Coming of Age Inside your Digital Borders

DEMOCRACY TECHNOLOGY

Hana Martínková

From a childhood eased into the internet age to a generation thrown into it.

Dear Europe,

I consider myself lucky to have been born in the summer of 1992. I grew up during two seismic shifts in everyday life. One was political, the other was digital. My hope is that, together, we can shape the next one. Europe has a long tradition of protecting its citizens, including the youngest, and it should bring that tradition to the digital world, where big tech companies have too often failed to take that responsibility seriously.

I had been a citizen of a newly free Czechoslovakia for barely five months when two new countries emerged on the world map: the Czech Republic and Slovakia. I only vaguely remember the 1990s, when people were getting used to both the freedoms and the dislocations of a new political order, all under the shared banner of a 'return to Europe'.

As if the Communist Party had ripped us out of our rightful place in your heart and we collectively needed to find our way back, even though the Europe we had supposedly left was very different from the one we were returning to. As a small child, my contribution was rather modest, I admit, but I am glad the adults put in the work. Later, membership of the European Union and NATO allowed me to grow up in safety, freedom and relative prosperity.

Some years later, I gradually became part of another project connecting people: the internet. I got my first email account on a clunky desktop in the final years of primary school, set up a Facebook account in December 2007 and texted on ICQ with the boyfriend I met at secondary-school dance classes. Only at university did I start a blog and get an Instagram account, as if I needed to graduate before I could handle those new tools. I did not always handle them well, but I certainly did better than I would have at 10 or 13.

> Like the 1990s, life before digital technology is a distant memory for me. But, thanks to an accident of timing, I could ease into the new reality. I did not have to confront the deluge of today's internet all at once, I grew up alongside it. Today's children do not have that luxury.

I had the chance to become bored. Today, algorithms anticipate our every interest. I could read a whole book without the Siren's call of my devices, on the recommendation of my local librarian rather than an algorithm. Friendships were cemented without shares and likes. None of this felt remarkable at the time. In hindsight, it looks like the freedom of one's own time and attention not being constantly solicited and monetised.

The digital world has evolved from decentralised networks of academics and geeks into a handful of vast platforms that shape the way we connect, communicate, learn, work and shop. Trying to return to the old internet would be futile. As with the version of you, Europe, to which the Czech Republic was returning, you cannot step into the same river twice. But we can decide what kind of internet children enter, especially those who cannot remember a time 'before'.

You have been a pioneer in trying to shape digital markets around human rights and fair competition, with the idea that Europeans should be citizens first, and consumers second. Your lawmakers have moved from privacy to platform responsibility and competition. Now children are finally at the centre of that project.

Attempts to create safer virtual playgrounds in the form of children's accounts have so far done little to alter the basic product: adults and children alike face online environments designed to maximise engagement. What the report *Child safety online*, prepared for the European Commission, calls social media may 'contain age-inappropriate and/or risky features (for example, addictive and harmful features, among which infinite scroll, autoplay, recommendation algorithms and persistent notifications) and/or content'. That is a long way from early email inboxes and social media where the main activity consisted of writing notes on each other's walls.

Child safety online brought together experts in health, psychology, computer science and child rights, alongside young people, around a clear principle: online environments should be designed to match children's developmental needs without sacrificing their rights to information, education and leisure. I want to believe you are the place that can get that balance right.

The report will likely inform the next phase of your action. Driven by public concern, governments inside and outside you have begun preparing or implementing laws that limit children's access to social media. France has moved to restrict access below a certain age, following Australia's example. Indonesia has implemented an Australia-style ban, while the UK, Greece, Canada, Denmark and Austria are considering their own restrictions.

Those bans are being introduced for all the right reasons. Big tech companies have repeatedly prioritised engagement and growth over child safety. Internal documents and court cases in the US have shown that companies made deliberate choices that exposed children to harm while increasing engagement, data collection and advertising revenue.

But bans are an incomplete answer if they leave the design of the platforms themselves untouched. The more ambitious task is to make digital spaces fit for young people, rather than simply trying to keep young people out of them. There is no going back to an analog age, but together we can make the digital one safer and use its full potential. Just as I had time to ease into an online life, future generations should have room to grow into one without being devoured by it.

The pressure to flatten and commodify is relentless, so your answer should be to protect the human being on the other side of the screen, especially the child. But we also know that bans are notoriously difficult to enforce, even if they can help set norms and change culture over time. You can do better than that. You can insist that digital spaces enrich people's lives rather than merely extract their attention. You can demand that access to useful tools should not be contingent on tolerating manipulation. Defining boundaries and creating a space where everyone can flourish has been the European way for decades and it should remain so going forward, in shaping the nature and boundaries of the digital world.

After the Velvet Revolution, the Czech Republic wanted to return to you because you promised safety, freedom and belonging. Almost four decades later, that promise cannot stop at the edge of physical space. I was lucky to grow up before the internet became impossible to avoid. Today's children deserve the freedom to develop away from coercive algorithms and platform designs, and the chance to become citizens before they become users or consumers. I grew up with luck. You can make sure those who come after me need less of it.

This article is one issue of our monthly newsletter *Love Letter to Europe.* Subscribe here.