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Déjà vu, what's new: considering a smartphone break over the break?

*The “**Smartphone policies in schools: What does the evidence say?**” report was selected for presentation at the 75th annual conference of the International Communication Association in Denver, USA. **Professor Sonia Livingstone** and **Dr Miriam Rahali** delivered the talk at a panel dedicated to exploring the policy and privacy concerns around youth digital media use, and reflect here on their *finde*.*

With just days to go before school's out for summer in the UK, parents may be getting ready to square off with their children over daily screentime limits. On the one hand, kids may be hoping to **increase** their presence on social media sites, while on the other, parents may be deliberately seeking out **enrichment activities** that limit the use of smart devices.

Erstwhile, school administrators and communities will likely be reflecting on the achievements and challenges of the past year, with several educators using the upcoming months to think through the formulation – or reformulation – of their online safety policies.

In February 2024, the UK Government issued non-statutory **guidance** on smartphone use during the school day, setting out a broadly restrictive but also flexible approach that sanctions a 'ban' but leaves it to individual school leadership teams to develop and implement a policy tailored to the school's needs, context and culture. Now that the ban is **one year on**, schools are better positioned to determine the next course of action based on what has been working well, and has not.

In collaboration with the **5 Rights Foundation**, the **Digital Futures for Children centre at LSE** (DFC) published “**Smartphone policies in schools: What does the evidence say?**” in September 2024 to provide an objective assessment of the research evidence in order to better inform administrators and school communities who are tasked with formulating policy. However, **the notable absence of rigorous studies** comparing a multitude of factors on academic outcomes denotes that findings should be treated with caution given the difference in methods and measures, and not least the discrepancies in definitions of the word 'ban' itself and its enforcement.

The DFC concluded the report with a call for a greater emphasis on gathering robust evidence in the outcomes of different approaches. At the recent **ICA Conference**, we were able to see how colleagues across the globe were thinking about how to assess smartphone bans. For example, data collection began in November 2024 across **middle and high schools in Washington** state (USA), to investigate whether smartphone restrictions lead to reduced distractions and to determine the differences in the effects between the more restrictive and more enabling policies.

At the **Media Psychology Lab** in KU Leuven, researchers are studying the effects of different smartphone regulations in secondary schools in Belgium. In the Netherlands, researchers have challenged media depictions of the positive effects of smartphone bans in schools. A study presented by Pouwels et al. at the **Behavioural Science Institute**, found that while students are less distracted during class without access to their smartphones, they are concerned about limited access to information and reduced availability for communication during school hours.

The '**Unplugged**' project (presented by the Erasmus School of Social and Behavioural Sciences) sought to understand adolescent perspectives on the benefits, drawbacks and alternatives to smartphone bans in secondary schools. Findings are in line with other reports that note increased concentration during class, but frustration with limited access to digital materials or contact with parents. Students indicated that they prefer to place their smartphones in a class basket (similar to a **pouch**), which felt safer and more connected, while concurrently developing a healthy attitude towards smartphone use. Also in the Netherlands, researchers are working to distil a blueprint for a child's effective use of their *first* smartphone. This research emerged in order to give parents the tools to effectively speak to their children, set goals and monitor their experiences when online.

In the UK, the **Smartphone Free Childhood** initiative encourages parents to delay giving their children smartphones (for reference, **97%** of children own a smartphone by the age of 12). Research conducted by Dr. Stern at the University of San Diego (USA) has examined the decisions of mothers in the "**wait until 8th** [grade]" initiative, which has now garnered attention across all 50 states, and has buy-in from more than 115,000 parents who have taken the pledge. Such commitments by parents showcase a collective move toward productive discourse on this issue, however more longitudinal research is needed to better understand the opportunities and drawbacks of delaying youth access to smart technologies.

The outline of the presentation prepared by Dr Miriam Rahali on behalf of the DFC at LSE was guided by the findings of the report, but was further contextualized to speak to both the 75th anniversary of the ICA, as well as the theme of the conference: **Disrupting and Consolidating Communication Research**, thereby productively framing the relationship between the restrictive and enabling approach to smartphone use in class as a dialectical.



Following the paper, **the presentation:**

- Takes stock of previous research
- Critically reviews present developments
- Charts out future avenues for research

The ban on smartphones has a long history (20 years!) of contestation and negotiation. In a rapidly changing digital landscape, the DFC has argued that policies should be **regularly assessed and revised** to meet the evolving needs of children and young people. However, patterns in the research suggest that in a Digital Age, issues that might be resolved today will more likely than not require re-solving tomorrow. Which is good news not only for all the children's digital media scholars pondering their future – but also for all stakeholders concerned with the transformative and stabilizing force of technological advancements in society.

This post gives the views of the author and not the position of the Media@LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Featured image: Photo by **Joao Viegas** on **Unsplash**

About the author

Dr. Miriam Rahali is a Visiting Fellow in the Department of Media and Communications at LSE.

Miriam Rahali

Her research focuses on the intersection of children and media, with a specific interest in advertising, consumer behaviour, digital literacy, and skills development. Dr. Rahali has more than three years of teaching experience at the Undergraduate and Master's level, and has lectured at Columbia, Cambridge, and LSE. She is a Fellow of the UK Higher Education Academy.

Sonia Livingstone

Sonia Livingstone OBE is Professor of Social Psychology in the Department of Media and Communications at LSE. Taking a comparative, critical and contextual approach, her research examines how the changing conditions of mediation are reshaping everyday practices and possibilities for action. She has published twenty books on media audiences, media literacy and media regulation, with a particular focus on the opportunities and risks of digital media use in the everyday lives of children and young people.

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