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Fighting Fire with Fire: Utilizing Social Media to Combat Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking

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FIGHTING FIRE WITH FIRE:
Utilizing Social Media to Combat Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking

Maggie Falwell

“We’re turning the tables on the traffickers. Just as they are now using technology and the Internet to exploit their victims, we’re going to harness technology to stop them. We’re encouraging tech companies and advocates and law enforcement—and we’re also challenging college students—to develop tools that our young people can use to stay safe online and on their smart phones.” - President Barack Obama

INTRODUCTION

- Three-quarters (76%) of teens use social media, with phones and other mobile devices being the primary driver of teen internet use: Fully 91% of teens go online from mobile devices at least occasionally. Among these “mobile teens,” 94% go online daily or more often².
- Increasingly, the business of human trafficking is taking place online and over mobile phones.
- Offenders use online services to advertise their illicit businesses, namely exploiting young women and girls for commercial sex by using online services such as Craigslist.com and Backpage.com³.
- A variety of other social, informational, and mobile networking sites, including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, play an increasingly critical role in fostering the recruitment of minors into sex trafficking and in providing a platform for trafficker-pimps, trafficked minors, and Johns to maintain communication with one another⁴.
- Traffickers are able to recruit, advertise, organize, and communicate primarily—or even exclusively—via mobile phone, effectively streamlining their activities and expanding their criminal networks⁵.

LOCATION OF POTENTIAL HUMAN TRAFFICKING CASES IN THE U.S.

INNOVATION

- My innovative idea is to employ the use of a mobile app, which will provide information and services to victims of human trafficking.
- The app will pose as a virtual game with a discrete portal that connects victims to a local anti-human trafficking advocate.
- In this portal, trafficked individuals will be able to connect via messaging with an advocate who can provide them with appropriate information and attempt to assist them for emancipation.
- If the victim’s pimp is approaching, the individual can “swipe” and clear all the messages or she/he can lock their phone, which will also erase the texts. Therefore, the individual is not placed in harms way if the pimp sees.
- Notifications will not be sent to the user’s phone and they will only see messages once they enter the portal at their convenience.

CONCLUSION

- Instead of relying on anecdotal events, most analysts agree that significant research is necessary to judge the extent to which human trafficking is facilitated and effectively combated via the internet and other social media technologies⁶.
- Efforts to prevent and prosecute these crimes are still in their early phases. More research and practice is warranted to develop better methods to identify and investigate domestic minor sex trafficking in all its forms⁷.
- Utilizing the app, researchers may collect both quantitative data, such as the number of downloads and time from initial contact to emancipation, and qualitative data, such as case by case analysis of conversation(s).

References

2. Lenhart, Amanda, Pew Research Center, April 2015, “Teen, Social Media and Technology Overview 2015”