"With more technology, there are no guardrails or safety measures, because everybody's racing to be the best and fastest adopter:" Marija Manojlovic of Safe Online on funding strategies, fundraising needs, and solutions for systems change.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard
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Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Can you talk about your organization, your approach, and specifically what gap you fill in the field?

Marija Manojlovic: Safe Online is the only global fund focused on child online safety and protection, which is a sad fact given the magnitude of the problem. We are the only ones in the world currently filling that role. As a fund, we are eight years old. We have so far raised and invested over $100 million in over 120 projects in every region of the world.

We are very much globally focused, recognizing that childhood sexual violence is not a problem of the developed or the majority world, but a problem of every country and every society. Also, given the technology component of it, this calls for a cross-region collaboration [across] all other divisions and sectoral lines.

As a fund, Safe Online focuses on three investment pillars.s. Our first one is systems. We are looking into how we can improve global systems as well as regional and national responses to enable policies, regulation, legislation, infrastructure services, and alignments. It is one of the biggest pillars of our work.

Then we have technology tools, where we are trying to see how we can leverage technology itself for prevention and response to online CSEA, as we call it, child sexual exploitation and abuse. Also, we are seeing how we can use technology to empower communities, industry players, governments, and the public sector to be better in their response and prevention.

Our third investment pillar is the foundational piece, which is research and data. We need to step up our game to understand the mechanisms by which technology is exacerbating the current issues around childhood sexual violence, and also figure out ways in which we can be current and on the front foot to understand the emerging threats as frontier technologies [i.e. any novel or developing technology with the potential to change how humans communicate and solve global problems] take a more central stage in every society.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How does Safe Online view systems work, specifically policy impact?

Marija Manojlovic: The systems pillar looks into specific interventions we can do to strengthen systems in particular areas. If we're looking into a national context, we're going to work with the government to see where they can embed the work to prevent online CSEA for the greatest impact. Is [this work] for example going to be taken on by the cybersecurity authority initially? Who's ensuring coordination across sectors and departments? From there, we are trying to support specific parts of the ecosystem as catalyzers of the wider response. At the same time, we are trying to capacitate regional bodies to influence more national policies.

More broadly, just the fact that we as a fund focus on systems, technology and data, evidence, and research shows how we are thinking about generating change across the entire ecosystem. You can't work separately from any of these pieces. Data and evidence is foundational to understanding what systems need and technology tools are essential for scale

We are not only a grantmaker. We are an active manager of our portfolio. We are trying to build connections. [We see], for example, in multiple countries across the world, that technology adoption is a big challenge, due to lack of technical expertise, cost barriers, etc. To overcome that, through our funding of technology, we incentivize shareable and scalable open-source tools that governments can adopt across the board at a lower cost than they would need otherwise. With our portfolio, we are actively trying to understand the situation and fill in or incentivize movement in places where current systems are lacking support. One example would be technology adoption, and another one would be collaboration with industry. We always think about barriers to incentivizing.

At Safe Online, we think about how we ourselves can be a systems orchestrator. Active management of funding and incentive structures is critical. We sometimes bring together organizations and support them to work together right now, because there is a small window of opportunity for them to generate change.

One example would be our "Disrupting Harm" project. It's the biggest global cross-country research on the prevalence of online CSEA. We created a concept and approached three organizations, UNICEF Innocenti, ECPAT International [End Child Prostitution in Asian Tourism] International, Interpol. We told them we believed they could help us do this research, and after some planning and initial discussions they accepted.

That research has now generated policy change across 12 countries in Southeast Asia and Southern and Eastern Africa. Countries have [created legislation] based on these findings. The research combines data from multiple sources - from educators, survivors, policymakers, prevalence [data] from kids themselves and caregivers, and legal assessments of every country. It's a full-on national roadmap of what needs to happen to start changing the system.

That's where I see us as a system orchestrator. We understood the gap, seized the opportunity, and put the investment in, and now we're seeing the change [with] wide national adoption of legislation or policies. Additional 13 countries across 4 new regions will have Disrupting Harm research reports published in 2025.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How did you work with regional organizations to help scale policy change on a regional level?

Marija Manojlovic: We've tested various approaches to working with regional bodies and later in the year I can share the evaluations we are now conducting to see what worked and what didn't. We are also curious about how successful that strategy was. We've worked in the ASEAN region, and also with the Council of Europe in particular, two regions where we have put significant investment in that modality.

We were looking at ways in which we can support country action across multiple countries where the demand is growing to address online CSEA, whether that is coming from national civil society organizations or international bodies, At that point you have an opportunity to use regional bodies to provide to them technical input, guidance and additional push to do that in the best way possible.

A good example is our support to the Council of Europe and the work of the Lanzarote Committee. As the expert body and a treaty organization to the Lanzarote convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse the Council of Europe was best placed to understand the needs of the member states and provide adequate technical expertise and guidance when needed.

Another example is our support to UNICEF regional office for East Asia and the Pacific and their work with ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian Nations]. Online CSEA is a big challenge in that region. What we decided to focus on there was incentivizing collaboration with the ICT sector. We've invested particularly in the regional ICT [information and communication technologies] forum organization. Three years in a row, we funded a big [ICT] convening to develop national and regional approaches to collaborating with the tech sector to address the abuse children are facing online, and to incorporate that into national policies. Success will not be immediate, but we are hoping it will bring about longer term changes.

It is important to emphasize that our approach is not the same in every regional context. We have to think about who we work with, and what leverage that particular organization has in country contexts, because some of these bodies have very little influence at the national level, some have limited influence in particular areas, and some are really effective in what they're doing across the national landscape.

Another way we work is we try to engage with, for example, the European Union around the adoption of new legislation on child online protection by sharing learning, knowledge, and expertise from our grantees to improve the debate at that level. Again, that process did not result in the adoption of the legislation we were hoping for, but it did show us how we can more coherently work as an ecosystem. The biggest failure of some of these regional efforts has been lack of data and evidence on what harms children are experiencing online to inform political debates.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What are some things that would be game changers to move the needle across all three of your priorities around policy, tech, and research? What do we need more of?

Marija Manojlovic: The main challenge here is that now 20 or 30 years down the line of this work, while we're making some progress to document solutions developed at the national level or local level that decrease levels of childhood sexual violence, those interventions are largely embedded within a world which does not have today's exponential growth in technology. Because of that, all the drivers that we are able to bring down, like harmful social norms or the ability of potential perpetrators to access kids, have now tremendously shifted. The world in which we operate now has exponentially increased the number of accelerators of that abuse, and also accelerators of the vehicles or vectors for spreading harmful norms and behaviors. You have exponential growth in the means to abuse, and also in ways to increase norms that enable that type of abuse.

The third overarching big challenge is that technology is evolving at such a great speed that by the time we think we understand it, we are already way behind. It's always a struggle to make the case for the need to address developments around digital technologies in our CSV ecosystem, as we are being told that we are looking way too ahead into the future. But this future is already here. It may be unevenly distributed, and you can't see it yet everywhere, but we are already there and we are already late.

I say in meetings that AI is one of the biggest challenges we see for the future of our work. Not only is AI able to produce new childhood sexual abuse material, and not only is that increasing hugely and exponentially the burden of victim identification for law enforcement, hotlines and helplines, but also AI is being used as a perpetrator. You can now exponentially multiply the number of perpetrators, but none of them are real, so you can't prosecute anybody.

This is also happening at the same time as technology is advancing on robotics and other things like haptics. We see that this is not only going to be a virtual risk down the line, but it may also actually be a physical risk as well. I sometimes sound like a sci-fi writer, but this is based on current risks. I'm not even projecting here. Things like this really worry me. These are challenges in which we are not incentivizing enough innovation, but also, we are not in the center of the biggest global debates.

We are only trying now to get CSV on the development agenda. We are not even close to being at the center of more critical discussions on financing, defense and innovation agenda of every government. That's my biggest fear and biggest challenge. There is a lag when you think about policies, technology, data, and the lack of ability to go fast.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What has helped make any tangible impacts?

Marija Manojlovic: I can give you a few examples.

Not all is doom and gloom. There are a lot of things we can definitely do. The biggest success we have had as a funder, but also as an intelligence body for the child online protection community, is that the riskier and crazier investments we've made, the higher the return.

For example, we had a bunch of people who have worked in this space a long time, but they did not have an organization. They wanted to do risky research to understand the perspectives and profiles of consumers of childhood sexual abuse material on the dark web. These are the worst offenders. These are people who live to produce childhood sexual abuse material, and exchange it on the dark web. These abuse groups go from toddler and infant abuse to the worst of the worst.

They thought that anonymous research would give tremendous insights into how we can disrupt and prevent that abuse, and [learn about] the pathways to it. Nobody wanted to fund them. We thought that sounded insane and impossible, but decided to give it a go.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Why?

Marija Manojlovic: We don't know anything about that community of offenders. We just vilify them. We are just saying these are evil people. They are evil people, but we don't know anything else. How are you going to tackle a problem? How are you going to address the demand side of this abuse if you don't know more about the profiles of abusers? What happened to their lives to end up in a spot where they are actually doing this thing? The findings of this research have been the most cited findings in any policy debates on online CSEA.

Protect Children Finland is now doing research. They're in Brussels every week informing the MEPs and other policy makers on the key findings. They're cited in UK debates and across the world. The findings were tremendously helpful. We learned that 70% of abusers have seen child abuse material when they were under 18. They were kids themselves when they started consuming CSAM [child sexual abuse materials], and a lot of them, around 40%, when they were under 13. That in itself is an adverse childhood experience, a child seeing child abuse material (CSAM). That in itself is trauma.

We learned that 40% of those who consume child abuse material on the Dark Web go on to commit contact abuse. That gives you a sense of the risk, and that's how you can argue with legislators that CSAM should be banned, because the more you see it, the more you're likely to go and commit contact abuse.

The global survey responses [came] from over 60,000 people in over 30 languages. Some responded just to say what they wanted to say and feel heard, but this tremendously changed the way we're thinking about early prevention, who needs to be targeted, how it needs to be targeted, who is at risk, and how we can use that for policy debates.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What other risky or outside the box stuff have you done?

Marija Manojlovic: Two more examples. One is maybe less controversial, but definitely it was risky. We were approached by an organization in the United States called Tech Matters with a proposal to build a fully open-source customizable platform for helplines across the world that would tremendously improve the way they work, and bring them closer to kids. The platform built was called Aselo. At the time, they had no funding and only one small donation. They told us they just had an idea that might work and asked if we could come in with funding. We did that. The platform is now scaled in nearly 20countries. It's not only being used to help with CSV, with kids who need support, but it's now being used by helplines for suicide prevention, mental

health, and by helplines for women who are victims of non-consensual intimate imagery sharing.

It's creating a movement in which helplines can get closer to kids. They're now available on social media platforms and apps so kids don't need to pick up the phone, because nobody actually calls in the present day and age. That was the first thing.

The second thing was optimizing the capacity and internal resource use of helplines that are already struggling with resources. It helped, for example, in the Ukraine response. It helped multiple helplines pool the resource hub of Ukrainian-speaking counselors. If you would call somebody in Kraków helpline, the person you were speaking to was not in Kraków. They were sitting somewhere else, but they were speaking Ukrainian because multiple helplines were sharing the same hub. They were connected through the same platform.

It is important to note that all these helplines own their own data, so data is not being abused. The ownership of data always remains with the helplines because it's very sensitive data, but internally they can analyze much more than they receive to optimize their responses. Now we're also introducing AI capabilities on top of that.

When you improve the platform overall, the software update happens across all the platforms if you want to do that. This is how to create efficiency and improve capacities for response to people who need it. It also gives us better data and understanding of what the trends are when it's pooled together. It was done in collaboration with CHI, Child Helpline International. Tech Matters now has more funders for this work, and industry started funding them as well. They were able to get more money over the years and become more of a social impact enterprise. It's a successful business model now.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How do you make decisions about funding innovation and prevention? How do you plan for the next thing, especially in tech?

Marija Manojlovic: I've always thought that a multidisciplinary team of passionate people create change. For example, in the technology space, another risky investment we made was to fund a group called DevOps housed at INTERPOL. It is now a formal technical group of Interpol that brings together people from industry, science, frontline workers, law enforcement, data scientists, nerds, and software developers in a very protected environment.

We started funding it by asking them to produce three tools. Then we've realized that's a stupid way to fund. You're not funding them to develop three tools, you're funding them to work together continuously. Basically, you're funding the vehicle. You're funding the brain of the full operation to keep on producing. We still fund them. What they do now is have meetings and hackathons two or three times a year. In between, they collaborate. They have joint repositories of data and code accessible to all the members of the community. They're creating tools, owning up to them, and spreading them across law enforcement, hotlines and industry who embed them. It's an amazing engine for development.

We're bringing together people from industry to discuss emerging trends. They're able to alarm us on what's happening on their platforms, and ask what they can do now. They [might suggest] a model they're using, for example, for the adult porn industry, [and ask if] that model can be

adjusted for specific needs in the online CSEA space. The group will enable them to come onsite and test their tools on data on CSAM in a controlled environment.

If you fund groups like that to continuously work together, you will have policy insights and likely better tools to address current and future issues, and a community that is trying to learn and build trust to share. This didn't exist before. Investments in trust and sharing are really critical.

More examples of funding system orchestration are efforts like the Data4Change initiative. This is not our funding work. It's basically us seeing that if we don't have good data, we can all just lock up our offices and leave. We started funding to understand what the ecosystem looks like now. What are barriers to sharing data? What are the myths around why we can't share, and what are the actual barriers? Three or four years down the line, we now have some collaborations happening. We have fully mapped the ecosystem. We are now developing a bank of good solutions.

Before, everything in this ecosystem was based on who you know and who you trust. It [seemed that] everybody was an outsider to a group of 15 or 20 people who were the major movers and shakers in the space, and everybody else was not welcome. We're now finding ways to incentivize this trust culture. Building initiatives is really important.

We're more and more invested in this space because not only do you need data to know where you need to be, but also you need [data] to develop tools. If you don't have data in the age of AI, you can't train any of the models you need. You don't have access to build actual tools.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What hasn't worked? What are some things you would advise people who are doing this work not to do?

Marija Manojlovic: We have now fully banned general public awareness campaigns. That is not something that we will ever give money to. It proved to be the least efficient, effective way to generate results. The key issue here is the way they're done, they're not meeting people where they're at. It just does not work because you're not specifically targeting the segments of societies that need change. General awareness raising just doesn't work, and as a fund with limited resources, [we question whether this should be] our gift. Maybe somebody else would do it.

As a fund, the biggest thing we can do is to be very targeted and seek catalytic investment pipelines. The biggest failure of Safe Online is, and continues to be [the struggle] to replenish the fund and make the case for more financing. We are at the limits of our funding until we gather more money at a bigger scale.

The issue is also that we are not fundraising for $500,000 annually, we are fundraising for more like 10 million annually. I don't know whether this is our personal failure, an organizational failure or an ecosystem failure, I would say the ecosystem failure more than anything else. Or maybe it is ours, I'm willing to take responsibility for it.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: You don't have an endowment right now?

Marija Manojlovic: No. Zero. So far, the UK government gave us around 80% of our funding, so over 80 or 90 million came from the UK government over the last eight years. Then the Oak

Foundation came [on board]. We worked closely with the G7, we've worked closely with the European Union, the Nordic [countries], all those governments. They haven't ever made funding available for this particular area of work, because it just does not exist in their international development assistance envelopes.

In terms of other areas of funding, [there are] organizations and people [who] care about [this issue]. It's just not an issue that people want as their flagship [issue]. Aside from Oak and a couple of other organizations with trustees who really care about the issue, it is not easy to make the case in institutional philanthropy, either.

While everybody believes in it, I have not yet talked to anybody who has fully bought into the agenda and the mission, committing larger portions of funding in today's world. Now especially, the huge challenge for the CSV area is that we all remain an area of funding with the [kinds of] constraints we are facing now.

Official development assistance more broadly is going to disappear. We're going to fall off government agendas, and this will be a critical barrier. I don't want to leave [the impression that this is] a thing with no solution. We are already, as Safe Online, doing something that may be tactically but also more substantively effective. We are trying to increase and expand the aperture of the online CSEA issue a bit wider to other linked areas.

We're going to launch a big initiative this year called "Safe Online for Mental Health" to understand the impacts of digital technologies on the mental health of children and adolescents. This is not going away from [the issue of] online CSEA. We're trying to understand what other factors are increasing vulnerabilities and potentially increasing risk or protective factors when it comes to childhood violence, and how it interacts with digital environments. We are already seeing way more interest than when we were framing this issue as narrowly online CSEA.

I was fundraising for a long time to bring in new donors, but I wasn't [successful], and we keep on relying on the same donors. But in just nine months of working on this initiative, we've brought in two new investors, Wellcome Trust, a big institutional investor of research, and ICONIQ Impact, an investment company. This only happened in [the last] nine months, because people understand more and see a bigger potential for the bigger issue with the "Safe Online for Mental Health" project.

It is critical for us to not be seen as a niche, or narrowly and stubbornly focused on just one thing, and show how that one thing is critically linked to other areas. We are also trying new narratives about how online CSEA and technology developments are linked. This is our arms race, between governments and between societies. With more technology, there are no guardrails or safety measures because everybody's racing to be the best and fastest adopter.

We need to talk in terms of governance, in terms of defense, security, and AI. We need to make ourselves relevant for those debates, but also understand the intricacies of those debates if we are to insert ourselves and become relevant. If we keep on being seen as a niche issue of children's rights, I'm afraid in today's world, especially in the last two months and what might happen next year, we're going to be marginalized.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Is there anything else you want to add?

Marija Manojlovic: My sense is that there are no solutions set in stone or in time. The solutions are a dynamic category, especially as technology is developing. Today, we need more new solutions as the world is changing. We need to figure out more ways, because this is not a battle we will win once and for all. It is something we need to work on because we are racing against time. Certain donor communities like to hear more about how they can solve complex problems, rather than being told solutions are already there and they just need to fund them. It's a set of things we need to constantly be thinking about, be willing to take risks on, and to come in to de-risk the work that needs to happen now for us to be able to respond to these issues in the future.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Thanks for taking the time to talk with me.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard (she/her) is Solutions Journalism Network's Chief Innovation Officer. She strategizes on communications, metrics, impact, product and technology, leveraging platforms for the network and creating cool content. She also leads the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of SJN that uses targeted research and analysis to identify and interrogate what's working and what's not in a particular sector or field. She has an MFA from Columbia's film program and has been creating, teaching and writing at the intersection of storytelling and social good for two decades. She has produced content for Current TV, UNICEF, Havas, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and Prism.

* This interview has been edited and condensed.