

Cyberbullying on the Rise, on Campus

Some faculty members maligned online by students, colleagues

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As greater numbers of people use the Internet and more work is conducted online, expect cyberbullying to spike as well, says Thierry Guedj, associate director of BU's Faculty & Staff Assistance Office. *Photo by Kalman Zabarsky*

[Faculty & Staff Assistance Office](#) (Link: /fsao/), a confidential campus resource that offers free counseling and referral services for University employees. Guedj, a Metropolitan College adjunct assistant professor of psychology, who specializes in children's and family issues, has had to educate himself about online harassment as more victims are finding their way to his door. With the number of online users exploding, he says, the phenomenon is expected to only get worse.

"Technology is at the crossroads with behavioral health," Guedj says. "Whether it's a dating site, MySpace, or a professional networking site, there are individuals who are vulnerable, such as teenagers, to what other people think of them. And there are people who are more on the antisocial side of things, who enjoy hurting and exploiting people. These people are dangerous — in the workplace and in the schools — and can do a lot of damage."

Bostonia asked Guedj what victims of cyberbullying can do if they are attacked, and how to avoid becoming a target in the first place.

Cyberbullying: it's not just a teenage battlefield anymore.

Last November, a 49-year-old Missouri woman was convicted on [charges related to a case](#) (Link: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/27/us/27myspace.html?ref=todayspaper>) in which she created a fake [MySpace](#) (Link: <http://www.myspace.com/>) persona to dupe her daughter's middle school nemesis, who later committed suicide. Colorado prosecutors recently used 19th-century libel statutes to pursue a [criminal case](#) (Link: <http://coloradoindependent.com/16411/craigslist-nastygram-results-in-libel-charge-for-jilted-loveland-man>) against a 40-year-old man who posted defamatory comments about his ex-girlfriend on [Craigslist](#) (Link: <http://www.craigslist.org/about/sites>). Teachers have found themselves on the receiving end of smear campaigns on [Facebook](#) (Link: <http://www.facebook.com>) and [RateMyProfessors.com](#) (Link: <http://ratemyprofessors.com>), a popular Web site where college students dish about their instructors — from workloads to teaching styles to the flattering cut of their jeans.

BU students and professors are not immune, says Thierry Guedj (GRS'01), associate director of the [Faculty](#)

Bostonia: The increased media attention would suggest a spike in online harassment. Is the Internet creating more bullies?

Guedj: I think it's a pathology that used to take other forms. If online aggression were not an option, people would find other ways to be aggressive. It's just a new way of doing business except that the Web offers the sense of anonymity and almost unlimited power. If you're unseen, you feel invulnerable. You think you cannot be found out. People feel much more at ease displaying aggressive behaviors when they don't see the person they're hurting. There's this sense of objectification of the victim, which is very easy to do online, but a lot harder to do in person.

Middle-schoolers and teens tend to be seen as the primary perpetrators and victims. How is this playing out among college students?

I've seen it more on the high school level, but both in high school and in college, there's been a lot of cyberbullying around sexuality and spreading rumor and gossip, particularly about the sexual promiscuity of certain individuals.

Any advice for parents who suspect their children are being harassed?

Often, for kids who are being attacked, there is a lot of shame associated. They already feel awkward. They're going to be afraid that if something happens online their parents are going to be mad at them. They're going to feel doubly victimized, first by the perpetrator, then by authority figures who don't respond in a kind, supportive way. I would really encourage students to immediately reach out to friends and family or professors or whoever is a resource. And to the people who are authority figures, I would encourage them not to be judgmental and to offer support and kindness rather than criticism.

What about online harassment in the workplace?

I've been in touch with several faculty members who have been cyberbullied through RateMyProfessors.com. Professors have been accused of things they didn't do, or their reputation has been sullied. One faculty member told me that a student had accused him of showing up high in class. Others have made veiled comments that a faculty member might be sexually harassing them. We had a case where a faculty member was harassing another faculty member by putting a bad rating on my RateMyProfessors.com. So there has been student-on-professor, and professor-on-professor harassment. It really hurts them badly when they read that about themselves online. People have become quite depressed about it.

What can someone do to combat this?

Typically, what I've advised people is to put it out in the open. For example, for a professor accused online, I would immediately tell them to speak with their department chairman and say that someone is spreading rumors about them online that are untrue, and that the chair and university authorities should be aware and hopefully launch an investigation into who is perpetuating these crimes or libel behaviors. For staff, the first thing is to immediately tell a supervisor, then seek help with the Faculty and Staff Assistance Office, and maybe get some legal assistance if they need to.

What moral or ethical responsibility do sites like Facebook, MySpace, and RateMyProfessors.com have when it comes to cyberbullying?

I can't comment on the legalities of their responsibilities. But their sense is that it's a first amendment issue and people should be able to say whatever they want, and it looks as though Web site owners can't

really be held liable for content that's being posted to their sites. But RateMyProfessors, for example, has created a new feature called "Professors Talk Back," which is a way for professors to respond to accusations or characterizations that they feel are unfair. That's the way some sites have dealt with it. They give a right of response to the aggrieved party.

Some prosecutors are dusting off archaic criminal statutes and finding other creative ways to confront cyberbullying. That seems to indicate that technology has far outpaced the means to combat its abuses.

That's a point I always make. Technology moves about 10 times faster than the legal process. Even in the rules process in business or academia, the technology is always at least 10 steps ahead. I don't see any solution to that. To be honest, I think technology is going to increase in speed of evolution, and there's absolutely no way anybody can keep up in the legal or business or academic community. What we can do is have general ethical rules about using media properly. But there's no way we can have specific rules for every technology and every new way of interacting socially online.

What's the most important things people should know about online communication and interactions?

Even though the Internet gives the illusion of anonymity or confidentiality or privacy, it's mainly an illusion. What I tell people about e-mail and Facebook and things like that is, if you don't want the world to see what you just wrote, don't write it. I tell people to act as if there was no privacy, because there is none. What the Internet gives is the illusion of privacy, but in fact it's the exact opposite. There is less anonymity and privacy than ever. Eventually, everything that gets written and communicated can be traced to its originator. If there's any sense that you make a communication that could be controversial, you should probably abstain.
