

# What role can the Internet play in supporting sex offenders?

## Introduction.

*The Internet has changed how humans get information and interact with one another. While it provides huge benefits it also poses great dangers if it is abused. This essay looks at the growing amount and type of pornography on the Internet as well as the affect that it has on individuals. We see how offenders use websites to reinforce their beliefs and exchange material and information with other offenders. A brief overview of the practical use of websites and tools by offenders to avoid detection is also given as well as law enforcement efforts to combat them. We examine the use of virtual child pornography and the dangers of exhibitionism. Finally, an account is given of the typical grooming process a child sex offender uses to lure a child into an attack.*

Since the mid 1990's the explosion of the Internet has undoubtedly brought huge benefits to the human race. We now can access it on smartphones, PDA's, laptops from almost anywhere. We use it to access our email, check our bank accounts or stay in contact with our friends. With this great ability, there is a dark side and that is the availability of an ever-growing amount of content that could be seen as harmful. Pornography has always been a part of the Internet with some studies suggesting that between 4 to 12 % of all content and 13 to 25% of all web searches are pornographic in nature (Ruvolo, 2011, Ropelato, 2011). What is worrying is the large amount of "free" pornography that has no age restriction for its viewers and can include extremely hardcore and graphic images, videos and stories. Another cause for concern is the ease of use and availability of legitimate tools and sites that can be used to distribute illegal pornography or groom children or adults for sex offences. Social network sites are frequently used by offenders to gather information and communicate with targets (Mitchell et al, 2010). It is also used to reinforce their paraphilliac tendencies.

Pornography or the depiction of sexual acts has been with us since prehistoric times and fine examples can be found on the walls of brothels unearthed in Pompeii. Part of the problem in dealing with the whole area of pornography is what actually constitutes pornography (Gosset & Byrne, 2002). This is especially true when it comes to paraphillias and their associated practises. While the average person may find "normal" pornography as sex between two adults acceptable, they may find pedophilia (feet) as abnormal and coprophilia (faeces) downright revolting. It could be argued that as long as two consenting adults are happy to play out their fantasies without risk to each other then there is no harm done, however there is also the case that people who use the Internet may intentionally or unintentionally come across these sites and this in turn could lead to abnormal ideations. This is especially true where children have access to these sites as this can lead to an abnormal formation of sexual values. There exists on the Internet a website or means of access to every paraphillia that has been documented. While

people are naturally curious, there is the worry that because of desensitisation to subject matter a person may seek out more extreme forms of pornography (Winder & Gough, 2010.). Thus someone who initially may have been only mildly interested in Bondage/Domination/Sado-Masochism (BDSM) could in time evolve and gravitate towards sites that may promote “rape” or “abduction” fantasies for example. The obvious worry here is that at some point the person will escalate and seek to turn fantasy into reality and carry out an attack on a non-consenting adult or child (Sheldon and Howitt, 2008, Wood, 2011). 76 per cent of offenders convicted of Internet-related crimes against children admitted to contact sex crimes with children that were previously undetected by law enforcement. The average number of victims was 30 per offender. (Heimbach, 2002)

Man by nature is a social animal that needs contact with peers and others to fulfil various psychological and emotional needs (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) There is a growing field of study in to the use of the Internet by individuals and the effects that it has on the psyche and social habits (Stern & Handel, 2001). While most people use the Internet for everyday use, there is a growing body of evidence that people use it increasingly escapist purposes. By going online people can escape the real world or avoid emotional issues. They can use it to relieve boredom (Quayle, Vaughan & Taylor, 2006.) or use it as a means of reducing anxiety or depression. Studies have shown that excessive Internet use is associated with social avoidance due to intimacy issues and the inability to form real world interpersonal relationships. Excessive users are also more inner focused, have higher levels of fantasy and display more symptoms of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). This increased isolation may actually exacerbate these issues as virtual social interaction replaces real world social contact (Laulik, Allam & Sheridan, 2007). The use of social networks, texting and instant messaging may give the impression that we are always in contact with our peers but in reality the interaction is not the same as real world communication (Kraut et al, 1998). Virtual worlds such as Second Life create the fantasy of friends but only in a digital sense. While this may be a welcome diversion from real world conflicts, it becomes a problem when fantasy overtakes reality.

The Internet offers huge benefits to an offender from the point of view of accessibility, affordability and anonymity. With the invention of photography, the availability of pornography has gone from the 300+ studios in Paris in 1860 to the tens of millions of images on the internet today. Add to this video's and web streams and the choice and type of content is almost limitless. In the US, the industry is estimated to be worth \$13bn in total and figures for the rest of the world are hard to judge but one estimate puts it at \$97bn (Ropelato. J, 2011). These figures only cover legal pornography and do not cover the illegal material that is produced by organized crime and individual users. As a result of this mass production, pornographic material is easily affordable and in some cases free and without restriction. There has been a shift in pay per view only sites to ones that offer free content and rely on advertising or premium services to generate revenue. Sites like porn.com, pornhub.com and xvideos.com all give free access to videos and images with no warning or age restrictions on their front pages. This allows access to material, which should be for adults only but in effect can be accessed by anyone of any age. Children

and adults visiting these sites may develop an abnormal view of sexual relationships (Fischer & Barak, 2001) and may contribute to courtship disorder.

One way that access to these sites supports sex offenders is that they can be used to validate their beliefs. By finding other people who share an interest in their paraphillia, they are reinforced in their belief that what they are doing is normal. Therefore, when it comes to sites that involve extreme sex or child pornography the offender may seek to minimize the affect of the sexual act on the “models”. They will use cognitive dissonance to convince themselves that the woman “enjoys” being raped or that the child actually likes what they are doing because they are smiling (Winder & Gough, 2010). The more material that is viewed the more that this behaviour becomes acceptable in their eyes. They see it as a victimless crime as the offender is not molesting the child directly and might not necessarily be molesting children themselves. They do not acknowledge that in order to view the material a child has to be molested in the first place (Kim, 2002). The fact that this material is viewed in secret and isolation from the offender’s non-paraphilliac peer groups means that there is no moral buffer to judge whether the behaviour is acceptable to society as a whole. The only peer group that the offender will probably discuss these ideations with will be like-minded individuals through chat rooms and message boards( [danpedo.info/](http://danpedo.info/) , [philia.ws/](http://philia.ws/), [boylinks.net/](http://boylinks.net/), [glgarden.org/](http://glgarden.org/) , [nambla.org/](http://nambla.org/), [boychat.org](http://boychat.org/), [cblf.org/](http://cblf.org/) ) All this will do is further reinforce the offenders beliefs as each subscriber seeks to support, validate and justify the others ideas.

Preferential child sex offenders are a good example of how an offender grouping uses the Internet to validate their beliefs and use the Internet to seek out victims. Preferential offenders will collect and categorize child pornography (CP) to fuel their fantasies. They can be obsessive in their collecting to the point where they could not possibly use all of their stored media just for sexual arousal and release (Nielssen et al, 2011). Ian Green (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/>) was caught with 100,000 images of CP. Green was in contact with other offenders from all over the world and was the head of a group that shared their images and fantasies in private Facebook pages. Such a large collection of CP would indicate that the offender’s preferential sexual interest was children and that while the offender may not have molested children up to the time that they are caught this would be what they wanted to do (Kim, 2002). The fact that Green was already a convicted offender bears this line of thinking out.

The other aspect of Internet use is the anonymity that it offers to an offender. Someone entering a sex shop or looking for a particular type of material runs the risk of exposure or recognition. An offender can hide their tracks very easily and without any great technical knowledge. They can hide behind a screen name and assume an identity that can change completely who they are, even what gender and age they are in reality. Paedophiles can converse with children posing as someone around their targets own age to lure them into private chat rooms or for real life meets (Malesky, 2007). Offenders can use encrypted email, Peer-to-Peer file sharing, steganography and anonymous networks to hide their tracks. Even at a simple level, an offender can use any of the freely available

and open to the public wifi hotspots that can be found in bars, cafes, hotels and many other public spaces. In Ireland an offender can use an exploit in the Eircom network using a simple app called “dessid” that allows the offender to download child pornography over someone else’s router without their knowledge.

Sex offenders need to remain anonymous has led them to ever more innovative ways of hiding material and concealing their identity while communicating with each other. One method is to use a fake Facebook account that is only accessible by friends. Offenders can then exchange information within a closed group with little chance of detection. On a practical level, cloud computing allows for the storage of files on servers that can be accessed anywhere and from almost any device. This has the added security for the offender in that if the police search their hard drives there will be no incriminating evidence. An offender can use any one of a number of programmes that permanently wipes any incriminating information from a hard drive or browsing history. The hard drive itself does not even need to be in a PC or laptop anymore. Memory sticks and portable hard drives now offer huge amounts of storage in small casings that can easily be detached and hidden or if necessary destroyed if there is a fear of discovery.

Under current Irish legislation the sale, manufacture, distribution and possession of child pornography is illegal. However, the viewing of child pornography is not illegal. This was built in as a safeguard to protect people who innocently accessed child pornography by either clicking on a link or had it sent to them by a third party without their consent. There is a potential loophole however, whereby an offender may use cloud storage to save child pornography on a server in Russia for example where its possession is not illegal. The offender may then access the pornography as a viewer from a range of devices without fear of prosecution as they do not possess the files within the State. This is cause for concern in the future prosecution of offenders and is an area that should be urgently looked at.

Sex offenders share this type of information freely on message boards without fear of prosecution, ([www.boylinks.net](http://www.boylinks.net)) as there is no offence being committed. Police services face the problem of inadequate resources and the multi-jurisdictional crimes. In the case of Ian Green, Police from seven different countries and three different continents were involved. While tools such as Google’s Bedsread Detector and Microsoft’s Child Exploitation Tracking System (CETS) and PhotoDNA (Aldhous, 2011) provide valuable intelligence, more often than not it is only by carelessness that offenders are caught. They may use their credit card to subscribe to a website, leave their computer in to be repaired or open to accidental discovery. For every one offender caught an unknown number slip through the net. The fact that half of the 184 Interpol countries have no child pornography laws (ICMEC, 2008) makes the job of policing the Internet even harder.

One emerging area of the use of technology is the creation of “virtual” child pornography. This can be simple cartoon drawings or sophisticated 3D computer generated images depicting child like characters in sexually explicit fashion. Originating in the 1970’s Japanese Lolicon (a word play on Lolita Complex) depicts children as erotic cartoon characters. This has now evolved into 3D images that are even more

explicit and includes videos of sex acts with child characters. In Ireland and a handful of other countries these images are treated the same as real life CP and come under the same laws. The same cannot be said for the vast majority of other countries around the world. While the images may be cartoon in character, they have the same effect for child sex offenders and can be used as part of the grooming process.

Something, which is not often addressed, is the use of the Internet for exhibitionism and voyeurism. Traditionally these would have occurred by individuals visiting “dogging” sites or by an offender exposing themselves to members of the public. Both of these activities carry their own inherent dangers not least of which is a criminal conviction. The use of web cams now allows offenders to carry out these activities from the comfort of their own home. Some sites do offer paid for live streams of people indulging in sexual activity; while others like xhamster.com allow users in chat rooms to provide live images of themselves. There are a number of causes for concern here in that an offender may escalate their online activity to real world situations (Wood, 2011). What is more worrying is the use of these activities by children. They may think that they are safe in their own home and their exhibitionism carries no risk but many do not realise that online predators have been known to use video capture software to record these images. These images are then swapped between offenders or posted on websites for all and sundry to view. It also leaves anyone under the age of 17 posting images or videos of themselves online open to prosecution as even though the images are self produced the child is still underage. This is also valid when it comes to “sexting” (Shah, 2010) and emailing of pictures to one’s boyfriend or girlfriend. Children should be made much more aware of the dangers posed by these type of activities as well as safer use of chat rooms.

When it comes to grooming a child for abuse, the internet has become an invaluable tool for paedophiles. Social networking sites and chatrooms provide an offender a vast hunting ground upon which to prey on. Chatrooms tend to be frequented by children that may have problems forming interpersonal relations with their family or peers and so are vulnerable to the “friendship” and affection offered by an offender. More often than not, the offender will lie about their age and status to gain an initial foothold and will build upon this over time. The offender provides a listening ear and support to a child that will be craving just that sort of attention. The offender will have acquainted themselves with the lifestyle and language of their target, the pop stars and film stars that are in vogue, the music that they listen to. Some offenders may make sexual overtures from the start, asking if the child has Skype or MSN for video chat, others may spend weeks even months grooming their target, building up a relationship and gaining their confidence (perverted-justice.com). They might start out by sending innocent pictures and cartoons such as lolicon and gradually build up to sexualizing the child. This is where virtual CP comes into play as it introduces sex in a non-threatening way to the child. This then can move on to pictures or videos that the offender will have gathered. These images will show children “enjoying” what they are doing and show that there is no harm in sex between two people who might be different ages (Winder & Gough, 2010). All of this, the affection, the support, the listening, the Lolicon, the images, all seek to reinforce in

the vulnerable child's mind that the offender is not a threat. In fact, if anything the offender is the only one who understands and loves the child. The ultimate goal of all of this downloading, collecting and grooming is a meeting between the offender and the child. This is when then fantasy turns to reality for both the offender- and the child.

### **Conclusion.**

While the creation of the Internet has provided huge benefits to mankind it has also proved to be a fertile ground for abuse and misuse. Pornography is as old mankind but with the rapid expansion of the internet it has never before been more accessible. While access to this material by children is a cause for concern, what is more worrying is the ease and availability of access to hard-core and child pornography. Viewing of this material may lead to pathological ideations and lead individuals to acting out their online fantasies. Sex offenders use this material to validate their beliefs and justify their actions by supporting each other through dedicated websites. They also use these websites to exchange information on what freely available tools can be used to avoid detection in viewing and storing child pornography. While law enforcement agencies have themselves developed online tools to detect sex crimes, legislation lags far behind fast moving technological changes. Online grooming has now become a much easier and safer option for sex offenders to choose their victim. As technology and methods change so rapidly perhaps the best way to protect people from predators is better education in protecting their online privacy, their use of social networks and chat rooms.

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