

Facebook page that praised UK killer taken down

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Flowers are seen at the home of Raoul Thomas Moat, a fugitive wanted for murder, after Moat killed himself Saturday, ending a weeklong manhunt, in Newcastle, England, Sunday, July 10, 2010. Moat turned a shotgun on himself when police moved in during a six-hour standoff in Rothbury, north of the city of Newcastle. (AP Photo/Scott Heppell)

(AP) -- A Facebook fan page that glorified a dead killer was removed by its creator Thursday after it drew sharp criticism from Britain's prime minister and put the social networking site in an uncomfortable situation.

The [Facebook](#) site "R.I.P. Raoul Moat You Legend" had attracted 38,000 fans, scores of comments praising Moat - and outrage from politicians. Facebook had refused to remove the page even after Prime Minister David Cameron had condemned it, saying there should be no public sympathy for a "callous murderer."

Despite the mounting pressure, Facebook said the page, while controversial, did not violate its rules. But its creator, Siobhan O'Dowd, took it down, saying she was surprised by the negative reaction.

"To be honest, I didn't think this would be the kind of reaction I would get," O'Dowd said.

Facebook confirmed it had not removed the page. Another similar Moat tribute page remained, with more than 9,000 fans.

O'Dowd said she was planning to start a new Moat page, and did not explain how it would be different from the old one.

"We don't condone what he did, as what he did was wrong," she said. "I feel sorry for the families, but he was still a human being at the end of the day."

Moat, a former bouncer, had just been released from a prison term for assault when he shot his ex-girlfriend, killed her new lover and seriously wounded a policeman earlier this month. After a week on the run, he took his own life Friday when cornered by police.

Cameron's spokesman, Steve Field, said the government had spoken to Facebook about the page, and Cameron praised Conservative lawmaker Chris Heaton-Harris for demanding that Facebook remove it.

"I cannot understand any wave, however small, of public sympathy for this man," Cameron told the House of Commons on Wednesday. "It is absolutely clear that Raoul Moat was a callous murderer - full stop, end of story."

For many, however, that was not the end of the story. From 18th-century highwaymen to outlaws like Jesse James, criminals have long attracted

romantic mythology and public support. The presence of Internet sites like Facebook allows those emotions be seen worldwide, almost instantaneously.

Moat sparked one of Britain's biggest police manhunts and a media frenzy after his shooting attacks in northeast England. While on the run he "declared war" on police and vowed "I won't stop until I'm dead."

His hours-long standoff with police Friday was carried live on TV before he apparently shot himself. Police acknowledged firing stun guns at Moat in the final minutes and the police watchdog is investigating his death.

Dozens of bouquets and cards have been left at the spot where Moat died, many by strangers.

Many more wrote tributes on the now-vanished Facebook page. The comments ranged from angry to obscene to apparently heartfelt. Fans declared that Moat "one of the few remaining reasons Britain is still great," sympathized that "love got the better of you" and praised him for being someone who "would rather die like a soldier than live like a coward."

Some accused the police of persecuting Moat. Others blamed his ex-girlfriend, whom he shot and seriously wounded.

The page was not entirely pro-Moat - some posters condemn both the killer and his Facebook fans.

Aric Sigman, a psychologist who has studied the biological effects of social networking, said the online outpouring reflected a new and alarming phenomenon - "recreational, virtual grief."

He said sites like Facebook allow strangers to "hold hands virtually and amplify and consolidate their personal feelings, using this news item as a vehicle for their own emotional issues."

"It is being used to amplify and elevate views which in the real world we would all feel are not constructive or healthy," Sigman said.

Facebook defended the Moat tribute page, saying it could help provide a forum for debate.

"Facebook is a place where people can express their views and discuss things in an open way as they can and do in many other places, and as such we sometimes find people discussing topics others may find distasteful," the company said in a statement Thursday. "However that is not a reason in itself to stop a debate from happening."

Facebook regularly removes content that violates its terms, including material that breaks the law, incites violence or is "hateful, threatening, or pornographic."

In February, Facebook removed the profiles of 30 British prison inmates at the government's request after several incidents in which prisoners reportedly used the site to organize crime or taunt others.

Heaton-Harris said some of the comments on the Moat fan page incited hatred.

"Some of them are inciteful, inciting people to go and do horrible things to the police and to women," he told the BBC. "I think it's the job of politicians to say, 'Hold on a second, we have got some boundaries here.'"

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