

How do we address sexual violence in the digital age?

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After unsuccessfully applying to dozens of jobs, an interviewer flatly told Megan (to shield her identity, Megan's real name is not used) that while she was highly qualified, her online "extracurricular activities" weren't compatible with the job. Not knowing what the interviewer was talking about, Megan left and quickly Googled herself. What she found brought her to tears. There she was, in the second search result, standing naked in the shower for the entire world to see. The pictures were shot by her abusive ex-husband a couple years prior and while she had not wanted him to take the photos, his threats prevented her from telling him to stop. Dozens of explicit images were now connected to her LinkedIn and Facebook profiles and the police were saying there was nothing that could be done. Just when Megan thought she'd broken free, her ex showed, yet again, why he still had the power.

Unfortunately, Megan's experience with revenge porn is becoming increasingly common. From high school students who take photos for a boyfriend or girlfriend, to undergrads, to same and opposite-sex partners and spouses, revenge porn and other forms of technology-based sexual violence are affecting every segment of society. Thankfully, victims will soon have options due to the efforts of Representative Brian Turner and a bipartisan group of North Carolina House members who sponsored and secured the passage of House Bill 792. H.B. 792 will criminalize the distribution of sexual images without the depicted person's affirmative consent, allow victims to recover up to \$10,000 for unlawful disclosures, and authorize courts to destroy the illicit images. Additionally, the law supports low-income victims by permitting courts to require the perpetrator to pay a victim's attorney's fees. The most important aspect of H.B. 792, however, is not the punishment it authorizes, but the empowerment it provides to victims who can reclaim some of the dignity they've lost through the violation of their privacy.

As our community grapples with the impact of revenge porn and other forms of technology based domestic abuse, our challenge is not in controlling the distribution of images; it's in redefining community standards on the intimate issues of privacy, sex, and consent in the digital age. While many of these problems have been enabled by technology, the internet and social media are only the latest mediums that allow us to disrespect and dehumanize. They are not the cause of the problem and their regulation will not provide a resolution. While House Bill 792 addresses the consequences of sexual violence, it does not and cannot address the underlying contempt that fuels acts of domestic violence. Instead, that task is left to each of us. As victims begin to rebuild their reputations through the protections of H.B. 792, I hope our community will start the hard work of preventing abuse through conversations with children, friends, and family on the difficult issues of privacy, consent, sex, and the respect required for both genders and all gender identities. These conversations, not new laws, are how we will build community values and confront the deeply rooted causes of domestic violence.

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