

Speech: Matt Hancock's speech on technology at the Margaret Thatcher Conference on Security

It is commonplace to say that technology is changing almost every aspect of our lives.

Some say the change is greater than ever before, and they may be right.

I wonder, if the child born in 1820, when the fastest anyone could travel was by horse, and any information could travel was by pigeon, would have experienced more change over a lifetime than a child born in, say, 1970, or 1980 will experience over their lifetime.

But there is no doubt that the changes we have lived through, and are living through, are huge.

And they are ultimately underpinned by one thing. The cost of storing and transmitting information has collapsed over a generation, in a way unprecedented since the invention of the printing press in 1454. And now, communication, around the globe, is almost costless – so long, that is, as you can get a signal.

This change has created huge advantages, many beyond measure.

It has allowed ideas to spread, collaboration to happen, people to learn. It has entertained us; saved us time, brought people together.

It has replaced jobs, changed jobs and created new jobs.

And yet we are only at the cusp of the impact of this free flow of data: of artificial intelligence, machine learning, automation of the means of production, distribution and exchange, not just by hand, but increasingly by brain.

As someone who comes from a tech background, I find this change both exciting and daunting.

It offers great promise for humanity, and has the potential to bring dark new threats.

The question we face as a society, is to harness the power of new technology for good, to improve the condition of mankind, and to mitigate those threats.

Rising to the challenge posed by new technology is one of the great challenges of our age.

To get our response right, first we've got to get our thinking right.

Let's just take two areas of impact: the impact on jobs, and the impact on society. Each is itself a huge canvas.

First, the impact on jobs.

Throughout history, new technologies have disrupted the world of work. Today, people worry, in seemingly equal measure, of how we will fill the countless jobs being created by new technology, and what we will do with those made unemployed by new technology.

This argument has been run repeatedly through the ages.

Harold Wilson feared the machines would take all the jobs.

John Maynard Keynes lamented a future of "technological unemployment".

The Luddites smashed looms because they were replacing the hand weaving technologies of the time. And I should know, because they were led by the Hancocks of Nottinghamshire, and I'm descended from them.

Yes, jobs are being destroyed, and jobs are being changed, but so too are jobs being created. Some say the new blue collar job is coding.

The vital task is to ensure we see redeployment, not unemployment. That we automate work and humanise jobs. And that we harness new technology to save money, improve safety, and build the UK as the best place in the world to develop and deploy new technology.

As Margaret Thatcher herself said:

"Technology is the true friend of full employment, the indispensable ally of progress, and the surest guarantee of prosperity."

We need to make that true today not by burying our heads in the sand but by equipping people with the skills they need to thrive with the new technology.

The second area where we've got to get our thinking right is the impact of technology on society.

While the internet brings incalculable benefits, so too it brings harms, and to harness its benefits we must mitigate these harms.

Parents worry that their children may be vulnerable online in ways they don't understand. Customers worry what tech companies are doing with their data. Citizens worry that terrorists can use the internet to plan with impunity.

The basic problem is that technology is developing faster than the speed at which society has built new rules to deal with the challenges it creates. As a result, we do not yet have a shared understanding of what is and isn't acceptable online.

It is the role of Government to lead the way in closing this gap and ensure the right balance between freedom and security in the new digital age.

The internet grew up on a libertarian dream that a lack of rules would bring out the best in everyone. It does bring out the best in most people. But just like offline, not everyone. That's human nature. So we need to ensure both that people are free, and are kept safe, online as well as off.

This is the underlying thinking behind the Digital Charter that we will introduce.

It will set out a rules-based framework for how businesses, individuals and wider society should act in the digital world.

Our starting point is that the delicate and careful limits that we have honed over generations for life off-line should apply online too. For example, we cherish the long-held principle of free speech. Yet that freedom has established boundaries, which stop people inciting terrorism or violence. And these boundaries must apply equally whether someone is using pen or paper or are writing it on social media.

And if we are successful, the reward is significant. Our aim is to create a world-leading framework that provides the basis for an understanding of the best way to bring this balance throughout the free world.

The stakes are huge. On both counts, the impact of getting things right will be enormous. No country yet has managed it and if we can do so we will have a big advantage, strengthen our digital economy, and make our country more secure.

Ultimately, the prize is significant.

Business, done right, is a force for good in the world. Technology, harnessed right, solves human problems and makes life better. Using data well, and according to sound ethical principles, is fundamental to ensuring we maximise the benefits, and limit possible harms, from all of this innovation.

This is our goal. And our goal is not just practical, but deeply moral too: to improve the human condition by harnessing technology for good. That surely is a prize worth working for.