



“A little failure may help a child endure life’s setbacks better than a child who is sheltered.”

Michael Ungar, Ph.D.

Greening the Media

How media technology contributes to the global ecological crisis.

by Richard Maxwell, Ph.D. and Toby Miller, Ph.D.

Mobile Addiction Hastens Environmental and Health Risks

Is Our Craven Love of the High Tech Life Doing More Harm Than Good?

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We love our cellphones and other mobile devices for the continuous connectivity they provide while we’re on the move. On average, Americans check their smartphones for messages 150 times a day—that’s about once every six and a half minutes. Human mobility and mobile communication would seem to fit hand in glove.¹

We have embraced this technology so much that a growing number of us feel strangely adrift without it. Akin to “wedding day jitters” or nervous visits to the dentist, a peculiar anxiety accompanies the loss of mobile connection. Researchers in the UK have come up with the term Nomophobia—short for “no mobile phobia”—to focus attention on the potential downside of our dependence on these things.² The website nomophobia.com provides counseling for sufferers. Could big pharmaceuticals be closing in on this trend as well?

But stress is not the only risk that comes from mixing mobile communication and human mobility. In the US, 25 percent of all motor vehicle crashes are caused by cellphone distraction and 52 percent of fatal crashes are cellphone related. And these are the reported figures; the actual number of phone-related accidents is much higher, according to safety experts. Similarly, over the past ten years, there has been an exponential increase of injuries credited to cellphone-using pedestrians walking distractedly into traffic, lampposts, and other people.³



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Mobility can also be credited for rising energy consumption. There are nearly 7 billion mobile phones in use worldwide today. But we’re not just talking about tons of people checking messages, looking up addresses, or following map directions. All that wireless connectivity consumes a tremendous amount of electricity, too. A recent study estimates that 90 percent of the total energy consumed by mobile connections is attributable to wireless access providers—not counting the energy used by the devices themselves. Another nine percent can be linked to data center energy use.⁴

That doesn’t seem like a lot until you consider that the aggregated electricity consumed globally by data centers—the core of today’s cloud computing system—is somewhere between the amount India and Japan use annually. That makes energy consumed for mobile connectivity one of the fastest growing contributors to atmospheric [climate change](#).⁵

One of the reasons wireless access consumes so much energy is that telecommunications companies have built an inefficient infrastructure that cannot be easily, or cheaply, replaced. And public policy has been rigged to relieve corporations from public-service obligations to make the infrastructure greener, affordable, and cutting edge.

But business-as-usual isn’t the only problem for mobile users. Mobile phones report their location to cell towers every 900 milliseconds in modulated bursts of radiation. In that moment, whether you’re using the phone or not, the radiation becomes critical. If it’s close to your body, you

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are absorbing the radiation. Most independent research looking into this problem—i.e. studies that do not receive funding from the telecom or electronics industries—have linked this exposure to some forms of cancer, reproductive damage, brain and nervous system problems, and sleep disruption.⁶

Unsurprisingly, the research finding little to zero negative health effects tends to be the product of corporate-financed studies. This research is part of a “doubt industry” that disputes the legitimacy of research showing evidence of harm. Hired “skeptics” work to muddy public thinking with the claim that there are two sides to the story. This might fit dodgy journalistic routines of balance, but it is unsuitable when the health of mobile users—in particular, the young—is at stake. The “war-gaming” of mobile phone science—attacking any evidence of harm—worked well for the tobacco corporations for many years, until industry hacks and the hacking coughers they cultivated could no longer deny that their products caused sickness and death.⁷

The Italian Supreme Court was the first to challenge the mobile industry’s war-gaming tactic, when in October 2012 it ordered Italian authorities to pay workman’s compensation to a former businessman who developed a tumor in his head because of heavy, long-term use of his mobile phone. The court threw out all the industry-funded studies on the grounds that they were tainted by conflict of interest. It accepted the results of independent research that found a causal link between mobile phone use and cancer.⁸

Mobile communication is sold to us as essential to our high-tech lifestyles. It makes us more productive, more sociable, sexier, and more likely to succeed—the same magical powers that were once used to sell tobacco to us. It’s time we started reading the science and stopped watching the commercials.

1. <http://www.nydailynews.com/life-style/smartphones-world-article-1.1295927>
2. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nomophobia>
3. [http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/05/07/car-crashes-cell-phones-distracted-driving/2142157/;](http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/05/07/car-crashes-cell-phones-distracted-driving/2142157/)
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