



Are smartphones changing our personalities?  
SHELLEY HADFIELD reports

# NARCISSISM LIVES HERE



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**O**N November 22 2012, all the phones went dead.

It wasn't a Hollywood horror movie, although some probably thought it was a nightmare.

A fire at a Telstra phone exchange had caused a telecommunications blackout for about 100,000 people around Warrnambool, Hamilton and Portland.

They lost fixed line and mobile phone services, Eftpos and ATM and internet access.

Some lost them for up to 20 days as services were progressively restored.

The State Government estimated it cost the region about \$1 million a day. But in our gadget-obsessed world it also provided a unique social experiment.

After a period of shock and loss, a funny thing happened.

Families reported sitting down to meals together and talking to each other. The community banded together.

People got out and visited the elderly and infirm.

"For the first few days, it was a real backwater," says Dr Mark Gregory, of RMIT's school of electrical and computer engineering.

Dr Gregory was a co-author of a 2014 report into the impacts of the fire.

"We got ... people saying to us their teenagers had to actually go out and discover the world and meet other teenagers out there," he said.

"There were some quite humorous anecdotes when it all came through to us — how the whole thing left their

teenagers and children wondering what to do now.

"A lot of teenagers were absolutely lost but they moved on after that initial shock.

"They would go to the shops, act as teenagers, there was this transition back to the hangout and groups of teens.

"It was comforting to see it didn't take too many days for this to occur."

But, to some degree, Dr Gregory said the device obsession did disappear along with the service: "There were people taking huge numbers of

photographs. People were still using the devices. When they finally got back on to the network, there was a burst of uploading of these photos."

More than two years later and across the other side of the world comes proof, it's been said, that we need to re-evaluate our relationship with smartphones and social media.

That proof is in a suddenly infamous image of seven young women beaming happy smiles as they huddle together for a photo.

Their faces are tilted

slightly upwards as their selfie stick extends into the air. After all, that's the best angle — and at any other spot, this would have been a great photo.

But these women have drawn ire around the world for turning a tragedy into an opportunity for a selfie.

As they posed, behind them emergency services were searching frantically for bodies in the rubble left by a massive blast in Manhattan's East Village which left two people dead and 25 hurt.

CONTINUED NEXT PAGE



FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

"Village Idiots", the *New York Post* proclaimed on its front page last Sunday, with a photo of these women posing for their own photo. And many agreed.

But they weren't the only ones. Christine Freundlich posted a photo of herself at the explosion site with a broad smile, making the peace sign.

In an apology last week, Freundlich said she had been inconsiderate: "What happened in the East Village is not to be taken lightly, and I regret my course of action."

Near the site, a neighbour taped a sign to a door: "This is a tragedy, not a tourist attraction. Show some respect."

Even in our own backyard, the behaviour of some members of the selfie generation seems to know no bounds.

Tragedy tourists earned condemnation in December for taking happy snaps of themselves as 13 people were held hostage by a gunman inside the Lindt cafe in Sydney.

Not even funerals are sacred anymore. University of Melbourne social media expert Dr Lauren Rosewarne says this trend highlights grief is coming in different forms.

"We do our grieving more publicly," Dr Rosewarne says.

"We are doing, culturally, our emoting more publicly in fact. There's a lot of this going on, it's an extension of living publicly."

There's little doubt that if Narcissus — that hunter in Greek mythology who fell in love with his own reflection in a pool of water — existed today, he would have a selfie stick.

An extension of our love affair with devices and social media, the selfie stick has even been dubbed the "wand of narcissism".

Melbourne psychologist Carolyn Manning says that "narcissism" is a term which has been hijacked to describe those with undeservedly high self esteem or who are self absorbed.

**H**EALTHY levels of self esteem are important to psychological health, Ms Manning says.

But what sets narcissists apart is a lack of empathy and poor relationship skills. For instance, those who take selfies at an unfolding disaster site clearly lack empathy.

"It's totally inappropriate and disrespectful to victims, their partners and families who are caught up in any kind of trauma or disaster to be exposed to individuals prioritising their need to appear in social media over other people's suffering," Ms Manning says. "Clearly the selfie-taker in this situation is showing no consideration, respect or empathy for victims and loved ones when they choose to put themselves in the position of being a pseudo-celebrity over all else."

Etiquette expert Anna Musson says what has happened at disaster sites like Manhattan is "an on-the-nose topic".

"I think they have gone up with a phone as an extension of their personality," Ms Musson, author of *Etiquette Secrets*, says.

She says the downside of this is there is less scope for knowing what is appropriate.

"They are never without it (their phone) so they are oblivious to the social parameters of what's appropriate and what's not. They have become insensitive. I think it's a disease on our society that is a cancerous growth," Ms Musson says.

The premise of good manners is to put another person's needs before your own, she says.

Rather than having reverence for other people in a tragic event, now it can be a case of "I was here when this was happening, I want everyone to know".

"We think that because we can we do. Because we can be on the phone at the grocery checkout, we do," Ms Musson says. "We forget this is inappropriate because it's disrespectful or it's dishonourable."

Dr Rosewarne says it's harsh to see these people as purely narcissists.

"What I think it was more about is 'I was there, I was at this major event'," Dr Rosewarne says.

"The question I would ask is, 'Could you not take a photo of the event without putting yourself in the middle of it?'"

She says distributing selfies taken at disaster sites is definitely narcissistic. She says this desire to document our own image is not new. From those who carved their own image in caves to artists who painted self portraits, it has been going on for millennia.

Hollywood actor Susan Sarandon has joked she and co-star Geena Davis invented the



The infamous selfie up for criticism on New York social media last weekend and (right) how the *New York Post* saw it; while (above right) Reservoir sisters Chrystalla and Maria Georgiou will ditch their devices as part of the 7TIL7 challenge. Picture: JAY TOWN



selfie with a Polaroid camera in their famous 1991 road movie *Thelma and Louise*.

The selfie stick, Dr Rosewarne says, is "an example of wanting to take that ever-more perfect image of oneself".

"I think we are more narcissistic because the technology enables us to be."

And, Dr Rosewarne says, celebrity selfie-taking culture has normalised the activity.

"Kim Kardashian's 400 million selfies gives the impression it's not a nerd activity but it's people we admire," she says.

"We have got a camera in our pocket all the time and we are on social media all the time."

Dr Rosewarne says technology enables us to feel connected, feel close to our

friends and feel like we have a lot of friends, therefore feeling we are popular.

She says it is not enough to go out to dinner with friends anymore — it has to be documented on social media as a way of "living one's life and living one's happiness publicly".

Ms Manning says the "cult of celebrity" is partly to blame for the popularity of social media.

She says social media provides a positive experience for many people, but it's about keeping a balance.

**T**HE immediacy of social media can lead to overstimulation and sleep issues, which spill over into other psychological and health issues, she says.

And, Ms Manning says, the

concentration on devices can lead to a reduced ability to focus on the here and now.

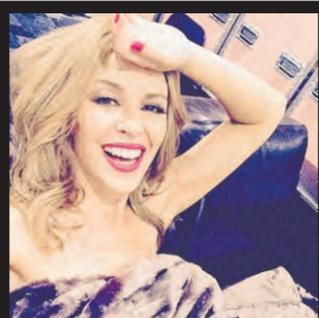
"I see many people out together, but glued to their own phones and not talking to each other. The focus of dining seems to be more about taking photos and uploading them, checking other people's activities or checking their phones, rather than enjoying the food and wine and good company."

Look around on a train and there is a sea of devices.

In Melbourne, people have walked off train platforms and in front of trams while engrossed in their phones.

In December, a tourist walked off St Kilda pier and into the cold water of Port Phillip Bay while checking Facebook.

Last year Telstra's





Maria says she wakes up and checks Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat and they are the last things she looks at before going to bed at night.

"You have a need to feel socially accepted all the time, so you do it," Maria says.

Chrystalla says she thinks it will be nice to step back and take a break from technology.

"I just recently bought an iPad and it seems like I'm always on it," Chrystalla says.

She admits a typical night for her would be checking Facebook and emails, as well as watching TV shows on her iPad.

Health of Australia founder Paul Waldren says more than 10,000 people took a national online test in the past week aimed at gathering a snapshot of the state of our health.

"What we learned is we are addicted to our devices," Mr Waldren says.

The National Health of Australia test found 63 per cent of respondents use their mobile device regularly in bed.

In all 81 per cent believed social media had an overall positive impact on their life, with most claiming it makes them feel more connected and aware of current events.

Mr Waldren says he understands the device obsession — he is addicted to his mobile phone.

He's checking emails the moment he wakes and the moment before he goes to sleep.

"It's everything I can do to put the phone down and get some sleep — and this is from someone who is smart enough and educated enough to know the perils," Mr Waldren says.

"I would say I have an addiction."

He says that over time he has

found he cannot get through the day without having his phone in his hand or nearby from 6am til 11pm.

"I would say most of my colleagues are the same. If that's not an addiction, I don't know what is," Mr Waldren says.

"I would say that my obsession and my addiction to my phone is damaging to my health, but I'm still choosing to do it."

When he's not checking his emails, he is reading research articles. If he has nothing else to do, he will go on social media.

He says people can't go to a restaurant or concert without getting on social media.

"It's because we want people to know our life is bloody fantastic and it's probably better than yours," he says.

"It's this real narcissistic social obsession that we are seeing, especially with social media."

Child psychiatrist and researcher Dr Philip Tam has developed the Network for Internet Investigation and Research Australia (NIIRA) as a resource for parents and schools. He says internet addiction has been emerging over the past five to 10 years, with children as young as 10 suffering from excessive use.

He says that in the Sydney clinic where he works, referrals are received on a weekly basis, with children going through a "digital detox".

In some extreme cases, children have dropped out of school and don't leave the house anymore.

Multi-user games are the biggest problem area he sees.

"Problem internet use is almost always the result of other underlying mental health

problems, like depression, anxiety, Asbergers is common, attention deficit disorder," says Dr Tam, who is part of an international working group which is considering whether problematic internet use should be accorded full mental health disorder status. He says he is yet to see any social media addicts.

Ms Musson says it has been a gradual slippery slope to device obsession.

She is concerned about a society where a sense of social acceptance is gained through how many likes people get on Facebook, where young people are developing a fear of missing out (or FOMO as it's known).

Rather than being in touch with people, we are picking and choosing what we want people to know about our lives.

"The real problem is we are losing our ability to be present and that is a real problem. We are slowly disconnecting from society."

She says sometimes we aren't seeing the elderly person or the pregnant woman on the train who needs a seat because we are so focused on our gadgets.

Ms Musson feels we are now starting to see a push back.

"I think increasingly we are saying 'No, can you put your phone away?'"

Her message to people is simple: "Practice being present. It's a discipline. I think our families, our communities, the bus driver, they deserve it."

And, she adds, if you do happen to poke someone in the eye with your selfie stick, then it's time to put it away.

**GO TO NIIRA.ORG.AU TO GAIN ACCESS TO RESOURCES FOR SCHOOLS AND PARENTS ON HOW TO DEAL WITH INTERNET ADDICTION**  
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**ANNA MUSSON'S 'NETIQUETTE' TIPS**

★ If your phone rings and you are with someone, you say, 'Do you mind if I answer this?' The person you are with should always take precedence over the phone.

★ The more you respond quickly, the more people will expect that from you. If you can, you respond that business day.

★ Meetings should only last 45 minutes, giving people 15 minutes to check messages and emails.

★ Families should have no-phone zones, with the dining room table off limits. This can also include setting a time of the day when the internet is off limits.

★ Consider where you are. Ask yourself, 'Is this appropriate and if the shoe was on the other foot — if it was your funeral, or you in a bus accident — would you be happy for people to be filming you?' Not everything needs to be recorded.

★ Don't record yourself on a selfie stick walking around. That's obnoxious, please.

★ Parents need to teach their children not to use a phone while walking down the street, while having dinner, using the rest rooms and, importantly, on public transport: "It so blatantly says, 'I don't care about any of you, it suits me right now.' It just reeks of being completely self-absorbed and obnoxious."

Smartphone and Tablet index revealed that the average smartphone user interacts with their device more than 150 times a day.

GlobalWebIndex's latest report on social networking trends shows that time spent on social networks continues to rise — from an average of 1.61 hours a day in 2012 to 1.72 hours in 2014.

FebFast introduced a social media component this year for the first time.

Later this month the inaugural 7til7 Challenge will encourage Australians to disconnect from the internet between 7pm and 7am for seven days.

The challenge will run from April 19 and is aimed at raising funds for headspace National Youth Mental Health Foundation.

Reservoir sisters Maria Georgiou, 16, and her sister Chrystalla, 23, are among those to take up the challenge.

