



The *spiked/O2* online debate ‘**Mobile phones and child protection: How far should we go?**’ was the third in a series of debates about the way that mobile phones shape our lives in the twenty-first century. Launched in February 2006, this five-week debate discussed the potential risks facing children from mobile phones, and the question of what, if anything, could or should be done to minimise those risks.

The debate culminated in a seminar at the Commonwealth Club in London, bringing together contributors to the online debate and other interested parties to reflect upon the role of mobile phones in protecting children in our mobile society.

*spiked* 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. [www.spiked-online.com](http://www.spiked-online.com)

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.

*‘We are sponsoring this online debate to stimulate views around the number of issues that surround the protection of children. Identify what the facts and fears are, who is responsible and for what. Perhaps more importantly we want to understand better, (and share that understanding), people’s attitudes towards mobiles and young people. We are keen to stimulate debate around why people think what they think of these issues in an uncertain world.’*

**Peter Erskine, CEO, O2 Plc**

Mobile phones and child protection: How far should we go?

View the debate in full at <http://www.spiked-online.com/childprotection/>

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## The experts

Our online debate asked readers to consider the questions: 'How do children use their mobile phones? What dangers do they face, and what are legislators and the mobile industry doing to protect them? What are the potential pitfalls of regulating for child safety?', and invited responses by email.

We published three position papers by experts on this issue.

The internet safety organisation **Childnet International** contributed a lengthy paper outlining the various risks facing children through their use of mobile phones. These risks can be broadly divided into what Childnet has categorised as the '3C's': Contact (the potential for paedophiles 'grooming' children online), Content (the potential that children will come into contact with illegal or harmful material such as pornography), and Commercialism (the risk that children will be lured into spending too much money, or buying unsuitable goods).

*The very features and facilities that make mobile phones particularly attractive to young users also offer the potential for misuse.*

**Childnet International**

'Given the phenomenal speed at which the technology is developing, it is essential for all sectors constantly to review the emerging challenges presented by mobile phone technologies,' stated Childnet, and offered several recommendations about what the mobile phone industry, regulators, parents and children themselves could do to improve safety.

**Frank Furedi**, professor of sociology at the University of Kent and author of the acclaimed *Paranoid Parenting*, took issue with the desire by some to use mobile phones as a 'digital leash' to monitor children's movements, in an attempt to keep them safe. Such strategies, he warned, do not work: and perhaps this is a

good thing too. 'It is ironic that we like our children to have mobile phones to keep us in touch with them; *they* want them to bypass our control and interact with their peers,' argued Furedi. 'It's healthy for young people to aspire to freedom from adult supervision and desirable. Who wants to have kids tied to our homes? Better that they are out learning to live life.'

*Young people's aspiration to independence and autonomy runs counter to parents' strategies of safety and control.*

**Frank Furedi**

**John Carr**, chairman of the UK's Children's Charities' Coalition on Internet Safety, began his contribution with some 'good news': that 'the mobile phone companies now appear to be seized with the importance' of dealing with issues such as text bullying, 'happy slapping' and 'the risks associated with providing unsupervised access to (undesirable) content or services', and 'a range of both technical and awareness-raising measures are steadily being deployed.'

*It is in the so-called 'child protection market' that many spying products are being most heavily promoted.*

**John Carr**

However, he cautioned against a development that has 'much less remarked upon': 'the steady emergence into the mass consumer market of a whole array of cheap, easy to use surveillance technologies which will soon enable every Tom, Dick and Harriet to become their own 007' - particularly in relation to tracking, or 'spying' upon, their children. The mobile phone industry's role in facilitating this process, he said, is 'a huge strategic error'. 'I doubt that many of these electronic surveillance techniques can play *any* useful part in normal family life, and outside the context of clear, strong, and in the end probably statutory, regulation, I worry about where it might all end up,' argued Carr.

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## The respondents

The online debate ran for five weeks, and attracted responses from the UK, Germany, Italy, India, Australia, Canada and the USA. Respondents to the debate included consumer groups, child protection charities, the Internet Watch Foundation, representatives of mobile phone companies, doctors, teachers, and O2 staff, alongside members of the public.

*Bullying has always existed. But now, with text bullying, the victim has an audit trail ... Surely this is a step forward from the 'he said, she said' conversations that teachers and parents have had to deal with in the past?*

**Kevin England, security manager, O2, UK**

*The NCC recommends that telecoms companies get together to offer a children's privacy option at point of sale.*

**Ed Mayo, National Consumer Council**

*I would be interested to hear the wider views on the role that the education system can play in addressing these age-old dangers, in relation to the new medium of the mobile phone...Why not involve the children in the debate on mobiles?*

**Nick Ward, PR consultant, Clarke Mulder Purdie, UK**

*It would help if all parents of children under the age of 16 registered their child as the user of the handset. This would enable network providers to provide a system whereby anything of an adult nature cannot be requested or downloaded to an individual's handset.*

**Jayne Billington, customer service, O2, UK**

*There needs to be careful thought about how the disadvantaged can be helped to benefit, without increased exposure to risk.*

**David Spicer, barrister and vice chair of the British Association for the Study and Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect, UK**

Respondents debated, among other issues, children's desire for independence, the role of parental responsibility, the developing more 'child friendly' types of phone, and the risks involved in regulation. In a lively and well-informed debate, a number of contributors took part who had been involved in the previous *spiked/O2* debates, on privacy (summer 2005) and health (autumn 2005).

*The best protection for a child, in my view, is good, mature, well -informed parents ... Parents should cultivate rational thinking, and give the necessary information on the risky things in life in a natural, non-frightening way so that the child does not become neurotic or antisocial.*

**Kyvelie Papas, retired paediatrician, UK**

*A very effective instrument of control has been the manufactured hysteria about 'child abuse'. People are understandably reluctant to relinquish their liberties, but will do so where there is 'risk', especially risk to vulnerable people including children.*

**Catherine Lomas Scott, Australia**

*I'd like to see some new mobile phone products on the market with features that would make parents feel happier about letting their children have them. The first obvious feature for a phone to have is control over what numbers the child can call, and...over which numbers the child can receive calls from.*

**Bridget Leathley, UK**

*I was born 70 years ago, and I learned to ring a landline phone at the age of 21. At that time, my generation was so ignorant...So we must congratulate the new generation. At the age of 10, they can handle mobiles and can enjoy independence.*

**Ramesh Raghuvanshi, India**

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## The London seminar

Over 50 people attended the London seminar at the Commonwealth Club on 1 March 2006. A panel of three speakers outlined their thoughts on the subject, followed by a discussion. The audience included industry representatives, policymakers, child protection charities, crime prevention organisations, and *spiked* readers. With the seminar having provoked lengthy coverage on Sky News that day, attendees and speakers came prepared to have as full a debate as possible.

The speakers were:

**John Carr**, chair, Children's Charities' Coalition on Internet Safety;

**Frank Furedi**, professor of sociology, University of Kent;

**Will Gardner**, research and policy manager, Childnet International;

**Mike Short**, VP - head of R&D, O2 plc.

**Will Gardner** emphasised the speed and complexity with which mobile technology has developed. Many of the risks faced by children using their mobile phones, he argued, are similar to those they face when using the internet - but this is exacerbated by the fact that the mobile phone device is more personal, and is 'always on'. He quoted one teenage girl's explanation of exactly what her phone means to her: 'Take away my phone, and you take away a part of me.' Gardner stressed the need for a multi-agency approach to regulation, and argued that any code of conduct will need to keep pace with the technology. 'How far should we go?' he asked. 'As far as we need to.'

**John Carr** referred to a national survey by the children's charity NCH that found that significant numbers of children have been bullied or otherwise intimidated via mobile phones - for example through text bullying or 'happy slapping'. What makes issues such as text bullying distinct from the more timeless, everyday forms of playground bullying is, he argued, that home fails to provide a sanctuary in the same way - children can escape the playground bullies

by retreating to their bedrooms at the end of the day, but they take their mobiles everywhere with them and are always accessible to unwanted calls or texts.

Carr raised the problem that it is very difficult to conduct a discussion on this subject rationally - it's too emotive, he said, and besides, 'who said parents had to be rational anyway?' In terms of solutions, he suggested, industry self-regulation is flawed as such a notion 'depends on an equality of strength and knowledge between state, market and consumer, and this doesn't exist with mobiles and child protection'.

**Frank Furedi** was deeply critical of those he called the 'moral entrepreneurs' of the child protection industry. 'It's the sociological view of children that determines this discussion, not any new risks posed by the technology', he argued, claiming that if the yo-yo were introduced today we would be exposed to similar concerns about the yo-yo's potential risks. Many of the 'remarkable' things children do with their phones give them a much-needed opportunity to conduct the peer relationships that our safety-first culture prevents them from conducting outdoors. The 'busybodies' in the child protection movement, he warned, are in the business of scaring parents and short-circuiting the process whereby they socialise their children, and this has destructive consequences.

**Mike Short** began his introductory remarks with a question: 'What is a mobile phone?' New technologies have always attracted controversy, he said, and 'we don't want a culture of fear - we want to balance concerns and benefits appropriately'. There are various options available to parents and children, he said, and 'a debate needs to be had about what forms are appropriate'. In this respect, said Short, the *spiked/O2* online debate has provided some useful views and suggestions. Others will come from teenagers themselves, who often have their own ideas about what they want and don't want from mobile phones and those

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who regulate them - a point that Short illustrated with some quotes from his son.

An impassioned debate followed. **Jonathan Picken** from the **British Association for the Study and Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (BASPCAN)** cautioned that, for the first time, a generation of children can access entirely uncensored material. 'We have to think about vulnerable children, not privileged children', he said. Frank Furedi countered that he agreed that the proliferation of horrific imagery was a concern, 'but I think it's essential that dealing with this be seen as a parenting issue, not a technology issue'.

'I know a child who refused to have a mobile phone - that was her method of rebellion', said **Lori Camm**, from **Magic Lantern Productions**. **Graham Barnfield** from the **University of East London** drew attention to the way in which much imagery on mainstream TV mimics the grainy quality popularised by 'happy slapping' images, to argue that this kind of footage is 'endorsed from the top down'. **Richard Brown** of **UKNetMonitor** drew an analogy with the ongoing debate about childhood obesity, and wondered how parents could become equal in knowledge to others in the mobile phone discussion. **Hamish MacLeod** of the **Mobile Broadband Group** addressed the tension that arises from people having bought mobiles voluntarily.

**Norman Lloyd** of **Crime Concern** flagged up the need for imaginative schemes for dealing with phone-related problems. **John Adams** from **University College London** discussed the issue of mobile contact in 'a sad world', in which mobile technology is contributing to a more general sense of atomisation. **Mick Hume**, editor of *spiked* and columnist for *The Times (London)*, asked of John Carr: 'Who do you think you are?' Representatives of the child protection debate, he argued, have not been elected to speak on behalf of all parents - who have many different views about mobile phones and how their children should use them. The often-cited claim that something must be done on

behalf of the vulnerable child is 'a blank cheque' for bans and regulation, and as such should be challenged.

The seminar concluded with some final thoughts from the panel. **Mike Short** pointed to the ways in which **O2** works with regulators in seeking the best solutions to these problems. Picking up on John Adams' point, **Frank Furedi** said that it might be a 'sad world' - but limiting people's contact further through restricting the use of mobiles would make people even more isolated.

**John Carr** argued that, while children clearly do break the rules, rules protecting children are important nonetheless. 'Nobody I know wants to see more regulation of the internet or any extension of censorship,' he has subsequently commented. 'What parents want is genuine empowerment. They want easy to use and easily available tools which help them keep them safe, according to their own family values or cultural traditions. I don't think that's too much to ask and the industry should do everything it can to deliver.'

'The positives of the technology can only be fully ensured if the negative side is recognised and acted against,' said **Will Gardner**. 'That is not to induce a 'climate of fear' amongst parents about the potential negatives and dangers, but it is to act responsibly to ensure awareness about the potential risks in combination with the provision of information in order to keep safe from these risks.'

At the end of a highly polarised discussion, all the speakers agreed that the debate should not end here. *spiked/O2* debates will return to these issues in the near future.

To view the archived debate in full, visit: [www.spiked-online.com/childprotection](http://www.spiked-online.com/childprotection)

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