

# Speech: Baroness Shields' speech at the National Security Agency

## **Part 1: background and career path**

Thank you for the warm welcome. It's an honour to be in the company of so many outstanding women.

Growing up in unremarkable surroundings in Pennsylvania, I never imagined that I would be standing in front of you today. But in many ways, I feel like we are fellow travellers.

As leading women in intelligence and security, together we endeavour to combat crime and protect lives. And you, too, might have come from unusual backgrounds. You, too, might have defied the odds to be sitting here today. And you, too, might have done it all whilst trying to be perfect mothers, daughters, sisters, spouses and friends.

Today, I work for Her Majesty's government as the Minister for Internet Safety and Security and the Prime Minister's Special Representative for Internet Crime and Harms. You must be thinking how on earth did that happen? How does someone from a little town in Pennsylvania become a baroness in the House of Lords? Well, I must say it's not a scenario that I could have ever imagined or planned.

And though it sounds a bit like a fairytale, I can assure you it was anything but. Raising my son as single mom and balancing a high-powered career 4,000 miles from family and friends – there were times when I honestly felt that my life and career were dangling from some castle tower. But I wouldn't trade it for the world. In fact, I have discovered that when the unexpected happens in life, that's often where the magic begins.

It has been a long road – I first discovered digital technology back in 1986. I was a grad student at GW and I wrote a business plan for a start-up that developed a turn-key system for photojournalists that would scan, capture and transmit photos over phone lines for printing in newspapers or magazines.

Back in 1986 this was revolutionary and I remember the first time I saw photos from the front lines of the civil war in Lebanon rolling off a digital press at Gannett News. I knew I had found my future career. I was so impatient, I didn't even stick around for graduation, I just packed up my car and headed west. I began my work in Silicon Valley, which took me to some of the world's top internet companies like Google, AOL and Facebook but not before spending a decade in a chip manufacturing company where I started as a product manager and rose all the way up to VP in 9 years.

But after a career that far outweighed my expectations, I was starting to see technology's unforeseen consequences and I was becoming a bit uneasy.

In his recent book *The Attention Merchants*, Columbia Law professor Tim Wu

argues that early idealists and evangelists of the web made one fatal mistake. They failed to create systems and institutions that preserved the internet's openness, whilst warding off its harms.

We were so focused on all the wonderful things that the Internet would do that we never stopped to think about the things it would undo. Things that the internet would challenge and upend. Things that matter like facts, truth, equality and respect for one another.

We had no systems, no institutions, to preserve the internet's openness – or, for that matter, to protect its users.

In 2012, I was working at Facebook, and took a meeting at No.10 that would change the course of my career. The Prime Minister wanted to see me to talk about an urgent issue. I had met him a few times before and had taken Mark Zuckerberg to see him shortly after his election.

The funny thing about the first meeting was that Mark showed up in a suit and tie and David Cameron wore a hoodie! You can't make it up! But this meeting in 2012 was about a much more serious topic. The Prime Minister was polite but clearly preoccupied.

He had just met with the parents of April Jones, a little girl from Wales who had been abducted and murdered by a paedophile. Her killer's search history showed he had been viewing child sexual abuse material online. April was just 5 years old.

As a mother, it was an anguishing wake up call. As a leader in the industry, I felt sick that we weren't doing a better job. I knew we needed to police our systems and rid them of this vile material. We needed an internet that would unite, not harm.

I began to work more closely with law enforcement to make Facebook more responsible. I logged long hours around conference tables with contacts in government. And over time, I developed a strong working relationship with David Cameron.

He asked me to head up the digital economy strategy and policy – advising the government on everything from tech entrepreneurship to online safety and security. In 2014, I had the honor of becoming (I believe) the first American-born woman to serve as a life peer in the House of Lords. And in 2015, shortly after the British elections, I became the first Minister for Internet Safety and Security.

When I took up this job, I suddenly found myself in an unusual position, one of privilege but also of enormous responsibility. Although an unlikely candidate born in America, the British government had called on me. And I knew I had a duty to serve.

The UK punches way above its weight in the digital arena and I knew it was an amazing opportunity. I could lead this emerging policy area and to make an impact on a global basis.

The UK was the first government to create a post responsible for this agenda. That meant this job could be a lonely and frustrating fight.

In the countries I visit, I don't even have a counterpart. That often makes it tough to mobilize against cross-national crime, especially when it can trace its origins to the darkest corners of the internet. Unfortunately, you know this all too well.

## **Part 2: challenges and obstacles – extremism**

There is, of course, the question of extremism – inciting violence around the world through fear and hatred.

I arrive here today following another tragic terror attack. This one in London around the Houses of Parliament; my home and also my place of work. The details and motivations are still the subject of intense investigation and forensics. But there remains no doubt that terrorists and extremists use internet platforms and applications to radicalise and incite violence.

The internet has become a vast, uncontested space which not only allows such destructive attitudes to exist but in some cases, to prevail.

Social networks algorithmically connect like-minded individuals and amplify their passions. That is the core of the online advertising business model.

But these connections sometimes channel people into echo chambers where highly emotive and passionate content, amplified by these algorithms, reinforces extremist messaging. This creates an illusion of strength in numbers.

We know how extremists use technology to manipulate information and sow the seeds of discord in society. We know how they use propaganda to reinforce grievance and recruit and inspire. And we know how they convince people to give up their lives and join "the fight". They look for those who feel invisible; the left behind. Or those who are marginalised or hold a grievance. All this didn't start yesterday. It's been going on for years. But today the pool of recruits is increasing as billions are connected to networks which act as beacons for the recruitment funnel.

Alongside this we can see an increasingly potent 'cycle of hate' across multiple extreme groups and ideologies as both sides of the extremist spectrum feed off each other, escalating tensions. We saw this after the London attack when this image appeared.

The photographer who took the picture said he posted it because the young woman wearing a hijab was traumatised by the event. However it was co-opted and manipulated by right wing groups as representing insensitivity to the carnage.

## **Challenges and obstacles: misogyny, online abuse, etc**

Which leads me to the second type of horror, a more insidious kind.

Admittedly, for many years I was an avowed web utopian. One of those who preached the promise and the potential of a world that is better because it is connected. A world where access and opportunity is democratised. Where everyone has an equal chance for their voice to be heard. But today, even I am feeling somewhat bewildered.

You may remember last March, Microsoft launched a Bot experiment on Twitter and with the help of natural language processing and machine learning technologies, the Bot learned to hate in just 24 hours. They launched it again a few days later to see if this was some kind of anomaly. But within hours its learned racist and abusive language reached unacceptable thresholds and its profile was suspended indefinitely.

It is a cruel irony indeed that one of humanity's most liberating innovations – the internet – has also become a vessel for violence and hatred. Online abuse, sexual exploitation and misogyny, trolling and cyber-bullying, hate speech and extremism can all make life online very threatening. And for women in particular, the internet is an increasingly hostile domain.

Women's equality and advocacy are issues close to my heart, not least because, as a woman, and a working mother, I have lived it and experienced the struggles and challenges gender inequality poses first hand. I have worked my way up in male dominated industries and brought up my son alone. And I have put a lot of pressure on myself to do it all perfectly.

I've seen this first hand – when I entered politics, I was shocked by the amount of hate and vitriol I received online. I've always considered myself a model citizen. But now nothing was off limits. Nothing was too personal or too sacred – and it was terrifying. And I was not alone.

In fact, following the murder of Jo Cox, the Met set up a special unit dedicated to combating misogynistic hate against politicians. It should come as no surprise that female politicians were among the worst affected – 33 out of 53 complaints were from women.

I should say that in 33 years as a working professional, I've seen a lot of positive changes in attitudes towards women in the workplace and in society as a whole.

There is more awareness of both conscious and unconscious bias and discrimination. There is more solidarity amongst women and more women are willing to stand up for themselves. And brave men often raised by amazing mothers, rise in support of women too, realizing that as long as women are not free, neither are they. However there is one forum in our society where, as a global community, we are failing to raise enough awareness and failing to protect women against the harms of misogyny, and that's online. The rise of online misogyny is a global gender rights tragedy. It is a powerful, decaying force taking a big step back in our attitudes towards women.

Online misogyny is enabled by virtual anonymity. The ability to remain anonymous online detaches abusers from their sense of reality and their responsibility to behave to acceptable moral standards. Unable to see or hear

the people they hurt, they express harmful beliefs, abuse others and illicit damaging reactions without fear of punishment. They then connect to others with similar intent, in whom perhaps these views are latent, and create networks, movements even, of aggressors. As a result users as a whole are bombarded with negative views across every social platform they inhabit, normalising offensive language and making offensive acts seem acceptable.

And this whirlwind of negativity is dissolving our hard earned respect as women.

So not only are these corrosive comments being shared extensively at great speed, but those who might otherwise have challenged them are desensitized to their impact.

And we know from our work countering violent extremism that dangerous attitudes online can translate into tragic situations offline. If extremist political views online can become terrorism, then online misogyny can manifest in the abuse of women in the real world.

Online abuse is still abuse. And never more true than for the heart-breaking crime of online child sexual exploitation. Criminals with a sexual interest in children can join forces with other offenders to abuse on a mass scale.

They can pay to watch child sexual abuse live-streamed all over the world, and children are being groomed and coerced into producing sexually explicit images by people they have never met, sometimes in countries far away. This has in turn led to the increase of child sex tourism and trafficking.

### **Part 3: solutions and long term impact**

But unlike in the physical world where national governments can take clear and firm action to keep people safe, there are no obvious solutions in the digital world. It is incumbent upon us to work together to find solutions to online harms and crimes. Solutions that cross national borders and involve real partnership between government and industry. Solutions that require unprecedented levels of collaboration for an era of unprecedented threats.

I am afraid that evil has access to all the same technology tools that we do which is why we must work with tech industry leaders to outsmart criminals, and stay one step ahead.

It has become a life mission for me to use technology to protect children all over the world from this heinous crime. In 2014, I founded an organisation called WeProtect to eradicate online child sexual exploitation and abuse using a multi-stakeholder approach. WeProtect leverages the power of technology to rescue victims, thwart criminals and bring perpetrators to justice. With the support of Prime Minister Theresa May and the leaders of 70 other governments, law enforcement, tech companies and NGOs, we are making great progress and we will not stop until every child can use the internet safely without fear.

The success of WeProtect's collaborative approach shows us that in this interconnected world, no one person, company, or country for that matter, can

solve these problems alone, it takes us all. We have proven that when the world comes together, we can achieve unprecedented things. ###Part 4: conclusion

I know that, like me, many of you might not have set out to work in intelligence. We have enormous responsibility on our shoulders. In our jobs we are expected to deliver immediate answers to near impossible questions with no margin for error. The world we operate in has never been more complicated and we face unprecedented scrutiny of everything we do.

Intelligence is a calling more than a career. But it's also a heavy burden. Can we ever do enough? Maybe not. But we can try.

So today I want to leave you with 3 messages:

1. It is our duty to share our expertise and skills
2. We must join together and turn our ideas and creativity into positive change
3. We must stand up for a world in which knowledge, debate and discussion bring people closer together so we feel part of something greater than ourselves. We can't let the world retreat to a dark place of ignorance and prejudice

I've been inspired from a line by the ever-popular musical, Hamilton:

When my time is up, have I done enough?

By being here, by showing up, you are asking yourselves that admirable question.

So I encourage each and every one of you to never stop asking, to fight for a better answer, and a better world, every single day.

Thank you.