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Cyberbullying really is that bad

Once a social issue makes it on 'Law & Order,' we better get concerned

By **Helen A.S. Popkin**

msnbc.com
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Helen A.S. Popkin

Teenagers can be serious jerks. You don't need research by the Pew Internet and American Life Project on cyberbullying to know that. It's interesting to note however, that at the dawn of the 21st century, teenagers have effectively transferred their jerk skills from corporeal to virtual, launching torments once reserved for the lunchroom, school hallway and bus stop into cyberspace.

According to [Pew's recently-released study](#), "About one third (32 percent) of all teenagers who use the Internet say they have been targets of a range of annoying and potentially menacing online activities." These youthful indiscretions include threatening messages, private online conversations shared with others and embarrassing photos and rumors posted for all the world to forward.

This is ugly, wiggle-head inducing information. Granted, a bus stop beat down is recognizably and immediately more damaging than an acronym-rich text threat. And the research also showed that 67 percent of teens surveyed said they're more likely to be bullied or harassed offline. But there's a gap in information here, one that arguably encourages the casual reader to summarize something along the lines of, "Hey, this cyberbullying isn't nearly as bad as we expected. No big deal, really."

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That's certainly the opinion of one delightful 15-year-old boy surveyed. According to this charming young lad, he once threatened to kill someone online, but hey "I played a prank on someone. It wasn't serious." So why not take the kids at their word — they're generally

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pretty good at navigating those moral gray areas, right? It's not like they ever do dumbass stuff like stick a firecracker up a frog's rectum and light it. Or knock up their middle school teacher. Or run away with some 32-year-old dude they met on MySpace.

Except, oh wait ... they do. Because they're teenagers. Their brains haven't finished cooking. Though it can be said of some adults (like the ones who get Pearl Jam tattoos), kids don't comprehend the Long Haul. As near as I can tell, the Pew study does not budget for the teenage brain. Most kids, like the jocular young man with the death threat mentioned earlier, don't comprehend the things that do damage if that damage can't be seen by the naked eye.

Let's face it. Once a social issue makes it as a plot point on "Law & Order," we better start getting concerned. Now, if you're like me, all the "L&O" franchises start to run together. But I do recall an episode where this popular high school girl got killed by this fat chick's brother because she took cell phone pictures of the fat chick naked in the locker room and then e-mailed it to everyone or posted it on the InterWeb or whatever.

Fat Chick ended up shooting and killing Dead Popular Chick's BFF for hanging a pig fetus on her locker. Or something like that. I don't really remember. But it doesn't matter. What I mean to say is this: Where is the Pew research on the connection between cyberbullying and real world harassment? Because it happens, and not just on "Law & Order."

Let's talk Brooks Brown. That's the kid Columbine psychopath Eric Harris posted death threats about but later spared the day of the 1999 school massacre. Brown's parents reported the Internet death threat to police, along with online information hinting at the fact that Harris was building bombs. As is well documented, the police did not follow up.

That's an extreme case, and perhaps even tasteless to cite following a description of a particularly exploitive "Law & Order" episode. It's also the most profound example of what happens when adults miscalculate the connection between cyber and real-world bullying. In fact, adults remained grossly inaccurate even after the fact, launching an anti-bullying crusade when the point was horribly moot.

Such misguided hysteria can be damaging, leading to the persecution of every kid venting his or her teenage angst online. And I'm sure not advocating that. But there's a fine line between overreacting and brushing off the issue altogether.

Maybe grown-ups want to believe cyberbullying ain't so bad because, to varying degrees, many adults indulge in it as well. Internet anonymity grants the freedom to trash someone's chat room opinion on politics without the fear of facing them two cubicles over the next morning. Even in the office, it allows the meek and miserable to aggressively address co-workers via cap-infused e-mails lousy with exclamation points (albeit creating permanent records they may live to regret).

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Lest we continue to downplay the implications of Internet bullying for kids or adults, consider Kathy Sierra. Earlier this year, the software programmer who ran the site Creating Passionate Users closed her blog after suffering an onslaught of abuse — everything from childish insults to threats of sexual and physical violence. This harassment was not limited to Sierra's blog, but infected all areas of cyberspace with items such as a manipulated photo of Sierra with her throat cut as well as the posting of her home address.

The Sierra controversy led to an InterWeb blogger smackdown with all the most popular Web geeks arguing the implications and/or veracity of Sierra's experience. The fact remains that the Internet is full of evil nasty trolls, and they're not always harmless, no matter their age.

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