

Common Societal Changes of Global Smartphone Usage Since 2007

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Abstract:

Changes in society can be observed since the smartphone became a dominant medium. The impact of the ubiquitous usage of smartphones was not predictable when the medium was introduced. These factors that paved the path to make the smartphone a dominant medium did not occur overnight. They were in place when Apple shook up the mobile phone market and introduced a smartphone in 2007. This paper describes and analyses some societal changes that occurred since the smartphone became mainstream and turned into the ubiquitous medium it is today.

Key words: McLuhan, iPhone, Android, iOS, Global Village, society, societal changes

1. Introduction

When Marshall McLuhan introduced the concept that the 'medium is the message' he proposed that each time a new technology enters the market the people exposed to this new medium will eventually shift to accommodate themselves to the newly introduced technology. Each time such a shift happens the long-term consequences on society are not understood as there is no data that allows researchers to conduct proper empirical analyses.

This paper suggests that a profound shift in the behavior of society happened on January 9, 2007 when Steve Jobs, the late founder of Apple, introduced the iPhone at Macworld. Even though the exact time of the iPhone introduction was recorded (Block, 2007)- the impact the medium smartphone would have on society in general was not foreseeable.

Phones that bore the prefix 'smart' were on the market years before the first iPhone, perhaps as early as 1992. From an overall market adoption point of view, the early and late majority consumers were not adopting those early smartphones. Research in Motion (RIM), the company that introduced BlackBerry smartphones, introduced their first BlackBerry phones in 1999. BlackBerry smartphones were primarily designed to help businesses and professionals. Hence BlackBerry's focus was on providing productivity to business users. Phones that used Windows Mobile, such as smartphones from many Taiwan based companies, such as HTC or E-Ten, were portable minicomputers or Personal Digital Assistant devices that had phone functions related to voice communications. Those early smartphones worked within their given framework and did what they were supposed to do, but they lacked universal adoption. They were still seen as devices used by technology savvy people who needed them to increase the productivity of their work. Before July 2007, the average consumer did not see a need to use nor own a smartphone and according to Comscore only 4% of mobile phone users in the USA owned a smartphone (Comscore, 2012). The resistive touch technology used by most of those windows-based smartphones required a stylus to effectively interact with the User Interface (UI). In the pre-iPhone era, it was commonly believed that portable devices that featured a small screen and use resistive touch technologies were more usable when they were combined with a stylus. The more natural way of interacting with the UI via the finger, or more specifically with the swish of a finger, was only made possible by the effective usage of capacitive touch screens as used in the Apple iPhone.

The smartphone was a device necessary to increase productivity and provided the ability to work on business documents or manipulate excel spreadsheets while the user was not in the office. Although the pre-iPhone smartphone could be used for tasks other than business the focus of pre-iPhone era smartphones was business and not entertainment.

2. How society changes when a new medium arrives

McLuhan points out that the history of human society was driven by crucial technological changes that occurred throughout the ages (Coupland, 2011). For example, the age of print, which came about with the invention of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg, had a profound effect on societies that were exposed to the printing press. The invention of the printing press allowed the printed word to be broadcasted via the medium book. In its most essential form, books allowed the literate population to gain access to the printed thoughts

and printed ideas of other people. The printed word allowed ideas and thoughts to spread throughout society much more rapidly than they could before the invention of the printing press.

Such an exchange of ideas and thoughts provided a profound change on societies. An invention, such as the printing press, allowed ideas of the few to enter the minds and hearts of the many, as the written word could now be printed more easily and distributed more widely. Deep societal ideas such as freedom, liberty, religion, chivalry, romantic love and so on were described and explained to societies via the medium book.

Ideas spread out to the masses via the medium book had an impact on society and provided the foundation to the revolutionary ideas of the 18th and 19th and 20th centuries. It can be stated that the written word, transferred to a wide audience via the medium book, was effective in spreading the ideas of freedoms and liberties as well as providing written frameworks or justifications to autocracies and oppressive regimes.

As it was driven by to the widely accessible printing press, the proverbial pen became mightier than the proverbial sword.

2.1 A new medium establishes itself

The smartphone as a medium is owned by more people in the world than any other medium in the past, in many countries the smartphone is owned by the majority of the teenage and adult population. Essentially the number of smartphone users according to Statista.com is at 3.5 billion users and will grow to 3.8 billion users in 2021 (Holst, 2019).

The almost omni-present medium smartphone did not just arrive in the proverbial overnight way. It took the business mind of Steve Jobs to develop an eco-system that allowed the smartphone market to grow organically. This integrated and organic approach made the iPhone almost from the start the undisputed market leader – initially in the consumer market, and later, after the iPhone established itself as the leading smartphone for consumers, in the corporate market.

When the iPhone entered the scene, the smartphone sales was driven by Apps that could be used for productive or entertainment purposes. Many Apps were free and were designed specifically and exclusively for the Operating System that made the iPhone run: iOS.

The key differentiation between iPhone and the other smartphone companies on the market was the ability of the iPhone to allow complex technologies to be used by everybody. Apple's approach paved the path for the other successful operating system on the market: Google's Android. Together with iOS, the Android based Operating Systems share most of the global smartphone market (Turner, 2018).

Although billions of smartphones users exist in the world, in 2018 the entire mobile phone market share was at 66.60% (Turner, 2018). In other words, two thirds (2/3) of the world population owns a mobile device. The entire share of mobile connections even exceeds the numbers of people who live on our planet. (Turner, 2018). The number of mobile devices worldwide as well as the number of smartphones worldwide are steadily increasing. For the first time in recorded history the entire planet is connected via a mobile grid that is fully enabled by mobile devices. Particularly in more affluent regions, the dominant mobile device is the smartphone. However, as prices of smartphones are constantly falling and more and

more people can afford new or used smartphones it is obvious that the number of smartphones in circulations will be owned and used by more and more people.

The medium smartphone achieved what no other medium preceding it could do –become the most ubiquitously used medium in the world.

2.2 The societal impact of ubiquitous smartphones

Books, newspapers, leaflets, brochures and so on, can be carried on a person almost anywhere, there is no medium that gets carried around as much as the smartphone. Smartphones are now part of the daily life. There is no medium that causes anxiety in owners when the medium is no longer operational or no longer in the possession of the owner - perhaps due to a depleted battery, or due to the medium being misplaced or stolen.

According to various studies, the reaction many smartphone users exhibit, if a phone is lost or misplaced or if a message is received, is akin to drug addicts whose supply of drugs gets capped (Haynes, 2018). Under those circumstances, smartphone owners receive the same stimuli in the brain that drug users get when injecting drugs (Dekin, 2018). A similar reaction is exhibited when the smartphone user loses connectivity to a network and is no longer connected to a wider network.

McLuhan points out that the tools we create provide changes to society on a variety of levels. For example; the smartphone eco-system requires trained software engineers working on the operating system; a well-established smartphone eco-system also requires a lot of software houses that are working on the software or on Apps that are supporting the smartphone; modern smartphones require creative people such as graphic designers and user interface designers who are designing the smartphone's user interface; smartphones and products that are sold alongside the smartphone require a trained sales staff and many shops with staff who are there to sell smartphones were set up; smartphones need raw materials and an entire supply chain infrastructure; furthermore laws also need to be adjusted or updated, for example, the transmission towers that are located in areas where people live require government approvals; companies with trained technicians working on repairing the smartphones or the infrastructure are also needed; and many other companies, suppliers, institutions, offices, and trained people are needed to keep the smartphone operational, legal and safe. The impact of such a system goes beyond the smartphone itself and involves all levels of society: before a driver used a mobile device to write a text message while driving and causing an accident there were no laws in place that prohibited texting while driving.

In order to establish a medium, we need to make sure, the medium can be established in an environment where everything is properly set up for the medium to become useful and stay relevant.

A medium that causes most of a society to change habits, that medium is the de facto reason for change inside a society. The consequences of such change in habit and behavior may take a long time to manifest itself. But indications in societal change become clear fairly quickly on all levels of society: laws need change to accommodate the new medium, parents require to educate or monitor their kids, businesses and schools need to change their policies either allowing or restricting smartphone usage, pedestrians are often focused on the phone

increasing chances for injury. The introduction of the smartphone and its universal adoption has had an impact on societies that went beyond the initial purpose of the medium itself.

The phone and the smartphone have created a world where we can communicate with anyone from almost anywhere to almost anywhere on the planet. McLuhan coined the term global village - smartphones, with their ability to use the internet, send voice, pictures, and videos all around the world are currently the key medium in this global village of people who are a fingertip away from being involved in the life's of other people (McLuhan, 1967).

3. The symbolical significance of the global village

The need to socialize is an essential part of the human condition. Communication is a key part of human socialization. For the first time in history we can effortlessly communicate to almost any person on this planet at any time of the day. The facilitation of communication was dramatically enhanced by mobile and the early smartphones and was fully established via the introduction of the iPhone in 2007.

By design smartphones connect and keep users connected to the internet. To use its full potential, the smartphone requires an internet connection, ideally a permanent internet connection. Smartphones enable and facilitate communication with people who are located far from each other. The global village was established when radios and televisions entered our living rooms, and so in 1966 McLuhan says:

"Like primitives, we now live in a global village of our own making, a simultaneous happening. The global village is not created by the motor car or even by the airplane. It is created by instant electronic information movement. The global village is at once as wide as the planet and as small as the little town where everybody is maliciously engaged in poking his nose into everybody else's business. The global village is a world in which you don't necessarily have harmony; you have extreme concern with every else's business and much involvement in everybody else's life" (Johnston, 2010)

It does seem ironic that although smartphones connect distant people, they seem to disconnect nearby people. The ability to communicate at dinner tables, the enjoyment of watching a television show with family and friends and comment about them with friends and coworkers, the privilege not to be connected, have all been reduced or eliminated since the introduction of the smartphones. It is an irony of our time that companies providing digital detoxing are striving and are being frequented by many users of smartphones.

3.1 The need to adopt

Since McLuhan coined the term global village details have changed. Today's technologies have moved us to a new level that McLuhan did not know about. It is likely that he could see a trend and he was able to anticipate a future where news travel even faster. The individual ownership of a medium like the smartphone was far from possible at the time McLuhan studied the effects of the media on people.

This current global village allows us to create our own content and share that with others. The technologies that allowed McLuhan to think about the challenges of his times were only in their infancy when McLuhan studied.

3.2 The philosophical significance of smartphones: ubiquitous and equalizing

Interactions with others, personal or professional, nearby and far away, require the medium smartphone. This is especially true if the interaction occurs over distance but also occurs when users are essentially living together under the same roof.

When the de facto choice of ownership is taken away – we are essentially no longer free, as any type of interaction or relevant interaction or significant interaction with others require the medium and not owning the medium will essentially cause a challenge to properly interact and communicate with each other.

Whether or not the interactions that occur on the medium are meaningful or essential is no longer important. The medium causes a society to do what the medium wants a society to do – at its most basic level that means that owning the medium becomes a de facto requirement for any member of a society.

The almost universal ownership of smartphones has made the medium the great equalizer. The medium smartphone is owned by almost all levels of a society and over all continents and all ethnic groups. Smartphones are used and owned by all social and economic levels, and smartphones are used by almost all age groups. It can be said that the smartphone became the de facto tool that connects people and that equalized societies.

4. Conclusion

The rapid acceptance of smartphones since the introduction of the iPhone in 2007 indicates that a new medium can enter society without much resistance if the entire infrastructure is ready to receive a new medium and the medium is accessible to a large part of society. On June 29, 2007, the day the Apple iPhone was released to the public (Chen, 2009), the infrastructure was ready and, at that time, a non-mobile phone company introduced a phone that, in one form or another, ended up in the hands of a significant amount of people all around the world. In January of that year Apple Computer dropped the ‘Computer’ from its official name, a small but significant move by a company that impacted the world so profoundly – by making a highly sophisticated and complex technology available to everyone and easily usable by everyone.

Apple’s iPhone showed that a significantly better product in terms of ease of use and the ecosystem it provided can change the world. The socioeconomic significances of such a medium are still not fully understood but this paper tried to show that smartphones have a significant impact on the way we interact, behave, approach each other, learn, teach, communicate, work, and live. In fact, this paper showed that the beginning of the societal change had a clear date, place and time.

This paper provided the background that McLuhan’s medium is the message (McLuhan, 1967) is as relevant today as it was when McLuhan coined the term. The difference today is that for the first time in history we are facing the real prospect to have a medium that is owned and used by every single person on this planet, across all age groups and economic groups. The smartphone defines us to our very core.

Smartphone ownership may already be as existential to many people as access to clean water, shelter and food. Since the smartphone became mainstream in 2007 it has penetrated all

levels of society. No other medium in recorded history was owned by so many at the same time and all around the globe.

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