Bullying and WWW Sites: An Introduction

Jeffrey Barlow
Pacific University

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Bullying and WWW Sites: An Introduction

By Jeffrey Barlow

Bullying is very much in the news at present. A simple Google search will yield about 17,900,000 hits [1]. A search of “cyber bullying” within that data set will yield about 915,000 hits [2].

This editorial review is our start at Interface on gaining a better understanding of the issues involved not only with bullying per se, and particularly cyber bullying, but bullying as a media phenomenon.

I should probably state as a fair warning at the outset that I belong to two different groups that are concerned with this phenomenon, and also have had personal involvement with the issue, which has doubtless shaped my response to it.

One of the groups to which I belong is the listserv youth-risk-online@googlegroups.com. I was invited to this group by Nancy Willard, our most recent guest at the Berglund Center Roundtable and have found it a very useful source for understanding Internet safety focused largely— but not entirely—on children and young adults [3]. The discussion is lively and wide-ranging and the group remarkably eclectic in their approaches. A light day’s list will still see 5-6 well thought out messages into my email. In the last year of reading the list, I have seen that many members have been widely quoted in the media, interviewed on television and frequently present their research at professional conferences in related fields.

The other organization to which I belong, in the minimal sense that I have attended one of their conferences and receive their e-mails, is the Family Online Safety Institute (FOSI) [4]. FOSI, as a glance at their Board of Directors will show, is a very well connected group that now stages several annual conferences (this year’s were in Washington D.C., Bahrain, and Madrid.)

Both of these groups are wonderful resources. FOSI is a public lobby with strong industry and institutional support. Youth-risk-online is a private group of scholars and practitioners. They are devoted to understanding and creating the best possible data from which good public policy decisions can be made.

My personal experience with bullying is that in fourth grade, after three years of attending schools where my mother taught and watched after me like a mother bear at all times, I went outside her protective shield to a town-wide basketball practice to which I walked, following unfamiliar routes. I was stopped en route and harassed the first evening, and given what seemed at the time to me to be a beating. My mother’s over-reaction brought down the wrath of the entire school system on the four or five boys who were involved, and whom I did not see again until, gulp, we all entered the same high school. This began a period which lasted for another four years where I was often frightened and occasionally harassed.

After going off to college I discovered first Judo, then a series of Gongfu related arts. I subsequently studied martial
arts and coached them in the U.S., Taiwan, Vietnam, and China. I came to understand that really what I had experienced in fourth grade was somewhere between being hazed as the new kid and being roughed up.

My fear at the time and over an extended period, however, was significant. Bullying interferes with the victim’s personal development, with his or her education, and their relationships with others. I missed a lot of what a very diverse high school had to offer, including all forms of non-compulsory athletic activity, because for boys the gym is commonly the scene of bullying.

This violence between young males is probably the most common and the most easily recognized form of bullying, the sort which has given the activity its very name. But there are also equally damaging and much more subtle forms of bullying which often go unrecognized.

For example, much bullying between girls is not easily recognized as violence per se but can easily seem more like minor bickering among friends. Cyber bullying, of the sort which reportedly has driven several young people to suicide recently, is also much more complex than the more familiar violence among young males.

Bullying then, is often a complex and serious issue and should not be tolerated. But its sudden explosion in at least the American media, if not in the American school system, puzzles many. While there have been several spectacular cases in the last few months, some argue that actually there is no evidence that bullying has increased.

At one of the sites I wish to introduce here, education.com, it is argued that:

“Despite the media frenzy around events such as school shootings, suicides, and filmed beatings on YouTube, there is no definitive evidence that bullying is on the rise. More research studies that consider rates of bullying over time are needed. Why might bullying be on the rise?

* There is greater awareness of the seriousness of bullying, which could be due to higher reporting rates by students.

* The addition of cyberbullying as a new, easy, and round-the-clock place to bully.

* There are a number of early childhood risk factors that have increased that might also increase a child’s vulnerability to bully or be bullied, such as an insecure attachment to a primary care giver or lack of parental supervision.” [5]

There are also other factors which may be distorting our understanding worth mentioning. I think it probable that socio-economic differences between bullies and victims are an important factor which is often neglected and that the current suffering of many groups in America is bound to increase violence at all levels. I also feel that the increased attention paid to bullying no doubt increases the willingness of victims to come forward. The key words “bullying and harassment” now signal to educators potential bad publicity and possible legal action, ensuring an immediate hearing for every complaint, no matter how trivial.

This pressure is increased on school districts by growing federal involvement. The government is now increasingly involved in preventing bullying, eliciting perhaps many different sorts of reactions. To some this interest might appear to be more interference from what the British term the “Nanny State,” —or “Smother Mother” as the Home School Legal Defense Association [6] calls it— a government that just won’t stay out of our affairs. But regardless of its need or right to be involved, the feds nonetheless offer a wealth of resources. See the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ materials, for example [7].

The Office of Civil Rights (OCR) has recently (October 26, 2010) issued to all school districts a ten-page “Dear Colleague” letter which presents the issue not as so often been the case an issue in criminal law but one of civil
Bullying and WWW Sites: An Introduction | Interface

This letter has been well received in the listserv youth-risk-online, in part because it changes the focus from criminal to civil action, but it will take a few weeks until we have a well-considered reaction from a variety of quarters [9]. There is bound to be a negative reaction to “Dear Colleague” as well [10].

The issue of harassment or bullying of gays is highlighted in the OCR letter, and by accompanying speeches by President Obama. This presents a very difficult issue for conservative Christians, who may simultaneously feel that harassment is wrong, but so is homosexuality, and who decry what they see as the increasing aggression of gay lobbying groups [11]. Many Christian groups share an understanding of what they refer to as the “gay agenda” as just another disguised campaign for “special rights” for minority groups, which must, in their views, come at the expense of everybody else’s rights.

Bullying then, is not a simple issue and the materials we have accumulated to fully understand it are not yet that comprehensive or reliable. It is obvious that bullying is inflected by ethnic, gender, and age differences. Diverse political and social groups are going to respond very differently to attempts to define, to identify and to prevent or to punish it.

Colleagues at youth-risk-online, particularly Patricia Agatston and Cricket [12], responded to my request for useful websites by sending me these links:

www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov  
www.olweus.org  
www.teachingtolerance.org  
www.pacer.org/bullying  
www.stopbullyingnow.com

I encourage anyone interested in this issue to explore all of the sites listed here for additional materials and perspectives. We will continue to follow this issue in Interface.

Endnotes


[3] I am not sure, but believe, that this group is not open to the casual reader but that one must be invited to have access. Anyone of course, could email the above link and ask for access, though I am sure that it will take some time to reply to all such requests. If I were requesting access I would state briefly and succinctly my reasons for wishing access, and the reasons why I could contribute to the group’s discussions.


[5] For the site, the article and the references see:http://www.education.com/reference/article/bullying-on-the-rise/ This is a very useful site with a wide variety of materials covering various approaches to bullying.


[8] Download the PDF at: http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201010.html

[9] This issue is of special concern to the gay community for obvious reasons and has been well received there as well as best I can tell from a quick survey of Internet sites. See, for example, http://gay.americablog.com/2010/10/dept-of-education-and-four-us-reps-take.html


[12] Thanks colleagues!

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