# 2016

Atwater Library and Computer Centre

[Hayley Crooks, PhD (Candidate) and Shanly Dixon, PhD]

# ["WHAT DOES CYBERVIOLENCE MEAN TO YOU?"]

Preventing and Eliminating Cyberviolence

**Hayley Crooks, PhD (Candidate) and Shanly Dixon, PhD**

*"What does cyberviolence mean to you?"* **Documentary Film about Cyberviolence**

"Participatory visual research is an area of research where, clearly, there is the potential to influence policy dialogue" (Mitchell, 2015)

### Rationale for documentary film making data collection:

Dr. Shanly Dixon and PhD Candidate Hayley Crooks decided that by bringing participatory video into the project as a data collection strategy they could not only enhance the quality of the data but also give back to the young people participating through media literacy and video skills. While we also employed more traditional qualitative research methodologies in the project, such as interviews, focus groups and questionnaires to gather data from a range of stakeholders, we believe that providing some young people opportunities to explore the issues around gender based cyberviolence on their own terms though participatory video could only enrich our data gathering and add a deeper perspective.

### Description of project:

We conducted a series of documentary filmmaking sessions exploring issues of cyberviolence directed and girls and young women at a community-based organization that addresses violence with youth. This organization works with young people that have been victims and perpetrators of, as well as witnesses and bystanders, to violence including self-harm. Throughout the workshops we worked with a total of 34 young people. However, about 7 young people emerged as key participants in the project. Youth who worked on the film were between the ages of 16 and 19.

### Why use documentary film as a research tool:

Using film production as a tool for data gathering enabled the participants to approach the issues as experts engaged in creating and leading a media production project of their own rather than as respondents in our research project.

Particularly when working with marginalized groups, youth or when power differentials exist participatory video as a research method offers a way to challenge the hierarchical relationship between the researchers and researched, "offering a feminist practice of looking alongside rather than looking at research subjects" (Kindon 2003). Employing participatory video as a methodology to gather data for the needs assessment enabled us to gather richer, more complex nuanced data. Because we had the time to build relationships of trust, explore issues more deeply and put the control of the camera and the conversation into the hands of the young research collaborators, the participatory video component of data gathering for the needs assessment provided an additional layer of insight. While participatory video

with youth is ethically complex (Ali 2010), the voice afforded youth through the methodology is evidence of the potential for use in advocacy and activist projects that may empower girls and community members (Sitter 2012).

## Description of the Sessions:

We began the project by getting to know the participants and by breaking the ice around the sensitive topic through group discussions about the medium of documentary, its history, representations of gender and application to social justice projects. Often young people are reluctant to engage in discussions about issues such as sexuality and violence for fear of judgment. However, a primary purpose of the organization that we were working with was to use arts based media to explore the social issue of violence. As a result, these young people were already very knowledgeable about issues such as gender inequality and intersectionality, had been engaging in authentic respectful conversations regarding difficult issues and were well prepared to explore cyberviolence through documentary film.

We chose the direct cinéma or cinema verité genre of documentary filmmaking to facilitate with the young people as it offered the most flexible approach. We did not want to be restricted by notions of a single 'auteur', polished aesthetics or 'high production value' filmmaking. Instead, we set out to utilize video as a research tool and, most importantly, a social justice platform.

Inspired by the theme 'what cyberviolence means to me' we conduced six, two-hour filmmaking sessions. Each session followed a similar structure, beginning with an opening exercise designed to create a relaxed and social atmosphere where young people felt comfortable to share ideas and have fun learning about (and through) the technology. As we reiterated at each session, the young people participating in the project are the experts on the issues that they were choosing to discuss, that they were leading the project and that we were participating as facilitators. A tech demo was team-taught or co-facilitated by participants at the beginning of each session. We also screened segments of films that were chosen to illustrate technical knowledge or to provide examples or inspiration. Mini exercises such as defining terms (e.g., 'what do you think cyberviolence is?' or 'What are the boundaries that need to be crossed to define an online action as cyberviolence?') were followed by break out groups where participants took turns interviewing a peer (formulating a topic, developing a few questions, interviewing their peer on camera). We finished each session with a group discussion about what was working, not working, and where the participants saw the project heading. The length of the project allowed us to establish trust and build relationships with the participants.

Participants did not have to have years of technical experience, cinematography or videography skills to participate in the project, after a few brief tutorials the youth began filmmaking in earnest. The young people shaped the content of the films. To be sure this was the case at every stage of the process, we went over the transcripts each day to pinpoint themes the young people had raised, and questions they had

brought up. When they were stumped for content in interviews we were able to remind them of interview questions they had raised in discussions.

## Take Aways:

Every time we engage in knowledge sharing about cyberviolence against girls and young women as a social issue we 'de-normalize' the practice. A key outcome of the initiative was that the participants, who are youth leaders, are able to share the knowledge they developed both through their roles as youth leaders and through the medium of documentary film.

## How this documentary film making project created safe spaces to build the capacity of girls, young women and stakeholders to prevent and limit the effects the of cyberviolence directed at girls and young women:

The community organization where the documentary film-making took place was already a safe haven where young people could connect to discuss issues around violence and social justice through art. We leveraged the atmosphere of trust and collaboration that had already been established in order to open discussions about cyberviolence directed at girls and young women in ways that enabled the data gathering required for the needs assessment.

Part of our aim was to explore the degree to which youth were aware of cyberviolence and to determine which aspects they believe are most relevant. We wanted to encourage using the digital tools themselves to articulate and analyze the oft times contentious issues as we did not want to add to the legacy of inspiring technophobia in young people. Using popular culture such as YouTube videos that might be critiqued as 'low culture' or discounted as 'kid content' to encourage discussion proved very productive. Rather than avoiding it, we used the cyberviolence culture online as part of the discovery process and as conversation starters. In this project we are acknowledging the fact that content created by young people is actually content – by rejecting ageist assumption around 'kids just putting stuff online' we get closer to viewing technology as empowering rather than just 'risky'.

## The cyberviolence documentary film making project contributed to promoting greater consultation among key actors so that we can better recognize cyberviolence, prevent and intervene:

 The impact of this strategy is far reaching, however the initial value is in having the young people share with the adult researchers how they view and understand cyberviolence. Their insights were a huge contribution to the needs assessment. Because we were gathering data from young people through the documentary film making project at the same time as we were engaging in focus groups, and questionnaires with larger groups in more structured contexts we were able to observe the more complex questions and issues that were raised in focus group sessions being discussed, debated and explored over a period of several weeks with

the youth from the documentary film making project. This provided important understandings regarding the ways in which young people struggle to make meaning, change their opinions and reflect deeply about many of the issues around cyberviolence.

The cyberviolence documentary film making project enabled us to see that it was possible for youth to engage in respectful, authentic and productive mixed gendered conversations. However, this was more likely to occur when participants were provided with the tools to create a safe space to speak about controversial issues around gender and intersectionality.

Upon completion of the young people's documentary film it was shared with other stakeholders at CEGEPS, universities, community centers, game jams etc. in order to inspire conversations through knowledge sharing activities. Seeing the young people discussing their perceptions of cyberviolence in the documentary served as a catalyst for launching discussions in other venues. Viewing the film will provide a useful tool for opening conversations amongst a variety of stakeholders, from educators, to law enforcement, to policy makers, to youth themselves.

**This cyberviolence documentary film making project served to develop and collaborate in the implementation of a strategy to prevent and fight against cyberviolence:**

The participants who produced the films were part of the organization's leadership program. These youths are in a unique position to mentor other youth and share the knowledge they had developed about gendered cyberviolence with other young people.

Many of the viewers of the film used the content as a catalyst for further discussion and research projects in classrooms.

Hayley Crooks is analyzing the data co-gathered from this project for a PhD dissertation on cyberviolence against girls. Additionally, the data was used in an article currently under review.

The method was replicated at an elite Montreal high school for girls where four sessions were conducted and the girls' used cell-phones and ipads to shoot their footage.

Hayley Crooks discussed the project on CBC's *All in a Day* in a piece called "what teenage girls really think about cyberbullying" with Alan Neal on June 1, 2015 and with Ed Hand on 1310 News in Ottawa, Ontario .

Shanly and Hayley presented the project for undergraduate crime classes, Congress of the Social Sciences and Humanities (2015), Hayley Presented on the use of

participatory video using this project as an example for Congress (2016) and will be discussing her PhD project at the first International conference on young peoples' cultures in Vancouver BC in October 2016 as well as at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City in October 2016.