

Online communication technologies and sexual assault

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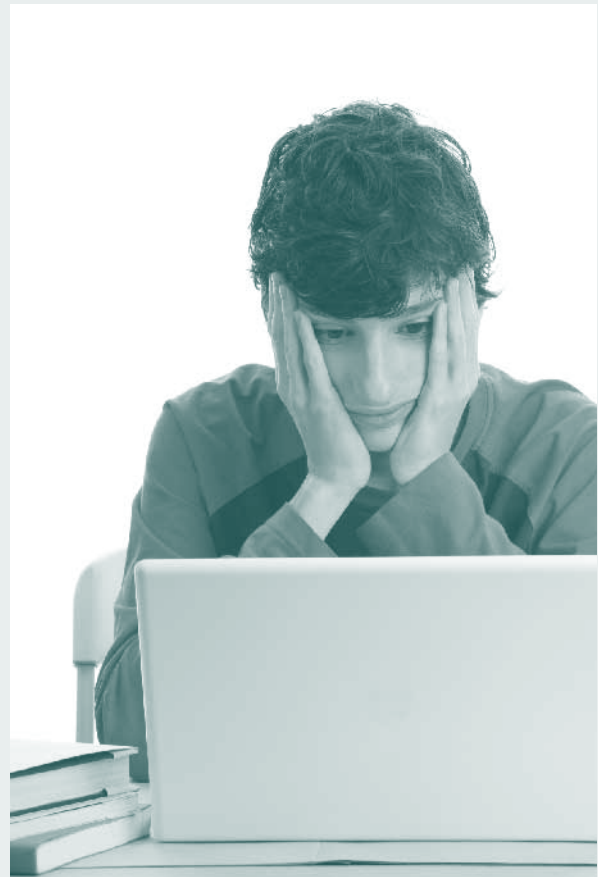
Online communication and mobile phone technologies represent areas of emerging trends in social interaction, particularly for young people. Taken at their broadest, social networking services are web-based interactive communication media such as email, chat rooms, blogging and instant messaging. Social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace integrate all these communication tools. Users can create profiles featuring pictures and personal information in ways that enable users to express unique digital selves in the online world (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2008). Mobile phone technologies, such as file sharing of photographs and video recordings, are also emerging as key sites of communication used by young people. The adoption of these new communication methods by young people in Australia is almost universal (Australian Communications and Media Authority [ACMA], 2009, pp. 7–8). In the UK, more than one in two people (55%) aged between 13 and 17 have a social network profile (Livingstone & Brake, 2010).

As people increasingly use social networking services and mobile phone technologies to communicate and socialise with each other, their use as vehicles for the perpetration of sexual assault is becoming an issue of significant concern for those working in the sexual assault field (Powell, 2009) and is the subject of growing media debate. This concern relates partly to the way in which such technology multiplies avenues for sexual victimisation. It also relates to a lack of understanding among some groups about how these technologies work, what exactly the nature of the problem is and what solutions are required to address perpetration and its impacts. In addition, it relates to the nature of the online domain itself, in which anonymity, diffusion and speed make regulating it difficult.

This article provides a snapshot of what is currently known about the use of new technologies and sexual violence, and highlights some of the challenges for policing the online domain.

Sexual victimisation through online communication technologies: What are we talking about?

There is very little empirical research about this issue. One readily available source of information is the news media. A number of cases have been recently reported in which mobile phone and online



Box 1: Young people's use of online social networking services

- 97% of 16–17 year olds use online social networking services (ACMA, 2009, pp. 7–8).
- 12–17 year olds use the Internet on average 6.3 days a week for an average of 2.9 hours a day (ACMA, 2009, p. 7–8).
- 91% reported the Internet as being a “highly important aspect of their lives” (ACMA, 2009, pp. 7–8).
- 72% of girls and 52% of boys aged 14–17 years had a personal profile on MySpace or other similar online sites (ACMA, 2007, p. 83).
- 29% of 7–17 year olds would freely give out their home addresses and 14% their email addresses (Choo, 2009, p. 18).

communication technologies have been connected to sexual assault victimisation.

Of the research that has examined young people's use of online communication technologies and experiences of sexual victimisation, the following findings are notable:

- The Growing Up With Media Survey (US) of 10–15 year olds ($n = 1,588$) (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2008) found that:
 - almost 15% of the sample reported being the target of unwanted sexual solicitation;
 - chat rooms were one of the least frequented areas by respondents who reported solicitation and harassment, but they were one of the most commonly cited areas where interpersonal victimisation occurred; and
 - of those who had experienced unwanted sexual solicitation, 4% said it occurred on a social networking site, and they were more likely to be female than those solicited elsewhere.
- The Children Go Online Survey (UK) of 9–19 year olds found that 31% had received sexual comments online and 28% had received

unsolicited sexual material. Eight per cent had gone to a meeting with someone first met online (cited in Livingstone & Brake, 2010).

- In Australia, it is estimated that 80% of 15–17 year olds have had multiple exposure to hard-core pornography (Choo, 2009, p. 18).

Researchers have suggested that these communications have the capacity to normalise sexual violence (Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2008; Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2009) and provide new ways of sexual offending (Powell, 2009). In our contact with those working in the sexual assault field and in the news media, a range of unwanted sexual behaviours and sexual offences facilitated by online communication technologies has been identified. See Box 2 (see page 18) for a description of behaviours.

Law, regulation and prevention

As in the offline world, in the online world, there is a continuum of sexually violent behaviours. Policing this space and developing prevention strategies are thus emerging as exceedingly challenging tasks. At this stage, we would identify the following reasons for this:

- *The speed and reach of information circulation*—The Law Institute of Victoria reported in 2009 that hundreds of millions of users posted more than four billion pieces of information each month (Law Institute of Victoria, 2009). In August 2009, Facebook reported that more than 1 billion photos and more than 10 million videos are uploaded each month, and that more than 1 billion pieces of content are shared each week (Facebook,



2009). Such content can be rapidly circulated and can persist in cyberspace indefinitely.

- *The limitations of current legislation*—Australian legislative responses to this issue operate across varying bodies of law, including: control of the use of surveillance devices; privacy infringement, voyeurism and other summary offences; and child pornography offences (Powell, 2009). There is a sense that it is “inadequate to deal with the global phenomenon that is online social networking” (Giancaspro, 2009). Even where laws are in place—for example, Commonwealth laws in relation to using mobile phones to stalk or harass, or federal criminal law in relation to using the Internet to menace, harass or cause offence—police at both federal and state level have had few resources to equip them to deal effectively with it (Egan, 2010).
- *Social networking and other online communications are central forms of communication for young people*—As Box 1 showed, the majority of young Australians have seamlessly incorporated their online and offline worlds. Indeed, the available research suggests that there is a significant overlap between the connections a person has in their offline and online worlds (Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter & Espinoza, 2008). From an adolescent developmental point of view, both domains are spaces in which young people are in the process of constructing their independent identities. Interest in sex and romantic “hook-ups”, the presentation of self and the creation of friendship networks have long been identified as part of the adolescent project. How this translates into online environments is yet to be well understood or documented. This presents challenges as to how regulation and policing can best be used. Some researchers argue that approaches that restrict or censor social networking opportunities will not be effective because of the contiguity between online and offline social interaction (Livingstone & Brake, 2010; Subrahmanyam et al., 2008).

Future directions

According to leading US sociologist, Dr David Finkelhor:

One of the problems with the internet is the sense that it's no man's land, that there's no one in charge,

that there's no one patrolling the neighborhood ... I don't know whether there's actually a legislative solution or not ... [however] this is something that we want our official law enforcement officials to be doing, not combinations of vigilante groups and entertainment corporations. (Lordan et al., 2007, pp. 28–29)

On the one hand, this may be an accurate diagnosis. The online domain represents new modes of social communication in which the traditional measures of authenticity, social civility and etiquette, and social regulation afforded by face-to-face contact are absent (Subrahmanyam et al., 2008). Yet it also presents a danger in that the online domain is seen as a distinct site to be controlled rather than an extension of young people's offline connections. And, in a further complication to this, we lack information about the nature and extent of sexual assault facilitated through social networking services. The anecdotal information coming from some of our stakeholders



Box 2: Range of unwanted online sexual behaviours

Contact and meet

Social networking services offer people of any age the ability to make contact with acquaintances or strangers. Once contact is established, an agreement to meet can be organised. Often, persistent contact may break down barriers of resistance to meeting face-to-face in the offline world:

- Police have identified this use of social networking services in cases of single-perpetrator and multiple-perpetrator rapes (personal communication, G. Davies, 8 February 2010).
- Older men may cultivate a caring Internet relationship with a young girl and arrange to meet her for sex, such as men in their early 20s pursuing (and being pursued by) girls of 13– to 15 years of age (Lordan, Finkelhor, Ybarra, Lenhart, & Boyd, 2007).

One issue raised was that agreement to meet offline was often taken to signal consent to sex.

Sexting

Sexting refers to the creation and dissemination of sexually explicit photographs via mobile phones. This can involve using mobile phones to take sexually explicit or suggestive images and circulating them by sending images via SMS from phone to phone, or uploading the image on social networking services (they may be images taken consensually or non-consensually, or document non-consensual sexual activity) (see Powell, 2009). Digital video recordings

of sexual assaults by perpetrators is also a recent phenomena in the convergence of sexual violence and mobile phone technology (Cunningham, 2006; Singal, 2010).

Anonymous social space for “campaigning”

Social networking services do not always require users to include their full name when signing up for accounts. Social networking services, therefore, can act as an anonymous social space. It is perhaps due to this anonymity that hate messages on social networking services proliferate. Hate messages can be used to vilify victims of sexual violence and further reduce victims’ willingness to report sexual violence. Some recent examples of anonymous hate messages are the sites established to support rugby player Matthew Johns after an ABC TV *Four Corners* program on 11 May 2009 implicated him in an alleged multiple perpetrator rape (Meade, 2009).

Trolling

Trolling refers to a deliberate attempt by social networking service users to disrupt and upset other users on a particular forum. This can be done by bombarding a forum, such as a Facebook tribute page, with sexually explicit material or with obviously subversive content. In late February 2010, a tribute site on Facebook for an 8-year-old girl who was abducted and murdered was vandalised with pornographic images and sexually explicit messages (Trenwith, 2010).

is that the use of these services in sexual assault is wide-ranging and of significant concern. However, we don’t know what the issues are in rural and remote parts of the country or what role education, class and social ties have to play. There is thus an important role to be played by sexual assault counsellors, police and other legal personnel and educators in guiding the research agenda in this area.

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