Welcome to the Cybersecurity Effectiveness Podcast, sponsored by Verodin. The Verodin Security Instrumentation Platform is the only business platform for security that helps you manage, measure, improve, and communicate security effectiveness. I'm your host Brian Contos, and we've got a really special guest today. Joining me is Parry Aftab. Welcome to the podcast, Parry.

Thank you so much, Brian. It's going to be fun.

I'm so excited about this podcast, but before we get going into some of the questions, you have such an incredible background and you've done so much. If you could just spend a few minutes telling our listeners who you are and some of the things you've done, I'd really appreciate that.

Sure. We'll try not to put them to sleep. I'm an internet privacy and security lawyer. I was one of the first cyber lawyers in the world. We didn't mean to create cyber law. We were just chatting and having too much to drink online, often enough, that the judges would take what we were saying at night and next day use it in decisions. Probably what I enjoy the most is the charities that I founded and run.

Almost 25 years ago, I created the world's first Internet Safety and Help group, it's changed its name a few times. I'll talk a little bit later about what we're doing next for the next generation, but we have addressed crimes and abuses, and helping parents, kids, women, old people, anybody who's getting hurt online. I have volunteers all over the world, all of us are unpaid, and we help anybody who needs help. I spend a lot of time doing that, and to pay the bills, I'm obviously a lawyer, and I advise governments; I advise governmental agencies, the United Nations, UNESCO, and most of the industry on what they need to do, to do it better, to make it safer, to make it more secure. These days, we're focusing a lot on what's gone wrong in privacy, and what we can do better.

Well, with such a busy docket, I'm so glad that you gave our listeners some time to hear about what you have to say today. Let's talk a little bit about cyber safety. You've been involved with this since the 1990s, how has it changed? Has it gotten better, gotten worse? What's changed?

Well, the devices have changed, the kind of activities changed, and access has gotten younger and older. The risks are essentially the same, they've just gotten more prolific and a little bit more innovative. What we started in 1995 when we
first started doing this, we were protecting adults online because kids really weren't online yet. In the United States, you were seeing kids get online in 1995, 1996. We were looking at between four and 5 million kids online at that time, but what we learned on protecting adults from cyber-stalking, and harassment, and bad things really helped us when the time came that we had to help kids, teens and tweens be safe online as well.

Parry Aftab: Now, we carry around more digital power in our backpacks, pockets, and purses than most corporations had in 1995. We need to recognize that with end-to-end encryption and companies that lie to you about what they're doing with your data and sell it to the world, or share it with the world, that we need to rely on ourselves and people we can really trust who are trustworthy if we're going to get through this in one piece.

Brian Contos: Parry, with all of your experience working with organizations and lawmakers, et cetera, and without naming names, are there some examples where people just didn't, or organizations or lawmakers just didn't get it, and somebody like you came in and really had to turn that light switch on for them, and it kind of caused some change? Was there a couple of moments like that, that you've had since you've been doing this?

Parry Aftab: Many, and many where no matter how often I said it and how loudly I said it, they still didn't get it. I will name names; Facebook. I was on their safety advisory board, there were five of us for many years and they added two more. When I found out how much they were lying to us and to everyone, I left the board screaming and shouting.

Parry Aftab: One of the things that I found was really interesting was with MTV. For years, we'd been saying that we couldn't come up with a campaign that would speak to teens. We were either too young or too old, but like in Goldilocks, we just weren't right. MTV came and they said, "Why don't we come up with something MTV-style to talk to young people and young adults about crossing the line?"  When does being curious about somebody become cyber-stalking? When does being funny become humiliating to the person on the other side? When does being critical about somebody break their heart? And finding where that line is so that young people and maybe all of us could understand when we were crossing it.

Parry Aftab: That was something. MTV came to me and they said, "We want to do something, we're not sure what to do," and we talked at length. Eventually, I agreed to sit on their public affairs board, and we helped design what's now known as a Thin Line. I thought that, that was terrific and a great way of getting a company that sometimes gets criticism for crossing their own line; being provocative and showing maybe too much flesh, getting them involved and helping young people understand what to do and what not to do online.
Brian Contos: Now, have you seen some positive changes happen? The awareness is great and what you've done with MTV and others. Have you personally witnessed, "Wow, this had a dramatic impact on an individual, or a family," or something like that?

Parry Aftab: Yeah. We've been doing this for 25 years, and so we've helped a lot of people. Perhaps the one thing that touched me more than anything else was with our charity in India. We run Cyber Safety India, the first cyber safety charity in all of India. I was hosting an event at the Leela Hotel in Delhi, which is this incredibly elegant hotel with roses, and music, and crystal everywhere. There was an 8-year-old who came with his father. His father didn't have someone to watch him, so he brought his son. He sat in the back. It was this huge event with heads of country for Microsoft, and Cisco, and Disney, and all these highfalutin people. This little boy was sitting in the very, very back coloring and doing whatever he was doing.

Parry Aftab: At the end... It was on cyberbullying. At the end, he raised his hand when I was taking questions from the group. I couldn't hear him, he was so far back in this enormous ballroom. I asked him to come up and stand at the podium with me. Literally, we had to put a chair at the front of the podium so he reached the top.

Parry Aftab: He looked at everybody and he said, "We've been hearing about children who are hurt online. We're hearing how they're hurting each other with cyberbullying. Parry has said..." I don't think he called me Parry, I think it was Dr. Aftab or something, but, "Parry has said we need your help." He stopped and he looked at the entire audience and he said, "If not you, who?" He said, "If you don't step up and help us help children, who will?" I sat there with tears in my eyes, this amazing child. I thought that, that was just remarkable. You get moments like that and you sit back and said, "Maybe I didn't waste my life on all of this."

Brian Contos: Yeah. How amazing. Stories like that I'm sure make all the effort worth it. You're involved with so many organizations. I know you do a lot of pro bono work, and I also know some of this you actually fund out of your own pocket. Maybe you could tell us a little bit about the various organizations that you're involved with and what they focus on.

Parry Aftab: Absolutely, especially how I hope to get your help as we move forward. The original charity is Wired Safety, but the name's gotten old. It's 25 years old, and a lot of the content is just something that should have been thrown away a long time ago. We were always the place you could come to for help. We created cyberlawenforcement.org. We created stopcyberbullying.org and .com. The sites are being reworked right now, but they are the leading cyberbullying sites in the world.
Parry Aftab: Now, we are creating a brand new 501(c)(3) in the United States. It'll be a charity in Canada, and it will affiliate with the internet safety organizations from Italy, Spain, Portugal, Wales, because they are off-shoots of ours, as well as, of course, Cyber Safety India. So cybersafety.org will be devoted to kids' issues, teens' issues. In 25 years, the internet has changed, and it's time for cyber safety to change too.

Parry Aftab: This will be looking forward, looking at cyber wellness and cyber wellbeing.

Brian Contos: Nice.

Parry Aftab: Yeah. It will look at different approaches about, how can we teach kids to take a breath and maybe calm down before they're hurt so much by what other kids are doing? We're looking at the new ways sexual predators are reaching our kids through sextortion when they get a copy of a picture that's provocative and then they blackmail the kids. Or, the newest way is taking somebody's head and putting it on somebody else's naked body, and we're seeing honor killings that are coming out of this around the world. It's looking at the real risks. Looking at the future risks. Looking at the new technologies and making it more about digital life skills. Where to go for help when you need it. Helping parents understand all these crazy things that are going on without blaming them for not watching their children 24/7/365.

Parry Aftab: I hope to get your help in that as we start aiming for what cyber safety should be now. In the olden days, we just spent most of our time trying to catch up.

Brian Contos: That's very forward-thinking. I love that. Some of those things that you mentioned I hadn't even considered myself. What can the average person listening to this do to help? How can they step up and get involved?

Parry Aftab: Well, we're all unpaid volunteers. Cybersafety.org is still under construction. It's not even fully formed yet. Once that's up, you can go there, you can register and volunteer, you can tell us what you want to do. In the meantime, I'm using LinkedIn as my recruiting tool.

Parry Aftab: You can go to my profile on LinkedIn, or watch all of the posts where I'm always asking for help and step up and say, "I want to help." We had problems with our training. Our Teenangels program, our teen internet safety experts, they speak at the United Nations right after the head of the United Nations, they testify before Congress, and they're 7 to 16 years old. It's just remarkable. They are true experts. One of our volunteers was fiddling with a hard drive and erased everything on the hard drive, and then didn't want to tell me. So the backups rewrote themselves twice, so 20 years of training is gone. I have to put it together for back-to-school in the United States in September, and lots of
people are stepping up, sharing their cybersecurity videos, giving me their own videos, giving us content.

Parry Aftab: I've got a company called Oust out of India that's donating the Mobile LMS, and everyone's helping me pull this together. Go to LinkedIn, I need your help. It will make a big difference in the lives of children -- yours, mine, all of the children.

Brian Contos: Absolutely. Absolutely. Parry, if there's one or maybe a couple pieces of advice that you could give to parents out there, and even some young people that might be listening to this as it relates to cyber safety, what are some takeaways?

Parry Aftab: Well, they're different for parents then kids. Let's start with parents. I'll give you three. One is, you're still the parent. So, I'm a lot older than you are, but I remember the days when my parents would say something and I would question them and they said, "Because I said so. Because I am your mother. As long as you live under my roof." These kind of things that we heard as reasons. A lot of parents now are afraid of saying no to their kids, or recognize their kids understand the digital world more than they do, but in the end, you're their parent and it's your job to act like one. Set rules, enforce them. Talk to other parents about what's going on. Don't lock them out of the internet, but be there and be inquisitive enough that you can keep them out of trouble. That's number one.

Parry Aftab: Number two, if your kids are cyber-bullied, first thing you do before you call me, or the FBI, or the CIA, or the RCMP in Canada, is give them a hug. Give them a hug and tell them that you are so sorry that this has happened. 95% of the kids will never tell their parents. If you're lucky enough to be one of the 5% whose kids trust them enough to tell them, don't overreact. Don't blame them. Don't freak out. Give them a hug and say, "I'm sorry this happened to you. I love you, you are special, and they are not the boss of you."

Parry Aftab: Then after your kids are settled down, you walk into the bathroom, stick a washcloth on your mouth, and scream bloody murder. But you don't let them see you sweat. The last is, you don't have to be an MIT genius, for crying out loud. This isn't really a lot different from parenting in real life. You just need to make the decisions about what it takes to raise good kids and try to keep them there, and we'll help. We'll be creating Wired Moms. We'll be doing a lot so that you'll get advice from other parents, with the kids. The internet is forever. What you post online stays online forever. This is not Las Vegas. What you thought was funny, which you thought was interesting, what you did, you're going to have to answer for a long time. That's number one.

Parry Aftab: Number two, you think nobody can figure out who you are? Wrong. They can, and you might be held accountable for it. Three, it's a great way to build your
own brand. Who do you want to be? Who do you expect to be? How do you want colleges to look at you, and coaches to look at you, and future employers to look at you? Remember what you post is who you are as far as the rest of the world knows, so be careful about it. Take a minute. If something upsets you, get offline. We call it Take Five. Drop the mouse, drop the device, and walk away until you calm down. Those are some tips.

Brian Contos: Fantastic advice, Parry. As we wrap up here, there is a question that I like to ask all of our guests, but I'm particularly excited to ask you because I know a little bit about the background here. Who's your favorite superhero or super villain, and why?

Parry Aftab: Well, Marvel was a sponsor of ours for many years before they were purchased by Disney. The chairman of Marvel was kind enough to actually create a custom Marvel Comic on cyberbullying with me in it and my Teenangel volunteers. More importantly, Spider Man, Spider-Girl, and a lot of other superheroes like Hulk and the rest.

Parry Aftab: So, what happened was, Doctor Doom managed to send a Trojan Horse to Spider-Girl. She opened it, he got into her computer, she didn't know anything about it. He started sending nasty messages to Hulk and everyone else. And yeah, they all came looking for her, and Spider-Man comes in and physically they fight for 10 pages. At the end, they bring me in to try to figure out what's going on, and we find out it's Doctor Doom. She learns about cyberbullying, reputations, and more importantly, malware.

Parry Aftab: These are real Marvel Comics. We're almost at the end. Microsoft was kind enough to sponsor the printing of 200,000 of them, but this was 10 years ago. I will send you one, and we'll post the images so everybody can share them on LinkedIn, and eventually on cybersafety.org

Brian Contos: I love it. I love it. Well, Parry, thanks so much. This has been an absolutely fascinating interview. Thanks to our listeners for joining. Be sure to check out other Cybersecurity Effectiveness Podcasts, sponsored by Verodin.