

## Adolescents and the Social Media: The Coming Storm

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### Editorial Comment

In her book *Failure to Connect: How computers affect our Children's Minds*, sounded the alarm to the educational community that computers would not impact the intellectual growth of children in the ways that had been anticipated by the Clinton Administration when they started the push to have the world-wide web integrated into American classrooms by passing the Classroom 2000 education initiative [1]. In a speech in April of 2013 [2], Clinton would follow-up by saying that the modern internet has forced a change in what we consider to be forms of good citizenship. The future will redefine how we should act and interact.

Unfortunately, while there have been definite gains in the ease of accessing information from a variety of sources using the internet, it now appears that the internet might also be having a seriously negative effect on students [3]. It is now becoming evident that the internet has redefined and expanded the meaning of bullying. The emergence of social media sites and its impact within the repertoire of high school and college students needs to be tested empirically as well as in the court of law [4]. Recently, however, a new trend has emerged and is observed in the establishment of anonymous "confession" sites tied into college and high school campuses. These sites appear to be an extension of the impact of Facebook and Twitter on students, and unfortunately, much of what is being witnessed on those sites is negative and hurtful and it is proving to be a challenge for administrators, teachers and parents to understand or control. The ability to remain anonymous and to add hashtags (#) for emphasis is often misused by adolescents who don't always think through the end result of actions.

The existence of these sites has led to a surge in legal prosecutions to squelch the mass distribution of malicious and incorrect information and to prosecute the aftereffects of bullying and defamation campaigns [5]. First Amendment rights do protect the rights of a person to share opinions without fear of prosecution, but it does not protect all categories of speech in this regard. Defamatory speech intended to harm a person's reputation or lower their regard within a community is not protected under the First Amendment [5]. Consider this recent case that occurred in Rogers, Minnesota [6]. A 17-yr-old honors student and captain of two sports teams read an anonymous post on a high school confessions website. The post suggested that the student had been seen kissing an attractive 28-yr-old gym teacher. The 17-yr-old target of the anonymous post responded "actually yes." What the students didn't realize was that this site was being monitored by the local police department due to sexually charged posts and references to drugs. While the teacher was rapidly cleared, the district superintendent acted quickly to suspend the very popular student. The student claimed that he was innocently placing a sarcastic response to what he saw as a ridiculous anonymous post. What he did not anticipate was that people who might misinterpret this would read it. Nor did he realize that the superintendent would

treat this "joke" as a factual violation of student conduct codes. The student has now left the Rogers district to join another school district and his parents have filed a lawsuit against the school [6].

In the coming months we will likely witness many more cases where one's right to be anonymous on a blog or confession site is challenged as a result of defamatory, seditious, threatening or harmful posts on these sites. It appears that adolescents are ill-equipped to deal with sorting these matters out. Especially when it comes to anonymous sites.

Since the establishment of "Juicy Campus" in 2008, confession sites have been popping up on high school and college campuses all over the United States and abroad [7]. What has been a concern is the direction that these sites have gone once established. It is quite apparent that college conversation sites can serve to draw a campus community together by easing forms of acquaintance, improving communication, and sharing events that produce pride or joy. However, the belief in anonymity leads to provocative statements being made without conscientious fact checking. Furthermore, a belief in anonymity leads to provocative things being said by people who would normally be too shy or reserved to say these things in person. What adds to this problem is others within the community joining in on the harassment or abuse through the use of "likes" or named or anonymous comments added to the link. This rapidly compounds the impact of the statement and can become overwhelming to the target [8] convincing them they can never recover their reputation. Hence the number of teen suicides associated with this occurrence.

Confession sites have been appearing at high schools across the country at a number that is currently doubling nearly each month [8]. On the surface, the content of these sites can appear highly destructive. While some college sites do reflect some level of responsible management, the high school sites do not seem to have a strong representation of conscience, compassion or intelligent regulation, suggesting a difference in the attitudes in kids in college (who generally want to be there) versus those in high school (who often do not want to be in school).

### Social Media Bullying

Commonly accessed and well-known accounts passed down over the ages (e.g., The Bible) suggest that bullying has probably existed in some form for as long as the human species can be traced. Aggressive behaviors have a long history of being displayed in child and adolescent age groups. Bullying is somewhat different from aggression in that it involves an imbalance of power or an unfair advantage of one party over another [9]. This can be seen in overt forms where larger kids might pick on smaller kids or covert forms such as anonymous chat rooms on the internet.

Bullying in either form isn't necessarily a solitary activity. It becomes more intense when there are others either goading someone on, or

when standing by and watching and not intervening (which suggests passive agreement with the bully) [10]. Because over 80 percent of reported bullying episodes occur with peers present, bullying can be called a social behavior that craves an audience [11]. Social media is providing the audience that bullying craves.

It is noted that technology combined with a sense of entitlement in the recent generation has led to a situation that is considerably "toxic" within American society. This problem is compounded when parents, teachers and administrators are less sophisticated in technology than their children or students [12,13]. The question is asked "How could parents of Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris not know what they are up to?" The answer is relatively simple: They probably did not know what Dylan and Eric were doing on their computers and probably didn't feel it needed to be monitored [14]. They did not realize they were using their computers and a program called Doom to practice killing classmates for a full year before the attack. While it is easy to find fault with that specific situation, the truth is that thousands of households are like that [15]. This is why Garbarino has pointed out that parents and educators need to adopt a new approach of being more actively involved in the lives of young adults, because that is currently waning in this country [12]. Social media, unfortunately, appears to be distancing adolescents from adults even further. This mechanism is something in need of further research.

## Gender Effects in Social Media

Historically, bullying has been such a male-dominated activity that the mention of female bullies was scarcely necessary [15]. According to [16], males dominate 95 percent of all direct forms of aggression (e.g., fighting, murder, assault). However, when bullying is extended to include indirect forms of bullying (e.g., phones, internet, anonymous letters) the frequency of female involvement matches the frequency of males. Whereas males tend to act out physically when impulsive or angered, females are more likely to resort to what [17] called the three C's (calling, cutting, & Cliques). According to Elkind, females use phones (i.e., calling) to disrespect each other, ignoring and avoidance (i.e., cutting) and tight knit exclusive groups (i.e., cliques). A 2010 Nielson report suggests that females use cell phones 20 percent more often than males, and they text 30 percent more often than males. This suggests a ready adoption of these technologies. In his book, *See Jane Hit: Why Girls are Growing more Violent* [18], suggests that technology tends to enhance the emotions that young females are feeling. While they shun direct confrontation, young women are quick to use on-line sites (e.g., Facebook and Twitter) and gossip to attempt to get even. Because younger women regulate their self-esteem more on social appraisal than do males, biting anonymous comments can have a devastating impact [19]. According to [20], 55 percent of teens and young adults admit to giving no forethought to what they are posting or its consequences. Ivester's concern is validated by a recent high profile case of a young woman costing her dad an \$80,000 settlement in a lawsuit by publically telling the sued corporation to "Suck It" on Facebook shortly after the court order was made [21]. Her comments violated the confidentiality clause in the agreement and led to the withdrawal of the award (Stucker).

Fifty percent of high school and college students say they have been the target of cyber-bullying [7]. Although similar to other forms of bullying in many ways, there does appear to be an evolving quality to web-based bullying that makes it hard to understand, anticipate and regulate. The number of hours that teenagers (age 16-18) engage in media technology is staggering (3 to 6 hours each day) [22], and the

majority of that time they are engaged in conversation. Conversation flows both positive and negative, however, in recent years bullying has crept into the everyday activity of the internet and these interactions are generally not monitored by parents or high school or college officials.

Cyber-bullying is accomplished through multiple mediums, such as text messages, internet chat rooms, Blogs, and social networks such as Facebook and Juicy Campus. On the surface, these appear to be a good idea because they allow the opportunity for large numbers of people to communicate, process information, problem solve and make contact with long lost friends [23]. The reality of the social networks is that they often become rumor and attack mills where peoples sex lives, morality, political affiliations and other errata are constantly being bantered. When you add anonymity to an assigned social network, that combination can be catastrophic. All said, how social media and context shapes the behaviors of young adults is poorly understood.

## High School and College Confession Sites

Just recently Keuka College was introduced to a Facebook Confession site ([https://www.facebook.com/KeukaConfessions?group\\_id=0](https://www.facebook.com/KeukaConfessions?group_id=0)). Keuka is joining the growing ranks of colleges and high schools that have confession sites set up allowing an avenue to rant, rage, commiserate and console. The one feature that sets these sites apart from many others is the ability for "confessors" to hide behind a cloak of anonymity while sharing information. Although it has long been felt that anonymous people are more honest in their revelations [24], honesty does not always equal truth, and honesty can lead to seriously hurt feelings and loss of self-esteem [25]. The Keuka Confession website is dominated mostly with discussions of people's appearance. We add to this by saying at this point in time the Keuka website is really tame, but self-esteem is tied strongly to social commentary on one's appearance, and one person's build up is another's put down.

Here are three recent posts to the Keuka Confessions site:

299) I like black guys!!!! all kind of black guys...& keuka black guys are hot !! #white girl. This anonymous post was "liked" four times by people with posted names.

298) i don't know his name, but he is black, tall and he always has his red beats on, he wears glasses and i think he is so cute, handsome and hot !!! #just saying.

296) J##### C##### is the most beautiful girl on the planet. This entry was liked by two people, one of which was the target.

On the surface, these are innocent posts, but they can stir envy, hatred, and they can make named posters targets. Little is known about these confession sites [8], but what little is known suggests there are far more problems than assets connected to these sites [26].

There is very little exchange of academic ideas on high school or college confessions sites. Comments about teachers are generally negative except when teachers are viewed as physically attractive. But while the college sites are unproductive and have been often challenged as defamatory [5], the high school sites appear more troubling because there is so much discussion of drinking, violence, suicidal ideations, and hatred for other students and school officials. School officials have been underprepared for this and consequently slow to react [6,26]. Because the First Amendment has generally stood up to the challenges of these websites, many school officials are suggesting the need for social media education and regulation. Matt Ivester, the founder of

JuicyCampus, appears to have realized this when he killed his site and began publishing books on how to properly use social websites (2011).

Although the potential exists for social media to be a useful tool for adolescents, there is a need for research into how these avenues for social communication are actually impacting youth. A natural tendency for youth to feel that they are special and unique is exacerbated by the social media and plays into what David Elkind referred to as the Personal Fable [27]. Along with this egocentrism comes the sense that one is not vulnerable to negative outcomes of actions. This allows for the publishing of catastrophic commentary and pictures on “very public” websites with little thought given to outcomes. With this in mind, let us end by encouraging research into the use of social media in an effort to calm an emerging storm [28-30].

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