Speech by Iyavar Chetty Film and Publications Board

Originally published in the Weekend Argus, Published in the Sunday Argus on 29 September 2003.

By Douglas Carew, adapted from a speech by Mr Iyavar Chetty of the Film and Publications Board given

to the ISPA.

" We are guilty of many errors and many faults, but our worst crime is abandoning the children, neglecting the fountain of life. Many of the things we need can wait. The child cannot, Right now is the time his bones are being formed, his blood is being made and his senses are being developed. To him we cannot answer 'Tomorrow'. His name is 'Today'" (Gabriella Mistral, Chile)

Albert Einstein once said that the world is too dangerous a place to live in - not because of the people who do evil but because of the people who sit by and let it happen. If Einstein were alive today, he may have changed that last part to "because of the people who profit from it". Thomas and Janice Reedy, the Texas couple convicted last year for distributing child pornography on the Internet, reportedly made R11.2m in just one month.

This paper is not about child pornography on the Internet but about child pornography and the Internet. It is not about what constitutes child pornography or, more correctly, child abuse images. It is about child abuse images and the Internet. It is not about demonizing the Internet because we all know that this most disturbing of all crimes against children predates the Internet. It is about the profoundly dramatic impact that the Internet has had, and will continue to have, on the creation and trafficking of child abuse images.

The context of my paper lies in the following:

* According to the Internet Watch Foundation, an industry-supported hotline in the United Kingdom, there are around 1 million images of child abuse in circulation on the Internet and that this number is expanding at the rate of about 200 a day.

* Child abuse images are accessed, each day, by more than 27 000 people worldwide.

* UNICEF estimates that 80% of paedophile-related investigations involve more than one country, meaning that the maker, distributor, possessor and location are not all in the same country, and that 90% of all paedophile-related activities involve the Internet. ("The Role of the Industry and the Internet Watch Foundation", Peter Robbins and Roger Darlington in Policing Paedophiles on the Internet, Edited by Dr Allyson MacVean and Det.Supt. Peter Spindler, New Police Bookshop, UK, 2003)

What is it about the Internet that makes it the medium of choice for paedophiles? In so far as the technology is concerned, three main factors have been identified:

1.   the Internet makes child abuse images more easily accessible

2. the Internet makes accessing such images more anonymous, allowing for access from the privacy of one's home, 24 hours a day, 365 days.
3. the Internet provides legitimization for paedophiles and their behaviour.

This is not to suggest that the technology itself is responsible for child abuse images. As Det.Insp. Terry Jones of the Greater Manchester Police Abusive Images Unit, who enjoys the distinction of having arrested the first person to be convicted for downloading child abuse images from the Internet in 1995, reminds us: "Technology does not abuse children - people abuse children." However, the Internet has made an impact not only on the availability of child abuse images but also on the behaviour of those who prey on children.

It is this "legitimizing" effect that is the focus of this paper - the impact that the Internet has on 'reinforcing' paedophilic behaviour and making it appear 'normal and acceptable' conduct to paedophiles. Castells, in his monumental study - The Information Age; Economy, Society and Culture, Blackwells, 1996 - states that, beyond casual social interaction and instrumental use of CMC, observers have detected the phenomenon of the formation of virtual communities, organized around shared interests or purposes, while John Suler, Professor at Rider University in the United States, describes the Web as a safe place to try out different roles, voices and identities.

"It is sort of like training wheels for the self you want to bring out in real life." ("A mirror on the self" by Bridge Murray in Vol. 31, No. 4 of Monitor on Psychology, April 2000). Murray goes on to say that, along with the anonymity offered by the Internet, comes an effect that social psychologists have associated with crowds: "disinhibition".

The online world lacks the checks on self that shape and constrain behaviour in the offline world.

Until the Internet came along, the paedophile was a lonely, pathetic figure, unable to share his perverse interests with his friends and neighbours, and often shunned and hounded out of a neighbourhood once identified as a paedophile. The Internet has changed all of that. The Internet is more than just a medium of communication. It has given birth to a new reality - a virtual reality - a cyberworld with its own rules, its own language and its own "netizens".

In so far as paedophiles are concerned, it provides a supportive context in which the child abuser is no longer a lonely figure but part of a larger community of like-minds.

It provides a world in which the paedophile feels accepted, reinforcing his belief that his perverse and criminal interest in children is normal because it is shared by many thousands like him in this cyberworld.

The Internet allows for a blurring of boundaries and the ability to self-represent from the safety of a computer screen is part of the compulsion to go online. Holmes ("Journal of Popular Culture", 1998) describes the computer as a mechanism for metamorphosis where deviant sexual fantasies become concretized. Durkin and Bryant ("Deviant Behaviour: An Interdisciplinary Journal", 1999) suggest that "cybersex" allows individuals to operationalise deviant sexual fantasies that would otherwise have self-extinguished were it not for the immediate reinforcement provided by online communication.

According to Mahoney and Faulkner ("Brief overview of paedophiles on the Web?, submitted to the "Focus on Children" summit in Washington, DC in 1997), the Internet allows paedophiles:

* instant access to other predators worldwide

* open discussion of their sexual desires

* shared ideas about ways to lure victims

* mutual support of their adult-child sex philosophies

* instant access to potential child victims worldwide

* disguised identities for approaching children, even to the point of presenting as members of teen groups

* ready access to teen chat rooms to find out how and who to target as potential victims

* means to identify and track down home contact information

* ability to build a long-term "internet" relationship with a potential victim, prior to attempting to engage the child in physical contact.

But the Internet is more than just a vehicle for facilitating paedophilic activities. It also facilitates change in individuals. Taylor and Quayle (Child Pornography: An Internet Crime, 2003) suggest that people who use the Internet as a way of meeting their sexual needs may come to it from a variety of backgrounds.

"Some are curious and find that that they are both interested in and aroused by child pornography. Some are aware of their sexual interest and see the Internet as a means of meeting that interest without recourse to contact with children.

"Others wish to find children to engage with, both at a virtual and at a face-to-face level. What seems to be the case for many individuals is that, once engaged with the Internet for the purposes of sexual gratification, that very engagement changes the way they think about themselves and others.

"This may be nothing more than a sense of 'coming home', of finding that there are many like-minded others, of finding a niche.

"For some, communication on the Internet offers a way of presenting oneself in a positive light, without the barriers of physical presence, and possibly with the added status associated with a 'good' collection of child pornography.

"The very process of acquiring Internet skills may leave the person feeling positive about themselves in a way that they have never experienced before.

"Such changes may be thought of as passive: the by-products of engagement. However, for others, as we have seen in the context of cybersex, such change is more considered and intentional."

A number of researchers have tried to find answers to two issues central to the abuse of the Internet for child pornography. Lamb ("Cybersex: research notes on the characteristics of the visitors to online chat

rooms", Vol 19, Deviant Behaviour: An Interdisciplinary Journal, 1998) provided the first systematic study of how chat rooms are used by paedophiles.

He found that very few people in his study showed any restraints in what they wanted to say or do, engaging others whom they assumed to be children in fantasies and mutual masturbation.

Jones ("Doing Internet Research: Critical Issues and Methods for Examining the Net", 1999) states that central to our understanding of the individual in relation to the Internet is awareness that there is an overlap between the online and the offline world. "For those with a sexual interest in children, life online operates in the context of the abuse of children both online and offline, either in the production and exchange of pornographic images, or in attempted sexual engagement."

Talamo and Ligorio ("Strategic identities in cyberspace", Cyberpsychology and Behaviour, 2001) emphasise that "whenever cyberspace is used within a real and meaningful context, the boundaries between real and virtual are blurred. Furthermore, activities in cyberspace produce outputs for real life and vice versa".

One case study by Taylor and Quayle, described in their book, Child Pornography: An Internet Crime which I referred to earlier, provided evidence of how one individual used the Internet to further his sexual interest in children.

"This was achieved through initially accessing child pornography, which intensified his levels of sexual arousal and behaviour and fuelled his desire to engage in a relationship with a child.

"His move to chat rooms allowed him to engage initially as a child persona in 'cybersex' with people presenting as both adults and boys, and then as an adult in order to access boys offline.

"We can see a progression in offending that moved him closer to behaviour that was clearly sanctioned online: that of the sexual predator.

"This is paralleled in changes in his sexual behaviour and language. Pornography was an important feature in that through it he accessed a like-minded community, secured a role in that community and was provided with a vehicle that allowed both solitary and mutual sexual expression.

"Pornography cemented both adult and child relationships, giving him status through the size and quality of his collection." The last time I met with representatives of Internet Service providers, they were at pains to convince me that the Internet is nothing more than an "information highway" and that it merely provides a medium of communication. They were not prepared to even consider the possibility that the Internet was more than just an "information highway".

Today, in the light of a lot more research on the "Psychology of the Internet", I hope that at least you will appreciate the point of view I have tried to impress on you in the expectation of a cooperative rather than a confrontational response to the amendments which are before Parliament.

Amendments which will impose certain liabilities under certain very specific conditions on internet service providers. In thanking ISPA for this opportunity, I conclude with a message and a story. The message is from the opening address of Minister Lindiwe Sisulu to the May 2000 National Workshop on Combating Child Pornography More Effectively: "The most important obligation of those who become aware of child pornography is to maintain a sense of horror. We need to maintain a sense of horror and make that the basis of our response to what is happening to children, on a daily basis, the world over. This is an essential condition for any struggle against the pervasiveness of this vile crime."

And the story, in just a few words : On 27 August 1984, in a hotel room in Amsterdam, Thea Pumbroek died. She had appeared in number of pornographic videos and died of an overdose of cocaine while being filmed in yet another pornographic film.

Nobody remembers her. She seems to have been treated in death as little more than the object she had been in life. Thea Pumbroek was six years old.

Originally published in The Weekend Argus on 29 September 2003.