

Children's rights in the digital environment – launching UNCRC General Comment 25

by Sonia Livingstone

After its formal adoption by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child on 4th February, General Comment 25 was launched on 24th March 2021. This is a game changer for children's rights in today's digital world.

For the child rights advocates hitherto uncertain exactly *how* rights offline can equally be realised online, the General Comment provides the clarity and explanation needed. For digital policymakers uncertain *where* children fit into ongoing debates over internet governance, AI ethics, data protection or freedom of expression, the General Comment provides the clarity and explanation needed. For the wider public keen to see children thrive in a digital world, no longer treated as the canaries in the coal mine, the General Comment provides the authority, and the road map, to bring about change. And for 1000+ children consulted around the world, and the one in three internet users under 18 for whom they spoke, General Comment 25 is the document that considered their views on a matter that affects them greatly – the digital world.



Andy Kelly from Unsplash

The launch gathered a large international audience to hear the experts – including children and young people – speak about the General Comment and how it mandates action from multiple stakeholders, especially the 196 States who have ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, to make the improvements now urgently needed. As Beeban Kidron, 5Rights chair, put it, the General Comment sets out

“a vision of an inclusive, secure and fair digital environment, accessible to – and designed for – all children.”

Stars of the show, the young people at the launch – both those participating live and those on video speaking the children's version of the General Comment text – provided an eloquent reminder of just why this document is needed.

Luis Pedernera, Chair of the UN [Committee on the Rights of the Child](#), called on participants to “make it yours” and spread it to all corners of the world, to improve children’s participation, protection, privacy and more in a digital world. Indeed, this is already happening, for on publication the General Comment was promptly [recognised by](#) the OECD, the United Nations Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development Goals, ECPAT (the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children), the International Telecommunication Union, UNESCO, the WeProtect Global Alliance, World Childhood Foundation USA, the World Health Organization and the [European Commission](#).

But it’s easier to say that rights offline also apply online, than it is to achieve this, and there’s [many barriers](#) to be faced. Articulating these at the launch, Shoshana Zuboff, author of *Surveillance Capitalism*, urged that:

“Embedding children’s rights into all things digital marks the end of the cyberspace mythos and the beginning of the future that we must fight for. It is intolerable that nearly every imaginary of this future, especially those created by our young people, leans toward the dystopian.”

Who should take action? Baroness Helena Kennedy QC, Co-Chair, International Bar Association Human Rights Institute was clear that:

“We have to call for the sector to be subject to regulation and legal standards. We must send robust message to lawmakers and lawyers that we must uphold children’s [best interests](#).”

With children’s lives now [digital by default](#) because of the pandemic, there is no time to lose.



Further information

You can find lots more information on the [5Rights Foundation website](#), including explanatory notes, the children’s version of the General Comment, resources for schools and more. In particular:

- [Read](#): General Comment No. 25 on children’s rights in relation to the digital environment
- [Watch](#) the launch (one hour webinar)
- [Watch](#): In our own words: Young people’s version of General Comment No. 25, read out by young people (7 mins)
- [Read](#): Our rights in a digital world: the results of the children’s consultation
- [Watch](#): Realising children’s rights in a digital world: Sonia Livingstone at the University of Surrey (one hour webinar)
- [Read](#): Children’s rights and the Digital Futures Commission

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Professor Sonia Livingstone OBE is a member of the UNCRC General Comment's Steering Group, and leads the Digital Futures Commission. Sonia is Professor of Social Psychology in the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science. She has published twenty books on media audiences, media literacy, and media regulation, with a particular focus on the opportunities and risks of digital media for children and young people.



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