

How Dangerous is Cyberbullying?




Peter K Smith is Emeritus Professor at Goldsmiths, University of London, who chaired COST Action IS0801 on cyberbullying. In this post, he examines the media coverage, prevalence and impact of cyberbullying and concludes that even though occurrences of cyberbullying may be exaggerated, there is important work to be done to prevent it from happening. His book *Understanding school bullying: its nature and prevention strategies* is in press (2014) with Sage Publications.

Cyberbullying – bullying others by means of mobile phones and the Internet – is largely a phenomenon of the 21st century, and over the last decade it has emerged as one major kind of bullying. In an [article in the Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry](#), [Sonia Livingstone](#) and I have shown that there has been a massive growth of research on the topic, with many articles, journal special issues, and books appearing since 2008 in particular. It has also attracted much attention in the press, sometimes of a sensationalist kind. As part of a recent EU funded [COST network](#) project on cyberbullying, a large-scale content analysis explored the amount and nature of coverage on cyberbullying in 1599 articles from 43 national, daily newspapers in eight countries (Australia, Belgium, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Slovenia, the United Kingdom). The period from 1 January 2004 till 31 December 2011 showed a general upward trend in coverage (34 articles published in 2004, up to 295 articles in 2011). The general tone of the articles, in which cyberbullying was the main topic, was coded as alarming (52.5%) or neutral (41%), with only a few coded as reassuring (6.5%). But how justified are these concerns?

How prevalent is cyberbullying?

The COST network action carried out a [systematic review](#) of 43 instruments to assess cyberbullying, and found many weaknesses in terms of definition, reliability and validity. A huge range of figures are available for how often cyberbullying happens, with some studies reporting that 20% or more of 11 to 18 year olds had been a victim of cyberbullying. However as we discuss in our review, many of these studies had lenient criteria, such as whether someone had ‘ever’ been cyberbullied, even on just one occasion. Usually we only refer to something as bullying if it happens more than just once or twice (repetition) and if the victim cannot easily defend himself (imbalance of power). If cyberbullying research does not attempt to assess these criteria (and there are difficulties with these criteria in the cyber domain), then it is likely that cyber aggression is being assessed rather than cyberbullying. Occasional or one-off occurrences of cyber-aggression may be reported by over 20% of young people, but serious or recent or repeated incidents are reported by only around 5%, less than for traditional bullying, as also found by the [EU Kids Online survey](#) of 9-16-year-olds. Other factors that affect prevalence estimates of cyberbullying include the nature and age of the sample, the emphasis on particular kinds of cyberbullying, and the date of survey administration.

Does cyberbullying cause suicides?

Cyber victimization has been linked prominently to cases of suicide, notably in some media stories, and sometimes labelled as ‘[cyberbullicide](#).’ Overall, there are clear associations between being bullied (whether online or offline), and suicidal ideation, and longitudinal studies do suggest a causal link, but other predisposing conditions such as depression, or difficult family circumstances are very often found to be present. Being a cyber victim can contribute to cases of suicidal ideation, and in a small number of cases to actual suicide; but it is very likely that such pre-existing difficulties are present as well. This makes it difficult to say that a suicide is ‘caused’ by bullying, although in some cases it may appear to have a leading role. 

Is cyberbullying increasing?

Clearly cyberbullying increased in the early years of this century, with the spread of mobile phones and Internet technology. But has it increased rapidly in recent years? What evidence there is does not strongly support this. We reviewed several longitudinal studies in the US and UK, and concluded that “while much remains to be researched in this regard, it is striking that, over the period when access to online and mobile technologies increased dramatically, there was no equivalent evidence of a clear or substantial increase in either risk or harm to children. One possibility is that the Internet affords no greatly increased bullying risks to children, than they would have encountered offline. Another is that there is an associated risk of harm, but this has been offset by increased awareness raising efforts and industry controls. Yet further possibilities may be identified in future research.”

Conclusions

While the levels of cyberbullying, and the risks entailed, may be exaggerated at times, this certainly does not imply that we do not need to take it seriously. On the contrary, the rather steady rates of cyberbullying contrast with the declines in traditional (offline) bullying found in many countries over the last decade. The effects of being a cyber victim are comparable with those of being an offline victim – that is, potentially very negative and sometimes with tragic outcomes. Much still needs to be done to raise awareness of the range of types of cyberbullying, and to promulgate **effective guidelines** for schools, teachers, parents and young people, as well as encouraging responsible actions from mobile phone companies and internet service providers.

This blog post gives the views of the author, and does not represent the position of the LSE Media Policy Project blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

January 13th, 2014 | [Children and the Media, Guest Blog](#) | [0 Comments](#)

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