

Online Child Sexual Abuse

Grooming, Policing and Child Protection in a
Multi-Media World

Elena Martellozzo

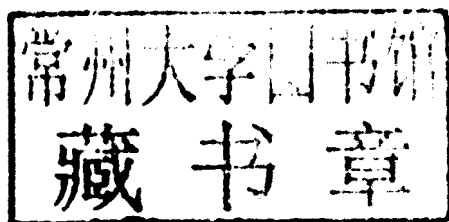


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Finally, this book would have not come to life without the endless support, love and encouragement of my husband and my family. To them, thank you.

Foreword

Internet use has grown considerably in the last decade. Information technology now forms a core part of the formal education system in many countries, ensuring that each new generation of internet users is more adept than the last. Research studies suggest that the majority of young people across the world have access to the internet on PCs and/or mobile devices. The internet provides the opportunity to interact with friends on social networking sites and enables almost unlimited access to information in a way that previous generations would not have thought possible. The internet provides a platform for peer communication previously unknown. Research suggests that digital media have become so central to young people's lives that the online-offline worlds have become a converged environment, where the young have developed their own language and social norms. Whilst the benefits of the internet undoubtedly outweigh negative aspects, it is clear that young people can be exposed to harm online. The nature of the risks encountered includes exposure to harmful or indecent material and exposure to harmful behaviour perpetrated by peers and by sex offenders. The idea that children might be 'groomed' on the internet by sex offenders is a relatively new one; the concept has been discussed in the sex offender literature for many years but has recently found its way into English law (Sexual Offences Act 2003) and is now part of an EU directive to Member States. Research in this area is embryonic and little is really known about the behaviour of those who use the internet to perpetrate sexual offences; still less is known about the way in which covert internet policing operates. In this book, Dr Elena Martellozzo confronts the emotive issue of online grooming of children. The book is based upon an extensive research study conducted by Dr Martellozzo, spanning several years spent with the Metropolitan Police High Technology Crime Unit, thus offering a unique insight into methods of covert police investigation. The behaviour of men who seek children online for the purposes of sexual abuse is extensively discussed, drawing upon observations of police practice, interviews with police officers and documentary analysis of offender chat logs and case files. The author also subjects the rapidly growing body of evidence on this emotionally fraught subject to a scrupulous and dispassionate analysis. This book is therefore a timely and much-needed assessment of the issues and

evidence relating to the practice and policing of internet grooming and makes a significant contribution to our understanding of sexual abuse taking place on the internet.

Professor Julia C. Davidson, Kingston University

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Introduction

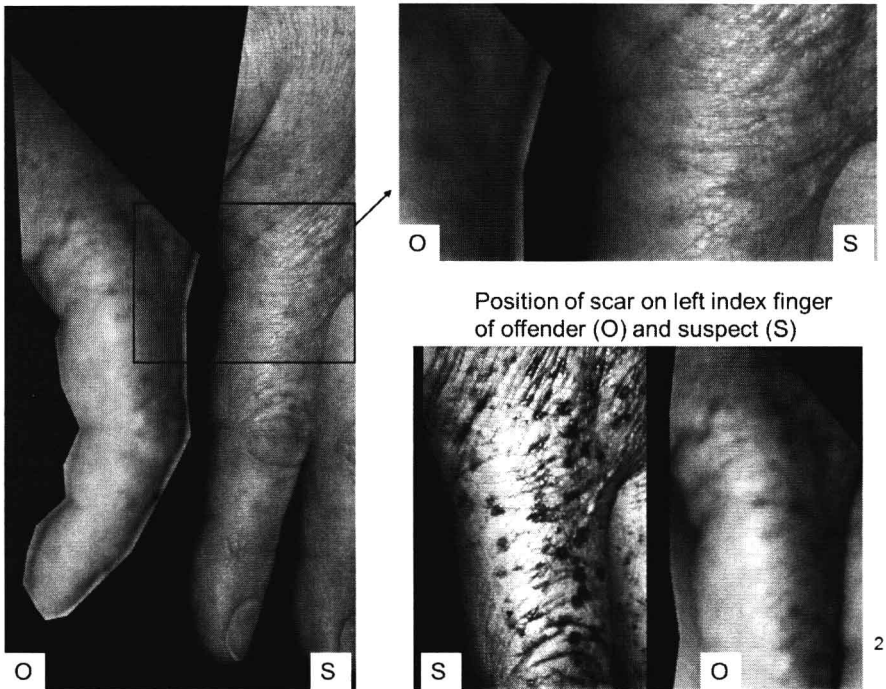
'Just as the computer has begun to revolutionise social life, it will revolutionise crime and deviancy; especially the parameters of deviant sexual behaviour . . . in fact, it is doing so already'

(Durkin and Bryant 1995)

In 2007, Jack¹ was detained by the Metropolitan Police. An intelligence-gathering operation had revealed that Jack had been using a website with images of child sexual abuse. Jack's home was searched and the police found a number of digital memory cards containing further images. Notably, most of these displayed South East Asian girls and it was discovered that Jack had travelled to Thailand twice between 2002 and 2004. The images, however, only showed the hands of a white man violating the girls and the police had no direct means to attribute this abuse to Jack. Questions remained whether Jack was guilty only of the distribution of indecent images or whether he had sexually abused children himself. In response to this ambiguity, the police involved the Centre of Anatomy and Human Identification at the University of Dundee in the case. Members of the Centre developed an innovative forensic technique that made it possible to match skin patterns on Jack's hands against those shown in the photographs. Researchers examined, for example, the location of scars, knuckle skin creases, freckle patterns and the morphology of nail beds. The result was a convincing match between the studied pictures and Jack's hands. The following pictures (Black et al. 2009) display examples of this analytic procedure.

Jack was prosecuted under the 'sex tourist provision' of the Sexual Offences Act 2003. He was jailed for six years and will remain on the Sex Offenders' Register for the remainder of his life.

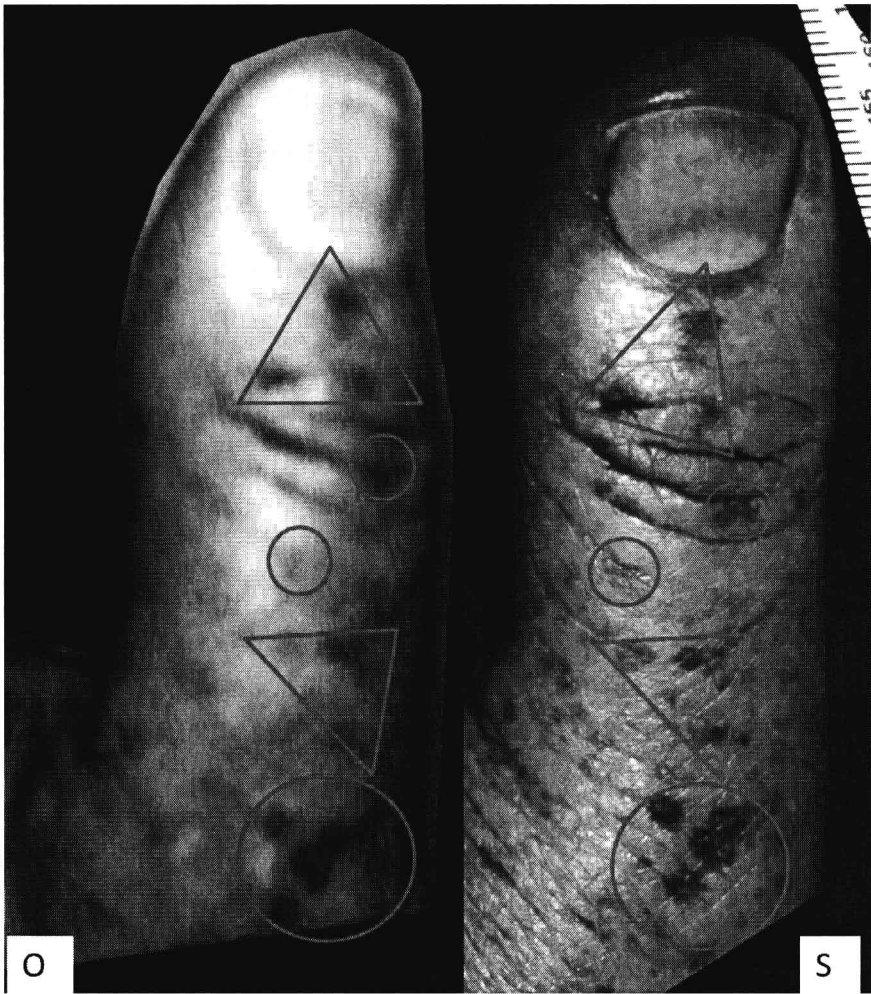
This case illustrates many of the concerns set out in this book. It highlights the connections between the real-life sexual abuse of children and the distribution and consumption of abusive images via increasingly sophisticated virtual networks. At the same time, it points to the need for police and other child protection agencies to develop innovative techniques to be able to trace the activities of sex offenders and establish connections between offences in cyberspace and in the



real world. Just a short time ago, neither the technology required for Jack to make, store and distribute indecent images of children, eg digital cameras, digital memory cards, the internet, nor the techniques used by the police to prosecute Jack's actions, were available.² Finally, the case is indicative of the international scale of these problems. In this sense, there is a particular need for up-to-date academic research on online child sexual abuse, to account for the changing nature and growing scope of the problem. This book seeks to contribute to this project.

Drawing on unprecedented access to data of the Paedophile Unit of the Metropolitan Police Service in London, the following study seeks to understand and explain the problem of online child sexual abuse (CSA). More specifically, it presents a theoretical and empirical investigation of the current tactics and operational procedures employed by the London Metropolitan Police High Technological Crime Unit (HTCU) and Paedophile Unit, and it explores patterns and characteristics of online grooming.

Online child sexual abuse has become a high profile and important issue in public life. When the victims are children there is clearly intense public and political interest and concern. Sex offenders are society's most reviled deviants and the object of seemingly undifferentiated public fear and loathing. This may be



Offender thumb (o) and suspect (s) left thumb, after yellow channel isolation, showing distinct patterns of pigmentation that match the left thumb of the suspect.

evidenced from ongoing efforts to advance legislation, develop police tactics and educate children and their carers to engage safely with multi-media and the internet.

The internet has become a key tool in enabling us to 'make sense' of our world. Understanding how sex offenders use the internet and how the police and the government are responding to their behaviour is central to how we think about the development of preventative measures. There is no doubt that new information and communication technologies – the internet in particular – have

opened up opportunities for perpetrators to abuse more victims in a less visible way. The internet allows for the expression of sexual behaviour with others that would not be feasible in the real world. The following chapters seek primarily to understand and explain the issue of online CSA and to explore patterns and characteristics of online grooming, policing and child protection in a multi-media world. The data presented throughout this book derive from empirical research conducted over the past seven years in the UK.

Data on grooming and policing child sexual abuse

I gathered data on online grooming and the online policing of online CSA through ethnographic research at the London Metropolitan Police HTCUs and Paedophile Unit. I secured unprecedented access to these sites³ and I was presented with an unique opportunity not only to engage with practitioners in the field but also anonymously to observe sex offenders' online behaviour and reflect on the development of police techniques and practices in response. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with officers of varying rank and experience in the HTCUs and Paedophile Unit. A total of 21 formal semi-structured interviews were conducted with police officers and forensic examiners working for the MET Police HTCUs and Paedophile Unit. Those interviews basically involved all those officers who do play a significant role in the policing of cyberspace. The interviews focused primarily upon:

Indecent images

Internet sex offenders fall into two principal categories: those who produce and/or download indecent illegal images of children from the internet and distribute them (Quayle and Taylor 2002; Davidson and Martellozzo 2005) and those who use the internet to target and 'groom' children for the purposes of sexual abuse (Finkelhor et al. 2000).

Therefore, a descriptive account was sought from both officers working in the HTCUs and forensic examiners regarding the nature and extent of indecent images encountered online. It is clear that sex offenders use the internet both to access child abuse images and to select victims for abuse. Gillan (2003) has suggested that the demand for child pornography through, for example, the use of file-sharing technology, has grown so rapidly that law enforcement agencies are now employed in an increasingly difficult global race to track down the child victims and the perpetrators involved. The approach adopted in the interview process allowed respondents to describe their views regarding the nature of the images, the pattern of escalation in the process of downloading and collecting the images, as well as their views about the offenders.

Grooming

Questions on grooming were addressed mainly in conversations with undercover officers of the HTCUC. This component of the study sought to address the officers' views on sex offenders' *modus operandi*. This area proved to be the most difficult to explore, particularly given the lack of relevant previous empirical research. Since the introduction of the Sexual Offences Act 2003, the HTCUC have placed undercover officers in teen and other chat rooms likely to attract children. Officers have been trained to act undercover and, through practice, have learnt how to pose as a child, as an adult or as a sex offender. They have learnt to mimic children's behaviour online, including their use of computer and mobile text language, in order to prompt and encourage conversation with child abusers seeking to groom a child.

The aim of this component was to ask respondents to describe and evaluate the process of online grooming, recounting any negative or positive impressions.

Innovations

It is clear that the internet is more than just a medium of communication (Castells 1996, 2004). It constitutes a new virtual reality or cyberworld with its own rules, identities and languages. It provides a supportive context within which the child sexual abuser is no longer a lonely figure, but forms part of a larger community that shares the same interests. The internet gives new meaning to the term 'paedophile ring', as the potential for offenders to organise child abuse is so considerable. However, the internet has also contributed to the development of innovative police tactics that make it possible to track down sex offenders who would otherwise have remained undetected.

Data on children's use of the internet

In collaboration with both the centre for Child Abuse and Trauma Studies (CATS) at Kingston University and the Metropolitan Police, I collected data on children's use of the internet through interviews with children, teachers and parents. Both pieces of research⁴ aimed to explore young people's experience and awareness of internet use and other digital media safety and to understand their behaviour on social networking sites (SNSs). The resulting qualitative data were analysed using a thematic approach. A statement regarding confidentiality and anonymity was given to all respondents and a code is used to refer to each specific interview (Police Officer ID: 1; Girl ID: 2 etc).

Overview of the book

The intended purpose of this book is to construct conceptual and empirical bridges between child sexual abuse, the dynamics of grooming processes and online

interactions related to sexual abuse. The emergence and increasing prominence in everyday life of mediated social interaction in cyberspace have had profound consequences for offenders' grooming behaviour, their underlying motivations and situational understandings, as well as their victims' responses and, in consequence, patterns of child sexual abuse in contemporary society as a whole. I therefore argue that it is necessary to unpick and re-examine grooming processes as they now occur online, with a view to achieving a better understanding of child sexual abuse today and formulating adequate policy responses.

Chapter 1 sets the scene, providing an overview of what we know and what we do not know about the nature and extent of child sexual abuse. It briefly reviews the existing academic literature to identify, define and critically evaluate the relevant key terms and concepts. This helps the reader gain a better understanding of the problem of child sexual abuse as it occurs both in the real world and in cyberspace. This chapter includes the definition of child sexual abuse in the new and much debated context of cyberspace. In this chapter, I also provide an overview of the international nature of online child sexual abuse and how there is increasing co-operation at policy level from government, law enforcement agencies and the charitable sector.

In Chapter 2, I present a sociological analysis of real and virtual abuse. More specifically, I explore the theories of the drivers that cause men and some women to deviate from the norm and engage in sexual activities with children. I will argue that there is no single theory that adequately explains why those who sexually abuse children (both on and offline) come to do so in the first instance and why they continue to offend over time. Nonetheless, sound theoretical explanations of child sexual offending are central to the development and implementation of policies, treatments and policing strategies sensitive to the range of motivations and behaviours underpinning abuse in the real world and in cyberspace. The chapter concludes by arguing that a key solution to the problem of child sexual abuse is to address all manner of potential offenders in the research – including men, women and children – and both worlds in which they may operate, namely the real world and cyberspace. It is only with a thorough examination of all such elements that it may become possible to increase awareness of the dynamics that occur between perpetrators and victims in the real world or in cyberspace.

Chapter 3 is concerned with the real protagonists of this e-era: young people and their use of the internet. In this chapter I turn my attention to the analysis of children's and young people's use of the internet and the risks they take when they are online. This chapter presents a critical review of relevant literature and recent research in this arena and links key findings to those from practitioners' and sex offenders' accounts presented in the two previous chapters.

Chapter 4 reviews the emergence of an international legislative framework to combat online child sexual abuse; from early laws prohibiting the sexual abuse and exploitation of children and initial manifestations of online child sexual abuse in the form of 'child pornography', through to more recent international legislative efforts to frame this problem as a form of 'cybercrime', a content-related

offence associated with the production and circulation of illegal content in cyberspace. In particular, the chapter explores how the convergence of these socio-legal challenges with advances in the new technologies has resulted in the emergence of the grooming offence, a distinct category of criminal behaviour with a requirement for bespoke and broad-based legal intervention. The chapter then turns to the matter of law enforcement and supporting interventions, focusing on the UK policing response as an exemplar of how distinct policing specialisms have developed in response to recent grooming legislation and how policing practices have adapted to accommodate the provisions of these statutes. Finally, the chapter identifies new and emerging gaps and challenges in policing and child protection practice presented by the introduction of grooming legislation.

Chapter 5 explores the challenges that official agencies such as the police, educational and charitable sectors face in promoting and enforcing the protection of children against online CSA. The first part of this chapter seeks to identify and evaluate how the government and the police have reacted to the exponentially growing problem of the production and distribution of indecent images of children and the problem of online grooming. It will therefore provide an historical overview of how online CSA developed.

Chapter 6 focuses on day-to-day police activities. More specifically it presents empirical evidence of police officers' undercover online interaction with sex offenders. It discusses the context in which undercover policing takes place, explores the grooming process and the stages of police intervention. Here, police practice is considered in detail to ensure a better understanding of how the policing of online grooming occurs and how police assess the risk of offending. This chapter will be a reflexive account of the research process. Here I describe the real experience of conducting an ethnographic study of undercover operations targeting online groomers.

Chapter 7 considers practitioners' views about policing child sexual abuse. It is in this chapter where I draw together covert police activities and sex offenders' online behaviour. I analyse sex offenders' online *modus operandi*, from the creation of their online profile to the online grooming of undercover police officers who they believe to be children.

Chapter 8 brings together the key arguments presented throughout the book. The chapter concludes by proposing that law enforcement agencies, academics and internet service providers should continue to develop further co-operative dialogue geared to raising social awareness about the problem of CSA in an informative and, above all, useful way. The common media coverage of CSA occurring via new technologies promotes the perception that children are at greatest risk from online abusers. Therefore, there is a clear danger of over-prioritising online CSA over CSA that takes place in the home, where children are at greater risk of being abused by someone they know. Myths such as this should be challenged rather than reinforced and allowed to prevail.

Notes

- 1 All the names used in this book are pseudonyms.
- 2 To give another example, Facebook recently introduced a heavily promoted video chat facility on its website. This was not available when the fieldwork for this book was conducted and it has the potential substantially to alter interaction on one of the most widely used social networking websites. In turn, this will have an impact on both the online behaviour of potential sex offenders and attendant security measures and policing operations.
- 3 I was granted ethical approval by the University of Westminster Ethics Committee.
- 4 Ethical permission to conduct the research was granted by Kingston University and Middlesex University Ethics Committee in the UK.

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Establishing the terrain

Introduction

Children are abused every day around the world: physically, emotionally and sexually, and sometimes with very severe consequences. There is a vast amount of academic research suggesting that prolonged neglect or abuse leads to children being placed in care and which can place them at serious risk of being socially excluded as adolescents and young adults. Such young people are more likely to engage in crime (Sir John Stevens 2002) and to continue to be victimised and abused in later life (Pritchard 2004). In particular, non-consensual sexual activities between a child and an adult¹ interfere with normal development processes and lead to maladjustment later in life. Abuse is often confusing, frightening and painful, and these negative effects may continue into adulthood. In fact, child sexual abuse has come to be widely regarded as a key cause of mental health problems in adult life (Mullen and Fleming 1998). Furthermore, abuse occurs during the critical formative time, when the child is learning by experience. Therefore, it should not be surprising that victims of sexual abuse may continue to suffer from debilitating effects, such as emotional distress, anxiety, rage, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse and suicide attempts.

Arguably, the process of grooming represents the main method through which children are sexually abused. Mass media coverage seems to suggest that grooming is a new phenomenon that has developed recently with the advent of the internet (Gillespie 2008). However, this is clearly not the case. As will be argued later in this chapter, there is ample historical evidence of child sexual abuse, even though it has only been recognised as a social problem for just over two decades (Wells et al. 2007).

There is a limited but expanding literature on grooming in the cyber world. It is important to make clear from the start that with this book I do not intend to conduct a comparative analysis of online and offline grooming. On the contrary, this book is a focused case study of the process of online grooming, policing and child protection. We simply do not know enough about child sexual grooming in the real world to support a comparative analysis of grooming online and offline. Of course, where appropriate, comparisons will be made – in terms of theory, epistemology, policy and practice – regarding similarities and differences between

grooming and child sexual abuse in the virtual and physical worlds. However, my analysis is firmly situated within the realm of cyberspace. In fact, what we may claim to know, however tentatively, about grooming in the physical world is so limited that it may even be counterproductive to attempt a thorough comparative analysis. Online and offline child sexual abuse take place within distinct but overlapping worlds. They are not hermetically sealed off from each other. The areas of overlap between online and offline grooming are manifold, substantive and significant. Moreover, these areas of overlap are neither straightforward nor easy to theorise or explore empirically. Because areas of overlap do exist, however, it is hoped that the generation of knowledge through sustained and focused engagement with the problem of online child sexual abuse will also contribute to a better understanding of child sexual abuse in the physical world.

It would not be possible to conduct any research exploring the problem of child sexual abuse (CSA) without defining key terms and establishing the social, political, cultural and legislative context within which this research fits. Given the ballooning interest in child sexual abuse among researchers with various disciplinary backgrounds, it is important to establish some conceptual order at the outset of this book and systematise key ideas. Therefore, it is the aim of this chapter to establish, first, what we know and what we do not know about the nature and extent of CSA. Secondly, this chapter will identify, define and critically evaluate the relevant key terms and concepts, so as to enable a better understanding of the problem of child sexual abuse as it occurs both in the real world and in cyberspace.

A necessary starting point of this analysis is the problematisation of the concept of childhood. Issues of childhood and child abuse are closely linked and, like most of the key terms addressed in this chapter, 'childhood' is a socially constructed and contested term whose meaning may vary significantly across space, time and context.

The second concept that deserves attention is 'sexual abuse'. This leads to the evaluation of more complex concepts, such as child sexual abuse, the issue of consent, as well as the British legislative and political context in which child sexual abuse is constructed and prosecuted.

Finally, this chapter defines child sexual abuse in the new and much debated context of cyberspace. It distinguishes between the production and distribution of indecent images of children and online grooming and explores the legislation created to prosecute these cyber crimes.

Defining 'childhood'

Common sense suggests that the notion of childhood is something that has been fixed and permanent throughout history. In fact, quite the opposite is true; childhood is a recent concept, which has been socially constructed over the years (Muncie 2004). The way in which society and law define childhood today is certainly different from the way it was perceived, for instance, in the European