Microsoft

Combating Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Online

Key Points

The internet serves many beneficial and constructive purposes, but it has also created avenues for criminals to exploit young people through the distribution of child sex abuse images and the trafficking of children for sexual purposes.

Microsoft aids in the advancement of technology, techniques, and processes to combat the use of the internet to exploit children. These efforts include the development of technology (like Microsoft PhotoDNA) that can detect images of child sexual exploitation and abuse, as well as collaborative efforts with law enforcement devoted to the cause.

It is essential to enact and enforce laws against the possession, production, and distribution of child sexual exploitation and abuse imagery worldwide, and to both build and fund the necessary infrastructure to ensure safe rescue, support, and recovery for victims of child sexual exploitation.

Every day, millions of people connect and share content on the internet in beneficial and constructive ways.

But the internet has also created new avenues for criminals to exploit young people, such as through the distribution of child sex abuse images, the trafficking of children for sexual purposes, and the grooming of children for sexual exploitation. The production and distribution of child sexual exploitation and abuse images represents a significant global law enforcement problem. In 2019 alone, the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) has received 16.9 million CyberTipline reports that included 69.1 million images, videos, and other files related to child sexual exploitation. These images are often found after pedophiles share and trade them among themselves and with others who reinforce their shared sexual interest in children.

Many of the child sexual abuse victims identified by NCMEC were prepubescent, with infants and toddlers the fastest-growing age category. Internet companies have an important role to play in helping fight this horrific trade by acting quickly to find, report, and remove illegal images.

Another form of child sexual exploitation is child predators' use of the internet to find victims. These predators take advantage of the internet's anonymity to build online relationships with young people or to communicate with those who traffic children for sex. As in the fight against images of child sex abuse, internet companies have an important function in stopping predators and child sex traffickers. They can enforce codes of conduct, provide mechanisms for customers to report predators, and invest in innovation for improved detection.

Globally, law enforcement is doing admirable work to combat the online sexual exploitation of children, but the scale of this problem requires a whole-of-society approach, including law enforcement, government, the technology industry, nongovernmental organizations, and academia.

Microsoft Approach Combating Cybercrime

The Microsoft Digital Crimes Unit is an international legal and technical team working across the ecosystem to address technology-facilitated crime. With the opening of the Cybercrime Center in late 2013, Microsoft brought its cybercrime experts—attorneys, investigators, business professionals, and forensic analysts from around the world—together under one umbrella to help them better coordinate and collaborate to address cyberthreats.

Combating Illegal Images and Online Grooming

Microsoft applies filtering tools and employs highly trained experts using cutting-edge technology to help detect and classify images of child sexual abuse that are shared and made publicly available on Microsoft services, such as OneDrive or Bing.

The company reports these images to **NCMEC,** removes them, and bans the perpetrators from all Microsoft hosted consumer services.

In 2009, Microsoft Research collaborated with Dartmouth College and NCMEC to develop an advanced technology called **PhotoDNA,** which helps to refine and automate the search for known child sex abuse images among the billions of photos on the internet. NCMEC used the PhotoDNA license to work with online services such as Facebook to uncover images of child sexual exploitation and abuse. Since then, it has become the industry standard for detecting such images and is also used across Microsoft's own consumer services.

In 2020, Microsoft released a technique for identifying potential instances of child online grooming for sexual purposes based off certain characteristics in historical chat conversations. Building off a Microsoft patented technology, the grooming-detection technique is the product of Microsoft-led hackathon in conjunction with Dr. Hany Farid of University of California, Berkeley, Kik, The Meet Group, Roblox and Xbox. The technique is now licensed for free to qualified applicants from the NGO Thorn.

Collaborating with Others

Microsoft collaborates with government, law enforcement and others around the world. Microsoft is an active member, representing the entire technology industry, on the international advisory board of the WePROTECT Global Alliance. This multistakeholder group of some 98 countries, 28 technology companies, and 30 civil society and international organizations, including INTERPOL and UNICEF is committed to ending the online distribution of child sexual exploitation and abuse imagery.

Microsoft supports the **Voluntary Principles to Counter Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse,** developed by the governments of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK, and the U.S. in March 2020 and in consultation with six tech companies (Facebook, Google, Microsoft, Roblox, Snapchat, and Twitter). These eleven principles provide a common and consistent framework to guide the technology industry in its efforts to combat the proliferation of online child exploitation.

Microsoft also supports INHOPE, the international association of hotlines and helplines, as well as the victim-services organization, the Marie Collins Foundation (MCF). Microsoft holds a seat on INHOPE's international advisory board and on MCF's strategic advisory board. Microsoft is a long-standing member of the industry-led Technology Coalition; supports the non-profit Thorn and its Innovation Lab; and participates as a member of the Child Dignity Alliance's Technical Working Group. All groups are doing their part to eliminate child sexual exploitation and abuse imagery from the open web.

Policy Considerations

Policymakers can help address the challenges of combating child exploitation online by supporting the following efforts:

Support Victim Recovery Services

Funding and infrastructure for effective victim recovery services is absolutely essential. Without this, any other interventions have the potential to do more harm than good.

Support Industry-Wide Best Practices and Guidance

Internet companies must continue to work with governments and law enforcement to help address the problem of online predators by establishing industry best practices and guidance. More emphasis must be placed on enabling companies to voluntarily find and report images of child sexual abuse. Policymakers can help change the focus of law enforcement to a model that measures their activities to stop crime and prevent abuse without penalizing the victim.

Enact Laws that Protect Victims of Child Sexual Exploitation

It is vital that governments enact and enforce:

- Child sexual exploitation laws that recognize and protect victims while holding traffickers accountable.

- Laws against the possession, production, and distribution of child sexual abuse images worldwide. In 2018, the International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (ICMEC) reported that 118 countries have enacted laws that are "sufficient" to combat child sexual exploitation and abuse imagery. However, 16 countries still have no laws at all.