

Youth and their online friends The ethical risk of social networks

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1 Introduction

Numerous crimes of nowadays can be correlated to Internet usage. Common examples of computer crimes – criminal activities involving an information technology infrastructure – are stealing information from sites, illegal access, cause of damages, misuse of devices, etc. Besides the activity of hackers, a novel “trend” of Internet crimes has been appeared. In the end of year 2006, a 13-year-old girl (Megan Meier) committed suicide after receiving cruel messages on MySpace from a “boy” – thought to be a good friend of the girl – who has never existed [1],[2],[3],[4],[5]. The originator of this foul play was the mother of her classmate and her classmate together. They created the character of a boy to get closer to Megan and find out the reason of wrong relationship between the 13-year-old classmates. The American legislative power was impotent with this crime; the case did not fit into any law at that time. Although this year (2008) a law about online molestation has been legislated [6] in USA, I still feel the ethical issue of this kind of behavior complex and important to think about and deal with it. Unfortunately, there are several cases similar to the instance of Megan Meier. Many Japan youth write diaries online and they are often encouraged to commit suicide. And they do.

2 Scenario

In these days more than one billion people use Internet all over the world. It has made possible entirely new forms of social interaction, activities and organizing, due to its basic features such as widespread usability and access. The age-group of social networking websites’ – such as Facebook’s and MySpace’s – users are mostly youth (kids and teenagers). This new form of socialization and interaction creates ability to contact others virtually. Cyberspace has washed away our boundaries of making friends. It’s possible to be available from 0 to 24 hours and starting conversation irrespectively of the countries we stay. This property of Internet is said

to be its main advantage and makes World Wide Web spreading and growing in an extremely rapid way. However, best things always have a risk to be the worst at the same time.

Social networking websites allow users to interact anonymously or even to utilize their “real names”.

Due to the non-traceability of the members of Internet community – users are linked only to IP addresses and not directly to their “real names” –, people may transgress more easily. Recently, the attention has been started to be transposed from “victimless crimes” – like the job of hackers – to cyberbullying committed by criminals or common men (such as Megan Meier’s case).

In September of 2006 abcNews [3] produced a survey about cyber-bullying done by I- Safe.Org [7]. The Data was based on answers of 1,500 students asked between grades 4-8. The results were as followed:

- 42 percent of kids have been bullied while online. One in four have had it happen more than once
- 35 percent of kids have been threatened online. Nearly one in five had had it happen more than once
- 21 percent of kids have received mean or threatening e-mails or other messages.
- 58 percent of kids admit someone has said mean or hurtful things to them online. More than four out of ten say it has happened more than once.
- 58 percent have not told their parents or an adult about something mean or hurtful that happened to them online.

By using Internet every day, youth are more probable victims of (online) molestation than ever before.

People living in “virtual space” feel freer to commit crimes or “simple” imbecilities without thinking of the consequences of their action. The effect of World Wide Web and its anonym usage have raised the ethical problem of what is possible, free, permitted and what is wicked, vicious or wrong. What are we allowed to do via Internet? What can we cause by using Web? Is it

good that children make online friends every day? What are the risks of usage of social networks?

3 Stakeholders Network

Millions of youth use Internet for building friendships and chatting with them every single day. They are the main stakeholders of cyber-bullying. Modern teenagers of present-day were born into cyberspace conversations; it's a natural medium for them. They create friendships online and they are the most endangered participants of cyber-crimes because of their extreme sensibility. At that age, relationships, friends and loves mean the life for boys and girls. Youth are defenseless, naive and pliable.

Application service providers are responsible for creation of anonym chat sites or online social networks; however, the content and purpose of conversations certainly cannot be restricted by ASPs.

The case of Megan Meier revealed the responsibility of the Court of Judicature. Novel, efficient laws have to be legislated in order to emphasize the importance of cyber-crimes and the increasing danger of youth's Internet usage. We have to learn how to handle these situations and people have to be aware of exist of these novel computer crimes. Rules may also be a punitive tool to control online bullying.

Parents (and education) also should pay attention to their children in order to avoid tragedies. Last but not least, Internet users should be aware of their full responsibility for the others.

4 Ethical Issues

What are the ethical issues of social network usage in cyberspace? What kind of behavior can be produced as a consequence of the free chat- and blog-sites? Is there any problem about creating online friendships? How can we trust in virtual friends and how can parents handle the pliable behavior of their endangered children?

Creation of personal pages of non-existing persons is achievable effortlessly online. Anonymity makes youth more open to strangers and long conversations can be made without the limit of differing space and time. These "meetings" are uncontrolled by parents (or anyone).

Anonymity makes people braver and may feel less responsible for the others. Without seeing the face of chat-partners or without knowing his/her name, people can easily become a victim or maybe the criminal of cyber-crimes. People's reactions and thoughts cannot be seen from the screen. Online sites give us the freedom of time

and space, but create also a restricted way of communication. If someone would like to sign out and switch off a conversation, it could be done without thinking of its consequences. You don't have to say anything. Thus, situations can be misunderstood.

Anonym partners could be thought to be more honest because they are hidden behind a user account.

Thus, youth can overestimate the importance of an online friend easily. Personal contact helps to find out more about a stranger, but hided people with a simple login name cannot be well-known. It's dangerous because virtual space changes most people's behavior. You can be anyone you would like to be. Thus, non-realistic relationships evolve. The responsibility of a non-existing character is felt to be less; that's why it's hard to make a distinction between what is good or bad in that different world. Our ethical and moral ends widen online. Hided, unknown, secret actions are not felt real, it's not our responsibility. Thus, unfortunately an innocent "game" can become easily a real crime. Getting to know a sensitive teenager in cyber-space and not being aware of his/her weakness can lead into a tragedy.

How can we handle a virtual character of a crime? Is "producing" a suicide passively through an online interface a real crime or not? We heard about real cases when making someone suicide was a criminal suit and that behavior was indictable. But in those cases suicide was not an accident, it was voluntary. In the case of Megan's death, is the mother of her classmate a murderer or a malicious person? How could happen an incidence like that?

The girl's mother, Tina Meier, said she doesn't think anyone involved intended for her daughter to kill herself. "But when adults are involved and continue to screw with a 13- year-old, with or without mental problems, it is absolutely vile," she told the Suburban Journals of Greater St. Louis [1]. Megan suffered from depression and attention deficit disorder [1]. Of course, we can raise the question if the personal contact between this vulnerable - and maybe ill - girl and a "real" boy would have caused the same tragedy in case of their conflict or not, but the responsibility of an adult playing this foul game cannot be denied. This mother would have never molested that 13 years old girl in life. She had the possibility of creating a virtual, "anonym" account that she could hide her face behind. She could play that strange game without feeling any responsibility for the girl.

How can we prevent tragedies? Where is the border between privacy and the misuse of anonymity? Growing Internet raises the problem and the increased possibility of involuntary computer crimes. What should we do? What are the alternative scenarios of this situation?

5 Alternative Scenarios

Anonymity is thought to be the problem. We should not use Internet without being responsive for our actions. Why do we need anonymity? Is it necessary or just an option that people prefer to choose? I think we cannot abolish the anonymity of Internet users. Privacy laws and human rights do not let application service providers to register ID numbers in case of usage of social networks. Our technical opportunities do not fit with this idea either. Uncontrolled use of social network sites may be the main problem. This idea suggests the question: who is the owner of Internet? Who is responsible for its usage?

Many services demand users to accept the term of use of their web pages. Some guidelines should be provided in order to attract attention to cyber-crimes and our responsibility. The question is: how can it be defined? Could it be efficient or not? License agreements contain several things that people never read, thus they are not aware of them. Another level of policy is law. Official punitive “rules” may be hard enough to decrease the number of social network crimes. The problem with this solution is again the definition of crimes and also the nontraceability of criminals. USA is exemplary in this issue; the law about online molestation has already been legislated. This way of control is penalty, but not preventive.

How can we prevent crimes? Avoid tragedies? Censorship can help us even at the level of country or at the level of private home. There are several problems with censorship. As I’ve already mentioned, ASPs cannot filter conversations, it’s physically impossible. Censorship is also easily permeable, especially in cases like this.

The problem of social networks is global, thus general local solutions cannot be effective. I think the most important prevention is educational and the attention of parents. Nowadays adults don’t really pay attention to their children. This bad side-effect of present-day society can cause real tragedies.

However, no one can control Internet usage and private conversations of a teenager who was born into Internet society and lives his/her life mainly in front of a computer browsing in a cyber-space all day long.

6 Conclusion

Donn Parker’s quote is still true for our behavior: “It seemed that when people entered the computer center they left their ethics at the door”. Our novel society built in cyber-space is carrying several risks for our children. With the increase of Internet and online social

networks, a new kind of behavior has been appeared. Internet crimes raised novel ethical, moral and legal problems of online society that’s effect cannot be predicted yet. Although, we have to start thinking about it.

7 References

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