

Chapter 5

“It’s almost like the earth stood still”

Youthful critiques of cell phones

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Introduction

This chapter explores several young people’s experiences of the place of cell phones in their lives through an odd and rather serendipitous exercise in which they voluntarily went without them for a period of nine days and then wrote about the experience. The results of their essays were not shocking in the sense of being unexpected. However, they were surprising in the degree to which they challenged the usual narratives about the benefits of such devices and the platforms they support and in the vividness with which they described that challenge. The following narrative describes the experiences that Ron and his students shared in living without cell phones, writing about those experiences and reflecting on that writing and its meaning.

I was teaching recently an undergraduate course in philosophy at a small Canadian university. Many students at the institution struggled academically due to limited literacy and a lack of university preparation. As troubling as this was, however, it was nothing new. I have taught dozens of courses to thousands of students over the past 20 years and it is clear that such limitations are the new normal in post-secondary education in Canada. Most professors simply expect them. But the students in this particular course were really struggling. They were not merely having trouble understanding the books in the course; they were finding them difficult simply to read. I will never forget an exchange with a student that made the whole situation stunningly clear. Frustrated by my students’ silence during a discussion of Plato’s *Republic*, I asked them to explain what it was that they did not understand. Long silence. Then one brave woman raised her hand and said, “We don’t understand what it says, sir. We don’t understand the words.” I looked around the class and saw all these guileless heads nodding pensively in agreement.

It was quite a moment. Faced with an unresponsive class, most professors feel they have failed. They think that if students are “not getting it,” or are not getting into it, it is the professor’s fault. They are not relevant. They are not clear. Or worse, they are boring. And sometimes they are right. But

this situation was more complicated. There was very little teaching and very little learning going on in that classroom. But not necessarily because no one cared if there was or was not. The students were not learning because they could not, and I was not teaching because I had not yet understood why.

My students, like all others in Canada, had been attending schools for some 13 years of their lives, yet they couldn't read a book like the *Republic*, let alone be moved, angered, or inspired by its argument or beauty. That was new. My father grew up in the 1950s in a poor, working-class neighbourhood in an industrial Canadian city. He did not go to the "right" school, and he and his classmates could only dream of attending university or college. The furthest he got was grade 10, when he was forced to leave school to support his family. Yet, by the age of 15, and despite the myriad social and economic limitations of his life, limitations that now set all pious souls aflutter with the need to accommodate, his school insisted that he read books like Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, works arguably as strange or stranger than the one I had assigned my first-year university students. And yet he did so and even 50 years later could still recall the experience. What had happened to our schools and universities?

The destruction of Canadian secondary and post-secondary education has been going on for some 70 years now, so the damage to my students was not likely to be remediated during a four-month introductory university course. But since one has to start somewhere, I began to develop a variety of what I considered legitimate accommodations for them – that is, accommodations designed to help them improve, not to affirm them in their inability. I slowed down the pace of the course, I prepared study notes for the more challenging passages, and I reformulated the analysis I was developing in simpler terms.

When the fruits of our collective labour arrived in the form of the students' midterm tests, I was discouraged to the point of despair. All that effort for nothing. Nothing. Even the more capable students showed no real sign of having understood either the texts or the lectures. When it gets that bad, one really wonders what the point of the whole business is, apart from professors' need for a vocation and students' need for a credential – in other words, apart from our collective need to keep the big, expensive educational machine running. But my despair notwithstanding, there was still the practical matter of how to assess their work. Could I really fail half the class? I might be able to get away with that if I were teaching organic chemistry. But in an elective (read, "service") course like philosophy? I would have every administrator in the university, plus a few invented especially for the occasion, come down on me.

In order to solve this assessment impasse (my unwillingness to give grades for nothing, combined with the impossibility of failing half the students), and based on a hunch I had been having about the connection between chronic in-class cell phone use and academic performance, I offered my students a compromise: Give me your cell phones for the next nine days, then

write an essay about the experience of living without it. This will give you a chance to earn additional grades to bring yours into a normal range.¹

Twelve out of the 35 students in the class chose to participate. I told them three different grades were possible: Excellent (5/5), Acceptable (3/5), and Submitted (1/5). I also strongly encouraged them to say what they really thought and experienced. I assured them, for instance, that there were no “right” or “wrong” answers, just better and worse ones. And I made it clear that even a hint of pandering to what they assumed to be “the professor’s point of view” would result in lower grades, not higher ones. In other words, I told them they were to act like the university students of old and write freely and frankly about what they felt and thought without fear of reprisal, if not of criticism. I should also mention that digital technology was not a direct object of study in the course, so students were not responding to my own analysis of that phenomenon, though they would certainly have heard me make various extemporized comments about it at various points in the course.

In the event, all students received five out of five, not because their efforts were equally successful but because all of them spoke with an honesty, interest, and at times eloquence about their experience that was infinitely better than any other written work they produced in the course. That, too, was quite a shock – a welcome one this time. For the first time in years I had the sense that there was something profound there to work with, if only I could encourage them to put their cell phones away long enough to get them to explore and express it. That was my end game in the course. But what they actually said about their cell phone-less lives was extraordinary because of both how reflective it was and how radically it departed from standard education and tech-industry narratives about how wonderful this technology is.

The following pages are an analysis of what they said. Pseudonyms have been employed throughout to protect identities and ensure confidentiality. We have organized the analysis according to the broad themes that emerged from their essays. As readers will note, there was an extraordinary level of agreement, if not of emphasis, among these students. What is perhaps most striking is how emotionally, socially, and intellectually deleterious they came to think their cell phones were after living without them for just over a week. What they said was virtually the opposite of the advertisements we are accustomed to hearing from educational authorities and technology advocates. The themes and expressions also resonate with those of the young people in other chapters in this book. Though the modes of speaking to these young people differed, there is a remarkable agreement in their thinking about the meaning of technology in their lives.

What to make of this thing? A general assessment

The usual industry and education narrative about the advantages of cell phones, social media, and digital technology generally is well known. It is claimed that such devices build community; foster communication;

increase efficiency; and, as a result, improve the lives of their users. Mark Zuckerberg's recent (2017) reformulation of Facebook's mission statement is typical of this narrative: The company's ambition is to "give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together." He then went on to give some content to this ambition: "ending poverty, curing disease, stopping climate change, spreading freedom and tolerance, stopping terrorism." No mean feats, those. Certainly not ones that a "single group or even country can do" on its own. Nonetheless, Zuckerberg exhorted us to strive to do so by building countries and groups and, one assumes, companies too, willing to take on "these big meaningful efforts" (Zuckerberg, 2017).

The immediate, ostensible reason for Zuckerberg's reformulation, complete with its modern pieties, was that foreign political operators had been caught using Facebook's platform for precisely the opposite reasons: In other words, to spread division, undermine communities, and encourage hostility and mistrust (Rosenberg & Frenkel, 2018). However, an even more troubling critique had already begun to emerge, one that went beyond the obvious political conspiracies to explore the design and ambitions of the platform itself. For instance, high-profile defectors from the industry began to explain the ways in which cell phones and the social media platforms they support are not merely open to political abuse, but are designed knowingly so as to be harmful to users personally and to societies generally in pursuit of a business model that actually depends on that harm for its profitability (Kent, Sottile, Goss, & Newcomb, 2018). Roger McNamee, former advisor to Mark Zuckerberg, commented that

All the content [you see on Facebook] is stuff that you like, right? It's what they think you like. But what it really is, is stuff that serves their business model and their profits ... And making you angry, making you afraid, is really good for Facebook's business. It is not good for America. It's not good for the users of Facebook. (Kent et al., 2018, para. 16)

Tristan Harris, a former design ethicist at Google, explained both the source and purpose of that anger and fear: "What people don't know about or see about Facebook is that polarization is built in to the business model ... Polarization is profitable" (Kent et al., 2018, para. 12). Dividing people, making them fear one another and compete with one another, may undermine a society's well-being, but it also provokes the very sort of feverish online activity from which technology companies profit most.

British journalist and novelist John Lanchester explored this model in his groundbreaking study of Facebook published in 2017 in *London Review of Books*. In "You Are the Product," Lanchester cites an article in the *American Journal of Epidemiology* entitled "Association of Facebook Use with Compromised Well-Being: A Longitudinal Study." According to Lanchester, the study "found quite simply that the more people use Facebook, the more

unhappy they are.” Even more, the study suggested “the positive effect of real-world interactions, which enhance well-being, was accurately paralleled by the ‘negative associations of Facebook use.’” In effect, Lanchester told us, “people were swapping real relationships which made them feel good for time on Facebook which made them feel bad.” He summed up the consequences of chronic use of such platforms: “there is a lot of research showing that Facebook makes people feel like shit” (Lanchester, 2017, para. 43).

These students could not agree with Lanchester more. Their essays not only confirm his analysis but also extend it by clarifying just what “feeling like shit” looks like on the ground and how its consequences stack up against the standard narrative of people like Zuckerberg. It is about time we started listen to these young people. They are the real canaries in the coal mine of our brave new technological and digital world.

“You must be weird or something”: what the students said

Six distinct though overlapping themes emerged from the student essays: human relationships, freedom, productivity and focus, morality and engagement, parents, and safety. None of these themes were assigned or even suggested to them. They emerged spontaneously from the students’ own thinking about their experiences. And there was a remarkable consistency in their thinking, despite the different emphases on and assessments of cell phones. For instance, the majority claimed that their cell phones were having deleterious effects on their human relationships, their productivity and focus, their freedom, and even their morality, and at least half of them thought that cell phones had cut them off from the “real” world in preference of an artificial technological reality. One student did write favourably and even apologetically about his cell phone and its uses. Yet even he qualified that approbation by indicating that cell phones could and often did have the types of consequences identified by the other students. But for him, that was the fault not of the cell phone, which is merely a tool, but of the person using it.

One final theme stands out for comment, though it was mentioned explicitly by only one student: writing. My experience in this class was similar to my experience in virtually all of my classes – students have a great deal of difficulty expressing themselves in prose. One student in the group acknowledged this fact and offered a possible explanation: cell phones and the laziness they encourage. The irony of her comment, however, was that in the very essay in which she made it, her writing skills demonstrated a notable improvement. By improvement I do not mean her essay was grammatically sound or stylistically refined or sophisticated. On those fronts this student’s work remained, like most of her colleagues’, moderately to seriously flawed. No, it was not technical proficiency that had changed in these essays but rather their spiritedness or engagement with the subject. Most

of their writing to this point in the course had been bland and perfunctory at best. But this assignment was different. You could hear their voices, and you could sense what they felt about what they had experienced. Indeed, you could sense that they were trying to find the words to express their experiences, and not just pumping out academic jargon. What they were saying somehow mattered to them and you could see it in their writing.

All the themes and features of their essays require further discussion. We will begin with human relationships.

Human relationships

“Believe it or not I had to walk up to a stranger and ask what time it was. It honestly took me a lot of guts and confidence to ask someone” (Janet).

Janet’s comment was one I’d read more than once in these essays. It is also one I hear frequently from other young people today. Of course, it is not unusual for youths to feel uncertain and awkward in public. However, what Janet was saying was not merely that talking to people she doesn’t know is difficult, but that it’s strange or abnormal, even if the request is for something as simple as the time. Cell phones seem to encourage this strangeness in several ways: “Why do you need to ask me the time? Everyone has a cell-phone. You must be weird or something.” This was Janet’s concern – that people would think she was strange or lying on the assumption that everyone alive has a cell phone. Emily went even further. Simply walking “by strangers in the hallway or when I passed them on the street” caused almost everyone to take “out their phone right before I could gain eye contact with them.”

To these young people, direct, unmediated human contact was experienced as ill-mannered at best and at worst as strange. Cell phones served as a type of social protection from such “live” or “real” situations. If you simply did not want to, or if you did not know how to cope with some person or situation, all you had to do was take out your phone and look down. James:

One of the worst and most common things people do now a days [sic] is pull out their cell phone and use it while in a face to face conversation. This action is very rude and unacceptable, but yet again, I find myself guilty of this sometimes because it is the norm.

Stewart described what it was like to spend a week without this protection:

Conversations I didn’t want to be in, or situations that were uncomfortable, I was forced to endure and interact in because I didn’t have my little hand-held device to shield me from any awkwardness that happens in day to day [sic] life.

And from her cell phone-less perch at a party, Emily noticed that

a lot of people used their cell phones when they felt they were in an awkward situation, for an example being at a party while no one was speaking to them. I noticed it a lot whenever my group of friends stop speaking for a minute, they all took out their cell phones.

The price of this protection, however, was the loss of human relationships, a consequence that almost all of the students identified and lamented. During the week without his phone, James found himself forced “to look [people] in the eye and [be] engaged in the conversation. This proves the fact that these things can be very negative when over used and when people depend on them too much.” For him, the cell phone had a narcotic effect that caused a loss of “people skills” and, interestingly, of “intelligence”: “We have become addicted to these devices and they are throwing our intelligence and people skills down the drain.” For James, intelligence derives in part from human relations. Lose those and you lose your mind, as it were. And Stewart put a moral spin on the experience. “Being forced to have [real relations with people] obviously made me a better person because each time it happened I learned how to deal with the situation better, other than sticking my face in a phone.” Of the 12 students, fully 10 of them said that their phones were compromising their ability to have “real” relationships with people and that spending a week without them made them keenly aware of this fact.

Freedom

“I have to admit, it was pretty nice without the phone all week. Didn’t have to hear the fucking thing ring or vibrate once, and didn’t feel bad not answering phone calls because there were none to ignore” (Peter).

The reverse side of this absence of real human relations was an awareness of a proliferation of meaningless “communication” with people encouraged by their cell phones. Not surprisingly, virtually all students admitted that ease of communication – with employers, friends, parents – was one of the genuine benefits of their phones. However, eight out of twelve said they were genuinely relieved not to have to answer the usual flood of texts, messages, and social media posts. Indeed, the language they used to describe their freedom indicated that they experienced this activity almost as a type of harassment. “It felt so free without one and it was nice knowing no one could bother me when I didn’t want to be bothered,” wrote Peter. Emily said she found herself

sleeping more peacefully after the first two nights of attempting to sleep right away when the lights got shut off. I didn’t frantically look for my cell phone in my bed that managed to disappear through the night under the sheets (yes I sleep with my cell phone).

Elliott wrote that “The thing that changed most during my week without a cell phone was that I had a lot more free time and I could concentrate longer on different things.” And Edward admitted that what he

liked the most about not having a phone was the fact that [he] didn’t have to be constantly talking to people. It was nice to be able to do something without thinking about when [his] phone is going to buzz again.

Several students went even further and claimed that “communication” with others was in fact easier and more efficient *without their phones*.

Actually I got things done much quicker without the cell because instead of waiting for a response from someone (that you don’t even know if they read your message or not) you just called them [from a land line], either got an answer or didn’t, and moved on to the next thing. (Stewart)

One of the primary benefits of cell phones and of the social media platforms they support is said to be that they facilitate communication and bring people “closer together.” In fact, these students experienced the communication provided by these devices almost as a distracting nuisance and as something that in part deprived them of genuine human relationships.

Productivity and focus

How about productivity? One thing that seems to be incontrovertible is the technologists’ assertion that their instruments and platforms make us more productive. What have the students to say about this?

If we are speaking about speed, most students would agree. The one thing cell phones and computers are is fast. But for them that speed didn’t translate into greater or better productivity. In fact, it had the opposite effect. Elliott claimed that without his phone he

could get everything done faster, for instance writing a paper and not having a phone boosted productivity at least twice as much. You are concentrated on one task and not worrying about anything else. Studying for a test was much easier as well because I was not distracted by the phone at all.

Stewart found he

could sit down and actually focus on writing a paper. Because I was able to give it 100% of my attention, not only was the final product better than [sic] it would have been, I was also able to complete it much quicker.

And James said that

Before, with the distraction of the cell phone present, I found that when doing school work I would easily become unfocused. In fact, I found myself taking breaks often to play around with my cellphone. When that distraction was removed I discovered that I got much more work done in a shorter period of time.

Even Janet, who missed her cell phone more than most, admitted that

One positive thing that came out of not having a cellphone was that I found myself more productive and I was more apt to pay attention in class. I didn't get distracted as much, always looking at my phone and texting people.

For her the only "downside" was that "Class did go by a lot slower and some classes felt forever without my cellphone."

The cell phone and its social media platforms did not make these students more productive; it distracted them and made them considerably less productive, and in the process diminished the quality of their work. This should not surprise anyone given what we now know about these technologies. Their primary aim *is* to distract people, to move them around sites, to get them to click as much as possible, and then to compile the resulting data and monetize it. Facebook, for instance, has no interest in people using its platform modestly and judiciously (Lanchester, 2017). Excess is where the money is, and the design operates accordingly. Yet many of our educational experts continue to advocate including more of this technology in schools and universities (Contact North, n.d.).

Morality and engagement

"Having a cell phone has actually affected my personal code of morals and this scares me" (Gina).

Morality is a tricky subject in liberal regimes and education systems for the simple reason that in such regimes and systems morality is considered a matter of private opinion and so everyone is permitted to have their own (Mouffe, 1991).² What this means is that serious public discussion about moral problems tends to be as brief as it is empty and is usually confined to the matter of calculating personal interests. Nonetheless, even we good liberals, if you push us hard enough, will begin to talk about things like fairness and justice and to express normal human concerns about situations that fail to achieve them (Mouffe, 1991).³ My students were no exception. Ask them a question about the "best regime," and they would invariably answer, "that depends on a person's personal opinion." But ask them about the effects their cell phones are having on their lives, and they were quick to tell you how morally compromised they feel and how upset they are about it.

Gina was a case in point:

Since I started using a cell phone three years ago I have noticed that I have become increasingly attached to it. I regret to admit that I have texted in class this year, something I swore to myself in high school that I would never do ... I am disappointed in myself now that I see how much I have come to depend on technology in the last few years. I start to wonder if it has affected who I am as a person, and then I remember that it already has.

And James, though he claimed that we must continue to develop our technology because “many lives will depend on it,” said that “what many people forget is that it is vital for us not to lose our fundamental values along the way.”

When it came to explaining the content of those values, students were less clear. But they were by no means silent. They were worried about their addiction to these devices, not just abstractly, the way they are supposed to be worried about being addicted to drugs, but substantively. They had a sense of what that addiction was depriving them of: a meaningful relationship to the world. This was, of course, a philosophy course, one in which there were discussions of Plato’s image of the cave in book 7 of the *Republic*, so it is not surprising that the students would express themselves in this way. After all, Plato’s image depicts people imprisoned in a shadowy dream world of illusions and explores the manner of their release and return the world beyond the cave. The parallels to modern screen technologies should be obvious.

Nonetheless, I had the impression that the students were also attempting to describe actual experiences they’d had during the time without their phones rather than merely repeating tropes from the course readings or lectures. Listen, for instance, to James as he described his experience:

It is almost like the earth stood still and I actually looked around and cared about current events; I was not blinded by media. I know that sounds extravagant but it is true. This experiment has made many things clear to me and one thing is for sure, I am going to cut back the time I am on my cell phone substantially.

Not only did James begin to see things; he also began to care about them. The experience of seeing something as it is was, for him, also moral experience.

Or consider Emily’s remark that cell phones “take away freedom, [they take] away our mind and knowledge to the outside world and [they take] away our confidence. It’s interesting to say that [they take] away our knowledge to [sic] the outside world.” For Emily, as for James, when you lose contact with life, you lose the source of your intelligence, too. And to explain the consequences of that loss of contact and intelligence, she appealed to George Orwell’s *1984*:

I’m a huge *1984* fan and after reading that book two years ago I relate it to everything in our everyday life. What was predicted is pretty

accurate, which is scary because we are all convinced we have freedom that is given to us in short supply, and cell phones are a huge part of 'Big Brother.' We are told once that a cell phone benefits us by quickly allowing us to communicate with one another, however we are not told about the consequences that will come within a short amount of years.

Far from liberating people for real community, cell phones imprison us in a stifling technological regime that kills freedom, hampers intelligence, and makes life empty.

And then there was Stewart, who began to see how things "really work" once he was without his phone:

One big thing I picked up on while doing this assignment is how much more engaged I was in the world around me all the time. I was always paying attention to what was going on, not just tuning things out because I had a message that had to be replied to right that minute. And you know what I notice when I was ever so engaged in the world around me? I noticed that the majority of people were disengaged, on a computer or laptop. It's pretty ridiculous, there is all this potential for conversation, interaction and learning from one another but we're too distracted by the screens that are everywhere around us to partake in the real events around us.

These students were not naïve at all; nor were they passive. Given only a small bit of freedom from the usual technological constraints of their lives, they began to see the situation very clearly and even started to resist it. The purveyors of cell phones and social media platforms have made it amply clear by their actions, if not by their words, that they wish to mediate everything we experience. The Gospel of John: "No one comes to the father but through me." The Gospel of Facebook: "no one comes to the world, but through Mark Zuckerberg's platform." Technology companies have sought aggressively to extend the scope of their influence to virtually every corner of the globe and of human experience. Their ubiquity alone makes it seem that any resistance to them is futile. Yet even after only a short stint without their phones, many of my students recognized their predicament and expressed genuine disaffection with it. It strikes me that as educators and as those who care for the young, it's up to us to ensure that students have more such experiences, not fewer, if they are ever to be able to make choices that are genuinely their own.

Parents

"My mom thought it was great" (James)

"It was extremely stressful for my mom" (Janet)

When it came to the matter of families, there were several contrasting and crosscutting views presented. Take parents, for example. At least three students indicated that their parents were quite pleased with their new, cell phone-less selves. One parent even proposed to join in the experiment, making it a family endeavour. These parents said that their children were more present and engaged in the absence of their phones, rather than being distracted and distant. James's comment was typical: "My mom thought it was great that I did not have my phone because I paid more attention to her while she was talking."

Other parents, however, were concerned about safety and the deprivation of communication. They had become accustomed to having that immediate connection with their children and did not find its absence easy. And several students also felt the same way, especially those who were out of province. Emily: "I felt like I was craving some interaction from a family member. Either to keep my ass in line with the upcoming exams, or to simply let me know someone is supporting me." And Janet admitted that "The most difficult thing was defiantly [sic] not being able to talk to my mom or being able to communicate with anyone on demand or at that present moment. It was extremely stressful for my mom."

There are of course many different ways for young people to relate to their parents. But it did seem to us that as a rule this group of university students was more frequently in contact with their parents and more dependent on them than have been previous generations of students in this country. Whether this contact and dependency were caused by cell phone technology – we are in touch more now because we can be – or the reverse is difficult to say. One thing is clear, however: They are now mutually reinforcing. Only one student, after having described his parents' concern about being unable to contact him while away on a holiday, said, "They can go fly a kite." For the rest, the parents' concern seemed legitimate and in some cases was shared.

Safety

This raises the matter of safety. Parents were concerned about their children's safety and what might happen if there were an emergency and they were unable to be in contact with one another. Several students echoed this type of concern. Janet said that "Having a cellphone makes me feel secure in a way. So having that taken away from me changed my life a little. I was scared that something serious might happen during the week of not having a cellphone." She went on to say something even more revealing:

Another thing I didn't like about not having a cellphone that made me kind of scared at times was if someone were to attack me or kidnap me or some sort of action along those line or maybe even if I witnessed a crime take place, or I needed to call an ambulance, I really wouldn't be

in any position to get help for myself or anyone else if I was by myself because I wouldn't have any sort of communication to contact emergency services.

For this student and several others there was the sense that the world is a very dangerous place and that cell phones are necessary to combat that danger. This was interesting because the place where these students live has one of the lowest crime rates in the world and has almost no violent crime of any kind.⁴ It should also be noted that even students from bigger urban centres were unlikely to encounter dangers of the types they feared because of their social position and class. Yet the fear of these things was very present for them and their cell phones were understood by them to be protection against it.

It seems to us that this fear is not precisely the type that Roger McNamee discussed (Kent et al., 2018). The fear he was concerned with is a sort of general fear of “the other” exacerbated by the polarization of sides that social media platforms encourage. The fear these students were talking about was more direct – fear of crime, accident, loss, etc. Nonetheless, there seems to be a family resemblance here. For there was in these students' essays, running beneath even the critiques of cell phones and the awareness of their existentially harmful character, a kind of uneasiness about being without them. Perhaps these young people, even the most prescient among them, were already on their way to the type of life being prepared for them by American technology giants like Apple, Facebook, Google, and Microsoft – a life made fearful and protected from that fear by the same device.

Conclusion

According to these students, cell phones are not the useful, productivity- and communication-encouraging devices we are accustomed to thinking of them as. In fact, if these students are to be believed, cell phones and their social media platforms frequently encourage just the opposite of these things. Rather than causing conversation (not communication) to flourish, they make it something onerous, difficult, and strange; rather than building community, they divide us; rather than making us intelligent and engaged, they dumb us down by cutting us off from the things we need most for our intelligence to grow.

So why did they keep using them, as virtually all of them said they would? Two things stood out in their essays. First, their underlying fear. It was just better to have them there, just in case. One never knows what might happen. Second, they understood in their bones that the technocratic world *we* have built for them is driven by these technologies, and therefore not to have them would seriously compromise their ability to gain a foothold in that world. They were not fools. They knew what their own lives were like. If we hold

together everything they say, it is clear that they are caught in a trap – one that forces them to do harm to themselves, while we and the world around them quietly assure them that there is no other way. It is about time we started helping them look for other ways out of the trap. We are the adults in the room.

Notes

- 1 I've appended the actual assignment instructions at the conclusion of this chapter.
- 2 While liberalism did certainly contribute to the formulation of the idea of a universal citizenship, based on the assertion that all individuals are born free and equal, it also reduced citizenship to a mere legal status, indicating the possession of rights that the individual holds against the state. The way those rights are exercised is irrelevant as long as their holders do not break the law or interfere with the rights of others. Social cooperation aims only at enhancing our productive capacities and facilitating the attainment of each person's individual prosperity. Ideas of public-spiritedness, civic activity, and political participation in a community of equals are alien to most liberal thinkers
(Mouffe, 1991, p. 73)
- 3 To ensure our own liberty and avoid the servitude that would render its exercise impossible, we must cultivate civic virtues and devote ourselves to the common good. The idea of a common good above our private interest is a necessary condition for enjoying individual liberty
(Mouffe, 1991, p. 73)
- 4 To identify the location of this university might compromise the identities of the students; therefore this identity has been omitted.

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Appendix: The Assignment

Bonus Assignment: Philosophy Course X

Value: Potential of 5% added to Final Grade

A. Assignment: Students agree to leave their cell phones with the professor for one week. Phones will be locked in the professor's office. Students will then write about the experience of living without their cell phone. Possible questions to be explored are:

- 1 What was most difficult about living without a cell phone? What was easiest?
- 2 What particular function of the cell phone did you miss the most?
- 3 What changed in your life during the week without your cell phone? What did not change?
- 4 How did other people react to your not having a phone (family, friends, professors)?
- 5 Did you like being without a cell phone? Do you not like it? Why?
- 6 What, if anything, did you learn about yourself that you didn't already know as a result of being without your cell phone?

B. Grades: There will be three grades possible:

5 Excellent

3 Acceptable

1 Submitted