Social responsibility on the Internet: Addressing the challenge of cyberbullying☆

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the phenomena of cyberbullying especially among young people. The discussion, based on an interdisciplinary study in the fields of brain studies, child development, psychology, social policy, victimization and Internet studies, probes the troubling phenomenon of cyberbullying which may result in suicide. It is argued that adolescents are more vulnerable than adults because they lack maturity with respect to capacities such as thrill seeking, impulse control, peer pressure, reward sensitivity, cognitive processing, rational decision-making and long-term planning. The article suggests remedies to counter online social ills and argues for responsible cooperation between parents, schools, governments, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and social networking sites.

1. Introduction

The Internet has created new markets and is profoundly changing the way people interact, express themselves, relax, find leisure, explore the world and think about their contribution to it. Made possible by technological advances in computer hardware, software, and telecommunications, in the Internet age people often have cyber lives in addition to their offline lives. The two are not necessarily one and the same.

At the dawn of the 21st Century, social networking sites were launched. These sites enable users to share information, photos, private journals, hobbies and interests with networks of mutual friends. They provide friends with the ability to email and chat online, connect and reconnect between past and present classmates and game partners. Social networking sites also open ventures by providing forums where business people and co-workers can network and interact, people find love and romance, and families map their Family Trees. While social networking is often used for pro-social activities (Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008; Wang & Wang, 2008; Wright & Li, 2011), such networks might also be abused for negative, anti-social purposes and provide a platform for online bullying.

The objective of this article is to address the growing social problem of cyberbullying. The term "bullying" in the physical world has tended to describe conduct that occurs when someone takes repeated action in order to control another person. Traditional bullying is defined as intentional, continued physical, verbal or psychological abuse or

aggression used to reinforce an imbalance of power (Kowalski, Limber, & Agatston, 2008; Olweus, 1993). It can involve tormenting, threatening, harassing, humiliating, embarrassing, or otherwise targeting a victim (Lipton, 2011). The term "cyberbullying" refers to online abuses mainly involving juveniles or students. While it is possible that in any given instance of cyberbullying, at least one of the parties may not be a youth,[1] discussions about cyberbullying generally revolve around school-age children and often call on schools to address the issue (Kowalski et al., 2008). The novelty of this article lies in its interdisciplinary nature, in bringing together Internet studies, brain studies, psychology and policy studies. This article (a) incorporates brain studies to explain why adolescents are especially vulnerable to the extent that they might be pushed to consider and commit suicide. It also (b) highlights the importance of responsible conduct by all relevant stakeholders and the importance of collaborative action.

Adolescents are particularly vulnerable as they are not fully capable of understanding the relationship between behavior and consequences (Ang, 2015). It is argued that many adolescents lack adequate ability to weigh dilemmas, evaluate choices and make reasonable decisions. Consequently, they take more risks (Elsaesser, Russell, McCauley Ohannessian, et al., 2017; Steinberg, 2007). Adolescents tend to overemphasise short-term benefits and underestimate long-term risks. This tendency is reflected in the far higher involvement of adolescents in risky conduct such as fast driving, automobile accidents, excessive drinking, acts of violence, criminal activities, experimentation with drugs, suicide attempts, intentional injury, and unprotected sex that

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☆ In memory of Lee Rawls (1944–2010).
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   [1] See, for instance, the Megan Meier tragedy: Cohen-Almagor (2015).

may result in unintended pregnancies and STDs (Galvan, Hare, Voss, Glover, & Casey, 2007; Steinberg, 2007). Furthermore, adolescent decision-making capacity is lacking especially in emotionally salient situations. They need the support of adults who have a mature prefrontal cortex (Casey, Getz, & Galvan, 2008; Galvan et al., 2007; Partridge, 2013a; Steinberg, 2013). It is argued that all relevant stakeholders – parents, schools, governments, NGOs and Internet companies – have a societal obligation to protect adolescents from bullying and cyberbullying as human lives are at stake.

2. Cyberbullying

Bullying and more recently cyberbullying are complex psycho-social phenomena present especially in schools all over the world (Craig, Harel-Fisch, Fogel-Grinvald, et al., 2009; Zych, Ortega-Ruiz, & Del Rey, 2015b). Both are forms of interpersonal violence that can cause short- and long-term physical, emotional, and social problems among victims (Vivolo-Kantor, Martell, Holland, & Westby, 2014) and also among bullies (Samara, Burbidge, El Asam, et al., 2017). Aggressors in cyberbullying have a lower level of self-perception to use and regulate emotion (Barnocelli & Ciucci, 2014). They are cold, manipulative (Sutton, Smith, & Swettenham, 1999) and they demonstrate conduct problems, hyperactivity, and low pro-social behaviour (Samara et al., 2017). Bullies tend to report lower levels of guilt, shame and remorse in situations of cyber aggression (Cross, Barnes, Papageorgiou, et al., 2015). They are also less likely to report values related to morality. Cyberbullies have little interest in being trustworthy, fair and honest (Perren & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2012).

Two important criteria of bullying – imbalance of power and repetition (Olweus, 1995) are not completely clear in cyberbullying (Slonje & Smith, 2008; Slonje, Smith, & Frisen, 2013; Zych et al., 2015a, 2015b). While traditional bullying is a manifestation of imbalance of power, when the powerful side exploits the advantage s/he possesses to humiliate another, in cyberbullying the bullies are not necessarily more physically powerful than their victims (Zych et al., 2015a, 2015b). One need not be physically fit or with social finesse to launch forceful attacks on one's victim. The Internet provides a levelling effect where strength is not physical but wordy, where brutality is more about the crudeness of the mind than about the power of the hands, where having social skills to become popular is of little significance (Cohen-Almagor, 2015). Articulating words via the keyboard can be no less harmful than the punching of the fist.

Cyberbullying is defined as using the computer, cellphone, and other electronic devices to intimidate, threaten or humiliate another Netuser (Kowalski et al., 2008). It involves targeted harm inflicted through the use of text or images sent via the Internet or other communication devices. Cyberbullying includes embarrassing, offensive, degrading or threatening text messages or instant messenger (IM) messages, electronic stalking, password theft or masquerading as another person on Social Networking Sites (SNS); spreading malicious rumors; sending threatening or aggressive messages; sharing private information without permission. Mobile devices facilitate cyberbullying on-the-go. Cyberbullying is not limited to texts. It may also include the distribution of embarrassing, violent (footage of fights and assaults) or sexual photographs or videos (including sexting – sharing explicit texts, nude photos and videos via cellphone); the creation of graphic websites or SNS pages devoted to harassing a person, ranking the fattest or "sluttiest" student, and online death threats (Gerson & Rappaport, 2011: 67–71).

Bullying is not a new phenomenon. Teenagers targeting, humiliating and/or intimidating other minors, typically occurs among teens who know each other from school, a neighbourhood or after-school activities (Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattanner, 2014; Shariff, 2009). Almost 40% of those who cyberbully report doing so for fun (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007). The ease of the Internet and the anonymity it provides, coupled with the lack of direct confrontation may enable

cyber bullies to experience less empathy and remorse forwards their victims (Cross et al., 2015). Cyber bullies are less aware of the consequences of their behaviour compared to face-to-face bullying (Cross et al., 2015).

Commonly, vulnerable populations attract the attention of bullies because they are perceived as easy targets who have difficulties fighting back. Children with disabilities and special needs are at higher risk being bullied by their peers (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2007, 2009). Ethnic minorities are sometimes disproportionately targeted.[2] Children and youth with confused sexuality and those who embrace non-conventional, i.e. not heterosexual sexuality (LGBQ, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and questioning) are also targeted (Beaty & Alexeyev, 2008; Berlan, Corliss, Field, Goodman, & Austin, 2010; Kahle, 2017).

Besides the bullies and their victims, we may distinguish other groups of participants in the cyberbullying activity: **Assistants** who join the cyberbullies and add their insults; **Reinforcers** who encourage and egg the bully by providing positive feedback; **Watchers** who remain passive. They choose to watch the cyberbullying taking place without interfering; **Outsiders** who move away from the situation and withdraw, and **Defenders** who actively intervene to protect and support the victim (Maunder & Crafter, 2018; Salmivalli, 2010; Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, et al., 1996). All participants but the defenders are complicit in the cyberbullying activity.

Modern technology facilitates easy and quick dissemination of hurtful and humiliating messages to one or many people. The anonymity of the Internet facilitates disinhibition and is most convenient for spreading malicious unfounded allegations and for backstabbing (Kowalski et al., 2008). Cyberbullying has desensitizing effect (Anti-Defamation League, 2008). Anonymity facilitates bullying as it helps aggressors to hide their identity, diminishes accountability and increases the level of moral disengagement (Cross et al., 2015). Anonymous victims may be more likely to incur unethical treatment (Yam & Reynolds, 2014). The online bullies may remain oblivious to what they do and are not moved to stop tormenting the victim (Ang, 2015; Kowalski et al., 2008; Li, Cross, & Smith, 2012). Suler (2004) described this mindset as dis-associative anonymity, where the bullies do not own their behaviour and abuse technology to distance themselves. Technology, of course, is merely means to ends. It can be used and abused. *People* are blameworthy for misconduct (Kant, 1959). The infrastructure merely facilitates communication.

Indeed, cyberbullying can be relentless. Images of bullying events can be posted on the Internet on multiple sites thus having lingering painful effect on the victim. Technology can be abused to increase the scale, scope and duration of bullying. The audience for the bullying can be very large and reached rapidly, and the bullying can follow the victims into their home, expressed on the screens of their personal electronic devices (Gerson & Rappaport, 2011; Shariff, 2009). Bullying can now take place around the clock, 24 h a day, seven days a week, without refuge (Kowalski et al., 2014).

2.1. The scope of phenomenon

Studies show that cyberbullying is a concrete, persistent and significant phenomenon problem that affects children and youth of both genders (Bulman, 2017; Holt, 2017). Due to measurement differences, time in which the research was conducted as well as the location and age of victims, victimization estimates range greatly, from 9% in some studies to 34% in other studies (Kowalski et al., 2008; Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Lenhart, 2009; Williams & Guerra, 2007; Wolak,

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[2] While some studies (Fandren, Strohmeier, & Roland, 2009; Fletcher, Fitzgerald-Yau, Jones, et al., 2014; Rodriguez-Hidalgo, Ortega-Ruiz, & Zych, 2014) report that minorities are more subjected to bullying, other studies (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Seals & Young, 2003; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004b) show no difference between majority and minority groups. See generally Zych, Ortega-Ruiz, and Del Rey (2015a, 2015b).