Online Child Sexual Abuse: Grooming, Policing and Child Protection in a Multi-Media World

By Elena Martellozzo
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The Internet provides endless opportunities to mingle with friends on social networking sites and blogs, as well as enabling limitless access to information to users that previous generations would not have thought possible. Despite this benefit, children have become more vulnerable to sex offenders because of the information they are exposed to and their desire in making new friends. Online Child Sexual Abuse: Grooming, Policing and Child Protection in a Multi-Media World1 finds that the ongoing Internet advancements have given sex offenders the ability to “groom” children, gaining their trust, and then subjecting them to potential subsequent harm. The book “addresses the complex, multi-faceted and counterintuitive relationships between online grooming behaviors, risk assessment, police practices and the actual danger of subsequent abuse in the physical world.”2 Understanding how sex offenders use the internet is essential to police and government regulation. The purpose of the book “is to construct conceptual and empirical bridges between child sexual abuse, the dynamics of grooming process and online interactions related to sexual abuse.”3

Author Dr. Elena Martellozzo is a criminologist and a senior lecturer at Middlesex University in London. She works very closely with the London Metropolitan Police and her

2 See Martellozzo, supra note 1, at Book Summary.
3 See Martellozzo, supra note 1, at 5-6.
research includes the analysis of online sex offending, online sexual abuse, children’s online behavior and police practice. She has written a number of book chapters and journal articles on online child sexual abuse.

The book is broken up into eight chapters: briefly presenting an overview of what is known and not known in the field; transitioning to several theories looked upon at different angles; and then it concludes with the proposition that law enforcement agencies, academics, and internet service providers should continue to prevent child sexual abuse (“CSA”). The first chapter sets the scene by introducing historic and current literature and defines key concepts and terms. The terms childhood, sexual offending, consent, CSA, paedophiles and paedophilia are defined to help the readers gain a better understanding of the field.

The second chapter is broken up into three parts by examining several theories with its focus in understanding why individuals decide to engage in sexual activities with children. The biological perspective explains that individuals are more likely to commit CSA because their sex hormone levels are too high promoting sexual desire and orgasm. The physiological perspective looks at David Finkelhor’s four step precondition model examining the offender’s motivation before engaging in CSA; then it studies the offender’s denial of blame with Gresham Sykes’s and David Matza’s five techniques of neutralization; and closes with recidivism by exploring Steven Wolf’s cycle of offending. Several other theories are mentioned, but there is none which supersedes the other in answering why, and it is highly suggested that one should understand all these theories to provide the best protective plan.

The third chapter’s focus is on children’s growing use of the Internet and the risks they take when they are online. One contributing factor to this growth is because of social

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4 See Martellozzo, supra note 1, at 30.
5 See Martellozzo, supra note 1, at 32-38.  

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networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, and Friendster. Social networking sites are defined as “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.” According to the British Office of Communications with its research on social networking and attitudes towards it, the Communication’s Office reported that fifty-nine percent of children who used these websites wanted to make new friends. Because of their desire to meet new people, children often tell strangers their email addresses, the school they attend, their phone numbers, and they usually give their photographs. It is highly suggested that parents and schools should inform children of the potential dangers resulting from their online interactions.

Chapter four reviews the international legislative framework to combat CSA, with its focus on UK’s policing response to the Sexual Offenses Act of 2003 which prohibit owning and sharing indecent images of children. Despite the efforts to limit CSA, perpetrators all over the world can still obtain these images because they may hide their identities. In fact, “sex offenders do not need to lurk in parks or shopping centres; neither do they need to be family members . . . they [can] groom children from the comfort of their homes, protected by the anonymity of cyberspace.” As a result of the anonymity, the production and distribution of indecent images has become a huge lucrative industry. It is very difficult to regulate these images because of countries’ legislative differences and the lack of jurisdiction law enforcement agencies have across borders.

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6 See Martellozzo, supra note 1, at 49.
7 See Martellozzo, supra note 1, at 52.
8 See Martellozzo, supra note 1, at 59.
9 See Martellozzo, supra note 1, at 79.
Chapter five begins with a historical overview of the development of online CSA, and then explores the challenges police and other agencies face when promoting and enforcing child protection against online CSA. Agencies have embarked on special operations where its members are to find individuals who have violated the laws against online CSA. Despite the efforts, these investigations were proven unsuccessful because of the publicity these operations drew and the difficulties with finding the “right” person. It becomes difficult to find the “right” person because sometimes the information the perpetrators use, are usually stolen information such as an email address, a personal password, or credit card details.\(^\text{10}\) And even if such information linked the individual, it is difficult to convict him/her if that person does not have an offending history.

The sixth chapter focuses on the undercover officer’s day-to-day activities in online interaction with targeted people, and discusses the difficulties they face during the grooming process and the stages of police intervention. Police officers found it difficult to speak with “targets” because they felt unprepared to meet the targets’ demands and were not aware of Internet lingo used commonly by children. Even if these problems were nonexistent, there is still the issue of having the target speak to the officer on a continued basis for the purposes of obtaining more evidence to convict. Although this chapter provides great details of the officer’s daily activities, such research is only based on twenty-one officers who are all concentrated in one location.

The seventh chapter builds off the previous chapter and examines the sex offender’s modus operandi, where the author leads the readers into the many issues with Internet profiles, and then to sex offenders’ attempts with gaining “the trust being the big friend and doing things

\(^{10}\) See Martellozzo, supra note 1, at 100.
for that child beyond the cause of duty.”

Further into the chapter, readers are introduced a spectrum where there is the hyper-confident groomer on one end and a hyper-cautious groomer on the other. Those in the latter spectrum are aware that anyone could explore the Internet and thus require more than those in the hyper-confident end by insisting on hearing the victim’s voice, seeing the victim on webcam, and receiving more photographs. The hyper-cautious groomer never furnishes “details about themselves until they are completely sure it is safe to do so.”

In the last chapter, the author tells the audience that she has met her goals set out in the Introduction, and briefly presents a summary of all of her findings, as well as providing various suggestions in protecting children and the risks associated with their use of the Internet.

The book is wonderfully written and well organized. The theories and the different angles presented to the reader exemplify the high level of organization required to write such piece. However, despite that the book’s main focus is with UK’s police force and government regulation with regards to online CSA, it is nevertheless a great introductory book because it sheds some light into this darkened field. It is very difficult to grasp and regulate online CSA because of the ongoing technological advancements to the Internet where its users may hide their identities from authorities and from victims. But as long as we are determined and persistent, there may be a way to protect our children from online sexual predators and sex offenders.

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11 See Martellozzo, supra note 1, at 143.
12 See Martellozzo, supra note 1, at 142.
13 See Martellozzo, supra note 1, at 142.