



Postdigital Young People's Rights: A Critical Perspective on the UK Government's Guidance to Ban Phones in England's Schools

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Contextualising Phone-Banning Guidance

As identified by Selwyn and Aagaard (2021), there has been a growing trend amongst countries globally to ban young people's access to and uses of smartphones in school; mobile phones are banned in schools by law in approximately one in seven countries (UNESCO 2023). The debate on whether young people's mobile technologies should be removed in educational settings is not new, and there are well-versed arguments in relation to cyberbullying, screen addiction, and distraction. As Selwyn (2012) suggests, these technologically deterministic views have underpinned policy discourse, yet only offer a narrow view on the ways in which technology intersects with the lives of young people.

Technological determinism emerges as an important focal point within our commentary. It acknowledges the ways in which technology may serve as a catalyst for both constructive and detrimental societal transformations, thereby exerting deterministic influence over the quotidian human experience (Kaplan 2009; Fawns 2022). Drawing on the longitudinal studies from Ofcom (2023), we recognise that young people's media lives are passively woven into the fabric of their day-to-day leisure, interactions, and knowledge generation. Networked infrastructures may be acknowledged as a conduit through which routine modes of socialisation and consumption cannot be disentangled from our offline worlds.

It is intriguing that, at the end of 2023, the Department for Education (2023: Para 2) in the United Kingdom (UK) announced its intention to provide guidance to

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schools in England ‘banning mobile phone use throughout the school day ... to tackle disruptive behaviour and online bullying while boosting attention during lessons’. The press release goes on to say that in the event ‘schools fail to implement the new guidance, the government will consider legislating in the future to make the guidance statutory’ (Department for Education 2023: Para 5). This announcement followed the address by the Secretary of State for Education at the 2023 Conservative Party Conference (Keegan 2023), where she said:

Today, one of the biggest issues facing children and teachers is grappling with the impact of smartphones in our schools. The distraction, the disruption, the bullying, we know that teachers are struggling with their impact, and we know that they need support. So today, we’re recognising the amazing work that many schools have done in banning mobile phones and we’re announcing that we will change guidance so that all schools will follow their lead. [Following applause] Because the focus should be on children learning in the classroom. (Keegan 2023)

It is notable that Keegan’s (2023) speech identified the exact same factors discussed by Selwyn and Aagaard (2021) (e.g. technology facilitating distraction, disruption, and cyberbullying). Further, her argument aligns young people’s uses of technology with deterministic narratives of harm and moral corruption. In February 2024, the UK government’s guidance was published and includes advice on searching students for their phones whilst instructing ‘that all schools should prohibit the use of mobile phones throughout the school day – not only during lessons but break and lunchtimes as well’ (Department for Education 2024: 3).

This article explores these foundational discussions through the postdigital condition, before drawing attention to the United Nations (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child and the updated comment on children’s rights in relation to the digital environment (United Nations 2021). Following this discussion, the commentary transitions towards an examination of the ethical considerations and broader ramifications inherent in the prohibition of mobile devices within schools across England. Grounded in a postdigital interpretation of phone-banning guidance, our commentary goes some way towards outlining the relationships between state-driven interventions in education, young people’s mobile technologies, and human rights.

Banning Phones in Postdigital Schools—A Pointless Epistemological Endeavour?

The widely accepted definition of the postdigital is that ‘we are increasingly no longer in a world where digital technology and media is separate, virtual, “other” to a “natural” human and social life’ (Jandrić et al. 2018: 893). Such a definition immediately calls into question the potential efficacy of phone-banning guidance in England; to what extent can young people be removed from their online architectures in a world of normalised connectivity? Such a question builds on Alcott’s (2007) work on epistemologies of ignorance, especially in relation to the intensity

with which social epistemologies collide with political ideology in phone-banning discourse. Of Alcoff's (2007) three types of epistemological ignorance, the post-digital stance adopted in this commentary best aligns with type three—*structural epistemological ignorance*.

Structural epistemological ignorance specifies that prevailing ways of knowing and forgetting are constructed by the socially dominant group. Crucially, these ways of knowing distinguish the dominant group from subordinated social actors. In the case of phone-banning in schools, we may define dominant social actors as policy makers, politicians, and educators and the subordinated group as young people who are having a phone-free education imposed on them. Interpreting Alcoff's (2007: 48) work in the context of banning phones in English schools, it could be seen that deterministic decision-making is filtered through the subjective bias of such dominant actors, which may 'result in a distorted or faulty account of reality'. Indeed, looking to the Programme for International Student Assessment data, presented by Kemp et al. (2024), we can see evidence of such false realities. Students attending schools both in the UK and internationally, where phone-bans are imposed, were found to have lower achievement scores than their non-phone-banning counterparts.

To assess the extent with which phone-banning represents a distorted account of young people's realities, the text from Macgilchrist et al. (2023) on who is designing postdigital futures is helpful. They suggest 'that practitioners, researchers, and others impacted by sociotechnical systems need to design futures and think about how to design futures that matter to them; otherwise, they (we) hand over design decisions to dominant actors' (Macgilchrist et al. 2023: 2). This viewpoint squarely addresses narratives around structural epistemological gaps inherent in the discourse on phone-banning directives and calls for an interrogation on which influential actors are shaping and executing educational policy in relation to technology.

In the context of our commentary, the sociotechnical systems in play lean on the interrelatedness between young people's social/cultural lives and their mobile technologies. These systems are at risk of being ignored by dominant actors in the development of phone-banning guidance in England, and the impact of such decisions at both policy and grassroot levels are as yet unknown. It could also be argued that such policy would hinder young people entering their postdigital working lives where key technological influences, such as artificial intelligence and augmented reality, will likely feature in some capacity.

This encourages us to consider whether current political discourse in England is engaging in some level of structural epistemological ignorance. Indeed, with Secretary of State for Education, Keegan (2023), identifying factors such as distraction, disruption, and cyberbullying as fallout from mobile phone use in schools, we can infer that policy is presently influenced by the understanding that technology is driving these aspects of young people's behaviour. Interestingly, the Department for Culture, Media, and Sport (2022: 37) recently released the UK Digital Strategy which, amongst other things, aims to give 'pupils the necessary skills and development opportunities to succeed in later life and access jobs in important growth sectors such as digital'. Yet, it could be seen that the policy drive towards pessimistic techno-determinism stands at odds with such strategic ambitions. A blanket ban on

mobile phones in England could constitute a *nanny-state* intervention, where over-protective government policy serves to hinder progression in a postdigital society.

Taking account of works such as Elwell (2014) and Ryberg et al. (2021) adds additional layers to this discussion. Collectively, they acknowledge that a truly non-digital life is no longer possible and that, even if phones are removed, young people's digital cultures remain ever-present in the background and are never 'off' (Hodkinson 2017). To break this down, the view of Traxler et al. (2022) on the entanglement of digital technologies with our day-to-day lives is important and offers a starting point for postdigitally situated policy developments that are receptive to young people's networked lives and address accusations of epistemological ignorance.

In the context of phone-banning in English schools, Traxler et al. (2022) would purport that the removal of young people's phones is unlikely to disentangle them from the social and cultural aspects of their digital lives. Indeed, this perspective could call into question Keegan's (2023) rationale for phone-banning, on the basis that cyberbullying, distraction, and disruption would continue in young people's lives regardless. Our inquiry into this entanglement commences with an examination of contemporary conceptions of young people's rights vis-à-vis their access to digital environments.

Postdigital Young People's Rights

Consideration of young people's rights in relation to the digital environment is not new (see Green et al. 2021). Current discourse recognises that young people's rights may no longer be viewed in a narrow rights protection sense and could be extended to include the legal protection of young people's autonomous exploration of digital spaces (Simpson 2021). Building on this foundation, Livingstone et al. (2021: 378) suggest that there is a pressing need to acknowledge young people as 'independent actors and rights-holders in relation to the fast-evolving digital environment'. We may recognise the promotion of youth agency as one foundational component in reframing how phone-banning guidance is discussed and interpreted.

Indeed, it has been noted that young people's voices are often omitted from the decisions which affect them the most (Livingstone et al. 2021). This is particularly important given it is unclear whether the UK government has undertaken any form of original and methodologically sound research to evaluate young people's perspectives in relation to the new guidance on banning phones in England's schools. If not consulted, Herring's (2008) stance on troublesome adult constructions of young people's uses of technology may be important. It is suggested that generational biases may emerge when adults talk about young people's engagement with their phones without consulting young people themselves. To explore these issues further, it is necessary to view phone-banning in schools through the lens of the United Nations (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In 2021, a clarification of the United Nations (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child was published to reflect children's rights in relation to the digital environment (see United Nations 2021). This update followed consultation with 709 young people from 27 countries across six continents. In the context of this commentary,

it is necessary to firstly consider the text in section VI on civil rights and freedoms. Here, the general comment states that young people have the right to access information through technology and ‘that the exercise of that right is restricted only when it is provided by law’ (United Nations 2021: Para. 50). Given that the UK government’s current advice does not constitute statutory guidance, significant questions should be raised on whether action taken to ban young people’s access to phones at the individual school level represents a breach of human rights.

There is an empirical foundation which demonstrates that young people use their smartphones as a method of accessing information in educational contexts (e.g. Sullivan et al. 2019; Cranmer 2020; Andersson 2022). As stated in an American study from Squire and Dikkers (2012: 458–459), young people use their mobile technologies ‘for amplifying their access to social networks, interests, and access to information, which taken together constituted a form of learning’. It is, therefore, necessary to examine how these developments breach young people’s right to access information through technological means. Building on the epistemologies of ignorance stance, questions could be raised concerning how the structural domination of young people’s digital tools overlooks a significant pedagogical and learning aid in learning environments.

The second aspect to draw attention to is found in section XI of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, in relation to education, leisure, and cultural activities. Access to smartphones and broader networked spaces is described as promoting young people’s ‘right to culture, leisure and play, which is essential for their well-being and development’ (United Nations 2021: Para. 106). The literature readily demonstrates that young people’s identity, culture, and leisure are rooted in their access to mobile technologies and networked spaces (e.g. boyd 2014; Turner 2015). This viewpoint is supported in the work of Mittmann et al. (2022) who recognised how platforms such as TikTok and Snapchat generate essential participatory spaces where young people maintain friendships and may construct a sense of peer connectedness. It is possible, therefore, to characterise young people’s online and offline cultures, leisure practices, and play ecologies as closely interconnected. This could mean that ‘distinguishing between so-called digital and non-digital spaces becomes increasingly difficult and probably impossible’ (Reed 2022: 2).

In this sense, the ways in which phone-banning guidance in England appears to ignore the protected rights of young people presents a risk to the contemporary youth cultures that underpin the lives of young people in the UK. This is especially so given that the guidance in England includes the removal of phones throughout the whole school day, not just during in-class time. This constructs fresh epistemic terrain to navigate in relation to postdigital discourse and invites further analysis which may consider how subjective constructions of young people’s phone uses coincide with legal, political, and cultural structures.

Our understanding is that little discussion has been had on this topic in either the academic or policy literature, and much further work is required beyond this initial commentary to understand the theoretical, legal, social, cultural, and ethical consequences of these decisions. What is clear, however, is that young people are post-digitally entangled with their mobile technologies and the networked spaces such devices grant access to. The entanglement perspective from Traxler et al. (2022)

may serve to address epistemic ignorance and facilitate ways of knowing that, as Alcoff (2007) suggested, produce epistemic frameworks that enable individual actors to reflexively engage with narratives of power and structure. In the context of this commentary, a reflexive postdigital epistemological stance on entanglement could move us beyond one-size-fits-all phone-banning guidance in ways that acknowledge the potential for smartphones to serve as valuable educational and cultural tools which also enhances accessibility.

Recommendations: Overcoming Epistemological Ignorance

In order to move beyond structural epistemological ignorance, this section outlines three key recommendations which may encourage those policy makers, politicians, and educators at the forefront of phone-banning guidance to recognise the value phones could present in educational contexts. These recommendations are far from exhaustive, but provide an initial reflexive epistemic foundation that is grounded in postdigital narratives of entanglement. Emphasis is also placed on how such an approach may be linked to the development and maintenance of digital literacy, the economy, and collaboration.

Technological Entanglements, Not Technological Disconnection

Adams and Jansson's (2023) work on constructing postdigital disentanglements, rather than simply constructing improbable narratives around disconnection, provides a lens through which hybridised relationships between individual actors and technological architectures may be observed. In England's schools, recognising young people as entangled with mobile technologies and networked spaces may go some way towards promoting a more productive, future-facing, stance. Adopting this approach may assist policymakers and educators to develop more informed and realistic strategies that align with the daily experiences of young people.

Phone-banning guidance in England could, therefore, be reassessed to advocate for more nuanced policies that transcend binary categorisations of technology as either beneficial or detrimental. The emphasis here could be placed on welcoming young people's postdigital baselines and building a set of holistic, context-specific recommendations for schools, which place young people's voices at the centre of phone-banning discourse. Doing so could reflexively reconstruct educational approaches around phone use, ensuring that classroom practices remain responsive to the evolving needs and capabilities of today's learners.

Digital Literacy: Preparing Young People for Their Futures

Much has been written in relation to the role of educators and classroom environments in the promotion of young people's digital literacy (e.g. Connolly and McGuinness 2018). As Burnett (2014: 192) suggested in relation to the development of young people's responsible and productive technological practices, there

is a greater ‘need for literacy provision in schools to be more aligned to literacies in everyday life’. In order to construct an education that is receptive to young people’s daily networked lives, rather than focussing on outright bans, educators and policymakers should consider fostering digital literacy skills to empower students in navigating the complexities of the digital landscape responsibly. This could entail incorporating innovative pedagogical strategies that leverage technology for educational purposes, while concurrently promoting critical thinking and ethical digital citizenship in ways which recognise the inseparability of the digital with the physical.

Collaborative Partnerships: Education and the Economy

A focus on technological entanglements underscores the importance of collaborative partnerships between government bodies, educational institutions, industry stakeholders, and young people. A collaborative approach that is receptive to ongoing technological developments, and the ways in which these shape and re-shape the trajectory of socioeconomic progress, would call on the UK government to reassess the blanket-ban approach in England. Such collaboration could facilitate a set of adaptive and reflexive policies grounded in postdigital ways of knowing that can evolve with the rapid pace of technological advancements. Constructing a collaborative approach may also help young people harness the transformative potential of technology in the classroom, while developing the future workforce in ways which underscore and deliver the UK’s digital strategy (Department for Culture, Media, and Sport 2022).

Summary

This commentary has lifted the postdigital lid on phone-banning guidance in England’s schools and has considered such a move in the context of young people’s rights in relation to the digital environment (United Nations 2021). The discussion has drawn on the structural epistemology of ignorance outlined by Alcoff (2007) and has positioned a postdigital theoretical stance on entanglement within this discourse. By engaging with ways of knowing and how epistemic structures of power and authority coincide with phone-banning guidance, this commentary has advocated for a shift towards more nuanced and inclusive approaches to taking young people’s phones away from them in educational contexts. These considerations were underscored by the importance of recognising young people’s rights within the digital landscape and calls for a reconsideration of educational practices to acknowledge the complexities of young people’s networked lives.

Two potential areas of the United Nations (2021) updated comment on children’s rights in relation to the digital environment were considered in the context of banning phones; these were (1) young people’s right to access information through digital spaces and (2) young people’s right to participate in online cultural, leisure,

and play activities. From a postdigital perspective, these potential breaches of young people's rights have been further explored and have called into question the theoretical, legal, social, cultural, and ethical consequences of banning phones in England's classrooms. In particular, a reflexive postdigital epistemological stance on entanglement has been outlined and adds an initial foundation to the ways in which phone-banning guidance may be approached and discussed. Much more work is required in this area.

With this epistemological foundation, a postdigital characterisation suggests that banning phones may be a futile endeavour, one which overlooks the intricate entanglement of technology in young people's contemporary lives. We have, therefore, proposed a set of recommendations grounded in existing literature which seek to acknowledge and reconcile the entangled nature of young people's day-to-day networked engagements. These recommendations focus on identifying the inescapable nature of technological entanglements, the role and importance of promoting digital literacy in the classroom, and how fostering collaborative partnerships between various stakeholders may contribute towards the UK's digital strategy (Department for Culture, Media, and Sport 2022).

Perhaps most of all, the article calls for more reflexive, adaptive, and future-facing educational policies which recognise and value the voices of young people in the development of school-based guidelines. Doing so would prioritise the evolving relationships between technology and society, and could provide the foundations required for supporting young people as they navigate their networked worlds.

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