• Miriam Cates

Smartphones are destroying our sense of common decency

Selfies at St Peter's Basilica show just how far our obsession with these devices has gone

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Since the death of Pope Francis, many people have flocked to Rome to pay their respects, crowding into St Peter's Basilica to see his body on display in a simple, open casket. Shockingly, some visitors have taken selfies on their phones alongside the corpse, which has provoked international criticism.

This conduct has been decried as outrageous, a violation of cultural norms such as respect for the dead and reverence for sacred places. Yet Vatican Selfie-Gate is just another example of how smartphones have upended expectations about social behaviour.

The selfie craze can be hugely disruptive. Walking over Westminster Bridge in the height of summer is like negotiating an obstacle course as one is forced to navigate around distracted, stationary tourists while trying not to "photo-bomb" their selfies or knock anyone into the Thames.

The growing nuisance of playing loud music through mobile phones on buses and trains also causes widespread irritation. Liberal Democrat leader Sir Ed Davey's proposal to issue £1,000 fines to those who selfishly play music on public transport will no doubt attract widespread support.

From pedestrians who never look up from their devices to loud personal conversations broadcast on buses, mobile phones have transformed our public spaces, and not for the better. It's easy to rail against "anti-social" Gen Z or "selfish" commuters but I know I'm often as guilty as anyone. Because although our culture has changed, human nature hasn't.

In fact, human nature very much explains our current predicament. Selfie-taking reflects the age-old impulse to <u>document our experiences and share them with others</u>. In the past we had public artists or official photographers to document important events. In 2025, in our pockets and in our handbags, we all have the means to record anything at any time. And the temptation to do so can be irresistible. Being distracted by our phones is also the natural response of the human brain to an addictive technology that by its very design provides far more stimulation than the world around us.

Anti-social behaviour flourishes when our natural selfish human impulses are not kept in check by commonly accepted boundaries, stigma and cultural norms. These norms have been greatly eroded in recent years, but we cannot (entirely) blame mobile phones. A decline in public religion, the <u>disaster of multiculturalism</u> and the erosion of parental authority all preceded the invention of smartphones and provided fertile ground for anti-social phone culture to take hold.

Yet even without the backdrop of our fraying social fabric, we should not be surprised at the transformational impact of smartphones. Just like in previous technological revolutions such as the invention of the printing press, industrialisation, or the advent of the motor car, mobile phones have been extraordinarily disruptive to our way of life. It is often technology – not ideas – that drives cultural change.

So what next? The current situation is becoming intolerable. But smartphones are not going away and neither would we want them to. For adults, there are a great many benefits; digital maps, online train timetables and remote working are all useful and life-enhancing. But how do we reinvent social etiquette for the mobile phone era? The answer lies

in a combination of carrot and stick, a blend of rules, legislation and the application of social stigma to those who don't fall into line. Financial penalties for music blasters are a great idea. Shops, restaurants and tourist attractions could implement "no phones" policies on their premises. And we could all be a bit braver in employing disapproving looks and polite requests.

The most effective step would be to put age restrictions on the use of smartphones and social media. Just as factory work, driving cars and smoking tobacco were all (eventually) outlawed for children, so we must recognise that smartphones are not safe for the young. Without the addictive temptation of smartphones in their pockets we have at least the chance to socialise the next generation into understanding the benefits of face-to-face interaction and how to behave well in public.
We must not be fatalistic. Throughout history, humanity has demonstrated an extraordinary ability to recalibrate in the wake of technological disruption. But it takes more than just outrage to rebuild; social restoration will require responsible citizens prepared to firmly call out anti-social behaviour and model good manners in public.