sigh).

Umm...

Let's see...

Oh my God, umm...

That's more difficult to answer, Um...

Like, (sigh).

Does your phone help you to say "I love you?"

Sure, yeah, it can convey that kind of message. I think that has to do with the intention of the sender, right, so if you're wanting to say "I love you" and can convey that message with your cell phone, I think it means as much.

I guess I say "I love you" on my phone a lot either via text or in person, but I don't think it really helps me communicate it more honestly, or fully, or genuinely.

I've been in a long distance relationship so there's FaceTime, and text messaging, and the opportunity to maybe talk, well the opportunity to talk at all, but also the opportunity to send messages and emails when the time change is such that we probably shouldn't be talking to each other vocally, because one of us is asleep or one of us is awake, so... it increases the sphere of time we can keep in touch with each other. I'm kinda sad to say, but yes my cell phone does help me to say, "I love you."

What do you do with your smartphone?

I mostly use my phone to communicate with my friends or other people, like collaborating on group projects or something.

I check email, I check the time, all the time. I take photos, I keep my files here – I use the Dropbox app.

I play games on it, I text on it, I have all kinds of apps that teach me things and make me smarter, like word of the day app, and crossword app, and poetry daily app.

I call my family, I text – mostly – I actually pay for minutes, so I text a lot.

Lots of text messaging, occasional phone calling, umm... I spend a lot of time looking up recipes.

I Instagram, I text with my mom and my sister, I mean, it's just... maps. It tells me where to go.

Social networks, Facebook, LinkedIn, uh... check up on email, umm... just a lot of different things.

Searching Reddit, Google Reader, umm... playing just a few games like Sudoku.

I... have Twitter on my phone, which I really love. I use my Twitter mostly as a news-feed.

Texts and calls, of course, and I check Facebook and Twitter.

I use it for texting and calling, but then also for browsing the Internet, and it's also kinda like my iPod now. I have all my music on there.

I have a couple of apps, not very many. Probably should have more to be hip.

I not only use it for, you know, just browsing the Web, but I also use it for, you know, communicating with people.

Does your phone link you to or separate you from reality?

Well it keeps, it gives you information at your fingertips, so if I want to know what the weather is outside right now without umm... having to check the TV or my computer or the Internet, then I can just check my phone.

It's more like an alternate reality, it's not really like... I don't know... I don't know how do describe it. It's basically, I guess, I don't know... what was the question again? Sorry.

It depends what you mean by reality. If you mean like real-world events, I mean it might know something's happening somewhere, but really you can feel kind of dissociated with reality because you're overstimulated with information.

Well, you get sucked into this phone that has new, different gadgets that are different than any other thing, supposedly.

I see people do a lot of things these days like riding the bus and stuff where they don't make eye contact and everything is all about the smartphone and sort of their head's locked into the virtual world and all around life is happening

I guess it's a huge problem for me and my friends also. We used to, well... when we went out to dinner, we used to chat a lot, but now everyone's looking at their cell phones.

I actually have strong feelings about that. I think that all this smart technology in some ways has made people less empathetic and feeling oriented.

Where normally you'd be sitting and thinking about where you are, observing things and processing them, I think that the tendency is to look down and look at a screen and control what that screen is showing.

Has your phone ever made you lonely?

No.

No.

Actually, yeah. I can remember a couple of times. One was when I was calling my brother who was currently in Washington. And I remember talking to him and having it cut out – and I kind of, well, I am officially separated from all of humanity. This is great.

Ahh, it's not really it's not an isolating tool. It's a, it helps you connect to people. I mean why would it isolate you?

It causes people to contact each other less on a personal level, because you automatically assume, through social media, which most people have on their smartphones, you know what's going on in their lives, even though they haven't contacted you.

Have you ever walked into anything while using your phone?

Mmm... I've had a few close calls.

I can't think of a specific time, but probably.

No.

Walk and talk, I'm OK, but walking and text messaging... you know?

What do you read on your phone?

I don't know if this counts, but occasionally I'll look up lyrics to songs and read them on my phone. I don't know if I've ever read literature on my phone. I don't think so.

I usually read a lot of forums or news and the forums usually pertain to interests like sports and similar things.

I read all kinds of things on my phone, I read my email, I read... sometimes I read poems on my phone.

I got a lot of notes and books on my phone, and I read Facebook, emails, and news.

I read news articles, stuff about the healthcare industry. I don't usually read Facebook and stuff like that, but uh, I actually read the news on my phone.

I think that because it's not tactile, and because it isn't only the piece of literature, it's not the same.

Have you ever intentionally spent a day away from your phone?

Well my phone... I've spent away from many days but my – I have two phones because I have a stupid phone and a smart phone. I'm never away from my smartphone, though I'm usually way from my dumb phone.

I haven't done that for awhile; usually, I just forget it.

Last summer I went on a backpacking trip. Probably the only time I spend a day away from my phone is when I'm camping.

I can't remember a time where I intentionally left my away for an entire day.

Probably in the last week or two. Umm, I don't always like to be connected to my phone and sometimes I will let it die in order to not have to deal with the world of obligations inside my telephone.

How do you feel when you forget your phone?

A lot times when I realized I forgot my phone, I feel kind of liberated. It's just so easy when you're out with somebody and they go to the bathroom to take out your phone and start talking on it. And when you don't have that option, it's sort of freeing. And I also get to feel smug because I'm the kind of person who doesn't have to look at her phone every five minutes, even though it's because I can't look at my phone every five minutes.

Uh, so I used to have a smartphone but unfortunately it broke and I can't restore it. And I'm starting to realize how much I really relied on my cell phone for everyday use.

I have been surprised that I get the sensation of excitement when I've left my phone behind because it means that I get to remember what the good old days were like.

I can't really find my way around places without the maps app. I have to communicate and my fiancé via Facebook chat so that she can get on her smartphone to be able to talk and so I really realize that I was pretty obsessed my smartphone.

The last time I spent maybe a month ago, when I forgot to charge my phone.

Sometimes like if I'm driving somewhere and I don't have it I get concerned, like if I run into car trouble, or lock my keys in my car something that I'm not going to be able to contact someone to be able to help me out.

I never forget my phone at home, actually, so uh, I think I would feel a bit of anxiety and I think it would also be wonderful at the same time... not to be reachable.

Personally, I hate my cell phone... and I try to weasel out of using it. When we moved back here in the states – when we lived in Europe, it seemed like more of a necessity.

Probably more so than I like to admit, I feel as though I've lost something very important and like I won't be able to get through the day as well as I could – which is total rubbish, but I still feel that way. It makes me very nervous to forget my cell phone.

Have you seen students use their cell phones to cheat?

Umm... I haven't.

No, but I'm sure that they do. But I have not directly witnessed it where I was sure that's what was going on.

I've seen people pass their phone from person to person.

I haven't. I know that they text in my class and I know that they surf the Web in my class and they're horrible at hiding it.

No, not to cheat, that I know of. I've seen them use it in class.

I don't know if they use cell phones to cheat in the sense of a test and they look up answers, but more to cheat out of being there.

I don't know if I've actually seen it happen, but I know that it probably does happen.

I don't mind if they use it before I start lecturing or whatever, but once I start my lecture, if I see they have a smartphone out I always tell them to turn it off. I don't deal with cell phones well – I'm kind of old-fashioned that way.

When do you use your phone in class?

I feel like that's a trick question.

I use it for texting and for browsing online.

To text.

Mostly just to check and see if I've received a text message.

Occasionally, I will confirm some statistic, or fact, or word that we are arguing about.

I record every lecture with my phone and then if there's something that I want a picture

of, like a slide that I need to write down really quickly, I'll use it to take pictures, too.

Occasionally a teacher will ask to have anyone look up something.

I did use my phone during the film noir screenings, but, I mean, not during class.

Especially when teachers assign, as they do now, will assign PDFs or readings on BlackBoard, a lot of people will refer to their phones and actually, like, read quotes from the reading we're discussing.

Umm... it was generally just a big lecture, so the professor would be just talking, and distracted and it would be easy to just like look at my phone in my lap.

The professor, you know, gives lectures, it drags on, you stop paying attention, you pull out your phone and start texting.

Are you a cyborg?

No.

No.

Totally.

Umm... definition of cyborg?

I don't think so.

Not technically.

Technically, yeah.

Do cell phones make lying easier?

Make lying easier...

Umm... no. By texting?

I guess, I mean a little bit, right? I guess if you have a cell phone, I guess when I was a kid, when I was like a teenager, you would call from your friend's house and say I'm at my friend's and they could tell from the caller ID, like your parents could tell from the caller ID. With a cell phone, you can call and say I'm at my friend's house, but you could really be at the... Dairy Queen or something.

I don't see how it would be easier to lie.

I don't feel like I use it that way, and I don't think that people in my life use it that way.

Oh yeah it takes away the guilt factor completely. You don't have any inhibitions, you can lie your cheeks off.

It's like why would illegally downloading a song on the Internet be any different than stealing a CD from the store? They're both stealing, but one... you know? It's just, the Internet makes things feel a little guiltless.

I don't think so I can lie just as easily with my old phone through text.

Well, I read a statistic somewhere, I think it was in *The Atlantic*, that 30% of the people you see on the street either talking or texting on their cell phone are actually talking or texting to nobody and pretending to talk or text, so that sense I think 30% of the people must be lying.

Have you ever felt a “phantom vibration” from your cell phone?

Yes.

Yes.

Yes. It's freaky.

Does your cell phone give you more or less control over your social life?

Hmm... probably more control, considering that most people are online, now.

I guess you could say less control in that you're always available, theoretically.

You're able to stay in contact with people on a more regular basis, I would say.

A bit of both. I think there's more control because it's easier to coordinate outside of my home. Sort of, if I want to get together with friends, I can text them or I can check my email.

I would say both. I think in some ways more control, because I can check emails and look up things any time I have it with me.

Then again, it also kind of kills your social life, because you're focused on a little mechanical device rather than actual people. And I think actual people are better than a little phone.

I think there's so much you can do on the phone, but you miss interaction with people.

Does your phone make you more or less aware of social class?

More.

Umm... I just never thought of it as, this is something that will help me get to a certain class, just a tool to help me organize my life.

Not everyone is able to get a smartphone and having that kind of technology at your fingertips can definitely separate you from other people.

I think that was one of the reasons why I put off getting one for so long. Because I felt like there were better uses for that money.

I would say more in some way because makes me, like when I broke last smart phone for example. I was stressed because I didn't have money to buy a new one, and when you have one you can't really go back.

It was paying several hundred dollars for something that was replacing a thing I already had. So yeah, definitely more conscious of it.

Less. Less aware, and even just being less aware of my surroundings, you know? You just get lost in it.

As almost everyone in every class in most of our society has them now, umm.... For example, like, I'm from a super poor family, but I think that smartphones allow you to kind of pass.

Everybody, well not everybody, a lot of people have a cell phone. But it was like making that decision to go to the higher level of bill, have a more expensive bill, made me more aware of whether or not I was in a social class that could afford that.

Do you ever feel guilty when using your phone?

All the time. All the time. I feel guilty as a member of a social group, as a member of a community.

Um... no, because I imagine that if I used it more often I might, like if I was calling overseas or long distance and really didn't have the money or something.

Yes. I feel that I depend on it too much. Partly for entertainment, and when I can't fall asleep at night.

I feel guilty personally. Sometimes I feel guilty when I wake up in the morning because the first thing I do is reach for my cell phone and literally my eyes have not begun to focus yet and I sort of have to use my phone like this, but I still grab it first. So now when I wake up, the first thing I feel is guilty.

I feel guilty in a sense that it can sometimes remind me how addicted I can be to the act checking for things.

I feel guilty because sometimes when I use my phone, because I'm hurting my phone, because I have food on my fingers or something. It's like, oh, this is terrible for this computer you're supposed to treat like a newborn infant.

That's an interesting question, because it makes me think that some people must feel guilty about using their cell phone, but I don't.

I'm wracked with guilt because of this stupid cell phone. All the time.

What does your cell phone help you to remember?

It helps me to remember certain appointments that I have during the day.

I don't really get into programming my whole phone to, like, give me alarms and alerts and help me. As a matter of fact, I really don't like helpful appliances.

It helps me remember to get up because I set an alarm on my smartphone to tell me to wake up in the morning. It helps me to remember details about any, uhh... anything really, as long as I have access to Wikipedia from it.

It's interesting that you should say that because it didn't help me to remember something that I really wanted to do on Saturday night.

Birthdays...

It actually didn't help me, because I didn't I tell it to help me.

It doesn't help me to remember all that much, to be totally honest, because I don't use the calendar on it very actively.

What does your cell phone help you to forget?

I think it helps me forget and kind of release information that I would have otherwise kept my brain, right, like none of us remembers phone numbers anymore. I don't know my husband's phone number, because I never have to know it. Until I'm locked out of my

house without my phone. I mean someday I'll need to know it.

Smartphones take a lot of the weight off of the importance of remembering details and facts, umm... because you can look them up just as easily with the push of a button.

Oh, a lot. Umm...

I think that it's lowering our potential for short-term memory. So, what does it help you forget? Just about everything.

Does your smartphone make you any smarter?

No, I wouldn't say it's made me smarter, but it actually helps me a lot professionally.

Oh gosh. No... no. I don't think so.

Well, maybe. Maybe. It makes me seem like I really know what I'm talking about when I'm giving directions, even though that's not the case.

It's a tool you can utilize to maybe present yourself in a smarter way. You can prepare easier, but I think all that stuff is available in other ways.

I think so, I think being on Twitter actually is really important in the sense of whatever, well I don't think necessarily Twitter is important as much as finding news updates for yourself.

You know I can get on the Internet, you know, that much faster or get on email and remind myself of something or my calendar to remind myself of something, so I know that I'm not necessarily any smarter, but the people around me might think that I am because I have the information.

Umm... probably. I mean, I use it look things up... on Google. Which I guess technically Google is making me smarter, but whatever.

God no, dumber, if anything.

I would like to say yes, but probably not.

Because it does all the research for me, with Google and social skills are not as good, because I text everybody.

It depends on what you define as smart. It's what is is. What your definitions of is is.

No... umm... no.

It kind of, I don't know, your brain is a muscle. We don't remember phone numbers any more – I'm trying to kick myself of that of having to relax and oh, it's on my smartphone.

I don't think my actual intelligence due to having a smartphone, I think just my access to database knowledge changes. So, think of it as, is a person with an encyclopedia any smarter because they have an encyclopedia?

It's the same, it would be an extension of the same argument for computers making people smarter, which is they are for you use them the right way.

No. It makes them dumber.

No, I think it's made me, uhh... more distracted.

You don't have to know anything, you just look it up, look some random fact up. And all the stuff they look up online now is just random crap.

I think that is has help me to appear smarter to my friends, because whereas they used to think that I was just making things up, now they can verify my claims on their phones. So it makes me appear smarter, um, because I am right most of the time.

I think yes, in just like learning how to use it I feel creates neurons in the brain whenever you have one of those challenges.

I guess I would understand smarter as either having more knowledge or having more critical skills, and it gives me a way to pass on or quickly acquire knowledge but I don't necessarily retain that knowledge. And I don't think it's made me smarter in terms of critical reading skills or analytical skills. No.