



COMMENT

## Moral outrage about new technology risks making us a prisoner of the past

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**Y**ou can't be too careful" is not just a widely used catchphrase. It is considered to be a truism. But when it comes to how we approach new technologies, the evidence strongly suggests these supposed words of wisdom to be false. Very often we seem to be far too careful, over-cautious and unwilling or unable to properly assess risk.

A [report by Ofcom](#) last week is, perhaps, the latest iteration of this. The telecoms watchdog found that parents are becoming increasingly worried about the hazards faced by their children online. In "the age of digital independence", the regulator's research found that more than half of ten-year-olds own a smartphone and that 45 per cent of parents feel the dangers of their children being online outweigh the benefits.

The parents' fears may have been exacerbated by a steady stream of news stories about the health risks mobile devices can supposedly pose to youngsters. Last November, it was reported that too much screen time can damage your child's brain. A recent study by Macquarie University in Australia concluded

that smartphones are making us all stupider, more forgetful, less social and that mobile phones should be considered as a “gateway drug” to possible addictions to gambling or pornography or both.



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These — and similar — concerns have led the US Congress to demand an examination of the impact of smartphone use and to oblige tech companies to change the way they approach young customers. When fear about breakthrough technologies emerges then regulations, legislation and prohibitions swiftly follow.

Of course, it is possible that these worries over smartphones will prove to be well-founded. Perhaps there is a plethora of other harms caused by these devices that we have barely begun to consider. We can say for sure that this apprehension follows an all too familiar pattern. For centuries, moral outrage from the commentariat and parts of academia towards the impact of innovative products has filtered down to the public, engendering widespread suspicion and often leading to draconian interventions.

In the late 19th century, when entertainment options were limited compared with today, critics claimed that novels were damaging the young. In 1894, the *Thetford and Watton Times* boldly declared that the novel is becoming “a national enemy, in that it is sapping the minds of our youths”. Over time it became increasingly obvious that very few, if any, minds had been severely sapped, the fear-mongers found a new target. In 1922, J

Duncan Spaeth, professor of English at Princeton University, declared in *The New York Times* that it was in fact motion “pictures, not printed words” that tended to corrupt vulnerable young people.

Ninety years ago, the popularity of the wireless caused consternation. The techno-pessimistic editor of *The Milwaukee Sentinel* opined that, “we are not so aware of some of the less obvious but nevertheless harmful effects of extensive and indiscriminate radio listening on the adolescent”. This sounded more like a hope that harmful effects of listening to the radio would be found, rather than evidence they had been. The editorial went on to speculate that, “the teenager who is having difficulty in adjustment has too often used the radio as a means of emotional overstimulation or as a retreat into a shadow world of reality”.

Almost identical arguments are used about the risks of online harms today.

In the 1930s when the fear of radios was at its peak, they were banned from cars in a number of US cities. The primary justification for this was the unfounded and preposterous claim that listening to the radio might prevent drivers from hearing fire engine sirens.

By the 1960s, once radio-listening and novel-reading were established parts of everyday culture, their preservation from the threat of new technology, rather than their elimination, became the cause célèbre. In 1965, an expert forewarned that the explosion in the popularity of television “might hurt radio, conversation, reading and the patterns of family living”.

The upbeat and optimistic website HumanProgress.org catalogues a swathe of technologies that are now commonplace but were once subject to bans. These include cars (or “horseless carriages” as they were known), lifts and bicycles.

Bikes were described in *The New York Times* in 1881 as “the most dangerous thing to life and property ever invented”. In

1894, the same paper carried the assertion that “there is not the slightest doubt that bicycle riding, if persisted in, leads to weakness of the mind, general lunacy and homicidal mania”. Even those of us who worry that modern-day cyclists can sometimes be a little over-adventurous or discourteous are unlikely to go quite that far. The modern-day equivalent of the 19th-century cycling panic may be the hover-board, which a few years ago was declared illegal by the New York police on similar grounds.

In many ways the debate about phones has also come full circle. In 1923, a popular American newspaper concluded, “This is the Telephone Age. Naturally, the prevailing disease among the young generation is Telephonitis. It has reached the stage of an epidemic, and the antitoxin for it has not been discovered as yet.”

Historic technophobia should not, of course, lead us to embrace a new culture of extreme recklessness. Research into the possible harmful effects of new tech should be neither abandoned nor casually ignored. However, the lesson is that very often today’s widespread worry becomes tomorrow’s amusing anecdote about absurd and groundless over-reaction.

History teaches us that there are many examples where you can be too careful. An innovative and enterprising country therefore needs to shift the dial towards embracing more risks and taking a more sceptical approach to those who see downsides in new technologies, rather than opportunities.

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