Chapter 13

When bullying crosses the screen

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Young people perceive the internet as a natural way to gain experience and meet their need for social contact and communication through digital means. However, it has also provided a new context for children and young people to intimidate and harass their peers, with serious consequences for their daily lives as well as their physical and mental health. In this sense, cyberbullying has emerged in many countries as a growing concern in terms of health and well-being.

Bullying behaviour is generally defined by three criteria: intentionality, repetition and uneven power. By extension, cyberbullying should also be defined by the same criteria, the main difference being that the phenomena occurs through the use of online technologies. However, due to the specificities of the use of technology, some bullying characteristics may become ambiguous in cyberspace, making it harder to agree on a consensual definition. Notwithstanding these difficulties, any definition of cyberbullying should be an extension of the definition of bullying. In this sense, it can be defined as the misuse of digital technologies to deliberately and repeatedly act in a hostile manner, with the intention of causing damage to another. Taking into account the variety of actions that cyberbullying can encompass and the diversity of possible content as well as the multiple forms of dissemination involved, cyberbullying behaviour is much more complex and varied than standard bullying.

In this chapter, we intend to reflect on the difference between bullying and cyberbullying, as well as the main factors that facilitate the occurrence of the latter or the transition from one to the other. But first, we need to look at the characteristics of communication mediated by screens and how this can facilitate aggressive behaviour. These characteristics include not only disinhibition, anonymity, the illusion of invisibility and a lack of tangible feedback, but also other features and technical properties of screen-mediated communication. It is important to take these into account, since they characterise the environment where young people predominantly socialise and communicate. The majority of these characteristics are interconnected and co-dependent, in particular in terms of the replicability, searchability and scalability of content.

The chapter will also discuss different anti-cyberbullying actions and the various forms of dissemination. Finally, we identify preventive and interventional approaches to cyberbullying, including regulatory, educational, parenting and technological approaches.

Characteristics of communication mediated by screens

Disinhibition

Having a screen that separates us from the other person facilitates a certain disinhibition between the interlocutors. We often observe cases of individuals who behave in a more open, relaxed and less constrained way in the digital world than they do in the real world. The presence of a screen may facilitate the emergence of behaviour that would never arise in face-to-face interactions, such as more hostile, aggressive or provocative communication that easily degenerates into episodes of cyberbullying.

Anonymity and the illusion of invisibility

The internet allows users to remain anonymous and escape their responsibilities, since it may be difficult to identify them. They experience the illusion of invisibility, since in this type of communication the user does not see the other party (unless they use a webcam). Thus, people often behave as if talking to a screen and not a real person. This illusion also facilitates greater disclosure of personal information than in face-to-face situations.

Persistence of contents

One of the technical properties of screen-mediated communication is the persistence of digital content, whether text, image, sound or video: "once on the internet, forever on the internet". Everything we publish online is automatically recorded and archived, irrespective of whether we want it to be or not. Consequently, it can be repeatedly retrieved, allowing anyone to find almost all content that has been published in a digital environment. This characteristic is particularly important in cases of cyberbullying, when subjects intentionally seek and disseminate content pertaining to others.

Replicability

Another property is the replicability of digital content. What we say online is no longer under our control once we have said it. This can be true for a conversation between friends, the comments that are made on a blog or the photos that are uploaded onto a social network. This information can be copied by anyone else and spread over the internet in several ways, including through e-mails, instant messages, profiles, blogs, social networks or file-sharing. Even if a user deletes a particular piece of content after it has been published, there is nothing to say that it has not already been copied or captured with a screen grab and shared. There are countless cases of cyberbullying in which this happens.

Searchability

As a result of the above characteristics, from the moment that digital content is available online, anyone can find it and reuse it in any way, including reposting it elsewhere. Young people are not always aware that what they publish today may be embarrassing in 10 or 20 years' time or even later, or that these items can be viewed elsewhere.

Scalability

The scalability of digital content relates to its potential visibility. After the publication of content on a public digital network, the number of people who can view it is potentially huge and this can reach exponential proportions, as in the case of content that "goes viral".

Lack of tangible feedback

The reduction or absence of physical, social and visual communication signals in most online interaction results in a lack of tangible feedback. When interacting via a screen or keyboard, people do not communicate with their body and all of their senses as they do in face-to-face communication. It is more difficult to know the mood of our interlocutor, especially how they feel after receiving a message that could amuse but also hurt or upset. Our attention is focused exclusively on the message without being contextualised by other non-verbal stimuli, including voice tone and facial expression. As a result, signals are lost, resulting in confusion that in turn may cause cyberbullying behaviour.

Given the indirect nature of online communication, in most cases cyberbullies cannot observe the victim's reactions in real time. Since the offender does not see the effects and consequences of his or her actions immediately, this can minimise any feelings of regret, remorse or empathy for the victim. In fact, for some offenders, their victims are no longer seen as people with feelings but become a simple computer screen that does not feel or suffer. Furthermore, when aggression is intentional, the lack of feedback provides no immediate reward, which can cause greater frustration and a desire to persist in the cyberbullying behaviour.

Bullying and cyberbullying

The comparison of face-to-face communication and communication that is mediated by technology highlights some important differences between bullying and cyberbullying. For example, the three main criteria used to define bullying may not be so evident in cyberbullying behaviours.

With regards to intentionality, in bullying, the aggressor has the intent to harm the victim, while in cyberbullying a lot also depends on the victim's perception of the action, and whether it was intended in jest and without malicious intent. An initial action may occur without malicious intent but the absence of non-verbal indicators, like the tone of voice, obfuscate the true intent behind the action. Beyond this, the

intentionality can also be misinterpreted by onlookers who take advantage of the initial action.

As regards the characteristic of uneven power, in bullying, this disparity is usually related to the distinguishing characteristics of the actors in the real world, namely differences in physical, psychological or social power. In cyberbullying, uneven power also becomes virtual as it may be based on a higher level of skills with technology, the characteristics of the content published on the internet, or the anonymity that the devices used may allow. The lack of support for victims may also stem from the fact that they cannot act upon the aggression because they are often unable to delete the content from the internet or identify the aggressor.

Finally, while bullying implies the repetition of behaviour over time, the repetition of cyberbullying can depend on the characteristics of the technology itself, regardless of the aggressor's initial intention. One single act of aggression like publishing a hurtful photo can be seen and shared several times by third parties, resulting in a continuous and repeated humiliation that may or may not have been the original intention.

Using Nancy Willard's[190] description as a starting point, types of cyberbullying behaviour can be categorised as follows:

- flaming: a discussion that may have started in person or online can evolve into aggressiveness on the internet, including sending and receiving inflammatory, rude, irate or obscene messages, in private or in public. This may degenerate into veritable "message wars" or commentary that can be dubbed "flame wars". This type of behaviour is often initiated after an exchange that becomes progressively more aggravated, where insults beget insults;
- harassment: repeated sending of messages of an abusive nature, aiming to annoy, threaten or alarm the recipient;
- cyberstalking: the persistent sending of threats or highly intimidating and intrusive messages that cause fear and threaten the victim's privacy;
- denigration: publishing false statements or broadcasting rumours and hearsay about the other person through the internet, with the goal of causing damage to their reputation or relationships;
- impersonation: pretending to be another person in cyberspace, or using their cell phone and then sending or publishing messages to potentially endanger or embarrass that person, causing damage to their reputation or relationships;
- outing: publishing or issuing public or private messages to expose another person's sensitive, private, intimate or embarrassing information;
- trickery: employing deception or scamming someone, with the purpose of obtaining secrets or embarrassing information, which can then be shared or broadcast online;
- exclusion: intentionally and cruelly excluding a person from an online group.

In terms of dissemination methods, cyberbullying can occur through a variety of platforms and devices, including:

- e-mails (asynchronous communication sent to an individual or a group);
- blogs;

- discussion groups (asynchronous communication of a group around a topic);
- chat rooms (group asynchronous communication) on the Web;
- instant messaging software (synchronous private communication);
- messaging apps for smartphones, such as Facebook, Messenger, WhatsApp, Snapchat and others;
- text/multimedia messages;
- groups and social network communities (very common among teenagers);
- online multiplayer games, be these MMOGs (massive multiplayer online games) or not, Web-based and/or played through computers, video game consoles, smartphones or tablets.

One of the most important aspects of cyberbullying concerns the continued risk of exposure. In "traditional" bullying, students are usually targeted by attacks during their time at school or travelling to and from school, which would mean from approximately from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., 5 days a week. In such circumstances, victimised students may be able develop avoidance or protection mechanisms, such as skipping class, arriving late, asking to leave early with the excuse of some commitment they cannot postpone, asking the teacher for clarification or remaining close to other adults during breaks. However, cyberbullying is extremely difficult to avoid. Victims can receive messages on their phone, computer, tablet or other technological device wherever they are, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Consequently, students that are victims of cyberbullying find themselves in a position of greater and constant exposure, which may amplify feelings of increasing vulnerability, anguish and suffering.

Furthermore, in cyberbullying the variety of roles that observers play is much more complex. Given that attacks can take place asynchronously, the observer may be with the aggressor or the victim when the action is initiated, but they may also be alone when receiving something that was shared, or when visiting a specific website or accessing a social network. In "traditional" bullying, observers are usually physically present as instigators, supporters of the aggressor, defenders of the victim or simply onlookers. However, there is greater ambiguity in the roles that observers of cyberbullying can play. If they choose to join in, they can make comments to encourage or discourage an attack, for example by placing a "like" on a post. Alternatively, if they choose not to show themselves they can nevertheless decide whether or not to spread or forward the messages or eliminate the disagreeable content, which may be part of the solution as it can help prevent the contents from spreading to a wider audience.

Another peculiarity of cyberbullying is the size of the audience. Digital technologies reach a particularly broad and unlimited audience (especially if the aggressions occur in the public domain), in contrast to the small group of peers that are often present in "traditional" bullying. Very rapidly, the dissemination of a video or an image crosses geographical and linguistic borders. With a simple click, the same content can be viewed in Greece, the United States or Australia, and content sometimes goes viral within seconds of its release. The humiliation felt by knowing that we are being watched and scrutinised by hundreds, if not thousands of people, assumes proportions that are vastly different, compared to the limited audience that we would be subjected to in a face-to-face context.

This rapid dissemination of aggression, and the multiplicity of places where it can be viewed, commented upon and recorded, gives these attacks a permanence, as opposed to bullying that takes place in a real location and cannot be reproduced or "revisited". Indeed, this aspect of cyberbullying relates directly to the searchability and permanence of digital content.

To summarise, while cyberbullying is a behaviour that is mediated by digital technologies, its manifestation and the way it is experienced by all those involved is considerably different from "traditional" bullying. It is crucial that young people be aware of the particularities of screen-mediated communication so they are able to anticipate the eventual repercussions and potential abuse that may arise from what they publish on the internet. It is essential to empower children, teens, parents and school professionals with the necessary skills, and also consider regulatory, educational, parental or technological approaches to combating cyberbullying.

Regulatory approaches

Regulatory approaches can take the form of legislation, self-regulation or parental rules. Legislation can be used to define and criminalise certain behaviour and conduct related to cyberbullying, either at the national, regional or international level. Examples of self-regulation can include terms and conditions of usage, privacy policies or reporting channels such as internet hotlines or helplines. Parental rules can also be established at the family level.

Educational approaches

There are many things schools can do to prevent, intervene against and combat cyberbullying. Teachers and the school community as a whole can be helped if the school as a whole adopts and implements anti-cyberbullying strategies, including integrating the topic in the school curriculum and raising awareness among all educational agents.

A current trend in many countries is to produce legislation that encourages schools to adopt policies, systems and procedures to deal with cyberbullying. Often the problem in schools is that cyberbullying is considered the responsibility of no one in particular. Setting up a team is the first essential step. This may include teacher representatives, other school staff, students, student associations, parents and legal guardians.

One of the first tasks of the team is to evaluate how big the problem is at the school and assess the needs of the whole school community. Based on the results gathered, the workgroup can then develop an appropriate action plan. This plan may include training and awareness, policy and procedures, and guidelines for responding to incidents.

Training in and awareness raising of prevention and intervention strategies should be directed at the whole school community including teachers and staff, students from all grades, and parents and legal guardians. Schools need to define clear, unequivocal policies and procedures that show that this sort of antisocial behaviour will not be tolerated. This can be achieved through clearly defined internal regulations or

specific policies relating to the use of ICTs within school grounds. These rules and the consequences of disobeying them – including disciplinary action and procedures – must then be communicated not only to students, but also to their parents and legal guardians. These policies should include a reporting system for victims and/or onlookers, as a means of preventing incidents of cyberbullying.

Although not many countries include cyberbullying in the school curriculum, there are already some useful resources available.[191] These are generally organised per teaching grade, and in accordance with the educational standards of each country. Examples of cyberbullying prevention programmes for schools are available in the final pages of this publication.

Beyond teaching, it is important to have students reflect on and demonstrate what they have learned. There is no better way to do this than by using appropriate ICTs; the article "60 things students can create to demonstrate what they know"[192] provides a variety of creative suggestions. Another way to get students involved and lead them to reflect on the topic of cyberbullying is to challenge them to take part in initiatives focused on the theme, such as contests, thematic weeks or school projects.

Parenting approaches

Parents and legal guardians can adopt a wide variety of approaches to tackle cyberbullying. First, it is extremely important to establish rules about the use of ICTs. It is recommended that parents and legal guardians put together with the child(ren) or teen(s) in their care a written document that clearly establishes what can and can't be done, and why. Once signed, this "contract" should define the rights and responsibilities of both parties. Broadly speaking, be it in relation to online or offline life, these will spell out the "3 Rs": be responsible, be respectful and be respectable.

Another fundamental parenting approach is promoting dialogue and debate in order to establish solid lines of communication and strengthen trust so that children feel comfortable asking parents for help if they encounter a problem. Hinduja and Patchin of the Cyberbullying Research Center have published a document that will help parents know how to ask the "right questions" about technology in general, and cyberbullying, sexting and social networks in particular.[193] Parents also need to know about and use the devices, sites, platforms and applications used by their children, so as to be able to approach this issue with prior knowledge.

A further preventive action for parents is to discuss with their children what they are saying on the internet and what is being said about them. To that effect, parents can run a search on Google using the names of their children, or even set up a Google Alert on the name of their child.

Helping children to handle adversity and promoting resilience will also help prevent cyberbullying because it gives victims the tools to deal with the situation and encourages passive onlookers to intervene to put a stop to cyberbullying. There are many online resources to guide parents and professionals in helping children and teens to acquire resilience skills (some of which are included at the end of this publication).

"Think before you post" is a popular piece of advice, and when it comes to deciding what to think about when publishing or sharing online the "THINK" acronym is particularly useful: is it True? Is it Helpful? Is it Inspiring? Is it Necessary? Is it Kind?[194]

There are several steps that parents can take if they fear that their child is being cyberbullied.

- Keep calm. Control your emotions and avoid reacting in emotionally exacerbated ways, assuring the child that the priority is to support and help them get through the situation, rather than blaming or punishing them.
- Assess the situation. Seek information that helps you understand the type or form of cyberbullying in question; who the aggressor is; the source of the conflict; where it occurred (e.g. in which social network site, app or forum); what was said or done to the victim; how long it has been going on and who else knows about the situation.
- Secure the evidence. Performing screen captures, printing or taking pictures of the message(s) that demonstrate the act of cyberbullying which may eventually allow you to identify the aggressors and provide evidence of the cyberbullying.
- Block/report the aggressors. If it is possible to identify the aggressors, you can block and/or report their profiles or messages.
- Report the case and request collaboration. Depending on the kind of situation and who may be potentially involved, you may consider reporting the incident to an appropriate organisation such as your child's school, school community, club or association. Administrators of these organisations have the duty to provide a safe environment, ascertain the facts with an investigation, and decide on an adequate means of response.
- Contact the authorities. In very serious situations that involve, for example, threats of violence, blackmail/extortion attempts or encouragement to self-harm or suicide, do not hesitate to contact the local police authorities.
- Get specialised help. Sometimes children may need to go beyond the help their parents can give them and talk to a relevant expert. For example, in some cases the help of a mental health professional can be very useful. It is important to present the child with all the options.[195]

Technological approaches

There are several levels of technology that can help to prevent situations of cyberbullying or intervene in them. These include operating systems, programs, websites, platforms and apps, as well as specialised online help and technological solutions. There are countless functions on operating systems, for example, designed to protect and safeguard the security and privacy of users. Not using such functions such as setting up user and guest accounts to protect access can often make cyberbullying worse.

Programs, websites, platforms and apps provide many features, too, that help, even if they have not been designed specifically to prevent cyberbullying. These include computer reset systems, which are particularly useful for shared computers; features to automatically close all sessions, platforms and apps on all devices once a user session is over; programs that help create and manage strong passwords; authentication

mechanisms based on double authentication; functions enabling users to set their preferred level of security and privacy; and mechanisms to report and block users.

Finally, there are online help and technological solutions especially designed to prevent and intervene in cyberbullying incidents. There are a range of anonymous reporting and incident management systems, mainly geared towards schools, which readers can find online. These include sites and platforms such as CyberBully Hotline, Safe2Tell, StopBullies, STOPit, TextSomeone and the BullyBøx. There are a number of programs and apps too that have been designed for a similar purpose, including CyberBullyRadar, Delete Cyberbullying, KnowBullying (an app from the samhsa.gov store) and ReThink (see URLs in the final pages of this publication).[196]

Conclusions

When we take a closer look at the differences between bullying and cyberbullying behaviour and the characteristics of screen-mediated communication, it seems safe to say that cyberbullying may have more serious and insidious repercussions for young people than other forms of bullying. Indeed, cyberbullying may trigger more intense and troubling health-related symptoms as well as greater physical, psychological and social risks.

Whether in the private or the social domain, images and the written word can have an enormous impact on young people because victims can re-watch and re-read the offensive content, thus reliving the experience over and over again. We therefore recommend that every effort be made to deploy an encompassing strategy that combines all four approaches – regulatory, educational, parental and technological – to tackle cyberbullying and enable our children to reap the full benefits that online communication can offer them.