

Speech: Margot James speech on Safer Internet Day

Thank you for inviting me to this year's Safer Internet Day event. I'm thrilled to be here at the BT Centre, and I would like to congratulate the UK Safer Internet Centre on coordinating a highly successful campaign which sees hundreds of organisations get involved to help promote the safe, responsible and positive use of digital technology for children and young people. This event is celebrated in over 100 countries and is one of the many Safer Internet Day activities happening all over the UK.

I'm very encouraged to see so many young people here today in this auditorium. It is crucial that we in government, as we make policy, learn from young people about their experiences online. Digital technology and social media enable young people to access educational resources, make social connections, build relationships and demonstrate creativity.

As the use of technology has grown, it has impacted every area of our lives. Planning a journey, checking your bank balance, organising campaigns, sharing photos, listening to music – all daily tasks that so many of us now complete online. And I know that many of the students here today are passionate about how technology benefits their everyday lives. I share that passion.

But we also know that a lot of young people are worried about what they see or experience online.

I'm looking forward to speaking with students from Dundonald Primary School, Kaizen Primary School, Viridis Schools Federation, Dr Challoner's High School, Mayfield School, Sarah Bonnell School and Brooke School. I'm particularly interested in hearing about their experiences online and seeing what they have prepared for this year's Safer Internet Day.

I'm aware that many of you are Digital Leaders in your schools and I'd like to thank you for the contribution you make to Safer Internet Day, and extend my congratulations for all the hard work you have carried out at your schools to help ensure that your peers get well informed about how to stay safe online. The exhibitions you have been preparing are focussing on consent online. The theme of this year's Safer Internet Day.

Consent has been much in the news of late. A New York Times investigation has just found that the information being collected about us through apps on our smartphones is far more extensive than most of us imagine or are aware we have consented to.

Last year the government made sweeping changes to the Data Protection regime and gave citizens new powers over their data. Consent, the theme of Internet Safety Day, must now be freely given, clear, unambiguous and fair. That's really important.

This legislation is not before time. Last week it was reported that Facebook have been paying users as young as 13 to download a Facebook Research app in contravention of Apple's strict privacy rules. This app allowed Facebook to look at users browsing history and other network data by requiring users to install a "root certificate" – this certification enabled Facebook to decrypt those users browsing history including messages they sent, what apps they used and for how long, to amass a very rich data set in order to sell ever more targeted advertising.

Apple responded by pulling the offending App and standing up for our privacy rights; they are among many voices in the States calling for similar privacy laws to the GDPR, that we have in Europe, to be enacted in the United States.

Online safety is a top priority for the Government and we want to make the UK the safest place in the world to be online. We will soon be publishing an Online Harms White Paper which will set out clear expectations for companies to help keep their users, particularly children, safe online.

Internet companies have always enjoyed legal protection from liability for user generated content. This laissez faire environment has led some companies to pursue growth and profitability with little regard for the security and interests of their users. There is far too much bullying, abuse, misinformation and manipulation online as well as serious and organised crime online.

For too long the response from many of the large platforms has fallen short. There have been no fewer than fifteen voluntary codes of practice/conduct agreed with platforms since 2008. Where we are now is an absolute indictment of a system that has relied far too little on the rule of law.

The White Paper, which DCMS are producing with the Home Office, will be followed by a consultation over the summer and will set out new legislative measures/laws to ensure that the platforms remove illegal content, and prioritise the protection of users, especially children, young people and vulnerable adults.

It will also include ambitious measures to support continued education and awareness for all users and to promote the development and adoption of new safety technologies. We want to get to a place where we can enjoy the huge benefits of new technology has to offer, without our children, and other vulnerable individuals, being put at risk of serious harm.

So eEngagement with industry, charities, peers and academia sits at the heart of our approach. And back in November 2017, with thanks to the UK Safer Internet Centre, we were able to talk and listen directly to many young people, some of whom I believe are back here again today in this room. The conversations we had are helping us to develop world leading laws as well as other measures to make sure that the UK is the safest place in the world to be online.

In developing the White Paper we have continued to engage with a wide range of organisations. And I am grateful to those organisations, including

Childnet and the Internet Watch Foundation that are part of the executive board of the UK Council for Internet Safety, which I co-chair with Ministers from the Department for Education and the Home Office. The Council does hugely important work, bringings together expertise from a range of organisations in the tech industry, civil society and public sector to collaborate and coordinate a UK-wide approach to improving internet safety. It's great to see that a similarly collaborative approach lies at the heart of Safer Internet Day.

Let me repeat my thanks to The UK Safer Internet Centre for inviting me along today. I look forward to hearing more of your ideas about what more needs to done to help keep everyone safe online, and today is a timely reminder of the work ahead.

The government is determined to act so that we can all enjoy the huge benefits of new technology, without our children, and other vulnerable individuals, being put at risk of serious harm.