Stop-IT conference on Internet child pornography

The conference commenced with presentations on new legislation being considered by the Italian Parliament which would clarify the definition of child pornography and impose significant penalties on its production and distribution. The Italian government also has proposed the establishment of a national centre to combat Internet child pornography. The centre would investigate reports of illegal material, and Internet service providers would be required to report illegal material that they find, to the centre.

A key theme of the conference was the impact of Internet child pornography on the victims of the sexual abuse depicted in such images. Roberta Cecchetti of Save The Children, Italy, stressed the importance of identifying and locating victims depicted in child pornography, so that further abuse can be prevented and the victim given appropriate support. She explained that it is particularly important that police identify new images, as these indicate the possibility that abuse is recent and ongoing. A representative of Sweden's hotline spoke of a recent case involving thousands of images depicting girls aged between five and 12 years.

The continued existence of the images on the Internet causes many victims considerable distress: child psychiatrist Professor Francesco Montecchi spoke of the need for a pragmatic approach to obtaining evidence and testimony from young children in criminal proceedings against a perpetrator. She also stressed the need for support for victims beyond the criminal investigation and trial period.

Research Director of the Cyberspace Research Unit at the University of Lancashire, Rachel O'Connell, outlined the typical patterns of behaviour adopted by paedophiles when 'grooming' children in Internet chat rooms. Many scan the online profiles of children before making contact and typically start with a friendly discussion of music, hobbies, sports and games, followed by questions designed to minimise the risk of detection. Paedophiles seek to win the trust and affection of a child in their online conversations before progressing to discussion of sexual matters. They may send child pornography in an attempt to normalise the behaviour in the child's mind, and to facilitate a face-to-face meeting. Ms O'Connell stressed that children, parents and chat site operators need to be aware of these typical behaviours, and argued that child protection considerations should be factored into the development of hardware and protocols for new platforms, such as mobile phones.

Ruth Dixon, Advisory Services Manager for Childnet International, highlighted the need for children and parents to be aware of the range of applications and platforms on which Internet grooming can occur. Chat can take place in world wide web, instant messaging and gaming applications, as well as dedicated chat applications. So-called 'flirting' games on SMS on mobile phones also pose a risk by providing an opportunity for individuals to meet without one party knowing who the other is. Ms Dixon said that those most at risk are children aged 12 to 15 years – they would not consider people they chat with online to be 'strangers'. She argued that it is difficult to reliably protect children in chat rooms. Chat rooms for children only were difficult to police as paedophiles are adept at persuading children and authorities that they themselves are children; the large volume of chat activity means that logging and filtering could potentially consume substantial amounts of human and computing resources; and moderating is itself problematic because paedophiles will be attracted to undertaking such activity. However, Ms Dixon said that the risks associated with chat rooms could be managed by continuing to educate children and parents about the risks and steps they could take to avoid them.

Speaking from a law enforcement perspective, Luigi Mancuso of the Italian Carabinieri spoke of the real distinction between, one the one hand, private collectors and distributors of child pornography and, on the other, commercial operators whose interest in such material is purely financial. Many of the latter have connections with organised crime. Private collectors typically use Usenet newsgroups, web-based 'communities' and peer-to-peer applications to exchange material because of the perceived security and anonymity these applications afford. Commercial operators typically establish web sites which more easily support credit card transactions and enable operators to refer customers to several sites. Customers of commercial sites tend to be older, to have limited technical expertise and are less likely to be perpetrators of child sexual abuse. Private collectors tend to be young adults, have more technical skills and be abusers of children themselves.