

CYBERBULLING AND REAL REALITY

Iebiedēšana tiešsaistē un reālā realitātē

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Abstract. *There are various risks tied to cyberspace. Some of them are social risks because they are cultural risks, being related to new forms of relationships and interactions among people.*

In the last decade, toxic evils like cyberbullying and other malicious cyber violence are growing, and the search of antidotes is becoming a common concern for governments, educational authorities, teachers, parents and children alike.

The available data shows clear evidence that the number of persons affected by cyber violence is increasing (Shariff e Churchill, 2009; U.S. Department of Education, 2011; Dilmac, 2012; Catalano, 2012): a Google search of the word “cyberbullying” finds more the 11 million of items. Despite the popularity of the word, there is a limited knowledge of this issue and many of the first conceptual formulations about it continue to be spread in literature, such as that the characteristics of bullies who act face-to-face and those who do so in cyberspace are very different.

The paper analyzes the classic model of cyberbullying behavior, as described in literature, introducing a new element to be considered. It is that, especially for young people, Web and physical world are more and more becoming a whole: virtual-web and real reality are a continuum that we could define as an e-real-reality.

Analyzing two of the most known cases of cyberbullying and considering some other evidences emerged by recent researches, we are theoretically convinced that a better understanding of this element could lead to the development of more effective strategies for combating cyberbullying.

Key words: *bullying, cyberbullying, online behavior.*

Introduction

Ievads

In the last decade, the large diffusion of the Internet, caused a growing of cyber violence with negative significant effects on adolescent victims, such as increased anxiety, depression and suicide ideation. In fact, with the rise of social networking and the immediacy of electronic communication, the potential for harassment, threats, cyberbullying, perceived defamation, and general incivility is greater than ever before (Bird et al., 2012).

A considerable amount of research has been done on cyberbullying phenomenon (Katzner, 2009; Smith, 2009) and in a critical review of research on this issue,

Tokunaga (2010) portrayed it as an umbrella term encompassing several adjacent concepts such as internet harassment and electronic bullying. It has been underlined that while several instruments to assess cyberbullying have been developed since 2004, there is nevertheless a lack of knowledge about their psychometric properties (Berne et al., 2013). The study about cyberbullying started from the traditional bullying and some of the early consideration are become undisputed assumption. But are all those assumptions still valid? The continuous progress of new technologies, their pervasive diffusion and the attitude of young people of managing them could not have produced some changes also in cyber violence growth?

The definition of cyberbullying is still debated by researchers across the world. This paper contribute to clarify this concept focusing the attention to a new perspective: the loosing, especially in younger generation, of the limit between virtual-web and real reality. The web profile is a part of a real personality, a new dimension that is added to the multidimensional essence of a person.

Classical definition of cyberbullying *Iebiedēšanas tiešsaistē klasiskā definīcija*

Cyberbullying has been defined as a particular form of bullying (Kowalski and Limber 2007). It is described as bullying that occurs through media and communication devices such as mobile phones, email, and the Internet (e.g. social networking sites, web pages, and blogs). Cyberbullies threaten, scare, libel, humiliate, and offend their victims from far away. They use pictures, movies, e-mails, messages and comments to harass and pick on their targets on Web.

Unlike other forms of bullying where there has been a long-standing general agreement among researchers about the repeated nature of the behavior, studies of cyberbullying have been less restrictive in applying a definition that requires a persistent and meaningful interaction between the perpetrator and the victim, primarily as a result of the anonymity cyberbullying affords the perpetrator (Wolak et al., 2007).

In her book, Nancy Willard (2007) identified seven different categories of common cyberbullying actions:

- Flaming: Sending angry, rude, vulgar messages about a person to an online group or to that person via email or other text messaging.
- Online harassment: Repeatedly sending offensive messages via email or other text messaging to a person.
- Cyberstalking: Online harassment that includes threats of harm or is excessively intimidating.
- Denigration (put-downs): Sending harmful, untrue, or cruel statements about a person to other people or posting such material online.

- Masquerade: Pretending to be someone else and sending or posting material that makes that person look bad.
- Outing: Sending or posting material about a person that contains sensitive, private, or embarrassing information, including forwarding private messages or images.
- *Exclusion*: Cruelly excluding someone from an online group.

Bullying vs cyberbullying *Iebiedēšana un iebiedēšana tiešsaistē*

Norwegian researcher Dan Olweus (1993) claims that aggressiveness, repetitively, and power are the three key components to bullying behavior:

*Bullying is thus characterized by the following three criteria: (a) it is aggressive behavior or intentional "harmdoing;" (b) it is carried out repeatedly and over time; and (c) it occurs within an interpersonal relationship characterized by an imbalance of power.*³²

Bullies behavior is aggressive in nature, designed to hurt the other person's feelings or relationship with others, or even to frighten him or her. The person being targeted has a hard time defending him or herself and bullying behavior often occurs without apparent provocation.

In literature, the characteristics of bullies who act face-to-face and those who do so in cyberspace are considered very different. Many authors agree that the main difference between traditional bullying and cyberbullying lies in the fact that traditional bullying is power-based, and this power is expressed through a direct, aggressive contact with the targeted people, instead cyberbullying prefers the anonymity (Hinduja and Patchin, 2006; Cameron, 2010). Bullying is considered a form of abuse, its distinctiveness of this abuse is that it is a peer abuse. What sets it apart from other forms of abuse such as child or domestic abuse is the context in which it occurs and the relationship of the interacting parties. The most important features that many researchers underlined in regards to cyberbullying is that in cyberbullying the identity of the perpetrator is usually unknown (Shariff & Johnny, 2007; Shariff, 2009). Very often the targeted individual is not sure who posted particular comments or set up a fake profile. Not knowing who is the abuser can lead to victims a sense of powerlessness, but the ability to be anonymous can induce a phenomenon of disinhibition, pushing people to say or do things online that they wouldn't normally do because they feel invisible.

Cyberbullies compared to face-to-face bullies are considered more likely to engage in risky online activities, spend more time online, and found it easier to be themselves online. Private access to the Internet did not make a difference. Gender differences showed girls more likely to be cyber than face-to-face

³² <<http://www.colorado.edu/cspv/blueprints/modelprograms/BPP.html>>, retrieved: February 3, 2013.

bullies if they have a profile on a social networking site. Age and internet ability beliefs were also positively but not independently associated with cyberbullying. Cross-country differences were small and patterns remained mostly stable across countries, suggesting that individual and not country-level characteristics are pivotal in explaining cyberbullying. (Görzig and Ólafsson, 2013).

Quing Li claims (2007) that factors like gender, culture, knowledge of safety strategies, and frequency of computer use, may provide valuable information to assess possible involvement with cyberbullying. The author sustains the importance of comparative studies about bullying and cyberbullying for understanding of how cyberbullying is influenced by traditional ways of harassment.

Two extreme cyberbullying cases *Iebiedēšanas tiešsaistē divi ekstrēmi gadījumi*

Two cases can be assumed as exemplar of the evolution of cyberbullying, the case of Megan Meier and the one of Amanda Todd. The case of Amanda Todd demonstrates how web-virtual and real reality are now beginning to make part of an undistinguished whole. New technologies are used to amplify the effect of a physical attack to a target and also to rouse the aggressiveness in social Web communities, which role and weight is more and more growing.

The Megan Meier case is so synthesized on Wikipedia:

*Megan Taylor Meier (November 6, 1992 – October 17, 2006) was an American teenager from Dardenne Prairie, Missouri, who committed suicide by hanging three weeks before her fourteenth birthday. A year later, Meier's parents prompted an investigation into the matter and her suicide was attributed to cyber-bullying through the social networking website Myspace. Lori Drew, the mother of a friend of Meier, was indicted on the matter in 2008, but in 2009, she was acquitted.*³³

According to the Web site that is dedicated to her memory,³⁴ at the age of thirteen, the life of Megan was starting to be good: she had lost twenty pounds, changed schools (from public to private) and a boy posing as a sixteen-year old, Josh Evans, contacted her through Myspace and expressed interest to her. But the relationship with this presumed boy suddenly changes. He begins to post messages stating a day that Megan is “a slut” and that she was “fat”. The day of suicide Megan received vulgar messages. Her mother was aggravated at her for reading them and Megan was reportedly furious that her parents weren’t “on her site”. After Megan suicide, her parents learned that the sixteen-year old boy never even existed, He was a hoax: he was invented by the Megan’s former friend mother.

³³ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suicide_of_Megan_Meier>, retrieved: 4 February 2013.

³⁴ <<http://www.meganmeierfoundation.org/megansStory.php>>, retrieved: 4 February 2013.

In the Megan's sad story, there are some points to be considered:

1. The fake identity of the boy, and the messages written by different persons knowing the password to the account;
2. The unnamed adults implicated in the hoax.
3. The incomprehension that Megan feels by her mother, who was annoyed instead to be "to her side" (it is the expression used by Megan before committing suicide).

The second case shows some crucial differences. Amanda Todd story is reported in a 9-minute YouTube video entitled *My Story: Struggling, bullying, suicide and self-harm*, which shows her using a series of flash cards to tell of her experiences being bullied. The video posted on September 7, 2012, received over 1,600,000 views by October.

Amanda's story is shocking. A stranger convinced the young girl (thirteen aged) to bare her breasts on camera and later blackmailed her. Amanda experienced anxiety, depression, and panic disorder because of this. Her family moved to a new home, where she began using drugs and alcohol. A year later, the individual reappeared, creating a Facebook profile which used the topless photograph as the profile image, and contacting classmates at her new school. Again Amanda was teased, and changed school for a second time. In her YouTube video she writes that she began chatting to "an old guy friend" they had sex while his girlfriend was on holiday. The following week, the girlfriend and a group of others attacked Amanda at school while shouting insults and punching her to the ground. Following the attack, Amanda attempted suicide by drinking bleach, but she was rushed to hospital and saved. After returning home, Amanda discovered abusive messages about her failed suicide attempt posted to Facebook. Her family moved to another city to start afresh, but Amanda was unable to escape the past. Six months later further messages and abuse were still being posted to social networking sites. Her mental state worsening, she began to engage in self-mutilation. Despite taking anti-depressants and receiving counseling, she took an overdose and spent two days in hospital. Later, she was teased by other students at her school for her low grades, a consequence of a language-based learning disability and the time she spent in the hospital to treat her severe depression. On October 10, 2012 at about 6:00 PM, Amanda was found hanged at her home.

The Amanda Todd story starts, as the one of Megan, with an anonymous who presents itself like a friend and through flatteries receives confidences and, in the case of Amanda, a topless photo. But the second part of the Amanda's story is very different. Amanda is physically attacked by known persons and suffers harassments by her classmates in different towns. Changing town has no positive effect: web network is everywhere and reaches her. Messages about her failed suicide are diffused on Facebook and insulting messages against her are

posted in social network sites. In the case of Amanda, we assist to a group fury either on Web or in the real life. The bond between web-virtual and real world doesn't exist, cyber violence loose its anonymity: aggressors show their face. Social networks play a crucial role in her story and it is very important that Amanda uses You tube to explain her motivations to suicide accusing her aggressors of bullying.

Online behavior *Uzvedība internetā*

To better understand the phenomenon of cyber violence and cyberbullying it ought to consider some factors about the online behavior. The first one concerns the motivations for children and young people, but also for many adult, to participate to social networks and the kind of relationships that those new form of aggregations offer. Web sites, such as Myspace and Facebook, offer the opportunity to create an individual Web page, post self-relevant information (e.g., self-descriptions, photos, preferences, etc.), link to other members (e.g., "friends lists"), and interact with other members. Users of those sites are often attracted by the possibility that their web profile is visible and appreciate by other people. They take pleasure and pride of their popularity that attempt to extend to the largest number of contacts or friends. The opportunity they have to exhibit their profile and showcase them generates and fosters mild forms of narcissism and exhibitionism, not infrequently causing violent reactions against those who dare to post a critique. On the other hand, the fierce mockery or criticism are very regular in social networks. Often people who criticize use their real name: they want to be recognized and gain support from members of the community. It is not casual if recently, there has been a tremendous amount of attention in the media surrounding the issue of narcissism and social networking Web sites (e.g., Baldwin and Stroman, 2007; Orlet, 2007; Vaidhyathan, 2011, Gentile et al. 2012).

Another important factor related to social network is the homophilic tendency for the members of a Web community to have more homogeneous opinions as well as share many common traits. A consequence is that group dynamics have place also among the social networks members (Backstrom et al., 2008; Hui et al., 2009). Finally, if one considers that all day it is possible to be online and we are immersed in a society driven by technology, the influence of social network show its strength, power and pervasiveness. The novelty of Grillo's political movement in Italy, existing and operating only on Web, confirms this tendency. Grillo apostrophizes in a violent way his political opponents and uses the Web as a political agora, where dissent is not allowed in any way. Those who try to express their own opinions without a previous endorsement by Grillo suffer the wrath and insults by him and his followers. They practice a sort of e-ostracism.

Social networks are a phenomenon that can affect the cyber violence and hence produce changes on cyberbullying. Various theoretical frameworks have been imported for the use of social network analysis. The literature on social network is vast: there are three journals that focus entirely on social networks - *Connection*, *Journal of Social structure*, *Networks* - and there are a number of publications that focus on the techniques and theories that form the field. Nevertheless, we know very little about it. Very interesting are the studies about multiple personality disorder in the Internet, like *Facebook Multiple Personality Disorder* (abbreviated to FMPD), that studies the cases of those who portray themselves on Facebook completely differently to how they actually are/ behave in real life. There is who is a quiet introvert in real life, but frequently comments, makes jokes/banter over Facebook, presenting polar opposite personalities.

However, the online behavior of those who practice violence is not necessarily connected to a personality that seeks compensation from their shyness and frustrations through violent actions protected by anonymity. Anonymity is especially important to hide, to steal personal and confidential information or images prohibited. With the anonymity one hides envy and resentment and tries to escape a possible punishment. Instead, those who are certain of their strength and enjoy of the admiration obtained by their actions don't like anonymity. Bullies are aware of the infringement of rules and are proud of affirming own power and misbehavior. They are arrogant against authority and aim to humble the weakest, subduing and scaring them, as well as aspire admiration of their followers. Exercising allurements and emulation toward their followers is an important aspect of bullies. The cyberbullies who work in anonymity, in fear of being discovered, completely isolated from other fellows, are very different from the bullies that one meets in real life. But there are bullies that use new technologies to improve their malicious actions, and they don't match the classic cyberbullying definition. They haven't a double personality, as Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, but they consider as a whole the cyber space and their real life: technology is a means to extend their supremacy and power.

The e-real-reality ***E- reālā realitāte***

Some more recent definitions of cyberbullying underline the continuity with bullying behavior:

[Cyberbullying is] an aggressive, intentional act or behaviour that is carried out by a group or an individual repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself (Smith and Slonje, 2007).

Price and Dagleish definition agrees with this vision (2010):

Cyberbullying is the collective label used to define forms of bullying that use electronic means such as the internet and mobile phones to aggressively and intentionally harm someone. Like traditional" bullying, cyberbullying typically involves repeated behaviour and a power imbalance between aggressor and victim.

The anonymity is not taken under consideration in the above definition. Obviously it remains the use of new technologies as a means to threat, harass and do violence.

However, in many recent cases of cyberbullying, especially the more extremes, e. g. that ended with the victims suicide, it emerges the contiguity of Web world and real life. The cyber violence is perceived as real, and to make it disappear it is not enough to turn off computer. It's like in Wes Craven's movie, *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), where Tina Gray, a young teenager, suffers from terrible nightmares in which a man with a red and green striped sweater haunts her. The nightmare becomes reality and sowing death in a group of teenagers. An interesting detail of film is the mother of Tina, who blames her, instead of supporting her.

Because of one can be transfer in the Web an important part of life, such as self-image, expectations, judgments, etc., there is a serious consequence: it impossible to turn off real life, save committing suicide. The Web amplifies what happens in real life. And more and more cyber violence becomes a corollary of the violence that one undergoes in real life. Moreover, in the Web one is alone and cannot run away from outrageous things. They remain online.

In recent years, the Web is losing the attractiveness of virtual place where one can escape from the frustrations of real life. Today, those who post an artifact profile in a social network, don't content of a parallel virtual existence. To be on the Web is significant because it allows to express what one want to be: it is like the image one would like a mirror reflects. For this reason the derision and scorn on the Web become very important, because those who offend are perceived as a real persons, belonging the circle of known people.

For many young people, Web and physical world are more and more becoming a whole: virtual-web and real reality are a continuum that we could define as an *e-real-reality*.

Conclusion ***Secinājumi***

The concept of e-real-reality express a cultural attitude of considering the virtual-web dimension integrated to the physical dimension. Avatars are perceived as real and often are preferred to actual persons: they can ever be more social then humans and do not age and do not fat. Augmented reality has now becoming familiar. Some American scholars have underlined the changes

in act in communication and spoken language of adolescents, putting those changes in relation to the use of information technology (Marcucci and Lavenia, 2003; Wells, 2006). They observed that adolescents finish their sentences in rising tone and slightly dubious way, as to suggest that everything they say it is more a question than a statement (a phenomenon called upspeak or uptalk). This new way of speaking suggests that the thought of young people, to make sense and be validated, should always be connected to the thought of others.

Those are all elements that lead to a new dimension of research on cyberbullying. Moreover, it is not to underestimate the amplification that the Web makes of every action. There is also the possibility of repeating messages, images, videos, etc., related to their persistence on the Web, where time and space does not correspond to the physical reality of space and time. However, both web-virtual and physical dimensions influence our actual actions. Think to the virtual political movement of Grillo in Italy: it is influencing the real life of an entire country. The attempt, after the political election of February 2012, of Grillo and his followers to impose through the Web a bottom up democracy - pity if the leader of this form of e-democracy continually offends and insults those who are not in agreement with him - has all the characteristics of a cyber mob violence. And it is a clear example of e-real-reality.

Summary

The aim of this article is a theoretical reflection on a factor which could be important for further researches in the field of cyberbullying. Many scholars continue to consider the anonymity as a fundamental characteristic of cyber bullying. But this is an assumption that doesn't meet the current trends in social networks, where members more and more tend to show and express their identity. Through social networking, cyber bullying could become collective, transforming itself in a corollary of bullying. The article tries to highlight how the Web and physical world are increasingly perceived as a whole, especially by the younger generation. Web and physical reality blend together in an e-real-reality. This new concept of reality opens to study youth cultures under another perspective and it is important for its implications in many areas. One can consider an example of e-real-reality the recent success in Italy's political movement of Grillo: a virtual political movement with real effects in the life of a country.

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