

Speech: Children's media in a digital world

It's a pleasure to be here at this Children's Global Media Summit to discuss the future of children's media in a digital world.

I'm in the fortunate position where I have two roles here: as the Secretary of State responsible for Digital and Media – the first Secretary of State to include Digital in my official title – but also as a mother to two boys.

So I really do appreciate the importance of this Summit, and of the new digital world for our children.

Like any mother, I want my children to be safe online, but at the same time I don't want to smother them, or unduly limit their freedom. That is the balance I have to strike in my professional role too.

We all know that we're living through a time of great change, and that digital is an ever-increasing part of everything we do, as we move more and more online – and that includes media.

For my generation, media used to mean the shows we watched, the music we listened to, the books and comics we read. And they're all still relevant even in this digital age. Around a third of children have a radio set. Nine out of ten children still watch TV on a traditional set. Millions of families are hooked on Strictly, and I'm sure most of us here, not just our children, will watch history being made at Christmas when Jodie Whittaker becomes the first female Doctor Who.

But the media is changing, and children's engagement with it developing at an incredible rate. It isn't just about settling down in front of the television for whole evenings any more. I know this from personal experience. One minute my children are watching Horrible Histories on the iPlayer, the next they're looking at a Youtube clip to help their homework on the iPad. The platforms, content and experiences the media offers them are far more varied than when I was their age.

That's because in this digital era, media has taken on a broader meaning. Increasingly it is where children socialise, and how they experience the wider world, although that too is changing all the time – in fact the pace of change can feel relentless.

Once it was Myspace and Bebo, now it's Instagram and Snapchat. Ten years ago neither of those existed. Now they have nearly one billion users combined. In the years ahead it will be something we haven't even heard of yet – so it is vital that on all of this we continue to look forward and prepare for the next innovation.

As any parent will tell you, children understand how this technology works. Better than anyone. They were born into it. A fifth of 4 year olds in the UK

already have their own tablet, and more than half of them are regularly online – and when you get to 12 to 15 year olds, my children’s age, that figure rises to 99%. They are completely at home in the online world. Or think they are. Because what children don’t necessarily understand is the level of risk involved.

Ofcom’s Media Attitudes Survey, published just last week, made the challenges clear. It tells us almost half of all 12 to 15 year olds have seen something hateful online in the last year. A quarter have been contacted online by someone they don’t know. And one in ten have seen something of a sexual nature that, as the report words it, made them feel uncomfortable. Something they weren’t emotionally or mentally prepared for. Something, frankly, they should not have seen.

Now as a parent, that really worries me. As Secretary of State, it’s my responsibility to do something about it. We don’t pretend this government can, on its own, solve this global challenge. But we are committed to taking genuine action and for the United Kingdom to lead the way.

That is why we are working hard in three ways: through our Digital Charter and Internet Safety Strategy; through our work to support children online; and through taking steps to help the media provide for our children in a global society.

First, we announced our Digital Charter in June to establish a new framework to balance freedom with protection. Through the Charter, we will work with businesses, academics, charities and the wider public to build consensus on how technology should be used and how we act online. We announced our Internet Safety Strategy in October – the first major step towards achieving that goal – and the consultation on that closes this Thursday. The aim here is simple: behaviour that is unacceptable in normal life is not acceptable online.

These are, of course, global issues. Every country is being transformed by the rapid development of digital technology, so we are consulting with people from a whole range of backgrounds – other Governments, technology firms, content creators, schools, the voluntary sector, and ordinary people young and old – to make sure we get this right.

That includes consulting on a social media code of practice to tackle harmful conduct – including bullying behaviour – and an industry levy to support educational programmes and technical solutions.

Only a few weeks ago I was fortunate enough to be able to join the Duke of Cambridge to support his Royal Foundation Taskforce on the Prevention of Cyberbullying. It is exactly this sort of action, which brings together tech companies and charities to set out effective industry-driven initiatives, that we need in order to make a real difference. I look forward to His Royal Highness’ keynote speech tomorrow, and to continuing to work together on this very important issue.

The second area Government is taking action on is around supporting children

online. It is crucial that young people understand online risks, that they know where to get help, and that they're able to recover when things go wrong.

Today's generation is the first to learn about relationships and sex in an online world, and that isn't always something their parents understand or can teach them about. So we're bringing in new compulsory school subjects in England. For the first time, primary school children will be taught Relationships Education, and secondary school children will be taught Relationships and Sex Education.

And we are considering how we can best support children, and their parents and guardians, through industry-designed projects, peer to peer support schemes and partnerships with civil society organisations. It was great to see the BBC Director General today launching the "Own It" website to do exactly this, by giving children the information they need to minimise risks online.

And thirdly, we are taking steps to ensure that the media provides for and supports our children in a global society. While the distinction between TV and online blurs, it is so important that children have access to the content that helps them understand their place in the world.

So we are taking steps to strengthen the children's TV sector in our country. We have introduced a tax relief. We have given Ofcom new powers to impose quotas on commercial public service broadcasters, taking into account the new platforms on which children watch this content.

And we are committed to establishing a contestable fund to stimulate new public service content, with children's programming as potential area of focus. We want the children's sector, a source of so much imagination and inspiration for all of us, to play its part in a media environment that provides for our children for years to come.

As I said at the outset, I'm in a fortunate position where I see the challenges first-hand, but I am also able to do something about it. When I'm much older, and grey-haired, I want to look back on my time in this role and say we helped to make the digital world a safer place for children.

For me that means protecting them without limiting their freedom, or putting barriers on their ability to learn and explore. If we get it right it is something that will benefit my children, their whole generation and their children after them.

Thank you.