

## *Omegle Shuts Down as Founder Acknowledges Crime on Video Chat Site*

Omegle's popularity surged during the pandemic. But critics said that it let online sexual predators go unchecked.

By Eduardo Medina

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Omegle, the popular website and app that paired random users through video chat, has shut down after its founder acknowledged persistent criminal activity and critics said that it had become a haven for pedophilia and child sexual abuse.

Founded in 2009, Omegle spiked in popularity during the coronavirus pandemic quarantines, as visitors found surprising moments of socialization from a roulette of strangers onscreen.

But the anonymous, freewheeling nature of the website, which had about 60 million monthly visits, also made it a hub for pedophiles, according to lawsuits and law enforcement agencies across the country that have sued the website or listed it in complaints related to child sexual abuse imagery cases.

The founder of Omegle, Leif K-Brooks, said in a letter posted to the site's home page that despite his efforts to foster a community that could "alleviate feelings of loneliness" or spur connections, the crimes and misuses that had taken place had made its operations "no longer sustainable, financially nor psychologically."

Mr. K-Brooks, who founded the website at 18 years old, did not explicitly mention problems with pedophilia on the website in the letter. Still, he noted that while "it is reasonable to question the policies and practices of any place where crime has occurred," the recent criticisms had led him to conclude that "the only way to please these people is to stop offering the service."

He could not be immediately reached for comment on Thursday.

The end of Omegle comes as lawmakers and law enforcement agencies continue to examine the role of technology and social media in the explosion of online child sex abuse in recent years.

While the problem predates the internet, smartphones, social media and cloud storage have worsened the issue, and several lawsuits and criminal cases have argued that Omegle enabled abusers to meet children for anonymous messaging and coercion.

Michele Bush, a forensics expert and the owner of Loehrs Forensics, a consulting firm that handles civil and criminal litigation regarding electronic evidence, said that the demise of Omegle has highlighted twin crises that haunt tech companies. Such businesses face the problem of addressing rampant criminal activity on their platforms, sometimes with limited resources to stop it. They also face threats of criminal charges if they do not comply with requests from the authorities for data that could prove such activity.

These threats came to a head in 2018, when federal authorities took down Backpage.com, a major classified advertising website that had been repeatedly accused of enabling prostitution and sex trafficking of minors, in a move that unnerved other tech companies.

When Mr. K-Brooks noted in his letter the personal toll of being a watchman for his site, Ms. Bush said, he was likely hinting at how “he is terrified of the legal implication that I’m sure law enforcement are putting on him to basically investigate these crimes.”

“It’s kind of like if a small mom-and-pop restaurant was trying to run their business, and the F.D.A. said, ‘You need to do this, this and this,’” Ms. Bush said. “Well, the time that it’s going to take me to figure out how to get what you need is going to put me out of business.”

The problem for Omegle, Ms. Bush said, was that it was a simple website: It did not require any sort of identifying information to verify users, including email, name or phone number.

The only identifying information the platform could have captured was an I.P. address, the unique sequence of numbers assigned to each computer or smartphone connected to the internet. Since Omegle did not collect that information, Ms. Bush said, when somebody used the website to collect or distribute child sexual abuse imagery, “you have this level of anonymity that was prohibiting law enforcement from being able to get anywhere in their investigation.”

Mr. K-Brooks said in the letter that while the company had “implemented a number of improvements” to its services, including human moderators, the standards that critics had set to safeguard the site were “not humanly achievable.”

Still, several lawsuits against Omegle have accused the company of skirting responsibility for what occurred on the site. Omegle had placed a disclaimer on its home page stating that children under 13 should not use the service and that “human behavior is fundamentally uncontrollable” and some users “may not behave appropriately,” according to court records.

A suit against the company in U.S. District Court in New Jersey called the warning “nothing but window dressing.”

Another lawsuit against Omegle in the U.S. District Court in Oregon claims that a man in his thirties had met an 11-year-old girl on the site and forced her to record herself engaging in sexual acts.

On Omegle, the suit stated, “these predatory users felt empowered and incentivized to continue their abusive and malicious use of the product.”

**Eduardo Medina** is a reporter covering breaking news. More about Eduardo Medina