

The Dumb Phone Manifesto

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Next time that your iPhone croaks on you, consider replacing it with a cheap dumbphone. Here are 10 reasons why:

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1) You can fire your therapist & quit your meditation practice

Feelings of angst, meaninglessness, or existential dread predate the smartphone, but the addictive “content” that keeps you compulsively checking the little black box is surely hurting your mental peace.

An acquaintance of mine used to work in a psychotherapy practice that demanded patients sign up to a gym as a prerequisite for treatment. There is strong evidence that regular exercise improves overall well-being. The evidence linking social media detox to depression alleviation may not be as strong as exercise, but it is hard to look at the modern attention economy and believe it is psychologically neutral.

Owning a smartphone means carrying a highly optimized attention-harvesting device everywhere you go. Avoiding social media on such a device - as users of screentime apps, minimalist launchers, and app-blockers have found out - is practically impossible.

Moreover, relying on a dumbphone will make the occasional 5-15 minutes of staring into space unavoidable, which allows you to cancel your little morning meditation practice.

2) You can finally get properly lost

Getting lost is the best way to invite **Lady Fortuna** into your life. Having constant access to Google Maps is the best way to tell her not to bother you with her gifts.

Unplug for a bit and let yourself drift: a wrong turn, a chance encounter, a change of plans. These are the kinds of moments you never optimize for, but tend to remember decades later.



Figure 1: Lady Fortuna: Roman Goddess of Luck, Fortune or Fate

3) It will improve your sense of direction

An obvious corollary to No. 2, but when you stop using Google Maps for everything you will be forced to exercise your atrophied internal GPS.

Have you ever moved to a new city and spent your first 3 months using Google Maps for your daily commute and trips to the grocery store? Have you ever suspected (and regretted) that it is quietly destroying your sense of direction? Ditching the smartphone forces you to pay more attention to your surroundings when you travel, which has benefits that go beyond navigation.

Yes, it requires you to be more prepared for trips. You may naively expect this to make them less spontaneous: after all, you can't just whip out your phone and navigate to a cool rave you just heard about. But in practice, the proliferation of optionality inevitably leads to decision fatigue: one of the quieter maladies of the modern attention economy.

Like a child that has to choose between 50 kinds of candy, you don't become freer—you just become more tired.

When travelling, you may have to carry a small notebook with key metro stops for the cities you are passing through. If abroad, you may need to jot down a few useful phrases—like your grandfather did when he visited Paris in the 1960s. You will forget this sometimes and get properly lost (see 2). And every once in a while you'll

have to put on a smile and ask a stranger for help. But so what?

4) Your battery will never die on you

When your battery lasts 7-8 hours, you feel vulnerable. The very anticipation of the battery dying on us makes us anxious. This is not because you particularly care about the voltage of the electrons in your pocket, but because you have come to rely on these electrons for the very basics of your social existence: buying a round of beers, finding that laundromat 5 minutes away, legally entering the tube station, and displaying your ticket for that ecstatic rave in an abandoned shoe factory on the outskirts of Utrecht. Ditching the smartphone will make you rediscover simple, offline alternatives for these social rituals: a wristwatch, a wallet, access to a printer, and a bit of forward planning. You will find a certain zen in knowing your social life is not dictated by the state of charge of a brittle piece of glass and aluminum spyware.

This analog existence was known and loved by our parents and grandparents, until they - God help them - decided to all buy smartphones too.



Figure 2: Smart phone: Dumb Choice?

5) You will call your mom more often

Everyone knows that person. Either they're bedridden, ageing, sick, bored, or they simply miss you. Having a dumbphone in your pocket means that a spare 15 minutes is more likely to end up as a wholesome catchup, rather than scrolling through Joe Rogan clips. Either way, those are 15 minutes you won't get back.

6) You will read more

If you think that having 24/7 access to the internet is making you read fewer physical books, you are probably right. If you think this may be a problem, you know what to do

7) You will receive more positive, actionable news

Offline News tends to be actionable. It is either positive, neutral, or mildly negative:

1. “Sammie broke his arm in Chamonix”
2. “Anne and Seb are getting married!”
3. “Happy Hour at your favourite oyster bar is now between 6:30pm and 7:30pm”
4. “There’s a salsa social at the bowling alley this Friday”

On the other hand, online news is generally un-actionable, and invariably depressing:

1. “Joint USA-Israeli strike kills a hundred or so school-age girls”
2. “Why you will be poorer than your parents”
3. “Microplastics are making you infertile”
4. “Ten ways to make your LinkedIn profile AI-ready”

Ditching the smartphone means you’ll have less of the latter, and more of the former

8) You will be more bored and creative

Remember that creative and fun thing you did when you were 9? You may have learned all the flags by heart, or made a musical about talking barnacles. You may have gotten really good at conkers or yo-yoing. Maybe you staged a DIY fashion show in your back-yard, or built a tree house in a bush (a bush-house, anyone?). The enabling factor was time and boredom. Ditching the smartphone will give you both back in heaps

9) The internet is not what it used to be

Whatever reasons there may have been to be perennially online in 2012-2015 must be re-visited in 2026, as the internet has changed a lot in the last 10 years. It has become more predatory, less information-dense, and more “enshittified”, a process described by Cory Doctorow

10) You will become an ally in the righteous crusade against the “QR-code-ification” of spaces of leisure.

With enough time and boredom I hope to one day write a full treatise in favour of the criminalization of QR codes in spaces of leisure like bars, cafés, pubs and cinemas. But I will give a brief sketch:

On a hot summer day in our favourite lakeside *brasserie*, the only thing standing between my dad and a chicken caesar salad with two lemonades were 10 taps on a janky HTML phone on a 3G connection on his Motorola smartphone. After getting frustrated with his inability to bend the form to his will, he looked at me in quiet resignation and said: “Am I really getting that old?”.

The indignity he suffered on his day off is due to a social choice that we have collectively made. That older people don't protest vocally against the “QR-codification” of spaces of leisure I chalk up to their fear of being ‘found out’ that they lack “21st century skills”.

But what are these skills exactly, and why do I possess them whereas my dad does not? There is nothing

virtuous about my ability to bend janky HTML forms to my will. The skills I have, and that my dad lacks, were picked up from video games, dealing with the pesky ads on away ads on Piratebay and online streaming sites, and avoiding surcharges when wading through Ryanair's Kafkaesque website. These skills, known as "21st century", which young people take for granted and older people desire, are a strange contingency of a certain vile, niche corner of late capitalism. They are nothing to be proud of, and not something we should encourage.

QR codes, while clever and remarkably fault tolerant, in practice just mean the replacement of a 10 second conversation with 10 taps in a confusing, badly designed HTML form. When used in places of leisure in lieu of normal methods of making requests to service staff they represent a subtle perversion of the social contract. QR codes may be clever, but putting them in spaces of leisure is, to use a term familiar to software engineers, an "anti-pattern". Since it is the older crowd that is more likely to be gullibly upsold by the online "funnel": it is an accessibility nightmare.

Ditching the smartphone makes you a quiet but powerfully against the code-ification of spaces of leisure.

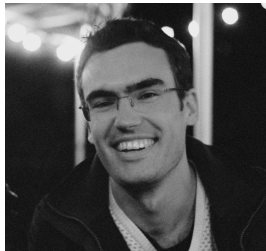
Conclusion

You may ask why I wrote this manifesto. I will respond: In any group whose members have been slamming two bricks against their testicles for years under the impression that this is simply how life works, the first person to notice that it is, in fact, optional has a minor obligation to do some gentle proselytizing.

Hence this dumbphone manifesto.

You cannot buy your freedom with a new Android launcher, nor with a screentime app, no matter how strict. The smartphone has to go.

Hope you enjoyed my ramblings, and see you on the flip side!



portrait of the author