

Chapter 12

Technological Help to Prevent and Reduce Cyberbullying

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ABSTRACT

This chapter intends to present the most common technological solutions that can be implemented to prevent and reduce cyberbullying. Three main questions will be addressed: How can children stay safe online? What can the information technology (IT) industry do to combat cyberbullying? How effective is automatic cyberbullying detection? The chapter will illustrate the progress that has been made to reduce cyberbullying through technological means and discuss the notion of industry self-regulation. Indeed, the IT industry has a responsibility to respect societal obligations towards users, especially when users are children. While many companies in the industry are working responsibly on solutions for the safer use of technology, some global internet service providers are involved in the illicit use of users' personal data. As a consequence, problems of online safety cannot be solved locally, but through concerted actions undertaken at an international level.

INTRODUCTION

Home is no longer a private space. It is penetrated by social networks, rooms for online chatting, and virtual spaces for shopping, entertainment, and socialization.

Children and youngsters perceive the internet, smartphones, and related technologies as essential tools for their social life. Until a few years ago, many parents had difficulties in using the new technologies themselves, and didn't understand the risk hidden in them. In fact, plenty of parents candidly admit that it was their children who taught them how to use the internet.

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Today, the situation is completely different. Parents know how to manage digital technologies, and are able to protect their children by activating parental control tools.

In this regard, applications have been implemented to fight cyberbullying by using blocking and filtering options on a computer. Parents can prevent access to dangerous websites using commercial as well as open source and freeware programs that provide functions of parental control. Most of these functions enable parents to check the internet activities of their children, prevent their access to certain websites, and limit the time they spend online. However, whilst such preventive measures are useful, they are not infallible since parental controls can be bypassed. In the same vein, a child can use a computer or a smartphone where no filters are configured. Moreover, the proliferation of mobile technologies offers ever more new opportunities for accessing the internet.

Trying to avoid the problem of cyberbullying by preventing children from using the internet altogether is, however, not the answer. In fact, it has been observed that banning a child's access to the internet is not only impossible but can, paradoxically, actually damage their educational and social development (Coyne & Gountsidou, 2013).

Taking the drastic step of completely banning children from using the internet and smartphones, may not, in any case, solve the actual cyberbullying itself, as the following case illustrates.

To avoid acts of online bullying, the parents of a young girl, whom we will refer to as E., prevented her from surfing on the internet in their absence, and only allowed her to use an old mobile phone that was not equipped with multimedia functions and an internet connection. When E. was thirteen, however, she became a victim of cyberbullying. How could this happen? Some of her classmates showed her that there were messages on Facebook denigrating and ridiculing her. These messages were posted by other classmates who, in front of her, behaved in a kind and friendly manner. The consequence was that E. was doubly upset: she could not understand why her friends were denigrating her and, at the same time, she was unable to respond. Indeed, she could not connect to the internet herself and, consequently, was reliant on friends to see the hurtful messages concerning her. This created serious stress problems for E., and eventually her parents were forced to move her to a different school.

In this light, it is remarkable that, in 2010, a law was approved in France that banned the use of smartphones during any teaching activity (Shaban, 2018; Smith, 2018). Going further, in fact, the French parliament have recently (July 30, 2018) banned smartphones along with other kinds of internet-connected devices such as tablets from schools entirely. This prohibition has been imposed on schoolchildren between 3 and 15 years of age. French secondary schools are left to decide whether to adopt the phone ban for their students.

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