

Designing defenses against cyberbullying

May 21 2014, by Anthony Moore



Leanne Bowler

Social media websites, such as Facebook and Twitter, can be fertile ground for cruel and inappropriate online behavior among young people. Unlike traditional bullying in schoolyards or other public places, cyberbullying can happen at anytime and cruel messages can remain viewable for indeterminate amounts of time, leaving subjects of harassment and intimidation without refuge.

An information science research team, led by University of Pittsburgh School of Information Sciences Professor Leanne Bowler, has studied

the issue of cyberbullying among adolescents and young adults—and developed seven recommendations for website design features that could mitigate online bullying behaviors.

A research paper on their work, titled "Developing Design Interventions for Cyberbullying: A Narrative-Based Participatory Approach," was recently honored with Microsoft Research's prestigious Lee Dirks Best Paper Award after Bowler's team presented it at iConference 2014, an international gathering of information science professionals and scholars in Berlin, Germany, in March. Bowler's collaborators are Pitt graduate student Eleanor Mattern and former Pitt faculty member Cory Knobel, an assistant adjunct professor of informatics at the University of California at Irvine.

"Young people have every right to expect a [social media](#) experience that encourages well being and positive interactions between them and their peers. This should be a fundamental goal of those charged with developing online environments," said Bowler. "Designers of such environments should take from this research project lessons about the expectations that [young people](#) hold, and they should build environments that better reflect the values, needs, and perspectives of our young people."

For the project, the researchers met with two focus groups—one composed of high school teenagers and the other of undergraduate students—to create a series of [cyberbullying](#) scenarios. The focus group participants then worked with the researchers to pinpoint precise moments in the scenarios when bullying interventions were needed.

Collectively, they then developed a set of seven recommendations for designs on social media sites that could offer the bullied, and their supporters, a range of active and passive features to alleviate and prevent inappropriate harassment online. The seven recommendations do not

specify exactly what site administrators should add to their sites; rather, they suggest design themes around which they could build features that would best fit their unique sites. The seven design recommendations follow.

- **Design for Attention:** comprised of features such as personalized anti-bullying messages, a design with this theme would give social media users a stern warning against the continuation of behavior reported as abusive by others.
- **Design for Consequence:** comprised of features such as a "Bully Button," a design with this theme would flag offensive comments, status updates, photos, and tweets for a formal review of content.
- **Design for Control and Suppression:** a design with this theme would trigger prompt removal of materials deemed offensive by social media administrators or algorithms.
- **Design for Empathy:** comprised of features such as sad music and emoticons, a design with this theme would appeal to the humanity of social media users, making the emotions acquainted with bullying concrete in the minds of a potential bully.
- **Design for Empowerment:** a design with this theme would facilitate interventions by administrators—providing a sense of authority over a potential bullying situation.
- **Design for Fear:** a design with this theme would show potential consequences of inappropriate behaviors online, such as a suspension from the site; these consequences would be site specific.
- **Design for Reflection:** comprised of features such as pop-up warnings, a design with this theme would cause young social media users to pause and consider the ramifications of their actions.

Issues regarding the wellbeing and growth of young people lie at the

heart of Bowler's academic career.

Within Pitt's School of Information Sciences, Bowler teaches courses on new media literacy, technology for young people, children's literature and media, and early literacy and language development. Her research focuses on young people and their relationships with computers, media, and mobile technology. Bowler's recent studies have investigated teen and youth information seeking, mindful online behavior, and health information seeking online, among other topics.

More information: The research paper, "Developing Design Interventions for Cyberbullying: A Narrative-Based Participatory Approach," is available online: www.ideals.illinois.edu/bitstream/handle/2142/114441/1/Developing_Design_Interventions_for_Cyberbullying_A_Narrative-Based_Participatory_Approach.pdf?sequence=2

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