



Smartphones and Adolescence: Emancipation or Slavery?

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From fascination to preoccupation

Ten years ago, with the popularization of digital tablets, many families observed with fascination the interaction that two-year-old children were having with these devices. They moved their fingers easily across the screen reacting to visual and auditory stimuli, interacting with the machine in a way that was almost symbiotic. At that time, many applications appeared directed specifically to this age group. On the other hand, today we have conclusive evidence that digital screens used before the age of six give way to problems of brain development. Pediatric societies have warned repeatedly of their negative impact and educational groups tell us that in the years of infancy they

are producing delays in the acquisition of speech or great difficulties whenever they have to tolerate frustration.

We can say that something similar happened to us with smartphones and the period of adolescence. The age at which they should have their first mobile phone has been slowly going down. Today 70% of children in Spain younger than 12 have their own device which they use in most cases without any kind of limitation. Adolescents spend an average of five hours a day between games and social networks. This is not harmless. Scientific literature is warning about the relationship that exists between the use of smartphones and the general reduction of a state of well-being, sleep disturbances, problems with behavior, greater soli-

tude, the weakening of in-person social relationships and low academic achievement. Estimates suggest that 28% of people present symptoms of addiction to smartphones with higher figures among the younger population¹, and that 37% of the world population present symptoms of problematic use.² The impact of bullying increases from 5% to 25% when a digital element is introduced. The age of access to pornography has dropped to 11 and the addiction to online games does not stop increasing. The Pediatric Association of Spain recommended that families not give their children an Internet-connected smartphone before the age of 16.

Despite this, until a short time ago, almost no one had put this reality on the table for discussion. As the techno-deterministic society that we are, we accept every technological novelty without criticism as a positive and inevitable step toward the future. Digital technology marks and prescribes our destiny. To question its development is seen as suspicious. However, to what interests do these developments and the omnipresence of digital devices respond? Who is designing this technology and for what reason? Why is it so difficult to require restricted access to harmful content? Or requests for more democracy in the decisions about who provides and manages the content? And if we observe how important the undesirable consequences are, why are we so afraid to assume that perhaps we must limit certain uses based on the age of the user?

In conclusion, what we see today compels us to reflect seriously on our relationship with digital technologies and concretely with the technology of the smartphone. Above all, we must evaluate

what we can do to protect the most vulnerable population which right now is the adolescent population.

Is the good use of smartphones possible today?

Technology is not only an instrument, but also a mediator that reconfigures the experience that we have of the world. Its anthropological impact is enormous. In the case of the smartphone, miniaturization and portability, added to an infrastructure of connectivity that is almost omnipresent, have converted it into a ubiquitous technology which is integrated into daily life and operates in a form that is so encrusted as to be an appendage of our body, making disconnection impossible. Also, its individualized use separates it from other more communitarian technologies, a fact that promotes dynamics of isolation and disconnection from one's surroundings. Finally, its communications functions – particularly with social networks and instant messaging – modify the structure of interpersonal communication, they generate a continuous need for recognition, and they interfere with face-to-face relationships.

The smartphone not only connects, it also interrupts, it requires constant attention and redefines privacy. Different from the computer that is usually turned off after each use, the smartphone continues to remain active sending notifications which ask for an immediate and sustained response. The economy of mobile applications centered on the capture of one's attention and fed by algorithms designed specifically for that purpose tend to replicate behaviors that are close to being addictive. So, it is not

exaggerated to say that smartphones alter our cognition, influence our moods and determine a unique way of relating to each other. The negative consequences that have been mentioned and observed, especially in children and adolescents, should not be seen as resulting from the bad use of the smartphone, but rather are a direct consequence of the characteristics that are proper to this technology. They are characteristics that were present in its design, structure and purposes, and which have been perfected to the degree that the capitalist niche of the digital economy grew.

Today, just as this technology has been designed and planned to do, it is impossible to have a use that is adequate and limited in time without a great effort at self-control and self-limitation. These are habits that we cannot ask of adolescents who have not yet developed cognitive maturity. Is that not a sufficient reason to rethink it totally and to regulate its use?

Families say enough

In November 2023, a group of families in the Poblenou neighborhood of Barcelona wanted to address our shared concerns regarding a fixed, often unexamined social consensus: that the transition to high school was the appropriate time to give our children a smartphone. The movement had a greater impact than what we expected and thousands of families from the entire country joined us. Social and political reactions began to arrive and a year and a half later norms were put into place that completely prohibited the use of mobile telephones within educational areas, and proposals for regulations at

the national level, such as the new *Law for the Protection of Minors in Digital Environments* which is currently being debated.

To free educational spaces of mobile phones is a necessity. Where this has been carried out, it has been observed that there is a betterment of educational results and a diminution of conflictive situations.³ Digital education, which today is absolutely necessary and unavoidable, should not take as fact that our children have a smartphone in their pockets. Other ways will need to be found to build critical capacity and computational competence beyond the possession of the device itself.

Notwithstanding, the families have the key. There has begun the collection of signatures on an agreement among those families that commit themselves not to give smartphones to their children under the age of 16.⁴ The objective is to make visible a legitimate option, to provide evidence that many families would desire the later arrival of this technology – 62% of Catalan families, according to an ALM poll – and to avoid the feared social pressure. In a month, more than 10,000 families have joined the agreement.

The search for new regulations and a new social contract concerning the use of smartphones and adolescents should have a clear goal to protect the whole of society with special attention given to the most vulnerable groups. The change that we are looking for is very broad, it is cultural and long term. It would have to include all the social agents. It will not be fixed either by law or sporadic or temporary limitations. Above all, it would have to serve to end the abuse of digital companies that market with an eye toward our attention and our vulnerability.

An opportunity to build a different future

We are not talking about returning to a predigital past, but rather of understanding that it is necessary to place technology where it belongs and not allowing it to determine the road. The desire for societal progress has been a fundamental pillar of modernity. But it has frequently forgotten that there is not always a correlation between technological progress and social or human progress. The more complex the technology, the more difficult it is to judge it in a critical manner, which is paradoxically something that can be derived from an attitude of passive acceptance. This is the point at which we find ourselves and it will be necessary to revert to increasing our capacity for discernment and refining our ethical sense.

The consequences described here were not anticipated nor evaluated before the appearance of the smartphone. Their rapid expansion fifteen years ago was not accompanied by ethical studies nor by evaluations of their possible impact, nor by public discussions. It is as if we and our children had been subjected to a social experiment on a large scale. In this situation and with the dynamic of acceleration in which we are placed, precautionary principle is presented as a basic resource. Nothing is more urgent

in the field of digital development as the fact of not being able to wait for a prior evaluation or for a progressive introduction. We are not unaware of the difficulty of applying this precautionary principle since it is impossible to know the exact consequences of the use of technological gadgets or mobile applications until they have been used by a high number of people. For this reason, more than ever, we should be able to explore the possibilities of applying ethical reflection in the very design of the technology, in the seed of its intentionality, anticipating not only consequences but also asking ourselves about the criteria with which it has been created. And, if necessary, urge a moratorium on its application while waiting for a regulation which can avoid a negative impact.

Knowing how to put technology in its place, to pump the brakes on it – if that is allowed – or, if necessary, abandon it entirely. Different from nature – which we can control, or not, but which we have to accept as a condition for the possibility of our existence – we have created technology ourselves, and if it harms us, we can always abandon it, unless we have stopped pursuing that adulthood of the human race proclaimed by the better version of a humanizing Enlightenment.

Xavier Casanovas Combalia⁵

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 5. Director of Cristianisme i Justícia (2014-2021). Profesor of ethics at IQS (Universitat Ramon Llull). Vicepresident of Adolescència Lliure de Mòbils Catalunya.