

Sites blamed for failing to halt cyber-bullying

Kaya Burgess, Ben Tufft

Experts in child protection and internet safety have called for social networks to be regulated by law after an investigation by *The Times* revealed that cyber bullying was implicated in at least nine teenage deaths investigated last year.

Campaigners expressed shock that nothing had been done to regulate the way that social media sites such as Ask.fm and Facebook deal with reports of abuse. This was despite evidence from ChildLine that calls relating to online bullying increased by 87 per cent last year. *The Times* asked coroners'

offices around the country how many teenage deaths they had investigated in the past year where social media may have played a role.

The findings revealed at least seven teenagers thought to have taken their own lives after being bullied online, dating back to June 2011. Two further

cases were investigated last year. They include the death of Tallulah Wilson, 15, who threw herself under a train after being encouraged to self-harm on Tumblr, and Martin Holder, 16, who suffered bullying at school that spread to Facebook and YouTube.

"All we can do is take the word of these social networks about how speedily they process complaints raised by their users," said John Carr, secretary of the Children's Charities' Coalition on Internet Safety. "There has never been an independent audit and there is a lot of scepticism over how seriously they take reports. Having a statutory obligation on them to do more would absolutely help. Why not give Ofcom an obligation to inspect the procedures these sites have in place?"

Anthony Smyth, managing director of the BeatBullying charity, said one in three young people is bullied online, and one in 13 "persistently". He added: "We recommend clearer and tougher laws, particularly intervention at an earlier stage and better regulation of the online sector. The Government needs to stand up to the industry."

He added: "Smaller companies, such as Snapchat and Ask.fm need to do a lot more to ensure their systems are in place and robust enough." Six teenage deaths investigated last year involved Ask.fm. Yesterday, the Latvian-based social network declined to comment.

Helen Goodman, the Shadow Culture Minister, said: "It's alarming and emphasises the need to take stronger action. We need the rules of the game properly established, not just voluntarily."

Christine Pratt, founder of the National Bullying Helpline, said of the deaths: "I suspect it may be even more. There has been a spate of suicides among youngsters aged 12 to 17. I think online bullying is on the increase."

The NSPCC called for social networking sites to respond more quickly to reports of abuse and to block bullies.

Facebook declined to comment, but cited recent remarks by Simon Milner, its policy director in the UK, who said: "Every service is different, trying to force legislation that codifies this need to handle safety, it would be incredibly hard to come up with something."

A Department for Culture spokesman refused to comment on the prospect of legislation, but said they expected social networks to "respond quickly" to cyber bullying. **Leading article, page 22**

The victims



↑ Chelsea Clark, 13, was found hanged in her bedroom in Wolverhampton on June 29, 2011. She was said to have suffered from online abuse, including

on ask.fm, but the coroner could not be sure she planned to take her life. Her death was only brought to the coroner's attention last year



↑ Izzy Dix, 14, was found by her mother hanged, at the family home in Brixham, Devon, on September 17, 2013. Before taking her own life, Izzy had

been subjected to a vicious campaign of bullying both in person and online. The coroner concluded that the death was a suicide



↑ Daniel Perry, 16, from Dunfermline, was found hanged on July 15, 2013. He jumped from the Forth Road Bridge after being blackmailed over videos online



→ Tallulah Wilson, 15, from West Hampstead, London, took her life by jumping in front of a train on October 12, 2012. She had visited blogs and online forums related to suicide and self-harm. The coroner returned a narrative verdict

→ Joshua Unsworth, 15, from Goosnagh in Lancashire, was found hanged on April 4, 2013. The coroner recorded an open verdict, but online abuse and trolling were claimed to be a significant contributory factor in the case. After their son's death, his parents called for the ask.fm website to be banned



↑ Martin Holder, 16, from Gloucestershire, was found hanged on November 7, 2012. The coroner's inquest is yet to reach a verdict. However, bullying at school, which spilled over on to the internet, is thought to be a factor by his family. His death was not brought to the coroner's attention until 2013



↑ Anthony Stubbs, 16, had just become a father for the first time when he committed suicide on January 14, 2013. Online taunts

about the new father's possible bisexuality, on ask.fm, led the teenager to take his own life in woodland near Leyland, Lancashire



↑ Sinead Taylor, 15, an aspiring dancer, was found hanged on August 28, 2013 at home in Woolwich, London. Claims that bullying had

occurred online and in person are being looked at by the coroner, who has not yet reached a verdict on Sinead's death



↑ Hannah Smith, 14, was found hanged in Lutterworth, Leicestershire, on August 2, 2013. A verdict has yet to be

recorded, but the girl had received abuse on ask.fm. Her father has called for new rules to help young people online

'Those who bullied my son have their lives ahead of them'

Kaya Burgess

Whether in the classroom, in the playground or on the school bus, 16-year-old Martin Holder had been bullied throughout his life. Yet it was only when the abuse spread online to Facebook and YouTube that his mother witnessed it for herself.

Martin was found hanged in his bedroom in November 2012, discovered by his younger sister at their Cheltenham

home. The trauma is still raw for his family, but it has driven Martin's mother to demand that cyberbullies be banned from the internet.

She has also called for schools, parents and the police to work together to educate teenagers that online bullying can be as harmful as physical abuse.

Mrs Hamlet-Hughes had access to her son's Facebook account and could see when "banter" with fellow school pupils went too far and spilled over into

abuse. Although Martin often tried to stand up to his bullies by reporting them to teachers or blocking them online — as young people are advised to do — his mother had noticed him becoming quieter and more withdrawn.

"I would piss on your dead body," read one comment online, posted beneath a video a bully had stolen from Martin's phone and uploaded to YouTube of him dancing in his bedroom.

"I hope you get run over by a car," was Martin's combative response, met with the reply: "I hope you die as well."

On Facebook he would be excluded by school friends or picked on for being small or unpopular.

"Martin would always say 'No, it's all right' when I would ask him about these online conversations," Mrs Hamlet-Hughes said. Martin never reported the bullying to Facebook because he tried to deal with it himself, she explained.

It was only after his death that police showed her the full extent of what he

Tips on how to avoid abuse

For parents

- Set time limits. Do not allow a child to spend hours unsupervised
- Activate filters
- Familiarise yourself with Facebook and Twitter
- Talk about online issues regularly and make children aware of helplines
- Don't ban the internet completely, it will make them more secretive
- Make clear that online abuse is a serious form of bullying

For young people

- Activate privacy settings. Use "report abuse" or "block" buttons
- Think carefully about the personal pictures and information you share
- Tell parents or teachers if you are being bullied
- Keep a record of abusive messages
- Be wary of anonymous user sites

had put up with online. "Some of it may have seemed like jokes, but when you get it constantly it eats away at you. It made him feel small and worthless. They would pick on his size, tell him to shut up, tell him his opinions were worthless. He even once said, 'I'm always the butt of everyone's jokes and I've had this for 12 years'."

Martin's school would respond by arranging meetings between Martin and his bullies or assigning him a peer mentor, but the punishment for bullies is not robust enough, his mother explained.

"Ban bullies from access to the internet for six months," she said. "Freeze their online accounts. Give them an internet ASBO. Schools will take notice when you bring the police in."

Martin was studying forensic computing at a sixth-form college at the time of his death and hoped to work for GCHQ, also based in Cheltenham. He sang with a band, Within These Walls, though was suddenly dropped from the

group and given no reason why. His ashes now sit in a wooden box in the corner of the kitchen, beneath a smiling photograph taken on holiday in Malta shortly before his death. His smiling demeanour was just his way of fitting in, his mother explained, but the bullying was taking its toll.

Mrs Hamlet-Hughes said she did not want to "demonise" the social networking sites, but said that companies such as Facebook seemed much quicker to clamp down on misdemeanours such as copyright infringement in music videos posted on their site than they were to stamp out cyberbullying.

"Parents need to realise there is no separation between cyber and verbal or physical abuse," she explained. "You try to block [bullies] online, but they then get you in the playground. Police should get more involved and prosecute bullies for some of the things that go on there." Investigations are continuing to ascertain whether Martin

definitely intended to take his own life, but his mother is in no doubt. "I used to think suicide was a selfish act," she said. "But not anymore. He didn't leave a note, but he did write in the dust on the window. 'The darkness ahead is not what you imagine.'"

Mrs Hamlet-Hughes has access to the phone and Facebook account used by her daughter, who is now 14, and said that she is "very grown up" and "knows more about suicide and bullying than any other kid out there". Online abuse often forms only one part of a bullying campaign, but ChildLine found that the "24-hour nature" of cyberbullying means that it carries on far beyond the school gates. "There has to be a form of punishment to stop children from doing it," Mrs Hamlet-Hughes said. "People lose their jobs over this sort of thing, but there's no consequences for these bullies. The ones who bullied Martin are now at college and still have their lives ahead of them."

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