CASCADING EXPLOITATIONS: THE CELEBRITY NUDE PHOTO HACK AS DIGITAL PHENOMENON

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Background

On August 31, 2014, the Internet was abuzz after the release of hundreds of private nude photos of female celebrities. For months, a collective of hackers had worked to penetrate Apple's iCloud storage, which automatically backs up photos from devices such as iPhones. However, iCloud does not lock users out after a number of incorrect login attempts, so the hackers guessed the usernames/email addresses and passwords of female celebrities until they were able to access the accounts. An anonymous self-proclaimed "collector" then acquired the photos and published them on social media sites such as AnonIB, 4chan and Reddit. From there, they quickly spread via various digital networks across the world. While the scandal was analyzed ad nauseum by media outlets, largely lost in the discussion was a sustained examination of the ways in which the affordances of digital media, and particularly social media, facilitated the incident. This essay examines the digital implications of the celebrity nude photo hack by analyzing three facets: its relation to the broader practices of hacking, the implications of the photographs' circulation online through social media, and the photographs as a form of online pornography. Ultimately, the transcoding and online circulation of these nude and semi-nude images of women facilitated not only the exploitation of the celebrities but also the exploitation of the affordances of digital media.

Method

This article employs a triadic critical framework to examine the implications of the celebrity nude photo hack at three levels: in the context of hacking more generally, at the level of their dissemination through social media, and as a form of online pornography. First, I explore the photo hack in the context of hacking more broadling, placing particular emphasis on its heavily gendered culture. Then, drawing primarily from van Dijck's (2013) theory of social media logics, I explore the ways in which the hacked photos were disseminated through social media platforms like AnonIB, 4chan and Reddit. Finally, I present an analysis of the photos as online pornography and place them within the broader context of celebrity pornography. Pulling from Susanna

Paasonen's (2011) insights, I explore the digital materiality of the images and their complicated status as "amateur" pornography due to the fame of their subjects.

Findings

Hacker Culture and Gender

To begin teasing out the implications of the celebrity nude photos as a digital phenomenon, we can first view them within the context of hacking more broadly. In *Hacking: The Art of Exploitation*, Jon Erickson (2008) explains that "the essence of hacking is finding unintended or overlooked uses for the laws and properties of a given situation and then applying them in new and inventive ways to solve a problem – whatever that may be" (p. 1). Further, he explains that early hackers were driven by their belief that "information should be free and anything that stood in the way of that freedom should be circumvented" (p. 2). For some hackers, the problems they seek to solve and the pieces of information they work to expose are, at least in their minds, noble. A perfect example of this facet of hacker culture is Anonymous, the most prominent hacker collective. As Gabriella Coleman (2014) explains, what began as Internet mischief and run-of-the-mill trolling eventually morphed into "an earnest activist endeavor…to improve the world" through hacking (p. 21). As a result, many of Anonymous' actions involve organizing cyberprotests, hacking individuals or organizations that (in Anonymous' view) threaten or violate human rights, and/or stealing and releasing information that will harm those individuals or organizations. For Anonymous, even though their methods are illegal and the outcomes vary, their goal is activism and the service of communities and/or individuals that are being harmed or exploited. However, in the case of the celebrity nude photo hack, the goal was not of "hacktivism" but rather what Tim Jordan (2008) calls "cracking." "Crackers" are cybercriminals who "break open your computer and sneak inside, for their own purposes" (p. 3). For the "crackers" who stole the celebrity nudes, the "problem" they sought to solve was their lack of access to nude photos of celebrity women. By exploiting the flaw in iCloud's security, the circumvented the barriers to this content and disseminated it. This hack is an instantiation of male domination and subjugation of the female body – vigilantism in the pursuit of sexual gratification. While hacking may be a potentially liberating action, in this context, it resulted in the harassment and exploitation of women.

The celebrity hackers' exploitation of security flaws to exploit female bodies was facilitated by the heavily gendered practice of hacking. In her work on hacker culture and its relation to gender politics, A.E. Adam (2003) points out that, even more than other jobs in the technology sector, hacking is dominated by men. She contends that this is due at least in part to the "wild west," frontier-like masculinity espoused by the hacker ethic. Because hackers operate at the margins of computing where the laws don't apply, much of the ethos of hacking is imbued with notions of vigilantism, which is typically gendered masculine. As a result, in the world of hacking, women are cast as "other" and generally rendered invisible. Despite the Hacker Ethic (Levy 2010) promoting equality regardless of characteristics like age, race and presumably (though unstated) gender, in doing so it renders difference invisible and serves to cloak its implicit sexism. In this way, the act of hacking in and of itself has been gendered male

and carries with it ideologies of domination and appropriation. With this context in mind, the sizeable hacking subculture, housed in large part on AnonIB and 4chan, that seeks the domination and appropriation of women's bodies by hacking and stealing their private photographs can thus be seen as a logical outgrowth of hacking more broadly. This is not to say that this outcome was inevitable, but the masculine desire to overcome barriers and appropriate content lends itself such phenomena.

The "Wild West" of Social Media: The Logics AnonIB, 4chan, and Reddit

Like many other hackers seeking to release information, the "collector" used social media as his primary distribution site, in particular AnonIB, 4chan, and Reddit. These sites operate according to the principles of social media logic, and these principles help us to better understand why these particular social media enabled the dissemination of the nude celebrity photos. In his explication of social media logics, van Dijck (2013) emphasizes that one key facet of social media is its programmability. These sites' programmability means that what users see on the site is a two-way street; users can upload their own content, but it is modified and controlled by the programmers who tweak the sites' algorithms and interfaces. This push and pull between users and programmers means that "social media platforms can neither take credit nor blame" for what happens on the site, although van Dijck emphasizes that social media are not "neutral platforms" (p. 9, 2). The principles by which each individual social media site negotiates programmability "affect[s] the conditions and rules of social interaction" on that site (p. 2).

AnonIB, where the "collector" originally shopped the photos around, hoping to sell them to users in exchange for bitcoin, is an anonymous online imageboard that prides itself on the anonymity of its users. The interface of the site is extremely basic, much in the vein of 4chan, and its primary function is that of pornography. Like most pornography, the images are categorized by the "type" of women or activities they feature (such as "College Bitches" or "BJ/Oral sex") or by the location of the women (by state or country). Once a user clicks on one of these categories, images appear in the order they were posted, with most recent posts at the top of the page. Older posts are pruned, disappearing from the site permanently. This simplistic interface and the lack of algorithmic ranking or search means that the focus is solely on temporality and the images posted by the users. The anonymity and temporality of the site facilitate its use as a place for illegal content. The poster of the offending content is unidentifiable, and before the post can be discovered and legal action taken against it, it has most likely been pruned anyway.

Many of the images on the board are revenge porn (nude images released by a partner or former partner) or stolen photographs that are the result of hacks. In fact, hackers on the site advertise their services and will take payment from users to hack the cloud storage of women and disseminate their photos (Hess 2014). While the site features moderators, they only have two rules. The first is no child pornography, which is often broken by posters. If moderators catch the offending post in time, the post will be removed, but often it is pruned before this happens. The second rule is "don't be evil;" on AnonIB, being "evil" apparently consists only of releasing the "personal details like addresses, telephone numbers, social network links, or last names" of those in the

photographs as well as avoiding private trading (http://anon-ib.co/rules.txt). In other words, the theft of women's private photos, the non-consensual spread of those photos, and the consequent dehumanization and objectification of these semi-anonymous women does not constitute evil and thus does not warrant any interference from the moderators. As Amanda Hess (2014) argues in her analysis of the site for *Slate*, AnonIB users thus see the hunting of nude photos of women as a sport, and their capture as a "win." She explains that AnonIB "is an organized network of people who seek to exert power over women and girls by reducing them to lifeless bodies and hoarding them in their hard drives." More than lifeless bodies, however, the women are rendered only images of those bodies; two-dimensional trinkets to be collected, traded, and sold. The celebrity images constitute a bigger "win" because of the fame of their subjects.

Following the "collector's" largely failed attempt to sell the photos on AnonIB, the images appeared on 4chan and quickly migrated to Reddit. While not as lawless as AnonIB, 4chan and Reddit, and the proprietors' reaction to the posting of the photos ("Every Man" 2014), evinces what Alice Marwick (2013) identifies as the influence of neoliberal individualism on the logics of Web 2.0. Drawing implicitly from the Hacker Ethic (Levy 2010) and its praise of the open and free circulation of information, Reddit in particular placed all the ethical responsibility for the circulation of the photographs in the hands of the posters, electing not to police its community unless moved to action by forces (like the Digital Millennium Copyright Act) larger than itself. The DMCA was invoked to attempt to stem the flow of the celebrity images across the Internet, including on 4chan and Reddit. The reaction of the moderators on Reddit is especially fascinating, reading more as a manifesto of the freedom of information and neoliberal ideas of individual responsibility than a mea culpa for their part in disseminating illegal content. On September 6, a week after the leak, Reddit finally banned r/TheFappening, the subreddit on which the photos were housed. The moderators posted an explanation of their banning policies in response to the outrage of those in the community who cried foul. The post, entitled "Every Man is Responsible for His Own Soul," explains their compliance with DMCA obligations in removing the content or directing copyright holders and their representatives to images not hosted by their servers. It then morphs into a statement of Reddit's ethos, praising its lack of barriers and the open circulation of information. The anonymous editor explains:

> "We uphold the ideal of free speech on reddit as much as possible not because we are legally bound to, but because we believe that you - the user - has the right to choose between right and wrong, good and evil, and that it is your responsibility to do so. When you know something is right, you should choose to do it. But as much as possible, we will not force you to do it."

Apologizing more to its community than to the victims of theft, the post places all the responsibility in the hands of the posters, electing not to police its community until it was legally forced to do so.

Overall, these social media sites' simple interfaces and refusal or at least hesitation to police content emphasizes user control. In this way, the hacker principles of the lawless "wild west" frontier invade social media, and women, celebrity or not, often pay the price. It is productive, then, to view the celebrity nude photo hack within the context of

other social media harassment of women. In their discussion of sexting and non-consensual pornography, Henry and Powell (2015) emphasize the extended access to women that digital media has provided for harassers, saying, "Where before harm occurred primarily where a woman could be accessed physically – now women can be accessed in other ways" (p. 11). That harm, which can include the release of photographs, personal information, or vitriol, can now haunt women constantly and permanently through the persistence of social media. In this way, the affordances of digital media – the ability to hack and steal photos and information without physical proximity and the easy and often uncurtailed dissemination of this content on social media – have increased male access to women and their resources to harass and exploit them.

The Resonances of Online and Celebrity Pornography

Finally, the nude celebrity photographs shared on 4chan and Reddit can be understood both in the context of online pornography and of leaked (or in some cases, merely "leaked") celebrity pornography. In *Carnal Resonance*, Susanna Paasonen explores both the digital and affective aspects of online pornography, asking, what happens to pornography when it goes online, and what embodied experiences and emotions does it move us to have? In approaching the leaked photos as a form of online pornography, I will first touch on their purely digital aspects: the ways the files are organized and indexed and the materiality of the images. I will then move to explore the dichotomy of the amateur and the professional in pornography, examining the ways in which celebrity complicates this binary and the notions of authenticity the split engenders.

In her analysis of the ways in which online environments shape users' experiences with pornography, Paasonen discusses the indexing and categorization of videos and images on pornography websites. She explains, "The visibility and clear articulation of subcategories facilitated by indexing and categorization provide users with faster access to the imageries of their choice and give them a plethora of brands and alternatives to choose from" (p. 70). Indexing is thus motivated by speed and convenience, allowing users to quickly get to the "brand" of pornography they desire. Typically, these brands are subgenres that are often descriptive of the sexual acts they depict - for example, "blowjob," "group sex," "anal," etc., or that refer to physical characteristics such as age, hair color, or body size. These organizational techniques share a generality; most mainstream, general porn websites like youporn.com do not have categories devoted to specific stars. They assume that users are less interested in who specifically appears onscreen but rather what that (often nameless and, in the case of male performers, faceless) person is doing.

However, the photos released in the celebrity nude photo hack were indexed exclusively by celebrity. Take, for example, the torrent files available online after sites like 4chan and Reddit removed the photos due to DMCA claims. The file I downloaded on September 3, 2014 contained all of the photos leaked on August 31, indexed by celebrity. The torrent consisted of a .zip file which, when opened, contained a myriad of folders labeled with the celebrities' first and last names. Such indexing structures how users interact with the files and belies a structuring logic that indicates *how* these images were understood as having meaning. They were not indexed by sex act or

position; indeed, many of the photos were relatively mundane nude selfies taken in the mirror, barely titillating by most standards of online pornography. Nor were they indexed by general physical characteristics or location. Instead, they were indexed by star, indicating that the user is presumed to care *who* this person is, not specifically what she is doing, how she looks, or where she is located. While the photos released in the celebrity photo hack are indeed part of broader trends of revenge porn and other types of online harassment against women, these photos in particular were newsworthy because of the fame of their subjects, and the organization of the files reflects this.

Paasonen also explores the materiality and aesthetics of online amateur pornography through her case study of images on Wife Bucket, an amateur site where users upload photographs of their female partners. Paasonen reminds us that "The images materialize not merely as digital files—for this would be an abstract materialization, indeed—but as shots interpreted through the codes of amateur imaging and home media (that is, directness, authenticity, realness, and recognizably intimate resonance). They are embedded in textures of domesticity that have a particular feel" (p. 104). Just as the photos on Wife Bucket were often taken in the home, so too were the photos released in the hack. The notions of authenticity and intimacy in the "feel" of these images, a more affective materiality, points to a key reason for users' curiosity about the photos. Indexed as they are to highlight the famous subjects they depict, the photos allow us an unfiltered intimacy and with celebrities that we rarely get to experience. This desire for authenticity and intimacy with celebrities through viewing their nude bodies and/or sexual exploits is not unique to the nude photo hack. In her analysis of Pamela Anderson and Tommy Lee's sex tape, Hillyer (2004) makes many of the same arguments that Paasonen does about amateur pornography, saying, "The tape's domestic credentials serve both to establish its authenticity - in an environment populated by fake celebrity sightings and computer-generated imagery - and to add an extra charge to its pornographic appeal" (p. 52). The mundane, amateur aesthetics of the sex tape adds to the experience of its integral realism, authenticating itself by virtue of its boringness much in the way of the celebrity nude photos. However, while Pam and Tommy's tape was physically stolen from their home, the digital nature of iCloud storage removes a significant barrier for audiences who want a more intimate glimpse at celebrities. This desire for a peek behind the curtain at celebrities is unsurprising due to our celebrity-obsessed culture; indeed, Doll (2011) posits that celebrity pornography "may be the penultimate form of celebrity watching" (p. 108). Thus the masculine aspects of hacker culture, its fringe nature, the affordances of social media sites like 4chan and Reddit, and the resonances of online pornography coalesce to explain the celebrity nude photo hack as a digital extension of misogyny, sexual harassment, and our culture's fascination and desire for intimacy with celebrities.

Discussion

In conducting this research, I was struck by the repetition of exploitation at each level of analysis. The hackers who stole the photos exploited a flaw in iCloud security to steal the celebrities' private photos. While some hacking collectives, such as Anonymous, use their exploitation of security lapses to work for social good (as dubious as that work may be), these hackers used their skills to extend the masculine, vigilante ethos of hacker culture into the practical exploitation of women's bodies by rendering their

private images public. The "collector" and other individuals who obtained the photos then exploited the anonymity and lack of policing on social media sites like AnonIB, 4chan, and Reddit to disseminate the photos around the web. The logics of these social media sites reflect the openness of information and relative lawlessness of the Hacker Ethic and afforded the spread of the images across the web. The theft and dissemination of these photos rendered them non-consensual online pornography, and their amateur aesthetics lent an intimacy to the images that was all the more engrossing because of the fame of their subjects. However, this intimacy exploited the bodies and images of the female celebrities, appropriating their private images for our entertainment and titillation. While these cascading exploitations are not necessarily causal, the logic of taking advantage of weakness connects our understanding of hacking and the logics of certain social media to our understanding of the status of women in patriarchal societies. As a whole, the celebrity nude photo hack exposes the gendered logics of hacking and certain social media sites, where images of the female body are hunted for sport and stolen intimacy with celebrities constitutes an epic win.

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