
Living Without a Smartphone: Using Autoethnography to Get Closer to Basic Phone Users

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Abstract

The smartphone seems to be playing a prominent role in the fast adoption of ICTs. However, the majority of users of mobile phones in the world employ what is called a basic phone, a device that provides basic functions like making calls and sending text messages but lacks all the capabilities of its smart counterpart. Employing an autoethnographical approach one of the authors renounced to using a smartphone and social applications for several years in order to gain better understanding of the conditions faced by basic phone users. Complemented with the insights provided by smartphone users participating in the study, several interesting phenomena have been identified. The research project is still under execution.

Author Keywords

Smartphones; Basic Phones; Social Networks; Autoethnography; Mobile Applications.

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Introduction

There is a lot of pressure to own a smartphone nowadays [1]. Telecommunications companies want

A First Person Account

“Back in 2009 students in my university were joining and using Facebook massively with professors following them. There were several stories about the privacy policies of the site that was basically requiring their users to renounce to it and to any form of anonymity.”

“I did not like the approach and decided that I would pass on Facebook and wait for the next big thing. Some colleagues argued that they joined because they wanted to keep in touch with students. Facebook was the place where all the action was happening, everyone was there. I often heard the question: «*are you in Facebook?*» not from students but from professors and faculty. When I answered no, the recurrent reply was a form of «*How come?*» How is it that I being a computer science person was not in Facebook? I was missing all the action and on the road to obsolescence.”

their subscribers to contract data plans that provide all kind of services associated with Internet access and can only be consumed with a smartphone. Phone manufacturers get a higher profit margin for sales of smartphones so they put a lot of effort in marketing those. There are plenty of companies that advertise their “apps” – software pieces designed to run in mobile and other advanced devices – and offer advantages and promotions only accessible through a smartphone.

The mobile ecosystem – devices, connectivity, platforms, service providers, application developers, content creators, etc. – is fueled by a plethora of social network applications that form a positive feedback loop: every new user and every new message increases the value and attractiveness of the network compelling more users to join and post messages. The only condition to enter the network is to own a smartphone.

Prices of smartphones and of the services that come with them, prevent most people of the world from entering such ecosystem. There have been important improvements in mobile phone penetration rate but the fact is that more than half of those phones are basics not smarts [2].

Then, how can we understand the experience of basic phone owners? The body of knowledge in HCI provides several tools for the purpose, but what about renouncing to the smartphone for some years in order to have a firsthand experience of the phenomenon? One of the authors of this paper has been living without a smartphone for more than five years and continues doing it. Starting as a sort of rebellious behavior, soon the importance of observation and learning through own experience was realized and the focus was

changed to an auto-exclusion experiment that included not only the smartphone but some social platforms like Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp among others.

In this paper we share some of the observations made and thoughts and reflections shared in discussions about the experience.

Autoethnographical approach

Autoethnography is a research technique in which the researcher studies a cultural or social setting through a personal experience, that is then analyzed and described as comprehensively as possible [3]. Although it originated in social sciences it has expanded to other fields. HCI, being as multidisciplinary as it is, also applies the technique as can be seen in studies like [4] and [5].

In this study autoethnography has been used to gain a firsthand experience of the situation of people that for some reason does not use or does not own a smartphone. To a lesser extent, those that do have a smartphone but use it only for basic functions like making and receiving calls, are in a similar position and the insights obtained can be applied to them too. This group – people that only have a basic phone or use a smartphone as if it was not – represents an important percentage of mobile users globally [2] and it is quite important because a basic phone is often the entry point for connecting to modern information society.

The subset formed by basic phone users that live in metropolitan areas, in environments where smartphones are common, and that relate and mingle with them socially is the focus of this study.

“For me, Facebook was only the most prominent pressuring force to engage in social applications at that time, as others had been in the past: Second Life, MySpace, Hi5, and those that followed: Tumblr, Pinterest, Instagram, Snapchat, Whatsapp, Uber, Waze.”

“A new trend started with the advent of the Apple iPhone: the pressure to own or use a smartphone that previously was only a question of convenience changed to a matter of status with side effects of marginalization. Some services and applications began to be offered only to smartphone users up to the point that I felt a sentiment of patent exclusion. Until then I was able to connect to any service using a regular computer or laptop but with Whatsapp, Snapchat, Waze, Uber, some payment services and thousands of «apps», the smartphone was required.”

The experimenter was lucky enough to be able to sustain use of a basic phone for several years. It is now usual that companies or institutions require a smartphone, some even provide it to their personnel, deploying corporative apps or use instant messaging services for handling internal communications. As mentioned in the introduction, the pressure to use a smartphone can have diverse sources.

Account of the Experience

A short version of the first person account of the experience throughout the years is presented in the side bar. Because the experiment continues the complete story has not been published.

Benefits and Pitfalls

Reflection and analysis of the extended version of the recount presented in the previous section, led the research team to identify a set of features, some positive some negative, related to the experience of living without a smartphone. In this analysis lack of smartphone is also regarded as disconnection to a certain extent.

Among the positive features, the one most apparent is that the urge of constantly check social feeds is eliminated. It can be argued that a healthy social life requires attention to updates about friends, coworkers and relatives in order to keep the connection live. Because the capacity of a person to keep up with such news is limited, the constant feed of updates through electronic means may result detrimental to relations with kin who live closer but with whom there is no electronic connection.

A less evident positive benefit is the ability to pay attention to a different set of interests. What is trendy in one or in several virtual social spheres may not be that relevant for the disconnected individual. Although it is sound to assume that the connected and disconnected spheres will permeate each other, the flow of messages in the internet makes it easier to pay attention to global or international issues that seem to be more important than local ones simply because more people is posting about them. However, too much attention to the global context may lead to neglecting local problems. A balance is needed to avoid that peril.

The social circle may be different in nature for those connected and those unconnected. The quality of the relations among connected people is highly dependent on the willingness of the participants to keep the link alive. It is easy to effectively cut the link using mechanisms of blocking, muting, hiding, anonymizing, and even faking accounts. It is possible to replace a friendship as quickly as desired because there is plenty of users to choose from.

For the unconnected person, the social circle is less dynamic. It is always possible to break a link but the person cannot be blocked or muted. In small social circles, like family, classroom or office, it can be impossible to avoid seeing or talking to a particular person.

The dynamism of electronic relationships enables what can be called a “working circle”, a social circle formed by those that for different reasons – work, joint projects, reencounters, family or community events, sympathy, fortuity, etc. – keep a more active connection with constant updates and communication

“The unintended exclusion had effects. Things started to happen around among friends and colleagues that went unnoticed to me: job opportunities, buy and sell offers, meeting appointments, projects coordination, requests for help, plans for the weekend, debates over current issues and several others.”

“Important events for which I was formally required eventually reached my email account or basic phone through SMS or call. I noticed that it relied on someone recalling that I was out of the group and needed to be contacted by other means. If no one remembered then I was left out.”

exchanges. It only takes a friendship request or account blocking to change the working circle. Migration of users – becoming inactive or abandoning a social application in favor of a different one – also changes the working circle. Finally, the limited capacity of attention mentioned before, makes the working circle change when attention refocus.

The geographical reach in the connected world is much wider than for individuals without smartphones or social media accounts. It is like if the social technologies were bending geographical distances for friendship and travel. A connection with a person in the other side of the world can be formed relatively easy. Traveling to an unknown place, provided a reliable Internet link, is quite feasible. The printed map and the commercial address book of the unconnected are no competitors to the social and mobile technology in that sense.

Complementary experiences

Autoethnography is the main research tool in this study but we have found that it is not possible to rely only on it. Turns out that a person without a smartphone can tell a lot about those with a smartphone but the converse is also true: when a group of connected people share spaces – classroom, office, house, etc. – with unconnected persons, they are also able to observe and identify peculiarities.

One of those relates to mental models. The way unconnected people interpret mobile technology is different and often less than accurate. The extent and practical effects of the difference although is a patent phenomenon, requires deeper study and analysis and will probably be the subject of a future report.

A sense of community belonging is felt by those that engage in social applications. The crowd of users is sensed as an extended friend group and even as a security net. Unconnected users are unable to experiment that sensation and do not understand why a constant check of the smartphone is so important. In fact, a connected user may see that the unconnected is incurring a significant cost for being out.

As this research project advances we hope to find new insights coming from people with a smartphone that observe the circumstances of those without one.

Conclusions

This paper reports the results of an autoethnographic experiment in which one of the authors has been avoiding owning or using a smartphone for several years. The use of a basic phone has provided opportunities for observing and reflecting about the behaviors of those that do own a smart device. The researcher also avoided having a Facebook account as well as other social platforms, which resulted complementary to the no-smartphone experience.

The authors found that as the mobile ecosystem developed, more applications became unreachable inducing a sentiment of exclusion and segregation.

Through analysis and reflection, several features of the connected group – those with a smartphone and accounts in several social media services – and the unconnected group – a basic phone or smartphone used only for basic functions like making calls and sending text messages – were identified and characterized as positive or negative.

“Finding out that an event had happened and that I did not know because of the lack of a smartphone or social app account was a bit disappointing but on the other hand I noticed I was, to some extent, free of the urgency of being constantly checking a social feed full of frivolous and inconsequential posts. People walking facing down to their smartphones, the constant buzz of devices in social gatherings, quick escapes to attend a social app exigencies, were all funny and pervasive reminders of a new type of attachment.”

“Realizing that I was learning a lot through observation and by firsthand experimentation, and that some of things noted were less than desirable I was sure I had good answers to the inquiry: how come?”

It seems that unconnected people is able to pay attention to different problems and things than those in the fully connected world. They might be more interested in local matters that affect those physically near, while those in the connected group are aware of issues of a broader geographical span although their interests seem to be centered in the trendy topics that the virtual social network proposes.

The results are interesting in order to better understand the situation of what is in fact the majority of mobile phone users. Globally smartphone owners are a minority but tend to think they are not because they are well connected and live and work in environments where every person owns a smartphone.

The autoethnographical approach seems to be yielding valuable results, but we think that this type of study requires the participation of both connected and unconnected researchers. The autoethnographer may be incapable of appreciating all the implications of her exclusion. Connected users near her may be in a better position to fully appreciate some of the consequences of avoiding the smartphone and electronic social feeds.

One interesting insight identified is that both conditions lead the users to develop different mental models about the technology, the social applications, personal relations that are possible and to some extent, the world that surrounds them.

There are several opportunities for research in this approach. We plan to continue the autoethnographic experiment and at the same time, interview other users that are in an exclusion condition by natural reasons. There is a good chance that the basic phone – «dumb

phone», «feature phone», «*frijolito*», «*ladrillo*», «*cacahuatito*», «*flecha*», and several other names it is known by around the world – will continue to be the technology of choice for entry-level, first-time, mobile users in developing countries. Hence the importance of gaining a good understanding of their users.

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