

The Intersect

What your smartphone addiction actually looks like

By [Caitlin Dewey](#) October 27, 2014

If you are one of the thousands of Washington Post readers accessing this page on your smartphone, please chill for a minute. Look around. Observe the commuters or bored line-waiters or [distracted dining companions](#) around you.

Chances are, says [Babycakes Romero](#), a London-based photographer, you'll notice plenty of other people who are suctioned to their screens. Because for better or worse, the cellphone has become modern society's security blanket: a way to protect ourselves from the inherent loneliness or awkwardness of the human condition ... but also an unlikely source of both.

"I have nothing against technology at all," Romero said, "but I feel like it's starting to affect social cohesion and we need to know when to switch it off — or else we will become permanently switched off from each other."

Romero knows better than most. For the past year, he's been documenting the world's phone addiction in a series he calls "The Death of Conversation": striking street photos that nail down, in stark black-and-white contrast, exactly

what we lose when we're staring at screens. Romero and I chatted by e-mail about his philosophy on photography, phones and the overlap in his series. This conversation has been lightly edited for style and space.

First things first: What inspired the series?

It was something I kept seeing over and over again as well as experiencing firsthand. I saw that smartphones were becoming a barrier to communication in person. I saw how people used it as a social prop, to hide their awkwardness, to fill the silence, but as I continued to observe and document this modern phenomena, I felt that the devices were actually causing the awkwardness and the silence. They basically allow people to withdraw rather than engage.

All social etiquette regarding the use of phones in company seems to have disappeared. The device takes precedence over the person that is present, and that felt wrong. It is a form of rejection and lowers the self-worth of the person superseded for a device. I feel it also highlights a growing sense of self-absorption in people as they would rather focus on their world in their phone, rather than speak to the person they are with.

Why do you think people rely so much on their phones?

I think people's entire lives are now on these portable devices, so there is always something for them to look at that they feel is more worthy of attention than the people or the world around them.

This would be reason enough, but they are actually starting to rely on them as a way out from the company they are in. It allows them to opt out from conversations they don't like or can't contribute to. It has become the ultimate social prop. Previously the only available social props were cigarettes and alcohol, but they helped social cohesion, not

hindered it. (I'm not saying they are better but it's interesting to see what technology has created and how it is affecting human interaction.)

I think the visible rise of narcissism might be a contributing factor, too: People know that every single thing that arrives on their device is somehow connected to them, whereas in conversation, you're not always the focus. It's almost as if we're starting to become incapable of processing someone else's life because we've become so preoccupied with our own.

Why do you think online or phone communication is different than in-person contact? Like, what's lost between the two? (Isn't there some good – some connection, or some emotional value – to be had in the “virtual world”?)

I personally find virtual interaction very sterile and unrewarding. Skype can make a conversation even with your nearest and dearest seem awkward. It's like an MP3 compared to vinyl. At the end of the day it is a digital facsimile — a poor substitute.

I accept that compared to nothing at all it is better, but you experience so much more in person: the energy, the connectivity, being able to stare into someone's eyes and see exactly what they are thinking. When you have the protection of a screen and a keyboard and you can think about your response, you become much more contrived and guarded. You choose how to present yourself rather than being exposed for what you are. It's for this reason that people are resorting more and more to computer communication — it allows them to be the best version of themselves, and that is very appealing.

Some of the photos seem to be taken in places where people wouldn't necessarily have conversed with the people in their immediate vicinity, even if they didn't have phones – like the subway, or while they're waiting in line. What's your argument against phones there?

I only ever took shots that included two people that were together, regardless of the scenario. They were simply situations that if smartphones didn't exist they would most likely be talking. People hate silence when they are in company. It makes us all feel awkward. This is why people are turning to their devices in those moments. However, if they didn't have them to fall back on, they would be working double time to make conversation simply because the silent pause is something that most seek to avoid.

For the record, I don't have a problem with people using their phones per se — just when they prioritize them over the company they are in. There has been an incredible global response to these pictures, and people have left hundreds of comments. But the most poignant remarks are about how miserable and rejected it makes people feel. I hope now at least that those that are suffering at the hands of their partners, families and friends can maybe confront the problematic phone use and set up some basic boundaries. The rise of the smartphone has been so rapid that we haven't had time to work out the social etiquette.

It seems like you spend an extraordinary amount of time observing ordinary people. And I noticed that a lot of your series are [about the “death” of things](#) – conversation, TV, etc. Are there any things you seeing being *born*? Do you notice more good or bad patterns in peoples' behavior, on balance?

I read a book called “The World Without Us,” by Len Wiseman, which detailed what would happen to the Earth if man just disappeared tomorrow — how long it would take for the Earth to “grow back” to its pre-human self. It essentially

e natural order of things.

However, rather than it being a depressing conclusion, I found it quite liberating. If you accept the transience of the universe, it frees you up. You stop thinking about the future, your legacy ... you start to live in the moment and focus on what's in front of you rather than where you think you should be heading.

I started to take photographs of abandoned objects as I was fascinated by these things that had once been in a place of pride in people's homes, and were now cast out onto the street without a thought. They seemed to speak to me when I looked at them. I could feel their pain. I also loved that by taking a photograph of them, I was preserving their final moment before they got taken away by the rubbish men.

You can't really decide what your own focus is. I just find you naturally gravitate towards things. and for me to confront mortality and to acknowledge it, rather than pretend it isn't going to happen, is for me a much healthier way to live.

Finally, a necessary question: How much do you use your phone personally?

I actually don't have a smartphone, for those very reasons. I can see how consuming they are and I know if I had one I would be no better about it than anyone else. I am also completely addicted to observing and feel that, as a documentary photographer, I would be missing too much if I was staring into the palm of my hand the whole time. For me, no matter what is on a smartphone, it can never be more interesting than real life.

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You can follow Romero's work [on Twitter](#) and [his blog](#).

Caitlin Dewey runs The Intersect blog, writing about digital and Internet culture. Before joining the Post, she was an associate online editor at Kiplinger's Personal Finance.
