

The Devilish Draw of Tech Devices



By Sidney Secular

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If you're caught up in the digital world, you may need to demote your devices since they may be – or become – a device of the devil. Around 2006, the morbid mania of manipulating bytes began to chew away at people's time and attention spans. That was when the Blackberry began to draw people into "texting," a means of "communication" that soon became a status symbol among first the nerds and then the herds. You *had* to "text" or you felt that there was a black mark against you among intelligent people – and even your friends. I also remember, however, a very colorful (and disgusting) photo taken of a fat man who was texting while driving when his car – and himself! – were cut in half by a truck! Very striking indeed and somewhat prophetic!

Nonetheless, possessing a Blackberry made one feel like an ersatz superpower. There was the belief that one had an Alexandrian library in one's pocket ready at a moment's notice to look up any fact, settle any dispute, or communicate with anyone! And this hyper-awareness was hyped to the heavens by those who created this marvelous instrument of 21st Century communications wizardry. Some of us in the senior set assumed that the novelty would wear off – eventually – but it never did and people were drawn ever deeper into their illusions and, worse, into their *delusions*!

The i-phone released in 2007 enabled the user to access Twitter, thus drawing people into becoming what used to be called "twits," not a compliment by any means at least at that time. Yet, the word became a badge of honor instead of a "put down" and folks spent their time tweeting away instead of being involved in far more productive activity. The result of all of this "technology" was that the time people spent on their phones kept creeping up and up and up, sometimes to 6 or 7 hours (or more) a day! People slept with their phones next to their beds lest they lose some expected (or unexpected) call or otherwise be deprived of time spent on their heady new activities! Being an older person, when the phenomena first appeared, I seriously believed that society was undergoing a plague of the mentally disturbed. When I was young, talking to oneself *out loud* was not a sign of mental health. Suddenly, wherever one went, one was surrounded by people apparently talking to themselves when, of course, they were conversing on the phone with another addict!


Phone usage crossed the line to the point at which it was definitely dysfunctional in a normal society. Surrounded by people speaking to open space made one feel transported into another reality. In the meantime, "social media" – a type of technology that did not require a phone but could use that appliance, was providing platforms that were making some people anti-social, irritated and angry – especially when they were communicating with those with whom they had political and cultural disagreements. This hostile foundation eventually bled and led into the blue vs. red dichotomy that migrated from individuals to groups and even States and nations. Eventually, as normal human interaction was restricted by technology, attention spans became twitchy and it became bitchy to concentrate on any one thing for any length of time. It also became difficult to read books – even e-books on Kindles and Knooks – watch full length movies unless their violence or technology gave them that "other worldly feel," or carry on extended conversations with one's family and friends.

Offline life, minus the minute-to-minute changes in information and technology began to seem boring and absent the dynamic, high resolution world always at one's fingertips. These unhuman devices made people believe that they were expanding awareness, enriching social life, and extending humanity in many new directions.

But, after a while if one were older or not too far gone into the "trans-human" universe, one began realizing that man is the servant of these devices while believing that we are merely using them. Many people also became aware that the ease of the use of this technology opened a gateway to others into our own world of technology. The beeps, tweets and buzzes made it easy to determine anyone's agenda and the priorities of those interested in that agenda could readily supersede the person using that technology. We have become so enslaved to this "matrix" that even if one is not a millennial or caught up in the digital diversions and delusions, the individual is still likely to check one's phone or email more often than is necessary – or wise! Meanwhile, it is more than probable that the digital babble causes people to miss life's important matters because they were scrolling mindlessly through Facebook or Twitter feeds.

Also far too many people identify their value as a person in accordance with Facebook "likes" and public responses to Twitter and TikTok posts along with constantly arriving emails that shunt the user off in new directions almost involuntarily. The algorithms that power platforms like Facebook and YouTube are many times more powerful than the technology that sent man to the moon! They're the product of billions of dollars of research and development and the expertise of thousands of Ph.D.'s from the top universities of the world and are directed at the human mind rather than more mundane scientific inquiries. These artificial intelligences and artifices were not all that long ago the subject of science fiction. But even so, humans have worried about the

degrading psychological effects of man's interaction with machines for centuries. Adam Smith warned us about it in "The Wealth of Nations". We have met the enemy and he has mastered our minds and turned us into his robotic followers.

In recent years, sounding the alarm over the negative consequences of smart phone use has become a thriving cottage industry. We now have "screen detox" resorts for adults, screen-time consultants for kids, and "digital sabbath" groups that encourage members to unplug completely for one day a week. Special new phones have been invented to solve the addiction to the "old" phones – like the "Light Phone", a \$250 dumb-phone with a black and white display that can only be used for calling and texting. Such "extreme" correctives may be necessary as "detox" solutions if the addictive toxic practices continue burgeoning out of control. Just being near a smartphone, even if it is turned off seems to emit an attraction that turns *us* on, rather like an alcoholic looking at a full, unopened bottle of Scotch. Any pleasant stimulus tends to draw us to it whether it is eating chocolate or using the many different aspects of technology. We often become bored and distracted in group settings and yearn to return to cyberspace like a moth to a flame. And there is a reason for this. Person to person contact whether limited to two or involving larger groups *requires effort!* We have to think about the other person involved. On a phone, we can be totally self-absorbed and no one knows or, frankly, cares as they, too, are on *their* phone. Yet, if the topic of such a contact is unpleasant or in any way a problem, it is far more difficult to deal with our response behind the shield of technology. Even the passive use of Facebook such as scrolling through "feeds", watching videos, and absorbing news updates has been shown to increase anxiety and decrease happiness  because we are often challenged with problems we cannot solve in our "detached" state. Isolation is bad enough but isolation within the context of a large group of equally isolated people is a formula for psychopathy.

In retrospect, I believe one of the goals of those who instituted the nearly world-wide Covid lockdowns was to isolate people so that they would have no choice but to become more absorbed in their newfound artificial realities created by those digital technologies and tech toys. It is one thing to be able to turn them off and interact with other people, but when you *cannot* do so, these ingenious devices at least present us with *some* outside contact! Being artificially cut off and separated from our fellow humans facilitated the use of Zoom meetings – a poor substitute for face-to-face, personal human interactions which is what the real world is all about. And even with the gradual return to normalcy, Zoom meetings offer a way for people to avoid travel and other inconvenient requirements of personal interaction. Often what is “easy” makes what is “good” somehow “less good.” Meanwhile, the technological “digiverse” deprives us of the opportunities to let our minds wander in order to create. It also cuts off the cross-pollination of ideas and prevents us from getting lost in our imaginations. These are the things that make us human and creative, and without which we might as well be the machines or robots we are being programmed to be.

It's odd to think of these digital devices as robots. But these advanced phone tablets, laptops, smart watches, PCs, “health indicators” and connected home devices are, in fact, conduits for some of the most advanced forms of artificial intelligence ever created. Companies like Meta (Facebook), Alphabet (Google) and Twitter have built ultra-sophisticated machine-learning algorithms whose main purposes are to generate engagement – which is to say, to short-circuit your brain's limbic system, divert your attention, and keep you clicking and scrolling for as long as possible – while keeping track of everything you say and do. “Alexa, what shall I do now?”

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