How to Address Internet-Facilitated Sexual Violence

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The Centers for Disease Control defines sexual violence as a sexual act committed by one person against another without that person's consent. Encompassing a range of acts from harassment to rape, sexual violence is typically thought of as a physical act. However, the increased popularity and accessibility of cell phones and computers have brought sexual violence into the digital realm. To stem this new and growing type of virtual violence, policymakers and other civic leaders should carefully consider how information and communication technologies facilitate sexual violence and then take proactive steps to prevent further harm.

Professionals who serve survivors of sexual violence are uniquely well-positioned to inform discussions about how various technologies contribute to sexual violence and what might be done to address the problem. I have done research interviews with such professionals and draw from them to present insights that could help protect people from virtual sexual infractions.

How New Technologies Can Facilitate Sexual Violence

The professionals I interviewed, who serve survivors ranging from small children to adults, highlight several ways current technologies are used to carry out sexual violence.

- **Perpetrators use virtual means to initiate conversations and in-person contacts with their victims**, especially minors. Popular social networking sites like Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat, and dating applications like Tinder, have increased people's online presence. Each of these platforms allows users to express themselves and make social connections. Unfortunately, perpetrators can also use these platforms to exploit young people's desires to connect and receive attention. Young people sometimes take online friendships into the real world without knowing whom they will really be meeting in person.
- Service professionals also report that **cell phones are used to record acts of in-person sexual violence, which allows the victimization to be broadcast online.** Before technology made it easy to record and share information with a wide audience, sexual violence typically occurred between two parties: the perpetrator and the victim. Now, because of live-streaming platforms and the regularity with which people document daily events, sexual violence may involve the perpetrator, the victim, and large portions of the victim's social network. In cases where videos or other records are shared online, victims of sexual violence not only have to process the trauma they experienced, but also have to live with the knowledge that their friends and family may have also witnessed the assault.
- **Videos or images shared on social networking sites can be difficult to remove.** Thus, victims have the chance of being re-traumatized every time they come across the content or are confronted by the knowledge that it is still being shared.

Benefits for Fighting Sexual Violence

Although new technologies can be used to facilitate sexual violence, they can also help address the problem. For instance, professionals told me about instances where sexual violence was recorded and the recordings were used as evidence to prosecute the perpetrator. Historically, prosecution of sexual violence has been difficult. Many cases never reached prosecution due to lack of evidence, and those that did were plagued with "he said–she said" scenarios. Now, digital records, whether through text message, social networking platforms, or multimedia content, can serve as concrete evidence for survivors.

Internet technology can also help survivors amplify their voices, raise awareness about sexual violence, and connect to resources through web-based platforms. The "Me Too" movement is the perfect example of the way survivors of sexual violence leveraged technology as a tool for empowerment. Access to online resources

is particularly important for survivors who may not be physically able to access community-based resources or for those who are hesitant to seek in-person resources for other reasons.

Where the Real Blame Lies

None of the professionals I talked to want to ban virtual technologies or vilify a particular platform. Instead of placing the blame on technology, the focus needs to shift to the cultural and societal practices that support violent behaviors. Survivors of sexual violence are often forced to prove a crime was committed, while also convincing the public — at times even their close friends and family — of their own innocence. That reality has not changed, even with the increase of virtual sexual offenses.

Victim blaming remains prevalent in U.S. culture, and survivors are too often challenged rather than supported. Curricula aimed at sexual violence prevention typically equip women — the most common victims of sexual violence — on how to avoid sexual assault, with suggestions on what to wear, what not to drink, and where not to go. But instead of teaching one group how to avoid perpetrators, the conversation should aim to empower everyone to create healthier relationships.

Recommendations to Redress Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence

Community-based organizations can sustain and build from the power of the "Me Too" movement by elevating survivors' voices. Survivors can help educate the general public about the prevalence of sexual violence and validate other survivors' experiences.

More research is needed about how young people learn about consent, relationships, and basic communication skills, taking into account both physical and digital interactions. Abstinence-only education focuses too narrowly on avoiding teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections; and it could be traumatizing or viewed as shaming for victims of abuse and for young people who have already engaged in sexual activities. Furthermore, the abstinence-only approach does little to address virtual sexual harassment or Internet depictions of sexual violations.

Policymakers, advocates, and others concerned about the problem of sexual violence should work to ensure sex education includes conversations about consent and information about how to develop healthy relationships — both in person and online. Evidence-based curricula and realistic examples of personal traumatic experiences should be required in schools and community health programs.

Read more in Kwynn Gonzalez-Pons "Helping Professionals' Perspectives of Technology's Role in Sexual Violence" (working paper, 2018).