

Eliminating unlawful sexual images of minors without censorship

Executive summary

Curbing access to unlawful sexual images of minors without relying on mass surveillance and censorship is the holy grail for human rights defenders working on child sexual abuse prevention. Two years of evidence-based and compassionate advocacy, led by a diverse team of world-leading independent experts, have placed ProStasia Foundation in a unique position to offer a package of sustainable solutions to bring this elusive goal within reach. By hosting a professionally-supervised peer-support forum for populations at high risk of image-based offending against minors, and developing new clinical research into whether legal outlets could divert this population from such offending, we will deliver a prevention action plan that avoids the need for blanket measures that would infringe the privacy and freedom of expression of others. Through these interventions we will provide policymakers and Internet platforms with cogent evidence that a human rights based approach to the prevention of sexual offending against minors is both possible and effective. By driving support for these solutions within government and industry, the outcome of this project will be to lay the groundwork for a long-term and sustainable reduction in the use of unlawful sexual images of minors without reliance on surveillance and censorship.

Background

The battle against child pornography—nowadays known as child sexual abuse material (CSAM) or unlawful sexual images of minors—will be won not when the last such image is deleted from the last server, computer, or phone. Realistically, that will never happen and we should be frightened about any world in which we could accomplish that and be sure that we had done so. Instead, the battle will be won when the last adult accesses such an image... before deciding never to do so again. That's also an ambitious goal. But it's one that carries much more promise for achieving a sustainable reduction in the demand for such images, rather than merely a temporary disruption of their supply.

For as long as those with a sexual interest in children are using social media, major Internet companies will be at the centre of the battle to stop them from doing harm. Yet thousands of pedophiles are on social media platforms right now—and there is no way to get them off,

or even to identify who they are, without massively surveilling and censoring the platform's entire user base. Those who have already been convicted of sexual offenses are banned from some major platforms such as Facebook, but this provides a false sense of security. What about those who haven't been convicted because their crimes haven't been detected yet? And more importantly, what about those who haven't offended yet—is there any way to stop them, when we don't know who they are?

In the 2018 Annual Report of the Internet Watch Foundation, its Chair Andrew Puddephatt stated "we can't continue to just censor and arrest our way out of the problem" of the distribution of unlawful sexual images of minors, and proposed that "a serious and long-term investment in prevention" is required to address it. ProStasia Foundation is one of a new guard of child protection organizations that are focused on this approach of preventing child sexual abuse, rather than merely apprehending and prosecuting those who have already offended.

There are pedophiles (in the correct, clinical sense, meaning people who feel a primary sexual attraction towards children) who aren't child abusers, just as there are child abusers who don't have pedophilia (in other words, those who don't possess that attraction, and who are driven to offend by other factors). Even so, about 61% of those convicted of offenses related to unlawful sexual images of minors are pedophiles, which is a significantly higher figure than the proportion of those who commit hands-on offenses at about 35% (Seto, Cantor, & Blanchard, 2006). This makes them an important target group for a campaign to reduce this type of offending.

Although research into a possible cure is ongoing, our current state of scientific knowledge suggests that a sexual attraction towards minors (such as pedophilia or hebephilia) is unchosen, lifelong, and incurable. However, with the right information and support networks, there is also strong evidence that those with such an attraction—collectively known as MAPs—can spend their whole lives without offending. This includes preventing them from accessing child abuse images.

Motivation

This project is dedicated towards strengthening the protective factors that we already know can help keeping MAPs from falling into patterns of abuse, and expanding our knowledge of possible protective factors that experts believe may also be helpful in diverting them from image-based offending specifically. It is motivated by two factors:

1. Major Internet platforms are not adequate for the task of hosting peer support prevention forums for MAPs, due to the risks of harassment and abuse from other users, and arbitrary termination of service. During 2018, the Lucy Faithfull Foundation from the United Kingdom piloted a program offering free online support services to self-identifying MAPs, conducted by trained counselors. The service was offered on an independently-moderated chat server called MAP Support Chat, then hosted on Discord (discordapp.com). When other Discord users complained, Discord terminated the service. This action was criticized by mental health professionals because it removed one of the few avenues of free, anonymous, and professional support for MAPs who didn't want to offend (Herzog, 2018).
2. Unlawful sexual images of children are wrong because they directly harm children in their production and/or their distribution. The same is not true of fictional depictions such as cartoons, which do not affect any real child. Some MAPs report that their therapists support their use of such fictional depictions as a coping strategy that can improve their mental wellness and reduce their inclination to resort to actual abuse images. Yet pressure is building for the internationally accepted definition of child pornography (or CSAM) to be expanded to include artistic and creative works, which would put an end to this therapeutic intervention. There is therefore an urgent need for research to determine whether the criminalization of the possession of sexual depictions of minors would aid or hinder the work of prevention professionals working to reduce offending against real children.

Activities and outputs

1. Strengthening peer support

Prostasia Foundation offers two interlocking solutions to address these unmet needs. First, we will support and strengthen the world's largest existing safe space for online peer-based support and education for help-seeking adolescent and adult MAPs, now retitled MAP Support Club (MSC), which Prostasia now hosts under a strong partnership that we have established with its independent administrators.

Studies (Lievesley, Elliot, & Hocken 2018) show the promise of such peer-support forums in strengthening norms that promote lifelong celibacy when it comes to minors. Through this project, MSC will also be used to promote understanding that sharing unlawful images of minors is also wrong and that there are alternative ways for MAPs to manage their attraction safely and legally.

The activities and associated outputs that we aim to produce are:

- **Improving support options**

Prostasia Foundation currently provides infrastructural and technical support to the independent administrators of MSC, which is currently based on a peer-support model. This proposal will enable us to expand the availability of professional support through MSC, by hiring licensed therapists from our partner organizations to staff a dedicated professional support channel. We will conduct survey research of participants over the year on their experiences of receiving peer and/or professional support through MSC and publish a report on our findings.

- **Strengthening safeguards**

To promote trust among its users, MAPs are not constantly supervised on MSC, which places a heavy reliance on chat administrators to identify and report behavior that contravenes the terms of service of the platform. To further minimize the risk that users might use the platform for prohibited purposes, we aim to integrate industry standard CSAM scanning technologies into it, utilizing image hash and URL lists maintained by the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) and/or from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC). We will assess the effectiveness of these technologies over the year and publish a report on our findings.

- **Outreach to stakeholders**

Prostasia Foundation already has a successful program of outreach to those at risk of accessing unlawful sexual images of minors, by way of Google search ads. We will extend this program through an active program of outreach through social media networks, other websites and forums, and through the networks of partner organizations, including both paid advertising and organic content. We will also seek to establish new partnerships with Internet platforms to establish MSC as a trusted referral destination that they can offer to help-seeking users.

2. Research into legal sexual outlets

As a complement to our peer-support program, the second component of this project is the development of a detailed research proposal to determine whether the legal availability of safe, victimless sexual outlets such as art, fiction, roleplay, and sex toys, could have the effect of reducing sexual offending within this target community, or conversely whether their availability would stimulate unhealthy attitudes towards offending and lead towards an increase in the consumption of unlawful sexual images of minors.

Although there is some observational evidence to support the former hypothesis (Diamond, Jozifkova, & Weiss, 2011) and to contradict the latter (Paul and Linz, 2008), no experimental research exists on the question. The experts whom we work with posit that the use of outlets as a coping mechanism may be helpful for at least some individuals who would otherwise be drawn towards abuse images, and could therefore be a part of the solution towards reducing the consumption of such images. This project will begin to fill that gap in the research.

As this research is a substantial and long-term project, the activities and associated outputs that we aim to produce in this first phase are:

- **Exploratory work**

A literature review, methodology development, collaborator agreements, and external peer-review will be completed.

- **Formal proposal**

A formal, written, completed, peer-reviewed, professional quality scientific research proposal will be developed. The actual research will be conducted in the next phase of this project.

- **Conference dissemination**

This phase of the research, and its relationship with the peer support work, will be presented at at least two professional conferences including the Annual Research and Treatment Conference of the Association for Treatment of Sexual Abusers.

Beneficiaries

The ultimate beneficiaries of this project are child victims of sexual abuse. Every time that images or videos depicting child sexual abuse are shared online, the children depicted are being re-victimized. Similarly, children who are groomed for sexual abuse online—even if they believe themselves to be willing participants—frequently find themselves to have been traumatized by the experience in later life. Censorship alone will not protect such children from abuse, but prevention-focused interventions stand a better chance of doing just that.

More directly, the immediate beneficiaries of this project will be the experts who work with people who are at risk of sexually offending against children. The Internet is the first place where these people tend to turn for information and support—especially if they are young MAPs discovering their sexuality for the first time. If they encounter experts online who tell them that they have a choice not to offend, they have a good chance of hearing this

message and acting accordingly. But if their first encounter is with those who tell them that they are innately evil and are doomed to offend eventually, this too will factor into their behavior.

Objectives

By supporting a trusted and secure peer support forum dedicated to the prevention of sexual offending against minors, and maintained in partnership with mental health professionals, we aim to produce a measurable reduction in the propensity of our target population to seek out and consume unlawful sexual images of minors. Through clinical research into the efficacy and safety of fictional outlets as a coping strategy, we also aim to pave the way for future reductions in the consumption of such unlawful images. By passing on our learning to policymakers and platforms, we also aim to ensure that future laws and policies incorporate a prevention focus, rather than being based solely upon censorship and surveillance, which carry a far greater risk of infringing the human rights of others.

Personnel

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About Prostasia Foundation

Prostasia Foundation is the first and only child protection organization that focuses on working with stigmatized groups as allies in our mission of child sexual abuse prevention. Many of the laws and policies designed for child protection infringe the rights of others such as sex workers, LGBTQ+ people, people seeking help to avoid offending or reoffending, and even children themselves... but most other child protection groups tend not to be very mindful of such impacts. Even many other nonprofits and companies are also hesitant to speak out about flaws in proposed child protection measures, because of the stigma around child sexual abuse and its prevention. We are unique in taking a human rights focused and sex-positive approach. We prioritize the prevention of child sexual abuse through research, public outreach, and advocacy, and we do this in cooperation with Internet platforms, and with minorities whom other groups exclude and stigmatize.

Our mission is to ensure that the elimination of child sexual abuse (CSA) is achieved consistently with the highest values of the society that we would like our children to grow up in. We do this in four ways:

1. Helping to fund sound scientific research on CSA prevention

2. Engaging with diverse stakeholders whose voices are not normally heard
3. Addressing the human rights impacts of child protection laws and policies
4. Communicating the results of our research and engagement to policymakers, platforms, and the public

References

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Budget

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