Ladies and gentlemen,

I am truly privileged to have the opportunity both to be surrounded by such esteemed company as well as to be able to address what constitutes -in my personal opinion- one of the greatest struggles of our time. My background, at least on paper, is chiefly in technology, consequently I have spent years of my life in immediate proximity to groundbreaking technological achievements. Since the dawn of time, us humans, we have harboured this fear of unleashing something that we cannot control, whether it is through curiosity, ambition or a desire for power. For ancient Greeks, it was Pandora’s Box, german folklore tells the tale of the Sorcerer’s Apprentice. Mary Shelley gave us “Frankenstein”, a cautionary tale about not only something that we cannot control, but in fact, something that we ourselves created.

For those who are a little rusty on their classic literature, “Frankenstein” is a story about a young scientist who is so horrified by the monstrous appearance of the creature he brings to life, that he abandons him with catastrophic consequences. It is no wonder that we are plagued by the same fears and anxieties about technology today.

We have experienced time and again just how powerful, creative and enabling technology can be in our lives and in our actions, especially for children and youth. Technological developments present children with a treasure trove of information, it enables them to become independent learners, to boost their creativity, to hone their problem-solving skills and to connect with the outside world in an unprecedented manner. Our devices and connectivity matter to us right up there with food and shelter. The unconnected self as we once knew it no longer exists. Instead, an abstract, digital universe has become a part of our identity.

Nevertheless, we have had to confess a bitter truth: technology is rarely neutral and a simple app can be equally dangerous as a loaded gun. The immediacy of technological interactions has normalised instant gratification, the constant stimulation eventually structurally rewires the brain and creates a psychological dependence which is similar to cocaine addiction. Childhood becomes public record as children’s privacy is continuously and consistently compromised through the collection of their data points by ad companies, home technologies, educational platforms, online portals at their physician’s office, online games, social media and the list goes on and on and on. The loss of human connection through face-to-face communication is creating a future where emotional intimacy becomes a rarity and emotional intelligence stunted. Children’s perceived reality is twisted into carefully curated content, culminating in their developing severe self-esteem issues, social anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation.

We must be honest about the scale of the challenge and face the tough questions about the gaps that we know exist. Let us disrupt the popular narrative - it is not a matter of Big Tech being too “big” to regulate. It is not that we cannot do it. It is not a lack of knowledge. Our hesitation is voluntary and intentional. It is our job to know, it is our job to innovate and to regulate. We cannot abdicate our role in shaping the future. It is imperative to make the digital world age appropriate.

To achieve this purpose, governmental actors and regulators must join forces with technical organisations to construct frameworks with concrete guidelines for companies and industry alike. IEEE made good on this promise and proved that the online world *can* be redesigned on principles. When approached by the UK legislators, IEEE delivered its neutral technical expertise to offer technically feasible and viable solutions, disproving critics who branded the Code as “wishful thinking”. In 2021, the Age Appropriate Design Code came into effect in the UK, a revolutionary piece of legislation poised to transform how digital technologies engage and interact with children. The provisions enshrined within the Children’s Code, as it has come to be known, propagate that the onus is on tech companies to protect children from rights’ violations which transpire in the digital space.

What we are proposing is a proactive stance which promotes the design of services which are age-appropriate by default. In other words, our specification lays out a set of impenetrable processes to tackle the risks within system design and software engineering and instead maximise the benefits of digital services for users under the age of 18. It can be applied within a life cycle model or within a set of methods of system or software engineering, while organisations which suspect that their systems pose risks to children are able to utilise it for reiteration of analysis and redress. Even more recently, IEEE inaugurated the GET Program, which provides free access to global socio-technical standards in AI Ethics and Governance that provide guidance and considerations towards trustworthy AI, including the standard for Age Appropriate Design based on the 5 Rights Principles on Children.

There are quicksilver moments of my childhood I cannot remember entirely. Irresistible and emblematic, I can recall them only in fragments and shivers of the heart. Much like those moments, childhood should encompass joy, laughter and most of all, trust. Suspicion and fear do not belong on that plane. Hostility, fake news, violence, the popularity matrix, the commercialization and commoditization of innocence do not belong in those tender years. Thus, the question to confront is this:

Are we serious about youth and their digital rights and will we make a steadfast commitment to follow through, not just today during this session, but continuously and decisively? Or will we, like Frankenstein, abandon our creation to run amok, playing hide-and-seek in order to escape the consequences of our own actions, hoping that we can outrun our conscience for the destruction we have unleashed?

These questions are no longer intellectual. We have a chance now to put children at the front stage. Children and adolescents who are brilliant, outspoken and ambitious. Who demand that we listen to what they have to say, their fears, their concerns, their judgement. And we must make a demand for ourselves to create a better future for them, wherein technology is a tool that they use, not a tool that uses them.