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The Role of the Internet in Crime and Deviance

CHAPTER CONTENTS

OVERVIEW

Chapter 9 provides:

- A brief overview of the ways in which linked, mobile, digital technologies have revolutionized the ways in which (especially young) people communicate and interact with each other.
- Discussion of the 'digital divide' and an analysis of the ways in which the Internet and World Wide Web are shaping the development of China as it moves from totalitarianism to 'market authoritarianism' and partial democracy.
- A description of some of the 'ordinary' cybercrimes that most frequently appear in the news.
- Reflection on the ways in which the Internet is transforming, not only young people's leisure and pleasure habits, but specifically and explicitly their sexual development.

KEY TERMS

- content
- cybercrime
- cyberspace
- cybersurveillance
- cyber-terrorism
- cyber-warfare
- democratization
- digital divide
- Internet
- user-generated content
- World Wide Web

Over the last two decades take-up of the ***Internet*** has resulted in radical and far-reaching changes in both industrialized nations and, increasingly, in the 'developing world'. Even in the period since the first edition of this book was published (in 2004, just as Mark Zuckerberg was setting up Facebook as a localized college directory and messaging service at Harvard University), most people's working, shopping, financial and leisure patterns have altered dramatically as a result of linked, mobile, digital technologies and the ***World Wide Web***. At the vanguard of profound social, cultural, political and economic changes, Facebook had, as of the end of 2013, 1.23 billion active users, was worth $135 billion, and is accessed by 556 million people every day (*Guardian*, 4 February 2014).

While social networking sites are used by people of all ages, they have particularly revolutionized the ways in which young people communicate, compete and interact. We may have seen the emergence of the 'kidult', as the media have termed adults who enjoy a prolonged (or permanent!) state of adolescence, but young people use new communications technologies differently to their parents' generation. By way of example, in July 2009, a story broke that had the UK

media all of a Twitter. Matthew Robson, a 15-year-old schoolboy on work experience within the Media and Internet Research Team at global financial services company Morgan Stanley wrote his placement report on *How Teenagers Consume Media*. In it, Matthew describes a mediascape which has become a great deal more confusing and complicated in some respects, and considerably easier, more mobile and more accessible in others. The report reveals that teenagers do not listen to the radio, preferring to use their PCs and phones to access online streaming sites which are free of adverts and allow users to choose the songs they want instead of listening to what the radio presenter chooses. They rarely purchase music; most have never bought a CD but do download tracks and albums illegally, using iPods if they are from higher income families and mobile phones if from lower income families. No-one in their mid- to late teenage years, according to the report, regularly reads a newspaper, as most do not have the time and cannot be bothered to read pages and pages of text when they could view a short summary of the news on the Internet or on TV. Teenagers have also stopped going to the cinema by the time they reach 15 because they have to pay the adult price and, besides, it is possible to buy a pirated DVD of the film at the time of cinema release. The report further informs us that nearly all young people are registered with Facebook, that girls are a lot more prone to spend their time on social networking sites than boys but that, unlike their male counterparts who spend the majority of their free time gaming, 'only about one in fifty' girls plays console games, though the dominance of the Nintendo Wii is put down to girl gamers and its status as a console that the whole family can enjoy. Most widely and sensationally reported by the media was Matthew's observation that young people don't use Twitter. As he drily observes, Twitter is 'pointless', 'strictly for the elderly' and its chief advocate, Stephen Fry (a man in his late fifties known principally for appearing on TV and radio and being very clever), 'is not particularly cool' among British youth.

What is abundantly clear from these brief details of Matthew Robson's report is that the continuing development of networked computer technologies have transformed how we communicate and consume, work and play, and engage with others across the spheres of economic, political, cultural and social life. So embedded have these technologies become that it is easy to forget just how profound the changes have been and how rapidly new forms of social action and interaction have become normalized, taken-for-granted, even mundane. eBay (established in 1995), Google (1998), Wikipedia (2001), YouTube (2005), Facebook (2006) and Twitter (2007) are among the most ubiquitous brands in contemporary life. Yet it is worth remembering that 25 years ago the Internet was unheard of among the general populace, and was known only to a small and specialized community largely confined to academic and scientific institutions. From this position of marginality, the subsequent expansion of the Internet has been exponential (Jewkes and Yar, 2010).

Redefining deviance and democratization: developing nations and the case of China

While there have been far-reaching developments in the rise of 'new' media technologies in the West, the transformations that are taking place in some parts of the developing world are arguably even more profound. Having said that, we should not lose sight of the continuing global '***digital divide***' which, as Miller (2010) explains, means that the move to the digital age is greatly enhancing the position of the advanced, industrialized economies over those of the developing world, allowing them to play by a fundamentally different set of economic rules. Start-up costs of Internet access are still prohibitively high for the poorest people in the world, where many do not even have access to a telephone service. Moreover, regional growth in Internet use is not always smooth and continuous, but may be disrupted by war, disaster or displacement. For Miller it is quite simply the case that, without some form of intervention, developed countries will benefit from increased access to knowledge, increased economic flexibility, and increased communication efficiency, while developing nations are at risk of being ever more victimized and marginalized by these trends. The optimism that once accompanied the Internet revolution has begun to fade in light of the realization that our culture has transformed the Internet more than the Internet has transformed our culture (Miller, 2010).

To illustrate further the digital divide, usage statistics now put the global Internet population at 2,405,518,376 or 34.3 per cent penetration (up from 23.8 per cent penetration in 2009; www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm). Leading the world table is North America where 78.6 per cent of the population are online. At the other end of the scale, just 15.6 per cent of Africa's population has Internet access – although this is triple what it was five years ago. Of the total world Internet users by region, 44.8 per cent are in Asia; 21.5 per cent are in Europe; 11.4 per cent are in North America; 10.4 per cent are in Latin America and the Caribbean; 7.0 per cent in Africa; 3.7 per cent in the Middle East; and 1.0 per cent in Australasia/Oceania. In terms of languages, 536.6 million Internet users communicate in English, closely followed (and rapidly being caught up) by Chinese language speakers at 444.9 million (www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm).

China provides a fascinating case study because it illustrates in dramatic ways how digital technologies are implicated in social, political and economic change. Use of the Internet in China grew from 22 million in 2000 to 162 million at the beginning of 2007 (www.internetworldstats.com/asia/cn.htm). By 2010 that figure had risen again to 420 million and, in 2014, the China Internet Network Information Center estimate that 618 million Chinese people use the Internet, and 281 million use popular microblogging sites known collectively

as Weibo (www1.cnnic.cn). The biggest distributor of online video is Yukou Tudou, which has overtaken YouTube with over 1bn megabytes of data transfers every day. The Mandarin search engine Baidu has more hits than Google, and Chinese entrepreneur Jack Ma has set up Taobao to compete with eBay.

These examples are all the more remarkable given the Chinese authorities' fears about the potential uses of the Internet by 'subversives'. Over the last two decades China has undergone immensely important economic reforms which have given rise to tensions involving the Chinese media industries. With a population of nearly 1.4 billion and an increasingly important role to play in the global political economy, the Chinese media have been described as being in transition between totalitarianism and market authoritarianism (Winfield and Peng, 2005). Nowhere is the dual role that Chinese media play – simultaneously commodities in the market and ideological apparatuses – more apparent than in relation to new information and communication technologies; in particular, Internet restriction and censorship. A study conducted in 2002 found that of approximately 200,000 websites to which access was attempted, 19,032 sites accessible from the US were inaccessible from China on multiple occasions, suggesting that even allowing for temporary technological glitches, the vast majority of these sites were deliberately blocked via government-maintained web filtering systems (Zittrain and Edelman, 2003). In 2004 an Amnesty International report revealed that the Chinese Government was becoming increasingly heavy-handed with people using the Internet to circulate anti-government beliefs. All Chinese Internet Service Providers (ISPs) have to register with the police and all Internet users must sign a declaration that they will not visit forbidden sites. Among those routinely blocked are news, health and education sites, although pornography sites are virtually unregulated (http://web.amnesty.org/web/content.nsf/pages/gbr_china_internet). In January 2010, Google declared that it was no longer going to censor search results on Google China and two months later the company announced that it was moving its Chinese operation from the mainland to Hong Kong to avoid the rules and restrictions imposed by the authorities in Beijing such as the blocking of results for searches using sensitive words and phrases, for example 'Tiananmen Square 1989'. In 2014, as the 25th anniversary of Tiananmen approached, many Western news agencies reported that the Chinese Government had further cracked down on access to information about the unrest of 4 June 1989, when troops shot dead hundreds of pro-democracy protesters gathered in central Beijing. The Chinese authorities have never publicly admitted how many people were killed and many people born in China after these events maybe unaware that it ever happened (www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-18321548).

As the *Guardian* (22 March 2010) noted: 'The furore highlighted the challenges of doing business in China for western companies and drew a line under the era of unfettered optimism about the Internet's ability to change the

country'. For all its reputation as a wild frontier, then, the truth is that the Net can be used as just another means of constraint by those governments around the world who wish to discourage free thought, speech and action. Nevertheless, there has been some softening in attitudes on the part of Beijing in recent years, even if benevolence is somewhat inconsistently applied. In May 2008 it was reported that the Chinese Government had responded to the devastation caused by an earthquake in the Sichuan province in which tens of thousands of people perished by moderating its control of the Internet. This meant that those affected by the tragedy could use video sharing sites, blogs, chat rooms, instant messaging services and the like to circulate graphic pictures and accounts of their experiences. For these new citizen journalists the Government's relaxation of its generally tough stance on Internet content brought an unprecedented level of freedom and, as noted in Chapter 2, citizen journalism has changed the relationship between traditional news producers and audiences and taken the 'immediacy' of news and its synoptic power to a new level. ***User-generated content*** is particularly powerful when produced by ordinary people in regions where professional journalists and cameramen have been unable to get to the scene quickly enough or where reporters are banned for political or military reasons.

China has also become the home of much activity that criminologists usually refer to by the shorthand term '***cybercrime***'; a word that encompasses both 'computer assisted' and 'computer oriented' crimes. The former refers to those offences which, while pre-dating Internet technology and having an existence independent of it, find a new lease of life online. For example, falling into this category are: certain types of fraud, such as selling non-existent, defective, sub-standard, or counterfeit goods; theft of monies through credit card and bank fraud; investment frauds such as pyramid schemes and fake stocks and shares; intellectual property offences, including the unauthorized sharing of copyrighted ***content*** such as movies, music, digitized books, images, and computer software; posting, sharing and selling obscene and prohibited sexual representations; and harassment, 'stalking', bullying, sexual predation and forms of hateful or defamatory speech. These offending behaviours are not unique to the online world (having long-established terrestrial counterparts), and have thus been described as 'old wine in new bottles' (Grabosky, 2001). However, if we stick with this analogy, we can certainly appreciate that we are dealing with *an awful lot of wine* in very many, differently shaped and capacious bottles (Jewkes and Yar, 2010). This point is illustrated by the fact that the first cybercrime in China took place in the mid-1980s, which was two decades later than the first active digital crime in the West, when the Chinese banking system was defrauded. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s the growth of cybercrime in China was slow and steady, but today cybercrime in China is a vast self-perpetuating criminal industry and is proliferating partly because current law is wholly inadequate to deal with it (Qi et al., 2009).