Keep Your Thumbs Still When I'm Talking to You

DAVID CARR

David Carr was a journalist and author who wrote about media and culture for the *New York Times*. He was born and raised in 1956 in Hopkins, Minnesota, where he attended grade school and high school. Later, he attended the University of Wisconsin–River Falls and then the University of Minnesota, all the while working at odd jobs to pay for his education. In all, as he put it in an interview for a series about unconventional educations, it took him seven years to get through college. Carr was the former editor of the *Twin Cities Reader,* and he wrote for the alternative weekly *Washington City Paper*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, and *New York Magazine* before moving to the *Times*. In addition to being one of the writers featured in *Page One: Inside the New York Times*, a documentary about how and why the *New York Times* wouldn't relinquish its esteemed position in the journalistic world to Facebook and Twitter, Carr was the author of the best-selling memoir *The Night of the Gun*. In the book he recounts the story of his own cocaine addiction by interviewing the people he associated with during that period of his life. In his review of the memoir, Corby Kummer, his former editor at the *Atlantic*, referred to Carr's "joyous peculiarity." Carr died of pneumonia and complications of lung cancer in February 2015, after collapsing in the newsroom.

In "Keep Your Thumbs Still When I'm Talking to You," which was first published in the *New York Times* on April 15, 2011, Carr argues that our digital age "has made it fashionable to be rude."

WRITING TO DISCOVER: *When someone you are conversing with answers a call or takes out a phone to make a call, what has been your response? How did you feel? Unimportant? Understanding, especially if there might be an emergency? Angry or disgusted when you realized the call was trivial chit-chat? Have you changed the way you react to such situations over time?*

You are at a party and the person in front of you is not really listening to you. Yes, she is murmuring occasional assent to your remarks, or nodding at appropriate junctures, but for the most part she is looking beyond you, scanning in search of something or someone more compelling.

Here's the funny part: If she is looking over your shoulder at a room full of potentially more interesting people, she is ill-mannered. If, however, she is not looking over your shoulder, but into a smartphone in her hand, she is not only well within modern social norms, but is also a wired, well-put-together person.

Add one more achievement to the digital revolution: It has made it fashionable to be rude.

I thought about that a lot at South by Southwest Interactive, the annual campfire of the digitally interested held in Austin, Tex., the second week of March; inside, conference rooms brimmed with wireless connections, and the people on the dais competed with a screen in almost every seat: laptops, or even more commonly, tablets. In that context, the live presentation that the people in the audience had ostensibly come many miles to see was merely companion media.

But even more remarkably, once the badge-decorated horde spilled into the halls or went to the hundreds of parties that mark the ritual, almost everyone walked or talked with one eye, or both, on a little screen. We were adjacent but essentially alone, texting and talking our way through what should have been a great chance to engage flesh-and-blood human beings. The wait in line for panels, badges, or food became one more chance to check in digitally instead of an opportunity to meet someone you didn't know. 5

I moderated a panel there called "I'm So Productive, I Never Get Anything Done," which was ostensibly about how answering e-mail and looking after various avatars on Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr left little time to do what we actually care about or get paid for. The biggest reaction in the session by far came when Anthony De Rosa, a product manager and programmer at Reuters and a big presence on Twitter and Tumblr, said that mobile connectedness has eroded fundamental human courtesies.

"When people are out and they're among other people they need to just put everything down," he said. "It's fine when you're at home or at work when you're distracted by things, but we need to give that respect to each other back."

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His words brought sudden and tumultuous applause. It was sort of a moment, given that we were sitting amid some of the most digitally devoted people in the hemisphere. Perhaps somewhere on the way to the merger of the online and offline world, we had all stepped across a line without knowing it.

In an e-mail later, Mr. De Rosa wrote: "I'm fine with people stepping aside to check something, but when I'm standing in front of someone and in the middle of my conversation they whip out their phone, I'll just stop talking to them and walk away. If they're going to be rude, I'll be rude right back."

After the panel, one of the younger people in the audience came up to me to talk earnestly about the importance of actual connection, which was nice, except he was casting sidelong glances at his iPhone while we talked. I'm not even sure he knew he was doing it. It's not just conferences full of inforati where this happens. In places all over America (theaters, sports arenas, apartments), people gather 10

in groups only to disperse into lone pursuits between themselves and their phones.

Every meal out with friends or colleagues represents a negotiation between connectedness to the grid and interaction with those on hand. "Last year, for my friend's birthday, my gift to her was to stay off my phone at her birthday dinner," said Molly McAleer, who blogs and sends Twitter messages under the name Molls. "How embarrassing."

If South by Southwest is, as its attendees claim, an indicator of what is to come, we won't be seeing a lot of one another even if we happen to be in the same room. Anthony Breznican, a reporter for *Entertainment Weekly*, said all it takes is for one person at a dinner to excuse himself into his phone, and the race is on among everyone else.

"Instead of continuing with the conversation, we all take out our phones and check them in earnest," he said. "For a few minutes everybody is typing away. A silence falls over the group and we all engage in a mass thumb-wrestling competition between man and little machine. Then the moment passes, the BlackBerrys and iPhones are reholstered, and we return to being humans again after a brief trance."

In the instance of screen etiquette, sharing is not always caring, and sometimes, the bigger the screen, the larger the faux pas: On an elevator in the Austin Convention Center, some crazed social media promoter jammed his iPad under my nose and started demo-ing his hideously complicated social networking app that was going to change the world. I leaped to safety as soon as the door opened.

Still, many are finished apologizing for what has become a very natural mix of online and offline pursuits. In an essay on *TechCrunch* entitled "I Will Check My Phone at Dinner and You Will Deal With It," MG Siegler wrote, "Forgive me, but it's Dinner 2.0." 15

He added: "This is the way the world works now. We're always connected and always on call. And some of us prefer it that way."

It scans as progress, but doesn't always feel that way. There are a number of reasons why people at conferences and out in the world treat their phones like a Tamagotchi, the digital pet invented in Japan that died if it wasn't constantly looked after and fed.

To begin with, phones glow. It is a very normal impulse to stare at something in your hand that is emitting light.

Beyond the gadget itself, the screen offers a data stream of many people, as opposed to the individual you happen to be near. Your e-mail, Twitter, Facebook, and other online social groups all offer a data stream of many individuals, and you can choose the most interesting one, unlike the human rain delay you may be stuck with at a party. Then there is also a specific kind of narcissism that the social Web engenders. By grooming and updating your various avatars, you are making sure you remain at the popular kid's table. One of the more seductive data points in real-time media is what people think of you. The metrics of followers and

retweets beget a kind of always-on day trading in the unstable currency of the self.

"My personal pet peeve is people who live-tweet every interaction," 20
said Roxanna Asgarian, a student at the CUNY Graduate School of Journalism who attended South by Southwest this year. "I prefer to experience the thing itself over the experience of telling people I'm doing the thing."

Still, for those of us who are afraid of missing something, having the grid at our fingertips offers reassurance that we are in the right spot or gives indicators of heat elsewhere.

But all is not vanity. For anybody with children, a job, or a significant other, the expectation these days is that certain special people, usually beginning with our bosses, can reach us at any minute of any day. Every once in a while something truly important tumbles into our in-box that requires immediate attention.

Mobile devices do indeed make us more mobile, but that tether is also a leash, letting everyone know that they can get you at any second, most often to tell you they are late, but on their way. (Another bit of bad manners that the always-on world helps facilitate, by the way.)

At the conference, I saw people who waited 90 minutes to get into a party with a very tough door, peering into their phones the whole while, only to breach the door finally and resume staring into the same screen and only occasionally glancing up. In that sense, the scenery never really changes when you are riding with your digital wingman. I saw people who were sitting on panels surfing or e-mailing during lulls, and then were taken by surprise when it was their turn to talk. (And it's not just those children. I was hosting a discussion at another conference with Martha Stewart, no slouch when it comes to manners, and she kept us all waiting while she checked "one more thing" on her Twitter.)

I should sheepishly mention I was on highest alert for electronic 25
offense because I switched out my smartphone before South by Southwest and was on a new Droid that I'm pretty sure could guide the next mission to Mars, but it was clunky when it came to sending texts and Twitter messages. Digital natives (read "young people") will tell you that they can easily toggle between online and offline. My colleague Brian Stelter can almost pull it off, in part because he always seems to be creating media and consuming it. And in Austin I saw Andy Carvin, NPR's one-man signal tower of North African revolution on Twitter, sitting in front of a screen while the British band Yuck played a killer outdoor set at Stubb's. He sent Twitter messages about the show, and about Bahrain as well.

William Powers, the author of *Hamlet's BlackBerry*, a book about getting control of your digital life, appeared on a panel at South by Southwest and wrote that he came away thinking he had witnessed "a gigantic competition to see who can be more absent from the people and conversations happening right around them. Everyone in Austin was gazing into

their little devices—a bit desperately, too, as if their lives depended on not missing the next tweet."

In a phone conversation a few weeks afterward, Mr. Powers said that he is far from being a Luddite, but that he doesn't "buy into the idea that digital natives can do both screen and eye contact."

"They are not fully present because we are not built that way," he said.

Where other people saw freedom—from the desktop, from social convention, from the boring guy in front of them—Mr. Powers saw "a kind of imprisonment."

"There is a great deal of conformity under way, actually," he added. 30

And therein lies the real problem. When someone you are trying to talk to ends up getting busy on a phone, the most natural response is not to scold, but to emulate. It's mutually assured distraction.

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT THE READING

1. In paragraph 4 Carr discusses his experience at the South by Southwest Interactive conference. What did he find ironic about the presentations by people on the dais? (Glossary: *Irony*)
2. Why, according to Carr, do we find it more attractive to reach for our phone than talk to the person we are with? What's the allure?
3. What does Carr mean when he writes in paragraph 19: "The metrics of followers and retweets beget a kind of always-on day trading in the unstable currency of the self"? Explain the metaphor that Carr uses in paragraph 24 when he writes: "In that sense, the scenery never really changes when you are riding with your digital wingman." (Glossary: *Figures of Speech*)
4. Author William Powers thought he had witnessed at the South by Southwest show "a gigantic competition to see who can be more absent from the people and conversations happening right around them" (26). In your opinion, is he correct? If so, what does that observation say about how we are changing as a result of the digital revolution?
5. How well does Carr's title reflect his topic and thesis? (Glossary: *Thesis*)