



I E-hate U: Challenges for Practitioners from e-hate and Technologically-Facilitated Offences

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Now I've been assured that I can be quite technical as you're all a pretty web hip crowd. So first up can I just say that the shift from static, proprietary dominated html content to the user-generated virtual community based web 2 technology is filled with opportunities for service delivery. These web applications facilitate participatory information sharing, inter-operability, user-centred design and collaboration and the host of new mashups and Open API's to interconnect websites and provide systems integration has taken the web to a whole new level.

So here is our first challenge when using the web for service delivery. There's a geek speak all of it's own that is rich and complex. However when a service provider first sits in a room with a web developer to discuss how to blend service delivery with technology it's not long before one or the other begins to think 'I have no idea what you're talking about'.

Web based violence against women

Now when you think of web based violence against women, this is probably what comes to mind.

Gang-Rape Victim's Horrific Facebook Ordeal

A 16-year-old Canadian girl is raped and drugged by a gang of boys and men, and the photos go viral on Facebook. ⁱ

Or

Students set up 'pro-rape' page on Facebook

A group of University students set up a "pro-rape" page in the sports and recreation section on Facebook. ⁱⁱ

However it has been my experience that there is a far more common and subtle form of violence against women online.

"(In 2007 a) study showed that when the gender of an online username appears female, they are 25 times more likely to experience harassment. The study, conducted by the University of Maryland, found that female user-names averaged 163 threatening and/or sexually explicit messages a day." ⁱⁱⁱ

Another example is described by the women in these Yahoo Answers ^{iv} questions.

"Can I sue these people?"

My boyfriends' friends and family thought it would be funny to post some really negative and gross things about me on Facebook. In their status feed they posted my phone number and said that I gave head for free and people should call me for sexual favours. People were commenting and I asked them to stop. I called the police and they said that I would be charged for reacting to it." ^v

Or



“... my ex-boyfriend for putting pictures of me on their facebook website. Those pictures are too revealing and one of them he stole from my cell phone. Now all his friends and my friends can see me almost naked on his facebook profile and now I cannot go out because I get harassed about the pictures, I am embarrassed, ashamed and i am scare (sic) my kids will be harassed because of that. I told him not to do it, but he did.”^{vi}

So as an online worker, here's another challenge - what is the term for what these women are experiencing? Language is power and being able to name something is crucial. Any of you that doubt the power of giving things a name, this just imagine how laborious and difficult life would be without job titles. When someone asks what you do, most of us would use our job title. But what if you had to describe what you did every time someone asked? Now for those who put out fires or place parking fines under car windscreens, having to describe what they do wouldn't be too hard. But what about nurses? Or television personalities? Or proctologists?

Just like in the days before feminism, we don't have any terminology to describe what's happening to these women. It's really frustrating using legal terms like stalking, harassment or rape as they don't capture the far more subtle ways in which the violence is occurring online. Another example, I recently had a falling out with a friend's abusive husband. The next day all three of their teenage children defriended me on facebook. Now that hurt my feelings but even more frustrating is that I can't put a name to what he did. According to the Urban Dictionary^{vii} the term for this would be “defriending - the act of de-friending someone on facebook, often for socio-political reasons”, I don't think it fully covers the aggressive motives behind it.^{viii}

For those of you that have never heard of the Urban Dictionary, it's an online dictionary which is being created and maintained by members of the general public. Anyone online can view the pages and becoming a member allows you to add words and write their definitions. It contains words and acronyms that are of such fleeting of specialised popularity that most will never appear in any printed media format. Sites like this are able to respond to the ebb and flow of new words and web trends and for those who've never heard of phenomena like being Chuck Bessed, it's an invaluable resource. However as much as I love the Urban Dictionary, most of the new words and their definitions have been created by young males and are often demeaning towards women.

Take the word Troll, a commonly used disparaging online term which means someone who, for their own amusement, creates posts that are deliberately crafted to inflame readers. In the general web community it is a word that describes an action and is gender neutral. Now when I looked up the word troll in the urban dictionary, I found that the definition of this word was quite correct, it described an action and there was no reference given to any particularly personality types or genders. However when I dug a little further, I found 119 other words to do with trolls. Of these 24 (20%) were derogatory towards women. Here are some examples:

Troll Bride: A fat, ugly, smelly woman with an attitude who traps you into marrying them because they're pregnant.

Troll whore - A short fat woman in her early thirties whose target is married men whom she will use for food, cigarettes, gifts, and money in exchange for sex.

Troll King - One, generally male, who has a tendency to date women whom are troll like or resembling a troll.

Troll Hogging – Groups of men who go out with the intent of picking up fat ugly women for one night stands. Most often done as a competition.^{ix}



There were no male equivalents of these terms.

By comparison there were 4 derogatory words about gays or lesbians and 4 dedicated to extolling the virtues of online male game characters. There were no female hero equivalents.

At the same time as this male dominance of the new language of the internet, there has been a retagging of existing words. Take the word 'rape' for instance. A strong term with violent and negative connotations which is now being used to describe lesser and almost comical events such as 'Facebook rape'.^x This is a relatively new term that is when an individual leaves their Facebook account open. This is then interfered with by a third party who changes that person's status or signs them up to unwanted groups. There are competition pages for who has the most humorous 'face rape' story.

As a geek I find these trends disturbing and as a feminist it makes me angry. By not having a language to denote our experience of the net, women are being silenced or their experiences belittled or devalued. Dale Spender examines this issue at length in her book 'Nattering on the Net'.

So I've started to make up my own terms for things and will use them till something better comes along. Remember the Yahoo Answer questions? I have termed what happened to those women as 'cyber punches'. This is an attack from out of the blue and for no apparent reason by someone you thought was a friend. It's not life threatening but it hurts at the time and makes you feel indignant and ask why? Perhaps a 'fatal friending' could mean you have had to close down your accounts, move house or change your phone number because some jerk you once cared about has gone toxic all over your online accounts.

So this is where the term e-hate came from. Trying to find a term to use for events that are commonplace online but still don't have words to adequately describe them yet. However I don't want to give the impression that women are passive victims on the net. Far from it.

"... women are fighting back. Sparked by the violent harassment of (Kathy Sierra, a well-known software programmer and Java expert), one blogger started a "stop cyberbullying" campaign. This was picked up by hundreds of other bloggers and an international women's technology organisation, Take Back the Tech, a global network of women who encourage people to "take back online spaces" by writing, video blogging, or podcasting about online harassment." iii

Challenges for practitioners who are delivering counselling

A client walks into your office and says:

"The other day I was playing Second Life (an online virtual reality game) and a man in the game jumped on my avatar and forced himself on me. I did not want this to happen and I cried all night. I don't know who to turn to because this happened online and I don't remember the mans' username. I feel violated and horrible.

My friends say I should call the police. I just don't know what to do. Does this count as sexual assault?" xi

Internet technology has brought many new challenges for the law. In this example, has a crime taken place? If so, who is the victim and who is the perpetrator? The avatars or the people behind them? Is an online assault as traumatic or harmful as one in real life? Is the raping of an avatar the same to the victim as that of a real world victim? All of these issues are being debated but the way forward is



not always clear and one soon comes across the murky waters of are there degrees of rape. Having various levels of how harmful a rape is has become a hot topic on the net in America at the moment and twitter is alive with the #Dear John debate.

I think of e-hate as falling into two categories

1. Technologically-Facilitated Offences
2. People being nasty

Technologically-Facilitated Offences

These are behaviours which are against the law and the internet is the tool used to facilitate them. Examples include stalking, child pornography, libel, defamation, identity theft etc.

People being nasty

This is probably the most common form of e-hate. Includes:

- cyber bullying,
- online harassment,
- non-actionable threats,
- posting hurtful images or personal information
- starting or spreading rumours
- telling lies

This behaviour is distinguishable from Technologically-Facilitated Offences by the fact that there is little, if anything that can be done legally. It's people being mean, nasty and vicious to each other using web 2 technology.

Often the world wide web is viewed as one huge 'thing' that is 'everywhere'. In reality the web is made up of a myriad of specific computer programs that allow users to do things for instance send email, watch or post videos, view or create websites, play games etc. Some of these programs also allow users to form communities. These would be entities such as forums or bulletin boards (dogsonline, x factor fanclub), virtual worlds (second life, world of warcraft), chat rooms (yahoo chat, chat trivia), use groups etc. Abuse from one program or community may not necessarily cross into another program or community. For instance being harassed in the x-factor forum may not have any affect on your participation in Second Life. This is because the only interaction you have with these people is when you're online using that entity. If things get harsh you can change your name and avatar and chances are no one will know who you are unless you tell them.

To many people, cyber relationships can feel just as tangible and filled with emotional investment as those in real life. The effect of having one of these relationships turn nasty can have a strong impact. "How people react to trauma depends on the person and situation. For example, the amount of support one receives following the event and other existing stressors all play a role." ^{xii}

Being abused via a social network is particularly harsh. Unlike virtual communities where you may only know people by their online name and never actually meet them face to face, on a social network your online friends contain many of your real world friends and relatives. These can include people you've met briefly, people you used to or currently go to school with, work colleagues, the children of friends etc. Being hounded out of a social network means that you may have to give up online contact with your real world friends. Even if you start up a new persona an abuser may still be able to trace



you through your networks.

Issues to address with clients may include what the attack meant to them? What are they using the internet for and are there other options? How much online support have they received from their friends and from the site administrators (if they have complained to them)?

Introduce the concept of taking some time out from the network to let things cool down a bit. Most posts and bulletins are automatically deleted after 2 weeks and with so much competition for your attention, most online events become old news very quickly.

For someone heavily into the internet, this will seem like an eternity so discuss what they are going to do instead and work through what to say if someone mentions the e-hate campaign against them? Frame abstinence in terms of a challenge – can you stay Facebook free for 4 weeks?

Some people who spend a lot of time online socially or use social networks to stay in touch with real world friends will be especially affected by the disruption of these virtual networks. They may find it beneficial for practitioners to explore ways in which they can strengthen and perhaps expand their real world networks.

Practical info like where to go, transport, staying safe, setting boundaries, how to know if someone is your friend and respectful relationships.

Explore if the real world is a good place or too confronting? Explore the challenges for instance where to park, the cost of things like admission, what to wear, what to do if they say the wrong thing etc.

In particular explore issues of control. For all the lack of control of information online, there is a lot of control over the environment. For instance, if things get awkward or dull you can just exit. There is always the backspace to erase your words. Moving from place to place takes just a click and no one knows what you look like or if you're laughing or crying unless you tell them.

Online friends often don't transition well into the real world

For example, a person may have hundreds of online friends, some of whom they consider to be very close friends, but these are quite different to relationships with real world friends. Cyber friends may live in a different country or lead hyper lives. This means they easily juggle multiple chat conversations while jumping between the latest buzz sites, reading emails and listening to music. These friends therefore, may prefer to be online instead of talking in the real world. Online personas can also be quite different from the real world one, for instance someone with sparkling wit online may be quite dull and withdrawn in real life, let alone what they look (and smell) like. What this means is that in a very short time a person can go from believing they have a lot of friends to having almost none. It is good to explore issues of loneliness, disillusionment and isolation.

Jeff Utecht advocates the use of a social and professional you on the internet.

“Facebook is the ‘Social You’...the you with your friends and the you while hanging out... your blog... should become the ‘Professional You’. The place you mould who you are, what you are interested in, and where you want to go.... (It is important to) understand that when (you) start a Social You that there's this other part that people see, read and respect and that side is just as important, if not more, than the Social You.”^{xiii}

Places like Linked In, Blogger and Wikispaces are great places to put your professional self out there.



Supporting your client

Part of the distress of an online attack may come from feelings of powerlessness and the anonymity of an incident. Re-frame the attack in terms of it being a reflection of a misogynistic society.

Ann Travers suggests re-framing the attack in terms of it being a reflection of a misogynistic society.

“It is important to interpret sexual harassment as not solely about male sexual behaviour towards women but as a gate-keeping device that limits the extent to which women are able to participate in social spaces, including cyberspace.”^{xiv}

Understanding the event(s) within a bigger context can be useful in demystifying the attack. It also reduces the perceived size of the attack (which is often instigated by just one person) and places what has happened within a framework that is comprehensible but not personal.

Clients presenting from online harassment are no different than any other. It is a case of exploring the psychological issues with the client that may increase her feeling of powerlessness. Look for psychological issues that exacerbate the stress response (extreme poverty, past abuse etc).^{xv}

There is research that suggests that those most vulnerable online are the ones who are most vulnerable in the real world.^{xvi} All these issues can be used to form the basis of an online management plan to stop the client from being re-abused.

How to stop the harassment and move on

Legal options

This is often the first thing a client wants to explore and all over the world legislation is being modified to include the internet^{xvii}. Always get advice from your legal resources, however it has been my observation that for most e-hate victims, legal action is often problematic. There are many reasons why, I'm going to look at two. The first one is Jurisdiction.^{xviii}

In our Yahoo examples, let's say the perpetrator is in QLD, using an ISP based in Tasmania to access a website based in America to harass a victim in Melbourne. So where does the crime take place? You need to know this in order to know which legal authority to contact. Is it state, federal or international?

Which law has been broken?

This can be hard to ascertain - is it identity theft, fraud, libel, defamation, copyright infringement, sexual harassment, bullying, stalking or something else? For many online victims they just want the harassment to stop and are not always determined to have 'their day in court'. However just like in the real world, legal action is not the only way to counter violence.

Online action

This is often the swiftest and most straightforward course of action.

“In the case of e-mail harassment, you need to contact the harasser's ISP (Internet Service Provider) and register a complaint. ... If there are posts on a (website), forum or bulletin board, contact the moderators (or site administrators).”^{xix}

Complaints need to describe what happened and state what action needs to be taken. Keep any correspondence and log any action taken including dates and times.



Generally speaking, most site administrators are intolerant of bad behaviour by users. Use the report abuse buttons to communicate directly with the complaints department however some administrators will require a court order. Avenues open to administrators are to remove offensive material and terminate user accounts. Organisations like Cybersmart and ThinkUknow have more tips.

Reclaim the net

For many people 'just turning off the computer' may not be practicable so then what?

Research therapy

Suggest your client research their attack and document how to avoid it happening in the future. They could research online resources on bullying or harassment or find sites where they can relate with others who share (their) experiences.^{xii}

This has the added benefit of showing them how much of the web is not involved in e-hate campaigns.

Online publishing

If they would like to write about their experiences in a contained environment, try survivor forums like Pandys or Our Place. If they want to take it up a notch, they could start their own blog or contribute to a blog about harassment on the net. Actions such as these turn the tables on the abuser as abusive posts may come to be seen quite differently over time.^{xx} Here are some more:

- Tell your online friends what is happening and ask them to be supportive.
- Place a public statement about the harassment on your facebook/myspace page. Add a link to your blog or websites you've found useful.
- Become actively involved in the 'stop online harassment community'. There are a number of them dedicated to ending online violence and providing support to victims such as Take back the Tech and WHO@.

Some people choose to retaliate by posting on name and shame sites, however this tends to reduce you to the abusers' level so isn't recommended. Public naming and shaming, particularly online, of sex offenders is an issue being explored by broadcaster Derryn Hinch.

Karen Banks, in her book entitled "Leave the Internet Alone." writes:

"The Internet is not creating new forms of crimes against women and children, but it is creating new ways and means for crimes to be perpetrated. However, it is also creating new ways and means for people to organise, network, campaign and bring about social action."^{xxi}

Conclusion

The internet is bringing about challenges for many different practitioners. For web designers and those based in the ICT industry. Challenges to do with language and discrimination. The challenges for legal practitioners and legislators are changing so fast I doubt that any government will ever be able to effectively legislate against it. We've also got new ways for violence to take place as well as new ways to reach hitherto silenced victim survivors. Lastly there are the challenges to the counsellors who are struggling to understand the technology and apply it to practice.



The Internet has brought enormous changes and benefits to our society and this will continue into the future. With these benefits come risks. Unlike the real world where publishing is regulated, expensive and time consuming, the internet makes it easy to replicate and distribute every snide remark, funny photo or regrettable incident. When social networks are blended into the mix, the viewing audience can expand to include family, friends and work colleagues. The legal options are still unclear and Internet law is being written before our eyes.

From a personal perspective, I believe how a person sees the internet and the information on it is crucial to their response to it. If it is viewed as a wild and violent place then one will react accordingly. However if it is seen as an opportunity to deliver service like never before, then there's a wonderful new world out there.



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Useful websites

A blog about cyber safety issues including using social networks	http://www.safekids.com/
Cyber angels	http://www.cyberangels.org/
Cybersmart	http://www.cybersmart.gov.au/
A guide on how to initiate and run a stalking support group in your agency or community	http://www.ncvc.org/src/AGP.Net/Components/DocumentViewer/Download.aspxnz?DocumentID=46855
A list of Social Networks	http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_social_networking_websites
Pandys (Pandora's Project sexual abuse survivors forum)	http://www.pandys.org/
After Silence (Sexual abuse survivors forum)	http://www.aftersilence.org/
Our Place (DV survivors forum)	http://www.our-place-online.net/
Think U Know	http://www.thinkuknow.org.au/
Working to halt online abuse (WHO@)	http://www.haltabuse.org/



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