

8th Grade

1st Place

Carlee Stanton, L'Anse Creuse Middle School East

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Q: Suppose that jurors are using their cell phones to Google for background information while serving on jury duty. Should jurors in Michigan be allowed to use electronic communications during a trial?

The American judicial system is based on the presumption of innocent until proven guilty. Each accused is guaranteed the right to be judged by a jury of their peers. The responsibility of a juror is to base his decision strictly on facts presented at trial; outside influences and bias cannot impact their verdict. This is the very essence of a jury: impartiality. A jury cannot gain knowledge from any source other than the prosecuting attorney, defense attorney and witnesses called to the stand. Gaining access to inaccurate information could alter their opinion, leading them to make a decision based on misinformation. All of this is crucial to the fate of the accused, which is why I believe a juror should not be allowed to use a cell phone to google for background information while serving on jury duty.

The core democratic value of justice states clearly that all people should be treated fairly in the court of law. The great statesman, Alexander Hamilton, once said, "The first duty of society is justice." A person charged with a crime is deemed innocent until proven guilty. This is the foundation of the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. The Sixth Amendment guarantees the defendant the right to an impartial jury. By bringing technology into the courtroom, jury members are no longer forming their opinions based solely on what is presented in court; gone are the words "unbiased" and "impartial," along with the suspect's right to a fair trial.

Sheppard v. Maxwell, 384 U.S. 333 (1966) was a landmark Supreme Court Case. In 1966, Sam Sheppard was convicted of murder for the death of his pregnant wife. Throughout his trial, media swarmed the courthouse. Broadcasting stations gathered beside the jury room, exposing jurors to incriminating information not presented at trial. Neglecting to sequester jurors before deliberations and inadequately supervising their telephone calls, the judge failed to take effective measures against the pervasive publicity. Sheppard challenged the verdict, stating it a product of an unfair trial, due to the massive media exposure surrounding his prosecution. His case was appealed to the Supreme Court, where he received an 8 to 1 ruling in his favor. If the primitive technology in the sixties was capable of altering the course of a trial, imagine the effects of twenty-first century technology, should jurors use electronics while serving on jury duty. This statement is affirmed in the words of Justice Clark, who declared, "...Given the pervasiveness of modern communications and the difficulty of effacing prejudicial publicity from the minds of the jurors, the trial courts must take strong measures to ensure that the balance is never weighed against the accused." It is the responsibility of our judicial system to ensure that modern technology does not infringe on suspects' rights in the court of law.

"I consider trial by jury as the only anchor ever yet imagined by man, by which a government can be held to the principles of its constitution," proclaimed Thomas Jefferson. I believe every suspect is entitled to a fair trial along with an impartial jury, which is why I strongly feel jurors in Michigan should not be allowed to use electronic communications during a trial.