

CRIME ONLINE

**By Yvonne Jewkes (Editor).
Willan Publishing.**

Review by Mike Sutton¹, Nottingham Trent University

Crime Online is an edited collection of eleven chapters about Internet facilitated crime – otherwise known as cybercrime, online crime, internet crime, digital crime, virtual crime or by my own preferred label: NetCrime.

Overview

The book begins with a most peculiar introductory chapter that is simultaneously about Jewkes' own research interest in the role of the Net in suicides, murder and paedophiles and an introduction the work of each contributor; as such it reads like a poorly edited cut and shut job. What this means is that if there is an intended, or even a consequential, unifying theme to the book then the reader, and in my case the reviewer, is left to work it out for themselves. And herein lays one of my main initial criticisms. I might be happy to watch a feature film or read a work of fiction and solve the puzzle of the author's intentions by concluding that it is essentially about exploring a kaleidoscope of various collected themes - such as difference between physical and emotional courage, hypocrisy, guilt and redemption, but an academic book is different. Whereas a film takes little more than 90 minutes of passive popcorn munching to digest during leisure time, it takes academic working days to read properly and digest an academic book. And for that reason above all others, I want an academic book to tell me what it is about – if not in the beginning then a least at its end. Having read it I can see then if I agree and try to work out what I have learnt and what I might usefully do with that knowledge.

To be fair though, I wonder how many students and busy academics read all of the chapters in an edited collection so that they are able to view them as a whole piece of work?

Perhaps Jewkes was aware of this when putting these various chapters together and so her intention was to do no more than provide a volume of work on NetCrime that would enable readers to choose an area that suited their own interests and read it and then reference it in their own work. As the reviewer of this entire book, however, my appreciation of it is most likely going to be quite different from that of what I imagine will be the average reader. And yet this is no bad thing, in my opinion because reading this collection from beginning to end has firmed-up for me what was previously little more than a subconsciously simmering feeling about what is

¹ Reader in Criminology and Director of Nottingham Centre for Study and Reduction of Hate Crimes, Nottingham Trent University

currently wrong with the criminology of NetCrime. Namely, that there is way too much rhetoric and hyperbole in the field.

Let me explain. Some of the chapters in this book shamelessly do no more than regurgitate the same old fantastic rhetoric that has been kicked around the hi-tech/cybercrime conference circuit for the past 10 years. The writing here is so immersed in hackneyed hi-tech cyber-hype that there is, apart from the appropriate seeding of text with social science nomenclature, little to distinguish it from the Saturday morning ramblings of American Society of Criminology conference fringe futurologists, axe-grinding writers, journalists, secret service employees – real and imagined - and police officers suffering from pre-pensionable entrepreneurial moral panic attacks. And throughout the work of some authors in Crime Online there is an underlying moral panic, deviancy amplification polemic with little basis in properly conducted research of the kind that supported Stan Cohen's importantly original and insightful work in this area. I know this because during my post-graduate studies over 20 years ago I read his PhD thesis from start to finish 3 times.

Rudyard Kipling wrote that in the world of the blind the one-eyed man is king. And this is certainly something which has allowed many self proclaimed 'experts' in the area of NetCrime to shamelessly yet successfully wing-it around the academic conference circuit and publish in journals and books what amounts to little more than speculative bombardments and rhetorical accounts of the various ways that the Internet can be and/or is being exploited for criminal purposes. The hyperbole and lazy rhetoric has thrived in a medium of early awe among many academics at the unique newness of the Internet and the paucity of understanding and appreciation about the importance of NetCrime. Today, however, we are all much more familiar with Internet related technology and I believe that the time has arrived to vociferously call for criminologists in this field to move on from endless speculations about propensity for exploitation and mere swivel-chair bound moral panic starting.

Empirical NetCrime research is essential if we are to take criminology in this area from sideshow curiosity to mainstream. And I think this book represents an important first stepping stone in that direction. Some authors of chapters in this book thankfully do challenge the lazy rhetoric of *cyber this and cyber that* cyber-hype head-on in search of an ethnography fuelled understanding of the wider social and individual actor dynamics of online crime. The aim of these authors also is to seek to gauge both the seriousness and prevalence of various crimes online and to better understand how they intersect with offline crime communities.

'Real' lives, obviously, exist both on and off the Internet and are influenced by overlapping 'environments' but this has been neglected. The chapters by these more critical authors redeem the book, and Jewkes can be commended for putting these together with other chapters that focus more upon media analysis and deviancy amplification theory. Organising an edited collection is hard work and can, I am told, be a thankless task. In the case of Crime Online the hard work has paid off. The result is a valuable book, although perhaps not exactly for the reasons the Jewkes might have intended.

By accident rather than design, I believe, this edited collection highlights that the decade of easy and cheap cyber-hype that began around 1998 is rapidly passing. We

need now harder and more valuable empirical research. And for no other reason than Jewkes' timely positioning of thoughtful and scholarly work alongside that of chapters representing the soon to be curious and tired-old conference circuit freak-side-shows of cybercrime, I shall be adding Crime Online to the reading list for my own hi-tech crime undergraduate students.

The Devil is in the detail

The first four pages of the first chapter by Jewkes begin by strangely sensationalising a number of news stories that involve chat rooms, suicide or predatory paedophiles, chat rooms websites and murder and then tagging onto the end of all this cyber-hype two academic get-out-clause paragraphs to the effect that maybe 'its all just a moral panic'. While this may not be intended, Jewkes' writing does not come across as genuinely ironic parody. For this reader at least, the book opens disingenuously with an attempt to bake a sensational cake and then wash it down with a small glass of objectivity – just to be on the safe side. The result is a simplistic and disappointing spin-concoction that is typical of the confusing work of many academic 'experts' in this field who seek to be all things to all people. It left me feeling a little queasy I'm afraid.

Jewkes' unfortunate tendency to spin is further evidenced by her statement that since the publication of her earlier edited collection in 2003, cybercrime has burgeoned into an established sub-field of criminology. This is verging on nonsense because seminal works in the field existed long before this interesting but relatively minor edited collection. Strangely, Jewkes and all contributors, except the last chapter's author, Katja Franko Aas, fail to mention or to even so much as reference the work of major Internet crime pioneers such as David Wall. And strangely absent too are references to Clough and Mungo's (1992) ground breaking *Approaching Zero* and much less objectively of course, Mann and Sutton's (1998) pioneering virtual ethnography of Internet newsgroups, crime and deviance that was awarded the British Journal of Criminology Annual prize in 1999.²

In this review I do not undertake a chapter by chapter review of *Online Crime* and certainly readers this journal would be unlikely to wish to know the detail contained within the thirteen pages of comments I have written on them. Those comments will find their way into my own future work and I must here thank Jewkes and her collaborators for stimulating my thoughts as I am sure they will of other readers of her book.

Particular praise, I believe should be given to Majid Yar for his excellent chapter on Internet piracy. Yar characteristically gives us both the statistics and the bigger picture so that we might both neutralise industry and criminal justice system hyperbole while appreciating the importance of this particular NetCrime problem as well as its actual consequences. Of equal importance is Katja Franko Aas's 'Beyond the desert of the real: crime control in a virtual(ised) reality'. This work could stand as the beginnings of a new manifesto of NetCrime criminology. Aas calls upon us to situate the so-called 'virtual' within the so called 'real' world in order to more fully

² The Centre for Crime and Justice Studies British Journal of Criminology Prize 1999 for the best article which, in the opinion of the BJC Editorial Board most significantly contributed to the knowledge and understanding of criminology and criminal justice issues.

understand Internet facilitated offending. Hers is essentially a call for empirical research with offenders rather than endless swivel-chair speculation, media analysis and contemplation. This I believe is now the essential way forward for criminology in this field. There are PhD theses out there that do document such ground breaking work. I count one of my own doctoral graduates, Ed Pollock, among them and I know of others. If you have written such a thesis yourself and are reading this review then you could do much worse than to get your light out from under that bushel and publish it. Future journal articles and edited collections really do need your valuable insightful empirical work if we are going to progress beyond most of the work contained within Crime Online.

References

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