

Social media cases up by 40 per cent

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CASES coming before the courts involving malicious and offensive use of social media have jumped by almost 40 per cent in the past year.

More than 800 files involving alleged public electronic communications offences have been passed to the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) since 2010.

Almost 260 cases were dealt with last year – a surge of almost 40 per cent on the 186 cases in 2011.

In a recent high profile case a Belfast city councillor has found herself facing charges for offensive online comments.

Former DUP Belfast deputy lord mayor Ruth Patterson (57) appeared in court last month to face charges of sending a message on Facebook deemed to be grossly offensive.

The 57 year-old, who is due before court again in October, is to contest the charge.

The latest figures emerge amid increasing fears over ma-

PPS dealt with 260 incidents in 2012

licious messages being sent over the internet.

Recently *The Irish News* revealed that police were investigating online comments made by a loyalist bandsman, in which he said he was "praying" that a bomb would kill Catholic residents in Ardoyne, north Belfast.

Concerns have also been raised over Twitter trolls – people who send abusive messages using the social network – threatening rape and violence against women.

Labour MP Stella Creasy is among a host of recent high-profile targets.

Social media site Ask.fm has been criticised after it emerged that 14-year-old Leicestershire schoolgirl Hannah Smith took her own life due to cyberbullying.

■ FACEBOOK: Belfast DUP councillor Ruth Patterson who has appeared in court charged with posting an offensive message on Facebook



■ TROLLS: Internet trolls are people who send abusive message using social networking sites

Mark Jackson, a partner at Thompsons Solicitors in Newtownards and specialising in social media issues, said it was increasingly becoming a more significant legal issue.

"Because people have instant access to all sorts of social media platforms it is becoming more of an issue for the law to keep up with," he said.

The figures were obtained by *The Irish News* through a Freedom of Information request to the PPS.

A total of 801 files involving complaints relating to Section 127 of the Communications Act were received by the PPS since 2010.

Offences under the act include menacing and malicious messages through a public communications network, and improper use of public electronic communications.

The PPS received files for 199 cases in 2010, followed by a further 186 in 2011 and 256 last year.

A total of 160 cases have been sent to public prosecutors for consideration between January and July this year.

Since 2010, the PPS has sought prosecution in almost 420 cases, while a further 90 cases have been dealt with by diversion measures such as cautions.

The number of cases where the PPS has pursued a prosecu-

INCREASE IN OFFENSIVE USE OF INTERNET

Files received by PPS:

Year	Number of cases	Number of suspects
2010	199	222
2011	186	200
2012	256	275
2013 (Jan-Jul)	160	171
Total	801	868

PPS decisions on how to proceed with cases:

Year	Prosecution	Diversion	No Prosecution	Total
2010	96	23	75	194
2011	102	18	46	166
2012	134	32	74	240
2013 (Jan-Jul)	84	17	36	137
Total	416	90	231	737

Misconduct in Stormont departments

NORTHERN Ireland executive departments have disciplined six staff members over the past three years for online misconduct on social media websites and blogs. A Department of the Environment employee posted information on Facebook when it had not yet been released into the public domain. The incident was dealt with through informal disciplinary procedures by departmental managers.

One staff member within the Department for Regional Development received a written reprimand and formal warning after posting "inappropriate correspondence" on Facebook. The Office of First and Deputy First Minister gave an informal warning to one employee within the last financial year for misconduct. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development gave a written

warning and financial penalty to one offending civil servant in the past three years. A Department of Employment and Learning staff member was formally disciplined for misconduct on social media websites and blogs. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment also disciplined one employee since 2009/10. The details of online misconduct were obtained through Fol requests.

tion has increased year-on-year from 96 in 2010 to 102 in 2011 and 134 last year.

The PPS has said they are currently drafting interim guidelines for dealing with cases involving social media.

Mr Jackson, who specialises in cases involving disputes over internet communications, said social media cases required careful consideration from the PPS.

"The balancing act is bringing a prosecution when some-

thing has happened which is serious enough to warrant it and there is a criminal offence, instead of bringing a prosecution which is banter that has gone to too far and would be a waste of public money," he said.

Eastwood's wife files for divorce



CLINT Eastwood's second wife has filed for legal separation from the actor and director. Dina Eastwood, pictured with the *Million Dollar Bay* director,

filed a petition in California's Monterey County Superior Court seeks spousal support and physical custody of the couple's 16-year-old daughter, Morgan.

The petition also indicated that Clint (83) and Dina (48) had a pre-marital agreement. The Eastwoods have been married since 1996 and lived in Carmel. They

met when she went to interview him for a TV news station. Clint Eastwood was married once before, to Maggie Johnson, from 1953 to 1984.

Woman (49) assaulted close to hospital in city

A 49-YEAR-OLD woman was seriously assaulted in the Hannahstown area of west Belfast. The woman was given a lift by a man in a silver car on the Falls Road,

close to the Royal Victoria Hospital on Sunday evening. She was driven to a lay-by on Wheelers Road, close to its junction with Tornaghrough Road, and

was assaulted. The man then drove her back to the junction of Falls Road and St James Park and dumped her out of the car. Police have appealed for information.