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The Big Question: Should we act to eliminate the risks in using social networking websites?

BY RHODRI MARSDEN | WEDNESDAY 10 MARCH 2010

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Why are we asking this now?

On Monday, Peter Chapman, 33, was sentenced to a minimum of 35 years in prison for the murder of Darlington teenager Ashleigh Hall. Chapman, a convicted sex offender, was "very active" on a stolen black Acer laptop in the period leading up to the murder; it later transpired that he had used the social networking website Facebook in order to choose his victim. While websites such as Facebook usually play a passive, benign role in crimes that headlines might suggest are entirely attributable to them, this is one case where the death of a young woman was indeed caused by the ease of constructing a false Facebook identity, coupled with a tragic ignorance of the signs we should all look for, and the rules we should all follow.

What did Chapman do?

In autumn last year he signed up to Facebook under a false identity. By using the name Peter Cartwright and a photograph of an attractive, bare-chested young man, he successfully posed as a 19-year old and began to exchange messages with Ashleigh. Within the space of a month they had arranged a weekend rendezvous; Chapman explained in a message that the father of "Peter Cartwright" would be picking her up in his car. Ashleigh's body was found the following Monday.

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What is it about these sites that's creating such a problem?

First, they're extraordinarily popular with young people. Facebook is second only to Google in terms of overall popularity online, and the amount of time we spend on such websites to socialise, exchange messages, post links to interesting websites, play games and arrange real-life meet-ups is increasing rapidly. Marketing research company Nielsen reported last summer that 17 per cent of all time spent online is on social networking websites – and that figure is pushed up considerably by teenagers. Second, we're gullible. The ease with which we can be flattered into opening messages and entering into dialogue with people we don't know is staggering; it's known as "social engineering" and has been rampant online since the first major web virus spread around the globe behind the email subject title "I LOVE YOU".

Is this issue restricted to children?

Certainly not. Each week sees countless examples of adults being hoodwinked online, too. Indeed, the older generation's lack of familiarity with modern technology can put them at an even higher risk of being duped into handing over money, revealing secrets or making ill-advised arrangements to meet strangers. The most famous recent example was when Fidel Castro's 40-year old son had his explicit email messages reprinted in newspapers worldwide; the person he thought was "gorgeous" 27-year old Columbian sports journalist Claudia Valencia was actually a 46-year old man called Luis Dominguez.

Is Facebook a particular source of concern?

Facebook is one of the few social networking sites that require you to use your real name when you sign up. "It ultimately creates a safer and more trusted environment for all of our users," says a Facebook spokesman. "We require people to be who they are." However, it remains very easy to pretend to be someone else – as demonstrated by Peter Chapman with tragic consequences – and Facebook's "real name" culture might even mean that we're less likely to spot fakery. MySpace and Bebo, by contrast, are a free-for-all with no restrictions on pseudonymity – but it's important to realise that there are many sound, privacy-related reasons for not revealing one's true identity online. Indeed, many children are very aware of and comfortable with the idea of managing multiple online identities.

Can we ever be 100 per cent sure who we're talking to online?

No. But while this fact could easily prompt paranoia, it's more useful to adopt a healthy scepticism about online relationships and to classify them very differently to real-life ones.

What could be done to prevent a repeat of the Ashleigh Hall tragedy?

The Home Secretary Alan Johnson said yesterday that both the UK and the US were working on ways to detect the presence of convicted sex offenders on the internet, but legislating effectively in the online space is incredibly difficult. An NSPCC-supported plan to extend the sex offenders' register to include their online identities and email addresses was deemed a breach of offenders' rights under European law in December 2008, and while it remains a government commitment, the ease with which Chapman created his online alter ego demonstrates how toothless such a law would prove. In the US, the state of Illinois saw a new law take effect on 1 January which bars known sex offenders from social networking websites, but the definition is so broad as to potentially exclude them from risk-free online zones such as job-hunting websites, Amazon and even Google. In addition, tracking offenders' internet use from an increasing number of access points (cafes, libraries, mobile phones, Wi-Fi hotspots and much else besides) just isn't practical.

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What more could these sites do to protect children?

Given that millions of teenagers use Facebook, MySpace and Bebo as virtual platforms to socialise, raising the minimum age permitted to join (currently 13 for Facebook and Bebo, 14 for MySpace) would be a drastic and unworkable measure – and, indeed, wouldn't have helped 17-year-old Ashleigh Hall. The Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP), an arm of UK policing dedicated to child protection, is campaigning for social networking websites to incorporate a clearly visible button which would allow children to report suspicious behaviour; MSN Live Messenger and Bebo are two of many to already feature it, but Facebook is not yet on board – a fact described by Lib Dem home affairs spokesman Chris Huhne as a "glaring failure". But the human weakness in detecting suspicious behaviour can render even that button redundant – making education the most crucial measure.

What rules should be followed?

CEOP's website at thinkuknow.co.uk is an excellent resource for children, featuring information on how to have fun, how to stay in control and where to report anything that seems unusual. There's also a primer for parents about social networking and other internet activities that their children might be indulging in. But three golden rules for children: don't post material that you wouldn't want your parents to see; keep your personal information private; and keep your internet friends as internet friends – because online identities may not always correspond to those in real life.

Is there any way of completely eliminating the risks?

Only by avoiding use of the internet altogether, but in the 21st century this is becoming an increasingly impractical option. Engagement and familiarity with the internet's delights and menaces are a far better way for us all to stay safe.

Are sites such as Facebook as dangerous as they are made out to be?

Yes

*The internet is an unregulated space that convicted sex offenders have unfettered access to

*The ease with which we can adopt online pseudonyms can make the online landscape very confusing

*Children who have not had sufficient education about online safety may find themselves at risk

No

*The media enjoys demonising Facebook and likes to play upon existing fears of the internet

*Social networking websites are an increasingly important social tool and should be encouraged

*The vast majority of children have no more trouble in their online social lives than they do in the playground

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