

The Hum Podcast

Episode 14: “The Internet Is A Pretty Effective Weapon”

{Theme music begins}

{Cynthia’s voice begins to come in over top of music}

Cynthia: The thing that I wanted to make the film about was to challenge this idea of oh it’s just the internet, it’s not real life, it’s not - it’s something you can just choose to engage with or choose to walk away from, but that’s not really the case. The internet, you know, spills over into every part of our lives.

{Music increases in volume}

Male: You’re listening to The Hum.

{Music decreases in volume}

Gilad: Now before we kick things off, I’d like to take a few seconds to talk about Boxcar Social. It’s one quarter bar, one quarter cafe, and one quarter amazing. In fact, it’s so amazing that I’ve decided to get married there later this year, so I guess that makes it also one quarter amazing event space. They’ve got four locations all around Toronto, including one right by the lake. If whiskey, wine, or beer by the water isn’t your thing, then I’m sure coffee, tea, and a rotating

menu by the water must be you. Boxcar Social, where curiosity, innovation, and excellence meet. Be sure to check them out in person or online at boxcarsocial.ca.

{Music fades out}

Gilad: We're joined here today by Cynthia Lowen, director of *Netizens* which just had its international premiere at Hot Docs. Cynthia is also an Emmy-nominated documentary filmmaker for *Bully* and an award-winning writer and poet. Cynthia, thank you so much for joining us here today. Can you tell us a little bit more about what *Netizens* is all about?

Cynthia: Yeah. So for about two and a half years, I've followed several women who were the targets of online harassment and who, over the course of the filming, continue to be targets of online harassment and the film follows as they confront the hurdles to getting justice. So that comes in the form of both the kind of obstacles in terms of law enforcement, site operators, and the platforms where the abuse is happening itself, and then also just the broader cultural obstacles to people understanding the kind of threats that they were under, why it is such a serious situation. It really follows these three women as they seek justice online.

Gilad: How do you define cyberbullying or cyber harassment? I mean it seems like such a complicated thing. How do you view it?

Cynthia: Often, what I will refer to it as is digital abuse. I think when you hear the word cyberbullying, often I think that there is a minimization of the kinds of acts of violence and the extent to which those acts radically impact the target's life, so it can be stalking, using these,

you know, all these digital tools that we have now have become really great weapons for stalkers, for domestic abusers. Non-consensual pornography, which is sort of sensationally referred to as revenge porn, we hear about it often in the context of celebrity photos being leaked, but really for the more typical person who's being targeted in this way, it's within the context of an abusive relationship and these images are being used to coerce someone to stay in a harmful, damaging, abusive relationship. So many women who I filmed with, many more of them - the three main women in the film, I filmed with many other ones who were targets of non-consensual pornography and it was always, you know, an ex-boyfriend, ex-partner. They were trying to leave their relationship or had left their relationship and then inevitably the pictures are sent to her boss and her colleagues, and they're trying to upload her nudes onto her company's website and it's going to her dad, and so it's interesting to me that those - the non-consensual pornography is just so often not only a reflection of the patriarchy that we really exist in and it works in a certain way because shame is still quite effective, but that it's really used in a relationally abusive way. And then, of course, online threats of violence, in particular women tend to be targets of sexualized violence. So, you know, often threats will not just be to murder you, but to sexually assault or rape you and murder you, so that's sort of some of the gamut. One of the other women in the film had numerous websites created about her with really damaging information and the perpetrator used search engines to [indistinct] that these sites would rise high in search engines to destroy her career. So that's another sort of creative take on it, but you know, perpetrators are pretty creative and what they do with these new technologies and the internet is a pretty effective weapon for someone who wants to abuse it.

Gilad: I know Simona and I were talking this morning about how infuriating all of this was because all of the burden falls on the victim, to prove their innocence, to have to reach out to ...

Simona: To like, to find justice, or even to get someone to believe that this is actually a real thing with a real impact. I just feel like there's a real formula that victimizers use when targeting a victim. It's not just, you know, like a one static moment. It's not a blowup fight. It is a very vigilant process that they take on and devote time to, with the ultimate goal of destroying a person's life, relationships, opportunities of employment, and then when do they ever say like okay I'm done now, hands like [clap], nailed it.

Cynthia: Right, right.

Simona: She is like - there is no way she is doing anything better than what she is doing right now.

Cynthia: Yeah, it's funny because sometimes we - Carrie and I will talk about, you know, where are they getting the playbook from? You know, where is the playbook, where can we find it, because so often the perpetrators do very similar sort of courses of conduct.

Gilad: Like if there's a - as if there's a training on this.

Cynthia: Yeah.

Simona: Yeah. How can we make our victimization a bit more in-depth and expansive?

Cynthia: Yeah I mean, the like - the number of women who are like, yeah the pictures in the abuse burst first-place that those things are spread, either, you know, harmful websites or, you know, very personal pictures or personal information. It's always the employer, it's always, you know, the boss and the dad are just like - really? And of course it makes sense because really, what the perpetrators are hoping is that this person won't be able to get a job and she'll have to come back to me. She won't be able to, you know, go home to her family and so she'll rely more heavily on me for emotional support or I'm just going to punish her. So I think there's sort of those two things of like what's the endgame. I think on one hand, the endgame is well, you know, maybe she'll come back to me because often what happens is that the perpetrator is the partner, but the woman being targeted doesn't think that because sometimes they'll be like in a relationship or they've both broken up - you know, this happens all the time, they think they amicably broke up.

Simona: And then we're good.

Cynthia: They're friends.

Simona: Yeah.

Cynthia: Yeah and so when this starts happening, she's like, hey this terrible thing is happening, do you have any idea like how my pictures could have gotten out there, was someone using your computer, was someone on your email like, you know. And the guys are always like, oh my god, I can't believe this is happening to you, like let me help you try and solve this. And then lo and behold, you know, eventually law enforcement gets involved and

they can figure it out and they trace the pictures and they were like no, they were coming from his computer, and it's like oh, oh!

Simona: There's like such an element of isolation, like the ammo of having to isolate them so much that you force this change in lifestyle, like it changes, then you become dependent on one person for the totality of your livelihood, which just seems like wow, you really put some thought into this.

Cynthia: Yeah and I mean the other thing that so many people say is like this is a full-time job, who has time for this?

Simona: Yeah?!

Cynthia: Like Tina, who is in the film, who has a former partner created fourteen websites about her. I think the number is fourteen - more than a dozen websites about her and he's got to be going back and working on them to keep them high in the search engine results, because she actually at one point hired a reputation management firm. So many people will hire companies that will try to generate other content to come up higher in the search results than the damaging stuff that someone has put out there to target you with. And yet, you know, she's like god, these sites just keep coming up higher than what we can generate. He's got to be working on it, who has time for this?

Gilad: Like I wonder if he schedules it into his phone and ...

Cynthia: Right.

Simona: Or outsource it, because you can think about the mechanics of just having a webpage are like - you're paying hosting fees, you have to renew each year, you pay like - it becomes like how much money are you investing in the like harassment of an individual? And sometimes it's not even an individual you have a really in-depth relationship with. It could have just been a very casual relationship that fizzled out and you think that's it, we're done. It's just casual dating and then this whole new layer - you're exposed to this whole new element or layer of what they have the ability to do to you, which is so crazy.

Cynthia: Yeah.

Gilad: One part of the film that really jumped out was when Tina was in the - I think it was the Toastmasters and there's of course the white guy that approaches her and is like, you know like, it's not that bad, it's not that bad, and you know again the burden is on her to convince him that it's bad for her. And so one thing that we were looking at before we started this interview was this quote came up and it was, "When we stand by, we are not inhibiting cyberbullying behaviour at all. We are adding to it." I wanted to get your thoughts on that.

Cynthia: Yeah, I mean two things. One is that scene was really uncomfortable for so many reasons, and we would joke in the edit that, you know, this sort of confrontation where this guy is telling a woman who's being targeted, who has just spoken publicly in this meeting about the impacts it's had on her and it's sort of gotten very emotional, and afterwards he comes up and it

begins with “It might be just because I’m a guy”. And we were always like, oh no, stop there, like it’s not going to get any better.

Simona: That’s the “I’m not racist, but” and it’s like oh, you’re about to say something uber-racist.

Cynthia: Totally racist.

Simona: And uber-sexist.

Cynthia: Yeah so unfortunately, he didn’t stop there and went on to tell her your experiences are illegitimate and what you’re feeling is illegitimate and it’s actually not what you’re feeling, or not what you’re justified in feeling and I’m going to tell you what you should be feeling as someone who has no idea what she’s going through. And in the scene, she is very physically, noticeably super uncomfortable and the first time we were looking at this scene, you know, I want her to tell him to just, you know, say something very rude to him and walk away.

Simona: You know, fuck off. They’re Toastmasters, like you’re not judging my story.

Cynthia: Yeah, I want her to tell him to fuck off, but she doesn’t. She navigates the situation away that I think is familiar to a lot of people who are, you know, constantly making this assessment of how do I exit this situation in the safest way possible and is it worth confronting this person, and she doesn’t confront him. She like placates him to some degree and exits the engagement with this conversation and first time it’s like, oh I can’t just play it like that, it’s too

upsetting to me as someone who wants her to tell him to fuck off, to just see how she navigates this, but it's so real, it's so true to just that experience of like - is it really worth, am I safe to confront this person, is it worth it to confront this person, should I just get out of it? So it's a painful moment in the film for me that she doesn't confront him. But I think in it yeah, it encapsulates this whole thing of well it's just the internet, why don't you just turn off your computer, why don't you just walk away, who cares what they're saying about you on the internet, you know, you're you. And for Tina, it doesn't matter if she's on the internet or not, there's still going to be ten websites coming up every time she tries to get a job that is preventing her from surviving, so I think it encapsulates a lot of that. The thing that I wanted to make the film about was to challenge this idea of oh it's just the internet, it's not real life, it's not - it's something you can just choose to engage with or choose to walk away from, but that's not really the case. The internet, you know, spills over into every part of our lives, even just to figure out the closest place to get a cup of coffee.

Simona: And I think we were talking about this morning as well is that, I think one of the things to differentiate like physical harassment is that you can physically leave a space, lock a door and you can choose not to return or not. And so many victims have to leave jobs, have to leave school, have to leave, you know, communities because of this victimhood. But then with the digital aspect of it, it's that no, it's permanent, like there's no algorithm to scrub the internet clean or take - you don't have the agency to take content off and that in that case of the individual, she did an MBA from an Ivy League school and that didn't transfer over because she continually had to navigate spaces to protect herself, but also try to like, pay her rent and like no one really thinks about or discusses the fiscal impacts of online harassment. No one thinks about, you know, okay you'll find another job. No, the first thing you do as an employer is like a

quick Google search and just take whatever's on the front page as fact, as opposed to questioning that content.

Cynthia: Yeah. I mean something else that, looking ahead with this film, I really want to address in more of the process of developing an impact engagement campaign for the film, and really looking at where can we make a real difference on this is just employer education. You know, there's no - if someone does a credit check on you, you know, financial credit check on you, at least in the States, you have to - you get a notification of that. You have to sign a paper that says fine, you can run a credit check on me, but in a sense - in essence, employers are doing the same thing. They're doing these informal background checks using whatever happens to come up on the search engine. There's no guidelines for how to digest that information in a way that is responsible. There is no opportunity for someone who is being searched on Google to say hey, I know you looked me up on Google, you may have seen some things there, I would like an opportunity to talk to you about that in a way that you might if hey, someone just looked at my credit report, you know, I had an uncle who stole my identity and now my credit score is weird and I'm working it out. You know like, you don't get that opportunity because there's no reporting. There's no accountability on the part of employers and on the part of universities and admissions departments at universities and graduate schools for what they may be finding out about potential student candidates and it's just a really big problem. There need to be guidelines.

Simona: And I think that then you start to like kind of break it down: if females who are represented more, who are victimized at a higher rate for online harassment are then subjected to these like very informal checks online are taken out of employment pools, you then start to

realize, again, the data skews against women to utilize these spaces, so they're like essentially pushed out by no - and like these institutions have no recourse. It just like, we just want the best candidate, but you want the best candidate with the least amount of information available online about them.

Cynthia: Yeah, or like potential baggage.

Simona: Yeah exactly.

Cynthia: Tina was saying they would look me up and I don't blame them, you know, they look at what's about me, what's there online. Whether it's true, whether it's not true, they don't care, they just don't want to deal with it. They don't want to know.

Simona: I think that also like comes into - like a question I have is that I think one thing that you hear, like Me Too has been such a big element of like what we're currently talking about at the moment, why these issues have become more and more important to discuss and that you realize that in every situation, it was trying to convince law enforcement that this is real, that you know, an employer that this is real, to your family this is real, or to your relationships that this is real. You're consistently dealing with the trauma of victimization and then constantly dealing with character assassination essentially, and like one question is like, how do we move the needle, like how do we actually start having - making or having conversations or making real change within these institutions?

Cynthia: Well I think that's a great question because there's on the individual level, I think what we're seeing now is women's voices being - here's a great example of why it's important that women can feel safe and empowered to be online and express themselves online, because what we see happening is that this outpouring of women just saying I too have experienced, you know, sexual assault, violence, discrimination has led to this moment of, you know, this whole thing of being cracked wide open and like oh my god, we have - you know, we all knew this. We have like a really really significant cultural, social epidemic of violence and discrimination on our hands that we all know, we've all been living in it, you know. But now because the internet I think has enabled a sort of collective public vocalization of that, it's like okay fine, we can't ignore it anymore, and yet that institutions that are - the institutions remain the same, you know. The statute of limitations to report a sexual assault, they remain the same. The workplace culture remains the same. The educational systems remain the same. The sort of cultural bias that we've - that have perpetuated this inequality is still absolutely very live and well, and yet we are at that moment of like, okay well maybe the first step is like acknowledging. We've all known there's a problem, but maybe now the powers that be are like okay fine, maybe there really is a problem. But yeah, I think the systems are really slow to change and just law enforcements systems, like these statute of limitations issues, they're huge. They're really really big issues and they're designed to disable victims from getting justice and they're designed embolden perpetrators.

Gilad: What does an ideal justice system look like and I ask that because the onus and burden falls on the victims, having to relive their trauma from sometimes ten and maybe even fifteen years ago, to have to recollect that information. I can't even tell you what I had for dinner yesterday, let alone remember detail by detail what happened ten years ago, and so of course

you might find holes and especially when you're having to recount something that's very traumatic. What does a fixed justice system look like in this case?

Cynthia: Well, for starters I think there's - I think the people who are at the top, the bias infiltrates the entire system, so what you were talking about with, sort of, victims of sexual assault essentially going through like a character assassination in the process of taking their cases to trial and knowing full well that's what they have ahead of them, not only does it result in things where the perpetrators often get off, but it also disincentivizes women from coming forward and participating in these cases because why should I go through that? You know, I survived the violence, maybe it's not worth it for me to try to also get justice, and that is awful. I filmed with, it's not in the movie, but I filmed with a woman police officer in Florida, who was a part of the child's sex crimes unit. I think I mention this in the Q & A on Monday morning and she had this case come to her because she was dealing with a lot of cyber crime. She was kind of the only person in the office that they knew maybe would have some clue of what to do about this case, so she gets this case where a young woman was, you know, her pictures - nude pictures were all over the internet. They had been sent to her employer, they were - the perpetrator was trying to upload them to the employer's Facebook page. She worked for the city, so it wasn't just like any, you know, it's like a - not maybe the most understanding of employers. Fortunately, the employer was understanding but was like hey, this was how the woman learned that this was even happening, the employer was like hey, someone has been making like forty attempts a day to upload nude pictures of you to our city, you know, public-facing social media, what is going on. So she went to the police and, of course, the dad ended up getting these pictures of her. Long story short, what the police officer - the young woman came in, she was in her 20s, and in the process of going through the pictures that have

been released, they discovered that she was a minor in some of them and so the police officer was like, oh great. The detective was like great, I can do something here. But had there not been pictures of her as a minor, she would have to had to tell that young woman that I'm sorry, there's like nothing I can do for you and the reason is that the detective was like, I'm never going to get a search warrant, I'm never going to get permission from a judge to do an IP address search to find out who's uploading these pictures. So it's an issue where the judges are, you know, not reflective of the people who are being victimized. Generally, the detectives and the law enforcement officers are also - don't necessarily get the issue. The district attorneys are not going to effectively prosecute these cases because it's like just the law is just so like, oh I don't know, like he's going to say someone else, you know, came - broke into - which is what he said, someone else came and broke into my server, I had nothing to do with it. Fortunately, in this particular case, the person did get prosecuted and the young woman did win her case, but the systemic issue is just - it's really massive. It's really massive.

Simona: So like, on the flip side, then looking at okay, if change is so slow to happen in these kind of historical, social institutions and tech is becoming more sophisticated, why is the onus still on the individual user to protect themselves, like change your passwords or don't post anything or don't take nude photos, don't give them to anybody. Okay and - but what are you as a platform doing to protect the user themselves, or why is there still a hesitation from platforms like Twitter or Facebook to really call out this bullshit behaviour and say like this is not acceptable as part of our community guidelines?

Cynthia: Well, in the US, we have a law called Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, which back in the mid 90s gave immunity from liability to these site operators for anything

posted on their sites by third parties, so they enjoy this immunity that is - it's just expansive, so there's nothing that compels them to make any changes on their platforms. You know, they can't be sued, which is totally bonkers, so it was really interesting last week when Mark Zuckerberg was testifying in Congress and Congress was like oh my god, I can't believe you, you allow these privacy violations, you sell people stuff and there's hate speech. And I'm like all right, have you all like noticed you are legislators, like you have given these companies blanket immunity from liability, what on earth did you expect to happen? Like why are they going to hire, you know, thousands of content moderators and why are they going to develop technologies to really effectively make sure their platforms aren't being abused, because they've known they're being abused forever. They know it, you know, it costs money to deal with it. Why would they spend the money to do that if they don't have to and so it's like - it's like they've been just given like free reign, you know, go forth and make money, go forth and like print your own money. You know, it's like - so I think that that is changing maybe. It's so extremely controversial to make any change to this law that gives immunity because, of course, the tech companies are like ah, you can't do that! Like if we don't have immunity, we're all going to like wither and die in the vine and it's going to be terrible and the whole world is going to fall apart, you know, so they have that story. But I do think that the perception in the wake of our election about the extent to which the internet actually has real ramifications in our lives, in our communities, in the social fabric of like our, you know, our whole world. That's real. And that perspective I think is finally changing, which is again, I think a really important step to addressing this and to reallocating resources to, you know, we have like community, you know, officers of community beats. You know, maybe the internet should be sort of like part of how we think about that community and I think tech companies are I think sort of the - they may be coming to the end of kind of this their own golden age of having just no oversight. Unfortunately, had they made choices to adhere to their

own community standards at the very least and to actually effectively address abuse on their platforms that they know is happening, I think that they could have probably - you know, Mark Zuckerberg wouldn't be sitting in Congress having to explain to, you know, all of these people who seem to be really digitally not literate how the internet works.

Simona: And it was brutal to watch that hearing and then like questioning well what if someone likes a post or just some basic, just like really focusing on such basic elements of the online experience, but not actually taking into account that there is real danger with how we manage data and like who then has access to data or how freely someone is able to access that data and then what they use that data with. And I think like one of the - one of the things I've really noticed about the Me Too movement, it gained momentum when powerful white women stood up in front and said this was happening to me too, but there had been, you know, history upon history lessons around what's it like to be a marginalized - a woman of colour or a woman with a disability within that space, and then already navigating that knowing already like I'm an easier victim because of these intersectional factors. And that I have said that Anita Hill was in the 90s and that there was still people - for those who don't know, Anita Hill, I think was against Thurgood Marshall, had complained that he had been sexually harassing her.

Female: Clarence Thomas.

Simona: Clarence Thomas, sorry. Thurgood Marshall is a good one. Clarence Thomas and that was in the 90s, and she was a very powerful, like she was a very well-spoken black woman. But you think about the women, the everyday person working in an office and that they just have to - not only are they dealing with their trauma privately, but they're not reporting it and so like the

numbers don't really, like the numbers aren't fully representative of the reality of what's going on.

Cynthia: Absolutely, I mean I think the barriers to justice are so much greater. Carrie Goldberg, who's one of the attorneys in the film, the film opens with a story of a young black thirteen year old girl who is raped, and the rapist videotaped and then disseminated in her school and she's asked to leave school. She's not given any counselling, any support, any you know, law enforcement in terms of - like nothing. She was basically just told, you know, your presence here at school is causing this video to be, to become more virally spread throughout the school, so you should just not come back to school, we'll let you know when you should come back. So one of the things that - and Carrie, you know, this was the first case like this that Carrie had received, but she started getting more and more cases like this. And what she was saying earlier this week during one of our Q & As is this perception that young black women have are sexualized and seen in this sexualized way that prevents them from being believed as being victims who did not give consent. Everyone said well it's consensual, I think it was consensual.

Simona: She was thirteen.

Cynthia: Thirteen.

Simona: She was thirteen years old.

Cynthia: Yeah, so I mean that's just one example of just this deep deep racist bias tied with this gender aspect of that, leading to this conclusion that young black women who are raped can't be victims of rape because they must have given consent in some way.

Simona: Just by their reality, just by being ...

Cynthia: Who they are.

Simona: Who they are, something that they can't control.

Cynthia: Yeah.

Gilad: I know that there's no answer to this, but I'm going to ask it anyway. So Jill meets Dan on Tinder. They go on a couple dates and she's not feeling it and she breaks up, and she starts to feel like this harassment is happening to her. What does she do? What do you start doing, do you document things? What happens?

Cynthia: For starters, preserve everything. Preserve all of the every, you know, screengrab, every communication, every you know, text message, every email, every - everything. Just preserve everything, because what often you must prove in order to win a case or to get even the most basic order of protection is that there's a course of conduct that is repeated, and the systems tend to recognize a repeated act of abuse or sort of an increasing act of abuse. They're very concerned in the - the law enforcement tends to be very concerned about the metrics: okay he sent you five text messages, he left you three voicemails, he sent you, you know, eight dick

pics. You know like, and that is what they can kind of like, oh that sounds like something is happening here. So, you know, maintain - getting the evidence is really important and just saving it, you know, put a folder on your computer called like "horrible asshole from Tinder" and just throw it all in there and just keep making sure you're saving all that stuff. Call Tinder or email Tinder's customer service. Carrie is actually currently taking on Tinder in a case where a man was - there was an account, a fake account created for this person and just thousands of guys were showing up at his house and he kept calling them saying, you know, this fake account is targeting me, all these people are coming to my home, it's like really dangerous for me, and they just wouldn't respond to that. So I wouldn't hold your breath for Tinder to necessarily respond. I might say to Jill, check out Bumble.

Simona: Where you make the choice.

Cynthia: Where women are the leading, are the leaders in the encounter, in the engagement, have a lot more control. Go to law enforcement. I would also talk to your friends and make sure that you have some people who are tracking you, who know what's going on, who are checking in to make sure that you're doing okay, that you're safe. If the individual has pictures of you, you may want to, you know, just keep track of that and Google yourself, see if there is anything else weird going on, if they're posting to other places about you. There's, you know, tons of websites like myexgirlfriend.com, you know, what's the first thing that you have to enter when you upload an entry onto myex.com or any of these other sort of revenge websites, well they ask for her name and the town and her age and where she's from and what high school she went to and a link to her Facebook page, so if you - it's always a good idea I would say for anyone, it's not vanity and even if it is vanity, it's a great moment to like have some vanity in the name of

personal safety, Google yourself. You know, I tell people, just - you got to know what's out there. It's part of our currency, it's part of our digital currency. We need to know what our Google search engine results look like. If someone's using the search engine to abuse you, you really need to know about it, so you can do something about it.

{Theme music fades in}

Gilad: My name's Gilad Cohen.

Simona: And I'm Simona Ramkisson.

Gilad: This podcast was edited by Brandon Fragomeni and Alex Castellani.

Simona: The Hum is an initiative of JAYU, a charity that shares human rights stories through the arts.

{Theme music fades out}

Gilad: Support us making more podcasts like these by donating at jayu.ca/donate.