

The world then and now, and how the way we protect our children needs to change

 By [Jessica Tennant](#)

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This National Child Protection Week (CPW), Google South Africa and Media Monitoring Africa hosted a roundtable putting a spotlight on the importance of online safety for children.



CPW is an initiative led by the Department of Social Development to highlight the rights of children in accordance with the Children's Act of 2005 as well as the role and responsibility of every citizen in protecting children in order to create a safe and secure environment for them to thrive.

That said, the discussion included Web Ranger learners and partners, school principals, government officials and social media experts and was around how to incorporate social media safety guidelines into existing school codes of conduct and how the policies and procedures to address these need to change.

There has been a rise of social media related ills such as cyberbullying, sexting, etc. that affect school learners, and as a result, there is a need to equip schools and parents to address with these issues if and when they arise. Keynote speaker William Bird, director of Media Monitoring Africa, was of the opinion that this is the responsibility of all stakeholders and that it's a matter of drawing on each of their strengths and being guided by our constitution.

“ It's only if we deliberately choose a path that works with multiple stakeholders that we'll all be able to build our democracy and the best our digital world has to offer combined with the unrivalled potential of our young people. ”

Bird shared some, what he called, 'old fart' comparisons about the world now and what it was like when he grew up, to provide context to how things have changed and why our approach to protecting our children needs to change.



William Bird

“Things were simpler then and therein lies one of the greatest current ironies,” said Bird. “Today we have amazing technologies to make our lives simpler or at least to give us the illusion of simplicity or convenience and to make some of our increasingly complex lives simpler,” he explained. “If you look at how easy it is to buy anything online, with one click you can buy just about anything and it will be delivered to your door in just a few hours. This is a radically different world.”

Back in the day, he had to go to the library to look up information for school projects. These days, this information is literally at your fingertips – all you need is a mobile device and a search bar. “The skills we need now are not so much about locating the information, but how to sift the quality and the relevant from the rubbish.”

The world was a lot bigger and a lot smaller. “TV carried the latest news in the evenings. It was always delayed and even then, it was a fraction of what was going on, and not only that, it was also pretty much half an hour to an hour long and it was at the same time every day. There was ‘the news’ and we went home to watch it at 6 or 7 o’clock in the evening.”

Now the news is instant. Not only is it 24/7, but it also’s unending, and the world has shrunk dramatically, so we can see in real-time what people are seeing, playing, thinking or doing all the time, anywhere. “The suffering, the abuse, the joy, the beauty, the craziness, the insanity, all the time at the same time. It’s completely mad.”

It was easy to control things back then, he said. “The government simply banned things... they banned all sorts of books, they banned films and anything that had a different world view, and then they created their own media to disseminate their own views at the time.”

As a teen interested in sex this was less than ideal. “Like any normal teen keen to explore their sexuality, you had to know someone. You had to know the brother of the friend of the friend of the cousin in the next class whose father had stolen his father’s magazine or video, and if you were lucky you might have got access to something called a *Scope* magazine.” At the time, this was about the most risqué thing you could get in South Africa and you needed skill and perseverance to get your hands on one. These days, all you need is a mobile device and access to the internet and you can find anything.



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These shifts highlight how we’ve moved from information scarcity to an abundance of information, how we’ve moved from an era of easy adult regulation to needing to give young people the skills to self-regulate. “As much as I’m saying we need to equip our young people with skills to self-regulate, in no way does this aggregate our responsibility as adults to build a world that isn’t just safe for our children but one that supports them to thrive and reach their potential.

Moreover, they highlight how we, as adults, have new, better looking, more interesting, more in-tune, exciting distractions and interactions, as he called them, competing with us.

“ *Being a parent these days is just about bloody impossible because you’re competing against the world and often the world has spent billions of dollars literally creating stuff that is infinitely cooler than you are.* ”

"*Fortnight*. How ridiculously cool is that and they think that I’m going to compete with that as a parent coming home from work, tired and grumpy... These things don’t just compete with us as parents, they compete with us for our children’s time and their attention and of course for their views and input."

The controllers

Faced with these challenges it seems that there tend to be those that we call the controllers, he said. “Those who will say, well, clearly all of this stuff is evil and we must stop it.

“They’ll try old methods and wonder why they don’t work. They’ll take away the phone and wonder why the kid is still up at 4am in the morning watching TikTok videos and all the rest and it’s because they forgot to take away the iPad.” So, their approach is to ban cellphones and they’ll say, ‘Government, you need to control the internet, stop all of these evil things, stop these pornographers, take it away, take it away, take it away!’ They’ll ask that all of this new stuff is brought back into our small and more controllable world.

“Of course, you can do these things, but the reality is that with this approach, you’re really setting yourself up to fail for the simple reason that young people always find ways around these things.

“The controllers, I think, are really people who need a lot of hugs and to be told it’s ok, the new world will be fine.”

The free marketeers

On the other extreme are those Bird called the free marketeers. “Those who say what amazing opportunities this technology presents to us.” To make money by harvesting children’s data to target them more accurately and effectively sell more to them. “They see kids merely as products, as things and ways of making themselves even more wealthy than we could possibly begin to imagine.

“The problem with this approach is that throwing out all the rules gives the impression that technology should just be free to

roam and do whatever it pleases. Such an approach, while potentially enticing, has no answer for how to deal with cyberbullying and the spreading of sexual abuse material.” It negates the fact that technology is made by people and hides the implicit biases that are built into it and it is fundamentally at odds with building a democratic country.



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“While both approaches are understandable, neither I believe advances our democracy and crucially neither help us to effectively protect our children.”

A rights-based approach

Bird believes we need a third approach, a rights-based or Web Ranger approach to technology and child protection that has our constitutional values at its base.

An approach that acknowledges that our young peoples’ realities are fundamentally different from ours when we were young. “They have new, far greater pressures, a million more demands, a reality that constantly reminds them of the world’s ills and potentials.” Children are becoming increasingly more anxious, but this isn’t technology’s fault. “It’s the fact that their world is fundamentally different from ours.”

This is why we need to equip our children with the skills to navigate this vastly different world. “It isn’t magically going to promote equality and child protection and democracy unless we build it to do so... We need to ensure we give our young people and the public at large skills to critically engage with the digital world. They need the tools to discern real from rubbish. They need the ability and the power not just to spot this information, but to act on it. If we equip our young people to spot real from rubbish and act on disinformation, not only are we giving them critical life skills, we’re giving them the most direct form of protecting and building our democracy by ensuring people can act in an informed manner.

But we need to set clear boundaries. “This isn’t saying, go wild and do whatever. If young people want to think about and engage with ideas about sex and sexuality, we need to make sure that there’s positive sexual content out there.

“So, the rights-based approach is one that says, as adults, we have a role to play in our schools and homes, that says while things change, our constitutional responsibilities offer a constant guiding light to equality, dignity and a world where our children are safe.”

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