Technology facilitated sexual violence against women: Overcoming rape culture in cyberspace

Dr Anastasia Powell

Accessible to literally millions of users throughout the globe, communications technologies have traversed and fused public and private life in radical ways. In particular, social networking sites, a vast array of user-generated content, and internet enabled smartphones, produce permanently connected diverse individuals, with ever changing identities, communications and encounters online. And yet there is a dark side to the virtual world – a world which has also become a ‘breeding ground’ for both offensive and criminal conduct (Levmore and Nussbaum, 2010). The Internet, perhaps paradoxically, has simultaneously enabled new freedoms – as well as a glimpse into the deeply embedded gendered, racial, classed and sexual prejudices that continue to permeate our communities. This presentation focuses on one such example: Technology Facilitated Sexual Violence (TFSV) against adult women (Powell, 2010a,b; see also Henry and Powell 2014, 2015a, 2015b). It explores two key questions: How are digital technologies being used to facilitate sexual violence and harassment? And can technology play a role in preventing or addressing these harms?

TFSV includes six dimensions of harmful, sexually-characterised behaviours where communications technologies are used in some way to facilitate or extend the harm to victims. These behaviours encompass both sexual assault offences and image-based sexual exploitations, and include the following: (1) online sexual harassment; (2) gender and sexuality-based harassment; (3) cyberstalking; (4) image-based sexual exploitation (including ‘revenge pornography’); and (5) the use of communications technologies to enable a sexual assault and/or to coerce a victim into an unwanted sexual act (see Henry and Powell 2014). All of these harms are taking place within a broader social and cultural context – where openly and descriptively threatening rape is used in online communities and forums to attack and exclude women and girls; where sexual violence is not just a recurring joke, but a popular topic of memes and online banter; and where women who dare to speak out about sexual violence and harassment online are barraged with hate speech, direct threats, and violent imagery. It is in this context that TFSV can be understood as a collection of harms that themselves are simultaneously produced by - and reproduce - a “rape culture”. This term, long established and debated by feminists, refers to a culture that implicitly and explicitly condones, excuses, tolerates, normalises and fetishes sexual violence against women. Arguably, the presence of a global rape culture has become more prominent in the era of user-generated content, camera-enabled smart phones and social networking sites. In other words, communications technologies provide a new medium for the perpetration of sexual violence, with the effect being to unveil the existence and prevalence of a rape culture in the modern world.

While it is apparent that communications technologies are being used in varying ways to perpetrate sexual violence and harassment against women, these diverse mediasimultaneously create new opportunities for activism, resistance and informal justice in response to sexual violence and rape culture. Communications technologies have enabled more women and girls to speak about and share their experiences of sexual violence victimisation with a much wider audience. This presentation discusses not only the nature of TFSV and its connection with rape culture, but also examples of activist projects, legal reform and informal justice practices that seek to overcome rape culture in cyberspace – and indeed – in our communities more broadly.

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References


