Bullying, Cyberbullying, and Hate Speech

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ABSTRACT

This paper applies the concepts of moral and social responsibility to the internet in considering bullying and cyberbullying that result in loss of life. Specifically, the author probes the moral and social responsibilities of internet users (agents), of their immediate surroundings, and of the education system in fighting cyberbullying. Balance needs to be struck between two most important principles: freedom of expression and social responsibility. Illustrative examples in which this disturbing and harmful phenomenon of cyberbullying has cost young life are mentioned. It is argued that cyberbullying has some of the characteristics of hate speech and that many of the tools used to fight against hate may be utilised to fight against cyberbullying. It is further argued that all relevant stakeholders need to think of the consequences of their conduct, that internet abusers should be accountable for their wrongdoing and be penalized, and that people who have the ability to stop or at least reduce the risk of cyberbullying should take proactive steps, exhibiting zero tolerance to cyberbullying. The article calls for a responsible concerted effort by responsible users of the internet, parents, schools, governments, NGOs, and administrators of social networking sites to raise awareness of the problem, address it, and fight together to lessen and possibly eliminate it from the online information highway. Disregard for the consequences of both cyberbullying and hate speech and inactivity facing them are immoral.

1. PRELIMINARIES

The Internet has comprehensive and far-reaching positive effects. However, its very foundations, based on innovation, easy use, relatively cheap cost, and near-universal accessibility made the Internet open for use and unfortunately abuse. The Internet contains the best, but regrettably also the worse products of humanity. We should relish the many positives and address the negatives. In order to do this, we must balance one against the other two very important values: on the one hand, the *raison d'être* of the Internet until now, which is freedom of expression; and, on the other hand, the value of social responsibility that should be an essential component of the *raison d'être*.

The object of this Essay is to discuss moral and social responsibility required to deal with people who utilize the Internet for vile, illegitimate and anti-social purposes. The Essay focuses on the problem of cyberbullying, and on our shared societal responsibilities to counter this phenomenon. It builds

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on my previous research on the subject and expands on it (Cohen-Almagor, 2011a, 2015a, 2018b, 2020). Virtual users abuse social platforms to harass their so-called "friends". Virtual "Friends" might befriend others for sinister purposes, not to lend support but instead to inflict harm (McVeigh, 2011). Sometimes these people are using fake identities and accounts. Sometimes they resort to anonymizing tools to hide their identity so they could bully others behind virtual masks. It is argued that social responsibility is no less important than freedom of expression. Freedom without responsibility in this digital era might prove to be dangerous as Internet abusers exploit digital freedoms and target their victims maliciously and relentlessly, sometimes to death.

Consider Ask.fm, a social networking platform on which users can create personal profiles and send anonymous questions to other users. Users can also post photos, videos and GIFs in response to questions. The users' age is meant to be 13 and over but it is not uncommon for people below the age of 13 to open accounts. Ask.fm has more than 215 million registered users around the world.1 The questions can be innocent and they can also be malicious and nasty. 16-year-old Jessica Laney was asked "Why are you so ugly?", "Can you just kill yourself already?" The barrage of abusive messages was so fierce that in December 2012 Laney killed herself (Baker, 2012; Fazan, 2012; Murray, 2012; Roberts, 2012; Pendergrass and Wright, 2014). In August 2013, 14-year-old Hannah Smith was "asked" to "drink bleach" and "go get cancer" before she hanged herself (Abad-Santos, 2013). Smith took her own life after suffering constant abuse from ask.fm online bullies who ridiculed her and urged her to die (*The Age,* 2013).

The modus operandi of Ask.fn fits the cyberbully well and more deaths were associated with the platform. Ciara Pugsley, 15, and Erin Gallagher, 13, from Ireland, took their own lives in separate incidents during 2012 after being bullied on the site (Maguire, 2016). In January 2013, Anthony Stubbs, 16, took his life as a result of bullying (Romano, 2013). In April 2013, 15-year-old Josh Unsworth was found dead after being subject to harassment and abuse on the website (Tozer, 2013). In July 2013, Daniel Perry, 17, jumped from a bridge subsequent to bullying on the site (Byrne, 2013; Smith-Spark and Vandoorne, 2013). In September 2013, three teens from the USA, Australia and England took their lives as a result of Ask.fm bullying: On September 10, Rebecca Ann Sedwick, 12, from Florida, took her life (Broderick, 2013). On September 14, Katherine-Christine Buckley, 15, from Queensland, Australia, could not cope with the cyberbullying and took her own life.2 On September 17, 14-year-old girl Izzy Dix from Devon, England, hanged herself (Farrell, 2013; Panther, 2013). Another victim, Laura Mckay, testified: "I've been bullied on ask.fm and been told to kill myself many times. It's easy for people to hide behind and bully and it needs to be stopped" (Press Association, 2013). It did not. In October 2013, two more victims were added to the list, Olivia Mae Scott, 16 from Vermont,3 and Savy Turcotte, 13, from Saskatchewan, Canada (Smith, 2013).4 The young age of all the victims is noticeable. Their thread of life was cut far too short.

In August 2013, changes were made to make Ask.fm safer. The site's managers said it would view all reports quickly, within 24 hours, make the report button more visible, and include bullying and harassment as a category for a report. In February 2014, Ask.fm launched a 'Safety Center' that provides advice for both users and parents. Ask.fm extended the use of software to scan questions and answers posted by users for key words and phrases. It also expanded the number of filters in use, increased the scanning vocabulary and added manpower to examine content. Its managers improved response time to questionable content either before it gets to a user or just afterward (Blake, 2015). With the deployment of these security measures, Ask.fm directors argued that they were able to maintain a much safer environment for its millions of users. However, the improvements are still insufficient. Critics demand to ban all anonymous posts. In May 2015, it was reported that 14-year-old Aurora Cerullo took her own life after she was bullied on Ask.fm. Aurora was the third Italian teenager in a year suspected of killing herself after being trolled on Ask.fm (Kendrick, 2015). In April 2016, 17-year-old Felix Alexander opted suicide after he was bullied on Ask.fm (Alexander, 2018; Slawson, 2016). Little wonder that Protect Young Eyes, an organisation that was founded to create a safer Internet for children, advises parents that they should take extreme caution when deciding if

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