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Sex on the net: online relations between the men who pay for sex

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www.PunterNet.com

Several years ago, we came across the website, www.PunterNet.com. This British website advertises itself as ‘The Online Community for Patrons and Providers of Adult Personal Services in the UK’. The website was launched in 1999 and was described by the London Evening Standard as ‘...the most successful of the prostitute-reviewing internet sites.’ (see www.PunterNet.com). The site is dedicated to the publication of (almost entirely) male reviews – or ‘field reports’ – of heterosexual encounters with (predominantly) female sex workers. In addition, the website boasts a service provider database and an announcement board. The site, hosted by Galahad, who describes himself as ‘just a regular bloke’, aims to:

.. facilitate the exchange of information on prostitution in the UK. Here you will find information on where to find services, what to expect, legalities, etc. You will be able to read reviews of encounters with working girls and submit your own ‘field reports’. This web site aims to promote better understanding

between customers and ladies in hopes that everyone may benefit, with less stressful, more enjoyable and mutually respectful visits.

(www.PunterNet.com)

PunterNet is not unique, but has two characteristics which set it apart from other websites dealing with commercial sex. First is its longevity and success; at the time of writing it has existed for over eight years and a European version of the website – *PunterNet Europe* – was launched in 2004 (see www.punternet-eu.com). Secondly, it does not appear to be chiefly commercial in nature. Although *PunterNet* does carry links to a limited number of advertisements, its purpose appears mainly to be to provide information for men who use the services of female sex workers. In this sense it is unlike commercial sex websites, which exist primarily, or solely, as a source of profit, and much more like the millions of websites which have been set up and run by enthusiasts or service users for the benefit of fellow enthusiasts or users.

This chapter is based on the *PunterNet* project – a covert cyber-ethnography of the field reports posted on www.PunterNet.com. It is worth noting here that this website is concerned with what has been described elsewhere (see Scambler and Scambler, 1997), as indoor, voluntary adult sex work. Also, that *PunterNet* creates and sustains a normative moral order which is intolerant to coerced, or involuntary, sex work, including sexual slavery, trafficking and the abuse of children. With its focus on indoor, rather than outdoor – or street – sex work, the men who review for *PunterNet* are also likely to be ‘better off and/or more cautious or inexperienced’, in comparison to those who visit street

prostitutes [who] are more likely to be looking for ‘cheap “quickies”’ (O’Connell Davidson, 1996, p.182).

PunterNet – and other similar websites – have created opportunities for remote relationships between the men who pay for sex, as well as possibilities for conducting social research from a distance. This chapter explores the transformative potential of the net in securing a space for online relations between men who pay for sex and discusses the creation and maintenance of a new normative social order. The chapter also examines some of the methodological and ethical dilemmas of the *PunterNet* project. The next section of this chapter focuses on the technological potential for transformation.

Transformative technologies

Contemporary discussions of the net are dominated by accounts of individuals who are looking for, and manipulating, information. The net can, thus, be seen as a massive source of knowledge and information to be searched, browsed, controlled and archived. However, Sproull and Faraj argue that if we conceptualise the individual as a social actor:

... then we should view the net as a social technology [which] allows people with common interests to find each other, talk and listen, and sustain connections over time (Sproull and Faraj, 1997, p.38-9).

Jewkes and Sharp (2003), however, have argued that the net is not indeterminately neutral but, in fact, a highly gendered social technology. Firstly, because the majority of individuals who design, develop and distribute the net are men. Secondly, because many

of the practices facilitated by the net, including hacking, stalking, trafficking and pornography are predominantly performed by men and the victims of these practices are usually women and children. Many feminist commentators have agreed with this position. For example, writing about pornography, MacKinnon (1995) describes the net as having pioneered 'new harms' (p. 1959) and suggests that the net has increased the opportunity for the distribution of images which exploit and objectify women for the pleasure of men. The internet trade in brides has received similar attention from feminist writers. Letherby and Marchbank (2003), for example, suggest that the metaphor of buying a car on-line would not be out of place within the trade of 'mail-order' brides on the net in that: 'Not only can the purchaser select the "model" of woman he seeks ... he can also access all the other necessary business information, in just the same way as he would select a dealer and car loan firm!' (p.70).

That said, the simplistic positioning of men as oppressors and women as victims does not underpin the analysis of data within the *PunterNet* project. Indeed, as Letherby and Marchbank (2003, p.68) themselves note: 'Oppression and exploitation are not unproblematic concepts and it is too simplistic to argue that women are inevitably oppressed and men the inevitable oppressors'. Other writers have also highlighted the potentially transformative potential of the net for women. Jewkes and Sharp (2003), for example, have written about the role of the net in subverting the traditionally gendered consumption of pornographic images. In short, as van Zoonen (2002) argues, the internet is as much a feminine/female world as a masculine/male one.

There is a considerable volume of literature on sex work, with most of this literature focusing on the experiences of male, and predominantly female, sex workers

(Walkowitz, 1980; Chapkis, 1997; McKeganey & Barnard, 1996; Sanders, 2005). In comparison, and until very recently, very little has been known about the men who pay for sex. Although some research has been carried out with the male clients of female sex workers, Perkins (1991) estimates that less than 1 per cent of all studies of sex work focus on these men. However, the net has provided social researchers, and others, an opportunity to explore the world of men who pay for sex. It has also provided the potential for such men to find each other and exchange information, as well as create and sustain a normative social world in which they can share their experiences of commercial sex.

We commenced the *PunterNet* project in 1999. At that time, *PunterNet* contained 5,067 field reports of 2,661 women, written by 2,554 authors. We selected to sample approximately ten per cent of field reports by author (for a further discussion of research methods see Earle and Sharp, 2007). The majority of men posted only one or two field reports but, at that time, the highest number of field reports posted by any single individual was 48. (To give an indication of just how popular this website has become over the last few years, at the time of writing, there are 41,172 field reports online and the highest number of posts for any single individual is 138.) The field reports are highly structured. When posting a report, individuals complete an on-line pro-forma, which gives details of the woman's name, the location of the encounter (town and, in some cases, actual address), telephone number and/or website address, price paid, and length of time taken. Comments are then organized under three headings: 'her place', 'description' and 'comments'. Finally, punters are asked to indicate whether they would recommend her to others and whether they would visit her again themselves. To give you a flavour of

these field reports in their entirety, we have included a fairly typical field report below. Note that where typographical errors exist (without impeding meaning), we have retained these in the text:

Field Report on "Suzy" of Northampton

Posted December 4, 1999

From: Bazuk

Date: 12-11-99

Day of Week: Thurs

Time of Day: 7pm

Location: Northampton

Lady Advertises By: Walkup/Parlour

Contact: www.paradise-massage.co.uk

Time: 45mins

Price: 70

Her Place: Clean safe and rather catching, a bit small though

Description: What can i say, she is blond, petite and nice and soft, just like your favourite fruit (peaches), good enough to eat.

Comments: The massage made me relax so much i nearly fell asleep, but suzy asked if i would like to massage her, too right i would, spent a little while using my fingertips on her thighs, which i hoped she liked. Explored her body and her fragrance was enchanting, the soft caresses really make you feel at ease, we did the reverse oral for a while but when she climbed

my pole the pevic thrusting went into overdrive, i could take much of it for long so i held out as long as i could and was totally knackered afterward. I recommend Suzy to anyone she is a little diamond.

Would You Return: Yes

As expected, the reviews vary quite considerably in length and level of detail and the majority of field reports are highly evaluative. Of greatest interest in our analysis of the data presented in *PunterNet*, however, was to focus on the use of the net as a space for sexual storytelling and the next section in this chapter focuses on this.

Sharing sexual stories online

Plummer (1975) argues that all sexual experience is ‘socially organized’, but he makes an important distinction between categories of experience which are collectively supported and those which are not. He states:

... all sexual experience becomes socially organized ... Thus the masturbator, the necrophile and the frotteurist will organise their sexual experiences, in the main, without any kind of collective support, whiles ‘swingers’, homosexuals and premarital lovers are more likely to organise their experiences in group situations with others. Both kinds of sexual experiences become socially organised, but only the latter becomes enmeshed in collectively evolved norms. (Plummer, 1975, p.85)

Paying for sex is sexually deviant and taboo. It is also a discreditable activity in the sense used by Goffman (1963) to refer to invisible deviance which runs the risk of becoming visible and, thus, actually discrediting the individual concerned; individuals in such discreditable situations have a strong incentive to avoid being exposed, and nowhere is this more apparent than in the case of a man who pays for sex. Indeed, to be identified as someone who pays for sex exposes a man to discredit in a variety of ways and, potentially, in relation to all of his relationships. Exposure as a man who pays for sex invites the labels of deviant, pervert, criminal and dangerous, as well as the label of sexual inadequate.

The net, and specifically *PunterNet*, provides men with a space for sexual storytelling in which sexual experiences can become both socially organized and, crucially, enmeshed in collectively evolved norms. Men who pay for sex are, thus, no longer obliged to define their actions solely in terms of the prevailing (negative) attitudes to paying for sex, nor in relation to the threat of stigmatizing labels. Instead, men who pay for sex but can now do so in relation to, and within, an alternative normative order in which paying for sex is defined as perfectly compatible with an otherwise creditable identity. In other words, the transformative potential of the net, and the creation of *PunterNet* and similar websites, has meant that men who pay for sex can create remote relationships with similar others.

The normative world of online relations

Whilst any attempt to describe something as abstract and embracing as a normative world is likely to be extremely partial, we have set out below what seem to us to be the key features of the particular normative order which defines the *PunterNet* community.

Paying for sex is normal and raises no moral issues

At no time in our analysis of the *PunterNet* data did we find reference to any of the moral debates which, in the wider community, surround paying for sex (for example, debates on whether sex work dehumanises women). The absence of any reference to these debates suggests a normative order in which the legitimacy of such questions is simply not acknowledged, rather than one in which certain well-considered positions are adopted. The fact that men feel no need to justify their actions against hostile moral positions (which would almost certainly be the case if they discussed their actions in the wider community) suggests a moral world in which such debates have simply been temporarily put aside.

That is not to say, however, that there are no clear moral boundaries which define the *PunterNet* community. It is clearly assumed, for example, that commercial sex with anyone under the age of 18 is morally unacceptable. Whilst sex workers were variously described in field reports as ‘lovely girls’, ‘down-to-earth girls’, and ‘friendly girls’, they were never described as ‘young’ girls – with all that this implies in relation to underage sex and the explicit remit of *PunterNet* which claims to deal ‘only with lawful activities involving consenting adults’. The youngest age referred to in any report is 18 years. For example:

18 years of age, blonde hair, blue eyes, gorgeous body. [Shyboy]

She is looking very young (actually she is 21 but looks like 18) and has a slim, natural figure. [Newmessage]

Violence against women is also morally proscribed, as is the transgression of certain social norms by sex workers themselves, including taking the money but not providing the service and mis-representation of appearance, price or services offered. For example:

I've only posted this report as a warning and also as a bit of entertainment for others to laugh at my expense. I was told on the phone that £70.00 covered 2 girls, everything in, and "my friend will do Anal" Went in, paid the £70.00 and the blonde knelt down unbuckled my pants and started sucking me... then i saw her hands in my trouser pockets while they were on the floor! ! recovered my credit cards, car keys and cash and stupidly stayed! ! [Preston Pete]

approx 45/50 nice face pleasant to look at normal size 12 not heavy NOT busty as advertised [janothing]

Advertised as young dutch blonde, definately E.European though [Meadow man]

Links are also provided to websites which offer information exchange on difficult/dangerous clients or sex workers and women's advice groups which provide support for victims of sex trafficking and violence.

Explicit accounts of intimate sex acts are legitimate and necessary

The overwhelming majority of field reports contain highly explicit reviews of intimate sex acts. These reviews adopt sexually explicit language and graphically describe instances of oral sex, masturbation, anal and vaginal intercourse and ejaculation. Whilst humour is not altogether absent in these reviews, they are, in general, straightforwardly descriptive and words such as 'cock', 'pussy', 'cunt', 'tits', 'cum', 'fuck' and 'wank' are habitually used without irony or humour or, indeed – as far as we can be sure – erotic intent. What is implied in the use of these explicit accounts is that they are a necessary means of conveying and exchanging information with other men who pay for sex. In some instances, field reports serve as a warning to other potential *PunterNet* clients:

... simply the worst experience I have had in a long long time and I personally wouldn't send my worst enemy their. She told me I could cum on her breasts and then moaned at how messy it was! The only consolation was that she dropped the dirty dripping tissues right in her lap and had to run off and wash! A fitting end to an awful experience. Avoid like the plague!
Recommended: No. Would You Return: No. [Big Guy 58]

... would advise anybody thinking about it to forget it – probably the worst woman I have been with and will remember this night for a long time for all the wrong reasons. Recommended: No. Would You Return: No. [Crikey]

In other instances, field reports confirm the comments made within other field reports, for example:

I am not a regular punter but have been viewing ‘PunterNet’ for a while and chose Selina because she visited your home and those field reports totally sold me on her but I did not know how true they were. [Expresstrain]

Other field reports serve to give helpful advice:

When you book for the first time, don't be surprised if you are questioned at length about yourself; Peaches is very fussy about whom she sees - if you piss her off on the phone or question her security arrangements she won't see you, but that is your loss! [Valentine]

The use of such language in a purely descriptive way sets *PunterNet* apart from mainstream morality (where such words are taboo), and the culture of the male locker-room (where such terms are used, but with humour or irony) (see, for example, Kehily and Nayak, 1997).

The sex worker is a lady

Whilst men's perceptions of female sex workers are complex and often contradictory, there is an underlying assumption that they are professionals and, thus, worthy of respect. That is not to say that one does not find seemingly offensive remarks within some field reviews – as in the extracts we have used above – but these are usually justified by some failure of the sex worker concerned to provide a satisfactory, or *professional*, level of service. The default attitude seems to be one in which sex workers are essentially good, decent women who work hard to provide a high level of service. Field reports often urge other men to 'treat' sex workers 'well'. For example:

... I am not the youngest rooster about yet Andrea made me feel very special indeed. From the company and conversation to the very most exquisite and frankly explosive physical moments we shared I always felt she truly cared for and was interested in me. It would be all too easy to see Andrea every day, if my wallet and heart would take it I'd do it, what more can I say. She is one in a million, treat her well and you will be rewarded in kind. [Richard French]

Some field reports highlight the professional and business-like nature of the relationship between sex worker and client:

... I have to keep reminding myself that I am not reporting my own girlfriend's personal and intimate details to the world, and that Zena's a business woman, and I am writing a recommendation. [Richy]

Since the 1970s, organisations, such as the American COYOTE have argued that being paid for an hour of sexual services was no different to being paid for an hour's typing. The idea of sex work as ordinary work has developed considerable currency since then. For example, Chapkis (1997, p.76), argues that: 'Once sex and emotion have been stripped of their unique relationship to nature and the self, it no longer automatically follows that their alienation or commodification is simply and necessarily destructive'. For Pheterson (1993) the promotion of sex work as work serves to counter the 'whore stigma' which has shaped and defined women who sell sex as dirty and bad. Data from the *PunterNet* project, therefore, suggest that men who pay for sex align themselves with the debate which positions sex work in the context of ordinary work rather than within the context of sexual violence and abuse. In this respect the normative world shared by men who pay for sex is quite different from prevailing attitudes towards sex workers in wider society which often defines sex workers as either moral outcasts or as the victims of men.

Awareness of the two distinct normative worlds

Whilst we argue that, in many respects, *PunterNet* constitutes a distinct normative world, that is not to say that the men who write field reports are unaware of or uninfluenced by the wider normative world in which they live. We are not proposing here a distinct sub-culture but, rather, the creation of remote relationships in which certain specific common normative assumptions are suspended in such a way as makes participation in a deviant sexual activity morally easier than if practised outside of this context. The fact that men

are concerned about being seen entering the premises of a sex worker, for example, or about being exposed as a client to their significant others demonstrates their overall commitment to mainstream norms. Although some men seem to pay for sex outside of their immediate neighbourhoods, our analysis of the *PunterNet* reports indicate that discrete locations are highly prized (in contrast to busy high streets). For example:

Nice Quiet Area. House is opposite a field so no nosy neighbours across the way. [Billog]

[an] 'industrial' type building set in large car park V safe [W.H.Oami]

Other types of discretion were also valued, particularly if paying for sex in a hotel:

She arrived wearing a discrete business suit and carrying a briefcase. I had given her my room number and she came straight up. [Been Around]

So, in writing field reports for *PunterNet*, men are entering, creating and sustaining a normative world in which paying for sex has none of the morality threatening features which it possesses in the context of wider society. In the final section, we consider some of the ethical and methodological issues we encountered when working on the *PunterNet* project.

An ethical and methodological footnote

All research raises ethical questions and in most research studies, gaining the consent of participants is paramount. The British Sociological Association, for example, argues that:

As far as possible participation in sociological research should be based on the freely given informed consent of those studied. This implies a responsibility on the sociologist to explain in appropriate detail, and in terms meaningful to participants, what the research is about, who is undertaking and financing it, why it is being undertaken, and how it is to be disseminated and used ... Research participants should be made aware of their right to refuse participation whenever and for whatever reason they wish (<http://www.britsoc.co.uk>).

Internet-mediated research raises specific ethical queries (Hewson et al., 2003) but covert internet-mediated research – and cyber-ethnography – is even more problematic. On the subject of covert social research, the British Sociological Association state:

There are serious ethical and legal issues in the use of covert research but the use of covert methods may be justified in certain circumstances ... covert methods violate the principles of informed consent and may invade the privacy of those being studied (<http://www.britsoc.co.uk>).

As an example of covert cyber-ethnography, the *PunterNet* project raises a number of specific ethical issues. The most general of these issues relates to the status of the

material we have used and the extent to which it is ethically legitimate to use it in social research. This concern is, of course, one which applies to all sources of data where the material is produced for one purpose and then appropriated by social scientists for another, without the knowledge or consent of the originator. It seems to us that such a concern is mitigated by three main factors: firstly, whether or not the material was placed in the public domain by the originator; secondly, whether any deception was required to access the data and thirdly, whether the use of the material by social scientists in any way harms or compromises the originator of the material, or its subject(s).

Taking the first of these factors, it is clear that the data used in the *PunterNet* project was placed in the public domain. However, 'the public domain' is best seen as a continuum ranging from the strictly private (such as personal bank account details) through to sites which are completely open to anyone who has internet access. In between there are various degrees of openness, from sites that require a password, where passwords are readily issued to anyone who asks for or pays for one, to sites which are restricted to members of particular organisations or who claim some special characteristic required for access. *PunterNet* falls into the category of the most publicly accessible kind of website: anyone can anonymously access and read any material posted on the site. Some writers have argued that researchers must be mindful of the difference between internet data that is 'publicly accessible' and that which is 'publicly disseminated' (Fox and Roberts, 1999). Whilst the *PunterNet* data probably fall into the former category we feel that the use of such data is still permissible. As we, and others, have described elsewhere (Soothill and Sanders, 2005; Earle and Sharp, 2007), the issue of public accessibility is acknowledged on the *PunterNet* site itself, with the expectation that

researchers, journalists, the police and others, will be frequent ‘lurkers’. We have been lurking on the *PunterNet* site for many years now.

Deception was not required to access the data. However, the issue of harm or compromise is a little more complex. Most of the field reports on the *PunterNet* site are posted anonymously. However, some reports appear with a seemingly valid email address. Similarly, most of the men appear to have selected a pseudonym when posting to the site, but a few men seem to have used their own name. Whilst we have not revealed any email addresses in our analysis of the data, we have retained the names chosen by men themselves. Whilst it is conceivable that individuals could be identified by these chosen names, our view is that because individuals have chosen to publish reviews in a public forum under these names, we are not significantly increasing their risk of exposure by publishing them here.

Wherever in the world we have presented our data from the *PunterNet* project, the first question asked is always: how can we know that the data are authentic? No doubt, the net provides opportunities for filtered, or mis- representations, of social reality and social identity (Turkle, 1995). However, not everybody agrees with this perspective. Mann and Stewart (2000), for example, suggest that the representation of social reality on the net may be fairly convergent with that which is presented in the ‘real world’. Others are more inclined to believe that online accounts may contain both real and fantastic elements. For example, writing about narratives in cyberspace, Poster argues:

Individuals appear to enjoy relating narratives to those they have never met and probably never will meet. These narratives often seem to emerge directly from people's lives but many no doubt are inventions. (Poster, 1995, p.91.)

Perhaps the most obvious dimension to the question of authenticity is the extent to which we can be confident that the accounts on *PunterNet* are written by genuine clients, in the light of an actual encounter with a sex worker. Although it is impossible to rule out the possibility of invention altogether, there are a number of reasons why we believe men's accounts to be authentic. Firstly, there is the sheer volume of field reports available on the site. Whilst some accounts may be fantastic, it seems unlikely that the many thousands of men who post on the *PunterNet* site will all be deliberately posting false or purely fictional accounts. Secondly, there are sufficient external references contained within the reports – such as telephone numbers, websites and addresses – to suggest that the basis of the vast majority of the reports was a genuine encounter. More anecdotally, we also know that sex workers themselves talk about *PunterNet* and discuss their own field reports. Furthermore, some of the independent escorts also provide links to *PunterNet* field reports on their websites. Finally, a small number of field reports are overtly critical or hostile, but many more contain what appear to be balanced judgements, mentioning both positive and negative features of the sexual encounter. This suggests to us that the field reports are most likely authentic, and it is unlikely that many have been written by or on behalf of the woman in question.

As we discuss elsewhere (Earle and Sharp, 2007), a further dimension to the question of authenticity is the issue of how far the *PunterNet* data can be considered a valid

reflection of actual events. This question is, of course, one that is relevant to all forms of social research, whether they are carried out remotely or not. Writing about the use of life history research, for example, Plummer suggests that all research is 'context bound':

It does not matter if the account can later be shown to be false in particulars – most accounts, even so-called 'scientific' ones, are context bound and speak to certain people, times and circumstances. What matters, therefore in life history research is the facilitation of as full a subjective view as possible (1983, pp.14-15).

Men's accounts will, therefore, reflect the particular standpoint of the individual writing the account at any particular time. Plummer describes sexual stories as 'narratives of the intimate' arguing that 'there is no point in telling a tale without a receptive and appreciative listener, and one who is usually part of a wider community of support' (1996, p.34-5). For the first time in recent British history, *PunterNet* provides the men who pay for sex with the opportunity to create remote relationships within this wider normative world.

Chapter Summary

- Most of the literature on sex work has focused on the experience of the (predominantly female) sex worker. The widening availability of the internet and the existence of websites such as www.PunterNet.com, however, have meant that

social researchers (and others) can better explore the experiences of some of the men who pay for sex.

- Men's field reports, and the surfacing of their sexual stories, highlight the emergence of a normative social world in which paying for sex is normal and raises no moral issues.
- This chapter has explored the transformative potential of the net to create a virtual social space in which men who pay for sex can create and sustain remote relationships. It has also explored some of the methodological and ethical issues that emerge when engaging in cyber-ethnographic research.

Recommended Reading:

Earle, S. and Sharp, K. (2007), *Sex in Cyberspace: Men who pay for sex*, London: Ashgate.

Jewkes, Y. (ed.) (2003), *Dot. Cons: Crime, deviance and identity on the internet*, Cullompton: Willan.

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sex work; PunterNet; prostitution; sex workers; punters; clients of sex workers; authenticity; normative world; transformative potential; cyber-ethnography; sexual stories; morality; taboo; internet-mediated research.

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