

The Smartphone Society

The automobile was in many respects the defining commodity of the twentieth century. Its importance didn't stem from technological virtuosity or the sophistication of the assembly line, but rather from an ability to reflect and shape society. The ways in which we produced, consumed, used, and regulated automobiles were a window into twentieth-century capitalism itself – a glimpse into how the social, political, and economic intersected and collided.

Today, in a period characterized by financialization and globalization, where “information” is king, the idea of any commodity defining an era might seem quaint. But commodities are no less important today, and people's relationships to them remain central to understanding society. If the automobile was fundamental to grasping the last century, the smartphone is the defining commodity of our era.

People today spend a lot of time on their phones. They check them constantly throughout the day and keep them close to their bodies. They sleep next to them, bring them to the bathroom, and stare at them while they walk, eat, study, work, wait, and drive. Twenty percent of young adults [even admit](#) to checking their phones during sex.

What does it mean that people seem to have a phone in their hand or pocket everywhere they go, all day long? To make sense of our purported collective phone addiction, we should follow the advice of [Harry Braverman](#), and examine the “machine on the one side and social relations on the other, and the manner in which these two come together in society.”

Hand Machines

Apple insiders refer to FoxConn's assembly city in Shenzhen as Mordor – J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle Earth hellhole. As a spate

of suicides in 2010 tragically [revealed](#), the moniker is only a slight exaggeration of the factories in which young Chinese workers assemble iPhones. Apple's supply chain links colonies of software engineers with hundreds of component suppliers in North America, Europe, and East Asia – Gorilla Glass from Kentucky, motion coprocessors from the Netherlands, camera chips from Taiwan, and transmit modules from Costa Rica funnel into dozens of assembly plants in China.

Capitalism's simultaneously creative and destructive tendencies spur constant changes in global production networks, and within these networks, new configurations of corporate and state power. In the old days, producer-driven supply chains, exemplified by industries like auto and steel, were dominant. People like [Lee Iacocca](#) and Boeing legend [Bill Allen](#) decided what to make, where to make it, and how much to sell it for.

But as the economic and political contradictions of the postwar boom heightened in the 1960s and '70s, more and more countries in the Global South adopted export-oriented strategies to achieve their development goals. A new type of supply chain emerged (particularly in light industries like apparel, toys, and electronics) in which retailers, rather than manufacturers, held the reins. In these buyer-driven models, companies like Nike, Liz Claiborne, and Walmart design goods, name their price to manufacturers, and often own little more in the way of production than their lucrative brands.

Power and governance are located at multiple points in the smartphone chain, and production and design are deeply integrated at the global scale. But the new configurations of power tend to reinforce existing wealth hierarchies: poor and middle-income countries try desperately to move into more lucrative nodes through infrastructure development and trade deals, but upgrading opportunities are few and far between, and the global nature of production makes struggles by workers to improve conditions and wages extremely difficult.

Congolese coltan miners are separated from Nokia executives by more than an ocean – they are divided by history and politics, by their country’s relationship to finance, and by decades-old development barriers, many of which are rooted in colonialism.

The smartphone value chain is a useful map of global exploitation, trade politics, uneven development, and logistical prowess, but the deeper significance of the device lies elsewhere. To discover the more subtle shifts in accumulation that are illustrated and facilitated by the smartphone, we must turn from the process by which people use machines to create phones to the process by which we use the phone itself as a machine.

Considering the phone as a machine is, in some respects, immediately intuitive. Indeed, the Chinese word for mobile phone is *shouji*, or “hand machine.” People often use their hand machines as they would any other tool, particularly in the workplace. Neoliberal demands for flexible, mobile, networked workers make them essential.

Smartphones extend the workplace in space and time. Emails can be answered at breakfast, specs reviewed on the train home, and the next day’s meetings verified before lights out. The Internet becomes the place of work, with the office just a dot on the vast map of possible workspaces.

The extension of the working day through smartphones has become so ubiquitous and pernicious that labor groups are fighting back. In France, unions and tech businesses signed an agreement in April 2014 [recognizing](#) 250,000 tech workers’ “right to disconnect” after a day’s work, and Germany is currently contemplating legislation that would prohibit after-work emails and phone calls. German Labor Minister Andrea Nahles [told](#) a German newspaper that it is “indisputable that there is a connection between permanent availability and psychological diseases.”

Smartphones have also facilitated the creation of new types of work and new ways of accessing labor markets. In the “marketplace for odd jobs,” companies like [TaskRabbit](#) and [Postmates](#) have built their business models by tapping into the “distributed workforce” through smartphones.

TaskRabbit connects people who would prefer to avoid the drudgery of doing their own chores with people desperate enough to do piecework odd jobs for pay. Those who want chores done, like the laundry or cleanup after their kid’s birthday party, link up with “taskers” using TaskRabbit’s mobile app.

Taskers are expected to continuously monitor their phones for potential jobs (response time determines who gets a job); consumers can order or cancel a tasker on the go; and upon successfully completing the chore, the contractor can be paid directly through the phone.

Postmates – the darling of the gig economy – is an up-and-comer in the business world, especially after Spark Capital pumped \$16 million into it earlier this year. Postmates tracks its “couriers” in cities like Boston, San Francisco, and New York using a mobile app on their iPhones as they hustle to deliver artisanal tacos and sugar-free vanilla lattes to homes and offices. When a new job comes in, the app routes it to the closest courier, who must respond immediately and complete the task within an hour to get paid.

The couriers, who are not recognized employees of Postmates, are less enthusiastic than Spark. They get \$3.75 per delivery plus tips, and because they’re classified as independent contractors, are not protected by minimum wage laws.

In this way, our hand machines fit seamlessly into the modern world of work. The smartphone facilitates contingent employment models and self-exploitation by linking workers to capitalists without the fixed costs and emotional investment of more traditional employment relations.

Selves for Sale

Erving Goffman, an influential American sociologist, [was interested](#) in the self and how individuals produce and perform their selves through social interaction. By his own admission, [Goffman](#) was a bit Shakespearean – for him “all the world is a stage.” He argued that social interactions can be thought of as performances, and that people’s performances vary depending on their audience.

We enact these “front-stage” performances for people – acquaintances, coworkers, judgmental relatives – that we want to impress. Front-stage performances give the appearance that our actions “maintain and embody certain standards.” They convince the audience that we really are who we say we are: a responsible, intelligent, moral human being.

But front-stage performances can be shaky and are often undermined by mistakes – people put their foot in their mouth, they misread social cues, they have a piece of spinach lodged in their teeth, or they get caught in a lie. Goffman was fascinated by how hard we work to perfect and maintain our front-stage performances and how often we fail at them.

Smartphones are a godsend for the dramaturgical aspects of life. They enable us to manage the impressions we make on others with control-freak precision. Instead of talking to each other, we can send text messages, planning our witticisms and avoidance strategies in advance. We can display our impeccable taste on Pinterest, superior parenting skills on CafeMom, and burgeoning artistic talents on Instagram, all in real time.

New York magazine recently ran [a piece](#) about the four most desirable people in New York City according to OKCupid. These individuals have crafted such attractive dating profiles that they are pummeled with attention and racy requests – their phones ping continually with messages from potential

paramours. Tom, one of the chosen four, regularly tweaks his profile, subbing in new photos, and rewording his self-description. He has even used OKCupid's MyBestFace profile-optimizing service.

Tom says all this effort is necessary in our present "culture of likes." Tom considers his OKCupid profile to be "an extension of himself": "I want it to look good and clean so, like, I make it do crunches and shit."

The incredible reach of social media and people's rapid adoption of it to produce and perform their selves are engendering the emergence of new technologically mediated rituals of interaction. Smartphones are now central to the way we "generate, maintain, repair, and renew as well as . . . contest or resist relationships."

Take texting rituals, which, with all their complex, unwritten rules, now play a commanding role in the relationship dynamics of most young adults. One need not deal in toxic nostalgia to admit that new, technologically mediated rituals are displacing or radically altering older conventions.

Digitally maintaining, generating, and contesting relationships through smartphones is somewhat different from using phones to complete tasks associated with wage work. Individuals don't get paid a wage for their Tinder profile or for uploading photos of their weekend adventures on Snapchat, but the selves and the rituals they produce are certainly for sale. Regardless of intention, when a person uses their smartphone to connect with people and the imagined digital community, the output of their labor of love is increasingly likely to be sold as a commodity.

Companies like Facebook are pioneers in the enclosure and sale of digital selves. [In 2013](#), Facebook had 945 million users who accessed the site through their smartphones. It made 89 percent of its revenue that year from advertising, half of

which came from mobile advertising. Its entire architecture is designed to guide the mobile production of selves through a platform that makes those selves salable.

That's why it instituted its "real names" policy: "pretending to be anything or anyone isn't allowed." Facebook needs users to use legal names so it can easily match corporeal selves with digital selves, because data produced by and connected to an actual human is more profitable.

Users of the dating site OKCupid agree to a similar exchange: "data for a date." Third-party companies sit in the background of the site, scooping up users' photos, political and religious views, and even the David Foster Wallace novels they profess to love. The data are then sold to advertisers, who create targeted, personalized ads.

The pool of people who have access to OKCupid's data is remarkably large – OkCupid, along with other companies like Match and Tinder, is owned by IAC/InterActiveCorp, the sixth-largest online network in the world. Crafting a self on OKCupid may or may not yield love, but it definitely yields corporate profits.

Awareness is spreading that our digital selves are now commodities. New School professor [Laurel Ptak](#) recently published a manifesto called "[Wages for Facebook](#)" and in March 2014, Paul Budnitz and Todd Berger created [Ello](#), a fleetingly popular Facebook alternative.

Ello proclaims: "We believe a social network can be a tool for empowerment. Not a tool to deceive, coerce, and manipulate – but a place to connect, create, and celebrate life. You are not a product." Ello promises not to sell your data to third-party advertisers, at least for now. It reserves the right to do so in the future.

However, discussions of the peddling of digital selves by gray-market data companies and Silicon Valley giants are

usually separate from conversations about increasingly exploitative working conditions or the burgeoning market for precarious, degrading work. But these are not separate phenomena – they are intricately linked, all pieces in the puzzle of modern capitalism.

iCommodify

Capital must reproduce itself and generate new sources of profit over time and space. It must constantly create and reinforce the separation between wage laborers and owners of capital, increase the value it extracts from workers, and colonize new spheres of social life to create commodities. The system, and the relationships that comprise it, are constantly in motion.

The expansion and reproduction of capital in everyday life and the colonization of new spheres of social life by capital are not always obvious. Thinking about the smartphone helps us put the pieces together because the device itself facilitates and undergirds new models of accumulation.

The evolution of work over the past three decades has been characterized by a number of trends – the lengthening of the workday and workweek, the decline of real wages, the reduction or elimination of non-wage protections from the market (like fixed pensions or health and safety regulations), the proliferation of part-time work, and the decline of unions.

At the same time, norms regarding the organization of work have also shifted. Temporary, project-oriented employment models are proliferating. Employers are no longer expected to provide job security or regular hours, and employees no longer expect those things.

But the degradation of work is not a given. Increasing exploitation and immiseration are tendencies, not fixed outcomes ordained by the rules of capitalism. They are the result of battles lost by workers and won by capitalists.

The ubiquitous use of smartphones to extend the workday and expand the market for shit jobs is a result of the weakness of both workers and working-class movements. The compulsion and willingness of increasing numbers of workers to engage with their employers through their phones normalizes and justifies the use of smartphones as a tool of exploitation, and solidifies constant availability as a requirement for earning a wage.

Apart from the Great Recession, corporate profit rates have steadily climbed since the late eighties, and not only as a result of capital (and the state) rolling back the gains of the labor movement. The reach of global markets has widened and deepened, and the development of new commodities has grown apace.

The expansion and reproduction of capital is dependent on the development of these new commodities, many of which emerge from capital's incessant drive to enclose new spheres of social life for profit, or as political economist [Massimo De Angelis](#) says, to "put [these spheres] to work for [capital's] priorities and drives."

The smartphone is central to this process. It provides a physical mechanism to allow constant access to our digital selves and opens a nearly uncharted frontier of commodification.

Individuals don't get paid in wages for creating and maintaining digital selves – they get paid in the satisfaction of participating in rituals, and the control afforded them over their social interactions. They get paid in the feeling of floating in the vast virtual connectivity, even as their hand machines mediate social bonds, helping people imagine togetherness while keeping them separate as distinct productive entities. The voluntary nature of these new rituals does not make them any less important, or less profitable for capital.

Braverman said that “the capitalist finds in [the] infinitely malleable character of human labor the essential resource for the expansion of his capital.” The last thirty years of innovation demonstrate the truth of this statement, and the phone has emerged as one of the primary mechanisms to activate, access, and channel the malleability of human labor.

Smartphones ensure that we are producing for more and more of our waking lives. They erase the boundary between work and leisure. Employers now have nearly unlimited access to their employees, and increasingly, holding even a low-paid, precarious job hinges on the ability to be always available and ready to work. At the same time, smartphones provide people constant mobile access to the digital commons and its gauzy ethos of connectivity, but only in exchange for their digital selves.

Smartphones blur the line between production and consumption, between the social and the economic, between the pre-capitalist and the capitalist, ensuring that whether one uses their phone for work or pleasure, the outcome is increasingly the same – profit for capitalists.

Does the arrival of the smartphone signify the [Debordian](#) moment in which the commodity has completed its “colonization of social life”? Is it true that not only is our relationship to commodities plain to see, but that “commodities are now *all* that there is to see?”

This might seem a bit heavy-handed. Accessing social networks and digital connectivity through mobile phones undoubtedly has liberatory elements. Smartphones can help battle anomie and promote a sense of ambient awareness, while at the same time making it easier for people to generate and maintain real relationships.

A shared connection through digital selves can also nourish resistance to the existing hierarchy of power whose internal

mechanisms isolate and silence individuals. It's impossible to imagine the protests sparked by Ferguson and police brutality without smartphones and social media. And ultimately, most people are not yet compelled to use smartphones for work, and they certainly aren't required to perform their selves through technology. Most could throw their phones into the sea tomorrow if they wished.

But they won't. People love their hand machines. Communicating primarily through smartphones is fast becoming an accepted norm, and more and more rituals are becoming technologically mediated. Constant connection to the networks and information we call cyberspace is becoming central to identity. Why this is happening is a labyrinthine speculation.

Is it, as media and technology expert Ken Hillis [suggests](#), simply another way to "stave off the Void and the meaningless of existence?" Or, as novelist and professor [Roxane Gay](#) recently pondered, does our ability to manipulate our digital avatars provide a balm for our deep sense of impotence in the face of injustice and hate?

Or – as tech guru Amber Case [wonders](#) – are we all turning into cyborgs?

Probably not – but it depends on how you define cyborg. If a cyborg is a human who uses a piece of technology or a machine to restore lost functions or enhance her capacities and knowledge, then people have been cyborgs for a long time, and using a smartphone is no different than using a prosthetic arm, driving a car, or working on an assembly line.

If you define a cyborg society as one in which human relationships are mediated and shaped by technology, then our society certainly seems to meet this criterion, and our phones play a starring role. But our relationships and rituals have long been mediated by technology. The rise of massive urban centers – hubs of connectivity and innovation – would not have

been possible without railroads and cars.

Machines, technology, networks, and information do not drive or organize society – people do. We make things and use things according to the existing web of social, economic, and political relationships and the balance of power.

The smartphone, and the way it shapes and reflects existing social relations, is no more metaphysical than the Ford Rangers that once rolled off the assembly line in Edison, New Jersey. The smartphone is both a machine and a commodity. Its production is a map of global power, logistics, and exploitation. Its use shapes and reflects the perpetual confrontation between the totalizing drives of capital and the resistance of the rest of us.

In the present moment, the need for capitalists to exploit and commodify is strengthened by the ways in which smartphones are produced and consumed, but capital's gains are never secure and unassailable. They must be renewed and defended at every step. We have the power to contest and deny capital's gains, and we should. Perhaps our phones will come in handy along the way.