Arresting Behaviours
Social Media and Its Uses in Helping Victims of Sexual Assault

This paper offers an alternate view about social media and its possibilities for victims of sexual assault to the e-crime version where people are at risk of predators. It also looks at some of the questions we receive from users of social media and how we deal with the issues.

History
The South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault (SECASA) started in 1977, 36 years ago, providing a service to female victims of recent sexual assault. By the late 1990s services were available for child victims of sexual abuse, male victims who preferred a male counsellor, children with problematic sexual behavior, a program for adolescents with sexually abusive behavior and alternate therapeutic approaches such as mosaic, clay and art groups. SECASA also had a Legal Clinic for clients wanting assistance with compensation claims, prevention programs in primary and secondary schools run with peer educators and had started working with victims of family violence.

All these additions to service provision came about as we tried to make our service more accessible to various groups. We moved into the community out of a large teaching hospital. We opened locations in population growth areas trying to cover our region of 1.2 million people in a more accessible manner. We marketed the service to the gay community by attending Pride March and Midsunma, male victims by running a weekend retreat, CALD groups, Indigenous communities by using Aboriginal paintings for our service posters, Making Rights Reality for victims with a cognitive impairment and alternate therapies for clients who did not find talk therapy useful. By 2000 we had 45 workers and 8 locations. In 2007 we co-located with Victoria Police in a Multi Disciplinary Centre where 16 SECASA staff share with 4 Department of Human Services Child Protection workers and 23 Victoria Police members.

We were conscious, however, that there were people who did not access our service for a range of reasons including

- Mobility problems
- Not being ready for face-to-face counselling or therapy
- A desire to anonymously access information
- Psychological problems
- Preferring to use on line services rather than attending at an office

We had started in the late 1990s looking at the newly developing web technology as an option for providing services for additional groups of clients who we thought were not interested in face to face services or found them too difficult to access but still wanted information or support.

There are two inter-related issues that are relevant to our service development. Firstly the prevalence of sexual assault and secondly the extraordinary proliferation of social media over the past decade and what that means for organizations such as SECASA as they come to terms with these changes.

Statistics
Sexual assault is mostly a hidden crime which takes place in private and is no respecter of class or gender. Marginalised and disadvantaged people are more likely to be assaulted. This poses specific problems with making a service available to different populations of victims and survivors especially people in isolated and remote areas and with mobility issues.

Fergusson and Mullen in a review of international research in 1999 concluded that

- 1 in 3 females under the age of 18 would experience a sexual assault and
- 1 in 6 males under the age of 18.
The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Personal Safety Survey (2006) reported that most people do not report a sexual assault to anyone even their closest friend or relative and that

- 1 in 5 females and 1 in 20 males had experienced sexual violence since the age of 15.

These statistics pose a specific issue for sexual assault centres as they work in an area with a high prevalence of criminal offences and limited reporting for many reasons including embarrassment, distrust of the judicial system to treat victims respectfully and the different ways people deal with trauma.

Social Media

How does social media fit into the prevalence of sexual assault and the low rates of reporting? In 1998 SECASA created a static website whose primary purpose at the time was to reduce the number of brochures we printed and talks we gave to students, members of the public and professionals. We won awards for our website and for a while thought that would be sufficient involvement in the new technologies.

By the mid 2000s it became apparent that there were other changes happening in the world of the internet that could not be ignore if you were committed to accessible service delivery. Website users were surveyed and if was found only 5 percent were under 18 years of age. This was in a website which, at that time, had 350 000 unique visitors per year. A number of overseas surveys concluded that the internet was increasingly pivotal in the lives of teenagers for information finding and as a hub of their social lives (Keffer). Another researcher Borzekowski found that 1 in 5 adolescents stated they went to the internet to research a difficult health topic. Other research indicated that young people were using the web in different ways to adults. It was suggested that they preferred to ask their on line friends for information rather than their parents. Clearly sexual assault comes into the arena of difficult topics and for many young people a difficult health topic.

We created a youth website SECASA Youth. The youth website is small and colourful with an emphasis on constantly changing content delivered in small blocks that are easy to read on a mobile phone screen. It directs users wanting more information to on line and downloadable resources on other sites. It promotes youth oriented messages such as safe partying, safer sex, cyberbullying and keeping yourself safe in relation to web cams, and mobile phone cameras. Later the website was made mobile phone friendly as it became clear that young people are more likely to look for information via their smart phone than on a computer.

SECASA also started to deal with the issue of sexting following a large number of requests from schools and workers for information about the legal situation after a number of young men were put on the Sex Offender Register in Victoria over sexting charges. Magistrates have no discretion in this matter in Victoria at present, whatever their views about the situation. It was clear there was a clash of adult and adolescent cultures. Adolescents see sexting or selfies as a private activity when between boyfriend and girlfriend. However, sending photos of yourself either naked or in intimate poses is currently a criminal activity in Victoria if you are under 18. This will be the situation until legislation intended to catch paedophiles is amended. Police have generally stopped charging young people of similar ages when the photo is not transmitted to a third party without the consent of the original sender but the activity is still illegal.

Around 2005 SECASA decided as an agency to address the social media issue and see what worked. There was a brief flirtation with Second Life which did not prove very successful. Our Avatar was sexually assaulted which was an interesting way for SECASA to discover how on line virtual realities can work. A Myspace site was created which in retrospect was not the best choice but eight years ago it was not that clear whether Myspace or FaceBook would be more popular. Now with over one billion FaceBook users against 120 million for Myspace it is clear. However, this is not an area where there are any certainties. The one fact we know is that the top 15 social networking sites have over 1.5 billion users. The opportunities for providing a service and information free to such a huge audience are unequalled in any other forum. In addition you receive instant feedback and that for a direct service agency is invaluable.

Our Myspace site proved successful. A FaceBook page was set up and that was also successful. We had new friends, visits, group memberships and blog viewings. We used weekly bulletins to deliver sexual assault information in a non-threatening manner. These bulletins were often reposted to the friend networks of our friends and then onto their friends and so on forever giving us greater coverage than old fashioned brochures and posters.
Then we started our involvement with Yahoo! Answers which is a community-driven knowledge market website launched by Yahoo! in December 2005. It is a large site that allows people to ask questions that are answered by the general public. The quality of the answers depends on who answers the questions. It is a very popular site and has 15 million users daily. We were also asked to be part of the panel answering questions on the Somazone site run by the Australian Drug Foundation.
Here are a couple of examples of the types of questions we find sitting on Yahoo! Answers or are asked to answer on Somazone that will give you an idea why we pursue these options.

When I was sexually abused, the guy who did it, his cousin sat there and watched the full thing. I know it’s wrong. If I went to the Police would anything happen about the guy who watched even if he didn’t do anything? It’s just been running through my head.

I was raped lotsa times when I was a kid by this man. I had counselling and dealt with it. That was over ten years ago tho and I can’t have a sexual relations so I haven’t had a boyfriend ever. I am really sad and lonely. Please help.

I’m 16 and my Dad has sex with me. Is this right?

I think I am in love but we only text and chat on Facebook. He calls me cute and compliments me. Recently he’s been asking for a picture of my boobs. I am not sure what to think about this relationship. Please help me.

I’m being bailed a lot at school because of this photo. Please somebody help? I don’t know how to get this photo out of google images. I’ve tried using webmaster removal tool but it didn’t work. I can give the image url if any1 can et it removed off google images.”

These are questions that are not asked in any other forum. We do not get asked these type of questions on Duty or at Intake. So we continue to monitor these forums and dedicate time to dealing with these questions as a commitment to accessibility and breaking the silence. We understand the risk of questions that are just posted to cause a controversy but we have a policy of dealing with all queries in a respectful manner as they all give us an opportunity to disseminate accurate information.

We were involved in a research project with the Australian Catholic University (ACU) to look at The use of an on-line site to seek information and help after sexual assault. We put considerable resources into Yahoo! Answers and other social media sites and wanted to make sure that this was an efficient use of resources and was effective. This project analysed 69 posted questions about sexual assault and 391 answers. A comparison between the answers from SECASA’s Cyber Team and the Yahoo Community revealed major differences in the type of tone of the responses. The responses posed by SECASA were more systematic and showed greater detail, accuracy and support than those posted by the Yahoo Community. SECASA received the most votes for the ‘best’ answer by both Askers and the Yahoo Community. This reinforced our view that it was important we put resources into responding on these sites.

As SECASSAs social media presence grew we were seen as knowing more about it than other comparable agencies. That was accurate in the field we inhabit. When the on-line project worker found she was spending large amounts of time talking about various social media, internet and associated issues SECASA created the Social Media Safety brochure in conjunction with Victoria Police.

When the sexting issue started to take up a lot of time we decided to create a sexting information pack and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development asked us to provide two packs to each secondary school in Victoria. With the aid of a grant from the Victorian Law Foundation we provided over 4000 packs. We also created an app to allow for anonymous reporting of sexual assault S.A.R.A. for people who were not willing to report to the Police and did not use Crimestoppers.

**Conclusion**

SECASA is still pursing social media avenues. For all the negative publicity about cyber bulling, the dangers of on line dating and paedophiles grooming young girls, it is an amazing resource. One Billion Rising is a campaign to raise awareness about violence against women. It was publicised almost entirely on line and attacted hundreds of women to dance at Federation Square in Melbourne and at similar events around Australia. They are now planning their 2014 event. We Will Not Go Quietly is a rape victim’s brave response to a stranger assault. The woman concerned went public and published a zine.
which is an online magazine. The SlutWalk is also a Facebook event in Melbourne and the initial comment by a Toronto Police Officer in January 2011 that lead to the SlutWalk was also posted online and went viral.

On a more global level last year there was a Saudi woman detained by the country’s religious police after she launched a campaign against the ban on women drivers in the ultra-conservative kingdom. Her supporters through Facebook organized a mass rally about this issue.

The challenge for SECASA is how we keep up with this approach. Counsellors are not usually chosen for their technological skills. Technological skills alone do not answer the types of questions we deal with on Yahoo Answers or Somazone. As an agency we need to put some thought into how we train workers who are interested in this area to provide a responsive appropriate service.

But we have started down this path and have moved from seeing it as a side issue to service provision to being an integral part of our service provision. SECASA now allocates two counselling positions, or the equivalent funding, into this area. The present SECASA with over 50 workers bears almost no resemblance to the original sexual assault centre started in 1977 at the Queen Victoria Hospital with one person. We can see the same developmental path for our involvement in online social networking sites. What seems a huge time and resource commitment in 10 years time will appear just a beginning as we move towards on-line counseling.

**References**


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