

SAMPLE REPORT
ON
SOCIAL MEDIA INVESTIGATION

A target uses one social media site and an investigator collects information through that site. With large sites like Facebook and Twitter, there is often a good chance a target will have an account, so this is a good strategy.

This is a step -by- step description of an actual investigation that I was asked to do. I am anonymizing the identity of the target for her protection, as she has not been arrested or charged with any crime. This story is intended to demonstrate the investigative process, including all the dead ends that led to the final insights.

THE TARGET

The target of this investigation, whom I will call "Sarita" is a woman who has an unhealthy interest (perhaps obsession) for a classic rock band called MK Band. Her interest was especially focused around one band member in particular, whom I will call "Anil".

Sarita maintains Facebook tribute pages to Anil. She travels around the country to see Anil's band and always has pictures taken with them. She also sends e-mails and gifts to Anil. But it was when she showed his pictures she had taken of his house- a few hundred miles from where she lives – that she was brought to my attention. Anil was concerned that Sarita's interest had escalated to a level where she might be dangerous.

THE BACKGROUND INTIAL INFORMATION

The initial information I had for Sarita included some screenshots of discussions she participated in from her Facebook tribute pageto Anil. In the discussions, she would occasionally post angry rants about other women who had an interest in Anil of MK Band especially if they posted a comment she disapproved of. She actively banned people from viewing the fan page (and her profile page also.)

Her true name was very common, so simply searching for her on the web was not likely to return good results. She also appeared to have several fake accounts that she used to post. The language used in the rants from these fake accounts was very similar to the language in Sarita's Post. Also Sarita's profile picture was a photo of her and Anil together, while the fake accounts profile photos were beach scenes; no actual person was shown. While this is not evidence of anything by itself, it might suggest that someone did not have a personal profile photo to upload.

THE INVESTIGATION

Facebook, Part 1: Finding and "In"

I began by visiting the facebook fan page for Anil. Since the fan page was public, I found a few posts by Sarita. These linked back to her facebook profile page. She had her privacy settings turned on quite high, so I could not find any information about her from her page. In fact, I could not even send her a friend request, since we did not have any friends in common. (This is a facebook setting people can choose to protect themselves from "spam" friend requests)

I decided to start by sending friend requests to active members of the fan page. I assumed that some of them would be friends with Sarita, which thus allows me to send her a friend request. I became a fan of Anil's page myself and sent the friend requests. I did not include any messages with these requests: there was no deception. I simply befriended people who actively posted in the community, particularly people who had liked or commented on things Sarita had posted.

Within an hour, one member had accepted my friend request. He was friends with Sarita, so I could now send Sarita a friend request. This would show up as a request from someone who had a friend in common with her.

Other Social Networks, Part I

While I waited for her to respond to my request, I began searching for her in a number of different ways on the web.

I started with her facebook username, which was something like Sarita.Verma.4121. However, this did not turn up anything outside of facebook. I also saved a copy of her facebook profile picture and did a Google image search for matching pictures, in case she had used it on other

profiles. However, that returned no results either. I searched for forums or forum posts centered around Anil's career, hoping to find posts by Sarita. No luck.

I went to Twitter and searched for her by name. Since I had a photo of her from facebook, I hoped I would be able to identify her visually in a profile picture. This did not turn up any accounts that I could identify. I also searched on Pinterest for boards dedicated to Anil, thinking she might have maintained one of these, but there were not any. I even looked at photos of Anil posted on Pinterest, but there were not too many. I was able to check out each one and confirm that, as far as I could tell it had not been posted by Sarita.

On LinkedIn, there were over 350 people with Sarita's name. I went through the list by hand, looking for people in her known home state of Haryana. I found one woman who did not have a profile photo. She was a fourth grade teacher. I then searched for her and the name of her school. This Google search eventually leads to a Facebook page for her church that in turn, linked to her Facebook profile. It was not the Sarita, I was looking for. I went through a few more dead ends before hitting page 8 of the search results, where I found a profile with her photo on it. It was the same person in the Facebook photo.

Unfortunately, this page did not provide much more information. She listed no places of employment, and her connections were not visible. All that showed were interests in freelance writing and photography. Using a non personal account, I sent her a LinkedIn connection request.

Other Social Networks, Part II: First Success

However, since she had a different profile photo on LinkedIn than she had on Facebook, I did another Google image search for photos. This time, I looked for those that matched her LinkedIn picture.

I was rewarded with four hits, all on the internet forum "Find a Celebrity Taste" This site is dedicated to locating taste of celebrities. The first hit was for Sarita's profile page on this forum. It included a rambling and somewhat patronizing message, instructing people on what was "respectful and appropriate" which was very much in line with her tone on Facebook.

This site provided a list of her ancestors and links to many pages she created and maintained, which described the graves of her relatives. The comments on her profile page also indicated that she has asked several people to transfer control to her for pages that they had created for “Find a Celebrity Taste”

This was actually an important insight, even though it did not have anything to do with Anil. The fact that she used a condescending, demanding tone in her posts and that she overreached her bounds in a need to control things on this website indicated that her behavior was typical of her personality and not restricted to her interest in Anil.

Sarita did not have a username on “Find a Celebrity Taste” that was not simply her name. Unfortunately, this name was also extremely common- something many different people would use across sites. Still, I tried searching for the username along with Anil’s name and his band’s name in Google, but there were no promising results.

Facebook, Part II: Fake Accounts and Friends

Back on Facebook, I looked for a couple of the fake accounts that Anil suspected Sarita of maintaining. One had disappeared, but one was still active. Using the screen grabs, I was able to match photos from the deleted account with photos on the active fake account. Both used the same beach scene on their profile pages. Again, while this is not necessarily evidence of anything, it suggested a possible connection between the two pages, I checked to see if the active fake account was friends with Sarita, but I could not see a connection there (possibly there was none or possibly because of Sarita’s Privacy settings).

By this point, Sarita had logged on and accepted my friend request. Now, I could see all her posts, photos and profile information. Browsing through her photos and status updates, it became clear that she was obviously a serious fan of Anil and his band, but she also mentioned other bands. She also mentioned her interest in tracking down the “Find a Celebrity Taste” sites of famous actors and her family members, echoing what I found on the “Find a Celebrity Taste” forum.

Facebook, Part III: Findings

About half her posts detailed her trips to see Anil's band or other bands perform. She talked about breaking down in her car when she heard one band member was retiring. The other half of her posts were both melancholy and somewhat self – righteous.

Example include

- “ How frustrating it is when you're the only person who can see how evil and sneaky someone is and everyone else is blind to it”
- “Sometimes it's better to be alone nobody can hurt you” and
- “ A successful woman is one who can build a firm foundation with the bricks others have thrown at her”

Her profile included links to her Twitter and YouTube pages. Her YouTube channel was dedicated to a totally different artist, featuring tributes to him and videos of him performing.

Her Twitter handle included Anil's last name in it, but her tweet's were protected. I sent a follow up request to her from Twitter account that matched the Facebook account she had already approved. To gain her trust through mutual interests, I tweeted a link to a video from Anil's band, so she would see it if checked out my profile.

Other Social Networks, Part III

As I waited to see if she would respond, I used her Twitter handle as a username in another Google search. This username was more unique. It turned up Sarita's Pinterest account (with her real name attached to that Twitter handle). The account had only one photo posted, and it was of a band in the same genre of Anil's band (but not Anil's band itself).

It also turned up a single post on the weight loss site My Fitness Pal, which did not have anything to do with Anil.

At this point, I has a pretty clear picture of Sarita's Activities. She had not replied to my requests to connect on LinkedIn or Twitter, but I felt like the other sources had provided enough background to draw my conclusions.

INVESTIGATION RESULTS

After reviewing all the information available about Sarita on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn and the forum site “Find a Celebrity Taste”, I was able to draw a conclusion about Sarita.

First, she ties a lot of her identity into her fandom for bands general and Anil’s band in particular. She is definitely a big fan of Anil herself as well. She follows the band around the country and posts about them frequently on a number of platforms. However, Anil (and his band) is not her only focus; she talks about other bands and maintains fan pages for them too.

She is also a lonely person who does not seem to be happy with her life. She does not have a career, and her posts suggest she is divorced and unhappy being single. She gets angry with people for perceived small slights and responds with long, angry rants and often completely cuts these people out of her social media life. Many of her posts are preemptively defensive, warning people about the potential consequences if they get in her way. Yet, she has no power to actually do anything to anyone who “crosses” her expect to block them.

Taken together, it seems that Sarita’s few interests form the core of her personal identity. Her confidence is low, and she holds on to these interests with fierce intensity. At the same time, it seems that she has never done anything to anyone who hurts her expect to complain about it or hide from them.

In addition, she had interests beyond Anil and did not post anything especially creepy about him. Her enthusiasm seemed unhealthy, but not dangerous. Thus, as a result of the investigation, I reported back to Anil that nothing on social media indicated he had to worry about Sarita.

Research Associate

New Delhi