

UK teen homicides linked to social media lead to calls for more to be done

Dionne Thompson For The Straits Times

DEVON - Two weeks ago, a BBC Panorama documentary on the "social media murder" of a teenager sent chills down the spines of many parents across Britain.

The gangster-style stabbing last year of Olly Stephens, 13, by two boys he knew only from Snapchat, in a field called Bugs Bottom in Reading, was the sort of knife crime that felt horrifically out of place in English middle-class suburbia.

Even more startling was that the entire attack had been planned and discussed afterwards on social media, and almost all the evidence used in court came from mobile phones.

Police officers were shocked by the violence they found, from the language of the Snapchat voice notes to the Instagram photos, as well as the videos posted there and elsewhere.

Olly's killing was apparently done in revenge.

It left the nation reeling.

"All involved were so young and it was almost like they were completely detached from reality - as though they'd watched too many 'gangster films'," said Mrs Megan Heath, 35, an administrator and mother of two.

Mrs Christina Hutchings, 45, a counsellor and psychotherapist, told The Sunday Times she had recently come across another case of a teenage girl being beaten up by other teenage girls in an attack that was also orchestrated on social media.

"It feels like it has now become the norm, an acceptable way to seek revenge or restitution or resolve disputes," said Mrs Hutchings.

And the trigger is "often something small that then escalates out of control, fuelled by social media platforms".

In Olly's case, he had seen a younger boy being humiliated online in the Snapchat group he shared with his attackers and had taken a screenshot to share with that boy's older brother to try and protect him. The attackers felt angry and betrayed when they found out.

But Olly's murder, said Detective Andy Howard, the chief inspector at Thames Valley Police, was only "the tip of a very large iceberg".

There have been other young deaths in Britain linked to social media.

In September 2018, Frankie Thomas, 15, killed herself at home after viewing explicit self-harm material for several months, including on Wattpad, a social storytelling platform.

In November 2017, Molly Russell, 14, did the same after looking at images of self-harm and suicide on Instagram.

In London, 30 teenage murders were committed last year, the deadliest since records started in 2003.

Experts say social media was a key factor in the spike. Disagreements are intensified on social media, and violence could spill over into real life.

"If you read comments on any social media, people always feel freer to 'say what they really think' without considering the consequences," said Mrs Heath, who has also worked in schools.

"A lot of these comments would be things people would never say to anyone face to face."

As Mr Stuart Stephens, Olly's father, noted of the language used by Olly's attackers on social media: "If they had been in school, and someone had overheard these conversations, something would have happened."

Mr Junior Smart, founder of the St Giles Trust SOS Project, which helps divert young people from crime, said social media platforms "have got a lot to answer for".

"In practically every situation where we've seen violence happen there has been some sort of connection with an online platform in some form," he noted.

Mr Joe Caluori, head of research and policy at Crest Advisory, a crime and justice consultancy, agrees. "Social media is a bigger factor in violence and the deaths of young people than we realise."

Tech companies should "stop avoiding responsibility"

On the evening of Olly's death, even as they struggled with shock and grief, Olly's mother and his older sister were already trawling social media looking for evidence of what had happened.

But families of victims often come up against a brick wall, with tech companies refusing them access to their children's social media accounts, or dragging their feet on releasing them, which could affect investigations.

Earlier this year, Baroness Beeban Kidron, a film-maker and an advocate for children's rights, noted grimly in the House of Lords that "children's lives should not be the collateral damage of the tech sector" and asked the government to assess the role played by social media in the deaths of children in Britain.

In 2019, the Children's Commissioner for England implored social media companies to stop "avoiding responsibility".

In an open letter to Facebook (which includes Instagram and WhatsApp), Snapchat, YouTube and Pinterest, commissioner Anne Longfield noted that "none of the platforms regularly used by vast numbers of children were designed or developed with children in mind, and for some children this is proving harmful, whether that is due to addictive in-app features, inappropriate algorithms or a lack of responsibility for the hosting of dangerous content".

She also admitted that she had no power to demand data pertaining to children from the tech giants - but this could soon change.

An online safety Bill, which is making its way through Parliament, will make it a legal requirement for social media platforms to protect children from harmful content, including user-generated content, under threat of fines for the companies and even jail for their executives.

Under this Bill, content monitoring and age verification, the two bugbears of parents seeking to protect their children from social media harms, will have to become much stricter.

But more can be done to strengthen the safety net.

"There is now a lack of pastoral care and counselling services in schools, and where they are in place, they are completely over-stretched. I know the government wants a school counsellor in every secondary school, which would be great in working with children who bully and are also on the receiving end of bullying," said Mrs Hutchings.

What minimum age?

When Olly was killed, he was just 13, the minimum age required to access most forms of social media. But he had been on social media long before, since many platforms make little or no attempt to verify their users' ages.

This would not surprise many. A survey released this year by Ofcom, the British communications regulator, found that just four in 10 parents knew that 13 was the minimum age requirement for most social media and that most children under 13 already had their own profile on at least one social media app or site.

This was despite seven in 10 parents of children under 16 expressing concern about the online content their child was being exposed to which included violence and bad language.

Schools are trying to plug the gap. Many have strict policies on the use of social media for staff, parents and pupils, and conduct safety education. Children as young as six are taught what to do if

approached by a stranger online. And at some schools, those attending events are reminded not to share photos or videos of the event on social media in case they expose children whose parents do not want their images online.

One parent who wanted to be known only as Jake said his son was suspended for a day by his secondary school after taking and posting a picture of his schoolmate on social media without his friend's consent. It was a non-uniform day and the schoolmate, a boy, had worn a dress.

The post simply said: "Nice dress."

"To be honest we were quite impressed at the way they handled it and did come down on him quite hard," said Jake, who supports the school's action but did not want to use his real name for his son's sake.

However, he has no plans to enforce a social media ban on his son, which experts say can backfire in any case.

"Punishing children by taking away their mobile phones or laptops can make them even more isolated at school by their peers," said Mrs Hutchings, who has two sons aged nine and 4½.

This is even more the case for children who have been bullied on social media or forced to do things such as break the law, she said.

If nothing else, Jake's son came away from the incident with an improved sense of social media boundaries.

Instead of trying to keep children off social media as long as possible, a more realistic approach for parents would be to teach them how they and others should behave online, said experts.

"In some ways, bizarrely, I think I'd like our kids to do more social media," said Jake. His other son "has thousands of unread messages on his phone and I sometimes wish he would use it more for actually interacting with friends", rather than just passively watching content.

"In a way, the whole thing is so terrifying that the best, or certainly easiest, thing is to give up and just keep your fingers crossed that it won't be your kid who ends up getting harmed. Which is terrible, lazy parenting of course," he said.

"But screen time and social media is so all-encompassing now that trying to control it would just drive you mad."

About the case

In January last year, a 13-year-old boy from Reading, a town in the south-eastern English county of Berkshire, was lured to a field near his home by a girl he knew and brutally knifed and left to bleed to death by two boys he had met online.

The case was unusual in that 90 per cent of the evidence used to convict Olly Stephens's attackers came from their phones - mostly thousands of Snapchat conversations between the trio who had plotted the attack, discussed it afterwards and then tried to delete it all.

All four were part of a Snapchat group. Olly knew the girl in real life, and was meeting his two attackers for the first time that day.

He had apparently incurred the wrath of the boys, aged 13 and 14, after standing up for another child who had been subject to "patterning": a filmed or photographed humiliation that is then shared on social media.

The whole thing was over in minutes. Olly left his home at 3.33pm on Jan 3 and was ambushed by his attackers, who wanted to teach him a lesson by "patterning" him.

At one point, the younger attacker produced a knife and stabbed Olly twice.

About 15 minutes after Olly had left home, a boy knocked on the door to say that Olly had been stabbed. Mr Stuart Stephens ran to the field, which was close by, to find his son covered in blood and lifeless.

The police found an Instagram video of the older attacker, posted two days before the murder in which he warned: "You'll see the knife go through the top of his skull... if he comes I promise you I'm poking a nank through his head."

Nank is slang for knife.

The attack was also casually discussed over Snapchat by the same boy: "I'll just give him bangs or stab him or something. I don't care."

Bangs means hitting.

Another Snapchat voice note by the girl referred to plans to "bang him and pattern him and shit. I'm so excited you don't understand".

Because there was so much gangSpeak and violent slang, police investigators had to use translators to sift through the messages. And, disturbingly, during the investigation, the online space was alive with threats of violence against Olly's family.

They received hundreds of taunting and abusive messages via social media, "images of people waving knives, celebrating Olly's death and threatening his wife and daughter with rape, along with pictures identifying where they live", said Baroness Kidron, in highlighting Olly's case in the House of Lords earlier this year.

Detective Howard at Thames Valley Police admitted that there had been concerns about "people taking matters into their own hands", including breaking the law, due to swirling speculation on social media during the police investigation.

In the end, the evidence proved overwhelming.

Two boys, aged 13 and 14 at the time of the attack, were convicted of murder and received life sentences with a minimum of 13 and 12 years respectively. A girl, 13 at the time, was convicted of manslaughter and given five years in custody.

Olly's mother, Amanda, insisted that she felt no hatred. "There isn't a feeling of anger towards them, it's just sadness at the situation that's been created, and the loss for us and for everybody."