

A welcome step: a statement of support for Apple's plans to detect child sexual abuse images

"Twenty years ago, [child sexual abuse images] online were a problem; 10 years ago, an epidemic. Now, the crisis is at breaking point." New York Times, 2019^[1]

When in August this year US technology giant Apple announced significant new steps to strengthen its response to child sexual exploitation and abuse, there was a genuine sense of hope that this and other newly developed technologies could help to turn the tide in this crisis that affects so many children and families across the world.

Apple's proposed solution has huge potential to identify known images of child sexual abuse, prevent their further circulation online and that way help protect children from further abuse and apprehend offenders. Importantly, Apple's new technology could allow for the detection of known child sexual abuse material in an encrypted environment, thus preserving user privacy.

Privacy for internet users is a fundamental right that must be supported, including for victims and survivors of abuse. The issue does not need to be a binary choice between privacy and safety: we believe Apple can demonstrate that it is possible to utilise abuse detection technology in a way that detects known illegal abuse images and maintains user privacy.

Concerns that such technology is a 'slippery slope' towards surveillance remain hypothetical and do not justify rejecting an opportunity for progress that would enable the many thousands of victims and survivors of sexual abuse who have their images circulated online to be protected from revictimisation and retraumatisation. Instead, we should work together to ensure appropriate safeguards, checks and balances are in place.

Using technology to detect child sexual abuse material has been a critical part of the wider fight against child abuse for more than a decade. Apple's new tool builds on this existing technology and is designed to do one thing only: detect known sexual abuse images of children that have already been classified by experts. It would not operate in isolation but be embedded within a system of checks and balances, with human supervision and in collaboration with experts.

It is imperative that Apple continues to maintain its commitment to prioritise the safety of their youngest users and proceeds as soon as possible with the roll-out of the detection technology in the US and beyond.

Time is of the essence: the rapid expansion of digital technology and increased access to the internet have transformed the lives of children and young people worldwide. Yet, advances in technology that have allowed children to connect and learn have also provided opportunities for offenders.

We cannot simply turn away from child sexual abuse. There is a moral imperative to take action. As the crime is committed using digital means, technological solutions must play a key role in the response.

The innovative, privacy-focused technological solution presented by Apple offers an opportunity to turn the tide to create a safer digital world for children. We urge Apple to rapidly implement these new capabilities and call on other technology firms to apply their own incredible expertise and skills to the challenge on their own platforms and services.

Signatories

WeProtect Global Alliance

Ms. Mama Fatima Singhateh (UN Special Rapporteur on sale and exploitation of children)

5Rights Foundation

African Child Policy Forum

African partnership to End Violence against Children

Canadian Centre for Child Protection

Child Helpline International

Child Rescue Coalition

ChildSafeNet

C-Sema

Defence for Children-Liberia

ECPAT International

ECPAT Sri Lanka

Equality Now

Forum for Digital Equality

Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children

IJM's Center to End Online Sexual Exploitation of Children

Innocence in Danger

Institute on Justice for Child Witnesses

International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children (ICMEC)

International Justice Mission U.K

Internet Watch Foundation (IWF)

Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (ISPCC)

It's a Penalty

Lifeline Childline Namibia

Missing Children Europe

National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC)

NSPCC

Project VIC International

RAINN

SAWN Association for the Protection of Children and Teenagers against Violence and Sexual abuse

South Asia Initiative to End Violence against Children (SAIEVAC)

Telefono Azzurro

The Centre for Social Justice

The Smile of the Child

Thorn



[1] New York Times, September 2019: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/09/28/us/child-sex-abuse.html>