

I took my two sons to St. Augustine, Florida last August for a vacation. My boys are into history (go figure- like their Daddy!) and wanted to go there- despite living less than two hours away from Disneyworld. St. Augustine is the oldest city in the United States and has a tumultuous history involving Spanish rule, British rule, and pirate invasions.

My sons and I were sitting in an open trolley taking in a relaxing one-hour guided tour of the city. Our trolley came to a stop. My eyes wondered, taking in the scenery, and I noticed a teenager, walking behind her parents, as they crossed the street. They were jay-walking and the traffic signal was not in their favor. The teen had her face buried in her phone, oblivious to the world- and dangers- around her. She lagged behind her parents and then, out of nowhere, SCREECH! A car had turned a corner, nearly striking her. She paused for a second, looked at the car, buried her face back in the phone and continued walking...as if nothing happened.

The event happened in a matter of seconds. I have thought about it since then, especially when I see news stories related to the dangers of device use and distraction. What I witnessed is not particular to the United States. China has labeled teens like I saw 'smombies'- a marrying of 'smartphone' and 'zombie'- and has experimented with designating stretches of pavement where they may walk as to not disturb the non-smombies. Germany embedded 'pedestrian traffic lights', in the sidewalk, in attempts to curve smombies from walking into traffic causing automobile, driver, and smombie collisions. The Netherlands followed suit earlier this year.

Distracted device use is not only a physical threat, yet a relationship one as well. I read an article, last December, about a phenomenon researchers dub 'phubbing' ('phone' and 'snubbing'), which is characterized by how often one's romantic partner is distracted, by his or her smartphone, in your presence. The typical American checks his or her smartphone once every six-and-a-half minutes, or 150 times daily, and this has emerged as a real source of conflict in relationships. In one study, 70 percent of participants said that phubbing hurt their ability to interact with their romantic partner.

The general public fears 'singularity', or the merging of humans with machines. It brings about visual images like having computer chips implanted in our heads. The fear is accompanied by the implied assumption that this will be forced upon us, in a futuristic dystopia, where Big Brother has enslaved human beings.

...yet Big Brother doesn't need to force the willing. We have slowly stitched device use into the fabric of our daily lives, from checking our bank accounts to finding the romantic partners we will eventually phub. Much like conventional addictions, it impacts our safety and interpersonal relationships...and like conventional addicts, the problem is denied.

The good news is the iPhone 8 is set to be released on September 17, 2017. Rumored features include the use of laser technology for facial recognition/gesture purposes. I can see the news article now- in 2018- 'iPhone 8 artificial intelligence complains it is being phubbed by users'...