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Cyberbullying in context

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By Patrick Burton

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The violent incident at Krugersdorp High School last week has once again propelled cyberbullying into the public eye. Cases such as this tend to emphasise the extreme forms of violence and aggression perpetrated online, and the dangers that can be attached to the use of social media.

They also risk overshadowing the advantages and benefits of social media use by young people.

Our understanding and knowledge of cyberbullying, its impact and its manifestations, are still in relative infancy.

There is little research that has been undertaken on the subject in SA, and internationally it is only over the past five years that it has been more fully explored.

There is no common definition, and what is commonly termed cyberbullying may include a host of behaviours and activities ranging from harassment to threats, online solicitation and invasion of privacy.

The broad and varied interpretations and definitions undermine any comparability of the rates or extent of cyberbullying.

Further, beyond a handful of small studies, there is no national data for SA that we can use to assess any growth in these behaviours.

So what do we know? We know that there is often a blurring of boundaries between the bullied and the bullies.

As with more traditional forms of bullying, what data we have shows that a significant proportion of those who bully online have themselves been bullied.

Similarly, there is a blurring of the divide between offline and online experiences, with many of those who have experienced some form of online bullying having either previously been bullied offline or subsequently victimised offline as a result of their online experiences (as with the Krugersdorp High incident).

Youngsters who might normally engage in any form of physical or emotional bullying find it easier to do so online – one can (but often does not) remain anonymous; one is often removed from the immediate response and any signs of emotional distress of those bullied; and it is often more difficult to conceptualise the possible consequences, because they are seen as so abstract and distant.

For all these reasons, youngsters who might not otherwise ever be considered bullies, or themselves think about inflicting harm on their peers, get caught up in online bullying behaviours.

There is also emerging evidence to suggest that it is harder to determine the impact of cyberbullying on young people than more traditional forms.

Several cases of online bullying, often in the form of harassment, or "outing", have resulted in the suicide of the victim, and in most cases peers, families and those around the victim had little or no idea of the emotional and psychological trauma the youngster was experiencing.

But what evidence we do have shows that as with offline bullying, depression, irritability, a lack or inability to focus and withdrawal may result from online bullying.

Certainly most incidents of online bullying do not result in any physical violence or self-harm; many children will dismiss or contain any negative emotional or psychological impact.

But this does not mean that there should be any less importance attached to preventing the action in the first place, or offering support to those who need it.

Ultimately, we need to adopt a similar approach to dealing with violence of any kind. A better understanding of what drives the violence is needed.

What are the underlying behavioural factors and drivers that result in violence and bullying being acted out online?



Online engagement can be an important and immensely valuable space for young people to explore issues they face. We need to maximise the benefits of this space for children, while preventing the violence that undermines it, says the writer. Picture: Reuters

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How do these behaviours relate to wider social norms, attitudes and values?

What are the messages that are transmitted around such behaviour?

From a prevention perspective, one can certainly focus on controlling or managing the platforms on which this bullying occurs – and most certainly parents need to be aware of, and monitor, their children's online presence and activities.

More importantly, though, is changing the offline behaviour that determines online behaviour, increasing awareness of the potential consequences (in terms of harm, well-being and legal terms), and providing adequate support and reporting mechanisms to those who are bullied that will not result in further victimisation of other kinds (like having access to their phone or internet suspended – often an immediate and instinctual reaction of many parents).

Schools, and police, need standardised protocols on how to deal with reports and incidents, and teachers, parents and adults in general should be sensitised as to how to identify when online violence might occur.

Most important, though, is that this is all done while recognising that technology, and particularly social media, provides a valuable and – despite incidents such as those reported in the media – still predominantly positive medium for young people to share, learn and grow.

Online engagement can be an important and immensely valuable space for young people to explore issues they face on a daily basis, to learn both from educational resources and from peer-to-peer engagement on how best to deal with challenges.

We need to maximise the benefits of this space for children, while preventing the violence that undermines it.

Patrick Burton is the executive director of the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention. More information on cyberbullying can be found at www.cyberbullying.org.za/CJCP/

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