Chapter 15
Abuse of Human–Computer Interactions:
A Counterpoint to Transformative and Liberatory Technologies

Warren J. Blumenfeld
Iowa State University, USA

ABSTRACT

In our "information age," technology has improved the lives of many people in significant ways, while connecting the human family as never before on a global scale. Although the possibilities are only limited by our imagination, so too are the dangers for abuse of these technologies. This chapter investigates these dangers by providing a cautionary counterpoint to the transformative and liberatory possibilities technologies offer. Examples of the forms this abuse takes leads off the chapter, followed by some of the psychological and sociological theories that have been put forward to assist us in understanding and possibly addressing this abuse of human-computer interactions.

INTRODUCTION

Online Cheating and Plagiarism

She is attempting to complete her undergraduate degree at a large Midwestern university in the United States, and she needs only two additional courses before she will graduate. She accepts a great summer intern position in her chosen field,

which will become permanent and full-time contingent upon completion of her degree.

He is a brilliant graduate student completing his Masters degree at her university. They negotiate a deal whereby she will enroll in two online courses to fulfill her remaining degree requirements, and he will do *all* the work—the assigned readings, written assignments, online discussions, communications with the course instructor—and upon receipt of two passing grades, she will pay him

the amount of $2000 for each course, or a total of $4000. As it turned out, not only did he pass both classes for her, but he also scored the grade of "A" in each. She, in turn, received a higher cumulative grade point average and "earned" her undergraduate degree, which allowed her to walk to the stage to pick up her diploma at her graduation festivities to the beaming excitement of family and friends assembled on that momentous day. The following week, her company offered her a full-time position with a superb benefits package.

In addition to this form of cheating, students and others are employing communication and information technologies to lift other people's ideas and work and pass it off as original to them. An entire industry has emerged catering to their needs in the form of Internet-based companies that provide fully completed works, including term papers, at a relatively low cost to students. And the chances of being caught are generally on the students' side. According to Dr. Fintan Culwin, of London South Bank University in the United Kingdom:

Many students realise the likelihood of being detected is low. As academic institutions are run more like mass industries, tutors cannot be expected to learn the details of so many students' writing styles (quoted in Clare, 2000).

Culwin and others warn that computer-facilitated academic plagiarism has possibly already decreased the inherent value of a university or college degree.

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ABUSE OF THE NEW TECHNOLOGIES

Cyberbullying

Ryan Patrick Halligan was born in Poughkeepsie, New York in 1990. His parents described him as a shy, sensitive, and affectionate young child with an infectious smile that early on drew people close. Before he entered school, his parents had concerns about his speech, language, and motor skills development, and from pre-school through fourth grade, they enrolled Ryan in special education services. The family moved to Essex Junction, Vermont, where, by the fifth grade, he encountered face-to-face bullying on a regular basis in his school. Rumors soon circulated throughout the school that Ryan was gay. By middle school, his classmates continually teased and harassed him for having a learning disability and for allegedly being gay. They soon extended their taunts against Ryan into cyberspace.

On October 7, 2003, feeling that he could no longer live with the constant and escalating abuse, Ryan Patrick Halligan took his life. He was 13 years old.

Reports (Spero News, 2006) indicate that Ryan displayed many of the symptoms of youth targeted by cyberbullying: he spent long hours on his computer, and he was secretive regarding his interactions on communication and information technologies. His parents saw him manifest a number of changes in his behavior: he increasingly lacked interest in engaging in social activities that included his peers, and he exhibited a pronounced

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