



How Smart Phones Are Turning Our Public Places Into Private Ones

EMILY BADGER 8:35 AM ET 4 COMMENTS



Smart phones have miraculously enabled people to stay connected, informed, and entertained, even in transit. We can now text, tweet, Skype, check Facebook updates, email in-boxes, Pandora channels and news feeds from a subway stop or street corner. [The distracted walker](#) has become both an urban menace and an [April Fool's laugh line](#).

Tali Hatuka, who heads the Laboratory for Contemporary Urban Design at Tel Aviv University, laments, however, what she sees as the technology's darker side. So many smart phones may now be spoiling the "public" in our public places. Hatuka and colleague Eran Toch have been studying smart-phone users relative to their old-school, flip-phone counterparts. And the difference between the two groups is surprisingly stark, with serious implications for the future of public space in cities and the often-uncelebrated role that sociologists say they play.

"It's very interesting to see that some of the basic ideas of public spaces are conceived totally differently by smart-phone users," Hatuka says.

The ubiquitous smart phone may even degrade the way we recognize, memorize and move through cities

She and Toch have given lengthy surveys to both smart-phone and traditional cell-phone users, quizzing them about their own behavior – where, when and how they use phones – and how they feel about the behavior of others. Smart-phone users, for starters, are much more commonly under the illusion that they have privacy even when walking down a public sidewalk. They're less skittish about having personal conversations in public. They're more detached from their physical surroundings. They're more likely to violate social norms about having disruptive, private phone conversations (and less likely to feel guilty about this).

Smart phones, in short, have given users the impression that they move through communal spaces as if in private bubbles. "They feel that everywhere they are, they have their privacy," Hatuka says. Smart phones have created, the researchers say, "portable private personal territories."

"The whole idea of public/private as binary is becoming much more

complex,” Hatuka says. “Instead of thinking about public and private, we have to think about the private sphere becoming more dominant in public. For the smart-phone users, they’re totally, constantly engaged with the private sphere, and it’s reducing the basic roles of public space.”

This is not a good thing. The public sphere plays an important role in our communities: it’s where we observe and learn to interact with people who are different from us, or, as academics put it, it’s where we come to know “the other.”

In their surveys, Hatuka and Toch also asked what sounded like some pretty silly questions about what people remembered of the public spaces they’d visited just 10 minutes earlier: what did those places and the people there look like? Smart-phone users couldn’t remember much at all, which is another of way saying that they weren’t paying attention in the first place. This suggests, Hatuka says, that the ubiquitous smart phone may even degrade the way we recognize, memorize and move through cities. We will lose many of these benefits when we’re one day *all* walking around thumbing our Twitter feeds.

“I think we’ve already lost many things,” Hatuka says. Five years ago, if you didn’t know how to get somewhere in the city, you’d probably stop to ask a stranger. Now, Google Maps can get you there. “So no one is asking anything,” Hatuka says. “This kind of stranger communication is a vital thing for a society. The communication of strangers was always one of the key roles of public spaces, observing and exchanging with the other. Because smart phones are supplying so many of these services, this kind of exchange with the stranger is just diminished to almost zero.”

So why do smart phones change our behavior so much more radically than their simpler cell-phone predecessors did? Smart phones, Hatuka says, combine numerous spheres: your social network, your email, your news source, your live personal conversations. When you’re interacting with each of those spheres while walking through a public park, which social code do you follow? Do you follow the code of the public park (wherein we politely make eye contact with one another), or do you follow the social code of Facebook (wherein you better hurry up and acknowledge all the friends who just “liked” your latest status update)?

As Hatuka and Toch have found, for smart-phone users, the social norms of the physical world are often trumped. They’re becoming less important. All of this means we may need a concerted campaign to keep the “public” in the public sphere, to actively encourage people to observe and interact with each other. We may even need to redesign our public places to do this.

“I don’t have a solution for that yet,” Hatuka says. But she suspects we’ll need to tap the very tool that is now harming our public places. “I think we’ll need to use technology.”

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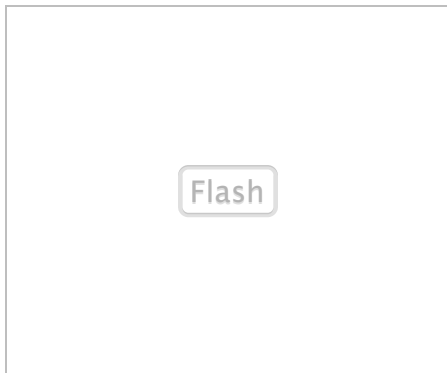
Emily Badger is a contributing writer to The Atlantic Cities. She also writes for *Pacific Standard*, and her work has appeared in *GOOD*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, and *The New York Times*. She lives in Washington, D.C. [All posts »](#)

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