20th November 2014 - UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: Digital Impact

**Baroness Grey-Thompson (CB):** My Lords, I thank my noble friend Lady Kidron for tabling this debate today. The House has just heard from the noble Baroness, Lady Benjamin, who was passionate in her wish to protect children. This is a very important debate. It is not just about young people. It is something that affects us all. I take today as an opportunity to listen to experts. I welcome the noble Baroness, Lady Shields, to your Lordships’ Chamber. I very much look forward to her contribution.

I quote from iRights:

“Enabling children and young people to deal with the challenges and engage knowledgeably with the digital world is the best way to ensure the full potential of the internet”.

That is vital. I am a fan of the internet. I was trying to think about how much of my life is spent online. I thought it was significant—mostly because my daughter keeps telling me to put my phone down—but it is much bigger than I thought. It is booking trains, taxis, reading the House of Lords Library briefing pack on this debate, checking Marshalled Lists and Order Papers, let alone the e-mails and social media platforms I use, and keeping in touch with my family.

I love the fact that I can be sitting at my desk in London and watch my daughter do her maths homework 300 miles away until she asks me to help her. In the pre-internet days, if I wanted to book a hotel, I had to take the word of the manager or a travel agent that the hotel was accessible. Now, they can send me a picture and I can choose whether to stay there. The camera on my phone is better than any camera that I have ever owned and, thanks to remote cameras, I can put a little camera on my daughter’s crash helmet as she is canoeing down the river and watch it on my tablet while I am sitting in the warmth of the car.

For me, social media are a way to engage, to ask questions, to challenge; that is not always welcome. One night, when I was in your Lordships’ Chamber for some late-night votes, a few people commented on how I had voted, but when I posted that I had missed my evening meal and asked whether anyone knew of a takeaway that was open at one o’clock in the morning, I was inundated with offers to bring pizza to Peers’ Entrance. Someone even posted that they lived in the same block as me and would make me a sandwich and leave it outside my door. It is amazing how you can dip in and out. You can engage with the pictures I tweet of the food that I eat on trains or what I say in debates. I can use it as a straw poll. In various debates that I have been involved in, people have sent me messages and given me extremely helpful information.

When I thought about this debate, I also thought about safety. Not all of my online interactions have been positive. I was recently interviewed on “Newsnight” about the issue of equal pay for women in sport. I was being pragmatic, not radical; I was not asking for a sudden change, but I cannot repeat in your Lordships’ Chamber some of the unparliamentary language that was used towards me. I think of myself as being fairly resilient, but when people are swearing and—I can say this—I was called a moron several times, it can be really hard to deal with. The offside rule seems to be the only gateway to any knowledge about football; if you know that, you must be okay.

It is not the same as having a conversation, where you can see someone’s body language and where the conversation might become more intense because you can see the person who is displeased. Often, the person at the other end has had time to ponder, stew, react and become very angry. When I explained to someone who was extremely rude to me that it is the same as printing it on a piece of paper, running towards me and thrusting it in my face, they stepped down and apologised, because they had not realised how aggressive they were being. What if I were 12 or 13 years old? Some people think that they are being funny. It is about context. Some people genuinely do not realise that they are being rude. There are people at the extreme end who are simply being horrible, but it is about the context and how people say things.

One disadvantage with social media and e-mail is the immediacy with which people expect a response. I recently received an e-mail at nine o’clock in the morning and then a vitriolic complaint three hours later because I had not replied, but do we punish somebody every time they say something out of context? I have said clumsy things in real life and on the internet that I later regret. There must be a way to manage this. We must come back to this in more detail in your Lordships’ Chamber.

The UN convention was written before the digital era; to be fair, if it had been written two years ago it would probably be out of date now. I look back to when I was working with the London Organising Committee for the 2012 Olympic Games. We were discussing the athletes’ village in 2007, or perhaps 2008. Several people questioned whether we needed wi-fi in the village—whether that was a justifiable expense. If we had not had it, we would have looked rather foolish. I am by no means an expert in the digital world, but we are not talking about laptops any more; we are talking about mobile technology. We do not know where it is going to go in the next year, let alone in the next five years.

I am worried about the number of people who do not have access to the internet. About 2 million disabled people do not have access. For some, it will open doors; others will be left behind. I hope that my noble friend Lady Lane-Fox will explore that in more detail, because I worry as much about those people who are using it as those unable to use it.

I have a 12 year-old. She has a phone. Some children whom she knows are on platforms that they are not meant to be on it because of their age. We talk about internet usage and what we think is appropriate as a family. She is very willing to show me messages that she has been sent. Frankly, I have been shocked by some of the things that I have seen nine, 10 and 11 year-olds write. She has had the confidence to remove herself from that conversation, but that has not been easy for her because she felt that she had a responsibility to be part of a group. That is why section 4 of iRights is so important. Young people need to feel confident to step away from these things. It is a lesson that I should learn. If you read a social media comment at two o’clock in the morning, the best thing to do is to turn your phone off and walk away from it.

Many people do not realise how far it can go. They talk about having friends. My daughter is fed up with me saying, “They are not real friends. They are different friends”. One comment can go around the world immediately. We have only to look at the pictures of Kim Kardashian that went to hundreds of millions of people in a very short time.

Young people use the internet in a very positive way. I think that a lot of young people are more informed about the world now than I was when I was that age. My knowledge of the world depended on which newspaper my parents bought and watching the six and 10 o’clock news. Today, young girls can find information about a whole variety of things. I do a lot of work with women in sport about the desire of young girls to be size zero. With one click, you can find pages of pictures of famous young women who are size zero. Young women of my daughter’s age aspire to be like them. It is very hard for them to choose what is and what is not the right thing to watch. That is why we need education. We need young people to feel able to make choices.

I think iRights is doing an amazing job because it has made me question things that I do, and I think that I am relatively savvy about the internet. Do I read all the terms and conditions of the forms I sign? No, I do not. Should I? Yes. Have I started? Yes, I have. I am very careful about the content that I share. I do not tweet pictures of my family. I turn off the location. I like it that when I open certain internet sites, they suggest books for me to read. That is fantastic, but I am also conscious that I am being directed down a certain path. Sometimes, I am very radical: I click to the second page of the search engine results. Because it is around me, I am aware of those things.

We must consider digital literacy and how we educate our young people. I would love digital literacy, physical literacy, literacy and numeracy to be joined together in our education system in balance.

My noble friend Lady Kidron cited Sonia Livingstone. I read a very interesting article in the Library briefing pack where she said that Governments promote ICT but we do not think about children’s needs. We must think of our children’s needs and all our needs. I think about how my husband uses the internet, how I use the internet and how my daughter uses it. They are all different, but we need to know and understand each other. We also need to do a lot of work about how disabled people can access information, especially as most benefit applications are now online. Without access, we will be leaving lots of people behind.

UNICEF issued a very interesting briefing document—I declare an interest as a sporting ambassador for UNICEF. It made seven recommendations. I shall just highlight the first two. The first is about ensuring equal access to digital media by providing technology and infrastructure. That is really important. In particular, we need to target different groups, such as girls, disabled children and vulnerable groups. The second is about actively engaging children in ongoing dialogue. We need to talk to young people about this so that they are able to make free choices.

I hope that there will be a favourable response from the Minister on this issue. It is something that we will have to come back to because it will affect us all. Finally, I thank my noble friend for her tireless work in this area.