

The Invisibility of Digital Sex Trafficking in Public Media

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Abstract

Sex trafficking is a form of modern slavery that strips its victims of basic human dignity. It is a global pandemic, impacting geographically and socioeconomically diverse communities. Academic scholars have responded to sex trafficking by analyzing its state as a global network, and have repeatedly argued that the Internet plays an integral role in modern sex trafficking and that the Internet is being shaped by current trafficking practice. However, books, film, and news articles often fail to recognize the intimate connection between the Internet and sex trafficking, focusing instead on the physical constraints and geographical dislocation of trafficking victims. If the Internet is referenced in these sources, it is treated as an outside actor that enables trafficking, but that is not itself influenced by its interactions with trafficking. My research consisted of analyzing the body of literature created by STS scholars and other academics and analyzing representative case studies from public media. I argue that the Internet's ephemeral nature, its momentum as a deregulated system, and its global ubiquity all contribute to public media's general failure to depict it as an integral component of the trafficking network. In response to these problems, which inhibit the accurate depiction of the role technology plays in sex trafficking, I propose that Internet trafficking must be made tangible in local discourse despite its inherent ephemerality, and that there must be an investigation of the effectiveness of U.S. policy regarding Internet regulation as it applies to individual privacy concerns.

Introduction

Sheila was twelve when she was forced into sex slavery. After running away from home, she was kidnapped and taken to a series of locked houses, where she was drugged and raped by several men nightly over a period of five months. At each house, the doors were locked and guarded. One evening, when the "first customer [was] late," Sheila was able to escape through an unlocked window, and reached a local fire station (Bowley, 2012, p. 25). She was detained for five days before entering a rehabilitation program in Atlanta, Georgia.

This story, recounted in *The White Umbrella: Walking with the Survivors of Sex Trafficking* (Bowley, 2012), is just one of many such

accounts given by trafficking victims. In a fact sheet issued by the United States Department of Health and Human Services, sex trafficking is defined as “a modern-day form of slavery in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such an act is under the age of 18 years” (Department of Health, 2011). Sex trafficking is a trans-national concern, documented in Thailand, Cambodia (Davy, 2014), Hungary, the United Kingdom (Kelemen & Johansson, 2013), and within U.S. borders (Jefft, 2013). Traffickers primarily target women and girls (Department of Health, 2011). Domestic child sex-trafficking is a particularly disconcerting manifestation of this demographic emphasis (Butler, 2014). Globally, there are approximately 20 million individuals who are presently enslaved, of which 700,000 are smuggled into the United States from abroad. Approximately 50,000 of these individuals are children. Domestically, as many as 300,000 children are at risk of being exploited by sex traffickers. The average age of entry into sex trafficking is between twelve and fourteen, but could be as low as five (Butler, 2014). These sobering statistics indicate both the overwhelming frequency of trafficking and the necessity to actively combat it. Unfortunately, opposing trafficking can be quite difficult. Police corruption (Harlan, 2012), ambiguous victim protection laws (Hall, 2014), and the economics of trafficking as an industry (Schaffner, 2014) contribute to this difficulty.

In parallel, the world has become more globalized and decentralized. This change is largely due to the emergence of the Internet as a ubiquitous technology (Ryan, 2010, p. 179). Since its inception, the Internet has been a free and open platform to disseminate information and to connect geographically distant parties (Ford, 2014). This freedom has consistently conflicted with the privacy of individuals (Wolf, 2014; Larson, 2013). I argue here that the deep connections between the Internet as it is defined above and current sex trafficking practice are not well represented in public media sources. Academic sources consistently elucidate the sociotechnical system that facilitates sex trafficking, but media sources either avoid the Internet entirely, or do not take the connections between trafficking and the Internet to their logical conclusion.

The Academic Depiction

In looking at the connections between the Internet and sex trafficking, STS researchers such as Kunze (2010), Hughes (2000), Musto & Boyd (2014), and Kumar (2013) argue that the two are tightly coupled. This coupling is implicitly viewed by academics as an Actor-Network, an array of associated entities where “the set of postulated associations is the context that gives each entity its significance and defines its limitations” (Callon, 1999, p.89). In this instance, the networked array includes traffickers, anti-traffickers, trafficking victims, trafficking customers, local, federal, and international governments, local and international economies, online classifieds web pages, search engines, e-commerce technologies,

computers, and the connective wiring itself that carries global Internet traffic. Actor-Network theory states that these diverse and complex connections inextricably define their linked entities (Callon, 1999, p.89). This theory contextualizes how STS scholars argue that the Internet and sex trafficking influence each other, whether through the transition into anonymized and distributed sex trafficking as an industry or through the Internet's development as a robust e-commerce platform. This intertwined system is sociotechnical; it takes on technological connotations while maintaining its status as a social actor. It both shapes and is shaped by other technological and social actors, such as black-market economies, interactions between trafficking customers, methods of delivery in human capital, law enforcement, trafficking experts, and international law.

Academics argue that sex trafficking as an economic system has facilitated the Internet's development as an e-commerce platform. Hughes proposes this model in *The Internet and Sex Industries: Partners in Global Exploitation* (2000). She states that "the Internet industry thrives on the sex industry and looks to it for innovation" (p. 38). This phenomenon has played out in the development of many e-commerce technologies now ubiquitous on the Internet, such as rapid credit card transactions, database management, and search engines. These technologies were initially leveraged to serve the economic interests of online pornography vendors. In addition, the success of large search engines has always been dependent on advertising revenue from online pornographic websites, without which search engines are at a competitive disadvantage (Hughes, 2000). The sex trade's influential role in digital commerce provides strong evidence for deep connections between the Internet and sex trafficking that have irrevocably changed the state of the Internet.

Because the Internet is deeply integrated into modern sex trafficking, it also heavily influences and shapes the state of current sex trafficking practice. Hughes argues that the Internet has facilitated prostitution tours and mail-order bride systems. These forms of sex trafficking are uniquely viable as online services. This is due both to the Internet's broad advertising reach and to the anonymity the Internet provides for customers who share information about where and how to purchase women. This anonymity is particularly troubling, because it allows for widespread promulgation of "cruel, racist, misogynist attitudes" among patrons of these services (Hughes, 2000, p. 37), which can then be rapidly acted upon in search bars on pornographic websites (Hughes, 2000, p. 39).

The Internet has also broadened the socioeconomic and geographic range of trafficking targets. Although impoverished women have always been particularly vulnerable, social networking sites have allowed traffickers to target women and girls from various socioeconomic backgrounds through blackmail and manipulative relationships (Kunze, 2010, p. 246-247). The Internet has also augmented the vulnerability of impoverished people groups by disseminating images from the developed world among agrarian populations. Traffickers will latch onto the desire

for a better life that such images inspire (Kumar, 2013, p. 117), allowing them to more easily manipulate victims. The implications of these developments in trafficking methodologies are clear: the Internet maintains connections with trafficking that are deep enough to modify modern trafficking practice. Both this conclusion and the economic evidence listed above showcase the reality of the tight coupling described in scholarly circles.

Even outside of the trafficker-customer relationship, the Internet has profoundly complicated anti-trafficking efforts. For example, law enforcement has increasingly outsourced anti-trafficking endeavors to Internet-based data storage and analytics companies. Police may outsource predictive analytics work to these companies in order to identify potential perpetrators and/or victims (Musto & Boyd, 2014, p. 473). This has complicated notions of who anti-trafficking “experts” really are, and has introduced difficulties in defining who manages anti-trafficking efforts. These third-party motivations are also disconcertingly dependent on market economics (Musto & Boyd, 2014, p. 473-475).

The rise of online classifieds sites such as backpage.com and craigslist.com as high-profile facilitators of child sex trafficking has created additional complications for anti-traffickers. On one side, they are an obvious target for anti-traffickers to work to shut down trafficking. The open nature of these sites provides a space for anti-traffickers to monitor, collect data, and actively prosecute perpetrators. They have also created opportunities for anti-traffickers to publicly speak out about the role that technology has come to play in sex trafficking, granting them additional influence and authority in the public sphere. Specifically, anti-trafficking actors are able to publicly denounce well-known sites that maintain trafficking connotations: they can directly influence public opinion about these sites (Musto & Boyd, 2014, p. 466-467). The interactions between anti-trafficking actors and the Internet described above illustrate that the ramifications of the coupling between the Internet and sex trafficking are extensive.

This is not an isolated concern; rather, it has implications for the rest of the Internet network, which can rapidly become quite complicated and ethically ambiguous. Under the assumption that the connections between the Internet and sex trafficking exist, this evidence illustrates that they implicate more than just the trafficking-Internet unit of the network. STS scholars have found profound – and sometimes disturbing – connections between the Internet and sex trafficking. Neither the Internet nor sex trafficking would look like it does today without its counterpart. Through this lens, the Internet and sex trafficking form a cohesive actor-network, as defined by Callon (1999, p. 89). Framing this system as an actor-network helps to draw attention to the interdependent relationships described above. From here, I will investigate a set of case studies from public media to see if they reach the same conclusions as the academic literature available.

The Public Depiction

Depictions of trafficking in public media are overwhelmingly focused on the constraining and controlling power of physical spaces and on non-digital power hierarchies. If the Internet is referenced in public media, it is viewed as an external catalyst, separated from trafficking itself. Although there are exceptions to such generalizations, the media sources chosen as representative case studies in this analysis¹ do not recognize a cohesive network like the one seen in academic thought. In broad strokes, this set of media sources includes three films, four news articles, and one book. Two of the films are documentaries, and two of the news articles come from local news sources.

The first important similarity across these media sources is an overwhelming focus on jail-like spaces, especially within visual media. *Nefarious: Merchant of Souls*, a full-length documentary about the sex trafficking industry, makes use of dramatic reenactments as it describes sex trafficking; these scenes often depict large men dragging women into black cars and dark rooms. The documentary often depicts women in jail-like environments where they are physically restrained into a small, confined space (Nolot, 2012). Similarly, the television documentary series *Crime Inc.* aired a sex trafficking episode that reenacts physical kidnappings and currency being passed tangibly from hand to hand (Quintanilla, 2011). In *Taken*, a 2009 film, men break into the house of the protagonist's daughter, and physically rip her out from underneath the bed where she is hiding. Both she and other trafficked women are depicted in handcuffs or chained to beds throughout the film (Morel, 2009).

This focus on physical confinement also appears in print sources. Many of the stories in *The White Umbrella* focus on physical kidnappings (Bowley, 2012, p. 15) and physical abuse from male role models (Bowley, 2012, p. 21, 33, 40). The news editorial "ISIS says Islam Justifies Slavery" describes kidnappings of Yazidi women undertaken by The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). ISIS forces these women into either abusive marriages or sexual servitude (Freamon, 2014). Regardless of the media

¹ A major difficulty in creating this pool of data was finding elements that were representative of the wider population. These specific elements were selected because they appeared continually both in my research and in my interactions and conversations with friends, family, and various anti-trafficking groups. Looking at the sources themselves, CNBC's *Crime Inc.*, *Nefarious: Merchant of Souls*, and *Taken* are all films, of which the first two are documentaries. *Taken* is a feature-length film created for public entertainment. Huffington Post's "Let's Confine Slavery to the History Books", CNN's "ISIS Says Islam Justifies Slavery", WBTV's "Internet is a Hotbed for Human Traffickers", and WHEC's "The Role the Internet Plays in Human Trafficking" are news editorial pieces. Huffington Post and CNN are nationally recognized news sources, while WHEC and WBTV are local news stations from Rochester, New York, and Charlotte, North Carolina, respectively. Lastly, Bowley's *The White Umbrella* is a set of memoirs written by both trafficking victims and anti-trafficking advocates from Atlanta, Georgia.

format of the source, male traffickers and their ability to physically kidnap and dislocate women into confined spaces appear repeatedly in media depictions of sex trafficking. This focus on physical constraint contrasts with the decentralized and anonymized digital trafficking described by scholarly sources.

Public media often depicts the Internet as an outside force that catalyzes sex trafficking, but not as a component of the problem. *Crime Inc.* makes reference to the Internet allowing access to a broader customer base, but doesn't reference the elements of trafficking that are taking place uniquely online (Quintanilla, 2011). *Nefarious* references the Internet, but only indirectly, as a catalyzing element in Cambodian trafficking event where parents sold their daughters in order to gain access to Internet-connected luxury items (Nolot, 2012). In both of these cases, the Internet is an external force. Although the Internet is recognized as exerting influence on trafficking, in no way does the Internet itself become a part of the network. Neither of these sources recognize how trafficking would look inextricably different without the Internet, nor how trafficking has influenced the state of the Internet itself.

Perhaps the most telling component of trafficking depictions in media is simply the number of times that the Internet is even referenced. *Crime Inc.* mentions the Internet once, in a segment which only lasts about a minute (Quintanilla, 2011). *The White Umbrella* comments on the Internet once, but only in the way that it has facilitated the objectification of women. Digital trafficking itself is not referenced (Bowley, 2012). In *Taken*, anti-traffickers use the Internet once to look up information about a trafficking cell, but the Internet itself is never directly connected to sex trafficking (Morel, 2009). "Let's Confine Slavery to the History Books" makes no reference to the Internet. Again, the Internet plays an integral role in modern trafficking, yet these sources completely sidestep the problem.

"ISIS Says Islam Justifies Slavery" and the two local news sources ("Internet is a Hotbed for Human Traffickers" and "The Role the Internet Plays in Human Trafficking") are anomalous in their Internet references. The ISIS article doesn't reference the Internet at all, but it seems that the Internet actually doesn't play a role in the form of trafficking it describes. The entire network is self-contained, because ISIS members are both traffickers and consumers. There is no economic end-goal; ISIS' motivations are tied to their interpretation of the Quran (Freamon, 2014).

On the other end of the spectrum, WBTV and WHEC are profoundly aware of digital trafficking. These local news sources explicitly state that the Internet increases access to potential victims through online ads and social media, and they describe how the Internet makes it easier for traffickers to facilitate conversations with customers. They recognize both the changes that the Internet has wrought within trafficking, and the ways that traffickers have changed the state of the Internet, particularly through the creation of misleading web pages, which lure victims into trafficking

situations (Miranda, 2015). Even the fact that these sources recognize explicitly digitized forms of trafficking through online classifieds is anomalous (Horvatits, 2015). Both of these sources were written as a response to local trafficking incidents, a similarity that will be discussed momentarily.

The media analyses above illustrate that public media has created a very different picture of the trafficking network. There is an overwhelming emphasis on the physical kidnapping and confinement of victims, and the Internet is almost never deeply involved. Although there are certainly exceptions, the bulk of public media depicts sex trafficking as being inherently dissociated from the Internet.

The Problem of Digital Sex Trafficking

The self-evident differences between academic and media depictions of digital trafficking give rise to the question of why this disconnect has occurred. The Internet maintains three primary attributes that make it difficult to depict in media: the Internet's ephemerality, its deregulated status, and its ubiquity present difficulties in depicting online trafficking in the media.

First, the Internet's impalpability makes it difficult to represent in media. This seems to be especially true in visual media, but also applies to text sources. Kunze, an academic scholar, cites Joyce Priddy's argument that the Internet has made sex trafficking abstract. She states, "Human trafficking is now possible by viewing images of potential girls, bidding [for them] on the Internet and paying for [services] via the Internet." (Priddy, 2007). The entire process has become intangible and difficult to depict visually. This problem is easily seen in *Nefarious*' and *Crime Inc.*'s reliance on motifs of physical constraint and kidnapping, both of which are much easier to depict than the passing of signals between computers that facilitate online transactions.

On the other hand, the presence of tangible trafficking occurrences enables representative media, as illustrated by the local news sources described above. These articles are surprisingly cognizant of online trafficking. Their tangible awareness of the problem seems to stem from their being written as a response to local trafficking incidents. As these communities were confronted with tangible trafficking instances, local news sources were provided with examples of trafficking, which could then be depicted.

Second, deep-seated domestic fears about Internet regulation make trafficking uncomfortable to represent in public media. Logically, online trafficking may require additional digital regulation. This regulation comes into direct conflict with U.S. policy regarding the Internet as a platform for free speech. In *Free Speech vs. Human Dignity*, Wolf argues that this tendency in public opinion has been paramount since the Internet's inception. It is particularly evident in the passing of the Communications Decency Act of 1996 (CDA) (Wolf, 2014, p. 251). The

CDA was originally intended to promote economic and intellectual prosperity during the infancy of the Internet (p. 255), but ultimately, “the CDA virtually eliminates nearly every public and private U.S. citizen’s right to privacy on the Internet” (p. 279). The U.S. norm of the priority of freedom of speech over the rights of the individual on the Internet is culturally widespread and historically ingrained. In *Forgetting the First Amendment*, Larson argues that online privacy interests come into direct conflict with American notions of freedom of speech (p. 92). Freedom of speech has historically won this conflict (p. 93). A topic that would inevitably lead to additional digital regulation would be overwhelmingly unpopular with both government figures and the general public. Through this lens, it is logical for public media to tread lightly when dealing with Internet trafficking. Admittedly, this assertion requires some speculation about the motivations of the media producers, but it seems to be worth pursuing, because it integrates conversations about Internet trafficking into more widespread discussions regarding Internet privacy and digital rights.

A third and final difficulty for public media is the globally ubiquitous nature of the Internet. Online trafficking is an international concern, bringing with it diplomatic and trans-cultural challenges that make trafficking intangible for consumers of public media. The Internet has created fluidity between the geographic locations of traffickers. Traffickers can do business online, anywhere in the world, without ever stepping foot in the host country (Kunze, 2010, p. 252). Although traffickers can stay in one country while maintaining business in another, “domestic laws, and law enforcement are restricted by national borders” (Kunze, 2010, p. 253). The [International] Convention on Cybercrime refuses to take a strong stance on trafficking, primarily because of the overwhelming influence of countries which support a de-regulated Internet. This group implicitly includes the United States (Kunze, 2010, p. 277). Partly because of the admittedly complex interactions between the Internet’s global reach and the lack of consistent international regulation, countries with more lax policies have become safe havens for traffickers (Kunze, 2010, p. 278). The overwhelming geographic dispersion of Internet trafficking and its fluidity across the Internet’s decentralized network bring cultural disconnects and miscommunications into media attempts to deal with trafficking. Why should a European or East Asian person care about trafficking’s prominence in the United States, or vice versa? Trafficking’s occurrence in nations where diplomatic ties are shaky complicate the matter further. These complexities make it difficult for media to deal with trafficking in a way that is engaging to a diverse audience.

The Abolition of Digital Sex Trafficking

The above analysis indicates that there are huge issues in how media represents the trafficking network. The significant role of the Internet within the network is barely referenced by media, and when it is, there are

significant failures in its depiction. Artifacts from disciplines as diverse as film, news, and literature all converge upon the public sector, generating misinformation and promulgating mental constructions of sex trafficking that are antiquated at best. In the worst case, they are dramatic projections that remove the reality of trafficking from our everyday lives.

Unfortunately, the Internet has both globalized and localized sex trafficking. It can occur anywhere, at any time, from the comfort of our own homes, and through our routers and laptops. What steps can public officials take to combat this overwhelming problem? Two proposals follow.²

First, Internet trafficking must be made tangible in local discourse. The trafficking network must not be allowed to hide behind the Internet's intangible infrastructure. As the articles from WHEC and WBTV illustrate, trafficking is much easier to grapple with when it is taken out of the shadow of digital invisibility and placed in the limelight, where it can be properly addressed by local communities. Practically, this could be implemented in many ways. One possible solution would incorporate trafficking education modules into public school systems. These modules could be tailored to the ways trafficking appears within communities. Another solution would facilitate better dialogue between academia and the producers of public media. Academic communities could remove the ambiguities of digital trafficking by informing directors, writers, and artists about the realities of Internet trafficking and common misrepresentations of the trafficking network. This solution could manifest itself in the form of town hall meetings, which would take place within local communities. Regardless of the implementation, the key to this proposal is the need to introduce tangibility into conversations about Internet trafficking.

Second, there must be a serious investigation into the effectiveness of U.S. policy regarding Internet regulation and the role of digital law enforcement. This is not to say that online liberties are unimportant, or that freedom of speech should be unambiguously restricted. Rather, the United States cannot rely on policy meant to facilitate online growth during the early years of the Internet. Now that the Internet has attained some level of stability, the U.S. should re-examine its digital policy decisions and find a solution that prevents digital trafficking while maintaining online freedom. Admittedly, a solution to this problem will be difficult to find. The notion of a completely free Internet that also completely protects at-risk persons from trafficking may be untenable. Regardless, the point is simply that United States lawmakers need to be having this conversation, rather than

² Ultimately, the effectiveness of implementing these proposals cannot be proven substantively. They stem from recognizing that two of the primary difficulties facing public media as it grapples with digital trafficking are the immaterial nature the Internet and sociopolitical stigmas surrounding Internet regulation. These proposals are not designed as mandates, but are rather proposed as potential possibilities.

silently relying on outdated online policy. Once a domestic solution is found, this conversation can be taken to the international community, where a more unified front could allow for the creation of effective international anti-trafficking laws. Once the United States is able to productively engage in conversation with the international community about Internet regulation, global anti-trafficking law may become much more potent.

Conclusion

I have argued that there are serious deficiencies in how sex trafficking is depicted in media, and I offer possible reasons for these deficiencies along with potential roads to their resolution. The observations proposed above will hopefully open up a dialogue that will generate concrete solutions to the ambiguities inherent in media depictions of trafficking. This paper cannot be the end of the conversation; there is still much that needs to be seriously considered and acted upon in public discourse. Concrete solutions must be found to the questions presented above. This paper offers the opening salvo of that debate.

In both of the aforementioned proposals, public media continues to play a crucial role in discussions regarding the Internet and sex trafficking. Although public media has failed to capture the realities of Internet trafficking in many ways, there is incredible room for its growth as a combatant of online sex trafficking. This is especially true if we are able to integrate the valuable insight and knowledge provided through academic study into the media we consume. The first step in leveraging public media as an anti-trafficking entity requires recognizing that a problem exists and beginning to understand why it has occurred. This review of public media sources, although a first step in this direction, reveals that extensive progress must still be made.

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