





# Revenge *is a dish best served...*

# ONLINE

WHAT DOES THE UGLY CULTURE OF ONLINE PAYBACK MEAN FOR OUR REAL-LIFE RELATIONSHIPS? TABITHA LASLEY FINDS OUT

It never gets easier. You always feel violated. Every time you get an e-mail from somebody notifying you of the pictures or trying to make contact after they've seen the pictures, or you find a new site that has your material up, or you find new pictures from that same batch. You're victimized all over again.'

Sarah\* is discussing the naked pictures of her uploaded to yet another website by her ex-boyfriend. The pictures, taken early on in their relationship, had been haunting her for two years. As fast as she got them down from one site, they'd spring up on another. She'd sent her ex a cease-and-desist order and, for a while, they disappeared. Then in 2011, she posted a photo of herself with her new boyfriend on Facebook. Suddenly, the pictures resurfaced, against a backdrop of her Facebook profile, linked to her full name, e-mail address and place of work. The website agreed to take them down, on the condition that she upload a photo of herself fully clothed, holding an 'I got doxed' sign. Being doxed is when someone reveals your personal information online, destroying your anonymity.

A week later, a Google search of her name threw up 20 pages of results with links to the pictures. Someone e-mailed them to her boss. She was called into a meeting, and had to defend herself against charges that she was distributing them. She was also fielding constant Facebook messages and e-mails from men who'd seen the pictures online, and assumed she was available for anonymous sex. She was told by the police that there was nothing they could do; legally, the photos belonged to her ex. Eventually, she was forced to leave her job and change her name.

Welcome to the age of 'revenge porn'. Back in the 20th century, spurned lovers might cut up a jacket or sew prawns into pelmets. But analogue revenge is hard to exact without getting your own hands dirty. Just ask Vicky Pryce, who tried to get back at her ex-husband, British MP Chris Huhne, by telling journalists she'd taken his speeding points. She's just started serving an eight-month jail sentence. Vengeance 3.0 is so much simpler. All you need do is send a few compromising shots of your ex to a custom-built 'revenge porn' website, then sit back and watch as their life unspools around them. It takes five minutes, and the repercussions roll

on for years. Once images go viral, they're almost indelible. 'The internet has made revenge cheaper and easier,' says Danielle Citron, Professor of Law at the University of Maryland in the US, and an expert on cyber-harassment. 'You can mask yourself online. And when we feel anonymous, or lost in a group, we act on destructive impulses more readily. We do and say things we would never do if we were face to face with a person.'

This effect is known as de-individuation. Online, where free speech is the only amendment that matters, it's rife. Worse than the pictures on these sites are the comments people leave beneath. These threads are lawless enclaves of misogyny where users are free to express their hatred of women in the most visceral terms. Talk ranges from critiquing girls' genitalia to discussing how to kill them: 'This is group polarization,' explains Citron. 'The more people see those comments, the more extreme they're going to be. They try and go one better than each other.'

Online disinhibition doesn't just affect losers lurking in their mother's basements. Social networks have enabled the rest of us to settle scores before we've had a chance to count to 10. On Facebook we can disseminate scathing opinions in seconds, which friends can 'like', ratifying our behaviour. Grown-ups who should know better now wage

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wars of escalation on Twitter. Chef Claude Bosi tweeted a man who criticized his food on Trip Advisor to tell him he was a 'c\*\*\*'. Author Alice Hoffman was so incensed by a bad review that she tweeted the reviewer's phone number, and encouraged followers to get in touch and 'tell her what u think of snarky critics'. Some companies receive so many irate tweets about perceived poor service, they've had to set up separate feeds to deal with them.

Beyond this generalized loss of courtesy and caution, the internet has bred a taste for brooding. Before social networking made the recent past accessible, you were considered

weird for spying on your ex. Now, we'll happily admit to 'Facebook stalking' people. A study by Brunel University found that about half the site's billion users monitor their exes online (it also found that they experience more longing for that ex, greater distress over the break-up and slower personal growth). It's this culture of casual voyeurism that's allowed people like Hunter Moore to profit. He founded the first revenge porn site, Is Anyone Up. For a while, he was a media *bête noire*. Gazing out insolently from magazine covers and chat-show sofas, he earned himself the appellation 'most hated man on the internet'. He thought he knew his public and that their taste for revenge stopped at sexual humiliation. He was wrong: 'People started doing "death revenge"', he says. 'It was beyond getting back at your ex. If somebody died in a car accident (they'd submit) autopsy pictures of them mangled in a car wreck. I'm not a religious guy, but I'm still a human being. I don't like looking at that s\*\*t.' Moore sold the domain, effectively closing the site, but new sites rushed in to fill the vacuum; compared to them, Is Anyone Up looks almost benign. Craig Brittain, founder of Is Anybody Down, has been accused of tricking women into sending photos by posing online as a bi-curious girl. The site is affiliated with 'Takedown Hammer', a service that removes pictures for a fee. It's apparently run by lawyer David Blade III, though there's no record of any such person on the New York attorneys' database, and he has the same IP address as Brittain.

Pink Meth doesn't charge to remove photos, but demands that victims write a 500-word *mea culpa* (complete with head shot), heaping a second serving of shame upon them. In taking ownership of women's bodies, then blaming the victims themselves, it feels queasily reminiscent of real-life rape. Women often comply, because they feel it's their only recourse.

But revenge porn is not legal; it's just that the laws against it are not enforced. 'There are tons of laws that cover invasions of privacy, infliction of emotional distress and defamation, on the civil side,' says Erica Johnstone, who runs Without My Consent, a resource for victims of revenge porn. 'The problem is, it's so expensive to file a lawsuit. Often defendants are judgment-proof, meaning they don't have any assets. They have nothing to lose, which is why they engage in this type of behaviour to begin with.'

Meanwhile, criminal law is lagging far behind. Police still tell victims to 'switch off their computers', as if online revenge never translates into real-life abuse. In fact, there are increasing reports of girls being approached in the street by men who recognize them from these sites.

Citron says she knows of one rape case in which a US marine posted pictures of his ex (taken off Facebook) with a message (purportedly written by her) on the Craigslist website saying that she wanted a rape fantasy fulfilled. Pretending to be her, he arranged a date and time with her rapist (more than 100 men responded to the ad) and she was brutally raped in her home. The marine and rapist were both sentenced to 60 years in jail.

Sarah is now licensed to carry a concealed weapon. Unfortunately, no weapon can protect you from the psychological pain of discovering your most intimate shots online. Dr Keely Kolmes, a psychologist who's helping Johnstone and colleague Colette Voegle compile a survey on the emotional effects of revenge porn, says that victims can suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), hyper-arousal, flashbacks, nightmares and intrusive thoughts. Some research has indicated that online harassment is more psychologically harmful than offline harassment, because it's ongoing, hard to evade and the abuser can remain anonymous.

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As for the scorned ex? They don't get much relief either. A University of Marburg study found that beyond a short-term high, taking revenge offers no real satisfaction. What it does do, though, is erode trust between the sexes. A study by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) found that teenagers now think: 'peer surveillance and recording (is normal), to the extent that many young people felt they had few friends they really trusted.' Ten years out of her teens, Sarah is struggling with a similar response. 'It's created a lot of issues. People who become victims are on these sites much more than they want to be, because they're constantly looking (for) their pictures. The pornography really taints your view. It paints the most disgusting picture of guys, of how obsessed they are with the female body. It's like this dark, disgusting version of men. And you become privy to it when you start looking at these sites.' **mc**

\* Name has been changed.

## REVENGE PORN RELIEF

If you've been targeted, Sarah's campaign to criminalize revenge porn offers advice and useful contacts (Endrevengeporn.com). She also recommends Womenagainstrevengeporn.com, a site that gives step-by-step guidance on getting your pictures down, while Erica and Colette's website Withoutmyconsent.org is excellent on the legal side of things.

