

JOURNALIST RESOURCE



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How We Investigated the Dating App Company Match Group

Country: UNITED STATES

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Project

How Tinder, Hinge, and Their Corporate Owner Keep Rape Under Wraps

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In 2022, a team of researchers at Brigham Young University [BYU] published an [analysis](#) of hundreds of sexual assaults in Utah. They found that attacks facilitated by dating apps happened faster and were more violent than when the perpetrator met the victim through other means.

The study helped ground some of the questions that were top of mind as we dove into reporting this story: What did dating app companies know about the extent of harm on their platforms? When did they know it? What, if anything, were they doing to stop it?

We also wanted to understand the experiences of people who reported rape and sexual assault to dating app platforms. Did they receive a reply?

Match Group, the dating app conglomerate that owns popular apps like Tinder and Hinge, has an [official safety policy](#) stating that when a user is reported for assault, “all accounts found that are associated with that user will be banned from our platforms.” So why were we reading about banned users being able to get back on the apps? What was the company doing about that?



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Over the course of 18 months, we reviewed hundreds of pages of internal company documents, along with thousands of pages of court records, securities filings, and analyst reports, coupled with dozens of interviews with current and former employees, and survivors of sexual violence to try and get at some of the answers to these questions. We also tested out Match Group’s own policy of banning users reported for sexual assault with a data experiment devised in collaboration with The Markup, a nonprofit news organization.

Reporting

We knew from the BYU study that abusers were using the apps in order to match with and harm people. We wanted to be able to underscore the very worst-case scenario of this harm—and while searching online for sexual assault and rape cases involving a dating app, we found local news articles about a case in Denver involving a young cardiologist named [Stephen Matthews](#).

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We also searched through social media and Facebook groups to look for women who had matched with Matthews on dating apps.

We also began speaking with current and former Match Group employees, who provided a window into the timeline of the company’s conversations around safety and acknowledgement that they were missing the mark. Employees were able to provide internal documents that backed up conversations that we had with many background sources.

Since Match Group is a publicly traded company, we were also able to access SEC filings, earnings reports, investor reports, and annual reports to the public to paint a financial timeline of the company’s trajectory and what it was promising the public.

Creating a data experiment

As we dug deeper into the Matthews case, we realized that several survivors had reported him to Match Group apps—yet, he was able to continue to use the platforms, messaging, meeting up with and assaulting women. We thought it was important to test Match Group’s safety policy in real time—to see if it was actually booting people off when they were getting reported, and how easy it would be to get back on using similar account details. Since there is very limited data on dating app companies and user profiles, we knew that this could help increase transparency into the company’s safety practices. Over the year and a half that we worked on this story, I also had friends and acquaintances ask me whether I thought dating apps were still safe. If we could give readers more of a sense of how likely it would be for someone accused of sexual assault to get back on these dating platforms, it would be useful knowledge for anyone trying to date safely on these apps.

We went through a couple of rounds of trial and error deciding how we would create different profiles and on what apps. We decided to test some of Match Group’s most popular apps, Tinder and Hinge, because they’re also the platforms that Matthews used to match with unsuspecting women. We referenced existing guides to getting back on dating platforms posted by app users on Reddit and other online platforms. We conducted experiments in April and May 2024 and again in January and February 2025. We found that we could successfully create a new account after being banned without needing to change the user’s name, birthday, or profile photos. I think it’s significant that we were able to do this with information that is readily available for anyone to find online, with no significant technical knowledge. It shows just how easy it is to get around a core safety feature.

Challenges

One of our biggest challenges was the fact that both the survivors of sexual violence as well as the majority of our sources within Match Group did not feel comfortable speaking on the record. It took months of consistent communication, patience and trust building to get one whistleblower to come forward. The wheels of investigative journalism move slowly, yes, but also, it’s good to remember that folks have all sorts of valid reasons for not wanting to speak out on their lived experiences. As a journalist, it’s up to you to navigate that with care and never make someone feel pressured to speak with you.

When we realized that we likely wouldn’t be able to feature a survivor of sexual assault linked to the Matthews case in Denver, we doubled down on getting court transcripts and other records from hearings in the case. We worked with a local pro bono attorney through the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press. The attorney was instrumental in helping us explain Colorado’s privacy laws and navigate the record process. In Colorado, a judge has a lot of discretion to make records available, so some of our attempts to access court records were denied with the argument that it was to protect survivor privacy. We also sent a Denver-based reporter to attend the hearings in-person for us, and then, once we were able to get the transcripts of the hearing, were able to compare her notes with the transcripts to verify her notes of what occurred. Through court transcripts and police reports/affidavits, we were able to reconstruct some of the details of the Matthews

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1. It’s hard to get inside private companies when they don’t share a lot about what goes on inside. For publicly traded companies like Match Group, though, you can look at publicly available records like earnings calls, transcripts, annual reports, investor reports, and SEC filings.
2. Look for court cases with available records that could help illustrate harm, and get in touch with the attorneys and local public officials related to the case, such as the district attorney. Even if you can’t speak to anyone involved, you can request court documents, transcripts, and helpful filings such as affidavits.
3. Take things slow with sources. Many folks will begin by speaking with you on background or off the record, some may never go on the record. That’s OK.
4. Don’t forget about social media comment threads to look for sources. Don’t sleep on YouTube and Reddit!

This investigation was an extensive team effort. Through funding from the Poynter Institute, journalist Hanisha Harjani came onboard as a co-reporter. Denver-based journalist Stephanie Wolf provided on-the-ground support during Matthews' criminal case. Journalist Aaron Glantz edited the project alongside Sisi Wei at The Markup. Our data experiment was led by journalist Natasha Uzcátegui-Liggett and edited by Soo Oh at The Markup. The project was co-published in *The Guardian*, The Markup, and The 19th. Legal support was provided by the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, and in particular, the efforts of Denver-based attorney Steve Zansberg.

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