3 Child Grooming Case

While we focus on white-collar financial crime in this book on computer crime, we must not forget that there are a number of other types of crime that are typical for cyber crime and Internet crime as well. Typical examples are hacking, child pornography and online child grooming. In this chapter, we present the case of child grooming as computer crime.

Internet use has grown considerably in the last decade. Information technology now forms a core part of the formal education system in many countries, ensuring that each new generation of Internet users is more adept than the last. Research studies in the UK suggest that the majority of young people aged 9-19 accessed the Internet at least once a day. The Internet provides the opportunity to interact with friends on social networking sites such as Myspace and Bebo and enables young people to access information in a way that previous generations would not have thought possible. The medium also allows users to post detailed personal information, which may be accessed by any site visitor and provides a platform for peer communication hitherto unknown (Davidson and Martellozzo, 2008). There is, however, increasing evidence that the Internet is used by some adults to access children and young people in order to groom them for the purposes of sexual abuse. Myspace have recently expelled 29,000 suspected sex offenders and is being sued in the United States by parents who claim that their children were contacted by sex offenders on the site and consequently abused (BBC, 2007). The Internet also plays a role in facilitating the production and distribution of indecent illegal images of children, which may encourage and complement online grooming.

3.1   Online Offenders

Recent advances in computer technology have been aiding sexual sex offenders, stalkers, child pornographers, child traffickers, and others with the intent of exploiting children (Kierkegaard, 2008: 41):

> Internet bulletin boards, chat rooms, private websites, and peer-to-peer networks are being used daily by pedophiles to meet unsuspecting children. Compounding the problem is the lack of direct governance by an international body, which will curb the illegal content and activity. Most countries already have laws protecting children, but what is needed is a concerted law enforcement and international legislation to combat child sex abuse.

Men who target young people online for sex are pedophiles (Kierkegaard, 2008; Wolak et al., 2008). According to Dunaigre (2001), the pedophile is an emblematic figure, made into a caricature and imbued with all the fears, anxieties and apprehensions rocking our society today. Pedophile acts are – according to the World Health Organization (WHO) – sexual behavior that an adult major (16 years or over), overwhelmingly of the male sex, acts out towards prepubescent children (13 years or under). According to the WHO, there must normally be a five-year age difference between the two, except in the case of pedophilic practices at the end of adolescence where what counts is more the difference in sexual maturity. However, the definition of criminal behavior varies among countries. As will become evident from reading this article, pedophile acts in Norway are sexual behavior that a person acts out towards children of 16 years or under. There is no minimum age definition for the grooming person in Norwegian criminal law, but age difference and difference in sexual maturity is included as criteria for criminal liability.

Wolak et al. (2009: 4) present two case examples of crimes by online sex offenders in the United States:

- Police in West Coast state found child pornography in the possession of the 22-year-old offender. The offender, who was from a North-eastern state, confessed to befriending a 13-year-old local boy online, traveling to the West Coast, and meeting him for sex. Prior to the meeting, the offender and victim had corresponded online for about six months. The offender had sent the victim nude images via web cam and e-mail and they had called and texted each other hundreds of times. When they met for sex, the offender took graphic pictures of the encounter. The victim believed he was in love with the offender. He lived alone with his father and was struggling to fit in and come to terms with being gay. The offender possessed large quantities of child pornography that he had downloaded from the Internet. He was sentenced to 10 years in prison.
- A 24-year-old man met a 14-year-old girl at a social networking site. He claimed to be 19. Their online conversation became romantic and sexual and the victim believed she was in love. They met several times for sex over a period of weeks. The offender took nude pictures of the victim and gave her alcohol and drugs. Her mother and stepfather found out and reported the crime to the police. The victim was lonely, had issues with drugs and alcohol, and problems at school and with her parents. She had posted provocative pictures of herself on her social networking site. She had met other men online and had sex with them. The offender was a suspect in another online enticement case. He was found guilty but had not been sentenced at time of the interview.

According to Davidson and Martellozzo (2008: 277), Internet sex offender behavior can include: "the construction of sites to be used for the exchange of information, experiences, and indecent images of children; the organization of criminal activities that seek to use children for prostitution purposes and that produce indecent images of children at a professional level; the organization of criminal activities that promote sexual tourism".

Child grooming is a process that commences with sexual sex offenders choosing a target area that is likely to attract children. In the physical world, this could be venues visited by children such as schools, shopping malls or playgrounds. A process of grooming then commences when offenders take a particular interest in the child and make them feel special with the intention of forming a bond. The Internet has greatly facilitated this process in the virtual world. Offenders now seek out their victims by visiting Internet relay chat (IRC) rooms from their home or Internet cafés at any time. Once a child victim is identified, the offender can invite it into a private area of the IRC to engage in private conversations on intimate personal details including the predator's sex life (Australian, 2008).

3.2   Internet Characteristics

The Internet is an international network of networks that connects people all over the world. Any computer can communicate with almost any other computer linked to the Internet. The Internet has created a universal technology platform on which to build all sorts of new products, services, communities and solutions. It is reshaping the way information technology is used by individuals and organizations. The Internet has provided an expedient mode of communication and access to a wealth of information (Dombrowski et al., 2007).

In less than two decades, the Internet has moved from a strange communications medium to an obvious tool in our homes, schools, workplaces and travels. It enables us to search information, perform routine tasks and communicate with others. The technological aspects of the Internet are developing at the same high speed as the number of users globally. The Internet provides a social context for us to meet with others and to exchange information (Quayle et al., 2006).

The World Wide Web is a system with universally accepted standards for storing, retrieving, formatting, changing and displaying information in a networked environment. Information is stored and displayed as electronic pages that can contain numbers, text, pictures, graphics, sound and video. These web pages can be linked electronically to other Web pages, independent of where they are located. Web pages can be viewed by any type of computer.

In a survey of young people in Norway between the ages 8 and 18 years old, 78 percent of the respondents said that they are involved in chatting. The use of chatting for communication is more common than the use of e-mail in this age group. In the age group 17–18 years old, all respondents said they do chatting. The percentage reporting that they have been plagued while chatting was 9 percent. Among chatters about one third has met persons in reality that they first met while chatting (Medietilsynet, 2008).

The Internet is a valuable tool; however, it can also be detrimental to the wellbeing of children due to numerous online hazards (Dombrowski et al., 2007: 153):

> There is the potential for children to be abused via cyberspace through online sexual solicitation and access to pornography. Indeed, the Internet is replete with inappropriate material, including pornography, chat rooms with adult themes and access to instant messaging wherein others could misrepresent themselves. Because children are actively utilizing the Internet where unknown others can have access to them or where they can be exposed to inappropriate sexual materials, they require safeguarding and education in safe Internet use.

Online grooming might be compared to online learning and other forms of online activity. The purpose of such analogies is to identify both similarities and differences. Learning on the Internet, for example, is structured as a formal and non-anonymous activity. To some it is scary rather than safe, because students are asked to expose their (lack of) knowledge on the Internet and share it with others. Active and extrovert students enjoy this, while other students choose to be passive on-lookers.

Generally, going online enables individuals to play a personality role, which might be more or less different from their real personality. There will always be a difference between your role in virtual reality and in real world. We play roles as adults and parents, or children and students, both in the real world and in virtual realities. However, in the virtual world we may find it easier to live our dreams and fantasies. In the type "second life" environments on the Internet, people tend to be unfaithful and to build their dream existence alone or with others.

What is then so special about being online? One answer to this question is that you can be in a different, informal and anonymous setting to live out dreams and fantasies.

3.3   Internet Relationships

The Internet is a special artifact system that has enormous technical and social positive impacts on modern society (Kierkegaard, 2008: 41):

> *The online environment enables access to a wealth of information and communication across both distance and time. There is a vast amount of data available on virtually every subject, making it an effective learning tool.*

However, the Internet is also a double-edged sword with negative and positive consequences (Kierkegaard, 2008: 41):

> *It has a potential for misuse and has generated societal concerns. Today, the danger for children is even greater because the Internet provides anonymity to predators.*

Recent advances in computer technology have been aiding sexual predators, stalkers, child pornographers, child traffickers, and others with the intent of exploiting children. While they have existed prior to the Internet, the advent of the new technology two decades ago has allowed for easier and faster distribution of pornographic materials and communication across national and international boundaries (Kierkegaard, 2008).

On the other hand, the Internet is not all negative concerning sexual communication (Calder, 2004: 3):

> *It can be used for healthy sexual expression. For example, the Internet offers the opportunity for the formulation of online or virtual communities where isolated or disenfranchised individuals e.g. gay males and lesbians can communicate with each other around sexual topics of shared interest; it offers educational potential; and it may allow for sexual experimentation in a safer forum, thus facilitating identity exploration and development.*

The Internet allows sex offenders instant access to other sex offenders worldwide, forums facilitate 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 a member of teen groups. Furthermore, the Internet allows potential offenders ready access to chat areas and social networking sites reserved for teenagers and children, to discover how to approach and who to target as potential victims. The Internet provides a means to identify and track down home contact information, and the Internet enables adults to build long-term virtual relationships with potential victims, prior to attempting to engage the child in physical contact.

Relationships are built using social software. Through the Internet, people are discovering and inventing new ways to share knowledge and interests. People communicate on the Internet with each other in a human voice. These conversations using social software are collectively referred to as social media, a wide-ranging terms than encompasses the practice and resulting output of all kinds of information created online by those who were previously consumers of that media (Cook, 2008: 7):

> *Philosophically, social media describes the way in which content (particularly news and opinion) has become democratized by the Internet and the role people now play not only in consuming information and conveying it to others, but also in creating and sharing content with them, be it textual, aural or visual.*

For this reason, social media is interchangeably referred to as consumer- or user-generated content. Social media is often defined by the categories of software tools that people use to undertake this consuming, conveying, creating and sharing content with each other, including blogs, pod casts, wikis and social networking that have found their place on the Internet (Cook, 2008).

Blogs in terms of online personal journals are one of the examples mentioned by Cook (2008), and Mitchell et al. (2008) phrased the following question: 'Are blogs putting youth at risk of online sexual solicitation or harassment?' They conducted a telephone survey of 1,500 youth Internet users, ages 10–17, in the USA. They found that 16 percent of youth Internet users reported blogging in the past year. Teenagers and girls were the most common bloggers, and bloggers were more likely than other youth to post personal information online.

However, Mitchell et al. (2008) found that bloggers were not more likely to interact with people they met online and did not know in person. Youth who interacted with people they met online, regardless of whether or not they blogged, had higher odds of receiving online sexual solicitations. Bloggers who did not interact with people they met online were at no increased risk for sexual solicitation. Moreover, posting personal information did not add to risk. The only difference found was related to harassment, since youthful bloggers were found to be at increased risk for online harassment, regardless of whether they also interacted with others online.

3.4   Grooming Legislation

The concept of sexual grooming is well documented in the sex offender literature (Finkelhor, 1984), and is now filtering into legislation policy, crime detection and prevention initiatives. A recent report in the Guardian Newspaper suggested that the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre in the UK receive an average of 4 phone calls per day from young people planning to meet people with whom they have developed an online, sexual relationship (25/02/2009).

Potential offenders using the Internet to perpetrate sexual offences against children fall into two principal categories: Those who use the Internet to target and 'groom' children for the purposes of sexual abuse (Finkelhor et al. 2000); and those who produce and/or download indecent illegal images of children from the Internet and distribute them. Recent legislation has sought to protect young people from Internet abuse through the introduction of a 'grooming' clause. This new offence category was introduced in the Sexual Offences Act (2003) in England and Wales (this section of the Act also applies to Northern Ireland). Section 15 makes 'meeting a child following sexual grooming' an offence; this applies to the Internet, to other technologies such as mobile phones and to the 'real world'.

'Grooming' involves a process of socialization through which a potential offender seeks to interact with a child under the age of 16, possibly sharing their hobbies and interests in an attempt to gain trust in order to prepare them for sexual abuse. The concept of 'grooming' is now also recognized in legislation in the UK. The Sexual Offences Act (2003) in England and Wales, and Northern Ireland and the Protection of Children and Prevention of Sexual Offences Act (2005) in Scotland include the offence of 'meeting a child following certain preliminary contact' (section 1). 'Preliminary contact' refers to occasions where a person arranges to meet a child who is under 16, having communicated with them on at least one previous occasion (in person, via the Internet or via other technologies), with the intention of performing sexual activity on the child.

Several countries are beginning to follow the UK in legislating against grooming behavior. Sexual grooming has also recently been added to the Crimes Amendment Act (2005) in New Zealand. In the US it is an offence to transmit information electronically about a child aged 16 or under, for the purpose of committing a sexual offence. The Australian Criminal Code makes similar restrictions, as does the Canadian Criminal Code. The legislation in the UK differs in that the sexual grooming offence applies both to the new technologies including the Internet and mobile phones, and also to the 'real world'; legislation in other countries addresses only electronic grooming via the Internet and mobile phones.

Norway is the only other European country to adopt the grooming legislation. The relevant sections in the General Civil Penal Code ("straffeloven") concerned with sexual offenders in Norway include Section 195: Any person who engages in sexual activity with a child who is under 14 years of age shall be liable to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 10 years. If the said activity was sexual intercourse the penalty shall be imprisonment for not less than 2 years, and Section 196: Any person who engages in sexual activity with a child who is under 16 years of age shall be liable to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 5 years. Section 201a is the new grooming section in Norwegian criminal law. This section was included in The General Civil Penal Code in April 2007:

With fines or imprisonment of not more than 1 year is any person liable, who has agreed a meeting with a child who is under 16 years of age, and who with intention of committing an act as mentioned in sections 195, 196 or 200 second section has arrived at the meeting place or a place where the meeting place can be observed.

In Norwegian law the grooming section refers to *the intention of committing an act*. However, the perpetrator must actually appear for a meeting (sometimes a police trap), an intention to meet is not enough, it is possible that it should be but it is difficult to prove beyond doubt. Therefore, the legislation is phrased as follows: "…has arrived at the meeting place or a place where the meeting place can be observed". It is the potential scene of the crime, which is the meeting place where the offence is intended to take place, that the offender has arrived at, or the offender can observe the potential crime scene from where he is located. We refer to the potential offender and offender as "he", although little is known in the literature abut the gender of all online groomers.

3.5   European Policy

A recently published EU (2009) document entitled '*Combating the Sexual Abuse, Sexual Exploitation of Children and Child Pornography*' sets out the shortcomings and vision in protecting young people form sexual abuse. The framework decision outlines the difficulty in protecting young people when there is such widespread variation in national criminal law and law enforcement practice in Europe. The situation is seen as exacerbated by the hidden nature of the offending and compounding issues such as victims' reluctance to report abuse.

The role of information technology in facilitating global abuse and sex offender networks is discussed. The EU suggest that '*developments in information technology have made these problems more acute by making it easier to produce and distribute child sexual abuse images while offering offenders anonymity and spreading responsibility across jurisdictions. Ease of travel and income differences fuel so-called child sex tourism, resulting often in child sex offenders committing offences abroad with impunity. Beyond difficulties of prosecution, organised crime can make considerable profits with little risk*' (p. 2).

Following this Framework decision it is likely that other European countries will follow the UK and Norwegian example by introducing grooming legislation and the 'viewing' of indecent child images will become an offence:

'*New forms of sexual abuse and exploitation facilitated by the use of IT would be criminalised. This includes knowingly obtaining access to child pornography, to cover cases*

where viewing child pornography from websites without downloading or storing the images

does not amount to "possession of" or "procuring" child pornography. Also the new offence

of "grooming" is incorporated closely following the wording agreed in the COE Convention' (p. 6).

Article 5 refers to online grooming as the 'solicitation of children for sexual purposes' (p. 5) and asks that each member state ensure that such conduct is punishable in law. This refers to cases involving children under the age of consent under national law (which varies considerably across Europe), where an adult arranges to meet for the purposes of sexual abuse via the means of '*an information system*' (p. 5).

Grooming legislation has been introduced in several countries but is now recognized in the EU Framework Decision (Article 5), the difficulty is of course that the framework is not in any way enforceable and countries may simply chose to 'opt out' particularly if their current legislative framework, particularly in respect of the age of consent, does not easily accommodate the recommended legislation.

3.6   Seventeen Internet Characteristics

We are all familiar with online services on the Internet. A typical example is online banking, where we complete our payments of bills at home. Most Norwegians have many years of personal experience using online services on the Internet. According to the United Nations (2008), Norway is ranked third in the world in terms of online services provided by the government. Sweden and Denmark are on the top of the list, and Norway is followed by the United States and the Netherlands. The United Kingdom is ranked tenth on the list.

A number of characteristics of the Internet for online services has been observed, which may shed light on methods potential offenders use to groom children. The following list was generated based on a literature review:
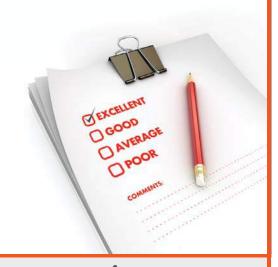
1. *Disconnected personal communication.* While communication on the Internet might be personal in content, it is not perceived as interpersonal in meaning. A typical example is e-mail, where the sender might feel completely disconnected from the time and place the receiver reads the e-mail message. Even when chatting in real time, sender and receiver may perceive both involvement and disconnectedness at the same time. Some may change their personality unconsciously when moving from face-to-face communication to e-mail communication (Weber, 2004). Internet grooming can be and often is different from 'real world' grooming in that potential offenders spend little time chatting and will come straight to the point, sometimes instantly, e.g. 'would you like to meet for sex'. This would suggest that the Internet might act to remove inhibitions associated with face-to-face contact, which can be explained by the disconnected nature of personal communication on the Internet, thereby avoiding unpleasant emotional states (Quayle et al., 2006). There are, however, some potential offenders who will still spend a considerable amount of time grooming a child online, particularly in peer to peer networks, in order to prepare them for abuse (Davidson, 2008). Generally, there are a number of distinguishing characteristics between the Internet and the real world as the two principally different forms of grooming.

2. *Mediating technology.* According to Afuah and Tucci (2003), the Internet is a mediating technology that interconnects parties that are independent. The interconnections can be business-to-business (B2B), business-to-consumer (B2C), government-to-business (G2B), person-to-person (P2P) or any other link between individuals and organizations. In the case of grooming, Internet serves as a mediating technology mainly for person-to-person (P2P) communication, but person-to-group (P2G) and group-to-person (G2P) do also occur. In relation to grooming, changes in interconnections occur over time, where an initial contact may start as person-to-group, for example group of teenagers, and then move into person-to-person, where the potential offender has singled out of potential victim.

3. *Universality.* The universality of the Internet refers to the Internet's ability to both enlarge and shrink the world. It enlarges the world because anyone anywhere in the world can potentially make his or her services, messages and requests available to anyone anywhere else in the world anytime. It shrinks the world in that distance is reduced on electronic highways (Afuah and Tucci, 2003). In the case of grooming, the Internet enables each grooming individual to potentially contact anyone, anywhere and anytime. Contact is established without the groomer having to travel physically, all he needs to do is to travel electronically. The Internet combines global communications with an incredible range of resources (Calder, 2004). The global reach enabled by the Internet permits grooming to cross cultural and national boundaries far more conveniently and cost effective than is true in traditional grooming (Laudon and Laudon, 2010). However, cultural and communication issues exist between jurisdictions that can limit the extent of universality perceived by users.

4. *Network externalities.* A technology or product exhibits network externalities when it becomes more valuable to users as more people take advantage of it. A classic example is the first person in Norway who got himself a telephone. Until a second person got a telephone, there was nobody in Norway to talk to on the phone. The value of the telephone for each subscriber increases with the number of subscribers. Similarly, the value of the Internet increases with the number of Internet users. The more people that are connected to a network within the Internet, the more valuable the network is to each user (Afuah and Tucci, 2003). The more children that are connected to a network, the more valuable the network is to each groomer, since he is able to reach and get in contact with more potential victims. Since Internet access is found in more and more homes all over the world, the number of potential victims rises accordingly.

5. *Distribution channel.* The Internet acts as a distribution channel for products that are information bits, such as software, music, video, news, tickets and money. There is a replacement effect if the Internet is used to serve the same deliveries, which were serviced by the old physical distribution channel. There is an extension effect if the Internet is used by more people and for new services (Afuah and Tucci, 2003). When grooming children, the potential offender may use the Internet not only for communications. He can also use it to send gifts and other digital items that the child might be interested in. He can also send digital items that the child is not always interested in, such as pornographic pictures and videos to test reactions.

6. *Time moderator*. The Internet has an ability to shrink and enlarge time. It shrinks time for people who want information when information sources are closed. It enlarges time when related work can be done at different points in time (Afuah and Tucci, 2003). Both dimensions of the Internet as a time moderator can be important in online victimization of children. When a child is offline, the groomer can leave messages and gifts for the child to pick up next time the child logs on.

7. *Low cost standard*. Individuals could not exploit the properties of the Internet if they adopt it. For two reasons, adoption has been easy. First and foremost important, the Internet and the web application are standards open to everyone and are very easy to use. Second, the cost of the Internet is a lot lower than that of earlier means of electronic communication (Afuah and Tucci, 2003). Given the low cost standard, access to the Internet is not limited to affluent or well-educated people. Both adults and children have access independent of social class in most countries. For a groomer, this enables access not only to a large number of children but also to a large variety of children. Universal technical standards of the Internet enables any computer to link with any other computer regardless of the technology platform each is using (Laudon and Laudon, 2010).

8. *Electronic double*. It is not the real person who is present on the Internet. It is a digital copy of the person who is present. The digital information about the person creates an image of the person, which we call the electronic double. The way in which a groomer is perceived by a child on the Internet is thus dependent both on the information the person provides and the image this information creates in the child's mind. Even if the groomer is completely honest in all communication with the child, the child may perceive the man as very different from reality and maybe similar to someone the child already knows. Also the man may perceive the child and create an electronic double of the child in his head, which can be far removed from reality, but which may serve his fantasy.

9. *Electronic double manipulation*. The electronic double created on the Internet represents an image of the real person. The real person can change his or her electronic double and make it more or less similar to the real self. The most obvious change is age, where a groomer may claim to be younger than he actually is. This requires consistency in all other information, so that the presented age matches other information about the person. Similarly, children may claim to be older than they actually are.

10. *Information asymmetry*. Information asymmetry is often reduced on the Internet. Information asymmetry exists when one party to a transaction has information that another party does not – information that is important to the transaction. The World Wide Web reduces such information asymmetries, as the other party can find the same information on the web (Afuah and Tucci, 2003). Neither the man nor the child has information monopoly in areas where information is available on the World Wide Web. However, the adult will typically be more knowledgeable than the child, leading to an information asymmetry between potential offender and potential victim, which can be explored and exploited by the potential offender.

11. *Infinite virtual capacity*. Access to the Internet is perceived as unlimited; you do not have to wait on hold or in a long line. For example, virtual communities like chatting houses have infinite capacity for members who can talk anytime of the day for as long as they want (Afuah and Tucci, 2003). However, in some parts of the world there are bandwidth and infrastructure limitations that reduce the virtual capacity. The amount of time online groomers spend in pursuit of children will depend on a number of factors such as available virtual capacity.

12. *Independence in time and space*. While a traditional meeting requires that participants are present at the same place at the same time, virtual meeting on the Internet is possible even if different participants are present at different places at different times. The online environment enables access to a wealth of information and communication across both distance and time (Kierkegaard, 2008). The independence in time and space is typically the case when using e-mail. When participating in a chat room, participants are required to respond within a short time frame, eliminating independence in time, but still keeping independence in space. On the mobile phone, SMS messages have the same characteristic of independence in time and space. Calder (2004) has suggested that the Internet promotes better social relationships as people will be freed from the constraints of time and place, however it could also limit social relationships to the virtual world and reinforce isolation. The relevance to Internet groomers can be found in both relationships and isolation sometimes practiced by potential offenders.

13. *Cyberspace*. Using the Internet is not just a supplement to or add-on to real life. It is also an enabler of an alternative life style in cyberspace with its own cyber culture. Cyberspace is an abstract space, rather than a physical space, where a culture has emerged from the use of computer networks for communication, entertainment and business. Cyber culture can for example be found in virtual communities, which is a group of people that primarily interact via communication media such as newsletters, telephone, e-mail, instant messages or as newsgroups, rather than face to face for social and other purposes (Whittaker, 2004). In terms of online grooming, both adults and children are sometimes members of virtual communities. Calder (2004) argues that there are many benefits that can be derived from the development of online relationships and online relationships that become sexual in cyberspace. Cyberspace can facilitate the formation of romantic relationships, improve the chances of finding an "optimal" partner, highlight that relationships can develop on attachments, and improve one's skills in interpersonal, yet virtual, communication.

14. *Dynamic social network*. The emergence of social network services has radically challenged our understanding of traditional, territorial social networks. An average Westerner's social network comprises about 150 individuals. Once a physical social network is established, this number of members tends to change little over time, and the members themselves do not change very much. In contrast, the Internet enables individuals to expand and reduce their social network and replace members in the network (CEOP, 2006). The Internet provides a social context for more and more people to meet more and more people where people are replaced by other people over time. There is a dynamic social network rather than a stable social network on the Internet. When both potential offenders and potential victims dynamically change their social networks, the likelihood of contact increases.

15. *Ubiquity*. In traditional grooming, a place for grooming is a physical place, such as schools, sporting events, shopping malls, children's clubs or public places. Online grooming is ubiquitous, meaning that it is possible just about everywhere, at all times. It makes it possible to groom from a laptop, at home, at work, or even from a car, using mobile technology. The result is called a grooming space – a grooming place extended beyond traditional boundaries and removed from a temporal and geographic location. From a groomers' point of view, ubiquity reduces transaction costs – the costs of grooming children. To transact with children online in the virtual world, it is no longer necessary that the potential sex offender spends time or money traveling to a grooming place, and much less mental effort is required to make an effort (Laudon and Laudon, 2010).

16. *Richness*. Information richness refers to the complexity and content of a message. Traditional communication channels have great richness. They are able to provide personal, face-to-face communication using aural and visual cues when making contact. The web makes it possible to deliver rich messages with text, audio, and video simultaneously to large numbers of people (Laudon and Laudon, 2010).

17. *Interactivity*. Systems used on the Internet are interactive, meaning they allow for two-way communication between adult and child. Interactivity allows an online groomer to engage a child in ways similar to face-to-face experience but on a massive, global scale (Laudon and Laudon, 2010). Interactivity gives both potential victim and potential offender the possibility of communicating messages without interruption.

This list of 17 characteristics was derived from the research literature. The list might be refined in terms of exhaustiveness; overlap and hierarchy in future research.

3.7   Virtual Offender Communities

Kierkegaard (2008) argues that the anonymity, availability of extremely sensitive personal information and ease of contacting people make social networking sites a useful tool for online child predators. The sites enable both potential offenders and potential victims to explore and exploit all 17 characteristics of the Internet listed above. While many of the sites have age restrictions, it is possible for potential offenders to misrepresent their age (how far the MySpace threat to remove those believed to be over 18 but posing as under 18 is carried out in practice for example is questionable). To hide their IP addresses and locations, they piggyback on Wi-Fi connections or use proxy servers. Decentralized peer-to-peer networks prevent material from being tracked to a specific server, and encryption lets them keep online chats private from those policing the web.

Social networking sites have been studied in different contexts. For example, Tufekci (2008) explored the rapid adoption of online social network sites by students on a US college campus. Using quantitative and qualitative data based on a diverse sample of college students, demographic and other characteristics of social networking site users and non-users were compared. A distinction was made between social grooming and presentation of self. In the study, non-users displayed an attitude towards social grooming (gossip, small-talk and generalized, non-functional people-curiosity) that ranged from incredulous to hostile. Contrary to expectations in the study, non-users did not report a smaller number of close friends compared with users, but they did keep in touch with fewer people. Users were also heavier users of the expressive Internet, which is the practice and performance of technologically mediated sociality.

Thus, while social grooming through language may well be an important human activity, there seems to be no reason to presuppose that everyone will be equally disposed to such activity. Interest in exchange and browsing social information about friends and acquaintances, and curiosity about people, is likely to be related to interest in how an application specifically facilitates such activity (Tufekci, 2008).

When we apply Tufekci's (2008) terminology to online grooming, online groomers are likely to be heavier users of the expressive Internet than pedophilic non-users of social networking sites. As users of the expressive Internet, online groomers use the Internet as an instrument to express opinions and communicate information. *Expressive Internet* is the practice and performance of technologically mediated sociality. It is the use of the Internet to perform and realize interactions, self-presentations, public performance, social capital management, social monitoring, and the production, maintenance and furthering of social ties. The expressive Internet might be recognized as a social ecology involving other people, values, norms and social contexts.

Instrumental Internet, on the other hand, refers to information seeking, knowledge gathering and commercial transactions on the Internet, and non-social communication involved in such transactions. This is typically the Internet of online banking, shopping and checking the weather. Tufekci (2008) found no difference in the use of instrumental Internet for users versus non-users of social networking sites.

The expressive Internet has been expanding rapidly, a process often described in the popular press as the rise of social computing. These tools have been assimilated as a means of social interaction and social integration for increasing numbers of people and communities. People are increasingly using the expressive Internet in ways that complement or further their offline sociality (Tufekci, 2008).

The distinction between the two groups of users is a point also raised by some of the probation officers interviewed by Davidson (2008) in the UK. The probation officers were working with groomers in treatment programs. They spoke about offenders for whom the Internet played a significant role in their lives and who had many online relationships. Using the Internet to offend was almost a natural progression for these offenders as it played such a big part in other areas of their lives.

The Internet has afforded potential sex offenders the opportunity to create their own virtual communities, by allowing instant access to other offenders worldwide, open discussion of their sexual desires, shared ideas about ways to lure victims, and mutual support of their adult-child sex philosophies. Computer technology and the Internet enable potential sex offenders to locate and interact with other offenders more readily than before. The organizational aspects of a common gathering place and the resultant support child predators are providing each other is probably their most significant advantage – and the most troublesome for a concerned public.

Child predators are forming online communities and bonds using the Internet. They are openly uniting against legal authorities and discussing ways to influence public thinking and legislation on child exploitation. While sex offender web sites are being tracked down and removed from Internet servers in countries all over the world, they are popping up again at a higher pace in most parts of the world, many sites are hosted in the United States and Russia.

An example of a web site representing a virtual community for sex offenders is "Boylove". One of the largest sex offender networks on the Internet. On the web site, The Boylove Manifesto could be found, which argued the case for intergenerational relationships (www.prevent-abuse-now.com):

> *As boy lovers we distance ourselves from the current discussion about "child sexual abuse". Human sexuality plays the same part in a boy love relationship as it undoubtedly does in any relationship between human beings. A boy lover desires a friendly and close relationship with a boy.*

Similar text can be found on Boylovers.net:

> *Over the years, paedophilia, or boy love as it is sometimes known, has come under heavy criticism from those who are opposed to it in the media, government and general society. Often, this can be very one-sided and extremely vitriolic in nature.*
>
> *Here at BoyLover.net, we believe that people deserve the chance to hear both sides of the argument. Doubtless, by now you will have read or heard many opinions against paedophilia. With this in mind, we have taken the opportunity to present different views so that people can make an informed decision regarding the subject.*

Boylover.net seems important to mention here, as sex offender research in countries such as Norway, Sweden and the UK tends to focus on girls more than boys. As listed in the Norwegian court sentence, almost all cases are concerned with victimization of girls. Lillywhite and Skidmore (2006) argue that the view that boys are not sexually exploited is very common among many professionals working with vulnerable young men. Do potential sex offenders interested in boys perform online grooming different from potential sex offenders that are interested in girls? Different grooming behaviors may be employed with different genders.

D'Ovidio et al. (2009) conducted a content analysis of 64 websites that promote, advocate, and convey information in support of sexual relationships between adults and children to determine whether these sites were structured as learning environments for crimes involving the sexual exploitation of children. Their findings indicate that the adult-child advocacy websites analyzed were criminal in that they contained a variety of communication tools (e.g., chat rooms, instant messengers, and message boards) to foster interaction among site users and expose users to rationalizations for offending and, in turn, definitions favorable to sexual violations against minors.

Given these research findings, D'Ovidio et al. (2009) recommend law enforcement to consider expanding restrictions for companies offering website hosting services to modify their terms of service agreements to ban content advocating sexual relationships between adults and children. Out of 64 websites studied, 40 websites were registered in the United States, 9 in the Netherlands, 5 in Canada, 4 in the United Kingdom, and 1 in each of the countries Brazil, Czech Republic, Finland, France, Liechtenstein, and Slovakia.