

# Digital horror in children's rooms – how much longer unprotected?

## Is the turnaround in child and youth protection coming?

by Robert Tauschke\*

*After new studies on the hitherto more or less uncontrolled digitalisation in the children's and youth area, as well as the first consistent governmental measures abroad, the course has been set for a turnaround in the German-speaking countries as well. The disastrous consequences of media consumption in "children's rooms" are becoming increasingly evident.*

*Until now, the euphoria of the digital awakening and its prospects of profit have stood in the way of a well-thought-out education policy and protection of children and young people. Now effective countermeasures can be worked out. "Business as usual" is a matter of the past. Numerous current studies and reports provide a clear basis to do so. Is the urgently needed turnaround in child and youth protection finally coming?*

In its latest report, "Global education monitoring Report 2023", UNESCO recommends regulating mobile phone use in schools,<sup>1</sup> thus making a U-turn from its previous laissez-faire policy.<sup>2</sup> "Smartphones should be banned from schools to combat classroom disruptions, improve learning and protect children from cyberbullying, a UN report recommends."<sup>3</sup>

At the beginning of July 2023, the Swedish Minister of Education, *Lotta Edholm* (Liberals), reverses the decision to use digital media even in preschool (!), on the basis of new scientific research by the renowned *Karolinska Institute* in Stockholm.<sup>4</sup> It was released on 28 April and conducted by the scientists *Lisa Thorell*, professor of developmental psychology; *Torkel Klingberg*, professor of cognitive neuroscience; *Agneta Herlitz*, professor of psychology; *Andreas Olsson*, professor of psychology and *Ulrika Ådén*, professor and consultant in neonatology.

In the land of digitalisation – in China – "the Internet regulation CAC calls for the introduction

of a 'minor mode' in a draft regulation submitted on 26 July 2023. This would deny internet access to users under the age of 18 between 10pm and 6am. In addition, 16- to 18-year-olds would be allowed to use the devices for a maximum of two hours a day. For eight- to 16-year-olds, the duration would be reduced to one hour and for under-eight-year-olds to eight minutes." [...].

"In 2021, China had introduced similar restrictions on video games. Short video platforms such as *Bilibili*, *Kuaishou* or the app *Douyin* by *TikTok* parent company *ByteDance* have already introduced a 'teen mode' in 2019, allowing this age group a maximum of 40 minutes of access per day."<sup>5</sup>

This approach to child and youth welfare should arouse our interest; after all, China is concerned with the well-being of its coming generation – hundreds of millions of children and young people.

The German neuroscientist, physician and psychotherapist, Professor *Joachim Bauer*, urgently calls for a turnaround in child and youth protection regarding digital media. In his latest publication (2023), he presented in detail the alarming contents as well as the rampant consumer behaviour of children and adolescents. He then deals with the massive psychological, physical, and social consequential damage.<sup>6</sup> Bauer calls for a turnaround to avert the damage to individuals and society.

In May 2023, the wake-up call of a head teacher in a secondary school (5th-10th grade) reaches-out to parents and teachers. From her everyday school life *Silke Müller* publishes cases that stir up. With her school, she is "digital ambassador" for the federal state of Lower Saxony – so she is cer-



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tainly not an opponent of digitalisation, quite the opposite. Müller describes how children and young people grow up in a brutalised and crude parallel world, unnoticed by their parents and teachers.

From her everyday school life, she reports how pupils experience unfiltered torture, rape, blackmail and racism

without being able to talk about it. They are left alone with it.<sup>7</sup> Her observations can easily be transferred to all schools. She, too, urgently calls for “a contemporary, values-oriented media education”.

Turning away is no longer an option. With the mass distribution of smartphones since the 2010s, a barely noticed brutalisation and crudeness of children and young people has come about. Until now, official measures and recommendations were simply inadequate.

Today, educational bureaucracy and policy makers have the opportunity to respond appropriately to the excesses of unrestrained digitalisation without making accusations of “exaggerating” or “blocking the future”.<sup>8</sup>

(Translation “Swiss Standpoint”)

<sup>1</sup> Unesco. *Global education monitoring Report, 2023. Technology in education: A Tool on whose Terms?* <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000385723>

<sup>2</sup> <https://condorcet.ch/2023/07/stellungnahme-zur-nationalen-digitalisierungsstrategie-in-der->



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*bildung/*, 16 July 2023

Patrick Butler and Hibaq Farah. 'Put learners first': Unesco calls for global ban on smartphones in schools. *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jul/26/put-learners-first-unesco-calls-for-global-ban-on-smartphones-in-schools#:~:text=Unesco%2C%20the%20UN's%20education%2C%20science,effect%20on%20children's%20emotional%20stability,26%20July%202023.>

<sup>3</sup> Urs Kalberer. *Unesco für Handy-Verbot in Schule*. <https://condorcet.ch/2023/07/unesco-fuer-handy-verbot-an-schulen/>, 31 July 2023

<sup>4</sup> Statement of the Karolinska Institute on the national digitalisation strategy in education “Beslut om yttrande över förslag till nationell digitaliseringsstrategi för skolväsendet 2023-2027. (Ert dnr U2022/03951, vårt dnr 1-322/2023)” cf. <https://www.regeringen.se/contentassets/d818e658071b49cbb1a75a6b11fa725d/karolinskainstitutet.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> China wants to limit mobile phone use for children and young people. In: *junge Welt*, 2 August 2023 <https://www.jungewelt.de/artikel/456403.china-will-handynutzung-f%C3%BCr-kinder-und-jugendliche-begrenzen.html>

Cf. also: n-tv.de. Handy- und Internet-Sucht. Chinesische Regierung will die Nutzung von Smartphones und Tablets durch Kinder eingrenzen. <https://www.n-tv.de/ticker/Chinesische-Regierung-will-die-Nutzung-von-Smartphones-und-Tablets-durch-Kinder-begrenzen-article24301149.html>, 2 August 2023

<sup>6</sup> Joachim Bauer. *Realitätsverlust. Wie KI und virtuelle Welten von uns Besitz ergreifen – und die Menschheit bedrohen*. Heyne Verlag. Munich 2023

<sup>7</sup> Silke Müller. *Wir verlieren unsere Kinder! Gewalt, Missbrauch und Rassismus – Der verstörende Alltag im Klassen-Chat*. Droemer Verlag. Munich May 2023

<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, early warnings were ignored in the initial euphoria and gold-rush mood. Representative of many others are the well-founded publications of Professor Dr. Manfred Spitzer, an internationally recognised neuroscientist and psychiatrist.