How being 'always connected' changes everything in daily life

Being more or less constantly connected to internet services through mobile apps and the cloud is becoming an increasingly significant part of people's everyday routines. Here is a closer look at consumer research showing that **we have already reached a turning point in our behavior.**

▶ What's the first thing you touch when you wake up in the morning? This is the question I've been asking audiences from the ICT world in the US, Europe and Asia over the past few months. And for some reason, it always leads to sniggering among the crowd.

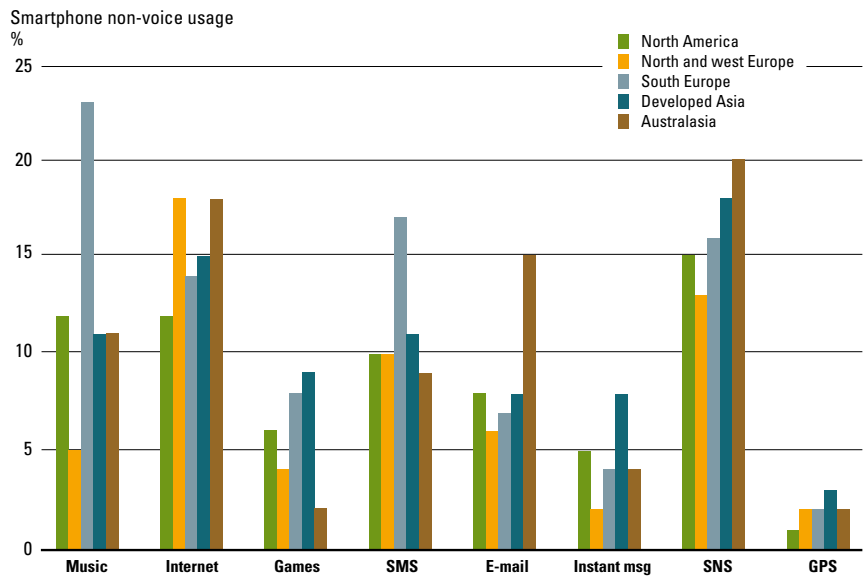
Why this is so is beyond my imagination… There's really nothing funny about an alarm clock – especially not at 6am.

Although Ericsson ConsumerLab's qualitative research has confirmed the ordinariness of waking up to an alarm clock, we now also see how the alarm – for many people – has migrated from the clock to the phone, and from the phone to the smartphone.

Nowadays, if you tend to wake up and fumble around for your smartphone to silence that irritating buzzer, the temptation to then check something on the internet often becomes too great to resist. Today, one-fifth of smartphone users in the US log on to Facebook before they even get out of bed. In Hong Kong, on the other hand, smartphone use before rising is more varied, with 15 percent browsing the internet, 10 percent reading e-mail, 9 percent chatting and 14 percent logging on to social-networking services. Meanwhile, Europeans combine internet browsing with use of a broad range of communications channels. But for them SMS is a strong component in the mix, with 10 percent of northern Europeans and 17 percent of southern Europeans texting in bed in the morning.

But among all the figures, it is the smallest of all that always triggers the same question from someone in the audience. Around 2 percent of smartphone owners say they use GPS when they wake up in the morning. The question is, why? It's certainly not to find out which bed they've woken up in; these are the people who are due to visit a new customer office or construction site later in the day. They start thinking about how to get there while still in bed, perhaps to work out whether they can put off getting up for a few minutes…

Smartphone use during morning in bed

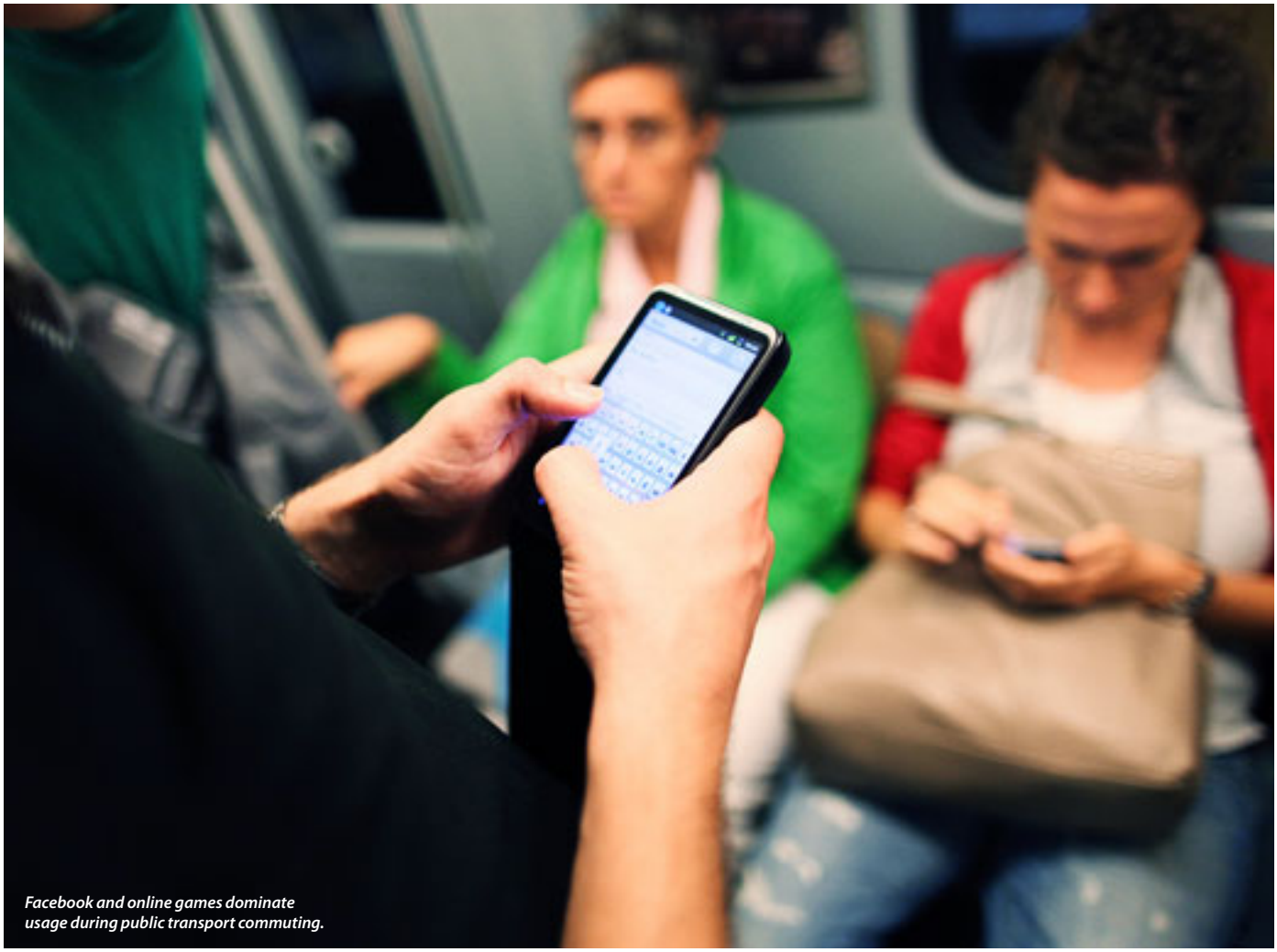


Base: Android/iPhone smartphone users

STARTING OFF THE DAY WITH THE PHONE

If anything proves how the ease-of-use of smartphones (combined with ubiquitous mobile broadband) has made them part of daily life, surely it's the way people pick them up first thing in the morning. Even for the sleepiest of minds, your thoughts immediately turn to action, and before your head has left the pillow, you're out on the internet. More than 40 percent of smartphone owners worldwide log on to the internet before getting out of bed. Then they prepare that cup of coffee so that their conscious minds finally start functioning with something approaching normalcy.

Starting off the day with the phone gets you into the habit of keeping it conveniently close to hand at all times. This habit-forming process should not be underestimated. Well above 50 percent of smartphone owners around the world use their devices soon after getting up in the morning, and usage levels rise from then on, with peaks at lunch time and during rush hour. The only point in the day at which usage levels dip is at dinner time – apparently still considered to be family time.



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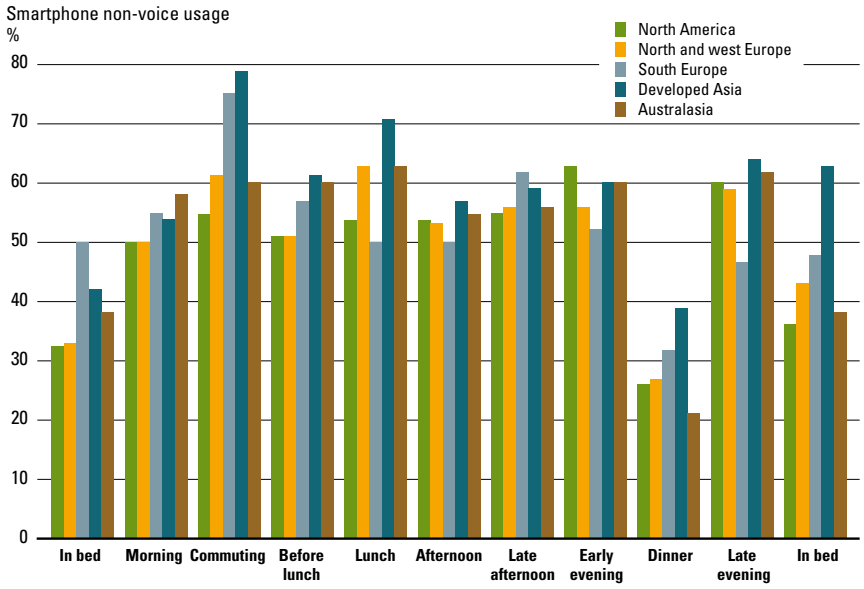
Facebook and online games dominate usage during public transport commuting.

Although global smartphone use peaks when people are commuting and taking their lunch breaks, there are clear local variations. Obviously, smartphone use among commuters varies according to people's chosen mode of transport. GPS and maps are used intensively in the US, where many commute by car. Meanwhile, Facebook and online games are far more popular in Sweden, for example: the place with the highest proportion of public-transport commuters among all the Western countries included in the study. Owing to the great proportion of commuters traveling by car in North America, overall smartphone use during rush hour is lower here than in other regions.

IMPORTANT VARIATIONS

Lunchtime use is focused on communication globally, but we see local variations in the apps that are favored. In the US, Facebook is very big at lunchtime, Southern Europeans rely heavily on text messaging and Northern Europeans enjoy a combination of the two. East Asians have a greater appetite for chat and instant messaging.

Smartphone use during the day



Base: Android/iPhone smartphone users
Source: Ericsson

We are entering an era in which ***it makes no sense whatsoever to talk about online versus offline*** for the simple reason that we are constantly switching between the two. And we scarcely even think about it.

These variations will become increasingly important as smartphones become ever more entrenched in everyday life. However, we should also be aware that the behavior of millions of smartphone users throughout the world is changing at the same time and in the same way on a global scale: while people used to spend a chunk of their time using the internet in places (mainly the home, at work, at school or in internet cafés) where they could sit down and focus on the things that needed to be done, their access is now spread throughout the day. Although we used to be relatively focused on carrying out specific tasks on the internet (and in the case of dial-up, we'd get out of there as quickly as possible), access is becoming increasingly spontaneous. We are entering an era in which it makes no sense whatsoever to talk about online versus offline for the simple reason that we are constantly switching between the two. And we scarcely even think about it.

NEW CHALLENGES FOR NETWORK PLANNERS

When we compare the results of our consumer surveys – showing how usage remains high throughout the day – with data from Ericsson Traffic Lab, we can also see that this global behavioral shift will have a massive impact on networks everywhere. Today, data networks are built for computer use, with clear peaks and dips over the day, and with capacity concentrated on residential and business areas. However, with smartphones and tablets, the dips and peaks are smoothed out as use is much more evenly spread throughout the day, creating new challenges for network planners and possibly new capacity bottlenecks.

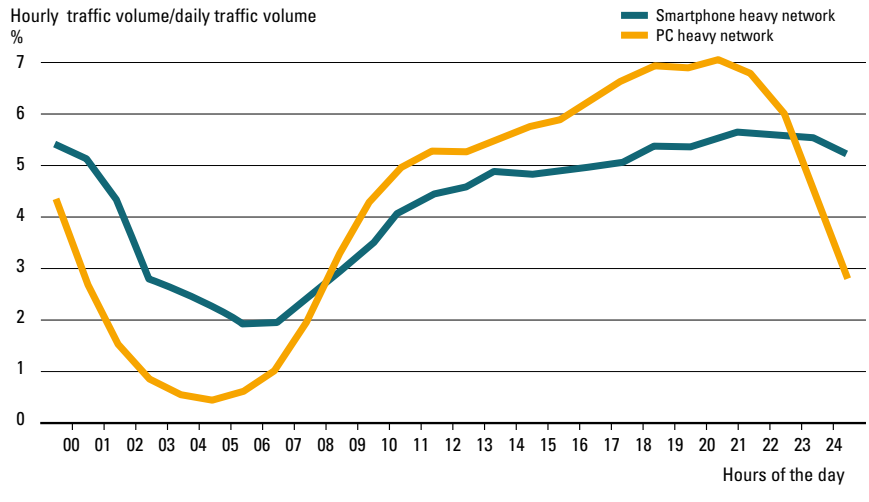
These big usage variations are not only caused by size and weight differences. Even laptop users with 3G/4G dongles largely stick to their old "chunking" behavior. From a consumer perspective, apps make life simple. They are considered easy to use because they involve little or no navigation through file structures, no inputting of addresses and no searching or clicking on links. In other words, apps give users direct access to the content or online service of their choice. Adding app stores to PCs may be relatively easy, but providing the simplicity and flatness of the smartphone app experience is something else altogether.

Owing to the simplicity of apps, consumers are developing the habit of finding new apps to address the challenges and chores that everyday life brings; they do this spontaneously as new situations arise, and think little of it. So although apps are used for personalization purposes and communication, the behavioral change we are witnessing comes from the way in which apps seamlessly integrate with everyday activities and tasks. They encompass public transport systems, schools, hospitals, recreational facilities, shops and restaurants, and cultural facilities such as libraries, concert halls and museums. Consumers are demanding apps for almost everything.

UNEXPECTED "KILLER" APPS

ConsumerLab studies show that smartphone users are spending a considerable amount of time on using these "everyday" apps and, in the process, integrating internet use into a more mundane level of their lives than ever before. It seems only natural that there should be an app for local-weather reports, another for accessing information about a particular product while in the store, and further apps for getting medical advice or for paying bills. Shopping lists, bar-code scanners, bank apps and bus schedules may,

Average packet traffic profile examples



Source: Ericsson

Figure 4: The state of the continuously changing ecosystem for context-aware mobile services

Base: Android/iPhone smartphone users
Source: Ericsson

in fact, become the "killer" apps the industry is looking for – even if, at first, they seem so boring that they are ignored.

Although smartphones currently drive this behavior, ironically, ConsumerLab's research in the US and Japan seems to indicate that consumers ultimately associate the new online experience with the app or service rather than the device itself. People develop the habit of "checking my Facebook account in bed" rather than "using my smartphone in bed." Similarly, opening the USA Today app replaces the habit of reading the morning paper at breakfast, and using Google Maps on whatever device is at hand becomes routine when going places.

Interviews with tablet users clearly show how app usage migrates between devices while the underlying app-related behavior remains unchanged. As an example, some tablet users reported having transferred their morning USA Today readership, as well as their evening YouTube or Netflix viewership, from the iPhone to the iPad while continuing to use the related apps in the same way. And so, without even noticing it, consumers have internalized the cloud in their most basic behavioral patterns. Their daily routine of communicating, commuting, working and exercising now depends on intermittent access to their favorite apps from various locations and through a range of devices.

And, together with our favorite apps, our reliance on cloud access follows us silently as we get back into bed after a long day of constant internet use. We snuggle up, turn on the phone alarm, and sneak a last peek at Facebook or the latest news report…

Our analysis shows that around 50 percent of smartphone owners worldwide access the internet in bed at night. And they go on surfing until their eyelids get so heavy that it's time to say good night. Good night for them, that is, but good morning to a new era of human life, in which the internet is an intrinsic part of everything we do.

Now, if I could only figure out why about 2 percent of smartphone owners globally also use GPS in bed at night… ●

AUTHOR

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