

Encyclopedia of  
**MEDIA VIOLENCE**

EDITED BY  
**MATTHEW S. EASTIN**  
*The University of Texas at Austin*

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only, cyber bully/victims experience even higher levels of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation and lower levels of self-esteem and physical health.

The long-term effects of cyberbullying appear to be as bad if not worse than those attached to traditional bullying. In comparing the effects of cyberbullying and traditional bullying, however, it is important to keep in mind that many of the individuals involved in one type of bullying are also involved in the other type of bullying. This is important for prevention and intervention efforts directed at cyberbullying. Parents, administrators, and school counselors working with students who are involved with either type of bullying should immediately inquire whether the students are also involved in any other type of bullying.

### Conclusion

In spite of conceptual and measurement issues that have plagued research on cyberbullying, as they do any relatively new research topic, the fact remains that cyberbullying is a problem among children and adults of all ages. The different venues by which cyberbullying can occur have presented problems in defining cyberbullying, but they present even more problems in the fact that they are ever-changing. This is confounded by the fact that the youth who are experiencing cyberbullying as either victims or perpetrators are digital natives who are trying to be helped by adults who are digital immigrants. This digital divide calls for the need for communication as everyone (e.g., students, teachers, administrators, parents, coworkers, supervisors, communities) works together to decrease the frequency with which cyberbullying occurs so that the negative effects stemming from it can be curbed.

*Robin M. Kowalski*

*See also* Aggressive Behavior; Bullying, Definition and Laws; Cyberbullying, Violent Content in; Cyberbullying Laws; Internet Violence, Influence on Society

### Further Readings

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## CYBERBULLYING, VIOLENT CONTENT IN

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Cyberbullying moves traditional bullying activities into the digital realm and adds new forms of aggression to the bully arsenal. It has become a significant issue for technology-savvy children and adolescents. This entry focuses on violent content in cyberbullying. It begins by defining cyberbullying and describing types of violent cyberbullying. It then gives specific examples of aggressive acts in high-profile cyberbullying cases before shifting to a review of research on the prevalence of different forms of cyberbullying.

### Definition and Types of Violent Cyberbullying

According to noted experts Sameer Hinduja and Justin Patchin (2009), cyberbullying is defined as willful and repeated harm inflicted through electronic devices such as computers and cell phones. It may happen via e-mail or text messages, in chat rooms, on

websites or social networking services, and in online video games or other virtual worlds. The channel through which cyberbullying takes place may affect the types of violent content possible, ranging from text-only to richer forms of aggression such as photos and video. Although bullying was around long before computers and other newer media technologies, Hinduja and Patchin identify distinguishing characteristics of cyberbullying: it can be anonymous; there is less inhibition about doing it; it is largely unsupervised; and it can potentially go viral, with content rapidly spreading among a large number of people.

Several common types of cyberbullying content have been identified, many of which may involve violence. Violent types of cyberbullying include the following:

*Flaming*, an Internet term for the communication of hostile or insulting messages online. This form of verbal aggression typically occurs without provocation in public forums such as chat rooms and discussion boards simply to personally attack an individual and/or incite his or her emotions.

*Photoshopping* (a reference to the Adobe Photoshop program), which, in the context of cyberbullying, involves modifying images or photos of a victim in a manner that embarrasses or otherwise harms him or her. This is often done by placing a photo of a person in some other environment or on another body. It could also extend to the doctoring of a photo to make it seem like a cyberbullying victim was the target or perpetrator of some violent act(s). For example, a victim's photo could be modified to make it look like he or she was beat up (such as through the addition of blood or bruises), or a gun or other weapon could be added to a victim's photo to make it appear as if he or she is violent.

*Happy slapping* (a term that originated in the United Kingdom) refers to an assault against an unsuspecting victim that is recorded (usually with a cell phone camera) and shared online. As noted by Hinduja and Patchin, happy slapping links traditional bullying with cyberbullying, since it entails physical, real-world abuse by a bully against a victim (as in traditional bullying) that is captured in digital form. The resultant photo or video can then be sent to others online, a phenomenon that has been enabled by sharing sites such as Facebook and YouTube.

*Impersonation* as a form of cyberbullying entails assuming the online identity of a victim (such as a

Facebook or Twitter account with their name) and posting false, embarrassing, or incriminating information that appears to have come from them. This can be done by hacking into an account of a victim or creating a fake account under the victim's name.

*Bombing* involves using an automated computer program to send thousands of messages at the same time to a victim's e-mail account, causing it to fail or be disabled. As noted by researchers Esther Calvete, Izaskun Orue, Ana Estevez, Lourdes Villardon, and Patricia Padilla, this is a form of aggression with no parallel in traditional bullying. It could extend to other forms of malice by cyberbullies intended to disrupt the ability of a victim to use devices or applications.

*Physical threats*, finally, encompass any online activities by bullies that involve threatening a victim's safety or well-being. Physical threats are one of the most obvious forms of violent cyberbullying, and according to Hinduja and Patchin, it is the type of violent content online that warrants immediate attention from authorities, in the wake of high-profile incidents like the 1999 shootings at Columbine High School near Littleton, Colorado. Hinduja and Patchin reported that Columbine shooter Eric Harris threatened in a web diary to "kill and injure as many of you pricks as I can" (a blatant example of a physical threat) before the eventual attack on his classmates and teachers. Although reported by a parent months before the shootings, law enforcement officials failed to act on this evidence, something they would be much more likely to do today.

These represent specific types of cyberbullying, although there may be more. In a 2009 study reviewing the literature on cyberbullying, Heidi Vandebosch and Katrien Van Cleemput took a slightly different approach to characterizing content in cyberbullying. They first considered characteristics of traditional bullying and then extended them into similar and new bullying activities online. According to the authors, traditional bullying is direct and involves physical abuse such as punching. It can also be direct through property damage, verbal and nonverbal abuse, and social exclusion. Cyberbullying also has direct, physical forms, but in the digital world. Property damage can occur through bombing or sending viruses. Verbal abuse occurs through flaming. Nonverbal abuse may happen through the transmission of threatening

images to a victim. And social exclusion may happen through exclusion from online groups. In addition, Vandebosch and Cleemput suggested that cyberbullying has indirect forms with no parallel in traditional bullying. These include (a) "outing" of entrusted information sent via e-mail or through some other private digital channel; (b) "masquerading," which is similar to what others have called impersonation; (c) spreading gossip through digital channels; and (d) taking part in an defamatory polling websites, such as those that ask to rate the attractiveness of victims. Within Vandebosch and Cleemput's typology, direct bullying forms (both real world and virtual) would be more likely to include violent content or be considered violent.

### Case Examples of Violent Cyberbullying

To get a clearer picture of what particular types of violent content in cyberbullying look like, it is helpful to review case examples. These specific incidents also provide a depth of understanding concerning the phenomenon of cyberbullying in general. Since the advent of the Internet, several cases of cyberbullying have become high profile as a result of news media coverage. This section describes some of these incidents, with an emphasis on the violent content in them.

One of the most infamous examples of cyberbullying is the 2006 case of 13-year-old Missouri student Megan Meier. This incident included impersonation of a different type—the bully was a friend's mother (Lori Drew), who posed as a 16-year-old boy named Josh Evans on the social networking site MySpace. "Evans" befriended Meier before turning against her and becoming hostile. One of "his" last messages to her read, "You are a bad person and everybody hates you. Have a shitty rest of your life. The world would be a better place without you." Meier responded with "You're the kind of boy a girl would kill herself over." She committed suicide by hanging 20 minutes later. This incident received widespread attention and resulted in legislation against using the Internet for harassment.

Further examples of violent content are described on Drew Jackson's cyberbullying resource website. Lauren Newby, a Texas teen, was bullied by a former classmate on a web message board in 2001. An entire page on the site had the violent phrase "Die bitch queen!" repeated hundreds of times. Another post made fun of her multiple sclerosis by saying, "I guess I'll have to wait until you kill yourself which I hope is not long from now, or I'll have to wait until

your disease [M.S.] kills you." She was also called "a fat cow MOO BITCH" on the site, and this act of aggression escalated into offline violence. "MOO BITCH" was written in shaving cream outside of her house, and a bottle filled with acid was thrown at her front door.

In another incident from 2002, Canadian teen David Knight discovered that an entire website had been created to make fun of him. Visitors were asked to post comments against Knight and even his family, which resulted in pages of hateful comments. He was accused of being a pedophile and of using a date rape drug on young boys. E-mails were also directed at him, saying things like "You're gay, don't ever talk again, no one likes you, you're immature and dirty, go wash your face." A similar website was created in 2003 to insult and threaten a teen in England named Jodi Plumb. It made fun of her weight and even posted a date for her "death." A Michigan teen named Amanda Marcuson was bullied by classmates in 2004 after reporting them for stealing her makeup in class. She was called names via an instant messaging program when she got home, including "stuck up bitch." The bullying continued into the evening, and she was bombed by hostile messages on her cell phone while out, filling it to capacity.

Additional examples of violent content are spotlighted by Hinduja and Patchin in their book *Bullying Beyond the Schoolyard: Preventing and Responding to Cyberbullying* (2009). For example, a hate website was created by students in New Jersey in 2004 naming a school's "top five biggest homosexuals" and the "top 20 gayest guys and gayest girls." In another case from 2006, a seventh grader received e-mails threatening physical violence against her and family members because of their race. One line from a message read "all I got to say is that you better watch every move you make N\*\*\*\*\* and you can tell your older sister[s] the KKK will be after them [too] B\*\*\*\*\*." In an example of happy slapping, six teenage girls were arrested in 2008 for kidnapping and assault after shooting a video of themselves beating up a female classmate. They intended to post the video online, in response to supposed negative comments made about them by the victim on MySpace.

### Research on Cyberbullying Content

Although case examples give a depth of perspective on cyberbullying and help to humanize its victims, research on the phenomenon in general is also important to help gain a sense of the bigger

picture. Almost all cyberbullying studies to date have involved surveys of young people designed to profile bullies and victims and document the prevalence and consequences of cyberbullying. Few (if any) content analyses have been done of cyberbullying, presumably because of difficulties with pooling a sample of such messages together. However, some surveys have asked young people about the types of cyberbullying they have experienced, and this is currently the best evidence available (beyond case examples) for general characteristics of violent content in cyberbullying.

In one of the largest and most relevant studies to date (published in 2010), Esther Calvete and colleagues surveyed 1,431 Spanish adolescents between the ages of 12 and 17 about cyberbullying behaviors. The researchers found that 44.1% of respondents engaged in at least one form of cyberbullying. Intentional exclusion from an online group was the most common type (20.2%), followed by posting negatives about a classmate on the Internet (20.1%), sending a link of such comments to others (16.8%), and hacking to send e-mails that could cause trouble for a classmate (18.1%). Note that these are not particularly violent forms of cyberbullying. Of the violent types described earlier, happy slapping was most common. The researchers uncovered two specific types of happy slapping: (1) videos of forcing others to do humiliating things (e.g., “cutting off the leg of a chair so they will fall when they sit and then recording them” or “making someone sing silly and then sending the video”) (10.4%) and (2) videos of hitting or hurting another person (e.g., kicking a classmate or vagabond) (10.5%). Approximately 11% of respondents also reported sending happy slapping videos to others. Other violent or aggressive types of cyberbullying reported include sending threatening or insulting messages via e-mail (15.8%), sending threatening or insulting messages via cell phone (15.7%), and sending messages massively that include threats or are very intimidating (9.2%). Overall, boys displayed more cyberbullying behaviors than girls, with the differences most pronounced for happy slapping.

Vandebosch and Van Cleemput surveyed 2,052 primary and secondary school students (ages 10–18), with the goal of profiling bullies and victims of cyberbullying, in Belgium in 2005 for a study published in 2009. They also asked about the prevalence of what they called “potentially offensive Internet and mobile phone practices,” or POP. The most frequent POP respondents reported being victimized by were threats or insults via e-mail or mobile phone

(33.7%). Vandebosch and Van Cleemput conducted their research before the ascension of social media, however, which somewhat limits the generalizability of their findings today.

Dorothy Wunmi Grigg studied cyberbullying through focus groups and individual interviews in a study published in 2010. Her British sample included a total of 32 primary school students, secondary school students, and adult participants (ages 8–54). All participants were asked open-ended questions related to cyberbullying. Results of thematic and interpretative phenomenological analyses revealed that the concept of cyberbullying may not capture the range of violent activities happening online, including those without repetition or imbalance of power as in many conceptualizations of cyberbullying. Grigg therefore suggests using a new concept, “cyber-aggression,” to account for more types of violent online activity. Cyber-aggression would encompass all intentional harm inflicted through electronic means on a person or group (of any age) who perceive such activities as offensive, derogatory, harmful, or unwanted. This offers a broader approach to considering violent content online.

In *Bullying Beyond the Schoolyard: Preventing and Responding to Cyberbullying*, Hinduja and Patchin review the self-report studies conducted on cyberbullying before the publication of their book in 2009. In their most recent survey up to that point, of 1,963 middle school students in the United States, they found that 43% of respondents said they had experienced one or more of the following in the past 30 days: receiving an e-mail or instant message that made them upset, having something posted on their MySpace profile or a website that made them upset, being made fun of in a chat room, having something posted online that they didn’t want others to see, or being afraid to go online. Their findings show that nearly half of respondents had an online experience that might be considered cyberbullying. The authors also charted several published studies of cyberbullying (by themselves and other authors) from 2002–2008 with percentages of adolescents in each who (a) reported being cyberbullied and (b) reported cyberbullying others. Both charts reveal a positive linear trend, suggesting that the problem of cyberbullying is getting worse over time.

### Future Research

Much has been learned about cyberbullying through research, but more studies are needed, in particular

content analyses. The research just reviewed gives some insight into cyberbullying content, but because it relies on self-report methods such as surveys and focus groups it may be missing some important aspects of cyberbullying messages, especially those related to violence. Content analyses can overcome the problems inherent in self-report techniques and provide a more accurate description of the form and content of violent cyberbullying messages, assuming a representative sample can be collected.

The international nature of cyberbullying research remains a strength and perhaps a weakness of this area of study. Because cyberbullying studies have been conducted in many different countries, it seems clear now that the problem exists all over the world. But this also raises questions about potential cultural differences in cyberbullying. Are patterns the same from nation to nation? To what extent do results in one country translate to others? Future research should compare cyberbullying across cultures and also document the prevalence and purveyors of cyberbullying in particular nations, such as the United States (where surprisingly little inquiry into cyberbullying has happened to date).

Cyberbullying research must also keep up with new technologies and applications, such as social media. As technologies and programs change, so may cyberbullying. Technological advancement even has the potential to alter some of the types of violent cyberbullying described earlier in this entry. For example, Photoshopping may become more video based as special effects software becomes more accessible and easy to use. Virtual (or computer-generated) representations of a victim might also be constructed and violently assaulted by bullies in purely digital form. This is already possible to an extent through avatar creation programs in video games, raising concerns about the potential for this kind of technology to be harnessed for the purpose of cyberbullying. As young people spend more of their lives online, bullies will likely find new ways to harass the digital selves of users, as they already have during the infancy of the Internet. Research in general can illuminate the problem of cyberbullying over time and help direct efforts at combating this pernicious new form of media violence. Automated computer content analysis programs could potentially be used to detect high-risk violent messages from cyberbullies and victims to prevent escalations of violence in the real world.

*Paul Skalski and Julie Cajigas*

*See also* Cyberbullying, Definition of; Cyberbullying, Effects of; Cyberbullying Laws

### Further Readings

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## CYBERBULLYING LAWS

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With the advent of cybertechnologies, cyberbullying—bullying through electronic means—among children and youth has emerged as an issue of concern among youth, parents, educators, members of the media, and policy makers at the state and federal levels. Since 1999, legislators in nearly all states have passed laws addressing bullying, and many of these laws specifically address cyberbullying. These laws typically require that school districts develop policies to address bullying at school. In addition to these state anti-bullying laws, there are constitutional issues and other federal and state civil laws that affect how school personnel address bullying. There also are federal and state criminal laws that may criminalize some behaviors that are viewed as cyberbullying.

### State Laws on Bullying and Cyberbullying

State laws on bullying did not exist prior to 1999. In the wake of the shootings at Columbine High School near Littleton, Colorado, there was a flurry of activity among state legislators, and within eight years, 30 states had passed laws on bullying. By 2012, 49 states had passed such laws. Laws addressing cyberbullying appeared somewhat later. In 2007 only five states had passed laws that explicitly addressed