Online exploitation of children: Police Strategies and Ethical Issues

More than a third of young people in 30 countries report being cyberbullied, with 1 in 5 skipping school because of it. (UNICEF, 2022)

The growth of Internet sure has made life easy for humans in several ways, but it also comes with serious risks especially for children. Children are spending more time online than ever before in human history. The most disturbing part of making Internet accessible to children/minors is the possibility of online exploitation and victimization. Even though exploitation of children/minors has been an issue since decades, the development of Internet has made it easy for online predators to contact their potential victims.
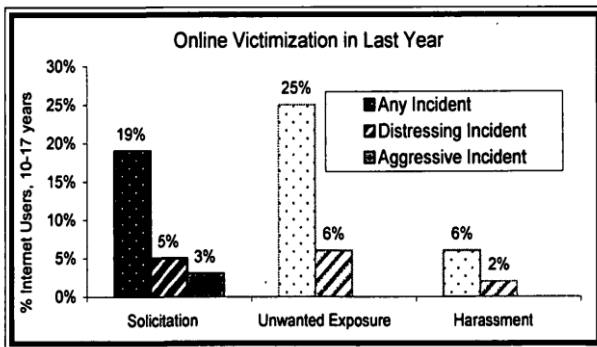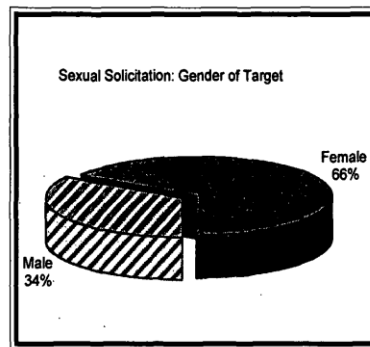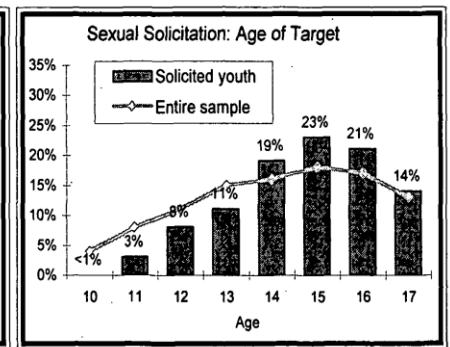

(Finkelhor, Mitchell, Wolak, 2000, pp. 17-18)

If we carefully analyze the data presented in the above figures collected in the year 2000, we can recognize that Internet users between the ages 10-17, especially women, have received more unwanted advances and solicitation towards them. It wouldn't be a mistake to assume that after two decades, with the exponential increase of social media platforms, these numbers would have increased multiple times. Hence, State Police officers have taken various measures to decrease such threats on the Internet, such as creating fake profiles on many popular social media sites, employing several "ethical hackers", asking for foreign intelligence services to access U.S. servers without judicial authorization to provide data in the search of online predators, hiring local graduate data science students for building an artificial intelligence algorithm to further access and

lessen these attacks. While these measures might achieve what they are intended to, but there are a lot of ethical issues, which will be discussed in this paper, that arise from implementing them.

To begin with, in my opinion State Police officers creating fake online social media profiles doesn't hurt anyone and will only help catch potential abusers. But how the Police will find them is a question to think about. Consider the following questions:

- Will the Police get in touch with everyone on social media with the questions?
- Will they wait for potential predators to contact them?

This is a tricky situation for the Police to be in, but I believe in this context the State Police are morally correct in going forward with their plan.

Additionally, the Police have employed "ethical hackers" to access social media platforms, websites etc. I strongly believe this is where the ethical issues arise. Because there is a huge chance for these "hackers" to get whatever information they want and misuse it. There is no guarantee that these "hackers" are good human-beings, for example, they could stalk a person they wanted to, without fear, and use that information to their advantage. Police can't be sure about the intentions of these hackers when they are hiring them, and if we look at it from a moral point of view then the Police are wrong.

Furthermore, the Police has also requested help from foreign intelligence agencies to provide data in search of online predators and have given them access to the U.S. Servers. This step of theirs is, without a doubt, reckless and will create huge security problems to the country. First, the State Police doesn't have the authority to give access to foreign agencies. Second, they cannot control what information the foreign agencies will retrieve from the servers. For instance, they could download personal information of army generals, government officials, celebrities etc., and intimidate them to get more sensitive information. Third, they could put a bug in the servers, constantly track our data and cripple the U.S before we even realize where the problem is. Fourth, there is no guarantee that foreign agencies will be more successful in finding the online predators than the agencies in the U.S. After weighing the points, it is safe to say that the Police are morally wrong if they implement this proposal.

Moreover, the Police has also hired graduate data science students from a local university to build an artificial intelligence algorithm to collect data online and find the offenders using this

data. If we consider that graduate students have extremely high amounts of work to do for their courses and so little time to complete their own assignments, what the Police did, by hiring graduates, is unethical.

We will now begin discussing each of these four measures taken up the Police and the continued usage of this data, with respect to the ethical theories that we studied till now in class.

First, we start with **RELATIVISM**, it is a concept where there are no universal standards of right and wrong. It is a belief that there's no absolute truth, only the truths that a particular individual (**SUBJECTIVE RELATIVISM**) or culture (**CULTURAL RELATIVISM**) happen to believe. In cultural relativism there are guidelines that vary from place to place and time to time. If we apply this to the four measures that the Police took, they are morally right because from their point of view all they did was make an effort to reduce online exploitation of children/minors. So, with respect to Relativism, what others might deem as morally wrong, the Police can/will maintain what they did is morally right.

According to **DIVINE COMMAND THEORY**, an action is considered good and moral if it is in accordance with the will of God, and an action is immoral and wrong if it is against His will. In this theory The Holy Books are used for determining morality and thus, act as a moral and ethical guide. But there are several Holy Books and not a single book that address our current situation. There are no guidelines/ information about Internet, social media, or online exploitations in any of the Books, therefore it is impossible to apply this theory to evaluate the morality of the Police.

ETHICAL EGOISM, in philosophy, is an ethical theory according to which moral decision making should be guided entirely by self-interest. An action is morally right if it's a person with maximum long-term benefits. If we apply this theory the Police are morally right because reducing online exploitations, no matter the path taken, will ultimately get them accolades which will be a long-term benefit.

KANTIANISM, formulated by Immanuel Kant, has two formulations:

1. *'Act only by that maxim by which you can, at the same time, will that it be a universal law'.* "In other words, when working out what you should do you must ask yourself 'would it be OK if everyone took this type of action?'" (Misselbrook, British Journal of General Practice, 2013). If we apply the 1st formulation to what the State Police did,

like giving unauthorized access to the U.S. Servers, then according to the 1ˢᵗ formulation it should be universal. Which means that the Police in every country should give unauthorized access to other foreign intelligence agencies. If it is followed, then it will lead to a categorical disaster. For example, let's assume this theory is implemented, then a state should share its server with an enemy state, which will eventually lead to a conflict between these two states or even the world. In this case the Police would be deemed morally wrong.

2. *"'So act as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end in itself, never as a means only'.* Other people should never be seen just as a means to an end. A useful reminder to us on a hard day!" (Misselbrook, British Journal of General Practice, 2013). Even in this scenario, what the Police did would be considered morally wrong because, they have hired local university's graduate students to collect data for them. They are merely using the students as a means to their end, which is reducing the online children/minor abuse.

"UTILITARIANISM (HAPPINESS PRINCIPLE) holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure." (John Stuart Mill, 1899, p.15). In other words, an action is good and moral if its results are more beneficial than harmful. And an action is bad and immoral if its more harmful than beneficial. This can also be termed as ACT-UTILITARIANISM. Let's consider our ethical issue here, the Police has given unauthorized access to the foreign intelligence agencies of the U.S. Server to collect data of bad actors online. Assume this data has helped the Police in reducing the online exploitation and victimization of vulnerable children, but the foreign agencies could use the given access to destabilize the government. In this case the harm this action of the Police has done more harm than good, so the Police are morally wrong. RULE-UTILITARIANISM is a branch of Utilitarianism, which states that, 'We ought to adopt moral rules which, if followed by everyone, will lead to the greatest increase of total happiness over all affected parties' (Quinn, 2015, p.78). If what the police did, like employing ethical hackers to get information to do their job, is followed by everyone it will be a problem for everyone in the society. So, in terms of Utilitarianism what the police did would be looked on as morally wrong.

VIRTUE ETHICS: "A right action is an action that a virtuous person, acting in character, would do in the same circumstances. A virtuous person is a person who possesses and lives out the virtues. The virtues are those character traits human beings need in order to flourish and be truly happy" (Quinn, 2015, p.90). There is no guarantee that the Police around the world would do the same thing to protect the vulnerable, there is no list which predetermined a set of characteristics that a police officer should possess. I believe we cannot judge if the State Police officers are morally right or wrong based on Virtue ethics.

"**SOCIAL CONTRACT THEORY:** Morality consists in the set of rules, governing how people are to treat one another, that rational people will agree to accept, for their mutual benefit, on the condition that others follow those rules as well" (Quinn, 2015, p.83). As mentioned earlier if all the states in the world start acting in the same manner, then there will be a catastrophe. So, I think the Police are morally wrong if we apply Social Contract Theory.

In conclusion, considering the ever-growing online exploitations and victimizations of vulnerable people, the State Police officers have taken several methods to reduce those cases. Even though there are a few ethical issues that arise from the Police measures, when all the ethical theories are applied, the Police are both morally right and morally wrong depending on the theory one chooses.

References

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