

human trafficking and online networks

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POLICY BRIEFING

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This updated version of the policy briefing contains the following changes:

References to the United Kingdom in the context of UP-KAT project surveys (pp. 10-13) were replaced with references to Great Britain to reflect the fact the survey sample did not include Northern Ireland and included England, Scotland and Wales only;

The survey data was amended to reflect weighted responses from national samples adjusted for age of respondents: 18 - 59, including corresponding changes in the number of responses for each national sample (N= 693) and the margin or error for national datasets (plus or minus 3.72 percentage points at 95% confidence level).



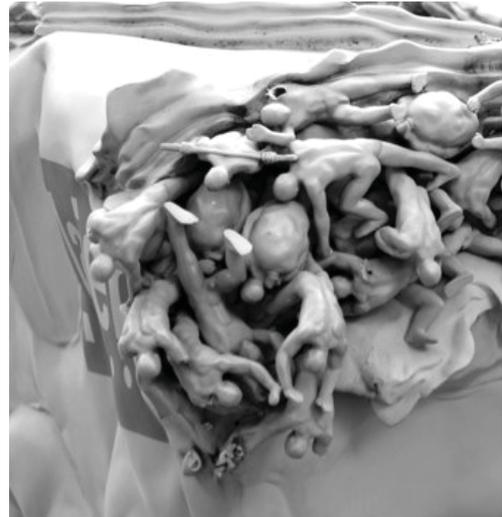
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² Art work on the front cover and p. 3: 'A Gift from Heaven' by Jiao Xingtao; photo courtesy of Kiril Sharapov

'It is difficult to imagine that in our free and democratic EU countries tens of thousands of human beings can be deprived of their liberty and exploited, traded as commodities for profit. But this is the sad truth and trafficking in human beings is all around us, closer than we think'

Cecilia Malmström

EU Commissioner for Home Affairs, April 2013
(European Commission 2013c)



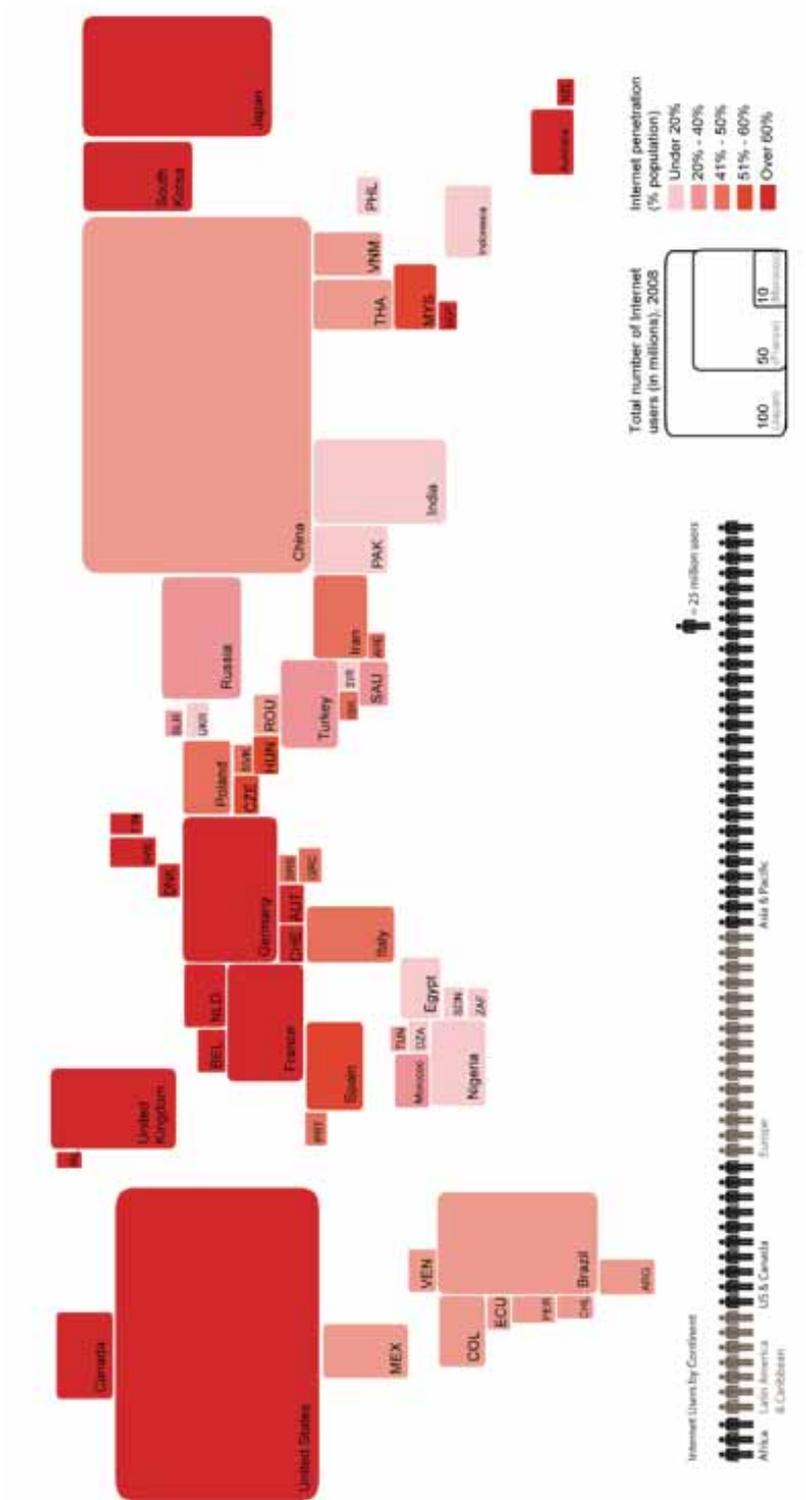
01 Introduction

Trafficking in human beings is a transnational phenomenon affecting most countries in Europe and worldwide. Its links with a range of other socio-economic and political problems - including transnational crime, migration, labour exploitation, gender-based violence, and poverty - have made anti-trafficking activities a priority for policy-makers in the European Union and its member states. According to the 2013 Eurostat Report on Trafficking in Human Beings (Eurostat 2013), 9 528 identified and presumed victims of trafficking were registered by EU member states in 2010, an 18% increase between 2008 and 2010 (p. 10); 61% of these people came from within the European Union (ibid). The data provided by the report are based on the number of identified and presumed victims of trafficking reported by national law enforcement authorities and, as a result, may not reflect the true scale of the problem. According to the International Labour Organisation 'as many as 800,000 people may be trafficked across international borders each year, with many more being trafficked inside their own countries' (ILO 2013).

The use of the Internet and online networks to facilitate human trafficking has been identified as an emerging concern, with the increasing accessibility and developing technologies of the Internet and digital networks enabling traffickers to operate with increased efficiency and anonymity. Social networking, online classifieds and dating websites are used to both recruit people into trafficking and advertise their labour. Anonymising networks are used to transfer and exchange data, servers are sited in jurisdictions with less stringent cybercrime statutes or enforcement, and there is a relatively new trend of criminals relying on portable and easy to dispose of smartphones.

The Internet and new communication technologies have been hailed as a sign of the 'death of distance' since at least the 1990s (Cairncross 1997). According to Eurostat, the majority of individuals in the EU (75%) used the Internet at least once in the three month prior to Eurostat asking them, with 62% using it on a daily or almost daily basis (Seybert and Reinecke 2013). Within the European Union, there are over 80 subscriptions to public mobile telecommunication systems per 100 inhabitants in all countries; in many countries, there are more subscriptions than inhabitants (Eurostat 2009). In 2012, about one in three EU inhabitants used a mobile phone to access the Internet in a 3-month period (European Commission 2013a: 106). However, there are significant differences in access within Europe and even more substantial differences beyond Europe's borders with access varying depending on factors such as location, education, gender and socio-economic status.

Diagram 1: The geography of Internet access³



³ Reproduced from Graham, M., Hale S. and Stephens, M. (2012) Featured graphic: Digital divide: the geography of Internet access. *Environment and Planning* (44): 1009-1010.

02 Policy and legal framework

The EU legal framework for addressing trafficking in human beings is contained in Directive 2011/36/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 April 2011 on Preventing and Combating Trafficking in Human Beings and Protecting its Victims (European Council 2011). The Directive replaced 2002 Council Framework Decision on combating trafficking in human beings and requires member states to undertake a range of anti-trafficking actions. It emphasises ‘an integrated, holistic and human rights approach to the fight against human trafficking’ (Directive, par 7), but remains, primarily, an instrument of law enforcement, crime control and victim protection (Chou 2008). Article 18 highlights the role of the Internet within the context of prevention through awareness-raising campaigns, research and education, although many of the Directive’s supporting measures have yet to be put into effect.⁴

The EU anti-trafficking policy framework is contained in the EU Strategy towards the Eradication of Trafficking in Human Beings (2012-2016) adopted by the European Commission in June 2012 (European Commission 2012).⁵ This is a non-binding document, which imposes no specific obligations upon member states (although it anticipated future binding provisions). The Strategy identifies five priorities, which are victim identification and protection, prevention, prosecution, coordination and cooperation among key actors, and increasing knowledge and effective response to emerging concerns. Similarly to the Directive, the Internet is viewed as a means of targeted awareness-raising. In addition, the Strategy emphasises the use of the Internet in the recruitment of victims and in advertising of their services as an emerging pattern. It assigns the responsibility for addressing the use of the Internet to national multidisciplinary law-enforcement units (Priority C, Action 1). It further suggests that the Internet offers ‘numerous possibilities to recruit victims’ by offering employment opportunities accessible via search engines, pop-ups, chat rooms and spam mail. In addition, social networks are identified within the Strategy as ‘increasingly popular recruitment tools’ (Priority E, Action 3).

In addition to the EU Directive the other key international documents, which obligate member states to take action against human trafficking, are the Palermo Protocol (United Nations 2000) and the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking (Council of Europe 2005). Neither of these documents mentions the Internet within the content of prevention, protection, prosecution or partnership. However, the discussion of the Internet in the EU Strategy reflects the European Commission’s vision of the Internet as a significant aspect of human trafficking requiring a coordinated response from its member states. The Commission therefore argues that further research is needed to increase knowledge of recruitment over the Internet and via social networks.

In preparation for the adoption of the new (EU) security strategy for Europe, a successor to the Stockholm Programme, under the headline of ‘An open and secure Europe: making it happen’, the European Commission (2014) issued a communication on priorities for the new programme, which includes a dedicated paragraph on human trafficking. The European Commission (2014) calls for the

⁴ See also O’Neill’s (2013b) discussion of this from a law enforcement perspective.

⁵ O’Neill (2013a) offers a helpful discussion of this in the context of the EU’s neighbourhood policy.

establishment of post-2016 Strategy on Human Trafficking to cover prevention, assistance to victims, safe-return and reintegration, and the role of the Internet.

The EU Cybersecurity Strategy, adopted in 2013, outlines the EU vision on how to enhance security in cyberspace and sets out a range of actions required (European Commission 2013b). In February 2014, the newly created Europol Cybercrime Centre (2014) released the first year report on its activities, which focused on high-tech crimes including cyber-attacks and malware, payment fraud, and child sexual exploitation. Human Trafficking is not mentioned in either of these documents.

03 State-of-the-art

Trafficking in human beings remains a contested and controversial area in both academic and policy debates. In this context, Zhang (2009: 193) has called for a more rigorous approach in order to establish 'empirically based rather than ideologically driven' research which scopes and interrogates human trafficking; Zhang also emphasises the importance of first-hand accounts from those who have experienced forced migration and trafficking. Reid (2012: 259) argues that the existing research around trafficking is 'methodologically inadequate and lacking the necessary theoretical foundation required for solution development'. In particular, the following two aspects of trafficking require further conceptualisation and empirical research.

- Firstly, the broad context which contributes to trafficking and makes people vulnerable to exploitation (including the social, economic and political causes of trafficking).
- Secondly, systematic empirical research (both qualitative and quantitative) is needed to examine how people are trafficked, the methods used to exploit vulnerable people, and in particular the role that technology plays in human trafficking.

As well as academic and policy debates, civil society organisations have been significant actors due to their proximity to people who have been trafficked. The results of the UP-KAT project surveys (discussed below) provide some evidence that the Internet is playing a role in human trafficking. However, there is no robust evidence to inform the understanding of key issues, such as the way in which the Internet can shape people's migrant journeys, the tactics and strategies of traffickers, or how the Internet could help challenge trafficking.

Work in fields including law, criminology and computing relates to questions of trafficking insofar as it looks at around the use of new technologies in the broader contexts of cybercrime, child pornography (Cohen-Almagor 2013; Kierkegaard 2008) and censorship (Edwards 2009). There is also some interesting discussion of trafficking and technology in the context of law enforcement and law (Dixon 2013) and computer science (Major: date unknown). However, there is limited robust empirical research focussed on human trafficking and online networks in particular. A significant exception is Latonero et al.'s (2011; 2012) reports on *Human Trafficking Online: The Role of Social Media and Online Classifieds* and *The Rise of Mobile and the Diffusion of Technology-Facilitated Trafficking*. Latonero et al. (2012: iv) argue that:

the rise of mobile technology may fundamentally transform the trafficking landscape. No other communication technology in history, including the Internet, has been adopted so rapidly around the world... Mobile's ability to facilitate real-time communication and coordination, unbound by physical location, is also being exploited by traffickers to extend the reach of their illicit activities. Traffickers are able to recruit, advertise, organize, and communicate primarily - or even exclusively - via mobile phone

However, there is a long history of policy interest in new technology and crime. For example, a 1996 FBI bulletin states that 'Computers have ushered in a new age filled with the potential for good. Unfortunately, the computer age also has ushered in new types of crime for the police to address' (Carter and Katz 1996; see also the discussion in Carr and Williams 2000). As the Europol Cybercrime Centre's (2014) first report observes, significant vulnerabilities remain today. The work of Latonero et al. (2011; 2012), as discussed above, demonstrates that the use of online networks in human trafficking is one of these challenges. Legislative attempts to regulate certain online behaviour that is perceived as harmful by policymakers have frequently been problematic. Carr and Williams' (2000) analysis of laws against computer misuse in three countries finds that these 'criminal laws have more to do with political and economic competition than with any genuine attempt to curtail intrusive and destructive activities directed at computers'.

In terms of the broader labour market, it has become routine for many to find and apply for work online (although, as noted above, access is uneven and unequal). A highly diverse range of jobs are advertised online: from very desirable roles to dangerous and exploitative ones. Writing about forced labour, Skrivankova (2010: 4) argues that the 'reality of forced labour is not a static one, but a continuum of experiences and situations [and] a continuum should therefore be used to describe the complexity of the exploitative environments and concrete individual situations of workers'. Roles that recruit online can also be viewed as falling on a spectrum.

Sexual exploitation has been a prominent concern for a range of stakeholders. Sex and sexuality are significant factors in the spaces of social networks (boyd and Ellison 2007). This use is often unambiguously positive or benign – for example, users finding welcoming spaces to discuss their sexuality. At the same time, relatively early in the development of these activities, Hughes (1999) argued that 'Sex tourism, mail-order-brides and prostitution are variations on the theme of sexual exploitation... The growth and expansion of the pornography and prostitution industries on the Internet have also increased the demand for new material, resulting in increased sexual exploitation of women'. On the other hand, O'Connell Davidson (2006: 18) criticises how "sex slavery" has come to the fore of policy attention, but 'its opposite in the form of prostitution as work remains largely invisible'. Cusick (2006) argues for a harm reduction approach to sex work, which might acknowledge where online networks can feed into opportunities for improved working conditions.

The Internet has been used for many years in the sexual exploitation of children (Worley and Smallbone (2006) summarise a number of the concerns around this). More recently, Latonero et al. (2011: 15, 18-9; 2012) have evidenced the use of computers and mobile technology in what appears to be sexual exploitation; this includes the sexual exploitation of children and young people.

Online networks clearly play a role in human trafficking both as part of and outwith sex work – especially given their wide reach. This includes an emerging concern with organ trafficking (see Ambagtsheer et al. 2013). However, more research is needed

to look at the place of different practices on exploitation continuums. There are also opportunities to use online networks to challenge exploitation.

There is a long history of computers being used for purposes related to crime, sex and exploitation, and in challenging exploitation. As shown above, online networks do play a role in trafficking – most publicly in advertising the ‘services’ of trafficked people – and there have been significant changes in the online networks and spaces involved, in breadth of access, and in the risks and opportunities there are.

04 Human trafficking and the Internet: exploratory empirical research

The following two surveys were undertaken within the context of ‘Understanding Public Knowledge and Understanding of Human Trafficking’ (UP-KAT) project.⁶ The project focuses on the understanding of human trafficking by the general public in three countries: Ukraine, Hungary, and the United Kingdom.

A survey of members of the EU Civil Society Platform against Trafficking in Human Beings

In May 2013, over 100 European civil society organisations formed the EU Civil Society Platform against Trafficking in Human Beings. The Europe-wide Platform was set up by the European Commission to serve as a forum to bring together civil society organisations working at European, national and local levels.

Following the launch of the Platform, Dr Sharapov contacted 96 members of the civil society platform with a request to contribute to an e-survey that included a specific question on the Internet and human trafficking:

‘Have you ever encountered a situation where the Internet was used as a means to recruit or ‘sell’ victims of human trafficking? If yes, could you share your experiences and/or include your views on what we need to know in relation to the Internet and human trafficking?’

Forty organisations responded to the survey, including 17 who answered the question on the use of the Internet. Such a low response rate may be, in part, attributed to the survey methodology and sampling; however questions should also be raised and further explored as to why only 17 out of 40 respondents mentioned the Internet. Does it suggest an overall lack of knowledge? Or is it due to the current focus of civil society attention on victim assistance and rehabilitation?

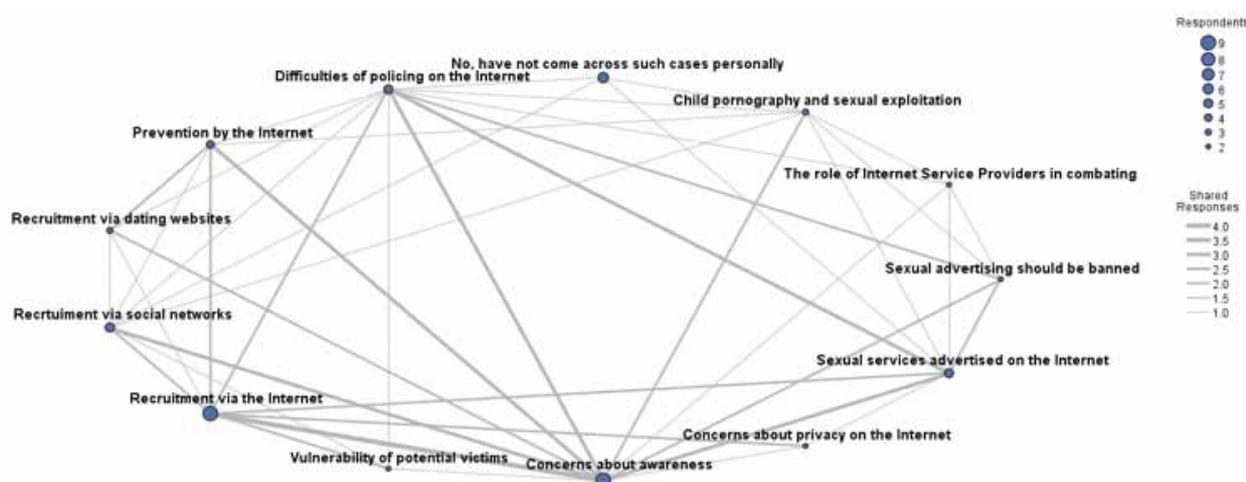
Out of 17 responses received, three respondents indicated they had not come across the use of the Internet in human trafficking, and 14 had. In addition, a call to contribute to the survey was also circulated to members of the anti-trafficking professional communities on LinkedIn. Out of seven responses, four indicated they had experience of the Internet being used to facilitate human trafficking. Overall, the survey question generated 24 responses, with 20 respondents providing qualitative

⁶ The project is led by Dr Kiril Sharapov and is based at the Centre for Policy Studies, Central European University in Budapest. This research received funding from the People Programme (Marie Curie Actions) of the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme FP7/2007-2013/ under REA grant agreement n° [PIEF-GA-2011-298401].

data. These data were analysed and coded with the help of IBM SPSS Text Analytics for Surveys to identify recurring themes across the data. While the survey is by no means representative, it is important insofar as it highlights some key areas of concern identified by experts working in the field.

The diagram below provides a visualisation of themes raised in the survey responses. Each circle represents a theme, and the size of the circle represents the frequency with which each theme was mentioned. The width of the line between two themes denotes the number of common responses they have.

Diagram 2: Human Trafficking and the Internet Themes Identified in Survey Responses



The graph indicates that recruitment via the Internet (9 responses) and concerns about public and victims' awareness of the Internet as a tool of recruitment (9 responses) remain the two key issues highlighted by respondents; 4 respondents mentioned both of these concerns in their answers. Concerns about recruitment via social networks, sexual services provided by victims of trafficking advertised on the Internet, and difficulties of policing the Internet were also prominent, all generating 5 responses. A number of other concerns were also identified including child pornography, dating websites as a method of recruitment, privacy, and criminals taking advantage of vulnerable people. Three respondents also described the Internet as a tool of prevention and protection, including Internet-based awareness campaigns, removal of sexual advertising, and the potential to engage with Internet Service Providers in this work.

UP-KAT surveys

Three national surveys of public opinion were carried out in December 2013 – February 2014 in Ukraine, Hungary and Great Britain⁷, and included a range of questions about the general public's:

- Awareness and understanding of human trafficking

⁷ Surveys were undertaken by three independent market research companies in Ukraine (PAPI Omnibus, N= 1,000), Hungary (PAPI Omnibus, N=1,000) and Great Britain (CAPI Omnibus, N=1,000). The data provided in this briefing relate to the age-adjusted samples: age of respondents 18-59, N = 693 (individual national samples), margin of error at 95% confidence level: +/- 3.72 percentage points).

- Sources of knowledge about human trafficking, and
- Attitudes to some of the dominant policy and media representations of human trafficking.

Policy briefings offering a complete account of the survey are forthcoming⁸. However, some preliminary results around human trafficking and the Internet are presented below.

The first question was open-ended and asked respondents to describe, in their own words, what they understood human trafficking to be. An overview of responses to this open-ended question will be included into the forthcoming UP-KAT research paper. However, the data on the number of respondents who were able to provide an answer, and those who indicated that they did not know what human trafficking was, are presented in the graph below.



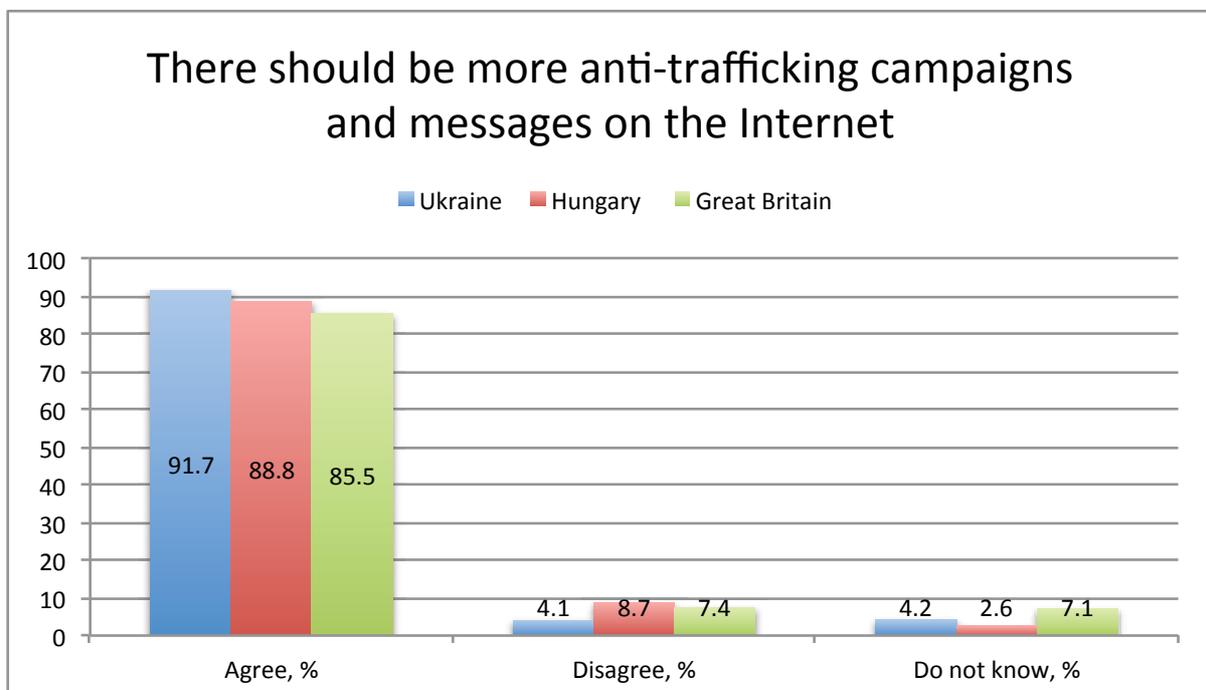
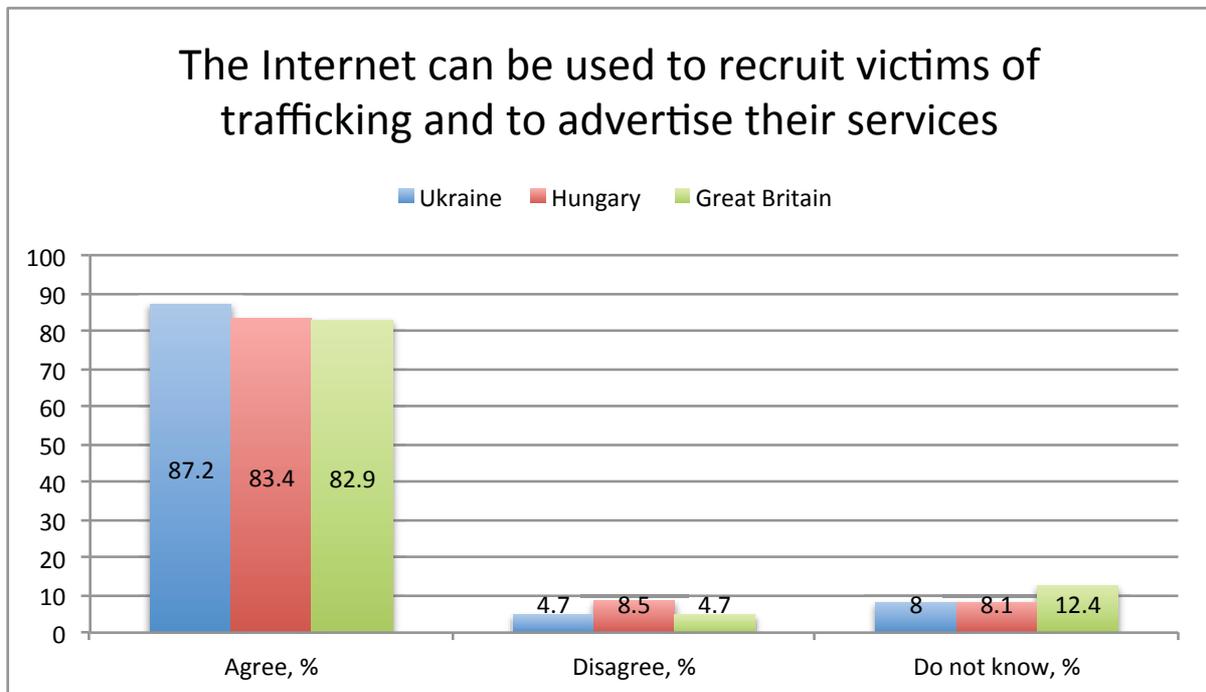
Overall, there is a high level of awareness of trafficking in human beings in Ukraine and Great Britain, with a lower level of awareness recorded for Hungary with 81% of respondents being able to describe what human trafficking was in their own words.

Respondents were also asked to identify how they got to know about human trafficking before the interview took place. In Hungary, 23% mentioned that they read about human trafficking on the Internet, and 9.4% learnt about it via social media. In Ukraine, the percentages were, correspondingly, 22.7% and 4.1%; and in Great Britain, 14% read about human trafficking on the Internet, and 8.4% via social media. These differences in how members of the general public learnt about human trafficking will be further explored in the forthcoming UP-KAT research paper, which

⁸ An UP-KAT research paper offering headline results of the national surveys will be available in October 2014 from the project web-page at <http://cps.ceu.hu/research/trafficking-in-human-beings>

will provide a comparative assessment of the human trafficking coverage in the three countries' national media.

Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement with the two statements, one suggesting that the Internet could be used to recruit victims of trafficking and to advertise their services; and the second statement suggesting that there should be more anti-trafficking campaigns and messages on the Internet. Their responses are presented in the two graphs below:



Overall, the survey data suggest that there is a general level of agreement among nationals of the three case study countries that the Internet and Human trafficking are linked in terms of enabling trafficking to happen and as a mechanism for awareness-

raising. The overall extent to which the issues of human trafficking are relevant to everyday lives of the overall majority in the three countries remains low, with only a minority of respondents in these three countries identifying trafficking as affecting them directly. Further qualitative research is required to explore what makes people associate the Internet with the risk of coercion and exploitation, how the use of the Internet to facilitate trafficking should be reflected in future anti-trafficking campaigns, and who the target audience of such campaigns should be.

05 Implications and recommendations

While it is important to consider continuities around trafficking and exploitation, online networks have impacted on aspects of these practices. Online networks offer both new opportunities and new challenges. They pose challenges insofar traffickers and exploitative employers can use them to act and organise more effectively. However, these networks also offer a number of opportunities: for research (in particular, for data collection and engagement); for public action (for example, free2work⁹ and Trafficking in Persons¹⁰ apps); for crowdsourcing (see Latonero et al. 2012); and for encouraging public action. These networks also raise issues for law enforcement: for example, older equipment and policies may be inadequate for dealing with online activities and there can be uncertainty about how to engage with criminal and problematic activity in online spaces (see Latonero et al. 2012: 28-30).

Social networks are creating novel online spaces; Facebook, Twitter, online classifieds etc. offer quite different contexts from older newsgroups discussing sex and trafficking, and the 'dark web' evolves quickly and offers distinctive spaces and possibilities (Bradbury 2014; Williams 2013). There are both opportunities and challenges around researching these spaces, and finding appropriate methodologies for understanding them. There are also questions about the ways in which mobile technologies are changing practices of trafficking, how mobile technologies are used to overlay or augment physical locations (Brown et al. 2013) and (as discussed above) about spatial variations in access.

Civil society organisations, working to combat human trafficking, acknowledge the importance of engaging with online aspects of human trafficking (as shown by the survey results discussed above). They have the potential to contribute to the on-going work against trafficking in human beings; partnership working with law enforcement, private companies and other government, EU and international agencies will also be important here.

The UP-KAT survey results discussed above show that the general public is aware that the Internet is used in human trafficking and would welcome action against this. Online public engagement with the issues of trafficking and forced labour could open up broad and inclusive debates and action to challenge the much more pervasive exploitation that we depend upon and encounter in our everyday lives¹¹.

The role of online networks in human trafficking is – as highlighted in the EU's new vision of a safe and secure Europe – an important issue today. However, there is a lack of robust research and information on the topic, which is a concern for both

⁹ <http://www.appbrain.com/app/free2work/org.free2work.android1>

¹⁰ <http://nethope.org/programs/global-broadband-and-innovations/safe-from-sale>

¹¹ Mendel and Sharapov's article on human trafficking and everyday life (in preparation) will discuss this in more depth.

practitioners and researchers. There is therefore a pressing need to support and carry out additional work on the online spaces used in trafficking and exploitation, and on the positive potential of online networks.

Future research should investigate how online networks can allow traffickers to operate more effectively and efficiently. Research should also consider the potential of online networks to challenge exploitation and trafficking and to enhance the safety of people in vulnerable positions. Future work in this area should include more robust empirical research, alongside further conceptual work to help understand exploitation, trafficking and online spaces. As the Internet increasingly becomes part of the day-to-day lives of EU inhabitants, engaging with and understanding these networks and spaces better could make anti-trafficking action both more everyday and more effective.

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