



'Selfies'

- Protecting young people online... from themselves? -

This short paper aims to provide a brief overview of the existing research, including research specifically conducted by the Internet Watch Foundation's Internet Content Analysts who are in a unique position to assess actual images and videos of child sexual abuse content. Furthermore, this paper aims to provide examples of initiatives that have been conducted in the UK to address the issue and concludes by providing a number of policy recommendations.

Introduction

A **selfie** is a photographic self-portrait and is typically taken with a digital camera, smartphone or webcam. The term 'selfie' is widely used – it is now included in the online version of the Oxford English Dictionary¹; the images are typically taken with a camera held at arm's length or in a mirror and often shared online.

Taking and sharing selfies has become popular among young people (albeit that it is not restricted to younger generations), but there is also a darker side to the innocuous practice of sharing casual pictures of oneself.

Increasingly, the Internet Content Analysts at the Internet Watch Foundation² (IWF) encounter sexually explicit (nude or semi-nude) images or videos created by a young person engaging in erotic or sexual activity³.

The experience of IWF's analysts is backed-up by research that demonstrates the prevalence of self-generated sexually explicit content. As such this issues needs to be addressed by all stakeholders involved in the area of online child protection. This short paper introduces some of the existing research and provides examples and recommendations on how to address the issue adequately.

¹ <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/390063?redirectedFrom=selfie#eid> (last visited 23/08/14)

² The IWF is the UK hotline for people to report child sexual abuse imagery online. In 2013, IWF analysts processed 51,186 reports and identified 13,182 webpages containing child sexual abuse imagery. The IWF works with law enforcement and the online industry to disrupt the availability of these images and videos. More information about the IWF can be found at www.iwf.org.uk.

³ In 2012 – when the IWF study (p.2) was conducted - the IWF assessed child sexual abuse material according to the levels set out in the Sentencing Guidelines Council's Definitive Guidelines of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 and therefore the use of the term "erotic" in this context is intended to reflect the IWF's standard threshold for 'actioning' content assessed as meeting the criteria of Level 1 of the Guidelines in that the predominant focus of the image is on the naked genitalia of the person(s) depicted. "Sexual activity" sufficiently encapsulates the criteria for Levels 2-5 of the Guidelines.

Quantitative and Qualitative research

While this paper does not intend to provide a full overview of the existing research, the data presented below aims to provide a snapshot of the nature and scale of the problem⁴.

In a 2013 ChildLine⁵ survey of 13-18 year olds, 60 per cent said they had been asked for a sexual image or video of themselves; 40 per cent said they had created an image or video of themselves; and 25 per cent said they had sent an image or video of themselves to someone else. Over half of the young people surveyed also said they had received a sexual photo or video, most received them from a partner but a third received them from a stranger. Whilst most said the image went to a boyfriend or girlfriend, a third said they sent it to someone they met online but didn't know in real life and 15 per cent said they had sent it to a total stranger.⁶

The amount of young people who potentially have been exposed to or contributed self-generated sexually explicit content shows the 'prevalence and 'mundanity' of the problem which, for instance, was also concluded in the 2012 research paper "Sexting: An Exploration of Practices, Attitudes and Influences"⁷. Interestingly, this research also concluded that "young people are willing to discuss these issues and want to learn about them in school but don't get the opportunity" (p.2).

IWF Study into self-generated sexually explicit images and videos

As IWF analysts encountered an increasing amount of self-generated images during their assessments of reports, the IWF decided to conduct a short study designed to provide a snapshot of the availability of online self-generated sexual content featuring young people and the extent to which such content, once posted online, is then redistributed via parasite websites⁸. This 2012 study is due to be updated in the second half of 2014.

The study used public reports of potential online child sexual abuse material made to the IWF Hotline over a four week period in September 2012.

During the course of the study, IWF Internet Content Analysts dedicated time to assessing and cataloguing content from leads generated by public reports. In deciding whether the content fell within the remit of the study assessments were made in relation to the following three criteria:

- 1. Is the content being assessed "self-generated content" featuring "young people"?**
- 2. Is the content being assessed a still image or a video?**
- 3. Does the content being assessed appear on a "parasite website"?**

⁴ For a good starting point into the existing research, see Ringrose, et al. (2012) A Qualitative Study of Children, Young People and 'Sexting.' (to be found at http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/resourcesforprofessionals/sexualabuse/sexting-research-report_wdf89269.pdf) (last visited 23/08/14)

⁵ ChildLine is a helpline in the UK offering children and young people aged 18 and under free, confidential advice and support 24 hours a day. ChildLine is a service provided by the NSPCC.

⁶ http://www.nspcc.org.uk/news-and-views/media-centre/press-releases/2013/childline-internet-watch-foundation/childline-tackling-sexting-internet-watch-foundation_wdn98995.html (last visited 23/08/14)

⁷ Phippen, A. (2012) Sexting: An Exploration of Practices, Attitudes and Influences (to be found at https://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/resourcesforprofessionals/sexualabuse/sexting-pdf_wdf93254.pdf) (last visited 23/08/14)

⁸ https://www.iwf.org.uk/assets/media/resources/IWF%20study%20-%20self%20generated%20content%20online_Sept%202012.pdf (last visited 23/08/14)

A parasite website was defined as “a website created for the purposes of displaying self-generated content where the content has apparently been harvested from the website to which it was originally uploaded”.

During the course of the study, analysts assessed **12,224 images and videos** as meeting the research criteria and definition of self-generated content. This total breaks down into **7,147 images** and **5,077 videos**. The content assessed appeared on **68 different websites** hosted in a variety of geographical locations worldwide. Over the course of the four week study, the amount of analyst time solely dedicated to the study was **47 working hours**.

Of the 12,224 images/videos logged during the course of the study, **10,776** of these were assessed as appearing on parasite websites. Therefore **88.15%** of the content assessed as part of this study had been redistributed from its original upload location.

In only 14 instances IWF analysts were unable to make a determination as to whether the website on which the content appeared was a parasite website. This would be the case where, for example, the website allowed upload of content but information which may have indicated provenance was entirely absent.

The finding that 88% of the content assessed appeared on parasite websites demonstrates the extent to which control over self-generated content can be lost once it has been circulated online.

Once this content has been redistributed to parasite websites, the young people depicted have no direct control regarding its removal or onward distribution with the result that potentially it may never subsequently be possible to remove it entirely from circulation.

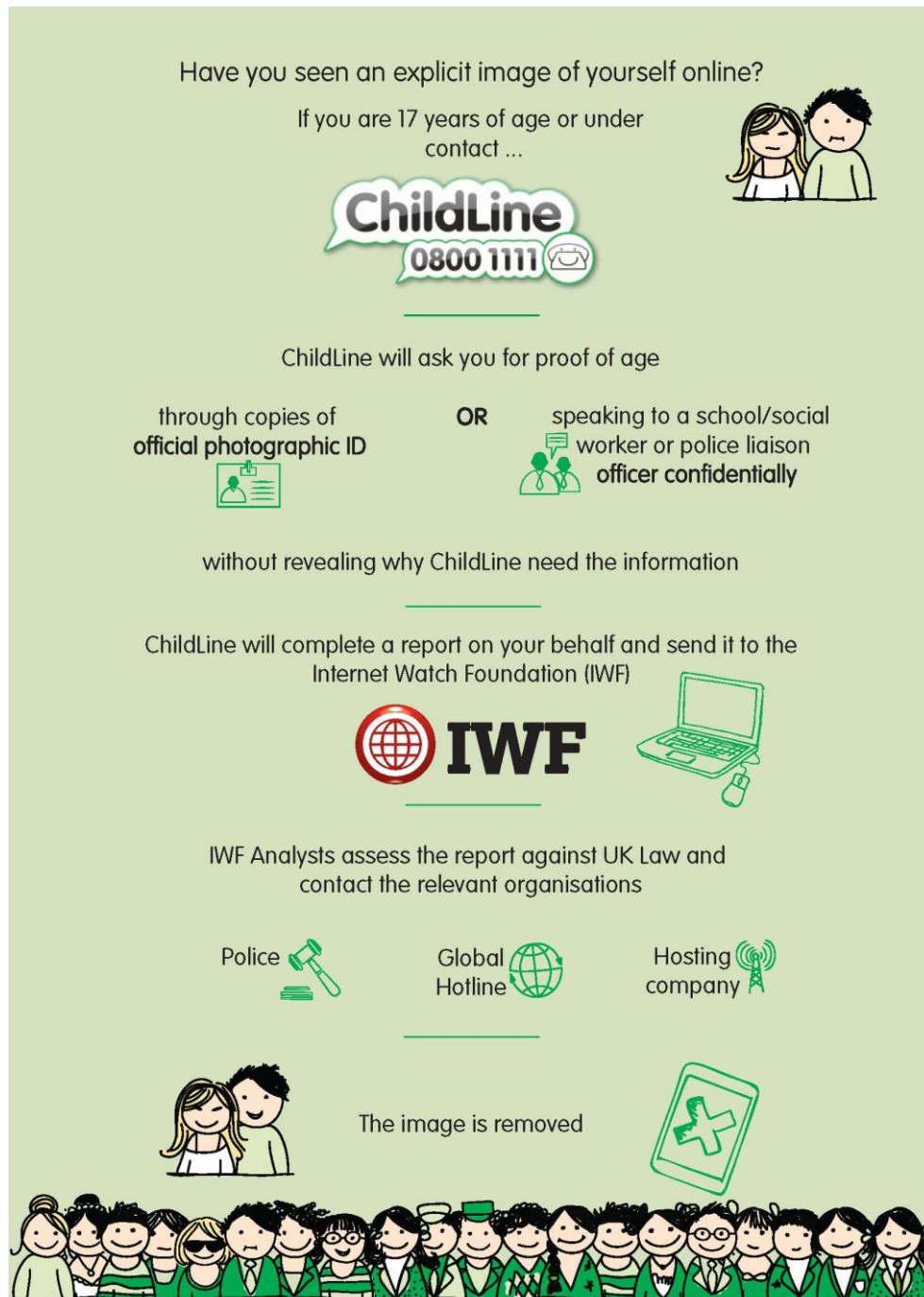
How to address the problem – Examples of existing initiatives

There are two sides to the problem that need to be addressed. On the one hand, it is important to work to prevent the problem from originating in the first place. Initiatives to raise awareness of the risks of sexting need to be developed by online child protection agencies. This can be done via charities, NGO's, schools,... and target children, parents or teachers. Several resources exist at national and international level and greater coordination between existing information could potentially increase the effectiveness and efficiency of the resources. The findings of the IWF research provide child protection agencies with the evidence to demonstrate the dangers of sexting to young people in order that they may gain a greater understanding of the risks.

On the other hand, it is necessary to ensure the problem can be adequately addressed as soon as it occurs. Although the IWF research has shown the potential difficulties in completely removing an image or a video, it is still necessary for both private and public actors to ensure child sexual abuse images are being dealt with adequately.

Firstly, this implies children have a secure and confidential way of reporting self-generated sexually explicit content to a relevant authority. Importantly, when the age of the person in the image or video is not evidently clear the age will need to be verified in order to confirm that the image is indeed an illegal

child sexual abuse image (if the young person is 18 or over, the image itself would not be a child sexual abuse image). In the UK, this was typically done by law enforcement but as young people might be reluctant to approach law enforcement the IWF is now working closely with Childline, who can provide a safe and confidential point of contact for young people. Childline will ensure the necessary data is gathered to confirm the age of the person so that the IWF can take action against the image or video.



Secondly, after the image or video is confirmed as a sexually explicit image of a child, the necessary procedures must exist to ensure fast and effective removal of the content. Hotlines play a key role in

delivering this service, together with the online industry and the relevant law enforcement bodies. Support for the hotlines is therefore crucially important for the successful fight against online child sexual abuse content.

Policy recommendations

The snapshot above shows evidence of the prevalence of self-generated sexually explicit content featuring young people. This is therefore an issue that needs to be addressed properly by all stakeholders who can work to raise awareness and improve the disruption of the availability of the content. It is recommended that the following basic principles are taken into account when deciding on policies targeting self-generated, sexually explicit content:

- **Prevention** through education and awareness raising is absolutely essential.
- Further **coordination between existing resources and tools** could increase their efficiency and effectiveness.
- **Inclusion of all relevant stakeholders** in the debate and actively supporting further coordination between stakeholders will create better solutions.
- **Support for helplines and hotlines** is needed as they are crucial to address the problem if prevention has failed.
- **Quantitative as well as qualitative research** should be promoted as it helps further understanding of the problem which in turn leads to better policy solutions.

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Annex:

Policy recommendations regarding self-generated sexually explicit content

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- 2) Further **coordination between existing resources and tools** could increase their efficiency and effectiveness.
- 3) **Inclusion of all relevant stakeholders** in the debate and actively supporting further coordination between stakeholders will create better solutions.
- 4) **Support for helplines and hotlines** is needed as they are crucial to address the problem if prevention has failed.
- 5) **Quantitative as well as qualitative research** should be promoted as it helps further understanding of the problem which in turn leads to better policy solutions.