Balancing privacy for victims of sexual crimes with

opportunity for support in online forum *AfterSilence.org*

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LSTU E-120 Internet and Society: Technologies and Politics of Control

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Assignment 2 – Prospectus

March 2, 2015

Personal safety and preservation of life, especially for victims of violent crimes, is one of the most basic necessities for people. These victims have the further challenge of trying to piece together as normal a life for themselves as possible, yet balance that with fear of being victimized again. An online community that provides support to victims of rape and sexual assault exists through a website called aftersilence.org.[1] This website has a variety of content, including resources and links to other websites, testimonials from victims who are part of the online community, chat room and a message board, most of which is private. There are over a million posts and 33,898 members, of which about 1100 are mostly active.

In this information age of the internet, where so much of our lives are publicly visible, how do victims of violent crime balance the opportunity for support in the online forum of aftersilence.org, with the necessity for privacy? In reviewing the website, there are very prominent warnings about parts of the forum that are public information, and guidelines for posting to the forum[2] as well as using the private messaging system.[3] There is a page listing members who are moderators and administrators[4] and posts on the forum about reporting harassing and potentially abusive posts. While the administrators and moderators of the site outline as much information about protecting oneself and being prudent about internet safety, it is still incumbent on the participants to exercise this caution. For example, just yesterday a new

[1] *Rape & Sexual Abuse Survivor Message Board, Support Forums & Chat Room.* Web. 2 Mar. 2015. <http://www.aftersilence.org/>.
[2] http://www.aftersilence.org/forum/index.php?s=f131c924178e4e5f653cdaae61158cce&showforum=10
[3] http://www.aftersilence.org/forum/index.php?s=f1265b4503f05148b02eca7f63b7e090&showtopic=67079
[4] http://www.aftersilence.org/forum/index.php?s=093a502427fce1c5a8b0f291e52eb123&app=forums&module=extras&section=stats&do=leaders

member created a pseudonym for herself, yet in her post gave her first name, age and the city where she is from.[5]

This online community is an example of a support system that can possibly help victims of violent crime (specifically, sexual assault) as they try to recover and rebuild their identity. But even more so than many other social networking sites, the members need to exercise personal protection by keeping any possible identifying information private. The approach for this project would be to outline information from the class on privacy issues (for example Latanya Sweeney's aboutmyinfo.org) that even though people use pseudonyms, they have no idea how even the smallest granules of information can be dangerous. This can also be expanded to determine how content is moderated and what the criteria is for taking down posts that are possibly harassing.

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[5] http://www.aftersilence.org/forum/index.php?s=d3a4df624f3b66e392d3c47af6ef6cd7&showtopic=108796