

The paedophiles, the trolls and the journalist

I NEVER SET OUT to become a cyberhate expert. What happened was so unlikely, and the twists in the story so strange and horrifying, that the narrative is hard to tell, and just as hard to follow. But, as I've since learned, trolling events are like this. The tentacles are long and deep and tangled.

My tiny second daughter was born on a boiling day in the middle of January in 2013. In the following months of endless patting, rocking and all-night feeding that arrive with a precious newborn, I became the subject of an orchestrated online hate campaign.

Three years earlier, back in 2010, I had been ABC Local Radio's Drive presenter in Far North Queensland, based in Cairns. By June of that year I was also heavily pregnant. While waiting for the birth of my daughter, I thought about how easy life was for me. How I had freedoms – like getting married, having a child and generally getting on with life. Sure, life had thrown me a few curve balls. But I'd never been routinely discriminated against. Not like the people I knew who were LGBTIQ+.

The research I read showed that if you were gay, bisexual or transgender, you were more likely to experience all sorts of disadvantages, including depression, violence, homelessness, drug addiction and suicidal thoughts.¹ This seemed to me an important, untold story. So I

wrote an open letter to Far North Queensland's gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community asking for people to come forward with their stories. The response was powerful, humbling and sometimes shocking.

Mais described being the subject of a violent assault because of his gender identity. The result was a crack to his skull and severe, ongoing pain. Trish was a young mother with three children who was trapped; she loved her husband and children but was really a lesbian. There didn't seem to be a way out. It was hard not to be moved by the pain in these stories.

As part of the interviews I compiled for this project, I found myself on the doorstep of a lovely home at Kewarra Beach, in the northern suburbs of Cairns. I can remember so clearly pulling up outside. It was a modern-style home, painted off-white, with a manicured garden. A child's bike was lying outside. At the door I was met warmly by Peter Truong and Mark Newton.

Newton, an American by birth, was tall and pale with blazing blue eyes, a strong accent and receding sandy hair. Truong, a Vietnamese Australian, had dark hair and eyes and a frame more compact than his partner's. His teeth protruded when he smiled, seeming to take up more space than they ought to.

Newton and Truong introduced me to their gorgeous five-year-old son. His name was written in wooden letters on the wall and his toys were neatly stacked away. He was told to go off and watch a DVD while I sat between his two dads on the couch and set up my audio recorder.

The two men then proceeded to tell me in great detail about how they had longed to become fathers and, after a difficult journey, ended up having their son via a surrogate mother in Russia. Newton was the biological dad.

At length, the men explained to me how hard it was to get their son into Australia. They told me Australian customs quizzed them for hours at the airport. At a later date, police checked whether the couple had suitable equipment to raise a child: a bed, clothes and bottles.

At this point in the interview I was compelled to ask, 'Do you think there was a suspicion that this must be something dodgy? There must be some paedophilic thing going on here?'

Newton replied, 'Absolutely. Absolutely. I'm sure that was completely the concern.' Both Newton and Truong smiled at the absurdity of the idea they might somehow be suspect. 'We're a family just like any other family.'

After the formal interview we went outside with their son. Like any young child, he was shy at first. After a while he opened up. He smiled and chatted and urged me to come and see his baby chickens. This is the moment that plays over and over in my mind like a home movie: the four of us are in the yard, the chicks cheeping loudly and running loose.

We chat about the chicks. Truong and the boy are trying to catch a couple of them, with some trouble. Truong asks his son if he's fed the chicks today. The boy says no. Truong tells him they would surely be very hungry by now. I ask the boy if the particular chicken he has managed to catch has a name. He replies that he hasn't figured out names yet but he might call this one 'Fasty' – presumably because it is hard to catch. Newton agrees that this chick is indeed fast.

In retrospect, the conversation was remarkable because of its ordinariness.

I snap several pictures of the boy holding a baby chick up under his chin. Peter is holding a fluffy chick too. The boy stands between his two fathers. All three of them are beaming.

At the time I thought this photo was so sweet; it featured on the front page of my gender project's web page on the ABC. Now it is the photo news organisations all over the world have published and republished, with the boy's face blurred to protect his identity. This is the image that reminds me that one single day – one decision – can leave your life irrevocably changed.

In February 2012 I learned that Mark Newton and Peter Truong were being investigated by the United States Postal Inspection Service and the Queensland Police as possible members of an international paedophile ring. The United States Postal Inspection Service is like the FBI, but they investigate crimes committed by post.

I knew straight away there must have been serious reasons to suspect these two men. Why would international policing agencies be cooperating on a case like this unless they had strong evidence?

I hoped it wasn't true but suspected it was. Dread encased me.

On Friday, 28 June 2013, Mark Newton was sentenced to forty years in prison in a US court after pleading guilty to conspiring to sexually exploit a child, and for conspiring to possess child pornography. Peter Truong also pleaded guilty for his crimes and was sentenced to thirty years' jail. (Prosecutors claimed their 'son' was actually purchased from his Russian mother for US\$8000 and was not biologically related to either of them.)

'Being a father was an honour and a privilege that amounted to the best six years of my life,' Newton reportedly told the court minutes before his sentence was announced.²

I felt dizzy with anger. A pure rage that made my face burn. The word 'privilege' lodged itself in my brain as if it had talons. I momentarily wished to stand before Newton and Truong – these men who'd welcomed me so thoroughly into their farce of a home – to say:

Being a parent is one of the most profound privileges that exists. Your job is to love that child and keep him or her safe. Instead, you systematically perpetrated heinous sex crimes against your child since he was a baby. It is sickening and it is unforgivable. What will become of your child after what you have done? Did you think about that?

You cannot overestimate the horror of the crimes. Media reports stated that the child, now known as Boy1, was abused from when he was just two weeks old. He was also shared around with numerous other paedophiles in other countries while the family was on 'holiday'.

In an email exchange, Detective Inspector Jon Rouse, from Queensland Police's Taskforce Argos, told me: 'Of the thousands of child exploitation cases I've been involved in, this will remain as one of the most horrendous breaches of a child's trust by persons charged with their care and safe upbringing.'

Within seventy-two hours of Mark Newton being sentenced, I started to get scores of hateful tweets, mostly from people in the United States calling themselves conservatives. They were responding to the article I'd written two years earlier, which was still online.

My trolls insisted I should have known what was going on behind closed doors. They wanted me shamed.

Ginger Gorman (@freshchilli) sang praises of gay men who paid surrogate to birth boy to be used for sex. SHAME HER!

So, @freshchilli: When are you and your employers going to own up to the horrible thing you have done?

@freshchilli pedophile collaborator

@freshchilli You need to add pedophile enabler to your twitter bio.
#Justsayin

@freshchilli maybe she would've picked up on it if she wasn't so blindly driven by her own biases and prejudices.

Many of the tweets conflated the gay 'lifestyle' with paedophilia. Griffith University's Professor Stephen Smallbone, who has been working on child sex abuse prevention for twenty-five years, believes such a conflation is inaccurate: 'There is a lot of variation among offenders, so it's hard to produce a specific reliable figure. But I think it would be reasonable to argue that the proportion of 'homosexual' abusers could be as low as 10 per cent. The terms homosexual (or gay) and heterosexual are actually very problematic when applied to child abuse. A small proportion of abusers will have a strictly exclusive sexual preference for – or experiences with – children. For the rest, the gender of their adult partners may be different from the gender of a child they abuse. Sexual orientation is in a sense irrelevant in sexual abuse. Whether you like men or women, are gay, straight or whatever, it is illegal to have sexual contact with children. The problem is about age and maturity, and about breaking the law, not gender or sexual orientation.'

Other trolls claimed the ABC pulled the article from their website to 'cover up what they did'. The real reason was simply compassion; Queensland Police requested the ABC take the article offline to protect Boy1's identity and the broadcaster immediately complied.

One of the trolls, despite purportedly caring about Boy1's lifetime of suffering and abuse, had no qualms about publicising this tiny victim's

name and photograph. Likewise, the right-wing blogger Robert Stacy McCain was happy to link to a post naming the child and sharing it with his millions of readers. Boy1 became a pawn in the game of moral righteousness.

To this day, my grief for Boy1 is deep and abiding. I think about him often and wonder how his life will turn out. US authorities are understandably cagey about what has happened to him since his 'dads' were arrested. I have simply been told he's safe and has ongoing access to specialist psychological help.

Sometimes I imagine talking or writing to Boy1. Although I'm not religious, it's almost like prayer. That's the only way I can describe it. A hope. A wish. A message, which I have no way to send him.

Dear Boy1, you've become a number. Since your case ended up in court, I'm not allowed to identify you. But in my head I say your name. I can see your face, clear as day. I see your sweet, shining eyes and your cheeky smile. Your white teeth. I can even hear your little voice, imploring me to come and see your baby chickens. If I knew then what I know now, I would have done anything to stop the heinous crimes being perpetrated against you. I would have done anything to end your misery. But I didn't know. I had no idea. None of us did. I'm so sorry. Please, somehow, may you be one of the few child abuse victims who make it through and find a path to recovery.

I'm connected to him because of what happened. And then disconnected too, because I'll likely never know the rest of his story. What I can tell you is the rest of my story.

Late one night not long after the trolling began, I read a tweet that said: 'Your life is over.'³

My husband Don and I quickly realised that location services were turned on for my Twitter feed and you could just about pinpoint our house on Google Maps. That night we both lay awake in bed wondering if our children were in danger.

Six days after Newton was sentenced in 2013 came the second frightening moment. Don found a photo of our family on the fascist

social network Iron March. The now-defunct website carried the slogan 'Gas the kikes' on its homepage.

In the photo posted on Iron March I was pregnant with our second child, and my older daughter, who was two at the time, was sitting on my husband's shoulders. It's a strange feeling to see that photo, taken with love for our family Christmas card, in such a hateful location. Had I, through the course of my work, put my family at risk?

One commenter called me a 'bitch'. 'Look at the fucking beak on it,' another poster wrote.

My mother's parents were Jews who fled the Holocaust. Some of our family members *were* gassed at Auschwitz. Yet despite the clear threat, there was no way to know if these people meant actual harm. We just had to sit and wait.