UK Safer Internet Centre

APPG on Social Media | appg

The APPG on Social Media inquiry:

"Selfie Generation": What's behind the rise of self-generated indecent images of children online?

1. Introduction

1.1 The WePROTECT Global Threat Assessment 2019 stated: "Large numbers of children are participating in the production of erotic or sexualised images of themselves, which can be shared more widely [online] or harvested and redistributed by those with a sexual interest in children"[1].

1.2 Self-generated indecent images of children is a wide-ranging term, which, in the context of this inquiry, is imagery produced of children when offenders groom and coerce them into sexual activities via a webcam or livestream or capture these images from live streams without any interaction with a child. It is also important to recognise that self-generated indecent images can also be generated through "sexting" where one child shares an image of themselves with a peer or through chat-based conversations where images are then shared following this interaction. Links have been made between this type of online criminality affecting children, and social networks[2].

1.3 The purpose of this inquiry by the APPG for Social Media is to make recommendations that will help to assist Government and Parliament with the complexities of regulating in the digital space and highlight best practice in how to respond to self-generated indecent images of children.

2. Background

2.1 According to statistics from the Internet Watch Foundation's (IWF's) 2019 Annual Report[3], less than 1% of child sexual abuse images and videos they removed in the last year were hosted on social media networks.

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[1] https://www.weprotect.org/ Global Threat Assessment 2019, pg29.
[2] https://www.nspcc.org.uk/globalassets/documents/online-safety/children-sending-receiving-sexual-messages.pdf
[3] https://www.iwf.org.uk/report/iwf-2019-annual-report-zero-tolerance

2.2 In the same year, the IWF also confirmed that they had acted on a record 132,700 webpages containing child sexual abuse images and videos and reviewed over 260,000 reports including reports from members of the public and proactive searches. Most of this content discovered by the IWF was on image hosting boards (84%) and cyberlockers (6%) hosted outside of the UK.

2.3 Worryingly, a third of those webpages that were removed, contained "self-generated indecent images of children" and 76% of those pages were confirmed as displaying girls aged 11-13 years old.

2.4 The UK Government is currently proposing "world-leading online harms legislation" seeking to make the UK the safest place in the world to go online. In April 2019, the Government published its proposals in the Online Harms White Paper. They proposed the introduction of a new statutory duty of care and a new regulator to oversee companies' compliance with the new regulatory framework[4].

2.5 On 12 February 2020, the Government published its initial response to the Online Harms White Paper consultation[5] and announced that it is "minded to appoint Ofcom" as the new regulator for online harms." The Government also reaffirmed its commitment to producing a new interim Code of Practice and guidance on how companies within the scope of the regulation should tackle Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation (CSEA) content and activity.

2.6 The purpose of the interim Code of Practice for CSEA is to bridge the gap and incentivise companies into taking early action before the regulator becomes operational. The initial response also stated that it is the Government's expectation that the regulator will set clear expectations around imagery that may not be visibly illegal, but is linked to child sexual exploitation and abuse and further states that the Government will be considering how to further address this issue in the statutory duty of care.

2.7 The Government has yet to confirm which companies will be in scope of the legislation, but the interim response to the white paper confirmed that it would apply to companies that provide services or use functionality on their websites which facilitate the sharing of user generated content or user interactions. Full details will be published in the Government's response later this autumn.

2.8 The online harms white paper also included proposals for empowering users to manage their online safety, and that of their children. The White Paper stated that users felt there was "insufficient support in place to support them online" and that users currently "feel vulnerable online." The initial Government response also set out that the Online Harms proposal would assume a higher level of protection for children than the typical adult user. The expectation from Government is that companies would use a range of appropriate tools to keep children safe online.

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[4] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/793360/Online_Harms_White_Paper.pdf
[5] https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/online-harms-white-paper/public-feedback/online-harms-white-paper-initial-consultation-response

2.9 The initial response concluded that education and awareness are key to supporting children to navigate the digital world and the statutory relationships, sex and health education curriculum in England will teach them the rules and principles for keeping safe online. The initial response also set out plans for a media literacy strategy to be published this winter with the aim of co-ordinating a strategic approach to online media literacy education and awareness for children, young people and adults.

2.10   Due to the impact of Covid-19, schools have been given greater flexibility of when they implement the new RSHE curriculum in England[6] the inquiry will touch on the importance of RSHE in schools and explore what impact the new curriculum could have on improving online safety and in tackling the rise in self-generated indecent images of children.

3. Definition of self-generated content

3.1 **The purpose of this inquiry is to explore the factors behind online self-generated images and the reasons why there has been a significant increase in self-generated content online, particularly featuring 11-13-year-old girls.**

The inquiry will focus on:
   a. How this content is created, by whom, and how it is distributed on the internet.
   b. The actions and response of the technology industry, NGOs, and Government to date.
   c. Consider the challenges in the removal of this content, which can span from the most extreme and egregious Category A content to content that is not necessarily illegal
   d. What targeted education and awareness initiatives there are/have been on this issue, or lack thereof, and what the potential impact is.
   e. The potential impact of the implementation of the RSHE programme in schools in England, and
   f. The response in the devolved administrations.

3.2 This inquiry will use the internationally recognised Luxembourg Guidelines terminology for its definition of self-generated sexual content/material involving children.[7]

3.3 The Guidelines clearly set out the complexity of this challenge. It states: "Children and adolescents under the age of 18 may take compromising pictures or videos of themselves. While this conduct itself may not be illegal or socially unacceptable, there are risks that any such content can be circulated online or offline to harm children or be used as a basis to extort favours."

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[6] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/relationships-education-relationships-and-sex-education-rse-and-health-education/implementation-of-relationships-education-relationships-and-sex-education-and-health-education-2020-to-2021
[7] http://luxembourgguidelines.org/english-version/ pg. 43-44

3.4 The Luxembourg guidelines are also careful to warn against blaming the children who produce this imagery. It states: "There is a potential risk that using "self-generated" or "self-directed" as opposed to "coercive", since this might imply the child is to blame for the abuse that may result from the generation of those pictures or other material. Although children, particularly adolescents may be willing to produce sexual content, this does not mean that they consent to or are responsible for the exploitative or abusive use and/or distribution of these images. Therefore, they should never face criminal liability for their role in producing or making the material within this context."

3.5 This position was further enhanced by the Lanzarote Committee of the Council of Europe on 6 June 2019, which produced a high-level opinion report[8] on the topic.

3.6 The legal basis for the assessment of child sexual abuse and exploitation imagery in the UK, is determined by the Sentencing Council Guidelines (2014)[9].

Category	Description
A	Image involves sexual penetrative activity; images involve sexual activity with an animal or sadism
B	Images involve sexual, non-penetrative sexual activity
C	Other indecent images not falling under Category A or B
Not illegal	The image is not deemed to be illegal.

4. Terms of reference

4.1 The purpose of this inquiry by the APPG for Social Media is to make recommendations that will help to assist Government and Parliament with the complexities of regulating in this space and highlight best practice in how to respond to self-generated content or material concerning children.

4.2 The inquiry will make recommendations regarding how the issue of self-generated indecent images of children can be addressed as a matter of urgency, given the worrying trend towards the increasing amounts of this content being discovered online.

4.3 **The objectives:**

a. To assess the current scale of the threat and assess the current response including how Covid-19 may have changed the nature of the threat to children online.

b. To understand how and where this imagery is produced, where it is located and make suggestions for how the wider technology industry can respond and address the threat.

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[8] https://rm.coe.int/opinion-of-the-lanzarote-committee-on-child-sexually-suggestive-or-exp/168094e72c
[9] https://www.sentencingcouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Sexual-offences-definitive-guideline-Web.pdf Pg 75

c. To identify the current initiatives that are in place that assist children with navigating the online environment safely and how these can be furthered to give more support to children and their parents and carers. This includes educating children about not onwardly sharing any imagery that has been sent to them and the importance of reporting this imagery.

d. To assess the risks involved with a delay to the implementation of the new Relationships, Sex and Health Education curriculum in England could have on children's ability to navigate the internet safely.

e. Make recommendations to Government ahead of the publication of its online harms' legislation about the future regulatory environment for child protection.

f. Seek to identify any potential gaps in current legislation in dealing with this issue.

5. Evidence gathering

5.1 The inquiry will launch in November 2020 and aim to conclude its evidence gathering process by May 2021. We will conduct four oral evidence sessions with the intention to hear evidence in the following areas:

1. Steps currently undertaken by technology companies (social media, hardware providers and others) to prevent the spread of self-generated child sexual abuse imagery.

2. Current education and awareness raising initiatives about healthy relationships and navigating the online world responsibly.

3. Further technical steps and innovation that could be utilised in the future to help respond to the challenge.

4. The potential scope to further build upon the Government's approach including Education and Awareness raising initiatives and new proposals for regulation that improves child protection online.

6. Stakeholders

6.1 The APPG is keen to hear from all stakeholders with the relevant skills, knowledge, and expertise in this area. We are particularly keen to hear from:

• Children and young people themselves about their experiences online.

• Law Enforcement- National Crime Agency, NPCC, Association of PCCs

• Representatives from the internet industry and not just social media providers or those in scope of the online harms legislation. We would be particularly keen to hear from image hosting providers, cyberlocker providers and the hardware manufacturers.

- Charities and NGOs that work with children and young people or on their behalf.

- Academics and researchers working in this area.

- Education Unions

- Parents and Guardians.

- Teachers, Social Workers, and others who regularly work and engage with children and young people.

- Relevant Government Departments: Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport; Home Office; Department for Education, in particular.

Please respond by 5pm on 31ˢᵗ January 2021, with any written submissions. Please keep submissions to a maximum of four sides of A4 and provide relevant contact details and information about you and your organisation in response.

Submissions can be sent to: media@iwf.org.uk and titled: APPG Social Media Inquiry, Selfie Generation.