



Sexting as media production: Rethinking social media and sexuality

new media & society

15(4) 449–465

© The Author(s) 2012

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1461444812459171

nms.sagepub.com



Amy Adele Hasinoff

McGill University, Canada

Abstract

Many of the responses to teen sexting are ineffective and unjust: authorities sometimes blame the victims of nonconsensual sexting, use harsh child pornography laws against minors, and give teenagers the advice to simply abstain. While some scholars champion girls' media production practices, mass media coverage of girls' social media use since the early 2000s emphasizes concerns that girls are creating and sharing sexual content. In this paper, I illustrate and challenge common concerns about the negative effect of digital and mobile media on how girls communicate and who they can communicate with. I argue that thinking about sexting as media production would encourage researchers to pay more attention to the opportunities of social media as well as the risks. Thinking about consensual sexting as an act of media authorship also pushes models of media production to better account for the privacy rights of people who create social media content.

Keywords

Girls, Internet, mass media, media production, mobile phones, sexting, sexuality, social media, teenagers, youth

'Sexting' has been widely discussed in US¹ mass media since December 2008, when a national survey was released reporting that 20 percent of teenagers had sexted (National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2008). Sexting is often defined as the practice of sending sexually explicit images or text through mobile phones or via internet applications, and teenage girls who create and share

Corresponding author:

Amy Adele Hasinoff, Department of Art History and Communication Studies, McGill University, 853 Sherbrooke Street West, Montreal, QC H3A 0G5, Canada.

Email: amy.hasinoff@gmail.com

images of themselves garner a great deal of anxiety – sexting is typically seen as a technological, sexual, and moral crisis. Yet, as Livingstone (2008) points out, the interactivity of the Internet and mobile media offers not only a set of risks but also a set of opportunities. In this paper, I first examine widespread ideas about the risks of sexting and then offer an alternative model of sexting as media production that highlights the need for further research on the potential benefits of sexting. Expanding the concept of media production to include sexting also suggests that models of social media should account for authorship, consent, and sexuality more thoroughly.

There is a problematic disconnect between the law and young people's use of mobile media: for example, in most US states two 17-year-olds can lawfully engage in consensual sex, but it is illegal for them to photograph their sex acts. This is because, regardless of one's age or consent to sexting, it is illegal to produce, possess, or distribute explicit sexual images of anyone under 18. Under US federal and state laws, all parties involved in explicit teen sexting are potentially child pornography offenders, whether they are victims, perpetrators, or consensual participants.

Since all forms of explicit teen sexting are illegal, discussions of sexting often do not distinguish between adolescents' uses of mobile media for sexual harassment and their consensual intimate sexual uses of these technologies, particularly in mass media and legal contexts (Slane, 2010). A teenager who chooses to send sexually explicit images to a peer is engaging in a very different activity than someone who distributes a private image with malicious intent or coerces another person to produce an explicit image. Albury and Crawford (2012) argue that young people are well aware of the differences and are developing norms and ethics of sexting based on consent. Viewing sexting as media production highlights the importance of consent by offering a new perspective that is less burdened with the contradictory legal assumptions that explicit teen sexting is inherently nonconsensual and that victimized youth are as culpable as their abusers since they both participated in sexting.

Though people may enjoy sharing sexual images consensually, teenage girls report being disturbed and traumatized by the unauthorized distribution of their private images (Powell, 2010a; Ringrose et al., 2012). The problem of abusive sexting emerges out of a hostile environment of ubiquitous verbal and physical sexual harassment in schools (American Association of University Women, 2001) that mobile media may exacerbate by facilitating the sexual objectification of girls (Ringrose et al., 2012). Some studies of youth and adults also suggest that sexting may be correlated with risky behaviors (Reyns et al., in press) and attachment anxiety (Drouin and Landgraff, 2011; Weisskirch and Delevi, 2011). However, a large-scale study of sexting among young adults found no correlations between sexting and risky sexual behaviors or psychological well-being (Gordon-Messer et al., in press). Qualitative research on the sexual dimensions and dynamics of mobile media demonstrates that these technologies are integral to youth sexual identities, relationships, hazards, and pleasures (Bond, 2011; Cupples and Thompson, 2010; Lenhart, 2009; Ringrose et al., 2012). While mobile media may amplify some sexual dangers, the media production model points to the need for research that examines the possible pleasures and benefits of sexting as well.

Commonsense ideas about the risks of sexting

I look to mass media and legal debates to illustrate two problematic commonsense assumptions about sexting. I use discourse analysis (Rose, 2001) to investigate ideas about the risks and dangers of teen sexual media production² that circulate in mass media, policy, and educational texts. These taken-for-granted ideas structure the way authorities think about the risks of sexting and how they respond to it, which can include ignoring abusive sexters, prosecuting victims, passing ineffective laws, and expelling youth from school for their perceived transgressions. Looking across a variety of texts, I select particular statements that the rhetoric and practices of scientific truth, governmental authority, journalistic objectivity, and rational thought tend to legitimate. This dominant, commonsense discourse that I focus on is not the only type of commentary about sexting. However, nonfiction texts offer a clear source of the baseline assumptions about sexting because these texts are deliberately created to be authoritative and to draw on and produce common sense. The examples I analyze are drawn from a larger study I have conducted on the responses to adolescent girls' sexuality in their use of social media (Hasinoff, forthcoming).³ In this paper, I focus on two features of the Internet and mobile phones which media coverage and legislative debates typically refer to as dangerous risks: anonymity and girls' disinhibition. I selected these two features because they offer significant potential benefits that are being obscured by a preoccupation with the dangers. These two concerns center on (1) who digital media allow girls to talk to, and (2) how the technology allows girls to communicate. In the second half of the paper, I discuss how viewing sexting as a form of media production leads to alternative ways of thinking about these issues.

Fears about anonymity and online predators

There has been widespread concern that so-called online predators will target minors, particularly girls, who appear in public online spaces. One of the main worries about MySpace in the mid-2000s was that under the cover of anonymity, adults could pose as friendly peers in order to convince naive girls to meet them offline (Marwick, 2008; Shade, 2007; Thiel-Stern, 2009). For example, during congressional debates in 2006 about legislation aimed at limiting youth access to social network sites in schools and libraries, one representative stated that these sites 'have become new hunting grounds for child predators' (US Congress, 2006: H5889). Cassell and Cramer (2008) explain that this panic brings back familiar fears about the telephone and the telegraph when they were first introduced that young women might use these communication technologies to make contact with inappropriate romantic partners and dangerous strangers.

Most online safety advice in the mid-2000s for girls instructs them to avoid talking with strangers and to hide their gender and age in online public spaces (Shade, 2007). A 2006 national online safety campaign produced by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children and the Postal Inspection Service warns girls to be careful about what they post online in order to avoid becoming victims of online predators. The '2SMRT4U' campaign's website, which has a bubblegum pink and dark turquoise color scheme, instructs girls to follow a detailed list of dos and don'ts that focus on withholding

personal information and remaining silent in online public spaces (2006). The site advises girls to make their gender invisible by using 'a gender-neutral screen name', and to avoid posting 'sexually provocative photos'. The campaign emphasizes that girls should never communicate online with people they do not know in person and that they should not appear in online public space as girls (2SMRT4U, 2006). In this framework, girls' online media production and forms of digital authorship are seen as dangerous and irresponsible if they merely self-identify as young and female. That is, 2SMRT4U's advice to girls is to remain anonymous when they use the Internet and to distrust the people they meet online, who could be concealing their identities for malicious (rather than safety-based) purposes.

This fear about social network sites carries over into the panic about sexting, since some prosecutors and media commentators argue that most sexting images will eventually be widely distributed and will attract online predators. For example, former district attorney George Skumanick argues that criminal charges for sexting are necessary in a legal brief for a sexting case that reached a federal circuit court. He says: 'Sexting provides the gateway for child predators to our children' (Donohue and Hailstone, 2009: 11). A former prosecutor featured on a CNN program makes a similar argument for punishing consensual sexters: 'Adults in the real child pornography business will hunt you down and take advantage if they find these pictures, and they will' (2009). Here she states that taking a naked picture of oneself virtually guarantees the attention of a predatory professional child pornographer.

By arguing that sexting increases girls' risk of victimization by online predators, prosecutors and media commentators reproduce the myth that strangers are the most likely perpetrators of sexual assault and implicitly blame victimized girls who have produced online content (sexual or not) or communicated with a stranger online. While fears about the anonymity of the Internet are rooted in legitimate concerns, they are often exaggerated. The focus on sensational types of online victimization in media discourses and legislative initiatives leads to public policy that does not address the most likely forms of sexual harm to minors (Wolak et al., 2008). A number of studies of sex crimes against minors involving digital media have found that these incidents reflect the same basic patterns and types of perpetrators as victimization that occurs entirely offline – that is, the vast majority of perpetrators are still family members, acquaintances, and intimate partners (Mitchell et al., 2005; Wolak et al., 2008). Further research is required to determine how often and under what circumstances private sexts are nonconsensually distributed, but it may be around 10 percent.⁴ Even then, for such an image to become available publicly, at least one recipient would have to upload it to a public website,⁵ and for a stranger to find the person depicted, some identifying details would also need to accompany the image. While assertions that online predators will 'hunt down' minors who sext fit into the homogenizing logic of a moral panic about the gendered dangers of sexuality and technology, there is no evidence that this routinely occurs.

Concerns about 'disinhibited' girls

Though educators and policymakers who worry about online predators insist that girls should avoid communicating with strangers online, another set of fears arises about

technology's impact on how girls communicate. The concern is that since the Internet and mobile phones permit instant communication that is removed from traditional social contexts and consequences, girls are more likely to make inappropriate sexual decisions when communicating with these technologies (Cassell and Cramer, 2008; Hasinoff, forthcoming). Concerns that youth are producing sexual images almost exclusively focus on girls (Draper, 2012) and instead of being portrayed as innocent and vulnerable to predators, girls who produce sexual media are often seen as irresponsible and out of control (Goldstein, 2009; Thiel-Stern, 2009). In contrast, the sexual risks of digital media for adolescent boys are more often imagined in terms of their access to pornography, not their creation of it.⁶ For girls, a dominant fear is that the immediacy and ease of mobile media communication undermines their supposedly innate desires for chastity. While this issue came up in the panic about MySpace, I find that it is particularly heightened in relation to mobile phones.

In some discussions of sexting, commentators fear that young people's use of mobile media leads to earlier sex, more sexual activity, and teenage pregnancy. A CBS *Sunday Morning* article posted on its website discusses Marissa Miller, a teenage girl involved in a high-profile sexting case in which a photo of her in a bra taken by a friend at a sleepover when she was 12 years old was later distributed without her consent. The story notes that she became pregnant at 15 and implies a strong link between pregnancy and sexting. The reporter suggests that sexting should remain illegal to help reduce the incidence of teenage pregnancy because, she states, 'When people see these sexy pictures, they are more apt to have sexual relations which will lead to teen pregnancy' (Braver, 2009). Miller replies to the reporter: 'I think most people who sent them probably already were doing things, their parents just aren't aware of what they're doing' (Braver, 2009). Miller's mother agrees, but the article then undercuts them both with the commentary of Bill Albert, 'an expert on teen pregnancy', who explains that technology is dangerous because it leads to a 'casual hook-up culture' (Braver, 2009). While girls' alleged moral failings are often blamed for teenage pregnancies (Luker, 1996), here technology supposedly contributes to teens' lack of self-control by promoting a 'casual hook-up culture'. For some observers this kind of commonsense causal link between mobile phones and unplanned pregnancy is self-evident. However, whether teens have sex frequently or infrequently, and whether they are casual acquaintances or in a committed relationship, research consistently demonstrates that the only effective way to reduce sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancies is to provide access to health resources and accurate information (Alford, 2007). As such, limiting teens' mobile phone use is unlikely to have any effect on the teen pregnancy rate.

Some observers worry that mobile phones and the Internet cause adolescent girls to engage in risky or non-normative sexual behavior. In testimony before a congressional committee investigating the dangers of MySpace, online safety expert Parry Aftab argues that teenagers are 'disconnected from the immediate consequences of their actions online, [so] many "good" kids and teens find themselves doing things online they would never dream of doing in real life' (2006: 16). She notes that they post photos and texts online in which they appear to be 'drunken sluts' (2006: 46). Likewise, a panicked newspaper article about online predators on MySpace quotes a psychologist worrying that teenage girls are 'acting in a very sexually provocative way' and are 'disinhibited' by the

Internet (Mayer-Hohdahl, 2006). By placing the explicit blame on technology, these commentators denounce teenage girls as ‘sluts’ for expressing their desires online. There is no parallel widespread discourse that technology causes boys to create sexual images or to be ‘provocative’ – being sexually inhibited is not expected or desired for boys, and accessing online pornography is usually seen as normal for them.

Another related concern is that digital media cause adolescents to be more sexually assertive. One part of the press release about the 2008 *Sex and Tech* survey, which the *Today Show* website reproduces in its online article unchanged, explains: ‘Nearly one-quarter of teens (22 percent) admit that technology makes them personally more forward and aggressive’ (MSNBC, 2008). This survey combines the term ‘forward’ with the even more negatively connoted word ‘aggressive’ in one question. Further, the condemnatory use of the word ‘admit’ leaves no space for thinking about how being ‘more sexually forward’ could be a positive development, particularly for girls. Just like fears about the telephone in its early days (Cassell and Cramer, 2008), this commentary expresses anxiety that telecommunication is dangerous for girls because it gives them new ways to talk (and think) about sexuality that might be less inhibited.

An alternative model of sexting as media production

The power of the term ‘media production’ for thinking about sexting is that the connotation is basically positive, especially for youth. The term is also useful because it references discussions about ownership and authorship in social media environments: for example, a range of scholars draw attention to the free labor of users who generate online content and data (Andrejevic, 2009; Cohen, 2008; Terranova, 2004). The creation and distribution of personal sexual images also matters in ways not captured by economic models. That is, expanding the definition of media production to include sexting highlights the importance of privacy and consent for all authors of ephemeral social media content. In the remainder of this paper, I first explain how viewing sexting as media production would encourage researchers to ask different questions about the risky features of personal sexual media and about the new forms of communication and self-expression that sexting might enable. I then turn to a discussion of how viewing sexters as media producers and authors would help researchers, educators, and policymakers respond to the practice more effectively.

Anonymity

While discussing sexual topics with online strangers may be risky for youth (Mitchell et al., 2007), the fact that these strangers are separated by distance and relative anonymity can also be of crucial benefit for some teenagers. This may help provide girls, queer teens, and other marginalized youth, in particular, find a refuge from some of the stigmas and restrictions they experience at home and at school. A range of research on digital media has found that it offers ‘a potential source of social support and powerful identity resource for a number of marginalized groups’, including those who face cultural, economic, and political barriers in their home communities (Thurlow and Bell, 2009: 1045). For example, message board participants on gurl.com offered one another support and

information about sexuality and topics such as menstruation (Grisso and Weiss, 2005; Polak, 2006). A variety of studies of gay, lesbian, transgender, and queer youth indicate that the Internet provides an important way to connect with communities and romantic partners, find information, and gain confidence (Alexander, 2004; Driver, 2006; Gray, 2009; Laukkanen, 2007; Macintosh and Bryson, 2008).⁷ As Pascoe explains, digital communication allows some youth to ‘form romantic relationships which, in many ways, transcend adult control and geography’ (2011: 9). In order to benefit from these opportunities, teenagers need to ignore the advice they may have heard from educators and national online safety campaigns that they should hide their identities if they are girls, never speak to strangers online, and avoid discussing sexuality on the Internet. Further research is needed to investigate how youth can safely navigate sexual discussions and relationships with people they meet online.

Communication

Girls are marginalized by their age and gender, and for some by their race, class, ability, and/or sexuality as well. Research on teen girls and sexuality indicates that because of this they sometimes struggle to communicate their sexual needs to partners, including talking about safer sex practices and about their sexual desires (Fine and McClelland, 2006; Tolman, 2005). While mass media coverage of teen sexting does not entertain the idea that it could have communicative benefits, this discourse does appear in lifestyle articles about sexting aimed at adults. Instead of expressing fears that mobile phones cause adults to be sexually aggressive, these articles often promote sexting on the grounds that it can increase sexual communication between partners and help them discuss their sexual needs in new ways. One article aimed at retirees quotes a 50-year-old woman who says: ‘It makes you a little more brave. It takes the fear away, your inhibitions. I might be a little more bold in a text message than I would be over the phone or in person’ (Leshnoff, 2009). Here lack of inhibition is not positioned as a cause for concern but as an important feature of sexual health and clear communication of needs and desires.

Some researchers maintain that digital communication offers important advantages for women and girls navigating sexual relationships.⁸ One study of teenage mobile phone use in dating relationships suggests that girls might be more assertive when communicating through texting than speaking face-to-face (Cupples and Thompson, 2010). Another study of online chatting observes: ‘Girls may be able to initiate online relationships with the opposite sex without much of the weight of traditional gender roles and without the possible stigmatization for being too forward’ (Subrahmanyam et al., 2004: 662). Women’s physical distance from online sexual partners could also help them resist the gender norms that dictate that they should politely tolerate sexual harassment (Döring, 2000). In contrast to the negative *Sex and Tech* press release rhetoric that teenagers ‘admit’ they are ‘more aggressive’ when communicating through digital media, research that attends to the power dynamics of gender and interpersonal interactions tends to view increased sexual communication and assertiveness as a positive feature for women. These studies suggest that scholars should investigate how sexting could help girls find new ways to express their sexual needs and desires and even perhaps re-write some of

the gender norms that ask girls to be passive and acquiescent in intimate heterosexual relationships.

Self-expression

Many digital media scholars stress that the Internet can enable young people to explore their identities and develop social and communication skills (boyd, 2008; Tynes, 2007). Jenkins credits the Internet with facilitating collaborative learning, providing unique opportunities for cultural expression, developing important workplace skills, and creating a 'more empowered conception of citizenship' (Jenkins et al., 2006: 3). The logic is that if youth are given the tools to make their own media, they will use them to express their own authentic points of view. Though most new media scholars do not position participatory media as universally positive and empowering, many hope that media production will help youth express themselves and challenge mass culture. For example, the MacArthur Foundation devoted a volume of their Digital Media and Learning series to civic engagement (Bennett, 2008). Many girls studies researchers also argue that media production can offer girls an important way to respond to the objectifying media portrayals of women (Driver, 2007; Durham, 2008; Harris, 2004; Kearney, 2006). Likewise, an American Psychological Association report on 'the sexualization of girls' states that by becoming cultural producers rather than just consumers of media, girls can resist sexualization because it 'enables them to be more effective cultural critics' (Zurbriggen et al., 2007: 40). Yet, while giving girls video cameras is thought to help empower them, they are often portrayed negatively when they turn the camera on themselves while nude or performing sex acts (Goldstein, 2009; Thiel-Stern, 2009).

One of the barriers to thinking about sexting as media production is that dominant models of adolescent sexuality – in scholarly and popular contexts – maintain that media can only have a negative impact on girls' sexuality (Egan and Hawkes, 2008; Heins, 2001). As such, consensual sexual practices that are mediated by mobile phones or the Internet are typically seen as evidence of sexual deviance or victimization (Albury et al., 2010; Goldstein, 2009; Thiel-Stern, 2009). Girls are often expected to develop sexual desires and modes of sexual expression that bear little evidence of their saturation in mass media representations of sexuality. Some researchers who examine girls' sexuality online are disappointed and frustrated when girls seem to reproduce the conventions of commercial pornography (Grisso and Weiss, 2005; Thiel-Stern, 2007). However, the common argument that teenage girls are sexting because they are victims of sexualized mass media representations often vilifies all forms of sexual representations instead of directly focusing on the specific problems of sexism, harassment, and the sexual objectification of young women (Egan and Hawkes, 2008; Gill, 2009; Heins, 2001).

To say that in some cases girls may consent to sexting does not mean that it occurs in a context free of coercions. The choices teenage girls make about how to embody and express their gender and sexual identities occur in environments in which sexual harassment from peers is ubiquitous and adult authorities might unfairly discipline them for their sexual choices. The stakes are even higher for girls of color, queer girls, and working-class girls, who are often punished more harshly than their more privileged counterparts (Dohrn, 2004; Tolman, 2005). Like adults, girls make choices within complex

social and media contexts they do not control. As decades of audience research has demonstrated for adults, McRobbie (1999) and Walkerdine (1997) have found that girls are also neither entirely free in interpreting and remaking media texts nor are they passive dupes of media representations. Driver (2007) finds that queer girls who consume mass media ‘combine textual enjoyment and critique with detailed subtlety’ and that they ‘work around and with commodified representations’ (11) in their uses and interpretations of mass media texts.

While social media can be used in sexually abusive and harmful ways (Powell, 2010b; Ringrose et al., 2012), in future research, scholars should consider if and how girls’ sexual media production practices, like more celebrated forms of media production, could also enable them to negotiate, respond, and speak back to sexual representations of youth and femininity in mass media. Karaian suggests: ‘A new generation of young women and teenage girls appear to have embraced [sexual imagery rather than trying to] rid the world of [it]’ (2012: 69). Even though a sexual image might be created for an audience of only one person – or just for oneself – such mediated practices of self-representation may facilitate media critique, creativity, and self-reflection. For example, Döring suggests that the features of digitally mediated communication make it easier both ‘to explore one’s own sexual desires and to critically reflect on the experiences associated with them’ (2000: 880). Kearney (2006) argues that media production is inherently radical and worthwhile for girls (or anyone in a marginalized social position) because they are routinely excluded from the process of mass media representation. While the technical skills gained in using a point-and-click mobile phone camera might be relatively minimal,⁹ I argue that having a degree of control over the process of self-representation is still significant. Viewing sexting as a form of media production helps make it possible to consider the creativity and ingenuity of teens who consensually produce their own sexual images. If researchers saw sexting in this way, they might investigate whether consensual sexting could facilitate personal exploration or critical reflection on gender and sexual representations in mass media.

Pleasure

Viewing sexting as media production highlights that the practice may be primarily motivated by sexual expression and pleasure. Lifestyle news items about sexting for adults offer an interesting alternative discourse about sexting, since they are often positive about the practice and usually focus on enlivening readers’ sex lives (Colon, 2010; Leshnoff, 2009). An American Association of Retired Persons newsletter article begins by noting that teens who sext are getting into trouble and exercising ‘bad judgment’, but the rest of the article explicitly promotes the practice for its adult readers (Leshnoff, 2009). In this article, a number of experts tell readers to have fun with sexting, and the article offers a step-by-step guide which includes: ‘When you’re comfortable, try texting something slightly suggestive’ (Leshnoff, 2009). For adults, sexting is not seen as a sign of ‘bad judgment’, and the only warnings the article provides are to ‘keep expectations ... in check’ and to ‘periodically house-clean’ one’s mobile phone:

If you're sending or receiving racy notes or photos, delete them every so often, advises relationship coach Suzanne Blake. 'If you lose your cell phone or it's stolen, pictures can be uploaded in a heartbeat.' – And that's not to mention the possibility of your teenage kids innocently flipping through your texts or photos. (Leshnoff, 2009)

Similarly, an AOL Personals article advises, 'Flirting over a text message or instant message on the computer can be a great way to spice up your relationship. It's especially useful for long-distance couples' (Colon, 2010). In contrast to the focus on risk in media coverage of teen sexting, these articles about adults note concerns that private texts or images could be distributed without permission as an afterthought and frame the practice primarily in terms of sexual pleasure.

The popular discourses of adult sexting as 'fun and flirty' indicate the need for further research on the pleasures of sexting and its role in sexual relationships. There are already indications that teens, like the imagined adults in these lifestyle articles, sometimes sext consensually for pleasure. For example, according to the *Sex and Tech* survey (2008), the most popular reason teens selected for why they engage in sexting is 'to be fun/flirtatious'. Albury and Crawford find that some young adults sext to maintain connections in long-distance relationships, and as one young woman explained, for 'just a different form of erotica', while others might take or send nude photos as 'more of a joke than the serious sexual type of thing' (2012: 468). Lenhart finds that some teenagers sext as part of a sexual relationship and several view sexting as 'a safer alternative to real life sexual activity' (2009: 8). Since many researchers recognize that non-sexual media production can be a pleasurable leisure activity, it is vital to examine the ways that sexting might be similar and could offer unique sexual pleasures. As Karaian (2012) argues, there is a need for more research and theory addressing how sexual pleasure exists alongside danger and risk, particularly for teenage girls.

Responding to abusive sexting

The advice in some popular articles about adult sexting may be a bit too cavalier about the risks for people of any age since it is currently difficult to address abusive sexting and protect personal privacy online. Yet advice for teens about online sexual safety is no better, as it often simply forbids the use of digital media for sexual purposes (Hasinoff, forthcoming; Shade, 2007). Nearly all youth who sext know that the practice is dangerous (Cox Communications, 2009), so these sexting abstinence messages are likely to be as ineffective as abstinence-only sex education programs (Alford, 2007).

If social media content producers have ownership over their private images, then the focus of sexting safety campaigns should clearly be to reduce unauthorized distribution. For example, one component of MTV's 2010 online safety campaign advises against forwarding images. The website explains: 'When you get a sext, you might not know if the person would be cool with you sending it around, so better to hit delete rather than forward' (A Thin Line, 2010). This seemingly mundane piece of advice is actually a radical departure from typical online sexual safety campaigns, which often exclusively target girls as the potential producers of digital sexual images and simply advise them to abstain from creating them (Hasinoff, forthcoming; Shade, 2007). By addressing sext receivers

rather than just producers, this type of message moves towards a more effective conversation about digital privacy. Research demonstrates that privacy operates according to different norms in digital media environments (Marwick et al., 2010), and as Nissenbaum (2004) argues, privacy expectations are contextual. Studies of such digital media privacy norms and practices are just emerging (Albury and Crawford, 2012), and it is already clear that the unauthorized distribution of a personal sexual image is widely considered a serious violation of privacy. Further research is needed to investigate the motivations and possible misconceptions of people who distribute private images without permission in order to determine how to reduce the incidence of this form of victimization.

I argue that viewing sexters as digital media authors is key to responding more effectively to abusive sexting because it brings to light the typically obscured distinction between consensual and nonconsensual sexting. As Slane (2010) argues, if sexting is seen as simply deviant and criminal for all parties involved, then the malicious distribution of private images becomes normalized. As such, a teenager who suffers this victimization has no recourse against the person who purposefully harmed her, since reporting the incident to authorities makes her vulnerable not only to harsh judgment and punishment but potentially to child pornography charges (Slane, 2010). In order to accurately recognize nonconsensual, harmful, malicious behaviors, it is a prerequisite to understand that sexting can be consensual.

This shift in perspective highlights the issue that abusive sexting emerges out of a larger context of ubiquitous gender- and sexuality-based victimization (Ringrose et al., 2012). Many education researchers stress that bullying and harassment reflect broad social norms and school cultures, and can only be addressed effectively through collective action by administrators, teachers, and students (Meyer, 2009). This work would be more complicated, time-consuming, and difficult than showing a public service announcement at an assembly or punishing individual sexters, but it has the capacity to address gender and sexual marginalization in lasting and meaningful ways.

By socializing online, users deliberately and inadvertently generate personal artifacts and data that are persistent, easily replicable, and sometimes searchable (boyd, 2008). Thinking about consensual sexting as an act of media authorship asserts that people who create ephemeral social media artifacts need not surrender all their privacy rights when they share this content selectively. Balsamo's question in 1996, 'What rights do individuals have *vis-à-vis* the information they produce in the course of their daily lives?' (347) is still unresolved, both in terms of evolving social norms and the uneven legal precedents established since then. As Solove points out, 'Copyright law demonstrates ... that the law is willing and able to control information' (2007: 185), but in the US the legal restrictions on distributing information that violates privacy are minimal. The problem of abusive sexting is part of an ongoing tension between privacy and free speech that new technologies are exacerbating.

Conclusion

I argue that both the panicked popular discourses about sexting and the rosy academic assessments of youth media production need to account for power, gender, and sexuality more thoroughly. That is, the focus on danger and victimization – whether in newspaper

articles or academic studies about girls' sexuality and digital media – is as one-sided as the popular and scholarly discourses that still make overbroad claims about the inherent democratic effect of social media. Both discourses persist because each merely exaggerates legitimate hopes and fears about new technologies. If legislators and legal authorities thought of consensual sexting as a creative form of self-expression, they would not criminalize teens who produce sexts and could instead focus on developing ways to protect adolescents (and adults) from the distribution of their private images. If youth educators saw sexting as a form of media production, they could concentrate their efforts on discouraging unauthorized image sharing and talking to youth about online privacy and sexual discrimination.

New media researchers can facilitate this shift in common sense by examining how and why teenagers and adults sext, what they do and do not consent to when they use digital media in their sexual and romantic relationships, and the incidence of harm. In addition to understanding the risks, scholars who start from the framework that sexting is media production might also pursue questions about the unique opportunities that technology could offer: When girls use mobile media to produce their own pornography, how are they challenging the sexism of the commercial media industries and how are they reproducing it? Could mobile phones help girls be more assertive and confident in expressing their sexual needs and desires? How can online anonymity help girls and other marginalized people express themselves and connect with others? How do girls produce their sexualities by producing social media?

This new model for thinking about and studying sexting highlights the need for further scholarship on media production – particularly in relation to youth – that fully accounts for sexuality and consent. This includes cases of consensual sexual media production and distribution as well as cases that involve abuse. There is a need for more powerful theories of social media production that can account for both the forms that are easy to celebrate as well as the messy, complicated, and even abusive forms of media production and distribution. Ultimately, a model of social media production that can incorporate sexting could enable scholars to think about social media authorship, consent, and privacy in new ways.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Carrie Rentschler, Lisa Nakamura, Sarah Projansky, Paula Treichler, Jonathan Sterne, and Mary Celeste Kearney for their invaluable feedback on versions of this work. Steve Jones and the reviewers at *New Media & Society* also provided crucial suggestions.

Funding

This work was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Fonds Québécois de recherche sur la société et la culture.

Notes

1. Sexting appears in mass media in other countries, but in this paper I focus on US laws and media coverage.
2. I use the term 'sexual media production' to refer broadly to practices including creating sexual images or videos with a mobile phone camera or other type of camera.

3. In this paper, I examine online safety advice, media coverage of sexting cases and online risks, a national sexting survey and media coverage about it, and testimony from an online safety expert at a legislative hearing. I obtained these texts from a variety of databases and search engines, including NewsBank, YouTube, GPO Access, and the websites of television networks and other organizations.
4. The largest and most representative peer-reviewed study reports: 'Photographs were distributed in 10 percent of incidents when youth appeared in or created images and in 3 percent when youth received images' (Mitchell et al., 2012: 5). Privately funded surveys have found that 2 percent (Cox Communications, 2009) and 14 percent (Gatti, 2009) of people who sent private sexts report that they were later distributed. In another peer-reviewed study, 25 percent of those who received a photo reported forwarding it and 8 percent reported sending a sexually explicit photo they took of someone else to a third party, often without permission (Strassberg et al., in press).
5. In one survey, 1 percent of teens who sent sexts reported that the image was later 'posted online where many people could see it' (Cox Communications, 2009: 38). In another survey, 3 percent of teens reported, 'I posted naked pictures or videos on a website or social networking site of someone else I know personally' (Gatti, 2009: 14). Both surveys' questions do not distinguish posts on friends-only pages from posts on public pages.
6. Justin Berry is an exception: he became involved in selling self-produced child pornography online, and garnered national attention after he was profiled in the *New York Times* (Eichenwald, 2005).
7. Pascoe (2011) notes that these resources are not equally available to all youth, as those who do not have Internet access at home might find that school computers censor websites discussing sexuality.
8. These researchers are well aware that the Internet has not, as initially promised, provided a space free of gendered forms of oppression, but they examine how these communication technologies might have a positive impact.
9. Kearney (2006) stresses the value of the technical expertise gained through practices such as directing, cinematography, and video and sound editing. The girl-produced media texts she discusses are technologically sophisticated, premeditated, and carefully crafted.

References

- 2SMRT4U (2006) What to type. Available at: <http://web.archive.org/web/20090601212651/http://www.2smrt4u.com/Tips>.
- A Thin Line (2010) Sexting: what is it? Available at: www.athinline.org/facts/sexting.
- Aftab P (2006) Testimony of Parry Aftab. Hearing: H.R. 5319, the Deleting Online Predators Act of 2006, Subcommittee on Telecommunications and the Internet. Available at: <http://energy-commerce.house.gov/108/Hearings/07112006hearing1974/Aftab.pdf>.
- Albury K and Crawford K (2012) Sexting, consent and young people's ethics: beyond Megan's story. *Continuum* 26: 463–473.
- Albury K, Funnell N and Noonan E (2010) The politics of sexting: young people, self-representation and citizenship. In: *Media, Democracy and Change: Refereed Proceedings of the Australian and New Zealand Communication Association Conference 2010*. Available at: www.anzca.net/component/docman/doc_download/466-the-politics-of-sexting.html.
- Alexander J (2004) *In Their Own Words: LGBT Youth Writing the World Wide Web*. GLAAD Center for the Study of Media and Society. Available at: http://archive.glaad.org/documents/csms/queer_youth.pdf.

- Alford S (2007) *Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Programs: Ineffective, Unethical, and Poor Public Health*. Advocates for Youth. Available at: www.advocatesforyouth.org/PUBLICATIONS/policybrief/pbabonly.pdf.
- American Association of University Women (2001) *Hostile Hallways: Bullying, Teasing, and Sexual Harassment in School*. Washington, DC: American Association of University Women Educational Foundation.
- Andrejevic M (2009) Exploiting YouTube: contradictions of user-generated labor. In: Snickars P and Vonderau P (eds) *The YouTube Reader*, 2nd edn. Stockholm: National Library of Sweden, pp. 406–423.
- Balsamo A (1996) Myths of information: the cultural impact of new information technologies. *Technology Analysis & Strategic Management* 8: 341–348.
- Bennett WL (2008) *Civic Life Online: Learning How Digital Media Can Engage Youth*. The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Media and Learning. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Bond E (2011) The mobile phone = bike shed? Children, sex and mobile phones. *New Media & Society* 13: 587–604.
- boyd d (2008) Why youth (heart) social network sites: the role of networked publics in teenage social life. In: Buckingham D (ed.) *Youth, Identity, and Digital Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 119–142.
- Braver R (2009) Targeting teens for sexting: more youngsters are transmitting racy photos of themselves via cell phones and the web, running afoul of child porn laws. *CBS News: Good Morning*. Available at: www.cbsnews.com/stories/2009/05/31/sunday/main5051909.shtml.
- Cassell J and Cramer M (2008) High tech or high risk: moral panics about girls online. In: McPherson T (ed.) *Digital Youth, Innovation, and the Unexpected*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 53–75.
- CNN (2009) Teens face porn charges. *Prime News*. Available at: www.cnn.com/video/#/video/bestoftv/2009/01/15/pn.sexting.teens.cnn.
- Cohen NS (2008) The valorization of surveillance: towards a political economy of Facebook. *Democratic Communication* 22: 5–22.
- Colon D (2010) Is sexting right 4 u? :-). AOL personals. Available at: <http://personals.aol.com/articles/2010/02/17/is-sexting-right-4-u/>
- Cox Communications (2009) Teen online & wireless safety survey: cyberbullying, sexting, and parental controls. Available at: http://web.archive.org/web/20100107065200/http://www.cox.com/takecharge/safe_teens_2009/media/2009_teen_survey_internet_and_wireless_safety.pdf.
- Cupples J and Thompson L (2010) Heterotextuality and digital foreplay: cell phones and the culture of teenage romance. *Feminist Media Studies* 10: 1–17.
- Dohn B (2004) All ellas: girls locked up. *Feminist Studies* 30: 302–324.
- Donohue MJ and Hailstone AJ (2009) Reply brief of appellant, George Skumanick, Jr. Miller, et al. v. Skumanick: legal documents. Available at: www.aclupa.org/downloads/Skumanickreply.pdf.
- Döring N (2000) Feminist views of cybersex: victimization, liberation, and empowerment. *CyberPsychology & Behavior* 3: 863–884.
- Draper NRA (2012) Is your teen at risk? Discourses of adolescent sexting in United States television news. *Journal of Children and Media* 6: 221–236.
- Driver S (2006) Virtually queer youth communities of girls and birls: cultural spaces of identity work and desiring exchanges. In: Willett R (ed.) *Digital Generations*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, pp. 229–246.

- Driver S (2007) *Queer Girls and Popular Culture: Reading, Resisting, and Creating Media*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Drouin M and Landgraff C (2011) Texting, sexting, and attachment in college students' romantic relationships. *Computers in Human Behavior* 28: 444–449.
- Durham MG (2008) *The Lolita Effect: The Media Sexualization of Young Girls and What We Can Do about It*. Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press.
- Egan RD and Hawkes GL (2008) Endangered girls and incendiary objects: unpacking the discourse on sexualization. *Sexuality & Culture* 12: 291–311.
- Eichenwald K (2005) Through his webcam, a boy joins a sordid online world. *New York Times*. Available at: www.nytimes.com/2005/12/19/national/19kids.ready.html.
- Fine M and McClelland S (2006) Sexuality education and desire: still missing after all these years. *Harvard Educational Review* 76: 297–338.
- Gatti J (2009) The MTV-Associated digital abuse study. *A thin line*. Available at: http://www.athinline.org/MTV-AP_Digital_Abuse_Study_Full.pdf.
- Gill R (2009) Beyond the 'sexualization of culture' thesis: an intersection analysis of 'sixpacks,' 'midriffs' and 'hot lesbians' in advertising. *Sexualities* 12: 137–160.
- Goldstein L (2009) Documenting and denial: discourses of sexual self-exploitation. *Jump Cut* 51. Available at: www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc51.2009/goldstein/index.html.
- Gordon-Messer D, Bauermeister JA, Grodzinski A, et al. (in press) Sexting among young adults. *Journal of Adolescent Health*.
- Gray ML (2009) Negotiating identities/queering desires: coming out online and the remediation of the coming-out story. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 14: 1162–1189.
- Grisso AD and Weiss D (2005) What are gURLs talking about? Adolescent girls' construction of sexual identity on gURL.com. In: Mazzarella S (ed.) *Girl Wide Web: Girls, the Internet, and the Negotiation of Identity*. New York: Peter Lang, pp. 31–49.
- Harris A (2004) *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Routledge.
- Hasinoff AA (forthcoming) *Sexting: The Politics of Social Media and Sexuality*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Heins M (2001) *Not in Front of the Children: 'Indecency,' Censorship and the Innocence of Youth*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Jenkins H, Purushoma R, Clinton K, et al. (2006) *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century. (Building the Field of Digital Media and Learning)*. Chicago, IL: MacArthur Foundation.
- Karaian L (2012) Lolita speaks: 'Sexting,' teenage girls and the law. *Crime, Media, Culture* 8: 57–73.
- Kearney MC (2006) *Girls Make Media*. New York: Routledge.
- Laukkanen M (2007) Young queers online: the limits and possibilities of non-heterosexual self-representation in online conversations. In: O'Riordan K and Phillips DJ (eds) *Queer Online: Media Technology and Sexuality*. New York: Peter Lang, pp. 81–100.
- Lenhart A (2009) *Teens and Sexting: How and Why Minor Teens Are Sending Sexually Suggestive Nude or Nearly Nude Images via Text Messaging*. Pew Internet & American Life Project. Available at: <http://pewresearch.org/assets/pdf/teens-and-sexting.pdf>.
- Leshnoff J (2009) *C*U*2nite: Sexting Not Just for Kids*. Love & Relationships: AARP.org. Available at: www.aarp.org/content/aarp/en/home/family/love/articles/sexting_not_just_for_kids.print.html.
- Livingstone S (2008) Taking risky opportunities in youthful content creation: 'teenagers' use of social networking sites for intimacy, privacy and self-expression. *New Media & Society* 10: 393–411.

- Luker K (1996) *Dubious Conceptions: The Politics of Teenage Pregnancy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Macintosh L and Bryson M (2008) Queer (re) presentations: youth, MySpace, and the interstitial spaces of becoming and belonging. *Journal of LGBT Youth* 5: 133–142.
- McRobbie A (1999) MORE! New sexualities in magazines. In: *The Culture Society: Art, Fashion and Popular Music*. London: Routledge, pp. 46–61.
- Marwick AE (2008) To catch a predator? The MySpace moral panic. *First Monday* 13.
- Marwick AE, Murgia-Diaz D and Palfrey JG (2010) *Youth, privacy and reputation (Literature review)*. Berkman Center Research Publication no. 2010-5. Available at: http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/publications/2010/Youth_Privacy_Reputation_Lit_Review/.
- Mayer-Hohdahl A (2006) *MySpace.com: Teens Love It. So Do Predators*. Lowell, MA: The Sun.
- Meyer EJ (2009) *Gender, Bullying, and Harassment: Strategies to End Sexism and Homophobia in Schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Mitchell K, Wolak J and Finkelhor D (2005) The Internet and family and acquaintance sexual abuse. *Child Maltreatment* 10: 49–60.
- Mitchell KJ, Finkelhor D and Wolak J (2007) Youth Internet users at risk for the most serious online sexual solicitations. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 32: 532–537.
- Mitchell KJ, Finkelhor D, Jones LM, et al. (2012) Prevalence and characteristics of youth sexting: a national study. *Pediatrics* 129(1): 1–8.
- MSNBC (2008) Survey: teens sharing nude images online: recent survey finds that sex, tech and teens make bad bedfellows. *Today Show*. Available at: www.msnbc.msn.com/id/28141513/wid/11915773.
- National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy (2008) *Sex and Tech: Results from a Survey of Teens and Young Adults*. Washington, DC: National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.
- Nissenbaum H (2004) Privacy as contextual integrity. *Washington Law Review* 79: 119–158.
- Pascoe CJ (2011) Resource and risk: youth sexuality and new media use. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 8: 5–17.
- Polak M (2006) From the curse to the rag: online gURLs rewrite the menstruation narrative. In: Jiwani Y, Steenbergen C and Mitchell C (eds) *Girlhood: Redefining the Limits*. Montreal, QC: Black Rose Books, pp. 191–207.
- Powell A (2010a) Configuring consent: emerging technologies, unauthorised sexual images and sexual assault. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology* 43: 76–90.
- Powell A (2010b) *Sex, Power, and Consent: Youth Culture and the Unwritten Rules*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Reyns BW, Burekb MW, Henson B, et al. (in press) The unintended consequences of digital technology: exploring the relationship between sexting and cybervictimization. *Journal of Crime and Justice*.
- Ringrose J, Gill R, Livingstone S, et al. (2012) *A Qualitative Study of Children, Young People and 'Sexting': A Report Prepared for the NSPCC*. London: National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.
- Rose G (2001) *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Shade LR (2007) Contested spaces: protecting or inhibiting girls online? In: Weber S and Dixon S (eds) *Growing Up Online: Young People and Digital Technologies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 227–244.
- Slane A (2010) From scanning to sexting: the scope of protection of dignity-based privacy in Canadian child pornography law. *Osgoode Hall Law Journal* 48: 543–593.

- Solove DJ (2007) *The Future of Reputation: Gossip, Rumor, and Privacy on the Internet*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Strassberg D, McKinnon R, Sustaita M, et al. (in press) Sexting by high school students: an exploratory and descriptive study. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*.
- Subrahmanyam K, Greenfield PM and Tynes B (2004) Constructing sexuality and identity in an online teen chat room. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* 25: 651–666.
- Terranova T (2004) *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age*. Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press.
- Thiel-Stern S (2007) *Instant Identity: Adolescent Girls and the World of Instant Messaging*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Thiel-Stern S (2009) Femininity out of control on the Internet: a critical analysis of media representations of gender, youth, and MySpace.com in international news discourses. *Girlhood Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 2: 20–39.
- Thurlow C and Bell K (2009) Against technologization: young people’s new media discourse as creative cultural practice. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 14: 1038–1049.
- Tolman DL (2005) *Dilemmas of Desire: Teenage Girls Talk about Sexuality*. Boston: Harvard University Press.
- Tynes BM (2007) Internet safety gone wild? Sacrificing the educational and psychosocial benefits of online social environments. *Journal of Adolescent Research* 22: 575–584.
- US Congress (2006) Deleting Online Predators Act of 2006. Congressional Record 152: H5883–H5889. Available at: www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CREC-2006-07-26/html/CREC-2006-07-26-pt1-PgH5883.htm.
- Walkerdine V (1997) *Daddy’s Girl: Young Girls and Popular Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Weisskirch RS and Delevi R (2011) ‘Sexting’ and adult romantic attachment. *Computers in Human Behavior* 27: 1697–1701.
- Wolak J, Finkelhor D, Mitchell K, et al. (2008) Online ‘predators’ and their victims: myths, realities, and implications for prevention treatment. *American Psychologist* 63: 111–128.
- Zurbriggen EL, Collins RL, Lamb S, et al. (2007) *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Author biography

Amy Adele Hasinoff is a postdoctoral fellow at McGill University. Her book on the media and legal responses to adolescent sexting is forthcoming from the University of Illinois Press. Her work appears in *Critical Studies in Media Communication* and *Feminist Media Studies*. For more information, visit www.amyhasinoff.com.