

THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Can technology help it ‘get better’? Social media has worsened bullying; now could it help stop it?

Jane McKenna - Sun Nov 6 2011

We live in an age celebrated for its remarkable global connectivity — of instant contact between individuals who might literally be a world apart.

Miraculous communication, but what has happened to our community? Today’s social media may be state-of-the-art but the world it has opened up is almost prehistoric, defined by groups of hunter-gatherers and vicious, unforgiving attitudes toward anyone considered to be outside the tribe. You don’t have to look very far or very hard to come up with glaring examples of unhealthy obsession, bully-like behavior and cruelty that have been fed and furthered by tools like instant messaging, Facebook, Twitter and so on.

Far too many young people end up using high-tech tools for low ends: anonymous attacks, slanderous whisper campaigns and worse — criminal harassment, victimization, abuse, assault and murder. These are children — and teenagers, and often adults as well — who are apparently numb to conscience and immune to consequence. And we have become all too aware of the lethal effects of their poison. Hardly a week goes by without news of their victims, bright and loving young people whose lives have been lost to fatal despair and the overwhelming — if misguided — belief that it will not get better.

One study has suggested about one in 12 Canadian teenagers is bullied on a weekly basis; those odds are apparently almost identical for students in grades 4 to 7, where 1 in 13 are targeted by bullies weekly. Another study found that 41 per cent of all students in grades 4 to 7 were involved in bullying monthly, whether as bully or victim. A 2007 study suggested that Canada has the world’s ninth highest rate of bullying among 13-year-olds. Reports like these point to a growing epidemic, but offer few solutions.

If we are going to reverse this trend, we will need better strategies than pessimism and panic. We must all do our part to create a safe environment for children, particularly at school. Encouraging students to recognize and report bullying will reduce bullying and similar bad behavior in their school. Adult awareness and involvement is also critical. Adults in the student’s life (whether at home or at school) must become fully aware of the extent of the bullying/victimization problems in the school. Empathy and intervention on the part of adults, who may affect the kind of positive outcomes that children and young people — especially those suffering bullying — feel powerless to make. We should remain resolutely focused on early, long-term intervention and engage students in this approach.

We have taken the problem seriously, but maybe not seriously enough. Behaviour in Ontario schools is governed by the Safe Schools Act, passed in 2000, which standardized codes of behaviour and punishment across all Ontario school boards. Those boards have since adapted the act to existing regulations, including previous zero tolerance policies.

Shortly afterward, in 2003, a brother and sister in Burlington filed a \$550,000 suit against the Halton District School Board, several school officials and three bullies in response to years of continuous torment, which was allegedly allowed to continue despite complaints to school administrators. The case spotlighted the fact that policies that are not put into practice are, in the end, just empty intentions. To varying degrees, we can all own this tragic failure. The longer we tolerate these trends, the more it becomes society's norm. Do those characteristics embody our highest potential as human beings, or is it just the animal behaviour that outwardly anonymous people exhibit when they feel immune to reprimand or the judgment of society? Is it really an incurable epidemic, or is that just a convenient excuse used by policymakers to avoid having to address the root problems?

Are we really expected to believe that the outsize creative minds that made this technology possible are such failures when it comes to integrating it into human lives in a humane fashion? Just as the scientists who gave us the atomic bomb felt compelled to dedicate the second act of their lives to peace, the programming community that has engineered these tools should bear some measure of responsibility for the world it creates.

If new technology makes it easier to be a stalker, rapist or abusive ex-partner; if it made it possible to slander or smear the innocent; if it gave immature youths the power to issue threats, the leverage to drive children into spirals of depression that ended in institutions, hospitals or morgues, is that not something of concern, even from a bottom-line profit standpoint?

I don't know the answer to that. But I am asking technology designers to join hands with us to make a difference. Children are driven by rewards, just as adults are. How can we make a difference to stop bullying? How can we see it stopped on Facebook?

We have to start somewhere if we hope to make a difference, to make a better world both online and in real life, two worlds that grow more entangled and more complex day after day.

Jane McKenna is MPP for Burlington.