Submission to the consultation on the Green Paper on the Internet Safety Strategy

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I want to make a submission to the Government on the issue of 'catfishing'.

As the Green Paper on the Internet Safety Strategy sets out:

"Catfishing is when an individual (or individuals) use the Internet to create a false identity or identities to form a romantic relationship, but without committing a criminal offence."

I was first motivated to look into the issue of catfishing after I was approached by a constituent called Matthew Peacock who had been cat fished.

Matt, who is a male model from Stockport, had his identify stolen online for four years by a catfish who used his pictures on dating websites to lure women. More than 40 fake profiles were created using his image.

Matt's whole family have been put under tremendous strain. His wife has been contacted on many occasions and wrongly told that her husband was cheating on her by asking girls and women for sexual photographs and videos.

The catfish also used photographs of Matt's nephews and nieces, claiming they were his own children in order to appeal to single mothers as being caring.

After publicising Matt's case in Parliament I have been approached by several other victims who have all been traumatised by their experience.

Collecting evidence from victims

I and members of my staff have spoken to victims of catfishing at length, including Matt, about what they think should be done to protect people from being deceived.

These conversations have informed this submission.

Catfishing should be made illegal, the industry should be made to do more to protect its users by introducing more robust ID verification procedures.

The victims all said the social media industry should do more to help protect people including acting more quickly to take down sites; introduce more robust and better age and identity verification procedures. Also sites that do not use verification procedures and allow anonymity should not be allowed to upload photographs.

Crucially all of the victims said, unprompted, that ultimately the only way to really deter the manipulative catfish was to make it an offence to create a false identity on the internet.

They felt this would not only put pressure on the catfish but would also place more pressure on the websites to clean up their act.

The victims talked about the sluggish response of websites and dating agencies to take profile's down and said that even when they did the catfish would reinvent him/herself in a different guise.

"That is why ultimately making it illegal to pretend to be someone else to forge emotional or sexual links with a person is the only sure way of deterring them," one victim told my office.

Make catfishing an offence

I believe that without a new law, catfish will just continue to disrupt people's lives. To make it illegal would be a massive deterrent and if people knew pretending to be someone else on line was an offence then they might be put off.

Although websites can take fraudulent pages down and take myriad other measures, catfish can just create another false profile the next day.

Creating a new offence of catfishing would have the very desirable effect of making people less likely to steal somebody's identity online and it would enable the prosecution of persistent catfish.

The technology industry should do more to make it harder for people to catfish others

According to the Government's own Internet Safety Strategy green paper more than half of online dating users say they have come across a fake profile.

A YouGov poll in 2016 revealed the scale of online dating phenomenon in Britain. One in three under-40s have used an internet dating service or app at some point, compared to 18% of 40-59 year olds and 8% of over-60s. Half of all 25-39 year olds know at least one couple who met online, compared to only 34% of over-60s.

Statistics from the campaign Get Safe Online reveal that seven reports of dating fraud are received by the UK's Action Fraud every day - an increase of 32% over a two year period from January 2013-December 2015.

A number of dating websites have dedicated fake account teams and Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Snapchat have measures in place so that an account that impersonates somebody can be taken down.

But more needs to be done to verify the age and identity of people who go online.

Sites, including dating sites, should be forced to introduce more robust ways of checking the identity of people who use their sites including scanning passports, driving licences and other documents and using photo-recognition software.

Voluntary code not enough

The voluntary Code of Practice proposed in the Green Paper does not go far enough.

Instead, there needs to be a statutory Digital Mediation Monitoring Complaints Board which could collect evidence and enforce proper standards and take action.

This monitoring board could also produce a star rated league table of dating and social media websites and expose the number of complaints it received against each one. This would help people keep themselves safe online.

Put more money into disrupting online abuse

The exact amount of money spent by the big internet companies on using developing technology to disrupt abusive relationships online is not in the public domain but insiders say the amount of cash spent on safety is 'minimal' compared to other areas of spending.

These figures should not be shrouded in secrecy. The House of Commons library has confirmed for me that information on spending in this is not available. The BBC ran a news item on dating website safety earlier this year, which said that safety features of such sites were often not divulged to 'maintain competitive advantage.'

Internet companies to be more transparent about what proportion of their budget they spend on protecting users. They need to help develop and use new technology that verifies ID.

I would also suggest that websites who do not use verification processes or who allow anonymity on their sites should not be allowed to upload photographs because that makes it easier for cat fish to operate.

Conclusion

A league table of how safe websites are would expose those who are not doing enough to protect their users.

Websites have to take more responsibility for internet safety and develop more robust ways of checking the identity of people who use their sites.

A new monitoring board to enforce standards would be far more effective than a voluntary code of conduct.

Making catfishing illegal would be a massive deterrent. If people knew pretending to be someone else was an offence then they would be put off.

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