

# Human Trafficking and online networks

JONATHAN MENDEL AND KIRIL SHARAPOV

The Scottish Institute  
for **Policing Research**



# Acknowledgements

- ▶ The presentation draws on an excellent review carried out by Janine Hunter
- ▶ This work was funded by the Scottish Crucible and some of the discussions supported by funding by the Society Research Group and GCU; the initial project team also included Wendy Moncur, Tamsin Saxton and Adam Barker; we are grateful for their work on this project
- ▶ The two surveys mentioned were undertaken within the context of 'UP-KAT' project, which received funding from the People Programme (Marie Curie Actions) of the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme FP7/2007-2013/ under REA grant agreement n° [PIEF-GA-2011-298401].
- ▶ This presentation draws on a paper at <http://bit.ly/1sYzPZT>

# Summary

- ▶ Definitions and background
- ▶ Computers, crime and exploitation
- ▶ What's new
- ▶ What the literature tells us about this
- ▶ What now?
  - ▶ Example 1: public opinion
  - ▶ Example 2: online geographies and cybercrime
- ▶ Conclusions

# Definitions

- ▶ Article 3, paragraph (a) of the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons provides a used definition of Trafficking in Human Beings (THB) as:
  - ▶ ‘the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of persons by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power [...] for the purpose of exploitation’ (United Nations, 2004).
- ▶ However, differences between trafficking and smuggling have been challenged, for example:
  - ▶ ‘Imagined as fixed and oppositional categories, freedom and slavery map onto other core dualisms of liberal thought, and work to produce accounts of the social world in which human beings are either free, in which case they are assumed to exercise self-sovereignty, or enslaved, in which case they are imagined as evacuated of agency and reduced to an object-like condition.’ (O’Connell Davidson 2013: 2)

# Definitions

- ▶ Worth noting that one thing the literature doesn't provide is clarity on a definition of trafficking (or 'modern slavery'): perhaps better to discuss a migration continuum or exploitation continuum?
- ▶ Absent agreement on a clear definition of trafficking, there is an argument for flexibility:
  - ▶ 'Although it is beyond the scope of this study to fully address the complex discourse on trafficking, it is worth noting the many tensions that arise. Some dichotomies are definitional, such as domestic or international; citizen or foreigner; documented or undocumented worker; victim or survivor. Other tensions involve complexities such as individual trafficker or organized crime; sold by family or stolen from family...' (Latonero 2011).

# Background

- ▶ According to the 2013 Eurostat Report on Trafficking in Human Beings (Eurostat 2013), 9 528 identified and presumed victims of trafficking were registered by EU member states in 2010, an 18% increase between 2008 and 2010 (p. 10); 61% of these people came from within the European Union (ibid). The data provided by the report are based on the number of identified and presumed victims of trafficking reported by national law enforcement authorities and, as a result, may not reflect the true scale of the problem.
- ▶ There's a very recent estimate of 10,000-13,000 potential victims of 'modern slavery' in the UK  
[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/381389/Modern\\_Slavery\\_an\\_application\\_of\\_MSE.PDF](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/381389/Modern_Slavery_an_application_of_MSE.PDF)
- ▶ Dealing with human trafficking and the internet is being made a policy priority within the European Union

# Background

- ▶ Trafficking in human beings remains a contested and controversial area in both academic and policy debates.
  - ▶ Zhang (2009: 193) has called for a more rigorous approach in order to establish 'empirically based rather than ideologically driven' research which scopes and interrogates human trafficking.
  - ▶ Reid (2012: 259) argues that the existing research around trafficking is 'methodologically inadequate and lacking the necessary theoretical foundation required for solution development'.

# Computers and crime

- ▶ “Computers have ushered in a new age filled with the potential for good. Unfortunately, the computer age also has ushered in new types of crime for the police to address.” (FBI)
- ▶ Above quote is from a 1996 bulletin (Carter and Katz 1996): computers have been posing ‘new’ challenges for a long time
- ▶ FBI (1996) argues that “Law enforcement must seek ways to keep the drawbacks [of computer crime] from overshadowing the great promise of the computer age.” However, Carr and Williams’ (2000) analysis of laws against computer misuse in three countries finds that these “criminal laws have more to do with political and economic competition than with any genuine attempt to curtail intrusive and destructive activities directed at computers”.

# Computers and crime

- ▶ Online networks are still creating opportunities for new types of crime and exploitation, and this is still hard to challenge
- ▶ These networks are also making it possible to carry out much older crimes using new tools
- ▶ Potential to use online networks to challenge crime and exploitation, too

# Computers and sex

10

- ▶ boyd and Ellison (2007) show that sex and sexuality are significant factors in the spaces of social networks, and have been for some time
  - ▶ This very often takes place in positive or benign ways, but can be more problematic
- ▶ The Internet has had a role in sex work over a long period (for example, see Shade 1996 on [alt.sex.services](http://alt.sex.services))

# Computers, sex and exploitation

- ▶ There also is a long history of the Internet being used in sexual exploitation and abuse: for example, Hughes (1999) describes uses of newsgroups to discuss where in Bangkok offered “the best chance of finding guys selling very young girls – pre-teens”
- ▶ Latonero et al. (2011; 2012) have evidenced the use of computers and mobile technology in what looks like sexual exploitation
- ▶ There’s now the need to “grasp the ways in which technological mediation is changing the terms on which...anti-trafficking interventions are staged” (Mustow and boyd’s 2014: 465)

# Online networks and labour exploitation

- ▶ Skrivankova (2010: 4) argues that the “reality of forced labour is not a static one, but a continuum of experiences and situations [and] a continuum should therefore be used to describe the complexity of the exploitative environments and concrete individual situations of workers”
- ▶ Online networks have long been used in various types of labour on this continuum – from poor pay/conditions found through services like Amazon Turk to fraudulent adverts on sites like Universal Jobmatch through to the use of social networks to draw people into exploitation by international criminal networks
- ▶ Medical trial recruitment also a potential factor in THB

# Online networks and labour exploitation

- ▶ This isn't a wholly negative picture: Horton's 2010 research finds that "on average, workers perceive online employers to be slightly fairer and more honest than offline employers"
- ▶ Online networks clearly play a role in THB outwith sex work – especially given their wide reach. However, more research is needed to look at their role on exploitation continuums
- ▶ There are also opportunities to use online networks to challenge labour exploitation – as can be seen, for example, in online targeting of companies who are 'bad' employers

# What's new?

- ▶ Online networks around THB offer both opportunities and challenges:
  - ▶ Challenges insofar as they can be used by traffickers and exploitative employers to act and organise more effectively
  - ▶ Opportunities for research – for example, more possibilities for data collection and engagement
  - ▶ Opportunities for public action – for example, free2work app, or crowdsourcing (see Latonero et al. 2012) and publicising of action (e.g. Walk Free)
  - ▶ Issues for law enforcement: for example, Latonero et al. (2012) discuss problems with equipment and policy alongside new spaces to 'patrol'
- ▶ Latonero et al. (2011) argue that “The ultimate beneficiaries of any technological intervention should be the victims and survivors of human trafficking.” Emphasise the importance of user-centric design

# What's new

- ▶ Social networks are creating different online spaces – Facebook, Twitter, online classifieds etc. offer quite different contexts from older newsgroups discussing sex and trafficking, and the 'deep web' evolves quickly
  - ▶ Again, there are both opportunities and challenges around researching these spaces, and finding appropriate methodologies for understanding them
  - ▶ Latonero et al. (2011) find a spike in adverts promoting sex workers in online classifieds during the 2011 Superbowl. Words associated with this are suggestive of trafficking but (as Latonero et al. acknowledge) uncertainty remains
- ▶ Access to online networks is expanding, while still uneven. Important to think about uneven geographies of access, risk and opportunity.

# What's new?

- ▶ For Latonero (2012: iv) “the rise of mobile technology may fundamentally transform the trafficking landscape. No other communication technology in history, including the Internet, has been adopted so rapidly around the world...Mobile’s ability to facilitate real-time communication and coordination, unbound by physical location, is also being exploited by traffickers to extend the reach of their illicit activities. Traffickers are able to recruit, advertise, organize, and communicate primarily—or even exclusively—via mobile phone”
- ▶ Also questions about how mobile technologies are used to overlay or augment physical locations (e.g. Brown et al. 2013) and about spatial variations in access (Graham 2013)
- ▶ Plausible that changing attitudes to surveillance and encryption – and growth of other online grey-/black-markets – may prove significant

# What the literature currently tells us

17

- ▶ A long history of computers being used for purposes related to crime, sex and exploitation (and to challenge exploitation)
- ▶ Online networks do play a role in trafficking, most publicly in advertising the 'services' of trafficked people
- ▶ There have been significant changes in the online networks and spaces involved, in breadth of access, and potentially in the risks and opportunities here
- ▶ Different types of spaces are constructed and interrelate in order to enable and challenge trafficking and exploitation

# What the literature currently tells us

18

- ▶ Some initial research suggests things are happening at a significant scale
- ▶ Articles have appeared in law, criminology and computing and society journals around new technologies and cybercrime, including child pornography (Cohen-Almagor 2013, Kierkegaard 2008) and censorship (Edwards, 2009). Also interesting work linked to Microsoft (e.g. Musto and boyd 2014)
- ▶ Mark Latonero et al. have published two striking reports (*Human Trafficking Online: The Role of Social Media and Online Classifieds*, 2011 and *The Rise of Mobile and the Diffusion of Technology-Facilitated Trafficking*, 2012)

# What now?

- Musto and boyd (2014: 462) observe a 'growing, albeit uninterrogated assumption that technologies of the networked, connective, and mobile variety play a central role in facilitating human trafficking. Attendant to these assumptions lies a corollary set of expectations that technology can be leveraged to disrupt trafficking, and that the efficacy of such disruption hinges on the promotion of public–private partnerships, heightened collaboration between state, non-profit, and corporate actors, and stepped-up internet and mobile surveillance of individuals suspected of facilitating and being victimized by the phenomenon.'

# What now?

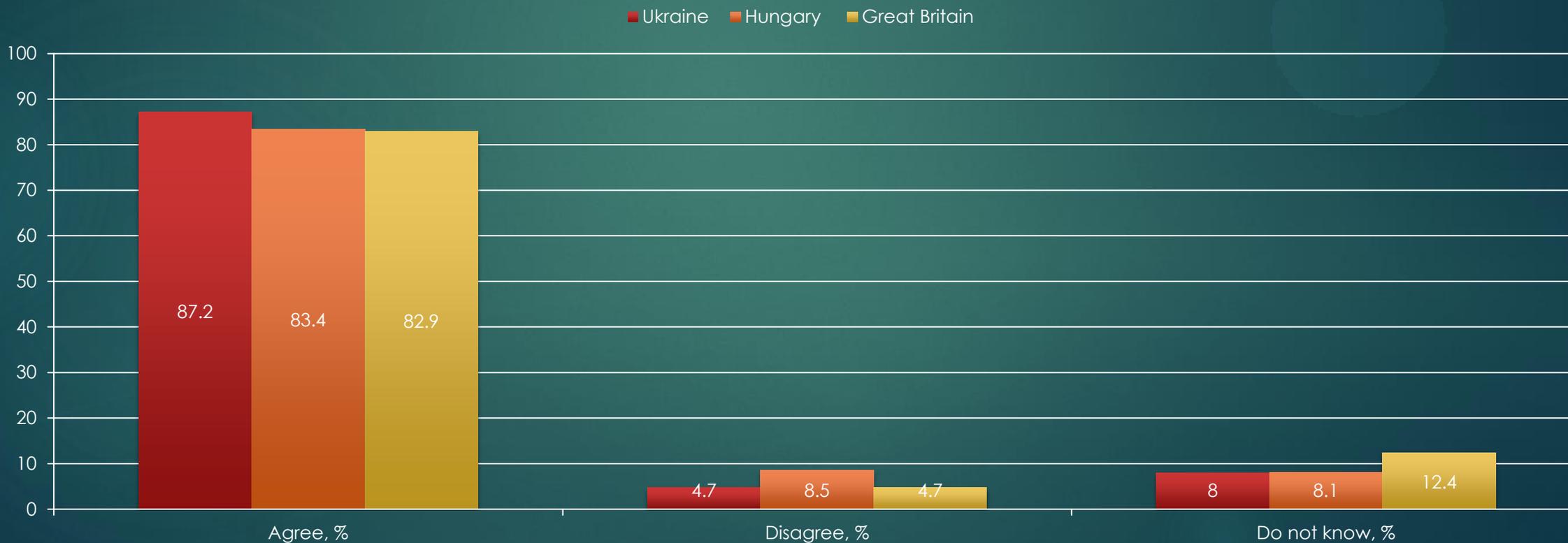
- The following aspects of human trafficking and online networks especially require development
  - Systematic empirical research (both qualitative and quantitative) is needed to examine how people are trafficked, the methods used to exploit vulnerable people, and in particular the role that technology plays in human trafficking.
  - The broad context which contributes to trafficking and makes people vulnerable to exploitation (including the social, economic and political causes of trafficking).

# Public opinion context

- ▶ UK-KAT survey results show a wide public awareness that the internet is used in human trafficking and support for further measures.
- ▶ Suggests a move beyond 'awareness-raising' to the matter of what to do

# UK-KAT results

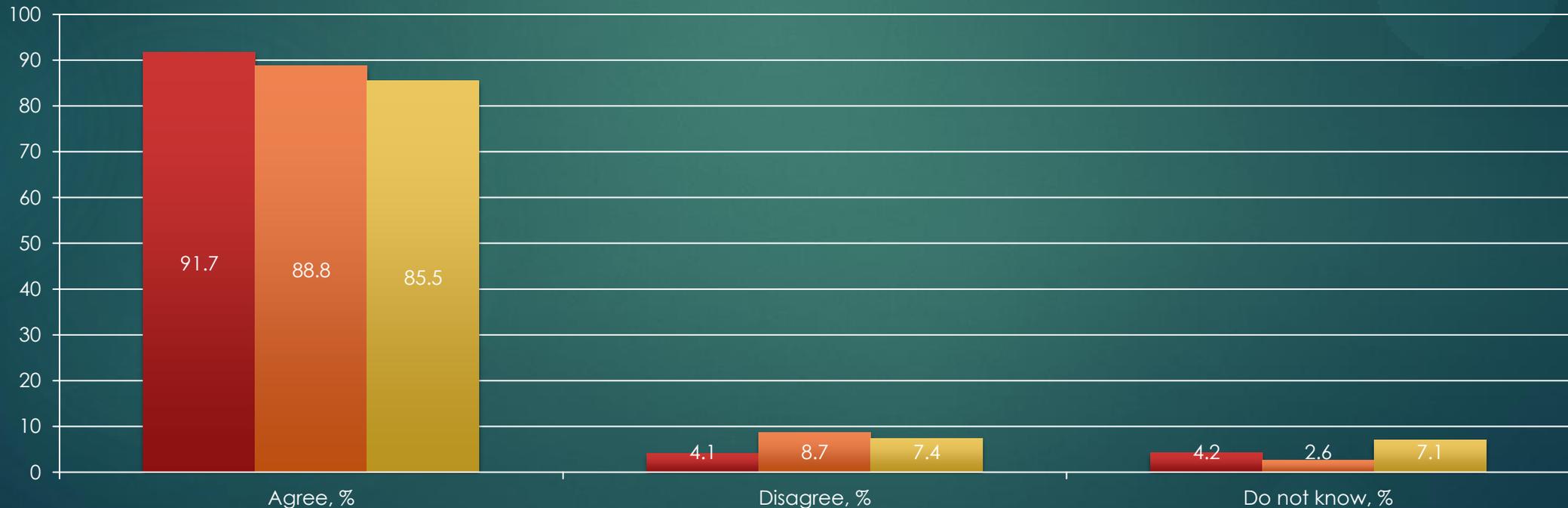
The Internet can be used to recruit victims of trafficking and to advertise their services



# UK-KAT results (see online report for details)

There should be more anti-trafficking campaigns and messages on the Internet

■ Ukraine ■ Hungary ■ Great Britain



# Online geographies

- ▶ Zook (2003) discusses how the Internet adult industry benefits from “Digital products, low barriers to entry, cost differentials, and sensitivity to regulation [which] have created a pervasive and complex geography of models, webmasters, and consumers around the globe” and argues that “the ‘space of flows’ cannot be understood without reference to the ‘space of places’ to which it connects.”
- ▶ Graham (2013) argues against ethereal ideas of cyberspace as both everywhere and nowhere – calling for a move to “employing alternate, nuanced and spatially grounded ways of envisioning the myriad ways in which the internet mediates social, economic and political experiences”

# Online geographies

25

- ▶ I argue (Mendel and Riesch, forthcoming) that there's a need to consider interactions between online spaces and other places
- ▶ This leaves the question of how we understand the types of online spaces used in trafficking, and how they connect to other places
- ▶ This also leaves the question of how to research these spaces
  - ▶ Latonero et al. have conducted important research around trafficking and sex work
  - ▶ However, there is a growing body of work showing the need for more quantitative work on online spaces to be complemented by qualitative research to understand how relationships develop (for example Brown, McGregor and Laurier (2013); Hine (2000); Mendel and Riesch (forthcoming); Parr (2011: Chapter 6))

# Cybercrime and cyberspace

26

- ▶ The European Cybercrime Centre (EC3)'s first annual report explicitly presents cybercrime as both “borderless” and with striking “scalability” (EC3 2013: 26). Does Geography have anything to contribute here?
- ▶ EC3 argues that cybercrime is “*borderless* [which] makes it possible for anyone to commit crimes against governments, businesses and citizens in the EU from almost anywhere around the globe’ (EC3, 2013: 26) and has a radical ‘*scalability* [which] results from the ease to replicate crimes on a massive scale due to the standardisation of software and the possibility to reach millions of computers without any logistical constraints” (ibid.)



# Cybercrime and cyberspace

27

- ▶ We should move beyond ideas of cybercrime as placeless because:
  - ▶ Different online spaces still work differently
  - ▶ Location is still important (see e.g. different trafficking laws and economic opportunities in different places)
  - ▶ Movement and borders remain especially important in the case of human trafficking

# Conclusions

- ▶ Human trafficking and online networks isn't a new issue, though it's increasingly being prioritised as a policy concern
- ▶ There is interesting empirical and conceptual work on the topic, though still significant gaps in both areas

# Conclusions

- ▶ There is a real need for both systematic, detailed empirical research and broader (often conceptual) work on the context of this issue
  - ▶ Some initial results suggest that work on public opinion and online geographies are both fruitful ways to address these issues
- ▶ Further academic work on the topic might allow both a more nuanced and more effective response: in Deleuze's (1992) words "There's no need to fear or hope, but only to look for new weapons"

# References

- ▶ **boyd d m, Ellison N B.** 2007. 'Social network sites: definition, history, and scholarship'. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 13 (1): Article 11. <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol13/issue1/boyd.ellison.html>
- ▶ **Brown, B., McGregor, M., & Laurier, E. 2013.** "iPhone in vivo: video analysis of mobile device use". *CHI' 13*. <http://www.ericlaurier.co.uk/resources/Writings/Brown-2013-iPhone-in-vivo.pdf>.
- ▶ **Carr I, Williams KS.** 2000. 'Securing the e-commerce environment: enforcement measures and penalty levels in the computer misuse legislation of Britain, Malaysia and Singapore'. *Computer Law & Security Review*. 16(5): 295–310. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0267-3649\(00\)05003-2](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0267-3649(00)05003-2)
- ▶ **Carter, D. and Katz, A.** 1996. *Computer Crime: An Emerging Challenge for Law Enforcement*. FBI. <http://www2.fbi.gov/publications/leb/1996/dec961.txt>
- ▶ **Cohen-Almagor R. 2013.** 'Online Child Sex Offenders: Challenges and Counter-Measures'. *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice* 52(2): 190–215. DOI: 10.1111/hojo.12006

# References

- ▶ **Edwards L. 2009.** 'Pornography, censorship and the internet'. In: L. Edwards, C. Waelde, Eds. *Law and the Internet* Hart Publishing, 2009. Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1435093> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1435093>
- ▶ **Graham, M.** 2013. 'Geography/Internet: Ethereal Alternate Dimensions of Cyberspace or Grounded Augmented Realities?' *The Geographical Journal*, 179(2), 177-182.
- ▶ **Hine, C.** 2000. *Virtual ethnography*. London: Sage.
- ▶ **Hughes DM.** 1999. *Pimps and predators on the internet: Globalizing the sexual exploitation of women and children*. N. Amherst, MA: Coalition Against Trafficking in Women. <http://www.uri.edu/artsci/wms/hughes/pprep.htm>.
- ▶ **Horton J.** 2011. 'The condition of the Turking class: Are online employers fair and honest?'. *Economics Letters* (111: 1)

# References

- ▶ **Kierkegaard S. 2008.** 'Cybering, online grooming and age play'. *Computer Law & Security Review*. 24(1): 41–55. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.clsr.2007.11.004>
- ▶ **Latonero M., et al. 2011.** *Human Trafficking Online: The Role of Social Media and Online Classifieds*. California: USC Annenberg Center on Communication Leadership & Policy. Los Angeles: USC.  
[http://www.issuelab.org/resource/human\\_trafficking\\_online\\_the\\_role\\_of\\_social\\_media\\_and\\_online\\_classifieds](http://www.issuelab.org/resource/human_trafficking_online_the_role_of_social_media_and_online_classifieds)
- ▶ **Latonero, M., et al. 2012.** *The Rise of Mobile and the Diffusion of Technology-Facilitated Trafficking*. Los Angeles: USC.  
<https://technologyandtrafficking.usc.edu/files/2011/08/HumanTrafficking2012.pdf>
- ▶ **Mendel, J. and Riesch, H. (forthcoming)** 'Science blogging below-the-line: a progressive sense of place?' in J. Cupples, C. Lukinbeal and S. Mains *Mediated Geographies/Geographies of Media*. Springer.
- ▶ **Mustow, J. L. and boyd, d. (2014)** "The Trafficking-Technology Nexus". *Social Politics* 21: 3).
- ▶ **O'Connell Davidson J. 2013.** 'Troubling freedom: migration, debt, and modern slavery'. *Migration Studies* [Advance Access published February 13 2013]: 1–20.

# References

- ▶ **Parr, H.** 2011. *Mental Health and Social Space: Towards Inclusionary Geographies*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- ▶ **Skrivankova K.** 2010. 'Between decent work and forced labour: examining the continuum of exploitation'. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.  
<http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/forced-labour-exploitation-full.pdf>
- ▶ **Shade, L.** 1996 'Is There Free Speech on the Net?' in R. Shields *Cultures of the Internet*. London: Sage.
- ▶ **United Nations.** 2004. *United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime and the Protocols Thereto*. New York: United Nations.  
<http://www.unodc.org/documents/treaties/UNTOC/Publications/TOC%20Convention/TOCebook-e.pdf>
- ▶ **Zhang S.** 2009. 'Beyond the "Natasha" story—a review and critique of current research on sex trafficking.' *Global Crime* 10(3): 178-195.
- ▶ **Zook, M.** 2003. 'Underground globalization: mapping the space of flows of the Internet adult industry'. *Environment and Planning A* (35)