



“WHAT DOES CYBERVIOLENCE MEAN TO YOU?”
DOCUMENTARY FILM ABOUT CYBERVIOLENCE

GENDER-BASED CYBERVIOLENCE STRATEGY DESCRIPTION



PURPOSE OF THIS DOCUMENT

This document describes one of the strategies used by the Atwater Library and Computer Centre's project, *Preventing and Eliminating Cyberviolence Against Young Women and Girls*, funded by Status of Women Canada (April 2014-April 2017). In making this strategy document publicly available, we hope to offer other organisations and communities a tool that can be adapted and used in order to develop definitions of and policies around gender-based cyberviolence. In establishing clear definitions and policies, we believe that organisations and communities will be better equipped to understand, prevent, respond to and eliminate gendered cyberviolence in their respective settings.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The Atwater Library and Computer Centre's *Preventing and Eliminating Cyberviolence Against Young Women and Girls* project was a 3-year project funded by Status of Women Canada. The project sought to develop strategies, in collaboration with stakeholders, that would mobilize participants to work towards the goal of preventing cyberviolence directed at girls, women, LGBTQQI2S¹, and gender non-conforming people. The strategy to develop definitions, policy solutions and responses to prevent and eliminate gender-based cyberviolence emerged directly from the needs assessment we conducted during the first year of the project. Stakeholders overwhelmingly articulated that there was a need to 'name cyberviolence' through defining cyberviolence. Without clear definitions, there was no way for people who were experiencing cyberviolence to point to a definition and seek help.

¹ Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, and Two-Spirit

“Participatory visual research is an area of research where, clearly, there is the potential to influence policy dialogue”

--Mitchell, 2015

IMPETUS FOR ACTIVITY

A key premise of the Digital Literacy Project is that whenever possible, data gathering and knowledge mobilization initiatives should be designed and conducted in ways that are meaningful and bring value to the communities that we work with. We incorporated this premise into the Atwater Library and Computer Centre’s *Helping Communities Respond: Preventing and Eliminating Cyberviolence directed at Girls and Young Women project*. Therefore, while we also employed more traditional qualitative research methodologies, such as interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires to gather data from a range of stakeholders, we believe that providing young people opportunities to explore the issues around gender based cyberviolence on their own terms through participatory video could only enrich our data gathering and add a deeper perspective. Additionally, this empowered the youth leaders who participated in the project to share the knowledge they gained with other young people.

DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT

A series of documentary filmmaking sessions were conducted exploring issues of cyberviolence directed at girls and young women, between the ages of 16 and 19, 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 and self-harm. Throughout the workshops, we worked with a total of 34 young people. However, about 7 emerged as key participants in the project.

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 themselves 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

Through group discussions about the medium of documentary, its history, representations of gender, and application to social justice projects, we began the project by first getting to know the participants and by breaking the ice around sensitive topics. For fear of judgment, young people are often reluctant to engage in discussions about issues as sexuality and violence. However, a primary purpose of the organization that we were working with was to use arts-based media to explore these issues directly, and as a result, we found that these young people were already very knowledgeable about these and other issues surrounding these topics, such as gender inequality and intersectionality. Throughout the sessions, everyone had been engaging in authentic respectful conversations regarding difficult issues, and were very well prepared to explore the overarching topic of the sessions, examining cyberviolence through documentary film. We chose the direct cinéma or cinema vérité 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, as a social justice platform.

Inspired by the theme ‘What does cyberviolence means to me’, we conducted 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 to lead the project, and that we were there participating as facilitators to their leadership.

THE PROCESS OF THE SESSIONS

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 for 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?’) followed break-out groups where participants took turns interviewing a peer (formulating a topic, developing a few questions, interviewing their peer on camera). Finally, we finished each session with a group discussion about what was working, not working, and where did participants see the project heading.

The length of the project allowed us to establish trust and build relationships with the participants. While participants did not have years of technical video-making, after a few brief tutorials, they began filmmaking in earnest, and were able to fully shape the content of their 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, this allowed us to remind them of some of the interview questions they had raised in previous group discussions.

THE 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, would be able to share the knowledge they developed, both through their roles as youth leaders, as well as through the medium of documentary film.

CREATING SAFER SPACES

How did this documentary film-making project create safer spaces to build the capacity of girls, young women, and stakeholders to prevent and limit the effects 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. Further still, we were able to leverage the existing atmosphere of trust and collaboration that had already been established, which even further opened up the data gathering process required for the needs assessment discussions about cyberviolence directed at girls and young women. Part of our aim in this process was to explore the degree to which youth were aware of cyberviolence, and to determine which aspects they believed were most relevant to them. We wanted to encourage the use of digital tools to help articulate and analyze the often times contentious issues surrounding cyberviolence, particularly as we did not want to add to the legacy of inspiring technophobia in young people. We used familiar popular culture tools as YouTube videos, that are often critiqued as ‘low culture’ or discounted as ‘kid content’, and the encouraged discussion proved very productive. Further still, rather than avoiding it, we used the cyberviolence culture online as part of the discovery process and as conversation starters. Throughout this project, we acknowledged the fact that content created by young people is indeed important and relevant content; by rejecting ageist assumption around ‘kids just putting stuff online’, we were able to obtain a closer viewing of technology as empowering rather than as just ‘risky’.

IMPACT OF STRATEGY

The cyberviolence documentary film making project contributed to promoting greater consultation among key actors so that we could better recognize cyberviolence, prevent, and intervene if need-be: The impact of this strategy was far-reaching. However, a great value in and of itself was having the young people share with the adult researchers how exactly they viewed and understood cyberviolence themselves. In effect, their insights were an enormous contribution to the needs assessment. Because we were gathering data from young people throughout the documentary film making project, while at the same time we were engaging in focus groups and delivering 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 an extended period of several weeks. Such a process provided valuable understandings regarding the ways in which young people struggle to make meaning, are able to change their opinions, and reflect deeply about many of the complex issues around cyberviolence.

The cyberviolence documentary film making project also enabled us, the researchers, to see that it was possible for youth to engage in respectful, authentic, and productive mixed-gendered

conversations, which was especially likely to occur when participants were provided with the much needed tools that facilitated the creation of a safe space to speak about controversial issues around gender and intersectionality. Upon completion of the young people's documentary film, their films were shared with other stakeholders at CEGEPS, universities, community centers, game jams, etc., for the explicit purpose of inspiring conversations through these 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, and viewing these film will proved to be an invaluable tool for opening conversations amongst and between a variety of stakeholders, educators, law enforcement, policy makers, as well as youth themselves.

IMPLEMENTING STRATEGIES TO PREVENT CYBERVIOLENCE

This cyberviolence documentary film making project served to develop and collaborate in the implementation of a strategy to prevent and fight against cyberviolence. First, the participants who produced the films were part of the organization's leadership program; these youths were in an especially unique position to mentor other youth and share the knowledge they had developed about gendered cyberviolence with other young people. Many of the other viewers of the film used the content as a catalyst for further discussion and research projects in their own classrooms. The data from this strategy was also used in several conference presentations and for a PhD dissertation in the Department of Gender Studies at University of Ottawa.