

The Tyranny of the Group Chat

Signal Fails 2.0 & for telephone desertion

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”In these times, nearly everyone in our surroundings is constantly carrying a mobile phone (whether “smart” or not). Phones demand a dominant presence in our daily lives and our encounters with everything around us. Input is constantly forcing its way into our lives, and we are continuously creating output for cops and companies. This parallel universe in our pockets distracts us from activities in the real world and leaves little to no space to consciously do and more than anything experience these things.”

(Against the constant presence of phones and In favour of spontaneity!, Rumor #1, winter 2020)

We look back at articles from Rumor #1, #2, #5, and #5.5, all of which discuss the problems surrounding phones, you know, those little informants in our pockets. Five years after the first article on this subject we note that the topic is widely discussed, but we must also conclude that the presence and use of smartphones has become further normalised. Especially for the generation that grew up with them and has never known a life without phones, the phone is an indispensable part of every activity: traveling, socializing, school and work, recreation and even concerning activism. It is no secret that these small electronic devices are unhealthy for us (especially psychologically, but they are now also beginning to affect us physically) and this is now also being addressed in societal discussions. But that is not what this text is about, nor were the previous texts we wrote. Those texts were about anarchists. And especially about what phones do to the way we organise, our safety, our social relationships and our ability to take action.

The assumption that your phone is being tapped on behalf of the AIVD/police is fairly ingrained in everyone. A phone-free meeting is the norm, regardless of the topic. This is a very good trend. Whether you are discussing the organisation of a soup kitchen (not illegal) or the preparation of an arson (quite illegal), it does not matter. Phones away, no one outside that meeting should know who says what, who speaks the most or the least, who has a discussion or conflict with whom, or who gets along best with whom.

However, the anti-phone trend falls apart beyond the phone-free meeting. Everyone brings their phone with them, so it is possible to find out which people are connected to the same cell tower at a specific time. When they are turned off, they are turned off at the same time, and when they are turned back on, they are turned back on at the same time, making it easy to track a group via the cell towers*. One plus one equals two.

But the most unsafe, inefficient and above all exhausting outcome of a phone free meeting is the Signal groupchat, how ironic! In my opinion the creation of these cursed flows of messages reflect a typical liberal-democratic tendency among us. It is similar to those who vote in elections: we are against the system, but perhaps we can make it a little better (in this example safer) for now. The use of Signal combined with other “secure tech” and adjustments to your phone (such as trying to make the device Google-free), evokes a similar thought.

Many of you will say that such group conversations are created in the name of efficiency, but we believe the opposite. And this is exactly what we all need to talk about: how do phones affect the way we organise ourselves? And pay attention! We are not going to preach morality here. It is precisely because of our extensive experience with and presence in group chats that we have come to oppose them. We find them confusing, lacking in affinity, far too concise for discussion, planning or analysis and above all authoritarian due to the many orders for mobilisation that are

sent. That is why groupchats fit into the context of the rise of authoritarian politics (see other texts in this Rumor).

When we analyse the group chat we see that it is mostly a new snowball-phonetree. They are mobilisation organs without possibility of discussion and participation. A few leaders place a call-out for events and actions without any dialogue or conviction. There exists the expectation that you will just show up. No passionate conversations, making plans, forming affinities, just the dump, “see you there”. It is true that the signal groupchat doesn’t lend itself for criticism and discussion. Everybody knows how fast that can escalate and turn into something terribly chaotic. Screens remove us from our emotion, we don’t see each other. You and I don’t know whether someone is laughing, being sarcastic, is looking irritated, is saying something sharp but in a controlled and constructive manner or is acting out as if they would be throwing a chair during a meeting. We don’t know because we are not there. The worst thing is that we can all fill it in for ourselves, usually we determine how someone else is feeling- and how the things said are meant on the basis of how we feel. So discussion in group-chats are avoided or people avoid group chats with discussions all together. What remains is the authoritarian mobilisation of the wanted footsoldiers, demo and action fodder.

Of course this doesn’t work, and with good reason! The end result? That the group chat bleeds to death and becomes non-active. Trying to give this group new life in reality is impossible work, considering by then Signal will have replaced every form of actual contact. What once started with so much enthusiasm and passion with the future in mind, now is ka-put!

Desertion!

“When you live in a squat you know that your phone is tapped... What then? Well, that means cycling a lot...”

(R.R., when talking about preparation of the RaRa actions.)

To end this article we have to come with a proposal. Not only because that is what should follow criticism on praxis, but also because it is essential for this topic. But we won’t spend too long talking about it, because the solution is - like the quote above says - pretty simple.

Total phoneless organisation: Desertion! No phone, get on a bike or walk to a meeting that is made secure. Experience the freedom, the absurd - and sometimes the frightening - feeling that you can now move and talk much more freely. Once engaged in this you might realize how incredibly strange it feels. This is the moment where you will truly realize that phones have entered our living reality and psyche. The comparison with a detox is not an exaggeration.

Some of us (or for the first time!) will regain skills lost. How can you arrive at the meeting point? Remove the dust from a citymap - where can you even still get one of those? -, navigation with landmarks and reference points of the (urban) landscape and a compass. Time will again become something to cherish. No meticulous planning with a travel-app but a spacious estimation to be sure that you get to your meeting. You arrive early, you still have half an hour just for you, time to think, reflect, so that the next moves will be made with determination...

For a list see ‘Tips against Phones’ in Rumor #5 and #5,5

*In a recent conviction of two neo-nazis the turning off and on of phones was used in their conviction. The time during which the phones were turned off and the location of turning them

off was seen as enough evidence for their geo-locations and therefore the taking part in the action.

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