

Guardian

On Line Child Pornography- not a problem in the UK?

The conclusion of the annual report from The Internet Watch Foundation makes for disturbing reading www.iwf.org.uk - '*Child abuse images quadruple online in three years.*'

Why is Internet child pornography on the increase, especially in the wake of several high-profile arrests and policing campaigns? The answer is complex, but in order to understand why, we need to look back to the 1990's when the production of child pornography not only became the preserve of the amateur, but also of new professionals.

In the late 1990's - partly in response to changing cultural sensibilities and government legislation child pornography moved first from being a commercial enterprise (a "specialised" form of more widely available traditional pornography), into a 'cottage industry', when paedophiles started to swap and share photographs, videos and books with other paedophiles, and then back again into a commercial enterprise which ran alongside the amateur 'cottage industry'. However this re-commercialisation was run by new entrepreneurs after it became clear how much money was to be made in child pornography, and how the Internet could facilitate profits.

Put simply, the Internet created a global gateway and market, with no boundaries or distance to the travel. As a result policing techniques had to change and now child pornography requires a co-ordinated international policing response, and a far greater willingness on the part of some national policing organisations to get their hands dirty.

Over the past few years the UK, for example has taken a very hard line on the production, distribution and downloading of child pornography and this hard line is evident in the figures produced by the IWF which suggest that only 0.2% of child pornography on the Internet has been found to be coming out of the UK compared to 19% in 1997.

But this is not so across other countries and in particular the US and Russia, who between them account for 83% of Internet child pornography. Why should this be the case?

For a variety of reasons, we know most about the USA. In 1984 in the US, the National Centre for Missing & Exploited Children was www.missingkids.com created to specifically focus on Internet child pornography. Their role was and indeed still is, to target the makers and distributors of child pornography. And whilst they occasionally run a high profile media campaign about a case they were effectively handed on a plate, day to day they actually do very little to tackle Internet child pornography. To make greater inroads their officers would have to leave their plush building and comfortable offices in Virginia and venture outside, in what I would refer to as a former detective as 'putting on the hat and going knocking'. Indeed until the US stops ignoring a growing problem and tackles the inadequacies of the National Centre for Missing and Exploited children it will continue to allow children to be abused for the sexual gratification for some, and large financial gain for others.

So what are the financial gains in child pornography? Put simply - massive. That is why organised crime is at the centre of child pornography in Russia. Organised criminal gangs, having seen the financial gains to be made, are now running the supply of child pornography as well as the exploitation of children through child trafficking. The police seem powerless to stop these cartels, who have established control either through corruption, or their ability to pay large sums of money to evade prosecution. Until Putin's government starts to tackle the growing organised crime cartels, who are running parts of the country, Internet child pornography will continue unabated and out of control.

So how do we move forward and stop the exploitation of children through Internet child pornography? The answer is simple - the Global Task Force <http://www.virtualglobaltaskforce.com> that was established in 2003 needs to have the financial and personnel resources to tackle the cartels in Russia, and the inadequacies of policing in the US. As well as, the support from related trans-national organisations and leaders to genuinely do something about the problem. Unfortunately, until that occurs Internet child pornography is here to stay.

Mark Williams-Thomas