

## **Digitally Empowering Young People: The Podcast S1 E1 – A reality check from the Internet Watch Foundation**

*A Senior Analyst from the Internet Watch Foundation specialising in child sexual abuse will outline the problem and explain different categories of "self-generated" content.*

BR

### **Bibizadeh, Roxanne**

Welcome to a new podcast series that aims to draw awareness to the social and digital emergency of self-generated child sexual abuse imagery.

My name is Doctor Roxanne Bibizadeh and I'm a Research Fellow at the University of Warwick.

And I'm here today with Rosa, a senior analyst from the Internet Watch Foundation. I would like to begin by sharing some of the findings in the Internet Watch Foundation's recent annual report that helped to contextualize the importance of raising awareness.

78% of child sexual abuse imagery is self-generated.

58% of this imagery involves children aged 11 to 13, and in 2023 the Internet Watch Foundation reported 1058% increase in this imagery, featuring 7 to 10 year olds.

We hope this podcast series will be useful for parents, carers, educational professionals, social workers, victims and survivors, law enforcement agencies and policymakers.

We will also have a special episode that is aimed at young people at the end of this series.

Before we begin our discussion, listeners should be aware that this episode of the podcast series is not suitable for children and young people to hear, and we will be covering serious and distressing content which may be triggering.

So if you have experiences relating to this topic, you may wish to consider whether you want to listen to this episode.

The final episode in the series will be designed for children and young people, and feature contributions from all our special guests.

So thank you so much for joining us, Rosa.

I would like to begin by asking you to tell us a little bit about the Internet Watch Foundation.

R

### **Rosa**

Sure. Thank you for inviting me.

So the Internet watch Foundation essentially works to make the Internet a safer place, and that's where people who are using the Internet for companies that make

services for the Internet and for children who are on the Internet as well.

So our main duty is to investigate reports from the public that the public feel contains child sexual abuse material.

So every day, myself and the other analysts are looking at online reports of web pages that potentially feature children in sexual acts, anything from category A to C, and then we work to get those instances of child sexual abuse removed from the Internet by contacting ISPs and helping to get material physically removed from the Internet.

So essentially it's looking at child sexual abuse every day.

And like you mentioned in your, just now regarding our statistics.

A lot of that material is self-generated.

BR

**Bibizadeh, Roxanne**

A key aim of this podcast is to draw awareness, so I think an important place to start is to ask if you could define what self-generated child sexual abuse imagery is and why this term is problematic.

R

**Rosa**

Yeah. So I mean it is a difficult term to explain because what it covers is so broad. But if we take it back to basics, it's essentially a term that's a descriptor of how an image was created.

It's essentially saying that that image was self-taken by a child, but it that's not enough to leave it just like that, we need to dive into it a bit further because the term itself doesn't give any indicator to the causation behind the creation of that image.

So it's a very broad term and we've seen differences in how it manifests itself across different age groups and also across different levels of consent.

Regarding the image creation, so it's probably helpful if I go through a couple of examples to really define further what a piece of self-generated child sexual abuse would look like.

So one example could be you have a 15 year old, a female who has taken a nude image of herself.

She's taken it. Consensually it was her decision to take it.

But various things may have happened and down the line, that image has been shared without her consent, so that you would have an instance of a self-taken image taken with consent, but has been shared or leaked without her consent.

Another example is you may have a 7 year old girl or boy who has decided to live stream or broadcast themselves from home in their bedroom and they may be

dancing.

They may be playing games or something, and a predator may approach that child and coerce them to perform sexual acts, and at that point, anyone listening to this might think what surely that doesn't happen, but it does and we see so many instances of it.

And here what's created as a result of that interaction online is a piece of self-generated content.

A child was performing in front of a device was coerced by an online predator to perform sexually, and in doing so, that whole interaction was recorded.

So there's no abuse of present, but the child is being abused remotely.

It can take a while to get your head around that type of concept and then another example of a piece of self-generated child sexual abuse material could be a 17 year old boy is approached online by another online user and maybe in a game or an app and say, you know, in a sexual conversation might start and then nudes are exchanged. And so, you know, the 17-year-old boy might take a nude image of himself and send it to someone he believes is interested in him. And then that conversation turns nasty, and that boy is blackmailed or extorted for further images. Further nude images more explicit images, but that image again was taken by the child, but the context behind it is that further images may have been created through extortion, so hopefully that explains the different sort of causes and instances behind a piece of self-generated content and how this you know one term doesn't necessarily suit all of the instances because you might have a 7 year old child who's under a very different set of circumstances to a 16 year old child.

And so it's extremely broad and we don't feel that the term really covers each sort of section of criminality appropriately.

But the important thing to take away is that there's a scale of coercion here.

There's children that are groomed and coerced to take more material, more self-generated material and that in some cases there is an element of consensual taking, particularly amongst older children.

And so it can get very blurry and suddenly this term self-generated doesn't necessarily fit for purpose anymore.

BR

**Bibizadeh, Roxanne**

Well, thank you for explaining the complexity of the term self-generated, but also for informing us of these very distressing examples.

I wondered if you could also explain for our listeners the different categories used to define this content.

So clarifying the distinctions in categories A,B&C.

R

**Rosa**

Yeah, absolutely.

So when the IWF grades material we always grade it into a category A, category B and category C. So I'll give you some examples of how that might overlay on top of a self-generated image of CSAM.

So category C images is typically an image that contains some sort of sexual posing, and in the context of a self-generated image that might be a nude selfie it would be probably a good example of that where a male or female child is standing naked the genitals are exposed and it's like an erotic pose that would be a category C image and we do see a lot of those that are online and being reported by the public and being found proactively and a category B image is a step more serious in that category B image could reflect sexual activity, potentially with another child or masturbation, and so those are typical scenarios for a category B image.

And yes, we do see both boys and girls within self-generated content and either interacting with each other sexually and that being recorded and also children masturbating often on demand by whoever is the remote abuser who is recording the material and asking the child to perform and at the top of the scale we have a category A image which is typically an image depicting penetration.

So that could be penetration of the vagina or anus and or it could also reflect bestiality or sadism, or humiliation and degradation.

And unfortunately, we do see all instances of those things I've just mentioned in self-generated material, which is probably quite shocking to hear.

But I think it's important for people to hear that.

BR

**Bibizadeh, Roxanne**

That certainly very harrowing.

Could you help us understand why the online threat for children has changed and why there has been such a dramatic increase in self-generated child sexual abuse?

R

**Rosa**

Yeah, potentially.

I mean, I think it's a very difficult question to answer because they're again, there are multiple factors at play here.

I think first of all, it's important to say that the analyst team at the Internet Watch Foundation has got a lot better at finding this material.

There's a lot of it out there.

We know where to look and a lot of the images that we find are reposted and

reposted and reposted and they never really go away.

So there is a lot of material there and just so the spread of the material itself and the immortality of the material itself is a threat.

But then other reasons for why this material has potentially increased is a lot more children have devices now and a lot of younger children have devices now.

And often the devices are in a private place in the bedroom or in a domestic setting at home.

It's fairly normal to have a child with a device, whether that's a tablet or a phone or a computer with a webcam, and that is certainly the portal into this world of self-generated content, of course and, you know, 20 years ago, when I was a child, that wasn't a thing. It didn't exist at all, so it's certainly the increase in devices, and I think there's also a popularity in terms of this trend for broadcasting or showing yourself on the Internet. It's a fairly popular thing for a child to do to want to broadcast themselves in just a casual setting, whether they're dancing or talking to friends or showing something that they've done.

But it does have a sinister side, and it can turn sinister if you have a online predator involved who's waiting to ensnare a child and waiting to coerce them to perform sexually.

And there are multiple platforms and apps out there in the public domain that children can download that enable them to broadcast and live stream themselves and I think it would be fair to say some of those apps may have questionable safeguarding measures in place, they may appear and disappear and be used one day and not the next. And come and go.

But there are multiple opportunities for children to be as connected as they ever have been on the Internet.

And that's not always a safe space to be in, because they are of course vulnerable and not perceptive when it comes to threats and we could also say that perhaps offenders are more skilled now at how to get children to perform sexually for them and how to manipulate them and the right thing to say the right thing to ask for, to create that type of relationship.

And it might also be easy to think that to get a child that you don't know who's 1,000,000 miles away in another part of the world to perform sexually, you might have to spend a long time grooming them and building a relationship.

And I think what we've seen infers that that isn't the case, that in an environment online where you have a child who's broadcasting and an offender who's watching, it can take minutes for an offender to make a sexual request of the child and the child perform that request. That doesn't have to be a long standing grooming process as far as the offenders concerned it's an instant win.

And so, you know, perhaps it would be fair to say that the offenders are learning what works and what doesn't when it comes to grooming children to performing sexually. So I think it's a mixture of all of those things.

**BR Bibizadeh, Roxanne**

And alongside how the threat is changed in the recent Internet Watch Foundation report, it was particularly alarming to read that there had been a dramatic increase in imagery featuring 7- to 10-year-olds. Why are we seeing the age range lowering?

**R Rosa**

It is a disturbing trend.

And I think again there are multiple reasons behind it.

I think children are perhaps given devices at a younger age now, and are tech savvy at a younger age now and 7, 8, 9, 10 year olds know how to use apps and are left alone in rooms with devices and we could also say perhaps there is an appetite for material that features younger children.

And I think it's also fair to say that 7 to 10 year olds are less sophisticated at threat detection.

And I think that's always been the case.

Of course, younger children are more vulnerable.

They might not understand that someone is recording them when they're doing dares or performing sexually, and they might not have a sense that what's happening in the moment. That their sexual performance or flashing their genitals to camera.

It exists in that moment only, but that's not the case, because we know that that's recorded and then exists for years and years on the Internet.

And why would a 7 or 8 year old have the sophistication to think that that could be that could be the case?

Of course they don't.

They're just having fun in the moment and just being silly in the moment.

And so perhaps that makes them a better target for offenders because they are and less perceptive of the threat.

And I think it's also really important to mention that the vast majority of this self-generated content that we're seeing is taking place in a bedroom or a home setting or a bathroom. And so those children feel very, very safe in their environment, and there's typically no safer place for a child than in their own bedroom. And so the guard is down, the child is already feeling secure, physically secure and I think that's something that offenders probably play on with younger children as well. There's no

physical abuser in the room, so the child feels safe, and so perhaps it's then easier to exploit.

You know, we haven't talked about COVID either, I mean, in some countries around the world, I think children were given devices to take home and continue home learning and suddenly you've got children who have devices at home who didn't have them at home before. And so lots of things to consider when it comes to understanding why the age range is lowering.

BR

**Bibizadeh, Roxanne**

This would of course be a great concern for our listeners.

I wonder if you could tell us from your experience what are the different forms of manipulation, coercion and deception used.

R

**Rosa**

I can certainly discuss that based on what I've seen and over many sort of many years of looking at these images and videos, I think something I've just mentioned is almost the first, the first form of I guess you could call it a form of manipulation is that these children are at home, they're in a safe place and their guard is down. That is that one of the most common denominator in almost every piece of self-generated content.

And so that is a key thing that allows this remote offender to tap into the child and get them to perform other things that are used. Typically you'll see an offender engage in some kind of dares game or some kind of game that involves the child's performing sexually whether that's taking clothes off or doing something for points or followers, or likes and often that will then escalate to the point where it's sort of you're into maybe category B material.

And we've seen many instances of where children are asking for more likes or more followers in order to perform more serious sexual acts, this is more common amongst older teens, maybe 11 to 13 age bracket where they are a little more savvy as to, you know, maybe what's going on and maybe having more of an understanding of sex and what sex means.

And you know, it could be the offender could easily have created if they're kind of grooming the child over a longer period of time, created a sort of a sexual relationship, which may have started with the harmless exchange of imagery and might have escalated into something more serious or the complete opposite, it might just be you know no tactics at all.

It might just be finding an image of a child online and just extorting them for more and saying, look, I've got this image of you. If you don't give me some more

images, I'm gonna send it to your teachers, to your parents, your family. And that coercion, extortion is definitely common amongst older children and can happen very quickly.

So that's that threat of exposure.

It's definitely a form of coercion and manipulation, and the offender knows that the child will very quickly be out of their depth once they have hold of a nude image of the child, they can exercise many threats, and so it's a lot, and I think particularly amongst younger children, what's fairly clear to us analysts is that children, of course, are encouraged by popularity, are encouraged by encouragement and by positive reinforcement.

And you'll see offenders and any instances where we can hear audio and where we can read chat logs, we can see a friend is really praising the child and making them feel really grown up and encouraging them.

And you know, just making them think this is a good thing.

I'm having fun here and I'll do more because my audience likes what I'm doing.

And it's pretty hard to see as analysts, particularly after the event has taken place, you can see the level of manipulation upon a young child who just isn't sophisticated enough to know that they're being manipulated in this way.

There's a lot of deception and some of it happens quickly, and some of it happens over time.

But yeah, it's very unpleasant.

BR

### **Bibizadeh, Roxanne**

It's very disturbing to hear about the techniques used, but hopefully some power can be derived from sharing this knowledge.

Turning now to think about what happens after the abuse has occurred.

What are the barriers to disclosure and what can we do about this?

R

### **Rosa**

I think sex is hard to talk about.

It always has been for children and for adults, and I think that's the first barrier to overcome in that this is a real threat.

It's happening now.

It's happened already, and it probably will continue to happen and therefore it needs to be talked about.

And it's finding ways to encourage talking to a trusted adult about what's happened and understanding that you haven't been naughty or done something wrong, you have been exploited.



And as a child, you're vulnerable and you can't consent to your own abuse. And we need to start making the adults responsible here instead of the child carrying the burden of what's happened.

And somehow and I don't have the answers, but it's about making it normal and OK to talk about this type of sex conversation, particularly when the risk is at the child is internalizing so much damage and so much pain and they're not talking about it. So, talking, talking, talking always and you know making the child in an ideal world, the child won't even question where they need to go to for help.

That should be almost as obvious as knowing 999 is the emergency services number because this online threat is big and I think it should almost be ingrained in children. Like if this happens, I know what the threat is and if it happens to me, I know who to go to and who to talk to.

And I know that people are ready to talk to me and that they're not going to cringe or tell me I'm naughty for this having happened.

I think it's a bit of a societal change is needed and just really making children aware that it's OK to turn to someone about this.

BR

### **Bibizadeh, Roxanne**

And we know that alongside barriers to disclosure, research suggests that there is a lack of support available for victims who do disclose.

Do you agree and what needs to be done to address this?

R

### **Rosa**

It's a great question and I think my response to it is I don't know if there is a lack of support for victims as much as do children know that they are victims, is how I would answer that and do children who've had an online exchange with a remote abuser who's recorded them doing something sexual.

Do they know that they're a victim?

Do they know that interaction was recorded and is being posted on the Internet or to the child do they think that's something just happened 6:00 o'clock last night and they've forgotten about it.

And I think that needs to be considered in this space that a lot of children won't know the extent to which they have just been exploited by an offender.

And that's pretty horrific in itself really.

And to what extent if a child is aware that, let's say they have, let's go back to this scenario where the 15 or 16 year old who's taken a nude image of themselves and it's then, you know, they've taken it themselves consensually.

But it has been shared amongst their peers.

Does the child in that instance feel like a victim or is that sharing and spreading of nudes so common that it just feels like a rite of passage for the child?

And again, it's a horrific sort of conversation to be having because it feels like you should feel outraged and you should feel exploited. But if you sometimes, if you speak to children who are 15-16, it sounds like a normal part of their life, and so do they feel like victims at all. And those are the questions that I feel are almost more important to delve into.

And then when it comes to support for victims there are resources out there. But like I said in my answer, to the previous question, perhaps they're not at the forefront of children's minds enough. Are the apps and the technology that the children are using are the safeguarding measures right there, right next to the option for them to take the picture.

So is it as easy to access safeguarding help as it is as easy to take a nude selfie of yourself?

And I feel like those two things should be as easy, and I think, you know, the lack of the visibility of support is perhaps a barrier to disclosure maybe.

BR

### **Bibizadeh, Roxanne**

Utilising your professional experience, what do you think our listeners, parents, carers, educational professionals need to know about self generated child sexual abuse imagery and how might we help prevent the creation and distribution of this material?

R

### **Rosa**

I think we need there to be some more awareness of what can happen to a nude image or a sexualized image of a child.

So like I mentioned before, you might have a 7 year old who has shown their genitals to camera and thought nothing else of it because it was a sleepover and it was funny.

And they're all laughing.

And they had no sense that someone was capturing that and sending it to other predators and posting it online for other predators to add to their collections.

So there's a real lack of awareness about what can happen beyond the moment with a nude image. And that it can live forever on the Internet. Same with nude selfies amongst older children. I think there needs to be more understanding of the bad intentions. When I was at school in the 1980s and 90s, there was a big emphasis on saying no to strangers dialling 999, it was almost drilled into you. And I wonder whether this sort of online safety precautions need to be drilled into children to the

same extent that you think just before you decide that it might be funny, or it might be a good idea to flash, or do a sexual performance to someone you don't know. Think twice.

Just have a full understanding of what might happen or what the worst case scenario might be.

You know, because we were told in the 80s, if you get into a car with a stranger, they might drive you off and do something awful.

But do children these days think if I masturbate on camera to someone?

I don't know. It might be funny in the moment, or I might think it's a good idea at the time, but what's the worst that could happen? Where could that go? And I don't think we're quite at that stage where young people or even grown-ups are really thinking beyond the moment, so I think full awareness is probably what's needed to help support early intervention. Because you can't be afraid of something if you don't know what the worst possible thing is, and it sounds so fearful, doesn't it?

But I think it's necessary for people to know what the full danger is.

With older children, so we're talking, you know, maybe 13 plus when it comes to this threat of sextortion, I think it's an awareness of what sextortion is, what it looks like, what it might feel like and where to go if it happens.

It's something that should be really familiar with children as they grow up in the digital age.

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### **Bibizadeh, Roxanne**

Are there any other ways in which you think we might be able to help support early intervention?

R

### **Rosa**

When it comes to the tech world, I think the ethics of technology is something that needs to be always considered so the apps that children are using the programs and software are they as safe as they possibly can be, supportive as they possibly can be is another way. This is this is not something that's going to go away in our lives.

It's sort of here to stay, and if it invades the private, personal and social life of children to the extent that it does, then it needs to be as safe as possible.

So I think it's a real joined up approach for every sort of grown up that is responsible for children or should be involved in some way to help protect them.

I think it's just making it a priority for multiple people is a start.

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**Bibizadeh, Roxanne**

And finally, before we conclude this podcast, is there anything else you feel our listeners should know about self-generated child sexual abuse imagery?

R

**Rosa**

I think something I probably like parents and children and others to know is if you look at some of the IWF data particularly that you mentioned at the start of the podcast and it often, the story is often told of girls and that the majority of images that we find depict girls.

So girls at home, in their bedroom, in terms of self-generated content and however I think it's really important that we don't forget about boys and how if boys are being exploited online, which they are and that they also need to have somebody to talk to and just being open to that because often girls as victims comes up first.

But I think we need to not forget about the boys and even if you look at our IWF annual report, if you look at the statistics for report remove service, you'll see that boys made up 73% of their of the total reports so let's not forget about the boys and that the conversations that we're having in the safeguarding materials that we're making need to be available to boys too.

Boys are at risk of sextortion, I've seen it with my own eyes, so let's just consider all children as being at risk.

BR

**Bibizadeh, Roxanne**

Thank you so much to our special guest for your contribution today and thank you to all of our listeners for engaging with our podcast.