How Google refused to take down vile slurs branding me a child murderer: ESTHER RANTZEN on the faceless trolls who threatened her charity work - but were still backed by the search engine because of her 'public role'

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Fighting back: Esther Rantzen asked Google to disassociate the link from a search for her name
Some people hate me. I'm not sure why, but I've learned over the years that there is nothing I can do about it. So, frankly, I usually forget about it, and if for some reason I am reminded, I certainly don't worry about it.
It’s a thick skin I developed during my (almost) 50 years working in broadcasting. I’ve found that the best way is to respect and care about the people who respect and care about you, and ignore the rest.

That was my philosophy until two months ago, in early November, when my colleague, James, mentioned something that had come to his attention on Google.

James is a successful businessman and a generous supporter of The Silver Line, the advice line I launched three years ago to help isolated older people. He explained that someone working for him — a young person who wanted to know more about my career — had Googled my name and been horrified by what he’d uncovered.

Directly beneath Wikipedia’s biography of me was the link to a shocking website. It included a lengthy diatribe which, among other lurid allegations, accused me of satanic child abuse, child murder, burying dead babies in my garden, holding drug-fuelled sex parties, covering up the crimes of well-known paedophiles, and creating Childline (the confidential helpline I set up in 1986 which has now helped four-and-a-half million children) as a front organisation whose sole purpose was to filter out accusations of abuse by celebrities.

These trolls could have wrecked my charity work

Anyone reading this poisonous filth, the website shrieked with rage, would be astonished that I had not been arrested for all these crimes long ago.

No wonder my colleague was deeply concerned when he read it. Not just because of the reputational damage it could do me personally, but because of the real harm it would do to the causes I care about, especially the work I have done with Childline for the past 30 years to protect children from abuse.

When I read the allegations made on the website, I shrugged it off at first. After all, the claims were so wild, surely no one could possibly take them seriously.

But James reminded me that there is a generation of young people — such as his colleague who found this website on Google — who know nothing about my television career, and might think, reading this terrible material in a respected search engine, that there must be some truth in it.

It was, after all, the second weblink listed in Google’s search results, and so many of today’s young treat what they read online as gospel . . .

So I approached Google, and, using their official complaints procedure, asked them to remove the weblink. After a week, they got back to me. They said they would not remove it.
Esther was shocked to find the vicious website attacking her and feared people who didn't know her would believe the lies.

They said they declined to do anything on the grounds of what they described as my ‘role in public life’ and ‘the public interest’.

Instead, they suggested I should take up the matter with the people who created the website and propagated these lies.

But, of course, I had no idea who they were. Like so much on the internet, it’s an anonymous website.

And, of course, this anonymity encourages the very worst aspects of human nature. The viciousness that used to be restricted to pub gossip or spiteful back-biting has now been provided with a world stage, thanks to modern technology.

Psychiatrist Dr Raj Persaud told me that research proves that internet trolls tend to be sadistic, Machiavellian psychopaths. They take pleasure in inflicting pain, they manipulate
people and search engines to get the result they want, and feel no remorse about the effects of their actions.

And yet, if anyone were to meet these trolls in person, they would often seem timid, meek and diffident. They display their violent cruelty only when they are confident they have a secure hiding place from where they can inflict as much pain as they want — anonymously.

After speaking with members of the press office at Google the links were finally removed

Only then can they feel powerful, whereas in real life they feel inadequate and impotent.

These are people who may well be suffering from serious mental disorders.

All the more reason for Google, Twitter and other search engines and social media sites to deny them the oxygen they need to fuel their obsessions, and to take away the audience they crave.

Until they do so, these faceless people can continue to take pleasure in inflicting pain and to ‘game the algorithms’, as I’ve learnt it is called, which means finding ways to outwit the mathematical rules that govern the way internet searches work (for instance by adding particular key words to weblink titles).

That way, they get their sites to the top of rankings and so reach the widest possible audiences.
It is a new battlefield in cyberspace: the trolls against the search engines.

In theory, search engines place the links which are considered most useful or popular at the top of the page. Generally, when listing results in order, they also take into consideration many other so-called ‘signals’ — for example, how often the page is updated and if it is from a trustworthy domain.

But in my case the trolls had won. And like many other of their victims, I found myself by mid-November still helpless, appalled that this pernicious website full of evil lies about me continued to be displayed so prominently for the world to see.

As a journalist, I know that no newspaper or magazine would ever have published these sick fantasies — claims made without any evidence — because they are such obvious libels.

No editor would have considered them for a moment. But the internet prides itself on being the Wild West of Information, where anything goes.

**No newspaper would print these sick lies about me**

And — as we have heard recently — this has led to the proliferation of fake news (such as that Donald Trump was born in Pakistan or that U2’s Bono had been rescued during a terror attack).

And is it not ironic that whereas newspapers are increasingly threatened by regulation, the internet remains free from such strictures. Indeed, shockingly, only a dozen of the 2,000 pages in the Leveson report on the Press covered the internet, despite the fact that it is the world’s fastest growing source of news.

It did not contain a single recommendation for regulating this vital area, on the grounds — I would say mistaken grounds — that ‘people will not assume that what they read on the internet is trustworthy, or carries any particular assurance or accuracy’.

In other words, the more unreliable, unfair and untruthful a news source might be, the less it needed regulating.

My personal dilemma aside, this all demonstrates that there are great issues at stake here which governments are failing to address.

Surely we deserve better. And for the sake of democracy, rather than worrying about the already regulated Press, surely ministers should be more concerned about the unregulated internet.

Not to censor it, but to encourage companies such as Google, Twitter and Facebook to use their common sense and exercise their skills — and their huge incomes — to prevent the trolls from creating a world where there is no distinction between fact and fantasy.

As I had no idea who my trolls were, I decided again to approach Google, but through a different route.

I reasoned that rather than giving prominent space to sensational lies, surely Google (which incidentally supports both Childline and the NSPCC) must be concerned that by giving such a seemingly authoritative voice to this damaging garbage, countless impressionable people might be swayed by it.
Worst of all, if they believed the lurid accusations, then children might be dissuaded from turning to Childline if they need help.

So much for Google’s avowed corporate motto: ‘Don’t be evil’.

Having rebuffed me once, this time Google offered me an alternative way to complain: the legal route.

I had to fill in a form explaining that the vile material was damaging and untrue, and therefore constituted an offence under the Defamation Act 2013.

However, the form was so complicated that I had to ask an expert in the NSPCC for guidance. As the charity runs Childline, and could at once see the potential harm to our crucial work for children, they helped me complete the document.

And, at last, there was a result — well, sort of.

Google withdrew an article about me — but not the one I’d originally contacted them about. It informed me it had taken down a piece on another less popular site, which it owned, called Blogger.

I hadn’t even seen this particular article, but it seems to have copied much of the content from the original lurid piece.
So, still, that first article remained, complete with its allegations of satanic abuse, child murder etc, as prominent as ever on Google’s main search listings, directly beneath my entry in Wikipedia.

Of course, I am not the only victim. Last month, a journalist for The Observer newspaper discovered that when anyone calls up Google and types in the question ‘Did the Holocaust happen?’, the top-ranking weblink that comes up was an article on a neo-Nazi website entitled ‘Top 10 reasons why the Holocaust didn’t happen’.

This shameful, Holocaust-denying material was what Google chose to rank above all other authoritative reports that explain how six million Jews were killed by the Nazis during World War II.

Initially, when the journalist brought this to the attention of the search engine’s bosses, they refused to remove it, or alter its results.

They disclaimed responsibility by saying: ‘We are saddened to see that hate organisations still exist. The fact that hate sites appear in search results does not mean that Google endorses these views.’

However, after The Observer’s findings were widely reported, Google released a statement saying that it had managed to tweak its algorithm to ‘help surface more high-quality, credible content on the web’.

But the episode raises deeply worrying questions.

Why do such conspiracy sites manage to manipulate Google’s ranking system in the first place? How do they manage to ‘game the algorithms’ so well? Since The Observer had been successful, and in the hope that publicity might be the only way to fight Google’s intransigence over my case, too, I contacted the Daily Mail about writing an article on this battle.

And of course, as a responsible, professional journalist I must then contact Google’s Press Office for a comment.

My conversation with them took place at 7.30pm on Wednesday. Within 90 minutes, the disgraceful weblink — about which Google had previously done nothing — was taken down.

But, of course, I am in a privileged position. It shouldn’t be that fear of being exposed in a national newspaper should force a climbdown. Google should have done so of its own accord, without any pressure.

When I asked Google why it had taken so long to remove such obvious, lurid defamation, it admitted that some of their systems had not worked as they should.

I was told: ‘Our goal is to help people find the huge amount of information that is available on the web, but we do remove content from our results in response to valid legal requests — for example, when a page contains defamatory material. We work hard to provide high-quality and accurate results for searches, but judging which pages on the web best answer a query is a challenging problem, and we don’t always get it right.

‘We’re constantly updating our algorithms to improve the quality of our search results.’
If I had not had the Mail on my side, there’s no doubt in my mind that the disgusting libel would still be there for all to see — with all its power to damage Childline’s invaluable work.

But not everyone is in my privileged position.

The fact is that Google, Twitter and all those who claim to be doing mankind a service by offering a liberating platform for the complete spectrum of our opinions, hopes and fears, are disgracefully failing in what ought to be their duty. Namely, to protect us from the worst excesses of human nature.

The Bible says in the Ninth Commandment: ‘Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.’

And the Eleventh should now read: ‘And thou shalt not allow people to tell wicked, damaging lies in cyberspace.’