

LESSONS TO BE LEARNT FROM THE UNFORTUNATE CASE OF THE DEATH OF MOLLY RUSSELL

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SUMMARY

In this article we describe the case of Molly Russell, whose suicide was caused by the on line content that she accessed while she was suffering from depression. We describe how this was brought about by the algorithms used in social media sites and the use of the internet to inappropriately call for help in depression instead of turning to human persons for help.. We describe the legal measures taken to improve safety for young persons using the internet, and we advise the importance of educating young persons on proper use of the internet and proper understanding of its potential.

Key words: Internet use – suicide – depression - internet safety

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INTRODUCTION

On November the first 2017, Molly Rose Russell, a 14 year old girl was found having hanged herself (Walker 2022, Giordano 2022).

THE CORONER'S REPORT

The Coroner, following an inquest, reported the circumstances as follows (Walker 2022): "Molly appeared a normal healthy girl who was flourishing at school, having settled well into secondary school life and displayed an enthusiastic interest in the Performing Arts. However, Molly had become depressed, a common condition affecting children of this age. This then worsened into a depressive illness (Walker 2022).

Molly subscribed to a number of online sites. At the time that these sites were viewed by Molly some of these sites were not safe as they allowed access to adult content that should not have been available for a 14-year-old child to see. (Walker 2022) The way that the platforms operated meant that Molly had access to images, video clips and text concerning or concerned with self-harm, suicide or that were otherwise negative or depressing in nature. The platform operated in such a way using algorithms as to result, in some circumstances, of binge periods of images, video clips and text some of which were selected and provided without Molly requesting them (Dollimore 2022, Naughton 2022). These binge periods, if involving this content are likely to have had a negative effect on Molly. Some of this content romanticised acts of self-harm by young people on themselves (Walker 2022). Other content sought to isolate and discourage discussion with those who may have been able to help. Molly turned to celebrities for help not realising there was little prospect of a reply (Walker 2022). In some cases, the content was particularly

graphic, tending to portray self-harm and suicide as an inevitable consequence of a condition that could not be recovered from (Walker 2022). The sites normalised her condition focusing on a limited and irrational view without any counterbalance of normality (Walker 2022). It is likely that the above material viewed by Molly, already suffering with a depressive illness and vulnerable due to her age, affected her mental health in a negative way and contributed to her death in a more than minimal way." (Walker 2022, The Independent 2022, Kingsley 2022, Payne 2022).

The Coroner stated that there were the following issues of concern;" The MATTERS OF CONCERN are as follows (Walker 2022). The following matters were raised during the Inquest:

- There was no separation between adult and child parts of the platforms or separate platforms for children and adults.
- There was no age verification when signing up to the on-line platform.
- That the content was not controlled so as to be age specific.
- That algorithms were used to provide content together with adverts (Dollimore 2022).
- That the parent, guardian or carer did not have access, to the material being viewed or any control over that material.
- That the child's account was not capable of being separately linked to the parent, guardian or carer's account for monitoring" (Walker 2022).

SAFETY ON SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

These matters of concern are indeed very valid, but there has been a tendency to focus in the public Debate

and especially in the Newspaper and Television and other media on the problems created by the technology companies which own the Social Media Platforms (BBC News 2022a,b, Sky News 2022a,b,c,d, Crawford 2023, Carroll 2025, Das 2023, Milmo 2022a,b,c,d, Gerken 2025) with far less, discussion of the broader picture. Yes, the social media need to be regulated, but other aspects of the problem posed by young persons suffering from a mental illness also need to be addressed.

THE NEED TO DIAGNOSE AND TREAT PERSONS WITH DEPRESSION TO PREVENT SUICIDE

According to the coroner's comprehensive report, Molly was, by the end, suffering from a depressive illness (Walker 2022). Depression is an illness which does carry an important suicide risk (Ernst2020, Harmer 2024). We have recently published an article which describes the doctor-Patient relationship and how this is changed by the use of the internet (Agius 2024). When persons who are suffering from depression suffer from depression, they need to be helped by a human being who can express to them a degree of human empathy, this is true of doctors who are assessing patients and therapists who deliver Cognitive behaviour therapy, so that a study has demonstrated that therapeutic empathy has a moderate-to-large causal effect on recovery from depression (Burns 1992). The need for treating persons who are suffering from depression with human contact which engenders trust and which also is combined with an assessment of suicide risk are highlighted by the Nice Guidelines For the treatment of Depression (NICE 2022). However, neither Diagnosis nor Assessment of depression were available to Molly, because the Diagnosis was not made while Molly was alive.

On the other hand, that Molly was depressed in the last phase of her life and that she called for help through the internet from distant influencers and celebrities, as well as that this help was not forthcoming or ineffectual is demonstrated by Molly's twitter account which has been forensically examined. This account also shows questionable posts or even posts promoting suicide (Crawford 2022). Other accounts of hers, such as an instagram account also contained posts promoting suicide.(Devine 2022)

EDUCATION

The consequence of this is that, it is of extreme importance, that, before a young person uses computers for the first time, that young person needs to be educated that computers are only machines. They are unable to give a human response to a cry for help, except according to the facts that they have been programmed to respond to. It is true that Molly had

called for help in her depressed state, but in an inappropriate way, to distant influencers and celebrities who either did not hear her or gave an inappropriate response. So, young persons need to be educated that computers may indeed give excellent access to knowledge and information, but, when they are distressed, they must turn to a Human being who cares about them and who can offer a human response, which, when appropriate, can arrange appropriate support or training. Computers, by their very nature, cannot give this. This is an essential part of the bigger picture that we must offer our young persons, whether they use computers or not, and it is only in this context that they can use computers, or carry out any other activities in a safe way.

TRAINING ON ON LINE SAFETY

The NSPCC has information on its website on On Line Safety for young People. (NSPCC accessed 31/05/2025)

A Molly Rose Foundation was set up in Molly's memory to campaign for On Line Safety for young People.(Molly Rose Foundation accessed 31/05/2025)

THE ONLINE SAFETY ACT

In The meantime, partly due to the incident we have described, the Online Safety Act is the UK's first major legislation which regulates social media, search engine, messaging, gaming, dating, pornography and file sharing platforms (Online Safety Act 2023). It gives the regulator the power to fine firms which fail to meet online safety rules and in serious cases the regulator can block access to a site in the UK. The first set of online safety rules have been published, legally requiring platforms to assess the risk of illegal content such as terrorism, hate, fraud, and child abuse. However Safety campaigners believe that there are important loopholes in this code regarding illegal content, including a lack of specific rules on live streaming and on content that promotes suicide and self-harm (Badshah 2025, Fox 2024, Hennessey 2025, PA 2024, Scott 2022, Spencer 2022, Kuenssberg 2025, Leake 2024, Jenkins 2025, Whannel 2025, Hymas 2025, Landi 2025). We strongly advise that an improved Online Safety Act should be applied within an environment in which the educational approach that we are advocating is also the norm. Both approaches will optimise on line safety for children and young adults. Clearly the regulation of the internet is not fully achieved yet.

CONCLUSION

We wholeheartedly endorse the legislative and regulatory adjustments put forth in the wake of the Coroner's report on Molly Russell's untimely death.

These adjustments are essential to shielding vulnerable youth from dangerous content on the internet, especially in the areas of age verification, content control, and parental supervision. However, we think even more drastic action is required, especially at the educational level, based on our own recent research on how consultations can be conducted online (Agius 2024). We suggest that children must be taught explicitly and systematically from the first time they interact with computers that computers are merely machines; tools made to facilitate communication and information access, but fundamentally unable to provide emotional intelligence or significant human reactions. Young people need to be taught that responses they get online, particularly through social media, are unpredictable and might not come at all, as was the case with Molly when she asked for assistance. Furthermore, even automated online warnings or helpful advice cannot guarantee that users will follow up or get the emotional support they require. A human component has always been absent from computer-mediated interactions. Therefore, we support educational programs that specifically teach kids that they should always seek professional advice and support from a trusted human being, someone they know loves them, when they are experiencing depressive, anxious, or distressing thoughts. In order to offset the fictitious sense of assistance and connection that can result from digital interactions, this early education is crucial.

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Both authors contributed to the literature search and the drafting of the text.

Both authors approved the final manuscript.

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