



## **Taking the lid off the world of amputee devotees, fakers and disability trolls and what you can do to protect yourself**

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***WARNING THIS ARTICLE CONTAINS SOME STRONG LANGUAGE***

If you had told the sixteen year old me that there were men (and they are mostly men) who found me sexually attractive because of my missing hand then I think I would have been totally dumbfounded. At sixteen I was convinced that most people were repulsed by the sight of my stump. I bought clothes with large pockets and I kept my stump hidden. I don't think I would have coped well with the knowledge that some men would find my stump desirable and a 'thing of beauty'.

And I didn't really consider that notion until 2009 when I became fully aware of amputee devotees - individuals that express a strong sexual interest in congenital or traumatic amputees and other limb difference.

In the autumn of 2009 I joined Facebook to promote my book 'Shared Experiences - The experience of having and parenting children with upper limb deficiencies.' I saw the potential to connect with limb difference groups across the world and tell them about the book. I wanted to sell as many copies as possible, so that parents as could hear each other stories and that Reach [www.reach.org.uk](http://www.reach.org.uk) the charity I wrote if for could raise funds from its sale.

To accompany the publication I posted some photos of myself showing that I also have a limb difference, because I wanted would be readers to see I was talking from a position of personal knowledge. Over several months my husband took a range of photos of me proudly displaying my stump. I was pleased with these photos as they said, 'Here I am and I'm happy with what I look like'. My sixteen year old self would have been amazed!

I was really happy with the way 'Shared Experiences' was taking off and I was contacted by parents of limb different children around the world telling me about their experiences and their thoughts on their children's limb difference. I was also contacted by those with their own limb difference and I accepted all these people as Facebook friends because we had a common bond.

However, in among these numerous friend requests were those who didn't want to connect with me to discuss limb difference, in fact far from it. They just wanted my photos and that's how I became aware of devotees. I was tipped off by a Paralympics athlete who warned me that photos of me were appearing on devotee websites. My first reaction was one of disbelief and my initial inclination was to close my Facebook account and withdraw from using social media.

I then became very cross that I had put myself in this situation and I checked out my growing friends list. And when I examined some more closely I discovered I had unwisely accepted friendship requests from about a dozen men who I now know were devotees. I set about 'unfriending' them.

However I was effectively 'shutting the stable door after the horse had bolted' because these men had already run amok among my Facebook albums downloading and saving my photos and then someone posted a number of them on devotee websites.

And that's when it totally dawned upon me that these interactions had exposed me to a side of life I didn't even know existed and that is the 'secret world of a devotee' and that devotees will do anything to start up relationships with women with limb difference and build up their collections of photos.

Of course I realise now how naive I was and I should have done more to protect myself. However hindsight is such a wonderful gift and how many of us are good at protecting ourselves from unknown threats?

So after the feelings of shock and anger passed I realised I had a stark choice either to remove myself from online activities or use my experiences to warn others about the hidden dangers. I chose to raise awareness and I started contacting other Facebook users who had devotees in their 'friends' lists. Some were pleased to be told and others less so. I soon realised that it's not a black and white subject matter, as there are many limb different women who are happy to interact with devotees and actively encourage it.

At this point I must state my case very clearly. It is not for me to judge what others choose to do and who they wish to do it with it. I know that some limb different people knowingly and happily conduct relationships with devotees. There are also models who knowingly and happily have very sexy photos taken in the knowledge that these photos are specifically for the devotee market. If that's what they want to do then fine: 'flash your sexy stump and then bank the big bucks'.

However, I'm aware that **most limb different people do not wish to be objectified in this way** and find the whole devotee scene rather creepy and even menacing.

The devotee scene doesn't do it for me and when I read devotees writing such lines as 'I want to rub my c\*ck against your stump' it makes me want to 'throw up' rather than roll my sleeve up.

I carried on warning Facebook users and ruffling a few feathers as I went. There were a few who told me that I was encouraging devotees by even mentioning the topic and if I carried on telling people about it then the idea would gain popularity and become mainstream!

I found this quite bizarre because your sexuality and your sexual preferences are mapped out very early in life and the idea that I could encourage anyone to develop a hitherto to unknown sexual preference is, I think, very unlikely.

What I soon came to realise was that people didn't actually like me talking about it and would prefer it, if I could make the subject go away by **not** mentioning it. Too late! This age old sexual preference was gaining increasing exposure, not through me, but by the power and exponential growth of the internet,

I soon learned how much when I gave a radio interview in 2011 for a BBC local radio station. The BBC issued a press release afterwards and parts of that interview appeared on devotee websites later that night, with some comments from devotees who were affronted by my comments. One even said words to the effect, 'But for men like us, women like her wouldn't get dates'. At first I was angry at his arrogance, but after a while, I laughed at the ridiculousness of his assertion because most of my limb different friends are in relationships and **not** with devotees!

So I feel I have a responsibility to challenge devotees' proclamations that they are the only people who can truly love the limb different, because it's simply not true and it's a myth they perpetuate to justify their actions. Maybe I'm at the age now where I could be best described as 'formidable old boot' because I'm certainly not going to be put off warning those who had no idea about devotees and I carry on regardless doing just that.

Now fast forward to 2011 and I was contacted by my now friend Geoff Adams Spink who is a Thalidomider and chairman of EDRIC. He wanted to talk to me about EDRIC and check out if I was interested in participating in their work. Fast forward

even further and in August 2012 I was appointed to the board of EDRIC with responsibilities for online safety. Well, who better than someone who had their limited number of fingers burned!

## Identifying the threat

EDRIC is a network of networks and we aim to bring together limb difference organisations from Europe and beyond. We seek to connect people within a specific interest group, encouraging dialogue in a safe and open environment where sharing of information is a principle objective.

But in such an environment, others can exploit the openness and access to individuals to meet their own objectives that may cause harm, distress or danger to EDRIC members and DysNet users.

Our position is clear: we need an effective online safety policy and we also need to draw our users' attention to the threats. They can take action to protect themselves and be aware of devotees, those associated with devotees and others who pose a threat to safe networking. That is at the heart of our online safety policy. Your safety is important to us so it's important that you know about amputee devotees and others who pose a threat to your safe networking.

Those who pose a threat fall into the following categories;

- **Amputee devotees** who target limb deficient individuals for personal sexual gratification
- **Recruiters** who facilitate 'Amputee Devotees'
- **Fakers** who create false identities to access limb deficient individuals
- **Trolls** who target people with disabilities with hate messages

As I stated earlier on in this series of articles, devotees are individuals who express a strong sexual interest in congenital or traumatic amputees. We know that amputee devotees increasingly use the internet and social media to make contact with people with limb difference and limb deficiency, so need to be considered as a significant threat to the EDRIC/DysNet community and all limb difference charities and groups.

Most of the amputee devotee websites are based in the US and range from hard core pornography to admiration and devotion sites, hence general use of the term 'devotee'.

Amputee devotees are mostly men who are sexually attracted to women with missing limbs and will seemingly do anything to establish relationships with women with missing or malformed limbs. There may well be a subset of men attracted to other men and women attracted to women but male amputee devotees certainly appear to dominate.

Most devotees target adult women although there is growing anecdotal evidence that some devotees are trying to befriend the parents of limb deficient children via Facebook.

Many devotees use social media because their chances of bumping in to a limb deficient woman in their own locality are unlikely. For many, it is portrayed as unrequited love i.e. they find it hard to meet their 'soul mate'.

Many believe that their lives will be complete if they find a woman with a missing hand, arm, legs, etc. Their fixations can be very specific and they will specify that they are looking for example, 'a woman with right arm missing below the elbow' or 'woman with two missing legs'.

It is this level of objectification that indicates the obsessive nature of their quest as personality or other physical features are rarely mentioned. The missing limb takes on paramount importance in the potential relationship. Their need to establish contact is so great that some resort to adopting fake profiles on Facebook such as pretending that they are also a woman with a limb deficiency.

Their purpose is to network with limb deficient women and when accepted as a Facebook friend they may seek to engage an online dialogue, but more often the purpose has been to gain access to the women's Facebook photo albums to download them without permission for unauthorised use. Often they post the photos acquired via this deception on 'appreciation' websites and online notice boards. This behaviour appears to be a form of trophy hunting and display.

Devotees are also known to physically stalk women with limb deficiency and there have been cases in the US and across Europe where they have waited in the car parks and waiting rooms of limb fitting centres and attempted to take covert photos. Women who have been stalked and targeted in this way often report how violated they feel.

However some limb deficient women are perfectly aware of the risk and are happy to pose for photos for devotees sites because it represents an income stream or

some other personal need is being met. Equally some women are happy to form relationships with devotees because they enjoy the erotic desire.

### **Devotee grooming**

Amputee devotees and others who seek to contact or exploit those with limb difference online or elsewhere are a diverse group. As much as we might like to pigeon hole them, they are a socially widespread group that, as Dr. Elena Martellozzo, criminologist, states (when describing paedophiles), they ‘cannot be accurately characterised with one dimensional labels’.

There have been similarities drawn between paedophiles and amputee devotees and particularly where an element of grooming has been deployed. Grooming techniques and characteristics, described by Dr. Elena Martellozzo, assists us in describing some grooming techniques employed by paedophiles that are in fact very similar to those used by amputee devotees and others seeking to gain their trust.

In her four year study, she identified some common and alarming features across child sex offenders which can be mapped across to devotees and I have found her work useful in describing devotee contact and grooming techniques;

- They see people with limb deficiency as depicted in images as tradeable objects and not as real people
- Actions are justified by neutralising guilt through claims that they are helping people with limb difference have sexual relationships and that is for the good of the limb different person
- Intrusions and unwanted contact are justified by making excuses or minimising the impact the abuse might have had on them.
- Once identified, online groomers deny their offence and involvement with the online offences, claiming that their behaviour was pure fantasy
- The web is seen as a veil for anonymity many believe they will not be caught
- It is a belief that ‘everything is accepted’ on the web, including fetishes and paraphilic behaviours

Dr Martellozzo said: *“Whilst there is no such thing as a typical online child groomer, it is nevertheless both possible and instructive to identify a range of distinctive child grooming behaviours. The majority of online predators see the internet as safe environment where all forms of behaviour are allowed, including child abuse, but police are increasingly aware of this.”*

The same is true for amputee devotees, only there is no international or national law protecting limb deficient or people with disabilities from predatory devotees, although laws on harassment and anti stalking measures might be applicable.

One victim of amputee devotee reported that

*‘I’ve been to the police about this and the policeman I saw was telling me that these devotees must have such a collection of photos in their computers that it would probably put a child paedophile to shame.’*

The grooming techniques can be very sophisticated and take place over many months.

Grooming examples are as follows;

- One devotee used Facebook messaging to talk to a limb deficient woman. For many months the conversation was lightweight and friendly but once he gained her trust changed tack and suddenly asked very intimate, intrusive questions. It is important to note that this particular devotee was pretending to be limb deficient
- Others portray themselves as ‘Prince Charming’ in search of their princess. One wrote to a limb different woman and said,  
*“It is my goal to meet and marry such a woman and to spend the rest of my life on this earth ensuring that she feels like the most loved and luckiest lady on earth. I hope this is the case for you, and for anyone else who has joined in a lifelong partnership.”*

### **Other methods and techniques used by devotees**

Devotees apply a range of methods and techniques to gain access to their target including:

- Hiding identity by continually change their online names but their contact email addresses always remains the same. They bombard women with messages in an attempt to meet. One such devotee has used, to date, about six variations of his name and surname, altering the spelling
- Some use infiltration to legitimise themselves i.e. they join groups or ask for invitations to closed groups by lying about their intent. For example a UK based charity had its Facebook official group infiltrated by a man claiming to be a doctor. Checks revealed this was untrue and among his Facebook friends were a number of known devotees.

## **Devotee Activists**

Some devotees are social activists/militants as they feel that their sexual preference is the last to be accepted and often draw parallels between themselves and the gay rights movement of the 1970s. When challenged, they justify their behaviours with statements such as previously mentioned: 'but for men like us, disabled women wouldn't get dates'.

However in their attempts to convince interest parties that their sexual preferences should be treated as mainstream, they overlook that the majority of women they target are appalled and are not willing participants who have often been tricked into allowing photographs to be used.

Research highlights a surprising level of self-justification within the devotee community as the following quote from the devotee website OverGround demonstrates:

*'One last word: Even those devotees who tend to the extremes of paraphilia do not present any danger or harm to disabled people, or to anyone else. It is not the pain, suffering or hardships of disability that attract us. We have no wish to cause pain or injury to others.'*

## **Devotee Summary**

So in summary, amputee devotees use social media in a variety of ways but their prime motivation is to:

- Meet and form relationships with women with limb deficiency/difference
- Gain unapproved access to photographic images of individuals where their affected limbs are visible
- Network with other devotees to share images and maintain a social group
- Normalise their behaviours through advocacy and arguing for the social acceptability of devotees

## **Recruiters, agents & groupies**

Beyond devotees themselves, are those who facilitate and enable their activities by enticing or contacting limb deficient women on behalf of devotees.

Another subset is the groupie or willing accomplice. They are often limb deficient women who are in some way involved with devotees. They try to help devotees normalise their activities by dismissing the claims of women who have been tricked by devotees or by claiming that limb deficient women who don't want sexual relationships are sexually repressed. Fakers

Fakers can include amputee devotees who go to great lengths to make friends online by creating fake profiles and identities to facilitate online contact. The profiles are characterised by the following:

- Majority of their Facebook friends appear to be limb deficient.
- Their friends list does not include family members i.e. sharing same surname
- They only interact on issues relating to limb deficiency.
- They publish very few photos of themselves generally and barely any in social situations.
- They disclose very little personal information, their focus being more on those they are in contact with.

Others in this category include those that seek attention and sympathy by portraying themselves or their children as limb deficient or disabled. Sometimes the aim is to fraudulently raising money for non-existent surgery or medical interventions by tugging on the heartstrings of those with real limb deficiency or disability.

Examples are as follows;

- A male based in the US who claimed to be a wheelchair user. He only ever posted one photo of a male in a wheelchair (most likely not him). He then proceeded to target a member of a dysmelia group on Facebook asking her for photos and asking her lots of intrusive questions about her life. Her suspicions were aroused and she was able to get an official police check on him and found out that he wasn't a wheelchair user at all.
- Some fakers work hard to create a pseudo image, usually a photo of them which they have substantially altered with image manipulation software by erasing a limb(s) so that they appear to be amputees, or by swapping heads/faces of a photo of a real amputee. They then use these images to gain the trust of real limb deficient people.
- Fake groups/pages on Facebook have been set up supposedly protect limb different women from devotees. However it has been set up by a suspected devotee.

## **Trolls who target people with disability**

In internet slang, a 'troll' is someone who posts inflammatory, off-topic or hate messages in an online community such as an online discussion or social networking page. The name emanates from the 'wicked troll' creatures in children's tales.

Trolling is purposely sowing hatred, bigotry, racism or misogyny to cause upset, distress and anxiety. Their gratification comes from those who reply and achieving notoriety.

Hate messages from trolls can have devastating effects on the lives of individuals and have led to suicide (outside the limb deficient arena). By targeting those that may already be vulnerable, the risk of harm is greater i.e. targeting of limb deficient people who may already have self esteem issues and sending messages suggesting worthlessness.

Trolls themselves tend to be emotionally immature users who thrive in any environment where they are allowed to make shocking comments in public domains such as blog sites, news sites, discussion forums etc. For example,

- Trolls will often seek disability sites and post comments for effect such as 'You're all a bunch of freaks' or 'I like the f\*cking circus'.
- Trolls also target parents of disabled children with comments such as 'You should have had a termination' suggesting allowing disabled children to be born in some way damages society.

## **Top tips for keeping yourself safe online.**

### **Overall online safety**

- **Weigh up the risks versus benefits** Remember that social media is a hugely powerful tool for businesses and individuals. It gives everyone the opportunity to connect with huge numbers of people very quickly and very easily. This clearly has enormous benefits - but it also, inevitably, carries some risks.
- **Never give out personal information online.** Incidents occur constantly and social media users need to keep on their guard so that their security is not threatened and privacy is not invaded by making choices about how much personal information they provide. Users should make conscious choices. If you don't want to be in the public eye then don't interact on public sites

- **Once it's online it's there FOREVER** Always remember that any participation online can result in your comments and photos being permanently available and open to being republished in other media and that others may try and contact you.
- **Don't libel anyone. It's tempting to publicly 'name and shame' but** stay within the legal framework and be aware that libel, defamation, copyright and data protection laws apply. Be careful what you say about people and what you accuse them of
- **Never, for any reason, agree to meet someone face to face that you met online.** Unless others are aware of the meeting and plan on going with you, this could be potentially very dangerous.

### When using Facebook

- Only accept friend requests from people you know or know of
- Keep in mind that no matter what your privacy settings - the internet is not private so if you post a photo anyone can save it and the photo can end up anywhere!
- If you want to use the internet but retain your own privacy, then create your own pseudonym
- If you are being pestered then lock down your privacy settings so that you can only be messaged by friends.
- If you think that a devotee is stalking you - then block him.

### When using Twitter

- Check out your followers and who they are following and if you're unsure then block them.

I hope I've alerted DysNet users rather than alarmed them. It took me a while to accept that devotees exist and even longer to understand their behaviours.

I've now made my peace with the simple fact that while 'Mr Mainstream' might be a 'breasts or legs' man, please keep in mind that it's only a small minority of men who feel their pulses race at the site of a shapely stump.

Finally, I'm certainly not seeking to normalise devotees' behaviours or give them a platform. I don't like being pestered by devotees, but they're out there and there is little that can be done about it other than take measures to safeguard your privacy. I realise I've left readers a lot to think about and I welcome your feedback and comments.

EDRIC and its online DysNet network encourages dialogue about all aspects of limb difference - please join in the conversation on our RareConnect Forum which is for people affected by limb differences. It is safe, moderated and available in the main five European languages.

You can find it here: <http://www.rareconnect.org/en/community/dysnet>

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