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CYBERBULLYING AND THE EDUCATOR'S RESPONSIBILITY

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Abstract:

This paper takes the results of a previous study and considers them in the light of societal concerns about cyberbullying. The topic of cyberbullying attracts a great deal of attention in the more popular media, with many of those involved expressing frustration or uncertain of their responsibilities. The previous study found a relatively high level of cyberbullying among university students and this paper raises issues around what might be institutional, professorial and societal responsibilities. It is hoped that the publication of this paper will generate both an awareness of the problem and discussion on what might be the appropriate action by professors, the university and the students.

Keywords: cyberbullying, technology in education, IS education

1. INTRODUCTION

On June 27, 2010 the New York Times published a front page story essentially raising the question of who was responsible for controlling cyberbullying in schools [Hoffman, 2010]. Was this a new phenomena or simply the toilet block wall gone into cyberspace; was it down to the parents to manage or the teachers; was it something the children should sort out for themselves? The article provoked a rush of letters to the editor and blog posts. While the article published in the newspaper essentially looked at the problem from the perspective of school children (and middle school children at that) there is little doubt that it is present in all levels of education. Similar (sometimes tragic) stories to the New York Times article have run on the BBC news [BBC News 2008], in the Sydney Morning Herald [SMH 2009] and received exposure at national conferences [Bamford, 2004].

Cyberbullying, "an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself" [Smith et al. 2008a, pg1] has several characteristics that make it insidious and difficult to control. Unlike the writing on the toilet block, the words or images used in cyberbullying do not remain at school and can follow the recipient into a private space – a computer screen in a bedroom at home, a cell phone or on to a social networking web site to be viewed by all who have access. Cyberbullying uses technology (and equipment at the leading edge of technology –

YouTube, smart phones and social networking websites) where the social mores and expectations of acceptable behaviour are still to be worked out. Cyberbullying confronts many parents (and perhaps teachers) with a technology about which they know little and have even less idea how to control – a not unusual reaction is to attempt to “ban” the technology. A case could be made that cyberbullying is more harmful than typically schoolyard bullying since victims can be contacted 24/7 via Internet (e.g. via social networking websites) or mobile phones. The popular media has shown us that cyberbullying can constitute criminal behavior, and in some cases can lead to death and/or suicide [Webster]. Finally the New York Times article points out that the legal position in relation to use of the technology, a “search” of a cell phone or web site is far from settled.

This paper takes a recent study completed by the authors and published at PACIS in 2010. It relates the findings and results from that study to the social issues raised above. This paper does not provide new research material but provides a relatively brief overview of the background, methodology and results reported in that paper [Zhang, Land and Dick, 2010], (where further details of the study, complete results and methodology employed may be found) and raises the above issues for discussion at the IAIM SIG Ed conference, against the background of the findings from that study. The authors contend that as IS professionals we have a special responsibility here – partly as we are seen as knowledgeable on subject of such technologies, partly as our students may be seen as early adopters and partly due to our general responsibility as educators.

II. BACKGROUND

The anonymity associated with electronic communication tools promotes cyberbullying behaviour [Aricak et al. 2008, Campbell 2005, Li 2008, Raskauskas et al. 2007]. Cyberbullying exhibits the characteristic of not providing a face-to-face experience, this allows cyberbullies with the intention to stay anonymous, appear unknown to their victims, (such as setting up an email account under false name [Li 2007, Raskauskas et al. 2007, Smith et al. 2008b]). According to Herring [2002], anonymity reduces social accountability for the bully, making one feel less guilty when engaged in hostile and/or aggressive acts [Herring 2002, p. 8]. Furthermore, Campbell [2005] stated that the anonymity offered by the electronic communication tools could produce bullies, who would not normally participate in traditional face-to-face bullying.

Traditional bullies are often characterised as being physically stronger or bigger than their victims. However, cyberbullies do not have to be physically stronger or bigger than the cybervictims, rather, a person's competency in using the technology provides 'power' to become a bully [Raskauskas et al. 2007, Smith et al. 2008b].

Ybarra & Mitchell [2004] found that self-reported experts in Internet knowledge were twice as more likely to report exhibiting aggressive behaviour towards someone else online. In addition, those who spent an average of four or more days per week on the Internet were 73% more likely to show cyberbullying behaviours online. Ybarra & Mitchell [2004] suggested that it is possible that some online aggression behaviour was the result of frustration felt by adolescents who have spent an extended amount of time online. In addition, it is also suggested that the chat room and email environment promote the opportunity of aggressive response by users [Campbell, 2005]. This argument is supported by the non-verbal nature of Internet, which does not allow for direct feedback, therefore, could encourage people who may not respond aggressively in the same situation in a traditional environment, to feel less constrained and exhibit aggressive behaviour online.

Traditional bullying typically occurs at a specific time and place, while cyberbullying can happen anywhere, and at any time, as the cybervictims may continue to receive text messages, emails or see comments made on websites wherever they happen to be at the time (at home, out with friends, at school, etc.). [Li 2007, Li 2008, Smith et al. 2008b]. The breadth of the potential audience also differs between traditional and cyberbullying. With the nature of electronic communication tools, an embarrassing and/or private image can be spread much faster and reach a far larger audience size than traditional bullying, which might be confined only to the particular classroom or school settings [Li 2007, Raskauskas et al. 2007, Smith et al. 2008b].

Existing literature identified the substantial effects cyberbullying could have on victims. Herring [2002] argues that cyberbullying behaviour constitutes violence, as it can substantially affect the victim physically, psychologically and/or emotionally [Shariff & Gouin, 2006]. Shariff [2003] identified changes in the US laws, where emotional and psychological harm e.g. mental shock and suffering are recognised as 'tangible' harm [in Shariff & Gouin, 2006]. People often report suffering from stress, emotional distress, feeling upset, feeling embarrassed, or afraid as a result of cyberbullying experience [Ybarra et al. 2007]. Therefore, it is important to address the causes of cyberbullying to assist counsellors, and policy makers to develop programs to reduce this problem.

For educational institutions, if bullying complaints are taken to court, or made public by the media, there can be severe consequences including financial losses from claims for negligence [Shariff & Gouin, 2006] and harm to the institution's reputation [James Cook University, 2009].

III. METHODOLOGY

The survey for the study [Zhang et al, 2010] was designed based on a range of literature from the literature review. To allow for a comprehensive view on the constructs hypothesized as leading to cyberbullying, related survey questions were developed based on survey questions on subjects not focused on cyberbullying. For example, survey questions measuring 'Technology Usage' were subsequently developed by consulting and adapting from established frameworks on Internet usage [Anandaraja Et al. 2000, Cheung & Huang 2005]. The survey questions aimed to determine whether the student is a cyberbully or a cybervictim, have been developed from the type of cyberbullying actions outlined in the literature [Willard 2004, Li 2008, Campbell 2005, Bamford 2004, Finn 2004, Aricak et al. 2008]. The words Cyberbully/cybervictim/cyberbullying did not appear on the survey, as the individual's perception on the terms might affect their responses.

The survey developed for the study was pre-tested and administered to the sample of the targeted respondents. 250 survey invitations were sent out, and potential participants were given 10 days to complete the survey. Final response rate was 54%.

IV. RESULTS

The main data collection found 62% of respondents had experienced cyberbullying in the past year. 40% of respondents have conducted actions which can be considered cyberbullying behaviour in the past year.

Online games seem to be an extreme case of cyberbullying. Out of the 134 respondents, only 53 people are regular online gamers (40%). 47% of online game players have been cyberbullied by

flaming messages more than twice in the past year. Players of online games are characterised by their respective unknown real-life identity to other players. Survey respondents had stated the following: "There are plenty of idiots online." And "People act more aggressively on the net, even if they are scared in real life". This suggests that a university student usually predicts/expects flaming related behaviour from online users whom are unknown to them in real-life. As the online gaming environment requires a large amount of interaction with other unknown players, it is possible that the flaming is imbedded in online gaming culture.

21% of respondents have experienced flaming via Instant Messaging in the past year. 17% have experienced flaming via phone calls and/or SMS. 8% of respondents had experienced cyberbullying through masquerading. 17% of respondents had been cyberbullied through outing and trickery actions. 14% of respondents acknowledged conducting flaming behaviour in the past year via Instant Messenger (IM), which seems to be the most common form of electronic communication tool used when conducting flaming behaviours. A small percentage of respondents had admitted to engaging in anonymous cyberbullying behaviour, IM seems to be the most common electronic communication tool used for masquerading, followed by online games and social networking websites / blogs.

Significant evidence from the study supports that as an individual spends more time on electronic communication tools, they tend to conduct more cyberbullying related behaviour. This correlation suggests that the amount of technology usage casts significant influence on an individual's tendency to conduct cyberbullying related behaviour. The finding supporting this proposition is consistent with findings from existing literature [Raskauskas et al. 2007, Smith et al. 2008b]. We can conclude that there is ample evidence to support that the amount of technology usage can affect students' display of cyberbullying related behaviours.

Several prior studies on Internet usage had mentioned that perceived enjoyment, social pressure and self-efficacy impacts on a person's online behaviour. Significant evidence from the research study shows that social pressure from peers using Internet applications weakly affects an individual's cyberbullying behaviour. This is an interesting and novel finding, as this proposition was developed based on Internet usage literature, not cyberbullying and/or bullying literature. Other findings under this proposition were that an individual's level of experience with technology usage (self efficacy) and their perceived enjoyment of Internet do not significantly affect their cyberbullying behaviour. Future research should focus on validating the social pressure construct and its correlation with cyberbullying behaviour. In addition, test other possible constructs that can be formed under 'perception and attitudes' construct, especially from close monitoring of new developments from the Internet Usage literature area.

It must be noted that based on existing literature, there exist many psychological factors which could cause a person to conduct bullying related behaviour. Specifically, this could include: angry response to perceived threats, revenge acts against another individual, aimed to obtain social or material rewards, and dislike of a person's physical traits. As a result, findings from this research study suggest that the amount of technology usage and social pressure are the possible additional factors that cause a person to conduct bullying actions using electronic communication tools. The ability to be anonymous online seems to be correlated with increased cyberbullying related behaviours. This may further suggest that factors unique to electronic communication tools may have influenced cyberbullying behaviours.

The Zhang et al [2010] paper also reported a number of limitations (one institution, limited sample size etc.) but the study does suggest that cyberbullying represents a problem of significant magnitude to society and to college students. It is not just a middle or elementary school

problem. To underline the perception of the problem one has only to look at the rather sensationalist media coverage it often generates.

V. DISCUSSION

The above results (extracted and summarised here from Zhang et al [2010] provide considerable evidence that cyberbullying exists in the university environment. But the phenomenon is a complex one. An earlier study [De Souza and Dick, 2009] provided some indication that children see a disconnect between what they do online and what they do face to face – a disconnect that at least to some extent was shared by the cyberbullying “victim”. As stated earlier the technologies are new and in many cases children are more familiar with them than their supervisors be they parents or teachers. Most of us can relate to the time when we (as professors) had mastered corresponding with our students by email, only to discover that they had moved on to Facebook and no one used email any more.

However in the college environment there are several factors that are worthy of consideration in the context of the above:

- Use of technology – in many cases it is possible that the cyberbullying takes place on college supplied and maintained equipment. It could be argued (and indeed many parents might expect) that the provider of such equipment has a duty to ensure that it used only for appropriate purposes. However it is not like down-loading music or videos; it is almost impossible to ensure that students access sites like Facebook for only “suitable” purposes. A possible alternative would be to ban access to such sites through university servers however what college is going to want to interfere with a primary means of student communication?
- The advent of smartphones has complicated the issue – such devices mean that most web content is available on a student's phone. In many cases the students might be expected to use a mix of telephony and college supplied wireless – it would be most difficult to determine in which arena the cyberbullying was taking place.
- Classroom disruption – with 60% of students reporting being victims (and 40% perpetrators!) there seems little doubt that cyberbullying is likely to have an effect on harmonious classroom behaviour, discussion and teamwork. Many might argue that professors have a duty to promote a discord-free learning environment to aid in learning and should at least be aware of potential problems. Against this a professor may well suggest that student should be treated as adults and expected to deal with such issues themselves.
- The nature of cyberbullying – just how “bad” is it ? While sexually explicit text messages sent to young children or to colleagues in the classroom may be viewed with serious concern (to put it mildly) perhaps there are many instances of less disturbing cases where any administrative action or professorial intervention would seem over the top.
- The judicial role – it is far from clear as to what action might be legally taken by the institution or by the professor. The courts have yet to rule on many aspects of online communication.
- The cost – such cases are likely to be time consuming and expensive involving the gathering or large amounts of evidence and interviewing many students. It could be questioned as to whether this cost is justified.

The above issues are put forward to encourage discussion of this issue. There may well be many more. Whatever the length of the list, it seems that this problem is prevalent in colleges and will almost certainly be an area with which academics and college administrators are going to have to deal.

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