MAKING SOCIAL MEDIA MORE SOCIAL: DEVELOPING INNOVATIVE INTERVENTIONS TO ADDRESS CYBERBULLYING

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ABSTRACT

Cyberbullying is a form of bullying or harassment that occurs on electronic platforms, through electronic means. It includes harmful behavior such as posting rumors, threats, sexual remarks, personal and intimate information, hate speech, online trolling and cyberstalking, which can lead to increased levels of depression, anxiety, lower levels of self-esteem and increased suicidal tendencies among victims. This paper covers the various forms in which cyberbullying manifests itself in India, surveys the current policies and legislations about online harassment, provides ethnographic information about cyberbullying, and suggests areas of improvement in addressing the issue in India.

Keywords: social media, cyberbullying, electronic platforms, online harassment, online trolling, cyberstalking

INTRODUCTION

Cyberbullying is a form of bullying or harassment that occurs on electronic platforms, through electronic means. With a dramatic increase in the usage of internet amongst teenagers, cyberbullying has become a very common phenomenon amongst the youth. Harmful behaviour includes posting rumors, threats, sexual remarks, personal and intimate information, hate speech, online trolling and cyberstalking. A common link between all forms of cyberbullying is the intent of the perpetrator to cause harm to the victim. Cyberbullying has lead to increased levels of depression, anxiety, lower levels of self esteem and increased suicidal tendencies among victims. Cyberbullying traces its origin to conventional types of bullying with some differences in the offense and impact. Unlike "offline bullying", the victim in cyberbullying might not know the identity of the perpetrator or the reason why he/she is being targeted. The social and psychological impact is also much worse as the content used to harass the victim can be spread and shared easily among many people and often remains accessible long after the initial incident. Cyberbullying occurs most frequently, though not exclusively, on social media. It has spread to

literally all sections of the so called regulated internet. Over one million children are harassed or bullied on Facebook itself in one year (McAfee). Cyberbullying can also take place through the use of websites belonging to certain groups such as climate scientists or LGBTQ groups to effectively request the targeting of another individual or group. It is extremely prevalent in the online gaming industry as well. In this male-dominated industry there are examples of rampant sexual abuse and misogyny online. Swatting (harassment tactic in which emergency services' such as a police response team are sent to another person's address due to false reports), as a result of gaming rivalries online is rampant, and has also led to deaths, and example of which is the killing of Andrew Finch, in Kansas, USA by SWAT units. Even the most technical and inhuman aspects of the internet, like the search engines have not been spared. Bullies use Google Bombs to increase the prominence of favoured posts sorted by the most popular searches, done by linking those posts to as many other web pages as possible. This manipulation of search is usually done to target the most marginalised sections of any society. The Ryan Halligan Case of Vermont, USA (2003) was the first case that dealt with the issue of cyberbullying. Interestingly, the defendant was not convicted due to the lack of an applicable criminal law. Developed nations have formulated mechanisms to efficiently prevent and persecute cyber-bullying but countries like India are still lagging behind.

Manifestation of cyberbullying in India

Over the past few years, there have been several surveys tracking the occurrence and frequency of cyberbullying due to its severe impact. In a survey of 25 countries in 2012 to understand the global pervasiveness of online bullying (Microsoft Corporation), children in India reported the third highest online bullying rate, only after China and Singapore. This study was done on 7600 children from the age groups of 8-17 years. The study concluded that 50% of the children using internet in India faced some sort of cyberbullying or online harassment. Coincidentally, India also forms the third largest market share for Facebook. A study by McAfee also reported very similar findings in 2014. This has had extremely harmful impacts on the mental health of children. Dr Sameer Malhotra, Head of Department of Mental Health at Max Healthcare, said that many students whom he counselled at schools underwent cyber bullying through social networking websites. Currently treating two or three cases related to emotional stress caused by the use of social media, Dr Malhotra concluded that cyberbullying has a 'tremendous' negative impact on the self esteem and mindset of children. Moreover, this problem is cyclic. Victims tend to use social media more, ranging from 6-7 hours of usage daily, which further impacts their condition.

Gender is also a major determining factor of the level of abuse a person faces. Women face sexual harassment on almost all forums. Cyberstalking (the repeated use of electronic communications to harass or frighten someone, for example by sending threatening emails) is

considered even more dangerous because it generally involves a credible threat to the victim's safety. Stalkers may send repeated messages intended to threaten or harass a particular person. They may encourage others to do the same, either explicitly or by impersonating their victim and asking others to contact them. This further leads to sexual assault and cases of rape. In a nation like India where the access to internet has increased exponentially in the recent past, these crimes have become more and more rampant. The perpetual pressure that the patriarchal society places on women makes things worse. In 2011, an MBA student of the reputed Indian Institute of Management (IIM), Bangalore committed suicide after her boyfriend dumped her on Facebook. Since then, such cases have risen progressively, especially amongst students. Even if the harassment or abuse originates offline, it most likely gets worse over the internet. Moreover, the most marginalised sections of society such as transgenders and homosexuals have to censor themselves over social media to avoid harassment stemming from homophobia and transphobia in the society. This is directly antithetical to the basic idea of social media and the freedom of expression that it is supposed to promote.

The degree of harassment that an individual faces online is not just related to the age or gender of the victims. Though they are major determinants, minorities across the board face abuse online, be it religious or ethnic minorities in the age of populism or be it free speech activists under communist and authoritarian regimes. There are several cases in India where people have been abused online just for their opinion, which tends to be in opposition with that of the populist cause of the present government. Surprisingly enough, this also includes the Minister of External Affairs herself, who was harassed online by Right Wing groups for issuing passports to an interfaith couple. The same Right Wing outlets bully people for criticizing the moves of their government. This clearly indicates the severity of the problem.

Current Policies and their Outreach

Security and privacy awareness in India is very poor and inadequate. The exponential increase in the number of users of social media has not seen an equal rise in terms of awareness and protection by the state machinery. It would be very useful if both, the government and civil society were more aggressive in raising awareness and triggering change in behaviour. The same Microsoft Research that was stated in the earlier section goes on to show that 70% of the victims in India know that they are being bullied online. However, user knowledge, when it comes to dealing with such activity, is shallow, especially in circles with lower levels of literacy. The most convenient way of dealing with bullies is to report the content or the person itself to the website. For example, reporting a post which is infringing on the personal information of an individual. However, these posts are only removed when a significant number of people viewing that post report it. This remains problematic on three levels. Firstly, viewers might be ignorant to the

problem that the victim is facing and might not report it. Secondly, if the victim asks people to report it, it may cause backlash and more social alienation. Cases where private conversations and photos have been posted online often lead to cases of self-harm and even suicide in largely conservative societies. And thirdly, the very fact that the removal of a post is contingent on how many people report it and not the content itself gives more leeway to attack minorities. An easy and common way of getting rid of 'creeps' is blocking them online. But a victim still cannot control the data and information that the perpetrator posts publicly. In such a space, a new and effective method that people have adopted is to publicly name and shame people accused to harassment. However, this remains a means that only people in the most educated, aware and elite circles can use because of the difference in sociological mindsets in the less privileged sections and lack of access to resources and education.

An essential drawback that almost all social media enterprises go through is that they don't take the responsibility of educating users about the methods through which they can remain safe. Whenever a website like Quora or Facebook change their privacy policy, an automatically generated email contains the details, which most users don't bother going through. Privacy policies are lengthy and full of legal terms with which the common user is not well versed. Sadly enough, one of the reasons for cyber bullying being this big a problem is lack of user knowledge when it comes to reporting it and getting adequate redressal.

In India, there is no specific legislation which deals with cyber bullying. However there are certain provisions in the Information Technology Act, 2000 that deal with certain acts that do come under the ambit of cyberbullying. Section 66A in the amended IT Act (2008) deals with these crimes. Sending any message (through a computer or a communication device) that is grossly offensive or has menacing character; any communication which he/she knows to be false, but for the purpose of causing insult, annoyance and criminal intimidation comes under this section. This crime, under the current IT/Cyber/Criminal laws in India is punishable up to three years of imprisonment with a fine. This was initially developed for the growth of e-commerce in India, but since then has been used to persecute online harassment as well. However, there are no specific provisions in this act to protect children, an issue important enough to warrant closer attention.

Areas of Improvement

Despite the presence of laws that can potentially persecute perpetrators, they are rarely used. Except in cases of suicide, abetment of suicide, creation and circulation of pornographic content the legal course isn't followed. Schools deal with other cases with punishments ranging to suspension. The reluctance of people when it comes to reporting cases to authorities helps the state machinery to escape responsibility and turn a blind eye to the systemic nature of this

problem. The onus of reporting these crimes must not be only on the victim, given that they are usually minors. Schools and other institutions must take up the responsibility of providing justice to the victims under law.

Policymakers must also show more empathy to children. This can firstly be done by introducing new provisions pertaining to this matter under the current IT Act or introducing new legislation altogether. Detailed explanation about the impact, not just on the victim, but on the society as a whole must be given to all stakeholders. These sensitisation programmes must be introduced not just by the government agencies, but also by private bodies such as schools, companies and so on. To give more particular attention to this matter, the counsellor in schools and HR department in corporate bodies must be very well versed in the legality and application of the laws that deal with online harassment. The government has introduced Cyber Cells under the Police forces to deal with online abuse. However they are extremely sparsely located.

Legal experts argue that the IT Act 2000 should to be re-amended to specific provisions pertaining to cyber bullying. Further, cyber bullying needs to be made a serious offence with minimum five years imprisonment and a fine of Rs. 10 lakh. Unless you have deterrence in law, it will continue to be a prevalent offence.

Interview with a Social Media Influencer

The author interviewed social media influencer and fashion blogger, Muskan Chanana, whose Instagram page has more than 80,000 followers. The author asked multiple questions surrounding cyberbullying and ways to address the current state of online harassment, to which Ms. Chanana replied with facts and information, both of which were quite illuminating. The following is a transcript of the interview:

1. *What, in your opinion, is cyberbullying?*

I would say cyberbullying is a form of bullying that occurs on social media, which may occur in the form of trolling, shaming, hacking, leaking personal information, cyberstalking, harassment, and exclusion. I think the effects of cyberbullying are different from physical bullying. With the latter, there may be a less sense of agency, depending on the situation. But often the people involved is limited. With cyberbullying, however, the number of people in front of whom harassment occurs can be very, very large, which can have a very alienating effect on the victim.

2. *How is it different from physical bullying?*

It differs from physical bullying or "offline bullying" in that you may not know the people who bully you, and the way they bully you can be very different too. For example, cyberbullies can publicly shame by commenting on posts, trolling, and sometimes even hacking into your account

to retrieve and leak very sensitive information. Perpetrators of physical bullying often tend to know the victim in person, and it often happens in shared environments. With cyberbullying, on the other hand, the shared environment is the entire platform, and it depends on the kind of privacy setting users have.

3. *Could you provide some real-life examples of it? Maybe something you've experienced, or a friend has, or a story you may have heard?*

Well, last week, a batchmate from school unwittingly passed an insensitive comment on a video portraying a person with Tourette Syndrome. A lot of people jumped in to correct and critique her, and after realising her mistake, she apologised, explaining that she didn't know the person in the video suffered from Tourette's. But the commenters did not stop; they used it as an excuse to pass derogatory and misogynistic slurs on her. Some even said things like "you don't deserve to live". Despite repeated apologies and requests to stop the harassment, people continued, and she got over 200 comments from people she didn't even know. This left her very anxious and scared. She deactivated her account immediately, and fears returning to school.

4. *Do you think people should be educated in how to deal with cyberbullying?*

Definitely. While I do agree that all the policies to address cyberbullying are present on the terms and conditions of the site's usage, they are often tucked away in some corner of the site, and their language is inaccessible. I myself tried covering all the security and cyberbullying policies Facebook has, and found it a very difficult endeavour. Given that social media platforms are experts on, well, social media, I think they can do a lot more to spread awareness about cyberbullying through more interactive and accessible forms such as videos, games, things of that nature. They can easily use the means at their disposal to run anti-bullying awareness campaigns. I am sure some of these platforms may have done so in the past, but it's still a very pertinent topic, and very few people know how to deal with it. So continued, accessible initiatives from the side of the platforms is what I think should be done to educate people about cyberbullying.

5. *What do you think are the most appropriate actions to take when dealing with a cyberbully?*

I honestly believe that not engaging with a cyberbully is the best plan- it is simply not worth it. It is easy to let the words of others get to you, and I personally feel that by targeting responses back at a cyberbully, you are not achieving anything and are just encouraging further conversation. Additionally, I feel that when you are a public figure, or semi-public figure, it is important to use my platform as a space to general conversation and not only address *one* cyberbully, but rather the issue at large.

6. What would not be the correct way of dealing with a cyberbully?

As I mentioned above, I would say that "stooping down" to their level by name calling or throwing insults their way, regardless of how much they may or may not deserve it, is definitely not the right way to handle the situation.

7. Do you think social media is the main form of cyberbullying? Are there any other platforms that people can cyberbully on?

I think that just given the sheer number of people on social media, cyberbullying is most prevalent on such platforms. Within social media, I would say that the most about of such activity definitely happens on Instagram- especially amongst people our age. I think on a platform like twitter, which is dominated by words, you see a lot of political cyberbullying, amongst celebrities etc... . Facebook is something that most people our age don't actively use. Snapchat is definitely something we use and is a place where cyberbullying is seen, but the majority of people I know tend to keep their Snapchat private and use it as a mode of communication. Instagram however is inundated with visual items, specifically photos, and therefore is much 'easier' target for cyberbullying to happen- people are quick to judge and make comments, without thinking twice about their actions.

8. Name some ways that people can reduce the risk of cyberbullying

Acknowledging that they are being cyberbullied is probably the first step. People tend to be embarrassed and don't want to accept what is happening and try to brush things under the rug and ignore what is happening. Similarly, people who see cyberbullying on social media platforms more often than not, don't react. By that I mean that while someone may notice unpleasant activity on your profile, they don't actively do anything about it. Additionally, I think it is crucial for there to be more awareness around how to deal with such issues- we should know about who to call, when to reach out, how to reach out, etc… I think there are such spaces, but they aren't as publicised as they should- maybe even using Instagram advertising would be useful!

9. Have you ever cyberbullied someone?

I would like to think I haven't. There are definitely degrees of cyberbullying, and I know I haven't ever publically made a comment or intentionally written anything on social media to offend someone and in a traditional sense 'cyberbully' anyone. That being said, some may think that not 'liking' someones photo or even making a negative comment via text about something I have seen online can be defined as a type of cyberbullying. It is crazy the impact a 'like' or the lack of a 'like' can have on people. I try my best to not judge what I see online and treat others the way that I want to be treated.

10. If you knew someone or were being cyberbullied by someone yourself, what steps would you take in order to address the issue?

I would start by just talking to someone I trust. Social media is a great form of communication, but I genuinely believe that there is nothing more powerful than having a strong support system offline. Talk to someone you trust about what is happening- each situation is different and there isn't a one-size-fits all situation. The unfortunate or fortunate thing with being cyberbullied, is that you most likely will never meet the person bullying you, and have that opportunity to speak face to face. I would also suggest blocking the person- if they don't like what you post, don't let them see what you post- while this doesn't address the actual bullying and the impact it may have on you, it is a fast solution to stopping immediate bullying. But most importantly speak to people and surround yourself by people you love and trust.

Resources for Healthy Interaction

There are ways prescribed by psychologists and sociologists which help one deal with abuse online. It is often recommended not to respond to the cyberbully in personal interactions as it might be perceived by the perpetrator as a challenge. It also makes sense to save as much evidence as possible, in cases where legal recourse is imperative. Users must also be familiar with the terms and conditions of usage of any website, as companies have also acknowledged this problem and play a major part in dealing with it first-hand. A fair knowledge of the company policy helps in taking swift action. However, the most important thing to be done, especially in serious cases is to reach out for help. These can be people ranging from teachers, mentors, parents, NGOs and the cyber cell of the Police.

There are several focus groups, especially in universities where people (mainly victims) come together to share their trauma and seek help. Organizations such as the Centre for Cyber Victim Counselling (www.cybervictims.org) receive several distress calls from parents, students and schools and they provide legal and psychological help to people in need. Organizations such as the National Institute of Mental Health, Cyberbullying Research Centre and the Centre for Suicide Prevention provide ready and immediate help online.

CONCLUSION

It is important to understand that online harassment remains one of the biggest threats to the society and its youth today. The cognizance of this problem is the first step that we need to take towards solving it. The growth of NGOs, help centres at schools and colleges and the initiatives of the government seem like a ray of hope. Each individual irrespective of social context must self-introspect his/her behaviour online. It requires the collective effort of individuals to make

the space online safer for the entire group. Moreover, by-standers must report incidents of abuse immediately as at times, the victim is unable to do so. This requires the full support of the corporates and the governments. There is a long way to go, if we want to preserve the internet for the same purpose it was created: a space where every individual can express themselves without the fear of harm or harassment.

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