



Digital & Multimedia Sciences Section - 2015

C9 The Role of Fantasy in Investigating Online Predation Cases

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After attending this presentation, attendees will be aware of ways to use close examination of internet communications to identify and investigate online predators. The presentation applies principles of hybrid crime assessment to identify pressure points at which the online predator is likely to become dissatisfied with cyberspace and seek to move his or her crimes into physical space. One tool for conducting these investigations is understanding the role of fantasy and how it can be manifested in relation to crimes in cyberspace.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing a new investigative tool for conducting predator investigations that have both online and physical interactions between predators and their victims.

One online dictionary defines predation as, "...a relation between animals in which one organism captures and feeds on others".¹ In cyberspace online predation can have much the same definition; however, feeding on others usually becomes psychological rather than physical. Online predation almost always includes an element of fantasy, whether as a tool for exploitation or as a state of mind in the predator.

Contrary to some popular definitions, victims of online predators are not limited to children. Online predation is virtually always a power issue, often mixed with fantasy, and its targets depend upon the proclivities of the predator. Understanding this combination is useful as an investigative tool. Identifying the role of fantasy in the mind of the predator can assist the investigator in identifying and investigating the suspect.

Fantasy can take two forms. One way to differentiate is to view the fantasy as a way to escape into a world where day-to-day issues lose their importance. Healthy individuals fantasize periodically but generally emerge from their daydreams unscathed and, perhaps, refreshed; however, other individuals — not as mentally healthy — escape into fantasies and may not emerge. Their lives become integral with their fantasies and, at some point, those fantasies may evolve and develop to the point where the individual must act them out as part of his or her daily physical existence. Simply, these people lose the balance between the real world and their manufactured fantasy world. Consequently, they leave clues that can assist in investigating their activities and can also assist in tracing them through cyberspace and into physical space.

Cyberspace is an alternative dimension. It is a parallel universe that gives its denizens the ability to live in a world that meets their criteria and does not offer the normal disappointments of daily physical-world life. The presence of erotic chat rooms, sadomasochistic websites, and virtual worlds addressing other extremes of behavior attest to a market serving fantasies that are somewhat "off the grid." Online pornography has long been a topic for academic study, in part due to its breadth and depth. Deviant behavior is alive and well and has a home in cyberspace.

Humans live three lives: public, private, and secret. In the anonymity of cyberspace, it seems safe to acknowledge and act out the secret life. Investigators can use this behavior to predict physical behavior and, in some cases, predict the point at which it will emerge with dangerous consequences into physical space.

This presentation will explore two cases of online predation: a romance scam and a lengthy (over five years) international cyber stalking. Through examination of internet communications relating to these two cases, attendees will see examples of how online predators signal their unhealthy intentions and give clues about how to locate and investigate them. Both of the predators lived in worlds of fantasy and in both cases their behavior online signaled emergent behavior in physical space. In one case, investigators were successful in bringing the perpetrator to justice while in the other case, the suspect is still at large.

The presentation will discuss the issues involved in fantasy, the two exemplar cases, and, finally, the evidence available to digital investigators following the suspects in cyberspace.

Reference:

1. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/predation>

Online Predator, Digital Investigation, Fantasy