

why i am not on whatsapp

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it is a question i am asked every now and then, along with a particular kind of irritation. like i am not being smooth. like i am not readily available. almost an irritation that I cannot be owned at fingertip level. like i am stubborn. *did you not know..? it's free! come on, what is your problem?*

i do not wish to be a problem for others! yes, i am somewhat hard-headed, or should i say, change does not come so easily to me. i take time to get into something, so, it takes time to get out of something too. but Whatsapp.. *everybody is on Whatsapp!* no, actually not. *nobody checks sms's anymore.* no, that's not true. *who does email? i hardly check mine anymore.* well, everybody does email, as you cannot do much online and digitally without having an email address. and what about voicemail? Rowan Atkinson's last appearance was in Man vs. Bee, and in that series, his character's daughter makes it clear: "Dad, no one does voicemail anymore." yes, some would even have an answering service saying, "i do not check these messages, rather send me a Whatsapp." And so on.

it would appear that Whatsapp and Telegram and the like is just the logical next step in communication technology, and everyone should move along with the times. who does actual telegrams anymore? absolutely no one. who sends snail mail for general purposes anymore? no one. so from snail mail we moved on to email. and from email to Whatsapp. it's like one, two, three. so, if you, like me, stopped at nr two, you are simply behind the times. and stubborn. or both. or stupid as well.

so why am i not on Whatsapp then? let's say it's because i am stupid! that would end this little essay right here. case closed. but i won't get away with that. most people that know me, know that i have at least some brains. i cannot really hide it. but is it not stupid to pay two to three hundred dollars per month to make international calls and send sms's while you could do it all "for free?"

OK then, here's my first problem with Whatsapp: it's actually TOO easy. easy because it's free and you do not have to think of time and place. anything - text, pictures, videos - all goes in a snap. and so the whole world has become quite a bit more snappy (and the snapping at each other has ballooned). faster, easier, on the cheap. and so the whole world becomes faster, with the net effect, that our lives are racing more, our stress levels pick up more, and our sense of time and place (our sense of being rooted) becomes murkier.

the jump from snail mail to email has been huge already. before email, there was no dreaded inbox. there was no climbing a mountain every day just to keep that thing under control. yet, it was still a box. you had a sense of its size, of how heavy it becomes, how overloaded. Whatsapp took this away. messages enter and then they start to slip into the ether. like it's a bottomless pit. so, on the one hand, it seems to be lighter, as distant messages virtually disappear. but at the same time, everything becomes more frantic, as you need to catch the message while it is still hot and around.. reply before it slips off into the endless scroll-dimension. and so

the pressure and expectation for immediate responses grow. the pressure to be everything to everyone all the time.

but the more important question is: how did these revolutions in communication speed and ease affect the QUALITY of our communications?

a hand-written or mechanically typed letter took quite a bit of effort and time. it was indeed not so easy. you needed to weigh your words more, you took more care of what and how you wrote. editing was cumbersome. beginnings and endings had more gravitas. already with email, formulation relaxed quite a bit, spam messages exploded and beginnings and endings (framing, context) started to fray. yet, an email did not float right off into the air. it went into a box. it could still be sorted, moved around, serve as legal fare.

with Whatsapp and other social media communications, the whole point became the fleetingness. email service providers were still exactly that: providers of a communication service. this is in fact not quite the case anymore with Whatsapp and social media.

which brings me to the real rub. why did Mark Zuckerberg buy Whatsapp for \$30 billion? so he could give freebees to the whole world and look on with a happy heart that everyone can communicate faster and much much cheaper? did charity ever make him one of the richest men in the world? (it is at this point, that i want to ask everyone who has ever sent me an invitation to join Whatsapp "because it is free", whether *they* are not being a little stupid).

Whatsapp is this: not a communication service, but a maximizer of engagement, in order to extract as much behavioural data from each user as possible. communication is not an end, therefore, but a means to an end. for, the more you engage through this medium, the better Zuckerberg can mine your behaviour in order to sell a better product to a whole host of hungry data exploiters, of which advertising is the largest, but by far not the only. and it seems these days that most people have become aware of this. "surveillance capitalism" has become a known entity. and yet the standard response to it is, *it does not bother me. targeted ads? what's the big deal?* and in this way, nearly three billion people walked leisurely, along their most intimate and private communications, into one of the biggest money making schemes in history.

well, somehow, Zuckerberg thought it was and remains a big deal. the whole of the digital economy thinks it is a big deal. buying and selling data profiles have become the gold rush of our times. and it is not just social media. there is a whole army of apps in on the game too. you install an app. it asks you: can i use your camera, can i use your microphone? you think, what for? the app function has got nothing to do with taking photos or making recordings. but it asks you because it *wants to watch your facial expressions and listen to your voice*. it wants to analyze your facial expressions and the mood when you speak. more and more it wants to be able to track your state of mind, moment by moment, *to catch you when you are most vulnerable* for a certain product or piece of information.

that in itself is insidious enough - this profound loss of privacy. but the deeper aim and problem with all our "free" services these days is *the shaping of who you are* - not in this or that shape, but A FIXED SHAPE - as predictable as can be. we all have to become more fixed in our identities, our interests and behaviours. not to turn us into better human beings, or better citizens. but to turn us into products that will

sell well. no one wants to buy your profile if it cannot be well defined and easily predicted. but the more you become like a little machine that runs according to fixed patterns, the less you expand your horizons by learning new things, the less you are being creative, the less you reach out and connect with those who differ from you, the higher your selling price will be. not that - ha-ha! - you will ever be financially compensated for what you give away so willingly. you get your free stuff, don't you? no, the more you can be put into a box, the higher the towers of today's multibillionaires will rise, some of whom regards themselves as essentially a different species from all the rest, worthy of everlasting lives and owning the universe.

not that emailing has been spared all of this. hello, ever wondered why Gmail is for free? and why most people have ditched their independent service providers for Google? Because Google is just being so nice to everyone?

but still, what has it all to do with someone who is irritated with me, because they want to share video clips, gather a Whatsapp group for a particular project and communicate more effectively around a certain topic? in a very narrow sense, not much. and i acknowledge that within small day to day circumstances i will be perceived as the problem case while all else is getting along just fine, and fast at that.

but amplify this group forming over the vast ocean of human interaction on a daily basis, realize then what's been happening: because of its speed and fleetingness, the quality of our communications have dropped. the doors to the proliferation of online abuse, sexploitation of minors (Whatsapp a particular culprit here) and mis- and disinformation have flung wide open. the current mayhem in the UK, triggered by a complete falsity, is fueled through Telegram, for instance. our democratic discourses, imperfect to begin with, has been weakened world-wide. extremism on both the left and right has steadily risen. some conspiracy theories even became main stream.

but what about all the good uses? the campaigning for a good cause, the maintenance of family connections, the spread of useful information around crisis moments, you name it! yes, there are tonnes such examples, which i won't deny. but again, what has been the net effect? our communications have become far more compartmentalized. our real life relationships are suffering from a constant stream of disruptions from conversations that do not feel or honour time and space much. the Arab Spring for instance, facilitated by the speed and wide availability of social media, fizzled out in a few years. simply because using fleeting mediums to drive a cause produce fleeting results. it is one thing to "go viral", it is quite another to substantiate a programme of action, set up leadership structures that can sustain momentum and translate into lasting political change. cheap and easy media elevates the immediate reaction, the surface sensitivities in such a way that the MeToo movement for instance gave rise to a nasty and counterproductive cancel culture.

of course it does have effect. but we should realize the severe limitations of that effect.

on a personal level, i am still keeping Whatsapp at arm's length, to minimize disruption while i am with others - with Joke, with Mira (I also do not carry a smart phone with me, even though I own one). furthermore, something you pay for, or for which you go and sit down to type, you take a little more care with. and then, it is

already quite an effort to properly organize all my communications - on which so much of my career depends - and keep them accessible, with a finger on many different conversation trains, some of which stretch over decades already. adding Whatsapp to the mix would not be impossible, of course. but it would push my little boat more towards quantity and less quality. and that would reverberate into my life as a whole. this is just part of my little effort: to keep that balance more towards the quality side, in a world that is already running at fever pitch as it is.

the upshot here is, apart from some irritation in my direction, i still manage an extensive network and career internationally -just with using emails, phone calls and sms's. No social media at all. And for that, I am not at any technical disadvantage.

For dedicated online meetings, I use Zoom, and sometimes Skype. And to note, most people actually have no problem at all with keeping up with emails, to sms, to make and receive calls. When it comes to international calls, I do not expect people to pay to call me. I know it is expensive, and feels even more expensive once you get into the habit of using a "free" alternative.

Do i then miss out on some opportunities, or do i lose some connections due to my "primitive" means of communicating? of course i do. But how much? Not enough to have a real effect on my overall success rate. And with all its pretensions of being unmissable, Whatsapp remains a secondary means of communication, for you can in fact choose not to use it. But you cannot do anything digitally without an email address. You also cannot exist in a modern state without a telephone number. So it is not that my stubbornness regards a mere option. It regards sticking to the basics. Yes, i sometimes have to remind and call and email and leave voice mails and sms's for a while before i get a response ("sorry, i mostly use Whatsapp these days"), but once commutations established, i find that most people get down to business and simply communicate.

and that hefty bill every month? it bites, i do admit. but it still does not weigh up against the price i have to pay in terms of quality time, in terms of the liberty many could take to inundate me with trivia to which i would feel obliged to reply, and indeed, it still does not weigh up against my resistance to play along with the biggest con game of our times: "it's free!"

There is quite an irony at work here: a lot of people who are averse to too much governmental control, or believe conspiracies about dark forces controlling the world, designing viruses to cause pandemics, etc., they are quite protective of the tools provided by Big Tech through which they can do their "research", gain their "insider knowledge" of how we are all being taken for a ride. and yet, the real life conspiracy is exactly the way these tools are designed: to capture our engagement through addictive forms of information. Big Tech is far more in control of our worlds than any George Soros or WHO could ever be. And yes, they are taken to task by lawsuits, hearings and legislation - the EU, especially, is trying very hard to reign them in. But they have become "too big to fail" to many governments and the controls they do put in place, will never be enough to stem the tide of filth that runs through the veins of their systems. because without the filth, their business model would tank. Not to mention what happens to our lives once an authoritarian government gets their hands on all that data. Witness the extreme control happening in China, thanks to our dependence on "free" communication tools.

Be irritated by me then, but as long as i can (i do not declare myself totally immune) i will pay my cents for an email address (and web site) served by a small

company in a town that i can go and visit, can call and get effective, direct, personal assistance. pay my phone bills so i won't unnecessarily spend time talking to people far away while i have real people with and around me. and if you refuse to spend any cent when contacting me, give me a missed call, it'll call you back. or just email. how's that.

yes, i wish there was something like Whatsapp that is PUBLICALLY OWNED, paid for by all of us with no behind the scenes profiteering. but as long as that does not exist, i want to try not to make the dollar-fat people even fatter.

and perhaps, through being hard headed on this, i can raise just a little awareness of how we COMMUNE-icate: are we actually building COMMUNE-ity? or do we rather splinter ourselves in a million little bubbles, hardening, rather than softening our differences?

Technology is not an endless upward curve of progress. Like all else, it reaches a plateau where finding balance becomes more important than to keep innovating.

i have not even touched upon the heavy toll all these little video clips we are sending around, in order to pretend we are actually not thousands of miles apart, are taking on the environment through the massive amounts of energy it consumes. or the severe consequences of social media addiction on the youth of today. the point is that the "wonder" of modern day global communications has its limits. and i am just wondering whether we've not already passed the line of sustainability of what is simply good for us. *of what is connecting, rather than distracting.*

so that, in all, is why i am not on Whatsapp. for now. so rather not invite me to join with that "it is free" line. For we are individually, and collectively, paying a hidden price that we better begin to calculate.