

I felt numb – not sure what to do. How did deepfake images of me end up on a porn site?

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There was an insistent knock at the door. This in itself was startling – it was the winter of 2020 and we hadn't yet returned to socialising indoors after lockdown. I wasn't expecting visitors. When I answered, I was surprised to see a male acquaintance of mine. He said he needed to speak to me. I knew it was something unprecedented because he asked to come in. He told me to sit down. That's when the adrenaline started coursing through me – people only suggest that when they're about to deliver bad news. My two-year-old son was at nursery and my first instinct was that something terrible must have happened to him. I could feel my heart thundering in my ribcage. I don't remember the exact words my friend used. But I can recall the gist of it and his obvious discomfort. What he told me was stranger than I could ever have imagined. He said that he had encountered images of me on a porn site: manipulated, faked images, my face on other bodies, galleries of pictures uploaded by someone who claimed to be my boyfriend. I didn't know how to react. I had my arms very close to my sides and I was gripping the edge of the sofa. I was utterly confused – I'd never shared any intimate photo of myself with anyone. How had I ended up in DIY porn? I remember thinking that my male acquaintance was using the language of subtlety and complexity while I was a stuck record, shouting the same things on loop: That's impossible. Then: What have I done to deserve it? The sounds were coming from my body. I caught fragments of his speech, key words: violent, malicious, weird, police. He had taken the time to gather information for me, how I could get the images taken down, who I might contact for support. I do remember thinking what a horrible position it must have placed him in, too; how embarrassing the whole thing must have been. It would have been easier by far not to tell me. In that moment, I almost wished he hadn't. I had never thought about how fake online content could impact my life before. "Deepfake" porn – where an image is digitally manipulated to replace one person's likeness with that of another – is sometimes used in a malicious attempt to humiliate female celebrities, figures in the public eye. But there's nothing particularly high-profile about me. At the time, I was in my mid-30s, an author and part-time university lecturer living in suburban Sheffield, not far from the area of north-east Derbyshire where I grew up. I'm best known as a poet who likes to write about the places I know, the people that make them special. I have a Wikipedia entry and a website, but I'm a long way from being famous. In November 2020, I was emerging from a lockdown spent with my partner, our toddler and my two stepchildren, then aged 20 and 14. Life had been dominated by domestic routine. During the pandemic, I took every opportunity to write, in between looking after my son full-time. Because of the impact of lockdown, I found myself scribbling pages of notes about the growth of online content and what narratives it was foregrounding, the impact it might have on women in particular. In my creative work, I've always been particularly interested in women's hidden histories:

the stories of forgotten female mountaineers, for instance. I've also written extensively about body image and the public scrutiny of female bodies. Bizarrely, in the months before that knock on the door, I had been working on a sequence of poems looking at the status of women in the porn industry, inspired by listening to Jon Ronson's podcast *The Last Days of August*, in which he investigates the suicide of the porn star August Ames and the influence of new technologies on porn. I'd also just finished reading Laura Bates's book *Men Who Hate Women* and her examination of "incel" culture and online misogyny. I had been steeped in the world of online gender-based violence in an intellectual sense. But it was utterly bizarre to suddenly find myself catapulted into a world I'd been (privately) writing about. Life was imitating art. I was a character in my own story. I wanted to escape. * * * That night, I sat down and looked at the images for myself. Some of them were like grotesque Photoshop jobs – obvious fakes. Others were more plausible, realistic images depicting violent sex, photos that could have been genuine. All of them were profoundly unsettling. You wouldn't need to be an expert in coding to have produced some of these – there were various levels of sophistication on show, and I now know that there are apps that make faked images and videos at the click of a button. In fact, in the weeks after I discovered the photos of me, my sister-in-law shared a lighthearted video in the family WhatsApp group in which different family members seemed to appear in a Beyoncé video. This was how I'd always assumed deepfakes were used – for entertainment or for satire, not porn. As I scrolled through the fake pictures and the accompanying texts (which were just as disturbing – invitations to humiliate and "use" me), I started to get a sense of the perpetrator's process. It was obvious that someone had downloaded ordinary images (mostly holiday photos or selfies from social media such as Facebook, but some could have simply been accessed through a search engine) and used those to create the new pictures. I took some screenshots as evidence. I felt numb, slightly aimless. I wasn't sure what to do next. It took me a few hours before I felt able to call the police. How do you report this kind of intangible violation? I hadn't been physically harmed or threatened, even though many of the words accompanying the deepfaked images deployed violent and aggressive language. But I knew that revenge porn – where an intimate image of someone is shared without consent – was illegal, so I assumed faked images might fall into the same category. I hoped the law would somehow safeguard me. The officer I spoke to from South Yorkshire police was kind and sympathetic and took as many details from me as she could. It was cathartic just to talk to her. But ultimately, empathy and time was all they could give me. Making intimate deepfakes was not a crime then (though it soon will be in England and Wales). If the pictures had been emailed to me in an attempt at blackmail, there might have been a malicious communications case to pursue. But these images had existed online for a while without me even being aware of them. And I'd been notified by a third party rather than contacted by the person responsible. Nobody had been directly threatening me or attempting blackmail. Perhaps whoever did it never intended for me to see the pictures. I wanted – needed – to be able to talk to friends and family, but I was also deeply ashamed, as if I must have somehow brought this on myself. My partner was always there to listen, but I was aware of the need to protect my stepdaughter from some of my turmoil, especially as – like many teenagers – she was having a difficult time dealing with the disruption to her normal life caused by Covid. I didn't want her to become frightened. The friends I confided in were kind and supportive. I did get a few confused responses – things like "someone must really fancy you to have done that". Most people hadn't really heard of deepfakes before and I was too exhausted to keep explaining. I was worried that my parents and older relatives would think I must have shared explicit photos of myself, that they wouldn't be familiar with the idea of digital manipulation. But I was also angry about the culture that underlies such responses, a climate that focuses on what victims can do to safeguard themselves from violation, rather than how we might stop people violating others. Even if I had been sending nudes, it wouldn't have given someone else the right to share them with the world. It was also difficult to explain how photographs that weren't "real" could have had such an impact on me. But what is a "real" image? I was having nightmares about sexual assaults, directly influenced by the images. I can still close my eyes now and see the pictures as if I were really part of each scene. I am a fiction writer, so my whole career is founded on the understanding that things that are created can have as much of an emotional impact on an audience as things that have actually happened. Memory is a reconstructive process, not simple recall. I felt haunted. I would walk down the street and imagine that everyone knew, that they could see right through me, that I was on display. Going to collect my son from nursery became an ordeal. For many years, I've relied on some combination of therapy and medication to keep my generalised anxiety at a level that allows me to function. I found myself phoning the doctor to see if I could increase my dose of sertraline. Because it was so hard to express my feelings about the deepfakes and because there was no further support from the police available, I decided to turn to art. I couldn't change what had happened to my image without my consent, but I could try to reclaim control through the act of writing. Since I was a child, writing stories and poems has been a source of comfort. So I wrote and filmed a poem about my experience and shared it on social media along with a petition calling for pornographic deepfakes to be criminalised. When I pressed "share", it was terrifying. After I first saw those deepfake images, I wanted to delete all of my social media and go into hiding. I wanted to make myself very small. My intention through broadcasting the poem was to show that, ultimately, I wasn't humiliated and that I wasn't going to disappear. I also wanted to raise awareness about a form of image manipulation that was poorly understood and to connect with anyone who might have had a similar experience. The outpouring of support online was humbling. Strangers, acquaintances and friends sent messages of solidarity. It made me feel much less alone. There were a few trolls who used the opportunity to mock me, but they were a minority. Some responses were bemusing. I received a tweet along the lines of, "If someone painted a nude picture of you it would be flattering, why is this so different?" I was receiving DMs telling me to stop whingeing, to

toughen up. I got the occasional mild threat. I read John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* for comfort, to distract myself: A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image ... From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually. And so she comes to consider the surveyor and the surveyed within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity. His words had never felt more true. I reflected on how, as a writer, I am used to observing others, making them the object of my gaze. In many ways, that's quite a privileged position. The deepfake episode flipped all that around – it objectified me. I understand why victims of image-based abuse may not want to talk about it, and especially not in public. It's tiring and largely thankless. People may question your motives. Then there's the risk of "copycat" material appearing, the initial deepfakes leading to more. Nobody should feel a responsibility to speak out. I'm glad I did, though. Crucially, it has stopped me from being afraid of the internet, my "crime scene" in this case. For every negative comment there have been multiple instances of positive connection. It's important to me to feel that we can make art out of anything and that art is a source of unity. Something that people always ask is whether I have any idea who did this to me. I don't. Of course I wanted to know at first. I raked back over everyone who might hold a grudge, thinking of ex-partners and people I'd worked with, friends and acquaintances. It seemed likely that it must be someone I know because they'd had access to my Facebook photos, which were shared with online "friends". But there was no obvious answer and I quickly realised that the attempt to find out might only damage me further by undermining my trust in people. I don't want to live my life looking at everyone and wondering, "Was it you?" I am fairly trusting by nature and sometimes that backfires, but being open to the world also creates opportunities for intense joy. I'm comfortable with the unsolved mystery now. It doesn't matter – it could have been anyone. All I can control is my response. One of the reasons I'm able to live with that mystery is that the images no longer haunt me. I'm still on medication, but I don't have nightmares any more. I've still got the folder of screenshots saved on my phone, but I never look at them. I've got better galleries to focus on: pictures of my son, photos of the Peak District and my travels, covers of books I want to read. It wasn't difficult to get the pictures taken down. In a weird twist, the creator of the website profile deleted their page and all the galleries shortly after I was first made aware of the images. That lends an extra layer of strangeness to the whole experience. I was left with the screenshots as evidence and there were a few other places on the internet where they had appeared. But the original material had been removed. Was it a coincidence? Did they somehow know that I'd discovered the images? Again, I don't think it would be helpful to dwell on it. I'm very grateful to the person who was brave enough to make me aware of these images, and I appreciate the personal risk it must have involved for him. At the time, I sometimes wished I'd stayed in blissful ignorance, but now I'm glad I was told. Knowledge is power. I'm glad there's a continuing public discourse around image-based abuse. Ultimately though, we also need to change our culture. All of us (and that includes me) need to be more aware of the imagery we freely consume, what our motives might be. We need to remember that so many images have a hidden story behind them.