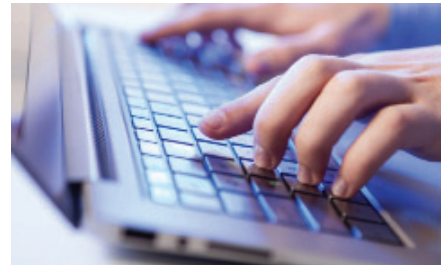


The anti-social face of social media

→ **JIM BARRINGTON** examines the worrying trend for 'trolling' on social media



Unless you were drunk or spoiling for a fight – or both – it is highly unlikely that you would make inflammatory comments in a face-to-face meeting with strangers. Now, though, with the numerous forms of social media readily available to anyone with a phone or a laptop, things have changed dramatically.

People involved in fieldsports, particularly those supporting hunting with hounds, have long faced accusations of cruelty, barbarism and bloodlust. As time went on, even those insults seemed to lose their strength and, having created an atmosphere in which almost any offensive, untruthful or libellous statement is thought warranted, hunting folk are now commonly referred to as animal haters and likened to rapists, murderers and paedophiles. Perhaps the view held by many over the years to simply ignore such outlandish accusations has encouraged a greater degree of opprobrium, but whatever the case, this is no way for any campaign to be conducted and says far more about the attackers than those attacked.

Anyone who uses Twitter will immediately recognise the type of verbal assaults used by people who are obsessed about particular issues. Some aspects of social media – perhaps better described as unsocial media – allow total strangers to intrude into the lives of others and say whatever thought enters their blinkered and bigoted minds. I used to think such situations could be solved by the person involved just being told to get a thicker skin, after all they're just words, aren't they? But what is unknown to



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those who prefer to engage in this form of abuse is the state of mind of their target. During the period my mother was dying, I was receiving disgusting and sometimes threatening tweets and blog comments from people totally unknown to me. The grieving families of Gems McCormick and nine-year-old Bonnie Armitage, both tragically killed in hunting accidents, were subjected to vicious, gloating tweets from people who claim to be compassionate; their self-satisfaction deflated only when they were tracked down and exposed in the press. I can now well understand how a young person, or indeed anyone at a particularly low ebb, may not be able to cope with a similar onslaught.

The fact that many of these 'keyboard activists' are anonymous – or so they think – only adds to their bravado. Indeed, those who consider themselves 'activists' should re-think the term, as lying in bed firing off vitriolic comments about those with whom they disagree can hardly be described as 'activism'.

The problems are exacerbated by those who appear to live their lives via social media. Speak only to like-minded users and you will think everyone sees things your way; believe 'facts' that are reported by those same people and the line between fake news and reality quickly dissolves. How many people now believe 400,000 badgers are snared every year simply because the League Against Cruel Sports director tweeted it? Or that those who attended 2016's Boxing Day meets, according to the same 'expert', are now mostly opposed to hunting? And nothing excites the keyboard warrior more than when some incident can give rise to a frenzy of tweets, creating an atmosphere akin to dropping a piece of meat into a tank of piranhas.

If all that resulted from social media was that those who seem permanently attached to one device or another were allowed to vent their anger it might not be so bad, but of course it doesn't end there. Inflammatory statements from

those who claim to oppose violence inevitably encourage others to do their dirty work. For a commercial concern, such as a pub or hotel, negative comments on the internet can cause financial loss. Threats to boycott a business or create some other difficulty for those establishments that might host a hunt meet or associated event must be taken seriously. It's not surprising that in certain cases these intimidation tactics work and they will continue to do so while little or nothing is done to curb it.

New Crown Prosecution Service guidelines are catching up with this modern form of communication and its abuses and those who are severely troubled by social media trolls should study them carefully with a view to contacting the police if a line of acceptability is crossed. Evidence will be needed for a prosecution and through the simple use of a 'screen-print' button on every computer, a tweet or any other social media comment can be captured, no matter how quickly it might be deleted by the abuser after having second thoughts (ask a young relative how to do this if you feel it is beyond your computer skills!).

As far as those campaigning for repeal of the Hunting Act are concerned, the insults, slurs and accusations mean just one thing – opponents are angry and frustrated that hunting, albeit in a different form, is still continuing; why else the torrent of childish and ignorant internet abuse?

So, despite all those insults, accusations, lies and obscenities, it is important to realise why it is happening... and, in that regard, maybe what is worse than being tweeted about, to paraphrase Oscar Wilde, is not being tweeted about. ●

CPS guidelines can be downloaded from www.cps.gov.uk/legal/a_to_c/communications_sent_via_social_media/