Introduction

THREE CASES

On a late August evening in 2012, students from Steubenville High School in Ohio hosted a series of house parties to celebrate the end of summer. Attendees included Trent Mays and Ma’lik Richmond, two star football players from the high school, and a 16-year-old girl from a neighboring town, whom the two young men sexually assaulted multiple times during the evening. The first of these violations occurred in the back seat of a car, Mays taking advantage of the victim’s inebriated status during the drive between parties, while Richmond and two other male friends watched. The subsequent assaults, by Mays and Richmond, occurred in the basement of another boy’s house, while the girl lay unconscious on the floor, once again in front of witnesses. Every stage of Jane Doe’s abuse during that night was captured in pictures and videos, posted on YouTube and Instagram for popular consumption. The events were also circulated and commented on by the perpetrators and bystanders via text messaging and social media platforms, such as Twitter.1

Earlier that year, on a cold, January night, 14-year-old Daisy Coleman and her friend decided to join a handful of boys from Daisy’s high school for a small house party in Maryville, Missouri. A few hours and many drinks later, a heavily intoxicated Daisy was (allegedly) assaulted by 17-year-old Matthew Barnett, while his friend watched and recorded the incident on his phone.2 And only one month after the
Steubenville rape, 15-year-old Audrie Pott of Saratoga, California, was also sexually assaulted at a house party by three young men she knew.3 Waiting until she was passed out drunk, the three 16-year-old boys dragged Audrie to an upstairs bedroom, drew and wrote on her body, sexually assaulted her, and took photos, which they shared with others at her school through social media and text messaging. As rumors and images of her abuse circulated among her peers, Audrie also became the target of their bullying; eight days after the assault, she killed herself by hanging.4

These three cases describe highly publicized incidents that dominated news media and public discourse in 2013. When they made headlines, most of the concern surrounding youth, technology, and sexuality centered primarily on problematic but legal activity among teens (i.e., sexting). The Steubenville rape, and the Coleman and Pott incidents that followed in its wake, however, featured non-consensual, sexually abusive, and criminal behavior by young people, introducing a new set of questions and anxieties about the consequences of digital engagement for teens. The stories were met with shock and outrage over the callous behavior and attitudes young people exhibited. Particularly bewildering and alarming was teens’ willingness to brazenly share such activity across social media, without concern for repercussions. The question gnawing at everyone, myself included, was: What were these kids thinking? Public fears over the dangers of the digital turn for younger generations became more acute once the Steubenville trial started. The crucial role of social media in gathering evidence in the case raised serious concerns over the implications of the digital trail for young men and their futures. At the same time, Audrie Pott’s suicide and the online harassment directed at Jane Doe after her assault also sounded alarms about social media platforms and cyberbullying.

The use of digital platforms to document and share sexual assault and perpetuate sexual harm and abuse presents important questions about youth peer cultures and sexual practices, as well as concerns over how this group is engaging with new technologies. Why would young people publicize such behavior on social media? What are the long-term implications of this activity for young victims and perpetrators of sexual violence? Public discourse in the ensuing months and years treated the incidents as a referendum on technological risk, as cautionary tales about cyberbullying, underage drinking, and the harms of digital engagement for adolescents everywhere and for young women in particular.5
The sexual violence central to these cases and the motives driving young people’s digital participation remain insufficiently analyzed.

Research has likewise been slow to theorize image-based sexual abuse among youth, often subsuming instances of digitally mediated sexual violence into broader discussions of rape culture or technology-facilitated violence, citing them as examples of both. This scholarship frames digital harm as an extension of unequal gender relations into the digital realm, but though true, this framework fails to explain the motives of the perpetrators of such abuse. More recently, scholars have identified power and control as reasons for image-based sexual abuse, however these studies are overwhelmingly based on violence in the context of dating and intimate partner relationships. Multi-perpetrator sexual assault is a group occurrence, with its own unique motivations and power dynamics, one that requires a separate investigation of young people’s digital activities in such settings. Such assaults are not only about the relationship between victim and offender but also about those between co-offenders and bystanders, as well as men’s relationships to each other. As peer-oriented behavior, these incidents necessitate a different explanation of technological engagement, one that centers identify and performance rather than coercion and control as the frame of analysis.

Although news media and public attention have moved on to other pressing social problems in recent years, instances of young groups of men assaulting young women and capturing and circulating this abuse via digital platforms continue to happen across the country (and the world). In 2017 a 15-year-old girl’s rape by multiple perpetrators in Chicago was streamed on Facebook Live, watched by dozens in real time, without anyone reporting the event to the police. In 2019 three 18-year-old boys assaulted an intoxicated, passed out 17-year-old girl in a hotel room in Deerfield, Ohio; filmed it; and shared the rape on Snapchat. Three similar incidents made headlines in 2020 alone. In Georgia three young men recorded the rape of another girl and posted it on Snapchat. In South Carolina two boys recorded the sexual assault of a 13-year-old on Facebook Live, and the video was shared dozens of times. And in Providence, Rhode Island, eight young men posted on Facebook a video of their rape of a passed out 16-year-old girl at a house party.

This is by no means an exhaustive list; rather, I offer these occurrences as examples that such behaviors are an ongoing feature of the adolescent sexual assault landscape and require our attention. In this book, I engage explicitly with such cases to provide critical insights
into what these episodes tell us about the meanings and contexts of young people’s digital activity. Further, I document how social media and digital evidence feature in social and institutional responses to the incidents, to analyze the consequences of the digital trail for victim-survivors and perpetrators of sexual assault. More broadly, I attempt to provide critical insight into the appeal of social media platforms for mediated representation writ large and the implications of this digital turn for our culture and society.

SITUATING ADOLESCENTS’ DIGITAL PRACTICES

Digital media are now a ubiquitous feature of everyday life, with a vast majority of teens having access to a smartphone or computer. According to the latest study by the Pew Research Center, as of 2022, 95 percent of American teens have a smartphone or access to one, with ownership being nearly universal among youth of different genders, races, ethnicities, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Nearly universal mobile phone ownership also means heavy usage of social media and online platforms by teens, with YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat as the primary platforms regardless of demographic characteristics. The explosive uptake of new technologies has been met with an equally expanding body of research and public debate on the implications of this digital engagement for youth. One area of concern has been the interface of technology and sexuality, with anxieties about how young people manage privacy and the damaging impact of digital engagement converging around sexting. Studies find that the news media frame sexting in a negative and alarmist discourse that suggests technology drives adolescents’ engagement in increasingly sexual behaviors and may include harmful behaviors.

Contemporary discourses about teens and social media are only the latest iteration in a long history of social concern and moral panics around youth and technology. They are informed by a determinist view that sees technology as an autonomous force, operating outside of the control of humans and with the capacity to act upon and change society. They also reflect an adult perspective of risk and safety informed by social anxiety about perceived problem shifts in youth values and behaviors. Historically, teenagers have been constructed as both risky and at risk; they are either vulnerable and dependent, and thus in need of adult protection, or delinquent and dangerous, and thus in need of control and discipline. Both configurations engender risk anxiety in adults, often
resulting in segregation and increased surveillance and control over adolescents’ lives.\(^{19}\)

Youth sexuality, in particular, is a key site fraught with fears for adult generations and subject to heavy policing by them.\(^{20}\) The continued concern among adults regarding youth sex and sexual practices reflects assumptions about young people’s immaturity, “raging hormones,” and their inability to make good sexual decisions. These understandings arise from the social construction of teenagers as emotionally and intellectually not adults and therefore in need of guidance and protection. But they also reveal our anxiety over the vulnerability of children and adolescents to being sexually exploited and the need to protect their sexual innocence, especially in an increasingly sexualized cultural and media landscape.\(^{21}\) Digital technologies exacerbate these fears since they complicate and often undermine efforts to protect youth and their (sexual) innocence, both by facilitating access and communication between teenagers and by increasing the potential for harm through their ability to store, distribute, and replicate information.\(^{22}\)

Rather than adding to current anxiety about teens, sexuality, and digital engagement, I suggest placing adolescents’ social media practices into social and historical perspective and giving young people a chance to articulate their own ethics of engagement.\(^{23}\) Today, the technological means to document behavior are far more dispersed throughout the general public than ever before, as is the over-sharing culture promoted and naturalized by social media platforms. As a generation that has grown up digital, young people’s identities and ethics are being fundamentally shaped by these new norms and cultures, both positive and negative. At the same time, teens are trying to navigate the precarious and highly gendered social landscape of adolescence, and we must be sensitive to this fact, and to the ways digital practices are often embedded in these dynamics, if we are to understand the motives and values informing their digital praxis.\(^{24}\) What does it mean for youth to grow up in a world where social media and mobile technologies are key sites and tools of self-presentation and identity work, including expressions of gender and sexuality? A world where disclosure is increasingly encouraged, routinized, and rewarded, not least of all by the logics and affordances of social media platforms themselves? Engaging with these questions is crucial if we want to understand why some teens digitally capture and distribute sexual abuse.

In this book, I examine how youth experience and make sense of these gendered worlds and the evolving social media landscape through
an analysis of the gender dynamics, sexual ethics, and digital norms that inform young people’s interactions and digital practices. I also investigate the ways teens’ practices and ethics intersect with, and are informed by, the logics of digital technologies and broader economies of attention and humiliation. My analysis is based on qualitative interviews with 35 young men and women between 16- and 18 years old. I find that for many adolescents, dominant gender norms and heteronormative sex scripts inform their interpersonal relationships and peer cultures, including interactions with the opposite sex, and that such dynamics also extend to their digital praxis. My conversations with teens further reveal a world where digital production and sharing is primarily individualistic and heavily driven by likes and peer validation. The principal consideration behind much of their social media activity focuses on the potential consequences for oneself: Will I get in trouble if I share this image, for example, or will sharing it get me likes? And are the rewards of sharing worth the risks? This is not to say youth are thoughtless in their digital production and decision-making, just deeply self-focused. Such a narrow focus has implications for who their imagined audiences are and what they perceive as the consequences of their actions, including what their actions mean for others, and informs their overall ethics of digital participation. My analysis suggests young people record and share their behavior on social media—including negative activity—with immediate contexts in mind, often with the goal of receiving peer validation. This approach to digital engagement extends to sexual activity, I argue, including sexual assault. Instead of focusing on the criminal aspects of teens’ behavior in such instances, I propose centering the social nature of the assaults and the rewards of digital sharing. Doing so enables us to understand the digital documentation and sharing of this behavior not just as evidence of a sex crime but also as a means for young men to perform hetero-masculinity for their peers’ gaze and approval.

Digital platforms and activity are instructive because they reflect, magnify, and make more visible the structural factors and inequalities that shape everyday life. When social relations and cultural systems are shaped by misogyny, racism, and other forms of prejudice, for example, this becomes visible online. Similarly, when young people record and share sexual violence or callously mock and bully victims of assault on social media, they are telling us something about the cultural values and beliefs that shape their views and experiences of gender, sexual norms, and sexual victimization. We have to use these incidents to determine how the social and cultural fault lines that structure American life impact
young people. Understanding the abusive content created and disseminated by teens in these cases, the ethical dispositions displayed, and the lack of fear of consequences, I contend, requires us to address how their behaviors and ways of thinking are situated in and supported by patriarchy, heterosexism, and rape culture.

Also crucial to the discussion of why teens would share evidence of a sex crime on social media is the design of these platforms. It is easy, between discussions of young men’s masculinity goals and the unequal dynamics that permeate our gender relations, to forget about how digital media influence individuals’ behaviors. Much of the existing scholarship on gender and digital abuse treats social media as neutral phenomena whose application depends on the motives of their users. Men turn to these platforms with the express purpose of asserting their power and control over women, whether in the context of an intimate relationship or in the public sphere. However, social media do not simply channel user interactions; they also structure the manner in which interactions take place by enabling and encouraging certain types of practices through their design and software architecture. Digital platforms actively encourage the publication and circulation of private material and promote such practices without reflection, all in the name of profit. Hence, I argue here for theorizing sexual violence and its digital circulation at the intersection of localized gender practices with larger digital cultures and technological affordances. While these properties of technology certainly do not determine teen practices, I maintain that they can encourage diminished ethical responsibility, commodification, and an instrumental attitude among users that makes digital abuse possible. Established patterns of inequality and the attention economies and cultures of humiliation and exploitation in which media practices are embedded further destigmatize and sanction such harm.

HOW THE DIGITAL TRAIL MATTERS

The cases that serve as the focus of this book provide a rare opportunity to examine the implications of the digital trail for sex crime investigations and young people’s entanglement with the criminal justice system. One of the more noteworthy—and concerning—revelations to emerge from the Steubenville trial was the astounding volume of evidence investigators were able to obtain through social media. Story after news story highlighted the thousands of text messages, photos, and social media postings that helped prosecutors build their case and successfully
convict Mays and Richmond. Digital platforms in Steubenville, as well as in the Coleman and Pott incidents, were similarly instrumental for galvanizing public interest in the cases and pressuring local authorities to take the sexual assault allegations seriously. The ease with which new media gather, store, and distribute information, as well as their capacity to engage and mobilize publics, invites consideration of the possibilities of technology for institutional responses to sexual violence. How useful is the digital trail for sexual assault investigations? The scholarship on sexual violence shows rape myths, gender stereotypes, and victim-blaming attitudes continue to permeate the criminal justice system’s treatment of survivors and perpetrators of sexual assault. Does digital evidence hold any potential for disrupting these patterns?

Reliance on smartphones and social media to capture evidence of criminal activity and of the digital trail in the criminal justice system is increasingly common and encouraged. Nevertheless, youth and legal scholars have been slow to examine the role of new technologies in investigating and prosecuting sexual violence, including juvenile sexual assault. Most of the research in this area focuses on cyberbullying and sexting to highlight the inappropriate charges and draconian penalties young offenders often face in such cases. Researchers warn about the risk of over-regulation and criminalization of young people’s consensual, digital sexual interactions as states struggle to develop or revise laws to properly deal with these practices. But what of the law’s response to non-consensual and sexually abusive image sharing by this population? What are the consequences of the digital trail for young perpetrators of sexual assault and for the punishment meted out to them?

When the three cases that open this book made headlines, I also worried over the repercussions of the digital trail for victim-survivors. Sexual violence can be a severely traumatic event; having evidence of that violation and humiliation shared for the world to see can deeply amplify the harm to survivors, especially young and vulnerable victims. While social media played a crucial role in elevating the cases to the national sphere and generating public interest in the incidents, they were also used to circulate the artifacts of their abuse for broader consumption, as well as make fun of, shame, and bully the victims in each case, with tragic results for some of them. What promises and pitfalls do new technologies pose for young survivors of sexual violence and their justice goals, then? Are social media and digital evidence the solutions to victim-survivors—and the problem of sexual violence more broadly—being taken seriously?
My analysis reveals the contradictory potential of digital media for sexual assault survivors and offenders, as well as larger cultural and socio-legal responses to gendered violence and image-based abuse. New technologies provide valuable information in criminal cases, helping to corroborate victim allegations, critique attitudes and myths about rape, and generally aid in overcoming long-standing barriers in processing sexual assault. Their utility, however, is compromised by obstacles resulting from the inability of criminal justice actors and the law to keep up with the constantly evolving state of technologies, as well as ongoing issues surrounding the admissibility and reliability of digital evidence. For young survivors, social media’s potential is context specific. Digital evidence helps victim credibility, can offer powerful visual evidence, and may contribute to allegations being taken more seriously by the criminal justice system. But technology also creates new forms of social consequences for survivors, often amplifying their suffering and future victimization, particularly due to the law’s failure to account for the gendered nature of the harm perpetuated through these platforms. For both survivors and perpetrators of sexual assault, ongoing gender, race, and class biases across the criminal legal system continue to limit the efficacy of the digital trail in improving responses to gendered violence. Still, social media present some survivors and advocates with new opportunities to seek justice through extralegal avenues, to engage broader publics, and to engender cultural shifts in discourses and solutions to sexual violence and image-based sexual abuse.

HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

The chapters that follow are dedicated to exploring the interplay between gender, status, technology, and sexual violence among youth, as well as the consequences of these relations for responses to juvenile sexual assault, both through and outside of the criminal justice system. A dialectical approach to the relationship between technology and society informs my arguments and analysis throughout this book. Influenced by media theorist Raymond Williams, this social constructivist view conceptualizes digital media as both socially shaped and socially shaping.29 According to this perspective, the consequences of technologies arise from a mix of the “affordances” or “logics” that limit the ways technologies can be used and the unexpected and emergent ways people make use of those affordances.30 Writing specifically on gender, science and technology studies scholar Judy Wajcman describes
this framework as technofeminism, referring to the mutually shaping relationship between gender and technology, with technology conceptualized as “both a source and consequence of gender relations.” Such a framework allows for a flexible approach to social media that accounts for both how people’s engagement with technology changes over time and the ways technology (re)shapes other practices. In the context of multi-perpetrator sexual assault and technology-facilitated violence, this perspective helps identify the ways the objectifying tendencies of social media and their inducements toward visibility and social exposure intersect with existing inequalities within peer groups and social contexts to sanction or create new forms of sexual harm and abuse.

The first chapter engages directly with the question of what would motivate teens to record and share sexual assault on social media. I begin with an analysis of how the selected incidents, as well as the relationship between technology and youth, are presented and explained by the mainstream media. I then consider the group aspects of the assaults, and the rewards of documenting and sharing rape and sexual abuse within those peer relations, to identify the motives driving some teens to digitally capture and disseminate these crimes. I detail how gender norms, peer cultures, and masculinity, in particular, shape young people’s sexual practices and ethics, including their digital activity, to explain why risky or criminal sexual behaviors may be recorded and shared by some of them.

Understanding the reasons some adolescents document and distribute sexual abuse on social media also requires us to make sense of the behavior and norms exposed by technologies in these cases. Drawing from interviews with teenage participants, chapter 2 situates young people’s behavior in the broader context of gender inequality, rape culture, patriarchy, and digital humiliation. It further explores the ways technological design and logics impact teens’ disclosure practices and create an ecosystem of commodification, humiliation, and exploitation that sanctions digital abuse. My analysis in these first two chapters provides a theoretical framework for examining technology-facilitated sexual violence that recognizes the dynamic ways social and technological factors inform and shape each other, impacting practice and norms.

The changing disclosure norms and ethics resulting from the digital turn have serious legal and social repercussions for perpetrators and victims of sexual violence. Chapters 3 and 4 examine the uses of the digital trail in the investigation and prosecution of the selected cases and in juvenile sex crimes more broadly, based on interviews with prosecuting and defense attorneys with experience in juvenile sex crimes, including