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Abstract

New question and answer websites Ask.fm and Formspring have brought highly specific and personal abuse to a new level amongst young people by providing easy anonymity to users within a circle of offline friendship groups culled from Facebook. Relatively unknown due to their unattractiveness to adults, these sites are growing rapidly and have already been associated with at least eight suicides amongst teenagers.

Media educators at school level encouraging self-awareness of social media use need to be aware of this new trend. At higher levels, these sites provide a fascinating current case-study of online disinhibition, and fit into ethical and legal debates on the responsibilities of platform providers, and of individuals as media producers.

This paper is based on an anonymous online survey of 302 13- to 16-year-olds at a British state girls' school. Results showed abuse levels were significantly higher than on Facebook or Twitter. The girls felt using the Q&A sites with their real names felt more real than when asking questions anonymously, but receiving anonymous abuse felt significantly more real than either. Opinions as to the acceptability of "sending hate" were mixed, with some users feeling victims had no right to complain if they had entered the forum.

Keywords: Formspring, Ask.fm, anonymity, abuse

Overview

Social media has been used to good effect as a learning tool by many educationalists at higher levels (Selwyn, 2007), and in schools (Jenkins, 2009; Berger and McDougall, 2011), but beyond the classroom the picture is mixed. Researchers have found complicated relationships between network sites, self-esteem, well-being and friendships (Valkenburg et al, 2006; Lee, 2013), with some recognising significant problems of abuse at school-age (Ybarra et al, 2007; Juvonen and Gross, 2008).

Traditionally, social media used by educationalists such as Facebook, Twitter, and even the group facilities of Blackboard and Escenic are, by their nature, not anonymous, though anonymity is not binary. Researchers have examined discursive anonymity online, and differing levels of personal disclosure (Gross and Acquisti,

2005; Schwammlein and Wodzicki, 2012). Some research has compared disclosure levels across different sites (Schrammel et al, 2009). Many researchers are particularly concerned about young people's levels of disclosure (Waters and Ackerman, 2011). It is widely accepted that behaviour changes according to levels of anonymity online, exhibiting an online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004). Much has been written about anonymous cyberbullying amongst young people who can 'hide behind a screen' to 'give hate', (Qing, 2007), with girls seeming particularly likely to suffer in this way (Simmons, 2011).

These issues are heightened by the advent of question and answer sites that can be simultaneously anonymous and linked to public, offline identity profiles such as on Facebook, producing very different patterns of behaviour to traditional social networking sites, with extreme personal abuse becoming common.

This research examines this phenomenon and compares it with other sites popularly used by teenage girls: Facebook, which explicitly insists on offline identities, and Twitter, where users generally provide a recognisable picture, name or nickname. It works within the paradigm that, when degrees of anonymity are present, deindividuation to some level is likely. It attempts to examine not just how the girls behave on semi-anonymous sites but how much weight they give to their own and others' behaviour.

On/Off Anonymity: Formspring.me and Ask.fm

Most popular platforms only offer the user the chance to define their anonymity in a single profile. Users may choose how much information they wish to disclose and even change their minds, for example, deleting a photograph or phone number, but they cannot easily switch between different levels of privacy on one site.

This changed with the launch of question and answer site Formspring in the US in 2009, 'cloned' (the owner's description) by Ask.fm in Latvia in 2010. Although the chat facilities are slightly different, for the purposes of this research, the two sites are treated as identical. These sites, which can be linked to profiles on Facebook, Twitter, etc, have both been very popular across the world, with Ask.fm claiming 37 million unique visitors per month across North and South America, Europe, the Middle East and Russia, against Formspring's 19-20 million (O'Hear, 2012). In some schools, social circles have migrated to them en masse (Lewin, 2010). They have a dual nature in that users create "real world" social profiles similar to Facebook, or simply log in with their Facebook/Twitter etc profiles, but can then send questions openly or anonymously to each other. If the recipient chooses to answer the question, then both question and answer appear on the recipient's wall.

This clear invitation to deindividuation and disinhibition while interacting with members of your own offline peer group has been particularly identified by teachers and anti-bullying campaigners as encouraging abusive behaviour, and being

particularly tempting for teenage girls desperate to ascertain their social worth (Simmons, 2011, p133). She said:

> For girls who define success as being liked by everyone, Formspring lets hope spring eternal: you can open an account and maybe, just maybe, you won't get a mean comment. Or perhaps others will rally to your defense. You'll be that girl who everyone really loves!... It is a toxic, self-reinforcing cycle.

Online commentator Foster Kamer, of Gawker, who tried Formspring, described it as "evil, fun and addictive". He said:

> You can just endlessly bomb someone's Formspring with hate mail, or affection, or subversive questions and you know they'll read it all, because they're using Formspring,…they're trying to get to the good stuff: the questions they want to answer...

> The high is cracklike.... At first, it's fun. And then you want more. You need more. You feel lonely without the questions. Why isn't anybody asking you any more?

Formspring has been associated with at least three teen suicides (Yaniv, 2010; Daily Mail, 2011; James, 2011), and Ask.fm with at least five (Irish Examiner, 2012; Kelly 2013, Robson and Warren, 2012). In the wake of bad publicity, Formspring has attempted to reinvent itself as 'interest-based', but Latvian founder of Ask.fm Mark Terebin reportedly shrugged off criticism, saying: "We only have this situation in Ireland and the UK most of all. It seems that children are more cruel in these countries." (Beckford, 2013) However, as suicide statistics are notoriously unreliable and hard to compare, this may be incorrect.

Research Design

I hypothesise that this combination of identity and anonymity is a new online feature, likely to result in increased levels of abuse compared to platforms without this combination.

RQ1: Is abuse more common on Formspring/Ask than on other platforms popular with this age group: Facebook/Twitter?

A puzzling feature of behaviour on these sites is that girls can delete offensive questions without answering, but sometimes choose to answer them, thus publicising insults against themselves.

RQ2: how do girls deal with this abuse, and why do they sometimes make abuse public?

Although anonymous abuse has always taken place in schools, for example by leaving notes in lockers or writing on toilet walls, I posit that the easy, risk-free nature of these platforms is likely to tempt a larger number of people to misbehave, because their own behaviour feels less "real". I hypothesise that increased abuse is not the result of the same small number of people widening their abuse, but that people who would not abuse offline will do so on this platform. I also wish to know whether or not abuse on this platform is taken to heart, or shrugged off as a "known issue". Thus:

RQ3: does it feel more or less real to use the platform while anonymous, or use it while identified, or to receive anonymous abuse?

Research Methods

A survey about anonymity in social networks was drawn up following a focus group at a British state girls' school to ensure clear language was used and appropriate issues covered.

To prevent contamination of the conclusions by students' becoming aware of the researcher's ideas, the survey was conducted at a different British state girls' school in Years 9, 10 and 11, ages 13 to 16.

A girls' school was chosen because cyber-bullying is a particular issue amongst teenage girls (Simmons, 2011). Making an online survey available to girls only at a mixed school posed technical and administrative problems. A state school was chosen to provide the widest possible relevance, though I would caution that the results would not be mirrored uniformly across schools, as a site that is very popular at one may be unused at another.

A mixed methods approach (Wimmer and Dominick, 2011, p121), allowed quantitative and qualitiative analysis of the girls' experiences of and reactions to Formspring, Ask and the comparative platforms of Facebook and Twitter using multiple-choice questions with randomised answers. Skip logic was used if respondents did not use a particular platform. To allow the subjects' voices to be heard, some open questions were included for discourse analysis (Fairbrother, 2007, p60).

The school was promised a report on their pupils' online habits, with identifiers redacted, and a Powerpoint based on students' answers for use in classes or assembly as a tool for encouraging media awareness and self-awareness. Only two parents refused permission. The remaining children were given access to the survey, hosted on surveymonkey, via the school's intranet site. They were also given information sheets including anti-bullying helpline numbers and websites.

It was important ethically that the survey was not compulsory or done in class time so girls didn't feel their peers or teachers were observing them. However, Year

Leaders repeatedly encouraged girls to take part, resulting in a response rate of more than 90 per cent. The open questions also had high response rates, it seemed these students wanted to share their feelings and experiences. All quotes are uncorrected.

Results:

Of 302 respondents, 130 students had used Formspring or Ask, 164 had used Twitter, and 245 Facebook. Anecdotally, Formspring had been popular a year earlier but had been largely abandoned, replaced by Ask.fm.

Feelings about Formspring/Ask

Girls were asked a series of questions about their experiences of Formspring in a multiple choice format, results are given below. They were also given an opportunity to write further how it felt to ask questions anonymously on Formspring or Ask.fm, with 77 out of 130 Formspring/ask users choosing to respond, which were subject to discourse analysis. Most were brief replies such as 'fun'.

A small number said they used the anonymous option positively as an extension of offline jokes, with coded references for friends. One said: 'i just write to my friends funny things, but they know its me.' Others use it as a more tentative way of making contact: 'well if you're on anon then you can ask someone how they're doing if they're upset without sounding too personal ... which is easier than asking in real life where it could be awkward'. Another wrote: 'it can … help clear up disagreements without the people having to come face to face.'

A third of responses made comments that could be classified as references to disinhibition or deindividuation: 'when youre on anon you could be ANYONE'; 'you feel like you have power and you can hide behind a screen'; 'you feel like you can say anything you want'; 'Its quite exciting to be able to say something but without your name on it as theres no consiquences for you.'; 'i think then people answer the questions honestly and dont change it because of who asked the question'; 'It kind of gives you more confidence, like you can ask people that you dont know well things.'

The respondents were not directly asked if they 'gave hate'. However, some responded with comments that made clear they had, such as: 'It feels better to ask a question anonymously because you don't have hold back on what you want to say and at the same time it's bad cause you can say whatever you want to anyone, so you can be as mean as you want which can hurt the people you're saying it to.'

Receiving and dealing with abuse

Of 130 girls who had used Formspring/Ask, 50, or 38%, reported receiving anonymous hurtful, embarrassing or frightening messages (figure 1). These girls were asked about the questions and their responses, which were subject to discourse analysis, though it should be noted that it is the <u>reported</u> questions and answers under analysis. Questions usually focussed on sexual behaviour, looks and projected image, with a few insults around "cockiness". They included:

- 'Your ugly'
- 'you're wierd'
- 'you're such a freak'
- 'you should die'
- 'you're an attention seeking whore'
- 'Everyone in 8c hates you'
- 'what is ur bra size, it looks titch'
- 'your friendship group – bitchiest group in y8'
- 'why do you still hang round with beccy she doesn't want to be your friend anymore'
- 'how far did you go with dominic'
- 'why do you bum off everyone you see?'

It is noteworthy that these questions clearly come from personal knowledge of the recipient, some being finely targeted. Though not conclusive, this is highly suggestive of having greater power to wound than general abuse on most online forums. They also make clear to the recipient that the abuse is not coming from a stranger who they will probably never meet offline, but from people they probably see regularly.

Most replies were sarcastic or dismissive, such as: 'thanks', 'okay...', 'haah your great' or similar. Some tried to be more straightforward. One listed the following:

'Why are you such a slutty little cunt' – '<u>I dont think i am to be honest</u>'

'you look like a fat pumpkin, why did he even have sex with you' – '<u>i don't know you would have to ask him</u>'

'i heard you fingered yourself you little hoe, your a fucking hoe with no self steem' – '<u>umm dont know where you heard that</u>'

One girl responded to 'no one likes you' with 'i like me'. Another replied to 'kill yourself love, everybody would be better off without you', with 'i couldn't agree more, however telling someone to kill themselves is disgusting', and rather brilliantly responded to 'your a slut' with the one word putdown: 'you're*'.

Of 33 girls who listed abusive questions they had received, only seven (21%) reported that they did not reply. Replying meant that the insults were visible on their

profile, which they wouldn't be if they ignored them. If the profile was linked to Facebook, they would also be visible to all the receiver's Facebook friends. Their willingness to give publicity to their tormentors in this way is one of the puzzling features of young people's behaviour on Formspring and Ask. Many other commentators have noted that withholding of personal information seems incompatible with the motivations to join a social networking site (Debatin et al, 2009) and that disclosure fosters liking (Lampe, Ellison and Steinfield (2007). However, these studies have usually focussed on biographical information (names, location, profile pictures) or on routine news (uploading pictures after a night out). This extreme form of self-disclosure, in which girls' reveal the opinions of their enemies, seems new. It is hard to see any benefit to them. Some studies have shown that positive comments by others on Facebook profile pictures are very important to whether or not others view them as attractive (Hong et al, 2012). It seems likely that a girl who allows this kind of abuse to be displayed on her profile will be judged as less socially attractive as a result.

The reasons why a girl may choose to reply, thus publicising the insults, were explored in the focus group, resulting in the following question:

Table 1: 'Sometimes people decide to answer questions even if they are hurtful or embarrassing. Why do you think that is? You can tick as many as you want.'

	Ask/Formspring (n=103)
You have to look like you don't care	61%
They are angry or upset and want to say that it's not true	47%
They want other people to comment and be on their side	47%
If you don't they'll know that they've got to you	46%
They want people to talk about them, it makes them more interesting	41%
It's better than no-one asking you questions at all	18%

The spread of answers may show multiple motivations, or may show that young people themselves are unclear about why they react the way they do. The extreme,

personal nature ofthe abuse reported may mean receivers react without clearly thinking of the consequences.

It may also be that young people feel obliged to respond because their fellows' opinions of those who 'give hate' vary wildly. A discourse analysis of general comments about how it felt to use the platform showed some were highly critical of anyone using it to bully: 'i wouldnt ever give hate on ask.fm as its just cowardly and pathetic', 'most people used the anonymous thing to send people abuse/harsh comments or took the mick out of them etc.. i have never dont that, i believe its completely wrong and unfair on the person recieving it'

However, others showed a streak of victim-blaming that was reminiscent of reactionary remarks made about rape survivors. Comments included: 'I think it's unfair when people choose to get a certain website, like ask.fm, and then act all surprised when its not all lovely questions!' and 'if some don't like the questions they've been asked then why don't they delete their account?! some people just try and be attention seeking'.

One girl wrote:

> If you choose to have formspring or ASK then you know your going to get abuse, it is almost guarenteed and everyone knows that. I have no sympathy with those who claim they are being 'bullied' on it because they know that when they sign up and if they are that sensitive then they wouldn't have got it. It is pure attention seeking and not only that but i have heard of people posting 'rumours' about themselves to get attention.

Another ignored the fact that it is almost impossible to have a social life as a teenager without being online in some way, saying:

> I understand that people can feel vunerable online but if it really that much of a problem then they shouldn't be online. Being online if a perfectly safe and fun experience as long as you use you head and dont put yourself into positions where you could be taken advantage of.

The final phrase here echoes down the ages from the days of Tess of the D'Urbevilles. To continue the analogy, these remarks are similar to the once-common legal defence against an accusation of rape that consent, once given, is given for all sexual activities and for all time, sometimes even to other men, and cannot be withdrawn (Dripps, 1992). This idea is still current, as in George Galloway's comments on Julian Assange (Booth, 2012). It may be that having "consented" to receive questions by opening an account, the girls may feel they cannot refuse to answer any question, however vile.

While there is no consensus amongst users on what the platform is for or what rules apply, young people may feel that, having opened an account, they are obliged to

play the game to the end. This is an area that could be explored by media teachers in seminars on self-awareness in social media use.

Comparisons with Facebook and Twitter

Similar questions were asked for Facebook and Twitter, where 'anonymous' was replaced with 'without knowing who it is from', to reflect that people may create fake profiles in order to stalk or send abuse, but offline identities are the norm. Of course people who answered 'I've never received a message like that' may have received abuse from named people, but this research was not concerned with cyberbullying generally, as much as with differences between platforms where achieving anonymity was easy, against those where achieving anonymity takes the conscious intent of creating a new profile.
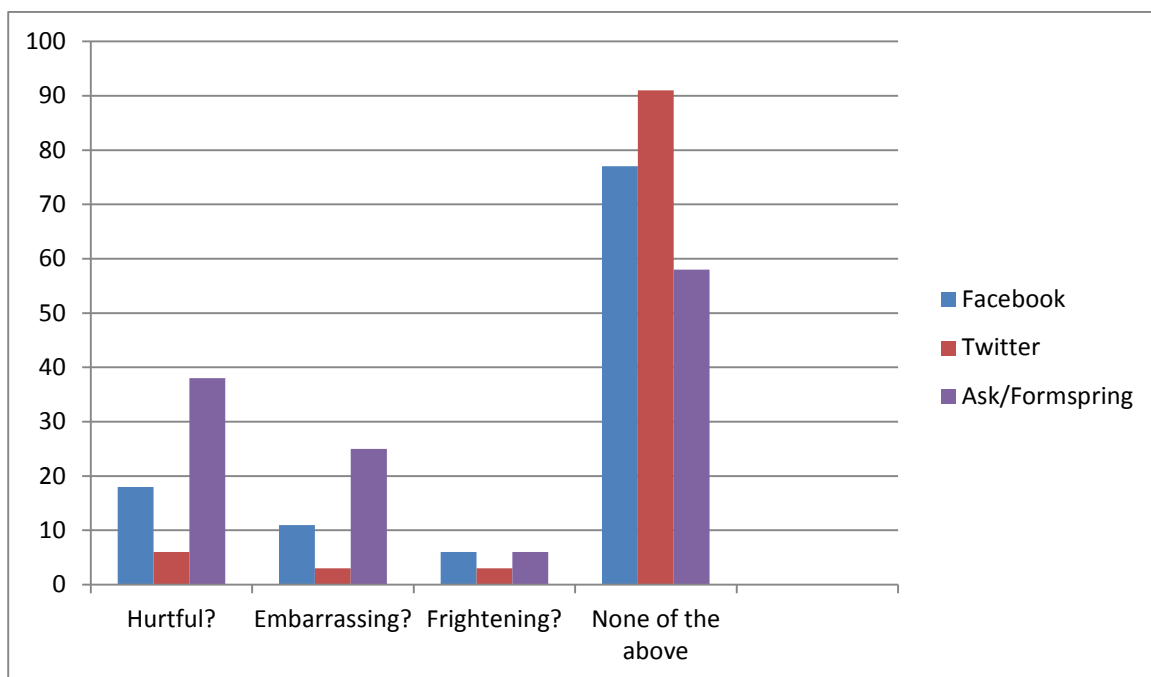

Figure 1: hurtful, embarrassing or frightening anonymous messages receiving on different platforms by percentage.

One heartening feature is the relatively large numbers who have not received anonymous abuse. Working in media education, it is possible to acquire a jaundiced view of social networks and forums, even without having a pastoral role. Correcting this distortion makes it easier to understand the great pull of these networks.

Looking at the reports of anonymous abuse, this clearly answers RQ1: far more respondents received abuse on Ask or Formspring than Facebook or Twitter. As one respondent commented: 'Ask is made for bullying'.

The lower statistics for abuse on Twitter than Facebook is harder to explain, as the Twitterverse is renowned for mass directing of wrath at individuals (Patterson, 2013; Celebrity Fix, 2013). However, these cases normally involve prominent people. These girls are likely to be too low profile to attract such venom, and are more likely

to be cultivating online-only friendships which expose them to fewer and less personal attacks than the bullying which spills from offline friendships onto Facebook and Formspring/Ask.

Is it real? Do they care?

Does all this abuse matter? A small number of suicides have, rightly, gained much attention, but it is difficult to attribute exact causes to them. Some researchers believe extreme bullying has moved online but is old wine in new bottles (Qing Li, 2007).

The fact that teenagers seem so anxious to remain online suggests the good vastly outweighs the bad. Mishna et al (2009) and Tokunaga (2010) reported some young people stayed silent about serious, frightening threats because they didn't want parents to remove internet privileges. The insults above seem harsh to adult eyes, but some research (Cass and Agiesta, 2011) suggests racist and sexist slurs are "no big deal" for young people. Is it possible this is a cultural norm barely more important than toddlers exchaning toilet humour, and leaves as little trace?

To find out, the survey included questions on whether or not sending or receiving anonymous messages felt 'real or virtual (not as important)', in comparison with other sites.
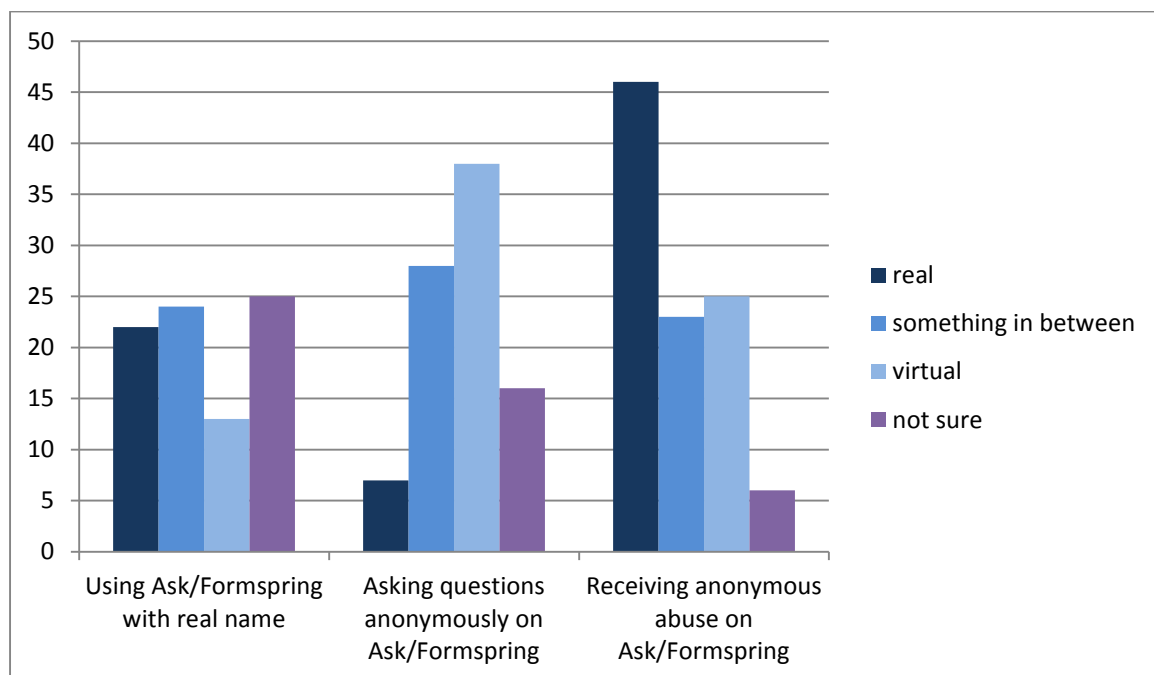
Here the differences in feeling when using Ask/Formspring in different ways are clear. When asked: 'When you ASK questions with your real name, or a username that your friends will recognise, does it feel "virtual" (not so important) or "real" or something in between?', there was a spread of responses, with 25 per cent answering 'not sure'. When asked about asking questions anonymously, the number that was unsure reduced, while the rest shifted towards virtual, with only seven per cent saying it felt real. As expected according to principles of deindividuation, acting anonymously immediately feels more like a game. This reversed when asked how it felt to receive anonymous abuse. Now only six per cent were unsure, with 46 per cent agreeing it felt real, the rest split between virtual or something in between.

This reversal when sending or receiving anonymous questions is significant. Though girls may use the anonymous feature without feeling the full consequences of what they are doing, they still do not easily shrug off anonymous abuse. Although only a small minority may actively complain of bullying, they commonly experience abuse as hurtful. Their dismissive or sarcastic replies should not be taken at face value, as they may well be a shield that conceals deep feeling. One girl encapsulated the problem of the dual public/anonymous nature of the site, as she described how she could no longer trust her friends:

> i have lost self confidence because of my ask.fm not knowing whos saying stuff to you makes me paranoid i get upset at the hate i get because it feels like people have been fake to me in real like and not told me the truth i feel like i know some of the hate question were asked by people i know and are quiet close to i think things like ask.fm should only be used by people who dont mind getting it, i come across like i dont care and sometimes i dont its all a joke if its online. Sometimes i get upset about it all.

Another simply put: 'When you get loads of hate, it makes you die inside'.

A Role for Media Educators?

Students quoted above dismissing bullying complaints have a point: victims do have power in their hands, and often do not take it. They could refuse to reply, set their profiles to block anonymous messages, or delete profiles on sites that cause them problems.

Survey respondents generally did not delete or deactivate profiles, even when they had caused distress. Of respondents who had used Ask or Formspring, 77 per cent had considered deleting their profiles but only 20 per cent had actually done so, 12 per cent had thought about it but hadn't done it, and 45 per cent hadn't deleted them but just didn't use them anymore. These ghost profiles will continue to haunt the web, popping up on searches and, unless settings are changed, sending alerts and messages to the profile owner that may tempt them back.

How can staff working in media education encourage young people to be proactive instead of reactive in their social media use? One solution comes from the US group Critical Issues for Youth, which helped the Mary Louis Academy organise a student-led Delete Day. The school had had issues with Formspring but the initiative took a wider look at social media, encouraging students to delete anything that didn't reflect their true image, thus appealing to their drive for better self-presentation, including sexual material, Facebook "likes" and pictures and posts that included some friends but excluded others. Teacher Alison Trachtman Hill was surprised to see entire Facebook account deletions.(Resmovits, 2011). Journalism and Communications Professor Julie Dodd commented that the fact that the initiative was voluntary and student-led was vital for its success (Dodd, 2011). Social networks with a supportive ethos may help: British group Beat Bullying works through peer-to-peer involvement, running regular cybermentor training events across the country for young people aged 11 to 25, who then support others through a secure social network. (www.beatbullying.org, 2013). On an ethical level, Ask.fm, which has no privacy settings, can also be used as a live case-study of personal responsibility in a world where we are all media producers.

At a higher level, the site raises ethical and legal issues of the ultimate responsibilities of platform providers, a crucial issue in media studies. Unsurprisingly, platform owners have resisted being held responsible for users' behaviour, Mumsnet's legal battles with childcare guru Gina Ford being a significant example (Rhodes, 2010). In the US, constitutionally-entrenched ideals of freedom of speech have traditionally trumped social responsibility in all but the most extreme cases, as recent comments from Facebook on a widely shared beheading video showed (Kelion, 2013). However, if the design of the platform can be shown to significantly alter behaviour, as this research appears to show, should web designers and platform providers be required to shoulder more of the blame? As more of the biggest media companies rely on user-generated content to pull in visitors and generate profits, I believe this research should be part of the debate on their responsibilities.

Conclusion

Levels of abuse on Formspring and Ask.fm are much higher than on other social networking sites. The abuse is not only vulgar and sexual, but also personally targeted, thus more wounding than the flaming commonly traded on anonymous forums. This personal abuse also causes distress and distrust in offline social circles.

Young people commonly experience these sites as a game, or as being relatively unimportant until they receive abuse. Then, they experience it as real. However, lack of agreement about what the site is for can translate to lack of support or perceived lack of support from peers towards those receiving abuse.

Unlike Facebook and Twitter, which have received widespread attention and are used by many adults, these question and answer sites seem to still be under the radar for most parents and teachers. As a consequence, young people are being left to make their own judgements as to how it should be used at an individual level. It seems unlikely that these sites are going to go away, but media educators at school level can help define norms of behaviour and use them as a learning tool on personal and social responsibilities, encouraging young people's use of social media to be conscious, not reactive.

Young people who have already suffered bullying, or who seem likely to be a target for bullying, or who have low self-esteem should be discouraged from creating profiles on these sites.

At higher levels, these sites are an important case-study in the debates on corporate versus personal responsibilities in a media increasingly dominated by user-generated content.

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