

Counteracting online child abuse while upholding Internet freedom

Executive summary

Since the inception of the Internet, its misuse to disseminate child abuse images has been a perennial problem. Today, the problem has largely been eliminated on mainstream Internet platforms, but this has only driven abusers to encrypted networks and services, such as the Tor network, for the distribution of such images. Apart from the ongoing revictimization of the children depicted in those images, the misuse of the Tor network to facilitate abuse has also produced other adverse outcomes, including associating the Tor network with criminal activity, and raising the incentives for law enforcement to develop de-anonymization attacks against the network. This project aims to counteract these harms, by developing and documenting applications for the Tor network that can reduce and prevent online child abuse.

What are hoped for goals or longer term effects of the project?

As we will explain in more detail below, we propose to develop and maintain a set of child sexual abuse prevention support and outreach services hosted on the Tor network, under the supervision of mental health professionals. By doing so, we will demonstrate our rejection of the narrative that the strong encryption technologies that enable privacy and anonymity online are incompatible with child protection. While all technologies can be used for good or evil, child sexual abuse prevention is the perfect case study to demonstrate how essential the Tor network is for experts who are adopting a "primary prevention" approach to child protection. Our project will be a practical illustration of that.

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," and proposed that "a serious and long-term investment in prevention" is required. 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 various key groups at which prevention initiatives can be usefully targeted, including men between the ages of 16-25, foster families, broken families, people working with children, and so on.

Another key group for prevention initiatives, and the most controversial to work with, are those who admit to having a sexual interest in minors. Professionals refer to this group as "MAPs" (minor-attracted persons). Our current state of scientific knowledge suggests that their underlying sexual attraction towards minors (such as pedophilia or hebephilia) is unchosen, lifelong, and incurable, but that with the right information and support networks, it is possible for them to spend their whole lives without offending. This includes preventing them from accessing child abuse images.

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, hosted on Discord (discordapp.com). When other Discord users complained that there was a chat server being used by self-admitted pedophiles, 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.

The same year saw the takedown of two other major support services for professionals working with people at risk of committing sexual abuse. The first was the termination of Tumblr accounts used for the discussion of child sexual abuse prevention, shortly before a much broader crackdown on sexual content on Tumblr. One of the accounts terminated belonged to a member of ProStasia Foundation's Advisory Council, who is a mental health professional and a researcher into the use of social networks in child sexual abuse prevention.

The other takedown from a major platform was the elimination of a peer support blogging network called "Pedophiles About Pedophilia" that had been hosted on Medium. One factor in all three takedowns was that self-styled anti-pedophile activists had complained to the platforms concerned and falsely reported these accounts and services as infringing platform policies against the sexualization of children. But another important factor identified by ProStasia Foundation was the effect of the law FOSTA (Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act), which has made platforms more risk-averse about hosting content related in any way to child sexual abuse.

A further problem facing professionals who wish to work with MAPs to prevent sexual offending is that not only their target population, but also the professionals themselves, are frequent targets for online harassment, doxxing, and death threats. For this reason, it is important for their own safety that MAPs who are receiving professional support to

overcome their risk of offending do so anonymously. But while the Tor network offers good anonymity to those who use it correctly, the majority of forums used by MAPs on the Tor network are run by active offenders, and are dedicated to the perpetuation of offending behavior.

Our project will begin to turn the tide, by establishing secure and anonymous fora on the Tor network dedicated solely to the prevention of offending, maintained in partnership with mental health professionals with expertise in sexual paraphilias. The project will have zero tolerance for the promotion of offending behavior, or for the sharing of unlawful or inappropriate imagery or links. By leveraging the Tor network's strengths to provide MAPs with free peer and professional support that is anonymous and resilient against censorship, the long-term effects of the project will be to produce a measurable reduction in the rates of child sexual abuse among the target population.

How will you do it?

We will be establishing three interlinked support resources on the Tor network and clear web, through which child sexual abuse prevention professionals can interact with those at-risk of offending, steer them away from abusive behaviors, and direct them towards additional offline sources of support and treatment:

1. A static website with straightforward, accurate information about the science behind minor attraction, coping mechanisms to deal with sexual thoughts towards minors, the true negative impacts of child sexual abuse on its victims, and the legal consequences of offending.
2. A moderated web forum in which those with unwanted attractions towards minors can engage anonymously with peers who have maintained an offending-free lifestyle, as well as from family members of such persons, and from mental health and criminal justice professionals.
3. An interactive chat server, complementing the web forum, in which peer and professional support can be provided to those seeking to avoid acting on their unchosen and unwanted feelings of attraction towards minors.

Candidates for each of these resources are already in operation on the clear web (these are described in "Similar/complementary efforts" below), and one of our first priorities (by month 1 of the grant) is to establish whether these can be transferred directly to the Tor network while simultaneously remaining accessible on the clear web, or whether new, separate resources should be established only on the Tor network. This decision will be

made on the basis of community feedback from the operators and users of those existing resources.

Once a determination has been made about whether to establish new resources for the Tor network or to further develop and make existing resources accessible on the Tor network, the necessary development will be undertaken and the Tor network hosted resources will be launched by month 6 of the project.

For resources 2 and 3 above, there is heightened concern about user-generated content contravening the terms of service of our platform, which will strictly prohibit the sharing of unlawful or inappropriate imagery or links. To address the risk of these terms being contravened, we will be integrating scanning of uploaded images against image hash and URL lists maintained by the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) and/or from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC). Integration of this functionality will be achieved by month 12 of the project.

Outreach to our project's target audience, and to the general public, are also key components of the project which will be conducted continuously throughout months 6-18. Outreach to those at risk of offending will be conducted primarily over social media and online advertising, including advertising on selected websites hosted on the Tor network itself, as well as on selected clear web sites, and on search engines.

Outreach to the general public will additionally be conducted through press releases, blogging and podcasts, and the presentation of our work at Internet and child protection conferences, initially including the Internet Governance Forum, and the Annual Research and Treatment Conference of the Association for Treatment of Sexual Abusers (both in November 2019).

Finally, we will prepare a full independent project evaluation report by month 18 which will investigate the impact of our interventions on the likely rates of future sexual offending against children among our target group, through methodologist such as interviews and focus groups. The report will also recommend how we can improve our interventions to make them more effective and responsive to the needs of its beneficiaries.

How long have you been thinking of working on this idea? What made you first think about it?

This idea stemmed from the same realization that caused the genesis of Prostasia Foundation in April 2018: that our society's hatred of child sexual abusers was leading us to

over-emphasize laws designed to punish certain categories of stereotypical offenders (without paying much attention to the impacts that these laws might also have on innocent people), and to under-emphasize measures to prevent abuse from taking place to begin with. As a result, harmful and ineffective laws such as FOSTA were passed unanimously because few were willing to question the narrative that it would eliminate child sex trafficking—and fewer still were willing to investigate more effective and humane alternatives.

Unfortunately, impartially collecting evidence and advocating for child protection solutions that respect human and civil rights doesn't seem to be a priority for any existing organization. As a result, poorly-conceived child protection measures commonly go unchallenged by other child protection groups, including measures that are not science-based, those that harm or stigmatize those who are not child abusers, and even measures that themselves actually directly do harm to children.

When child sexual abuse prevention resources such as MAP Support Chat were censored online during 2018, no other child protection group was willing to stand up and speak out, for fear of the stigma that is inevitably associated with taking a prevention-based approach rather than an enforcement-only approach. ProStasia Foundation was the only organization with the courage to do so, responding to experts who identified the crisis that censorship of these resources created for those in urgent need of psychological support and prevention information.

The first step that we took to avert this crisis was to work with its independent operators to help re-establish MAP Support Chat on a new independently-hosted service on the clear web, where it exists today. We also worked to strengthen the resilience of other prevention websites and resources, such as the Global Prevention Project; a clinician-run counseling service which came under attack by vigilante trolls in 2018 after it was falsely accused of promoting a pro-pedophilia agenda.

But child sexual abuse prevention services remain vulnerable, and those associated with them remain at risk of doxxing and abuse. We identified the hosting of such services on the Tor network as a solution to two separate problems: first, it would make prevention and support services more resilient against censorship. Second, it would help the users of those services to protect their anonymity. And an additional benefit would be to subvert the common belief that the Tor network is a playground for child sex abusers—showing that in fact it can be used for good, and may ultimately be a tool for reducing child sexual abuse.

Who is the project for?

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. Despite the popular belief that child sex offenders are remorseless monsters, the experts that we directly work with describe them as mostly ordinary people, except for their unchosen and often unwanted sexual attraction to minors. Just like anyone else, their capacity for empathy and self-restraint allows them to refrain from committing sexual abuse, given the right information and support.

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.

As venues for experts to connect with those at risk of offending are disappearing, the Tor network looms large as a censorship-free and anonymous alternative. But tragically, existing resources on the Tor network are dedicated to child sexual abuse and only make the problem worse, by feeding the cognitive distortions that enable abuse (for example, that children want and can consent to sex), and stifling messages that this behavior is wrong and can be prevented.

It is important that we build and promote resilient, stable, anonymous, and expert-facilitated alternative fora for people who are drawn towards children, that can challenge and dismantle the lies and distortions that promote a culture of sexual offending. Through this project, we will enable experts to intervene and prevent real acts of child sexual abuse, and thereby save children from years of trauma and shame.

What community currently exists around the project?

We have already established all of the partnerships that we will need to ensure this project's success. Here are just three of the mental health experts on our diverse Advisory Council:

- Dr Gilian Tenbergen. Dr. Gilian Tenbergen is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor of Psychology with SUNY Oswego, specializing in the neurobiology of pedophilia and its translation into the prevention of child sexual abuse. In Hannover, Germany, she spent several years working with the German Prevention Project Dunkelfeld.
- Nerea Vega Lucio. Nerea's thesis for her bachelor of medicine was on the topic of CSA prevention, non-offending pedophiles, and the use of social networks as therapeutic tools. She has deeply researched the topic of sexual paraphilias and engages with the non-offending community online.
- Dr. James Cantor is a clinical psychologist and neuroscientist, internationally recognized for his research on the causes of pedophilia over the past 20 years. Dr. Cantor is the Director of the Toronto Sexuality Centre and has served as Editor-in-Chief of the research journal Sexual Abuse and as Senior Scientist at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Canada.

We have also established productive working relationships with other child protection groups and prevention projects, including the Internet Watch Foundation, the Global Prevention Project, the Lucy Faithfull Foundation, and the Priotab project at Sweden's Karolinska Institute.

We also have a large network of grassroots members, supporters, and volunteers. Our most successful advocacy campaign reached over 17,000 people. This was our campaign to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, recommending against its proposal to change the international legal definition of child pornography (also called child sexual abuse material) to include fiction and art, that do not involve any exploitation or abuse of real children.

We have an opt-in newsletter database of over 6,000 subscribers whom we email with a regular monthly update of news and opinions. Our largest social media following is on Twitter, where we have over 1200 followers, that we have built up in only one year since our formation.

To extend this reach, we use Google search ads to provide information about child sexual abuse prevention to those who seem to be searching for images of child sexual abuse.

Since we launched this project, almost 7000 people have encountered our advertisements and clicked through to our website to read more. The click-through rate of almost 10% that we have achieved is considered extremely high.

Prostasia Foundation is a partner with the National Coalition Against Censorship, a member of the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom, Child Rights Connect (pending ratification), and the Dynamic Coalition on Child Online Safety, and we have presented at the Internet Governance Forum, RightsCon, and (upcoming in November) the Annual Treatment and Research Conference of the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers.

Why is this project needed?

Advancements in the prevention of child sexual abuse will follow from taking a nuanced, evidence-based approach that engages with all segments of the community. It won't come from doubling down on a punitive agenda that is based on harmful stereotypes and driven by tabloid headlines. In the haze of righteous anger and revulsion that fuels the latter approach, it has been too easy for lawmakers to overlook the human rights impacts of laws such as FOSTA, and too difficult to raise legitimate questions about the effectiveness of such laws.

This has perpetrated significant harm to the health and livelihood of already marginalized groups such as sex workers, the LGBTQ+ community, sexually active young people, and those who are trying to avoid offending or reoffending. It also puts children at greater risk, by depriving them of the contribution that these stigmatized groups could bring to child sexual abuse prevention.

When existing child protection organizations failed to stand up for the human rights of sex workers and Internet users when FOSTA was signed into law last April, a group of experts and activists came together to form Prostasia Foundation: a fearless new advocacy and research organization that embraces stigmatized groups as partners in our evidence-based mission to protect children from sexual abuse.

Today, Prostasia Foundation is rising to become the only child protection organization with the courage to promote a primary prevention approach that is human rights focused, and inclusive of sex-positive communities. Like other similar groups we are intolerant of child sexual abuse, but unlike them we are not intolerant of unconventional or even controversial approaches towards its prevention.

We firmly believe that every member of our community has something to contribute towards child sexual abuse prevention. And our Board of Directors and Advisory Council reflects the diversity of the communities with which we engage in this vital mission.

This project is urgently needed because no other organization will dare to take it on. Many of the largest mainstream child protection organizations that have promoted censorship as a solution to child sexual abuse have a broader agenda to eliminate adult content online, and they exclude perspectives of those who don't share that agenda, such as sex-positive therapists and researchers, LGBT people, sex workers, and the consensual kink community. As a result, there has been nobody to speak up when these communities become casualties of censorship such as over-blocking.

Internet companies themselves have also failed to protect platforms on which child sexual abuse prevention interventions take place due to the powerful sexual stigma that affects all who work in this area. Although approaches based on the prevention of child sexual abuse are effective, stigma makes it difficult for this approach to make headway against the emotionally more resonant approach of identifying and prosecuting offenders. It also makes it difficult to suggest balances and safeguards for child protection laws and policies that are necessary in a free and democratic society.

Prostasia Foundation is the only child protection organization that stands with Internet users to promote the positive benefits that strong encryption has to offer in our mission of child protection. By using the Tor network to host valuable child sexual abuse prevention resources that have been repeatedly censored and attacked on the clear web, we subvert the common accusation that the Tor network provides cover to child sexual abusers. As our project will demonstrate, the Tor network is also well designed to create safe and secure spaces in which professionals can work with at-risk groups to reduce child sexual offending.

Similar/complementary efforts

As far as we know, there are three complementary and somewhat similar efforts underway for the provision of direct online support services to those who are at risk of offending, and we are in close communication with both of them. The first comes from the Lucy Faithfull Foundation. As mentioned above, they were first involved with offering support online through the MAP Support Chat Discord server as a pilot project, until the service was censored by Discord. They are currently evaluating their next steps, and will be invited to collaborate with us on this project should it be funded.

The second similar effort is from a research project called Priotab at Sweden's Karolinska Institute. Priotab is operating an online clinical trial called Prevent-IT, providing anonymous psychotherapy online to people recruited from websites on the Tor network—though the therapy itself is conducted on the clear web. Because it is a clinical trial, participation is blinded, randomised and placebo controlled. This differs from the approach that we propose, in which all participants will receive the same level of support, which will be provided over the Tor network. However, Priotab is also a prospective project partner.

The third project which bears some similarities to ours is the Virtuous Pedophiles forum (virped.org), which is an independently-operated peer support forum. It also allows access to non-MAPs such as researchers, journalists, and family members. Although Prostasia Foundation also operates a general web forum of our own, ours is not dedicated to the needs of professionals and MAPs. Therefore, we will be consulting with the operators and users of this forum about whether they would like to partner with this project or whether we should use the Prostasia forum as a starting point.

In addition to these three similar projects offering direct support from professionals, there are also three similar efforts to provide static or self-guided prevention resources to those who are at risk of offending. These are the Lucy Faithfull Foundation's "Get Help" website on the clearweb at <https://get-help.stopitnow.org.uk/>, the Association Une Vie's "PedoHelp" project on the clearweb at <https://pedo.help/>, and the "Help Wanted" website from the Moore Center for the Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse on the clearweb at <https://helpwantedprevention.org/home>.

All of these three resources differ in minor ways from those that we have planned. First, none of them are accessible on the Tor network—though the Lucy Faithfull Foundation has plans to have its "Get Help" website hosted there, and we are in discussions with them about this. The information on both "Get Help" and "PedoHelp" are based on European law and contain some advice that is not legally accurate in the United States. The "Help Wanted" website, although based in the United States, is targeted only at adolescents. Therefore, none of these projects fills the gap that we intend that this project will.

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.** There is a gaping hole in current research about whether fictional outlets, dolls, or robots could help reduce CSA by providing a victimless outlet for the sexual interests of those who might otherwise offend against real children—or whether these would only such compound the problem. Although this gap was acknowledged at the Moore Center Symposium on Child Sexual Abuse prevention held in April 2019, we remain the only group promoting and seeking to raise funds for such research, and opposing new state and federal laws that would impede this vital research.
2. **Engaging with diverse stakeholders whose voices are not normally heard.** In May 2019 we held a Multi-Stakeholder Dialogue on Internet Platforms, Sexual Content, & Child Protection that brought together Internet platform and stakeholder representatives in a private expert-led seminar and open discussion about best practices to protect children without infringing the human rights of children or others. By facilitating a dialogue with experts and stakeholders who are normally excluded from the development of child protection policies by Internet platforms, industry participants learned how to make these policies more evidence-informed, and more compliant with human rights standards. The result will be improved accuracy in the moderation of sexual content: removing more material that is harmful to children and has no protected expressive value, and less material such as lawful, accurate information on child sexual abuse prevention.
3. **Addressing the human rights impacts of child protection laws and policies.** ProStasia Foundation was formed in April 2018 one week after FOSTA was signed into law. In February 2019, we filed an amicus curiae brief in the pending federal litigation to have the law FOSTA declared unconstitutional. As our brief points out,

FOSTA has failed in protecting children and has in fact done the opposite: resulting in the censorship of legitimate information about sex, including sex education information, and online communities involved in child sexual abuse prevention. We are the only child protection organization that has actively exposed the human rights impacts of this law.

4. **Communicating the results of our research and engagement to policymakers, platforms, and the public.** We have met with major Internet companies to discuss our concerns, both one-on-one and at major industry events. We have also engaged in advocacy with lawmakers including all 100 U.S. Senators. Our engagement with professionals and the general public includes our blog (to which we have posted 20 articles in the past year), and our monthly podcast/vodcast series, featuring half-hour interviews with experts in sexuality and child sexual abuse prevention.

Project coordinator

The coordinator for this project will be our Executive Director, Jeremy Malcolm. Dr Malcolm has significant experience of managing multiple complex, international and multi-stakeholder projects. He has raised and managed six-figure project budgets, working with donors such as Ford Foundation, Open Society Foundations, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), and Google. While employed at Consumers International as Senior Policy Officer (2008-2014), he coordinated its global program Consumers in the Digital Age and was responsible for spearheading proposed revisions to the United Nations Guidelines for Consumer Protection. While he was Senior Global Policy Analyst at the Electronic Frontier Foundation (2014-2018), he led the development of the Manila Principles on Intermediary Liability, which have become an aspirational global standard on that topic. Dr Malcolm graduated with degrees in Law (with Honours) and Commerce in 1995 from Murdoch University, and completed his PhD thesis at the same University in 2008 on the topic of Internet governance. Dr Malcolm's background is as an information technology and intellectual property lawyer and IT consultant. He is admitted to the bars of the Supreme Court of Western Australia (1995), High Court of Australia (1996) and Appellate Division of New York (2009). He is a member of the Multistakeholder Advisory Group of the United Nations Internet Governance Forum.