Man is the only animal that blouses. Or needs to. —Mark Twain

Introduction

The Internet has created new markets and is profoundly changing the way people interact, express themselves, relax, find leisure, explore the world and think about changing the way people interact, express themselves, beyond its physical elements, the Internet enables people to post and download anything they see fit, but trees. While social networking is often used for prosocial activities,¹ such networks might also be abused for negative, anti-social purposes.

The Internet’s design and raison d’être enable netusers to post and download anything they see fit, but soon enough people began to exploit the net’s massive potential to enhance partisan interests, some of which are


4 Netcitizens are also called Netizens.

5 Second Life a virtual world that was launched on June 23, 2003 by Linden Lab. Its users, called “residents”, interact with one another via avatars. Second Life provides

In a responsible manner. They still hold themselves accountable for the consequences of their Internet use. In other words, netcitizens are good citizens of the Internet. They contribute to the Internet’s use and growth while making an effort to ensure that their communications and Net use are constructive. They foster free speech, open access and social culture of respecting others, and of not harming others. Netcitizens are netusers with a sense of responsibility. This article makes a plea for netcitizenship.

Cybervenge

Cybervenge is a sub-category of cyberbullying: using the Internet to settle accounts, taking revenge for disliked conduct of another. Commonly it involves invasion of privacy.⁶ Modern technology has amplified the bullying phenomenon tenfold. Cyber bullies can mask their identity and make use of text messaging, email, instant messaging, message boards, chat rooms, web pages, webcams, blogs, social networking websites, and audio-visual sharing sites such as Flickr (online photo management and sharing application) and YouTube to cause embarrassment to others. The perceived anonymity of the Internet is instrumental in enticing people to cybervenge. The humiliation can now be posted on many cyber locations, and the list of technological arenas keeps growing with the inventions of new tools and mechanisms. Most cell phones have picture-taking and video-recording capabilities that can easily be uploaded to the Internet. The offensive files could involve peeping, vicious or sexual warnings or threats.

However, if one does not take active steps to conceal one’s IP address and other revealing details, it is quite easy to reveal one’s identity. Thus, as in cyberbullying cases, a vicious cycle is opened where victims may wish to avenge the revenge or gain compensation. One form of social irresponsibility might yet again lead to another or it may lead to legal battles. The revenge involves one of the most private characteristics of human life – sex.


¹ I am grateful to the Editor and referees of the Journal of Applied Ethics and Philosophy for their extensive constructive comments. All websites were accessed on August 5, 2015.

Revenge Porn and Sexbullying

A widespread manifestation of cybervenge is revenge porn designed to harass and humiliate the victim.

Revenge porn is on the increase. The Mujer Avançada Research Publication sexting-nude-photo-boyfriend-life-misery.html surveyed teens and young adults (ages 13-19) and 33% of young adults (ages 20-26) have received peer-to-peer sexual messages or images.11 With such a volume of activity, no wonder revenge porn is on the increase.

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use. Later those photos might become a source of trouble as they are abused to coerce or to extort from the photographed people. The originators of the photos become victims. As they wish their intimate photos to be taken away from them, others, once the photos reach the wrong eyes those photos might be used for blackmail. Trust, of course, is a major issue. If you do not trust the person with whom you share intimate photos then you might not trust them to handle or transmit the photos in a secure place or way that is for designated eyes only, you should avoid taking such photos.

Some forms of sextortion are malicious and deceitful for they exploit the users into unclothing and performing sex acts.25 It is not about relationships that had turned sour. Rather it involves criminal design to manipulate people, often young people, deceive them and use their sexuality and naiveté against them.

Adolescents are the most frequent victims of sextortion.26 Netcitizens need to share with younger people their experiences and ideas on how to keep safe online, and advise them what to do if they run into trouble. It is very important to speak to adolescents about being safe on the internet. There is no need for adolescents to divulge too much information about themselves or to expose themselves in intimate ways. They should be extra careful as to whom they reveal personal information, and instruct them to listen to their feelings: If postings do not look right, do not feel right, or make Netcitizens uncomfortable, they should consult a trusted adult. Netcitizens may spend time with younger friends and members of family, showing them how to responsibly use technology and how to report different forms of cyberbullying, explaining that not reporting cyberbullying only plays into the bully’s hands. Young people might be reluctant to report such intimate personal incidents to their families and they may not wish to involve the police. Thus it is suggested that awareness will be raised about existing hotlines that are available to Netcitizens who may wish to remain unidentified to pinpoint disturbing content. One example is www.cybertipline.com operated by the American National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC). Hotlines have to be transparent. Netcitizens should be aware – at the point of entry – of the persons/ organizations responsible for running the hotline system and persons and organizations on whose behalf hotlines are operated. Transparency also means that explanation is provided as to which concerns will be processed, under what criteria and by which public authorities. The reporting system should be explained in sufficient detail. Netcitizens should have the ability to track their concerns throughout the process, and they should be informed of the final outcome of the process.

To this end, organizations running hotline systems need to publish reports about their work. Easy targets for all forms of harassment and sexual bullying are youth who are questioning their sexuality or who are embracing unorthodox sexual preference: the homosexuality, bi-sexuality or trans-gender identity.27 They are at a greater risk than their peers because they seek acceptance, reassurance and like-minded people.28 Thus they use social networking sites to communicate with people and by doing this they also expose themselves to potential abusers who might wish to humiliate and expose them. Outing homosexuals against their will is another form of sexbullying which can be termed homophobic bullying. It might cause enormous strain which, in turn, might lead to suicidal thoughts and actions.29 Non-consensual outing blurs the line between private and public, and it might have very tragic consequences.

Agencies of the state see that the Internet is not above the law: what is illegal in the offline world is also illegal on the online world. Sextortion is illegal both offline and online. Citizens are expected to abide by the law. In moral and legally problematic plural responsibility of the agent to conscience is at issue, with appeals to moral consideration. Certain forms of conduct fall within the realm of morality rather than law. Being meant to others is marked by moral norms of civility. In the liberal world, sexting is accepted when conducted between consenting adults. People debate the morality of the conduct but it is legal. Sexting becomes morally and legally problematic when responsibility for bad actions must involve a strong form of moral responsibility in that the action was intentional. When people perform a morally significant act, we may think that they may deserve praise. When they fail to perform a morally significant act we may blame them for omission. Thus, by moral responsibility it is meant that autonomous agents have the understanding of the options before them, have access to evidence required for making judgments about the benefits and harms of the options, and are able to weigh the relative value of the consequences of their choice. Responsibility agents have a sense of history. They understand the connection between past, present and future. They comprehend causal forces and appreciate likely consequences of a given conduct. In this context, the idea of conscientiousness is relevant. It describes a condition of an active and inwardly driven pursuit of positive goals, duties, and obligations. The goal is to converge between the ought and the is, that individuals be motivated by ethical standards alongside or instead of personal motivations.

William J. FitzPatrick claims that all cases of moral responsibility for bad actions must involve a strong form of akrasia, i.e. acting against one’s better judgment. If an agent acts rashly, either he does so in full knowledge that he should not be doing it, which is clear-eyed akrasia, or he is acting from ignorance. In the latter case the agent will be held responsible.

In the case whether he is responsible or not will depend on whether or not his ignorance is culpable. His ignorance will be culpable only if he is responsible for some earlier failure that gave rise to that ignorance. And he will be responsible for that earlier failure again only if that was a case of clear-eyed akrasia. We do not establish culpability until we arrive at a relevant episode of clear-eyed akrasia. Ignorance, whether circumstantial or normative, is culpable if the agent could reasonably have taken steps to make himself aware of the possibility of the conditions that the person corrected or avoided it, given his capabilities and the opportunities provided by the social context, but failed to do so either due to akrasia or due to vices such as overconfidence, dogmatism, self-indulgence and contempt. Failure to recognize the wrongness or imprudence of one’s conduct does not relieve one of responsibility. In the above real-life story, Ravi failed to act in a civil way, respecting the privacy of his roommate due to vices of overconfidence, arrogance, dispossession, self-indulgence, contempt for others, or the like. An understanding of responsibility as protecting individual rights and avoiding the infliction of unjustifiable harm on others is the very basis of liberal morality that presupposes the existence of inviolable individual rights. Responsibility in the sense of honouring interpersonal obligations and responding to the needs of others is a matter of personal choice and of social convention. In other words, moral responsibility is often interpreted as a demand to respond to the possible consequences of irresponsible conduct that violates basic trust between people about keeping private what should be private is immoral and undermines social conventions and norms, first and foremost of those respect for others, and not harming others.

Lastly, the concept of social responsibility assumes that autonomous agents have the right to make choices. In other words, people have discretion as to the ways open for them to carry out their responsibilities, in accordance with their capabilities and the circumstances at hand.

In 2009, Craigslist was on the headlines for the wrong reasons. Its adult section was abused for cyberbullying purposes. The victim was a 17 year-old girl who was subjected to a porn attack. Elizabeth A. Thrasher, 40, from Missouri, became the first person to be charged with felony cyberbullying in that state after she allegedly posted photos and personal information of the young girl to the “Casual Encounters” section of Craigslist. Thrasher had an extended argument with her ex-husband. The girl was the daughter of the girlfriend of Thrasher’s ex-husband, sent Thrasher a message over MySpace. Thrasher responded by posting the youngster’s picture, cell phone number, email address, and employer on Craigslist section, which is frequented by adults looking for anonymous, no-strings-attached sex. The girl was then bombarded with explicit messages and calls in response, including pornographic pictures from men she did not know. More recently, the fact that Craigslist and other such forums can be abused with such ease is most worrying.

Conclusion

Social networking sites and blogs have increasingly become breeding grounds for anonymous online groups that attack women, sexual-orientation minorities, and others. The ethical use of information and communication technologies, and the sustainable development of an equitable information society, need a safe and public infosphere for all, where the first generation of cyberevenge, sexbullying and sextortion of the infosphere must be associated with an equally important, ethical concern for the way in which the latter affects


37 Ibid. 593.

38 Ibid. 609. Martha Nussbaum clarified that according to Aristotle akrasia is frequently (not always) caused by an excess of theory and a deficiency in passion. The person who acts akratically against her better judgment is frequently capable of performing correctly in all the intellectual ways; “what she lacks is the heart’s confrontation with concrete ethical reality”. See M. Nussbaum, Intimacy and Solidarity (NY: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 81. For further discussion, see George Shue, Who Knows Responsibility? (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).


43 Tennessee (n.d.). ibid. 593.


and interacts with the social environment. Ethical behaviour is behaviour that abides by relevant standards of conduct and considers the consequences of one’s actions, and being accountable for it. Ethics is not merely a question of dealing morally well with a given world. It is also a question of shaping the world for the better. This is a proactive approach which perceives agents as world owners, creators, and producers of moral goods.

When Netusers produce evil, society needs to develop adequate mechanisms to educate and raise awareness of the harsh consequences that might result from such an irresponsible behaviour. We all have a shared responsibility to shape a safe and, if possible, better world for our children.

The fundamental principle of social responsibility rests on the duty to make humanity itself our end. The way to do this is by promoting the ends that autonomous human beings freely choose as long as they do not harm others. Abusive language might lead to depression and suicide. Cases of revenge porn, cybereseve, sexbullying and sextortion should be raised and discussed in schools and, if needed, in the workplace. They should be deliberated openly and fervently. People, especially young people, should be made aware of the power of the word and settle the confusion between online and offline responsibility. Young people are vulnerable and society has an obligation to protect vulnerable third parties.

Responsibility and accountability should be shared by all involved: parents, school teachers and administrators, civil society organizations and business, countries and the international community at large. The aim is that people take responsibility and develop a sense of ownership over their actions, building foundations for change and improvement in their life chances and opportunities.

We as a society should invest in transforming Netusers into Netcitizens, people with awareness regarding the consequences of their conduct, users of the Internet who are cognizant about the values and importance of moral and social responsibility. Without such awareness, the present rowdy Internet will continue to be very costly. Safety should be maintained both online and offline, and studies should be carried out about the connections between the two. As stopcyberbullying.org holds, the task is to create a generation of good cybercitizens, controlling the technology instead of being controlled by it.

Netcitizens can develop a website, blog, or social networking groups on Facebook and other social Netforums for friends and community in which they evoke awareness to the problems of revenge porn, cybereseve, sexbullying and sextortion, alerting readers to potential signs of distress that bullied people manifest. The warning signs include unexpected or sudden loss of interest in using the computer; nervous, jumpy, anxious or scared appearance upon accepting messages; with young people, discontinued interest in going to school, extra-curricular and/or general out-of-school activities. Bullied people might be visibly angry, frustrated, depressed or gloomy after using the computer. They might become abnormally withdrawn and distant from family, friends, and favourite activities. They might lack appetite or suddenly begin to do poorly in school. They might complain frequently of headaches, stomach aches, or other physical ailments, have difficulty in sleeping or have frequent bad dreams, appear troubled or suffer from low self-esteem.

Netcitizens may also point to valuable information on the Internet, put out by The Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use, the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA), Stop Online Abuse and The Cyberbullying Research Center. In July 2015, an anti-bullying/parent notification app was launched. This anti-bullying app records a video of the bully in real time and notifies the parents of where their child is. A coordinated effort of all stakeholders – Netcitizens, readers of the Internet, ISPs and web-hosting sites, state authorities and the international community at large, will result in a more responsible Internet. There is a need to assure a certain security level on the Internet, like in any other industry.

I suggest publishing overviews and reports on a regular basis; lobbying for international awareness about the harms and abuse of technology; helping support groups and institutions that want to set up tip-lines, and advancing our knowledge of social networking and the psychology of people who use the Internet for various purposes.

Clearly, there is a lot to learn about Net human behaviour and what can be done to increase moral and social responsibility of all parties concerned. The fighting against cybereseve and sexbullying involves all responsible agents, including me and you.