



“The tech industry must find ways to use AI to combat this issue”: Bjorn Sellstrom of Swedish law enforcement and INTERPOL on international collaboration, engagement with the tech industry, and creating safe digital spaces.

Alec Saelens

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Alec Saelens: Could you introduce yourself and your professional background, specifically in dealing with child sexual abuse? Could you share what you're currently working on in this sector?

Björn Sellstrom: My name is Björn Sellstrom, and I have been a police officer for 34 years. I've worked with child abuse material and internet-related sexual crimes against children since 2006, initially at the national level in Sweden. Sweden was early to address this issue, starting with a database to share information about identified children in child sexual abuse material internationally. This initiative began in 2002 with INTERPOL's International Child Sexual Exploitation (ICSE) database.

In 2006, I focused on identifying children and perpetrators by analyzing child abuse material. After 10 years, I joined INTERPOL as the coordinator for the Crimes Against Children Unit, where I led a team of 15 from various countries. We managed victim identification internationally, expanding the database to connect more countries and contribute to this critical issue.

Identifying a child often leads to identifying the perpetrator, who is frequently someone close to the child, especially for very young victims. However, social media has introduced new dynamics, allowing older children to connect with perpetrators in different ways. The sharing of CSAM [child sexual abuse material] often occurs on the dark web, while other crimes involve social media platforms.

At INTERPOL, we aimed to create curricula for different levels of understanding, starting with basic training about the value of children. In some regions, misconceptions persist, such as the belief that boys cannot be sexual victims. Even when national legislation exists, it may not be effective due to cultural factors. For instance, some countries may have strong federal rape laws, but if these don't resonate with rural values, they may not be enforced.

This disconnect complicates efforts to address these crimes globally. While it's easier to engage with politicians and legislators at a political level, this doesn't always translate to real benefits for victims. While every initiative is better than nothing, progress can be slow and challenging.

Alec Saelens: Could you talk about a best practice—something you've done in your work that was particularly effective in holding perpetrators accountable, identifying victims, and ensuring the enforcement of national legislative frameworks at the local level? What strategies have had the most impact?

Björn Sellstrom: Of course, there are several effective practices. At the ground level, international cooperation and networking are crucial for identifying victims. Coming together to analyze material, watch videos, and establish a common language for identification allows us to send information to the appropriate local or regional authorities.

Cooperative task forces, where participants spend a few weeks locked in a room solely focused on identifying children, have proven to be a very effective tool. This intensive collaboration from different parts of the world significantly enhances our identification efforts. It's important to recognize that addressing this issue requires involvement from the tech industry, as it is not just a law enforcement problem but a societal one. We cannot make meaningful progress without their active participation.

Alec Saelens: Could you elaborate on that? What is the role of the tech industry in perpetuating this problem? Please discuss any effective changes or necessary actions to address this issue, considering the influence of these tech companies.

Björn Sellstrom: Of course, it's important to acknowledge the positive progress made, but we also see an increase in material, which complicates the situation. Without the tech industry's involvement, we would likely see an even greater rise in this type of content.

By engaging the tech industry and urging them to provide technical solutions, we can better understand and track both perpetrators and victims. Companies like Thorn, Griffeye, NetClean, and BlueBear, just to mention a few, are working to develop software that assists law enforcement in identifying children through for instance GPS solutions and by exploring EXIF [exchangeable image file format] data. One of the goals is to integrate various tools into a single investigative platform for law enforcement, reducing the need for multiple specialized tools. However, it's puzzling that we can send a man to Mars but struggle to remove harmful material from the internet. Initiatives like Arachnid, a web crawler, help identify and take down new material by contacting the providers, but challenges remain.

As a non-technical person, I find it strange that we haven't found more effective solutions. With the rise of AI [artificial intelligence], we are already seeing an increase in AI-generated child abuse material, which is very concerning. The tech industry must find ways to use AI to combat this issue. Many initiatives are underway, and it's essential to address this challenge, especially given the potential volume of harmful material that could be created and spread in the future.

Alec Saelens: To what extent do you think tech companies benefit financially from the distribution of child sexual images online? What can be done to prompt them to act, despite the fact that this activity may increase platform usage and user engagement? How can we leverage financial incentives to address the issues that tech companies are fostering?

Björn Sellstrom: I believe the companies are well aware of the problem, but they struggle to balance profit with their responsibilities. As a law enforcement officer, I feel they are not contributing enough. The tech industry needs to reflect on whether they are truly addressing this issue or just putting on a façade. Many companies seem to do the bare minimum to demonstrate responsibility, claiming they are addressing the problem while actually investing the least effort and resources. Clearly, much more needs to be done.

There's also the legislative aspect to consider. Companies must navigate what they are entitled to do regarding content removal while respecting privacy rights and free speech. This creates a complex political balance. For instance, the creation of the CSAM legislation at the EU level has been challenging. The Swedish commissioner, Ylva Johansson, initiated this effort a few years ago, but it has gone through multiple presidencies over three years to pass legislation, which

highlights the complexity of the issue. While tech companies express a desire to do more, they often resist regulation, arguing against overly restrictive measures. This makes it a tricky situation, as we need to balance action with the right to privacy.

Alec Saelens: To what extent are you tracking the financial flows that support the circulation of child sexual abuse material in your role as a law enforcement officer? Have you identified any of these financial channels, and have you been able to take actions such as seizing assets or imposing fines to hold people accountable for their actions?

Björn Sellstrom: The monetary aspect connected to child sexual abuse material varies among law enforcement officers in different countries. From my perspective, it's not a significant financial issue. Much of the material is circulated more for status among certain groups than for profit. For instance, individuals may share material to demonstrate access to children, stating, "I can film my own kids and share it in various dark web communities." While there is some money involved, it is not the main concern.

However, there are serious financial implications in cases of live streaming abuse, where someone might pay a small sum—like \$20—to view or order a video of a child being abused. Tracking this money is feasible, especially with the support of financial institutions. In Sweden, we have formed a coalition with banks and credit card companies to tackle these issues. The challenge arises with services like PayPal or Western Union, where transactions can be tracked, but it's difficult to determine the nature of the payments. Are they for videos of children or adult content? Often, these transactions occur on platforms that host a mix of content, making it hard to identify specific abuses. While we can trace and track cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin, it is a time-consuming process.

Additionally, we face challenges related to unaccompanied migrant children arriving in Europe. It's crucial to understand what happens to these children, especially if they arrive without guardians. Are organized crime groups involved? The links between financial flows and crimes such as child prostitution or child labor require more thorough exploration.

We have also noticed organized crime groups targeting Swedish boys through social media, where a perpetrator might pose as a girl to initiate a conversation. They build trust and eventually request compromising images from the boys. This is a form of sextortion, where the perpetrators demand money—often around \$1,000—threatening to share the images if the victim doesn't comply. This can generate significant revenue for the criminals involved. Tracking these financial flows is exceptionally challenging.

Additionally, it's important to recognize that some perpetrators operate with a business-like mentality, treating these interactions as transactions devoid of personal feelings. They may openly state, "This is just business," further complicating the situation. To combat these issues, we need to foster safe environments for children and effectively communicate the dangers they face. This raises questions about responsibility: who is accountable for educating children about these risks? Is it the parents, schools, police, or social media platforms? I believe we all share the responsibility to address this issue collaboratively.

Alec Saelens: In your view, what have been the best strategies to cultivate and maintain partnerships where people are able to work together to address these kinds of issues?

Björn Sellstrom: Addressing the challenges of cultivating and maintaining effective partnerships in combating child sexual abuse material is indeed complex. There are numerous initiatives aimed at preventing these issues, but the impact on creating safe spaces for children remains unclear.

For example, countries invest millions of euros annually in initiatives like the Interfaith Alliance and the WeProtect Global Alliance, contributing substantial funds to INTERPOL and other high-stakes political efforts. However, it's uncertain whether these initiatives truly benefit the victims or those who need protection. While I appreciate the intention behind these initiatives, I haven't observed enough tangible outcomes to feel confident that they are effective.

Many organizations, such as Plan International, ECPAT, INHOPE, Childhood International, and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) in the U.S., are indeed making strides in this area. Additionally, there are numerous efforts within Southeast Asia that focus on providing shelter and support for children. Despite this, when it comes to internet-related issues, it appears that many strategies fall short.

A significant barrier to success is the language and cultural differences that exist across countries. What works in one nation may not be effective in [others]. There needs to be a concerted effort to adapt successful strategies to local cultures, legal frameworks, and language models. This is where the WeProtect Global Alliance has shown promise by outlining essential pillars for action across social, legislative, educational, and law enforcement levels. They encourage countries to take proven strategies and adapt them to their unique contexts.

In Sweden, we observe a variety of regional, local, and national efforts, but a more cohesive international community focused on identifying children should also emphasize sharing best

practices for prevention. We need collaborative frameworks that foster communication and cooperation among nations, ensuring that successful strategies are not only identified but also effectively translated and implemented across diverse cultural landscapes.

Alec Saelens: Reflecting on your work in law enforcement and identifying perpetrators and victims, what would you advise governments or other actors eager to participate in this effort, particularly in collaborating with tech companies? What lessons should tech companies learn to work more efficiently and proactively?

Björn Sellstrom: For governments and other stakeholders eager to combat child sexual abuse material, collaboration with tech companies is crucial. However, real change hinges on the commitment of leadership within these organizations. It's essential for board members and CEOs to reflect daily on their responsibility, asking themselves, "If not me, who? If not now, when?"

In my experience at numerous roundtables, discussions often involve managers at levels below the CEO or board. While there's a lot of enthusiasm and initiative at these levels, without the backing of upper management, efforts frequently stall. Companies might allocate funds for prevention, but if that commitment lacks genuine passion from leadership, it becomes a superficial gesture. A lower-level manager might push for preventive measures, but the absence of deep-rooted conviction from the top leads to a disconnect.

The determination is palpable among investigators who spend their days addressing child abuse material. They are passionate and motivated. However, if higher-ups, like the chief commissioner of Sweden, acknowledge the importance of these issues without having directly experienced the gravity of the situation, their resolve may be less impactful. Without a personal connection to the issue, it becomes a matter of politics, predation, and bureaucracy.

We often see leaders gather for initiatives like the Interfaith Alliance, where they collectively express horror at child abuse. However, such gatherings can feel more like photo ops than genuine efforts to create change. The real work happens at the ground level, where law enforcement officers face the harrowing realities of their work every day, seeking resources and software solutions to better combat these crimes.

To truly address these issues, organizations must shift their culture and structure. They need adequate budgets, coordination, and a long-term strategic vision that extends beyond immediate concerns. It's not enough to initiate projects for a few years and then move on.

Organizations must maintain their focus, showing endurance in their commitment to combating CSAM. Ultimately, the mindset of leadership is critical. They need to maintain a broad perspective and a sustained commitment to the cause. Only then can we hope to move beyond tokenistic efforts and foster meaningful, lasting change.

Alec Saelens: How do law enforcement officials like yourself and your colleagues protect yourselves when confronted with such disturbing material?

Björn Sellstrom: This is a common question we encounter regarding these topics, but the reality is that either you have the resilience for this work, or you don't. Most people discover their capacity for coping with graphic material fairly quickly. Once you realize you can handle it, you find great satisfaction in being part of a community dedicated to safeguarding children and holding perpetrators accountable.

The driving force isn't the graphic content itself; rather, it's the commitment to the cause. You can develop your own strategies to manage the material, always reminding yourself that you're doing this for the right reasons. The question, "If not me, who?" becomes essential. Reflecting on that daily makes it easier to confront the challenging material.

In our relatively small international community, we connect at conferences and workshops, and you'll find colleagues who have dedicated decades to this work. We know each other well, creating a strong, supportive network. Most of us don't struggle significantly with the graphic aspects; it's more about the frustration that arises from feeling powerless. The real weariness comes not from viewing the material, but from the inability to identify the children involved and reach out to them.

Alec Saelens: Thank you for sharing your expertise and experience with me today.

Alec Saelens is a former journalist who supports SJN and its partners track solutions journalism's impact on society and the industry. In his former role, he researched and consulted on the connection between solutions journalism and revenue. He is co-founder of The Bristol Cable, the UK's pioneering local media cooperative. Before SJN, he was a researcher and coach for the Membership Puzzle Project and an analyst for NewsGuard.

***This conversation has been edited and condensed.*