Live streaming of child sexual abuse in real-time

Live streaming of child sexual abuse in real-time occurs when a child is forced to appear in front of a webcam to engage in sexual behavior or to be subjected to sexual abuse.

These acts are then live streamed over the Internet to a paying customer - the offender - who views and/or requests a particular type of abuse to be perpetrated over the webcam in real time.

Criminal Offense

Live streaming of child sexual abuse in real-time is not explicitly criminalised in any of the relevant regional or international legal frameworks on sexual exploitation of children.

However, the Lanzarote Convention criminalises the act of causing and coercing children to engage in child pornographic performances (Art. 21(1)(a-b) as well as knowingly attending child pornographic performances (c). Moreover it criminalises the act of aiding or abetting these actions (Art. 24) which could be applied to people facilitating or encouraging the offense.

The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children (OPSC) Art. 3(1)(a) criminalises the act of offering, delivering or accepting by whatever means, a child for the purpose of sexual exploitation.

Similarly the ILO Convention 182 Art. 3(b) criminalises the use, procuring or offering of a child for [...] pornographic performances.

These articles could be interpreted to capture acts related to live streaming of child sexual abuse in real-time by both offenders and facilitators.

Generally regional and international conventions related to child pornography cannot be applied to the issue of live streaming of child sexual abuse as the abuse or performance is usually not recorded. Therefore, it cannot be "produced, possessed or disseminated" as required under the current wording of the relevant regional and international legal frameworks.

Offenders and their Modus Operandi

- Offenders watching live abuse of children via e.g. webcam generally gain access through intermediaries or facilitators;

- Facilitators are sometimes the child's family or community members who force the child to perform in front of a webcam and communicate with and elicit (potential) customers;

- The offender and the facilitator or child agree on a time and date where the abuse will take place and the offender will log on. These appointments are made via chat, e-mail or phone;

- Additionally the parties involved will agree on a price the offender will pay, generally through common legitimate payment services. The amounts paid are generally small to prevent raising suspicion related to the transactions;

- Different platforms such as Skype or webcam-supported chat sites are being used to live stream the abuse over the Internet. This allows offenders to view the abuse in real time or to direct it through the chat or voice function;

- In some communities, there can be a level of social tolerance permitting the crime. This is related to several factors such as poverty and a limited understanding of the Internet, implications for the child or the illegality of these acts. Live streaming of child sexual abuse can then seem to offer a easy and quick source of income.

What can you do?

- Raise awareness and sensitize communities at large about the illegality, impact and risks related to live streaming of child sexual abuse;

- Advocate for stronger legal frameworks that specifically criminalise live streaming of child sexual abuse in real-time or child pornographic performances;

- Advocate for better resources for law enforcement to tackle this issue;

- Advocate and cooperate with financial institutions to trace and follow-up on suspicious transactions that could be related to the crime.

This factsheet was produced by ECPAT International - Programme combating Sexual Exploitation of Children Online