Book Review

Virtually Criminal: Crime, Deviance, and Regulation Online

Matthew Williams

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Virtually Criminal, by Matthew Williams, contributes to a growing body of scholarly literature looking to explain online behavior. Such work is of increasing importance given the millions of people who regularly use the Internet for business and entertainment purposes. *Virtually Criminal* is an ethnographic examination into the effects of virtual deviance on social ties and systems of social control in a graphically represented online community. Matthew Williams' ethnographic approach allows readers to experience the graphically represented online community of Cyberworlds and its inhabitants through his eyes. Williams draws upon criminological, sociological, and anthropological theories to explain virtual deviance and its effect on the inhabitants and development of Cyberworlds.

In the first chapter, Williams lays out the structure of the book, introduces Cyberworlds as the domain of study, and briefly discusses the evolution of graphically represented online communities. Chapter Two examines online communities in the context of the larger "information society" and debates the meaning of community as it applies to online groups. Williams then introduces the concept of cyber crime and reviews related victimization research. He is careful to draw a distinction between computer deviance that is criminal and computer deviance that is not criminal, but a violation of institutional norms.

Chapter Three offers a general theory to explain deviant behavior in cyberspace. Control theory provides a starting point for Williams' explanation of deviance in Cyberworlds. Williams links online behavior to the bond members establish with other members and the community. Characteristics of online environments are then discussed in terms of their neutralizing effect on internal controls that prevent one from engaging in deviant behavior. Chapter Four focuses largely on community-unity as a deterrent to deviance. Williams discusses, theoretically and anecdotally, the role of friendship and trust in forming bonds in Cyberworlds and the importance of "online artifacts" as "tangible" symbols of community membership.

Chapter Five offers a typology of online deviance and provides statistical data on the prevalence of these acts in Cyberworlds. Williams draws a connection between the bond offenders have to the Cyberworlds community and the type of deviant act committed. He associates tourists with flooding, spoofing, and general harassment because they have a very limited bond to the community. These acts, though disruptive and annoying, cause little long-term damage to the community. Flaming and online property vandalism are, conversely, considered to be more serious in terms of the damage inflicted upon the community than are flooding, spoofing, and harassment. Williams associates these serious acts of deviance with "citizens", or those Cyberworlds members who are generally more bonded to the community than are "tourists."

Chapter Six addresses the real-world psychological effect of virtual abuse on the victim. In this chapter, Williams uses speech act theory to explore a connection between virtual harassment and the manifestation of psychological trauma in the physical world.

Chapter Seven examines the social control mechanisms used to maintain order in Cyberworlds. Here, Williams differentiates between the control mechanisms used by community members and the mechanisms used by the community regulators, or those members officially sanctioned by the creators of Cyberworlds to police the virtual space. He attributes the emergence of formal mechanisms of social control to the increasing complexity and prevalence of deviant acts committed within the virtual space. Reintegrative shaming and disintegrative shaming are discussed from a theoretical perspective and their application in Cyberworlds is examined.

The eighth and final chapter of the book looks to generalize what was learned about the control of virtual deviance beyond the borders of Cyberworlds. Here, Williams describes how controls can be imposed in environments that are traditionally resistant to any sovereign regulation. He suggests technology as a regulator for a geographically diverse, ever-changing medium like cyberspace. Williams does, however, acknowledge that there are places where technological solutions to prevent deviance will fall short of their objective. To exemplify his point, Williams points to a *bot* being programmed to prevent profanity, but only being programmed to recognize the English language. Such a tool will, obviously, fail to prevent the use of online profanity when uttered in a language other than English. He concludes that technology is inexorably linked to its programmers and that technology-based control techniques must consider socio-technical issues if they are to be effective.

Virtually Criminal gives us an interesting analysis of virtual deviance and the ways in which it is handled in a graphically represented online community. Williams finds that deviance disrupts the very nature of Cyberworlds and causes members to question their attachment, involvement, and belief in the community. It also fosters mistrust among community members. Williams does, however, note an upside to the deviance that takes place within Cyberworlds. He finds that the sense of community is enhanced by the formation of social groups to combat deviance. Of particular sociological interest is the exploration of how Cyberworlds transitioned from a community where the enforcement of rules was handled informally by its users to a community where its creators dictated who enforces the rules. The social hierarchy created by only giving select users the authority to enforce rules is also discussed in terms of its sociological effect on the Cyberworlds community.

Ultimately, *Virtually Criminal* is an interesting study of one online community. It is well researched and the ethnographic style used by Williams keeps the reader involved. At times, the book's examples seem somewhat limited and its focus seems a little narrow. It does, however, raise a good number of points that are generalizable to deviance in other online environments and in physical-world settings. This book will appeal to researchers and students interested in social deviance and virtual communities, especially criminologists, sociologists and anthropologists. *Virtually Criminal* is a good study of how deviance manifests itself in a graphically represented online community and how community participants and creators cope with it.

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