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Phone Locks in a Time of Cancel Culture

By Anh-Minh Le

When comedian Ali Wong lifted up her pink mini-dress to bare her belly—and underwear—in front of a San Francisco crowd in February, it wasn't just for laughs (though she got plenty of those). It was also a statement on technology: Jokes like this one, she told the crowd at the city's Masonic auditorium, are exactly why she locked your phone away.

Locking mobile devices in neoprene to curb use and noise during performances has been on the rise over the last few years. In an era of increasing classroom disruptions and "cancel culture" in comedy, one company's pouches are experiencing a boom in demand.

Phone locks are the sole product offered by Yondr, a San Francisco firm founded by Graham Dugoni, 33, in 2014. Despite spending nothing on advertising and, like its flip phone-owning founder and CEO, not having any social media presence, Yondr has increasingly gained traction throughout the entertainment world, especially with outré comedians like Wong, Dave Chappelle and Chris Rock. According to the company, it has doubled revenue every year and expects to do the same in 2020. For the past two years, musician Jack White has required that concertgoers "Yondr" their phones, and "Freestyle Love Supreme," the hip-hop improv show that ran on Broadway last October through early January, used Yondr for the show's full run.

"What was surprising about the success of our Yondr experiment was not our onstage experience—what performer wouldn't appreciate an attentive, engaged audience?—but how many audience members appreciated it," the show's co-creator Lin-Manuel Miranda wrote in an email. "In both our reviews and on social media, people really appreciated the phone-free oasis we created for 80 to 90 minutes in their lives."

Users are given one of the company's pouches to slide their phones in. With a tap at a Yondr kiosk, the pouches lock and the phone owner is able to hold on to their pouch throughout the event.

The company sees itself as more than a tool for entertainers. While 60 percent of its clients are schools and 30 percent are entertainment-related, Yondr pouches are also used in courthouses, medical facilities and other institutions. Although schools and live events are "the pillars of the company and that's not going to change," Dugoni identifies other areas where Yondr can grow; for example, dispensing the cases on film sets and photo shoots.

The idea originally sparked after attending a music festival on Treasure Island in 2012. A man who appeared to be drunk was dancing when strangers decided to film him and post the footage online. “Not a nice thing to do,” says Dugoni. He wondered about the impact of such interactions on freedom of expression. “You become aware of what a phone is—what it does, its effect on people psychologically and on privacy,” he says. “You start to see how it erodes an experience.”

Last summer, Yondr hosted a phoneless music festival in upstate New York. The three-day event returns to Greenville, New York, on June 19. Attendance is expected to hover around 500. “It’s a camping festival with music and everybody hanging out,” says Dugoni. It’s not a money-making activity, but rather an exercise in “creating the party we’ve all wanted to go to.” (Yondr’s yearly company-wide retreat entails camping, in Joshua Tree National Park.)

Growing up in Portland, Oregon, Dugoni was passionate about soccer and the outdoors. He was a defender on the Duke soccer team and earned a political science degree. A foot injury sustained while working one summer as a ranch hand in Wyoming temporarily kept him off the soccer field after graduation. As he recovered, he taught in Vietnam and valeted cars in Portland. He then went on to play professional soccer for two years in Norway and Charleston, South Carolina.

At a finance job in Atlanta that he admits having “zero interest in,” he spent time in the library, reading on existentialism and phenomenology—Foucault, Kierkegaard and Heidegger—and “going down a rabbit hole, looking at the way the modern world is put together and the role of technology in modern life.” Dugoni’s phone is devoid of apps altogether.

Eager to get back to the West Coast, Dugoni moved to San Francisco, tapping his own savings and selling his Jeep Patriot to start his company. “That was probably good because it was a manual transmission,” he says with a laugh from his Mission District headquarters, referencing the surrounding city’s notorious hills.

After a year and $100,000 raised from friends and family, Dugoni says Yondr was profitable, with revenue from leasing its pouches. A dozen of Yondr’s 50 or so employees are located in San Francisco—in a homey 1908 Edwardian with curtained bay windows, cushy sofas and clusters of desks plunked in various rooms. The rest are spread across offices in Los Angeles, New York and London. To date, the company has taken in upwards of $1.5 million in funding from investors including Chappelle.

To develop the product, Dugoni consulted his local hardware store and a seamstress to create samples. “In the early days, I would go door-to-door,” Dugoni recalls. “I had prototypes and [an unlocking] base. My standard day, for maybe three to six months, was going around to every school in San Francisco.” To land on the radar of artists and performers he drove a motorhome down to Los Angeles for meetings.

About 16 miles south of Yondr’s headquarters, San Mateo High School is the largest public school in the country to employ the company’s pouches. For this school year, its about 1,800

students were asked to sign a student policy contract agreeing to a phone-free school day. Penalties may include detention or suspension. The program costs the school $12 per student and is funded by a booster organization. “Interruptions are at an all-time low and teachers feel supported,” says assistant principal Adam Gelb of the first six months. “They feel like they have their classrooms back.”

Students lock their phones in their first-period classroom and unlock them at the end of the school day. Some, however, have figured out work-arounds—placing calculators and old phones inside the pouches as decoys; utilizing strong magnets to pry open the pouches; even manipulating the locking mechanism’s metal pin. According to Dugoni, Yondr is continually looking at ways to improve its product—the current design is its third or fourth, he says—and Gelb is hopeful that the next iteration will be less susceptible to hacks. But even if some phones escape, the larger goal of curbing use during academic hours has been achieved.

“People used to play on their phones all the time, like playing Fortnite mid-lecture,” says student body president Michael Picchi, a senior. The administration reported 545 referrals for electronic device misuse last year, this past semester there were fewer than 20.

Dugoni is confident that if society can separate itself from tech gadgets in the public realm, beyond schools and shows, it will be a good thing. “We’re trying to navigate the digital age in a way that doesn’t suck all the meaning out of people’s lives,” he says. “Whatever that means. That’s the spirit of it.”

Discussion Questions

Phone Locks in a Time of Cancel Culture

Define: cancel culture, ubiquitous, neoprene, outré.

1. Comedians are finding it hard to perform as people are increasingly offended by jokes. Should jokes be found offensive? Are there certain types of jokes that should not be made?

2. Are you distracted by your phone in class? About how many times per school day do you check your phone?

3. Are you ever distracted by other students using their phone in class? Explain.

4. Do you have a teacher who has a phone policy that is effective? If so, explain how it works.

5. Do you agree or disagree with the claim in the article that phones erode experiences? Explain your position.

6. What does it say about our self-discipline that we need a bag to put our phones in so that we won’t be tempted to use them constantly?

7. Phone bags are what psychologists call a “commitment device,” i.e. a way to discipline your future self. Another type of commitment device is making rules. Could you make rules for yourself about your phone, e.g. no phone during class, no phone during meals, etc.? Do you think it would be effective? Why or why not?

8. Etiquette is the customary codes of behavior in polite society. Do you think that the ubiquity of phone use is part of a larger erosion of etiquette in society? Explain your position.

9. Think of and describe another behavior that you have noticed in public in recent years that is an example of the erosion of etiquette.