Young people, the internet and pathways into criminality: A study of Australian Adolescents

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To be young in a digital world
• Adolescence as a period of significant and tumultuous
  – Biological change
  – Psychological change
  – Social change

• Experimental and risk-taking behaviour central to the adolescent condition

• Changing environments – technologies such as the Internet, social media
Negotiating the digital landscape

- Much ado about the effects (and affects) of digital technologies adolescent development
- It’s true – adolescents are highly connected, and spend an unprecedented amount of time online
- The landscape through which adolescents traverse developmental stages is very different
Features of a criminogenic internet

• The Internet as a set of spaces/places where individuals converge and interact
• A unique social setting that allows social encounters that
  – Transcend space
  – Transcend time (synchronous + asynchronous)
  – Scalability
• Opportunities for experimentation
  – Ready accessibility, entry and exit that create incredible diversity of criminal opportunities made possible through Internet use
• New technological capabilities challenge notions of co-offending
  – Characterized by great distance, mass connectivity, identity concealment, lack of trust/reciprocity
  – Digital “offender convergence settings” (Felson)
• Can shape the ways criminal learning occurs:
  – Development of criminal commitments
  – Acquisition of criminal capabilities
• Internet as a “carnival” of potential criminal opportunities that tempt, seduce, thrill and engross (Katz, *The Seduction of Crime*)
Implications for pathways into crime

• The Internet/technologies makes purposeful adolescent experimentation/exploration/risk-taking ‘easy’

• Criminal encounters can be ‘accidental’ or ‘unpredictable’
  – Extension of mainstream pursuits or innovations in technological platforms

• Criminal encounters can be limited/episodic and not necessarily indicative of long-term commitments

• Formation of long-term commitments incremental
Theoretical influences

• “digital drift” [Goldsmith and Brewer 2015]
• Affordances (Gibson, Hutchby)
• Cultural criminology (Katz, Presdee)
• Environmental criminology
  – Routine activities
  – precipitators
The study: ‘Becoming Delinquent Online’

- Survey of entire cohort of Grade 8 students at an Australian Secondary School (n=43)
- Measures include:
  - Demographic variables
  - Self control (Grasmick et al 1993)
  - Delinquency (offline)
  - Digital Delinquency (across 7 areas)
  - Access to digital technologies
  - Digital literacy
  - Exposure to with the Internet
Results: Sample description

- Year 8 students (13-14 years of age)
- Gender: 51% male, 49% female
- Overwhelming majority white (93%) and had siblings (x=1.5, sd=1.1)
- Delinquency (offline) ‘any’ of four types 18.6%
- Males significantly more likely to score lower on the self-control scale
Results: Access to digital technologies

• 100% of participants access the internet

• 100% use mobile computer (laptop/tablet) to access the Internet; 93% a smartphone; 54% a desktop

• Report spending on average ~5 hours online per day ($x=4.7, \text{ sd}=2.4$)
  
  – 61% of time spent accessing Internet from laptops, 34% smartphones, 15% desktops

• Most frequently accessed locations: home (54%), school (31%) a friend’s house (8%), other locations (4.2%)
Results: Digital Literacy

• Basic tasks – vast majority comfortable with all tasks

• Advanced tasks – vast majority uncomfortable with all tasks

• Males significantly more likely to be comfortable performing most advanced tasks
Results: Exposure to the internet

• Tasks undertaken by majority of participants at least daily (simple and intermediate)
  – Searches, email, messaging, posting/checking social media, streaming video/music

• Tasks undertaken by majority of users infrequently or never (intermediate and advanced)
  – Video chat, uploading personal photos/videos, banking, buying/selling items, bittorent, website creation, programming, using VPNs and TOR.

• Average score on variety scale 0.5
Results: Digital Delinquency

- Just under half (49%) of respondents engaged in at least one form of digital delinquency
  - IP infringement (30%)
  - Discrimination & bigotry (26%)
  - Advocating violence (14%)
  - Sexual activity (12%)
  - Hacking 9%
  - Illicit transactions (2%)

- Average score (for above activities) on the variety of digital delinquency scale was 0.1 (i.e. least serious)

- Modal duration for delinquent activities 0-5 minutes per session (lowest score possible)
Results: conceptual relationships

- Those scoring higher on self-control showed less engagement in terms of the variety scale of digital delinquency ($r=-0.37$, $p<0.05$) and particularly sex-related forms ($r=0.32$, $p<0.05$)

- Congruence between online and offline delinquency: strong correlation between engaging in the real world and online scale ($r=0.45$, $p<0.01$) – and especially for piracy ($r=0.47$, $p<0.01$) and discrimination ($r=0.41$, $p<0.01$).

- Digital literacy not related to digital delinquency items (not surprising, as relatively constant amongst cohort)

- Exposure scale was associated with advocating discrimination & bigotry ($r=0.039$, $p<0.01$); Number of older siblings associated with discrimination & bigotry ($r=0.31$, $p<0.05$)
Implications

• Exploratory study provides initial insights into the emergence of delinquency in a digital context

• Provides some preliminary support for the digital drift hypothesis and pertinent conceptual links

• Highlights the need for further study – especially longitudinal
Questions?

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