Chapter 15

Abuse of Human–Computer Interactions: A Counterpoint to Transformative and Liberatory Technologies

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ABSTRACT

In our “information age,” technology has improved the lives of many people in significant ways, while connecting the human family as never before on a global scale. Although the possibilities are only limited by our imagination, so too are the dangers for abuse of these technologies. This chapter investigates these dangers by providing a cautionary counterpoint to the transformative and liberatory possibilities technologies offer. Examples of the forms this abuse takes leads off the chapter, followed by some of the psychological and sociological theories that have been put forward to assist us in understanding and possibly addressing this abuse of human-computer interactions.

INTRODUCTION

Online Cheating and Plagiarism

She is attempting to complete her undergraduate degree at a large Midwestern university in the United States, and she needs only two additional courses before she will graduate. She accepts a great summer intern position in her chosen field, which will become permanent and full-time contingent upon completion of her degree.

He is a brilliant graduate student completing his Masters degree at her university. They negotiate a deal whereby she will enroll in two online courses to fulfill her remaining degree requirements, and he will do all the work—the assigned readings, written assignments, online discussions, communications with the course instructor—and upon receipt of two passing grades, she will pay him...
the amount of $2000 for each course, or a total
of $4000. As it turned out, not only did he pass
both classes for her, but he also scored the grade
of “A” in each. She, in turn, received a higher
cumulative grade point average and “earned” her
undergraduate degree, which allowed her to walk
to the stage to pick up her diploma at her gradu-
ation festivites to the beaming excitement of family
and friends assembled on that momentous day.
The following week, her company offered her a
full-time position with a superb benefits package.

In addition to this form of cheating, students
and others are employing communication and
information technologies to lift other people’s
ideas and work and pass it off as original to them.
An entire industry has emerged catering to their
needs in the form of Internet-based companies that
provide fully completed works, including term
papers, at a relatively low cost to students. And
the chances of being caught are generally on the
students’ side. According to Dr. Fintan Culwin,
of London South Bank University in the United
Kingdom:

Many students realise the likelihood of being
detected is low. As academic institutions are
run more like mass industries, tutors cannot be
expected to learn the details of so many students’
writing styles (quoted in Clare, 2000).

Culwin and others warn that computer-facil-
itated academic plagiarism has possibly already
decreased the inherent value of a university or
college degree.

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sibly addressing this abuse of human-computer
interactions.

ABUSE OF THE NEW
TECHNOLOGIES

Cyberbullying

Ryan Patrick Halligan was born in Poughkeepsie,
New York in 1990. His parents described him
as a shy, sensitive, and affectionate young child
with an infectious smile that early on drew people
close. Before he entered school, his parents had
concerns about his speech, language, and motor
skills development, and from pre-school through
fourth grade, they enrolled Ryan in special educa-
tion services. The family moved to Essex Junction,
Vermont, where, by the fifth grade, he encountered
face-to-face bullying on a regular basis in his
school. Rumors soon circulated throughout the
school that Ryan was gay. By middle school, his
classmates continually teased and harassed him
for having a learning disability and for allegedly
being gay. They soon extended their taunts against
Ryan into cyberspace.

On October 7, 2003, feeling that he could
no longer live with the constant and escalating
abuse, Ryan Patrick Halligan took his life. He
was 13 years old.

Reports (Spero News, 2006) indicate that
Ryan displayed many of the symptoms of youth
targeted by cyberbullying: he spent long hours on
his computer, and he was secretive regarding his
interactions on communication and information
technologies. His parents saw him manifest a
number of changes in his behavior: he increasingly
lacked interest in engaging in social activities that
included his peers, and he exhibited a pronounced