Children’s rights & Internet

A day in the life of CARLA LICCIARDELLO

ITU is the United Nations specialized agency for information and communication technologies. ITU is committed to connecting all the world’s people – wherever they live and whatever their means. They protect and support everyone’s fundamental right to communicate.

I work for ITU, an agency of the United Nations, to engage partners from all sectors of the global community in a dialogue to tackle child online safety and foster digital literacy among future generations.

Meet Carla Licciardello, child online protection focal point, International Telecommunication Union (ITU)

ITU is the United Nations agency for information and communication technologies – ICTs. We allocate global radio spectrum and satellite orbits, develop the technical standards that ensure networks and technologies interconnect seamlessly, and strive to improve access to ICTs to underserved communities worldwide. ITU is committed to connect all people around the world – wherever they live and whatever their means.

ITU’s vision

The power to unleash the true potential of ICT lies in the hands of children and young people. ICTs are an excellent tool for children’s development, providing them the opportunity to learn, create, and engage in innovative problem solving – and the “democratisation” of ICTs means that this is becoming more prevalent.

Despite the profound benefits that ICTs can offer, children and young people are facing new and significant risks. Children can be exposed to inappropriate content or contact, such as potential sexual predators. They can suffer reputation damage through the publishing of sensitive personal information, either online or through “sexting”, having failed to grasp the long-term implications of their digital footprints. Children may engage in risky or inappropriate behaviour that creates negative repercussions for themselves and possibly others.

ITU has made this a priority issue, and launched the Child Online Protection (COP) initiative in 2008. The COP initiative engages partners from all sectors of the global community in an international dialogue to tackle child online safety, and to create an empowering online experience for children. COP brings together partners from all stakeholder groups to protect children online through forums such as the Working Group on Child Online Protection as well as through our global reach as a United Nations agency. Together we have come a long way: child online safety is now high on the political agenda for many countries, and has become a top priority for a wide variety of stakeholders, including businesses and financial institutions. Our common goal of ensuring trust in cyberspace cannot be achieved by stakeholders working in isolation. In an increasingly networked world, which knows no borders, it is vitally important that various efforts are well aligned towards the common goal of a safe and trustworthy cyberspace.

Future-gazing

In 10 years, I believe the internet – which is still in its infancy – will blossom further. Trends in the digital environment point to more wireless connectivity at exponentially higher speeds and the transfer of vast amounts of data on the go. This will mean picking up on our achievements today to ensure that our networks are fail safe and future generations will be able to surf cyberspace in a secure environment.

As we continue to work towards enabling the use of ICTs in both developing and least developed countries – where the remaining billion internet users will primarily come from – we must leverage widespread access to ICTs to enable
social development and environmental protection, generate wealth, and deliver health care and education to children around the world.

We must also recognize that we can never achieve the full potential offered by ICTs, if children, wherever they live, do not have trust in their usage. We can only ensure this trust by working together with stakeholders from all nations, as new challenges arise and new tools and coordination mechanisms will need to be developed and shared.

**The vital role of collaboration**

In order to reduce the risks of the digital revolution while enabling more children and young people to reap its benefits, governments, civil society, local communities, international organisations and the private sector must come together with a common purpose. The technology industry has a critical role to play in establishing foundations for a safer and more secure use of internet-based services and other technologies. For example, public and private partnerships are key to building a coordinated national, regional and international response to the problem of online child sexual abuse, while ensuring information sharing among different stakeholders. Industry, law enforcement agencies, governments and civil society must work closely with each other to ensure that adequate legal frameworks in accordance with international standards are in place. Such frameworks should criminalise all forms of child sexual abuse and exploitation; protect children who are victims of such abuse or exploitation; and ensure that reporting, investigative and content removal processes work as efficiently as possible.

**The leading change makers**

The UN plays an important role as a global convener and facilitator for stakeholders to come together to discuss, identify and implement solutions towards building a universally available, open, secure and trustworthy internet.

**There’s more to be done**

I believe we need to stimulate the production of creative and educational online content for children as well as promoting positive online experiences for young children. Technical measures can be an important part of ensuring children are protected from potential risks, but these are only one element of the equation. Parental control tools, awareness raising and education are also key components that will help empower and inform children of various age groups, as well as parents, caregivers and educators.

Stakeholders can proactively support children’s rights by working to close the digital divide. Children’s participation requires digital literacy – the ability to understand and participate in the digital world. Without this ability, citizens will not be able to participate in many of the social functions that have become digitised. Therefore, it’s crucial to develop programmes that support multimedia initiatives to provide children – particularly those in rural and underserved areas – with the digital skills they need to be confident, connected and actively engaged citizens, and enable them to fully participate in the digital world safely.

We must also develop online platforms that promote children’s right to express themselves; facilitate participation in public life; and encourage collaboration, entrepreneurship and civic participation. Finally, it’s important to design programmes in collaboration with local civil society and government to expand universal and equitable access to information and communication technologies, platforms and devices – and the underlying infrastructure to support them.