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Sheffield Hallam University begins €6.8m European project utilising AI to combat online child sexual exploitation

Researchers at Sheffield Hallam's CENTRIC have begun working with key partner organisations from across the EU to combat child sexual exploitation online.

The growth in online child sexual exploitation and abuse material (CSEM) is a significant challenge for European law enforcement agencies (LEAs). Referrals of CSEM exceed the capacity of LEAs to respond in a practical and timely manner. GRACE (Global Response Against Child Exploitation) aims to equip European law enforcement agencies with advanced analytical and investigative capabilities to respond to the spread of online CSEM that will help safeguard victims and prosecute offenders.

GRACE will apply proven techniques in machine learning and artificial intelligence to the referral and analysis process while embracing the technical, ethical and legal challenges unique to fighting CSE. GRACE will leverage resources already in place at Europol and the nine MS LEAs within the consortium aiming to provide results early, frequently and flexibly.

Babak Akhgar, Director of CENTRIC at Sheffield Hallam University said: "There has been a 4,000% increase in referrals since 2014 of explicit material involving children from broadband service providers.

"Clearly, this clearly exceeds the capacity of law enforcement agencies to respond in a practical and timely manner".

"This is driven both by increased availability and distribution of online content as well as improved detection and reporting processes".

"That is why we are working to provide a European-wide platform that equips law enforcement agencies with advanced digital and analytical tools they desperately need."

Professor Babak Akhgar, Director of CENTRIC said: "GRACE will be a critical project for CENTRIC, working alongside many world-leading Law Enforcement Agencies including Europol and renowned academic institutions this project will, ultimately, lead to advanced digital and analytical tools for combating child sexual exploitation".

GRACE is an EU-funded Horizon 2020 project that aims to equip LEAs with advanced digital and analytical tools that improve their operational capacity to address child sexual exploitation material. **CENTRIC** is one of 22 organizations across 14 countries in Europe that have come together to deliver GRACE, the project will run until 2023 and has received €6.8m in funding.

CENTRIC (Centre of Excellence in Terrorism, Resilience, Intelligence and Organised Crime Research) is multidisciplinary research centre at Sheffield Hallam University that focuses on applied research in the security and policing domains. In GRACE, CENTRIC will apply their expertise to develop techniques that support prioritisation of CSEM and the detection of long and short term trends.

For more information about GRACE, visit project website at <https://grace-fct.eu> or follow the project's progress on Twitter [@grace_fct_eu](https://twitter.com/grace_fct_eu).

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Notes to Editor

About Sheffield Hallam University

Sheffield Hallam University's vision is to become the world's leading applied university, transforming lives and creating opportunities for people from all backgrounds.

Named University of the Year for Teaching Quality in the Times and Sunday Times Good University Guide 2020, Sheffield Hallam is one of the UK's largest higher education providers, with over 30,500 students.

The University is committed to the Sheffield City Region, providing leadership to drive improvements in social mobility, health and the economy.

Sheffield Hallam delivers a comprehensive range of courses and is one of the country's largest providers of health and teacher training. Home to the UK's biggest modern business school, the University's industrial partnerships ensure that the knowledge students develop is relevant, addresses the skills gap and helps business grow.

The University's research is characterised by a focus on real world impact - addressing the health, cultural, economic and social challenges facing society today.