

## As 'rape' images rise, will life imitate porn?

*An explosion of graphic Internet sites prompts concern that depictions are provoking crime.*

By Ron Scherer | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

NEW YORK – Even by Internet standards, the spam is startling: advertising for websites that show women with knives up to their throats, or guns to their heads, as they are supposedly raped.

The sites use names such as all-rape, or cruel suffering. It is only in the small print that some purveyors say they use actors for the photos and videos.

Although "fantasy" rape sites have been around for some time, porn-watchdog groups say that in the past few months, there has been a virtual explosion of sites that purport to document – in graphic detail – women being raped. "They are heavily hitting the spam. It's very disturbing," says Katya Gifford of Cyber Angels, an Internet patrol group.

Because they don't involve children, the sites are legal. But they're raising eyebrows even among civil libertarians. Anti-rape groups are concerned that the sites will make sex and violence seem legitimate for some men. And although many of the sites warn minors away, there are no real safeguards to keep children from seeing some photos.

"Anyone concerned about violence against women ought to be interested in this issue," says Michelle Anderson, an expert on rape law and a professor at Villanova University School of Law in Pennsylvania. "There ought to be more discourse on how to deal with this free speech that abuses and degrades women."

Despite a slight decline in rapes last year, sexual violence continues to be a serious problem: The Department of Justice reported that serious crime dropped by 10 percent, but rapes fell by only 4.9 percent.

In some cities, the reported numbers have suddenly soared – possibly because of more women reporting the crime. In Pittsburgh, reported rapes rose 65 percent in the first half of the year. On the Hawaiian island of Oahu, they increased by 22 percent in 2001, and they jumped 75 percent in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

Earlier this year, after reporting that rapes rose 9.3 percent, New York's Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly said he would make the crime his No. 1 priority.

Back in 1994, Congress passed the Violence Against Women Act, which included money for battered-women shelters, counseling, and research. The program has been run by the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Justice, but now Sen. Joseph Biden Jr. (D) of Delaware, a sponsor of the legislation, is helping author a new bill that would create an independent office – and potentially boost the program's authority.

Yet prosecuting the purveyors might be difficult. Marv Johnson, legislative counsel for the ACLU in Washington, says the material is "basically no different than explicit rape scenes in a film – it is a form of artistic expression protected by the First Amendment."

However, Ms. Anderson says, it raises a free-speech dilemma. "I am opposed to government censorship," she says, "but for those already predisposed to violence against women, these sites may reduce their inhibitions and thus pose a potential real danger to women.... These Internet rape sites are devoted to glorifying and encouraging rape as something women deserve and enjoy."

And young people may accidentally end up on the sites. Two weeks ago, the Washington-based group Men Can Stop Rape received an e-mail from a 15-year-old. He'd been on a teen website that discussed sex and violence.

"He wanted to learn more about the issue and went into a website called real-rape.org because he thought it was a website to stop rape," says Pat McGann, research director. "Instead he saw clips showing girls getting raped, and he was shocked by them."

It appears that people forbidden from looking at the images are trying to get hold of them. CornerPost Software in Duffield, Va. sells software that screens out porn in family, school, and library computers.

"We are seeing an increase of [the sites] in the review process," says Ryan Elswick, chief of operations. "People are apparently pulling them up more frequently."

Jamie Zuieback, communications director at the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, has also received complaints about the sites and spam e-mails directing people to them. If the images don't include children, she advises people to contact the ISP that hosts the site to urge them to terminate the spam service.

But finding who hosts the sites is not easy. Take the case of real-rape.org. A domain search finds that the company's registrar is Tucows, Inc, based in Toronto.

Tucows has "probably leased the name to someone else, so it's difficult to find out who actually owns [the website]," says Alan Hughes, chief information officer of CornerPost. A Tucows spokeswoman says that as a registrar, it has no control over site content.

The server – the website's physical location – is a Huber, Ohio company called Ultratron. But "the hosting provider usually says 'It's not our content, we're not responsible for it,'" says Mr. Hughes. Ultratron did not return repeated calls for comment.