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ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE THE GLOBAL INVESTIGATION

CONTEXT

While you are reading this, there are an estimated 750,000 sexual predators connected to the internet, all over the world. Just in this moment. But in reality, overall, there are several million.

On the classic internet, on Facebook, Tiktok, Instagram, Snapchat, Discord, Zoom, Skype, on music radio discussion forums, on online video games... Every site and application children and teens spend more time on every day. From the age of 2, children in Western countries spend almost 3 hours a day on screens. Between the ages of 8 and 12, they spend nearly 4 hours and 45 minutes. Between the ages of 13 and 18, they spend almost 6 hours and 45 minutes a day. In France as in Germany, 70% of 11-12 year olds have an account on at least one social network, whereas they are only allowed to do so from the age of 13.

By connecting on social networks, teenagers receive invitations to be “friends”, to get to know each other. Under teenage profiles, or even without hiding, there are much older men who do not bother to hide their intentions. It only takes a few minutes for them to send a picture of their penis and ask for “nudes” to be sent. This is called grooming, or online sexual solicitation of minors. As soon as their victim sends the first picture, they start blackmailing them for more. This is called “sextortion”, or using sexual content as leverage. It is a form of blackmail, where a pedocriminal tries to get more pictures, videos, or even a real-life meeting. It could also be a criminal network whose motivation is solely financial. Out of West Africa, the con men known as “brouteurs”(grazers) mainly target young boys. Trapped by webcam blackmail, these teens freak out, some of them having even been driven to suicide in several countries. Instagram and Snapchat are the social networks where teens are targeted the most. But to reach younger children, the sexual predators’ favorite hunting ground is online games. The nearly 3 billion gamers in the world form a community with well-honed codes, where communication is very easy. You do not have to ask to be accepted as a friend or to “get to know someone” to get something. Playing on the addiction specific to video games, they offer codes to bypass harder levels in exchange for sending nude photos, videos, or for money. On Fortnite or World of Warcraft, grooming attempts are daily and have skyrocketed during the successive lockdown periods.

The health crisis has had dire consequences on children’s exposure to cybercrime. Specific pedocriminal forums, with several hundred thousand members, were even set up to discuss opportunities during Covid to approach children. But while the health crisis is now further and further behind us, the trend has not abated, quite the contrary.

In 2021, there will be an estimated 85 million sexual photos and videos in circulation worldwide, mostly involving children under the age of 13. More than half of this material is self-produced by minors themselves: these are the aforementioned “nudes”, or intimate videos of a sexual nature sent either consensually within the framework of a relationship – and which will then be used to harm (revenge porn) – or obtained under duress by an aggressor extremely skilled in manipulation (grooming).

When they are not created by minors themselves, these millions of images in circulation are the capture of sexual assaults and rapes of children, committed most often by their entourage. According to an American study, for 85% of them, consumers of pedocriminal content have already molested minors. Thanks to the FBI and Interpol, in October 2020, the French police were able to arrest 65 people who were downloading “unbearably violent” pedocriminal material throughout France. The accused all have very different backgrounds: a 56-year-old father, a computer specialist, who staged himself on the videos raping his 14-year-old daughter; a sports educator, a couple in their forties, a 62-year-old pensioner, an imam...

The “collectors” of this type of images act mainly on the dark web. Using browsers that leave no trace and make it impossible to track them down, they join a community that engages in all possible illegal activities: selling weapons, drugs, trafficking in virtual currency and, of course, producing and distributing pedocriminal material. On these forums, they share links and passwords that lead to servers as common as Dropbox or Google Drive.

Tired of finding the same scenarios over and over again, some of them take advantage of a practice that has been steadily developing for ten years: live streaming. For a paltry sum, ranging from 20 to 50 euros, these men order the rape of children remotely, most often in the Philippines, Madagascar or Romania. By chatting on social networks with intermediaries on site, often women, they ask them to organize a “customized rape”, which will be broadcast live, leaving no trace. The victims are often family members of the kidnappers – their own children or those of relatives – and the money collected is equivalent to a month’s salary. Some have the scene recorded so that they can watch it again. This is how a French airline pilot was sentenced to 5 years in prison for “possession and distribution of child pornography” and “complicity in sexual assault on a minor of 15 years of age”.

These two offences were tried in a civil court, unbefitting of the seriousness of having ordered the rape of a 5-year-old girl. But in the face of this legal conundrum, since January 2020, the law has evolved and allows for the prosecution of perpetrators for complicity in rape, a crime tried in criminal court and punishable by 15 to 20 years in prison. Currently, about thirty investigations are underway at the juvenile section of the Paris prosecutor’s office. France is a model in Europe for the judicial treatment of live streaming cases. In Germany as well as in England, these same sponsors can be fined and sentenced to a few months in prison, at most.

Faced with this constantly worsening global scourge, efficient regulatory means appear to be increasingly urgent. At the international level, one country is often cited as an example: Canada. The Canadian Centre for Child Protection, in addition to its educational tools, manages Cybertip.ca, a platform for reporting cases of online sexual exploitation of minors. Through Project Arachnid, they have developed a computerized tool that can detect pedocriminal content and demand its removal from tech companies. In five years, they were able to have 6 million photos and videos of child sexual exploitation removed from more than 1,000 electronic service providers in over 100 countries. But Europe is more hesitant on the issue, especially Germany. Currently, transitional legislation, which will end in 2024, allows tech companies to scan their content for child pornography and report it to the authorities to trigger investigations. European Commissioner Ylva Johansson, a former Swedish politician, is actively lobbying for permanent, binding legislation for companies to take over: obligation to detect, report and remove any illegal content under penalty of heavy fines. However, the associations that campaign for the protection of personal data are taking up the cause, brandishing the threat of a generalized surveillance law that would jeopardize individual liberties. At a time when the Meta group is heralding a real technological revolution with the advent of a 3D virtual universe, the Metaverse – in which security flaws for children are already massive – how can we regulate? What balance can be found between the preservation of privacy and the protection of minors on the Internet?

THE INTERVIEWERS

THOMAS-GABRIEL RÜDIGER, GERMAN CRIMINOLOGIST AND CYBERCRIME SPECIALIST

This researcher and former police officer discusses the tools to be put in place: a dissuasive virtual police presence, highly visible reporting buttons on browsers to report inappropriate content, means of alerting on social networks' private messaging, etc.



COMMANDER VÉRONIQUE BÉCHU, CENTRAL OFFICE FOR THE REPRESSION OF VIOLENCE AGAINST PERSONS (OCRVP), HEAD OF THE CENTRAL JUVENILE VICTIMS GROUP (JUDICIAL POLICE), FRANCE



French correspondent for the FBI, the HSI and all international police and intelligence agencies, Véronique Béchu has moved from field operations to political combat. Her career has brought her into contact with all types of offences committed against minors online, and her job has taken her to every continent. Véronique Béchu will share with us her transversal view of pedocriminality on the Internet.

YLVA JOHANNSON, EUROPEAN COMMISSIONER FOR HOME AFFAIRS

Swedish Minister of National Education and then of Social Affairs, she has been the European Commissioner for Home Affairs since 2019. She has been championing several legislative proposals, including the one on child protection on the Internet, which aims to legally and financially compel tech companies to detect online grooming situations and to report and remove any pedocriminal content spotted on platforms.



JÉRÔME BONET, FRENCH CENTRAL DIRECTORATE OF THE JUDICIAL POLICE (DCPJ) AND CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD OF EUROPOL



Jérôme Bonet will set the context around the explosion of pedocriminality on the Internet, particularly since the Covid 19 pandemic. He will shed a particular light on the phenomenon of grooming and sextortion, by conveying essential messages of prevention.

JOHN SHEHAN, VICE PRESIDENT OF THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR MISSING AND EXPLOITED CHILDREN (NCMEC)

The NCMEC is without a doubt the key player in the fight against child pornography on the Internet. As the international entry point for the vast majority of reports, this NGO helps to identify and rescue thousands of child victims every year. A cause John Shehan has been dedicating his life to for 22 years.



JIM TANNER, CRIMINOLOGIST, SPECIALIST IN SEX OFFENDER AND THE EXPLOITATION OF SEIZED COMPUTER MATERIAL



A sex offender probation officer for 20 years, this American criminologist is a wellspring of science in the field. Having conducted thousands of hours of interviews with men convicted of sexual violence, both physically and through the Internet, he can boast of having a keen understanding of their psyche.

Jim Tanner uses it to establish the psychological profile of these sexual predators: Are they receptive to therapy? Are they likely to reoffend?

KERSTIN CLAUS, INDEPENDENT COMMISSIONER FOR CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE (UBSKM), GERMANY

This journalist specializing in violence against women and children, consultant for multiple NGOs, has just been appointed head of the independent commission for child sexual abuse in Germany.



JOHN TANAGHO, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE INTERNATIONAL JUSTICE MISSION (IJM) CENTER TO END ONLINE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN

John Tanagho lived in the Philippines for 6 years, where he headed the local branch of the NGO International Justice Mission (IJM). Together with the Philippine police, he was instrumental in the rescue of 700 victims and the arrest of 260 suspects.



MARC VINCKEVLEUGEL, SECURITY POLICY MANAGER AT META FRANCE



He is the Meta Group's main contact with law enforcement agencies. Strongly criticized for the weaknesses of Instagram – the main social network on which sexual predators approach minors – Meta defends itself by the fact that the group is at the origin of 95% of the reports of pedocriminal content to the authorities.

DONALD FINDLATER, DIRECTOR OF THE STOP IT NOW! HOTLINE UK and Ireland

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