

Technology, Online News, and Crime Victims

Technology has created new ways for individuals to rapidly share information and opinions. These developments create unique opportunities for increased engagement in the public sphere but when it comes to crime victims and their healing, these same developments present significant challenges. Emblematic of this tension is the “comment forum”.

What are “comment forums”?

- Forums allow readers to participate in news production and “real time” response to news.
- Commenters can participate with anonymity, if they choose.
- Though relatively few individuals *write* comments (2.5-16%), a majority of those accessing news sites *read* comments (66-85%).^{1,2,3}
- When individuals *do* comment, they tend to respond rather than create.¹
- Moderation of forums is low, weakening the gatekeeping function that historically promoted accuracy and balance in news content.^{1,3,4,6}
 - Rarely moderated by journalists or editors
 - Un-moderated or post-moderated (posts only reviewed after they’ve been published)²
 - Peer-moderated^{3,7}
 - “Collaborative Filtering” (flagging of inappropriate content)³
 - Regardless of moderation type, content generally remains visible for a substantial period of time before being removed or demoted

Comment Forums Create News and Shape Opinion

- The multitude of facts and opinions now readily available through the Internet has created a public expectation of immediate, detailed information, and a diminished reliance on credible sourcing.^{6,8,9}
- Comments are generally placed close to news stories (e.g., on the same page), which suggests news rather than opinion.⁹
- Readers interpret a news story through the story’s frame and their own lens.¹⁰
 - Frames provide a way to understand and ‘place’ a problem & guide and limit the potential responses
- Readers integrate others’ comments into their understanding.¹¹
- Despite credibility gap, readers consider commenter content seriously.⁹
- Readers gauge public opinion based on comments^{3,11} and may alter their opinions to be in line with others.^{3,12}
- Story selection may be based on the *quantity* of comments posted by others to a story (a new ‘agenda setting’ effect.)³

Comment Forums and Crime Victims

- Survivors *are* consumers of forums.¹³

Privacy

- Victims may be identified or located through information provided, regardless of mainstream media's non-disclosure.

Rape Myths

- Media coverage of sexual assault continues to include a significant amount of victim blaming and rape myth perpetuation,¹⁴ and comment forums are no exception.
- In a sample of 4 news stories on the same case, 33% of comments (N=90) included overt victim blaming language.*

Suspension of Time

- A story can stay live indefinitely on the Internet.
- There is a permanence and perpetual accessibility of misinformation, harmful frames, and other detrimental information.⁶

"Well in this world she should have been more careful. 25 years...that's great! Although I wonder why so many."

Commenter responding news of a rapist's 25 year conviction

"I'm not saying she deserved anything like what she got.... No woman ever deserves to be assaulted. Ever. But to pretend that this story shouldn't serve as a cautionary tale is unrealistic. Ladies, get to know your dates before you go home with them. Like, maybe, have a cup of tea instead of booze... Especially with a guy you meet on Match, for crying out loud. They're all d-bags and everybody with any sense knows that."

What you can do

Learn

- ☐ About trauma & narrative
- ☐ About victims' rights, including the rights to privacy and protection
- ☐ About framing

Speak out & Speak with Intention

- ☐ Work to reframe stories with an understanding of all of the above.
- ☐ Research has found that individuals who pose questions, offer different perspectives, share experiences, and challenge or dismiss comments with socially unacceptable statements *can and do* stimulate diverse thinking and discussion, as well as positively impact the quality and depth of discourse with their participation.⁵

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