

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, 34 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 behaviour and a new program for adolescents with sexually abusive behaviour who at that time we called adolescent sex offenders. 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 Midsumma, male victims, CALD groups and Aboriginal communities. By 2000 we had 45 workers and 8 locations. In 2007 we co-located with Victoria Police in a Multi Disciplinary Centre where 15 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 could not access our service for a range of reasons including

- Mobility problems
- Not being ready for face to face counseling or therapy

- A desire to anonymously access information

We 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 for a range of reasons but might want to access information or support more remotely.

I want to take up two issues briefly at this point. Firstly I want to touch on the prevalence of sexual assault and secondly to mention the extraordinary proliferation of social media and what that means for how organizations such as SECASA as they come to terms with these changes.

Statistics

Sexual assault as we all know is mostly a hidden crime which takes place in private and is no respecter of class or gender. We also know that 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. We surveyed our website users and found out only 5 percent were under 18 years of age. This is in a website with 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.

As an agency we decided to address the social media issue and see what worked for us. We had a brief flirtation with Second Life which did not prove very successful. Our Avatar was sexually assaulted which was an interesting way for us to discover the reality of on line virtual realities. We decided to create a Myspace site. In retrospect not the best call we have ever made but six years

ago it was not that clear whether Myspace or Facebook would be more popular. Now with 700 million Facebook users against 120 million for Myspace we did not choose well. 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 1.32 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. We set up a Facebook page and that was also successful. 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.

Here are a couple of examples of the types of questions we find sitting on Yahoo! Answers 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 its wrong. If I went to the Police would anything happen about the guy who watched even it he didn't do anything? Its 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 cant 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.

We think 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 are currently 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 has analysed 69 posted questions about sexual assault and 391 answers. This study has examined questions and answers posted on Yahoo! Answers and developed seven analytical themes for them. 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.

Below are the seven themes identified by ACU with examples of the responses given by SECASA.

- Emotional support and affirmation

Please remember that you are a great mother and trying to make your daughter safe

... You know you are in the right

- Advice personal, medical, legal

You may want to have a medical, you may need the morning after pill and eventually to tell the Police what has happened

- Comments – explanations about an event

The past can confuse our feelings and what we think is usual or normal isn't so often 'normal' for people who have been physically/sexually abused in their past

- Reframing – low level counseling

Having nightmares and flashbacks are ways the body manages after trauma. The body thinks about what has happened and processes that information. Flashbacks are the body and brain remembering very vividly what has happened to it...and is very normal.

- The law and legal issues – information and interpretations

If you are under 16, no-one is allowed to have sex with you. It is a criminal offence. Sexual assault does not only mean penetration. Having a crotch shoved in your face without your consent would fall within the scope of an assault of a sexual nature.

- Resources and/or information available including websites supplied in each Answer

Consulting a lawyer or Legal Aid Centre could be a start and investigate an Interim Intervention Order against him. He can contest it in Court before it becomes a full Intervention Order. If you think talking to someone would help to clarify the situation and help you with options there are some numbers below. There are also some websites that you might find useful for information about sexual assault (large list provided)

- Accessing help – details including websites supplied in each Answer

If he suggests he wants to change his ways he could call Men's Referral Service, MRS where he can talk to another male about attending a Behaviour Change Group where

men can learn about respectful relationships.

Conclusion

SECASA is still pursuing social media avenues. We received a grant from the Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation to create a specific youth website and to explore on line counselling. 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.

The challenge for SECASA is how we keep up with this approach. Counsellors are not usually chosen for their technological skills. However, technological skills alone will not answer the types of questions we deal with on Yahoo Answers. 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 a serious part of our service provision. SECASA now allocates almost two counselling positions, or the equivalent funding, into this area. The present SECASA with 41 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 on line social networking sites. What seems a huge time and resource commitment will probably in 10 years time appear just a beginning.

References

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