

Against the Poverty of Language and Thought

16 Theses on the Cell Phone

Jason Rodgers

1. Cell phones are an overpowering, ever present factor in society. A factor which has multiplied at a staggering rate.
2. They help to deal with the fear of the unknown. It is imagined that they provide for the protection of children, assuring that the child will never be stranded or outside of the watchful parental gaze. If a car breaks down, one no longer needs to risk getting a ride from a stranger—a risk which is primarily having to confront the overwhelming alienation of our community.
3. The cell phone allows the user to avoid the risk of missing the updates they are constantly bombarded with. It is simpler and more convenient than having to risk making mundane choices yourself. The user is never difficult to contact about anything, no matter how banal.
4. The cell phone fulfills the need to be hip and current. Those without mobile communications devices are constructed as being outdated, in the cultural lag, backwards. By owning a cell phone one can feel progressive and up to date.
5. The underlying motivations for cell phone ownership are fear and convenience. Ultimately fear avoidance and convenience are the same thing- the avoidance of ambiguous situations.
6. It is no extreme statement to say that capitalism creates false needs. Fifteen years ago cell phones were a rarity, certainly no necessity. How did we live before? They are now a need. We need it like a fix of cellular smack.
7. The cell sell is the easiest imaginable; the consumer does it themselves. After the initial convincing, the consumer signs a contract, which they suffer monetary penalties for breaking. Once trapped, the job of persuasion is internalized by the consumer, so as to not face their contractual trap.
8. It is now standard at many jobs, even low paying ones, to expect ownership of a mobile phone. Employers can constantly contact employees. Labor engulfs everyday life.
9. Due to the addition of text messaging the cellular communication is trapped between orality and literacy. It has neither the improvisation and open ended nature of spoken language, nor the complexity and depth of written language.
10. This contributes to a poverty of language. The exchange is constant, yet nearly meaningless. This poverty of language contributes to a poverty of thought.

11. The 911 system, required by law to be included on all cell phones, allows the location of any cell phone to be triangulated, via GPS, within a few yards. The communication device becomes a tracking device. The cell is a cell.
12. Paranoid? Maybe. After all, they can't be tracking everybody all the time; there are just too many people. Precisely the point. The 911 system fulfills the concept of the Panopticon analyzed by Michel Foucault. We know they can't be paying attention to everyone at every given moment. At the same time we know that they have the capability for surveillance on anyone at any given time.
13. This position causes the internalization of the control of surveillance. The oppressor is no longer a clear external force, it is now a formless totality which impersonally constrain us. This formlessness makes it difficult to remain autonomous against it; it can not be pinned down. Furthermore, the user knows that they consented.
14. Cellular technology is transforming man into a cyborg. The technology grows more ever present. The user becomes more and more integrated into the totality. McLuhan argued that the integrated circuit and the television were extensions of the nervous system. He seems to have been premature. The cell phone is closer to the realization of this extension of the neurological system. Remember, McLuhan's often forgotten companion point, every extension is also an amputation.
15. The cell phone is becoming a permanent extension. It is responded to nearly automatically. This interaction forms a feedback system; a cybernetic system. What thoughts are ours, in this cybernetic system? This cybernetic transformation is particularly noticeable in the case of ear pieces and other hands free devices.
16. The question this brings up is not one of right and wrong. It is a matter of admitting that these devices cause major shifts and determining if these shifts are what we actually want. It has been pointed out to me that the picture I present may even be too optimistic.

As for my participation in these shifts, I refuse and resist.

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