

Laws about online behaviour

There are a number of laws that apply to behaviour online.

? Is cyberbullying or trolling against the law?

Although bullying, cyberbullying or trolling are not specific criminal offences in UK law, there are criminal laws that can apply in terms of harassment or threatening behaviour. For example should you receive threatening, obscene or repeated messages and fear for your safety, this is against the law and you should contact the police. Context is taken into consideration and the police will determine the response on a case by case basis.

Some of the laws below are relevant:

Communications Act 2003: This Act covers all forms and types of public communication. With regards to comments online, it covers the sending of grossly offensive, obscene, menacing or indecent communications and any communication that causes needless anxiety or contains false accusation.

Protection from Harassment Act 1997: This Act covers any form of harassment that has occurred 'repeatedly'; in this instance, 'repeatedly' means on one or more occasions.

The Malicious Communications Act 1988: This Act covers the sending of grossly offensive or threatening letters, electronic communications or any other form of message with the intention of causing harm, distress or anxiety.

Equality Act 2010: This Act states that it is against the law to discriminate against anyone on the ground of protected characteristics. These include disability, gender reassignment (when a person undergoes a process, or part of a process – social or medical – for the purpose of reassigning their sex), race (including colour, nationality, ethnic or national origin), religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.

Hate crimes and hate speech If you commit a crime against someone because of their religion, race, sexual orientation or disability, this is classified as a hate crime. Hate speech is defined as expressions of hatred and threats directed at a person or a group of people on account of that person's colour, race, nationality, ethnic or national origin, religion or sexual orientation. Hate crimes should be reported to **True Vision** – www.report-it.org.uk

? What other laws affect the online space?

The Computer Misuse Act 1990 says you can't impersonate or steal someone else's identity online. This means that writing a status on social media pretending to be your friend is technically against the law.

The Protection of Children Act 1978 and the Criminal Justice Act 1988 says that indecent images (naked pictures) of children under the age of 18 are illegal.

Section 33 of the Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015 refers to the new offence dealing with Revenge Pornography. This is a law relating to images of adults (ie over 18s), making it illegal to share or make public sexually explicit images of someone else, without their consent, with the intent to cause distress.

