SOCIETAL EFFECTS OF CYBERBULLYING:
THE DARK SIDE OF BUILDING BRIDGES WITH
TECHNOLOGY

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Abstract: Technology is often regarded as a positive source of social change. In recent decades, advancements in information technology have been seen as contributors to America’s economic prosperity and well-being. This technology has also impacted society in negative ways. One manifestation of this negative side is the practice of cyberbullying. Trends data indicate a growing prevalence of cyberbullying that warrants careful inspection. This paper evaluates ways that technology has affected our sense of community. In particular, this paper focuses on cyberbullying as a social trend that represents the negative side of information technology among today’s youth. Additionally, cyberbullying is evaluated from sociological and psychological perspectives.

Introduction
Technology is often regarded as a source of social change (Weinstein, 2005). Technological innovations have impacted the ways in which people live, work, play, and communicate. In recent decades, advancements in information technology – including computers, the Internet, and cellular telephones – are seen as contributors to America’s economic prosperity and well-being. Trends data clearly show the recent growth of this technology. Such innovations are so tightly integrated into modern living that virtually no life in America is left completely untouched by computer-driven technology (Kominski & Newburger, 1999).

In addition to the exciting possibilities provided for society by new advances in electronic communications, this technology has also impacted society in negative ways that violate social norms (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). One manifestation of this negative side is the practice of cyberbullying – an extension of traditional bullying behavior that is carried out in cyberspace. Due to the isolated manner in which this technology is most often utilized, trends indicate a growing prevalence of cyberbullying that warrants careful inspection.

The purpose of this paper is to review recent social trends relative to information technology in order to evaluate ways that this technology has affected our sense of community. In particular, this paper focuses on cyberbullying as a social trend that represents the negative side of information technology among today’s youth. Additionally, this paper will evaluate the trend of cyberbullying from sociological and psychological perspectives. By examining cyberbullying as a characteristic of modern culture, it is

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possible to determine what societal values are “cherished yet threatened, and what values are cherished and supported” (Mills, 1959/2000, p. 11).

**Trends in Information Technology**

The Pew Research Center for the People and Press (1999) surveyed the American public regarding scientific inventions of the century and social trends. This research revealed that technological changes were perceived as developments that improved society. Such positive changes, particularly those that changed the way Americans work and live, were considered among the most positive accomplishments of the century. Americans celebrate these inventions and conveniences of the century and point to such technological advancements as key causes for making their lives better today as compared to those of their family members in the 1950s (Pew, 1999).

When responding to whether technological innovations represented a change for the better, the worse, made no difference, or don’t know, information era inventions ranked highest among the responses. Specifically, 71% of Americans reported that electronic mail (e-mail) was a change for the better, 69% reported that the Internet was a change for the better, and 66% reported that cell phones were a change for the better. In this same survey, the trend toward growth in information technology was also supported when Americans were asked to give one-word responses to describe recent decades. Results indicate that, aside from major misfortunes such as wars and economic disasters, Americans used cultural terms to describe the past. When considering the terms chosen to characterize the 1990s, it is interesting to note that a term referencing “technology” topped the list – a term that was barely mentioned in any previous decade (Pew, 1999).

This trend is further supported by a 2003 report published by the U.S. Census Bureau. Nearly 62% of American households owned at least one computer, up from 56% in 2001 and up from a mere 8% in 1984. Internet access showed a similar steep climb, rising from 18% in 1997 to almost 55% in 2003.

A Pew Research Center social trends survey (2006) considered whether wide assortments of everyday consumer goods were considered to be luxuries or necessities: do such products help make everyday life more productive, more convenient, more comfortable, more efficient, or more entertaining? According to the results, relatively recent information era technologies such as home computers, cell phones, and high-speed Internet were quickly changing in consumers’ view from luxury to necessity items. For example, in 1996 only 26% of respondents considered home computers to be a necessity, but by 2006 that number had nearly doubled to 51%. It should be noted that cellular phones and high-speed Internet were still so novel in 1996 that these items were not even included in the survey. Yet by 2006, these items were considered necessities by 49% and 29% of respondents, respectively. Essentially then, such information age technology is quickly becoming a critical, not optional, tool for people in their daily activities (Kominski & Newburger, 1999).

Another reflection of the trend toward greater use of information age technology is seen in a 2007 report by the Pew
Research Center. According to this report, Americans today experience paying monthly bills differently compared to a generation ago. Charges for such information age innovations as cell phone use and internet service are near the top of today’s list of regular monthly expenses. Additionally, 28% of respondents indicate that the most common way for them to pay monthly bills is through online or electronic payments, while only 54% pay by check anymore and a mere 15% pay bills by cash (Pew Research Center, 2007).

All of this data suggests a substantial increase in recent decades in the growth and usage of information technology – particularly regarding such innovations as e-mail, the Internet, and cellular telephones. Patchin & Hinduja (2006) write that almost 90% of American teens between the ages of 12 and 17 use computers, that 73% of teens in this age bracket regularly use the Internet, and that by age 10 children are more likely than adults to use the Internet. These researchers additionally state that America Online serves over thirty-five million subscribers, and that members routinely participate in more than 16,000 chat sessions and send more than 2.1 billion instant messages across their network daily. Americans report that information age technology has changed their lives for the better to the extent that these modern inventions are now considered necessities of life. Such technologies have indisputably changed the fabric of American society. These changes, however, are not all positive.

**Negative Trends in Technology Use**

Despite the exciting opportunities made possible by information age innovations, it is also evident that use of this technology results in negative social consequences. One relatively new trend is the practice of cyberbullying – a variation of standard bullying behavior that occurs in cyberspace. The impulses are the same, but now that bullying has entered the digital age the effects are magnified; now, anyone with even the slightest proficiency with computers, the Internet, or cell phones can share negative and hurtful information with a few simple clicks (Lenhart, 2007). In a recent article identifying the current technology trends in education, McLester (2008) contends that cyberbullying ranks second in the list of top ten developments.

The definition of traditional bullying is widely agreed upon among researchers who study this antisocial behavior. Bullying is typically defined as a specific type of physically or psychologically aggressive conduct in which the behavior is intended to harm or disturb, that occurs repeatedly over time, and where there is an imbalance of power (Nansel, Overpeck, Pilla, Ruan, Simons-Morton, & Scheidt, 2001).

Cyberbullying meets these same criteria yet is carried out in the realm of “virtual reality” where electronic data is disseminated. More specifically, cyberbullying:

- Involves the use of information and communication technologies such as e-mail, cell phone and pager messages, instant messaging, defamatory personal Web sites, and defamatory online personal polling Web sites to support deliberate, repeated, and hostile behavior by an individual or group that is intended to harm others. (Li, 2007, p. 436)
Trends in traditional bullying can be compared to trends in cyberbullying by analyzing data published by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS). The NCES is the principal federal body for collecting, analyzing, and reporting data related to education in the United States. The BJS is the principal federal body for collecting, analyzing, publishing, and disseminating statistical information about crime, its perpetrators and victims, and the operations of the justice system at all levels of government. These entities regularly publish a joint report entitled *Indicators of School Crime and Safety*. According to longitudinal data (Table 1), the percentage of 12 – 18-year-olds who reported being the recipients of bullying behavior while at school remained largely steady between 1993 and 2005, ranging from a low of 5% of responding students in 1999 to a high of 8% in 1993 and 2001. However, a dramatic rise in the report of bullying behavior occurred from 2003 to 2005 when 28% of responding students declared that they had been the victim of bullying at school. This dramatic rise may be due, in part, to the increase of cyberbullying; as yet, cyberbullying is not counted as a separate statistic for the purposes of such reports.

Because cyberbullying is a new extension of an old problem, very little research exists to specifically address this trend. However, extant research does address particular behaviors favored by cyberbullies. Typical cyberbullying behaviors include: flaming (online fights where scornful and/or offensive messages are posted); harassment; cyber stalking (posting or sending unwanted or intimidating messages which may include threats); rumor-mongering; impersonation (using someone’s e-mail or other online account to send messages that will cause embarrassment or damage the person’s reputation and affect his/her relationships with others); outing and trickery (tricking someone into revealing secrets or embarrassing information which is then shared online); exclusion; and cyber-threats (SecureFirst for Children, 2008).

In order to understand why the cyberbullying trend represents such a significant social problem, it is necessary to consider the prevalence of this antisocial behavior. For example, analysis of reports indicates a dramatic increase in the incidence of cyberbullying since 2000 (Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Wolak, 2000; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Moessnner, 2007). In 2000, 7% of youth respondents had been bullied online in the previous

<p>| Table 1. 12-18-yr.-olds Who Reported Being Bullied at School During the Last Six Months |
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year. By 2004, the victim rate jumped to 29.4%. In 2006, 43% of American teens reported being the victim of some form of cyberbullying in the past year.

Research also indicates that fewer and fewer communications remain private anymore, particularly when they are conveyed via electronic media (Pew, 2006). Such communications make easy targets for cyberbullying behaviors. For example, 15% of teens who utilize the Internet declare that they have experienced unwanted online forwarding of messages that they intended to be private. Additionally, 13% of teens reported that rumors had been spread about them online, and 13% reported receiving threatening or aggressive e-mail.

Similarly, Patchin & Hinduja (2006) discuss how and where in America youth have been bullied while online, have bullied others online, or have witnessed online bullying. Their research indicates that cyberbullying occurred most often in online chat rooms, followed closely by text messaging and e-mails via computer.

The Magnification of Cyberbullying’s Harmful Effects
All types of bullying behaviors potentially cause emotional and psychological harm to the victims. This effect is magnified with cyberbullying because certain characteristics inherent in the technology increase the victims’ exposure to the deviant purposes of the bullies. Several issues specific to cyberbullying make this possible:

- Cyberbullies can remain virtually anonymous; such anonymity frees bullies from normative and social checks on their actions
- Supervision is severely lacking in cyberspace; there is no one to monitor or censor offensive content in e-mail or text messages
- Computers used by teens are increasingly used in private bedrooms; teens do not have to worry much that an inquisitive parent will discover their participation in bullying behavior
- Today’s teens and their cell phones are literally inseparable, creating opportunities for unending victimization (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006)

There is some research about negative outcomes felt by the victims of cyberbullying. Prevalent effects include feelings of frustration (almost 42.5%), anger (39.8%), and sadness (27.4%). Victims are also affected at school and at home, and their relationships with friends suffered as well. This data indicates that cyberbullying is impacting America’s youth in numerous negative ways (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006).

Sociological and Psychological Perspectives
Several sociological and psychological theories apply to the growth of technology and particularly to the emergent trend of cyberbullying. For instance, Weinstein (2005) acknowledges that technology is a source of social change, but he suggests that explaining exactly how innovations cause social change is not a simple task. Indeed, “technologies can have no effects in and of themselves” (p. 180). Rather, technology is merely introduced into an already existing social order according to the values of those who create the technology. This position is mirrored by Melvin Kranzberg, one of the founding
fathers of the history of technology as a discipline. Kranzberg states: Technology is neither good nor bad, nor is it neutral. Depending on how we design the technology, and even more on how we use the technology, it will affect us, it will change us, in some way. Whether the effects and the changes turn out to be good or bad, or both inseparably together, it is not predestined in the inherent qualities of the technology itself … but rather depends on the broader context and values within which we live our lives. (Hansen, n.d.)

Durkheim’s notion of “anomie” applies specifically to cyberbullying. First introduced in his book *The Division of Labor in Society*, published in 1893, Durkheim defines anomie as a condition where social order and moral norms are confused, unclear, or simply not present, leading directly to deviant behavior (Dunman, 2003). Writing at the end of the century, Durkheim believed that industrialization was responsible for dissolving the social constraints on socially acceptable behavior. Due to the complexities of industrialization, the social bonds that defined normative behavior were weakened as people became more socially isolated and separated. Today, computer technology and the Internet are causing this same effect on modern society and exposing us to the risk of anomie (Dunham, 2003).

With direct application to cyberbullying, Suler (2004) offers a modern psychological explanation of Durkheim’s notion of anomie. Referring to the “online disinhibition effect,” Suler discusses the many ways that today’s youth behave with less restraint while online. Accordingly, several factors lead to online disinhibition including the anonymity of the Internet, the sense of being invisible to others, the exaggerated sense of self from being alone, the delayed response between sending a hurtful e-mail message and getting feedback (if any) from the victim, and the lack of any online authority figure. Suler additionally offers that, though disinhibition can be benign, it more often manifests itself in toxic behavior such as cyberbullying. This toxic disinhibition has serious implications for society.

Social neuroscience offers a possible explanation regarding what goes on in the human brain during episodes of toxic disinhibition. Recent efforts in this science indicate an inherent design flaw in the interactions between the brain’s social circuitry and cyberspace. According to Goleman (2007), in normal face-to-face interactions between people, the brain relies on myriad social and emotional cues (smiles, frowns, blushing, voice inflection, etc.) to guide interactions in an attempt to assure that the encounters go well. Much of this brain activity occurs in the orbitofrontal cortex, a center for empathy. But this cortex relies on social information in order to restrain the impulsivity that may generate negative responses in social interactions. Suler (2004) asserts that it is well documented that people say and do things on the Internet that they would not normally say or do during a face-to-face interaction with someone including using rude language, offering negative criticisms, or even threatening others. It is the very isolated manner in which people typically interact in cyberspace that interferes with the neural transmission of the necessary social and emotional cues. This interference increases the likelihood of a toxic disinhibition effect.
Discussion

Behavior in cyberspace today summons images of *Lord of the Flies*, the popular fictional story that addresses several basic themes in political history such as the state of nature, social (in)stability, and human nature. In this allegorical tale, a group of young British boys is left on a deserted island. Though they originally try to organize themselves in an orderly society, they soon find themselves in a “state of nature” in which social order quickly disintegrates with disastrous results. A state of nature, by definition, is a society in which there is general autonomy; there are no rules and people have unlimited freedoms. Of course, such a condition of autonomy includes the right to do whatever one wants to whomever one wants; there are no positive rights, only laws of nature.

Moessner (2007) relates a description of the Internet and its supporting technological tools that closely mirrors the state of nature that exists in the imaginary world of *Lord of the Flies*: “Imagine you lived in a city in which there was no police force, no rules, crime is rampant, you can say what ever you want to whomever you want, everyone lies, and no one is too worried about it” (p. 4).

Perhaps it is an issue of too much freedom on the Internet. Chirot (1994) asserts that “we know perfectly well that too much individual freedom can easily turn into an unrestrained search for rapid gratification that can make an entire society break down…. It does not take much analytic power to see that certain parts of modern American society, for example, are losing all cohesion or moral restraint and that this tendency is increasing” (pp. 128-129). Such unrestrained freedom on the Internet has led directly to a new type of antisocial behavior that represents a modern example of the state of nature. A Hobbesian solution to correcting the social woes present in a state of nature is, of course, to create a social contract. Accordingly, members of a society voluntarily give up the right to act in any way they wish – subjecting themselves to civil law and political authority – in return for social order and stability. Indeed, this thinking led directly to the creation of the American form of government based on “consent of the governed.”

It almost seems as if our society suffers from a form of “future shock,” a term introduced by sociologist Alvin Toffler (1970) in his book of the same name. Future shock is a psychological term that describes the “shattering stress and disorientation that we induce in individuals by subjecting them to too much change in too short a time” (p. 10), stemming from the revolutionary growth of our civilization from an industrial society to a super-industrial society. Such growth results in enormous structural changes to society. Due to the rapid pace of change, people feel overwhelmed, stressed, and disoriented – future shocked – from experiencing information overload. The general causes of this information overload are remarkably similar to the information technology innovations that are used by cyberbullies. Toffler echoes Durkheim’s notion of anomie, contending that many of society’s problems and the state of social instability are symptoms of future shock.

Weinstein (2005) suggests that society may regret it if we tinker too much with technology. He writes of Dr. Victor Frankenstein’s outburst: “I have created a
monster” (p. 183). Due to the unintended consequences indicated in the trend data, cyberbullying is today’s Frankenstein monster. This fact is highlighted by a topical national news event. In a recent development, a mother from Missouri allegedly created a fake MySpace account to convince another female teenager that she was chatting in cyberspace with a nonexistent 16-year-old boy. The young female hanged herself at home in October of 2006 after receiving dozens of hateful electronic messages from the mother, including several stating that the world would be better off without her. The mother was charged in the first ever federal cyberbullying case for her role in this instance of cyberbullying. However, the jury unanimously rejected the three felony charges that alleged the mother concocted a scheme to intentionally inflict emotional distress on the teen by illegally gaining access to an unauthorized MySpace account (Zetter, 2008).

Prompted by public outrage following this incident, a cyberbullying prevention bill was introduced in May 2008 in the House of Representatives. If enacted, this bill will amend Title 18 of the United States Code: Crimes and Criminal Procedures. Specifically, H.R. 6123 proposes in principal part that:

Whoever transmits in interstate or foreign commerce any communication, with the intent to coerce, intimidate, harass, or cause substantial emotional distress to a person, using electronic means to support severe, repeated, and hostile behavior, shall be fined under this title or imprisoned not more than two years, or both. (WashingtonWatch.com, 2008)

Because the growth of cyberbullying is so pronounced, one wonders (à là C. Wright Mills) if this characterizing trend of our society is an accurate reflection of what values are cherished and supported in America. Are humans actually this violent by nature, especially when they feel that there is little chance of suffering repercussions for their behavior? Is information technology more of a hindrance to society than an asset? What are the consequences for society of continued unrestrained behavior of this nature? To what extent must America suffer before citizens consider a type of social contract in order to address this growing amount of social instability?

References


The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. (1999, July 3). Technology triumphs,


