

Imagine a World Without Smartphones

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When people think of the great attack on humanity, they often refer to 9.11, the start of the Iraq war, the COVID-19 operation, or the Russian invasion of Ukraine. But perhaps the deadliest attack on humanity is that of the “silent weapon” for a “quiet war” the smart phone. This weapon is aimed at the intellectual classes as a means of destroying their minds from within.

I have watched how the smart phone, combined with social media, has degraded the capacity of citizens to think for themselves over the last decade. This attack by the multinational corporations on our minds is far more dangerous than any bombing or shooting for it renders us passive, like GHB (gamma hydroxybutyric acid) (the date- rape drug) prone to exploitation and destruction.

The smart phone was launched in full force around 2009. I do not doubt that it had its positive aspects, and I was eventually forced to use one myself. Now you cannot travel without one in many parts of the world, and increasingly governments require them in order to be recognized as citizen. There is a sinister plan behind all of this, the great dumbing down, we call it.

The passivity and openness to suggestion that exposure to the smart phone induces is best described as a “*procedure of conditioning*,” to use the term of the German philosopher

Günther Anders.

Anders wrote about a previous bid for totalitarian rule that was remarkably successfully, and never completely ended,

“Massenregie im Stile Hitlers erübrigt sich: Will man den Menschen zu einem Niemand machen (sogar stolz darauf, ein Niemand zu sein), dann braucht man ihn nicht mehr in Massenfluten zu ertränken; nicht mehr in einen, aus Masse massiv hergestellten, Bau einzubetonieren. Keine Entprägung, keine Entmachtung des Menschen als Menschen ist erfolgreicher als diejenige, die die Freiheit der Persönlichkeit und das Recht der Individualität scheinbar wahrt. Findet die Prozedur des „conditioning“ bei jedermann gesondert statt: im Gehäuse des Einzelnen, in der Einsamkeit, in den Millionen Einsamkeiten, dann gelingt sie noch einmal so gut. Da die Behandlung sich als „fun“ gibt; da sie dem Opfer nicht verrät, daß sie ihm Opfer abfordert; da sie ihm den Wahn seiner Privatheit, mindestens seines Privattraums, beläßt, bleibt sie vollkommen diskret.”

(Günther Anders, Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen, Beck, München 1961, p. 104)

Here's the English translation:

“The stage-managing of masses that Hitler specialized in has become superfluous: if one wants to transform a man into a nobody (and even make him proud to be a nobody), it is no longer necessary to drown him in a mass, or to bury him in a cement construction mass-produced by masses. No depersonalization, no loss of the ability to be a man is more effective than the one that apparently preserves the freedom of the personality and the rights of the individual. If the procedure of conditioning takes place in a special way in the home of every person—in the individual home, in isolation, in millions of isolated units—the result will be perfect. The treatment is absolutely discreet, since it is presented as

fun, the victim is not told that he must make any sacrifices and he is left with the illusion of his privacy or, at least, of his private space.”

Here is my article on the smart phone from the Korea Times published in 2018. I softened up my criticism at the time to reach a broader audience.

“Imagine Korea without smartphones”

Korea Times

December 2, 2018

Emanuel Pastreich

When I make this suggestion, the response I receive from Koreans is one of intense fascination. But the assumption they make is that I am going to describe a futuristic “smart city” in which we no longer will use smart phones because information will be projected on to our eyeglasses, or our retinas, or perhaps relayed directly to our brain via an implanted chip.

But I mean exactly what I say. The unrelenting takeover of our brains and of our society by the smartphone is taking an ominous turn.

Each day I watch almost every person on the subway lost in their smartphones, and increasingly lacking empathy for those around them as a result. They are mesmerized by video games; they flip quickly past photographs of chocolate cakes and cafe lattes, or fashionable dresses and shoes, or watch humorous short videos.

Few are reading careful investigative reporting, let alone books, that address the serious issues of our time. Nor are they debating with each other about how Korea will respond to the crisis of climate change, the risk of a nuclear arms race (or nuclear war) between the United States, Russia and

China. Most media reporting is being dumbed down, treated as a form of entertainment, not a duty to inform the public.

Few people are sufficiently focused these days even to comprehend the complex geopolitical issues of the day, let alone the content of the bills pending in the National Assembly.

We are watching a precipitous decline in political awareness and of commitment to common goals in South Korea. And I fear that the smartphone, along with the spread of a social media that encourages impulsive and unfocused responses, is playing a significant role in this tragedy.

What do those smartphones do? We are told that smartphones make our lives more convenient and give us access to infinite amounts of information. IT experts are programming smartphones to be even more responsive to our needs and to offer even more features to make our lives more comfortable.

But Nicholas Carr's book "The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to our Brains" presents extensive scientific evidence that the internet as a whole, and smartphones in particular, are in fact reprogramming our brains, encouraging the neurons to develop lasting patterns for firing that encourage quick responses but that make contemplation and deep thought difficult.

Over time, we are creating a citizenship through that technology that is incapable of grasping an impending crisis and unable or unwilling to propose and implement solutions.

If smartphones are reprogramming our brains so that we are drawn to immediate gratification, but lose our capacity for deeper contemplation, for achieving an integrated understanding of the complexity of human society, and of

nature, what will become of us?

But consumption, not understanding, let alone wisdom, is the name of the game for smartphones.

In the case of the worsening quality of the air in Korea, I observe a disturbing passivity, and also a painful failure of citizens to identify the complex factors involved. Even highly educated people seem not to have thought carefully about the exact factors behind the emissions of fine dust in Korea, and in China, and how that pollution is linked to the deregulation of industry, or to their behavior as consumers.

That is to say those phenomena in society have been broken down into discrete elements, like postings on Facebook, and that no overarching vision of complex trends is ever formed in the mind.

We float from one stimulating story to the next, like a butterfly flitting from one nectar-laden flower to another. We come away from our online readings with a vague sense that something is wrong, but with no deep understanding of what exactly the problem is, how it relates to our actions, and no game plan for how to solve it.

There is a powerful argument to be made that certain technologies that can alter how we perceive the world should be limited in their use if there is reason to believe they affect the core of the democratic process. Democracy is not about voting so much as the ability to understand complex changes in society, in the economy and in politics over time.

Without such an ability to think for ourselves, we will slip into an increasingly nightmare world, although we may never notice what happened.

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