

Scamming the scammers: online romance victims fight back

Julie Power

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Spurned and scorned, victims of romance and other scams are turning into online vigilantes.

Frustrated by law enforcement's inability to catch the scammers who often stole their hearts as well as their savings, victims have set up hundreds of websites to bait, trick and track scammers, mostly based in West Africa.

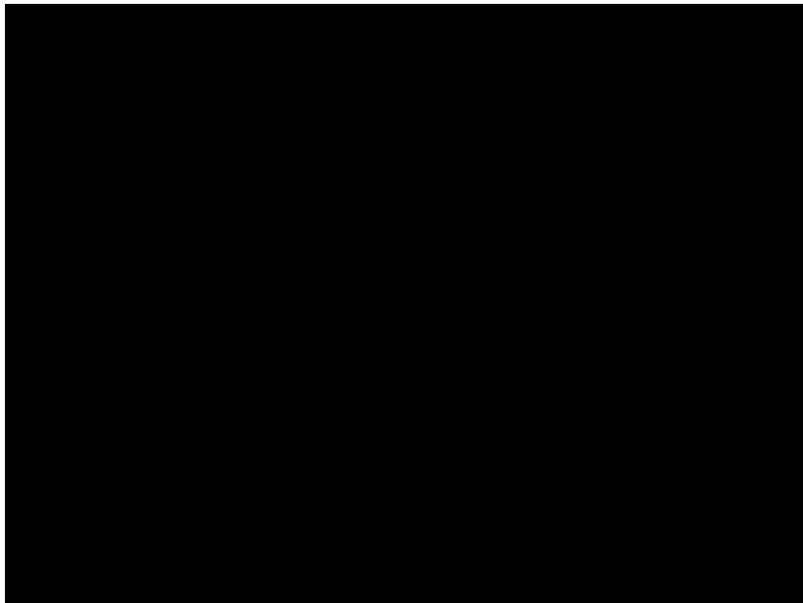
UK author Stephen Lee Ostrowski describes himself as a "fully fledged scambaiter based on the wealth of knowledge and accumulated scammers tricks of the trade". He uses a decoy personality Gerty to lure romance scammers. "We'll promise to send money for their sick son, visa, airline ticket," he said. "We even send fake Western Union payment slips to get their hopes up."

To make himself a target, he enrolls in dating sites where he portrays himself as a "lonely middle aged man looking for love". He has taken hundreds of "scalps" this way, stopping scammers in their tracks or wasting their time.

Ostrowski got involved when somebody he considered "financially astute" lost thousands of pounds in a West African scam. Before he started, he didn't realise the size of the problem, which he claims is the 10th biggest industry in Nigeria. Now he has enormous respect for the scammers' inventiveness. "They never cease to amaze me though with added twists to their approach when one story or scenario becomes too familiar or is a little overused."

He operates three fake profiles on a Facebook page, *"Support Group For Those Who Have Been Romance Scammed"* to waste scammers' time and uncover their true identities. He also baits Russian romance scammers who target men on dating or social media sites. These are usually run by crime syndicates in Russia and the Ukraine using fake profiles compiled of Russian model photos, said Mr Ostrowski, who has written a book on Russian scams.

There are 1000s of scambusting sites, including Pigbusters, [Stolen Valor](#), Military Imposters Awareness, 419Eater.com, ScammingScammers, Women Who Hate Nigerian Romance Scammers, and [RomanceScam.com](#). Others, like the man calling himself Nigerian Scamhunter, post [YouTube videos](#) and warnings, showing potential victims how to see if an image has been stolen by a romance scammer.



Scamming the scammers makes good radio for New Jersey scam hunter and comedian Davin Rosenblatt. To fool scammers, the cast of his [radio show Davin's Den](#) concoct characters and stories as crazy and convoluted as those devised by the bad guys to suck in victims. A character, Joe Currie, told a female scammer he could only pay in drachmas and yaks.

A Perth health worker in her early 30s named Damita Cherie (not her real name) asked the comedian for help when a scammer harassed her after she stopped payments. Ms Cherie met her "soldier" - who claimed he was Sergeant James Harris on deployment in Iraq - when he asked to chat via her Yahoo email. When the Western Australian police investigated Ms Cherie after they spotted large sums of money being sent out of the country, she realised she had been scammed.

After tracking down her scammer's phone number in West Africa, Rosenblatt's co-host called creating a character called US General Bulldog McIvey.

"How did you find me?" asked Cherie's scammer. "We are the US Army," boomed the General. "We found Bin Laden, we can find anyone. We have a drone flying over your house right now." By the end of the bizarre exchange, the scammer admitted he was the man claiming to be James Harris and soon stopped threatening Cherie.

These scams amount to "emotional rape", says Mr Rosenblatt, who was motivated by the large number of victims who have attempted or committed suicide. "Not only do you have a broken heart, and not only have you lost money, society looks down on you as a dummy."

Rosenblatt's patience doesn't extend to repeat victims. "Scammers got to eat, too," he said.

After falling in love with a US Marine online who stole her heart and her money, Tracee Douglas is warning victims and trying to stop scammers. When her soldier turned out to be a 22-year-old Nigerian man who had stolen the soldier's photos, she set up Military Scammers: The fight back (a private group which only members can access on Facebook)

Ms Douglas uses five or six fake Facebook personalities to lure and trick scammers.

The 300 members of her site are mostly victims of online military romance frauds where West African criminals, for the most part, have stolen the photos and names of dead and alive soldiers such as three-star Lieutenant General William B. Caldwell's ID. He might have been one of the top US army officers but he couldn't stop scammers from stealing his photos and ID thousands of times, he told [The Good Weekend](#).

Police warn that these sorts of activities are dangerous, reminding victims that these scams are often run by organised crime syndicates. Australian police have also had a range of successful prosecutions against scammers in West Africa, though they admit they know of only a fraction of the scams occurring. By continuing to be involved, they fear victims don't recover from the emotional and financial devastation of these scams by continuing to be involved. Because most of these scams operate across borders, prosecuting the criminals is more difficult than domestic crimes.

If you fear you have been scammed, contact

Scamwatch # [1300 795 995](tel:1300795995)

Scamwatch <http://www.scamwatch.gov.au/>

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/scamming-the-scammers-online-romance-victims-fight-back-20141205-121044.html>