

# How Would Dostoevsky Have Responded to the Smartphone?

“I don’t know how to make friends without my phone,” a teenager told me last summer when I found myself enforcing a policy banning screens at a student seminar I was helping with.

I was a little surprised by this line of reasoning, but I’ve encountered it more than a few times since from teens complaining about not having a smartphone or not being allowed to use their device at school.

I get it. Life as a teen is a bit awkward and phones help resolve that awkwardness. But while screens temporarily ease awkwardness in social situations, their effects on the whole may be considerably less positive. Increased screen time has been [associated](#) with higher levels of depression and social media appears to have a negative [impact](#) on mental health with an ironic tendency to [generate](#) greater feelings of social isolation.

This uptick in depression was observed several years ago by San Diego State University professor Jean Twenge. Writing for the *Atlantic* [she observed](#),

*The advent of the smartphone and its cousin the tablet was followed quickly by hand-wringing about the deleterious effects of “screen time.” But the impact of these devices has not been fully appreciated, and goes far beyond the usual concerns about curtailed attention spans. The arrival of the smartphone has radically changed every aspect of teenagers’ lives, from the nature of their social interactions to their mental health.*

The proliferation of digital technology has created an interesting paradox: devices that were designed to connect people have coincided with increasing rates of isolation, with nearly [half](#) of Americans reporting feelings of loneliness. Gen

Z, the generation that has grown up immersed in a culture of communication technology, has fared the [worst](#).

It turns out that this paradox of isolation and connection is nothing new. Fyodor Dostoevsky observed a similar trend in his own day. In Dostoevsky's work, [Brothers Karamazov](#), Father Zosima describes the isolation of Russian society in the late 1800s: "We are assured that the world is becoming more and more united, is formed into brotherly communion, by the shortening of distances, by transmitting of thoughts through air."

Do not believe them, he tells us. According to Dostoevsky, the seeming connectedness of Russia at the time was only a thin veneer covering the reality of a deeply isolated and lonely society. Another character in the book explains:

*[Isolation is] that which is now reigning everywhere, especially in our age... For everyone now strives most of all to separate his person, wishing to experience the fullness of life within himself, and yet what comes of all his efforts is not the fullness of life but full suicide, for instead of the fullness of self-definition, they fall into complete isolation. For all men in our age are separated into units, each seeks seclusion in his own hole, each withdraws from the others, hides himself, and hides what he has, and ends by pushing himself away from people and pushing people away from himself...*

Even with innovations that were meant to connect people, people had withdrawn into themselves, each "seeking seclusion in his own hole." If this was the case in Dostoevsky's time, how much more so today?

Increasing digitalization frequently leads to decreased human contact. Scholar Chris Allen [observes](#), "While we desire human contact, digital alternatives are often cheaper than everyday acquaintances. This has resulted in more and more aspects of our lives becoming digital by default, which has subsequently reduced our opportunities for everyday social contact."

This is not to say that technology is evil, or that it has not

helped to connect people across distances. But it is important to keep in mind that digital connection is not a replacement for actual investment in the lives of other people. Dostoevsky described the isolation of his own day as “horrible” and “unnatural,” and saw the increase in isolation as a move that would move to a destruction of the individual as well as society. As isolation increases, is it time to heed Dostoevsky’s warning and stop separating ourselves and pushing one another away?

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