

The New Normal? Young People, Technology & Online Behaviour

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In this article we draw from our own empirical work - with schools, ranging from assemblies around ‘online safety’ to workshops on specific issues such as the influence of the Internet and social media on relationships, with ethnographic investigations of social media forums, and with professional stakeholders in the management and prevention of online child sexual exploitation¹. We argue that there is some evidence of a shift in attitudes towards sexual abuse and exploitation, particularly among young people, where technology facilitates the legitimisation, mainstreaming and even normalization of concerning views and behaviours in relation to children, sexual abuse and victimisation.

Legitimation

Digital technology can facilitate expression and consensus building around problematic perspectives on sexual abuse, which from an offline perspective, would likely be viewed as socially unacceptable – whether in the legal, moral or cultural sense. However, with its public, democratised face, and opportunities for mass expression and broadcast, social media provides a platform for rapid expression and reinforcement of marginalised views.

This can be illustrated by recent social media discussions on the Adam Johnson case, involving a footballer who sexually assaulted a 15 year old girl after using mobile technology to groom her, illustrate several such problematic dynamics. Following one post by Sky News on Facebook about the case, a large number of responses were posted in solidarity with the perpetrator, blaming the victim for the assault and while absolving Mr. Johnson. For example, one comment read:

‘This girl has probably been rogered by plenty of 17 year olds behind the skips after nappy night but she decides to grass this one up. More fool him for falling for it though’,

and received 1,633 ‘likes’.

Such perspectives are not limited to social media arenas. In working with young people we regularly see similar views expressed. In a recent classroom-based discussion, a teenage girl strongly expressed the view that the Johnson victim knew what she was doing, ‘deserved’ the assault and even asserted that the fault lay with her parents in allowing her to go to nightclubs to meet footballers.

While many other young people challenge those who express such views, there is certainly a vocal minority who show little appreciation of the offenders’ wrongdoing and generally focus the blame upon the victim. It is highly problematic that such perspectives may be broadcast to young people and legitimised on social media, through, for example, the reinforcing effect of the number of ‘likes’ such comments receive, or the comparative absence of challenging views.

Normalisation

¹ The International Workgroup for Best Practice in the Management of Online Sex Offending (IWG) is facilitating the development and distribution of a framework for evidence-led practice in the management of online sex offending behaviour as well as professional knowledge exchange and collaboration across key stakeholders from academic and clinical research, practitioners and policymakers concerned with the management of online sexual offending behaviour.

Compounding the legitimisation of problematic sexual attitudes online, we can also draw on an evidence base that illustrates how technology can support the normalisation of abusive behaviour that would be viewed as wholly unacceptable in an offline context.

In one case, a girl referred to the fact that she had ‘lost count’ of the number of boys she had blocked on WhatsApp due to the volume of unsolicited ‘cock pics’ she had received. When asked to reflect on the likelihood of her peers behaving similarly offline, she said that it was something that only happened via mobile technology and that she felt the impact of the abuse was lessened when it was mediated in this way:

‘My phone is like a shield that protects me from the things that I see on it. It’s not real if its on my phone.’ (Y9 female).

Nevertheless, the fact remains that this 14 year old girl was frequently exposed to unsolicited sexual images of her peers without her consent. The flipside of this challenge of consent typically arises in cases where a sexual image is sent from a girl to a boy (usually as a result of a request), and is subsequently redistributed without permission:

‘It’s more stereotypically the boys. I think the boys will ask a girl for a picture, they’ll send it to him and then the boy will like show it round to his friends.’ (Y12 female).

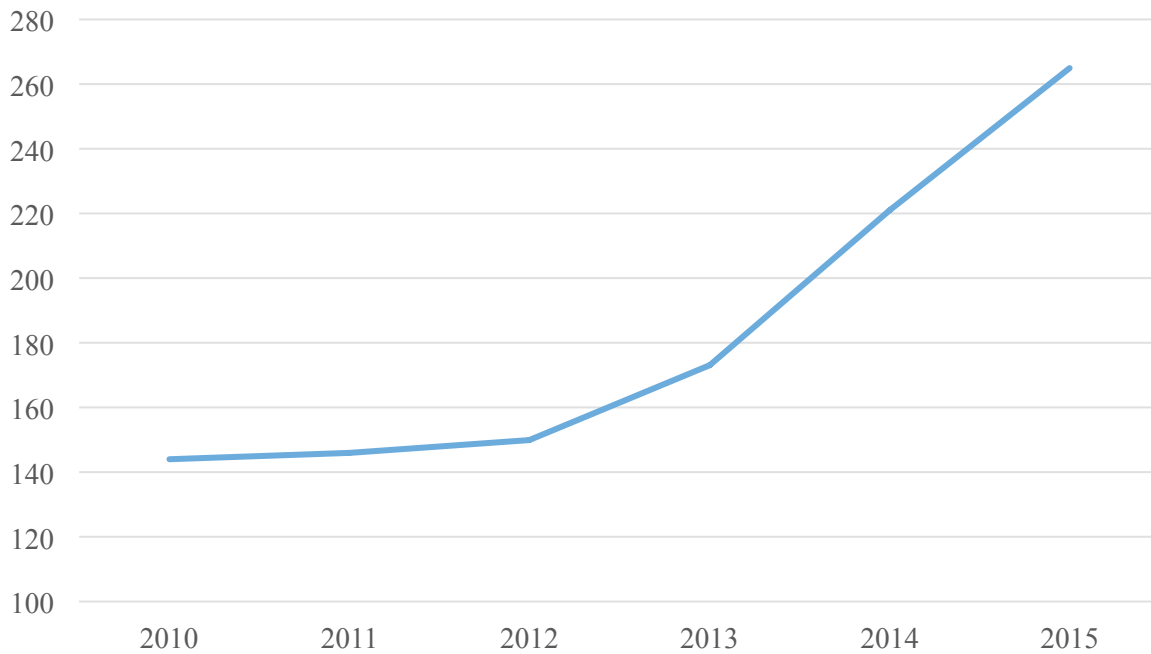
Again, the girl quoted above viewed this as a routine social activity, ‘one of those things’, rather than a violation of the originator’s consent and privacy, a form of victimisation, or the distribution of an indecent image of a minor.

Long Term Impact?

While there is a growing body of work on peer-on-peer abuse, particularly around sexting (for example Phippen 2012 and Ringrose et. al. 2011), there is far less research that considers the longer-term impact of such legitimisation and normalisation on attitudes toward sexual abuse or the acceptability of Child Sexual Exploitation Material - an increasing amount of which is self-generated (IWF 2015).

Increasingly, we encounter cohorts of young people who are growing up seeing little wrong with the redistribution of sexually explicit images of peers, who view the victims of sexual assault as the ones at fault, and whose formative sexual experiences are based upon self-generated images. Notwithstanding, little is formally known of the longer-term implications of these changing attitudes and behaviours, such as, for example, their role in criminal activity. A recent Freedom of Information request we submitted to the UK Ministry of Justice shows a marked increase in the number of prosecutions by offenders aged 18-24 for crimes under section 1 of the Protection of Children Act 1978:

The number of persons (aged 18-24) proceeded against at magistrates' courts under section 1 of the Protection of Children Act 1978 , England and Wales, 2010 -2015



While causation is always impossible to determine from such data, this trend offers some cause for concern as it clearly shows an increase in such prosecutions over the last five years. Further empirical work is required to identify the reasons for this increase, robust knowledge of peer-on-peer abuse in the online context and any interrelationships that may exist between these phenomena.

The Need for ‘Relevant’ Education

In our empirical work we frequently hear from young people who claim a dearth of relevant education around relationships and sex:

‘It’s like a failure of our education system cos like everyone I’ve spoken to, and I’ve spoken to people from other schools, say they’ve never had sex education classes at all.’ (Y12 male).

It is entirely rare to speak to young people who have participated in classes and discussions around things such as sexting and online pornography. Yet they are calling for this intervention from an early age, and asking for education that covers concerns related to technology such as self-generation, online abuse and the influence of pornography, as well as more fundamental rights-based issues such as respect, consent, and privacy. These calls have been echoed more recently in forums such as the IWG, which has identified a key role for preventative education (from childhood onwards) on the nature and implications of online CSEM.

Without effective education and intervention why should we be surprised that troubling attitudes and views are being developed? If there is nowhere where such views are

challenged from an informed position, is it any wonder that young people think that receipt of an unsolicited ‘cock pic’, a request for an indecent selfie, or online sexual blackmail are all ‘normal’ parts of growing up?

References

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