

Are texters under the thumb of cell phones?

Whether you think it's exciting or scary, mobile devices have changed how we interact.

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While Jessica Curnes chatted about texting addiction via an old-fashioned device — her voice — her cell phone dinged three times in 15 minutes with text messages.

She lives in perpetual connection. "One of my friends was in a really bad car accident. She was sending an e-mail," said Curnes, 22, a University of Northern Iowa student. "That hit home."

Did you cut back? Pause. "It really is badly an addiction," she said. "Even if it were illegal I would still do it."

On April Fools' Day, Gov. Chet Culver signed a bill making it illegal for most minors to use a mobile phone while driving and prohibiting anyone from sending or receiving texts.

It's of little debate anymore; it's dangerous and now illegal. What's left to ponder is how, in a few short years, mobile devices became such vital appendages that we can't go many minutes without them.

Some communications experts say they have changed us, and not for the better, while others say we are simply going through a period of adaptation to

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technology.

If you can hold your texts for a minute for boring statistics: 1.56 trillion text messages were sent worldwide in 2009, nearly 20 times the number just four years earlier; in Iowa, the number of mobile wireless telephone subscribers nearly doubled from 2002 to 2008, to 2.2 million, more than two-thirds of the population. Meanwhile, the number of land telephone lines in Iowa homes (1.4 million in 2007) continues to decrease, according to the Iowa Utilities Board.

"I check e-mail, return phone calls, look at the Internet, check Facebook," Curnes said. "It's a handicap in a way. If someone were to take my cell phone I would be so out of the loop I would be lost."

"It creates a kind of dependency on people. It's weird to think of walking to class and having every interaction not be conversations with people around me but on the phone."

Here's the justification: It landed Curnes a summer internship. One day she got a tweet from the Des Moines Social Club. The Ankeny native follows the group, which was announcing a need for a photographer. The communications major responded via text and sold them on her expertise in mobile social networking.

Excessive mobile phone use as a technological addiction is not included in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. But look around at people weaving down the sidewalk, texting away, and it may cause some to wonder why not.

Critic: Face-to-face time is now seen as a hassle

Among Iowa's biggest critics of mobile mania is Michael Bugeja, who has studied use of mobile devices since 1999.

"We are a different culture than in 2003, that's how quickly the medium became the message," said the director of Iowa State University's Greenlee School of Journalism and Communication. "I believe that technology controls us, we do not control technology."

"Cell phones convey one message and one only, whether calling, texting or watching a movie, and it's that something somewhere else is more important than the person we are with."

Here's his example, how he says the "Iowa nice" persona handed down from our pioneer ancestors who needed each other on the often brutal prairie, waving while passing on rural roads, was changed by one simple gadget.

"In 2003, when I approached someone on a cell phone, they would click it off and apologize," he said. "In 2004, they were apologizing to the person on the line. By 2005, they would ignore you entirely."

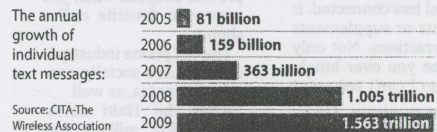
Five years after that, we are so plugged in that "technology says everything is routine except using it."

"Driving is routine, sitting at the dinner table is routine, sitting in an ISU classroom is routine," Bugeja said.

The gadget says anyplace you are with me, you should be using me.

Standing in line at Kum & Go. Young man in front de-pockets his cell phone and checks it. Seconds later, the next man in line unconsciously does the same, followed by the third in line.

Worldwide growth in text-messaging



Worldwide telephone, mobile and Internet use

