

## Chapter 9

# Cyberbullying and Cyberstalking: Are They as Serious as Their Offline Counterparts?

### ABSTRACT

*This chapter considers two of the most personal forms of online attack – cyberbullying and cyberstalking. While not always technically criminal events, in some jurisdictions cyberbullying acts are offences, especially when they include direct threats or physical assault. Indeed Jewkes (2010) indicates that cyberbullying occupies “a grey area between social harms and illegal acts, depending on their severity and the legal jurisdiction in which they take place” (p. 526). Cyberstalking may also be included in the stalking laws of many jurisdictions. This chapter aims to determine if cyberbullying and cyberstalking are as severe as their offline counterparts, particularly from a psychological perspective. Case studies of both cyberbullying and cyberstalking are provided, along with definitions of both activities. Known prevalence rates of the phenomena are provided, although as with most types of criminal events, the true prevalence rates of these activities is unknown. Descriptions are provided of some of the techniques used during cyberbullying and cyberstalking attacks, and differences between online and traditional stalking and bullying are considered. The demographic and psychological traits of cyberstalkers and cyberbullies are described, along with the traits of their victims, and the psychological effects of victimisation. Possible solutions for these problems are considered, including both preventative measures and suitable responses. Finally, potential future trends in the area are considered, including the possible use of online gaming and social networking sites for harassment, as well as the underexamined phenomenon of workplace cyberbullying.*

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## **BACKGROUND**

Rebecca is a fifteen year old girl who has repeatedly been the victim of cyberbullying. She regularly has to remove derogatory comments from other people which are posted on her social networking profiles. She also gets many text messages from phone numbers that she does not recognise, most of which are insulting and some of which contain threats of physical abuse. Recently she was sent a picture message where an image of her head had been placed onto someone else's naked body. When Rebecca went to school the next day, she discovered that the picture message had been circulated around all her classmates. She feels humiliated and upset, even though she knows that the photograph has been faked. Rebecca received more humiliating text messages throughout the day, and they did not stop when she returned home. Late that night her cell phone rang, but the caller remained silent when she answered. This happened eight more times until she gave up and turned off her phone. While she is very upset, Rebecca does not want to tell her parents about the bullying as she fears that they will take away her cell phone.

Stacy is a thirty year old woman who has recently broken up with her ex-boyfriend due to his abusive tendencies. Since the break-up, her ex-boyfriend has sent her at least ten emails every day, asking her to reconsider and to take him back. While she initially answered these emails, indicating that she was not willing to give the relationship another try, she quickly realised that this only encouraged his behaviours. He has cyberstalked her in other ways, including posting replies to every social networking post she writes, and initiating instant messaging conversations whenever she is online. He has also started to stalk her offline as well, using information about her whereabouts derived from her online activity. In the past few weeks his online communications have started to become more hostile, as he realised that Stacy was starting a new relationship. He began to

send derogatory emails to Stacy, suggesting that she is sexually promiscuous and threatening to physically harm both her and her new boyfriend.

## **Definitions and Key Terms**

The above case studies indicate how harmful and distressing cyberbullying and cyberstalking can be. Nevertheless, there has been little consensus as to suitable definitions for these two phenomena, nor are reliable estimates available of the prevalence of these activities.

Several definitions of cyberbullying have been proposed by academics and practitioners working in the field. Hinduja and Patchin (2009) define cyberbullying as "willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices" (p. 5). Belsey (n.d.) suggests that "Cyberbullying involves the use of information and communication technologies to support deliberate, repeated, and hostile behaviour by an individual or group, that is intended to harm others" (p.3). Willard (2007, p.1) defines cyberbullying as "sending or posting harmful material or engaging in other forms of social aggression using the Internet or other digital technologies" while Shariff and Gouin (2005) indicate that cyberbullying "consists of covert, psychological bullying, conveyed through the electronic mediums" (p. 3). Bhat (2008) cites Hazler's (1996) description of bullying. This indicates that an action is bullying when the victim is being harmed by the physical, verbal or socio/emotional actions of the bully. Secondly, there is a power imbalance between the victim and the bully and thirdly that the actions are repeated over time. Bhat (2008) indicates that cyberbullying "involves the use of ICT to intimidate, harass, victimise or bully an individual or a group of individuals" (p 54). This may involve the use of the Internet, mobile phones, or other ICT devices.

A similar concept is cyberstalking. Stalking can also be seen as a repeated engagement in threatening or harassing behaviours (Ashcroft,

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