

Chapter 41

“Nothing Crueler Than High School Students”: The Cyberbully in Film and Television

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ABSTRACT

The Internet as a fearful place is a theme apparent in numerous film and television presentations whereby fears and anxieties about new technology are exploited and new ethical challenges are mounted. The idea that the Internet can make a person, particularly a young person, vulnerable has much traction on screen: in the context of bullying, narratives frequently demonstrate that while it was once restricted to the parameters of school—the school grounds and the school day—the Internet enables such behavior to happen at any time and for it to occur repeatedly with an infinite audience. Anybody with Internet access—be it via their laptop or smartphone—can be bullied; equally, anyone with access to such technology can become the bully. Revictimization is the starting point for this discussion and is a key factor in distinguishing cyberbullying from the schoolyard terror of the pre-Web era. The public nature of many online attacks means that victims experience abuse in an ongoing fashion in turn, exacerbating and prolonging the trauma. Other themes explored include the flexibility of roles: whereas in schoolyard bullying the victim is frequently the weaker kid preyed upon by someone older and stronger; online the weaker kid can effortlessly become the bully themselves in a world where physical brawn is less important than computer prowess. Age and gender are also examined, along with emerging social concerns such as slut-shaming and revenge porn. These themes are each explored to expose the ways film and television depict social concerns exacerbated by new technology.

INTRODUCTION

The Internet as a fearful place is a theme apparent in numerous film and television presentations whereby fears and anxieties about new technology are exploited and new ethical challenges are mounted. The idea that the Internet can make a person, particularly a young person, *vulnerable* has much traction on screen: in the context of bullying, narratives frequently demonstrate that while it was once restricted to

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the parameters of school—the school grounds and the school day—the Internet enables such behavior to happen at any time and for it to occur *repeatedly* with an infinite audience. An unnamed female teen makes this point in the American drama *Cyberbully* (2011) during a group therapy session for cyberbullying victims:

In elementary school it was like “hey there goes Jelly Donut,” you know, stuff like that. And it sucked, right? But at least I could go home and get some peace. Now it’s like I can’t even post pictures on my own profile ‘cos people want to be telling me how fat or disgusting I am. This stuff follows me home.

Anybody with Internet access—be it via their laptop or smartphone—can be bullied; equally, anyone with access to such technology can become the bully. Film and television regularly depict the Internet as a threat—particularly so in early examples when the technology wasn’t particularly well understood (Rosewarne, 2016a; Rosewarne, 2016b; Rosewarne, 2016c). In the vast majority of examples, the Internet is only so fearful because users exploit its unique properties such as anonymity, physical distance, and the perception that social media use is somehow compulsory for young people. In the sections that follow, these properties are examined as themes in cyberbullying narratives, notably involving young people.

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REVICITIMIZATION

While in physical bullying recurrence and repetition are key in many definitions (Garrett, 2003; Lines, 2008), in the context of cyberbullying, a single electronic attack can have recurrent and repetitious effects. This point is illustrated well in narratives where an uploaded video goes viral. In *Cyberbully*, during the height of her bullying, the teen protagonist, Taylor (Emily Osment), attempts suicide. In the aftermath, Dr. Rilke (Marcel Jeannin) counseled Taylor’s mother, Kris (Kelly Rowan), and tried to explain Taylor’s response:

Being bullied online, that can push a kid over the edge. It’s like a group assault, very traumatic. Anyone with a computer can see it, it’s always there, 24/7. Makes the victim feel even more trapped, unable to escape from it.

On screen the public nature of much cyberbullying—be it manifesting in slurs posted on social media or in a humiliating uploaded video—exacerbates an occurrence by increasing the audience, the embarrassment, and also the sense of permanence. Dr. Rilke’s mention of a *group assault* is something that makes cyberbullying a markedly different experience to a physical attack. When Taylor, for example, asks her

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