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INTERNET SEX WORK

Beyond the Gaze

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Introduction: Technology, Social Change and Commercial Sex Online

Abstract Technology, particularly digital communication, has had a profound impact on how we organise our lives, conduct our relationships and the transactions of commerce and retail (van Dijk in The network society, Sage, London, 1991/2012). Sex work is part of this digitally networked society. Increasingly sex is sold via the internet. Most sex workers and their customers make contact using technology (phone, email, text, websites) to facilitate in-person services and arrange offline encounters, but equally important the digital revolution has created a medium through which sexual services are sold only online through indirect contact. This introductory chapter has four functions: (1) to provide a short overview of the literature in relation to commercial sex and digital changes; (2) to introduce the project *Beyond the Gaze: Working Practices, Safety and Regulation of Internet based sex work* and the key messages relayed in the book; (3) to specifically outline the methodologies used to gather the data; (4) to contextualise what direct and indirect sex work online actually involve.

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This introduction has four functions: (1) to provide a short overview of the literature in relation to commerce sex and digital changes; (2) to introduce the project *Beyond the Gaze: Working Practices, Safety and Regulation of Internet based sex work* and the key messages relayed in the book; (3) to specifically outline the methodologies used to gather the data; and (4) to contextualise what direct and indirect sex work online actually involve.

Technology, particularly digital communication, has had a profound impact on how we organise our lives, conduct our relationships and the transactions of commerce and retail (van Dijk 1991/2012). These technological developments have had a significant impact on forms of social organisation and the spatial distribution of human activities, with new social structures emerging which Castells (2000) has termed the 'network society'. Sex work is part of this digitally networked society. Increasingly, sex is sold via the Internet. Most sex workers and their customers make contact using technology (phone, email, text and websites) to facilitate in-person services and arrange offline encounters, but equally important, the digital revolution has created a medium through which sexual services are sold only online through indirect contact. Social changes in society have transformed the sex industry in the twenty-first century. Brents and Hausbeck (2010) have commented on the way in which cultural and economic changes in Western societies have influenced sexual attitudes and practices, as well as the context in which sex is sold. Brents and Sanders (2010) observe that these trends have contributed to a mainstreaming of the sex industry in the West, as economic business strategies are mirrored by sex businesses, gaining them legitimacy and reputation. Nonetheless, 'the acceptability of the sex industry is as much about social class, race and ethnicity as it is about liberal attitudes toward sexuality' (Brents and Hausbeck 2010, p. 16). As Bernstein (2007) notes, there has been an increasing 'privatisation' of the sex industry, as sex workers move from street-based

to indoor work. A combination of changes; in sexual attitudes, mainstreaming of the sex industry and a move to private commercial sex (as opposed to public and visible) are contemporary themes which underpin and inform the move to digitally facilitated commercial sex.

The development of Internet-enabled sex work must be situated in the context of technological and structural transformations in the global economy. For instance, there continues to be a 'digital divide' between those who do or do not have access to Internet-based technologies (Min 2010). This divide also translates into sex work, where although independent sex workers tend to have an online profile and often their own website, those working in other sectors such as massage parlours do not necessarily have Internet access (Pitcher 2014). Further, there are disparities between groups in relation to cultural capital, where individuals do not have the capacity and resources to engage in the digital economy in the same way as those with access to resources. One such group are migrant sex workers who may be disadvantaged, hindered by language capabilities and citizenship status and less able than others control digital interfaces. Whilst there is some evidence to suggest that migrant workers are becoming dominant in certain indoor UK sex markets sectors (Association of Chief Police Officers 2010) or geographical areas (see Chap. 2) their online presence is not evident in the same numbers, particularly when scanning independent escort websites.

Internet-based sex markets have become pervasive (Sanders 2005a, b, 2008), facilitated by computer-mediated communication through email, chat rooms, social media forums and web-based advertising. As Ray (2007) and others have noted, the Internet has had a substantial impact on the way in which independent sex workers, as well as escort agencies and sometimes massage parlours, advertise their services. Studies on the way in which the Internet is used for commercial sexual transactions and advertising by sex workers show that this has not only changed how sex workers and clients communicate with one another but also their social relationships, with the development of 'cyber communities' of both sex workers and customers (Sharp and Earle 2003; Sanders 2005b; Walby 2012; Pitcher 2015a). As with other industries, the Internet has also facilitated not only advertising of sexual services but also provided the opportunity for customers to review services of individual providers, which has become an important aspect of online marketing (Lee-Gonyea et al. 2009; Pettinger 2011).

It is impossible to identify the very precise time when sex workers began to move online but the first ever sex work-related website was reportedly launched in 1994 by a Seattle-based escort agency (Hughes 2004). Writing back in 2003, Sharp and Earle note that 'any Internet search will reveal, there are literally tens of thousands of websites dedicated, in one way or another, to prostitution, and this number is increasing all the time' (Sharp and Earle 2003, p. 37). Sharp and Earle's observation is reflected in our research findings, which show that most of the major market leading platforms in the UK opened their websites in the early to mid 2000s. Platform 1, for example, launched their first site in 2003 using a 'co.uk' domain address moving over to their existing '.com' version in 2005. Several of the other platform owners that we interviewed identified a similar timeline (early to mid 2000s) for the development of their websites. Aimed at the male gay market, the owner of Platform 17 launched in 2002 and the owners of Platforms 16 and 44 both said they started their sites about ten years ago, which at the time of interview would indicate a starting time of around 2006. It is apparent from several studies (e.g. Sharp and Earle 2003; Cunningham and Kendall 2011; Pitcher 2015b) that Internet-based sex work is a growing and developing sector in the UK and internationally. There has been no comprehensive research attempting to quantify this growth, although certain studies (e.g. Import.io 2014; Pitcher 2014; Smith and Kingston 2015) have undertaken small-scale analyses of particular websites advertising sexual services to present estimates of different groups of sex workers advertising online.

Our primary aims for the book are as follows:

1. Chapter 2 establishes the landscape of Internet-based sex work and specifically the micro-practices of sex work online, new sex markets and how the markets are organised and operate. We focus specifically on how new technologies have reshaped and reoriented the sex markets examining the features that have emerged in online (indirect) sex work such as webcamming. We learn more about how sex workers are owning and using digital spaces for their own business as well as to politically organise and engage.

2. Chapter 3 explores the profile and characteristics of sex workers who completed our survey across the gender spectrum who sell sex that is providing new information about how commercial sex is structured and organised.
3. Chapter 4 examines the new forms of crimes facilitated by the online environment such as doxing, misuse of images, persistent harassment as well as everyday privacy concerns. To counteract that, we explore the detailed data from 62 interviews with sex workers which consider the new style safety strategies which merge with more 'old school' measures for keeping safe.
4. In Chap. 5, we ask about the role of the police in Internet-based sex work. Given the Internet is largely self-regulating, we ask how does self-regulation of sex work operate? Who are the actors, what are norms, how can these be strengthened and what is the relationship between self-regulation and formal policing? We want to question whether it is realistic for policing to include Internet-based sex work, and the ways in which safety and support can be developed for this hidden yet sizeable community.
5. In the conclusion, we draw out some of the key messages that we have learnt from this project to assess the impact that digital technologies have on work, safety, crimes and policing.

Methodologies, Collaborations and Partnerships

Our underlining principles were driven by a participatory action research approach, particularly with sex workers, which would form the ways in which the project developed. We involved sex workers in several ways: (1) as paid co-researchers on the project; (2) through an advisory board who would act as sounding points for various methodological decisions throughout the design and piloting phases, points of analysis, guidance on safety resources and good practice guidelines; and involvement in dissemination activities; and (3) through a participatory film to synthesise the findings for a lay audience.

Given the project was underpinned by PAR, we had a methodological approach on which to then design our project. We considered that a

mixed methods approach, drawing on the traditions of qualitative and quantitative data collection methods, would best suit the far-reaching and diverse aims of the project. Qualitative methods, namely, through in-depth semi-structured interviews, would enable detailed information to be drawn out from sex workers, key informants in the online businesses and the police, providing space to talk at length about a vast range of issues. Given the sensitive nature of the sample population and the absolute need for strict ethical protocols, systems of confidentiality and discretion, the interviews were carefully designed tools that mapped onto the groups we wanted to recruit.

Quantitative survey methods were also appropriate as we wanted to find out more information about the trends and patterns of behaviour from sex workers and their customers. We were also aware that researchers in this field have often shied away from traditional positivist notions of quantitative methods, particularly given the significant wealth of data and understanding produced from ethnographic and talking-based methods (Sanders 2006). Yet given the boom in sex work research that has taken place in the past decade, the lack of innovation in merging methods and approaches through deeply ethical processes has meant that the number work has not been done. This has resulted in a lack of information to bring to the table, particularly in the context of policy and parliamentary arenas where numbers talk, resulting in policy often based on a very partial understanding of the sex industry. We designed a set of tools which would enable us to both capture the rich detail of everyday lives but equally in the broader contexts of trends and patterns relating to sexual labour, sexual consumption and the organisation of the sex industry online. The tools were developed with our co-researchers from the sex work community in addition to our advisory group. The tools were checked for relevance, wording and appropriate language, whether questions would help elucidate the information sought, and importantly for recruitment strategies.

Interviews with Sex Workers

Semi-structured interviews were deployed to gather qualitative data about online sex workers experiences and views. This covered six broad topics: reasons for sex working; use of Internet for sex work;

presenting the self online and intimacy; safety; privacy and regulation; and support for sex workers. Questions for those who also did webcamming included relationships with clients; providing a service; and privacy and safety. All people taking part in interviews also completed two forms; first, a 'Sex Worker Participant Basic Information Sheet' which collected quantitative data about key socio-demographic variables, and second, participants completed a form about their job characteristics in terms of how long, where, what markets, hours of pay, rates of pay and other work. Participants were recompensed £20 for their time. Interviews were carried out between November 2015 and October 2016. Four researchers conducted 62 interviews through different mediums: $n = 32$ were telephone interviews, $n = 14$ were carried out face-to-face, $n = 2$ used WhatsApp, $n = 9$ were Skype video interviews and $n = 5$ were Skype phone calls. These options enabled the participant to choose what mode of contact they preferred. Our concern was to obtain a sample of sex workers diverse in terms of sex work jobs they had, geography (region/home nation-based) and gender identity. After initial call outs to sex workers, the characteristics of the sample were monitored carefully, and specific call outs were issued stressing participation was required from particular cohorts of sex workers, for example, male sex workers, trans sex workers and migrant sex workers; specific calls were made to webcammers to ensure people in that specific job role were represented in the sample. The final sample demographics are available in the Appendix.

Survey with Sex Workers

In devising the survey, we replicated core questions on qualifications, age and ethnic categories from the Office for National Statistics guidance (2015). In relation to job satisfaction, we included a general question which is similar to that in other tools such as the European Working Conditions Survey. In the piloting stage, we received responses from ten sex workers (seven female and three male) in different sectors, including independent/agency sex work, BDSM, sexual massage and camming. The survey questionnaire was revised to consider comments

from the pilot stage, which related to issues such as clarification or suggested changes to question wording, the relevance or appropriateness of specific questions or precoded categories and suggestions for additional categories in checklists.

Given that there is no comprehensive sampling frame for sex workers in different sectors working via the Internet (Shaver 2005), and that this remains a hidden group, we were not able to obtain a simple random sample. We are conscious this sampling method may lead to some self-selection bias and that certain groups of sex workers may not have seen the invitation to participate, or have been reluctant to take part in a formal survey and thus we may not have reached more hidden populations of people working in the UK sex industry. Nonetheless, when comparing our findings with those of other studies of independent internet-based sex workers, we may be reasonably confident that our survey sample represents a broad cross-section, in terms of factors such as gender, age, working sector and geographical diversity, of individuals working independently of their own volition in online sex work. In order to reach the maximum number of potential respondents, we sent out an invitation to take part in the survey, with a link, through a number of different sources where female, male and transgender sex workers advertise or provide their services. The survey commenced on 7th November 2016. By the end of 2016, the survey had been promoted on 15 advertising websites, Beyond the Gaze's own website, on social media (Twitter and Facebook), through sex work projects' contacts and by snowballing methods. The survey closed on 23rd January 2017, with 652 completed responses and 6 partial responses, which were removed prior to analysis. A further 11 respondents neither lived nor worked in the UK, and these were also removed from the data set, leaving a final total of 641 respondents living and/or working in the UK. A profile of respondents is shown in the Appendix.

Recruitment Online

Our recruitment methods for sex worker interviews and the two surveys (sex workers and customers) were based on a range of methods, but

mostly facilitated through web platforms where sex workers advertise. Much time was spent building up research relationships with the key platforms so the recruitment process could reach the broadest range of respondents working in the UK. We are confident that no other study in the UK has worked with as many platforms, or achieved similar levels of access to private spaces on the closed website. We were able to achieve this through the support of key allies in the sex industry and those who introduced us to business owners. The project was privileged to have direct support from key platforms who displayed advertising banners promoting the surveys and call for interviewees. We also utilised social media activity as a recruitment method, through our Twitter site and also enjoyed considerable exposure via co-researchers postings and 'tweets' from sex workers who championed the research. Individuals also provided soundbite interviews for social media dispersal and went on the record clarifying our bona fide status as a research group.

Police and Web Platform Interviews

Two interview guides were designed for stakeholders, one for police and a second for IT, web platform, marketing and other online services representatives. We carried out a total of 35 interviews with police representatives, through these we interviewed a total of 56 police officers (plus $n = 2$ local authority representatives located in a multi-agency team with police) from $n = 16$ force areas across Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales and England (with representation from all English regions including North West, North East, Midlands, Yorkshire and Humber, North East, East of England, South West, London and the South East). Our sample had good representation geographically, including all UK nations and regions and representing different policies and laws on sex work.

To gain further insight into the commercial and business aspect of the digital landscape, 11 interviews were carried out with 12 individuals (one joint interview) representing IT, web platform and marketing stakeholders. Amongst those interviewed were webmasters for advertising platforms, owners of advertising platforms/hook-up apps/porn

site, representatives from a profile building service used by cam models and web designers specialising in design for sex workers. The sample included representatives from market lead advertising sites in the UK for female, male and transgender sex workers as well as smaller platforms.

Parameters and Limitations of the Study

There are limitations with this study, partly reflecting the specific research questions, but also methodological barriers researching the sex industry. In terms of the parameters of the study, we made a clear and conscious decision not to include modern slavery as an area of research, given the very specific relationship between commercial sex trafficking and organised crime through the Internet (see the special issue by Lerum and Brents 2016; Thakor and Boyd 2013). Researching how modern slavery and commercial sexual exploitation is facilitated through the Internet would have required specific partners (namely, police crime analysts) who have access to highly confidential information and work across the 'dark net', for instance (see ACPO 2010). Including modern slavery would have necessitated a different methodological approach and framework and one we felt could not be combined with the current broader questions we had about how digital technologies had changed the sex industry.

One of our main limitations is the lack of migrant sex worker representation in the study. In 2015 when BtG research commenced, many outreach and support projects throughout the UK who participated in the BtG and NUM practitioners group reported significant portions of migrant sex workers present in their local sex markets with Eastern Europe being the main area of origin and Romanians forming the largest migrant group amongst cis female sex workers. Those who carried out netreach reported significant proportions of migrants advertising in certain online spaces, they also found that this group was the hardest to make contact with, acknowledging a range of additional barriers to service access and support networks faced by migrants (Platt et al. 2011). Migrant people constituted 15% of people who took part in our survey