[Speech: Baroness Shields' speech: the reality of young life behind screens](#)

Your Eminence (Cardinal Parolin), excellencies, friends and child advocates. We gather here at the Pontifical Gregorian University, this great learning institution, under a burden of tremendous responsibility. We are here at the invitation of Father Hans Zollner, President of the world leading Centre for Child Protection, to examine the state of children, their dignity and safety in the emerging digital world. A world which is only now coming into view.

It is indeed a remarkable time to be alive. Technology empowers and enriches us in ways we never thought imaginable. Yet whilst it offers endless opportunities and possibilities, technology is also transforming childhood beyond recognition.

For more than a quarter of a century, we have been travelling at warp speed into this unknown future; extolling the virtues of the digital revolution that would democratise access to information, connect us all and help us understand each other better. When negative aspects were revealed, when the cracks began to show, we assured ourselves that this was the price to pay for progress but it was worth it. And whilst acknowledging that darkness too inhabited this brave new world, we were blinded by the light.

Years from now, when history writes the chapter entitled "the digital age", will it celebrate the immense benefits that technology has delivered and the great human progress that followed? Or, will it be a requiem of regret for childhood lost?

As it stands today my fear is that history will judge us harshly unless we act now. The next generations will rightly ask why we didn't do more. Why we didn't act decisively. Why we waited so long before coming together to find solutions. But this is not a time to despair. We have within our grasp the opportunity to shape the future and we must act.

What you witnessed in the opening video is a glimpse into the minds of seven young people. What they are thinking, feeling and experiencing. What life is really like for them as it becomes increasingly and predominantly digital. If these examples seem extreme, I assure you that they are not. They represent real life examples with devastating consequences experienced by young people all over the world.

If you've never been a victim of online crime or abuse, or known someone who has been, these stories are hard to relate to. But it becomes real when you meet a mother whose daughter was so distraught from incessant cyberbullying that she committed suicide. It becomes real when you're sitting with parents of a pre-schooler who was abducted and murdered by a paedophile who just hours before was looking at child sexual abuse images accessible freely online. It becomes real when you meet a mother whose teenage son, the same age as your own, fell under the spell of the so called Islamic State online,

travelled to Syria to fight and was killed. It becomes real when you meet with parents whose daughter, after being exposed to online self-harm groups, is in hospital again because she can't stop hurting herself.

I too was once a web utopian believing that connected humanity would create a better society. But whilst we fixated on all the wonderful things that the internet would do, we never thought about the things it would undo. How it would fundamentally transform childhood in just one generation.

When the first generation of digital natives came of age, we were amazed at how quickly they felt at home with the internet. We were surprised at how comfortable they were swiping objects on their tablets and smartphones. We scratched our heads as they shared too much with perfect strangers. But we said to ourselves – no need to be alarmed. After all – each new medium ushers a wave of new behaviors and our parents complained how much time we spent in front of the television. We thought the kids would be alright.

Well, the kids aren't alright. Because the thing they're carrying in their pockets, the thing they sleep with under their pillows, isn't just new kind of medium like TV was. It's a medium that subsumes every other medium. This generation's life experience has been profoundly shaped by the smartphone and the rise of social media. And if you chart this rise with data that's been collected since the 1960s about children's behaviours and attitudes you see something really alarming: this so called "iGeneration" is sleeping less, going out less, dating less and postponing behaviours that for decades marked the transition to adulthood.

Social media gives them illusion of being connected, with "friends" at their fingertips, whereas in reality the true connection they crave, one that resonates deeply enough to nourish and support them, is not accessible within this virtual space. Nevertheless, they try. They are addicted and they go back again and again, sometimes every free minute but with little satisfaction. And when they are alone, they have a fear of missing out.

The shift in how young people spend their time isn't neutral. It's negative. An increase in screen time has been directly correlated with unhappiness. In fact, research shows two hours of screen time increases risk factors for suicide and depression.

There's a common belief in internet circles that the products we love and use everyday are inherently good. And this belief comes from a good place. I know that because I have worked side by side with some of the greatest minds in the industry for over 25 years. And without exception, they are principled and well-meaning. They care about the future and they want to make it a better place for everyone.

But evil has access to all of the same technology tools that we do. And when the scale of these products reaches nearly half of the world's population, you don't just connect with good people you connect with the bad people too.

Smartphones, social media and communications apps are one size fits all. And there is no specific provision for the unique needs of young people who are

not ready to take on the responsibilities of their actions or to understand the realities of the human condition they are exposed to when connected to the internet.

If a child's first lesson in sexual education is a pornographic video, then this will become their reference point. These videos don't simply feature two adults having sex. They depict loveless misogynistic interactions, replete with verbal and physical abuse. When you think about the allure of this material, its addictive power and an unlimited supply online, you can imagine the impact on a young person just discovering his or her sexuality.

Pornographers aren't the only ones who have tools to create lasting impressions on children. The accessibility and reach of dangerous fringe views online are manipulating the minds of young people. These attitudes are facilitated and reinforced algorithmically. Young people, like all of us, naturally self-select what they want to read and engage with and in so doing, get trapped in filter bubbles that reinforce bias, prejudice and misinformation in a dangerous cycle.

Young people are open and susceptible to influences online where they are not monitored or supervised. Today children are groomed for sexual abuse online by people they have never met and would never have come in contact with if it weren't for the internet. They are coerced into producing sexually explicit images of themselves. Offenders connect with other offenders online. They share their disgusting tactics, strategies and their devastating acts of abuse. They pay to watch the live-streaming of children being sexually abused all over the world using anonymous access and cryptocurrency mechanisms to obfuscate their identities and crimes.

Society cannot turn a blind eye. This must stop. We must understand that what is happening right now is beyond anything we've ever witnessed. Some of our esteemed colleagues have called the internet the "greatest social experiment in history" and they are not wrong. But when the experiment unfolds in front of our eyes, and when its subjects are our children, we cannot be simple spectators.

My own realisation began just over a decade ago. The year was 2006 and I was the President of Bebo, one of the earliest social networks. With tens of millions of young users on the platform, we started seeing an epidemic of cases of child grooming. Paedophiles under the cover of anonymity interacting with unsuspecting young people en masse. And I myself began to see things in a different light. I had no idea the potential harms to our children that would be facilitated by the products we created. And once I saw it, I couldn't un-see it.

We began working diligently with the UK Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre, the FBI, Interpol and the US National Center for Missing and Exploited Children to address incidents one by one. But over time, the stream became a torrent and we realised that this problem was not confined to one network — it was a global problem; a problem with no boundaries, no clear lines of responsibility for solving it.

Governments and law enforcement struggled too as the perpetrators were located beyond their borders and crime-fighting infrastructures were deeply rooted in a local and physical response. Industry became increasingly challenged, reverting to a crisis management construct and addressing incidents as they happened vs being proactive.

In 2013, then Prime Minister David Cameron asked me to lead a US-UK technology task force that would focus on taking immediate and long-lasting steps to curtail online child sexual exploitation. Working together with the best and brightest minds in the tech industry to tackle the "unsolvable" problems we face in partnership — a radically different approach. An approach that would see government, law enforcement and private sector experts working together to eliminate the practices that were eroding the very foundations of what every child deserves — to be safe.

Within months we saw the art of the possible take shape. We were able to achieve a number of breakthrough results. Microsoft's PhotoDNA technology was adopted industry wide and completely transformed our ability to find and remove images of child sexual abuse wherever they appear on the web. The Internet Watch Foundation took on the challenge of being the intermediary and clearinghouse of digital hashes performing a vital service it continues to provide today to industry, government and law enforcement. Google began the process of altering its search algorithms to prevent child sexual abuse images and video from appearing in results, to remove them at scale and to break links to peer to peer networks hosting this illegal material. Visa, Mastercard and others financial service providers worked to eradicate the purchase of child abuse imagery through mainstream payment systems. And an innovative new NGO, Thorn was founded and launched in California to develop a comprehensive technology response to the heinous crimes of child sexual exploitation and trafficking.

These initiatives and many others have made great progress in the fight to stop online abuse but the tools and tactics of these criminals are not static. They are constantly morphing and changing and thus any technology solution, no matter how sophisticated must continue to evolve in response to the threats.

This fight has become a life mission for me. In 2014, inspired by the results achieved by the task force, I founded an organisation called WePROTECT. What underpins the strategy of WePROTECT is that it takes us all to fight this kind of evil online. To eradicate online child sexual exploitation requires a multi-stakeholder approach. We leverage 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 over 70 governments, law enforcement, tech companies and NGOs, we are making progress and we will never stop until every child can use the internet without fear, intimidation, abuse or exploitation.

In 2016, WePROTECT merged with the Global Alliance against Child Sexual Abuse Online, led by the US Justice Deptartment and the EU Commission. Today, the combined entity, the WePROTECT Global Alliance represents a unified movement

with a mission to empower everyone with a responsibility to protect children online. And supported by a commitment of 50M from the government of the United Kingdom, WePROTECT launched the Fund to End Violence Against Children in partnership with UNICEF and in support of 16.2 of the Sustainable Development Goals ratified by all member states with a target to end abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children.

WePROTECT demonstrates the vital importance of a 'coalition of the willing' to work together to protect children in the digital world but another vital aspect of protection is to ensure their rights are protected as they grow up digital citizens.

From the day a child is born they begin leaving a digital footprint — their medical history, their school records, their friendships, interests and moods are collected, analysed and even monetised. As adults, we are aware of the trade-offs when it comes to our personal information. When we click accept on online terms and conditions, we may not read the text but we know we are giving up a lot. But children do not. The unique needs of children must be paramount in the development of online products and services. This cannot be an afterthought.

That is why I am a firm believer, supporter and defender of the 5 Rights Framework which takes the existing rights of young people guaranteed by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and updates them for the digital age. These rights which include the Right to Remove, the Right to Know, the Right to Safety and Support, the Right to Informed and Conscious Choice and the Right to Digital Literacy are non-negotiable and they must be ensured and protected.

Internet platforms today have unprecedented insights into our thoughts, opinions, beliefs, emotions and intentions. In many cases the algorithms that power the suggestions we see seem to know more about us than we know ourselves.

For instance, if a young person is depressed or suicidal, then chances are the social network or communications app they are using will have tools to recognise this. Using natural language processing and machine learning to detect patterns in speech and usage might signal the state of mind or intentions of a child might or indicate that they need help. Facebook, Instagram and Google have all stated publicly that they have these capabilities to recognise depression and suicidal tendencies and many other potentially dangerous conditions. That being true, then the question for all of us is if such powers exist to measure the moods and emotional state of children; to predict those at risk, shouldn't we be more proactive with this knowledge?

Extraordinary times call for extraordinary measures and in this case, we need a new era of cooperation and shared responsibility that puts the needs of children first. We need to scale our response not incrementally but exponentially because change is the only constant and the future will deliver orders of magnitude more complexity.

As challenging as this wave of digital technological change has been, it is only the beginning. In Yuval Noah Harari's best seller "Homo Deus", he talks about a post-human world where technology enhances human capabilities beyond natural limits to create a new form of "Human". Today we already have wearable devices, altered virtual and augmented reality, biomedical implantables, robots and soon, neural lace.

All these developments come together to help us design a better, faster, stronger, healthier and more malleable version of ourselves. It all sounds like science fiction but is is closer than you think.

But humans aren't the only malleable component in the future. Technology too is morphing and changing in response to whatever stimuli or data it is presented.

Specifically, Artificial Intelligence has in the past few years begun to evolve in ways we cannot always anticipate. So much so that a few weeks ago, over 100 global experts wrote to the UN, urging it to protect us from the development of autonomous weapons. "We do not have long to act," their open letter reads. "Once this Pandora's box is opened, it will be hard to close." Some experts considered this intervention scaremongering but there is no denying the legitimacy of calling the world's attention to these potential risks.

So you take a step-change in the evolution of engineering and science and you couple it with our increasing symbiosis with technology and you get a very uncertain future. A future in which the essence of humanity, our moral compass and ethics, could be undermined. Note that I say "could be undermined"; the future is not fixed and that is why we have come together for this Congress.

The cultural critic Neil Postman said in the late 90's that "once a technology is admitted (in society), it plays out its hand; it does what it is designed to do, that "when we admit a new technology to the culture, we must do so with our eyes wide open." As we embrace this brave new world, the dignity, safety and health of our children cannot be an afterthought. It has to be our first thought.

Pope Francis in his recent TED talk stated that the only future worth building includes everyone. I agree wholeheartedly, and I would add that the only future worth building is one that protects everyone. There are times in life when how we act as a global community defines us. This is one of those times. Every young life damaged as a result of the digital revolution is a tragedy. And when these lives are taken together, it's our collective failure.

Though these problems are immense, I believe we can make progress. But doing so requires a new kind of thinking, a new kind of approach. Because what we are experiencing has not happened before in history. There are no true parallels. We must unite in our resolve. The progress we make together will determine the future of over 1 billion children who suffer abuse and violence in their everyday lives.

The Child Dignity in the Digital World Congress offers us an unprecedented opportunity to work together to gain new wisdom and to transform this newly found knowledge into tangible action. Let's embrace this opportunity wholeheartedly, because there's one question that we all have to answer, and that question is: "when our time is up, have we done enough? " Our answer must be yes! We owe it to ourselves, but especially, we owe it to our children.

Thank you.