

A Gaulish village fights the mobile phone plague

Seine-Port is committed to children and young people

by Stefan Brändle,* Paris

(CH-S) It is usually committed and courageous individuals who can win over their fellow citizens in favour of sensible innovations. Mayor Vincent Paul-Petit opens a mobile phone-free zone in the village of Seine-Port. A clear signal for the protection of children and young people, after decades of too little action on the part of the state.

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Seine-Port is located south of Paris and, as its name suggests, on a small harbour on the Seine, which meanders through the outermost suburbs of the French metropolis. You wouldn't know it from looking at this tranquil town of 2,000 inhabitants, but it has something of the famous Gaulish village fighting against Roman superiority.

Superior power? "These are internet companies like *Meta*, known for the *Facebook* and *Instagram* platforms," says Mayor Vincent Paul-Petit in his office overlooking the town park. "Their programmers are constantly working on new ways to attract young people to their apps. However, they don't allow their own children access to screens because they know that they'll be dumbed down."

Opinions are divided

Harsh words from a friendly gentleman who doesn't resemble *Asterix* at all: The former businessman was first elected mayor of Seine-Port in 2008, he is a father of five and grandfather of eight. At the school festival before the last summer break, he made a slightly cryptic announcement to his residents: The children should talk less on the phone during the holidays and instead run around more, read, or do nothing – boredom, as we all know, makes you creat-



Mayor Vincent Paul-Petit taking courageous steps.
(Picture Sophie Bordier/MAXPPP)

ive. Paul-Petit said that he himself would be rethinking about how to use smartphones during this time.

At the start of school in autumn, the man with the firm convictions then presented a charter "for a good use of screens". The key point is nothing less than a ban on mobile phones in public spaces.

Many residents were outraged: a ban? "Yes, because anything else won't work," replied the resolute mayor and announced a municipal referendum on the issue. In the brochure sent to all households, he quoted the new French Prime Minister *Gabriel Attal*, who is only 34 years old: "As far as the use of screens is concerned, we are heading for a health and educational disaster for children and young people."

The vote took place at the beginning of February and resulted in 54 per cent votes in favour; 46 per cent were against. The municipal council then decided where it was forbidden to use mobile phones: in front of schools, in shops, on the street and in groups in public spaces.

If you ask around in Seine-Port today, opinions remain divided. A father who accompanies his daughter on her minibike welcomes the ban: "If we parents are not left alone with a mobile phone ban, I'm in favour of it." The greengrocer at the entrance to the city park rolls his eyes in disapproval but says nothing.

The two young female managers of the hairdressing salon think that the municipality

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should “first of all set up enough surveillance cameras” in view of the many break-ins. The landlady of Bistro *La Terrasse* resists the resistance: “We don’t ban mobile phones here at the bar.”

Vincent Paul-Petit, 64, understands the objections. He makes it clear that he is not going to play community policeman or “confiscate mobile phones”. He also emphasises that his approach is apolitical. He himself belongs to the conservative Republicans but describes himself as “liberal”; and he says that two neighbouring municipalities governed by the Socialists and the Communists are now also considering a ban on mobile phones.

However, the long-serving head of the village is adamant on the matter. With a swing he lays three non-fiction books on the table in his office, one of which is entitled “How to manufacture digital fools”. The others deal with topics such as video violence, internet pornography, cyberbullying, and the sophisticated luring methods of game providers.

“Mobile phones are a real drug for children,” says Paul-Petit categorically. It’s about more than just the use of smartphones by the younger generation: “We are faced with the question of how we want to live together.” Time and again, parents tell him that their offspring become increasingly aggressive when their mobile phone time is restricted.

In the voting brochure, the municipality has provided telephone numbers for those seeking advice, as well as tips from psychologists and neurologists: no screens up to the age of three; up to the age of six, only one hour a day, a third of which should be spent with parents; and from the age of 10, no more than 45 minutes. Mind you, this applies to all TV, mobile phone, PC, tablet, and video game screens. “If this is exceeded

it causes concentration problems or even brain damage,” says the mayor.

And what if the children keep telling their parents that all their classmates have an *iPhone* and those who don’t have one are only met with pity and ridicule in the playground? The municipal council is giving the residents a simple nine-button mobile phone with a text messaging function in exchange for the obligation not to provide children with their own smartphone until the age of 15. “The aim,” says Paul-Petit, “is for everyone to have the same device.”

The issue is now also worrying national politics in Paris. President *Emmanuel Macron* has set up a digital commission to draw up proposals by the end of March on how excessive screen consumption could be controlled and restricted. It is unacceptable that all these screens are hindering the “affective, sensory and cognitive development” of children’s brains, says the head of state. He gave the commission two precise questions: “At what age should a ban be imposed? And perhaps with suspensions or restrictions?”

Paul-Petit doesn’t expect too much from this group of experts. “The best solution would be to ban young people from using mobile phones until they are 18. They can manage without it at school for that long.”

Mr Paul-Petit is pretty radical. Is he refusing to embrace the digital era? On the contrary, he believes he is ahead of the curve: “You’ll see that in three- or four-years’ time, *Meta* will be sued by so many lawsuits from parents that they will have to gear their programmes to the real needs of children.” With the Gaulish village as a role model?

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