



When explicit photographs of Emma Holten went viral without her consent she felt violated. Then she had an idea – what if she posted a new set of nude images? Fiona Neill reports on pornography, privacy and the politics of revenge



Emma Holten, photographed by Ulrik Jantzen. Opposite: one of the photos of herself by Cecilie Bodker that Holten posted online

In October 2011, 20-year-old Emma Holten, an arts student at Copenhagen University, woke up one morning and tried to sign in to her email and Facebook accounts. Her passwords no longer seemed to work. A self-described scatterbrain, she assumed she had once again forgotten them. By midday, when the problem hadn't resolved itself, she got in touch with Facebook and Gmail and secured new passwords.

When she finally gained access later that day, instead of the usual news from family and friends, Holten found hundreds of messages from men she had never met. They came from all over the world. Most were abusive and sexually explicit. Some contained a series of long-forgotten nude photos that Holten had shared with an ex-boyfriend three years earlier; others links to multiple porn sites where these images had been posted.

Overnight, while she slept, her email and Facebook accounts had been randomly hacked and around 30 intimate photos, taken on a mobile phone when she was just 17, had been stolen. Even worse, the hackers had posted her contact details, address and photos of her home, and the email address of her parents, two sisters and the boss of the publishing house where she worked part-time, a pernicious hacking practice known as doxxing (dox coming from documents).

"It was a concerted campaign," explains Holten, now 24, who makes it clear her ex was not involved. "It felt as though I were under attack. I thought the worst thing that might happen was that these men might find me hot. But it wasn't about sex; it was about humiliation and hatred. I really wasn't prepared for that." Later, Holten sends me a zip file containing some of the messages. Many are unprintable. "Bitch! I have ur naked pics. If u don't talk me or report me I will share them. I destroy your f***ing life," reads one Facebook post. "Do your parents know that ur a slut?" says another.

Some men tried to blackmail her, either by demanding money or threatening to send the images to her parents unless she sent further nudes back to them. A Swedish man demanded money for sex and, when she didn't respond, threatened to post the images on the Copenhagen University website. Strangers came to her home looking for her. Once or twice she messaged back to say that she hadn't agreed to the images being posted, but stopped when it became apparent that some men enjoyed this aspect of her pain and humiliation. "Whoever did this to me really wanted me to suffer," she says.

Holten had become a victim of revenge porn, a form of nonconsensual pornography,

SEX TAPES & NUDE SHOTS



Jennifer Lawrence The actress described the leaking of private images of herself as part of the iCloud hacking as a 'sex crime'



Kate Upton Photos of Upton and other celebrities were stolen during the mass iCloud hacking known as 'the Fapping' last year



Tulisa Contostavlos When the singer's ex-boyfriend posted an explicit video, lawyers got an injunction against website operators

whereby vengeful former boyfriends or, increasingly, hackers, post sexual photos and videos, mostly of young women, online without their permission. (Upwards of 80 per cent of victims are women.) The ruthless interconnectivity of the internet meant that when Holten googled herself for the first time following the hack, there were already pages and pages of websites showing her photos.

Revenge porn made headlines towards the end of last year following "the Fapping" (fapping is internet slang for male masturbation), where female celebrities, including Jennifer Lawrence and Kate Upton, had videos and photos hacked from iCloud and posted online. This was followed a couple of months later by "the Snappening", when thousands of Snapchat photos and videos,

which are meant to disappear after ten seconds, were leaked online, including many explicit "sexts" sent by teenagers. Just this week, for the second time in less than a year, model Kelly Brook was targeted by hackers who posted nude pictures of her online.

Back in 2011, however, there was little public debate or awareness about revenge porn in Denmark. It was regarded as something that happened sporadically, mostly to famous women. Everyone knew about Kim Kardashian's ex-boyfriend releasing a sex tape online. But many people didn't realise that the seedy underbelly of the internet had given birth to a whole new lucrative industry where perfectly ordinary and intelligent young women like Emma Holten were targeted.

She told her parents what had happened. ■

'IT WAS LIKE BEING UNDER ATTACK THE WHOLE TIME. THE SHAME WAS EXHAUSTING'

Some friends were sent the images as part of the hack. She was paralysed by what she describes as a feeling of “extreme shame”. “I felt depressed. I thought I would never be happy again. It was very lonely,” she says. In the following months, Holten kept an obsessive eye on what was happening online. “I had a concept that things would get better over time, that it would go away. But it didn’t,” she explains. Instead of disappearing, the problem multiplied as the photos spread to Tumblr blogs, Reddit and Twitter.

“Every time the photos were put on a new site, I knew it meant that the chance was that someone I knew, someone in my real life, would see them,” she says.

At one point, she went to the police. They said they were certain something illegal had taken place, but thought the images weren’t graphic enough to take any action. Finally, after she was harassed by a male colleague who viewed them online, Holten told her boss what was going on. Everyone was sympathetic, but no one had a solution. The shame and paranoia remained. The abuse continued. “It was like being under attack the whole time,” she says. “Or having a chronic disease. The worst thing is the paranoia. You don’t know who knows. If you meet someone that you like, you know that at some point you will have to tell them what has happened and that you will carry this all of

direction,” says Jenny Afia, a specialist in privacy and defamation at law firm Schillings, which recently acted on behalf of a female celebrity caught up in the iCloud hack. “It is an intrusive and horrendous crime. The key advantage of the new legislation is the way it raises awareness of revenge porn. The casual dallier should now be put off.”

Holten agrees that the criminalisation of revenge porn might have a preventive effect and encourage victims to speak out. But she thinks its main benefit is psychological. One of



After Jennifer Lawrence described the iCloud leak of her private images as a “sex crime” and argued that anyone who viewed the images online was perpetuating a sexual offence, Reddit, a site that hosted many of her photos, announced it would ban posts of nonconsensual images and videos. Shortly afterwards, Google said that users on its Blogger platforms can no longer show sexually explicit images and videos. Twitter followed suit and at the same time banned doxxing.

Earlier this month, San Diego web developer Kevin Bollaert was sentenced to 18 years in custody after being convicted of 21 counts of identity theft and six of extortion for operating a revenge-porn website called U Got Posted and a sister site called Change My Reputation, which charged women victimised by the first website around \$300 to take down each image.

Although these are clearly positive developments, they also reflect the scale of the problem. The appetite for stolen intimate images of women is now so voracious that if you google “gf revenge” (girlfriend revenge), it brings up more than two million web results. The tag line of one of the biggest revenge porn sites, GF Revenge, reads, “Get sweet revenge on your girlfriend by submitting nude pics for \$\$\$ cash.” The slogan on another popular site, MyEx, one of the hundreds that posted Holten’s photos, encourages men

‘THERE’S NOTHING WRONG WITH NUDITY. THE VIOLATION OF CONSENT IS THE PROBLEM’

your life. The shame was exhausting. I haven’t got over that. I don’t think I ever will. Those pictures were only ever meant for one person.”

In March, England and Wales followed Israel’s lead and became among a handful of countries to make revenge porn a specific crime under an amendment to the Criminal Justice and Courts Bill. In Germany, laws were approved last year to make it illegal to keep intimate photos at the end of a relationship if one partner wants them destroyed. A federal bill outlawing revenge porn in the US is due to be introduced to Congress this month, and 16 states already have such laws in place.

In England and Wales, anyone who distributes without consent a private sexual photograph or film of someone “engaged in sexual activity or depicted in a sexual way or with their genitals exposed where what is shown would not usually be seen in public”, will now be tried in a crown court and could face up to two years in prison. Previously, UK convictions were secured either by using existing legislation relating to harassment law or under the Malicious Communications Act. But the success rate was low. Of 149 cases reported to the police, only 6 resulted in a police caution or charge.

“The sympathy is going in the right

the most damaging aspects of her experience, she says, is the way that many people hold her responsible for what has happened.

“It’s like the 16th century, where a girl gets pregnant and ends up being blamed and slut-shamed, while the guy gets given a beer,” Holten says. “We are the new fallen women. If someone has their credit-card details stolen online, they aren’t held responsible.”

Fuelled by anger over the lack of debate about sexual images of women being posted online without their permission and the desire to regain some control over her life, last August Holten took radical action. She got a photographer friend, Cecilie Bødker, to take a set of artistically styled topless photos of her in everyday situations and posted them online alongside a heartfelt essay on consent. “There is nothing wrong with nudity. It is the violation of consent that is the problem,” says Holten. At first blush this might seem counterproductive, but actually Holten, a passionate and articulate personality, has opened up a new frontier in the war against revenge porn, lifting the veil of silence that has enshrouded victims and pointing the finger at perpetrators. Instead of slating women for taking intimate images of themselves, moral censure is slowly switching to those who distribute them.

to “get the dirt before you get hurt”. A celebrity trophy is even more lucrative. The more hits, the greater the advertising revenue.

Once approved by royal assent, the new laws in England and Wales will cover UK websites that distribute these images and videos. But many are hosted in far-flung legal jurisdictions where British law doesn’t apply or on the dark net – the Wild West of the internet, where everything is encrypted and users are anonymous. Pink Meth, a notorious revenge-porn site that paid people to post images of former partners and where many men viewed the images of Holten, was on an anonymous network called Tor. It was shut down by the FBI after an international police operation into the illegal drugs site Silk Road.

Without a coherent international reaction, many of the hackers and revenge-porn operators – whose actions can turn one ill-judged tap of a phone into a life-changing experience of seismic proportions – are likely to remain beyond the reach of the law.

Nor will new laws address the main priority of victims, which is to get rid of the photos and videos after they have been posted online and prevent their spread as quickly as possible.

Hazel Higgleton, 25, a body piercer from Chelmsford, has spent two years trying to

deal with the aftermath of an explicit video posted by her ex-boyfriend from a mobile phone when she finally ended their ten-month relationship after his controlling behaviour became threatening. As in Emma Holten's case, the nightmare began when she was sent links on social media to a woman involved in a sex act. When she opened the file, she discovered she was the woman.

"It was like being raped," says Higgleton, "as if these men had been physically touching me. When I googled my name, pages and pages of sites showing the video appeared."

Higgleton went straight to the police. She says they took a statement and were "supportive and kind", but said there was little they could do because her boyfriend had taken the video and owned the copyright. Unless he continued to harass her, they were powerless.

Last year, following a ruling by the Court of Justice of the European Union that says a person has the right to have a link that is inaccurate, misleading or distressing removed from the search engine under the so-called "right to be forgotten", Higgleton tried to fill in a form to get the images removed from Google's European search engine. But she discovered she had to list every web address and explain why she wanted it removed.

"It would have taken weeks and weeks to list every single link," says Higgleton.

before it has gone viral, when it's on Reddit or YouTube for example, over two or three days, in an office with colleagues at computers 24 hours a day, you can sometimes sort it out ... If you kill the Reddit link or the YouTube link, you kill the majority of links, because you feed back to the mother ship," Afia explains. "But even the best technical people in the world won't be able to rid the internet of these images completely."

Schillings and other specialist law firms can also make the information harder to find by removing it from the main Google search results. But it is a service financially out of reach of most revenge-porn victims.

Under digital copyright law, a video or photo belongs to the person who filmed it (selfies, for example), and porn sites and social media are more likely to respond to internationally recognised copyright law even if they don't respect privacy.

"If you own the copyright, there is a radical difference. It is more difficult for a website to turn these images into a business because they are breaking international copyright law," explains Jonathan Coad, a media lawyer at Lewis Silkin. But he points out that it's still a bit like the game Whac-a-Mole – as soon as the copyrighted content is removed from one website, it can reappear on another.

Coad represented singer and TV talent

Despite a recent NSPCC survey showing that six out of ten teenagers had been asked for sexual images of themselves, it is an issue ignored in the current PSHE curriculum. Most revenge porn is the unintended consequence of a sexting experiment that has gone rogue.

I have spent the best part of a year researching a novel with a revenge-porn theme, and it is evident that a generation brought up with smartphones and unfettered internet access is experimenting with sexting in the same way as a previous generation might have with drugs and alcohol. It is viewed as something almost mundane, and there is little concept of the potential repercussions if something goes wrong.

In February, a 14-year-old boy became the youngest person in Britain to be convicted of a revenge-porn offence after he sold nude pictures of his teenage girlfriend to friends on Facebook after they split up. Because the girl involved was under 18, he was charged with distributing indecent images of a child. It is legal to have sex aged 16 in the UK, but it is illegal and a serious criminal offence to take, hold or share "indecent" photos of anyone under 18. Most teenagers have little idea that sharing a sexual image of a girlfriend could result in five years on the sex offenders register. There is little discussion about the issue of consent or whether the internet can guarantee

'GENERALLY, REVENGE PORN IS ONE SIXTH-FORMER TRASHING THE LIFE OF ANOTHER'

In Denmark, Holten also made several attempts to get her images taken down from sites where they had been viewed most often, as did her supportive ex-boyfriend. On some, the photos had more than 100,000 hits. She contacted them to say she was 17 when they were taken and therefore a minor, but they said she had to prove this before they would be removed. Eventually she gave up.

Even for celebrity clients, with money to burn and top reputation-management lawyers on speed dial, getting images removed from sites is a Herculean task. Specialist lawyers work round the clock with a team of digital experts, whose main task is to launch a counterattack to prevent the spread of photos and films.

"The first priority is to secure their technology, work out how this information has got out and the level of surveillance and hack that the client faces," says lawyer Jenny Afia.

Schillings has a risk department that assesses the cause of the hack – whether a Trojan malware virus is to blame, or keylogger software has been installed that can mirror every keystroke action on your computer. Mostly, Afia says victims have been the targets of phishing campaigns, which trick them into handing over passwords.

"If you get instructed at the tipping point

show judge Tulisa Contostavlos after her ex-boyfriend posted an explicit video of her online. Coad famously managed to get an injunction served against website operators within two hours of being instructed.

He describes the new law as "window dressing", because it won't necessarily improve victims' access to justice any more than the old legislation. He questions whether police will have the resources to deal with what could prove to be a massive increase in revenge-porn complaints, which tend to be complex cases requiring a big investment of resources.

"It's all very well passing laws, but if the government doesn't provide a means of enforcing them, they're not worth the paper they're written on. The problem is that most revenge-porn victims can't afford lawyers. Generally, it is one young sixth-former trashing the life of another because they have been jilted," says Coad.

In response to this dilemma, the government has just launched a revenge-porn helpline and the legal advice centre at Queen Mary University of London has introduced a free legal advice service specifically for victims.

The service, headed by its director Julie Pinborough, has also begun a programme in local schools to educate teenagers on sexting.

privacy or the right to personal privacy, a concept undermined by social media, which encourages oversharing (although Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg has bought four houses surrounding his to guarantee his own).

Teenagers are operating in a moral vacuum, with scant guidance from adults who barely understand the issues. Equally worryingly, the debate has hardly begun about the double standard whereby women are persecuted after private photos have been posted online without their consent. There is little analysis of a culture where women are encouraged to share intimate images of themselves and then are shamed for being sexual.

Emma Holten believes the hatred from men towards her stems from the widespread sexual objectification of women online.

"It has taken sex out of everyday existence and placed it in a fantasy world where everyday ethics no longer apply. The rhetoric of saying you can desire a person sexually but hate them at the same time is very serious for women." ■

Fiona Neill's latest novel, The Good Girl, is published by Michael Joseph and is available from the Times Bookshop for £12.99 (RRP £14.99), free p&p, on 0845 2712134; timesbooks.co.uk. Read an extract at thetimes.co.uk/magazine