The smartphone society

We live in what Ofcom and the media have dubbed a smartphone society. Explore the era of 'iTime' through Ofcom's most recent statistics

Smartphone UK

A YouGov survey of 2,290 UK adults conducted in May 2015 confirms that we live in a smartphone society. The survey, commissioned by the media regulator Ofcom, found that two-thirds of UK adults (66%) and 90% of 16–24 year-olds now own a smartphone. The national figure has increased by 27% since 2012 and is likely to continue to rise. (See Figure 1.)

A challenge to television?

Almost three-quarters (72%) of time spent using smartphones is for communication. But younger people, especially, are increasingly using smartphones for information and entertainment too. Smartphones have overtaken laptops as a means of connecting to the internet. Younger people are ten times as likely as older people to say that their mobile phone is the device they would miss the most. Three in five (59%) 16–24 year-olds cited their mobile phone here, compared to only 17% who said they would most miss their TV set.

According to the Broadcast Audience Research Board's official measures (BARB), hours of weekly live-television viewing in the UK fell by 6% (or 12 minutes), to 193 minutes in 2014, following a 5% (11 minute) decline in 2013. Are smartphones poised to challenge the cultural centrality of television in the new media age? Smartphone owners with 4G were also likely to do much more online than other smartphone owners. (See Figure 2.)

The era of iTime?

Half of smartphone users say they are 'hooked' on their mobile phones. How 'twitchy' are you in the morning and late at night to sneak a look at your mobile? Almost half (49%) of young people aged 18–24 check their phones within 5 minutes of waking and two-fifths check them fewer than 5 minutes before going to sleep. Around one third of all adults (34%) said they checked their phones within 5 minutes of waking up. (See Figure 3.)

The American sociologist Ben Agger has called the arrival of smartphones the era of iTime, one which fundamentally alters the boundaries between public and private, and day and night. Today the habitual use of smartphones means that time for young people stretches and bends. They are genuinely postmodern. This is more than a clash of generations, he argues. Instead it represents new ways of doing everyday life. Boundaries dissolve as young people carry their smartphones with them everywhere.

Not to be 'on', Agger argues, is to be asleep. Work and interaction is everywhere: there is no 'off' time or disconnection. Perhaps we really do have to re-think what 'social life' means in the age of the smartphone society?

References