

# Youth at risk by the use of Internet

LUGANI Carlos Fabián <sup>1</sup> RIZZO Ana Cecilia <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Applied Information Lab, Universidad Nacional de Río Negro

<sup>2</sup> Academic Administration Study Group, Universidad Nacional de Río Negro – Sede Atlántica

{clugani, arizzo}@unrn.edu.ar

**Summary.** Everyday we are surprised by new stories of kids and teenagers who have been harassed on the Internet. The wide scope of Internet with its social network and new technologies and applications, allows spreading anonymous information like photos, videos or comments almost instantly. The results could vary from bullying to cheating or discrimination of any kind. The use of technology is in our daily life and even kids at an early age have access to it. The tools available to fight this problem are not enough. The government, families and school teachers are not prepared to deal with this kind of risks. Considering this reality, the possible solutions will be analyzed in order to educate kids and teenagers to be aware of the risks so they could learn the tools to deal with undesired situations.

**Key words:** boys, girls, teenagers, harassment, risks, Internet.

## 1 Introduction

Nowadays, both kids and adults could enter a new globalized world where the different cultures with its rules, information and education are mixed up and nobody knows for certain the real identity of the people behind the screen.

The main problem would be the different aspects that need to be analyzed regarding this issue. The first aspect will consider boys, girls and teenagers who are exposed to the risks related to the Internet.

Not only there are different types of victims but also of stalkers. This last group may include kids or teenagers sharing the same activity (at school, practicing a sport) and also an online stranger. Victims may be targeted by four different stalker profiles: friends, anonymous kids or teenagers, close adults and online strangers.

This paper shows the cases involved in cyberbullying or cyberstalking that boys, girls and teenagers (youth) are victims of and presents a proposal to deal with this

problem. This proposal is intended to face the nowadays situation, showing the advantages of the use of technologies but also the risks involved in it and the awareness process as the only way possible to face this problem, as children and teenagers are not prepared for dealing with these circumstances.

## **2 The characters and factors involved**

### **2.1 The age of children and teenagers**

An awareness model is important at any age. It is necessary to focus this model on a youth specific age target, for dealing with this problem and the solutions as well, and also identifying all other people that will take advantage with these actions.

In order to determine the youth specific age target it is necessary to take into account some aspects of the personality of children and teenagers. According to Livegoed [1] a kid of ten years old presents these characteristics: unpredictability, tantrums, contradictory reactions, sudden changes from feeling pleasure to anger, the need to oppose to the external world and eagerness to live new experiences. The range between 12 and 14 is called preadolescence. The characteristics of this stage are: the beginning of a break up between its own personality and the external world, aggressiveness, the need to be part of a gang or a fellowship in order to be part of a society.

Girls show some differences because they form part of a fellowship but the feelings of conquer and aggressiveness are not exteriorized, on the contrary, these inner feelings leads to a hostile isolation from the external world, with a tendency to exclusiveness.

At this age it also starts developing a physical maturity and the sexual aspect, but the focus of this study will not include this aspect, although it is one of the topics the preadolescence leads with at this stage of life.

The focus of study is delimited to a specific age period of five years, from 10 to 14 years old. Taking into account the present period, these preadolescents are considered “digital natives”, and their use on the Internet differs from the one family, teachers and society in general give to it. [2].

## **2.2 The teenagers and their social world, victims and stalkers**

Nowadays, the teenager's social life does not take place at a club, park or fast food restaurant. Instead the present social life involves being part of online sites like MySpace, Fotolog or Facebook. The group of friends becomes wider by the use of cell phones or computers, and by the use of technologies, teenagers meet in real life as a result of their virtual life [3]. This is an important aspect that needs to be highlighted because teenagers eventually will take their "real world" into their "virtual world" and meet the people of this "virtual world" in the real life.

This is the first classification of the victim and stalker concept (among teenagers). The typical victims tend to be more insecure, anxious, responsible, sensitive and shy. According to Olweus, they have a low self-esteem, and a negative vision of themselves. In the case of boys, they will be probably physically weaker than the other boys. Bullying appears more frequently among boys than girls and the number of victims among boys is bigger than girls. However, on one hand, stalking is more common among girls as it is a more subtle and indirect way of harassment. On the other hand, bullying appears more frequently from boys to girls and from older students to the younger ones [4].

The typical bully is a person whose behavior combines aggressiveness and physical strength. Bullying is considered to be an antisocial behavior pattern in conflict with the rules of society (conduct disorder) [4].

The victim could be any boy, girl or teenager since the people online may be anonymous. If the victims are bullied by schoolmates, certain behavior patterns could be identified at an early stage.

A passive victim will be the person who reacts passively when being attacked, while the normal reaction is to cry or run away. We are talking about lonely kids with not a friend in class. However, they have a negative attitude towards violence and in the case of boys; they are physically weaker than the rest of the class. The bully takes advantage of this reaction since he considers it a sign of weakness [5].

The examples explained above are not applied to adults considering that among them there are different kinds of stalkers and implies a study as a pathological conduct.

## **2.3 The Internet**

Previous to the Internet era, bullying or stalking could only take place by the presence of the people involved in any kind of conflict. But nowadays, children and teenagers are connected to the Internet and social network all the time and the real conflict takes place online.

These are the characteristics that make cyberbullying or cyberstalking a serious problem:

- Immediate availability of the information and messages: the online information is widely open to the public in general and in case of sending and receiving any message it only takes a few seconds.
- Scope: a message can be sent to a great number of people with minimal efforts.
- Data clearing: is too hard to clear personal data on the Internet even in the case of law violation and personal offences.
- Data distribution: the possibility of forwarding messages is unlimited.

Taking into account the Internet population that has access to the net; the following information must be considered: In 2013, the total amount of people with access to the Internet in Latin America was 160 millions of users. The average of hours that a user is connected to the Internet is 24 hours per month. In Argentina, 30% of users are between 15 and 24 years old (age range major percentage), and most of the time they are connected to social networks (9 hours per month), being Google and Facebook the main visited websites, and Facebook is leading over other social networks with a 94% of users, and 15 millions of users have access to YouTube with an average of 86 played videos per month [6].

#### **2.4 Devices connected to the Internet**

Nowadays, devices with connection to the Internet are increasing constantly (Personal and desktop computers, smartphones, TV and tablets). In the future all electronic devices will have Internet connection as this feature will be included by default to any kind of household appliances. Also, Internet connection is widely spread so that you could have access not only at home but also at school, shopping centers, restaurants, gas stations, and others. Additionally, Wi-Fi networks let users to connect to the Internet in every place.

According to the UNICEF 2013 Survey [7], the most common places where young people browse the Internet are: home (95%), Smartphone (73%), friend's house (51%), parent's house (49%), school (35%), telephone/internet booths (23%) and others (17%). In relation to the type of devices used for browsing the Internet the survey results were the following: desktop computer (83%), Smartphone (76%), laptops (73%), tablets (18%), videogame consoles (11%) and others (7%).

Related to the devices that had effective access to the Internet the following information was obtained: PC (92,1%), Smartphone (5,8%), tablets (2%) and others (0,1%) [6].

## **2.5 Internet services**

The most common Internet use is for browsing websites including text, videos, photos and music.

Most sophisticated Internet services are available for letting users to establish instant messaging and voice/video communications among two or more people. Also software applications let users know their geographical location. Social networks offer online services to be in touch with known people and with other unknown fellows.

According to a 2012 survey about Internet use in primary schools, social networks are in the first place like Facebook (73%), YouTube videos playing (59%), online gaming (39%), and a 6% of users for accessing digital newspapers [8]. Despite not being mentioned in any survey, Internet can be used to obtain medicine and drugs [9].

At last, several commercial software applications are available on the Internet (legally registered) known as Web 2.0: Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsUp, Line. All these applications are used according to marketing trends or consumer behavior. In some cases the use of Internet software applications could be oriented to private profit intentions.

## **3 Cyberbullying: a term well-known by the society**

The origin of the term “Bully” refers to two individuals involved: a bully and a victim. The bully, who feels powerful and superior, abuses the victim based on verbal or physical harassment. These actions can be direct (chats and one-to-one messages) or indirect (through other individuals or uploading data, messages, photos, etc, at specific websites that can be accessed without restriction) [10].

The main characteristic of cyberbullying is that the bully can obfuscate its identity. This anonymity let the perpetrators to send unlimited messages or attacks. The level of damage and adverse effects over the victim cannot be measured. Cyberbullying behavior models can be: offensive comments published on a website, information about the victim’s private life whether being true or false, or direct and indirect threats.

According to a USA 2010 survey, over 2.212 male teenagers and 2.162 female teenagers surveyed, girls are more exposed to suffer an abuse. The most significant cases identified at the survey were the following: become a victim of cyberbullying (16,6% for boys and 25,1% for girls), admitting being victim of cyberbullying (17,5% for boys and 21,3% for girls), and having received an aggressive message on a website (10,5% for boys and 18,2% for girls). The survey also showed that girls felt more emotionally affected than boys [11].

Although there is no specific statistic showing the relationship between cyberbullying and the suicide of the people affected by this, it should be taking into account the different situations involved for a better understanding of the processes and the consequences of each case.

#### **4 Awareness: the answer to the present risks**

Information and awareness will be the main way to counteract the risks previously identified. This is not an easy task because it is necessary to establish a good communication with children and teenagers so as the adults can help them to deal with a difficult situation. Also, adults must take care of the privacy and the independence of young people taking into account their rights and local regulations.

Fluent communication between adults and young people must be effective in order to deal with the risks when using technologies and software applications. After these initial conversations, adults should talk about stories and cases of the real life of young people like them.

In order to achieve a high level of awareness not only is it necessary to provide a brochure, workbook or a seminar but also another related actions must take place along time. Planned efforts are requested by the young people in order to define new concepts and make self assessment through multiple ways of communications. The contact between young people and adults should be permanent ending up in a long term relationship of trust and confidence. Also, government regulations and education policies are requested in order to cover all the young people community.

In order to achieve an acceptable level of awareness the following actions should be applied:

##### **4.1 Effective and open communication**

According to a survey about being bullied on the Internet, 67% answer not being bullied but 33% of the sample answer affirmatively. More than half of the survey sample did not know the bully, and about the question if they ask an adult for advice, 60% answered "No"[8]. However, it is a major challenge that young people turn into action and report the incident, and become a referent for other teenagers, in case of being through a similar situation.

Despite of the level of information that young people have, working in groups will always be more effective. The fact of implement an awareness model in groups let young people evaluate real situations and share with their teachers alternative solutions for mitigating any risk that they can be exposed to.

All the mentioned actions are intended to procure prevention. The efforts should be focus on acting before incidents occur. Late reactions end up in the difficulty to deal with these incidents, due to several factors as: identifying the cyberbullying at an early stage, the damage rollback once the cyberbullying have occurred, the psychological consequences that must be faced, the lack of confidence, self-esteem and negative aspects as the result of that incident. Therefore, major efforts should be focus on information and awareness activities.

#### **4.2 Adults and protective guide roles**

Parents, relatives and closer friends are part of the front line of this fight in the protection of children and teenagers in society. The second line is formed by school teachers, the different organizations where young people share cultural and religious activities, sport clubs, and the whole community.

It is important to teach the risks of the Internet use at an early age and it should be a permanent practice along the time, in order to become a common habit as it is closing the front door of your house every time you go out.

It should be taking into account that not all young people have parent's guidance. Some children and teenagers are living in community child care centers, foster care or host families. Although the total amount of boys, girls and teenagers who live in this situation represent a small number, they are exposed to a high level of vulnerability (according to a survey in Argentina in 2010, there were 14.417 boys, girls and teenagers without parental guidance) [12].

Finally, it is intended to comply with UNESCO Declaration of the Rights of the Child, taking into account the following items: a) protection from abuse and violence originated by the use of Internet, b) boys and girls have the right to use Internet to be protected from this kind of abuse, c) the right to not provide any personal data on the Internet, d) the right to preserve their identity and reputation from illicit activities, e) parents will have the right and responsibility of giving orientation, education and must agree with them for a responsible use of the Internet (limit Internet time connection, website that must not be visited, not providing any personal information in order to protect them from dangerous situations, etc). Also, parents must be educated in the use of the Internet and its content [13].

## **5 Conclusion**

It is impossible to control every person (children, teenagers or adults) who connect to the Internet and every website or blog published on the net. It is impossible to design and implement controls in the Internet as uploaded information and people

interaction are increasing at an exponential way. Also we must consider confidentiality and privacy of the messages (similar to physical letter privacy), conversations and personal private data [14][15]. Nowadays, there is a complete legislation for individual rights, especially for children. However, complex situations must be taking into account due to the different country's legislation. International agreements must be considered, especially the United Nations normative, as in Latin America we observe an unequal advance related to regulations on cyberbullying [16].

Some tools for mitigating the risks mentioned in this paper and for improving controls over the Internet are: Internet use training, acceptable use of social networks and the use of other technologies not only for establishing online connections with other young people, but also with adults as well.

Finally, although it seems that the Internet infrastructure was build for the insecurity of our boys, girls and teenagers, we only have the following tools to face the situation like providing accurate information, observing young people's behavior and listening to their concerns, as they are underage to deal with this complex reality.

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