

Smart phones foster dumb habits among pedestrians

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This Tuesday, Jan. 4, 2011 photo shows a pedestrian walking while using a phone in New York. While smartphones and other electronic devices changed popular culture by offering an ability to always stay connected, it so swiftly turned into such a compelling need that a simple walk down the street is considered wasted time. (AP Photo/Bebeto Matthews)

(AP) -- It was a miserable morning in New York, rain falling heavily and a 30 mph wind that made holding an umbrella difficult. Yet a man walked briskly up Fifth Avenue, balancing his umbrella and dodging pedestrians as he texted from his smart phone.

As a sheer physical act, it was almost Olympian in the strength, dexterity and concentration required.

It was also completely ridiculous.

It was RAINING. And cold. The man was, let's presume, minutes from some destination. At any moment, he could spear a fellow pedestrian with his umbrella because he was only marginally paying attention to where he was going. What message could possibly be so important that it couldn't wait?

While [smart phones](#) and other [electronic devices](#) changed popular culture by offering an ability to always stay connected, they have so swiftly turned into such a compelling need that a simple walk down the street is considered wasted time.

One too many times stepping around a shuffling pedestrian immersed in e-mail led me to conduct a [social experiment](#). I decided to count the number of people I saw distracted by their electronic devices during my 25-minute morning walk to work from New York's Grand Central Station to the far West Side.

Some ground rules: Cell-phone conversations count, along with texting and looking at the devices. I didn't consider listening to music to be a distraction - that, um, would require counting myself - but people who looked at their iPods while walking made the list. Pulling over to the side to use an electronic device didn't count, because that's what a courteous pedestrian should be doing.

So those three construction workers who stood together talking on their phones off Fifth Avenue were safe from wrath. Same for the woman who frequently asks for spare change next to St. Michael's Church on 33rd Street when she's on her cell. She's usually sitting.

In 15 mornings of counting in late November and December, the average was 48.6 people. The most was 67. The fewer was 28, on the rainy day our Fifth Avenue textlete felt he had room to maneuver. Generally speaking, it was about one in 10 [pedestrians](#).

In that time, I saw a woman nearly flattened by a taxi when she stepped off a curb into traffic while looking into her cell phone. A bicycle messenger rode and talked on his phone at the same time. One gabber pushed a baby stroller. One morning two police officers were on the phone. A man nearly bumped into me after swiveling his head mid-step from his screen to watch the backside of a woman passing by.

Even people not using their smart phones kept them in their hands, like drawn weapons. It's become an accepted part of urban posture.

Mind you, this is winter in the Northeast; the temperature was finger-numbing on many mornings. No problem: I pass by a bus shelter with an advertisement for gloves specially equipped to work touch-screens. There are also smart phone apps that encourage texting while walking, using the device's camera to show a picture on the screen of where a person is walking, visible as a backdrop behind what they're typing.

Smart phones have replaced tourists as New York pedestrians' biggest headache. We used to disdain people from out of town when they wandered slowly on the sidewalks, looking skyward at tall buildings and muttering as we walked by with purpose.

Now we're the menace.

We also used to walk with a certain amount of hyperawareness. Remember muggers creeping from dark corners? Pickpockets who worked the crowds? Now many people walk down the street oblivious to their surroundings, fiddling with an electronic device worth hundreds of dollars.

One New Yorker who followed my daily Facebook count of distracted pedestrians admits she's one of them. In fact, she often walks down city streets with her husband, both engrossed not in each other, but in their

smart phones.

"I find that my walk to the subway or home at night is the only time I can actually focus on myself," said the woman, who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of looking silly. "All of the other times of the day I'm surrounded by people who are constantly grabbing for my attention. I am the classic multitasker."

While she walks, her mind's usually racing with things she needs to remind co-workers or contacts, things she must tell the baby sitter.

Why not do it in the moment?

"I get a lot of dirty looks on the street, from people who are frustrated that I'm not looking where I'm going," she said. "I try hard to be respectful of the other pedestrians and look up and down very frequently."

A clip posted on YouTube last week of a woman who fell into a fountain while walking and texting at the Berkshire Mall in Wyomissing, Pa., near Reading, has been seen by more than 3 million people. The Pennsylvania woman, Cathy Cruz Marrero, appeared on ABC's "Good Morning America" Thursday with a lawyer and said they're looking into who was responsible for spreading the video. What was so important that she had to text right away? Someone she knew from church had e-mailed to ask when was Marrero's birthday.

It could be the permanent state of things; smart phone use is growing fast. The Nielsen Co. said that 95 percent of American adults have cell phones. Nearly a third of those are smart phones.

I'll confess that the devices have driven me to a few minor episodes of sidewalk rage. I've lightly bumped into distracted pedestrians on purpose

a couple of times. Not to cause harm - just to snap them from their virtual worlds and make them aware of the real one.

I've been to parties where clumps of people stared into devices, or texted, instead of actually conversing with humans around them. I always marvel upon landing on a redeye flight from the West Coast at how many people immediately take out their phones and begin dialing. It's 5:30 a.m. - 2:30 in the city they've left. Who are they calling?

William Powers once saw two women in New York crashing baby strollers into one another because they were both concentrating on phones. Powers, a former Washington Post reporter, wrote the book "Hamlet's BlackBerry," about how an addiction to technology prevents people from doing their best work or forging healthy relationships.

"We're hard-wired from our primitive ancestors to pay attention to novelty," he said. It happens whenever there are major technological shifts, like the establishment of printing presses, he said. Author Henry David Thoreau, famed for writing about a life in solitude around Walden Pond, once observed in the 1850s that people had become addicted to going to the post office.

"Didn't we say the same thing a while back about boom boxes and Walkmen?" noted Lizabeth Cohen, professor of American Studies in Harvard University's history department. "Maybe the constant is change."

Powers believes things will calm down as people become more accustomed to the technology. Knowing you can check your e-mail at any time may become as satisfying as actually doing it, and more phones will stay in the pocket. Society, in its natural course, may impose a new set of behaviors. When cell phones were new, he noted, many people didn't think twice about answering a call while sitting in a theater. Now

that's much more rare.

Changes are noticeable in another part of my journey to work, too. Cell phone conversations used to be fairly commonplace on the commuter train. Now they are widely frowned upon, a new social order set informally by fellow passengers.

So there's hope. In the meantime, look out for yourself on the street. No one else is.

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