

Dark Net: How Revenge Porn Goes Viral

web.archive.org/web/20210414160940/https://www.vocativ.com/271401/revenge-porn-viral/

Experts and revenge porn victims say once an image is on the Internet, it's almost impossible to go back

By [Zara Stone](#)

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When Annmarie Chiarini's ex decided to post nude pictures of her online, there weren't any laws prohibiting "revenge porn." Since 2010, great strides have been made to punish those like Annmarie's ex who post the pics—but for victims like her, that's often beside the point: Once nude pics are on the internet, they're often there to stay.

When nude photos are uploaded online to a forum or website they can be copied by third-party web scraping tools. Think of these as virtual robotic spiders with the ability to search the source code of a website and download its content, including images. Many of these tools are free to use. Once the images have been captured by another individual, they can be republished on multiple websites, Patrick Ambron, CEO of BrandYourself, an online reputation management company, told Vocativ. Photos, including revenge porn images, can also be manually downloaded by individuals for republication elsewhere.

Ambron's services help clients clean up their Google search results of everything from police mugshots to party photos. But, he acknowledges, revenge porn is especially complicated to remove because its spread can be viral.

"It starts by someone posting [a revenge porn image] anonymously on a forum," he explained. Then, either web bots or individuals can crawl the content and store it in multiple locations.

When a website gets taken down, the images that have been archived by web bots or simply downloaded by users will often resurface on different blogs. The re-uploads can be accomplished automatically or manually, he said. Eventually, a nude image can be broadcast across so many websites that its origin stops being relevant. Trying to individually request the removal of revenge porn images from each site is a game of whack-a-mole.

Around 5 percent of Ambron's business is from revenge porn victims. According to him, that's around 25,000 people since he started his company in 2012. And these are particularly difficult cases. "We can't take it down as fast as it's posted," he says. Because digital copies of a revenge porn image can spread so quickly, it's nearly impossible to remove them all, so Ambron focuses on the next best thing. His protection processes involve issuing photo takedown requests and creating other, non-revenge porn-related content associated with the victim's name in order to push incriminating images to the

third page of Google search results. This work is done manually. And, often, it's not enough. Revenge porn victims can live for years under the threat of their photos surfacing yet again.

Annmarie knows that fear well. Six years ago, she made a decision that would end up defining her life. Her then-long-distance boyfriend requested sexy nudes and she'd nervously agreed that he could take some photographs. She didn't feel great about her body, but he'd been asking for months and she didn't want to tell him "no" again.

She was an average thirty-something woman, teaching English at a Baltimore college and spending quality time with her five-year-old son.

But, quickly, her relationship soured, and in 2010 she decided to break it off. He didn't take it well. "His last words to me were 'I will destroy you,'" she told *Vocativ*.

The next day, an email from eBay invited her to bid on an auction, titled "*MD English Professor Nude Photos!*" A CD with 88 naked photographs of her had been listed by her ex. Concerned emails from friends revealed that he'd posted a link to the auction on the Facebook page of the college where she taught — and he also mailed hard copies to her boss and her son's kindergarten teacher.

Annmarie went into shock. "I was convinced I'd ruined my life, that it was my fault," she said. "I blamed myself."

She immediately emailed eBay to take the auction down and called the police for help. The police told her there was nothing they could do—in 2010 there were no specific laws prohibiting revenge porn. The images had been taken consensually, and her ex, as the photographer, owned copyright. This is not the case today, as [26 states](#) have passed laws addressing revenge pornography, though legislation can encounter pushback from people who believe restrictions placed on revenge pornography impacts their First Amendment right to free speech.

In Annmarie's case, eBay removed the listing, but each time it was taken down a new auction appeared, each from a different username. She was rattled. She'd wake up in the middle of the night to Google her name, searching eBay's adult section for a possible recurrence, she says. (eBay allows nude images to be sold on its site, but states these listings can't contain excessive titles or descriptions about the model).

Under [Section 230](#) of the Communication Decency Act, website owners aren't liable for user-submitted content on their websites. This protects sites from responsibility for language used in comments sections — such as defamatory comments about celebrities or death threats — but it also meant Annmarie had no obvious recourse. She thought about a civil lawsuit, but the lawyers she spoke to asked for \$5,000 to begin the process of filing, far too much for her to afford as single mother.

The actions that led Annmarie to this moment—entrusting an intimate partner with provocative images for private consumption—aren't uncommon. In fact, the number of people taking nude selfies is actually growing. In 2013 cyber security company McAfee reported that 50 percent of 18 to 54 year olds had ever shared intimate images with friends and partners. This number rose to 54 percent in [2014](#), despite publicity around that summer's "the fapping," in which celebrity nudes were hacked and shared across the internet. And, like Annemarie, some of those individuals will have their private images used against them.

After her initial revenge porn scare, Annmarie slowly started to recover from the trauma. The eBay listings had ceased. Work was awkward, but no one mentioned firing her. Her son stayed at his school. But then, a full year later, she received an anonymous email. It informed her that her nudes had resurfaced on xHamster, a popular porn site. Her full name, her town and the college she worked in was listed. "*Hot for Teacher? Well, Come Get It!*" screamed the headline.

Annmarie emailed xHamster and they removed her photos. But they'd already been viewed by over 4,000 people in the two weeks they had been available on the site. She looked into using a reputation service, but she couldn't afford one.

And many revenge porn victims likely can't.

Ambron charges around \$7,000 a year for personalized reputation management, but said costs can be higher in extreme situations. And he can't guarantee results. Michael Fertik, CEO of Reputation.com, another online reputation management service, agreed. According to Fertik, getting a damaging image or search result offline takes time; results in his business are not instantaneous. He explained his service works best as a preemptive measure, before a problem arises. This makes sense for large companies hoping to protect themselves from negative attention, like negative blog posts, but it's hard to apply this to no-name victims who get a sudden dose of infamy.

Fertik said the best way a victim can hide revenge porn links from Google is by becoming active on "big" influential sites, the ones that rank relatively high in Google results. For a victim, developing a large presence on Medium, Tumblr, Twitter and other highly-indexed sites forces links containing nudes onto the second page of search results, a place reached by only 20 percent of web users. So while these search results are still discoverable, the odds of someone coming across them in a casual Google search go way down.

It helps that the social media giants are onboard. In 2015 Facebook, Reddit and Twitter updated their policies to prohibit revenge porn. Google began offering a revenge porn removal tool in [July 2015](#). Victims. On social networks, users who encounter revenge porn can [report the content](#) as inappropriate and it's generally immediately hidden, then removed after the site has reviewed the request.

When you search Annmarie's name today, Google brings up a series of articles related to her revenge porn story, her Twitter account, her blog and her RateMyTeacher profile. And her revenge porn images have, so far, stayed offline.

Annmarie now works as an activist for the Cyber Civil Rights Initiative, an organization which offers counseling services and access to free legal advice to revenge porn victims. She's helped draft legislation to make nonconsensual publication of images a crime.

Despite these recent developments, revenge porn is still a problem. The CCRI helpline gets hundreds of calls a month, and Annmarie has replied to over 2000 emails from anxious victims seeking answers.

Even with the progress in the web community and the rise in police enforcement, nothing is guaranteed for victims. People are still creating revenge porn, and victims continue to deal with the consequences. Reputation services can only help so much, and for many victims, even when their photos are offline, the threat of the images reappearing remains.