



transformed human life quite like the internet, writes the Bishop of  
ations Committee

The 'digital world', that is an environment composed of digital services facilitated by the internet, plays an ever-increasing role in all aspects of life. It is the internet that makes the world go round today. It is the internet that provides heat and light. The trouble is that as the control of this world settles in the hands of a few very dominant players, there seems to be more heat than light.

In the past year many of us have woken up to this. Our data is the currency with which Facebook makes its billions. We thought we were the customer; we have discovered we're the product. Darker still, all sorts of inappropriate and illegal material are available to anyone who has a smart phone in their pocket, whatever their age: from on line bullying to do it yourself advice on how to self-harm, things that would not be tolerated offline flourish in the online environment. Parents in particular feel anxious and out of control. At the same time fake news, the misuse of personal data and abusive and hateful speech diminish and toxify our democracy and our public life.

For Christians and people of faith this is a particularly important issue. Jesus reserves his most stinging opprobrium for those who make life difficult for children. And it is children who are most at risk from an ineffectively regulated internet. Equally important, a faith perspective maintains that human flourishing requires the foundations of a strong and agreed ethical framework. It is this that is lacking online.

When other things that are wrong in our society and people demand that something must be done. With the internet, people are aware of the problem, but feel powerless. They don't think anything can be done.

But it can.

In its [report](#) on Internet regulation, the House of Lords Select Committee on Communication that I have served on for the past three years, sets out how we could do this through an approach known as principles based regulation.

Two things are instrumental -

1. An agreed set of principles that shape and frame all regulation of the internet; and
2. A new Digital Authority to oversee this regulation with access to the highest level of the Government so as to facilitate the urgent change that is needed.

After receiving evidence from industry practitioners, academics, politicians, interest groups and users, these are the ten principles the Select Committee have identified.

- Parity: to ensure the same level of protection online as offline
- Accountability: processes must be in place that mean individuals and organisations are held to account for their actions and policies

Transparency: powerful businesses and organisations operating in the digital world must be open to scrutiny

- Openness: to ensure that the internet remains open to innovation and competition
- Privacy: to protect the privacy of individuals
- Ethical design: to ensure that services act in the interests of users and society
- Recognition of childhood: to protect the most vulnerable users of the internet
- Respect for human rights and equality: to safeguard the freedoms of expression and information online
- Education and awareness-raising: to enable people to navigate the digital world safely
- Democratic accountability, proportionality and evidence-based approach.

The idea is that the whole way we interact with the digital world is designed differently so that the services that constitute the digital world can be held accountable to this agreed and enforceable set of principles. So this isn't just about mitigating against the worst of the internet's excesses by making our children more resilient to its harms, as some seem to suggest. It is a whole new approach. And because this is such an important issue for our children's well-being, for the safeguarding of our democracy and for the future development of every aspect of our civilisation and learning, the Government must see this as something that they oversee at the highest level possible. It is not an exaggeration to say that the future of our culture depends on it. The Government has said that through its Internet Safety Strategy, it proposes to make the UK "the safest place in the world to be online". This presents a way of achieving this aim.

It is no longer acceptable for the large dominant gatekeepers of the Internet to say that they are platforms and can only exercise limited responsibility for those who stand upon them. The e-Commerce Directive exempts online platforms from liability unless they have specific knowledge of illegal content. It was developed before platforms began to curate content for users. It would be much better to think of these platforms as public spaces, and therefore require the same statutory duty of care as would be expected in any other offline public space. Ofcom should have responsibility for enforcing this and the duty of care should ensure that providers take account of safety in the design of their services. This should include providing appropriate moderation processes to handle complaints about harmful content.

A new body, the Digital Authority, would then be established to instruct and coordinate regulators and go on to make further recommendations about how we can continue to regulate the digital world.

The digital world changes and develops at great speed. This is sometimes presented as one of the reasons we can't do anything to control it. On the contrary, it is because it changes so rapidly that we need this different approach and we need it to be taken seriously at the very highest level

of Government. This is the world our children inherit. We owe it to them to not just make it safe, but to establish the principles that govern its healthy development for the good of all.

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