

Sex work in cyberspace: who pays the price?

Chris Ashford*

Department of Law, University of Sunderland, UK

In January 2006, the UK government launched its long-term prostitution strategy. The strategy aims to produce better enforcement of laws against kerb-crawling and seeks to create more opportunities for women to leave prostitution. The approach of UK government focuses on 'street sex', yet in the cyber age we have seen a growth in the number of escort sites and a rise in the number of commercial pages on dating and networking sites. This article will consider the strategy two years on and seek to explore the potential impact of the government's proposals on prostitution and the growing number of socio-legal issues that are emerging from the rise in cyber-prostitution.

Keywords: Discussion Boards; Chat Rooms; prostitution; sex

Introduction

In January 2006, the UK government published its long anticipated response to the debate that has been stimulated by its earlier consultation paper 'Paying the Price' (Home Office 2004). The publication of that original document meant that recent years have seen prostitution firmly back on the reform agenda (Soothill 2004).

In December 2006, a series of prostitute murders in Ipswich (BBC 2007) meant that the subject of prostitution was also back in the media spotlight. The representations beamed into the living rooms of the public and detailed in the press did little to change any preconceptions that the public may have had about the nature and identity of prostitutes, as prostitutes were depicted as women who operated from street corners in order to battle extreme poverty or to feed drug habits. This perception of sex work as a gendered activity performed by women, rather than men, together with the myopic vision of a street-based practice was also at the forefront of the government's prostitution strategy (see more generally Moore 2006). The strategy states that it is designed to achieve four stated objectives (Home Office 2006: 1):

- (1) Challenge the view that street prostitution is inevitable and here to stay.
- (2) Achieve an overall reduction in street prostitution.
- (3) Improve the safety and quality of life of communities affected by prostitution, including those directly involved in street sex markets.
- (4) Reduce all forms of commercial sexual exploitation.

It is striking that within the 75 pages of the report there is no focus upon the role of cyberspace within modern prostitution, both in terms of the opportunities it presents for

*Email: chris.ashford@sunderland.ac.uk

the government in achieving its stated goals and also the additional challenges to policy-makers and law-enforcement agencies.

The government's analysis is also focused upon the female sex worker. This is perhaps understandable given that academic discourse has also focused upon a gendered vision of sex work with Morrison and Whitehead (2007) branding the limited research that has been conducted into the male sex industry as 'myopic' (see more generally Weeks 1981). They argue that academics fear being associated with research that might be labelled 'sensationalistic' or 'socially irrelevant'. It is therefore important that academic discourse increasingly examines sex work, both as a practice beyond the streets, and unbound by gender.

In June 2007, the government published the Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill. Clauses 71, 72 and 73 of the Bill focus upon sex work. They offer an opportunity to see the government's approach to prostitution in action. These sections of the bill reflect the government's objectives in placing a greater emphasis on rehabilitation and focusing on street prostitution.

This narrow focus is surprising in the context of a rise in the number of websites dedicated to varying forms of prostitution (Sharp & Earle 2003: 37). Just as e-commerce has allowed for the transformation of business and e-democracy has begun to change government and the democratic process, so too has technology impacted upon sexuality and commercial sexual transactions making 'traditional vices' ever more accessible to the general public (Ashford 2006; Walker *et al.* 2006). Such has been the growth of these commercial enterprises that 'spin-off industries' have also emerged. For instance, one Bournemouth hotel offers a number of workshops targeted at male sex workers with sessions varying from 'man-2-man tantric sexuality training' through to advice on how to 'Be a better sex worker'.

Within *A Co-ordinated Prostitution Strategy* (2006), the government sought to remove the perception of prostitution as an accepted form of behaviour, asserting 'it is not an activity we can tolerate in our towns and cities' (Home Office 2006: 1). The government went further and stated that prostitution would be tackled 'whether it takes place on the street, behind the doors of a massage parlour or in a private residence' (*ibid.*) but despite this strong assertion, the government has not reformed the complex statutory framework in which sex work operates (Hubbard 2006). Instead, it appears to be that the UK government is encouraging law enforcement agencies to target limited resources at street prostitution whilst prostitution supported by cyberspace seems to be thriving.

Phoenix and Oerton (2005: 77) have noted that regardless of specific detail within 'Paying the Price', the documentation represented a 'significant change in official understandings of prostitution in England and Wales'. They argue that in contrast to the historically 'tolerant' view of prostitution, 'Paying the Price' relocates prostitution as a problem in need of intervention. However, it would be more accurate to state that 'Paying the Price' relocates certain forms of prostitution, principally street prostitution, as problems needing intervention but is less explicit about other forms of sex work.

Nonetheless, this shift followed the first large-scale reform of sexual offences law in England and Wales in over 30 years. For the first time, prostitution was defined in statute, having previously been defined in the case of *R v De Munck* (1918) 82 J.P.160 CCA. The Sexual Offences Act 2003 broadened the definition to include men as well as women and in s 51(2) defined prostitution as:

a person (A) who, on at least one occasion and whether or not compelled to do so, offers or provides sexual services to another person in return for payment or a promise of payment to A or a third person; and 'prostitution' is to be interpreted accordingly.

Despite the statutory shift, there has not been an equal shift in policy and media perception. This is further complicated by the uncertain and at times complex language applied to prostitution. Moreover, the lexicon of sex work is significant in that it divides sex work into its myriad of forms. For instance, the cornucopia of commercial sex websites often use the term 'escort' rather than prostitute but, despite some historical difficulties in defining what amounts to prostitution (O'Neill 1999: 181), the activities of an 'escort' do now amount to prostitution if they include 'sexual services to another person in return for payment of a promise of payment'. This definition remains narrower than some definitions of homosexual prostitution that have included non-pecuniary benefits; for example, the definition offered by Maloney (1980) (quoted in Coleman 1989):

Any juvenile male who engages repeatedly in sexual activity with another male person or persons with whom he would not otherwise stand in any special relationship and for which he receives currency and/or the provision of one or more of the necessities of life.

Maloney went on to define the necessities as including 'food, shelter, clothing and protection' along with those items perceived to be necessities by juvenile youth, such as cigarettes and drugs.

This article seeks to use this broader definition of prostitution for the purposes of exploring the phenomenon on the Internet as though websites and online discussion for a can provide evidence of the offering of sexual acts in a sex work environment, there is not universally explicit evidence as to the form in which benefits, pecuniary or otherwise, are made. As we shall see, this is particularly the case with a social networking and dating site on which individuals can describe themselves as an 'escort', but is unclear as to the benefit that they expect. It may be an invitation to a role play in which one actor takes upon the role of escort and the other or others the client who provides a form of benefit that may or may not pecuniary.

All of the sex-work websites used in this research, and from which excerpts have been taken for use in this article, are free to access with no membership required. The use of any search engine quickly produces a vast array of websites, and a number of UK based sites are utilised in this article along with networking/dating sites. As with previous scholars in this field, I do not wish to be accused of either promoting or undermining the existence of the sites discussed and consequently the specific links are not given.

Whilst the use of chat rooms may give rise to issues about the ethics of exposing what are essentially time-bound and private conversations (DiMarco & DiMarco 2003: 171), the use of discussion posts do not, often displaying posts many years after their publication, and posted in an open and public-facing environment.

In the case of the brothel websites, these were located from a combination of searches conducted over a 12-month period and using existing location details provided in published literature of US-based locations. A combination of purposive and snowball sampling was deployed. Similarly, over that period, escort sites were located through a search limited to UK-based escort agencies and escorts and relied upon snowball sampling for generating additional sites.

One social networking and dating website for men seeking encounters with other men was used. This site came to prominence after a UK Opposition spokesman had utilised the site in order to meet a male sex worker during the government's prostitution review. This placed online-based male sex work into the UK media headlines for the first time. Although this site requires registration in order to search the site, the searching can be done with a searcher able to choose whether their 'tracks' are visible to the profile owner. Individual member pages can be private or public. If private, they can only be viewed by

members of the networking community. In the case of the pages used in this research, the sites were available publicly.

Prostitutes and their clients

McKeganey and Barnard (1996) identified five aspects that motivated clients into 'paid sex'. These were the capacity to specify particular acts that they wished to perform, or have performed on them; the capacity to have sex with a range of different women; the ability to seek out women with specific physical attributes or displaying particular images; the thrill of doing something that was socially frowned upon and the limited; and unemotional nature of the contact with the prostitute (McKeganey & Barnard 1996: 50). The availability of the Internet offers an opportunity to re-examine these motivational aspects and consider their importance in online sites and forum that support sex work.

Specific sexual acts

The specification of specific sexual acts can be seen in the next quote taken from one McKeganey and Barnard interviewee. This form of immediate and commoditised desire (Brooks-Gordon 2006: 92) whereby sexual acts become 'standardised' has been subsequently termed the McDonaldization thesis (Ritzer 1995):

Anal, I've only done that once with a prostitute, but it's perhaps more difficult to ask a girlfriend to do. Also I quite enjoy dressing up in ladies underwear which again I would not ask a partner to do. (Ritzer 1996: 51)

The growth of the Internet and, in particular, online forums built around 'commercial sex scene' sites often allow clients to seek out a prostitute to perform a specific sexual act, particularly where that act is perceived as unusual or deviant to the would-be client as in the above example. The following posting is taken from a South Yorkshire website that provides a series of advertising discussion boards for escorts and clients, along with a more social space that allows clients and escorts to exchange stories, jokes and cookery recipes. In the following exchange we see one potential client tentatively seeking out a prostitute who would be willing to engage in the practice of 'gagging' whereby a man forces his penis down the throat of the recipient:

Hi All,

I watched a few of the Gag Factor movies the other day, pretty strong stuff! Visit [website address deleted] for an idea of what these sort of films are about.

Basically they are oral only films where the girl gets done in the mouth until she starts gagging and spitting up saliva. Its [sic] pretty hardcore stuff but seems to be popular even in the UK with websites like [website address deleted] being setup.

There doesnt [sic] seem to be a great deal of girls offering this kind of service in the UK. I understand that its [sic] a very submissive act but can any of the girls here shed light on why not many offer this. Is it the submissive/degrading element, or is it just that its not catching on as much as it seems. Or am I just a little too perverted??

I've not had any luck finding girls willing anyway.

5 March 2006 (accessed 23/3/06)

As Soothill (2004) has noted, it is difficult to prove that such postings reflect genuine actions and are not merely expressions of sexual fantasy. The inclusion of a weblink to a

pornographic website that focuses upon this practice would suggest that this user perhaps has a history of fantasising over such behaviour. This posting also allowed a dialogue to develop with the sex workers on the site. One responded, stating:

I personally can't understand why any woman would want a cock forced so far into her mouth that it makes her gag, let alone a stranger's cock.

I know I would find it degrading.

5 March 2006 (accessed 23.3.06)

This exchange allowed the potential client to explore his sexual desire without a revelation of his identity or a physical encounter taking place thus reducing any possible rejection of his request. It may be the case that such forums allow a more honest and open expression of sexual deviancy between prostitutes and their potential clients. Whilst feminists such as Butterworth (1993) and Hughes (2002) have noted that the creation of the 'virtual women' may deepen the view of women as objects of male desire and the possibility of their exploitation, this posting would suggest that this form of cyber-exchange can empower women to set limits and create a new form of sexual marketplace. Chatterjee (2005: 15) has gone further and noted that technology may create a safer and more lucrative context for prostitution. In such a situation the role of the law in seeking to control and prevent this activity must be re-examined, but the current governmental policy framework on sex work does not do so. Rather, it continues to rely upon a traditional somatic, gendered and street-based construction of sex work.

In contrast to the earlier exchange, on other occasions questions from men seeking commercial sex encounters can be a prelude for a successful commercial interaction. This can be seen from the following example, also taken from the South Yorkshire site:

tease from the lady with the man to assist with the possibility of going all the way with the man and taking it up the &^%\$.

I would prefer a sauna but looking for anywhere I could get this done. Anyone any ideas ???

26 February 2006

This posting received a concise response:

Give me a call, I can sort this out for you.

26 February 2006

These forum exchanges offer an extension to the traditional face-to-face 'screening' that prostitutes traditionally rely upon as the Internet and email offer an opportunity to analyse language, style of writing and attitude expressed by potential clients (Sanders 2005: 68). This 'screening' is important in ensuring that the prostitute does not waste time pursuing individuals who will not become clients and in attempting to establish their own safety:

Of the emails that I get there are fifty percent that I automatically bin because you can tell a lot by the way someone phrases an email. If someone goes into too much detail in the first email or some of them you can tell it is kids messing about on their dad's computer. You become a good judge from the way they phrase their emails as to whether it is the type of customer that you want. (Sanders 2005: 69)

This would appear to further support the ‘McDonaldization thesis’ with men seeking sexual acts as one might consult a menu. It also has parallels with the ‘customer’ asking a street worker what sexual acts they are willing to undertake and the street worker varying that willingness from customer to customer. The specific sexual acts that men might seek become wider in nature, with clients able to seek out sexual acts over a wider geographical area from the comfort of their own computer screen. In this way the existence of both the cyber-prostitute promotes and sustains the sex industry. Furthermore, this apparent dialogue may promote a greater appearance of consent from the sex worker, apparently happy to engage in acts that they may in reality find degrading. This ‘veil of online consent’ could be even more damaging to sex workers.

For law enforcement agencies, these online developments are potentially worrying. The growth of a policing presence at known locations that tend to attract street prostitution is off-putting to the clients who wish to be anonymous. The police are therefore disrupting the marketplace in which prostitution takes place. Equally, the raiding of brothels and massage parlours make the space less ‘safe’ for clients seeking anonymous commercial sex encounters. **In contrast, the disruption of the cybersex marketplace is much more difficult given that meeting details would ultimately be exchanged through a telephone conversation or email, thus requiring a much more intensive and resource-dependent policing approach of covert policing** (Marx 1988), the effectiveness of which has been questioned (see more generally Klockars 1985; Brodeur 1995).

Different women and characteristics

Another factor that McKeganey and Barnard (1996) found to motivate clients is that of the availability of different women, supplementing existing sexual partners, as illustrated by this client:

I used to have different partners before I met my wife and it’s just something I missed. To me it’s better to do it this way than to go to a night-club, pick up a girl, go back to her place or do it in a car and end up catching something. (McKeganey & Barnard 1996: 52)

For this commercial sex user, prostitutes offer a more acceptable alternative to seeking out sexual partners in a bar. It also avoids the social niceties of purchasing a few drinks for the potential sexual partner and the usual ritualised seduction process. Moreover, clients often seek out specific physical and personality characteristics as shown in the following two examples where clients focus upon breast size, attitude and legs:

I would always look for a woman who is young, shapely, not too busty. (McKeganey & Barnard 1996: 52)

You wouldn’t believe this but it is the little things, like she’s got to have long legs or she looks a bit of a bitch. If she stands there and looks really nice that would be a complete turn off, shes got to look a bit bitchy, a bit of a tart. (ibid.)

Once again, the Internet environment can help promote prostitutes individually, with escort profiles enabling men and women to create deeper personas than they might in a brief open-air exchange.

These quotes would further suggest the commoditisation of sex workers and a legitimisation of sex work. One north-east England escort agency has a website offering women and a companion website that offers men. Both websites seem to emphasise both

the social/personality traits of the escort along with their physical attributes; an example is this description of 'Brad':

Brad is a young, athletic male escort who enjoys the company of ladies either in the social sphere where he is amusing company and displays a caring and sensitive personality or in the more intimate surroundings of a one to one encounter.

He is always responsive to the mood of his lady companions, intuitively sensing their needs, being able to pamper and spoil is second nature to him and he is truly an attentive partner.

He regularly works out in the gym making sure that his muscular body is fully toned . . .

Limited nature of the contact

The limited nature of the contact is another client motivational factor identified by McKeganey and Barnard (1996). Once again the McSex nature of these encounters is highlighted in the following examples:

The attractions of prostitutes are that it's easy. We both know what we want, there's no charade. If I go to a club or something I have to work for it but with a prostitute it's pure sex, no-one's kidding the other. (McKeganey & Barnard 1996: 52)

It was just the fact that here were women who would do anything, you know that was required, no bones about it plus the fact that there was no commitment at all. You know, it was for a specific purpose that you became involved, then it was over and you could go back to work. If you wanted another one it was just a matter of going along making your choice and so on. (ibid.)

According to McKeganey and Barnard (1996), this limited nature to the contact or impersonal nature of the interaction is a two-way process with prostitutes also valuing this aspect with women being quoted as viewing commercial sex as 'a willy in a wallet':

I'm a business woman. I try an' do ma best. They're payin' me for it and this is ma business. This is how I earn ma livin'. I don't jus' take the money and go 'och, fuck 'em'. They're getting what they paid for, that's the way I work. But only what they pay for and no more. So I do ma best. (McKeganey & Barnard 1996: 88).

However, the Internet and forums also allow for dialogue to develop between clients and prostitutes/commercial providers. One example of this is a discussion about facilities at one South Yorkshire massage parlour between the manageress and clients. In this way the Internet allows previously private sexual encounters to be discussed in a public way whilst retaining anonymity. Nonetheless a form of online community is created (Ashford 2006).

Has the standard of sevice [sic] at [location deleted] gone downhill recently?

13 February 2006

[location deleted] NOW HAD 3 DAY CLEANING ,, [sic] NEW HEATERS, NEW TOWELS, ETC, NEW CARPET ARRIVING NEXT WEEK FOR RECEPTION ROOM AND REDECORATING THROUGH OUT STARTING MONDAY ALL SUPPLIED BY MYSELF.

16 February 2006

beento [sic] [location deleted] many times but recently saw [name deleted] utter waste off [sic] time from minute in the room complained of being cold winged that she did not do oral and no word of a lie threw condom on bed and said 'cum on then you can put it on lets get on with it' at which point i [sic] took my leave used to be top place will think hard before retuning good luck [name deleted] you will need it.

16 February 2006

IM [sic] SORRY ABOUT [name deleted], SHE WASNT ONE OF MY STAFF, AND WONT BE THERE MUCH LONGER, NEW STAFF NOW [names deleted] MYSELF AND [name deleted] SO PLEASE TRY AGAIN OH AND WARM NOW TOO ...

19 February 2006

As mentioned earlier, this South Yorkshire site also includes a 'social' element including one section in which sex workers offer recipes and cooking tips along with shopping advice which actually serves to humanise sex workers, moving them beyond objects and reasserting their identity as women within this online community, as evidenced in the following post from October 2005 for Parkin cake:

4oz butter

4oz soft brown sugar

4oz black treacle

4oz golden syrup

4oz plain flour

4oz medium oatmeal

pinch salt

1 teaspoon bicarbonate of soda

3 teaspoons ginger

1 teaspoon mixed spice

2 eggs

6 tablespoons milk

put butter, sugar, milk, treacle and syrup in a pan and melt gently.

Put all dry ingredients in a bowl and make a well in centre.

pour melted mixture into well and mix well

lastly stir in beaten eggs.

Por [sic] mixture into a lined tin and bake in a moderate oven 325f/170c/gas mark 3 for about an hour.

cool in the tin for 15 minutes before turning out.

Wait at least a day before cutting into it.

To retain it's [sic] moisture wrap it in tinfoil and store it in a tupperware or tin

****to make it a bit lighter and more of a ginger cake you can forget the oatmeal and add an extra 4oz plain flour****

One can therefore reach the conclusion that these sites can both further objectify and at other times humanise sex workers, albeit in a traditional gendered role, that is to say with the sex worker as a baking, home-making women.

Aspects of modern prostitution

Sharp and Earle (2003: 37) have highlighted three electronic aspects to online prostitution – the ‘escort agency’ which tends to serve the ‘upper end’ of the market; the ‘independents’; and, third, the massage parlour. These can be compared to the ‘traditional’ divide between street prostitution, brothels and escorts, and escort agencies.

The most visible form of ‘traditional’ sex work is street prostitution which often represents the most vulnerable of sex workers and has been the traditional focus of both legislation and policy in this area (Sagar 2001; O’Neill & Campbell 2006). Street prostitution has also largely been seen through a gendered lens with the woman as sex worker and the man as punter (Bowley 2000). This seems set to continue under the current government policy framework.

O’Connell Davidson (1998: 18) has defined a brothel as being simply a ‘house of prostitutes’. For some, the brothel offers an opportunity to ‘clear the streets’ and to provide a safer environment for punter and prostitute alike. Nonetheless, Morton (2004) notes that such proponents ‘may as well try to eat pie in the sky’. He notes that there will always be those who due to age and appearance have to work as ‘lower class’ prostitutes on the streets and there will always be men prepared to pay. This may indeed be right, this rendering the brothel a transient space of commercial sex. In contrast, the Internet may offer an opportunity to remain within a fixed space as the escort would change their clients rather than changing their working location.

Due to their continued criminalisation, most brothels in are operated behind legitimate businesses, often massage parlours or saunas (O’Connell Davidson 1998: 21); although brothels are legal in Nevada, USA, where Castle (1974) wrote of the Ash Meadows fly-in brothel. Though that brothel is now closed, Nevada continues to operate a myriad of brothels that promote themselves through the Internet, listing their services and offering the sale of merchandise. In many cases where websites exist for the brothels, the ‘services’ offered are described as a menu, echoing once again the ‘McDonaldization thesis’ (Ritzer 1998). An all-male brothel catering for women was also expected to open during the course of 2006 (BBC News 2005), but as of spring 2007, Heidi’s Stud Farm was recruiting and had yet to open.

This commercialised and public attitude to brothels may appear to be a world away from the UK. Discussion boards, such as the one discussed above, offer an opportunity for massage parlours to enter into a dialogue with their potential punters and to promote their services.

The individual escort and cyberspace

It is in relation to individual escorts that the growth in ‘rent-boys’ or male escorts has appeared to be most apparent with sections of gay dating sites featuring an ‘escorts and commercial’ element. Though this would suggest a more ‘visible’ homosexual prostitution, male prostitution has been established as long as female prostitution (Coleman 1989; see more generally: Ross 1959; Ginsberg 1967; Kaye 2003) though it has been less the subject of research (Browne & Minichiello 1996).

Traditionally, an escort might engage in negotiations over the phone (Davies & Simpson 1990 quoted in Minichiello et al. 2001), but can now do so by email or through networking and dating sites.

One such site was at the centre of the 2006 UK political scandal involving an Opposition party spokesman, Mark Oaten. The site is UK-based, but hosts profiles from across the world of those who are seeking relationships, friendships and sexual encounters.

Within the site a specific space is provided for ‘commercial’ profiles that allow escorts to show their personal details and photographs.

The commercial profile follows the same structure as other user pages. Each profile page has seven fields. The first, and largest, field of the screen contains an image of the escort. This can include a maximum of six images, with a further seven images available in a ‘photo album’ the access to which is restricted to members of the site only. The next field of the site is general information commencing with ‘I am a’. Here the person producing a profile will state whether they are a Single Gay Man, Gay Male Couple, Single Bisexual Man or Bisexual Couple. This is followed by an ‘Interested in meeting’ field where they may select from the same listings as ‘I am a’. Next, a person producing a profile will select the purpose for which they are interested in meeting, which might include a relationship, 1-on-1 sex, group sex or other activities. Finally, in this section the client will choose the age bracket for people that he is seeking. This is followed by a personal information section which has the following fields: profession, height, body type, ethnic origins, hair, eyes, general attire, out (whether they are ‘out’ as a homosexual), dick size, cut/uncut (whether circumcised or not), body hair, orientation, role, safer sex, smoke and finally drink (see Branwyn (2000); and Bell (2001: 126–27) more generally on ‘compu-sex’).

In January 2006, Mark Oaten was exposed (Anonymous 2006) as engaging in a range of sexual activities with male escorts, which allegedly included ‘group sex’ and submissive sexual practices. At the centre of the debate was a young male escort (Thurlbeck 2006a) who had advertised on a number of websites including the dating site described above. A 25-year-old, male, sex worker named Tomash was reported to be claiming to earn in excess of £100,000 per annum and had been advertising in a major UK gay-themed magazine (Thurlbeck 2006b). In the February 2006 edition of the magazine, there was an advert for Tomash with a link to the dating website. Interestingly, his profile denied that he was the prostitute at the centre of the allegations and suggested another escort as being the one involved. The alternative escort, called ‘Kris’, also had a profile on the dating site advertised in the magazine though that profile was inactive at the time that the magazine went to press. Nonetheless, his review page on the now-defunct ‘male4male escorts’ site remained active and the photograph matched the image in the magazine advert.

By March 2006, Tomash’s profile had lost any reference to Mark Oaten, but the profile remains a good example of an escort profile on the dating site; his ‘about’ section states:

22-year old handsome Polish escort in Central London. Available for incalls in C. London as well as outcalls within the London area, or overnights further in home counties.

BASED IN SOHO (click on the link for my exact location and directions) => [link deleted].

Store this number: [number deleted] and give me a call when you need some companionship [sic] either at my place in W1 or in the comfort of your home/hotel.

As is typical for those advertising on the site, Tomash also completed the ‘looking for’ section:

I enjoy safe vanilla sex i.e. kissing, caressing [sic], body contact, sucking, wanking and so on; and I am versatile (passive as well as active)

I DO NOT DO: SLEAZE, FF, BB, CP, S/M or Pain, Violence etc.

Clean, one more time clean, polite and genuine clients only, please. No timewasters and under 25’s, please. I don’t use MSN & don’t do cam-shows.

You may also want to read what my loyal clients have said about me. Click here =>: [link deleted]

please AVOID using WITHHELD NOs and SMS. Best to CALL ME on [number deleted] TOMASH. Centrally located in Soho, will travel.

One contrast with female escort sites is the inclusion of personal data. This section forms part of the standard profile available to all users, but the commercial male users have also chosen to complete the form. In the case of Tomash, we learn that his favourite food is 'Japanese, Italian, Polish, English [sic] (anything really)', that his favourite TV show is *Queer as Folk* and that his favourite actress is Uma Thurman. Other categories included on the profile template include favourite music, author, film, actor, holiday destination, city, country, club and bar/pub.

This dating site, and others, appear to mix the menu-style choice offered by the Nevada brothel with the opportunity to negotiate and discuss 'services' found on more general sex-worker-themed sites together with the humanisation of sex workers through social exchanges and even, as we have seen, the sharing of cake recipes. Such developments represent a significant evolution in the operation of sex work and hence the continued lack of engagement with this issue of sex work in cyberspace by law enforcement agencies and the government alike is surprising.

Conclusion

It has been said that prostitution is the oldest profession and as Soothill (2004) has noted, prostitution has taken a number of forms over the course of its existence. Any legal and policy framework that seeks to control or limit its practice and the behaviour of its practitioners must recognise the modern contextual framework within which it operates. Today that framework includes the ever-growing Internet presence. **The shift within commercial dating websites towards legitimisation and mainstreaming of prostitution, albeit in a sub-cultural context suggests a deepening of prostitution within our culture rather than a move away from it. Brothels continue to exist, yet technology gives greater opportunity for prostitutes to work from home, advertising for and subsequently screening clients through the Internet.** For some, the need to stand upon cold and dark street corners is no longer present. For the punter, the risk of being caught appears to be much less than traditional street based prostitution rendering prostitution more attractive (Walker et al. 2006).

Against this backdrop any governmental or legal response, such as *A Coordinated Prostitution Strategy* (Home Office 2006), cannot and will not succeed in all its stated objectives unless it recognises and explores the role of the Internet in modern prostitution. The traditional position of the law has been to make it difficult for prostitutes to ply their trade (Samiloff 2006) and yet cyberspace offers a myriad of ways to do so today but is ignored in the current government strategy.

Paradoxically, the growth in the Internet as a prostitution gateway and instrument may help the government achieve three of the government's four stated aims. The view that prostitution is 'inevitable and here to stay' (Home Office 2006: 1) can indeed be challenged by the growth of the Internet which shifts commercial sex away from the street and into the home. In doing so, an overall reduction in street prostitution does become feasible. Finally, the goal of improved safety and quality of life for the communities affected by prostitution may be helped by a move away from street- **to Internet-based sex work.** It may of course atomize the issues associated with prostitution from concentrated social spaces to wider communities. Also, far from receiving help and attention of government, sex workers at the edge of society (Keogh 2004) are not being addressed holistically as long as the government ignores cyber prostitution.

Two years on from the publication of the government's strategy on prostitution we desperately need a new approach: one that either seeks to tackle prostitution within the context of the information age and seizes the opportunity of that technology to engage

with the sex-worker industry; or one that accepts consensual sex between clients and workers and refocuses the attention of the law on sexual exploitation, coercion and improving the safety of sex workers and clients alike within the context of the information age.

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