


Bullying, Cyberbullying, and Hate Speech

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ABSTRACT

This paper applies the concepts of moral and social responsibility to the internet in considering bullying and cyberbullying that result in loss of life. Specifically, the author probes the moral and social responsibilities of internet users (agents), of their immediate surroundings, and of the education system in fighting cyberbullying. Balance needs to be struck between two most important principles: freedom of expression and social responsibility. Illustrative examples in which this disturbing and harmful phenomenon of cyberbullying has cost young life are mentioned. It is argued that cyberbullying has some of the characteristics of hate speech and that many of the tools used to fight against hate may be utilised to fight against cyberbullying. It is further argued that all relevant stakeholders need to think of the consequences of their conduct, that internet abusers should be accountable for their wrongdoing and be penalized, and that people who have the ability to stop or at least reduce the risk of cyberbullying should take proactive steps, exhibiting zero tolerance to cyberbullying. The article calls for a responsible concerted effort by responsible users of the internet, parents, schools, governments, NGOs, and administrators of social networking sites to raise awareness of the problem, address it, and fight together to lessen and possibly eliminate it from the online information highway. Disregard for the consequences of both cyberbullying and hate speech and inactivity facing them are immoral.

KEYWORDS

Bullying, Cyberbullying, Education, Internet, Moral and Social Responsibility, Parental Responsibility, School Responsibility, Suicide

1. PRELIMINARIES

The Internet has comprehensive and far-reaching positive effects. However, its very foundations, based on innovation, easy use, relatively cheap cost, and near-universal accessibility made the Internet open for use and unfortunately abuse. The Internet contains the best, but regrettably also the worse products of humanity. We should relish the many positives and address the negatives. In order to do this, we must balance one against the other two very important values: on the one hand, the *raison d'être* of the Internet until now, which is freedom of expression; and, on the other hand, the value of social responsibility that should be an essential component of the *raison d'être*.

The object of this Essay is to discuss moral and social responsibility required to deal with people who utilize the Internet for vile, illegitimate and anti-social purposes. The Essay focuses on the problem of cyberbullying, and on our shared societal responsibilities to counter this phenomenon. It builds

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on my previous research on the subject and expands on it (Cohen-Almagor, 2011a, 2015a, 2018b, 2020). Virtual users abuse social platforms to harass their so-called “friends”. Virtual “Friends” might befriend others for sinister purposes, not to lend support but instead to inflict harm (McVeigh, 2011). Sometimes these people are using fake identities and accounts. Sometimes they resort to anonymizing tools to hide their identity so they could bully others behind virtual masks. It is argued that social responsibility is no less important than freedom of expression. Freedom without responsibility in this digital era might prove to be dangerous as Internet abusers exploit digital freedoms and target their victims maliciously and relentlessly, sometimes to death.

Consider Ask.fm, a social networking platform on which users can create personal profiles and send anonymous questions to other users. Users can also post photos, videos and GIFs in response to questions. The users’ age is meant to be 13 and over but it is not uncommon for people below the age of 13 to open accounts. Ask.fm has more than 215 million registered users around the world.¹ The questions can be innocent and they can also be malicious and nasty. 16-year-old Jessica Laney was asked “Why are you so ugly?”, “Can you just kill yourself already?” The barrage of abusive messages was so fierce that in December 2012 Laney killed herself (Baker, 2012; Fazan, 2012; Murray, 2012; Roberts, 2012; Pendergrass and Wright, 2014). In August 2013, 14-year-old Hannah Smith was “asked” to “drink bleach” and “go get cancer” before she hanged herself (Abad-Santos, 2013). Smith took her own life after suffering constant abuse from ask.fm online bullies who ridiculed her and urged her to die (*The Age*, 2013).

The modus operandi of Ask.fm fits the cyberbully well and more deaths were associated with the platform. Ciara Pugsley, 15, and Erin Gallagher, 13, from Ireland, took their own lives in separate incidents during 2012 after being bullied on the site (Maguire, 2016). In January 2013, Anthony Stubbs, 16, took his life as a result of bullying (Romano, 2013). In April 2013, 15-year-old Josh Unsworth was found dead after being subject to harassment and abuse on the website (Tozer, 2013). In July 2013, Daniel Perry, 17, jumped from a bridge subsequent to bullying on the site (Byrne, 2013; Smith-Spark and Vandoorne, 2013). In September 2013, three teens from the USA, Australia and England took their lives as a result of Ask.fm bullying: On September 10, Rebecca Ann Sedwick, 12, from Florida, took her life (Broderick, 2013). On September 14, Katherine-Christine Buckley, 15, from Queensland, Australia, could not cope with the cyberbullying and took her own life.² On September 17, 14-year-old girl Izzy Dix from Devon, England, hanged herself (Farrell, 2013; Panther, 2013). Another victim, Laura McKay, testified: “I’ve been bullied on ask.fm and been told to kill myself many times. It’s easy for people to hide behind and bully and it needs to be stopped” (Press Association, 2013). It did not. In October 2013, two more victims were added to the list, Olivia Mae Scott, 16 from Vermont,³ and Savy Turcotte, 13, from Saskatchewan, Canada (Smith, 2013).⁴ The young age of all the victims is noticeable. Their thread of life was cut far too short.

In August 2013, changes were made to make Ask.fm safer. The site’s managers said it would view all reports quickly, within 24 hours, make the report button more visible, and include bullying and harassment as a category for a report. In February 2014, Ask.fm launched a ‘Safety Center’ that provides advice for both users and parents. Ask.fm extended the use of software to scan questions and answers posted by users for key words and phrases. It also expanded the number of filters in use, increased the scanning vocabulary and added manpower to examine content. Its managers improved response time to questionable content either before it gets to a user or just afterward (Blake, 2015). With the deployment of these security measures, Ask.fm directors argued that they were able to maintain a much safer environment for its millions of users. However, the improvements are still insufficient. Critics demand to ban all anonymous posts. In May 2015, it was reported that 14-year-old Aurora Cerullo took her own life after she was bullied on Ask.fm. Aurora was the third Italian teenager in a year suspected of killing herself after being trolled on Ask.fm (Kendrick, 2015). In April 2016, 17-year-old Felix Alexander opted suicide after he was bullied on Ask.fm (Alexander, 2018; Slawson, 2016). Little wonder that Protect Young Eyes, an organisation that was founded to create a safer Internet for children, advises parents that they should take extreme caution when deciding if

their kids should use Ask.fm.⁵ Family Education recently compiled a “Complete Guide to Potentially Dangerous Apps All Parents Should Be Aware Of” (Rohm Nulsen, 2020). Ask.fm is listed among the dangerous apps. It is still considered one of the most unsafe apps for children (Elliot, 2020).

These disturbing cases are illustrative rather than exhaustive. I should also mention 12-year-old Mallory Grossman who died after being bullied online and offline by classmates (Taguchi, Kessel and Riegle, 2017), 15-year-old Phoebe Prince who took her own life after being tormented and relentlessly teased for many months by several girls at her high school. Nine teenagers have been charged in connection with Prince’s suicide. Their irresponsible behaviour was described as relentless. They bullied, cyberbullied, stalked and harassed Prince, pushing her to take her life. Craigslist, Facebook, Twitter and Formspring6 were abused for the unremitting attacks. Her books were routinely knocked out of her hands, items were thrown at her, her face was scribbled out of photographs on the school walls, and Prince received threatening text messages. A student said that bullying was a common problem at the school (Kotz, 2010).⁷ The teens mocked Prince even after she had died (Goldman, 2010; Kennedy, 2010). Prince’s tragic death did not evoke any sense of moral responsibility. This was yet another case of people who absolve themselves from guilt and compassion.

This sombre list of victims is meant to give a face to numbers and to explain that abuse of free expression has terrible consequences, that liberty should not be translated into a licence to harm, and that boundaries to speech must be introduced on the Internet in order to facilitate a secure and safe environment for users. More information can be found in my book which records some other instances where suicide was directly linked to cyberbullying (Cohen-Almagor, 2015a: 106-110).

I commenced research on social responsibility on the Internet in 2006. At that time, the focus of my research was on ideological, violent extremism and on child pornography. But as the cyberbullying phenomenon grew bigger so did my interest. I became aware and increasingly troubled by tragic stories of young children who took their own lives following online harassment. Often that harassment was accompanied by offline harassment. I decided to expand my research to include cyberbullying as well.

In previous studies I discussed at length the responsibilities of Internet intermediaries in countering cyberbullying. Internet intermediaries certainly have great responsibility to shoulder. But as I discussed their responsibility in my book and in other forums (Cohen-Almagor, 2015a, 2018b, 2020) I will not address this important issue here. Section II introduces the theoretical framework of this essay, moral and social responsibility. Sections III explains the concepts of bullying and cyberbullying. Section IV discusses the similarities between cyberbullying and hate speech, arguing that many of the tools used to fight against hate may be utilised to fight against cyberbullying. Section V discusses the responsibilities of parents and of the education system in fighting against bullying and cyberbullying. These are agonizing phenomena because they result each and every year with suicides of mostly young people whose death could have been avoided if only people – bullies and others -- were to act with greater sense of responsibility. Cyberbullying is a disease whose remedy is known. We need to work harder in employing remedies into effective use and prevent violence and harm.

2. MORAL AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

The Internet revolution erupted in the early 1990s without much preparation or planning and changed our lives quite significantly. This revolution has affected virtually every aspect of society. The Internet has created new markets and is profoundly changing the way people speak, find leisure, explore the world and think about human phenomena. In 2020, the importance of the Internet and the vital role it is playing in our lives became acutely apparent as countries fighting the coronavirus asked people to stay at home and conduct their lives – jobs, shopping, teaching and learning and all other aspects of life, from home. The saying “My home is my castle” made more sense in many parts of the world, England included (of course).

In the Internet age, people’s cyber life might be different from their offline life. Cyber life and offline life are often not one and the same. Many people have active life on social networking platforms

and have far more virtual “friends” than genuine, true friends on which they could rely at challenging times. Facebook alone has a staggering number of almost 2.91 billion monthly active users (*Statista*, 2021). This is almost a third of the world’s population.

Moral responsibility refers to the duty that individuals and groups have to act in accordance with the principles that guide our lives concerning right and wrong behaviour. These principles are the compass that guides human conduct in society. *Social responsibility* refers to the responsibility of individuals, groups, corporations and governments to society. The responsibilities are positive and negative: to better the society in which we live, and refrain from harming our community. Responsible agents take active steps to do good and to avoid harm (Kaliski, 2001; Carrol, 2016, 2018; Christians, 2019). Responsible agents care for one another, communicate with respect and do not stand idly by while seeing that others might be in danger. Both the private and the public sector are morally accountable. Many businesses adopted standards of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) into their business model. Common types of CSR initiatives include philanthropy, volunteerism, support for community, becoming a voice for disadvantaged groups, and adopting a friendly environmental policy. CSR initiatives evince good corporate citizenship, strong ethical practices, or sustainable business practices both on and offline (Novak, 1996; Trevino and Nelson, 1999; Carroll, 1999; Carroll and Shabana, 2010; Cohen-Almagor, Arbel-Ganz and Kasher, 2012; Goodpaster, 2010; Abend, 2014; Tripathy and Sarangi, 2017; Sena Gawu and Inusah, 2019; Tarabasz, 2019). CSR principles are good, right, and virtuous with respect to the roles and responsibilities that business organizations have in society (García-Rosell, Moisaner, and Mäkinen, 2023).

In the Internet age, the concepts of moral and social responsibility are becoming somewhat confused due to the Internet’s disinhibition effect. In the real world, people know that they are responsible for the consequences of their speech and action. In the online, cyber world, fake accounts are common. The freedom allows language one would dread to use in real life, unpleasant derogatory words, crude imagination that trumps conventional norms and standards. Some people relish the opportunity to inflict harm on others. Some online abusers exploit social network platforms to express mean sentiments and to hurt people with total disregard for the potential consequences of their conduct. They transgress decency norms with impunity. Some other online users are oblivious to the harm they are causing. Those Internet users do not even bother to hide their identity. They find bullying acceptable, entertaining and even approved by bystanders. They do not recognise that words can cause people to lose their dignity to the extent that they might find it difficult to show their face in public or to wake up in the morning. For some people, dignity is the most important thing in life, more important than certain organs or limb. All of us, to one extent or another, are worried about our reputation.

Immanuel Kant repeatedly appeals to the dignity of humanity in support of his ethical principles, especially the duty to preserve and improve oneself as a rational being and the duty to respect other persons (Hill Jr., 2014; Kerstein, 2014). Humanity, according to Kant, has dignity. It cannot be legitimately sacrificed for or replaced by something else. In *The Metaphysics of Morals* Kant (2017) writes “Act in such a way as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of anyone else, always as an end and never merely as a means.” Humanity is valuable no matter how it came to exist or what the effects of its existence may be. The special value of humanity is unconditional. The dignity of the person has no equivalent for which it can be legitimately exchanged.

3. BULLYING AND CYBERBULLYING

Bullying is defined as behaviour that is repeated, intended to hurt someone either physically or emotionally, often aimed at certain groups, for example because of race, religion, gender or sexual orientation. Bullying can take many forms and can include physical assault, teasing, making threats, name calling and cyberbullying (*GOV.UK*, n/d; Smith, 2016). UNESCO (2019: 14) characterises bullying as an “aggressive behaviour that involves unwanted, negative actions, is repeated over

time, and an imbalance of power or strength between the perpetrator or perpetrators and the victim. Frequency of bullying is measured in different ways by different surveys”. Aggressive behaviour has a vast overlap with conduct disorder, antisocial personality disorder, alcohol use disorder, drug use disorder, depression, anxiety and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder. This overlap has motivated interest in the common and differentiating mechanisms responsible for these co-occurring phenotypes (Eisenberger, Way, Taylor, Welch & Lieberman, 2007; Nilsson, Aslund, Comasco and Orelund, 2018; Martínez-Monteagudo, Delgado, Inglés and Escortell, 2020). Research shows that people possess a variation in a gene called monoamine oxidase-A (MAOA), which is associated with antisocial behaviour. People with the low-functioning variant of this gene are known as MAOA-L people, while those with the high-functioning variant are called MAOA-H people. The former are at increased risk for aggressive behaviour and the development of antisocial personality disorder, even more so if they grow up in an abusive environment. MAOA-L people have a more aggressive disposition and hypersensitivity to interpersonal conflict (Denson, 2014). Those with the MAOA-L genotype paired with maltreatment during childhood were correctly predicted to commit crime (Sohrabi, 2015).

As for cyberbullying, it is defined as using the computer, cellphone, and other electronic devices to intimidate, threaten or humiliate another Internet user (Kowalski, Limber and Agatston, 2008; Backe, Lilleston, and McCleary-Sills, 2018). Cyberbullying involves the infliction of harm via the Internet or other communication devices. Usually this is done repeatedly via modern technology that enables easy and quick diffusion of hurtful and embarrassing messages to one or many people. While traditional bullying is an exhibition of imbalance of power, when the powerful side abuses the advantage s/he enjoys to chasten another, in cyberbullying the bullies are not necessarily more physically powerful than their victims. The Internet affords a levelling effect where strength is not physical but wordy, where cruelty is more about the coarseness of the mind than about the power of the hands, where having social skills to become popular is of slight significance. Pronouncing words via the keyboard can be no less injurious than the punching of the fist. One need not be physically fit or with social subtlety to launch powerful bouts on one's victim. In the digital world, power is more about knowing how to abuse technology in an effective way while keeping one's own identity unidentified (Patchin and Hinduja, 2015; Alipan, Skues, Theiler et al., 2020; Giumetti, Kowalski and Feinn, 2021).

The anonymity of the Internet is most convenient for spreading unfounded allegations, for backstabbing, for malicious rumours. Anonymous cyberbullying increases the cyberbullied feelings of being trapped. Under cover of anonymity, cyberbullying and cyber-sexual harassment may provide a bully unwilling to directly harass victims with the opportunity to do so online (Walters and Espelage, 2020). Victims then persistently worry about the perpetrator's identity. Such information might ruin people's life.

Cyberbullying is considered a public health problem with serious implications for adolescents' mental health (De Pasquale, Martinelli, Sciacca et al, 2021). Cyberbullying includes embarrassing, offensive, degrading or threatening text messages, electronic stalking, password theft or masquerading as another person, spreading malicious rumours, sharing privileged information without consent. Mobile devices facilitate cyberbullying on-the-go. Cyberbullying is not limited to texts. It may also include distributing sexual or violent photographs or videos (including sexting – sharing explicit texts, nude photos and videos via cellphone), harassment and online death threats (Gerson and Rappaport, 2011). Van Geel *et al* (2014) found that cyberbullying was more strongly related to suicidal ideation than bullying and therefore it is more dangerous than traditional bullying. Cyberbullying increases the risk of suicidal ideation by a factor of 3.12 versus a factor of 2.16 when bullied in person. *Suicidal ideation* is defined as thoughts or wishes to end one's life and is seen as a precursor to suicide (Van Geel et al, 2014).

Cyberbullying magnifies the bullying phenomenon and with it amplifies the trauma experienced by the victim. A single bullying episode can be posted on many social networks and used to harass the victim also by sending it directly to the victim's phone. The cycle of aggression and violence

can be prolonged by having a virtual life that is difficult for the victim to avoid, as most humans are curious to know what is said about them. People find it difficult to completely shut themselves off as a defence mechanism. Most victims are simply incapable of isolating themselves from the harassment.

4. CYBERBULLYING AND HATE SPEECH

Cyberbullying resembles hate speech in several important respects. Hate speech is defined as a bias-motivated, hostile, malicious speech aimed at a person or a group of people because of some of their actual or perceived innate characteristics (Cohen-Almagor, 2018a). Hate speech expresses discriminatory, intimidating, disapproving, antagonistic and/or prejudicial attitudes toward these characteristics, which include sex, race, religion, ethnicity, colour, national origin, disability, or sexual orientation (Cohen-Almagor, 2018a). Hate speech is intended to injure, dehumanize, harass, debase, degrade, and/or victimise the targeted groups, and to foment insensitivity and brutality towards them. A hate site is defined as a site that carries any form of hateful textual, visual, or audio-based rhetoric (Cohen-Almagor, 2018a).

While bullied people are not *necessarily* victims because of some of their actual or perceived innate characteristics, there are many important similarities between cyberbullying and hate speech. Like cyberbullying, hate speech is a public health problem (Pies, 2018). Both forms of expressions are hostile and malicious. Both are morally reprehensible. The intention of the speakers in both is to harm their victims. Both expressions are self and other destructive. They harm not only the victims but also the bully and the bigot (Copeland, Wolke, Angold, and Costello, 2013; Sourander, Jensen, Rønning, et al, 2007; Pies, 2018). Therefore, we need to promote self-awareness of the adverse health consequences of bullying and bigotry.

Further, both expressions do not have any redeeming value for society. Both expressions might lead to agony, violence and death, inflicted by self or others. Both are speech-acts. Speech-act is an utterance that the speaker makes to achieve an intended meaning. Speech-act is a form of speech that is directly leading to action. In hate speech and cyberbullying, the intention of the speech is to negatively affect the victims. Indeed, many instances of cyberbullying and hate speech had led to violent actions and hate crimes (Cohen-Almagor, 2015a, 2016, 2018a, 2018b; Johnstone, 2016; *Human Rights Watch*, 2020). Both expressions corrupt the environment; they are anti-social, discriminatory and intimidating, degrading and brutal, often (but not always) using as their pretext victims' vulnerabilities such as race, colour, religion, sexual orientation and physical and mental disabilities. Both bullies and hate mongers abuse the Internet to hurt others.

The Internet has rapidly become the medium of choice for bullies and hatemongers because of its wide access at low cost. The Internet allows the ignorant and the prejudiced to send anonymous messages to those whom they despise. Studies estimated that between 13% and 46% of young victims of cyberbullying did not know their harasser's identity. 22% of the bullies did not know their victim's identity (Kowalski and Limber, 2007; Wolak, Mitchell, Finkelhor, 2007; Ybarra, Diener-West and Leaf, 2007).⁸ As said, commonly vulnerable populations attract the bullies' attention. They are perceived as easy targets who will not fight and resist. Children with disabilities and special needs are at greater risk of being bullied (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2007, 2009). Ethnic minorities are disproportionately targeted by bigots (Beaty and Alexeyev, 2008; Berlan, Corliss, Field, Goodman and Austin, 2010; Colby, 2016; Petrov, 2019). In a study among American adolescents who self-identified as White, Black, or biracial the latter group reported more bullying victimization than White and Black students (Sung Hong et al, 2020). Non-heterosexual youth are also targeted (Beaty and Alexeyev, 2008; Psych Central News Editor, 2010; Berlan, Corliss, Field, Goodman and Austin, 2010; Colby, 2016; Abreu & Kenny, 2018). Refugee children and people with non-traditional sexual orientation frequently experience high levels of violence and bullying (Psych Central News Editor, 2010; *Human Rights Watch*, 2020). Often, the prevailing discriminatory and harmful attitudes perpetuate silence and impunity as children endure more violence and harassment.

Technology facilitates bullying because perpetrators feel that they will be able to get off scot-free in the virtual world. According to *TechJury*, Facebook shelters over 83 million fake profiles, many of which protect the anonymity of bullies and trolls (Petrov, 2019).

Moreover, many of the mechanisms employed to fight against hate speech may be utilised to fight against cyberbullying. Internet service providers should develop filters that flag abusive language and censor it before it reached the victims. They have a duty of care to their users who empower their business. Schools and parents should install computer blocking programs at school and at home. NGOs and governments must exert pressure on Internet companies to do all that is in their power, and Internet companies have great resources and powers, to exclude malicious and destructive speech. If companies do not see this as their duty of care, then they should be compelled to do so.

In other articles I detailed the main tools that can be employed to fight hate (Cohen-Almagor, 2011a, 2011b). Many of them can be incorporated to stamp out cyberbullying. I argue that freedom of expression is not a recipe for lawlessness. The balance between free speech and protecting the public should not, on such matters, lean to the former. Liberal democracies have an obligation to secure the well-being of its population, especially vulnerable minorities. Indeed, the litmus test of a decent or civilized liberal democracy is the status of minorities.

Cyberbullying charged many victims who could not cope with malicious attacks and vile language. As said, the examples *supra* are only illustrative, mentioned to give faces to the cold statistics. The phenomenon is wide and far-reaching. Teens who share their identities and thoughts on social networking sites, such as Instagram and Facebook, are more likely to be targets than are those who do not use social networking sites (Lorenz, 2018). Managers of these platforms should be champions of social responsibility and care to the same extent that they champion freedom of expression (Cohen-Almagor, 2005: 105-123, 2015a). Tragic stories of cyberbullying and of hate crimes, where violent speech was translated into violent action, should be brought to classes and discussed openly and fervently. Sites like www.netsmartz.org are instrumental in providing information and promoting awareness regarding the possible harms of social networking forums on the Net.

A significant proportion of children and adolescents, between 20% and 40%, have been subjected to cyberbullying. Aggression leads to mental health problems and to self-harm (Aboujaoude, Savage, Starcevic et al, 2015). Studies that measured repeated exposure to cyberbullying found that 19.0% to 23.0% of respondents indicated that they were repeated targets (Hamm, Newton, Chisholm et al, 2015; Kwan, Dickson, Richardson et al., 2020; Memon, Sharma, Mohite et al, 2018).

5. PARENTAL AND SCHOOL RESPONSIBILITY

Bullying and cyberbullying must be taken seriously both at school and at home. The warning signs include unexpected or sudden loss of interest in using the computer; nervous, jumpy, anxious or scared appearance upon accepting online messages; withdrawn interest in going to school and in participating in extra-curricular and/or general out-of-school activities. Adolescents might become abnormally withdrawn and distant from family, friends, and favourite activities. They might lack appetite, or suddenly begin to do poorly in school. Adolescents might complain frequently of headaches, stomach-aches, or other physical ailments, have trouble sleeping or have frequent bad dreams, appear anxious or suffer from low self-esteem (Espelage and Holt, 2001; Ybarra, Diener-West and Leaf, 2007; Wolpert, 2008; Martin, 2010). Studies show that peer harassment contributes to psychological disorders, sadness, decreased self-worth, distress, desperateness, helplessness and loneliness, all of which are precursors to self-harm, suicidal thoughts and behaviours (Kowalski, Limber and Agatston, 2008; McMahon, Reulbach, Keeley et al., 2010; Olenik-Shemesh, Heiman and Eden, 2012). Other consequences are alcohol use, drug use and carrying weapons to school as self-protection (Ybarra, Diener-West and Leaf, 2007). These alarm bells necessitate attention and probing. While the bullied might keep quiet as they are reluctant to expose themselves further, the people around them should

not keep quiet. They should raise and confront the issues before it is too late. Silence is the bully's best friend and the worse enemy of the bullied. It facilitates the continuation of the bullying activity.

When victims speak up, we need to listen to them attentively and respond in a constructive way that addresses their concern and aims to resolve their problem. An active listener is a person who makes a conscious effort to understand the speaker's message, acknowledges the message, shows the speaker that she is engaged and respond to the speaker without judgment and with constructive feedback (*Virtual Speech*, 2017).

The discrepancy between young people's activities online and parental perceptions about these activities accentuates the importance of healthy and open communication between parents and children. Research suggests that open dialogue around Internet use and collaborative creation of rules between parents and children is more effective than controlling and restricting youth's Internet use in reducing online bullying and victimization (Hasse, Cortesi, Lombana-Bermudez, and Gasser, 2019: 28; Navarro, Ortega, Buelga et al., 2019). Spying on children and invading their privacy should only be done as a last resort when there is a significant cause for concern. Spying conveys distrust and might encourage youth to operate underground (Hinduja and Patchin, 2019).

Evidence suggests that children as young as ten are advising their parents on technology purchases (*eircom Household Sentiment Survey*, 2014), thus it is assumed that children would not be open to accept their parents' guidance on the usage of such devices. Most parents should acknowledge that the way to tackle cyberbullying is not by limiting access to technology but by providing emotional care to children and cooperating with schools and agencies to address the challenge. Parents should be stimulated to become friends on their children social networking accounts. This way they can screen activity and become mindful if their children are subjected to cyberbullying.

As for the responsibility of the education system, the favourite American response to problematic speech is to fight against it with counter speech. Many Internet experts and human rights activists argue that the way to tackle hate on the Net is by more communication, by openness and by exposing the problem. We need to show that all human beings deserve respect and concern, all have dignity, and that victimization negates liberal-democratic values that we all hold dear: pluralism, diversity, individuality, liberty, equality, tolerance, and justice. Counter-speech includes expressive support for the targets of hate, highlighting the values of tolerance, pluralism, individualism and respect for others. However, counter speech alone might not be sufficient to fight against cyberbullying as it is insufficient to fight against hate speech. More interventionist mechanisms might be needed to mitigate the harms that those forms of expressions inflict on their target victims.

There is a need for activity at primary and high schools alerting about hate on the Internet; its forms and attractions (music, video games, activities for kids); why racism and bullying are logically incoherent, anti-democratic and inhumane; why it is harmful; who is targeted, and why.

As cyberbullying is related to bullying, and much of it takes place among teens at schools, administrators and teachers should be proactive in the fight against all forms of bullying. This is essential in order to prevent a corrupt and unsafe environment. If bullying is tolerated, the consequences are likely to be anti-social behaviour and depression. Unsurprisingly, bystanders perceive such schools as unsafe environments (de Wet, Reyneke and Jacobs, 2020: 517). It is crucial to ensure safe and peaceful atmosphere in school. Bullied children indicated the poor climate at their school as one of the reasons for their suffering. Those who cyberbullied others or who were the target of cyberbullying were less likely to agree with statements that indicated that they "enjoy going to school," "feel safe at school," and "feel that teachers at their school care about them" (Hinduja and Patchin, 2019; Astor and Benbenishty, 2019). It can be assumed that in such anti-social and uncaring environments bullying and cyberbullying flourish.

Students should feel safe and comfortable in school. They should be able to rely on teachers and administrators for care and support. They should not be afraid of them. Unfortunately, while physical violence, including corporal punishment, is legally prohibited in schools in 132 countries, it is still allowed in 68 other countries (UNESCO, 2019: 20). While sexual violence perpetrated by

teachers is low, it still exists in some countries. Sexual violence includes rape and sexual abuse. In Central Africa, figures show that 7.1% of students suffered such abuse by their teachers (UNESCO, 2019; Cohen-Almagor, 2022).

The harms of bullying and cyberbullying and how to counter them should be an integral part of the digital citizenship education. The importance of the concepts of moral and social responsibilities should be explained and promoted. As the community of Internet users is vast and ever growing, what we need is to transform Internet users into Netcitizens: Internet users with a sense of responsibility. Responsible Netcitizens do not stand idly by when they witness targeting and victimizing others (Cohen-Almagor, 2015b).

Bullying prevention policies should adopt Zero Tolerance to bullying and cyberbullying both on and off campus, involving tight collaboration with parents and the student council, making parents and student representatives aware of the potential real problem, and creating unity in stamping out bullying. Data show that adolescents lack awareness or confidence that anything can be done about cyberbullying; therefore, efforts should be made to increase education regarding how to address it and who to tell, focusing on both vulnerable people and bystanders (Hamm, Newton, Chisholm et al, 2015; Bussey, Luo, Fitzpatrick et al, 2020; Smith, 2019; UNESCO, 2019: 48-50; Runcan, 2020; Hollaback, n/d, 2021). We need to educate people to take a stand and support victims by consoling them or notifying authoritative people and bodies who could interfere to redeem the situation.

Schools policies should exclude all forms of bullying, hate and bigotry off and online. They should ascertain that their computers are not used for purposes that are incompatible with these policies. Students should not abuse their time at the education system and exploit the technology that is made available to them to preach hatred against others, or to engage in expressions that contravene and undermine civility and respect for others. Hate is destructive. There is no reason to provide scope for hate speech in schools and after school.

Bullying prevention programs should also include positive elements of caring that promote the importance of peer support and school support; mechanisms for reporting bullying, and proactive collaboration between relevant stakeholders aimed at facing the challenge and overcoming it safely.

6. CONCLUSION

Cyberbullying is a heart-wrenching phenomenon because the majority of young lives that were cut short could have been saved if the relevant stakeholders, parents, schools, internet intermediaries and governments were to take appropriate steps to fight against it. Presently, schools, Internet companies and governments are certainly aware of the harms of cyberbullying. They can and need to be far more proactive in trying to minimise the effects of cyberbullying.

Research shows that social support from family and teachers reduce depressive and anxiety symptoms among children. Higher levels of social support from the family and school teachers increase the probability of higher levels of subjective well-being among youths being a victim of cyberbullying and being both a perpetrator and a victim of cyberbullying. Such social support may ameliorate the potential link between cyberbullying and distress outcomes at the psychosocial well-being level (Chang, Xing, Tin Hung Ho et al, 2019; Hellfeldt, Lopez-Romero and Andershed, 2020; Yang, Chen, Lin *et al*, 2021). Schools must have a duty of care to their students and, consequently, they must maintain bullying and cyberbullying prevention programs.

The forefathers of the Internet had the vision of creating a public space where everyone can say what he or she has in mind. This wonderful innovation of unfettered platform has backfired. Internet abuse corrupts public space and is posing many challenges on all levels: individual, the community, the state and the international community. We are in the early stages of learning how to cope with abuse. Innovators come with new ideas that enrich our world and they are also required to devise safeguards and rules of responsible conduct. Tools include guidance to children and parents how to remain digitally safe, training schemes, safety resources, crime reporting systems and children friendly

search engines (Andrews, Alathur and Chetty, 2020). Unfortunately, social networking sites and blogs have become breeding grounds for anonymous online groups that victimize gay people, physically and mentally-challenged people, women, people of colour, and other traditionally disadvantaged groups. Victims of bullying off and online are more than twice as likely as other kids to contemplate suicide and about 2.5 times as likely to try to kill themselves (BBC, 2010; Kaplan, 2014; Holt, 2017; Cohen-Almagor, 2021), and Van Geel et al (2014) found that cyberbullying was more strongly related to suicidal ideation than bullying and therefore it is more dangerous than traditional bullying. Cyberbullying increases the risk of suicidal ideation by a factor of 3.12 versus a factor of 2.16 when bullied in person thus we must tackle this challenge with utmost seriousness.

Education and communication are important keys. Parents should be involved in the lives of their children, watch their Internet behaviour, what apps they are using, with whom they communicate. Parents and schools should educate children how to use the Internet, for what purposes, what is right and what is wrong Internet conduct. Parents must be alert and cognizant of any warning signs of distress and depression. Schools need to step up their role in averting abuse. ISPs and social networking sites should limit harassing Internet conduct and make users feel secure by enacting suitable and effective protections. We also need legislation to protect children so they surf the digital highway and make the most of its tremendous resources in a tranquil environment.

Internet users can reduce Internet abuse and violent language when they are acting collectively. They can and should exert pressure on social networks to protect children and youth and warn them that otherwise the companies will suffer economic losses. We, as customers, should demand safe and responsible service. Netcitizenship is important. Netcitizenship is about developing responsible modes of conduct when surfing the Internet which include positive contributions to debates and discussions, and raising caution and alarm against dangerous Net expressions. Netcitizenship encourages counter-speech against cyberbullying and hate speech, working together to provide a safe and comfortable virtual community, free of intimidation, bullying and hate (Cohen-Almagor, 2015b).

Further research may analyse the ways social media apps are used in spreading bullying and hate speech, the way modern technologies are exploited to spread anti-social speech and whether search engines and social networking sites should continue to assist bullies and hate groups in advancing their anti-social and highly offensive agenda. Appropriate algorithms should be developed to flag and block hateful and harmful expressions. More synergies are required between studies on cyberbullying and studies on hate speech and bigotry. Scholars may learn from each other in devising appropriate mechanisms for tackling those highly disturbing phenomena.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ <https://about.ask.fm/about/>
- ² <https://www.facebook.com/IzzyDixAntiBullyingMemorialPage/posts/537389833015615>
- ³ Stomp Out Bullying, <https://www.stompoutbullying.org/index.php/about/share-your-stories/>
- ⁴ See also <https://www.change.org/en-GB/petitions/shut-down-cyberbullying-website-ask-fm-in-memory-of-izzy-dix-12-other-teens-globally>
- ⁵ Ask.fm, Protect Young Eyes, <https://protectyouneyes.com/apps/ask-fm-parental-controls/>
- ⁶ Formspring was a community of millions of people connected by curiosity about one another. It served users to anonymously post comments about other people. In essence, it was an open invitation for insults and gossip. The site closed down in 2013.
- ⁷ See also the movie *Bullied to Death: The Tragedy of Phoebe Prince* (2010), <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2776656/>
- ⁸ It is reiterated that cyberbullying does not necessarily relate only to young people; it is just that most of the research in this field has tended to focus on the young. For discussion on cybebullying among adults (see Harvey, Heames, Richey, and Leonard, 2006; Forssell, 2016; Vranjes, Erreygers, Vandebosch et al., 2018; Vranjes, 2018).