"Banning Smartphones for Kids Is Just Another Technology-Fearing Moral Panic"

by Nicholas Bowman

1   If a few concerned parents have their way, Colorado will be among the first states to ban the sale of smartphones for use by children under the age of 13. After witnessing what he called a "dramatic, very violent outburst" from one of his sons when taking away his smartphone, a Colorado father (and medical professional) helped create a new lobbying group, called Parents Against Underage Smartphones (PAUS). The group provides links to a wide range of research into the negative effects of smartphone use on children.

2   The effort appears to be well-meaning and supportive of healthy childhood development. But from my perspective as a media psychologist, informed by research into the uses and effects of communication technology, I see that the group's concerns fit a common historical pattern of undue alarm over new technology. Human innovation advances rapidly, but most people's understanding of new items and capabilities can't keep up. The result is a sense of moral panic over what we fear will be negative effects on us all, and even on society at large.

3   …The concerns of parents and groups such as PAUS are valid, but they shouldn't be dealt with by banning technology. Rather, children and adults should work together to understand new innovations and learn to use them in productive ways.

A History of Technology and Panic

4   One of the earliest examples of a moral panic related to information technology can be found in Socrates' concerns about writing. In the lecture later, ironically, recorded in writing as "Phaedrus," the ancient Greek philosopher said written words divorced information from its original spoken source, and said writing things down would irreversibly weaken people's memories. These may seem quaint worries today, but they were notable critiques in a time where systematic reasoning and oral debate were bellwethers[1] of intelligence.

5   In the 1790s, the printing of adventure novels raised concerns that children were compulsively reading at the expense of their chores. In the 1920s, people feared that crossword puzzles would contribute to illiteracy.…

6   Social attitudes regarding technology are not usually formed by direct experience. Rather, they most often come from media reports, parents and teachers, or Hollywood films. As a result, many of our perceptions of technological threats are based on often-sensationalized anecdotes rather than actual interaction and understanding.

7   Smartphones may be particularly difficult to evaluate, because one device has so many capabilities—for both good and ill.

Distinguishing Panic from Problem

8   Skepticism toward technology is important, so we can avoid misusing technology in harmful ways— such as using X-ray machines to figure out what size shoes a person needs to buy. Indeed,

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[1]bellwethers—indicators

philosopher Philippe Verdoux argues that technological advances increase the chances of any one invention destroying us all. But as worrying as Verdoux's warning might be, he doesn't suggest avoiding innovation. Rather, he says the most productive response is to develop a deep understanding of what a given invention's uses are, including its potential for good and bad consequences.

9 Moral panics, by contrast, tend to suggest people not use new technologies at all. Abstaining does avoid the costs, but also deprives people of the technology's benefits. For example, kids and teenagers with smartphones can use them to support their educational efforts. And they can help kids' social lives, keeping them in touch with friends. Safety also comes into play…many school districts are reversing bans on smartphone access during school hours, allowing and even encouraging students to use them for emergency communication.

Using Technology Safely

10 Engaging with new technologies cautiously—and, for children, under adult supervision—is a better approach than banning the unknown. The American Academy of Pediatricians suggests limiting children's access to computer, smartphone, and TV screens. But rather than banning screen time entirely, the group recommends parents and kids work together to figure how best to use smartphones and other devices.

11 By discouraging learning, moral panics fuel misunderstanding and unfamiliarity. Millennials don't actually understand technology as well as people often assume, which could help explain why they feel less safe online than older adults do. The connection comes from established research about how fear affects social beliefs: focusing too much on threats without also discussing skills leads to panic rather than progress.

12 When it comes to smartphones, it would be odd—and wrong—to ban kids from using the digital devices that help define their entire generation. And it wouldn't help prepare them for jobs and lives in the information-saturated 21st century.

"Worry Over Kids' Excessive Smartphone Use Is More Justified Than Ever Before"

by Jean Twenge

1   Parents who fear their kids are spending too much time in front of screens now have more reason for concern.

2   New research funded by the National Institutes of Health found brain changes among kids using screens more than seven hours a day and lower cognitive skills among those using screens more than two hours a day.

3   When studies find links between screen time and negative outcomes, some have argued that this is just the latest moral panic over technology.

4   After all, didn't the parents of baby boomers and Gen Xers worry that their kids were watching too much TV or talking on the phone too much? Those kids turned out OK, right?

5   So how are portable electronic devices, the chosen technology of today's kids and teens—a generation I call "iGen"—any different?

6   New research I've conducted on the relationship between portable device use and sleep provides some answers.

Everywhere, All the Time

7   It almost goes without saying that today's portable devices—including smartphones and tablets—are fundamentally different than the living room television sets and rotary phones of the past.

8   Since researchers have been tracking TV watching habits, the average U.S. teen has never spent more than two-and-a-half hours a day watching TV. Yet as of 2016, the average teen spent about six hours a day immersed in digital media—more than twice as much time.

9   This large amount of time spent using digital media is enough to crowd out time once spent on other activities, such as interacting with friends face-to-face, reading, or going out.

10   And unlike the telephone, digital media apps are designed to hook you. As former Silicon Valley executive Tristan Harris said of smartphone apps, "Your telephone in the 1970s didn't have a thousand engineers…updating the way your telephone worked every day to be more and more persuasive."

11   Second, unlike TV or landline phones, portable devices can be carried everywhere: to school, where teachers say they are a near-constant distraction, and into social situations, where a conversation can instantly be upended by reaching for a buzzing phone. (There's even a word for this: phubbing, a portmanteau[1] of "phone" and "snubbing.")

12   Sure enough, people have reported enjoying a restaurant dinner with friends less when their phones were available, compared to when they weren't.

[1]portmanteau—word that combines the meanings of two others

The Sleep Factor

13   Across many studies, kids and teens who spend more time with screens—including both TV and portable devices—also sleep less.

14   That could be because they spend so much time engaged with their devices that it's coming at the expense of sleep. But there's also a physiological reason: The blue light emitted by electronic screens tricks our brains into thinking it's still daytime, and then we don't produce enough of the sleep hormone melatonin to fall asleep quickly and get high-quality sleep.

15   Once again, some might argue that TV is just as bad: After all, it also takes up time and emits blue light.

16   But in a new paper, my co-authors and I decided to parse the two. We studied links between sleep and TV watching as well as links between sleep and portable device use. Then we compared the results.

17   Drawing from a large survey of parents administered by the U.S. Census Bureau, we found that 2- to 10-year-olds who spent four or more hours a day on portable electronic devices—versus no time—were twice as likely to be significantly sleep deprived. TV time was also connected to less sleep, but not as strongly or consistently.

18   Among teens ages 14 to 17, those who spent four or more hours a day on portable electronic devices—versus no time—were 44 percent more likely to not sleep enough. However, once portable device time was statistically controlled, watching TV or playing video games on a console had little link to sleep time.

19   Why would portable devices be more strongly associated with losing sleep?

20   For one thing, TV is simply not as psychologically stimulating as a portable device like a smartphone, which, unlike a TV, doesn't exist to simply consume media. Smartphones have also become a huge part of social life, whether it's texting with friends or interacting with them on social media.

21   And unlike TV, smartphones and tablets can be silently carried into the bedroom or even the bed, resulting in some teens using them throughout the night—what some call "vamping."

22   That might explain why sleep deprivation among teens spiked after 2012—just as smartphone use became common.

The Lesser of Two Evils?

23   To be clear, we did find that watching many hours of TV was associated with less sleep, especially among elementary-school age children. Watching over three hours a day of TV is also associated with depression—though more weakly than portable device use.

24   So parents were right to worry about kids watching too much TV in the 1970s and 1980s. But their worries might not have been as justified as today's parents' concerns about smartphones.

25   So what is a parent—or anyone who wants to sleep well—to do?

26   First, it's best for smartphones and tablets to stay out of the bedroom after "lights-out" time. Nor is it a great idea to use the devices within an hour of bedtime, as their blue light influences the brain's ability to produce melatonin. Finally, as a general rule, two hours a day or less spent on portable devices is a good guideline. These rules apply to parents, too—not only kids.

27   Just don't binge-watch TV instead.

Writing Prompt

You have just read two passages about teenagers and smartphones. Write a multi-paragraph essay arguing whether or not "the moral panic" about teenage smartphone usage is justified.

Manage your time carefully so that you can
- **plan your essay and do some prewriting**
- **write your essay**

Be sure to
- **use evidence from each passage**
- **avoid over-relying on solely one passage**

Your written response should be in the form of a multi-paragraph argumentative essay.

Write your response in the space provided.