

Cyberstalking Happened to Me

We'd been living in Maryland for just over a year in a nice, quiet neighborhood near Annapolis. On Saturday, December 21, 1996, a nasty cold I had quickly developed into bronchitis. We canceled plans to visit relatives on Christmas, had no tree or decorations up, and I was miserable. That night I went to bed early after taking some nighttime cold medicine. My husband, Chris, went upstairs to his office about 10 P.M. to get our e-mail. All of a sudden I heard his voice—very angry.

“What the hell?” he yelled.

I bolted upright, got out of bed, and went upstairs.

“What’s the matter?”

“Who do you know named Sfon@aol.com?” Chris was furiously pounding keys on the keyboard.

“I don’t know anyone by that name.” I walked over to his desk and looked at the computer monitor.

Our e-mail messages were being downloaded. Hundreds of them. We usually averaged 30 messages a day.

“Can you stop it?”

“I’m trying.” Chris repeatedly clicked the Cancel button and the messages finally stopped downloading.

Chris opened one message. Then another. And another. They were all the same. Someone had taken my reply to a message that had been posted on the “misc.writing” newsgroup and added an extra-long “Happy New Yearrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr” at the end of my signature file.¹ The “rrrrrrr’s” went on for two pages when we printed out the message.

I was stunned. I had no idea who did this. Maybe someone didn't like my reply, which was intended to be humorous. No one I knew on misc.writing would stoop to something this low.

Chris downloaded the rest of the messages, weeded through the e-mail bombs to get our real messages, then deleted all but a couple of the e-mail bombs—just in case we needed them. For the rest of the time he was online that night no more e-mail bombs arrived.

The next night at about the same time, it happened again. Chris yelled again. I raced upstairs. His face was red.

"I can't believe this jerk," he muttered angrily, jabbing his finger in the direction of the computer monitor.

Hundreds of messages were being downloaded. This time it was a different message, but the same return address: Sfon@aol.com.

I hadn't told Chris that earlier in the day I went online and posted a message to the misc.writing newsgroup. I asked if anyone else had been e-mail bombed. No one had, but some of the people on the newsgroup asked me to send them one of the e-mail bombs we'd received. We discovered that the e-mails were coming from an ISP called IDT out of New York and not AOL.² Just about everyone on misc.writing knew one particular group of people in New York who were the most likely candidates for the e-mail bombs—the Woodside Literary Agency.

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Earlier that year, I had read a post on Usenet from the Woodside Literary Agency:

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Subject: WRITERS SEEKING PUBLICATION
From: CFSQ98A@prodigy.com (James Leonard)
Date: 1996/01/24
Newsgroups: rec.arts.books.childrens
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The Woodside Literary Agency is now accepting new authors, re: fiction and non-fiction: children's books. Advances from publishers can be high. You must have a completed manuscript. We have offices from New York to Florida. E-mail for information: CFSQ98A@prodigy.com. If you respond during the month of February, call my new

Florida agency at: 813-642-9660. I will be there in February.

James

I called the phone number listed and spoke with James Leonard. He sounded professional and courteous and answered all of my questions. Then he asked me to submit a book proposal. Shortly after I mailed the proposal to Woodside, I received a letter from the company claiming it was the most professional proposal they'd ever read and they wanted to see the full manuscript. One paragraph down was a request for a \$75 reading fee. Since I'd already published six books, I knew the majority of agents don't charge reading or editing fees. Red warning flags appeared in my mind.

I visited a discussion group called misc.writing and asked if anyone had heard of Woodside, and then I recounted my experience. I soon found that Woodside was infamous for spamming³ its "Writers Wanted" message ad in any newsgroup it could find. It was obvious that Woodside hoped to entice aspiring writers or others unfamiliar with the business of writing and hit them with a reading fee. Woodside could find a lot of prey; wannabe writers are desperate to see their work published. Along with several writer friends, I began to search for Woodside's posts in various newsgroups. We left warnings about the agency as an act of kindness.

I began to receive e-mail from people who had sent Woodside their manuscripts or proposals and paid the requested reading fee. Some paid more than that—a contract fee and other miscellaneous fees—but never received anything in return except requests for more money. One woman lost about \$1,000. Some of these people asked me for help. I contacted the New York State Attorney Generals (NYSAG) office. I was told if I could find more victims, it would begin an investigation into Woodside's activities. So I posted messages on writing newsgroups asking if anyone who had given money to Woodside would be willing to join this investigation.

What I considered a helpful warning to fellow writers was seen by Woodside as a call to war.

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Chris waited while the messages downloaded. He deleted all but one—again, just in case it was needed later—and there were no more e-mail bombs for the rest of the night.

Although I was pretty sure this was the work of Woodside, I had to be positive before making accusations.

The next day I began receiving e-mail messages from mailing lists⁴ claiming I had subscribed to them. I hadn't. Luckily, most of the lists asked for confirmation before adding me, so I was able to stop most of the subscriptions before they got started. For the others, I had to make the effort to contact them and get the subscriptions canceled.

I found out that the University of Maryland University College (UMUC), where I was employed, was also e-mail bombed with messages from "me." It was obvious that this was an attempt to get me fired. Here is one of the messages, dated December 29, 1996, verbatim:

I'm an assistant teacher at UMUC and I think you and the whole of UMUC are a bunch of morons insidiously festering away your small brains. I may or I may not resign. I may stay to awaken you idiots. I'm an international author and I know what I'm talking about. I am also very powerful and wealthy, so don't even think of messing with me.

J.A.Hitchcock—Teaching computer courses at stinking UMUC.

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The next night, at 10 P.M., the e-mail bombs hit again. Chris had installed kill filters⁵ so that this time any e-mail from Sfon@aol.com would be deleted automatically. But our e-mail inbox began to fill up anyway. It was Sfon@aol.com again, but with a new twist—he or she had added the letter "a" or "b" so that the return e-mail addresses read either Sfona@aol.com or Sfonb@aol.com. The kill filters Chris created were useless.

"That's it!" Chris yelled. "Call Netcom." Netcom was our ISP.

By this time it was midnight. Not only was I still sick, I was ready to burst into tears. If it was Woodside, why was I being targeted and not the other writers from misc.writing?

I called Netcom. The tech support representative who answered was very understanding and quickly gave us a new e-mail address and proceeded to weed out our real e-mail from the e-mail bombs.

Chris decided it was time to separate our e-mail into “his” and “mine.” We had a free e-mail account with Geocities,⁶ where our personal Web pages were located. Chris began using the hitchcocks@geocities.com e-mail address and I used our new e-mail address from Netcom. Even with the new address, I knew I couldn’t take the chance of posting messages on newsgroups for fear of being e-mail bombed again. I contented myself with just reading the messages even though I longed to join in on many of the discussions.

The change in e-mail addresses didn’t stop the cyberharasser.

Messages forged in my name began appearing on newsgroups—hundreds of newsgroups, from alt.fan.harrison-ford to rec.climbing to alt.abortion. Some of the messages used my old e-mail address, latakia@ix.netcom.com, while others used sock puppets.⁷ One message appeared in all caps on the alt.atheism newsgroup:

ATHEISTS ARE MORONS:

AS A DAILY SPOKESPERSON FOR THE NEWSGROUP MISC.WRITING, I FIND THAT ATHEISM IS FOR UNINFORMED BRAINDEAD IMBECILS. TO LEARN ABOUT CREATIVE THINKING CONTACT ME AT MISC.WRITING AND MAYBE I WILL SEND YOU ONE OF MY BOOKS. AFTER ALL, I AM AN INTERNATIONAL AUTHOR AND KNOW WHAT I AM TALKING ABOUT. HITCHCOCK.

Another appeared, also in all caps, on the alt.beer newsgroup with the subject heading “Beer drinkers are morons.”

BEER DRINKERS ARE MORONS:

BEER DRINKING MOST CERTAINLY CREATES AN ENORMOUS POPULATION OF DRUNKS WHO NEVER CONTRIBUTE ANYTHING TO SOCIETY, THEIR FAMILIES OR ANYTHING LIVING. I AM AN INTERNATIONAL AUTHOR AND KNOW WHAT I AM TALKING ABOUT AND CAN BE REACHED AT MISC.WRITING. I’LL BE HAPPY TO GIVE YOU ONE OF MY BOOKS TO GET ALL YOU DRUNKS ON THE RIGHT PATH

WHERE IT IS ONLY AN ARM'S REACH AWAY.
HITCHCOCK.

Online friends from the misc.writing newsgroup went about canceling these messages whenever and wherever they popped up.

Then the cyberharasser discovered Chris's Geocities e-mail address and began e-mail bombing it with a vengeance. One of the e-mail bombs consisted of a single word repeated over and over—the name of our dog, Bandit. Chris was very upset at this new blow, and I was at a loss as to how to handle the whole thing.

Just when I thought it couldn't get worse, more forged posts appeared in newsgroups. The messages were still on the same "morons" theme but had a new twist: They now included my home phone number and dared the "morons" to call me. No one did, thankfully.

As if this weren't enough, problems began to appear in my offline life as well. Magazines I hadn't subscribed to arrived in my mailbox, as did memberships to music and book clubs I hadn't ordered. And I received notification of pending deliveries of porcelain figurines I never ordered. I had to call to cancel all of these. I realized someone was subscribing me to everything and anything.

We had company for dinner a week later, just after New Year's Day. We sat in the living room eating appetizers and chatting. Chris finished cooking dinner and I helped him serve it. It was a nice, relaxed evening with good friends, a relief after all the problems online.

A phone call came at the end of dinner. Chris answered and handed the receiver to me with a quizzical look on his face.

"It's some woman from California. She says it's about the Internet."

I shrugged my shoulders and took the phone from him.

"Hello?"

"Hi, my name is Cindy. I saw those posts on the newsgroups. I had the same thing happen to me and I thought you might want to know about them."

"I already know about the 'morons' posts and I have some people helping me cancel them," I replied.

She paused. "I don't think you've seen these. They're new messages posted on sex-related newsgroups."

"What?"

Everyone at the dining room table stopped talking.

“It’s something called Hot For Lovebites,” Cindy went on. “Your home phone number and address are in it. You’d better get online and see what I’m talking about. Then you might want to call the police.”

“Thank you,” I said and hung up the phone.

I excused myself from my guests, ran into my office, and turned on the computer. I quickly got online and discovered “I” had posted messages to hundreds of newsgroups—all of them sex-related or controversial, such as alt.skinheads or alt.sex.bestiality, and most of them with the subject heading Hot For Lovebites. I cringed as I read this post, which is verbatim except that I have substituted XXX’s for my real address and phone number at that time:

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From: Jayne Hitchcock
      <FunGirl@netcom.com>
Newsgroups: alt.sex.bondage
Subject: Hot Lovebites
Date: Sat, 04 Jan 1997 22:59:13 -0800
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Female International Author, no limits to imagination and fantasies, prefers group macho/sadistic interaction, including lovebites and indiscriminate scratches. Invites you to write or call to exchange exciting phantasies with her which will be the topic of her next book. No fee for talented University of Maryland students. Contact me at misc.writing or stop by my house at XXX XXXXX Lane, XXXXXXX, MD. Will take your calls day or night at (410) XXX-XXXX. I promise you everything you’ve ever dreamt about. Serious responses only.

Not only was the fungirl@netcom.com address fake, but my employer, UMUC, was being dragged into this. And I was scared to death because the harasser and untold others now had my address and phone number.

I swallowed hard, fired off a quick e-mail to my cyberfriends asking for help again, then went back to my dinner guests and very calmly told them what was happening. They were appalled.

The phone rang continually after the first call. I answered it only once—when I received a collect call. I thought it was from my mother

or sister. But when the prompt came for the caller to identify himself, a man's guttural voice announced, "It's Loverboy."

I didn't get much sleep that night. I was online most of the time and kept finding more and more of the Hot For Lovebites posts. Every time the phone rang, I cringed.

The next morning I checked the answering machine for messages. There was only one. I heaved a sigh of relief. I played the message and a man's scary-sounding voice said, "This is a serious phone call. Do you know your phone number is on the Internet at Fungirl dot-com? I live nearby and you should go to the police before someone knocks on your door."

I knew this, and inwardly thanked him for being nice enough to warn me even though I felt it was a somewhat crude phone call.

I called the local police and they told me they weren't computer literate—they didn't know what a newsgroup was. They said they'd be happy to send a patrol car over, but I told them that if they didn't understand what I was talking about, they couldn't help me. They referred me to the police commissioner's office in Annapolis. When speaking with a representative there, the dismissal was swift: "I don't know what to tell ya, lady."

Frustrated and afraid, and not knowing how far the harassment would go, I contacted the FBI Computer Crimes Unit in Baltimore, Maryland. I was informed that unless a death threat or threat of physical harm had been directed at me or I'd actually been physically assaulted, there wasn't much they could do. But they said they would send an agent to look into it. When an agent finally arrived to interview me it was almost a month later.

The phone calls continued. One came from Germany, and the message that was left lasted for five minutes. This caller assured me I could call or fax him 24 hours a day if I was interested; he left both numbers with the country code. Another person who'd seen a Hot For Lovebites post left this message for me online:

You must be one DIM writer. I'm about 20 miles away from you {along with a goodly amount of rapists, murderers, & crack-heads} Good Luck, you are going to NEED it. By the way, if you don't already own a gun; I suggest you go down to West street in Parole and buy one.

I began to fear that someone would actually come to the door looking for sex. I feared for my life. We bought a gun. I learned how to use it, and I learned well.

In cyberspace I had to fend for myself. So I did the only thing I could think of: I turned again to my fellow writers on the misc. writing newsgroup. Angered by the harassment and lack of help from law enforcement, we, as a group, decided to take control of the situation ourselves. I dubbed them my Internet Posse.

Control it we did. We dug into old files and records online. We made phone calls, took photos, and e-mailed anyone we thought would be able to help.

We finally found the proof we needed that the harasser was indeed the Woodside Literary Agency. It posted the "Writers Wanted" ad (similar to the one I had replied to) to several newsgroups on January 5, 1997. But it forgot to remove my name and fake e-mail address from the "From:" line on the message. This same fake e-mail address had been used earlier that day to forge the Hot For Lovebites posts and e-mail bombs in my name. This, along with other important information discovered soon after, encouraged me to file a civil suit against Woodside et al. in January 1997 in Eastern District Court, New York, for \$10 million.

In the civil suit, my lawyer named the Woodside Literary Agency and any of the names attributed to it, plus 10 John Does and Richard Roes⁸ in case we missed anyone.

Two of the people named in the suit, Ursula Sprachman and James Leonard, soon came forward with a lawyer. A third, John Lawrence, made himself known to my lawyer a week after I appeared on the TV program *Unsolved Mysteries* in May 1997. He filed a countersuit, claiming I was the person harassing and stalking him.

The ISP used for the harassment, IDT, cooperated fully with my lawyer. We soon found there were several accounts opened at IDT by the Woodside Literary Agency, but with different credit card numbers and different names so that when one account was canceled Woodside would jump to a new one and continue the harassment. IDT notified us that it found all of the accounts and canceled them. I began to breathe easier.

But the people at Woodside weren't done with me yet. My lawyer received a death threat over the phone. An employee of one of the ISPs Woodside spammed from also received a death threat. Woodside continued to harass me, online and off, including going to a great deal of trouble to find our new unpublished phone number. Woodside went

so far as to call neighbors I'd never met and ask if they knew our phone number. One neighbor was so rattled he knocked on our door to tell us about it.

Fellow writers formed a legal fund for me called H.E.L.P. (Hitchcock Expenses for Legal Proceedings). Contributions were put in a savings account and used for any legal expenses I incurred for my case against Woodside. I soon found out that Ursula Sprachman called and wrote the Maryland State Police, Maryland State Attorney General, and the FBI in Baltimore to file a complaint about me, claiming that the H.E.L.P. fund was illegal and something should be done to stop me. I was notified of the complaint by each organization, which added it to their files on me. I'm pretty sure Ursula wanted me arrested. That was very disturbing and it frightened me.

A year to the day after the harassment began, December 21, 1997, the phone rang at 7:15 A.M. I sleepily picked it up, heard someone breathing on the other end, and said hello a few times. No answer, so I hung up. When I awoke an hour later, I remembered the phone call and dialed *69. The phone call had come from the Woodside Literary Agency. I called the police to file a report and then called the telephone company to install Caller ID. I wondered what would happen next.

I didn't have to wait long. It came in the form of a letter titled "For Employment Purposes," which was sent to UMUC inquiring about my position there, how much money I made, what I did, and so on. The letter made it look like the company was planning to hire me and was doing a background check. It wasn't signed but the letterhead said WILA, which are the initials for Woodside International Literary Agency—the company's "new" name. The scariest thing was that my social security number was given in the letter. What else did Woodside know about me?

A secretary at UMUC told me she called the phone number listed and was yelled at by a woman with a German accent. This woman, who gave her name as Rita Maldonado, was angry that the secretary refused to give out any information about me. Ursula Sprachman, one of the known defendants, has a German accent. The letter was sent to my lawyer as evidence.

At a speaking engagement soon after this latest incident, a car followed me in the parking lot. The security guard on duty chased after the car but couldn't get the license plate number. Although I can't prove that the Woodside people were in that car, I felt that this incident was too much of a coincidence.

It seemed as though Woodside et al. had become obsessed with me. Every time I turned around, they did something else. Much of what they did made no sense, and at times was actually humorous. But it seemed they were determined to make my life so miserable that I would drop the suit against them.

I became so paranoid at one point that I would get down on the ground and check under my car before going anywhere. If anyone drove too closely behind me or seemed to be following me, I changed directions, changed lanes, or took a different exit—whatever it took to make sure I wasn't being followed.

I got a cell phone and carried it with me everywhere. The mental stress of the whole thing got to be too much and I began to see a psychotherapist. She helped me put things in perspective, calmed me down, and gave me a chance to talk it out. If I hadn't gone to see her, I don't know how I would have coped. I know I was on the verge of a mental collapse.

I came to realize that I should turn the "negative" of this situation into a "positive." So I got busy. I contacted the writers who'd been scammed by Woodside, got copies of letters and cashed checks from them, and then sent all of it to NYSAG. On November 14, 1997, NYSAG filed a civil suit against the Woodside Literary Agency et al. on four counts: false advertising, deceptive business practices, fraud, and harassment (the last for what they did to me). On February 17, 1999, NYSAG won a default judgment against Woodside. In July and August 2001, victims who paid Woodside money received restitution checks as part of that judgment.

After I testified before three Maryland legislative sessions, a bill that would make e-mail harassment a crime passed in April 1998. It is now a misdemeanor to harass anyone via e-mail in the state of Maryland, with penalties of \$500 and/or jail time.

I provided written testimony to the California legislature for a proposed cyberstalking bill. An amendment of the civil and penal codes related to stalking, this bill added the Internet and other forms of electronic communication as another method of harassment and stalking. It passed and became a law on January 1, 1999.

New Hampshire quickly approved a bill that made Internet harassment a Class A misdemeanor, punishable by up to one year in jail and/or up to a \$2,500 fine. I testified before the State House, helped amend the bill, then testified before the State Senate, where the bill was unanimously passed and put into law immediately after Governor Jeanne Shaheen signed it on June 25, 1999. Other states

soon followed, with either written or in-person testimony from me. Maine, Rhode Island, Minnesota, and Illinois were among them. Since the publication of the first edition of this book, 45 states have adopted cyberstalking or related laws. I'm working on similar legislation for the remaining states and then will approach a sponsor for a federal cyberstalking law. I don't want to see anyone else go through what I've gone through.

I volunteer my services to various organizations and law enforcement agencies nationwide, including the Department of Justice Victims of Crime, National Center for Victims of Crimes, various other law enforcement agencies, and Working to Halt Online Abuse (WHOA) and WHOA-KTD (Kids/Teen Division), of which I'm president.

I've become known as a cybercrimes expert, specializing in cyberstalking but also covering online identity theft, auction fraud, scams, and more. I speak about cybercrimes nationwide, appear on TV and radio, and am mentioned in magazine and newspaper articles. I travel the world to train law enforcement professionals on how to track down cybercriminals and work with victims. I've expanded my training sessions to include educational institutions, librarian conferences, corporations, and the general public. I want to get the word out to the public as much as possible to make them as cyber-streetsmart as I am now.

As a result of everything that's happened, my husband and I moved to an undisclosed location in New England and have taken extreme caution to keep our new residence private. Although it's worked to a certain degree, we know we're never going to be safe and that scares me. The good news is that in January 2000, I received a phone call from the U.S. Postal Inspection Service. They arrested Ursula Sprachman and James Leonard on federal charges of mail fraud and perjury. It turns out the third person, John Lawrence, was fictitious. James Leonard made up this persona, complete with social security number, driver's license, credit cards, bank accounts, and more, to do the majority of the harassment and cyberstalking. That they had become so obsessed with me as to go as far as creating this fictional persona scared me more than anything else they'd done so far.

Instead of facing a trial, the two decided to plead guilty. The federal sentencing hearing concluded on December 6, 2001. James Leonard received eight months in prison, which is the maximum sentence, and three years probation; Ursula Sprachman received three years probation, as she had no prior criminal record and because of

her age and poor health (she succumbed to illness in 2003). My lawyer made a handshake agreement for a settlement in my civil suit, the amount of which I cannot disclose. The most important thing to me was that the writers who had been scammed got their money back.

I saw this situation to the end, and I prevailed and won—not only for me, but for all writers and for all online victims.

There is justice, after all.

Endnotes

1. Signature File: A line or two of words, usually a user's name and contact information or favorite Web site URL, automatically added to the end of every e-mail or Usenet message sent out.
2. AOL: America Online, a popular Internet service provider.
3. Spamming: When someone posts a message to more than 20 newsgroups at a time.
4. Mailing List: Similar to a newsgroup except that all messages and replies are sent to your e-mail inbox. Most mailing lists are moderated; someone reads the messages before sending them to the list, eliminating most of the spam and unwanted clutter. However, some mailing lists are so busy that members can receive 100 or more messages per day.
5. Kill Filter: Many e-mail programs offer this feature so that the e-mail program can automatically delete any e-mail the user doesn't want. Most people use this for spam.
6. Geocities: An online "homestead" where people can get free Web page space, free e-mail, and other online extras. Located at www.geocities.com.
7. Sock Puppet: An e-mail address that goes nowhere when someone tries to send a message to it.
8. John Does and Richard Roes are often used in cases where the plaintiff does not know all the names of the defendants.