

# Speech: Matt Hancock speaking at the NSPCC “How safe are our children?” conference

Cicero once said ‘the safety of people must be the highest law.’

Throughout human history, the primary role of any government, of any community, has been to keep its members safe.

Balancing safety and freedom has been the goal throughout the ages.

And we must reset this balance anew in this digital age.

I firmly believe that technology is a powerful force for good. And that the Internet has spread opportunity more quickly across the world than any other technology.

But what we love about the Internet, the fact that it is noisy, open and free, presents so many challenges, especially for our young people.

Today I want to address what we, not just as a Government but as a society, can do to keep the Internet we love safe for our children.

Because young people are different.

While we need to think about the balance between freedom and safety online for adults, we have a special responsibility to our children.

As a society, as parents and as a Government, we recognise children need more protection.

Sadly, while the Internet brings these freedoms for young people, it also makes them more exposed to risks.

This week’s statistic that there have been 3,000 online grooming offences over the past year acts as a stark reminder of the dangers for children.

So when we debate how we want the Internet to be, it is vital that young people should be given centre stage.

Because we have a moral responsibility to build an Internet for the next generation that yes, is transformative, exciting and free, but also that protects those who use it.

## **Technology**

A lot of this can be done by tackling trolls with technology. Technology itself holds the answer to solving many of its own problems.

Just as airbags and seatbelts have helped us adapt to advances in speed,

emerging technologies, like facial recognition and machine learning, can play an important role in making the Internet a safer place.

From Apple's overnight switch off feature to Google's Family Link service, we have seen innovations where technology has been used to address problems.

I've even started using artificial intelligence to moderate the comments on my app.

And I want Britain to be known far and wide as the place where this technology for good is developed.

We have the best conditions to do this here in the UK.

From the first diode to Turing's computers, to the World Wide Web, the UK has been at the heart of some of world's most important tech inventions.

The UK is a digital dynamo. A nation of pioneers striving to lead in the technology that is transforming the world.

We have the third highest global investment in tech after the giants of USA and China.

And a few weeks ago London was once again ranked as the leading tech hub in Europe.

We have seen some fantastic innovations as a result of our status as a world-leading tech nation.

The fact that we in the UK are at the cutting edge of the development of this technology is a big advantage.

Because we can and must develop the technology that will keep us safe.

I believe that Britain has a special role to play in leading the global debate. And in doing so, we can be the world's best place to be a digital citizen.

My message today is that we all have a part to play. Parents. Teachers. Platforms. Tech companies. Governments. And civil society.

## **Parents**

First, parents have a responsibility.

Our children are introduced to technology at an increasingly young age. Today's teenagers are the first generation of 'digital natives', where interacting online is just as natural as doing so face to face.

In many ways this is a great asset. Digital skills are essential.

But it is easy to see why some parents feel uncomfortable with the technology their children are using, especially when their children may know far more about it than they do.

Parenting in this digital age is hard. But doesn't mean that it is impossible.

Setting boundaries with the use of new technology is important, just as we set boundaries for children in every other way.

The technology may be new but the principles haven't changed.

It is certainly true that the Internet has amplified the risks and brought them directly into homes and classrooms.

For example, if a child is being bullied during the day, and has access to social media, they can't leave the bullies at the school gate.

I firmly believe that very young children don't need to have access to social media at all. After all, they are children.

Social media is not designed for under 13s. It is often against the terms and conditions for children to be using these platforms.

And although this debate has started, there is much more that needs to be done to help parents protect children online.

Children are still developing. Research from the University of California proves that frontal lobes, which guide our rational decision making, develop all the way throughout adolescence.

This means young children are more susceptible to risks, including being groomed and exploited, both online and in the outside world.

So unlimited and unsupervised access to smartphones can be a portal to some very serious risks. And the Chief Medical Officer has highlighted growing concerns around the impact on children's mental health.

This backs up every parent's instinct. That children must be protected.

It is not to say that there is no role for young children to use technology.

The right amount of screen time can have a positive effect. And when supervised the Internet is a wonderful tool, including for homework and education.

We need to redress the balance so parents are given the tools and the advice to take responsibility for the incredibly difficult task of parenting in the digital age.

The NSPCC, and the Children's Commissioner, have both done fantastic work in beginning the task of helping parents steer a course through what can feel like uncharted waters.

## **Teachers**

Second, teachers and schools have a major role to play.

Many of the experiences that are fundamental to growing up, like building friendships, testing parental boundaries and exploring sexuality, are complicated by growing up online.

We rightly use our education system to help our children understand face-to-face relationships and what it means to be a citizen.

It is vital that we update these frameworks to reflect the new challenges of the digital age, and to reflect what it means to be a digital citizen.

To help them understand what behaviours are acceptable online and how they can contribute positively to the online world.

And also to help them understand online risks and know how to seek help if they need it.

I am the biggest supporter of edtech. I kicked off a project at DfE to drive the uptake of technology in the classroom for teaching.

But while I bow to nobody in my support of technology, we also need students to know how to stay safe.

Whilst it is up to individual schools to decide rather than Government, I admire the many headteachers who take a firm approach and do not allow mobiles to be used during the school day.

A high performing comprehensive school not far from here is ranked as Outstanding by Ofsted.

And their policy on mobile phones says "We are convinced that mobile phones are a distraction and have serious concerns about the impact of their inappropriate use. We know their use is reducing our students' ability to connect with one another socially on a day-to-day basis."

A recent study by The Journal of the Association for Consumer Research has shown that mobile phones can have a real impact on working memory and measured intelligence, even if the phone is on a table or in a bag.

I encourage other schools to look at the evidence and follow their lead.

I am working closely with our brilliant Education Secretary, who really gets this, to make sure both schools and young people get the support they need to be properly equipped in the digital age.

For the first time the Department for Education has made it compulsory for primary-aged children at school in England to be taught Relationships Education, and for all secondary-school children to be taught Relationships and Sex Education.

These new subjects will also include respectful relationships, and how to keep safe online.

We will be consulting on the guidance shortly and I urge you all to get

involved and have your say.

But this isn't just a matter for the Department, it's a matter for educators everywhere.

And it's our role in Government to make sure they get the support they need.

## **Platforms**

Third, platforms of course, have a duty of care to keep their users safe.

Tech companies have done incredible work in giving solutions whilst technology has been making waves and causing unbelievable change.

Social media platforms are effectively public spaces. And the owner of any public space, online or offline, has a duty of care to the public who are invited in.

And just as safety and social impact has become a competitive advantage in other industries, I want safety to be seen as a driver of innovation online, not a barrier to it.

I want us to be seen as a global leader in Internet safety too, just as we are in fintech, cybersecurity and AI.

For this to happen, tech platforms need to keep doing more when it comes to Internet safety.

Platforms should enforce clear terms of use that are easy for children to understand.

Platforms should have well signposted ways to report abusive or harmful content.

And platforms should give users clear explanations about what action has been taken as a result of user reports and complaints.

I welcome the moves that have been made and we need to work together to keep solving these problems.

## **Governments**

So Governments, and the citizens they represent, also have a vital role to play.

Not just because Governments have experience in developing and guiding policy.

But also because democratic accountability is important.

Our entire system of liberal democracy is centred on society being governed through the consent of the people. And if people don't like what they see, come an election, they can change their government.

Any lasting and enduring framework relies on democratic legitimacy and consent.

Despite a range of voluntary initiatives, good work by many charities and technological innovation, Internet safety remains an issue for so many young people.

We cannot allow this behaviour to undermine the very real benefits that the digital revolution can bring.

We cannot let the trolls win.

Either by letting the Internet become a free-for-all, simply too unpleasant for many people to use.

Or through their behaviour making society overreact and losing what makes the Internet great.

Last year, we published our Internet Safety Strategy Green Paper.

The results of our consultation told an interesting story.

Six in ten said they had witnessed inappropriate or harmful content online.

Four in ten had experienced online abuse.

And four in ten thought that their proposed concerns were not taken seriously enough by social media companies.

The message from our consultation, and our wider engagement on this, was clear. Terms and conditions are either not being enforced by platforms or are out of line with what the public expects.

We recently introduced transparency reporting requirements for social media companies.

This will make public how much content is being reported by users, and why, and how much support they are getting as a result.

And this will be reinforced by a statutory code of practice setting out clear standards.

We have published a draft code, which aims to make sure there is improved support for users online, and that more companies are taking consistent action to tackle abuse.

We have seen some good progress. YouTube's automated flagging systems led to 6.6 million videos being removed globally in just three months last year.

But as online communities continue to grow, industry-wide frameworks are not keeping pace.

So I will be working with our bold new Home Secretary to publish a White Paper, setting out how we plan to tackle online harms.

Some of these proposals will be legislative, building on the successful legislation we have already brought forward.

Two years ago, we legislated to make sure children cannot access pornography online.

And we have legislated this year to give people control over their data through the Data Protection Act.

Internet safety is the next step.

The White Paper will set out legislative proposals to tackle a range of both legal and illegal harms, from cyberbullying to online child sexual exploitation.

Of course Governments have other tools at their disposal too.

We want to make it easier for the tech industry to build safer products.

Startups have told us they lack the capacity and expertise needed to build safety into their products from the start.

Working with industry bodies such as TechUK, we will make sure they have the practical guidance they need to deliver a safer experience for all users.

And of course we in Government can use our voices too.

## **Civil society**

Finally, civil society has a role to play.

Your voice in this debate is critical.

I want to pay tribute to the NSPCC's tireless work on Internet safety and the quality of your research. The report you have published today makes another important contribution to this crucial debate.

The greatest social and political changes in our history have come about because of like minded groups like yours forming associations to press for change.

Please keep engaging in this debate. Keep asking the searching questions and keep proposing and indeed, building the solutions to these important issues.

## **Conclusion**

Everyone has their part to play in making the Internet a safer place and supporting a new generation of digital citizens.

I pledge to you this. As the father of three small children, I will use my role to do what I can to protect our young people and encourage them to use the Internet in a safe and responsible way.

The question I have is what role are you going to play? Whether you're a

parent, a teacher, run a tech platform or are part of civil society, you can play your part.

We can't stop technology. In my view, we wouldn't want to.

But this technology is made by humanity. So we can shape it for the benefit of humanity. And we must.

The stakes are high and the challenge is great.

But it can be done. So let us rise to that challenge, together.

Thank you very much.