Chapter 15

Introduction

Nicola Henry

The original idea around the development of the internet in the 1960s was that machines would “talk to each other” in exchanging messages, data, and programs (Leiner et al., 2009). Several decades later the era of the “interactive web” (or Web 2.0) has ushered in user-generated content, social networking, and cloud technology, making the visual image – photo, animation, and video – a staple of digital communications, epitomized by content hosting sites, social media, multimedia messaging, video chat, live-streaming, and online gaming. Digital technologies have facilitated a unique means through which to communicate and exchange information both textually and visually, and are an important medium for curiosity, pleasure, spectacle, and political activism. And yet images can also be harmful, not only for those depicted in the image but also for those who are exposed to the viewing of those images. Key components of harm – particularly in the digital era – relate to the permanence, accessibility, and spread of images on a global scale.

This section of the Handbook focuses on image-based harms, which we define as the creation or dissemination of images that denigrate and subjugate the person depicted in the image, or which expose the viewer to vicarious affect or trauma. While several chapters in this Handbook discuss the legal, social, or psychological implications of image-based harms, the three chapters in this section on image-based harms are based on original empirical research on three important issues: exposure to abhorrent violent material; pornography use and exposure; and image-based sexual abuse.

First in relation to exposure to abhorrent violent material, there have been growing media reports of social media content moderators experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in their day-to-day work (see e.g., Boran, 2020); of the harmful exposure of law enforcement personnel to child sexual abuse material (see e.g., Vedelago, 2020); and of individual users viewing acts of violence online either in real time or after the fact (see e.g., Lungumbu, 2020). After the Christchurch mosque shootings in New Zealand, which were live-streamed by the gunman on March 15, 2019, the Australian Government passed legislation which gives the Australian eSafety Commissioner powers to

The Emerald International Handbook of Technology-Facilitated Violence and Abuse, 267–270

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doi:10.1108/978-1-83982-848-520211062

issue take-down notices to digital platforms that host abhorrent violent material (AVM), with failure to do so potentially resulting in criminal prosecution. AVM is defined in the legislation as “audio, visual, or audio-visual material recorded of extreme violent acts,” which includes terrorist acts involving serious physical harm or death, murder or attempted murder of another person, torture, rape, or kidnapping involving violence (*Criminal Code Amendment (Sharing of Abhorrent Violent Material) Act 2019*).

Despite the growing attention to this issue, as well as accompanying legislative reform, there remains little scholarly attention to the short- or long-term impacts of viewing this type of content. In their chapter, Madeleine Novich and Alyssa Zduniak address this gap by examining the ways in which images of police violence shape perceptions of police, as well as the harms that exposure causes individual users of social media. Drawing on 19 interviews with a diverse sample of urban male and female college students, Novich and Zduniak found that participants of color were more adversely affected than white participants in terms of forming negative perceptions of police and experiencing emotional distress and fear of victimization. Although Novich and Zduniak acknowledge that the publication and circulation of violent imagery is also a political tool designed to garner awareness, outrage, and action, they argue that images of police brutality “affirm what minority communities have experienced for decades”; that is, they further entrench deeply held fears of victimization. They argue that for people of color, viewing images of police brutality restricts their social mobility and behavior and leads to “a traumatic impact on the brain ... brain dysregulation, stress, PTSD, and self-destructive behavior.” These harms have been recently discussed in relation to the video that went viral in May 2020 of a white Minneapolis police officer’s murder of African American man George Floyd. According to BBC journalist Sandrine Lungumbu (2020), “It is mentally and physically draining for me to watch yet another unarmed black man dying under arrest at the hands of another white police officer.”

While the vicarious effects of exposure to violent online content is a relatively new issue, the debate about the harms of pornography on adults and young people has been at the forefront of the feminist agenda for the past four decades. In relation to adults, for instance, Andrea Dworkin (1985) argued that pornography subordinates women, creating a sexual dynamic which normalizes sexual violence as sex “the putting-down of women, the suppression of women, and ultimately the brutalization of women” (p. 9). In relation to the effects of pornography on children, Michael Flood (2009) contends that these are likely to be: “emotional disturbance, sexual knowledge and liberalised attitudes, shifts in sexual behaviour, and sexist and objectifying understandings” (p. 384). He adds that for boys and young men, “the use of pornography may exacerbate violence-supportive social norms and encourage their participation in sexual abuse” (Flood, 2009, p. 384).

Samantha Keene begins her chapter on the impacts of pornography with a succinct summary of the long-standing pornography harms debate. While Keene argues that much mainstream pornography is “infused with themes of male dominance, aggression, and female subservience,” and that pornography plays a key role in the development of normative sexual scripts and the endorsement of

violence against women and girls, her conclusions about the harms and pleasures of pornography are far more nuanced. She draws inspiration from “critical porn studies,” which seeks to move beyond the pro- and anti-pornography dichotomy that focuses on “harms and their impacts or possibilities for legislative interventions or prohibitions” (Smith & Attwood, 2014, p. 7), and instead “draw[s] on insights from disciplines that acknowledge the complexity of culture and are aware of the shifts and continuities in the ways that sex and media are constructed historically” (Smith & Attwood, 2014, p. 11).

Based on interviews conducted with 24 heterosexual adults living in Aotearoa/New Zealand about their pornography use, Keene argues that empirical studies can help to contribute to a critical understanding of “the complex ways that pornography is experienced by viewers and their partners.” She found that although both male and female participants were reflexive of the misogynistic representations of sex, gender, and sexuality in mainstream heterosexual pornography, men tended to be more concerned about their own sexual performances, whereas women’s experiences were shaped by how their intimate partners related to them sexually, which in some cases included sexual coercion or sexual assault.

The third and final chapter in this section, by Olga Marques, focuses on image-based sexual abuse, also known as “nonconsensual pornography” (see e.g., Citron & Franks, 2014; Henry et al., 2020; McGlynn & Rackley, 2017), which refers to the nonconsensual taking or sharing of nude or sexual images, including threats to share images. Image-based sexual abuse began to receive attention in the early 2010s when the term “revenge porn” came into popular usage with media reports of websites that hosted nonconsensual nude or sexual images of musicians, sportspersons, and celebrities, as well as nonconsensual intimate images of “ordinary” people, often accompanied by their personal details, such as their name, occupation, geographical location, and social media handle.

As Marques notes, there is a lack of empirical research with sexual violence service providers on the topic of image-based sexual abuse. She conducted interviews with 10 frontline professionals to garner their perspective on the nature and harms. She argues that the sharing of images compounds the harms to sexual violence survivors by “adding a virtual – and indelible – ‘permanent remembering’ of the violence.” Marques argues that the trauma of the threat that the images can be discovered and seen at any time without warning “becomes part of the crisis that frontline professionals must also address.”

The chapters in this section are a timely reminder of the enduring power of images that survive and linger in both space and time, which can have significant implications for both the subjects of the image as well as the spectators.

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