

Regulation and the prevention of Online Harms

Backbench business debate: Thursday 19 November 2020

Introduction:

The Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) is a charity that works in partnership with the tech industry, law enforcement and government to remove images and videos of child sexual abuse wherever they are hosted in the world.

We provide a secure and anonymous place for the public to report suspect incidents of this content and use the latest technology to proactively search the internet for this content. The technical tools and services we provide help to keep technology companies platforms and services free from child sexual abuse.

DO the right thing ✓

Key Asks:

1. That the Government recognises the strong and effective mechanisms that are already in place to tackle online harms, such as the IWF, and partners with them to further improve online safety.
2. That the Government publish its response to the Online Harms White Paper as soon as possible and, at the very least, provide a clear timetable for progress towards legislation.
3. That the Government recognises the critical importance of education and awareness raising initiatives and that regulation alone will not solve these complex challenges.

Effective mechanisms for dealing with online harms, the IWF's impact:

The IWF believes that the new regulator will have a huge and complex task in trying to effectively regulate over 29 areas of online harms. To be successful, they will need to work in partnership with other organisations with specific expertise in the areas they are regulating.

The IWF has been working with industry and law enforcement for 24 years to tackle online child sexual abuse. Our partnership approach has been a success, and we are respected globally as a model of best practice and as an innovator of the technical solutions required for tackling the most egregious online harms.

- **Since the IWF was founded, UK hosting of child sexual abuse images and videos has been reduced to less than 1% in 2019, compared with 18% in the year we were founded-**

The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse concluded "In the UK the IWF sits at the heart of the national response to combating the proliferation of indecent images of children. It deserves to be publicly acknowledged as a vital part of how, and why so comparatively little Child Sexual Abuse Material is hosted in the UK."¹

The International Association of Internet Hotlines (INHOPE), following a recent audit, described the organisation as meeting "exceptional standards in all areas" and said its operations and structures set the standards for those around the world."²

- **Blocked at least 8.8 million attempts to access CSAM during one month in the Covid-19 pandemic-** Throughout the first lockdown in April, we worked with three major Internet Service Providers and Mobile Network Operators serving the UK market to ascertain how many attempts had been made to access known child sexual abuse material. This measured hits from across their networks to the IWF's webpage blocking list, further underlining the importance of the services we provide to industry and how effective their deployment is to protecting internet users in the UK from committing viewing offences,

¹ <https://www.iicsa.org.uk/key-documents/17805/view/internet-investigation-report-march-2020.pdf> p. 23; p. 33; p. 99.

² <https://www.iwf.org.uk/news/uk%E2%80%99s-internet-guardian-%E2%80%98sets-standard%E2%80%99-for-hotlines-worldwide>

- **We innovate and change-**
Offenders perpetrating these crimes are sophisticated and organised. Our response to this challenge must constantly innovate and change to keep up. We have invested in web crawling technology that is deployed to improve our proactive searches and we are developing new image classifiers in partnership with industry to speed up our accurate detection of this content. Over the past 24 years we have been able to innovate and continually remove more and more content year on year. Often legislation is outpaced by technology.
- ***Given our experience and expertise, the IWF believes we are uniquely placed to help in shaping the Code of Practice, investigating reports related to CSE/A on behalf of the regulator and monitoring compliance with the Code.***

Speed and pace of Online Harms legislation:

The IWF recognises that this is an extremely complex space to legislate in and that requires time. However, it has been three years since the Government first published its intent to legislate. This delay is now creating significant uncertainty in the sector and reduces the ability to leverage more funding and resources out of industry as they all eagerly anticipate the impact of online harms legislation and the cost this will create for their business. We need to act now as online harms continue to grow and evolve:

Self-generated indecent images of children continue to rise through lockdown-

- In just one week, analysts from the UK Safer Internet Centre Hotline, the Internet Watch Foundation, found that 700 individual girls had been exploited into filming their own abuse.
- Analysts found over 1,400 instances of abuse. Meaning these images had appeared in multiple places online.
- Most of the girls (55%) were in the 11-13 age range, but some children were as young as 3 and as old as 17. They were from a broad range of socio-economic backgrounds, ethnicities, and global locations.
- Figures from the Internet Watch Foundation suggest that self-generated images now account for 44% of all content actioned in 2020.
- Further detail about the rise can be found [here](#).

50% increase in public reports of suspected Child Sexual Abuse Images-

- There has been a 50% increase in public reports of suspected child sexual abuse images to the Internet Watch Foundation between March and July 2020, when compared with 2019.
- Figures from the Internet Watch Foundation found that 44,809 reports had been received during the national lockdown compared with 29,698 in 2019.
- Of those public reports between March and July 2020, 5,367 were confirmed to contain child sexual abuse material compared with the same period in 2019 where only 3,252 were actioned.
- This constituted a 65% increase in the amount of material the IWF was able to remove.
- Further detail about the rise can be found [here](#).

Importance of Education and Awareness Raising Initiatives:

- The National Crime Agency recently estimated that as many as 300,000 people in the UK³ pose a serious sexual threat to children either online or through contact offending. We must tackle this problem as well as ensuring that the online environment is as safe as possible for children.
- Technology in and of itself is not a silver bullet to solving these problems. That is why the IWF is one third of the UK Safer Internet Centre working alongside Childnet International and SWGfL to ensure that the harms we see daily are mitigated through effective awareness raising in schools and with parents.
- The Centre in the past decade has trained 21,000 professionals working with the nation's 6 million children and we also run Safer Internet Day each year which is a vital touch point in the online safety of the nation's children. In 2020, 2,000 organisations and 49% of children and 26% of parents were involved in the day in the UK, encouraging the safe and responsible use of the internet.
- ***The UK Safer Internet Centre currently receives £1.3m per annum from the EU, which will end in December 2020.*** We, [25 leaders from the online safety sector](#) and 33 MPs and Peers are calling for the UK Government to replace this vitally important funding in the spending review.

³ <https://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/news/onlinesafetyathome>