

FEATURE-Perils of online dating prompt safety efforts

Tue Mar 21, 2006 8:00 AM ET

By Verna Gates

BIRMINGHAM, Ala., March 21 (Reuters) - Josie Phyllis Brown never had a chance against her 6-foot-6-inch (2-metre) killer, although his stature was one of the few things she should have known from his Internet profile.

John Christopher Gaumer, who confessed to the murder and led Baltimore County police to Brown's body on Feb. 7, listed his height and other attributes in his quest for dates on MySpace.com, a free Internet social site owned by News Corp. <NWS.N> where mostly young people connect for friendship and romance.

Some personal profiles on the Web site are frighteningly revealing. People publish their birth dates, schools they attend, even clubs they will frequent on a given Saturday night, complete with a cellphone number for whomever might care to join them.

"Think about, there are millions of people we're dealing with here and somehow people think they are all preachers," said Paul Falzone, chief executive of Together Dating service, a brick-and-mortar company that performs background checks on all members. Falzone says background checks result in 10 percent of applicants being rejected.

For most of the 40 million people using Internet sites for dating and socializing each month, a disastrous 15 minutes over coffee at Starbucks is the worst they will suffer.

But there is enough danger out there that some U.S. states are considering legislation to force Internet dating sites to police themselves, while companies that do background checks say business is booming.

SCREENING DATES

Only a small percentage of "intimate partner violence" -- nearly 700,000 such incidents were reported to the U.S. Department of Justice in 2001 -- originate from Internet dating, according to Mark Brooks, editor of Online Personals, which monitors the dating industry.

For upstart online service True.com, even one assault is too much. The site performs background checks on every member, ferreting out sex offenders, felons and married people. About 11 percent of those who apply are rejected.

"To think a felon could find a victim, especially for a heinous crime, gives me the heebie-jeebies. I do all I can do to prevent that," said Herb Vest, chief executive of True.com.

Nevertheless, Robert Wells, convicted of lewd and lascivious acts with a child under 14, passed the True.com screening and posted a profile on that site. The company is suing him, claiming he committed wire fraud.

The small competitor is pressing for legislation to force big Web sites like Match.com <IACI.O> and Yahoo! <YHOO.O> to perform background checks, or clearly state they don't. So far, California, Florida, Texas and Michigan have considered legislation.

Yahoo! and Match.com, the industry leaders with 6 million and 15 million monthly visitors respectively, continually stress dating safety.

Match.com forces the 60,000 people who sign up for the service each month to review its safety policies before they subscribe. On both sites, every profile is reviewed and approved by human eyes to screen out excess information or obscenity.

Around 15 percent of postings are rejected, according to Kristin Kelly, spokesperson for Match.com.

That is not enough for some.

DARK SIDE OF THE 'NET

"The Internet has its dark side and they are not doing everything they can to keep sexual predators and gold diggers off these sites. If you don't police yourselves, the government will come in and police you," said Michigan state Sen. Alan Cropsey.

Cropsey has sponsored a bill that would force Web sites to do background checks, and it proposes posting a warning label on sites, much like those on cigarette packs.

Cropsey's legislation met vigorous resistance from the online industry.

"There are other ways to get to who that person is, rather than have the government ram a business model down your throat," said Abraham Smilowicz, chief executive of Webdate Inc.

Webdate uses real-time video as a safety measure, allowing prospective dates to chat and get a look at each other via webcams.

Daters themselves are also stepping forward to create their own safeguards. Companies like Safedate and Honestyonline are springing up to run background checks for individuals and grant their stamp of approval.

Honestyonline will even come to a home, weigh prospective daters, take a picture and leave with bodily fluids to confirm disease-free status.

William Bollinger, executive vice president of National Background Data, said his business had grown 600 percent in the past two years.

Even a background check would not have saved Lori Leonard. The boyfriend she met via the Internet was convicted of her murder on Jan. 27 in Hudson Falls, N.Y.

His record showed only misdemeanors from assaults on former girlfriends, not the sort of information churned up in basic background checks. Leonard endured two assaults before her death.

According to Dr. John Gray, author of "Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus," education is the solution.

"The warning signs often come out right away. Beware of someone who can solve all your problems or who comes on really strong," said Gray.

© Reuters 2006. All rights reserved. Republication or redistribution of Reuters content, including by caching, framing or similar means, is expressly prohibited without the prior written consent of Reuters. Reuters and the Reuters sphere logo are registered trademarks and trademarks of the Reuters group of companies around the world.

[Close This Window](#)