

Leaders in Paris call for protecting children online

November 11 2021, by Sylvie Corbet



France's President Emmanuel Macron, right, talks with U.S Vice President Kamala Harris, during the Paris Peace Forum, in Paris, Thursday, Nov. 11, 2021. Some world leaders and internet giants are expected to issue a global call to better protect children online during a Paris summit of about 30 heads of state and government, including U.S. Vice-President Kamala Harris. Credit: AP Photo/Christophe Ena

Internet giants, including social media apps Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and Snapchat, joined several world leaders to issue a global call to better protect children online at a Paris summit on Thursday.

The call, initiated by France and the U.N. child protection agency UNICEF, acknowledges that "in the digital environment, [children](#) can come across harmful and [violent content](#) and manipulation of information. Just like adults, children have rights to privacy, which should be respected."

The text also listed "threats amplified by technology" including [cyber bullying](#), [sexual abuse](#), prostitution, human trafficking, sexual and gender-based violence or violent online radicalization.

"We call upon all governments, online service providers and relevant organizations to stand up for children's rights in the digital environment," it said.

Signatories include Amazon, Google and YouTube, Facebook and Instagram's parent company Meta, Microsoft, Snapchat and Twitter. The call has also been joined by eight nations including France, Italy, Argentina, Jordan and Morocco—although not the United States.

About 30 heads of state and government and U.S. Vice-President Kamala Harris were participating in the Paris Peace Forum that opened Thursday. The summit, organized both in person and online, brings together [world leaders](#), CEOs, NGOs and others to discuss [global issues](#) such as climate, the COVID-19 pandemic and digital transition.



French President Emmanuel Macron, left, and Vice President Kamala Harris watch a welcome video at the beginning of the Paris Peace Forum, Thursday, Nov. 11, 2021 in Paris. The forum focuses on gaps in global health, post-COVID recovery and looking ahead for new principles of action for the post-COVID world. Credit: Sarahbeth Maney/The New York Times via AP, Pool

Macron chaired the session about children's rights in the presence of YouTube CEO Susan Wojcicki.

"We must regulate contents and authorization tools so that an 8-year-old, a 10-year-old, a 15-year-old child ... cannot be exposed to all contents without rules," Macron said. That must go via parental control installed by default on some tools, he said. He also insisted on the need for educating children about the risks of social media.

Macron, Harris, EU Commission President Ursula Von Der Leyen and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau also participated in another roundtable on regulating the digital domain, along with Microsoft president Brad Smith. Harris announced that the U.S. is joining the Paris Call launched in 2018 to improve security and better regulate cyberspace.

Children's rights advocates have for years urged [internet giants](#) to take action to better protect children.



From left, Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Former European Trade Commissioner Pascal Lamy and Vice President Kamala Harris speak during a Paris Peace Forum, Thursday, Nov. 11, 2021 in Paris. French President Emmanuel Macron is right. Credit: Sarahbeth Maney/The New York Times via AP, Pool

Revelations last month from whistleblower Frances Haugen about internal Facebook studies on the harm of Instagram on teenagers intensified parents' concerns about the popular photo sharing app.

Justine Atlan, head of "E-Enfance," a group advocating the protection of children on the internet, participated in the Paris Peace Forum.

"We can build a lot of tools ... but all these functionalities are useless because children lie about their age. For me, this is the big issue," she said. "That's why I think we all need to work together and find solutions."

Nora Fraise, head of a French association fighting [school bullying](#), praised "a key moment" that puts "international pressure" on internet giants.

Fraise founded "Marion La Main Tendue" ("Marion The Outstretched Hand") after her daughter, Marion, committed suicide at the age of 13 because she was being harassed at school.



From left, former European Trade Commissioner Pascal Lamy, Vice President Kamala Harris, French President Emmanuel Macron and French historian Justin Vaïsse arrive at a Paris Peace Forum, Thursday, Nov. 11, 2021 in Paris. The forum focuses on gaps in global health, post-COVID recovery and looking ahead for new principles of action for the post-COVID world. Credit: Sarahbeth Maney/The New York Times via AP, Pool



France's President Emmanuel Macron, right, talks with U.S Vice President Kamala Harris, during the Paris Peace Forum, in Paris, Thursday, Nov. 11, 2021. Some world leaders and internet giants are expected to issue a global call to better protect children online during a Paris summit of about 30 heads of state and government, including U.S. Vice-President Kamala Harris. Credit: AP Photo/Christophe Ena



France's President Emmanuel Macron, right, laughs with U.S Vice President Kamala Harris, during the Paris Peace Forum, in Paris, Thursday, Nov. 11, 2021. Some world leaders and internet giants are expected to issue a global call to better protect children online during a Paris summit of about 30 heads of state and government, including U.S. Vice-President Kamala Harris. Credit: AP Photo/Christophe Ena

"Those who are spreading hatred via their pipes hold some responsibility," she said about popular social media apps like TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat. Cyberbullying and bullying at school are often interconnected.

Fraisse said social media companies should request proof of identity as a first step and have better control over published content.

Social media companies have generally banned kids under 13 from signing up for their services, although it's been widely documented that kids sign up anyway, with or without their parents' permission.

Fraisse, who speaks in schools about online risks, also called for better educating children and parents on these issues.

She cited a nationwide study her association commissioned this year that showed the proportion of those who attempted suicide is higher among children bullied at school (12%) than in the general population (7%).

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