

Firsthand

Cell Bars

Global media students ponder a week without cell phones

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If you've ever wondered about the impact that cell phones are having on our lives—our thoughts, emotions, health, traditions—then ask yourself: How long could you go without yours? What might happen if you went without your cell phone for a week. Or more?

Students in our Global Communication and Culture had the opportunity to explore those questions in "Project Cell: The Personal Impact of Global Technology," offered as an extra-credit project during the spring of 2009.

The challenge: give up cell phones for a week, then observe, examine and reflect on how that little device impacts all parts of their lives. It's more than you might think. Consider:

- Cell phones have one of the fastest world-wide adoption rates of any media technology during the past century. In 2008, approximately 1.22 billion cell phones were sold globally, which brings the current number of cell phones in use to around 4.16 billion. (ITU, March 2009)
- While an overwhelming majority of 17–21-year-olds in the U.S. use cell phones daily, they still represent an "interim generation"; most can still remember a time and an age without portable communication devices.
- So far, most research on the impact of cell phones—as well as Palms, personal digital assistants (PDAs), and

BlackBerrys—focuses on the health risks associated with transmission frequencies, and not on the social, political or psychological ripple effects that such communication technologies are having. It is time for more work that examines the influence that wireless devices have on our lives.

What if someone needs me?

This begs the question: What will the future look like with American young people raised on cell phones? And how will these changes influence education, families, college life and personal life?

If these students' suggest anything, it is that such transformations are already well underway.

I am constantly making plans or going on the web or playing games

It was nice not having to worry about checking for messages, listening to my voice mail and calling people back.

"I definitely missed my phone. It's my security blanket. Without my phone I felt like I had no real connection to the outside world."

"Within the first 10 minutes of giving my phone away, I felt a complete sense of loss. I felt disconnected and I began to worry about a million things. Who was trying to talk to me? What if someone needs me? Whose numbers had I memorized?"

"My mother told me to go and try to reclaim my phone from the professor."

"When I have my cell phone I am constantly making plans or going on the web or playing games. When giving up my cell phone, I had to become more comfortable sitting still."

"I've actually enjoyed not having my cell. While I like feeling connected, there comes a certain point where this connection becomes stressful and causes anxiety. It was nice not having to worry about checking for messages, listening to my voice-mail, calling people back, and dealing with their anger when I don't call them back. I feel bombarded with e-mails and Facebook messages."

"Instead of having actual conversations, and even typing out whole sentences and words in e-mails, I find myself struggling. Cell phone use and the things that are incorporated with it—like its multitasking abilities and the quickness of communicating—have leaked into my methods of life.... This bias of speed and necessity that is linked with cell phones has made me a bit less patient and even less conversational, weirdly enough."

My mother told me to try to get my phone back from the professor.

"To a certain degree, my cell phone has made me more dependent on my parents.... Less talking would actually be a welcome relief. I'm ready to be independent, and for once actually have something to talk about when they call. There are only so many new things that can happen within a couple hours or day."

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"I think that I communicate better without my cell phone than with it. There is a certain human component that cell phones take away. Without a cell phone, I was forced to talk to people without texting and I found myself having a lot more face time with my peers."

"Cell phones are convenient because they allow you to communicate with a mass amount of people. Most of these people, I have learned, I do not really need to talk to."

"Noticing how much value I place on my phone was a wake-up call after giving it up for the week. There were too many times during the week that I thought, 'I wish I had my phone.' More often than not, I should have just been living!"

"It was a nice escape from certain people who cannot function without a cell phone. Some people actually call me more than twice a day. I do not think that is healthy. Why must they be in this constant state of connectivity? Next time (for the assignment) I'd recommend an entire semester—or a year."

These were just a few of the comments which students contributed to a larger class conversation about the impact of communication technologies on our lives. In the Global Communication and Culture course, we examine how an emerging form of communication (like, say, a cell phone) can structure or restructure human communication, information and entertainment. For most of us, most of the time, the media environment that we inhabit is pretty invisible. It's difficult to step outside of it and reflect upon it. Difficult, that is, until you do something like give up one of your main forms of communication for a week.

As many of the students' comments suggest, our attachment to our media devices should give us pause. It seems that we've rapidly constructed a society in which being without your portable electronic communication device—for even a part of a day—is seen as adventurous or dangerous. And where, for example, disconnecting from your devices—computers, Facebook, iPods, Twitter, YouTube, e-mail—and going outside for a walk is treated as an act of minor rebellion.

What is really important? What is really urgent? Is it good to have the expectation that friends, family and coworkers should always and continuously be able to be contacted? Is there an individual or cultural benefit to time alone, or time spent in silence? These are but a few of the questions that we considered. Disconnecting for a week opened up a space and time for reflection—and for trying to make more deliberate decisions about how, why, and what we are communicating. +

Welcome to the Class of 2013

With some 72 enthusiastic Orientation leaders welcoming them with banners, horns and flags to the college's main entrance on August 27, the 525 members of the Class of 2013 must have gotten the feeling that they are something special. And they are. The class is outstanding in terms of SAT scores, grade point averages, increased diversity, and gender balance—a remarkable achievement considering that 58 percent of undergraduates nationwide are women. The festively attired students shown here helped new arrivals move into residence halls and get involved in social events during the four-day Orientation weekend of social, academic and religious events before the start of classes. At New Student convocation in the chapel, the new class took a pledge to "take responsibility for learning, value intellectual work, search for the truth and endeavor to grow morally and spiritually."

