The Smart-Phone Attitude

Published: August 9, 2008

Things were strange enough when New Yorkers used ordinary cellphones. It was common, in those days, to see a straight-walking, pavement-eating New York pedestrian — the kind who growled at tourists holding open maps — turn into a creature with no more sense of direction than a pigeon on foot, once the phone was clapped to the ear.

According to one estimate, there will be five billion people using mobile phones by 2011, which means that, for some part of each day, most of our species will be reduced to wandering aimlessly.

But smart phones are changing everything. They are not meant to be held to the ear, for the simple reason that they are barely phones at all. This is especially true of the iPhone, which is more computer than phone.

I had an outdoor seat at a restaurant the other night in a neighborhood with high smart-phone density. Watching the passers-by holding their smart phones in front of them as they walked was like watching a parade of monks with heads bowed over their breviaries. As night settled in, I could see the glow of the screens shining upward on the faces of their owners, who were being guided down the street by peripheral vision and the feel of the sidewalk under their feet. It was like being in one of R. Crumb’s street scenes — everyone lost in a private thought bubble, everyone walking with a private posture.

Were they Twittering? Following their G.P.S.? Checking their stocks? Reading their e-mail? Texting a friend? Playing Crash Bandicoot? It makes no difference. I remember how strange it used to seem just to see someone reading a paperback or a folded newspaper while walking down the street. Now we are all getting to be that someone.

I used to believe that talking on a cellphone had no effect on my walking pace or directional stability. But after watching so many other pedestrians drunk with conversation, I realized that I am just as susceptible. And after switching to a smart phone, I had to switch to a new way of walking. I find it hard to ignore the gentle ping and throb that tells me new e-mail has arrived. So when my pocket pulses, I duck into a doorway or line myself up behind a lamppost, out of the current like a trout behind a rock. I feel at times like a remote-controlled robot, but I honor the first law of New York: keep moving or get out of the way.

VERLYN KLINKENBORG

A version of this article appeared in print on August 10, 2008, on page WK9 of the New York edition.