

Civil Society reflections on the preparedness to keep up with technological advances in the field of human trafficking

12 October 2023

16.00 – 17.00

Warsaw, Poland

Background

The rapid evolution of innovative technology has greatly influenced the way human trafficking is perpetrated. Criminals are increasingly leveraging technology at every stage of the crime – in the planning, recruitment, transportation, control and exploitation of victims, and in the transferring and hiding of criminal proceeds. This has made the crime even more challenging to tackle, as traffickers are exploiting technologies to remain hidden, to connect with vulnerable individuals, and to expand the number of users of victims' services. Moreover, traffickers are misusing technology to put in place new forms of exploitation, such as the livestreaming of sexual abuse available to a global audience, including of minors, to maximize profits. An analysis¹ of the international jurisprudence on the specific topic revealed existing cases where there had been no in-person contact between any of the parties involved in the exploitation of a person – the victims themselves, the traffickers nor the individuals indulging in the victim's exploitation – due to the use of technology.

As technology continues to evolve, counter-trafficking efforts need to keep pace with the developments in order to ensure effective prevention, protection, and prosecution. The increased misuse of technology by traffickers has carried great impact on the work of civil society organizations (CSOs) in the OSCE area working to combat human trafficking as well. From a victims' support- and protection point of view, CSOs have had to develop new frameworks for reporting, analysis and referral of content-based exploitation, adapt their awareness-raising and victims' outreach campaigns to the online environment, and diversify the psychological support provided to victims exploited through technology, among others.

It is essential that there is timely collaboration and investment in technology to stay ahead of traffickers and leverage technology for victim protection. This will require strategic thinking, innovation, and multi-stakeholder cooperation. There is a constant strive to sustain the progress innovation and technology brings, and it raises multiple questions regarding whether we are equipped to maintain pace with the given task. There are many examples: More and more technology companies are implementing **end-to-end encryption**, which is a technology that keeps content shared by users private and secure, from one endpoint to another. WhatsApp, iMessage, Android Messages and Signal all use end-to-end encryption. Facebook Messenger is expected to implement end-to-end encryption by the end of 2023.²

Another example, **Large Language Models (LLMs)**, have witnessed rapid developments in the last few years. LLMs are a type of AI system that works with language. Typical examples of LLMs include

¹ source

² <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-66099040>

OpenAI's GPT-4, Google's PaLM, and Meta's LLaMA.³ LLMs are deep learning algorithms that can recognize, summarize, translate, predict, and generate content using very large datasets.

The last example is **Simulated Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Material (CSAEM)**, which is sexual content depicting fictitious children in formats such as text, drawings, deepfakes⁴, or computer-generated graphics. It's also known as fictional CSAEM, pseudo CSAEM, or fantasy images. Recent technological advancements mean fictitious children can now be virtually indistinguishable from real children in child sexual abuse and exploitation material.⁵

The above-highlighted examples of technological developments can carry significant impact on the human trafficking crime and the efforts undertaken by civil society to save and support victims.

- End-to-End Encryption allows traffickers to increase their anonymity in the virtual space and lower the risks of being caught by law enforcement;
- LLMs are good at impersonating other people. It will become trivial for large-scale criminal platforms to be configured with goals to find potential victims on platforms, engage with them, develop trust (potentially over months) and set up the conversation to hand off to a trafficker, or extort directly on the platform;
- Simulated Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Material can be used to disguise the abuse of real children, as a gateway to "contact offending" against children (meaning abusing them in real life), and as a grooming technique. It can also lead to a massive increase of content related to sexual exploitation of children, which will require additional resources from civil society and state authorities.

Objective

The conversation around the above-described technological developments and innovation, and their potential misuse by traffickers to exploit victims, are at an early stage. This side event will gather leading experts from civil society organizations across the OSCE region to discuss the potential impact of recent technological progress on the ability to efficiently combat human trafficking. The side event will discuss needs and challenges, and whether the anti-trafficking community has established itself to sustain the inevitable technological progress with the necessary resources and strategies to keep up with what lies ahead, and what is required to ensure that we do not lose the innovation-battle against criminals.

³ [https://cset.georgetown.edu/article/what-are-generative-ai-large-language-models-and-foundation-models/#:~:text=Large%20language%20models%20\(LLMs\)%20are,%E2%80%94but%20useful%E2%80%94digital%20representation.](https://cset.georgetown.edu/article/what-are-generative-ai-large-language-models-and-foundation-models/#:~:text=Large%20language%20models%20(LLMs)%20are,%E2%80%94but%20useful%E2%80%94digital%20representation.)

⁴ Deepfakes are the manipulation of facial appearance through deep generative methods, using synthetic media that has been digitally manipulated to replace one person's likeness convincingly with that of another.

⁵ <https://theconversation.com/virtual-child-sexual-abuse-material-depicts-fictitious-children-but-can-be-used-to-disguise-real-abuse-180248#:~:text=What%27s%20virtual%20child%20sexual%20abuse,pseudo%20pornography%2C%20or%20fantasy%20images.>