

Cyberbullying: Is Federal Criminal Legislation the Solution?

Patricia I. Coburn,* Deborah A. Connolly, and Ronald Roesch
Simon Fraser University

La cyberintimidation est fréquente et est souvent un conflit réciproque où les jeunes individus jouent tour à tour le rôle de victime et de brute. Peu importe le rôle, la participation en cyberintimidation est associée à des résultats négatifs et a récemment été liée à la mort de jeunes, dans quelques cas. Afin d'essayer d'apaiser les inquiétudes croissantes concernant la cyberintimidation, le gouvernement canadien a adopté la loi C-13 (Loi modifiant le Code criminel, la Loi sur la preuve au Canada. . .), laquelle interdit la mise en ligne d'images intimes non consensuelles. À cause des critères spécifiques de cet article de la loi, il est peu probable qu'elle protégera de nombreux jeunes de la victimisation en ligne. La loi C-13 criminalise aussi le harcèlement ou le comportement ennuyant effectué par voies électroniques. Cette loi peut aggraver les problèmes de non-divulgaration, peut créer la confusion auprès des jeunes et peut faire en sorte que trop de jeunes, et un nombre disproportionné de jeunes marginalisés, soient intégrés au système de justice pénale. D'autres approches pour gérer le conflit, notamment l'accroissement de l'utilisation de programmes fondés sur la recherche empirique qui enseignent les jeunes à résoudre les conflits interpersonnels et les encouragent à dévoiler tout incident de cyberintimidation, seraient plus efficaces qu'une loi pénale fédérale à protéger les jeunes de la victimisation en ligne.

Mots-clefs : cyberintimidation chez les jeunes, Loi C-13, victimisation en ligne, différences approches à la cyberintimidation

Cyberbullying occurs frequently and is often a reciprocal conflict, with individual youths filling the roles of both the victim and the bully in a short period of time. Regardless of the role, involvement in cyberbullying is associated with negative outcomes and has recently been linked to the death of young people in a few cases. In an attempt to alleviate growing concerns about cyberbullying, the Canadian government passed Bill C-13 (the Protecting Canadians from Online Crime Act), which includes a prohibition on the posting of non-consensual intimate images. Due to the specific criteria in this section of

* Please direct correspondence to Patricia Coburn, Department of Psychology, Simon Fraser University, 8888 University Drive, Burnaby, BC V5A 1S6; e-mail tcoburn@sfu.ca

the bill, it is unlikely that it will protect many youth from online victimization. Bill C-13 also criminalizes harassing or annoying behaviour conducted via electronic communication. This law may exacerbate the problem of non-disclosure, may be confusing to youth, and may result in too many youth and a disproportionate number of marginalized youth becoming involved in the criminal justice system. Alternative approaches to dealing with the conflict, such as increasing the use of empirically based programs that teach youth to resolve interpersonal conflict and encourage them to disclose incidents of cyberbullying, would be more effective than federal criminal legislation at protecting young people from online victimization.

Keywords: youth cyberbullying, Bill C-13, online victimization, alternative approaches to cyberbullying

The majority of Canadian youth have access to a computer, use the Internet, and own cell phones (Steeves 2014; Mishna, Khoury-Kassabri, Gadalla, and Daciuk 2012). With increased reliance on technology, young people are at increased risk of being victimized online. Cyberbullying occurs frequently and is associated with increased risk of negative outcomes. In a few cases, cyberbullying has been linked to the suicidal deaths of young people. In response to some serious incidents of cyberbullying, Justice Minister Peter McKay introduced Bill C-13 (the Protecting Canadians from Online Crime Act) to criminalize certain online behaviour. On 9 December 2014, the bill received Royal Assent and it came into force March 2015. There were several concerns with this new law, but of particular interest for the present article is that criminalizing indecent and harassing communication online, which are common adolescent behaviours, could exacerbate the problem of non-disclosure, perhaps the biggest barrier to protecting young people online.

In this article, we discuss the psychology of cyberbullying. We argue that most forms of cyberbullying are a common yet covert adolescent behaviour that can only be addressed if it is disclosed to persons with the authority and power to intervene. Criminalizing this behaviour is likely to discourage disclosure. Consequently, only the most egregious incidents are likely to be reported. Most incidents will be undetected; both the victim and perpetrator will be left to deal with the consequences unaided. We provide a discussion of alternative solutions and programs that effectively encourage youth to discuss cyberbullying and decrease incidents.

Psychology of cyberbullying

Although there are some similarities between traditional bullying and cyberbullying, the two forms of aggression have distinct features. Cyberbullying may not require the same power imbalance as traditional bullying. The anonymous nature of cyberbullying may be a source of power for the perpetrator and not knowing the identity of the cyberbully can be particularly disconcerting for the victim. Although some definitions suggest that cyberbullying is a repeated act, a single message can result in a cascade of activity that may no longer be tied to the original source (Slonje, Smith, and Frisé 2013). Cyberbullying may be less likely than traditional bullying to come to the attention of adult supervisors, as cyberbullying can be perpetrated more efficiently and discretely (Mishna et al. 2012). Even though the majority of online incidents take place off school grounds, cyberbullying can quickly lead to issues within the school (Smith, Mahdavi, Carvalho, Fisher, Russell, and Tippett 2008; Hinduja and Patchin 2007), creating a grey area for students, teachers, and administration about the rights and obligations of all the parties involved. Finally, cyberbullying sometimes involves sexual content, adding further shame to the act (Shariff 2005) and perhaps decreasing the likelihood that the victim will disclose incidents.

Youth involved in cyberbullying are likely to be involved in other types of aggression, such as relational aggression, physical altercations, and face-to-face bullying (Hemphill, Kotevski, Tollit, Smith, Herrenkohl, Toumbourou, and Catalano 2012; Jose, Kljakovic, Scheib, and Notter 2012) and are more likely than those who are not involved in cyberbullying to act aggressively toward peers (Mishna et al. 2012). Cyberbullying is an act of reciprocal conflict, where a given youth can be, within a short period of time, both the victim and the aggressor. There are several factors that put adolescents at risk of being involved in cyberbullying. Youth who more frequently perpetrate online harassment are also more likely to report interpersonal issues, increased online victimization, family conflict, and a history of physical or sexual abuse (Ybarra and Mitchell 2007). Youth who most frequently engage in this newly criminalized behaviour are among our most vulnerable adolescents.

Cyberbullying leads to many adverse consequences. Not surprisingly, victims of cyberbullying report feeling frustrated, angry (Hinduja and Patchin 2007), confused, and/or guilty (Mishna, McLuckie, and Saini 2009). Some youth who create or receive naked images report feeling embarrassed, ashamed, and upset (Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones, and

Wolak 2012). Ultimately, cyberbullying can have serious implications, being related to incidents of self-harm, suicidal ideation (Hay and Meldrum 2010), and suicide attempts, for both bullies and victims (Hinduja and Patchin 2010). Although the incidents are rare, the stories of Amanda Todd and Rehtaeh Parsons are recent examples of how cyberbullying can have tragic consequences. Both girls took their own lives after intimate photos of them were transmitted through the use of electronic communication.

Cyberbullying messages sometimes have a sexual element and those messages are occasionally distributed publicly. Of course, this does not refer to all, or even most, forms of cyberbullying. Only a small minority of youth report having naked pictures of themselves or another person stored on their cell phones – a behaviour called sexting – and even fewer report distributing images (Mitchell et al. 2012). The most common reason youth report having created intimate images is for romantic purposes. This is followed by pranking and trying to start a relationship (Mitchell et al. 2012). Although the act of sexting is of concern, many images are shared with romantic partners or with those seeking to become involved with another adolescent. Occasionally, some of the images are then used in acts of cyberbullying by youth and even by adults who gain access to images of these young people.

Cyberbullying that does not involve sharing intimate images is a common adolescent behaviour. It has been estimated that between 10 and 35% of adolescents are involved in cyberbullying, either as a victim, a bully, or both (Hemphill et al. 2012; Hinduja and Patchin 2007; Mishna et al. 2012; Ybarra and Mitchell 2007). Considering the possibility of non-disclosure, it is likely that this figure is a low estimate. With technology rapidly evolving and young people being dependent on their online relationships (Mishna et al. 2009), it is essential to seek solutions to reduce cyberbullying and to mediate its effects. Such solutions cannot ignore a critical contextual factor: youth view their online activity as essential to their social life and fear any consequence that may include losing access to their technology. Many youth are quite reluctant to disclose when they are being cyberbullied (Cassidy, Brown, and Jackson 2012), even when their safety is threatened (Mishna et al. 2009), and the possibility of criminal sanctions may only further exacerbate the reluctance to disclose. An effective solution must be considered in light of its impact on disclosure rates; if youth do not tell someone about their victimization, even the most considered solution will not be deployed.

The Protecting Canadians from Online Crime Act

Only a small portion of Bill C-13 seems to fulfil the widely publicized purpose of protecting Canadian youth from cyberbullying. Many of the criticisms of the bill have focused on potential infringements of Canadians' privacy due to the increased powers of police to investigate and enforce online crime in general. We focus only on those parts of the bill related to criminalizing cyberbullying.

There is no way of knowing if legislation prohibiting distribution of intimate images (Criminal Code, s 162.1) will deter those who engage in this behaviour. However, even if it does act as a full deterrent, it will protect very few victims. As discussed previously, only a tiny portion of cyberbullying involves non-consensual distribution of intimate images. Accordingly, in the present article, we focus on the new laws on harassing and annoying online communication.

At first glance, Bill C-13's amendment of section 372 of the Criminal Code – which prohibits false messages, indecent telephone calls, and harassing telephone calls – to clearly state that these offences can also be committed through the use of electronic communication might be expected to protect youth from cyberbullying. Section 372 (2), states that everyone who sends a message with the “intent to alarm or annoy a person” or who “makes an indecent communication” commits an offence. Section 372 (3) states that everyone who, “with the intent to harass a person, repeatedly communicates . . . with them” commits an offence. However, a closer examination reveals several serious concerns with this law.

Cyberbullying typically does not come to the attention of parents and authorities until serious psychological damage has occurred; enacting a law that criminalizes adolescent behaviour might exacerbate non-disclosure. Parents are generally not well informed about the types of social media in which their children engage; they must rely on their adolescent children to tell them that they are being cyberbullied. Youth are unlikely to disclose when they (Cassidy et al. 2012) or someone they know (Li 2006) is being targeted online. Even when young people feel threatened and at risk of serious harm, most do not disclose to their parents (Mishna et al. 2009) and most are less likely to seek help in a cyberbullying situation than in a traditional bullying situation (Dooley, Gradinger, Strohmeier, Cross, and Spiel 2010; Smith et al. 2008). Smith et al. (2008) found that only 15.5% of cyberbullied respondents had sought help from parents and only 8.5% from teachers.

Youth view their online communications as a vital part of their social life. Their online relationships are as significant as their off-line ones (Mishna et al. 2009) and disclosing cyberbullying may jeopardize their access to technology. These new laws are essentially futile for the majority of young people who are being victimized and choose to try to handle the situation on their own. This sentiment was echoed at the House of Commons Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights by Françoise Boivin (NDP Member of Parliament for Gatineau) (Boivin 2014) and Marlene Deboisbriand (Vice-President, Member Services, Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada) (Deboisbriand 2014). These witnesses suggested that, under the new law, young people will *not* be more likely to approach the police. In fact, we argue that, if disclosing could get them or their friends in legal trouble, it is possible that the change in the law will make it even less likely that they will seek help. Due to issues around disclosure, it is questionable how useful these laws are in protecting young people from cyberbullying.

We argue that the law may be applied inequitably. If cyberbullying legislation criminalizes behaviour in which a large minority of youth are engaged, it will be difficult to ensure that the laws are enforced equitably. Indeed, they may be applied so as to discriminate against some youth. To illustrate this point, in 2004 the Ontario Human Rights Commission investigated complainants that disciplinary action under the Toronto District Safe Schools Act had been applied unfairly. The commission made several recommendations to the board to implement more progressive forms of discipline and avoid discrimination. Research carried out in the province of Nova Scotia revealed that black students were being suspended at a disproportionately high rate (Black Learners Advisory Committee 1994). Overall, it can be argued that overly punitive policies, such as zero tolerance policies in schools, can result in a disproportionate number of marginalized youth being suspended or expelled from school (Ontario Human Rights Commission 2007). It is possible that a new law criminalizing common adolescent behaviour will have the same effect.

The proposed amendments, which include wording such as “harassing” and “annoying,” can be confusing to youth. In fact, many youth may not even be aware of the new law and therefore may not know that their behaviour is illegal. There is concern that youth are confused about laws in general and laws related to the Internet specifically (Deboisbriand 2014). The new section 362 will not clarify things for the victims or the aggressors, with the result that some will be unsure as to

how the law can protect them and some unsure as to how to behave under the law.

Several witnesses before the committee, such as Shareen Shariff (a Canadian researcher and expert on bullying), expressed their concerns about being overly punitive with youth. Critically, most youth who perpetrate acts of cyberbullying either have been victims or will become victims and laws that serve to punish those committing offences will also be punishing some victims of the same crime. Given the highly sexualized and exploitative culture that we live in, it is unrealistic to expect that youth will be able to clearly distinguish what they consider to be having fun or joking from what is illegal (Shariff 2014). As Shariff explained to the committee, she is “concerned about the impact of reactive legislation on children and youth who are simply testing social boundaries and that includes the perpetrators” (Shariff 2014). Shariff was also concerned that a general lack of understanding of rights could lead to teachers, parents, and law administrators being overly punitive.

In summary, Bill C-13 has two sets of amendments that focus on the issue of cyberbullying. Section 162 of the Criminal Code is so specific that it will only apply to select cases of cyberbullying. Amendments to section 372 of the Criminal Code may have some unforeseen consequences, with the biggest concern, in our view, being the potential to exacerbate the problem of non-disclosure. There are additional concerns that the law could be applied unfairly, be confusing to youth, and result in too many youth being involved in the criminal justice system. Most of the issues discussed in this section were presented to the standing committee responsible for studying this bill. It seems that the government has passed yet another bill, in spite of an abundance of evidence that it will not have the desired effect.

Recommendations

Almost one third of all youth will be directly affected by cyberbullying at some point in their lives. Therefore, it makes sense to develop and implement better conflict resolution strategies to teach youth rather than use punitive measures that may only serve to further alienate those who are likely to have a myriad of social and behavioural problems. There should be increased support for research that examines factors contributing to this type of aggression, in particular, and youth

violence, in general. In addition, services that seek to support young people with mental health issues should be increased.

A critical element of any program is educating bullying victims on the importance of confiding in a trusted adult. For instance, the use of quality circles in schools has been shown to encourage youth to share their cyberbullying experiences (Paul, Smith, and Blumberg 2012). Creating a safe environment for young people might help encourage disclosure of serious issues. In addition, this approach will help keep teachers, parents, and counsellors informed about the changing face of technology. Some approaches that are used in traditional bullying situations might also be suitable for cyberbullying. For example, it is important to help bullies develop an understanding of the consequence of their actions. This may be particularly critical in instances of cyberbullying, as fewer than half of those who commit acts of aggression online feel remorse for their actions (Slonje, Smith, and Frisé 2012). The Boys and Girls Club of Canada appealed for restorative justice efforts to help deal with cyberbullying. A major part of their program is to work with youth on an individual basis (the victim and the bully) beginning with education (Deboisbriand 2014).

Currently, much of the effort to deal with cyberbullying is done through the Royal Canadian Mounted police. For example, the Youth Resource Centre provides officers to teach young people how to recognize, prevent, and deal with cyberbullying. Walk Away, Ignore it, Talk It Out, Seek Help is an evidence-based program (e.g., Leadbeater and Hoglund 2006) to help young people deal with face-to-face bullying, which has been implemented in over 50 schools. In 2012, the government committed \$10 million for the purpose of general crime prevention. Part of this funding is allotted to supporting school programs focused on reducing issues related to bullying. The government supports other non-criminalizing efforts such as Get Cyber Safe, Cybertip.ca and Needhelpnow.ca., where children can get assistance with issues related to sharing intimate images and online exploitation. The newly launched campaign Stop Hating Online provides all Canadians with information on the impact and potential legal consequences resulting from cyberbullying and their website provides young people and their parents with information on how to prevent and deal with issues related to cyberbullying. Educating the public is a necessary step in dealing with the issue but needs to be accompanied by more intensive strategies that will not only assist the victims but will also engage perpetrators of this behaviour in other activities that help them to deal with the underlying issues contributing to their behaviour.

One program that has been found to be effective in dealing with cyberbullying specifically is the KiVa program, which uses student peer members and computer exercises to help address bullying issues. Initial evaluations show that schools where KiVa intervention was implemented demonstrated a reduction in both traditional bullying and cyberbullying compared to control schools (Salmivalli, Kärnä, and Poskiparta 2011). In turn, reduction in victimization as a result of the KiVa intervention is also associated with decreased levels of student anxiety and depression (Williford, Boulton, Noland, Little, Kärnä, and Salmivalli 2012). Another program, developed and used in England, involves trained peer mentors who can give advice and refer victims of cyberbullying to counsellors. The use of peer mentors and online mentors to deal with bullying and cyberbullying has been positively reviewed and, although in need of further empirical evaluation, appears to result in a reduction in bullying (Banerjee, Robinson, and Smalley 2010). Although only a small percentage of youth who are involved in cyberbullying will have suicidal thoughts or attempt suicide, efforts should be made to address the underlying issues that lead to suicidal behaviour when young people are involved in cyberbullying.

School personnel may be unsure about how to deal with issues related to cyberbullying that does not occur on school grounds (Shariff 2005). This could hamper administrators', teachers', and counsellors' effectiveness in helping students. Therefore, training and support for those whom youth may go to if they choose to disclose is essential. Because many of those who perpetrate acts of cyberbullying have been previously victimized online, one effective approach may be to teach youth how to resolve or disengage from the conflict without retaliating (Ybarra and Mitchell 2007). Overall, encouraging youth to disclose, supporting adults that they might disclose to, and developing non-punitive conflict resolution strategies will be more effective in preventing cyberbullying victimization than implementing federal criminal legislation.

Conclusion

Cyberbullying is a common adolescent behaviour that can have unfortunate, even devastating consequences. However, the Criminal Code amendments contained in Bill C-13 that criminalize cyberbullying are not the answer. This law might confuse youth and there is a danger that the law will be applied discriminately, further marginalizing vulnerable youth. Critically, Bill C-13 could exacerbate issues of non-

disclosure, perhaps the biggest barrier to protecting young people from being bullied. The costs of investigating, prosecuting, and sanctioning youth who engage in cyberbullying would be better placed in prevention and early intervention programs to reduce cyberbullying. Intervention programs should target youth who are at risk for this type of aggression and youth violence in general, as the two are related. In addition, mental health services for young people who might be at risk for depression, anxiety, self-harm, and suicide should be increased. A proactive prevention approach could not only be more effective in protecting young people from cyberbullying (Kraft and Wang 2009; see also, Snakenborg, Van Acker, and Gable 2011), it could also help alleviate the mental health issues associated with this and other forms of aggression.

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