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Disruptions: More Connected, Yet More Alone

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SAN FRANCISCO — Last weekend, I was watching television with a few friends, browsing the week’s most popular YouTube videos, when a piece in the comedy section called “I Forgot My Phone” caught my eye. As I was about to click play, however, a friend warned, “Oh, don’t watch that. I saw it yesterday, and it’s really sad.”

The two-minute video, which has been viewed more than 15 million times, begins with a couple in bed. The woman, played by the comedian and actress Charlene deGuzman, stares silently while her boyfriend pays no mind and checks his smartphone.

The subsequent scenes follow Ms. deGuzman through a day that is downright dystopian: people ignore her as they stare at their phones during lunch, at a concert, while bowling and at a birthday party. (Even the birthday boy is recording the party on his phone.) The clip ends with Ms. deGuzman back in bed with her boyfriend at the end of the day; he is still using his phone.

Ms. deGuzman’s video makes for some discomfiting viewing. It’s a direct hit on our smartphone-obsessed culture, needling us about our addiction to that little screen and suggesting that maybe life is just better led when it is lived rather than viewed. While the clip has funny scenes — a man proposing on a beach while trying to record the special moment on his phone — it is mostly ... sad.

“I came up with the idea for the video when I started to realize how ridiculous we are all being, myself included, when I was at a concert and people around me

were recording the show with their phones, not actually watching the concert,” Ms. deGuzman said in an interview.

“It makes me sad that there are moments in our lives where we’re not present because we’re looking at a phone,” said Ms. deGuzman, who also wrote the piece, which was directed by Miles Crawford. She mused that, like it or not, experiencing life through a four-inch screen could be the new norm.

Or not. Ms. deGuzman’s video may have landed at one of those cultural moments when people start questioning if something has gone too far and start doing something about it.

Last week, the Unsound music festival in Poland banned fans from recording the event, saying it did not want “instant documentation” and distractions that might take away from the performances. In April, during a show in New York City, Karen O, the lead singer of the rock band the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, told audience members to put away their phones (using an expletive to emphasize her point).

A number of New York restaurants, including Momofuku Ko and Chef’s Table at Brooklyn Fare, have prohibited people from photographing their food. (Note to foodies: Your quinoa does not need to be artfully posted with an old-timey look on Instagram.) And, of course, many mothers and fathers who fought to keep the television out of the kitchen may see smartphones as the next threat to dinnertime civility.

In the late 1950s, televisions started to move into the kitchen from the living room, often wheeled up to the dinner table to join the family for supper. And then, TV at the dinner table suddenly became bad manners. Back to the living room the TV went.

“It never really caught on in most U.S. homes,” said Lynn Spigel, a professor at the Northwestern University School of Communication and author of the book, “Make Room for TV.” “At one point, a company even tried to invent a contraption called the TV Stove, which was both a TV and a stove,” she said.

So are smartphones having their TV-in-the-kitchen moment?

“Every experience is being mediated and conceived around how it can be captured and augmented by our devices,” said Mathias Crawford, a researcher in human-computer interactions and communications at Stanford University. “No place is this more apparent than our meals, where every portion leading up to, during and after a dining experience is being carved out by particular apps.”

People make dinner reservations on OpenTable; check in on Foursquare when they arrive at the restaurant; take a picture of their food to share on Instagram; post on Twitter a joke they hear during the meal; review the restaurant on Yelp; then, finally, coordinate a ride home using Uber.

“If you’re wondering when people are going to reject the phone, that will mean they need to reject Silicon Valley’s entire concept of how you ought to be dining,” Mr. Crawford said. But, he added, it was possible. “Yes, society is changing, but the iPhone is only really six years old, and those changes aren’t set in place.” Given the overwhelming response to Ms. deGuzman’s video, people are at least thinking about those changes.

“It wasn’t until this year that I’ve had these revelations about living in the moment without my phone,” Ms. deGuzman said. “I still have my phone with me, but I try to leave it in my purse. Now I find myself just taking in a moment, and I don’t have to post a picture about it.”

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