Preventing Online Bullying:
What Companies and Others Can Do

Jacqueline F. Beauchere, Chief Online Safety Officer, Microsoft Corporation, Redmond, WA, USA

ABSTRACT

The Internet, the landmark invention of our lifetime, has brought us great benefit, but along with it, risk and antisocial behavior, including online bullying (or “cyberbullying”). Defined as the use of electronic technology to demonstrate behavior that teases, demeans, or harasses someone less powerful, the global pervasiveness of online bullying is supported by data including that in a 2012 Microsoft study of young people worldwide ages 8 to 17. Prevention lies in the promotion of “digital citizenship”—safer, responsible, and appropriate use of technology and services. And, while no singular entity can combat online bullying alone, Internet companies can play their part, as exemplified by the robust tools and resources offered by Microsoft and others. A collective focus, however, is needed to help raise awareness and change behavior and, that responsibility must be shared among parents and adults, educators, young people, law enforcement, and government.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, Digital Citizenship, Digital Ethics, Digital Etiquette, Digital Literacy, Internet Safety, Online Bullying, Online Cruelty, Online Safety, Social and Emotional Learning

INTRODUCTION

The Internet is nothing short of the landmark invention of our lifetime. It has changed forever the way we work, communicate, learn, play, and grow. It has quickened productivity, expanded global commerce, enabled new opportunities for social interaction, and even sparked the creation of online communities. Yet, like all public places, the online world is not without its risks and bad actors.

While Internet companies cannot be responsible for the online behavior of all individuals, nor be expected to police all corners of the web, the public rightly has an expectation that industry will do its level best in helping to make the Internet safer and more secure for all. If businesses fail to meet these expectations, consumers will be less inclined to use web-based services, the advancement of online commerce may stall, and both industry and individuals will suffer a lack of trust.

This public expectation elevates the importance and relevance of the concept of “digital citizenship”—safer, responsible, and appropriate use of technology and services. It is essential that Internet companies and, indeed all organizations with an online presence, self-
assess that they are, in fact, doing their part to embrace and promote digital citizenship amongst their users.

In addition, Internet participants themselves have a responsibility to help protect the most vulnerable members of our global society: children, the elderly, and those with disabilities. Online bullying among young people has garnered significant attention in recent years. Media concentration on the most severe and tragic cases has triggered a borderline frenzy among some parents and others. A collective focus is needed to help raise awareness, educate, and change behavior in an effort to rewire society, such that children are disinclined to bully.

Efforts among individuals and organizations range from philosophical reflections (Bertolotti, 2011) in the emerging field of technoethics to more policy-oriented approaches, like workshops and other discussions convened by institutions such as the European Union (Rizza & Pereira, 2013).

The aim of this paper is to provide an overview of the steps taken by a key technology-industry actor—Microsoft—in its effort to promote online safety; the paper seeks to demonstrate the ethical principles helping to guide the company’s response to a key, topical issue, and thereby spark additional engagement within the sphere of technoethical studies.

DEFINING ONLINE BULLYING

Protecting young people from online bullying has been a keen focus for Microsoft for the last six-plus years. Experience shows us that young people, parents, educators, and government officials around the world continue to be concerned about the issue (also called “cyberbullying”), often asking: What is it? How can it be prevented? And, what resources are available to help raise awareness and educate the public?

Microsoft defines online bullying as “the use of electronic technology to demonstrate behavior—often repeated—that teases, demeans, or harasses someone less powerful.” Kids who bully may, for example:

1. Send hurtful or threatening messages to a target’s mobile phone or in an online game, or share humiliating pictures or a video on social media;
2. Disclose secrets or private information, for instance by forwarding, a confidential instant or text message;
3. Deliberately exclude someone from a group in a game or virtual world, or through social media;
4. Impersonate the target by gaining access to his or her mobile phone or social media account, and then send or post hurtful comments, or otherwise instigate trouble with friends;
5. Pretend to befriend someone, gain his or her trust, and then betray that trust.

Data vary on the prevalence of online bullying. Surveys estimate that between 10 percent and 40 percent of youth in the European Union, United States, and Australia have, at some point, been subject to cyberbullying. One important contribution companies and governments can make is to further society’s understanding of the issue through study and analysis.

In an effort to determine the global pervasiveness of online bullying, Microsoft commissioned a study in February, 2012. We polled young people between the ages of 8 and 17 in 25 countries, asking whether they had encountered a range of negative behaviors online. That spectrum can begin on one end with general “meanness,” such as teasing or name-calling; run through what most adults would consider “bullying,” or other more severe displays of negative behavior, and end with outright “cruelty,” including the willful intent to hurt or harm (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Three hundred youth from each country and region participated in the study, bringing to 7,644 the total number of respondents.
Preservation of Cultural and Scientific Heritage by Means of Digital Libraries
www.igi-global.com/chapter/preservation-cultural-scientific-heritage-means/71039?camid=4v1a