

# Users Looking for Child Pornography Are Gathering on Periscope, Twitter's Forgotten Video Service

VIDEO REVIEW SCIENCE IO9 FIELD GUIDE EARTHER DESIGN PALEOFUTURE

Bryan Menegus 12/15/17 9:30am • 53.5K 36 3

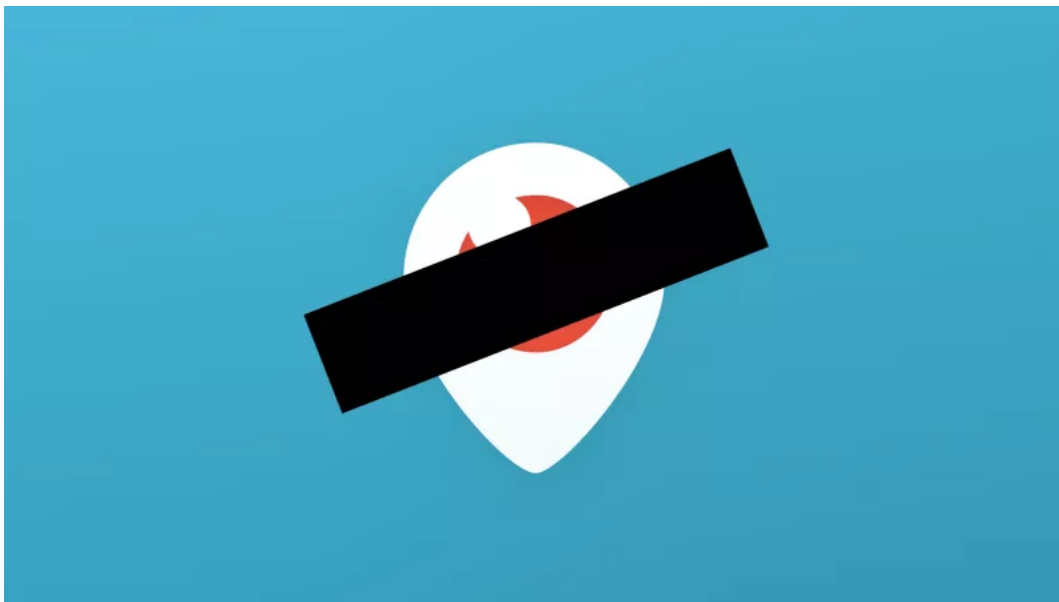


Image: Jim Cooke/Gizmodo

As 2017 wheezes to its merciful end and the social media titans reckon with growing backlash, Twitter's largely forgotten video streaming app Periscope has gained an insidious second life as a hub for seekers of child pornography. Gizmodo's search of the platform over the course of a single afternoon uncovered dozens of accounts—50 in total—which appeared to be soliciting sexualized images of minors, or in the worst cases, depicting it themselves.

Acquired by Twitter before launch to compete with a similar app named Meerkat, Periscope allows users to broadcast live videos—such as on-the-ground views of newsworthy events—which can then be shared and rewatched at a later date. Seamless integration with Twitter helped it debut in 2015 as one of the top 25 app downloads, according to analytics service App Annie. Though it's better off than Meerkat, which shuttered late last year, Periscope has plummeted to the 968th most downloaded app as of December 12th.

The presence of bad actors using a derelict platform to traffic in child pornography is almost less surprising than the brazenness of their methods in doing so. 22 of the users spotted by Gizmodo opted for names which did little to hide their intent, with handles like "lovechildrin," "girlpreteen," or "addmegroupsCPplease." (CP—sometimes further obfuscated as "cheese pizza"—is a well-worn shorthand for "child pornography".) Slightly subtler accounts merely included bios like "Love Little Girls the younger the better" or "j'aime les jeune filles" (which means exactly what you think it does.)

Though Periscope claims to have “zero tolerance for any form of child sexual exploitation,” the images used as avatars by some users tell another story. Of the 50 accounts found by Gizmodo, nine displayed the genitalia of prepubescent girls, and six more depicted sexual penetration featuring what appeared to be minors.

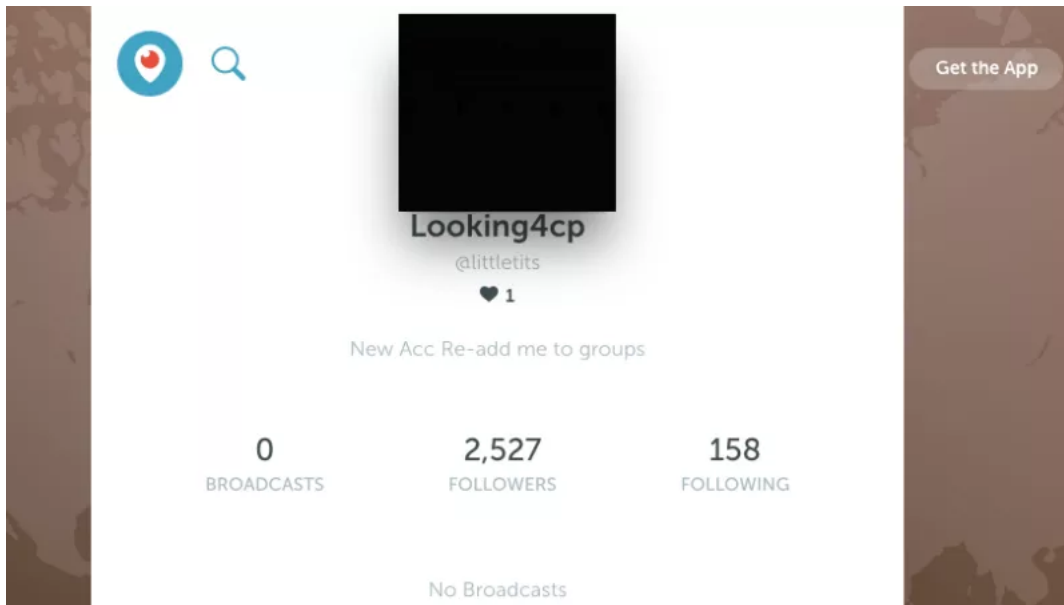


Image: Periscope

Many users that seem to reference a desire to share or view child pornography use their accounts' bio section to ask for admission to private groups—a feature on Periscope where, as the name suggests, sets of users can broadcast only to each other—which explains why the profiles of these users, some of which claimed over 4,000 followers, all displayed a broadcast count of zero. The same is true of adult porn streamers who sometimes amass followings in excess of 100,000 despite sexual acts, legal or illegal, being explicitly prohibited by Periscope's content guidelines, and whose videos are often recorded and reuploaded to forums like Reddit's r/Open\_Boobs. The most upvoted post in that community (which is dedicated to “info/media on Periscope chicks”) is titled “DO NOT FUCKING POST UNDERAGE GIRLS IN HERE.”

Though not counted towards broadcast numbers, private videos can be rewatched later in the same way that public videos can be on Periscope, unless they are deleted at some point after the broadcast ends. If deleted, Periscope declined to quantify how long content is stored on Periscope's servers. (Gizmodo, it should be said, did not join or attempt to join such private groups for obvious legal reasons and can't state conclusively that pornography featuring minors is being shared within them. We did, however, attempt to contact users among the 50 accounts who provided an email address, though none replied to a request for comment.)

Coexisting on Periscope alongside these users are, worryingly, accounts operated by actual children. Though the platform's user discovery tools are limited, several of these accounts followed users whose broadcasts featured or consisted solely of innocent broadcasts of young children involved in everyday activities. As Slate reported recently, predators have been known to leverage the app's live chat functions to encourage underage users to perform sexually exploitative acts like removing their clothing during a broadcast.

Periscope added minimal functionality last year that allows chat comments to be flagged as spam or abuse, but that system relies on other users in the chat to verify a comment is harmful. No option of any kind exists to flag accounts as violating platform guidelines—or US law, for that matter. If such an option existed, it isn't clear who would even handle the reports. A LinkedIn search for Periscope turned up no employees whose job title reflected user safety or content moderation.

A Twitter spokesperson told Gizmodo that “when a broadcast is reported, it is reviewed by a member of our teams who are available 24/7,” but declined to specify what “teams” existed and how many people comprised them. A Periscope post from late November addressing the sexual exploitation of children on the platform refers only to content moderation by a “committed team,” singular.

Gizmodo alerted Twitter to ongoing issues with child exploitation on Periscope, providing a series of questions as well as a list of accounts seemingly seeking child pornography, all but one of which have since been banned. Their response is reproduced below:

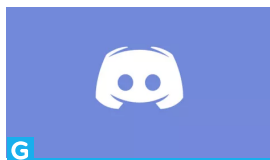
Thanks for reaching out. We recently shared an update on our safety efforts here.

All content on Periscope must follow the community guidelines. Anyone can report a live or replay broadcast; this article has more details on how to report a broadcast. When a broadcast is reported, it is reviewed by a member of our teams who are available 24/7.

We do not have additional numbers to share regarding the app or our team, but happy to help with any other questions you may have.

Real-time communication presents extraordinary challenges for user safety: Attempts by Twitter, Periscope's parent company, to curb extremism have been underwhelming at best, and chat client Discord had its own child pornography scandal earlier this year. For towering fuckups in live video moderation, look no further than Facebook's rash of user-generated crime and suicide broadcasts. Simply by design, Periscope has to contend with the worst problems of both chatrooms and live video. With Twitter increasingly investing in its own parallel video product, Periscope may be too expensive to repair, but just unpopular enough to quietly dismantle without embarrassment.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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