

Conference Paper: The Internet and Pedophilia

The Internet has revolutionized the way we conduct business, educate children and adults, socialize and communicate with others and the way we entertain ourselves. It provides quick and easy access to scores of information about a variety of subjects. But the Internet has also opened up new channels for sexual predators to reach their prey.

Pedophilia is nothing new. “While the common pedophiles or molesters used to risk exposure when they watched children at the playground,” says Pete Gessford, a Perry Township, Ohio officer who serves on the town’s Electronic Crimes taskforce. “They now have a certain factor of anonymity when committing the same crime online” (Thompson).

According to Julian Sher, investigative journalist and author of *One Child at a Time*, “The Internet doesn’t create pedophilia, but it certainly does fuel it.” Sher claims, “The Internet drags in those who probably wouldn’t have done what they did otherwise” (Bethune).

A U.S. Department of Justice study found that, of the estimated 24 million children online, one in five has received unwanted sexual solicitations, with teen girls being the primary target. Other high-risk youth populations include gay or lesbian kids, kids from broken homes, kids with an alcoholic parent, kids with preexisting learning disabilities, behavioral disorders and anxiety issues.

According to Retired Federal Bureau of Investigation agent Kenneth V. Lanning, who spent twenty years researching violent crimes, pedophiles fall into two categories. The first “are situational-motivated sex offenders, who tend to be

more impulsive and opportunistic. Although they typically prefer adult sexual partners, situational-motivated offenders prey on children as a substitute, due to either lack of self-esteem or inability to find an adult partner” (Siverts). The second category is comprised of “preferential-motivated offenders who tend to be more ritualistic and premeditated when committing their crimes. Unlike situational-type offenders, they do have an affirmative sexual preference for children and typically are better educated, have higher socio-economic backgrounds, and may be respected members of the community” (Siverts).

As the Dateline NBC show ‘To Catch a Predator’ so effectively demonstrates, pedophiles come in all shapes and sizes—they include doctors, teachers, lawyers and military personnel.

Social Networking Sites

Social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook are a great place to connect with other people, share pictures, music, interests and other creative content. Sadly, social networking sites can also be a place sexual predators look for vulnerable children to prey on. While older people might get on the Internet to perform a specific task, like make airline reservations or write an e-mail, then get off, “America's youth use social networks as virtual community centers, a place to go and sit for a while (sometimes hours)” (Hempel 1).

Since its January 2004 launch, MySpace has grown astronomically. The site currently has some 300 million users, about a quarter registered as minors, according to the company. “MySpace is now second in the United States

among all websites by total page views, behind only Yahoo, according to comScore Media Metrix” (“MySpace Limits Adult-Teen Contact”).

While young people flock to the site, many parents have concerns about the content their kids post and the people they meet. MySpace has “recently become a target of parents, schools and law enforcement officials concerned that teens that hang out at MySpace can fall victim to sexual predators” (“MySpace Limits Adult-Teen Contact”).

And their concerns have merit. According to one Pew Internet survey, social network users who create profiles or post photos online are more likely to be contacted by strangers than those who don’t, and that “girls are more likely than boys to have unwanted encounters online” (Smith 2). But others argue that meeting new people (also known as strangers) is the purpose of social networking sites. MySpace in particular has marketed itself as an almost dating site—a place for single people to meet other Singles.

Connecticut Attorney General Richard Blumenthal called MySpace “a parent’s worst nightmare” after reports that “as many as seven underage girls in one region of the state were fondled or had consensual sex with adult men they’d met through the site, and who had lied about their age” (Poulsen, “Scenes From MySpace Backlash”).

MySpace doesn’t allow those under the age of 14 to create profiles on the site, and 14 and 15-year-olds “automatically have their pages set as private—viewable only by friends they designate” (Yang).

Both MySpace and Facebook rely on users to report their age honestly, but without the means to verify that users are who they say they are, these sites can do little to stop predators from misrepresenting themselves online.

There are plenty of ways to keep minors out of adult-only activities in face-to-face interactions. You must be 17 to get into R-rated movies, 18 to vote and serve your country, and 21 to drink. Even without checking your driver's license, most liquor store clerks can tell the difference between a 13-year-old and a 33-year-old. It's not so easy on the web.

Adult-only online gambling and pornographic sites have had some success preventing minors from entering the site by verifying a user's age and identity with credit card details. But when it comes to keeping adults out of kids-only activities and areas of the web, it is much tougher.

The ability to be anyone you want—any age, race or gender—is what makes the social networking site so appealing to pedophiles.

“Another safeguard was announced in June (2007), when MySpace began requiring that users over 18 must know the full name or e-mail of a 14 or 15-year-old before contacting them” (Yang). *Wired* reported in July 2007, that “MySpace has located and deleted a stunning 29, 000 registered sex offenders from its site” (Poulsen “29,000 Sex Offenders Found on MySpace”).

Facebook, which offers a little more privacy protection than MySpace, has seen few pedophiles. “This has been a deliberate design choice for us,” Facebook's chief privacy officer says. Since it was founded in February 2004, Facebook has become the sixth most trafficked site in the United States, with

more than 87 million active users, and roughly 250,000 new registrations per day.

Both MySpace and Facebook have a “friend” system, where users must confirm or deny another user’s “friend” request before they can be added to each other’s friend lists. But once you’re a confirmed “friend” nothing is private. “Friends” can easily access the profiles of friends of friends. Facebook recently added a feature that displays the names and profile pictures of a few “People You May Know” on the home page along with the option to add them as a friend. It’s as if the site promotes acquiring larger and larger circles of online “friends.” When users value the quantity of online friends rather than the quality, the word “friend” seems to lose meaning. It’s not uncommon for social network users to have hundreds of online friends, but only a handful they know in person.

Chat Rooms and Instant Messaging

In addition to social networking sites, many kids use online sources of communication such as visiting Chat Rooms or Instant Messaging (IM). Tech-savvy kids are great multitaskers—they can do their homework while simultaneously visiting Chat Rooms, IMing their friends, updating their MySpace profile and searching for new music.

Chat Rooms are websites that offer “real time” conversations between multiple parties simultaneously. Chat Rooms frequently revolve around a particular theme, or are geared towards a specific group of people (kids, adults, gays, movie buffs, etc.), but virtually anyone can join the online discussion. Many Chat Rooms allow users to create avatars (a graphical representation of a

person), profiles (which can contain personal information such as a user's real name, screen name or e-mail address), and most Chat Rooms offer a private, one-on-one conversation feature.

Instant Messaging (IM) is software that also allows "real time" conversations between people with the same software who are online at the same time.

"Instant Messaging is safer than Chat Rooms because you can set up a 'Buddy List' of people you know. If someone from outside your list tries to contact you an alert will pop up, and you can refuse to chat and block that person from any further contact. Chat Rooms are open to all kinds of anonymous people. Even if the site is for "kids only," there is no way of knowing who you are actually chatting with" ("Being Safe on the Internet").

To get a better idea of how easy it is for adults to access kids-only areas of the web, I visited the web's largest free chat site, a website called #1 Chat Avenue. I clicked on the "Kid's Chat" room, entered a gender-neutral nickname and a fake birthday that would make me 13 years old. No other identification or age verification is needed. Entering a kid's Chat Room was just as easy at another chat site, Chat Family. I only observed the Chat Rooms, but the explicit nature of the conversations in these "kid's only" Chat Rooms is appalling. Either kids are growing up a lot faster than they did some ten years ago, or these weren't kids chatting at all.

It's easy to fall victim to sexual predators online. Without cues that face-to-face communication provides—like facial expressions, tone of voice, gender and

age, children and adults have trouble gauging a person's true identity and intentions.

Child Pornography

“According to authorities, there is an unprecedented growth in child pornography in the United States largely because of the Internet, which provides child sexual predators with a virtually undetectable means of sending and receiving illicit images of children” (Armagh).

The Supreme Court defines child pornography as “a visual depiction of any kind, including a drawing, cartoon, sculpture, or painting, photograph, film, video, or computer-generated image or picture, whether made or produced by electronic, mechanical, or other means, of sexually explicit conduct, where it depicts a minor engaging in sexually explicit conduct and is obscene, or depicts an image that is, or appears to be, of a minor engaging in graphic bestiality, sadistic or masochistic abuse, or sexual intercourse, including genital-genital, oral-genital, anal-genital, or oral-anal, whether between persons of the same or opposite sex, and such depiction lacks serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value” (“What is Child Pornography?”).

This sexually explicit material comes in a variety of formats and can be transmitted in a variety of ways online.

Though the age of whom is considered a minor varies some from state to state, every U.S. state has laws against possessing, reproducing or distributing pornography with minors. Since it first ruled in 1982 that the government could ban sexual images of children with no serious literary or artistic value, the

Supreme Court has expanded its view of what constitutes child porn. There is some debate now over computer-generated or virtual children engaged in sex acts. Some argue that if the children are virtual or computer-generated, the sex acts are virtual and should not be illegal. Others argue that virtual or not, the effect is the same.

There is also some debate over the effects that viewing child pornography has on pedophiles. While some might think that looking at child pornography does little harm, and may even satisfy the urges of pedophiles so they will be less inclined to commit sex crimes against children, others feel there is a direct connection between viewing child pornography and committing sex crimes against children.

“Looking doesn’t deter doing; study after study shows that 35 to 40 percent of those arrested for pornography possession are also hands-on abusers” (Bethune).

To demonstrate how viewing child pornography does not deter, but rather entices pedophiles to commit sex crimes, look no further than the case of Michael Briere. “In his confession to the rape and murder of 10-year-old Holly Jones, Briere told the court he had fantasized about molesting a girl for ‘maybe a year or two.’ He kept alive what he called his ‘dark secret’ on the web: ‘The more I saw it, the more I longed for it in my heart.’ On the night of May 12, 2003, “I viewed some material beforehand. I got excited. I really wanted to do it. I really wanted have sex with a child. I just came out of my place and she was there.” Forty minutes later Holly was dead” (Bethune).

What many might find surprising is that many of the pornographic images of children circulating the web were the result of online enticement, where children have been coaxed into photographing their own bodies for a friend met on the Internet. According to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), “as much as 10 percent of their seized material comes from older children who have taken compromising pictures of themselves”(Bethune).

Justin Berry was one such victim of online enticement, pulled into the world of child pornography. “When he was 13, Berry was sent a free webcam by an online predator, and agreed to take off his shirt for \$50. That seemingly innocent act started Berry down the seedy and dangerous path of online child pornography that culminated with him beginning his own online sex site” (Muir). Many experts, including online watchdog group Perverted Justice, say that there is no legitimate reason why a minor should have a webcam, especially in their bedroom.

Shutting down child pornography websites presents a variety of challenges for law enforcement officials. Law enforcement and government agencies simply do not have adequate resources to put kiddie porn peddlers out of business for good. The FBI estimates that there are currently over 100,000 child porn sites, “capable of bring in more than \$3 billion annually” (Luders). And the threat of fines and jail time does little to deter pedophiles from child pornography, as they employ many techniques to prevent detection. Pedophiles and child pornographers can use anonymous proxy servers to mask their IP address, URL encoding to hide the actual location of the illicit content, and

anonymous payment methods (Luders). Predators may also pay for child porn website memberships with stolen credit cards. Tracking these payment methods proves tedious and time-consuming for law enforcement (Luders).

While the U.S. and many other countries impose hefty fines and serious jail time for those caught with child porn, not all countries have laws against child pornography. This presents yet another hindrance for law enforcement.

Fortunately, Internet technology cuts both ways. “While the web has fed the boom in sexual exploitation, it has also given law-enforcement authorities powerful weapons to fight back” (Nordland and Bartholet). Two men were arrested in March 2006 “in the first federal cases involving child molesters on MySpace, and federal law enforcers shut down a site streaming live sexual abuse of toddlers, charging 27 people with child pornography” (“Beware Child Predators”).

While the threat of pedophiles on the Internet is a dangerous one, it’s important to keep in mind that the bulk of young sexual abuse victims know and trust their attackers. Victimizerers are often members of the family, people they thought were their friends, neighbors, boyfriends, girlfriends, clergy or childcare workers.

Works Cited

- Armagh, Daniel. "A Safety Net for the Internet: Protecting Our Children." Juvenile Justice 1 (1998). 5 Mar. 2008
<<http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org/jjjournal/jjjournal598/net.html>>.
- Baker, James E., and Melanie Krebs-Pilotti. "Internet Pandemic? The Not-So-Secret and Expanding World of Child Pornography." Federal Lawyer 53 (2006): 50-56. Wilson Web. Jen Library, Savannah. 5 Mar. 2008. Keyword: Child Pornography.
- "Being Safe on the Internet." Think Quest New York City. 8 Mar. 2008
<http://www.tqnyc.org/students/being_safe.php?s=P>.
- Bethune, Brian. "The Secret Network of Child Predators." Maclean's 120 (2007): 32+. Wilson Web. Jen Library, Savannah. 5 Mar. 2008. Keyword: Child sex abuse.
- "Beware Child Predators." Informationweek 1087 (2006): 35-40. Wilson Web. Jen Library, Savannah. 8 Mar. 2008. Keyword: Pedophiles, cyberbullying.
- Luders, Wade. "Child Pornography Web Sites: Techniques Used to Evade Law Enforcement." FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin 76 (2007): 17-21. Wilson Web. Jen Library, Savannah. 5 Mar. 2008. Keyword: Child Pornography.
- Muir, David. "All Children Vulnerable to Online Predators." ABC News. 6 Apr. 2006. 7 Mar. 2008
<<http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/Story?id=1812054&page=1>>.
- "MySpace Limits Adult-Teen Contact." Wired 21 June 2006. 4 Mar. 2008
<<http://www.wired.com/culture/lifestyle/news/2006/06/71216>>.

Nordland, Ron, and Jeffrey Bartholet. "The Web's Dark Secret." Newsweek 137 (2001): 44-51. Wilson Web. Jen Library, Savannah. 8 Mar. 2008. Keyword: Pedophilia.

"On Sexual Predation." Issues in Science and Technology 20 (2004): 46. Wilson Web. Jen Library, Savannah. 8 Mar. 2008. Keyword: Predators.

Poulsen, Kevin. "29,000 Sex Offenders Found on MySpace." Wired. 24 July 2007. 9 Mar. 2008 <<http://blog.wired.com/27bstroke6/2007/07/29000-sex-offen.html>>.

Poulsen, Kevin. "MySpace Predator Caught by Code." Wired. 16 Oct. 2008. 9 Mar. 2008 <<http://www.wired.com/science/discoveries/news/2006/10/71948?currentPage=1>>.

Poulsen, Kevin. "Scenes from the MySpace Backlash." Wired. 27 Feb. 2006. 5 Mar. 2008 <<http://www.wired.com/politics/law/news/2006/02/70254>>.

Ropelato, Jerry. "Tricks Pornographers Play." Family Safe Media. 9 Mar. 2008 <http://www.familysafemedia.com/tricks_pornographers_play.html>.

Siverts, Jennifer B. "Punishing Thoughts Too Close to Reality: a New Solution to Protect Children From Pedophiles." Thomas Jefferson Law Review 27 (2005): 393-420. Wilson Web. Jen Library, Savannah. 9 Mar. 2008. Keyword: Pedophilia.

Small, Kevonne, and Janine M. Zweig. "Sexual Victimization of Youth." The Prevention Researcher 14 (2007): 3-5. Wilson Web. Jen Library, Savannah. 5 Mar. 2008. Keyword: Child sex abuse.

Smith, Aaron. "Teens and Online Stranger Contact." Pew Internet and American Life Project. 14 Oct. 2007. 5 Mar. 2008

<http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Stranger_Contact_Data_Memo.pdf>.

Thompson, Charles. "Taking Off the Masks: Software Helps Police Uncover Criminals Who Operate Online." American City & County 120 (2005): 22.

Wilson Web. Jen Library, Savannah. 5 Mar. 2008. Keyword: Child pornography.

Yang, Jia Lynn. "Can This Man Make MySpace Safe for Kids?" Fortune 154 (2006): 32.

Wilson Web. Jen Library, Savannah. 5 Mar. 2008. Keyword: Child Predators.