Social Networking Sites Can Be Forums for Cyberbullying

Are Social Networking Sites Harmful?, 2011

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While hate and prejudice are as old as humankind, new technologies have helped to spread them quicker and more forcefully than ever before. The Internet has created racist forums and communities, and new social networking sites draw in teenagers and enable them to spread vicious rumors about classmates and neighbors. Cyberbullying has become a real threat, and parents and educators must work in unison to counter antisocial and harmful harassment and make such crimes punishable by law.

Hate has always been with us. Racism, anti-Semitism, and other forms of prejudice have always infected society at some level.

Historically it has come in many forms—in leaflets handed out from a paper bag on a street corner, in racist rallies and speeches and, occasionally, even from the pulpit. But in today's world there is a new, more insidious and effective delivery system for the age-old virus of hate. In many ways it is more potent, more virulent, and more threatening than anything we have seen in the past. It is, simply put, the ability to spread words of hate electronically.

Spreading Hate Online

It started with the Internet. While this technology held out the promise of a new era for interconnectedness, information-sharing and education, it also came with a dark underbelly, as bigots and anti-Semites found it a useful tool for propagating hatred. The Web sites they created have evolved over time and with the technology, yet they continue to be a very effective tool for spreading hatred, giving the bigots the ability to reach a potential audience of millions. Now, this ability to spread hateful sentiments electronically has reached new dimensions. It has taken on new life in the form of cyberbullying, or the ability to use (and abuse) the fairly new technologies of instant messaging, cell phones, texting, and online social-networking to harass and intimidate.

Nowhere has this new form of bullying been more prevalent than in middle and high schools. After all, it is teenage students who are most facile with these new technologies and who are most likely to employ them in a group social setting, such as school or camp. Indeed, the Internet, cell phones and other technological paraphernalia play a central role in the social lives of nearly all adolescents. While much of their online activity may be harmless enough, it has also provided an opening for would-be schoolyard bullies to spread innuendo, falsehoods and slander to dozens, even hundreds, of classmates with the touch of a button or click of a mouse. The real-world consequences of cyberbullying have been widely reported. We are familiar with the stories about children and teenagers driven to desperate, even suicidal acts after having been exposed to repeated harassment in
Finding Ways to Curb Prejudice

The question for educators, parents and those of us who work every day to confront and counter prejudice in society is how to effectively address this new form of harassment. What tools do we have to fight back? How can we prevent students from using technology to do harm to others, and to ensure that students really understand the impact of hateful words?

There is no one panacea [a cure-all], of course. But there are those reliable and effective tools that we have traditionally had at our disposal to respond when prejudice rears its ugly head. They include, in no particular order: Education, awareness and advocacy. Education remains one of the most effective methods for fighting back against bigotry. For example, the Anti-Defamation League helps to put anti-bias training programs directly into the school setting with cyberbullying and anti-bias workshops for middle and high school educators and students. These trainings not only raise awareness of the dangers and effects of cyberbullying, but also provide practical information to help schools, teachers and administrators to develop comprehensive plans for prevention and for creating and maintaining a safe learning environment for students. Awareness helps students, teachers, parents and caregivers to identify prejudice or cyberbullying when it occurs.

We know that cyberbullying can damage reputations, and destroy lives.

Awareness enables people to speak out and to report expressions of hatred—both of the viral and face-to-face sorts—and to have a greater knowledge of the risk factor involved if people remain silent and allow acts of hatred to go left unchecked.

Lawmakers Need to Act

Finally, there is advocacy and—better yet—legislation. Over the past 10 years, 41 states, including California, have adopted laws mandating schools implement anti-bullying statutes. Some of these statutes offer general prohibitions against bullying, while others are more directed and specific. More states need to adopt comprehensive anti-bullying laws based on the ADL model, and some should revisit their statutes in light of the unique problem of cyberbullying in our increasingly wired-up and logged-in society. And for those states that do have comprehensive laws, like California, we should encourage and help schools to comply by creating and adhering to strong school policies.

We can rise above the statistics. We can keep our schools and communities safe from online and real-world hate. But first it takes a will and a determination to recognize the extent of the problem, to speak out and say "no" to prejudice and bigotry, and to take action. We must act now to ensure that those who would engage in harassment or bullying—whether on the street or in cyberspace—will face real-world consequences for their actions.
Further Readings

Books


**Periodicals**


• Economist "Primates on Facebook: Even Online, the Neocortex Is the Limit," February 26, 2009.


• Ann Doss Helms "5 Teachers Disciplined for Facebook Postings," *Charlotte Observer*, November 12, 2008.


• James Tozer "Husband Dumps His Wife with Online Message in 'World's First Divorce by Facebook.'" *Daily Mail* (UK), February 9, 2009.


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