

PERSONAL STANCE: CYBERBULLYING

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OVERVIEW

Bullying is an act that was once performed with the tools of language and physicality. As digital technologies have become ubiquitous in Western cultures, they too have become a common tool used for harassment and oppression, giving rise to the act of cyberbullying.

Digital technologies also play a substantial role in defining and reinforcing cultural constructs. Societies and technologies exist in a symbiotic state, where one shapes and is shaped by the other. This complex relationship, coupled with anonymity and online privacy, render the traditional strategies for bullying intervention difficult to effectuate.

Rather than punishing cyberbullies and monitoring victims, empathetic and responsible digital citizens need to be empowered through the facilitation of critical thinking, collaboration and relationship building.

1. ISSUE OF CYBERBULLYING

WHY IS CYBERBULLYING AN ISSUE?

Bullying can be defined as ‘the calculated, ongoing abuse that is aimed at a less powerful target’ (Englander, 2013, p.11). Gladden et al. (2014, p. 7) describe the act of bullying as one that ‘may inflict harm or distress on the targeted youth including physical, psychological, social, or educational harm’.

Traditionally, bullying has been implemented by utilising the tools of language, physicality and manipulation. As digital technologies have become commonplace, they too have become the tools of bullying.

Cyberbullying is ‘a modern form of bullying performed using electronic forms of contact (e.g., SMS, MMS, Facebook, YouTube)’ (Sticca & Perren, 2013, pg. 1). The bullying behaviour is usually enacted in an online environment through text messaging, social media, blog posts and comments.

A study done by Sticca & Perren (2013) on the impacts on adolescents of traditional bullying versus cyberbullying found that the medium for the bullying is negligible, however anonymity and publicity are central to the worst perceived cases of bullying. Digital communication and social networking websites allow for anonymity and publicity to be easily attained by perpetrators, making cyberbullying a particularly severe form of bullying.

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES AS A TOOL

‘Cyber’ is a prefix that was popular in the nineties for describing anything that took place within the online environments facilitated by digital technologies. Mathematician Norbert Wiener first used the prefix when he coined the term ‘cybernetics’ in the 1940s. ‘Weiner borrowed the ancient Greek word ‘cyber’ which is related to the idea of government or governing’ (Newitz, 2013).

The prefix ‘cyber’ became synonymous with the word ‘technology’ in the nineties. *Technology* is a term which shares its linguistic roots with the word *text*, derived from the Greek word *tekhe*, meaning art, craft or skill. The word *tekhe* is taken from the Proto-Indo-European *teks*, which is to weave, fabricate or make. By considering the etymology of the word it is evident that ‘technology is about more than objects and tools; it refers to the ideas, practices, artifacts and sensibilities that define a culture. In this sense, it is inevitable that technologies will become so familiar and ‘natural’ that, at some point, they become transparent’ (Davis et al., 2015, pg 141).

This transparency is evident in the way that paper, pencils and languages are utilised. Objects and tools that were once groundbreaking technologies have now become ubiquitous components of modern life. That same ubiquity is now occurring through the circuitry and screens of digital technologies, as the connections, exchanges and amplification inconspicuously permeate most aspects of Western modernity.

As objects and tools become ubiquitous they generate the 'ideas, practices, artifacts and sensibilities' that define a culture, making digital technology a powerful influence over groups and individuals. In a study on dominance and prestige as avenues to social rank, Cheng et al. (2013) found that 'dominant individuals tended to act overbearing, credit themselves, use teasing to humiliate others, and be manipulative' (Henrich, 2016). These are all traits displayed by cyberbullies as they use the tools of digital technology to assert power over others through intimidation and public humiliation.

Cyberbullying is an issue as it occurs within the realm of digital technologies. These modern technologies can be very powerful tools that enable anonymity and stimulate wide-ranging publicity, whilst also defining the culture that students exist within.

WHY DOES CYBERBULLYING GENERATE DIFFERENT VIEWS?

The proliferation of digital technology means that it has penetrated the lives of most privileged Western citizens. In 2014-15, 85% of Australians over the age of 15 regularly accessed the internet, whilst 99% of 15-17 year olds were regular internet users, averaging 18 hours per week spent online. 72% of all users accessed the internet to participate in social networking (ABS, 2016).

This widespread usage means that an overwhelming majority of Australians are exposed to the potential risks of cyberbullying. Even those few who do not participate in social media activities can still be vulnerable to cyberbullying through the means of unsolicited photo or content sharing.

As there are varying attitudes on other issues that affect an entire culture, such as politics or education, there are also many views on the mitigation, management and response to cyberbullying.

WHAT ARE THE MAIN VIEWS AROUND CYBERBULLYING AND WHO HOLDS THEM?

VICTIMS

Victims of cyberbullying have been found to experience feelings of great loneliness as their personal and social identities become painfully impacted (Ortega-Barón, 2016).

PERPETRATORS

Perpetrators have been found to have low levels of empathy (Brewer & Kerslake, 2015), while other studies have found that cyberbullies have felt aggressive, vindictive, happy, pleased, guilty and regretful (Kowalski et al., 2012).

PARENTS OF VICTIMS

It has been found that parents of victims want to help their children, but that adolescent victims are generally reluctant to seek help from parents (Wadian et al., 2016).

PARENTS OF PERPETRATORS

In some cases parents of perpetrators have been defensive of their children and have even resorted to victim blaming (Funnell, 2016).

TEACHERS

Teachers and school personnel have a duty of care for all students, therefore they need to learn about the environments where cyberbullying takes place, as many educators have been found to feel unknowledgeable in this area (Cassidy et al., 2013).

GENERAL PUBLIC, MEDIA AND NEWS OUTLETS

Depending on personal narratives, political leanings and ulterior motives, the media and general public hold an array of viewpoints. The blame tends to shift between the victim, the technology, the perpetrator and the larger socio-political systems.

EXPERTS AND RESEARCHERS

Experts generally suggest that prevention and monitoring internet usage is key, but training for educators is also required (Cassidy et al., 2013). Others also suggest that a broader, more holistic approach to relationships and communities is required in order to develop empathy in both perpetrators and victims (Davis et al. 2015).

PRIVATE SCHOOLS

Have a public perception to maintain and protect. Due to this reputation and pressure from stakeholders, private schools have perceived cyberbullying as a symptom of bad behavior, leading to the expulsion of perpetrators (Cook, 2016).

POLITICIANS AND GOVERNMENTS

One of the current Australian Government solutions to cyberbullying is facilitated through the eSafety Commissioner's Office. The website contains information on cyberbullying for victims and the friends of victims with a focus on calling cyberbullying out when it occurs (Office of the Children's eSafety Commissioner, 2016).

SPECIFIC INCIDENTS THAT HAVE GENERATED MY INTEREST IN CYBERBULLYING

Several disturbing articles related to serious secondary school cyberbullying networks (and cybercrimes) have appeared in Australian news outlets over the past two years. Along with this, alarming rates of social media abuse from the general public have also been reported by the likes of feminist writer Clementine Ford, Muslim activist Mariam Veiszadeh and Indigenous entertainer Briggs.

JULY 20 2016 SAVE PRINT LICENSE ARTICLE

Brighton Grammar expels students who created vile Instagram account

Henrietta Cook ✉ + + +

[HTTP://WWW.THEAGE.COM.AU/VICTORIA/BRIGHTON-GRAMMAR-EXPELS-STUDENTS-WHO-CREATED-VILE-INSTAGRAM-ACCOUNT-20160720-GQ90XJ.HTML](http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/brighton-grammar-expels-students-who-created-vile-instagram-account-20160720-gq90xj.html)

Australian education **Police investigate claims schoolgirls across Australia targeted by site hosting explicit images**

Website reportedly contains thousands of non-consensual images of underage schoolgirls uploaded by male students

Melissa Davey @MelissaDavey

Wednesday 17 August 2016 13:53 AEST

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[HTTPS://WWW.THEGUARDIAN.COM/AUSTRALIA-NEWS/2016/AUG/17/POLICE-INVESTIGATE-CLAIMS-SCHOOLGIRLS-ACROSS-AUSTRALIA-TARGETED-BY-SITE-HOSTING-EXPLICIT-IMAGESGQ90XJ.HTML](https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/aug/17/police-investigate-claims-schoolgirls-across-australia-targeted-by-site-hosting-explicit-images-gq90xj.html)

Exclusive: Students from 71 Australian schools targeted by sick pornography ring

AUGUST 17, 2016 7:48PM

[HTTP://WWW.NEWS.COM.AU/LIFESTYLE/REAL-LIFE/NEWS-LIFE/STUDENTS-FROM-70-AUSTRALIAN-SCHOOLS-TARGETED-BY-SICK-PORNOGRAPHY-RING/NEWS-STORY/53288536E0CE38BA7955E92C7F7FA8DAR1HANNATARGETED-BY-SITE-HOSTING-EXPLICIT-IMAGESGQ90XJ.HTML](http://www.news.com.au/lifestyle/real-life/news-life/students-from-70-australian-schools-targeted-by-sick-pornography-ring/news-story/53288536e0ce38ba7955e92c7f7fa8dar1hannatargeted-by-site-hosting-explicit-images-gq90xj.html)

Social media's lack of intimacy driving sexist posts by Melbourne students, psychologist says

ABC News Breakfast By Patrick Wood

Posted 11 Aug 2016, 2:23pm

[HTTP://WWW.ABC.NET.AU/NEWS/2016-08-11/SOCIAL-MEDIA-DRIVING-SPATE-OF-SEXIST-POSTS-BY-MELBOURNE-STUDENTS/7720236SICK-PORNOGRAPHY-RING/NEWS-STORY/53288536E0CE38BA7955E92C7F7FA8DAR1HANNATARGETED-BY-SITE-HOSTING-EXPLICIT-IMAGESGQ90XJ.HTML](http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-08-11/social-media-driving-spate-of-sexist-posts-by-melbourne-students/7720236sick-pornography-ring/news-story/53288536e0ce38ba7955e92c7f7fa8dar1hannatargeted-by-site-hosting-explicit-images-gq90xj.html)

Cyber bullying: Government crackdown to target social media sites

AM By Sue Lannin

Updated 3 Dec 2014, 7:05am

[HTTP://WWW.ABC.NET.AU/NEWS/2014-12-03/GOVERNMENT-PLANS-CYBER-BULLYING-CRACKDOWN/5935560](http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-12-03/government-plans-cyber-bullying-crackdown/5935560)



1 in 5 Australian kids have experienced this. And the consequences can be devastating.

[HTTP://WWW.MAMAMIA.COM.AU/CYBERBULLYING-STATISTICS-IN-AUSTRALIA/](http://www.mamamia.com.au/cyberbullying-statistics-in-australia/)



Artists Rally Against Racist Abuse Aimed At Indigenous Rapper Briggs

Like Share 435

Written by Michael Carr on February 1, 2016

Following calling out those two "redneck scumbags" for dressing up in blackface as indigenous men for at an Australian icon themed party, First Australian artists Briggs proceeded to cop a tonne of abuse online. [HTTP://MUSICFEEDS.COM.AU/NEWS/ARTISTS-RALLY-RACIST-ABUSE-AIMED-INDIGENOUS-RAPPER-BRIGGS/](http://musicfeeds.com.au/news/artists-rally-racist-abuse-aimed-indigenous-rapper-briggs/)

Briggs Here's what they think about you.

BA Woodward
dont get me wrong i love his music! Im just fuckin sick to death of seeing the "indigenous people are so hard done by" when they get free health benefits free housing and government hand outs are the only reason they get a bad rap is because 99% percent of them are feral shoving fucks with no respect for anyone at all not even theyre own culture. Indigenous australians seem to be the most racist fuckin people on the planet, just about the only reason they get a bad rap is because they bring it on them selves by being lazy thieving disrespectful lazy dirty fucks!!!

7 minutes ago · Like · Reply

Like · Reply · 67 · August 26 at 7:38am

View previous replies

Briggs Dane Hollands - another white dude deciding what is and isn't racism.

[HTTPS://WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/SENATORBRIGGS/](https://www.facebook.com/senatorbriggs/)

Mariam Veiszadeh 6 hrs ·

I don't regularly check my messages - I did tonight. I am used to hate mail - I really am but what hurts the most is when people with real accounts, real names, with profile photos showing their partners and/or kids and with accounts showing their locations and work details, send me abusive messages, memes, photos etc. Once upon a time, these would come from anonymous accounts. Truly a sad state of affairs.

Like Comment Share

94 Top Comments

[HTTPS://WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/MARIAMVEISZADEH/?FREF-TS](https://www.facebook.com/mariamveiszadeh/?fref=ts)

Clementine Ford September 28 at 4:30pm ·

The comments on this Guardian interview have replenished my underground lake of male tears very nicely. "languidly float on back"

the guardian

Clementine Ford: 'There's something really toxic with the way men bond in Australia'

As her first book, Fight Like A Girl, hits shelves around Australia, the flame-throwing feminist says men have to give up some of their power to redress the imbalance...

THEGUARDIAN.COM | BY BRIGID DELANEY

[HTTPS://WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/CLEMENTINEFORD/](https://www.facebook.com/clementineford/)

2. COMPLEXITIES

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY AND OPPRESSION

Digital technologies are a cultural tool, existing in a state of flux between shaping culture and being shaped by culture. As with any other tool, digital technologies can be used to oppress diverse cultural groups. The examples on the previous page highlight extreme, yet all too common, cases of sexism made possible by digital technologies. Other recent cases include racism, classism, heterosexism, cissexism, and cultural appropriation. The complexity is that digital technologies have also empowered these diverse groups, contributing to many advances, but also causing great harm.

Bullying is commonly perceived to be 'a collection of bad behaviours', however 'one emergent argument is that it is an indicator of a broader, systemic problem' (Davis et al. 2015). Traditionally it may have been easy to blame and punish the perpetrator, however the internet and social media have made it more difficult to blame a single individual, therefore alternative approaches to responding to cyberbullying are required. Anonymity has also made the response a difficult task as the perpetrators can assume false identities in order to inflict harm upon victims.

RANGE OF STAKEHOLDERS

Another complexity is that the internet can be accessed by most people at anytime, and incidents can sometimes 'go viral'. This means that there are a wide range of stakeholders beyond the victims and perpetrators, making some instances of cyberbullying political handballs.

WHISTLEBLOWERS

A further complexity is that those with vested interests in protecting the perpetrators, such as parents and schools, may act to discredit or silence victims of cyberbullying by covering up the incident, devaluing the victim (also known as victim blaming), downplaying the events, and even threatening physical attacks (Martin, 1999). All of these responses happened in the case of the Brighton Grammar Instagram account in July, 2016 (Funnell, 2016).

3. PERSONAL STANCE

THE ROLE OF EDUCATION

My personal stance is that cyberbullying is a social issue, therefore education has an immense role to play in the response to, and mitigation of, cyberbullying. The anonymity of the internet and the unprecedented access that users have to public forums mean that cyberbullying cannot be prevented through monitoring use, threats of punishment or by passing instances off as simple acts of bad behaviour (Choo, 2015). Furthermore, the removal of the tools of digital technology or the enactment of bans are not options, this would be akin to removing the tools of speech should a student participate in verbal harassment. A more holistic approach is required. The following are some ideas around the minimisation of cyberbullying instances.

CULTURAL CHANGE

Firstly, if cyberbullying is to be viewed as a broader social issue the culture needs to change. Digital technologies are just a tool, changing the way in which individuals use the tool requires a change in the culture within which the individuals exist.

EMPATHY

One way in which the culture can change is by reinforcing empathy within students by developing 'the ability to take the perspective of another' (Davis et al., 2015, pg. 215). Responsible digital students will also need to learn self-efficacy and the ability to form and maintain positive relationships with others.

CRITICAL THINKING

The ability to think critically also requires development. 'Critical thinking involves analysing, creatively integrating, and evaluating not just circumstances, but the conditions that have given rise to particular circumstances' (Davis et al., 2015, pg. 127).

EMBRACING ALTERNATE PEDAGOGIES

The aim of critical thinking is to provoke conscientization by 'recognising internalised and external oppressions, and forging strong connections between knowledge and the ability to take constructive action' (Davis et al., 2015, pg. 165). The alternative pedagogies that emphasise conscientization include: queer pedagogy, anti-racist pedagogy, feminist pedagogy, anti-ableist pedagogy, Indigenous pedagogies, and post-colonial pedagogy.

AWARENESS

Lastly, I believe that the following current practices should be continued:

- educating students about creating and sharing content that may cause them harm in the future
- calling out cyberbullying as it occurs
- monitoring the internet usage of potential victims

(Office of the Children's eSafety Commissioner, 2016).

I have listed these strategies last as I believe that the more holistic measures of cultural change, critical thinking, empathy and alternative pedagogies will have important lasting impacts that break the culture of cyberbullying. Awareness is important, however if I were to imagine an idealistic teaching environment I would work for prevention over the possibility of victim shaming and restrictions.

AVOIDING 'QUICK FIX' RESPONSES

Most of the previous responses focus on encouraging students to connect and collaborate, rather than the default knee-jerk reactions of punishment and accountability that have been enacted by Government policy. These band-aid solutions have so far proven to fail the victims of cyberbullying as severe cases continue to take place (Choo, 2015).

4. IMPLICATIONS

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE TEACHING PRACTICE

As Media and Information Technology are subjects I plan to teach, I feel I have a considerable responsibility to educate students about the broad implications and the very real consequences of cyberbullying.

Instead of removing or blocking the tools that facilitate cyberbullying I would rather create situations where empathy (the ability to gain the perspective of another) can be learned and developed. The acts of collaboration, safe discourse and art making have been proven to help grow empathy within students (Bradshaw, 2016).

Spaces where students can form and maintain relationships will also be important. Engaging collaborative learning strategies by using techniques from Piaget's and Vygotsky's theories on constructivism will help learners to engage with content actively, intentionally, authentically, cooperatively and collaboratively (Howland et al., 2012).

Freire's theory of praxis is where reflection and action are applied to develop critical awareness. Application of this theory will help to construct environments that hooks refers to as transformative; spaces that foster the 'sense that there is shared commitment and a common good that binds us' (hooks, 1994).

Responsible, active and progressive digital citizens contribute to safer schools, communities and online environments. The above strategies are just a few examples of creating self awareness and community mindfulness. Borrowing from the following movements, theories and fields of work may also contribute to this awareness, ultimately producing students who do not engage with the practice of cyberbullying:

ACTIVISM **ANTI-CLASSISM** **DIVERSITY EDUCATION**
FEMINISM **CRITICAL REFLECTION** **CRITICAL PEDAGOGY**
GLOBALISATION **CULTURAL STUDIES** **PARTICIPATORY CULTURE**
ANTI-SEXISM **KNOWLEDGE ECONOMIES** **SOCIOCULTURAL LEARNING**
DIVERSITY **SOCIAL SCIENCES** **INDIGENOUS EPISTEMOLOGIES**
POST-COLONIALISM **POST-MODERNISM** **BRAIN PLASTICITY**
CONVERSING **SOCIAL NETWORKING** **COLLECTIVITY**

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