

This \$1 Billion App Can't 'Kik' Its Huge Child Exploitation Problem

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Soon after Raleigh, North Carolina police arrested registered sex offender Thomas Paul Keeler II in March last year, they discovered he was an avid user of Kik Messenger, the Canadian communications app billed as the West's alternative to WeChat. He was a member of more than 200 Kik groups with names like "kidsnbabies," all dedicated to trading child abuse material, including images and videos of minors aged between three and 12 "engaged in sexual acts with adults," according to a search warrant obtained by *Forbes*. In total, Keeler, who is awaiting sentencing after filing a currently-sealed plea agreement, shared and received such content with as many as 300 different individuals over less than a year, the government claimed.

This astonishing level of illegal content might appear unique, but in recent years this kind of activity has become rampant across Kik. A joint *Forbes* and *Point Report* investigation has uncovered evidence of a vast number of child exploitation cases involving the use of Kik, where some of the most appalling material is being shared and young girls and boys are being targeted for grooming. Posing as 14-year-old girls, we also discovered just how quickly predators were on the prowl and how third-party apps for sharing profiles appeared to be facilitating access to minors. And we found that Kik hasn't even been deleting the profiles of individuals charged and convicted of child abuse offenses.

Though many previous reports have recounted individual exploitation crimes facilitated over Kik, many parents may not have heard of Kik. But their kids probably have. Of its 15 million monthly active users, 57% are in the 13-24 age bracket. It's also received \$120 million in funding since its 2009 founding in Canada and is now valued at more than \$1 billion. Despite the financial success of the company, and Kik's own efforts to curb the problem, this investigation has proven worrying problems remain.

In response to our findings, child safety experts have called on the company to take action. "They could change things, absolutely. They could build in much more responsive mechanisms in terms of privacy and safety, they could provide warnings," said Sonia Livingstone OBE, professor of social psychology in the Department of Media and Communications at London School of Economics. She recommended more frequent warnings for children about people on the platform.

"It looks to me like Kik hasn't done any kind of risk assessment, they've allowed for anonymous communication without sufficient privacy and safety controls," added Livingstone, who also sits on the executive board of the UK's Council for Child Internet Safety.

Egregious cases

As a convicted child molester recently told CBS News' 48 Hours, Kik is a "predator's paradise." In the same episode, the mother of a murdered 13-year-old who'd communicated with her killers over Kik, said the app should be shut down entirely.

That case was one of many horrific crimes partly facilitated through Kik, according to court filings reviewed by *Forbes*. Take the case of William Steinhaus, who pled guilty in late 2016 to taking sexually explicit pictures of himself with a two-year-old who was occasionally in his custody. He used Kik on an iPhone to distribute those photos to approximately 25 other Kik users, some of whom he talked with about what to do to the infant. He was sentenced to 25 years in prison earlier this year.

Discussion and depiction of incest and rape feature prominently in child abuse cases reviewed by *Forbes*. In one exchange between two suspects, as described in a court document filed by the government, they discussed adopting a baby and the possibility of having sex with the infant. One of the parties later offered a non-nude picture of his own son to an undercover officer, though claimed he hadn't "tried anything" with the boy, according to police.

In October last year, a Kik profile with the name *bossiercopssuck* told an undercover agent he had nude images of his infant daughter taken while changing her diaper, a search warrant revealed. He then sent sexually explicit images of an unnamed child, the document read. The defendant in that case, Michael Stanley Clark of Louisiana, is facing charges of production and dissemination of child pornography. He's not made a plea and has been ordered to undergo a mental health assessment to determine competency for standing trial.

What makes Kik so popular amongst those sharing illegal content is spelled out by officers in court documents. In one search warrant, the officer writes: "Kik Messenger is frequently used by individuals who trade child pornography because it is free, simple to set up, easily accessible, potentially anonymous and allows users to share digital data privately."

Zach Myers, assistant U.S. attorney for the district of Maryland and lead prosecutor in the Steinhaus case, said that while many apps are used by those exploiting and grooming children, Kik commonly comes up. "This is not the only case I've prosecuted where offenders have used Kik, and I know many of my colleagues prosecuting these sorts of cases in the United States have prosecuted many offenders who were using Kik, either to communicate with victims they might locate on other platforms, or to locate victims there and communicate with them."

Harassed over Kik

To see how bad the problem was on Kik, we set up a handful of profiles, posing as 13- and 14-year-old girls. With one, we joined around 10 public groups, which allow every user to see who's participating and direct message one another. They're what make Kik that much more open than other social platforms. The groups we joined came up after searches for "teenagers," "friends" and "14." Within an hour, "the girl" had received 10 private messages, all from men.

One asked if we were male or female. Most simply said "hey." One, though, sent a particularly aggressive message with sexually explicit language. His profile picture was a young man with his shirt off. Over the course of a month, another fictitious profile we used to join the 10 public groups received more than 25 messages, just two from female users. One sender's profile used photo of male genitalia as the avatar. Another sent a picture of a full-frontal nude male.

But that was nothing compared to the level of interest we received after advertising a profile on a third-party application, KFF Username Finder For Kik. These kinds of apps allow people to post their profile openly and typically include filters for age ranges from 13 upwards. Within 10 minutes of advertising our profile, hundreds of messages came in. Not only were many aggressive in tone, they also contained images of male genitalia.

A spokesperson for that app said it had various mitigating measures in place, such as minimum age limits, automatic explicit content detection and black lists on disallowed topics with automatic detection of inappropriate posts. Users who break the rules are immediately banned, the spokesperson said, adding: "We're trying to develop better tools for protecting the users of our site all the time and encourage suggestions to improve from anywhere. Unfortunately, once control leaves our site and the conversion falls to Kik, we rely on Kik's own system of protection and moderation to look after our users from that point onward.

"There are several sites performing similar services to ours on the web that run themselves as a wild west of sorts. Something we try very hard to distance ourselves from."

Kik not deleting pedophile profiles

Kik isn't helping itself or protecting its young patrons in one big way: *Forbes* discovered the company hasn't removed profiles of individuals accused or convicted of child exploitation offenses. The profile used by Steinhaus, the man serving 25 years after pleading guilty of taking sexually explicit pictures of himself with a two-year-old, was *baddad4682*. It remained accessible at the time of writing. As were 17 other profiles named in court documents accused of acquiring or sharing child abuse material.

While it might be argued that sentenced pedophiles are in prison and can't access their profiles, that's not accurate. Just last week, 29-year-old Christopher David Grippe was sentenced to 280 months in federal prison for possession and distribution of child pornography. He was using Kik while incarcerated for another child abuse crime, communicating with others about sexually abusing children.

A Kik spokesperson admitted the company hadn't been removing offending profiles, but promised to do more. "We don't proactively remove accounts that have been charged with a crime, as that assumes every person investigated by law enforcement has done something wrong. We can and will do a better job of proactively removing accounts for users who have been convicted of crimes related to child abuse."



Founder and CEO of Kik Ted Livingston speaks onstage during TechCrunch Disrupt NY 2016 at Brooklyn Cruise Terminal on May 11, 2016 in New York City. (Photo by Noam Galai/Getty Images for TechCrunch)

An emailed statement from Ted Livingston, founder and CEO of Kik, noted various ways the company tries to keep children safe. "We encourage users to report content that they believe violates the Kik Terms of Service and Community Standards. Users are also able to block other users they no longer wish to chat with, or ignore chats from people that they don't know. Actions are taken against users found to have violated Kik's community standards and terms of service, including removal from the Kik platform where circumstances warrant.

"The other is through education and partnerships with organizations that help adults and teens understand the challenges of today's online landscape and how to avoid bad situations. For years, we've had teams dedicated to this, and we will continue to invest in those types of tools, provide resources to parents, and strengthen relationships with law enforcement and safety-focused organizations.

"We want all users to be safe on Kik and will continue to make Kik a safe, positive and productive place for our users to interact. We we are continuing to increase our investment in this area, as safety is a priority for us."

A honeypot?

Kik isn't ignoring the issue. Far from it. As a sign of its willingness to solve the problem, the company last year started to roll out a tool called PhotoDNA that helps identify previously-known images and video of child abuse being shared on online platforms, according to a law enforcement official from Canada, who asked to remain anonymous. The source also praised the company for providing data to police when they needed it, including the subscriber's given name and metadata for their use of the app.

But still Kik can't kick the problem. There's also evidence American investigators are treating Kik like a honeypot. The Canadian company provides a full guide for cops on how to use the app, while feds are running a significant array of fake profiles, even encouraging suspects to communicate with them over Kik rather than other platforms.

In November 2016, District of Columbia Metropolitan Police Department detective Timothy Palchak, acting in an undercover capacity on an unnamed classified ads site, interacted with a user who expressed an interest in incest, looking for a "mother with no limits," according to a criminal complaint. Soon after getting in touch with the suspect, Palchak wrote in internet speak: "Whats your kik dont like discussing on email."

In an earlier case, a separate investigator failed in an attempt to get the target to move over to Kik. A suspect responded to another of Palchak's advertisements in August 2016, to which the officer wrote: "Sweet 30 dad here with daughter. Do you have kik? easier to talk." The suspect replied: "How old is she? I actually don't. Honestly probably not the safest place to chat. I know a guy its talking to who said it wasn't."

Cops are going to incredible lengths in order to pursue offenders too. Police said in one warrant that in response to a request for an image from a suspect, who believed they were talking to an underage girl, the undercover agent provided a real photo of an unnamed officer assuming the identity of a 14-year-old.

Kik 'could do more'

The problem isn't limited to North America. Online safety project manager at Britain's National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), Rose Bray, said in surveys with under-18s, children had raised concerns about the security of Kik when compared to other messengers.

"One of the key things they didn't like about Kik was that adults were approaching them on there. They were being approached by strangers and sometimes adults who're pretending to be younger. They also told us about a significant amount of sexual content on Kik, often related to those strangers contacting them." They mentioned being approached by people with profile pictures that were of a sexual nature, or sending such images directly or encouraging others to send them, said Bray. "We'd like to see social networks like Kik take their safeguarding responsibilities seriously. We know there are a huge number of young users on there and they need to recognize that."

Experts say predators are now diversifying, using Kik as just one platform to carry out their crimes. Increasingly, streaming apps such as Facebook Live, Live.me, Twitter's Periscope and newer tools like

Musical.ly and Oovoo are being used to contact children for potential grooming. One search warrant detailing a case from Ohio where police said they found one suspect was using a range of those applications and Kik in hunting for underage girls.

"Offenders are using multiple apps simultaneously in the course of their offences, including to speak with the same victim. For example, from Kik, to Facebook, to Skype," added U.S. attorney Myers.

It's not just Kik that has plenty of work to do to ensure young web users are safe from abusers.