

The Conundrum of Visibility: Youth Safety and the Internet

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The complexities of the Internet continue to be a source of consternation for parents, educators, and policy makers. Some embrace the Internet, evangelizing about its tremendous potential. Others fear it, preaching en masse about its dangers. These cycles of polarizing doctrine make it difficult to understand that the Internet is quickly becoming just another aspect of everyday life, mirroring dynamics that shape every environment that people inhabit. Are there risks and dangers online? Certainly—just as there are offline. There is little doubt that technology inflects age-old issues in new ways, and these shifts must be understood. But when we focus exclusively on technology, we lose track of the bigger picture. For many youth, technology is part of their everyday lives, and must be examined in that context. The key to addressing online safety is to take a few steps back and make sense of the lives of youth, the risks and dangers they face, and the personal, social, and cultural logic behind their practices.

Four issues dominate contemporary conversations about online safety: 1) sexual solicitation; 2) harassment; 3) exposure to inappropriate content; and 4) youth-generated problematic content. Data on these issues have been well-documented, especially in the U.S. (Shrock and boyd 2008), but let's look briefly at each of these concerns before turning to think about the most significant opportunity provided by the Internet: visibility.

Sexual Solicitation

The image of the online predator is pervasive. He is portrayed as an older, unattractive man who falsifies his identity to deceive, groom, kidnap, and rape children. A handful of devastating but rare cases that fit this stereotype are put forward as proof that the Internet is dangerous. Statistics about sexual solicitation are misinterpreted to convey the idea that these men are lurking everywhere online. The image is perpetrated by TV shows where fake profiles of children are used to “catch a predator.” The danger of this manufactured image is that it is misleading and obscures the very real risks youth face with regard to sexual solicitation.

Consider the findings of the Crimes Against Children Research Center, who found that one in seven minors in a national U.S. sample are sexually solicited online (Wolak et al. 2006). Peers and young adults—not older adults—account for 90% of solicitations in which approximate age is known (Wolak et al. 2006). Many acts of online solicitation are harassing or teasing communications that are not designed to seduce youth into offline sexual encounters; 69% of solicitations involve no attempt at offline contact and youth typically ignore or deflect the experience without distress (Wolak et al. 2006). A study of U.S. criminal cases in which adult sex offenders were arrested after meeting young victims online found that victims were adolescents—not children; few (5%) were deceived by offenders claiming to be teens or lying about their sexual intentions; and 73% of youth who met an offender in person did so more than once (Wolak et al. 2008b). Interviews with police indicate that most victims are underage adolescents who knowingly meet adults for sexual encounters. These offenses tended to fit a model of

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statutory rape involving a post-pubescent minor having nonforcible sexual relations with an adult, most frequently adults in their twenties (Wolak et al. 2008a).

Let us not dismiss these crimes, for they are crimes. Statutory rape is illegal in many countries because our society believes that minors cannot truly consent to sexual relations with adults. But this problem is not unique to the Internet. Most youth are not at-risk online, and those who are tend to also have problems offline (Mitchell et al. 2007). In other words, the Internet provides a new forum for a type of problematic interaction that predates the technology. But the Internet is also a tremendous tool to see at-risk youth engaging in risky behaviors. Instead of deploring the Internet as the cause of age-old problems, we should use it to understand why youth do these things, and how we can reach out to prevent them from happening.

Harassment

Bullying, gossip-mongering, and harassment have been a cruel presence in the lives of children for a very long time. While the numbers vary wildly, as do the definitions for bullying or harassment, there is little doubt that the Internet has provided new ways for youths to torment each other. Ignoring highly celebrated and exceptional examples, the vast majority of online harassment targeted at children and teens stems from other youth.

While the Internet is certainly used for harassment, the term “cyberbullying” implies that what takes place online radically departs from offline behavior. Anonymity is often cited as a core difference. Yet, while online perpetrators may appear to be anonymous, this does not mean that victims do not know the perpetrators or cannot figure out who is harassing them. Hinduja and Patchin (2009) found that 82% of victims in their U.S. sample knew their perpetrator (and that 41% of all perpetrators were friends or former friends). Others claim that online harassment is more harmful. There is little doubt that online harassment can be more persistent and is thus visible to more people, including peers and adults. One could reasonably argue that the potential reputational damage of visible harassment is greater than physical and emotional blows shelled out in the locker room. But visibility is a double-edged sword. Increasing the transparency of harassment means that more people can observe the harm and intervene. More importantly, it is easier for adults—parents, teachers, counselors—to see what takes place online than what goes on in private. This is an amazing opportunity to address a long-standing problem, but adults must stop blaming the technology and focus on the youth hurting and being hurt.

Exposure to Inappropriate Content

As a society, we believe that some content that is acceptable for adults is inappropriate for minors. The increased flow of information facilitated by the Internet means that content of all types is easier to access now than ever, including inappropriate content. We worry that youth might gain access to forbidden content or be inadvertently exposed to it during otherwise innocuous activities.

Pornographic content is usually front and center in this discussion. Encounters with pornography are not universal and rates of exposure are heavily debated. Wolak et al. (2006) found that 42% of youth in a U.S. sample reported unwanted or wanted exposure

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or both; of these, 66% reported only unwanted exposure, and only 9% of those indicated being “very or extremely upset.” Furthermore, rates of unwanted exposure were higher among youth who were older, suffered from depression, and reported being harassed or solicited online or victimized offline (Wolak et al. 2007). This suggests that unwanted exposure might be linked to specific activities, particularly at-risk online behavior.

While use of the Internet is assumed to increase the likelihood of unwanted exposure to pornography, this may not be true among all demographics. Younger children report encountering pornographic content offline more frequently than online (Ybarra and Mitchell 2005) and a study of seventh and eighth graders in the U.S. found that of those who are exposed to nudity (intentionally or not), more are exposed through TV (63%) and movies (46%) than on the Internet (35%) (Pardun et al. 2005). This raises questions about whether the boundaries that we assume offline actually exist.

Youth-Generated Problematic Content

One of the Internet’s core benefits is that it enables consumers of culture to become producers and distributors. But not all user-generated content is considered healthy, particularly when youth produce content that society deems immoral, illegal, or detrimental. Eating disorders and self-harm have a long history, but the Internet provides a way for youth to document their “lifestyles” and find like-minded others. Teens once used Polaroids to capture their burgeoning sexuality; today, youth leverage mobile phones to capture and disseminate naked photographs, both for fun and harm. Gangs, violence, and hate are not new, but they are now documented and disseminated through fight videos and shock content. The content that results from these activities is undoubtedly disturbing, as is the ease with which it can be disseminated but shouldn’t we be more concerned with the underlying issues than the content itself?

Most troubling is the determination by some lawyers to prosecute minors who produce and disseminate naked photos of themselves and their peers as child pornographers. The legal apparatus around child pornography is meant to uncover, prosecute, and severely punish those who produce and consume content that records—or appears to record—the sexual assault of a child by an adult. When minors are prosecuted, child pornography laws are devalued and minors are victimized in entirely new ways.

Youth-generated problematic content is indeed disturbing. And technology does make it easier to distribute. But the underlying problems are the same. Once again, just because technology makes an issue more noticeable does not mean that we should focus on eliminating its visibility. Instead, we should use visibility to get to the root of the problem.

The Conundrum of Visibility

Many of our fears and concerns regarding online safety stem from the ways in which the Internet uncovers many things that were previously hidden. Simply put, we see more risky behaviors not because risky acts have increased, but because the technology makes them more conspicuous. Most of the risks youth take and face online parallel those they take and face offline. But many of us do not see at-risk youth seeking the attention of older men offline. Many of us are unaware of all of the hateful gossip and bullying that

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takes place in our schools. Many of us are oblivious to the availability of inappropriate content to those seeking it. And, finally, many of us do not realize how many youth are struggling with mental health issues, making risky decisions, or living in worlds of hate and violence. It's easier not to notice.

The Internet demands that we notice. It illuminates that which we least want to see. It shows many of our youth struggling and hurting and crying out for help. Of course, the Internet does not do this by itself. It does it because we're looking. But we're not seeing. We're giving agency to the Internet so that we can blame it for what it reveals, rather than forcing ourselves to contend with what we see. At the end of the day, the Internet is not the issue. The issue is us. We cannot provide perfect protection for our children. We don't have the social or organizational infrastructure to help all youth who are in need. We don't know how to stop bullying. We don't have a magic bullet to end mental illness or insecurity or anger. And we, the adults of the world, are scared. We want something to blame. So we blame what we don't understand, that which is forcing us to see. We blame the Internet because we are unwilling to blame ourselves for not knowing how to solve the problems of this world.

Perhaps it's time that we look beyond the Internet and begin addressing the fundamental problems of our society. Thanks to the Internet, they are staring us right in the face. It's high time we do something about it.

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