



## CYBERBULLYING, MORAL RESPONSIBILITY, AND SOCIAL NETWORKING: LESSONS FROM THE MEGAN MEIER TRAGEDY\*

Raphael Cohen-Almagor  
University of Hull

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper addresses the concepts of moral and social responsibility on the Internet in considering the most troubling phenomenon of cyberbullying that results in loss of life. Specifically, I probe the moral and social responsibilities of Internet users (agents), of the education system in fighting cyberbullying, and of Internet intermediaries. Balance needs to be struck between freedom of expression and social responsibility. The tragic story of Megan Meier serves as an illustrative example and some further incidents in which this ugly phenomenon of cyberbullying had cost young life are mentioned. It is argued that all relevant stakeholders need to think of the consequences of their conduct, that Internet abusers should be accountable for their wrongdoing, and that people who have the ability to stop or at least reduce the risk of cyberbullying should take proactive steps, exhibiting zero tolerance to cyberbullying.*

**Keywords:** Aristotle; bullying; cyberbullying; Internet; Megan Meier; moral and social responsibility; social networking

\* This article builds upon and expands on material published in Cohen-Almagor (2011, 2015, 2018).

## 1. Introduction

In October 2018, 13-year-old Ben McKenzie committed suicide after he was subjected to online threats and bullying on social media and on his mobile phone (Hendry 2018). Member of Parliament Paul Masterton raised the issue of his death during Prime Minister's Question time. Prime Minister Theresa May responded that cyberbullying is an "extremely serious issue" that needed to be tackled by the Internet social networks as well as the education system. PM May noted that Internet safety was and remains a major concern and that despite some progress in improving Internet users' safety, cyberbullying has remained a serious worry. May promised that the British government will continue to address this issue (Seith 2018).

Cyberbullying and bullying are highly upsetting and exasperating issues. They are distressing because at times they result in suicide, and any loss of life is sad. These phenomena are particularly distressing because often the life that are lost as a result of online and offline forms of bullying are those of young people, often in their teens. Cyberbullying and bullying deprived them of their future. These phenomena are frustrating because most of those misfortunes could have been avoided and/or prevented if relevant stakeholders were to conform to basic norms of social responsibility. Indeed, cyberbullying and bullying are social tragedy. These phenomena are a sombre testimony of the dark side of human nature. The Internet has exacerbated the problem of bullying and made it into a constant nightmare. The Internet has equipped bullies with a powerful weapon that enables them to torment victims relentlessly with no reprieve.

The Internet has affected all aspects of society. Digital platforms are increasingly where we meet new people and maintain older contacts. This became very apparent during the recent coronavirus crisis, where many countries went into a lockdown and people were forced to conduct their affairs online. People work, study and make phone calls; conduct business, video conferencing and social campaigns; search for information; shop, socialize and flirt; share photos and experiences; listen to music, watch movies and explore the world online. The world population is nearing 8 billion people. Of them, more than 4.6 billion people are using the Internet. In Europe and North America, the Internet penetration rate is more than 87% (Internet World Stats 2020).

In the Internet age, people have active life on social networking platforms and have far more virtual "friends" than genuine, true friends on which they could rely at challenging times. Facebook alone has a staggering number of almost 2.6 billion monthly active users (Clement 2020). Many

people have more than one identity. People create fake identities for all kind of purposes, kosher and non-kosher, legitimate and illegal. During 2019, Facebook removed 5.4 billion fake accounts. In 2018, Facebook removed roughly 3.3 billion fake accounts (Fung and Garcia 2019; Segarra 2019). In other words, the number of fake accounts exceeds the number of true accounts. The ease of opening new accounts has significant consequences which until now have not been adequately addressed.

This Essay discusses moral and social responsibility on the Internet. Section 2 explains the concepts of moral, legal and social responsibility by focusing on the writings of Aristotle. Section 3 elucidates the cyberbullying phenomenon. Section 4 discusses the responsibility of people who are using the Internet, Internet agents. Section 5 probes the Megan Meier suicide, a tragedy that illustrates an immoral use of the Internet on a social networking website, abusing the functions of the Internet without regard to the potential tragic consequences. Section 6 discusses the responsibilities of the education system, and, finally, Section 7 is concerned with responsibility of Internet intermediaries. Internet companies have a vital role in making cyberbullying part of our lives and in helping to redeem this painful social challenge.

## 2. Moral and Social Responsibility

*Moral responsibility* relates to the agent's conscience, one's ethical conduct and the moral compass that guides one's life that is normally within certain moral codes of society in a particular period of time. *Social responsibility* relates to these societal norms, and to the broader implications of people's moral conduct. *Legal responsibility* refers to the conduct of agencies of state power in legislating and enforcing laws that enable living together and that demand people to be accountable for their conduct (Cohen-Almagor 2011).

The philosophical foundations of the concept of moral responsibility lie in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, where Aristotle discussed what acting in accordance with one's best interests means. Aristotle (1962) discussed human virtues and their corresponding vices. He distinguished between *voluntary* action and *coercive* action. Individuals who are coerced to do something cannot be held accountable for their conduct. Their coercer is the responsible agent. I have discussed the issue of coercion elsewhere (Cohen-Almagor 2006). Of relevance to the discussion here are agents who act of their own free will. Individuals are responsible for their conduct when they are competent, well informed, and aware of what they are doing (Aristotle 1962, 1110B15-25).

A voluntary action must have its origin in the agent (Aristotle 1962, 1110a-1111b4). Agents' conduct expresses their conception of the good. For Aristotle (1962, 1111b15-1113b22), competency, deliberation, choice and moral agency are important in evaluating one's conduct. Deliberation precedes choice. People who have failed to deliberate are led by their emotions and/or passions. Choice between meaningful alternatives is important. People set for themselves desirable ends and secure relevant means to achieve them. When people choose to act unjustly from choice, they are vicious (Aristotle 350 BCE, Book V). Aristotle explained (*Ibid*): "But if a man harms another by choice, he acts unjustly; and these are the acts of injustice which imply that the doer is an unjust man, provided that the act violates proportion or equality. Similarly, a man is just when he acts justly by choice" (for further discussion, see Sauve Meyer 2012; Erginel 2016; Talbert 2019).

A just person is a moral person, and a moral person avoids three kinds of behavior: vice, incontinence and brutishness (Aristotle 1962, Book VII). Vice (*kakia*) is concerned with pain and pleasure. It is an excess or deficiency of virtue and is a matter of choice (Aristotle 350 BCE, Book II). This means that competent and free willed agents are responsible for their state of mind and for the choices they make. They bear responsibility for acquiring and exercising virtues and they bear responsibility for acquiring and exercising vices. Incontinence (*akrasia*) means lack of self-restraint (or lack of mastery) and therefore it is contrary to choice. An akratic person is acting without sufficient reason which is the result of some *pathos*, such as emotions and feelings. In turn, brutishness (*thēriotēs*) "is found chiefly among barbarians, but some brutish qualities are also produced by disease or deformity; and we also call by this evil name those men who go beyond all ordinary standards by reason of vice" (Aristotle 1962, Book VII). Brutish people include cannibals, people who devour their infants, or who lend "their children to one another to feast upon" (*Ibid.*).

Competent people who act voluntarily choose whether they wish to be virtuous and noble, or evil and bad. We all should know to distinguish between good and evil. Ignorance will not absolve us of responsibility. Society imposes penalties on people who harm others even when they did not intend to. Aristotle wrote that we punish people for their very ignorance, if they are deemed responsible for the ignorance, "as when penalties are doubled in the case of drunkenness" (Aristotle 350 BCE, Book III). People have the power of not getting drunk which made them idle and brought them to make the harmful mistake (Aristotle 350 BCE, Book III). And we punish those who are ignorant of anything in the laws that they should know and that is not too difficult to grasp. We also punish those who do bad things because they are careless. We assume that it is in

their power to act with care. Thus, people who act against their better judgment, termed akratic people, are morally blameworthy for their harmful conduct (FitzPatrick 2008; Kraut 2018). If an agent does something bad with knowledge that the action is bad, knowing full well that she should not be doing it, then the agent is said to be acting with clear-eyed akrasia (FitzPatrick 2008, 590; Lawrence 1988).

The concept of social responsibility refers to the responsibilities of individuals, the public sector, the private sector and the government to society. Our actions have some bearing on others and we should strive that this bearing will be positive. Responsible conduct is a caring conduct; it is acting with foresight while we are cognizant that actions have consequences, and we aim that the consequences will affect us and others for the better. Responsible people proactively do good and avoid harm (Bunton 1998; Christians and Nordenstreng 2004; Kaliski 2001; Marshall 1994; Rivers, Schramm, and Christian 1980; Cohen-Almagor 2015).

In the context of the professions, social responsibility is especially important because professionals are trained to hold a specific skill that requires autonomous judgment and expertise. Professionals are duty bound to serve their clients. Often a broader responsibility is attributed and expected (McQuail 2003: 191). Conduct is dictated and evaluated in accordance with a given set of standards. Professional standards may change with time; therefore, they are carefully monitored, and corporations are expected to bear responsibilities to their clients and to society at large. Adopting social responsibility norms and adhering to moral codes of conduct is the right way to behave (Novak 1996; Trevino and Nelson 1999; Cohen-Almagor, Arbel-Ganz, and Kasher 2012; on Corporate Social Responsibility [CSR], see Carroll 2015; Wan-Jan 2006; Goodpaster 2010; Carroll and Shabana 2010; Abend 2014; Kerr Janda, and Pitts 2009; Gawu and Inusah 2019).

### **3. Agent's Responsibility**

Cyberbullying involves the use of digital technologies to target people in order to harass, offend, threaten, degrade, ridicule, or humiliate them (Alipan et al. 2020; Kowalski, Limber, and Agatston 2008, 1). It involves targeting victims via computers, smart phones and any other electronic device. Some forms of cyberbullying involve electronic stalking, identity theft, password theft, the spread of malicious rumours or exposing private or privileged information without the victims' consent. Cyberbullying might also involve the distribution of photos and video clips of sexual or violent nature that would lower the victims' status in the eyes of peers or

society at large, damage their reputation and cause them great embarrassment. Extremely harmful forms of cyberbullying include circulating rape footages, blackmail and online death threats (Gerson and Rappaport 2011; Pesta 2013; Lallitto 2017; Petrov 2019).

The motivation for bullying online and offline is varied. Bullies wish to gain a feeling of power, purpose and control over others. Some bullies suffer from low self-esteem and engage in this activity in order to mask how they feel about themselves or wish to receive recognition from their peers (Salmivalli 2010; Ditch the Label 2018). Bullies engage in this sort of activity because they are bored, angry, or because they seek some twisted sense of entertainment. Some are motivated by revenge or frustration (Salmivalli, Huttunen, and Lagerspetz 1997; Perren and Alsaker; Duffy and Nesdale 2009; Doehne, Grundherr, and Shafer 2018). Bullies are likely to have experienced considerable stress or trauma. Many bullies feel that their parents/guardians do not spend enough time with them. They do not trust their relationships with friends and families and wish to gain attention and appreciation by showing their influence/power over others (Ditch the Label 2018).

Sometimes, bullies exploit anonymizing tools to assault victims. Those bullies are not likely to utter those offensive statements in one's face, but with the Internet as a filter and facilitator they have no qualms harassing their victims, pushing them to intolerable and most troubling state of mind (Hinduja and Patchin 2009; Smith, Mahdavi, Carvalho, and Tippett 2006). Studies estimated that between 13% and 46% of young victims of cyberbullying did not know their harasser's identity. 22% of the bullies did not know the identity of their victim (Kowalski and Limber 2007; Wolak, Mitchell, and Finkelhor 2007; Ybarra, Diener-West, and Leaf 2007; Cohen-Almagor 2018).<sup>1</sup>

The structure of social networking sites makes it easier to state rude, intrusive and offensive words that one would be hesitant to state face to face. The offence is exacerbated as often the victim is alone and hesitant to inform others about the aggression s/he is facing. Not knowing the identity of the electronic bully leaves the victim guessing who the person behind the aggression is: is it someone whom s/he knows, or a complete stranger? This creates a suspect and unsafe environment for the bullied.

Bullying is certainly not new. It has been part of life for many generations. In every class there are always children who become the target for some of

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<sup>1</sup> It is reiterated that cyberbullying does not necessarily relate only to young people; it is just that most of the research in this field has tended to focus on the young.

their classmates who enjoy ridiculing them and exposing their vulnerabilities in order to have a “good laugh”. At school, students who are somehow different attract the attention of bullies as they seem to be more vulnerable and defenceless, easy to pick on, humiliate and intimidate. Children with disabilities, youth with confused sexuality, students with special needs, and socially isolated adolescents attract the bully’s attention (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2007, 2009; Riggio 2013). Also ethnic minorities and homosexuals are disproportionately targeted (Beaty and Alexeyev 2008; Berlan et al. 2010; Kahle 2017).

Cyberbullying has desensitizing effect on bullies and bystanders (Steffgen et al. 2011; Pabian et al. 2016) and it can be relentless. It can take place simultaneously on multiple online forums, employing multiple technologies. Tormenting images of bullying can be posted on many social networking sites and cause victims prolonged suffering. Indeed, technology has the potential to exacerbate wrongdoing. Before the age of the Internet and smart phones, bullying stopped as the victim entered the shelter of the home. Today the harassment follows the victim wherever she goes, without a reprieve.

A study among European children aged 9-16 showed that one in twenty children was bullied online more than once a week, and one in ten was bullied a few times during the past year (Livingstone et al. 2011, 61). 12% reported that they bullied others during the past year (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, and Ólafsson 2011, 64; see also Görzig and Frumkin 2013). A British study that surveyed children aged six to nine reported that 20% children were the victims of “aggressive or unpleasant” behaviour online. In Denmark, 21% of the teens reported that they experienced cyberbullying. The study shows that Danish parents talk less to their children about Internet safety than before (Livingstone, Mascheroni, and Ólafsson 2014; for further discussion, see Navarro, Larrañaga, and Yubero 2018, 122-125). This serious problem may explain, at least in part, the rise in cyberbullying. According to the Megan Meier Foundation, approximately 34% of students report experiencing cyberbullying during their lifetime.<sup>2</sup>

At times, bullying accompanies another kind of evil doing. In Canada, 17-year-old Rehtaeh Parsons was raped by four boys while she was at a house party. Those boys made the trauma worse for Parsons by photographing her and then circulating Parson’s brutal ordeal. Parsons hanged herself amid months of persistent online bullying, with peers insulting her by calling her a slut, circulating her photos, messaging her and harassing her

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<sup>2</sup> Megan Meier Foundation, <https://meganmeierfoundation.org/cyberbullying>.

both online and offline (Newton 2013; Pesta 2013; Arthur 2014). Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper said that as a father he was “sickened” by the alleged events that led to Parsons’ death (CBC 2013). Those boys acted with full knowledge that what they were doing was wrong, and they still relished the opportunity to act immorally, which is flagrant clear-eyed akrasia. Parsons fell victim to a string of failures: of the boys’ families and of the education system to equip those boys with values of compassion and social responsibility.

#### **4. Agent’s Responsibility**

Taking responsibility has a significance in virtue of the role that this act plays in maintaining our self-conceptions as agents (Bero 2020). Per Aristotle, an agent would be held responsible for speech that has directly led to harm when she voluntarily chose to engage in that activity. While establishing a direct link between speech and harm is not always easy, undoubtedly some forms of speech, such as those that urge victims to kill themselves and murder threats are inciteful in nature and in no way can be regarded as protected speech (Mill 1948, chap. 3; Cohen-Almagor 1994, 2017). Agents who utter such words are blameworthy and should be responsible for their harmful consequences. Indeed, it must be acknowledged that words can inflict a great deal of pain. Words can upset and hurt. Words can move people to action.

Furthermore, anonymity plays an important role in linking traditional and cyber forms of bullying and harassment (Walters and Espelage 2020). Victims persistently worry about the perpetrator’s identity. We all feel anxious in the face of the unknown. We all worry about our reputation. Many people care about their public image and wish to be perceived by others in a positive light. Many are concerned about their social status and the way they are perceived by their peers and by other people who are of significance to them. Information posted on the Internet can enhance careers and contribute to one’s social status. But information can also ruin careers and lives.

In an earlier article (Cohen-Almagor 2011), I described how JuicyCampus.com was used to ruin the name of young people. Behind the shield of anonymity, agents dusted away all responsibility and inflicted great harm on their victims “for fun”. JuicyCampus closed down on February 5, 2009 after it gained deserved notoriety that caused users and businesses to shun. But JuicyCampus was soon replaced by other no less intrusive and damaging forums. In 2010, Ask.fm was established to enable people the posting of anonymous questions in the most offensive and



degrading way. In 2013 alone, nine teenagers were driven to commit suicide after they were subjected to cyberbullying on Ask.fm (Edwards 2013). Ask.fm is still alive and kicking. And in 2013, Tyler Droll and Brooks Buffington established an anonymous gossip app called Yik Yak. On this platform as well, people were able to say whatever they wanted without accountability. In 2017, after four years filled with scandals, harassment and irresponsible gossip, Yik Yak had shut down (Kircher 2017). One of the scandals was concerned with Tysen Campbell, a student at Western Washington University who, in 2015, was charged with a hate crime for posting “Let’s lynch her” directed at a black student leader (Green 2015; see also Larimer 2015; Diehl 2015).

Many of the cyberbullying cases that led to suicide involve adolescents tormenting peer victims and pushing them to death (Kaplan 2014). However, one of the early cases of cyberbullying in the USA involved a mother who recklessly brought about the suicide of her teenage neighbour because she suspected that that teenager did not behave kindly to her daughter.

## **5. The Megan Meier Tragedy**

Sarah Drew and Megan Meier were both 13-year olds. They used to be good friends but then had a falling out. Sarah was concerned that Megan had bad-mouthed her behind her back. Sarah’s mother, Lori Drew, 49, together with Ashley Grills, 19, a family friend and employee, created a fake account on MySpace, which was the most popular social networking site in the USA until the birth of Facebook (Sawyer and Roberts 2008). One day Megan received an invitation to connect with “Josh Evans” who presented himself as a 16-year-old from a nearby school. Megan’s parents were reluctant for her to approve Josh’s friendship request as she did not know him (Stossel, Vargas, and Roberts 2007) and because Megan was a vulnerable girl. She received treatment for attention deficit disorder and depression and had been in counselling since third grade (Deutsch 2008; Jones 2008). Her parents were, therefore, understandably concerned about Megan’s wellbeing. Megan insisted to approve that “hot guy”. Her parents complied as they understood this issue was important for Megan and did not wish to upset her. For the next six weeks Megan and Josh, under the watchful eye of Megan’s mother, embarked on an online relationship that became the center point of Megan’s life. Lori Drew later explained that the communication between “Josh” and Megan intended to gain Megan’s confidence in order to find what Megan felt about her daughter and other mutual acquaintances (Grohol 2018). But in October 2006 “Josh” wrote to Megan “I don’t know if I want to be friends with you anymore because

I've heard that you are not very nice to your friends" (Pokin 2007; McFadden and Fulginiti 2008). Megan wished to understand the reasons for Josh's sudden negative twist but "Josh"'s response was even more upsetting and insulting (Jones 2007; Pokin 2007). Megan's father, Ron, found after Megan's death what he believed to be the last message Megan read from "Josh" which said that everybody hated Megan, and that the world "would be a better place without you" (Pokin 2007; Collins 2008). Megan responded: "You're the kind of boy a girl would kill herself over" (Steinhauer 2008). Megan committed suicide that same day.

Lori Drew and her co-conspirators are blameworthy and morally culpable for masterminding the events that led to Megan's suicide. They played on Megan's emotions in a crude and cynical way. They did not act under compulsion. They were responsible for being unjust and self-indulgent, in deciding to cheat a young, vulnerable girl for their selfish and petty interests. They failed to exhibit fair judgment and did not consider how their careless and heartless game might come to a sad conclusion. They exhibited a strong form of clear-eyed akrasia, acting against their adult better judgment.

Lori Drew was reported saying that she felt her prank contributed to Megan's suicide, but that she did not feel "as guilty" because she found out that "Megan had tried to commit suicide before" (Pokin 2007). Somehow, instead of feeling more responsible for what she did because she pushed a vulnerable girl to her death, Drew felt less responsible. She felt no guilt or remorse (Lauer and Lewis 2007). Drew did not desire the apparent good, had control over what she did, and succumbed to the flaws of her character. She was responsible for the state of mind that brought her to concoct the fake account, and she needed to be accountable for her evil-doing. Aristotle (350 BCE, Book III) wrote: "every one does evil acts through ignorance of the end, thinking that by these he will get what is best", but one "must be born with an eye, as it were, by which to judge rightly and choose what is truly good, and he is well endowed by nature who is well endowed with this".

## **6. Responsibility of the Education System**

Slađana Vidović was 16-year-old when she committed suicide. She was the daughter of a Bosnian family who immigrated to Ohio. Slađana was subjected to continued bullying and harassment. At school, she was ridiculed for her thick accent. Classmates insulted her repeatedly (Crimesider 2010). Phone callers threatened her, told her to return to Croatia, and that they would harm her after school. "Slađana did stand up

for herself, but toward the end she just kind of stopped”, said her best friend, Jelena Jandrić. “Because she couldn’t handle it. She didn’t have enough strength” (Barr 2010). Slađana left a suicide note in which she described the prolonged harassment she endured at Mentor High School (Krouse 2019). Slađana’s parents implored the school to intervene and enforce anti-bullying policy. The school managers promised to take care of the young girl (Barr 2010). They did not. Slađana was one of no less than five students at Mentor schools who committed suicide between July 2005 and October 2008. The problem of bullying was evident. Yet the education system directors failed to see it. They suffered from clear-eyed akrasia and did not rush to act responsibly and address the problem head-on.

Schools need to adopt a policy of Zero Tolerance to bullying and cyberbullying both on and off campus. Parents and psychologists should be involved in such programs (Williams and Godfrey 2011). Educational programs that tackle bullying and cyberbullying should include extensive discussions that address the problems of silence, explaining that silence is not a solution. Quite the opposite. Silence only helps the bullies continue with the harassment. Such programs should also explain that thrill seeking should not include bullying. Tragedies, such as the painful story of Megan Meier, should be explained at schools. Clear procedures to report and investigate bullying and cyberbullying on and off school should be established (Hong, Espelage, and Lee 2018, 359-374; Schargel 2014). Effective intervention programs decrease cyberbullying and significantly improve classroom atmosphere (Cioppa et al. 2015; Cross et al. 2016; Aizenkot and Kashy-Rosenbaum 2018).

Furthermore, teachers and school administrators need to familiarise themselves with the use of new technologies. Schools should have digital citizenship classes in which students learn the basics of ethical and legal conduct on the Internet, mobile phone and other electronic devices (Wakefield 2017). School administrators should also acquaint themselves with the available mental health programs that could assist students in need. In September 2019, the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families in the United Kingdom has embarked on providing training sessions to 22,000 schools and colleges, bringing together education and National Health Service (NHS) professionals in order to ensure that pupils will receive the support they require in a timely fashion. In 2017, it was reported that one in nine young people aged 5 to 15 had a diagnosable mental health condition (Department of Education and Hinds 2019; for further discussion, see Farrington et al. 2017; Long, Gardani, McCann et al. 2020). This explains why bullying and cyberbullying are such pressing problems. Vulnerable pupils attract the attention of bullies and are unable

to cope with the continued harassment. In some cases, when young people are feeling trapped, they might start thinking of suicide as a way out.

## 7. Responsibility of Internet Intermediaries

The issue of responsibility of Internet intermediaries is urgent and pressing. Their actions and inactions directly affect the information environment. They have discretion whether their services are opened for all or limited in one way or another. Most Internet intermediaries adopt some form of moral and social responsibility. They opt for some standards of self-regulation by adopting codes of practice. Internet Service Providers (ISPs) have guidelines regarding what users are not allowed to post on their servers. They have the right and the duty to report potentially criminal activities. They may pre-screen, filter and remove content at their discretion. For instance, Facebook's Community Standards includes a clause on safety: "We are committed to making Facebook a safe place. Expression that threatens people has the potential to intimidate, exclude or silence others and isn't allowed on Facebook".<sup>3</sup> In 2020, the #StopHateForProfit Campaign forced Facebook to announce new content policies that would include tighter restrictions on advertising and flagging harmful posts published by public figures in violation of Facebook's rules. The change in policy was done under mounting public pressure and effective advertisement boycott that demanded Facebook to impose tighter restrictions on false news, bigotry and incitement to violence. The boycott by more than 100 advertisers, including some of the largest companies in the world, reportedly reduced Facebook's market value by \$56 billion and caused a heavy loss of \$7.2 billion to Zuckerberg's personal fortune (Sharp and Griffith 2020). Zuckerberg, the champion of free speech who believes racism, bigotry and hate speech are all protected under the First Amendment to the US Constitution, declared that he stands against hate, or "anything that incites violence or suppresses voting, and we're committed to removing that no matter where it comes from" (Sharp and Griffith 2020). Of course, declarations, codes and standards make sense only if they are appropriately enforced. They should not merely serve as a fig leaf to hide *kakia* or *akrasia* such as self-indulgence or dogmatism.

Internet intermediaries are gatekeepers. As such they have a duty to protect vulnerable third parties. Anti-social activities are most prevalent on three American social networking platforms committed to the First Amendment that holds, *inter alia*, that Congress shall make no law abridging freedom

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/communitystandards/>

of speech and of the press. These companies are Instagram (42%),<sup>4</sup> Facebook (37%) and Snapchat (31%)<sup>5</sup> (Petrov 2019; Kao et al. 2019).

The managers of Facebook wish to be all inclusive, believe in freedom of expression, and wish to promote merchandise by subjecting “friends” to subtle and not-so-subtle advertisement. Internet intermediaries exist to make money. Censorship contradicts their *raison d’être*. Richard Allan (2018), Facebook Vice President of Policy, explains: “free expression is key to a thriving society. So, barring other factors... we lean toward free expression. It’s core to both who we are and why we exist”. Indeed, for Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and other digital social platforms, freedom of expression is of utmost importance to the extent that Facebook initially did not have rules on what speech violated its terms of service (Rosen 2013). Allan (2018), in the same quoted paper, goes on to outline the exceptions to free expression. Strangely and revealingly, the words “bullying” and “cyberbullying” are not mentioned.

Presently, Facebook managers should be well aware of the harms that their platform facilitates. They have the ability to limit anti-social activities but until now they are not sufficiently proactive. It is possible to devise an algorithm that would flag abuse, especially continuous abuse and then a human eye would inspect the flagged content and make a decision. Internet intermediaries failed to fight cyberbullying to the extent they are able to and should. The question that they themselves need to grapple with is whether they have prioritized human life over and above all other considerations.

Freedom of use is not freedom to abuse. Freedom of speech is not unlimited. It needs to be within certain confines of security so that people of all ages would feel comfortable while surfing the Internet and enjoy the wealth of information that it contains. Gatekeeping equips Internet intermediaries with great powers, and practicing these powers requires great responsibility. Moral and social responsibilities are no less important than freedom of expression. A delicate balance needs to be maintained between having a wide forum for discussion and ascertaining that free speech does not instigate violence. Internet companies should assume responsibility as the buck stops with them. They should be committed to

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<sup>4</sup> Instagram (also known as IG or Insta), was launched by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger in 2010, and in 2012 it was bought by Facebook for \$1bn. It is a photo and video-sharing social networking service.

<sup>5</sup> Snapchat is also an image and video messaging application created in 2011 by Evan Spiegel, Bobby Murphy and Reggie Brown while they were studying at Stanford University. Facebook tried to buy Snapchat in 2013 for \$3 billion to boost its appeal with younger users but its offer was declined.

safety considerations. They should carefully think about the trade-offs resulting from their decisions and conduct.

I have been studying evil on the Internet for a long time. Cyberbullying is a heart-breaking phenomenon because it can be avoided. Attentiveness, care, responsibility, appropriate monitoring and support for the victims and also for the bullies are all important in the fight against bullying and cyberbullying. The bullies might have been themselves subjected to bullying and domestic abuse. With a better understanding of the reasons that make individuals bullies, it is possible to reduce the harms of cyberbullying (Hinduja and Patchin 2009; Ditch the Label 2018; Oakes 2019). Moreover, the technology that enables cyberbullying can be used against it. For instance, applications that would tell victims if someone who is threatening to them is nearby. The ability exists. It is a question of will and investment.

## 8. Conclusion

Following Aristotle, and per the data cited here and in many other studies about the harms of bullying and cyberbullying, relevant stakeholders cannot claim ignorance as basis for inaction. Since the Internet entered its commercial phase in the 1990s, they have acquired the understanding of the harms of bullying and cyberbullying; therefore, stakeholders are expected to take measures that would have corrected or avoided those social wrongs. It is very troubling that schools and Internet intermediaries failed to tackle bullying and cyberbullying that are often related and supplement each other to the extent they should have, either due to akrasia or due to vices such as dismissiveness, laziness, dogmatism, self-indulgence and lack of moral and social responsibility.

I opened with Prime Minister May and I will close with Sir Tim Berners-Lee, one of the forefathers of the Internet, who initiated a global campaign to save the Internet from political manipulation, fake news, privacy violations and other threatening forces that might bring about a “digital dystopia”. Emily Sharpe, the director of policy at the Sir Tim’s Web Foundation, said:

The web’s power to be a force for good is under threat and people are crying out for change. We are determined to shape that debate using the framework that the Contract sets out [...]. Ultimately, we need a global movement for the web like we now have for the environment, so that governments and

companies are far more responsive to citizens than they are today. (Sample 2019)

People, when acting collectively, have power. Word of mouth travels fast in the digital age: People can send and receive information to family, friends and colleagues through social media and are able to influence others by launching online petitions and campaigns. People mobilize crowds to challenge corporations and bring about change. Activists have, for example, evoked awareness to the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change and urged people to choose tap water over bottled water, recycle their waste, or purchase fair-trade products. I have mentioned the 2020 #StopHateForProfit Campaign at the background of the Black Lives Matter Movement that twisted Zuckerberg's hand to reconsider his stand on sheltering and facilitating hate speech.<sup>6</sup> Companies are more attentive and responsive to people power in the digital age. They are well aware that organised campaigns aimed at increasing awareness to particular problems can rally communities and bring about behavioural change. It is time for a social campaign to move Facebook to do all that it can to curb the challenge of cyberbullying. After all, nothing short than human lives are at stake. And if Internet intermediaries will not be proactive and responsible, then governments should step in to see that people, especially young people, could use the Internet without being subjected to abuse.

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<sup>6</sup> For further discussion on the power of social campaigns, see Mavrodieva et al. 2019; Moblab.

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