Invisible and Silent

It is sometimes easy to think that the persistent distraction of technology is a modern phenomenon. Yet even back in 1665, English writer Samuel Pepys was bemoaning the effect a newfangled portable device was having on his life. In a diary entry from May 13th, he complains that he is now forever glancing at this new acquisition hundreds of times a day, that it is constantly diverting his attention away from what he should be doing, and that it seems both pointless yet addictive. The offending technology? A pocket watch. Ironically, he then goes on to wonder how he ever lived without it.

Last April, the world reached a milestone of dubious merit in respect to another constant technological companion. According to the World Economic Forum, that was the month when, for the first time, there existed more mobile phones on the planet than people (8.59 billion phones for 7.95 billion people to be specific). Love them or loathe them, there is no getting away from the fact that personal, portable devices are now ubiquitous.

All of which makes a recent announcement that the UK Government intends to ban mobile phones in schools, a little bewildering. Laudable in its aim to try and curb distraction amongst students perhaps, but ultimately futile. Just like King Canute commanding the waves to stop, digital devices are a relentless tide that won't be halted just because some Minister of Education demands it. If I have learned nothing else in a lifetime of working with young people, I at least know never to make rules you can't police.

However, the bigger question is what is the real intention behind of banishing mobiles from the schoolyard in the first place? It is certainly true that they can be distracting. True also that many of the challenges faced by today's adolescents and teens inveigle into their lives via their phones. Yet it is not helpful to think of the technology itself as intrinsically good or bad. Better to see it just as an amplifier of human behaviour. Yes, social media can extend the pernicious reach of a bully. Yes, the illusion of anonymity online can tempt young people into risk-taking behaviour. And yes, so-called "Influencers" can prey upon normal teenage insecurities and anxieties.

But so too can a timely text convey love and support faster than was ever possible before. So can a photo shared bring an immediate sense of connection and inclusion for those who are separated. So can a myriad of apps keep children safer, happier, and better informed than any parent or teacher could manage by themselves.

If digital devices simply magnify behaviour, surely the best strategy for any school is to focus on managing the behaviour, not the phone. In the same way that St Leonard's is co-educational so as to prepare students to engage comfortably with other genders throughout their lives, or upholds uniform standards so as to ready them for a world that values good grooming and a tidy appearance, so too do we want to equip them to use digital devices appropriately once they leave us.

Banning the use of mobile phones whilst young people are in our care would squander a golden opportunity, not only to teach acceptable etiquette and societal expectations about their use, but also to address any negative behaviours that could otherwise grow into insidious bad habits if unchecked. By way of example, the College has never had any tolerance for bullying, albeit that it is often hard to detect or prove. However, it is now far easier for children to report concerns confidentially and even anonymously thanks to digital dropboxes, and a screenshot or text trail can now provide unarguable evidence of abusive behaviour. Obviously we don't

want students texting each other during the school day when they should be engaging face-to-face. However, we do want to ensure that by the time they leave us, they understand that society will hold them as accountable for their virtual conduct as it does for their in-person behaviour.

The other unfortunate consequence of an outright ban on mobile phones is that it ignores the educational and organisational benefits of allowing teenagers to learn to better manage their lives digitally as they move towards complete independence. Many teachers are comfortable allowing students to quickly photograph the results of a brainstorm session from a whiteboard rather than laboriously copy it down. Others encourage them to check Google for the meaning of an unfamiliar term, use a linguistic translator, film a short explanatory clip to demonstrate their mastery of a new idea, or complete a myriad of other educationally-enhancing tasks. And in the busy co-curricular lives of most of our students, the punctuality that comes from use of calendar apps, or confirmation of after-school arrangements via text, fosters personal responsibility and confidence. And, just as in wider society, purchasing food in our cafeteria is now far more likely to be done via app than card or cash.

For all of those reasons then, the College doesn't ban mobile phones for students in Year 7 and above during supervised classes for educational purposes. We acknowledge that ownership of a device that now outnumbers humans on the planet is inevitable. Therefore, we would prefer to use our time and influence to teach young people to use such technology effectively and respectfully. The biggest complaint about modern digital technology is that depersonalises healthy human interactions in the real world. There is nothing sadder than looking at a family gathering, or a group of friends huddled together, all glued to their screens rather than reading each other's faces. The same goes for the growing trend to never remove the insidious buds that people keep in their ears like some sort of baby's comforter. Just as heads down looking at a screen screams "I can't see you", so too do earbuds send the message "I don't even want to listen to you."

Accordingly, the College ethos on mobile phones and their associated audio devices is simple, respectful, pragmatic and values-driven. They may be carried, but they are to be "invisible and silent" unless otherwise instructed. Brought to school for appropriate educational and organisational purposes when permitted by a teacher, but at all other times, invisible and silent. Proper preparation for the expectations of the workplaces and respectful social situations in which we are ultimately preparing our young people to flourish.