

NOBODY SHOULD EVER PULL A PHONE OR TABLET OUT ON A DATE

Put your phone down! How a growing backlash is calling out our terrible tech manners

Save 48

The sudden loss of our manners where phones are concerned has not gone entirely unremarked CREDIT: LAUREN HURLEY/PA



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How many times have you watched with distaste as a parent ignores their young child beside them while mindlessly scanning their phone? Yes, we've all spotted them at it, and yes, how we've sighed and tut-tutted.

Next question: how many times have your eyes been glued to your own mobile screen while ignoring those in the room with you? Come on, be honest now. Few among us can claim we've consistently avoided such conduct.

It's known as phubbing: the antisocial practice of snubbing someone you're with to look at your smartphone instead. You've probably been variously a victim and a culprit, and for the past few years it's gone largely unpunished.

New research from Ofcom finds that, on average, people check their smartphones once every 12 minutes during their

waking hours. We are, it appears to have been universally agreed, addicted.

But while the latest figures from the telecoms regulator apparently confirm our dependency, there has been a less noticeable tug in the opposite direction of late. The growing social stigma surrounding phone overuse has been gradually building, as evidenced first of all by the coining of the handy “phubbing” portmanteau a few years back, to name the widespread problem. In other words, the sudden loss of our manners where phones are concerned has not gone entirely unremarked. And in the last few months the backlash, it seems, has gone mainstream.

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June CREDIT: KARWAI TANG/ WIREIMAGE

As poster boys for a trend go, it doesn't get much more mainstream than Simon Cowell, who in June told a Sunday

newspaper: “I literally have not been on my phone for 10 months.” Full of the joys of phone deprivation, the music mogul spoke of having consequently become “more aware of the people around me and way more focused”, and bemoaned those who spend meetings - in real life, with actual people - staring at their phones. Giving it up “really is good for you,” he added, as if in disbelief that emancipation from enslavement by tech could be anything other than painful.

Then, amid great fanfare, Apple itself jumped on board. At its annual developers' conference the same month, the tech giant announced a range of apps that limit time spent on iPhones and allow parents to set device "allowances". The new tools would warn iPhone and iPad users if they were spending too long on their devices, while iOS 12 would include a timer that would lock users out of apps after a certain period.

Apple were not the first in their field to tap into growing concerns about obsessive phone use. Google announced something similar in May, with warnings to discourage users from long YouTube binges and options to receive a single daily summary of notifications. Various apps, such as BreakFree and RealizD, can also help measure our smartphone addiction.

How ironic, you might snort, that the very companies that profit so much from our habit are now offering us a helping hand out. Nor did the irony of phone relinquishment by Cowell - a man whose television talent show *The X Factor* relied on viewers using their phones to vote for their preferred acts - go unmentioned. Echoes, perhaps, of Philip Morris International, the tobacco giant, setting itself up as the architect of “a smoke-free future”, as it did earlier this year.

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Yet it's hard to deny there's a burgeoning shame around devoting too much time to your phone. A number of restaurants have been catching on, too. Last November, Grand Central Chelmsford, an American eatery, introduced phone-free Fridays, a weekly fixture in which customers received 10 per cent off their bill if they put their phones away in an envelope for the duration of their dinner. The deal, brought in after the director of the business dined at Grand Central and noticed how many clients were on their phones while eating, was a resounding success.

"Most customers wanted to do it," says Chelsea Day, the manager. "Only about one per cent said no. It was a bit of a challenge for everyone but people found it great because they could connect with their families again. The



atmosphere also grew slightly louder as people were talking and laughing more.”

Earlier this year, the Fat Boar pub and restaurant in Wrexham announced a similar scheme - mobile-free Monday - offering diners a 25 per cent discount on their food bill if they locked up their mobile phones at the door, while in 2016, a bar called the Gin Tub in Hove, Sussex, installed silver foil in the walls and copper wire mesh in the ceiling to keep the place mobile phone signal-free. "I want people to socialise with the people they are with, rather than the people they are not with," the landlord, Steve Tyler, said at the time.

This idea of people “reconnecting” with each other by keeping their phones out of sight is no cod psychology either. In 2012, two studies at Essex University found that if a mobile is even visible during a conversation, it causes

people to feel less positive towards their interlocutor.

According to the researchers, the sight of our phones may automatically trigger thoughts about wider social networks, reducing in turn the degree of empathy and understanding in face-to-face interactions.

 Eddie Redmayne temporarily ditched his iPhone to 'live in the moment'

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Although Ofcom's study paints a picture of a nation still very much obsessed with their devices, the tide could possibly be turning. Googling the phrase "why I ditched my smartphone" yields more than 17,000 results. And before Cowell there was Steve Hilton, David Cameron's former aide who famously refused to own a smartphone (despite co-founding a tech start-up). Eddie Redmayne, the actor, also ditched his iPhone to "live in the moment", though he

later returned to the device to “master a healthier relationship” with it.

More recently we’ve heard manifold stories of phone users swapping their smartphones for old Nokias, describing how the downgrade helped them reclaim their lives. If this sounds like using methadone to come off heroin, then the parallel isn’t entirely outlandish: the idea that we’re genuinely addicted to our smartphones is supported by a growing body of evidence. There’s even a name for this too: nomophobia, a shorthand for “no mobile phone phobia” - the fear of being without your device.

If the problem appears to be out of control, it’s worth remembering this: in the grand scheme of things, mobile phone use is still today a habit very much in its infancy. As etiquette expert William Hanson points out, it often takes a

little time for society to habituate to new technologies and work out the optimum way to use them.

 Steve Hilton, David Cameron's former aide, famously refused to own a smartphone

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“If you look at the conventional telephone, the etiquette around that evolved,” he says. “Then, when the mobile phone first came in, people would shout into it, ‘I’m on a train!’ You don’t get that now; society adapts. But go to any high street coffee shop or restaurant, look around and you’ll see two people who’ve got together [to socialise] but one or both are on their phones.”

According to Hanson, we no longer need tolerate such phubbing. “If someone is being rude enough to sit there on their phone in front of you, I don’t think it’s rude for the phubbed person to politely call them out on it,” he says.

“For example, you could ask them ‘Is everything alright?’ If

they continue, you can say, ‘shall we rearrange?’” Drawing their attention to their behaviour is likely to be sufficient, he suggests.

Just as bellowing, Dom Joly-style, into our mobiles is no longer socially acceptable, devoting obsessive attention to them may before long attract the same social shame. After all, if we’ve learnt anything from recent tech history it’s that where Apple goes, the rest of us follow.

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