

Human Trafficking and the Internet* (*and other technologies, too)

By Judge Herbert B. Dixon Jr.

From the sublime and educational to the provocative and salacious, I am often amazed at the information and materials that can be found on the Internet. So it should not come as a surprise that the Internet, along with other technologies, plays a role in both enabling and combating human trafficking.

Use of the Internet to Ensnare Trafficking Victims

Some trafficking cases start with the offender contacting the potential victims on social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace. The techniques used by the offenders to gain trust vary widely, including expressing love and admiration of the victim, promising to make the victim a star, and providing a ticket to a new location away from the victim's home. Another type of trafficking effort starts with an online employment search and results in an unsuspecting victim relocating from her home on the promise of an unbelievably good job. After the victim has joined the offender, various techniques are used to restrict the victim's access to communication with home, such as imposing physical punishment unless the victim complies with the trafficker's demands and making threats of harm and even death to the victim and her family.

Here are some examples of how victims have been ensnared into human trafficking:

- In Illinois, a 19-year-old female responded to an Internet ad promoting modeling opportunities. Instead of offering her a modeling job, the offender enticed the girl to wait in a hotel room where she was expected to have sex with an unknown person. The offender, who would become her pimp, intended to sell the young woman for sex at an hourly rate. In this case, the

pimp's would-be client was an undercover police officer who brought the young woman to safety.¹

- In Denmark, law enforcement authorities noted suspicious advertisements for nannies, waitresses, and dancers on Web sites in Latvia and Lithuania. The traffickers used Internet sites to post advertisements for jobs in Western Europe. An anti-trafficking group in Poland reports that 30 percent of its clients (trafficked women) were recruited through the Internet.²
- Polish and Italian police jointly dismantled a network that trafficked men for the purpose of forced labor. An employment agency Web site was the primary means of recruitment.³
- Testimony was presented to the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations at a hearing on "Human Trafficking: Mail Order Bride Abuses" that some entities in the "mail order bride" industry (or international matchmaking organizations) have

been linked to trafficking organizations that offer adults and girls as "brides" but sell them privately into sexual exploitation or domestic slavery. These incidents include occasions in which foreign organized crime groups used fiancée and marriage visas to bring women into the United States for exploitation.⁴

- A scheme demonstrating how technology was used to circumvent both international borders and specific national laws involved trafficking of Japanese women from Japan to Hawaii for the purpose of sexual exploitation. The traffickers advertised in Japan for "nude models" to work in the United States. Upon their arrival in Hawaii, the models were used to perform live Internet sex shows and make pornographic videos that would be shown to Japanese audiences via the Internet. To avoid running afoul of Japanese pornography laws, the traffickers conducted their operation, which was

aimed at a Japanese market with all Web site material written in Japanese, outside Japan, in Hawaii. The live and recorded “performances” were transmitted to an Internet Service Provider in California, through which Japanese viewers would access them.⁵ In 2006, 89 percent of the estimated 270 million pornographic Web pages existing worldwide were produced in the United States.⁶

Efforts to Interrupt and Combat Suspected Online Human Trafficking Schemes

One noteworthy incident used a technique called crowdsourcing, that is, taking a job that had been traditionally performed by a designated agent and outsourcing it to an undefined, large group of people in the form of an open call. In May 2010, an anti-human trafficking activist became aware of a Russian woman traveling with a female friend. The two women had paid about \$3,000 for a travel exchange program that promised a job in Washington, D.C. When the two women arrived in the United States, their exchange program contact changed the details and directed them to travel to New York for work as hostesses at a lounge. The activist suspected the two women were being lured into a human-trafficking operation but was unable to convince them not to travel to New York. The activist then posted an online plea to an anti-human trafficking discussion group that led off with “Help me help my friend in D.C.” and described the situation of the two traveling women. Within minutes, discussion group members offered information and support, called human-trafficking hotlines and the Russian embassy in Washington, offered places for the women to stay, researched the travel agency and the lounge where the women were promised work, and volunteered to meet them at the bus depot. According to later news reports, one member of the discussion group did meet the women at the bus depot upon their arrival in New York and convinced them not to meet the “exchange program” contact. It goes without saying that such a massive mobilization of non-law enforcement and

nonmilitary personnel in numerous locations in such a short interval to assist and protect these two traveling women would have been impossible without the Internet. Increasingly, anti-trafficking groups are employing crowdsourcing tactics to assist in their work.⁷

Craigslist, an online site that provides classified ads and discussion forums for jobs, housing, items for sale, services, local events, and more, has been the subject of numerous anti-trafficking efforts. Based on allegations that Craigslist facilitated sexual exploitation through its Adult Services (formerly Erotic Services) section, Craigslist was often investigated, sued, and publicly criticized. These efforts included (1) a lawsuit by the Chicago Cook County sheriff alleging that missing children, runaways, abused women, and women trafficked from foreign countries were routinely forced to have sex with strangers because they were being “pimped” on Craigslist and (2) a hearing on domestic minor sex trafficking before the U.S. House of Representatives Judiciary Committee Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security. Ultimately, Craigslist announced closure of its Adult Services section in the United States, and later expanded the announcement to worldwide closure of its Adult Services section.⁸ Opinions are varied whether this result aided the overall effort to combat human trafficking. Some law enforcement agencies and anti-trafficking activists believe that Craigslist was the most responsive online site to law enforcement inquiries and its cooperation provided invaluable assistance in devising methods to investigate and combat human trafficking. Those expressing that opinion are of the view that the traffickers using Craigslist merely moved on to other sites.

The Internet and technology can even expose the customers to whom the traffickers cater. Take, for example, a Florida case in which a trafficker posted online ads offering commercial sex services by victims who were minors. Law enforcement investigators collected 28 Internet ads and a Garmin GPS seized from one of the trafficker’s vehicles. The investigators

were able to study the information yielded by the GPS unit and establish locations of several of the trafficker’s customers.⁹

Investigations by law enforcement and anti-human trafficking organizations have documented possible instances of online trafficking activity by members of organized crime families. The offenders used online services to advertise their illicit businesses, namely, exploiting young women and girls for commercial sex by using such online services as Myredbook.com, Eros.com, Cityvive.com, Adultsearch.com, Craigslist.com, LocalEscortPages.com, FindHotEscorts.com, EroticMugShots.com, MyProviderGuide.com, and Backpage.com. Searching one such Web site in the Los Angeles area using standard keyword search terms associated with the commercial sex industry, researchers collected data from 18,429 online posts. The researchers found that because many telephone numbers were associated with multiple sites, a total of only 4,753 unique telephone numbers covered all the sites. Also, the researchers noted that 2,050 of the online posts listed a telephone number that did not appear in any other post. The balance of the telephone numbers were associated with numerous online posts, including 112 telephone numbers that were each associated with 25 or more online posts and 107 telephone numbers that were associated



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with 4,615 of the online posts. Finally, posts from the most commonly listed telephone numbers revealed that identical phone numbers were sometimes used to advertise individuals of different ages and descriptions, in different locations, at different times. According to researchers, this type of analysis provides insights into potential cases of human trafficking.¹⁰

Private Industry's Efforts to Combat Human Trafficking

There are numerous instances of private industry joining the effort to expand the use of technology to disrupt and combat human trafficking.¹¹

- In December 2011, Google made several grants totaling \$11.5 million to anti-trafficking organizations to support new initiatives utilizing tech-

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nology to combat human trafficking. These technology-focused initiatives include projects with Polaris Project, Slavery Footprint, and the International Justice Mission.

- In June 2012, Microsoft Digital Crimes Unit and Microsoft Research collaborated on an initiative to support researchers who had creative ideas for researching the role of technology in facilitating the commercial sexual exploitation of children. The

Microsoft groups awarded a total of \$185,000 to six research teams studying a wide variety of issues related to disrupting technology-facilitated sex trafficking and improving services to victims.

- LexisNexis also is engaged in the effort to combat human trafficking and has been instrumental in promoting and introducing an array of technology-driven tools to assist in detecting, monitoring, and researching human trafficking, including a national database of social service providers; an online resource center for attorneys who work with human-trafficking victims; a training institute established with the American Bar Association on civil remedies for victims; and a Human Trafficking Index to track trafficking news articles produced by 6,000 news sources in more than 120 countries.
- JP Morgan Chase has developed tools for applying anti-money laundering protocols to human-trafficking networks. Because both money laundering and human trafficking tend to involve hidden financial transactions, technologies for detecting money laundering have proven useful in detecting other illicit transactions. One such investigation of several credit card transactions at a nail salon during nonbusiness hours uncovered a human-trafficking operation.
- Software company Palantir Technologies has worked with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) to improve NCMEC's ability to process and make sense of all the data at its disposal as a result of numerous initiatives studying human trafficking. These initiatives have demonstrated that researchers who use the substantial data that are being developed will be able to perform such tasks as diagramming complex relationships between persons, businesses, and online sites that may involve human trafficking. The resulting data and analysis can be of valuable assistance to law enforcement and others engaged in the effort to combat trafficking.

The Promotion of Research to Study Effective Anti-Trafficking Strategies

Instead of relying on anecdotal events, most commentators agree that significant research is necessary to judge the extent to which human trafficking is facilitated and effectively combated by the Internet and other technologies. One research report notes the necessity of bringing together various protocols (including those of the academic community, government, law enforcement, private industry, and NGOs). The report suggests future research questions, including:

- Can online technologies be used to monitor and disrupt the demand side of sex trafficking?
- Can technologies designed to detect sex trafficking be used to detect labor trafficking?
- How might offline trafficking behaviors manifest themselves in online messages?
- Do potential traffickers and clients using mainstream social media sites differ from those using more underground sites, forums, and chat rooms?
- Can online technologies be exploited by traffickers to reconnect with recovering victims, leading to recidivism?
- How will Internet-enabled mobile devices affect human trafficking?¹²

No doubt, the above research and recent technological interventions in anti-trafficking efforts would enhance the effectiveness of those efforts, increase public awareness of the efforts, and assist the development of support programs for victims and survivors of trafficking.

Conclusion

There have been hopeful signs generated in efforts using the Internet and other technologies to combat human trafficking. However, with each effort to advance the cause of combating human trafficking, the traffickers look for newer technologies to stay a step ahead of law enforcement. The president of the United States spoke on this topic recently, specifically noting the use of technology to aid in this fight.

He stated:

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.

*President Barack Obama
Address to the Clinton
Global Initiative
September 25, 2012*

I agree, Mr. President. I agree! ■

Endnotes

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3. *Id.*

4. *Id.* at 9.

5. *Id.* at 12.

6. *Pornographic Statistics*, FAMILY SAFE MEDIA, http://familysafemedia.com/pornography_statistics.html#anchor6.

7. M. LATONERO ET AL., USC ANNEBERG CTR. ON COMM'C'N LEADERSHIP & POLICY, *THE RISE OF MOBILE AND THE DIFFUSION OF TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED TRAFFICKING* 20–21 (2012) [hereinafter CCLP 2012 Report], https://technologyandtrafficking.usc.edu/files/2012/11/HumanTrafficking2012_Nov12.pdf.

8. M. LATONERO ET AL., USC ANNEBERG CTR. ON COMM'C'N LEADERSHIP & POLICY, *HUMAN TRAFFICKING ONLINE: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES AND ONLINE CLASSIFIEDS* 21–22 (2011) [hereinafter CCLP 2011 Report], https://technologyandtrafficking.usc.edu/files/2011/09/HumanTrafficking_FINAL.pdf.

9. *Id.* at 19.

10. CCLP 2012 Report, *supra* note 7, at 23–25.

11. *Id.* at 16–18.

12. CCLP 2011 Report, *supra* note 8, at 38.