



# Places of Risk, Places of Help:

Understanding Online Exploitation In 2000

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This report provides a comprehensive examination of the ongoing evolution of the Internet, detailing both the increasing risks and emerging opportunities that affect especially young users in the digital age. The report aims to enlighten stakeholders about the dual-edged impact of digital environments and advocate for informed and responsible engagement online.





## INTRODUCTION

The development and rapid adoption of the Internet is making many changes in our communities and culture. One distressing change is the opportunities for predators and pedophiles to sexually exploit children in new and unexpected ways. This aspect of the Internet is the topic of examination for this report.

In hopes of including everyone in this dialogue, this report will start with a historic summary of how the Internet was developed and why.

After these environments are summarized, this report will examine the kinds of risks to children and youth present in these environments, as well as the opportunities to use these

environments for positive, therapeutic purposes.

Concluding remarks in this report will focus on the underlying principles of the Internet that make it such a unique environment, both for abuse and therapy, and will offer some observations and possible considerations for the safe use of these Internet environments by young people.



## TECHNOLOGY

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### Background

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Understanding how and why the Internet was designed may help to understand the various environments that exist within it.

The Internet originated in the 1960s by the US Defence Department's Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) to maintain communication during extensive crises like wars. This led to the creation of ARPANET, a decentralized network that maintained resilience even with significant

infrastructure damage. This design has shaped the robust and expansive nature of today's Internet.

Today's digital landscape involves various levels of interaction through the World Wide Web, email, social media, and real-time communication platforms like instant messaging, which continually enhance global interconnectedness.



## RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES

The digital realm presents a spectrum of risks, especially for children and youth. Predatory behaviours, cyberbullying, and exposure to inappropriate content are significant concerns in environments like chat rooms and social media platforms. However these digital spaces also create unique opportunities for therapeutic interventions and support, leveraging anonymity and accessibility to offer help to those who might not seek it in traditional settings.

Using the Internet as a way to deliver mental health and counselling services may seem strange at first considering the traditional visual, and non-verbal interactions associated with face-to-face therapy. These considerations are

mitigated however, in several surprising and revolutionary ways. Several encouraging aspects of CMC enhance the use of the Internet to deliver therapeutic interventions.

*“New communication technologies are invented with rather limited purposes in mind, but they are quite often adopted by masses of users in unexpected ways.”*

Computers-Mediated Chat: Ways of Finding Chat Partners.” (2000)

### Risks Online:

Predatory behaviours, cyberbullying, and exposure to inappropriate content are prevalent across various platforms such as social media (TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat) and online games (Fortnite, Roblox).

These environments are particularly vulnerable to misuse due to features like anonymity and real-time interaction capabilities.

The emergence of this pantheon of CMCs and technological communications innovations has certainly lent itself to unforeseen results. Some results have been an increased risk to children and youth while some results have been innovative health and therapeutic care practices previously unimagined. Quite simply, the Internet has become like a

great public movie screen and all aspects of human imagination and intention can be projected on to it.

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varying types. The sexual exploitation of children is one example of these criminal activities.

Before going any further however, it seems prudent to point out that the activities that we are talking about are not the majority of what happens on the Internet. Objective perspectives about the harm posed by the Internet are hard to come by, as are firm statistics about the incidences of exploitation, or amount of child pornography, and number of children negatively impacted. Parry Aftab creates some perspective stating...

"I always use the 90 percent /10 percent rule.... I always tell them that 90 percent of the Internet is terrific, educational, creative and safe. The remaining 10 percent isn't. But that 10 percent often gets more traffic and attention than the rest of the Internet combined."

Parry Aftab

This does not imply that children and youth are not being exploited on the Internet but gives the issue perspective and is a good starting point when discussing risk. The tendency to demonize the Internet because of the perceived pervasiveness of exploitation is no more sustainable than the belief that buying a child a computer and allowing

them Internet access unsupervised in their bedrooms is harmless. Keeping in mind the 90/10 percent perspective, we ask "What are the risks that youth face through CMC and what are the opportunities to mitigate that risk by offering therapeutic interventions through those same avenues?"

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## Indirect Risks

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The Internet poses indirect risks to youth because it facilitates the production and distribution of pornography and allows for the creation of communities of individuals sexually interested in

children. The Copine Project out of University College Cork in Ireland has been actively researching the complexities of pedophile activity on the Internet since the mid-1990's.

Their studies indicate that Internet technologies facilitate adult sexual interest in children in a variety of ways:

- The creation of trans-national networks of individuals with sexual interests in children that support pedophilic values;
- The mass distribution of child pornography in digital formats independent of hard copy publishing through a mostly unregulated milieu, that crosses international boundaries,
- 'Legitimizing' influences and making the detection and confiscation of child pornography difficult

The Copine Project (1998) research findings indicate that child sex related newsgroups provide a passive, supportive, virtual environment that facilitates the discussion of fantasies and alleged experiences of sexual offences against children in a context that routinizes, sanitizes and normalizes sexual contact with children.

Copine Research also found that adults with a sexual interest in children engage in child sex related chat rooms in IRC, (and) typically engage in a number of activities as follows;

### ***The Orchid Club***

The use of conferencing technologies is just beginning to be accessible to the majority of the public but unfortunately, pedophilic individuals have been aware of its potential for a long time. In 1996, an international group called the Orchid Club was identified and members were arrested following the online rape of a child. It was alleged that in April of 1996, two California men used a digital camera to photograph a ten-year-old girl in sexually explicit poses. The images were broadcast to other members of the Club in a chat room. The viewers of the images then sent instructions to the California man, suggesting poses and requesting specific images. This represents the first time an online assault of a child has been documented resulting in criminal proceedings, and where others remotely participated in the assault.

- Trading child erotica and child pornographic pictures
- Recounting alleged experiences and fantasies
- Role-playing fantasies for the purposes of masturbation
- Swapping pictures for fantasies
- Exchanging information about how to avoid social sanction.

An individual may download images from newsgroups and web sites, or they may engage more actively in the exchange of pictures through IRC and ICQ, and video conferencing protocols such as CU-Seeme.

These activities are indirect risks to children and youth because they reinforce a community of pedophiles who are supported and validated by each other in their predatory intentions. Other activities of indirect threat may include the incidences of child sex tourism where children are offered as sexual objects to tourists via the Internet, or the advertising of 'child brides' and the distribution of 'kiddie-stroll' maps on the Internet that show predators how to find vulnerable street children in other cities and countries.

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## Direct Risks

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Direct risks to children include all forms of information abuse. The inappropriate release of information about the child and their families can lead to loss of privacy, financial fraud and a form of 'cyber-stalking'. Information that reinforces anti-social values can be harmful to youth who are offered no avenue of alternate value development. For instance, following the shooting at Columbine High in Denver, Colorado, a web site was established that glorified the actions and death of the two boys who wielded the guns. An additional concern is "children may be exposed to inappropriate material that is sexual,

hateful, or violent in nature or encourages activities that are dangerous or illegal."

Besides risks of information abuse, there are direct risks of a sexual and emotional nature. The Internet can be hazardous to young people because they may be exposed to pornography or emotionally manipulated by online 'buddies' that exploit a child's trust and the child's desire to establish friendships. In extreme situations children may be recruited and lured out of their homes by people whose purpose is to engage them in sexual activity.

*"Chat rooms have opened up our homes to virtual strangers who can pretend to be anyone, any age and either sex. They can talk to children in complete secrecy.*

*They can prey on a child as their parents sit in the next room... Pedophiles who used to be isolated can now find victims without leaving the security of their own homes, at little expense and little risk of being caught."*

Canadian Resource Center for Victims of Crime,  
Child Sexual Exploitation and the Internet. October 2000

The emotional manipulating of children takes place over time and with skilled practice on the part of predators.

"They (children) may not feel any threat by "talking" to someone online and after a few weeks or months of communicating, they are not strangers anymore."

That 'buddy' can then use the information they have gathered about

the child to manipulate them. If the child has sent a photo of themselves, the predator may alter, or 'morph' it to put the child in a sexually explicit position and then use it to blackmail the child.

Additionally, exposing children to progressively more explicit child pornography also serves to normalize the images and desensitizes children to the violation these images represent.

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## Dangerous Playgrounds

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The proliferation of social media platforms, online games, and mobile apps significantly altered the way young people interact online.

Social apps such as TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat provide expansive networks where users share vast amounts of personal information through images and videos. While fostering connectivity and creativity, these platforms also pose risks such as the spread of misinformation,

privacy breaches, and increased exposure to cyber predators.

Online gaming environments like Fortnite and Roblox have become cultural phenomena, engaging millions of young users globally. These platforms enable real-time communication and interaction but also present risks such as exposure to violent content and potential grooming by predators using in-game chat functions.



## Therapy & Support Online

Despite the risks, the Internet continues to offer substantial therapeutic opportunities. Digital platforms can serve as vital resources for mental health support, especially for teenagers who are often more willing to engage in conversations about their mental health online than in traditional settings. Initiatives like online counselling services and mental health apps provide accessible and immediate support for users, harnessing the disinhibition effect to encourage open discussions about personal issues.

Organizations are increasingly leveraging these platforms to conduct outreach and support, offering services like crisis intervention through chatbots and peer support forums. The accessibility of these

tools means that help is available 24/7, providing a lifeline to those who might feel isolated or unable to access traditional forms of therapy.

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## Therapy Online?

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*"Almost as soon as the Internet was invented, its potential for psychotherapeutic communication was apparent."*

### E-therapy: History and Survey

Using the Internet as a way to deliver mental health and counselling services may seem strange at first considering the traditional visual, and non-verbal interactions associated with face-to-face therapy. These considerations are

mitigated however, in several surprising and revolutionary ways. Several encouraging aspects of CMC enhance the use of the Internet to deliver therapeutic interventions.

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## The Three Effects in Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC)

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### **Hyper-personal Effect:**

The hyper-personal effect enhances personal connections through selective self-representation and idealization, positively impacting individual ego functions.

Joseph Walther outlined in his research that CMCs create a mutually reinforcing "intensification loop" fostered by selective self-representation, idealization, and reciprocation. This effect strongly appeals to users by confirming an idealized self, which can strengthen ego function and have a beneficial impact on individuals.

### **Accessible Effect:**

Accessibility extend essential services to those unable to access traditional forms, particularly in mental health.

CMCs significantly enhance the accessibility of services for those who cannot reach traditional services. For instance, online therapy extends to the majority who would typically avoid professional mental health services, offering a new modality that addresses concerns about confidentiality and privacy.

### **Disinhibition Effect:**

Lowers barriers to personal disclosure, facilitating deeper communication but also potentially hastening conflict.

Disinhibition is double-edged; individuals may be quicker to both self-disclose as well as to engage in conflict. This effect can make therapy more effective or embolden online trolls.



The effect of computer mediated communications reduces unconscious defence mechanisms, they also facilitate clearer communication, greater disclosure, and more profound processing of deep-seated issues. Conversely they can hasten conflict engagement as well as self-disclosure.

*“Online communications not only allows for more clear communication, but also allows for greater disclosure and the processing of “soul” issues needing to be addressed.”*

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## Emergence of E-therapy

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*“E-therapists are exploring all modes of Internet communication for their work with e-patients. Services are currently available using e-mail (regular or encrypted with PGP or S/MIME), real-time chat, secure web-based messaging, videoconferencing, and voice-over-IP (Internet phone)... As broadband Internet connections become available to more consumers, videoconferencing and voice-over-IP are increasingly available. Even so, many consumers continue to prefer the non-visual, non-voice, low-tech environment of e-mail and chat, finding it easier to communicate about sensitive issues without visual or voice connection.”*

Computers-Mediated Chat: Ways of Finding Chat Partners.

The three effects discussed here have contributed to the rapid development of therapy using computer-mediated communications. The possible applications of online therapy include:

- Information resources on psychological concepts and issues;
- Self-help guides;
- Psychological testing and assessment;
- Help in deciding to undergo therapy;
- Information about specific psychological services;
- Single-session psychological advice through e-mail or e-bulletin boards;

- Ongoing personal counselling and therapy through e-mail;
- Real-time counselling through IRC, IT telephony, and audio-video conferencing;
- Synchronous and asynchronous support groups, discussion groups, and group counselling;
- Psychological and social research.

These activities related to mental health and therapies are occurring in many settings.

Another example of therapeutic services being offered over the Internet is the Samaritans. The Samaritans are trained volunteers who have been offering online email support to suicidal people since 1994. In 1999 they responded to emails from over 25,000 people.

Originally situated in the United Kingdom, Samaritans now have 21 branches world wide, including China and Australia.

Therapy can be offered over the Internet in a medical or clinical CMC setting that mimics traditional therapy. Currently there is great interest in finding ways to use video conferencing to deliver

psychiatric services to patients in remote settings. This movement, referred to as Tele-Health, is being seen as a way to provide health and medical model services to patients that would not otherwise receive support. Remote assessment and treatment can occur without either the doctor or patient even being in the same geographical area.

The development of hospital and clinic-based telemedicine and the use of sophisticated videoconferencing hookups allow physicians to work with patients in remote locations. This is another example of the Internet offering assistance and help to individuals.

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## Resources & Support Online

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In today's digital age, technology serves as a linchpin in fostering education, supporting mental health, and nurturing community connections. Each of these

domains highlights a unique aspect of how digital platforms contribute to societal enhancement and individual well-being.

### **Educational Content and Resources:**

Platforms like YouTube and educational apps provide valuable learning opportunities and content which can enhance knowledge and skills.

### **Mental Health Support:**

Digital platforms offer accessible mental health resources and online counselling that are particularly appealing to teens and young adults. These platforms use chatbots and peer support forums to provide crisis intervention and ongoing support.

### **Community and Social Connectivity:**

Despite their risks, platforms like Facebook and other social networking sites offer spaces for community building and social support, connecting users with similar interests and providing a sense of belonging.



## CONCLUSION

The landscape of computer-mediated communication is complex and ever-evolving. While the Internet undeniably presents risks, particularly to younger users, it also offers unprecedented opportunities for positive engagement and support. Educating users about safe practices and encouraging responsible digital citizenship can help mitigate risks while enhancing the benefits that these technologies bring to society.

We must focus on harnessing the Internet's potential for good, ensuring that its vast capabilities are used to foster, not hinder, human connection and well-being.

The world of computer-mediated communications is varied, diverse and becoming more so all the time. CMC environments - email, IRC, ICQ, and conferencing - can be compared to electricity; they can be used to help or used to harm.

As the technological movement progresses it is advisable that people become more familiar with the qualities of the Internet that will continue to impact how we electronically communicate.

The three elements of effect - the inclusive, approachable nature of CMC, the disinhibiting effect of online therapy, and the hyper-personal effect as stipulated by Walther - are aspects of CMC that facilitate both abuses, and therapeutic opportunities in cyberspace.

Media-generated hysteria notwithstanding, sexual exploitation of children on the Internet is a real occurrence that affects everyone and puts children at risk. Up to this point it appears that criminal elements have been better able to use the Internet for corrupt purposes. However, by educating civil society, public servants, parents, youth and those who care for youth about these aspects of the Internet, and encouraging creative uses of the medium, it is possible to minimize the negative impact of online exploitation. Such a rich environment of communication offers unexplored potential for human interaction and must not be lost to technically sophisticated predators seeking ever more explicit experiences. Involving youth, and those sectors of society that are respectful of youth, in designing creative solutions to these problems will be imperative to the future culture of cyberspace. Solutions based on creating youth-friendly environments - not censorship - must be addressed and supported by all sectors of society.



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