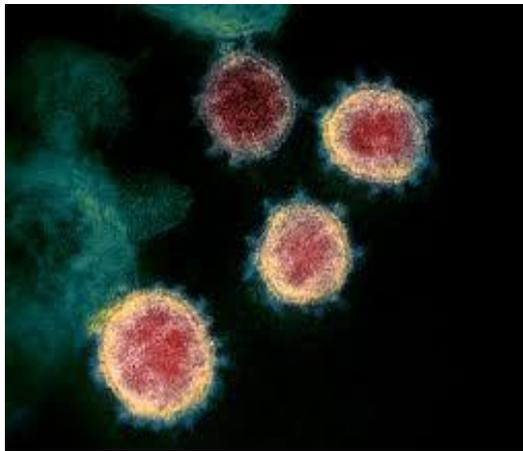


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LESSONS FROM FIGHTING NOVEL CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19) FOR COMBATING ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE AND EXPLOITATION



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I. INTRODUCTION

The whole world is reeling under the havoc caused by Novel Coronavirus (SARS CoV-2) and the disease that it causes – Covid-19. The **coronavirus** COVID-19 is affecting **192 countries and territories** around the world and **1 international conveyance** (the *Diamond Princess* Cruise ship harbored in Yokohama, Japan). As on 25 March 2020, till now there have been **416,916 cases and 18565 deaths**. The world is in grip of a pandemic that is going to change the humankind in ways that is difficult to decipher today. At this time of need when social distancing is the norm when people are forced into quarantine or are self-quarantined, the Internet is coming to the rescue of many people, be it businesses, educational institutions, hospitals, banks or people working from home or people sitting idle at home. The Internet and especially Social Media has become an excellent medium of keeping people connected when they cannot

connect physically and cannot travel. But, as we know, the internet has a dark side as well and it is especially dangerous and risky for the young and the uninitiated. The Internet is a place where children are groomed, coerced, deceived and sexually abused. Beyond the crime of the abuse, and the humiliation, is the crime of recording it. Beyond the abuse, humiliation and recording of it, is the crime of sharing it, then the viewing of it repeatedly by others who create the demand for more ‘material’ — more sexual abuse, more sharing.ⁱ This phenomenon of occurrence of online child sexual abuse and other online crimes against children viz. exposure to inappropriate or harmful content, contact with strangers leading to sexual solicitation, cyberaggression and cyberbullying, cyberstalking, and information security risks via the sharing of images and videos and personal details, have a greater propensity, when more *children and*

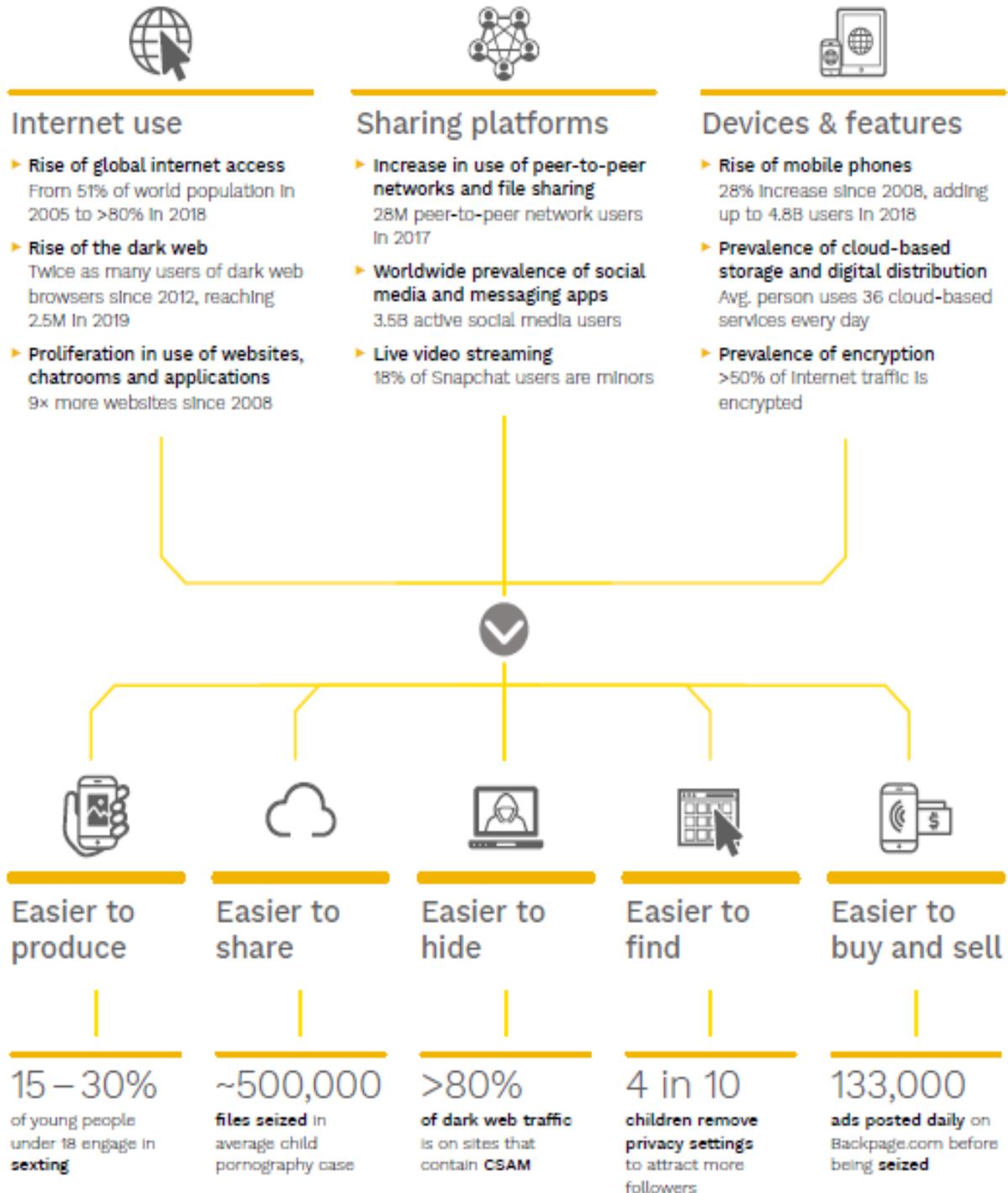
young people are on the Internet for work and entertainment during the lockdowns and stay at home. During these times the Internet is the only medium of communication with the outer world. This is a huge cause for worry during these trying times.

Online Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation has become endemic. The number of domain names associated with child sexual abuse imagery is increasing, according to the UK's Internet Watch Foundation 2018 Annual Report. In 2018 the IWF found 3,899 domain names with 105,047 URLs were used to host such content, a 3% increase on 2017's 3,791. The 3,899 domains hosting child sexual abuse content were traced to 54 countries. Over the past decade the volume of images and videos

of suspected child sexual abuse reported to the US National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) has exploded from 450,000 files in 2004 to more than 45 million files in 2018. At the same time, the number of reports of URLs containing CSAM has increased from only 3,000 in 1998 to 18.4 million today.ⁱⁱ As the advancement in technology happens at a very rapid pace and the social preparedness does not match it, the instances of online abuse of children are growing exponentially. (See Figure 1).

But it is not just because of the advancement of technology that the problem exists and is increasing by the day. Technology in itself is value neutral. There are many more factors to it.

Figure 1: Advances in technology make it easier to abuse children online^{iii iv}



II. SIMILARITIES BETWEEN COVID-19 AND OCSEA

We will try and look at what are the ways of mitigating and abolishing this menace of Online Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation and other form of Online Child Abuse. But, before that we have to understand what all Online Child Abuse consist of, and why and how its propensity is set to increase as more and more children and young people will spend more and more time on the Internet. In this paper, we will discuss and understand – (a) what are the various forms of online child sexual abuse and how technology aids it, (b) what are the various technological tools to tackle the menace of online child sexual abuse and how effective they are, (c) what are various legal and policy provisions to tackle the menace and how effective they are, and (d) what are the tools and techniques with the law enforcement to tackle the menace – **all these through the lens of our learning from fighting**

the Novel Coronavirus Pandemic. We will also discuss and understand the issue of dichotomy and balance between (a) “privacy and security” and (b) “freedom and tracking” in the online space. We will also discuss and understand the psychology of children and young people and why and how they are so susceptible to online sexual abuse and exploitation. We will conclude with the ultimate solution that can contain and abolish the menace of child sexual abuse.

As I discuss and you read on with suspense let me decrease your anxiety, especially during a time when you are already overwhelmed with being locked down indoors and fighting a global pandemic of unprecedented nature and magnitude. As we say in Sanskrit – “एतदपि गमिष्यति”, **this too shall pass.**

But, one thing is for sure, by the time we would have come out of this pandemic, we would be more empathetic, we would be more kind, we would be more cooperative and last but not the least we would value life more than commodities. We will learn, and it will get into our DNA and genetic memory that technology and development are means and the ultimate realities are life and coexistence. But the important question is that for this learning to take shape in our social conscience will the churning and the turmoil happen on its own or will we have to put efforts to learn the lessons for ourselves and put them into practice? The emphatic answer is that we will have to learn our lessons proactively and if we don't then such pandemics – of the nature of health emergency or other kinds, will strike again and again and the whole humanity will be at the risk of collapse.

III. LEARNING TO COMBAT OCSEA BASED OF EXPERIENCE OF FIGHTING COVID-19

There is an uncanny simile between the fight with the Novel Coronavirus (Covid-19) for almost all aspects of our lives. We just need to sit back and reflect. Similarly for Online Sexual Abuse, the lessons are –

1. As is happening with Novel Coronavirus that it is an unknown and uncontrollable virus and phenomenon, similarly for the Internet. Internet is not under a central command and authority. The Internet is a global network that operates without a central governing body and it comprises many interconnected autonomous networks. It is important to understand that the interconnected networks are autonomous and are connected voluntarily. It has been explained by the industry experts that the Internet has grown enormously mainly

because there is no central administration of the Internet. It allows organic growth of the network. Due to its non-proprietary nature, any one company or government cannot exert too much control over the network. This lack of a central administration is both a boon and a bane. On the one hand it allows innovation, quick adaptation and organic growth but on the other hand it also allows unchecked growth of features and applications that are malicious and detrimental to the upkeep of law, order and general well-being.

2. As is being observed in the fight with the novel coronavirus, the Internet has played a big role. Both – (a) privacy and freedom, and (b) security and tracking, of the Internet are important. It is not a choice of either this or that. Both are needed. We have seen that the restriction on free information in China caused the reporting and action to be delayed. We have also seen how in

Singapore smartphone devices have been used to track every Covid-19 positive, twice daily. This tracking of the Covid-19 positives has enabled to move on with life without lockdown. Therefore, for the sake of security and safety, high handed use of techniques like blocking is not recommended and is not in the best interest of the Society. It is important to understand the cybercriminals who engage in online child sexual abuse are highly adaptive and mutative. Therefore, the Technology that is used for identifying, blocking and filtering the CSAM (Child Sexual Abuse Material) needs regular and updated learning from the case studies of actual crimes that are happening to remain updated. This process of updating has to go on at a rate and pace that will match the adaptation and mutation of forms and natures of cybercrimes.

3. During these times of uncertainties due to the pandemic we have seen clearly that

we have valued life over money and material things. It is the human life that matters more than material belongings. The lesson for combating Online Child Sexual Exploitation is that while till now Blocking and Filtering of CSAM came usually in lower priority than safeguarding data etc. Anti-Virus Applications got precedence for data and financial security over securing life and dignity of children, we will have to accord higher priority to child online safety while designing and applying filtering, blocking and remedying technologies.

4. The Novel Corona Virus threat has taught us the lesson that if anyone is at risk then everyone is at risk. Whatever has a propensity to influence and spread will affect everybody. Similarly for Online Child Sexual Exploitation, it is not something that it only affects a certain class of people or people from only a certain region. Everyone is at equal risk and it lowers or heightens based

on the precautionary measures one has taken. But the risk will not end until and unless the root cause of the problem exists in the environment.

5. We have seen that the moment we lower the guard the virus attacks and spreads. Similarly with CSAM. The moment precautionary measures like parental controls, anti-virus, anti-malware and other such measures are ignored the CSAM spread online and becomes a bigger threat to engulf more and more children in its vicious tentacles.

6. Breaking the chain of transmission is important. The monster out there needs feeding to grow sustain and transmit. The feed has to be stopped. Similarly to prevent and stop Online Child Sexual Exploitation all the Child Sexual Abuse Material has to be identified and weeded out and removed from the digital space. Also, production and transmission of new CSAM has to be

stopped. In the late 1980s CSAM had almost ended due to huge efforts by the law enforcement in particular and society in general, but the problem spiked up after the advent of Internet, as the Internet provided a vector, a carrier and an anonymity and hiding place for the perpetrators. Also due to indelible “digital footprint” the CSAM is next to impossible to be weeded out completely from the digital space, but production of new CSAM can be definitely stopped by synchronized efforts from all the stakeholders.

7. The most important learning is when the enemy is advanced, novel and mutative and difficult to track, filter and control then work on the victim protection and go to the basics – washing hands. Similarly following privacy controls, parental controls, and adoption of psycho-social behavioural change and family and community oversight over children and young people’s usage of

the Internet is extremely important and reduces the risk and threat to a great extent. This will however, require a sustained messaging through different ways and means to reach to everyone. The role of all types of media, educational institutions, health institutions, resident welfare associations and other such institutions that have outreach to families and children becomes very important.

8. Victim protection has to be at a full coverage scale, anyone left out means the threat remains and can spike up anytime. During the Lockdown due to the Novel Coronavirus pandemic, COVID-19 positive identification and reporting and cure is a must. CSAM had been weeded out almost by late 1980s but after advent of the Internet it got a medium of transmission, hiding, anonymity and trade. In the Digital Age, it is extremely difficult to locate, identify and remove all CSAM. This requires a

coordinated effort of the law makers, law enforcement agencies, technocrats and the victim and their families to work together. Reporting is a must and so is good follow up of the cases by the law enforcement in close cooperation and coordination of the technocrats. In want of inefficient and ineffective law enforcement and technical help the victims do not have the trust on the system to report to get remedy and justice. The systems of remedy and justice have to be augmented. But, as in the cases of treatment of COVID-19 patients the laws, policies and treatment/remedy protocols will have to be based on information and knowledge from dealing with the actual cases. So, these synergies of all concerned have to be developed and ensured. There already are lots of work happening and many avenues of synergies – all of them of to be woven together in one effort. This synchronization should not mean that there

should be centralization. What works best is synchronized decentralization towards the same objective.

9. As is being learnt in the fight with Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19), cooperation and care for the poor and the marginalized is important for everyone's online safety also. The practices of Digital Citizenship will have to be taken up by everyone. When the rich and the powerful expose and transmit CSAM out in the digital space – knowingly or unknowingly, they may get out of the trouble, blackmailing and extortion racket, but their irresponsible act put the poor and the young at risk as the CSAM propagates in the digital space and act as a fodder for the cyber criminals who gain strength and money from it and with that strength and money trap the poor and the young.

10. As with Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) the problem of Online Child Sexual Exploitation is both global and local and

solutions will also have to be at both levels. Child sexual abuse and exploitation is a multi-sectoral and multi-jurisdictional problem that calls for an integrated, global response. While successfully combating crimes related to child sexual abuse material (child pornography) requires national, regional, and global coordination must be backed by the strengthening of public policies through the development of uniform legislation. While laws vary from country to country, social and cultural factors should never be the basis for the normalization of criminal behavior. These differences in laws weaken the stance against child sexual abuse and exploitation, further complicating the situation, when offenses committed through the use of information and communication technologies are not regulated, allowing offenders to focus their efforts in countries where they know they will not be punished or where laws or prosecution of these crimes

are weaker. A comprehensive approach to prevention, victim assistance, and investigation is the most effective means to combat crimes related to online child sexual abuse and exploitation by raising public awareness of the problem, increasing the services available to assist victims, and improving the overall efforts of law enforcement at the national and international levels. Complying with international legal standards is only the first step, followed by the adoption and implementation of national legislation and the creation of national programs within public policies related to violence against children. Working in regional languages and adaptation as per the local customs and traditions and social realities is important while complying with international and national laws and protocols.

11. As is being seen in the South Korean and German examples of fights with COVID-

19, testing and identification widely is the key to success. Similarly, for Online Child Sexual Exploitation the key to success for its abolition will be widespread outreach to find

the cases in the society and communities proactively. This will led to step by step end of the fodder (CSAM) that the cyber criminals thrive on.

IV. WAY FORWARD

The biggest understanding that one derives from the ongoing fight with the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) is that the burden on the health system has to be reduced and the curve of number of COVID-19 positives have to be flattened for the health systems to be able to handle it. Similarly for the Online Child Sexual Exploitation cases have to be minimized in the track by preventive measures for the technological and law enforcement related aspects to be dealt with scientifically with a breathing space. So we have decided to take our full range of preventive workshop modules to the whole country, to all the institutions. And this will be free of cost and the plan is to reach to at least 10 institutions in all the districts of India. The estimate is that there onwards the issue of Online Child Sexual Exploitation gets into mainstream discussion and programming on Child Protection and Child Education. Since we have tie ups with all the relevant government and technical agencies of law enforcement and technology the learning from the workshops and sessions and active case findings will be fed into development of preventive and responsive technology and preventive and responsive protocols for law enforcement and law making.

We have outreach to Institutions and Voluntary Organisation in all districts of India and we will take this programme in a mission mode. We will manage to do it free of cost though resource sharing methods. Please contact

I am writing this paper as the Executive Director of FLAIR – Forum for Learning and Action with Innovation and Rigour and it is based on a more technical and academic paper on the same subject. We have a programme on Child Online Safety and Well-Being – “Young People in a Digital Society”. I decided to write this paper in the current context so that when we come out of the Novel Coronavirus pandemic and press the reset button for all our future activities, we will reset this programme also. We have already been working and collaborating with all the stakeholders, technical agencies, governments and grassroots organisations, but going forward we are now going forward with the following understanding –

- (a) We will now change from project based approach to full-fledged open campaign based approach
- (b) We are reaching out to all the Educational Institutions and Child Protection organisations/Agencies for collaboration. We will deliver the programme on shared costs. The Child Protection Organisations will take care of Trainees and venue and FLAIR will take care of the Delivery of Modules and its documentation and proactive linkage of the learning from the workshops and interactions for improvement of technical and legal and law enforcement systems and protocols.

Please write to me at ajay.s@flairindia.org if you want to discuss anything on the subject, programme and campaign.

ⁱ Once upon a year, The Internet Watch Foundation Annual Report 2018

ⁱⁱ Julie Cordua. "A Bold Goal: Eliminating Child Sexual Abuse from the Internet". Thorn. April 2019.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sources for upper part of figure: ITU. "ITU releases 2018 global and regional ICT estimates". December 2018; The Tor Project. "User Metrics". August 2019; Internet Live Stats. "Total Number of Websites". August 2019; Cisco. "Cisco Visual Networking Index: Global Mobile Data Traffic Forecast Update". February 2019; Sandvine. "The Global Internet Phenomena Report". October 2018; Tecxipio. "Tecxipio Magazine: File Sharing"; We are social. "Digital in 2019". January 2019; Statista. "Distribution of Snapchat users worldwide as of July 2019, by age and gender". July 2019; Statista. "Number of mobile phone users worldwide from 2015 to 2020". November 2016; Petapixel. "The Importance of Cameras in the Smartphone War". February 2015; Dr Garrick Hileman, Michael Rauchs. "Global Cryptocurrency Benchmarking Study". 2017; Techjury. "Cloud Computing Statistics 2019". March 2019.

^{iv} Sources for bottom part of figure: Sheri Medigan, Anh Ly, Christina L. Bash. "Prevalence of Multiple Forms of Sexting Behavior Among Youth – A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis". April 2018; NetClean. "NetClean Report 2017", 2018; Dr Gareth Owenson, Dr Nick Savage. "Empirical analysis of Tor hidden services". May 2016; Internet Matters Ltd. "Infographic revealing kids' use of social media survey stats"; Marinus Analytics. "Marinus Analytics finds sex trafficking surging online after Backpage.com shutdown". November 2018.