

Speech: Jeremy Wright speaking at the launch of the Online Harms White Paper

Thank you all for joining us and thanks to the British Library.

And for those of you who are wondering why we have come to the British Library to talk about the internet, let me offer an explanation.

Until the internet arrived, this was the world's great collection of human knowledge.

In this collection are the products of the greatest innovations and innovators in our history – from some of the earliest works created by the printing press to letters from Ada Lovelace, often known as the first computer programmer.

Elsewhere there are elements of our legal history, like one of the few remaining copies of the Magna Carta.

And it is on the interaction between the technological progress that drives our economy and the rules that protect our society that the White Paper we have published this morning is based.

Just as the invention of the printing press required new ways of thinking about copyright and the ownership of ideas, so the online world has produced its own challenges.

The internet is a part of our lives – nearly 90% of adults in the UK are online and 99% of 12-15 year olds.

In many ways it is a powerful force for good. It can forge connections, share knowledge and spread opportunity across the world.

But it can also be used to promote terrorism, undermine civil discourse, spread disinformation, and abuse or bully.

For the most vulnerable in our society, the effects are more acute and sometimes they are tragic.

And the truth is that the more we do online, the less acceptable it is that behaviour which would be controlled in any other environment is not controlled online.

How to preserve a dynamic and innovative internet, while keeping its users safe from serious harm, is one of the great policy challenges of our age.

This White Paper is our response.

So what does it say?

We could have decided to continue as we are – to urge online companies, in louder and louder voices, to do more to tackle the damaging content on their platforms but leave it to them to decide what should be done and when.

Or we could pursue a prescriptive system of rules-based regulations that would struggle to keep up with a fast-changing threat landscape.

We have concluded that neither of these approaches would deliver the better, safer internet which is in the interests of both those who provide online services and those use them.

So we have set out in this White Paper a different approach.

We propose a duty of care for those online companies which allow users to share or discover user-generated content, or that allow users to interact with each other online.

A duty to do all that is reasonable to keep their users safe online.

That duty will be enforced by an independent regulator.

The White Paper sets out in greater detail our expectations of online companies as to how they should meet that duty of care and we expect the regulator to reflect those expectations in new codes of practice it will develop.

The regulator will also take account of the need to promote innovation and freedom of speech.

It will adopt a risk-based approach, prioritising action where there is the greatest evidence of threat or harm to individuals or to wider society.

It will also adopt a proportionate approach – taking account of a company's size and resources.

It will be regulation designed to be intelligent, but most of all designed to be effective.

The regulator will have powers to demand transparency from online companies about the harms found on their platforms and what they are doing about them.

And the regulator will have powers to impose meaningful sanctions.

We are consulting in the White Paper not just on remedial notices and substantial fines, but also on senior management liability and the blocking of websites.

But this will be a regulatory approach designed to encourage good behaviour as well as to punish bad behaviour.

Just as technology has created the challenges we are addressing here, technology will provide many of the solutions and the regulator will have broader responsibilities to promote the development and adoption of these

technologies and to encourage safety by design.

It is also important to recognise that we all need the skills to keep ourselves safe online and we will task the regulator with promoting those skills too.

So we are proposing some significant changes and we believe they are necessary.

I want to take the opportunity to thank the team of civil servants from my Department and the Home Office, and others across Government for the huge amount of hard work that has gone into producing this White Paper today.

And I want to thank those of you here this morning who have campaigned for a safer internet, who already do so much to keep people safe online and who have added so much to our thinking on this subject.

We hope you will continue to add to that thinking.

We want you to tell us what you think of what you read in this White Paper, so we can get it right.

CONCLUSION

The last thing I want to say is this.

There are those who say, and will say when they read this White Paper, that because the internet is global, no nation can act to regulate it unless every nation acts to regulate it.

I don't agree.

I believe the United Kingdom can and should lead the world on this. Because the world knows we believe in innovation and we believe in the rule of law too. We are well placed to act first and to develop a system of regulation the world will want to emulate.

This White Paper begins that process, and I am grateful for the strong support in its development of my friend and colleague the Home Secretary, to whom it is my pleasure to hand over to now.