

Thursday, December 10, 2020

## It's not the cure, but the delivery system that matters: the importance of community

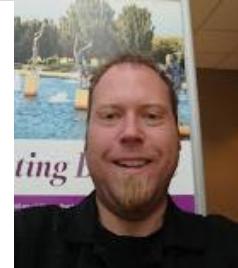
By Kieran McCartan, Ph.D., David Prescott, LICSW, & Kasia Uzieblo, Ph.D.

This has been a frustrating week for writing. With respect to developments in our field, it seemed as though the goalposts kept moving; the blog could have been on anything and nothing. As the week started, we were looking at recent reports ([The Sun](#); [Complex](#); [New York Times](#)) about the reality of Pornhub was, despite their protestations, all is not happiness, smiles, sanitized sex, and sexuality; instead, there is a dark side. It wasn't long before Pornhub [took remedial action](#); we will have to wait to see the results.

Next, the blog was going to examine the unintended impact of new encrypted messaging policies and practices that can put children at risk for grooming and abuse ([The Guardian](#); [The Children's Commissioner for England](#)). This promised much to discuss. However, that debate has been moved down the agenda, in the UK at least, with increased discussions around Brexit and COVID-19. important messages and conversations are getting overshadowed. Stimied again! However, this is a topic that we will return to in the new year, as it highlights the balancing act between risk and safety in child protection with an evolving frame of online protection.

The third and final, blog that we were going to write is about the balancing act between internet filters and prevention messaging after Kieran attended a meeting that discussed whether the cost of implementing such tools was an appropriate and relevant investment. Interestingly, this meeting went round in circles and it was decided that more research and evidence was needed. All of this highlights and focuses the challenge of prevention: do we prevent and try to stop what might happen or do we respond to what is happening? This, in turn, feeds into larger debates and reflects previous blogs on this site, so it felt like retracing old ground.

Another day brought [headlines](#) reporting the first people in the UK—first in the world – outside of clinical trials to be vaccinated against COVID-19 with the Pfizer jab, which was great news! Interestingly, the news



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### SAJRT Bloggers' Profile

We are longtime members of ATSA dedicated to furthering the causes of evidenced-based practice, understanding, and prevention in the field of sexual abuse.

[The Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers](#) is an international, multi-disciplinary organization dedicated to preventing sexual abuse. Through research, education, and shared learning ATSA promotes evidence based practice, public policy, and community strategies that lead to the effective assessment, treatment, and management of individuals who have sexually abused or are risk to abuse.

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coverage throughout the day and ensuing discussions about evidence, effectiveness, patient safety, and rollout highlighted the lynchpin that brought all these potential blogs together. The real issue is not necessarily the vaccine itself, but the mechanism through which the vaccine is delivered. The biggest challenge is changing public minds, education, prevention, engagement, inclusion, and community building. All these same challenges confront us in the field of sexual abuse.

Like COVID-19, preventing sexual abuse means understanding and responding to it directly (and does not involve behaving as though it does not exist or will go away on its own). Also, like COVID-19, sexual abuse can be overwhelming, omnipresent, and presents challenges for individuals, communities, and society. This means (again like COVID-19) our response is often divided – even divisive – and results from a spectrum of belief and acceptance. Beneath this are considerations of people's knowledge, understanding, trust in the system, belief in science, and hopes for the future. In many circumstances, we find ourselves at a stalemate: in recent years, the field of addressing sexual abuse has tried new approaches to tackle the issue, including prevention, reframing messages, groups of people reaching out to the public, and listening systematically to who people who have abused – and those who have been abused – have to say.

Each of these efforts has worked to a greater or lesser degree. We can see the same pattern, the same approaches, and the same frustration in these debates as we do in the rollout of the COVID-19 vaccine. The question then becomes, what now? Do we all need radical overhauls in our approaches? Is the answer to preventing sexual harm in doubling down on our current approaches and seeking out more evidence and opinion? Or is it a return to control and regulation? These are difficult questions with no obvious answers.

The one common element that arises in both the challenges around sexual abuse and COVID-19 – the element that ties together the threads of Pornhub, encryption, and filtering software is the community. Our communities. Sexual abuse is a community issue and therefore communities need to understand it better to respond to it more effectively and prevent its spread. Punishment and restriction do not stop sexual abuse. While such sanctions can help in some cases, awareness and support can do much more.

We are all members of our communities and society beyond, and together we shape the debates and actions that move us forward. Our greatest successes come when we work together, and our greatest failures happen when we resist new information and cooperative efforts. This is true across the board, from child protection to immunization. In many ways, especially in the political arena, our community is more fractured than ever before. While advances in accessing knowledge and resources have brought so much of the world together, they have also happened at the very times that many of us have become increasingly entrenched in our own echo chambers. If services to prevent abuse and rehabilitate those who have abused are the primary issues, then how do we respond? It seems safe to say that we need a new delivery mechanism and new ways to think about moving forward.

The challenge as we move in 2021 is how do we immunize ourselves against sexual abuse, the way that we are immunizing ourselves against COVID-19? And how do we immunize ourselves against both the panic and apathy that violence and the pandemic can bring? How do we get the "cure" out there (in COVID's case, that means the Pfizer jab, and in sexual abuse, it is the education, knowledge, and understanding we need) in a more effective way? It is a challenge, but as a community, we can work together to solve it!