

## • Introduction

The *spiked/O2 online* debate 'U TXTng 2 me?: Young people, mobiles and social networking' is the opening debate in our second 'Mobile Futures' series, exploring what roles mobile technologies will play in our changing lives. Launched in September 2006, this debate discussed the changing social boundaries among young people, and the question of who should take responsibility for setting those boundaries.

The debate culminated in a seminar at the Commonwealth Club in London, which brought together both contributors to the online debate and other interested parties to draw out the potential benefits, risks and dilemmas of new social networks in an age of mobile technology.

*spiked* ([www.spiked-online.com](http://www.spiked-online.com)) is a London-based online publication whose provocative edge attracts readers of all ages and nationalities. We also provide a forum for further discussion, through our pioneering online debates and live events at venues across London.

O2 is a leading provider of mobile services in the UK, Germany and Ireland and owns O2 Airwave - an advanced, digital emergency communications service. The views expressed in this debate do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of O2.

'At O2 acting responsibly in all that we do - towards our employees, customers, suppliers and within those communities we serve- is critical. We measure what we do and strive for continuous improvement. Dialogue with our stakeholders - understanding your views- is key to our success... and sponsoring debates such as this one, helps us to form a view of the issues that surround the mobile phone: to identify what the facts and fears are, who is responsible and for what.'

Peter Erskine, CEO, O2 plc

## • The experts

Whether texting, talking or being tracked by worried parents, young people live in a mobile-connected world. How are new technologies re-shaping the boundaries between childhood and adulthood? And who should set the boundaries - teenagers, parents, governments or companies?

We published four position papers in response to these questions to spark the online discussion.

John Carr, Chairman of the *UK's Children's Charities' Coalition on Internet Safety*, responded that

**'There is no monopoly of concern.'**

Arguing that we all have a responsibility for child protection, he proposed that new technologies allow old forms of criminal behaviour to find new forms, and that educating parents, teachers and young people about potential harm is just as important as regulating the technology itself.

'In an important sense, it hardly matters whether it is two, or 2002, children who have been harmed in this way. Any and every parent who knows of an avoidable risk to their child is going to want to avoid it. Parents do not sit down and say, 'Ah yes. The probability of little Johnnie coming to grief if he does x is only 0.00001% so I won't bother even to talk to him about x, lest it spoil his fun.'

John Carr

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In contrast, Jennie Bristow, freelance writer, mother and former commissioning editor of *spiked*, asserted that,

**‘Children should be allowed their freedom.’**

Comparing her daughters’ potential social networks with her own limited social circle when growing up in a small village, she deplored the assumption that parents should greet every new influence with ‘foreboding’ and prevent children from finding independent space, whether real or virtual.

‘I don’t demand that the authorities ‘do something’ to stop my toddler throwing her food on the floor or having tantrums in toy-shops, and I hope that when she becomes a recalcitrant teenager I won’t be looking to the authorities to sort out what are, after all, the same kind of domestic barneys. Children should be allowed their freedom. This does not mean that parents should let them do whatever they want. It is our job to draw the boundaries, just as surely as it is our children’s mission to find ways of breaking the rules.’

**Jennie Bristow**

Ed Mayo, chief executive of the *National Consumer Council*, reminded us that,

**‘The views of young people need to be taken into account - they’re often far more sophisticated than the regulator’s.’**

Drawing on 18 months of research into the views of children themselves, he noted that they were often dissatisfied with their experience as consumers, and that mobile phone operators, in particular, were rated low for both value and service. Though not opposed to all regulation, children want to be treated as autonomous beings, and this has to be balanced with the desires of parents to protect them.

‘[T]he timeless urge to protect one’s children is now played out in the contemporary setting of digital connectivity and it would be naïve to assume that these new forms of communication do not matter. They matter to young people. The consumer freedoms of mobile telephony and social networking are valued precisely because these are innovations, which promise autonomy and a release from adult control.’

**Ed Mayo**

Jonny Shipp, head of content standards and policy at *O2*, noted that

**‘Kids may be inexperienced in life but they’re streets ahead of their parents in realizing the creative and social possibilities of mobiles.’**

Drawing out this disparity between children’s social naivety and technological nous, he pinpointed the two main areas of concern to parents - inappropriate content and inappropriate contact. *O2*’s response has been both to regulate and moderate online content accessible from mobiles - including material uploaded to user-generated-content sites like [Look At Me](#) - and to educate parents about new technologies.

‘None of these controls can take the place of informed parental supervision. Yet parents generally don’t know much about social networking or the risks associated with the internet on mobiles. Our biggest challenge therefore is to offer parents the expert support they need in order to provide that

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supervision. Two little known facts among most parents are: first, that you can now access the Internet on a mobile, and second, there's a new breed of Internet service that is as much about uploading, sharing and linking to other content as it is about downloading and viewing. This new and more creative use of the web is a high profile manifestation of what is known as social networking. No wonder kids love it'.

Jonny Shipp

## • The respondents

During the seven weeks the debate was live, it attracted responses from around the world, including Canada, Israel and Australia. The respondents included policy advisors, academics, politicians and representatives of pressure groups and industry bodies, as well as individuals who gave no affiliation.

Attitudes to the question, 'who decides where the boundaries should be drawn?' varied widely, ranging from simply saying that parents should decide, to calls for government to regulate all content and supervise mobile operators closely. Several respondents proposed technical solutions that limit what mobile technology can do in a young person's hands.

Many responses went deeper into the issues. The willingness of both parents and technology companies to focus on dangers rather than potential benefits was deplored by several contributors, and the role of child protection groups in raising fears around small risks was criticised by one policy advisor. Many writers noted the positive impacts of mobile technologies on broadening young people's social possibilities.

A few wrote that parental worries can be eased by knowing their child has a mobile phone, others advocated reinforcing the roles of parents as rule-makers by educating them more about the technology. Several contributors pointed to the importance of recognising that the virtual world of online social networking is not as separate from the real world as many young people appear to believe.

The appeal to young people of private space that is mysterious and inaccessible to their parents, and the futility of trying to close it down, were explored by a number of writers. Many took a commonsense approach, noting that all young people have to learn about potential dangers and how to avoid them, in the real as well as virtual worlds.

### • Extracts:

'Prevention is only ever better than cure when the probability of what you seek to prevent is fairly high, and the measures you introduce to deal with the purported problem are known to be effective.'

**Bill Durodie, Senior Lecturer in Risk and Security, Cranfield University, UK**

'Like the safe use of matches or crossing the street- the younger children are when you teach them the dangers of mobiles and the safe use thereof, the better the chance of the 'msg' getting through. Children do many potentially dangerous things (as do adults); you can't stop them but you can teach them how not to get hurt.'

**Nina Bryna, Israel**

'It is time technology classes at school taught students how to get the best out of their mobile and how

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a mobile works. This could increase interest in a career in engineering.’  
**Professor Chris Todd, UCL, UK**

‘Those that celebrate technology also call for it to be restricted on our behalf. But they’re wrong in two ways. They overstate the impact of the technology on our lives and overestimate it as the source of more problems. Considering that innovation in mobility and networking is so young, calling for it to be regulated for the sake of kids, their parents and ultimately the rest of us, will diminish its potential by the time we’ve all grown up. We’re passing judgment on something that we’ve only just begun to explore.’

**Martyn Perks produced the debate ‘What is innovation for?’ at the Battle of Ideas, UK**

‘Social networking (although they don’t call it that) is to today’s young people what pirate radio was to their parents. It is popular, not just because it is an incredibly efficient way for time-poor young people to keep in touch, but because it is a bit edgy, and more importantly because - with notable exceptions - parents don’t do it, and don’t understand it. Reading Jonny Shipp’s account, the mobile companies have done, and are doing, far more than just about any other sector to protect and inform young people. This is commendable, but as technology converges, so does the need for the whole of the ICT sector to work together.

‘As John Carr, alludes to, what is clear is the naivety of young people, posting information on their blogs, from their mobiles, and in chat-rooms, that simply shouldn’t be posted. A lack of commonsense is fostered by a sense that somehow the world of mobiles and computers, operates in a different dimension where different rules apply. Young people would be a lot safer with the simple understanding that cyber space IS the real world.’

**Richard Brown, UKNetMonitor, UK**

‘Two things come to mind when considering this debate. Firstly, there is the perception of technology within the UK. There seems to be a growing, underlying suggestion that technology is ‘toxic’. We must be aware of how this could impact our knowledge economy. Information Communications Technology (ICT) companies need to better promote the good things they do, and do more good things (O2 has done well at this and there are a handful of others that do, but most don’t). ICT companies also need to focus more on tackling the negatives.

Secondly, our approach to young people and negative content on the net reminds me of the early days of tackling issues of drug addiction- when we proposed ‘just say no’. We have moved on to give more information about drugs, what could be harmful and why, to assuming informed choice can be made by a young brain. Merely pushing for labelling and filtering around, say, pornography doesn’t do enough- its a form of technological ‘just say no’.

**Dr Gail Bradbrook, Director of Strategy and Partnerships, Citizens Online, UK**

‘Jonny Shipp’s comment about how little parents know about what their children can do on internet-enabled mobiles is important and we should be worrying more about what parents don’t know rather than what their children do. But don’t worry too much - children are just as price sensitive as the rest of us, and are therefore unlikely to access the internet much via mobiles!’

**Jane Vincent, DWRC, University of Surrey, UK**

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‘Part of empowering users of technology is enabling them to make their own choices, and also about knowing how to stay in control, how to look after themselves and others. We are not just talking about safe use, but also responsible use. Is it about setting boundaries, or about helping and enabling others to help themselves?’

‘It is so important that we support parents, who continually have to catch up with technology, both in understanding about the technology and how their children are using it. At *Childnet* we have tried to ensure that parents can access this information. We are delighted to be working with *O2* to get this important message out to their customers, as well as ensuring that within the company these messages are recognised and well-understood.’

**Will Gardner, UK Research and Policy Manager, Childnet International**

‘Congratulations, *spiked*, on the debate. Until recently, efforts to prevent kids spending what they should not, seeing and hearing and reading what they should not, and meeting those they should not, has been an exercise in deterrence, not prevention. Putting all customers of a simple chat service through identity checks that we might see at an airport is neither practical nor proportionate to the service -and harm- we fear.’

‘In this regard, the actions by mobile carriers to introduce age verification for commercial, visual adult content and to extend this as an optional service for non-premium web content, was a step change in responsibility. The same might be said of the new approach of identifying and preventing UK access to child pornography at the ISP level. These are two examples of where technology is there as an aid to protection and public empowerment -just as much as it is to revenue generation.’

**George Kidd, UK, ICSTIS**

## • The seminar

The seminar at the Commonwealth Club in central London was heavily over-subscribed, with over a hundred invitees wishing to attend.

Three speakers opened up the discussion, chaired by **science writer Timandra Harkness**. A vigorous debate ensued amongst the audience, which included industry representatives, policy makers, academics and *spiked* readers.

**Mike Short, vice president of research and development at O2**, kick-started the evening with a short introduction on why *O2* chose to sponsor the debate. ‘We feel that this is a very important area to debate,’ he explained, ‘because when it comes to children and their use of mobile phones and the internet, we want to discuss [the issues] up front, and in a very open way’. Taking us through what *O2* has done historically, and what the company proposes to do in the future in terms of regulation, Short concluded, ‘as we move from a verbal to a visual world, new challenges are emerging’ but by taking advice from the experts, *O2* hopes to keep pace with the ‘proliferation of innovation’ and help keep parents informed and kids safe.

**John Carr**, chair of the ***UK’s Children’s Charities Coalition on Internet Safety***, then flagged up some of the specific risks attendant on this new wave of innovation. Carr outlined how mobiles have become integral to a young person’s sense of self, but also how ignorant their parents are of the elements of technology, which their children are engaging in. For instance, while a third of children now regularly blog, only one per cent of their parents know what the term

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means. Citing the ways in which mobile phones can be used in surveillance, whether during a 999 emergency or in a 'Teddyfone' listening device in their child's knapsack, Carr predicted a worrying trend towards a loss of privacy. He concluded that, although children are 'undoubted masters of the universe' when it comes to new technology, 'what they lack is worldly wisdom' and this is why we need to better educate their parents on the 'possible harms and potential risks.'

**Jennie Bristow**, however, advocated a less neurotic approach to children's use of new technology. As a freelance writer (and mum of two), she suggested that mobile phones are 'part of us and what we do' and that the 'dynamic of "fear first" and the rush to discuss and regulate, in a fruitless attempt to make any dangers go away' prevents us from appreciating the positive aspects of new technology and maximising on the opportunities it affords to children. At a time when children seem to have 'much less freedom to interact spontaneously', and when even their 'play is structured and supervised', new technology can open up 'new friendships and networks'. The pitfalls and dangers, Bristow concluded, were for children and parents to work out for themselves - without the interference of a regulator. Indeed, Bristow concluded, the multi-agency approach advocated by Short and Carr 'seeks to make the "dangers" of new technology its defining features'.

The issues raised were then thrown out to the floor. **Sarah McVittie**, of **82ASK**, highlighted how children are using mobile phones for sexual health and relationship advice - thus tackling embarrassing issues head on. **Will Gardner** of **Childnet** highlighted once again how parents are not aware of what their children's phones can do, to which John Carr added that mobile phones could now be used as a form of electronic graffiti, spreading malicious slanders further than previously possible.

**Alan Meyer** of **Mast Action UK**, recommended that simpler leaflets be produced so that parents, who are self confessed 'idiots' when it comes to technology, can understand the technology their kids operate with ease. But a nurse in the audience, who claimed to have had a great deal of interaction with the child protection 'industry' agreed with Bristow that we are 'overly concerned' on this issue and that we are projecting adult fears onto children and that we should just 'relax'.

**Dr Ruth Rettie** of the **University of Sussex**, who had just completed a PhD on mobiles, argued that many parents praise mobiles, explaining that in the era of fractured families, absentee fathers can maintain 24/7 contact with their children through texts. **Rax Lakhani**, of **Catalysis** concluded that we must maintain a balanced attitude to mobiles: yes, mobiles allow kids to record a 'happy slapping' incident, but they can also allow kids to download the latest installment of Harry Potter on the bus on the way home.

Figuring out the pros and cons of how we - and our children - use mobile phones will be an ongoing process. Many attendees of the seminar also contributed to the online debate before it closed, and stated how important they found it to have the debate in public.

Furthermore, many contributors, both online and at the seminar, raised the wider issue of privacy and public space. Issues of surveillance, of rewritten social rules around private conversations and images, and of access to mobile users' personal information, all link to the proposed theme of **the next spiked/O2 Mobile Futures debate**, suggesting that it would indeed be the right topic for spring 2007.