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Help me, mummy. It's hot here in hell ...

That was one of the sick messages posted on a Facebook tribute to a 14-year-old girl who died in her sleep. And, as this investigation shows, the internet craze of 'Trolling' is causing unbearable distress to more and more grieving families

by Tanith Carey

AT 7.30am on a January morning this year, Carole Gelder went into her 14-year-old daughter's bedroom to wake her for school. What she discovered was too awful for any parent to contemplate. Lauren was in bed, dead. An inquest found the teenager, who suffered from mild epilepsy, had probably died from a fit during the night.

If Carole thought her pain could not get any more profound, she was mistaken. At first, she derived some comfort from the thousands of people who posted their condolences on RIP pages set up in memory of Lauren on Facebook.

Then a few weeks later, she saw a posting that was to mark the beginning of a new nightmare. It was an image of a horse and cart pulling her daughter's coffin, with the words 'Happy Mother's Day'. Day after day, for nearly a month, the awful messages kept on coming. Each one was more carefully crafted than the last, twisting the knife deeper into Carole's heart.

One picture of Lauren carried the plea: 'Help me. Mummy. It's hot in hell.'

Each time, the abuse was reported to Facebook and the comments taken down, but within hours more would appear. Finally, when she could stand it no more, Carole, 45, from Gloucester, made her way to the cemetery where her daughter was laid to rest.

'I sat down next to her and told her I couldn't protect her. I couldn't stop this person hurting us,' she says.

That person was Sean Duffy, a 18-year-old unemployed loner, who was eventually tracked down by police.

Last week, he was sentenced to 18 weeks in prison for persecuting four families of dead youngsters on Facebook. He has been linked to many more.

But if the police or families expected that Duffy's prison term would mark the end of the online persecution of grieving families, they were mistaken.

On the day Duffy was sentenced, four minors were trapped underground at Gleision Colliery, South Wales. As soon as news emerged they had perished in floodwaters, tribute sites were created.

But, interspersed with messages of love and grief on the sites were vicious minutes, one of which read: 'I'd rather be a dead miner than Welsh.'

The Mail launched its own investigation into these sick individuals and discovered they are same people who also targeted the memorial pages of Eton schoolboy Horatio Chapple, with pictures of sexual entrails, after he was killed by a polar bear last month.

Sean Duffy may be behind bars, but sadly it seems he was just one member of a global, organised network of so-called 'trolls' whose sole aim is to desecrate memories of the dead.

But now one man is fighting back. For the past two years, part-time boxer Michael Fitzpatrick, 42, has been studying the phenomenon of RIP trolling from his home in Northern Ireland.

As the trolls spread their depraved messages, he spends three hours a day diligently monitoring their movements, picking up clues they leave behind, identifying their trademarks (in Duffy's case, it was defacing the eyes of his victims with swastikas) and reporting them to the relevant websites.

So far, Michael has collected up to 2,000 screen grabs of the worst trolling incidents as evidence for the police — and has tracked down the identities of 12 RIP trolls operating in the UK.

In this complex game of cat of mouse, Michael must hide his identity. He has already been targeted with threatening videos on YouTube, another troll playground.

So he has removed his name from the electoral roll — and wiped any trace of who he really is from the web.

He knows only too well that trolls often build fake Facebook accounts in their victims' names, post horrific pictures of themselves abusing the toddler because he had spoke a few vacuous words from people who seemed to like it.

Michael says: 'The average profile of an RIP Facebook troll is male, aged mid-20s to 30s, although as many as 15 per cent are women.

'A great many have previously been in jail for other crimes, such as violence or drugs. Many are jobless and spend their whole lives trolling.

'Often they will go online pretending to condemn troll behaviour, just so they can post offensive links.

'They compete for the most emotional and angry reactions from mourners — which they call "kills".

Lols is a corruption of the word 'lol' — meaning to laugh out loud.

Condemnation and threats to report them are seen as badges of honour, which they re-post to prove they are successfully upsetting others.

As soon as a troll sets up a new Facebook page, fellow RIP trolls quickly congregate — and direct each other to more sites, where they then try to outdo each other with the most offensive material, on which they congratulate each other.

Their tactics are underhand and ruthless. Michael says: 'One technique is to scan for pages of dead and stillborn babies, dead the pictures and derider them.'

Often the repercussions spill over into the real world.

After Lauren Drew died, one of her friends attempted suicide with a drug overdose after she was falsely held responsible for some of the postings.

Yet not even the threat of having their real identities traced deters these twisted individuals from hiding behind their false internet personas.

Michael, who has written a book about his experiences called Crossing The Bridge, says: 'When I contact RIP Trolls on Facebook and tell them their real identities will be noted, they still don't stop.

'A common trait her shade is believing they have a God-given right to hurt people. Sometimes they will claim to have been bullied — and so are redressing the balance.

'What marks these people out is that they lack remorse or empathy, and believe the world should suffer for their entertainment.'

Indeed, when the Mail contacted one troll — an individual using the screen name 'The Pro-Peanut' on Facebook, his main complaint was that his profile might be temporarily taken down for attacking memorial sites to the Welsh miners.

There was no repentance — only a concern that his vile activities might be interrupted.

He sent a message saying: 'I have had about 40 people yelling at me about dead miners and I didn't even kill them.' As ever, on the day we got in contact, the Pro-Peanut's work was visible all over Facebook.

As a well as trolling sites about the Welsh miners, on another memorial page he expressed delight at the death of a 26-year-old man, called Dennis, in Georgia, saying: 'It must have been time to take the trash out.'

At the same time, he was showering the family of Russian ice hockey star Pavel Demitra with messages to say he hoped he'd died painfully in the plane crash that killed of people this month.

Asked why he trolls, The Pro-Peanut explains that increasing the pain of grieving families is what he does best.

It is a straightforward mission statement. 'I ruin family friends and grief tourists' view of a dead person.

But while there can be little doubt that trolls are mentally ill, there is growing pressure on Facebook to do more to stop them.

Facebook told the Mail it takes more steps than any other social network to keep its pages (real) free and has a team of moderators, based at its European HQ in Dublin, to remove offensive material when it is reported.

Furthermore, a spokesman claimed the changing nature of IP addresses — the numerical identity code that is unique to every computer — means it's now very difficult to track down the location of perpetrators and it's simply not possible to ban anyone from using Facebook.

He added: 'We strongly encourage people using Facebook to report objectionable content so we can investigate and take action.'

But Michael thinks more could be done. Using the report button to flag telling someone with genuine wounds to get some rush of vagueness. In my experience, it takes dozens of people reporting at the same time before a profile is taken down.

'Anyone can make as many accounts as they want in any name they want and once an account is banned another can be made to replace it within minutes.

'Facebook removing content seems very little when it can be put back up within minutes.

'There is trolling content that has stayed up for weeks, months, just because enough people haven't reported it at the same time. Chingaling can go on for years.'

Robert Mulhearn from Bournemouth found his son Tom, 15, hanged at the bottom of the garden after he was taunted by bullies last May. The day after, he and his wife, Tracey, came across pictures of his son on Facebook which had been digitally doctored.

In one shot, a scene had been added to the image and a troll posting under the name Derrick Smith had written the words 'Hang in there Tom'.

Robert, 48, a team leader at Jaguar, says: 'We'd never even heard of trolling before this. But as soon as a young person dies, all the kids rush to put up the sites to express their condolences. But they don't realise the trolls could target them.

'They don't put proper security settings on their tribute pages until it's too late.'

When Robert tried to contact Facebook and have the pages taken down, he was astonished at how difficult it was.

'We're not anti Facebook. Yet when this happened to us, we couldn't speak to anyone at Facebook.

'It took two days to get the images taken down. We went to present the evidence at its headquarters — no one would talk to us.

Lauren's mother, too, said she found it almost impossible to get hold of Facebook when the vile images kept surfacing. It would get stopped and the pictures taken down — then they reappeared the next day.

'We tried to contact Facebook, but there's no one on the end of the phone to speak to.'

Bothered, it was Michael Fitzpatrick who was able to help the Mulhearns find the troll responsible — once again, it was the individual calling himself The Pro-Peanut — but, so far, no charges have been brought. Bullying charities also believe more steps need to be taken to curb the spread of trolling.

Sherry Ashwell, of BeatBullying, told the Mail: 'It's unacceptable for this to continue. This kind of trolling contains some of the most horrific, heinous and damaging material. Evidently, more needs to be done and Facebook can only be part of the solution.

'We are talking about children here and safety needs to be the number one priority. Facebook is not an anti-bullying expert and it needs to work more closely with us so there is a joined-up approach.

'Both the law and Facebook need to catch up with what is happening.'

MP Karen Bradley has already raised the issue in the House of Commons and contacted the Departure of Culture, Media and Sport to discuss what further measures can be taken.

The Tory MP for Staffordshire Moorlands got involved after she was contacted by the family of car crash victim Hurley Bates — who was also trolled by Duffy.

Like so many of the families, she is of the same view that Facebook can do more to verify the identity of the users. 'I am not sure Facebook is doing as much as it could do. Just washing its hands and saying "there's nothing more we can do" is clearly not acceptable.

For Lauren and her family, the torment is not over. When they heard Duffy had been sentenced, her friends flooded Facebook with messages expressing hope that, finally, she could rest in peace.

They were wrong.

Within hours of the sentencing, more trolls had put up vile pictures, which had to be reported.

Yet another knife in the wounds of an already tormented family.

■ IF YOU are struggling with cyber-bullying, go to CyberMentors.org.uk

Torment: After Lauren Drew, 14, died in her sleep, trolls tortured her parents with vicious posts on Facebook tribute pages

They desecrate the memories of the dead

Culprits often have links to child porn

Trolls compete for mourning families' anger

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