

No place to hide

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By Ed Hammond

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One evening in March, library assistant Graham Mallaghan was leaving work at the University of Kent in Canterbury when he noticed a group of people hanging about outside the exit. Some of the group started shouting abuse. 'Wait till he comes out, we'll kick his f***** head in,' one of them yelled.

For Mallaghan this incident was part of a confusing pattern, in which he increasingly found himself being intimidated and threatened with no apparent explanation. No explanation, that is, until an acquaintance told him to look on Facebook, now the most talked about of the online social networking sites.

When Mallaghan logged on, he found a group called For Those Who Hate The Little Fat Library Man, dedicated to insulting him.

One of Mallaghan's responsibilities is to enforce the library's noise regulations, and he believes the group was set up by students unhappy with his efforts. Mallaghan, who is 37, says that it quickly began to have an impact on all aspects of his life: 'At its peak the group had 363 members. Both my wife and I had the brakes on our bikes cut. People would run up to me and take photos on their phone ' at one point there was a competition on the group for who could get the best close-up.'

Websites such as Facebook and MySpace are the primary exports of the Web 2.0 revolution, which brought user-created internet content to the fore. The biggest of the sites, MySpace, launched in August 2003 and now has more than 200 million accounts worldwide. Facebook has gathered more than 49 million accounts so far, including more than five million in the UK, its third-largest market. Globally it is adding 200,000 users a day. The MySpace audience is mainly composed of teenagers, while Facebook's users are older ' dominated by college students and young professionals.

The sites have grown exponentially over the past four years by offering a fast, free and easy way for people to come together online and coalesce into an ever-shifting network of social connections around hotspots of friendship, work and shared interests. This can lend new energy to existing friendships and seed new ones at an astonishing rate. All you need is the patience to create your own homepage on one of these sites and the lack of inhibition required to start sharing details about yourself, your life and thoughts with the world. The doors of the social network are thrown open.

The networking currency is 'friends' ' online camaraderie expressed in the links that users create between their homepages and the pages of others members of the network. And because you never need leave your computer to stay in touch with your friends, you can have many hundreds of them.

Mallaghan remains perplexed by his experience and believes the huge number of people bullying him had to do with the medium in which they began doing it. 'It was as if they compartmentalised online and real life. But I couldn't do that ' their behaviour online had a profound effect on me.' He believes sites such as Facebook 'lend themselves to this kind of thing' and worries about how people behave when 'something gives them false courage, and they don't imagine they're going to get caught'.

When I approached - through Facebook - one of the group administrators, or presidents, of the For Those Who Hate The Little Fat Library Man group, she responded with a statement. 'Other than my name being put on the website I had no part to play in this event whatsoever. I do not want anything to do with your story as I had no part in this at all. Do not put my name in any article whatsoever.' But once you are out there on the network, all sorts of unwelcome visitors can come calling, and there is not much you can do about it, except perhaps to stay silent and hope they go away. The founder of the group did not respond to my Facebook advances.

Laura Evans (not her real name) sits by the window of a north London coffee shop. Autumn is stating its case in the streets outside. Papers, sweet wrappers and leaves cluster and form eddies before tumbling along in the direction of the City. Blowing into her cup, Evans looks out at the street and remarks on the chill in the air. Evans, 24, tells me she became a member of Facebook last year for the most obvious reason of all - her friends were already on it and she had started to feel that there was a party going on somewhere that she was missing out on.

'At first I was against it. You think it's only for geeks, but my friends were always telling me about this Facebook thing and that Facebook thing, so I just thought 'why not give it a go?'" Evans built a personal homepage on the site and although the online profile she created for herself 'was a bit unrealistic', she started to attract new friends almost straight away. 'Once people started messaging me I felt obliged to reply, and then you start getting sucked in. I got a bit addicted to it and started checking it every day' so you're always on there trying to make new connections.'

But this greedy pursuit of friendships is not without its pitfalls. 'I had tons of friends, all different kinds of people, some I already knew, and others complete strangers,' says Evans, marking off the different groups on her fingers. 'Old school mates, people from parties and things like that, lots of 'randoms' who I sort of knew as friends of friends, ex-boyfriends ' for some reason they think it's a good way to re-introduce themselves - and of course my friends who got me on there in the first place.'

In August, Evans received a private message from someone she had cut out of her life a few years previously. She had changed her phone number and e-mail, and even moved house in a bid to lose contact with certain people, and now they were back in her life. The ease with which they had found her came as a shock.

The message said: 'I bet you didn't think you'd find me on here, well here I am. You changed your number, like a coward' Let's just hope we never have to bump into one another ever again.'

'I was just sat there staring at the computer in shock for hours; I just kept re-reading the message over and over. I don't think I ever once thought about it being unsafe - you just log off if anyone annoys you. But here, at the click of a mouse, was one of the people I had worked hard to distance myself from, and he had thrown a knife at my online social bubble.'

Evans shut down her account last month, but admits that she still feels like she is missing out on something by not having one.

Social networking has rapidly transformed the way we interact with each other, and has started to redefine the idea of friendship, making it something much more nebulous than in pre-web days. But where casual friendship thrives, so does casual enmity. The free association that social networking sites put within everyone's reach cuts both ways, creating an equally fast, free and easy tool for those who do not want to be our friends. And the social pressure users feel to create more and more connections scatters personal information about themselves more and more indiscriminately.

'It is a classic symptom of the early development of these sorts of things,' says Neil Munroe, external affairs director of Equifax, a credit reference agency that offers consumer advice on the risks of online socialising.

Easy access to personal information is a perennial problem for technologically advanced societies. But Munroe believes that the detached nature of social networking encourages people to be far more liberal with information which offline they would consider private. In this online environment ' with its apparent dearth of immediate consequences of our actions - social networkers often impart personal details which can lead to them being harassed or bullied, on and offline. A survey conducted by Equifax for the UK's National Identity Fraud Prevention Week in October revealed that 83 per cent of people using online social networks were giving their full name, 38 per cent revealed their dates of birth and 63 per cent made their e-mail addresses public.

While Mallaghan's and Evans' stories demonstrate just how easy it is for adults to attract unwelcome attention on networking sites, younger online socialites have long been at the sharp end of internet-based crime, with countless stories of sexual predators taking advantage of the veil of anonymity the web offers them.

In the US, social networking sites are facing increased legal and political pressure from state law enforcement officials to introduce controversial age-verification technology. Aimed at rooting out online sexual predators posing as young people, the new technology is designed to protect children, who make up 22 per cent of social network users. Executives from MySpace's parent company, Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, held meetings this month with state attorneys-general.

But for many youngsters and their parents, the threat of bullying, transferred from the playground to MySpace and similar sites, is as much of a concern. In September, the British government published guidelines on how to tackle the issue of cyber-bullying, a problem - according to research conducted by the Department For Children, Schools and Families - experienced by one in three children. Ed Balls, secretary of state for children, schools and families, said: 'Cyber-bullying is a particularly insidious type of bullying as it can follow young people wherever they go, and the anonymity that it seemingly affords the

perpetrator can make it even more stressful for the victim.'

Action is being taken to protect children from internet abuse. However, if - as in Mallaghan's case - the victim of cyber-bullying is an adult, who is responsible for protecting them?

One answer is Mallaghan's employer, the University of Kent. 'We have no objection to students using sites such as Facebook as long as they do so in a responsible manner,' a spokeswoman said. 'However, some of the comments on the website were deeply offensive and, as Graham's employer, we alerted Facebook to this contravention of its code of practice.'

According to the Association of Teachers and Lecturers' guidelines, this was the correct route for the university to take. When cyber-bullying affects an employee the guidelines suggest, having been informed of the material, 'the senior manager should approach the website hosts to ensure it is either amended or removed as a matter of urgency, ie within 24 hours.' They go on to say: 'If the website(s) will not co-operate, the senior manager should contact the internet service provider.'

Facebook says it shares the view that cyber-bullying is unacceptable. A spokesman said: 'Facebook does not condone cyber-bullying on the site and will disable accounts that are found to be intimidating others in any way.' In its terms of use, Facebook states that members will have their accounts deactivated if they intimidate, harass or bully other users or engage in predatory conduct or stalking. Among other rules, members can lose their accounts for creating a false identity.

Matthew Harris, a partner at law firm Norton Rose and a specialist in information technology and intellectual property law, explains that harassment or bullying can result in action being taken against the bully. But, he says: 'Just as the bully is liable for his actions, when the bullying occurs online, anyone who facilitates it over the internet - for example, a social networking site - and continues to do so once they have been made aware that it is occurring could be equally liable.'

Mallaghan says the website did not respond to the university's complaint and 'did not seem to do anything at all about it'. Instead Facebook responded by informing the university that it did not take complaints from institutions. So he contacted the site himself to request that the group be closed. He also went on the website and used the 'report group' function to alert Facebook to the situation.

Facebook continued to allow the group to exist on its website, and failed to respond to any of Mallaghan's pleas to get it removed. Eventually, with the help of a colleague's son, Mallaghan was able to access the For Those Who Hate The Little Fat Library Man group himself, and remove its contents more than a month after it was created.

For Evans, the idea of cyber-harassment is part and parcel of the social networking experience. Looking out of the window of the coffee shop, she points to the people bustling past one another in the soggy, grey light of the street. 'They wouldn't dream of exchanging insults,' she says. 'Put the same people online and they'd be slagging each other like there was no tomorrow.'

Dr Karen Long, a lecturer at the University of Sussex who specialises in the social psychology of the internet, says the web merely serves as a new platform for behaviour that has always been around. She describes the exchange of abuse between social networkers as 'the same as people writing insults on the walls of public toilets'.

But she agrees that there are important differences in the online experience. 'The factors that limit behaviour in face-to-face interaction are absent online,' she says. 'Status markers don't exist, so people feel freer to be more anti-social.' The perceived escape from responsibility is one of the great dangers of social networking. Many users of the websites believe what happens online stays online, but as with Mallaghan, this is not always the case.

The law goes some way to protecting internet users from abuse. But often it is more effective for individuals to defend themselves. To this end, there is a growing number of voluntary groups that work to uphold the values of good cyber-citizenship online, patrolling the web for people who misuse the environment it provides.

From its small offices in Pennsylvania, Cyber Angels has rolled out a worldwide operation, offering protection to web users. Launched as an arm of the Guardian Angels - a volunteer group that was set up in 1979 to patrol the streets and subways of New York - it offers support and advice to victims of cyber-stalking and bullying. It provides free weekly online classes, covering a range of subjects, to help web users understand what they can do to protect themselves from potential bullying.

'We'll help you collect all the information you need to take it to the police,' says Katya Gifford, a

spokeswoman for the group. 'The biggest number of complaints comes from social networking site victims; it's the number-one type of case that we deal with, and the problem seems to be growing.'

Back in the coffee shop, things have got very noisy. It seems the hospital around the corner has just finished hosting a post-natal class for all the mothers and babies in London. The place thunders with a cacophony of hissing espresso machines, screaming infants and soothing maternal tones.

Evans is telling me about life after Facebook: 'I was controlled by it for a while, I couldn't shut it down, even when I wanted to, and I was always checking it. It's a bit of a social disability not being on it, but I just think that is ridiculous. I'd rather be left out than controlled by it.'

To research this piece Ed Hammond set up a two Facebook accounts, one under his own name and another using a pseudonym. Within five days the pseudonymous account was disabled and his e-mail address blacklisted.

The other side of social networking

Enemybook

Goes under the strap line 'Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer'.

Set up as a riposte to the perceived bogus nature of many online friendships, Enemybook runs off the back of Facebook.

It allows you to add people as Facebook enemies below your friends, specify why they are enemies and notify them that they are enemies. You can also see who lists you as an enemy, and even become friends with the enemies of your enemies.

Snubster

Similarly to Enemybook, Snubster derides the notion of social networking sites, and can run off Facebook. Users can build lists of personal enemies from their Facebook contacts, who will then be sent a snub and will be alerted that they are either 'On notice' or 'Dead to me'.

Hatebook

Modelled on the Facebook concept, and with an almost identical layout, Hatebook offers a less friendly approach to the world of social networking. You can befriend 'Other haters', and your homepage alerts you when 'Other fricking idiots' contact you. The site also provides you with an 'Evil Map', marking the locations of other users. The antithesis to Facebook's emphasis on making friends, this is an open forum for abuse and aggression.

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