Troll Attack

Student Version

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Online Survival Guide: How to Fend Off a Troll Attack

Synopsis

This case goes through a story of a teenager who inadvertently becomes a target of cyber bullying after her post on Instagram goes viral. The case begins with the effects of the bullying being limited to happening on social media, but it gradually escalates to affecting the victim and her family also in the physical world. The situation gets even more out of hand as she becomes a target of a cyber crime as her accounts are accessed by the bullies.

The case at hand is a work of fiction, but it was created based on combining elements from multiple real-life cases from around the world.

The Case

Background

Anna is a typical teenage high school student in Denmark. She has a good social life and is active on several social media sites. Her 500 Instagram followers are mostly her friends, people from the same school and some relatives. She doesn't have a private account but hardly anyone outside of her circle interacts with the content she posts.

Section 1: A post goes viral on social media and the bullying starts

One day Anna posts a photo on Instagram with an awful and inappropriate joke related to some football team with a couple of hashtags. She doesn't think of the content that much and really doesn't even have strong feelings about it but thought it was funny.

Several days later a much more popular Instagram influencer outside of Anna's social sphere is going through posts under the hashtag and sees the photo with the joke and is annoyed by it. The influencer shares a screenshot and Anna's Instagram profile name making the post now visible to over 100 000 people, which is 200 times larger than the original intended audience.

As a result, Anna wakes up to thousands of notifications on her phone. Her profile suddenly gets visited by thousands of people who comment on her current and older posts. Many also share the screenshot posted by the influencer with comments ranging from insults to death threats. After deleting the original photo the commenters don't stop and move on to her older posts. Anna has to make her profile private and changes the account's name in order to stop them.

But the rage doesn't stop there, as people are still circulating the posts, sharing screenshots of her posts with the comments and creating new hashtags about "canceling" him. By the time also her boyfriend and close friends identified from Anna's photos are also getting harassed by these people.

Section 2: Doxing, things come to real life

Some unknown person from the internet managed to discover Anna's full name, and with googling and searching different places eventually manages to discover not only Anna's phone number and email address but also her home address. People share her contact information in an anonymous forum online and it starts to spread among the people enraged by her post.

This results in Anna getting constant prank calls making her have to switch her phone number. However, their house also gets pizza deliveries, death threats sent by mail and trash thrown onto the windows.

Things come to a boiling point when a prank caller posing as the police posts the angry profanity laden response of Anna's father to 4chan. Trolls rejoice in the old man's furry and Anna's father becomes a topic of internet memes.

The family has to change phone numbers and remove their names from public directories.

Section 3: Unauthorized access

Anna used the same very basic password for all her accounts. Unfortunately, Anna's credentials were revealed in an unrelated hacking of an online forum where she had an account. The hackers had shared in several forums the account names, emails and passwords of thousands of people and now suddenly her account information was of interest to people. Due to the hack and fact that she used the same password everywhere, anyone could find both her email address as well as the password with a lucky google search. Now the attackers could find and use the same password and access Anna's e-mail account. By looking at the email accounts history of emails, it allowed the attackers also to see which sites she had registered to. Anna had also a Snapchat account which the attacker could now request a new password to knowing her email and then after receiving it, made it possible for the attacker not only to access this account, but also change the credentials.

The attackers now could see all her private messages, photos and activity log and spread it online. What was even worse, is that she had stored some personal photos meant only for her and her boyfriend on these accounts, which were now circulated online.