

- Social networking

# FACEBOOK, WHATSAPP OFFER HIDING PLACES FOR TRAFFICKERS

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LONDON— Technology has helped modern slave drivers reach out farther and faster to advance their lucrative trade in human beings.



Social media aids recruitment, stolen credit cards finance travel, victims can be monitored virtually and sold online before proceeds are laundered—electronically, of course.

Fresh victims can be recruited, transported worldwide and trapped in slavery in just days—compared to months in the past—with the police often barely able to react, criminal analysts say.

According to the latest UN statistics, 600 trafficking routes globally have been identified— in every region of the world— an increase of almost a quarter between 2007 and 2014.

## Tools to target victims

Instead of lurking in malls, train stations, homeless shelters and brothels to find vulnerable people, traffickers have a plethora of digital tools to target potential victims.

“Take Moldova, for example. In the past, you could visit any village or town, identify the middlemen and find out what was happening,” said Radu Cucos, an official at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, a security watchdog.

“Now, you cannot do that ... everything is hidden online,” Cucos said.

Every day, hundreds of billions of messages are sent, posts written and calls made over apps and websites such as Facebook, WhatsApp and Skype—the perfect hiding place for traffickers.

“Facebook is really a primary social media medium for traffickers to engage susceptible and vulnerable victims into the trade,” said Kevin Campbell, vice president of global operations at the US-based antitrafficking group, The Exodus Road.

Traffickers tend to advertise victims over listings and sexual services websites rather than the dark web—part of the internet beyond the reach of search engines—as this offers them a far bigger pool of potential buyers, according to police.

## Cover for traffickers

The vast reams of content online, and the encrypted nature of modern tech—the police in many nations can intercept phone but not WhatsApp calls —provides cover and a cloak for traffickers.

“Traffickers can hide among the sheer volume online,” said Dan Parkinson, an officer at Britain’s antislavery police unit.

Technology is also helping criminals to evade detection in the offline world as they can plot and perform abuse from home—such as cybersex child trafficking where sexual exploitation is broadcast around the world to paying customers, charities say.

In the Philippines—a major source nation—local abusers and global clients from Australia to Canada are outsmarting police by mixing up payment methods, using cryptocurrencies and streaming over encrypted livestreams that are tough to trace.

“Exploitation begins online ... but often leads into offline physical sex exploitation, (and) trafficking,” said Lotta Sylwander, country head for the UN children’s agency (Unicef) based in the Philippines. “And the victims are getting younger,” Sylwander added.

#### Newways to address problem

According to Facebook which runs WhatsApp, its security experts are pulling content relating to trafficking and are working with law enforcement, civil society and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime to share findings and report crime.

Microsoft—the parent of Skype—is funding research to learn how criminals misuse technology, developing software to spot child sex exploitation, and collaborating with other tech firms and the police to refer crimes for follow-up and prosecutions.

“While these efforts are not a perfect solution, we continuously invest in new ways to address the problem ... child sexual exploitation is a horrific crime,” said a Microsoft spokesperson.

Teams from tech giants including Facebook, Twitter, Google, Microsoft and Uber united last month for an annual hackathon to develop and test tools to combat online child sex trafficking.

#### Cooperation inconsistent

The police and cybersecurity analysts say cooperation from web companies in tackling human trafficking is inconsistent—but that new US legislation could change the landscape.

The law penalizes website operators that facilitate online sex trafficking and makes it easier for prosecutors and victims to sue sites that keep exploitative material on their platforms—if they can be shown to have knowingly done so.

Yet this could simply spur traffickers to advertise their victims on sites run by overseas companies in countries which are out of the reach of US authorities, legal experts say.

“That is really scary,” said Maureen Guirguis Kenny, codirector of the Human Trafficking Law Clinic at Case Western Reserve University in Ohio. “That’s the dark side of this.”—