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Smartphones in Class *The Debate that Hides Deeper Social Issues*

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Abstract

Smartphones are deeply embedded in young people's daily lives, but their use in the classroom raises concerns about their potential negative effects, such as distraction, decreased concentration and procrastination (Lin et al., 2021; Mahsud et al., 2021). Public discourse tends to present this phenomenon in terms of addiction, fuelling moralistic narratives (Lachance, 2016). The current debate, driven by UNESCO's 2023 report on technology in education, calls into question the place of smartphones in schools. This article aims to deconstruct these discourses by putting forward two central arguments. Firstly, it analyzes the social structures that promote hyperconnection in the context of contemporary capitalism. Secondly, it criticizes the excessive focus on young people's use of smartphones, which distracts attention from deeper social problems. I argue for a sociological perspective, rooted in political and historical contexts, to better understand the societal challenges associated with smartphone use among young people.



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Introduction

Smartphones are an integral part of young's daily lives (Bonneville & Riddell, 2023) yet some feel there is cause for concern. Indeed, it is known that the excessive use of smartphones in the classroom for non-academic purposes can pose a series of problems, such as loss of concentration, dispersion, inability to focus, decreased vigilance and procrastination (Lin et al., 2021; Mahsud et al., 2021). As Lachance points out, “among the many dangers evoked in the press, the question of new media addictions has been grafted onto the many fears harbored about the very young. Confusing compulsive and addictive behaviors, relying on the amount of time devoted to certain uses instead of focusing on understanding the quality of the user's relationship with the object, the term addiction has entered common usage to the point of sometimes being emptied of its meaning” (2016, p. 130 [*translated from the French*]). The old fear of seeing reading fade away, and paper books disappear, has re-emerged. In light of UNESCO's widely discussed report on Technology in Education, released in the summer of 2023, which recommended that only technology proven to enhance learning should be allowed in classrooms (UNESCO, 2023), significant debate persists. The focus is particularly on whether smartphones should be permitted in schools at all. The debate is on and concern is growing that many young people are headed for disaster. Especially since several books aimed at the general public have been published in recent years on the harmful effects of screens on young people. Think *Mind Change: How Digital Technologies Are Leaving Their Mark on Our Brains* (2015) by Susan Greenfield or *La fabrique du crétin digital: les dangers des écrans pour nos enfants* (2019) by Michel Desmurget.

In this text, we will put forward two core arguments that contribute to deconstructing the place of moralistic discourses on young people's use of smartphones. The aim here is not to minimize the impact that smartphone misuse can have on young people, particularly in the classroom, but rather to refocus, to ground the debate in the social, economic and political issues that mark the current development of capitalism. The first argument invites us to question the type of society in which we live, and which encourages hyper-connectivity. The second argument is based on the need to break away from the tendency to focus on young people using their smartphones, which hides other social problems that are much more urgent to resolve, and which would nonetheless contribute to the development of a much fairer society favoring the emancipation of young people. These arguments invite us to take a critical distance from the many moralizing discourses about young people's use of smartphones. We are arguing here for a more sociological, and therefore more political and historical, perspective when it comes to smartphone use among young people. Rather than repressing young people's use of screens, and demonizing this use when they are in the classroom, we believe that it would be to our collective interest to become aware of the diversions taking place, and to focus our attention and actions on the broader and deeper social issues that directly or indirectly affect the youth of today.

Context and Issues

Social issues Associated with the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)

Over the last few years and decades, the number of published works on ICTs has been colossal. Fascination with ICTs is still widespread. They are still the object of utopias (Grosjean et al., 2018). They fascinate, seduce and attract. But on the other hand, ICTs have also been seen, and continue to be seen in some circles, as “bad” in themselves: they are even said to be responsible

for the ruin of the new generation! At least, this is the title of a provocative text published by Twenge, professor of psychology at San Diego State University, in *The Atlantic* review a few years ago (2017): “Have smartphones destroyed a generation?”. Many harms are attributed to screens, and in particular smartphones, including the fact that they are responsible for a significant increase in mental health disorders, particularly among young people.

The media are full of opinion columns and reports with alarming headlines: “Your smartphone is damaging your mental health” (Hicks, 2019 [*translated from the French*]), “Using your smartphone too much would have harmful consequences on your mental health” (Alric, 2019 [*translated from the French*]), “How Do Smartphones Impact Youth Mental Health?” (Psychology Today, 2020), “Exposure to screens: a danger for young people” (Journal de Montréal, 2020 [*translated from the French*]). As Lachance explains, “The apparent impossibility of teenagers being able to give up their cell phones has received a lot of media attention in recent years. This commonplace seems to have been reinforced by some professionals, who have witnessed teenagers bursting into tears or exploding in anger when their phones are taken away. The symbolic importance that the phone takes on at this age goes a long way to explaining why the object becomes so precious to them (Metton-Gayon, 2009)” (2016, p. 131 [*translated from the French*]). Yet concerns about ICTs, and the Internet in particular, are not new:

From the very beginning of the Internet's popularity, issues associated with its use have been raised, fuelling considerable media interest. Several studies have attempted to describe problematic Internet use (PIU), explain its causes, make links with similar difficulties (e.g., different forms of addiction) or suggest possible solutions, without however reaching a consensus on the subject (Sergeie et Lajoie, 2007, p. 149 [*translated from the French*]).

As we already mentioned (Bonneville and Riddell, 2023), as far back as the 90s, Goldberg spoke of the “disorders” associated with excessive Internet use (1995). For his part, Young, whose work has now become classic, showed how some individuals tended to become as “dependent” on the Internet as some are on drugs, alcohol or gambling (1998a). This was referred to as “cyberaddiction”, or obsessive use of the Internet. Goldberg (1995) and Young (1998b) made this concept widely known, linking it to “*Internet Addiction Disorder*”, associated with compulsive overuse of the Internet responsible for irritable behaviour when deprived of it (Douglas et al., 2008, p. 3029). The phenomenon that researchers were trying to grasp at the time certainly seemed difficult to grasp, so divergent were conceptions of what was considered in the late 90s to be a set of addictive behaviours. At the time, the phenomenon researchers were attempting to understand proved evasive, given how divergent the conceptions were in the late 1990s of what constituted addictive behaviours driving individuals to continuous connectivity (Young, 2004). But, as Sergeie and Lajoie mentioned, “at what point does Internet use become problematic?” (2007, p. 149 [*translated from the French*]). The debate is still open, and there is no sign of it dying down in the media. In Quebec, a commission has even been set up to examine the issue: “La Commission spéciale portant sur les impacts des écrans chez les jeunes” (The Special Commission on the Impact of Screens on Young People)¹. As specified on the Quebec National Assembly website, “On a motion carried by the Assemblée nationale on June 6, 2024, a select committee was

¹ <https://www.assnat.qc.ca/fr/actualites-salle-presse/communiques/CommuniquePresse-7225.html>

established to examine the issues related to the impacts of screens and social media on young people's health and development” (2024).

Over the last few decades, several studies have shown that ICTs (of which the smartphone is one) are “double-sided”:

On the one hand, they save time, freeing us from the constraints of a physical presence, allowing us to live according to the rhythm of immediate desire, in an illusion of time abolition. On the other hand, they generate a new constraint, that of having to respond and be reached instantaneously, in a constant state of tension, with no possibility of temporizing the relationship (Aubert, 2018 [*translated from the French*]).

Young students, who use ICTs, are no exception:

Students use smartphone as a tool for studying, communicating with friends and family and study purpose. Easy internet connectivity along with user-friendly advanced technology help students easily access required study materials. On the other hand, despite of its apparent benefits, excessive smartphone and Internet use can lead to anxiety, (Do et al., 2020) attention deficit (Ho et al., 2014), sleep disturbance, (Zhang et al., 2017) poor quality of life, (Tran et al., 2017) and poor academic growth (Karki et al., 2020).

Since the launch in 2007 of Apple's first iPhone with touchscreen interface, it has become commonplace to note just how much the smartphone can, indeed, accomplish. A device that has become essential for many people, the smartphone has rapidly become an integral part of students' daily lives.

A Social and Media Panic?

What we have just explained points to one thing: the use of screens by young people has been a source of great concern for several years. This has helped to make the phenomenon of screen use among young people - and by extension smartphones - a societal matter. A societal matter is always debated in the public sphere and involves different stakeholders. Because of its importance, a societal matter calls into question the fundamental norms and values of a society. It draws the line between “right” and “wrong” and thus leads stakeholders to set out normative recommendations and prescriptions. In the debate that interests this article, it is the amount of time young people spend in front of their screens each day that is of major concern. And, consequently, the loss of control by parents and educators over this “time” spent by young people in front of screens, over which “we” - adults - seem to have lost control. As Forsler and Guyard state, “The arguments against spending too much time in front of different screens include fear of addiction, depression and other medical conditions, but also an increasing focus on how excessive screen time and constant connection affect social and cognitive abilities” (2020). The concerns raised by the population in general, and relayed by the media both upstream and downstream, point in this direction. The fear of watching young people “dumb down” before our eyes due to their excessive screen use is mentioned repeatedly on nearly every platform. This is an “editorial seam” (Lardellier & Moatti, 2014, p. 29) fully exploited by several media. This is also what Boyd notes in their book *It is complicated* (2014):

Although teens often use the word *addiction* in passing reference to their online activities, media coverage of teen's use of social media amplifies the notion that the current generation of youth is uncontrollably hooked on these new technologies and unable to control their lives. Fear mongering stories often point to accounts of internet addiction boot camps in China and South Korea, where the compulsion allegedly rivals alcoholism, drug addiction, and gambling. In the United States, media coverage frequently portrays American youth in dark bedrooms with only the glow of the screen illuminating their faces, implying that there's a generation of zombified social media addicts who are unable to tear themselves away from the streams of content from Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram (p. 78).

By doing everything in their power to attract attention and win the loyalty of a given readership or audience, the media contribute, little by little, to the construction of various media panics: "Entertainment-oriented news formats, including the use of 'op-ed' and editorial pages for audiences to express other points of view, help account for the expanded use of MP [moral panics] in news reports" (Altheide, 2009, p. 80-81).

Thus, we hypothesize that the issue of screen use among young people may be a moral panic, somewhat akin to a conservative panic. The underlying assumption behind the controversy surrounding the use of screens, and smartphones in particular, among young people is that "it was better before"! As Forsler and Guyard state,

Moral panics often occur when a new media technology is introduced and the users of these new media show disapproved forms of behavior, such as passivity or aggression. Historically there have been panic campaigns over a wide range of so-called low culture; comic books, rock 'n' roll, video nasties, et cetera, that is believed to degenerate in particular the younger generation due to violent or vulgar content (2020).

The topic of moral panics, which are first and foremost media panics, has been much discussed since Cohen's classic work published in 1973. In his book *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, Cohen describes the media coverage associated with the rivalry between two youth groups in Britain in the 60s: the *Mods* and the *Rockers*. A rivalry which, at the time, generated a considerable amount of media hype, contributing to a generalized fear of emancipating youth. This was followed by a disproportionate reaction shared by journalists, politicians and other well-thinking people (such as experts), who contributed to the emergence of a collective denunciation. The history of recent decades in the industrialized countries is rather rich in this regard; just think of the reactions and controversies at the time (and still today in certain circles) to television, cinema, heavy metal and rap music, pornography and video games, etc. (Gay, 2000; Hassan, 2018; Bowman, 2016).

When it comes to smartphone use among young people, the "narrative" is rooted in what Bourgate sees as three main fears about screens: 1) dumbing down (screens would make you stupid), 2) alienation (screens blur the boundaries between reality and fiction) and 3) deviance (screens are responsible for deviant and marginal behavior) (2000, p. 23). However, this narrative is anything but neutral. The need to "beware of technocratic and instrumental conceptions of language that see it as a neutral and consensual means of transmitting information between free-minded and equal citizens" (Boutet, 2010, p. 2 [*translated from the French*]) is therefore important. There is nothing neutral about fearing screens, denouncing the use young people make of them in all kinds of contexts (including at school), shouting about addiction and so on.

And as Boyd points out, “the language of addiction sensationalizes teen’s engagement with technology and suggests that mere participation leads to pathology” (2014, p. 78). The rhetoric surrounding young people’s use of screens is helping to shape the public’s fears about young people and their behavior. As a result, authorities are urged to legislate. Even more so when the problem of screen use among young people, particularly in the classroom, is accompanied by a “legitimizing guarantor” such as vaping. A case in point is the Ford Government in Ontario, which in April 2024 decided to introduce strict rules on smartphone use in the classroom, as well as on vaping: “We have heard loud and clear from parents and teachers alike that cellphones in classrooms are distracting kids from learning”, said Stephen Lecce, Minister of Education. “Our government is introducing the toughest policy in Canada to tackle this issue by cracking down on cellphone usage during class time, as well as banning vaping in all schools” (Government of Ontario, 2024).

In short, smartphone use among young people, especially when they are at school, is clearly seen as toxic. Hence the political project to legislate on usage time, to avoid what is presented as a public health problem. As Boyd points out,

The overarching media narrative is that teens lack the capacity to maintain a healthy relationship with social media. It depicts passionate engagement with technology as an illness that society must address. It is easier for adults to blame technology for undesirable outcomes than to consider other social, cultural, and personal factors that may be at play (2014, p. 78-79).

The challenge for us, as critical researchers, is to be able to interpret the focus on smartphone use among young people as a process of eclipsing other social problems which, in our view, are more urgent and serious, and which we will be stressing a little further on.

Stop “Exonerating” the - Capitalist - Society in which we Live

Banning the use of Smartphones while Ignoring the General Learning Conditions of our Young People

Debates and controversies about screens and smartphones, particularly at school, are certainly legitimate. Far be it from us to ignore, or trivialize, the negative effects that excessive use of smartphones, or screens in general, can have on young people. But once correlations between ICTs and many of the harms they generate have been established, the question remains: what is to be done? One simple solution has been to ban all use of smartphones in schools. This is the approach taken by the Government of Ontario: since autumn 2019, secondary school students have been strictly forbidden - except for specific reasons - to use their smartphones: “When in class, students should be focused on their studies, not their social media”, said Stephen Lecce, Minister of Education. “That’s why we are restricting cellphones and other personal mobile devices in the classroom” (Government of Ontario, 2019). In Quebec, Bernard Drainville, Minister of Education, has decided to do the same: “Quebec is moving ahead with a full ban on cellphones and other electronic devices in schools” (Shingler, 2025). Drainville said that cellphones are a barrier to socialization among students and can lead to conflict” (*Ibid.*) He also announced “the cellphone ban alongside other measures that he said are intended to improve “civility” at the province’s schools. The other measures include an obligation for schools to formalize the value of respect in

their codes of conduct and for parents to sign that code of conduct to ensure they are aware of it” (*Ibid.*).

Once again, far be it from us to say that the use of smartphones by young people should not be restricted. The question we need to ask ourselves, however, is: why do it, how do we do it, through what mechanisms and using what approach? The challenge here is to avoid the trap of legislating and prohibiting without explaining. Without meaningful consultation with teachers, parents, and young people themselves, any policy risks missing the mark. Too often spoken for but rarely listened to, young people – those most directly affected by their own smartphone use and whose ‘well-being’ is constantly cited – must finally be given a genuine voice in shaping the policies that concern them. In Quebec, the Centrale des syndicats du Québec (CSQ) has distanced itself from the Quebec Ministry of Education regarding the blanket ban on smartphones in schools. Le Journal de Québec quotes Éric Gingras (President of the CSQ) as saying, “It should be professional autonomy, so we don’t think that a national blanket directive would allow us to achieve our goals,” he said in an interview. “Let the community decide how screens are used” (Lajoie, 2024 [*translated from the French*]). In other words, let teachers themselves decide what is “good” or ‘bad’ for their students. And let’s at least consult young people, as Benoît Ethier of the Barreau du Québec school explains in his article “Even at 14, their voices matter” (2025 [*translated from the French*]).

And yet, we say we want the best for our young people. Would it not be a good idea to shift the focus from the smartphone to the many other technologies that have taken on a growing role in the classroom? And which, including the smartphone, are also contributing to the scourge of distraction (Dontre, 2021). Why suddenly put the smartphone in the firing line, at the risk of “exonerating” all the other technologies that now populate classrooms (Bonneville and Riddell, 2024)? At the risk of blameless all the other social problems facing our young people, to which we will return later. The idea here is not to oppose technological devices against each other, let alone rank them according to their impact on our young people’s education. Rather, it is to encourage critical thinking, as Bulfin et al. (2015), for example, which consists of questioning the place of these devices in our daily lives and the discourse (which is not neutral) that accompanies them.

It has to be said, over the last few decades, with the widespread use of ICTs in all spheres of social and human activity, technological devices have grown considerably. The Covid-19 pandemic has seen a sharp increase (Mindzak and Kumar, 2024). Companies and promoters of new technologies have seen this as an opportunity for growth and the development of new markets. But these are not without consequences for teaching organizations, teaching work and the pupils and students themselves, as Mindzak and Kuman recently showed in the journal *Critical Education* (2024). This has been the case for over two decades now: classrooms, from primary school to university, have been and continue to be equipped with all kinds of technical devices, all of which are superimposed on one another and have the potential to increase distraction (Dontre, 2021). Promoters of new technologies were quick to invest in the education sector, helping to “computerize” more and more classrooms. The aim was to train future citizens to be tech-knowledgeable and connected in what was presented as a “digital” world (Saint-Martin and Tessier, 2020, p. 7). ICTs played a fundamental role in this transformation, and many studies, particularly in the field of education, have examined, and continue to examine, the advantages and disadvantages of these technologies (Baron, 2019).

The context in which students are now required to learn, with all the stimuli that crowd their field of perception, is shaped by the widespread presence of multiple technological devices. These are the focus of significant interest by several national and international organizations, which see them as an opportunity to enhance young people's learning and improve their skills in a society and economy undergoing profound transformation, which will require young people to have ICT-related skills when they enter the job market (OECD, 2015, p. 2). This is certainly a legitimate ambition. However, these technologies are not without consequences for learning methods either. The data and information they make available flood learning environments, potentially creating what we might call the "cork effect": an uncontrollable accumulation of data and information that, beyond a certain threshold, impairs any processing capacity (Grosjean, Mayère and Bonneville, 2018). Indeed, the multiplication of technological devices in the classroom undeniably accentuates the presence of cognitive attractors.

The relationship students have with their teachers, with other students and with the classroom itself is gradually changing. Moreover, students no longer have to learn with their ears, by listening to their teachers, but also and above all with their eyes: digital learning supports have multiplied in the classroom. And they don't always systematically replace paper-based learning materials (text photocopies, books, manuals, handwritten lecture notes, etc.). As a result, the student's "occupation" has become more complex: students have to listen to their teachers when they speak, have to look at the Powerpoint (for example) when it is projected, sometimes have to look at what is (at times) written on the blackboard, have to have their book or textbook in front of them, have to look at their personal screen (laptop or tablet), and so on. The smartphone adds to the range of devices that already exist.

What we really want to emphasize here is that, in my opinion, it is important to understand that, upstream, the problem stems from the fact that the classroom has been colonized by a whole range of technological devices (the smartphone is just one of many) that constantly require and force students to pay more and more attention (Bonneville and Riddell, 2023). These technical devices promote, encourage and participate, one might say, in multi-tasking and "social acceleration", to use Rosa's concept (2013). In the field, this leads to "excess" behaviors (Aubert, 2006) that consist in wanting to do more and more in an ever-shorter time, and to be reactive, hence the behavior we see appearing that consists in "violating" time insofar as, notably with the help of ICTs, we are constantly connected and bound to one or more tasks. Students combine their coursework and all that goes with it (studying, exam preparation, homework, teamwork, etc.) with a job (outside the classroom), a social life and sometimes a sporting life too. Today's young people are over-stimulated and captivated by all kinds of mechanisms for capturing their attention, including ICTs. In his book *24/7: Late capitalism and the ends of sleep*, Crary clearly shows how this trend became more pronounced in the twentieth century. How "social time" was colonized by the logic of capitalism, in line with the ideal of a "life without pause".

It should come as no surprise, then, that many young people want to make time their own, to structure it around their day-to-day concerns. Several anthropologists, including Lachance (2011), have clearly demonstrated the multiple injunctions facing young people in a world of uncertainty. The appropriation of temporality goes hand in hand with an increased sense of autonomy.

By managing their own time, they [young people] convince themselves that they can govern themselves according to their own rules, while at the same time

desynchronizing themselves from imposed rhythms. In other words, by playing with the constraints of time, they adapt to these constraints. In this sense, behaviors that transform their relationship with time are part of this logic of empowerment (Lachance, 2011, p. 111 [*translated from the French*]).

This means that young people need to become increasingly skilled at multitasking, which is something they quickly learn to do and value. ICTs make all this possible. As Lachance points out once again, “Youth seem to favor situations in which they can express a certain subjective control of time” (2018, p. 299 [*translated from the French*]). Smartphones are devices that give students a certain amount of control over their “time” (when they are in the classroom), which they are often tempted to use in addition to what teachers and professors consider, perhaps rightly, to be “learning time.” It is difficult to imagine a classroom as a space/time that is separate from all other social time. We can certainly condemn the fact that a classroom or a course is no longer completely “opaque” (but have they ever been?), but should we be surprised, given the central role given in our contemporary societies to acceleration and urgency, which are symptoms of the idea that “time is money” and that “there’s no time to lose”? Does this argue for a complete ban on smartphones in classrooms? Perhaps. Surely. But our job as critical researchers is also to place the so-called excessive use of smartphones in its sociological context. That is what we are attempting to do in this article.

The classroom is obviously not immune to the social pressures and logic that weigh heavily on many students. Being constantly connected, even in the classroom, allows students who are skilled at multitasking to “flourish” without necessarily realizing that their academic performance may ultimately suffer (Junco, 2012). However, it is important not to fall too easily into the trap of technological determinism, which would argue that “the technical object influences the social, in a causal logic where the former is the independent variable and the latter the dependent variable” (Doray and Millerand, 2015, p. 66 [*translated from the French*]). We believe that taking into account how students use technology is fundamental to better assessing the impact that ICTs have on an entire generation of students. And let’s dare to say it: the ability to adapt to the technological environment in which students are immersed, whether they like it or not, is perhaps also a skill to be acquired. However, we still need to be able to better educate our young people about how they use smartphones.

Furthermore, should outrage at young people who are allegedly addicted to their smartphones, as we often hear, distract us from the view that certain classes, and school in general, are sometimes a “waste of time”? Although school is not perceived as a waste of time by young people per se, as Lachance (2011, pp. 54-55) has shown, certain classes are! “When the meaning of the subjects taught is not immediately apparent” (Lachance, 2011, p. 54 [*translated from the French*]). Thus, “why learn math for some? History for others? Anything that does not make sense from the personal perspective of these teenagers is a waste of time” (*Ibid.*, p. 55 [*translated from the French*]). It is important to understand here that the “tyranny of time,” of imposed, restrictive time that creates multiple pressures and therefore increases stress, and that institutions (schools and families, in particular) reproduce, is consciously or unconsciously fought against by young people seeking emancipation (Lachance, 2011). In search of meaningfulness, in other words. Collectively, we may well regret this. We may criticize it. But we must also understand its meaning. The same is true of the boredom experienced by many young people in many of their classes. Even if it is taboo for many to admit it, the boredom felt by young people is highly factual. This is certainly what Yacek and Gary remind us in their article published in 2023 in the British

Educational Research Journal: “The prevalence of student boredom poses a difficult challenge to educators” (p. 136). The problem of boredom is so complex and deep-rooted that it has prompted researchers to seek a better understanding of it and to grasp all its specificities (Tze et al., 2016). As Boë explains,

The teenage years are emblematic of boredom. Demotivation, laziness, idleness, aimlessness, inertia, passivity, loss of interest: a feeling of boredom lies behind each of these epithets frequently used to describe adolescents by themselves or their parents. When young people direct their boredom toward something, they often focus it on school or, worse still, work (2016, p. 27 [*translated from the French*]).

Smartphones and social media fill this void. Large companies do everything they can to capture the attention of our young people.

Living in a Hyper-Modern Society

From the 90s onwards, the widespread use of ICTs in all spheres of social and human activity was seen by many as the foundation of a new social and economic environment that was emerging. Undeniably, computerization has played a fundamental role in the socio-economic transformations that many have attempted to define, putting forward the idea of the transition to a “new society”, considered by many to be “better”. This observation, which appears in countless studies conducted over the past decade on the transformations shaping different work environments in the transition to digital technology, remains indicative of a major social transformation in a society that is still difficult to define. Some refer to a “knowledge society,” a “communication society,” or an “information society.” Others speak of the transition to a “cyber society,” a “networked society,” a “commutative society,” etc. Beyond these attempts at conceptualization and theorization, one thing remains constant in both French and English-language studies: ICTs are profoundly (structurally) changing people's daily lives. Young students are no exception, of course, and we all must realize this collectively.

We need to take a broader look at the type of capitalist society we have now entered. A sociological reading of contemporary capitalist society shows that it has merely “radicalized” what already characterized it under modernity. A more “critical” “alternative interpretation” is particularly well illustrated in sociology, with work on what many will call “hypermodernity”. If we follow Aubert's lead, this is the “fruit of economic globalization and the generalized flexibility it entails, with its ever-increasing demands for performance, adaptability and responsiveness, leading to a profound change in our behavior” (Aubert, 2008, p. 24 [*translated from the French*]). Aubert mentions that the notion of hyper represents “excess, too much, beyond a norm or framework. It implies a connotation of constant surpassing, of maximum, of limit situation” (Aubert, 2010, p. 7 [*translated from the French*]). These are the expectations we try to fulfill by implementing new strategies designed to make individuals more productive in all aspects of life. Because we need to do “better” (more), “differently” and with “less”, we hear in political, economic and managerial discourses. If, as we have just seen, individual workers are driven to excel, it is because most of the time they have “understood” that they have no choice, and that it is in their interest to outperform as much as possible. Excellence, as Aubert and De Gaulejac understood it (1991), is now one of the core values that the organization tries to instill in its members. In this way, self-improvement, which often leads to excess (Aubert, 2010), does not arise in a “social vacuum”. The hypothesis here is that today's young people evolve in

environments where speed and rapidity are over-valued. Hyper-connectivity is taken for granted. So, to sum up, we could say that

The conjunction between the advent of new communication technologies (e-mail, cell phones, Internet) and the triumph of financial capitalism, based on a demand for very short-term profitability, has given rise to three new ways of experiencing time: instantaneity, made possible by these new communication technologies; immediacy, which stems from the possibility of getting an answer in the blink of an eye, and which concerns the deadline for demanding a result: since it is possible in the moment, I want it in the moment; and lastly, urgency. (...) The advent of these three new ways of experiencing time translates into a continuous acceleration that now punctuates the rhythm of contemporary society, both in terms of work and individual experience (Aubert, 2003, 2010) (Aubert, 2018, p. 13 [*translated from the French*]).

Is it any wonder, then, that in the daily lives of young and old alike, “excessive” behavior (Aubert, 2006) - the desire to do more and more in less and less time, and to be reactive - is becoming the norm? Should we be surprised to see a growing number of young people adopting behaviors that consist of “violating” time, given that, particularly with the help of ICTs, we “communicate” all the time and everywhere? However, we know that the use of various devices (cell phones, computers, smartphones) that allow us to be connected almost continuously can sometimes lead individuals who live excessively to situations of emergency, suffering, stress, exhaustion, etc. These phenomena have already been analyzed by Jauréguiberry (2010) over the past 15 years. The paradox here is that the more time seems to accelerate, the less we feel we have! In other words, the more time speeds up, the more we miss it (Rosa, 2013).

Focusing on Young People's use of Screens: A Distraction?

As mentioned a few times above, authorities are becoming increasingly concerned about screen time among young people. These concerns echo the alarmist preoccupations of many parents, educators, school administrators, politicians and experts of all kinds about the alleged catastrophic impact of screens on young people. Certainly, as we mentioned above and reiterate here, there is certainly cause for concern. In any case, the concerns are entirely legitimate. Experts of all kinds are constantly reminding us of this. As Lachance points out,

As these technologies have become commonplace, and the use of screens has become more widespread in everyday life, a number of new forms of behavior have emerged in recent years. The risks apparently inherent in the use of these new objects have been widely reported in the media, often in the most alarming terms dangers of exposure to screens, constant connection, disclosure of personal information; health hazards for cell phone users exposed to waves, backache linked to poor posture in front of the computer, neck pain for those who regularly bend over their smartphones; dangers of these technologies distracting people, at the risk of jeopardizing the basic rules of conviviality on public transport and during evenings out with friends, etc. (2016, p. 130 [*translated from the French*]).

In short, the consequences of hyper-connection are well documented. As a society, as a citizen, as an educator, as a parent, perhaps as a youth worker, it is undeniable that the well-being

of young people is a source of concern. Collectively, we want to put forward a better society, where young people can, and will be able to, grow and flourish, learn, educate and become good citizens, in a fairer and more equitable society. But are we not collectively missing the mark when we focus (or over-focus) on smartphones as such? Yes, smartphones are a problem. They capture and divert human attention, fostering subservience and driving individuals toward constant connection. But are other, more pressing social problems also on the agenda of the many actors involved in the emergence of alarmist discourse about screens among young people? The question needs to be asked straightforwardly. We dare to ask it here in this text. The authorities say they are concerned about our young people, their education, and their well-being. But if that is really the case, why not broaden the public debate to include other social issues affecting our young people? For example, why not collectively denounce the housing-related problems that directly or indirectly affect young people? In Canada, according to the most recent data, 29% of residents do not live in acceptable housing (Statistics Canada, 2024). And yet, we know that housing conditions have a direct impact on health (both mental and physical):

Housing directly affects the health of children and youth, including their ability to develop optimally and achieve life goals. One-third of households in Canada live in substandard conditions or in housing need, as defined by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. Canada is the only G8 country without a national housing strategy (Waterston et al., 2015).

The latter say that “Living in housing need can negatively impact all aspects of child and youth physical, mental, developmental and social health” (Waterston et al., 2015). Are we talking about it in public forums? In the media? As much as for smartphones?

And what about the problems associated with food insecurity, particularly among young people? As noted by Gundersen et al., “Food insecurity, the uncertainty or inability to acquire sufficient food because of financial constraints, is a growing population health concern in many high-income countries” (2018, p. 2). As reported by Statistics Canada, “In 2022, 16.9% of Canadians were food insecure, compared with 12.9% in 2021. Overall, the proportion of individuals in households experiencing food insecurity has increased by 5.3 percentage points from 2018 to 2022” (2024). How is it that we have reached this point today, in 2024, when the problem has been known and documented for so long? How can we ignore this urgent social problem, which is barely mentioned in the media or in the general public sphere?

Moreover, what about the expectations (or lack thereof) of young people in Canada with regard to their future (job market, student debt...)? As Statistics Canada points out,

At over 7.3 million people in 2022, nearly one-fifth (19%) of Canada's population is made up of youth and young adults aged 15-29. Between disruptions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as high inflation and interest rates, this group has faced disproportionate challenges to their quality of life compared with other age groups. Recent surveys of Canadian youth indicate that they are less satisfied and less hopeful about the future. The rising cost of living is forcing some to make major sacrifices; for example, in 2022, 32% of youth said that they wanted to buy a home or move to a new rental but decided not to because of price concerns. While economic, social, and environmental challenges are influencing major life

decisions and the morale of young adults, these issues are also complex and nuanced (Statistics Canada, 2023).

This is something we rarely talk about. As if the only way to make the transition to adulthood was to live with uncertainty about the future. An uncertainty partly linked to the repayment of student debt, which is very high for many students. In fact, according to Statistics Canada's most recent data (2020), 43% of college students had incurred student debt by the time they graduated. The average loan amount was estimated at \$16,700. Only 32% of students surveyed had paid off their debt at the time of the survey. At undergraduate level, 51% of students (more than 1 in 2) had a student debt, for an average loan amount estimated at \$30,600. Only 34% of students with student debt had paid off their debt at the time of the survey. So, how can we remain optimistic about the future, when financial pressure continues to mount among young people?

The high cost of housing and of everyday necessities is not only reducing the ability of young adults to meet important financial goals or being able to afford to have children – it is also leaving young adults with less money left over for leisure activities. Income continues to play a role in youth mental health, with those living in the poorest households less likely to report excellent or very good mental health (59% of males; 50% of females) (Statistics Canada, 2023).

The issues associated with youth mental health are extensive. In a recent report, the Canadian Institute for Health Information (2022) uses figures to illustrate the extent of what could be described as a mental health crisis among young Canadians:

In 2019, there were 39,801 children and youth hospitalizations for mental health disorders. There were an additional 146,845 children and youth hospitalizations for all other conditions. In 2020, there were 36,708 children and youth hospitalizations for mental health disorders. There were an additional 122,996 children and youth hospitalizations for all other conditions. The proportion of hospitalizations that were for mental health disorders increased from 21% in 2019 to 23% in 2020. Nearly 1 in 4 hospitalizations for children and youth age 5 to 24 were for mental health conditions in 2020. In 2020, Kids Help Phone reported twice as many interactions (phone calls, texts, use of self-directed help resources) across Canada compared with 2019 (Youssif, 2020).

There would be plenty of cause for collective outrage. Fortunately, more and more of this is being reported in the media. But let us say it ironically: there is no collective panic in response to these urgent social problems that call, or would call, for an immediate and firm action!

In short, these social problems, which have been well known and well documented for quite some time, do not receive as much media attention as the use of smartphones and screens among young people. The attention paid to them remains relatively marginal; experts, politicians, decision-makers, etc., prefer to focus their attention on young people and screens, which are blamed for all kinds of harm. In the background is the idea of making parents, teachers, and young people themselves more responsible. However, this desire to make those involved more “responsible” is part of a neoliberal ideology that consists of psychologizing and individualizing social problems. We therefore agree with Forsler and Guyard: “we argue that it is based on a neoliberal ideology where the responsibility for managing the supposed risks of extensive digital

media use is placed on the individual” (2020). We are indeed in an ideology of governmentality, to quote Foucault (2004), and more specifically in an ideology of disciplinary power that is expressed through the establishment of a normalization of behaviors and attitudes towards an object or behavior (a use). Let us take this interpretation further and see this desire to restrict all forms of screen use among young people, or at least to regulate its use in a top-down manner, as a means of making bodies docile in the sense that Foucault understands it in his book *Discipline and Punish* (1979 – original edition in 1975).

It must be recognized that the numerous discussions about the responsibility of teachers, parents, and young people themselves regarding the use of screens by the latter are, to use Hache's term, a true “neoliberal pastoral” (2007, p. 50).

Conclusion

It is certainly a sign of a healthy society that we care about young people's well-being. These concerns undoubtedly reflect our desire to ensure that our young people have a promising future, and that they can hope to live in a society where they can flourish and participate in the collective good. More specifically, it is also our young people's learning conditions that are at stake when it comes to the debate on the place of the smartphone in the classroom. So, taking an interest in young people's use of smartphones, and screens more generally, is legitimate, given the growing number of observations and analyses from many sources and competent authorities about the problematic nature of the latter in young people's daily lives. However, this “interest” is perhaps not as neutral and sympathetic as we would like to believe or think. Firstly, although it seems benevolent a priori, it is part of a rather “moralizing” discourse that draws a distinction between “good use” and “bad use” of screens among young people (Cordier and Séverine, 2023). Secondly, this “interest” distracts attention, creating a diversion, from other social problems that are, in our opinion, considerably more important and urgent than screen time among young people. We have mentioned the scourge of food insecurity, access to housing, the loss of meaning associated with many people's view of the future, all of which are perhaps not talked about enough in the public sphere. And yet they continue to wreak devastating havoc, with dramatic consequences for the future of our young people.

Furthermore, the focus on young people and their use of smartphones and screens tends to “individualize” the difficulties they face. Hence the preponderance in the media of the concept of “addiction” or “cyberaddiction”, which appears repeatedly and forcefully to describe the problem affecting many young people who are unable to regulate their own use. And therefore “responsible”, as it were, for “their” pathology. But, as Lardellier points out, “does ‘cyber-addiction’ exist!” (2016, p. 61). It has to be said that “this question is one of the most crucial and ‘sensitive’ when it comes to young people, ICTs and the Internet, and one of those with the most far-reaching implications. Empirical evidence shows that certain forms of Internet and video game use can be problematic, leading to risks of abuse and even addiction. Figures are being bandied about by various organizations, with varying degrees of bias and (in)dependence. The fact is, more and more people - and not just young people - can't imagine life without a connection, and even accept that they are dependent on their smartphones, tablets and computers, which are inevitably connected. This media and editorial bonanza is based on books aimed at the general public, and frequent reports” (Lardellier, 2016, p. 61-62 [*translated from the French*]). While problematic smartphone use can certainly be prevalent in our advanced industrial societies, it must be

acknowledged that years marked by virulent criticism of young people's use of screens have early on created what looks like a case of media panic, which is itself a moralizing (conservative) panic. A lot of “work” has been done by politicians, columnists, public figures and experts of all kinds, to “educate” the general public about what would be “good” for our young people. The idea of a rapid and urgent ban on screens, and smartphones in particular, in the classroom remains disarmingly simple. Yet this idea masks a whole range of social problems that directly affect our young people, and for which - it has to be said - not much is being done. “However, these young people are no better or worse than the generations who turned twenty a few decades ago. They are the children of their time, made up of doubts, radical recompositions, political, social and scientific crisis(es) and revolution(s)” (Lardellier, 2016, p. 140 [*translated from the French*]).

And it must be acknowledged that in a gloomy social environment and faced with a frustrated future, young people find with the Internet, its avatars, its games, its friendships (even fake ones, but ‘not that’), escapes that are undoubtedly more exciting than real life, enabling them to find refuge in a ‘better world’ (quotation marks de rigueur on this expression) (Lardellier, 2016, p. 64 [*translated from the French*]).

In short, as Moro puts it, it is high time we reviewed our ways of thinking and acting:

Banal, yet sublime, familiar, yet disturbing, such are our teenagers of today and tomorrow, here and elsewhere... We say we love them; often, they intrigue us, and too often, they frighten us. The way we look at our teenagers needs to be questioned; the evolution of knowledge and ways of dealing with them, too (Moro, 2010; cited by Lachance, 2016 [*translated from the French*]).

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Ardavan Eizadirad, *Wilfred Laurier University*

Gustavo Fischman, *Arizona State University*

Derek R. Ford, *DePauw University*

Four Arrows, *Fielding Graduate University*

David Gabbard, *Boise State University*

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Dave Hill, *Anglia Ruskin University*

Nathalia E. Jaramillo, *Kennesaw State University*

Richard Kahn, *Antioch University Los Angeles*

Gianna Katsiampoura, *University of Athens*

Harper Keenan, *University of British Columbia*

Kathleen Kesson, *Long Island University*

Ashwani Kumar, *Mount Saint Vincent University*

Ravi Kumar, *South Asian University*

Saville Kushner, *Drew University*

Yulong Li, *The Chinese University of Hong Kong*

John Lupinacci, *Washington State University*

Kevin R. Magill, *Baylor University*

Alpesh Maisuria, *University of East London*

Curry Stephenson Malott, *West Chester University*

Gregory Martin, *University of Technology Sydney*

Cris Mayo, *University of Vermont*

Peter Mayo, *University of Malta*

Peter McLaren, *Chapman University*

Shahrzad Mojab, *University of Toronto*

João Paraskeva, *University of Strathclyde*

Lana Parker, *University of Windsor*

Brad Porfilio, *California State University, Stanislaus*

Marc Pruyn, *University of the Sunshine Coast*

Lotar Rasinski, *University of Lower Silesia*

Leena Robertson, *Middlesex University*

Sam Rocha, *University of British Columbia*

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Özlem Sensoy, *Simon Fraser University*

Patrick Shannon, *Penn State University*

Steven Singer, *The College of New Jersey*

Kostas Skordoulis, *University of Athens*

John Smyth, *Federation Univ. Australia*

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