

# The New Avengers

Posted by *editor*

It would seem that increasingly, people don't get mad, they get online.

When I was 16, duelling pistols at dawn, or a strongly worded note scratched in blood was about the limit of my revenge arsenal. Actually, they were figments of my fevered imagination as I fantasised ways to get back at those who rejected me, and my homemade cupcakes. The thing is, back when I was sixteen, revenge seekers didn't have the tools that make retribution such an easy, instant, often sordid and permanent business.

These days, social media has levelled the playing field for people of all religions, creed, class and colour, but the virtual landscape is also littered with the fall out of those who don't or can't play properly. At almost the same time that the collective roar of Egypt's liberated youths soared across cyberspace, the silence of some powerful figures in Australian sport, squirming under the weight of another scandal, punctuated the paradoxes of social media use. With 9.8, 6.7 and 1 million [Australian visitors](#) respectively to Facebook, YouTube and Twitter each month, the degree to which persons can amplify their gripes using such tools, are almost beyond comprehension.

"There is a culture of public revenge on the rise and a reason for that is anonymity ... and the accessibility of social media tools. Adults, children, persons with intellectual or social challenges, anyone can access social media cheaply," says Sarah Calleja, Director of Action Psychology.

How popular is such payback? Some of the most visible stories include Melbourne Tigers basketballer, Corey Williams using Twitter to take on the officials of the Perth Wildcats and to bypass media to talk to his 'publics' and a Queensland woman who is punishing her husband's illicit behaviour by posting images of his lover's plus size underwear online. Down in Victoria, the St Kilda schoolgirl saga, just keeps resonating. Among the retribution tales from overseas blogs like [RevengeLady.com](#), also highlight the lengths to which the spurned and the disgruntled go to take back their power.

Sarah Calleja says the situation has many of her psychologist colleagues shaking their heads. "Anonymity is our first concern and our second is inappropriateness—people crossing boundaries, just because they can. It's alarming, we need research to determine how this behaviour could be incapacitating people and impacting on their future."

She believes that even those who are open about their identity while seeking retribution, risk causing more damage to themselves in their quest. "People experiencing failed relationships are getting online and devastating and humiliating others. It may not be illegal or immoral, but it is unethical. People are taking photos of each other in the context of a relationship and then one partner puts that up online in an effort to be punitive, which is what happened to Lara Bingle. In the end, I think Brendan Fevola was the one who got mud on his face.

"The St Kilda football girl has been able to bypass media, so no one knows what the whole truth is. Social media has enabled her beyond her maturity to do damage. There's no way to know how much harm she's caused herself.

"Here we have tools that no one has conceived of previously that have accelerated before we've applied the moral and ethical frameworks or accountability measures. As a society we need to have an understanding of what the boundaries are."

Dialogue about the need for boundaries also abound in the business and legal communities—particularly in the wake of the Age columnist Catherine Deveny's dismissal for tweets she did after hours, and more recently since the Wikileaks affair. Rostron Carlyle Solicitors is one of a growing number of legal organisations grappling with the implications of businesses social networking policies and their impact on employees using social media inside and outside work.

Anyone seeking public payback should also be aware that a number of Australian precedents and acts are in place that could mean litigation for publishing private images without consent, and for using surveillance devices on people without their consent. Lawyer, Sophie Dawson from Blake Dawson acknowledged that in light of media industry calls for defamation laws to be applied to social media, users needed to take care. "If you are unlucky and you do get sued, you could lose your house, all for the brief joy of having a go at someone online," she told [The Australian](#).

But for those who think they can hide their identity, Sarah Calleja warns, "When people do get found out and often they do, the consequences are horrendous. If you're charged for stalking offences or doing something that is considered to be abusive online, you'll have a police record against your name. You may be 18 and you may not be able to get a job, and you never ever thought that anyone would catch up with you."

Words: Jenan Taylor (@jatayls)



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