



Child Sexual Abuse Material and the Internet (part 1): Influences and Motives of CSAM users online

Our world has experienced considerable change since the arrival of the Internet. This new media has simplified commerce and communication at the same time that it has revolutionized our work and leisure. Nevertheless, it has also created a space conducive to criminal activities of all kinds: drugs, weapons but also child sexual abuse material (CSAM). People with sexual attraction to children now have the opportunity to join together in communities in which their criminal behaviour will be made acceptable, even encouraged.

Examination of CSAM on the Internet will be divided into two thematic analyses. The present document constitutes the first part and will focus on the offenders. After analysing the impact of new technologies on offenses related to CSAM, it will look at the influences/motivations of the offenders. This research is based on an observation of the communities who share CSAM on the Deep Web¹, and more specifically on Darknets² Tor and Freenet. The observation was carried out from the comments and discussions of users of these networks following the methodological guidelines of social ethnography.

The second analysis will provide an overview on the size of the phenomenon, the challenges and the possible opportunities for law enforcement.

¹ The invisible web or hidden web refers to the part of the web that is not directly accessible to traditional search engines. It includes all documents not indexed by search tools like Google, Safari, Yahoo, etc.: sources whose access is controlled by a password, sites having an internal database, pages accessed through a search form, unreferenced documents (intentionally or not), intranets, extranets, ...

² The Darknets are a small part of the invisible web that was intentionally hidden. Two typical darknet types are friend-to-friend networks (usually used for file sharing with a peer-to-peer connection) and anonymity networks such as Tor via an anonymized series of connections, available at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Darknet_\(networking\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Darknet_(networking)).

I Impact of new technologies on CSAM offending

Before the digital technologies were widespread and the computers were connected into a global network, production, acquisition, possession and distribution of CSAM was much riskier than it is now: a person would have to go into a shop to buy a pornographic magazine and this way show his face; order CSAM through the post by providing his name and address; bring a film tape to be developed by a technician, who could report the suspicious images; lastly, he or she would have to store this material in paper form, which takes up a lot of space and is very visible to any onlooker.

The criminalization of CSAM in the end of the 1970s and the 1980s coincided with the advent of home computer systems and the predecessors of the current World Wide Web: Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) and Usenet newsgroups. These technologies were quickly adopted for CSAM exchange as a more secure alternative and in this way started the history of CSAM online. In the coming years the criminals quickly adopted the newest technologies available to more easily conceal their misdeeds: from BBS and newsgroups to the Internet Relay Chat (IRC), email and Internet forums, then to peer-to-peer (P2P) networks and finally moved to the Deep Web and the Darknets.

The spread and accessibility of digital technologies made it possible to produce, exchange, and store CSAM in an entirely inconspicuous way. Currently, a microSD memory card weights less than a single gram, is the size of a fingernail, and can contain thousands of image and video files. At the same time, the Internet allows anonymous exchange and distribution of digital CSAM. The estimated number of Internet users worldwide surpassed 2 billion in 2014, an increase of 708% from the year 2000.³

The increase in the Internet users has coincided with the increase in cyber-criminality, including CSAM offences. The number of child sexual abuse material reports that the International Association of Internet Hotlines INHOPE receives has been increasing by a yearly average of 45% since the start of the programme⁴.

³ <http://www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users/>

⁴ INHOPE, Statistics 2012-2014, available at: <http://www.inhope.org/tns/resources/statistics-and-infographics/statistics-and-infographics-2014.aspx>

New technologies have therefore provided a nearly perfect space and conditions for the expansion of CSAM offences by facilitating its production, storage, distribution, and exchange. The anonymity and invisibility of the Internet combined with extremely fast and easy communication are all factors that contribute to the increase in CSAM circulating on the web.

Now we will look specifically at the offenders and their motivations.

II The disinhibition effect of the Internet and moral disengagement in CSAM exchange groups

All persons committing offenses related to child sexual abuse material do not necessarily have an exclusive and unhealthy sexual attraction to prepubescent children. How can we explain their taking part in these serious violations of children's rights? Psychology and more specifically the disinhibition effect provide some initial answers.

Inhibitions that traditionally limit certain types of behaviour may be lowered online by the invisibility, the anonymity, the lack of nonverbal communication cues, the alteration of perception that ignores the real impact of cyberspace activities, and the minimization of authority and of possible punishment⁵. Therefore, some behaviours which would never be allowed to express themselves when face-to-face, like interest in CSAM, can flourish online. The disinhibition effect of the Internet also has a significant influence in online criminal phenomena like cyberbullying, hate groups, etc.

Furthermore, the Internet provides a platform where individuals with sexual attraction to children can find each other, share their stories, and find support and encouragement for the criminal behaviour. More dangerously, it is a platform where an individual's behaviour can be subjected to social influence and where one can learn and internalize sexually abusive behaviour and its rationalizations. Recent research on the topic highlight the

⁵ Suler, J. (2004), "The online disinhibition effect". *Journal of Cyberpsychology and Behaviour*, 7 (3), pp. 321-326.

validation and normalization functions that participating online in child sexual abuse support groups has for an individual⁶.

These groups do not directly engage in criminal activities but propagate child sexual abuse and a “romantic” engagement with children as a sexual orientation. The arguments used to validate what in these groups is called “child love” can create result in moral disengagement: a situation where a person may act against his own moral norms but explain this to himself in a way as not to feel guilty. Some rationales used for moral disengagement⁷ are well established in these online communities:

- Moral justification. A common excuse expressed by CSAM users is that this material was accessed for sexual release, this way managing the sexual urges and preventing direct sexual contact with children. Using this type of justification CSAM users see themselves in a righteous light, as a sort of Good Samaritans.
- Advantageous comparison. A CSAM user or distributor who, comparing himself with those who commit sexual offenses against children, minimizes his own damaging behaviour and sees it in a positive light.
- Euphemistic language. A good example of euphemistic language is the term of “child lover” used in these communities. This term might have positive connotations if the whole context is not taken into account.
- Displacement of responsibility. The use of CSAM can be seen by the offender as a consequence of the hypocrisy of the society: it criminalized sexual relations with minors and this way constrained individuals with sexual attraction to children to search for sexual release in CSAM.
- Diffusion of responsibility. An individual who may feel qualms about the delinquent activity he is taking part in, can excuse his actions by saying that “everyone is doing that.”
- Disregarding or distorting the consequences. For example, in the online communities promoting “adult-child love” a prevalent opinion is that the psychological damage to the molested children is a consequence of reaction by the family and other people

⁶ EUROPOL, « Virtual Global Taskforce Environmental Scan 2012 », p.3-5, available at: <https://www.europol.europa.eu/content/virtual-global-taskforce-environmental-scan-2012>

⁷ Bandura A., Barbaranelli C., Caprara G.V. and Pastorelli C. (1996), *Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement in the Exercise of Moral Agency*, in «Journal of Personality and Social Psychology», 71 (2), pp.364-374.

close to the child and not of the actions of the molester. Furthermore, viewing of CSAM and its distribution is not seen as having any negative consequences to the child depicted in the material.

- Dehumanization. Dehumanizing elements can be encountered in pornographic contexts where individuals are seen and treated as sexual objects, something to be used and discarded.
- Attribution of blame. Extensive use of CSAM may lead the user to believe not only that the child can give informed consent to sexual relations but also that the child is initiating them.

To sum up, erroneous justification and rationalization, which stem from participation in CSAM exchange networks on the Internet, can lead to significant behavioural and cognitive changes.

Alongside psychology, sociology can also shed light on the dynamics involved, particularly with respect to the value of an image within communities.

III CSAM offenders: the *value* of an image

There is no one typical CSAM offender but different behavioural patterns, observed by law enforcement and academia researchers over time, allow for a certain typology.

Firstly, a known behaviour of many CSAM users includes collecting: users don't just view the material; they download it, catalogue it, and actively seek out missing images from series with the same child or children⁸. This activity often becomes obsessive with users dedicating significant amounts of time to find the missing images and to otherwise perfect the collection. If the collection is lost (because of seizure by law enforcement, technical malfunction or other reasons) the collector will most likely try to rebuild it⁹.

CSAM exchange communities can be further divided into three main categories: *sharing*, *trading* and *hoarding*. Users in a *sharing* community post CSAM publicly, so it would be

⁸ Lanning K. (1992; 2010). *Child Molesters: A Behavioral Analysis*, Washington (DC), National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, p.79-80.

⁹ Taylor M. and Quayle E. (2003). *Child Pornography: An Internet Crime*, Hove and New York, Brunner-Routledge, p. 85.

available to any other community member. This is done to acquire respect, status in the community, and gratitude of the peers.

Traders, on the other hand, exchange CSAM on the perceived value of the images, exchanging only to other material of comparable value. In this case, the newest, most novel and rare material are considered to be the most *valuable*¹⁰. *Hoarders*, a category very similar to *traders*, are closed groups of CSAM users, who exchange the material perceived to be rare and *valuable* only inside the group.

A user, who started his collection in a *sharing* community, may move to *trading* in order to acquire specific rare images. Furthermore, a CSAM user may be propelled to abuse and photograph or videotape the abuse in order to have more *valuable* material to exchange or to increase his or her social status in the online community¹¹.

The different CSAM user profiles further illustrate the fact that this market is not monolithic and users may be led by different motives and strategies. For example, the *sharer* communities often express resentment towards *traders* and *hoarders* as being egoistic and "not doing their part for the cause"; *hoarders* and *traders*, on the other hand, may see *sharers* as not careful enough about their security.

IV Conclusion

Child sexual abuse material online is a complex problem without a simple explanation or solution. The number of Internet users is rising dramatically in the last few years, increasing the scale of online crimes correspondingly. CSAM producers and users are able to easily hide their identities and activity through anonymizing and encryption software.

Furthermore, the ease of making contact with other individuals around the common interest of CSAM creates a space where delinquent behaviour is being actively encouraged, the tools and know-how of offending are freely provided and, finally, erroneous justification and rationalization arguments are spread and internalized by new members of this delinquent

¹⁰ Neverauskaite J. (2015). *Il Deep Web e la pedopornografia*, C.Cipolla (ed.) «La rivoluzione digitale della sessualità umana», FrancoAngeli, Milan, 2015.

¹¹ Quayle E. & Ribisl K. (2012). *Understanding and Preventing Online Sexual Exploitation of Children*, Routledge, London & New York, p. 103-107.

subculture. Although it is impossible to describe one typical offender type, often noted are obsessive characteristics, which manifest in the collecting behaviour, or the search for peer esteem, respect and status in the online community (through the sharing of CSAM), which might be lacking in the offender's offline life.

It is clear that this problem will not be solved by law enforcement alone: not only because of the enormous resources that would have to be devoted to effectively fight this crime, but also because the Internet does not fit into the framework on which the current criminal law systems are based. The challenges and opportunities of fighting CSAM online will be further examined more deeply in the second part of this analysis.

This analysis was written in June 2015 by Justė Neverauskaitė and reviewed by ECPAT Belgium.

ECPAT Belgium is the Belgian member of ECPAT International (End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes). The mission of ECPAT Belgium is to fight against sexual exploitation of children for commercial purposes: child prostitution, child pornography, trafficking of children for sexual purposes and child sex tourism.

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