

Jeremy Wright speaking at the NSPCC Conference 2019

Thank you for the introduction.

As most of you know when the internet began, it was a way for a relatively small number of scientists to talk to each other about their work.

Today the internet is a way for all of us to talk and to hear from the whole world, and is increasingly where we conduct our professional, social and family lives.

It follows that it is also a place where increasingly our children are growing up. As some of you will know 99% of 12-15 year olds are online, spending around 20 hours a week on the internet.

And as we live more and more of our lives online, it becomes less and less acceptable, less and less sustainable for the protections, and the restrictions on bad behaviour that we expect and require in every other environment not to be present online.

If in the society we want to live in, you couldn't get away with it in print or broadcast media, or out in the streets, then you shouldn't be able to get away with it online either. But right now, too often you can.

Many of you deal with the real consequences of that discrepancy.

And you have the right to ask us in government to act on the statement – if it's unacceptable offline, it's unacceptable online. I want to explain how we intend to do that and set out some of the challenges in doing so.

Now lets be fair, some of the online platforms have begun to hear the voices of those who advocate for children, like so many of you here today, and to take some steps to make the online world safer.

But it is not enough and it is far too reactive to tragedies, not proactive in preventing them. And many of these companies have themselves begun to accept that government must have a role here.

We cannot accept self-regulation anymore, or co-regulation come to that. So if Government is to regulate, how should it do so?

There are genuinely held and valid concerns about freedom of speech online and the need for innovation there to continue.

Genuine and natural fears of government deciding what is right and wrong on the internet. But I think we have to keep in mind our objective of protecting people from harm.

This is not about making rules for the internet that don't exist elsewhere,

it is about bringing the rules we live by to the world we increasingly live in.

Another genuine fear is that in an environment that changes as fast as the internet does, where the threat landscape is very mobile, the rules get out of date fast.

And that is why I believe the right way forward is a duty of care based model, which the NSPCC, among others, have so effectively argued for.

What it means is that online companies who deal with user generated content, and facilitate searching for it, or sharing it, must do all they reasonably can to keep the users of their services safe.

And of course the more vulnerable the users, including children, the more it is reasonable to expect.

There will be codes of practice to help explain what the duty of care might involve, but the key point is that the overarching duty sits above them and means that no online company can say – as harms manifest themselves in new ways, as we know they will – that there was nothing in the code of practice about it, so I did nothing to keep my users safe from it.

We expect, we deserve, and we will require that some of the cleverest companies in the world use their ingenuity to protect us, as well as to sell to us.

So we will set out that duty in law. The next question is – how will that duty be enforced?

There must be a regulator, independent of government, with the ability to administer the duty of care and the powers to sanction those who ignore it.

Those sanctions must be significant to influence the actions of the big international companies that so many of these online entities now are.

Significant in terms of the scale of fines, but also in other penalties and we will consider individual director liability or site blocking.

Government must act but we also expect and will require online companies to act. But the truth is we all have to take action to keep ourselves, and our children safe online. Nobody is going to uninvent the internet or social media.

And however effective the regulation I am proposing may be, it will not stop every piece of harmful content from reaching every one of us.

So we need the skills and techniques to keep ourselves safe, and we need to teach them to our children. And we should require the new regulator and the companies it regulates to do more to give us these skills and techniques. So there is much to do and we should approach it with determination, but also, in my view, with humility.

It's important to listen to what people have to say about this White Paper and to make improvements where we can. We are consulting on it until the 1st July and I encourage you all to respond. It is also important for us to hear from young people themselves, and we have been doing that.

One of my officials recently had the unenviable task of explaining a regulator and a duty of care to a group of 8-year-olds.

But actually, they got it. And when asked what the punishment for a breach should be, one child said 'a £100 fine'. Another, less forgiving student, said 'No – it needs to be £500'.

Well I can reassure those students and all of you that fines will be considerably higher than that. And I've been hearing from them myself, from a group of year 10 students in Solihull, to the Diana Award's anti-bullying ambassadors here in London.

And they all have experiences and interests to register in this process. It is in their interests most of all that we must get this right. It is also important to recognise that there is no comprehensive international model to follow.

What is proposed in this White Paper means the United Kingdom will lead the world and we should be proud of that not intimidated by it.

But we want others to act to protect other citizens of the digital world of all ages, so I am also speaking to policy makers and legislators in other countries to urge them to take a similar course.

In all of this I need your help, your passion and commitment to a safer online world for our children translated into effective legislation and regulation.

And I recognise the urgency of doing that, so I intend to publish the Government response to the White Paper consultation by the end of the year and to introduce legislation as soon as possible next year.

We are doing as much as we can now to bring Parliamentary consensus on that regulation when it is brought forward.

But even so, getting this right cannot be done immediately. And we should not wait for a new regulator to be established to take action on online harms. Neither should the companies which will become subject to that regulation.

We've set out in the White Paper some of the work we are doing now to protect children online. For example, the UK Council for Internet Safety has developed an online resilience toolkit for users. Helped by many of you in this room.

And government has funded the UK Safer Internet Centre to develop cyberbullying guidance which provides advice for schools on understanding, preventing and responding to cyberbullying, and an online safety toolkit to help schools deliver sessions.

And I know you are hearing from my colleague, the Education Secretary, later today on, among other things, what we are doing to incorporate online safety into the school curriculum.

We are making progress, but ensuring we are giving children the skills they need to go online is still a relatively new and emerging issue and there is more we could do.

That's why government will produce a new draft code of practice on child online safety to set clear standards for companies to keep children safe online.

That will be published ahead of the new online safety laws.

The draft code will set our expectations about what is required to keep children safe and will examine existing resources available, including whether specific guidance should be offered to parents and carers.

And it will act as a one-stop shop for smaller companies to help them navigate the range of guidance already available, and fill any gaps if necessary.

This will make it as easy as possible for companies to take practical steps to improve safety ahead of new laws.

This work will complement the media literacy strategy which we announced in the White Paper.

In addition to that, I have commissioned new guidance about the use of technology by platforms to ensure that children are protected from inappropriate content.

This work will provide platforms with guidance establishing appropriate safeguards. We expect that guidance will be published in the autumn. So we recognise that our children are growing up in a changing technological world.

And significant harms are emerging that are unique to the online world – such as cyber-flashing, deepfake pornography or the trauma of having private sexual images disseminated across the internet.

We know from the NSPCC and others that sexting is a growing issue.

You then have deeply worrying group behaviours such as viral suicide games, or sustained and co-ordinated campaigns of online abuse directed against individuals by particular groups in society.

These paint a picture of an online world that I and you don't want our children to grow up in.

I have talked about how regulation structures need to adapt to change that, but the criminal law needs to keep pace too.

So today, alongside colleagues in the Ministry of Justice, I have asked the

Law Commission to review the current communications offences to establish whether the law is fit for purpose, and make specific recommendations about options for legal reform in this area.

It will consider whether the non-consensual taking and sharing of intimate images could be more effectively dealt with by the criminal law.

And it will also examine whether the legal framework around co-ordinated harassment by groups of people online is as clear and fit for purpose as it needs to be. This work will begin next month.

So there is plenty of work being done and plenty more to do.

Keeping our children safe online is complex because the online world is complex, and changing all the time.

My priority in the 12 months I have had this job has been the development of proposals now set out in the Online Harms White Paper, that I believe will make a real difference in making that online world safer.

I am proud of it. But I believe it can be made better.

I hope you will help me do that and that together we make the United Kingdom the safest place to grow up online.