TEXT JAFFE HRC 10032023

Many decades ago, when I was an adolescent, my old great aunt Caroline shared with me that she had reached her limit. She said that she had seen the first airplanes, the first cars, the radio, the telephone, washing machines, even the long forgotten Walkman, but that she had given up with the photocopy machine. Now back then, considering myself somewhat of a geek, I smiled or maybe I smirked… But today I am fast approaching a similar ceiling with virtual reality, big data, neuromarketing, algorithms to cite just a few. To put it bluntly, I venture to assert that all my fellow Committee on the Rights of the Child colleagues were in the same jam as we plodded ahead to produce General Comment 25 on children’s rights in the digital environment. Fortunately, the Committee could count on exceptional external experts to guide us, the 5Rights Foundation represented by Beeban Kidron being one of the finest.

This panel is supposed to discuss How legal and policy frameworks can be strengthened to uphold children’s rights in the digital environment. I could end here by saying to States and all stakeholders, it’s simple, just implement the recommendations that are contained in General Comment 25. For example, and this will be my only quote: “States parties should ensure that, in all actions regarding the provision, regulation, design, management and use of the digital environment, the best interests of every child is a primary consideration”. End of quote. Everything should flow from this. But allow me to go a couple steps further. Earlier today the High Commissioner mentioned the development of a Global Digital Compact at the 2024 Summit for the Future. Let me submit to you that we cannot envision the future without another category of experts and that moving forward the most powerful and effective ingredient is the full and authentic participation of children.

You know, the CRC’s General Comment 25 would be a wobbly deficient document if children had not been consulted by the hundreds on all continents. The participation of children this morning in today’s proceedings, on this very panel, demonstrates that children express valuable opinions and should be listened to. Children are uniquely positioned to understand how the digital world empowers them and puts them at risk. With children’s views and opinions we also learn how digital programs and hardware enhance positively the evolving capacities of children. If we listen to children’s views and opinions, we will all feel more effective in the efforts we must put into protecting children and we will know how to make the digital world more inclusive.

As all societies are absorbed more and more into the digital age, children are leading the change. It would be a good thing if all the digital Neanderthals in the room myself included consulted more with children so that we do not become disconnected from their increasingly digital reality. We must also not shirk our responsibilities. States, all stakeholders, including the business sector must cooperate to ensure that in the digital world the full range of children’s civil, political, cultural, economic and social rights are promoted, respected, protected and fulfilled. This is the reason why the input from the other panelists is so important. How do we introduce an efficient national and transnational regulatory framework? How do we make sure that businesses and digital creators conduct child rights impact assessments on all the services that they market and that monetary profit does not trump all other considerations? How do we infuse not only a human rights but a child rights culture in company boardrooms and at policy setting tables?

I could end here, but it would betray many many children that the CRC meets with on a regular basis and who let us know about the dark side, how uncomfortable and unsafe their online experience can be. They often cite cyberbullying and offensive sexual or violent imagery, but I could go through a whole catalogue if we had more time. My final message is admittedly a very provocative question: why bother to strengthen the online legal and policy frameworks if our offline legal and police frameworks are unable to stem the tide of violence, abuse, and exploitation of children in their everyday palpable environments?