

COMMENTARY

Human Trafficking and Technology

Law enforcement agencies have begun using the tools that traffickers have turned to—ads, chatrooms, dating sites—to conduct online raids targeting traffickers and individuals seeking to illegally purchase humans or their services.

Tatiana Akhund, Daniel Pollack and Katie Shipp | March 1, 2022



Human trafficking is universally regarded as one of the most repugnant violations of human right. In unstable economic times, there is an acknowledged added, direct effect on the vulnerability of individuals and their increased chance of falling prey to human traffickers.

The number of people trafficked each year is uncertain. As of May 6, 2021, the Migration Data Portal reported that there were 108,613 individual cases of human trafficking in 164 countries. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 8.7 provides that member states “take immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labor, end modern slavery and human trafficking and secure prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labor, including recruitment and use of child soldiers, and by 2025 end child labor in all its forms.” The Polaris Project, a leading nonprofit non-governmental organization that works to combat and prevent sex and labor trafficking in North America, estimated that 10,583 victims were trafficked in 2020 within the United States.

Human trafficking survives almost exclusively on its ability to exploit the vulnerability of others. Sadly, technological advances have created increasingly facilitated labor and sex trafficking. The widespread use of the Internet created a global new platform on which traffickers could recruit and showcase victims, as well as a space to conduct transactions. The technological leaps in smartphones even further opened this space, allowing any person immediate, worldwide access to this platform.

As we enter the third year of the pandemic and individuals’ lives become more and more ingrained in the virtual world, UNODC has found a correlation between COVID and increased trafficking through the Internet. Because individuals—especially children—spent more time online and on social media sites during periods of quarantine and containment, they were increasingly vulnerable to online exploitation. This is not surprising. As COVID continues, people may find their social circles shrinking, their access points to employment and friendships

frozen off, normal routines interrupted (especially for those working from home), and themselves reliant on social media.

Through the Internet, traffickers find outlets to create advertisements to lure and recruit new victims for labor and sex trafficking. For example, police and law enforcement in Moldova and Italy dismantled a labor trafficking network that used fake employment agency websites as their primary recruitment tool. In Illinois, a woman was enticed with a modeling opportunity advertised online, but was forced into prostitution after responding. Not only does the Internet allow for the easy recruitment of victims through a widespread dissemination of false opportunities, it also acts as a coercion mechanism. A former victim of sex trafficking stated that she was blackmailed into prostitution when her rapist threatened to share recordings and other photos of her online.

The Internet has not just created a platform for trafficking on an individual level. Sites have emerged on the Internet and the dark web that have the ability to traffic victims at terrifyingly high levels. Backpage was infamous for the platform it provided to traffickers. In 2018, Backpage was seized by U.S. law enforcement, a move that was in fact criticized by sex-work advocates who argued that shutting down Backpage would only create room for more sites on the dark web, ultimately making it harder to track down victims or traffickers. Yet, while younger counterparts *have* emerged on the dark web since Backpage was shut down in 2019, a study by Childsafe.AI, a software company that deploys machine learning and active collection networks to observe actors that buy and sell human beings online, found that demand for prostitution dropped significantly and searches for illicit sex plummeted in the year after Backpage was shut down.

Unfortunately, this reprieve was brief. As all Hydra heads do, new “marketing” tactics have emerged for traffickers in the post-Backpage world. Instead of a single platform ruling the Internet’s trafficking market, a 2020 Polaris report and Childsafe.AI study found that sex traffickers began to use advertising platforms, “hobby boards,” and Sugar Dating sites.

Hobby boards are especially unique, and less well known than sugar dating sites. Hobby board platforms allow individuals (self-identified “hobbyists”) to purchase commercial sex, review individuals or businesses providing commercial sex, and participate in discussion forums and chat rooms on the subject. Significantly, the boards also serve as a platform for traffickers to “advertise” their victims. Prospective buyers can see detailed lists of sexual acts or services provided as well as graphic descriptions an individual’s body parts.

Because the Internet is not fading away, the ways in which it is exploited will continue to develop and mutate. However, it should be seen not as a wild, unrestrained and faceless force to be reckoned with, but as a tool to be used. Law enforcement agencies have begun using the tools that traffickers have turned to—ads, chatrooms, dating sites—to conduct online raids targeting traffickers and individuals seeking to illegally purchase humans or their services.

Technology and AI have also been used to flag and monitor patterns indicative of trafficking. For example, Microsoft developed “Project Artemis” in collaboration with The Meet Group, Roblox, Kik and Thorn. The computerized system uses Natural Language Processing to detect specific words and speech patterns, which are then sent to human

moderators for review. This could be a huge step in monitoring chat rooms and forums, which are inundated with too many users for human moderators to oversee alone. A computer-generated CGI called “Sweetie” has also been used since 2013. Using an automated chat function, the computer image of a young girl has helped law enforcement expose over 20,000 people seeking commercial sex with minors.

Just as traffickers have developed their tools and expanded through the bounds of the Internet, these same advances in technology provide law enforcement with the ability to mass target offenders. Admittedly, it may take the law time to catch up, especially as interstate and international targeting and trafficking continues to increase in scale.

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