The Guardian

Opinion

The Guardian view on smartphones and children: a compelling case for action

Editorial

Regulating new technology is never simple, but the status quo offers inadequate protection

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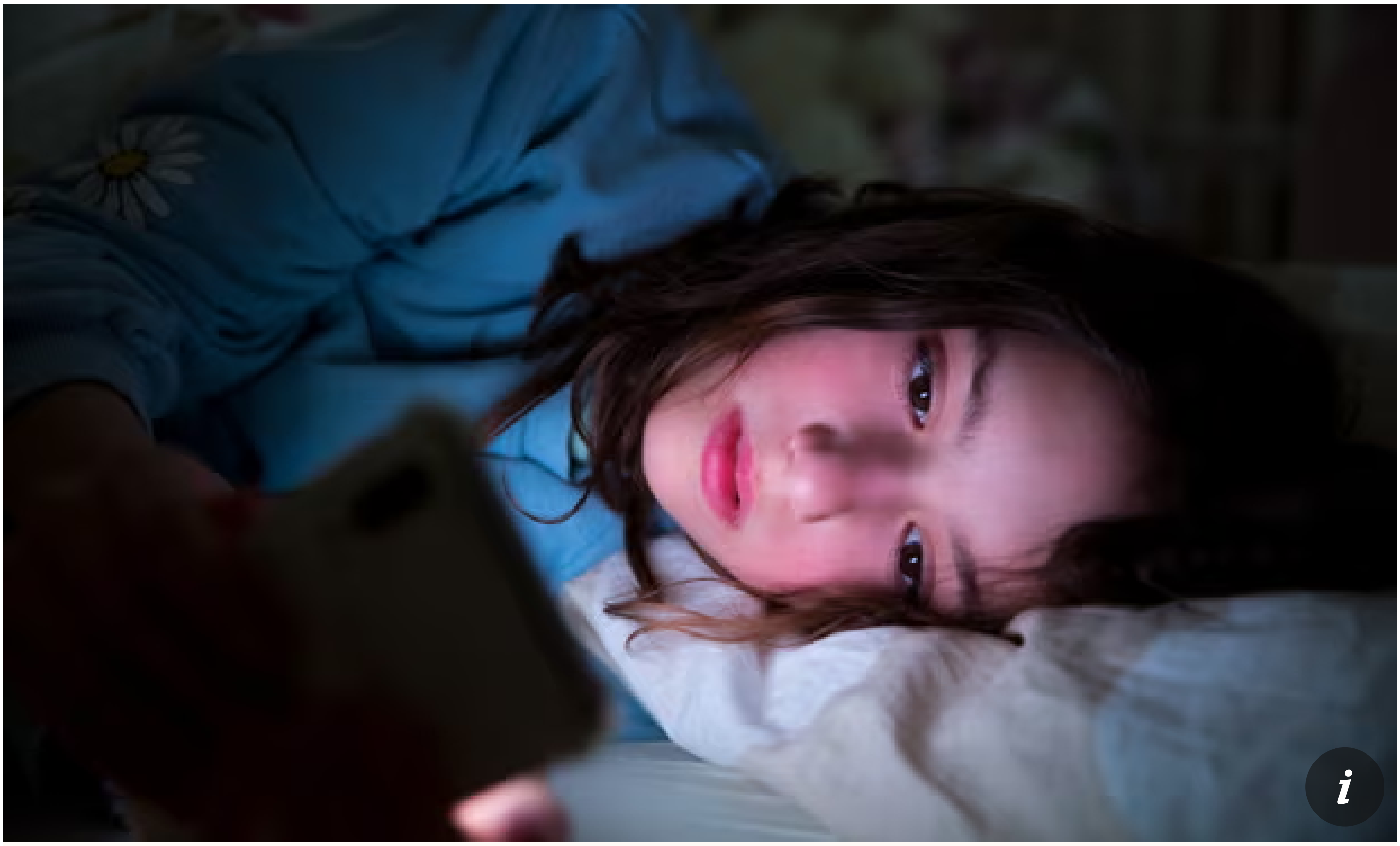

The principle that some products are available to adults and not children is uncontroversial. Access to weapons, alcohol and pornography is curtailed in this way because a level of maturity is the precondition for access (but not a guarantee of responsible use).

Until recently, few people put smartphones in that category. The idea of an age restriction on sales would be dismissed as luddism or state-control freakery. But ministers are reported to be considering just such a ban for under-16s. Opinion polls suggest that it could be popular with parents. Government guidance already calls for a de facto ban on mobile phone use in schools in England and Wales. Many headteachers had already imposed rules to that effect. If there is not yet a consensus that young people's use of smartphones needs stricter regulation, that is the trajectory.

The smartphone is a recent enough innovation (the first iPhone was launched in 2007) to limit firm conclusions about effects of its use. But there is evidence of sudden, steep rises in depression, anxiety and other mental health problems in the first generation to pass through adolescence in a state of digital saturation.

Correlation doesn't prove causation. There might be many reasons why young people are increasingly lonely and lacking in self-esteem. But there is plausible culpability in the simultaneous mass dissemination of platforms and devices that dissolve notions of privacy, are engineered to be addictive and turn social interaction into something akin to a competitive video game. There is no obvious other candidate to account for a pattern that is replicated in so many different countries. The connection is credible enough that societies might not want to wait for definitive confirmation before intervening.

One counterview is that phones are the wrong target. It is the apps and the content they channel that harm young people. The hardware is neutral. Another objection is that the phone is an essential tool of modern life, with benefits that outweigh disadvantages. The task is to teach safe use, or empower parents to enforce it. In that view, the state cannot hold back a social revolution, nor should it want to. The tortured evolution of the recent online safety bill shows the immense complexity of regulation in a rapidly evolving realm.

Defenders of a relaxed approach would note that every advance in communications technology, from the novel to the transistor radio, has been accompanied by panics about the impact on young mores. It is wise to be wary of over-romanticising memories of an analogue childhood. On many measures - the absence of routine corporal punishment, for example - young people in Britain are much safer today than their forebears. There is also a reasonable practicality hurdle. Now that phones are already so routinely found in young hands, it will be very hard to confiscate them.

Those are caveats to the case for regulation, and reasons why it must be carefully designed, not persuasive arguments for keeping the status quo. The balance of risk tends towards favouring political action to reinforce boundaries around childhood when it has been invaded and commodified by advances in digital technology.

It is easy to see why companies that profit by monopolising the attention span of young minds want unchecked access. It is far from obvious why that access should be granted.

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