



Physical Anthropology Section - 2013

118 Is There Such a Thing as Internet-Mediated Homicide?

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After attending this presentation, attendees will reflect on a specific type of murder related to the use of the internet, chat lines, and chat rooms.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by assessing the role of the increasing use of the internet in the etiology of sexual crime or homicide.

In the literature, the terms "internet homicide," "internet chat-room killer," and "Craig's List killer" have been coined to indicate the scenario in which a victim of homicide is met through a chat line or chat room and lured to death at the hands of the murderer. Various criticisms have been made of this new concept, on the grounds that the outcome is no different from that of other homicides committed without the use of web resources, and so the method used has no particular influence. Indeed, it has been claimed that informatic crime just reflects a technological change in the nature of crime rather than a new form of criminal behavior attributable to the use of the internet for criminal purposes.

This scenario offers points for reflection on the nature of web-mediated victim-murderer interactions, to assess the effects on the planning and commission of the crime.

These reflections were prompted by experience as expert forensic psychiatry witnesses in a case in which the murderer had confessed to having had an exclusively virtual relationship with the victim lasting about four months, in which they spent up to 14 hours a day on a chat line. Their relationship was characterized by a strong emotional involvement of the man, who left the girlfriend he was living with because he claimed to be in love with the woman he had met on the web. Importantly, the murderer and his victim had some "online sex" experiences, but he quickly started to show conflictuality and instability motivated by jealousy, which put the woman off. After threatening to commit suicide "live" on the web (brandishing a gun – perhaps a toy) to prevent the woman from ending their virtual meetings, the man went to her home and, during their first and only real meeting, he killed her with a blunt instrument he had carried with him.

The recorded dialog between the aggressor and victim (Murderer: "How could you do this to me?" Victim: "Bastard, get out! I'll fuck with whoever I want!") reveals the typical victim-murderer relationship but, although this had already been expressed in a virtual reality scenario, it had never before been translated to the real world.

The man had previous convictions for drug peddling and for attempted murder of his ex-wife discovered in the act of adultery, and violence against her companion.

The case appears to be an example of the destructive potential of passage from a virtual reality to the real world. It illustrates the risks of losing both a sense of reality and a sense of limits, making it difficult to separate what is real from what is imaginary and has never been real, with all the negative consequences that can stem from this loss of the sense of reality.

The woman's desire to end an exclusively virtual relationship was seen by the man as a real, traumatic experience. It injured his deepest emotions and his anger, symptomatic of the narcissistic wound he felt he had received, can be classified as "one of the most pernicious afflictions of the human psyche," because "if the man who feels anger is irrational, the man who feels hate is not, regardless of whether, in the given circumstances, the hate has a rational foundation or not."

All this demonstrates that it is possible to claim that there really is such a thing as Internet-correlated homicide, because in this case the quality and quantity of the Internet interactions progressively altered the man's perception of the real relationship between himself and the victim. This culminated, in their first and only meeting, in murder provoked by her rejection; the pain he suffered was undoubtedly real, and all the more incomprehensible and deep to him because of the pleasure he had derived from their virtual encounters.

Virtual Identity, Sexual Crime, Homicide