

Investigating Internet Child Exploitation Poses Complex Challenges

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Internet child exploitation is a broad term used in this paper to cover the entire spectrum of sex-related offences against children facilitated in whole or in part by internet technology. The offences include production and distribution of child abuse images, sexual solicitation of children online, and virtual offences, or sexual acting out against children through internet technology.

Internet child exploitation poses complex challenges for law enforcement primarily because of three key attributes of the phenomenon. First, internet based offending can quite easily and cheaply be trans-jurisdictional and multi-jurisdictional in scope. On the other hand, law enforcement agencies are in many respects jurisdictionally limited. The result is an inherent disequilibrium between the capacity of offenders to offend, and the capacity of law enforcement to respond.

Second, internet technology advances with great speed, and those advances are delivered to the market and taken up by internet service consumers with similarly great speed. Accordingly, the technological dimensions of internet child abuse are constantly and rapidly changing. The pace of technological change and widespread market adaptation to change typically far outstrips the capacity of legislators to pass necessary new laws, and often outstrips the capacity of law enforcement to retrain and re-equip. The result is that often law enforcement is fighting this year's battles with last year's tools and training.

Third, internet technology has facilitated the rapid proliferation of electronic communities whose members have no shared geography. In most social contexts this unifying power of the internet is highly desirable. However the community building capacities which internet technology provides have been exploited by those with a sexual

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interest in children. Relieved of the isolation and secrecy that goes with having such obviously anti-social interests, those with a sexual interest in children have used the internet to create strong webs of mutual support and encouragement in the further proliferation of child sexual exploitation. In a word, internet technology has meant empowerment for those interested in sexually exploiting children. Open source data around the volume of demonstrated interest in internet child exploitation has also raised deeply troubling concerns about the extent of adult interest in child sexual exploitation. In other words, law enforcement is coping not only with the widespread empowerment of the internet child exploitation community, but also with alarming indications about the size of that community.

Investigators in many jurisdictions world wide, and many other front line experts in the fight against internet child exploitation, are well aware of the inherent challenges in the field as outlined above. Accordingly, there is now a substantial body of front line experience and expertise available to be pooled, to devise priority responses to these challenges. In late 2008, the Kids' Internet Safety Alliance did just that. KINSA hosted a discussion group consisting of those with front line experience in a variety of fields highly relevant to the fight against internet child exploitation. The group came together in Geneva to collaboratively identify priority responses by law enforcement to the proliferation of internet child exploitation. The central theme animating the discussions was – where do we need to be in two years and how do we get there?

Members of the discussion group brought to the table investigative expertise at both the national and international level. They also brought technology and intelligence expertise. The members of the discussion group came from Europe, North America, Africa and South America. Both the law enforcement sector and the private sector were represented. The discussion group was deliberately structured to ensure it brought forward the perspective of front line workers in this important and emerging field.

At the end of weeks of preparation, culminating in two days of intensive discussions, the diverse but accomplished group reached a gratifyingly broad consensus on priorities in the fight against internet child exploitation. The many points within that broad consensus about what we need to address in the next two years are discussed below. They are broken down into two major categories: organizational issues for law enforcement and technological issues.

ORGANIZATIONAL ISSUES FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT

Image Sharing

Outsourcing Aspects of Internet Child Exploitation Investigations

Officer Retention

Collaboration and Information Sharing about Emerging Issues and Best Practices

Border Security

TECHNOLOGY RELATED ISSUES

Cloud Computing and Software as a Service

Social Networking

Location-based Services

Increased Computer Memory and the Data Deluge

Wi-Max Environments and Unsecured Private Networks

Law Enforcement Presence in Cyberspace

Multi-Sectoral Technical Working Groups

Traditional Investigative Skills

Finally, there is a short discussion of the consensus reached on the important issue of child to child online exploitation. Child to child online exploitation challenges law enforcement to reach beyond its own sphere of expertise, and engage across the spectrum of child protection related disciplines.

This compendium of distilled wisdom from the front lines of the fight against internet child exploitation will be of assistance to policy analysts, legislators, and executive decision makers in law enforcement, government, and the private sector.

CONCLUSION

Internet child exploitation as a field within law enforcement is growing rapidly. The rapid growth is in large measure a recognition that the response to the problem has for years been inadequate. With the desire to make up for past inattention comes the need to close the gap between offenders and law enforcement as quickly and effectively as possible, and keep it closed as internet technology improves. That is what inspired the KINSA discussion group, and that is what inspired the extraordinary degree of consensus set out in this paper about current priorities reached by front line experts from around the world. The path to where we need to be in two years has been clearly demarcated.

KINSA will continue to contribute to thought leadership in this evolving field by hosting similar discussion groups with a variety of subject matter experts from different disciplines and different regions around the world. The learning gained from those discussion groups will then be disseminated widely, as part of KINSA's mandate to further online safety for children everywhere.