

For better or worse, web phenomenon Chatroulette takes all the filters off, writes Louise Burke

'Four hundred bucks,' the car full of young West Coast supporters shouted at me as I stood waiting for the lights to change in Subiaco on a recent Sunday evening, before hurling the kind of abusive language which doesn't bear repeating. When that didn't appear to persuade me to perform a sexual act for them, they reasoned: "That's more than you earned last week (tart)!"

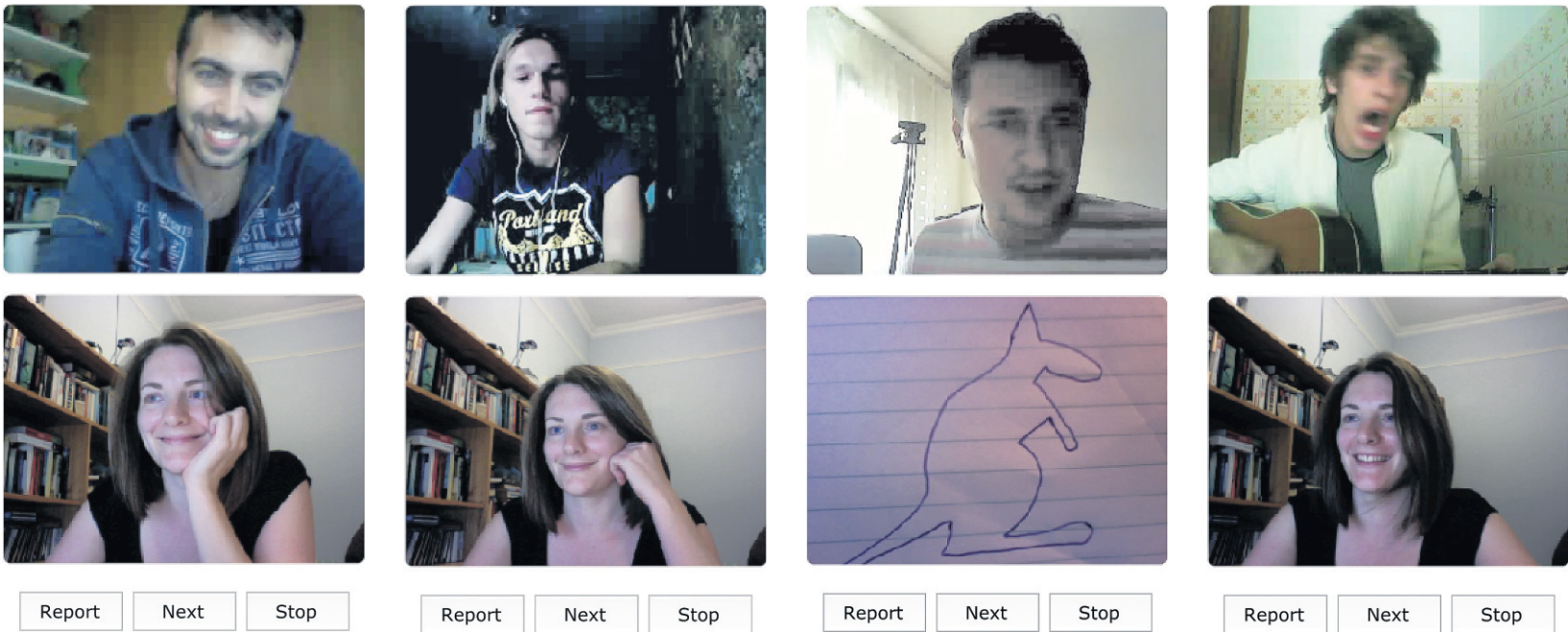
I repeat this incident not to incite anger — while it's on the extreme end of the scale, this kind of thing is almost background noise for women who take an evening stroll. Even in the so-called golden triangle.

And I doubt it's any worse than the things being yelled out of cars in the 60s, 70s, 80s or 90s.

Before that I like to imagine the insults were more refined — perhaps "Show us your petticoat maiden of the night" or "your inheritance is inadequate you scantily clad vixen!"

But it's worth keeping this kind of everyday, real-world behaviour in mind before considering the way people socialise on the internet.

The net doesn't create perverts, or even garden-variety idiots, it just gives them a bigger audience.



Chat like never before

This week I ventured on to the underbelly of social media, Chatroulette, to see what the online world is coming to. Chatroulette, invented in the bedroom of Russian teenager Andrey Ternovskiy late last year with a bit of funding from his parents, has grown to tens of thousands of online users at any time.

The concept is simple, turn your webcam on and the site randomly links you to chat via video link with random strangers around the world. Don't like what you see? hit "next" and you'll get someone else.

Or, in most cases, something else. Something-fleshy-else.

After five minutes of "nexting" tens of something else, I can safely recommend parents keep their children far, far away from this site. Medical students on the other hand may find it useful.

Such is Chatroulette's reputation that last month Apple went as far as banning the site, and anything resembling it, in its guidelines for app developers. It's even been lampooned by South Park and Jon Stewart on the Daily Show.

Various informal studies bandied around the web suggest the percentage of male users is anywhere between 70 and 90 per cent. Users are also said to be twice as likely to encounter a sign requesting female nudity than actual female nudity.

Despite the reputation, it's not all bad. The most famous success story is "Merton", a pianist who improvised songs about the people he was linked with on Chatroulette and recorded their reactions.

His first clip clocked more than six million views on YouTube.

After rumours the anonymous hooded Merton was popular American singer-songwriter Ben Folds, Folds performed a live ode to the internet sensation at a concert, using Chatroulette on stage.

The fascination with Chatroulette recalls the early days of the web, according to Curtin University internet studies lecturer Tama Leaver, who says the dominance of personality based sites such as Facebook have prompted a desire to recapture complete "randomness".

"I think with the evolution of things like Facebook and sites like that, we've become a lot more attached to our real name and our real identities. Chatroulette, if nothing else, is completely random," Dr Leaver said.

"At the same time it adds that element of video, which is always a

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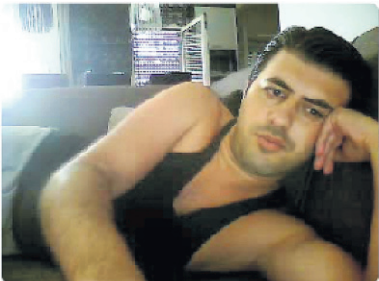
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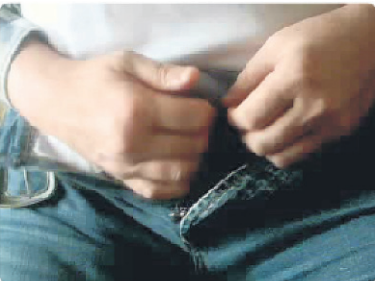
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 From P32

'Some of the connections people make are incredibly valuable'

DR TAMA LEAVER,
CURTIN UNIVERSITY LECTURER

thousand times more risque, but it reaps much bigger rewards if you find someone interesting to talk to.”

Dr Leaver had heard of instances where people had found themselves talking to soldiers serving in Afghanistan or Iraq. “You do hear about some people having amazing conversations, people connecting who would never have otherwise found a way to interact.”

With a bit of persistence, I found it was possible to find interesting,

apparently normal, people to talk to.

In fact, the ordinariness of some of the conversations I had in my week of trialling the site came as a surprise. It seems it’s not just West Australians who are fascinated by the weather.

A New Yorker who worked in a lead recycling plant told me about the last show he saw on Broadway, and the dangers of his work environment.

A marketing student, also from the US, talked about his new puppy, a black Labrador, and held her up to his webcam for me to admire.

I drew pictures of Australia and a hopping kangaroo to show a Romanian man where I was from, while he attempted to translate with an online dictionary.

A teenager strummed his guitar and sung something unintelligible until I got bored of humming along

and clicked next. The sleazier users were more predictable, always starting with variations on “hi sexy”, “show me yours and I’ll show you mine” or holding up signs requesting nudity.

Dr Leaver said some high-publicity incidents of children getting access to the site (despite its explicit 16+ warning) and being exposed to confronting sexual images had not helped its reputation.

A proliferation of clone sites have attempted to use different methods to create more family friendly versions.

There is also potential for using algorithms to measure skin exposure in order to block content.

“Anything where there’s potential for something risky or pornographic to be displayed, you have a lot of people saying this is terrible and this is wrong, and it is one of the hard

things to balance,” Dr Leaver said.

“If you go to that ideal of being as free as possible, free often means you have the good and the bad in equal measure.

“But that said, some of the connections people make are incredibly valuable.”

People were often very wary of interacting with strangers in the real world but at the same time craved that interaction, he said.

“That chance of a random connection is a very valuable thing socially if people are looking to explore and engage with other people they wouldn’t otherwise engage with,” Dr Leaver said.

A big part of the site’s appeal, as well as its downfall, is the perceived lack of consequences creating a “carnival” environment where virtually anything goes.

“You get the very good, the very

random, the very bizarre, the very exciting and of course the fairly substantial chunk of very disturbing,” Dr Leaver said.

I saw some good things, definitely some random things and plenty of the “very disturbing”.

But none of it felt as threatening as being yelled at on the streets of my own neighbourhood.

I eagerly await the day the real world catches up with the net, and instead of waiting for the lights to change to escape unsavoury people, I can simply hit “next”.


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