

Anastasia Powell

'safe sext'?

young people, technology and sexual violence

In her forthcoming book, *Sex, Power and Consent: Youth culture and the unwritten rules*, Dr Anastasia Powell explores young women's experiences of pressured and unwanted sex, and the socio-cultural norms that contribute to these experiences. In the following article, Anastasia discusses recent public debates surrounding 'sexting' and what they reflect about society's understandings of sex, power and consent more broadly.

It has become commonplace to acknowledge that developments in information and communication technologies (ICTs) have significantly changed the ways we connect and relate with each other. For children and young people, or 'Generation Y' (broadly defined here as those born in and after 1982), ICTs have become a vital part of social life and a forum for the exploration and presentation of their identities, including their sexual identity. Indeed, according to figures from the Australian Communication and Media Authority (ACMA), social activities such as emailing, mobile phone and instant messaging, as well as visiting social networking sites, form the greatest component of young people's use of ICTs, far exceeding the hours spent on homework or other 'practical' functions (ACMA 2007).

Despite many young people's positive experiences of mobile technologies and online spaces and the apparent 'freedom' for self-expression they can represent, it is the 'risks' and 'dangers' of ICTs that are more commonly the focus of public debates. 'Sexting', or the sending of sexually explicit text and picture messages via mobile phone, is a case in point. However while those of us concerned with the prevention of sexual violence might be focused on the more exploitative forms that sexting can sometimes take, the recent public debates regarding sexting also reflect, in my view, problematic social

norms regarding sex, power and consent. These norms underpin experiences of sexual violence, particularly for young women. It is these two elements of the issue of young people, technology and sexual violence that I wish to explore further here.

Sexting and the role of ICTs in sexual violence

While there is, as yet, little Australian research into the exact nature and prevalence of sexting, some surveys have found that as many as 25 per cent of respondents have been asked to send a nude picture of themselves, and as many as 51 per cent of teenage girls say they sent the sex message due to pressure from a boy (Battersby 2008; National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy n.d.). Certainly reports from schools and parents suggest that sexting is an important emerging issue in the Australian context (*ABC News* 2009). Two particular concerns are that teenage girls and young women may be experiencing pressure to send the sexually explicit images in the first instance, and that, where the initial image has been sent with consent, it may then be widely circulated without their consent.



ICTs have also been used in the perpetration of sexual assault itself, as in the 2006 case of the 'Werribee DVD' where the assault of a young girl was recorded and distributed through DVD and internet postings, as well as more recent instances of sexual assaults being recorded and distributed via mobile phones and social networking websites (Powell 2009; 2010a, b).

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Technology, it would seem, offers 'new ways for committing traditional crime' (Australian Federal Police 2007: 3). In the case of sexual violence, ICTs create new mediums for continuing the harm by further humiliating and harassing the victim. However, rather than being attributable to the technologies themselves, the underlying causes of sexual violence continue to be intertwined with societal norms towards sex, gender and consent. Like patterns of sexual assault generally, it is women and children who are typically the subjects of unauthorised sexual images (Department of Justice Canada 2002). Unauthorised sexual images (whether through sexting or in relation to recordings of sexual assaults) and the harm they cause can be understood as part of the continuum of sexual violence (Kelly 1987). In addition, within the broader context of so-called 'raunch' culture, it has become commonplace, even expected, for young women to be represented (and to represent themselves) in very particular, sexualised ways.

The influence of raunch culture

As is highlighted in my book *Sex, Power and Consent*, contemporary western culture has been described as the 'age of raunch', 'generation sex' and 'generation SLUT' or 'Sexually Liberated Urban Teens' (Powell 2007; 2010b). Following the so-called liberation of the 1960s and 70s, we live in times of an unprecedented sexualised and sex-everywhere culture. These cultural expectations have been force-fed to contemporary young people more than to any previous generation,

thanks to a highly sexualised consumer capitalism. In the 'post-feminist media culture' young women must choose from a very narrow and unfulfilling field of choices regarding their sexual identities and experiences of sexual pleasure. According to feminist writers such as Rosalind Gill and Ariel Levy, this sexuality speaks to a hetero-normative male fantasy in which women's sexual pleasure is derived from the role of sexual object associated with the sex and pornography industries (Gill 2007; Levy 2005). The mainstream stylising of young women's sexuality is touted as an indication that young women are sexually 'liberated' and that they are free to engage in sexual pleasure outside of the gendered norms which would previously have precluded, or at least negatively judged, such expressions of female sexuality. In a world with apparently endless 'choice', young women are under increasing pressure not only to conform to these particular versions of female sexuality, but to embrace them as being 'empowered'. As Levy (2005) argues, it is as if feminism gave women the freedom to choose to be sexual but not what kind of sexuality they can express.

The promises of feminism then – of opening up gender roles and valuing female sexuality and sexual pleasure – have yet to be realised. Instead, young women are encouraged, even expected, to display an active and 'out there' sexuality through their behaviour and dress. Yet they continue to tread an impossibly fine line between being judged a 'slut' if they go too far or 'frigid' if they do not embrace their new-found sexual 'freedom' enough. Women's experiences of pressured and unwanted sex have arguably become more problematic in the context of raunch culture.

In addition, while feminisms have continued to critique gender inequalities, many younger women (and men) have infamously responded to this with ambivalence and, in many cases, repudiation. The catch-cry of the post-1990s young woman – 'I'm not a feminist, but ...' – reflects this tension within our supposed 'post-feminist' era. Post-feminism refers to our living in a time in which feminism is assumed to have 'outlived its purpose', that it has already been successful in ending gender inequality (McRobbie 2009). In this context it has become difficult to be openly critical of sexual mores (even those regarding consent and sexual violence) without being labelled 'anti-choice', 'anti-sex' and being seen to be rejecting the very sexual freedoms that feminism fought

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to achieve (see McRobbie 2004; 2009). This has the cumulative effect of making young women’s experiences of sexual coercion increasingly difficult – both for them to identify and name at an individual level, and to speak out against collectively at a societal level.

The experiences of young women

Interviews with girls illustrate the influence of such pressures in Australia and internationally, particularly in relation to sext messages. It is increasingly expected that young women engage in sexting as part of ‘normal’ sexual relationships. For example:

He had just threatened to dump me and said if I took them we could get back together. I made him promise he’d keep them to himself. It took him about two weeks to convince me – he was constantly pounding ‘please, please’ – he said he needed them for us to be together ... and at the time I decided it would be an okay thing to do ... I thought if I did it for him, everything would be happy and we’d be a happy couple ... When you are young and have your first boyfriend, all you want is for the relationship to work. You’ll do anything to make that happen.

– ‘Helen’, aged 14 years (see British Broadcasting Corporation, 2009)

I was going out with somebody and he pressed me for a long time to send pictures to him. I wasn’t going to do it ... He went on at me for a long time to do it and I had always said no. But then I thought, you know, we’d fought and fought about it, and I just thought right, I’ll give in and I’ll do it ... I wouldn’t do it if I hadn’t been in a relationship, I wouldn’t have done it for anybody else.

– ‘Tracey’, age not revealed (see British Broadcasting Corporation, 2009)

These experiences are similar to those reported by young women in much of the other research when discussing the subtle sexual pressures within their relationships. For example, international research suggests that fear of a partner getting angry or ending the relationship if sex is denied is a common reason given by adolescent women for their experiences of

unwanted sex (Blythe et al 2006). In the case of sexting, while there may sometimes be pressure to send the initial image itself, the further distribution of that image is an additional violation of an individual’s sexual autonomy, further humiliating, intimidating or harassing the victim.

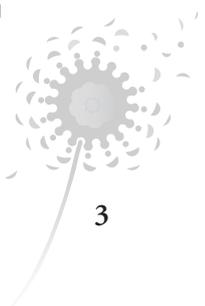
‘Helen’ describes:

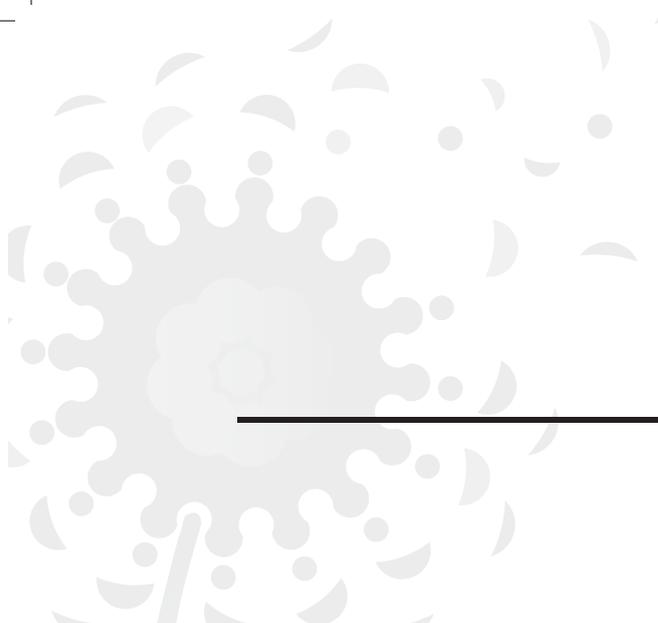
I was absolutely mortified, horrified. Everyone had seen them, not only all the people in my class but even at other schools in the area. The pictures were up in the bathrooms, in the corridors. People would stop me in the street and recognise me. They called me a porn star. I couldn’t go [out], it was embarrassing for my friends as much as me. I was going to leave school at one point but I was too mortified to explain why to my parents.

– ‘Helen’, aged 14 years (see British Broadcasting Corporation, 2009)

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The broader issue of taking unauthorised sexual images of women and girls (including the widespread, non-consensual distribution of sext messages) can be understood as yet another feature of a society which, despite years of significant reforms to sexual consent legislation and documented shifts in community attitudes towards rape, continues to fail to take women’s sexual autonomy seriously. Yet rarely does public or media debate engage with the issue in this way. Instead, the persistence of the sexual double-standard means that not only is it mostly images of young women that are being distributed, but it is also young women who are being labelled and judged by their peers and broader society for engaging in sexual behaviour in the first place – rather than a simultaneous focus on those (both male and female) who send on the original messages. These images would not be distributed if, first, those responsible did not consider that the images would enhance their social standing and that there was a willing audience for them, and, second, if that initial audience did not consider it okay to send the image on to others.





Here again, the broader context of raunch culture and an assumed 'right' to consumption of sexual images means that the individual (usually woman's) right to sexual autonomy is not even considered. Dare I mention it, but the appalling public response to the (clearly non-consensual) nude image of celebrity model Lara Bingle which was leaked to the media provides a poignant example. If young women had any delusions about the extent to which their consent to the taking and distribution of a sexual image matters in mainstream society, then the tirade of public sentiment against Bingle and in support of 'poor' Brendan Fevola and Michael Clarke would surely put them in their place. In this case, it was not the non-consensual taking of the image nor its non-consensual distribution that was the focus of public censure – rather, it was Bingle's 'unjustified' indignation and the damage that her 'over-reaction' to such a 'minor' incident would cause to the men involved. The public response to this case (and numerous non-celebrity cases like it) reflects social norms regarding sex and consent whereby (usually women) victims of sexual violence and exploitation continue to be undermined and discredited, while the responsibility of (usually male) perpetrators is minimised or completely ignored.

In addition, as young people continue to become accustomed to and surrounded by sexual images, particularly of women, there are increasing pressures on both young women and men to reproduce these images in their own lives: to participate in 'raunch culture'. For young women this may mean pressure to present themselves in a way that reflects the new 'empowered' model of female sexuality; for young men it can mean pressure to be avid consumers of these images. For example, when I spoke about this issue at a public forum recently, one mother told me that her son had been bullied at school for not having sexual images of girlfriends to share on his mobile phone. He was taunted as being 'gay' because he didn't engage in sexting and share these images with male peers. This anecdote, while making no claims to represent a majority experience, does reflect the pressures young men may experience to conform to dominant models of masculinity. It also demonstrates the normalisation of the distribution of unauthorised sexual images of women and girls. Such pressures can make it hard for young

men to 'do masculinity differently' and take an alternative stand on such issues. At the same time, they also reinforce the objectification of women and girls.

A prevention agenda

While there are ongoing legislative and policy debates regarding the appropriate response to sexting in particular, it is essential that a prevention agenda is also directed at this issue. In particular, that sexual violence prevention programs engage both young women and young men in discussions about what it might mean to be an ethical user and consumer of technologies, and an ethical bystander. For example, Australian criminologist Moira Carmody, in collaboration with the NSW Rape Crisis Service, has developed a sexual violence prevention program that supports young people to ethically negotiate sexual encounters and engages them in discussions about 'being an ethical friend and citizen' (Carmody 2009). Another sexual violence prevention program has been developed and evaluated by CASA House in Melbourne, with an additional component currently under development which will tackle issues of technology and sexual violence (Imbesi 2008).

We can indeed educate young men and women to be more critical consumers of images: to think about the images they encounter and whether it is ethical to send them on to their peers; and, additionally, to consider whether it might be appropriate and ethical to report the image to an authority. This is not to suggest that we should ignore educating young people about the potential for exploitation through ICTs and to be careful of the ways in which they represent themselves. Rather, it is of serious concern that to date much of the 'warnings' have been far too reminiscent of 'victim blaming', as though there was only one party responsible for forms of sexual violence and exploitation, whether via ICTs or otherwise. In a youth culture where exposure to sexual content, sending on received images and posting others' images on social networking sites are all normalised, we need to engage young people in discussions about setting boundaries on not only the images that they choose to take of themselves (and the broader influences on that 'choice') but, just as

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importantly, the images that they choose to send on to others. More broadly, what the public responses to the issue of sexting and other cases of distribution of unauthorised sexual images highlight is the need for primary prevention that challenges problematic socio-cultural norms about the meaning and importance of sexual consent.

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- The book *Sex, Power and Consent: Youth culture and the unwritten rules* by Dr Anastasia Powell and published by Cambridge University Press will be available July 2010.**
- Dr Anastasia Powell will be the keynote speaker at DVRCV’s Partners In Prevention forum on 11 August – see advert p.19 of this edition.**