In the space of only a handful of years, less than an evolutionary blink of the eye, the mobile digital device has gone from being present-at-hand, in Heidegger’s sense, to fully ready-to-hand, meaning it has passed from being something that is merely of interest, as perhaps an idea or concept might be, to being something that is a practical tool we use intuitively, without conscious thought. This trajectory is of course the one mapped out for us by the designers and manufacturers of digital technology. The great technological revolution of the early 1970s, when Bill Gates and Steve Jobs were just geek university drop-outs, not billionaire gurus, came about because innovators like Gates and Jobs could see that computers had the potential to be machines that people used in their homes and in their everyday lives. The prevailing view until then had been that computers were both too complicated and too expensive for anything but commercial, military or enthusiast (i.e., geek) applications.

Not only do we use the mobile digital device without thought, now, as Heidegger said of hammers, it has in many ways supplanted thought, thus rendering large parts of our minds redundant. So long as we have Google maps we don’t need to remember the way home or know how to read a map in order to get somewhere – our device can tell us. Nor do we need to remember to pick up groceries, our device can remind us to do that, or else enable us to order them home-delivered. Similarly we can program our TVs no matter where we are and we can connect with friends via social media no matter where they are. And since practically everyone has a mobile digital device – and not just in the first world, either – these days we don’t even need to concern ourselves with such old-fashioned questions as to whether so-and-so has a phone.

Digital technology is, to say the least, a profound new kind of distraction, one that amplifies all the previously existing distractions ‘consumer society’ could throw at them – cinema, magazines, radio, TV, and commodities themselves – and effectively forecloses on the possibility of escaping its clutches. There is literally nowhere one can go these days that isn’t somehow in the thrall of commodity capitalism. This connectedness, which in its present intensity was impossible even a decade ago, comes at a price, albeit one that few of us are complaining about. It is creating a new kind people, one that as parents whose childhoods were much less connected can and should seem utterly alien, even schizophrenic. I will go so far as to say: schizophrenic is what we really mean when we say connected. One can only imagine what the people to come will be like.

Phone companies and dot.com boosters tell us that our ‘device’ is our means of reaching the world. The reality is of course the other way round. It is ‘their’ means of reaching ‘us’. Our screens are their billboards. But unlike the old-fashioned static billboards blighting the streets and highways, our smartphones aren’t random – they don’t just flash random images at us. They’re programmed to deliver advertisements and ‘suggestions’ that reflect our carefully data-tracked habits. Concerns about personal privacy and the tracking
and trafficking of our data are waved away as by us as much as by the data-miners themselves as so much paranoia.

There has been no device in the history of technology more efficient than the smart phone when it comes to capturing ‘our’ attention. So much so it has made time itself seem unbearable in its absence. One can hardly imagine waiting for a bus or a plane or a coffee without the distraction of one’s phone. It’s as if seconds and minutes stretch into hours and days when not contained by a digital device of some kind. Adults and children, young and old, men and women, are all equally afflicted. As Fredric Jameson argued more than two decades ago, the final frontier of capitalism was always consciousness itself and that moment has arrived.

I propose that the changes to society initiated by the digital revolution can be understood in terms of schizophrenia. I argue that there are four symptoms that suggest this diagnosis:

1. De-centering of the ‘I’: we can no longer totalise/control the competing subjectivities/voices in our heads. Wants have become needs (shopping) and needs have become optional (climate change).

2. Inability to distinguish between the merely apparent and the actual – or rather, the virtual is ‘actual’ in our heads. Triumph of the surface and superficial – the apparent is all there is, hence the success of Ikea, Disneyland and shopping malls. Manifests as fascination with indigenous ‘deep’ knowledge (territorialised desire).

3. Loss of metacommunication (Bateson). Unable to stop voices/demands and we are helpless against them. This manifests as loss of impulse control and an intense fascination with mindfulness and spirituality. Hyperstimulation produces a desire/need for anaesthetic, ie drugs, to reduce stimulation, or manage it.

4. Self-destruction seems both rational and attractive: manifests as over-eating, drug abuse, sedentariness, war, climate change.