

# Cyberbullying



**Gilberto Marzano**

*Rezekne Academy of Technologies, Latvia*

## INTRODUCTION

Information and communication technology (ICT) plays a central role in contemporary society. Computers are affecting human life in a great deal in that they are essential in all life dimensions. An increasing number of things run by computers, while massive amount of multimedia materials circulate through the Internet, especially by smartphones. New technologies have thoroughly penetrated into the everyday life since not only affect science and business, but also leisure and interpersonal relationships.

The difference between contemporary and past epochs lies in that, nowadays, the reality includes both physical and virtual things as well as living and artificial agents.

One of the chief impacts of computer is on communication which has made a great leap forward thanks to the advances in networking and internet technologies. Today, one can connect with friends and family around the world as well as can deal with business anywhere and anytime.

Despite these changes, human nature remains the same and the people's evil behavior didn't change. Paradoxically, thanks to the Internet, cheaters may have at hand more ways to cheat and perpetrators dispose of new powerful means for harming and harassing their victims.

Cyberbullying is a new, alarming, and evil phenomenon closely connected with relational changes that new technologies are causing in our society.

Essentially, it consists in using the Internet to harass, threaten, and harm individuals who are the weakest and most vulnerable. Victims of cyberbullying are mightily children and adolescents. In fact, young people are immersed in new digital

technologies and use them without knowing their implications.

In the Internet world, it is meaningless to say that "children should be treated like children": information technology put absolutely on the same level adults and children. The difference between children toys that imitate adult objects, e.g. a tricycle and a bicycle or a pedal car and a motor car, doesn't work on the Web. There isn't the *Internet for children* and the *Internet for adults*. Both adults and children use the same devices, tools, and ways of communicating and interacting.

It is universally agreed that no responsible adult would give the car keys to a child or an armed gun. Even though, this is what an adult does when puts in the hands of children a smartphone with an active Internet connection without give them any advice about the cyber threats.

This chapter aims at presenting cyberbullying as a direct consequence of the social metamorphosis that, induced by the diffusion of the new technologies, endangers our security and exposes us to new actual threats. The following paragraphs illustrate the background of this evil phenomenon, then, specific aspects, such as cyberbullying diffusion, the difference between cyberbullying and traditional bullying, and the characteristic of cyberbullying, are discussed. Finally, some new emerging phenomena related to the sexual sphere, the so-called revenge pornography and the homophobic cyberbullying, are highlighted.

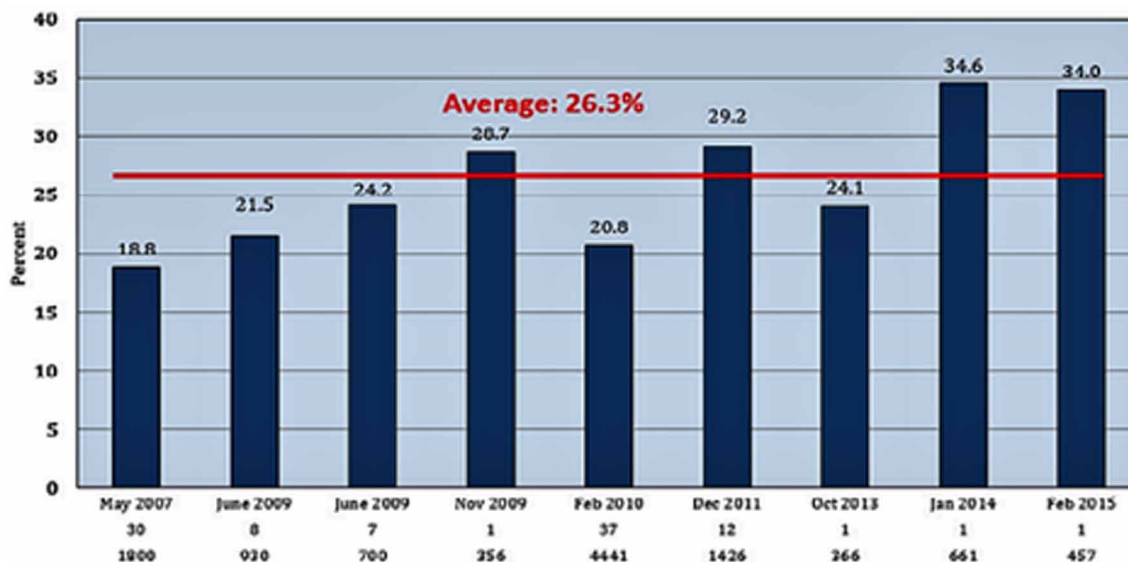
## Background: Cyberspace Threats and Cyber Violence

As the real world, cyberspace is full of real dangers and pitfalls: cyber violence can produce similar effects as the real-world violence (Finn, 2004;

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Figure 1. Lifetime Cyberbullying Victimization Rates (nine different studies 2007-2015)

Source: Cyberbullying Research Center<sup>1</sup>



Temple et al., 2016). Furthermore, what in real life is blamed, such as gambling and pornography, in cyberspace is easily affordable. Cyberspace relative anonymity gives people the opportunity of accessing places where, in real life, decency and shame usually prevent them from frequenting. Anonymity is one of the crucial aspects of cyberspace which offers opportunities and, at the same time, exposes users to risks and threats.

At the moment, cyber violence is difficult to define and, as a result, its prevalence rates are largely unknown (Peterson & Densley, 2016).

Many forms of cyber violence correspond to traditional forms of aggressive behavior. Perpetrators of cyber violence are not a uniform group, but they share the characteristic of exploiting digital media as a powerful weapon to inflict real damages to their victims. This is the case of *cyberbullying*. This term refers to bullying through new technologies, especially the Internet and smartphones.

Cyberbullying is the most controversial form of cyber violence (Corcoran, Guckin & Prentice, 2015) and there is a vast literature on this issue that addresses the phenomenon from different points of view: that of victims, perpetrators, and

bystanders, that of educational institutions, that of legal measures, that of prevention, and so on. Many sites have been created by parents of children who, after being victims of cyberbullying, committed suicide or by associations that to combat the cyber violence.

Figure 1 shows data from a survey conducted by the *Cyberbullying Research Center* directed by two influential researchers on cyberbullying, Sameer Hinduja (Florida Atlantic University) and Justin Patchin (University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire).

In 2013, the results of a three year multi-disciplinary project which involved researchers from 28 countries of the European Union have been published (Smith & Steffgen, 2013). This project traced a demarcation line from the previous research, often too oriented to psychological interpretations of cyberbullying.

Many of the first cyberbullying interpretations were based on media reports. For obvious reasons, media emphasized cyberbullying extreme cases, this is, which culminated in the suicide, or the attempted suicide, of victims. Media continue to underline the toxic and suicidal consequences of harassment resulting from new technologies. But, this is a wrong assumption. A few years ago, Marr

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