

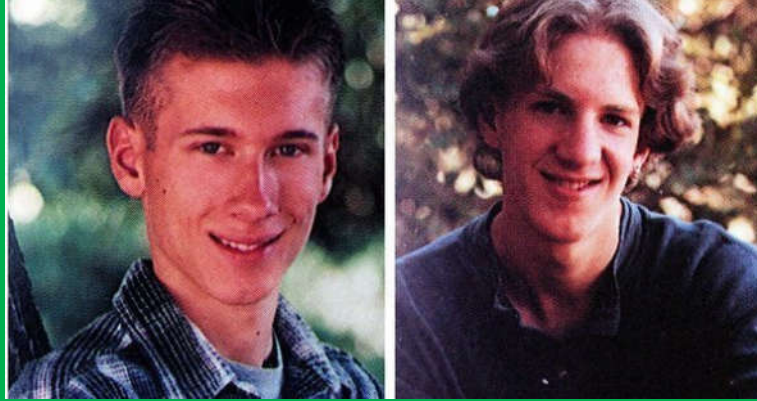


Good morning

In the next half an hour I would like to consider the special features of cyberbullying and how modern online communications methods have facilitated the rise in this form of bullying, and how people whom you would never associate with any kind of bullying get drawn in and become complicit in practising it – often without realising how they became involved. And then this afternoon, I would like to use my workshop to consider how we can all work to eliminate this from Church, and other environments.

After the conference, I will be putting my slides online on the Abel website complete with my notes – I have put a lot of references to documents you can download to read further so hopefully you don't need to take too many notes.

**20 April 1999
Columbine High School**



**Eric Harris
Dylan Klebold**

Cyberbullying is not that new.

In 1999 on April 20th, a 17-year old Eric Harris and an 18-year old Dylan Klebold walked into Columbine High School with a variety of weapons and started killing staff and students. 12 students and 1 teacher were killed and 24 people were injured. Eric and Dylan committed suicide. Investigation later showed Harris and Klebold were subjected to constant bullying, which greatly contributed to their decision to enter their high school and open fire. Investigations showed that school staff were well aware that these two young men were being regularly bullied – but their response had been “Don’t worry man, it happens all the time”.

**2007
Missouri**



Megan Meier

2007 Megan Meier Case – Missouri 15 years old who was very connected to internet. Became the target of personal attacks and insults which drove her to commit suicide. She was fooled into forming a deep friendship on the internet with a non-existent boyfriend who had been created in order to harm her by sending cruel messages. She received a hurtful bullying message on the internet, went up to her room and hanged herself. The perpetrator, a local man who had a grudge against her family, was identified. No criminal charges were ever brought.

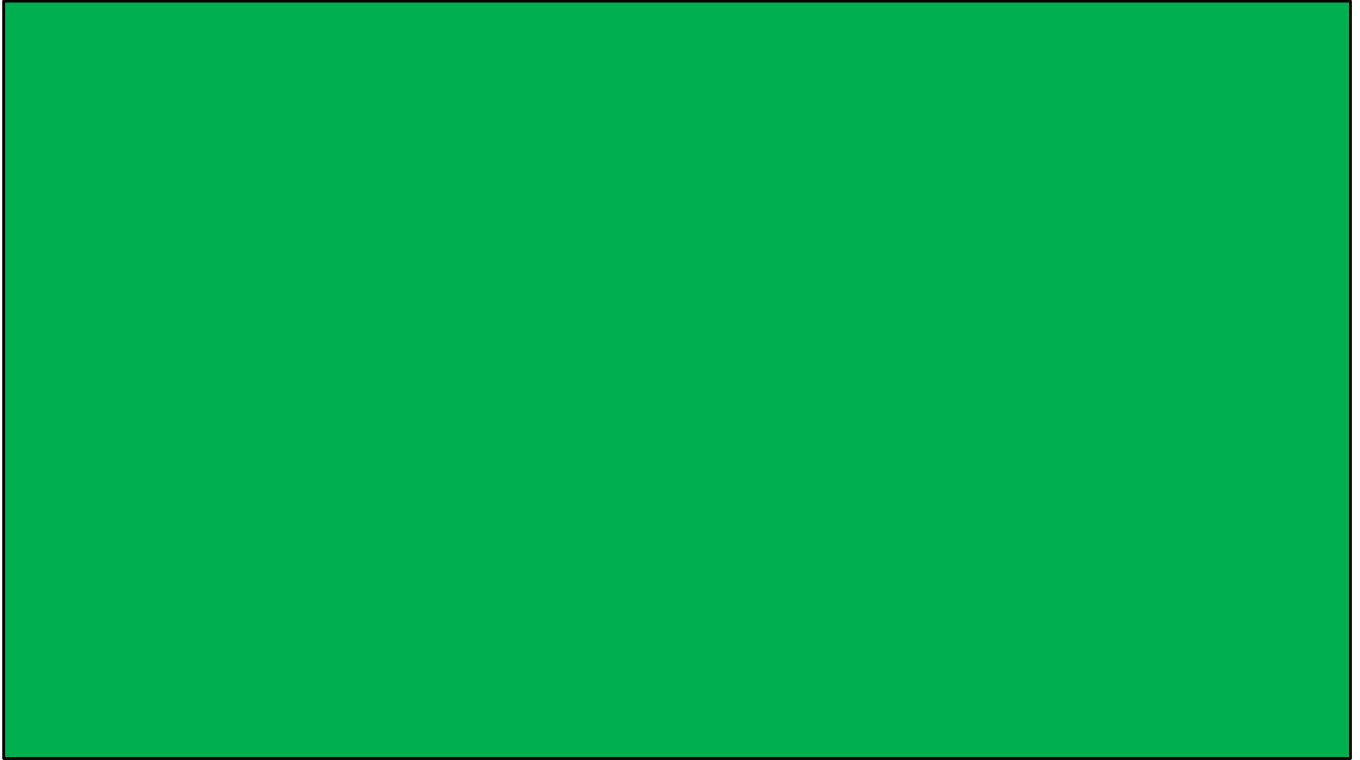
24 May 2022

Robb Elementary School, Tx



Salvador Ramos

And now we have the terrible events of last week in Texas where a young man called Salvador Ramos was being repeatedly bullied for his clothing and an impediment in his speech, bought two rifles and went to an elementary school and in all killed or wounded 37 people.



These incidents all involve **young** people being bullied via the internet and there is a false impression that this is a problem limited to young people.

Research on the cyberbullying on adults is quite limited since most research into the topic has relied on interviewing university students on their experiences at school or college.

Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union

- 2009 Study
- 103 randomly selected members
- 34% of respondents bullied
- 10.7% cyberbullied
- All targets of cyberbullying also bullied

However, a small study by the AMWU using a randomly selected survey population of their members identified that over 10% of respondents had experienced cyberbullying

University of Christchurch, NZ

- 2019 Survey of Adult Cyberbullying
- 20,000 respondents
- 15% at least once in their lifetime
- 2% during the last month

10 years later, a much larger study performed by the University of Christchurch New Zealand showed that 15% of respondents had been cyberbullied at least once, and that 2% had been cyberbullied within the past month.

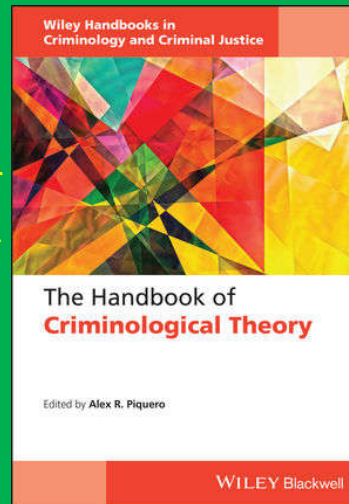
Cyberbullying

- Anonymity for the bully
- Greater impact from an individual act
- Longevity of the act
- Stimulus for Mob Behaviour
- Social Learning Theory
- Learn
- Imitate

Bullying of any kind is a deviant behaviour. Deviance is defined as “any behaviour that the majority of a given group regards as unacceptable or that typically evokes a collective response of a negative type” The key things which make cyberbullying different from conventional physical or verbal abuse is the level of anonymity which the use of the internet makes possible, coupled with the abuser’s ability to achieve a greater impact from their actions. Cyberbullying tends to create mob behaviours, inciting people to join in - despite this apparently being an abnormal and deviant behaviour for them. This is referred to as the Social Learning Theory because people learn and imitate the behaviours of others around them.

Handbook of Criminological Theory 2016

- Professor Ronald Akers
- Professor Wesley Jennings
- “People generally more likely to engage in deviant behaviour when they associate with others who promote, favour of justify its use”
- “Level of imitation is in direct proportion to the extent to which is it condoned or unpunished”

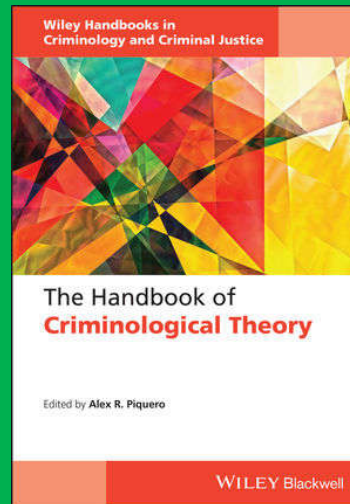


Professors of Criminology Ronald Akers and Wesley Jennings examined this in the Handbook of Criminological Theory published in 2016. In summary, they suggest that people are generally more likely to engage in deviant or criminal behaviour when they associate with other people who promote and favour behaviour of this type and offer justifications for its use.

So if deviant behaviour is either condoned or goes relatively unpunished, it is more likely to be imitated

Handbook of Criminological Theory 2016

- Differential Association
- The greater the exposure, the greater the level of adoption.



This is sometimes referred to as “differential association” because individuals see a particular behaviour as being effective or uncondemmed. And the more someone is exposed to it, the more likely they are to adopt it. In other words, it is a cancer which can spread through an organisation unless it is treated very quickly. One or two deviant individuals can quickly corrupt an entire organisation.

Social Learning Theory in Practice

Let me give you an example of this from real-life. In 2020 an online PCC meeting was organised in a church during the Covid quarantine period with everyone joining on Zoom.

An attempt was made to prevent the Churchwarden from joining the meeting by not letting them out of the Zoom Waiting Room because one vociferous individual objected to them being present. That individual managed to delay the start of the meeting for almost 15 minutes while an argument raged about whether to admit the warden, who was of course legally entitled to be there and who had done nothing wrong apart from to support the Rector in a local matter.

People who clearly felt that this was an incorrect action were unable to prevail over one or possibly two loud individuals who were experienced at bullying people.

Amongst those present at the meeting were an engineer, a solicitor and a journalist, otherwise decent, highly respectable people entrusted with the running of a church, all of whom would have described themselves as faithful Christians.

And yet they shrank from standing up for what was clearly the proper thing to do until one person found the courage to speak up and then other voices joined them

This an excellent example of Social Learning theory and how quickly it can undermine the integrity of an organisation but also how quickly it can be used to restore it.

4 Factors influencing Social Learning

1. Differential Social Organisation –
Common Group Characteristics
2. Differential Location within a Social Structure:
 - Group memberships
 - Status of group in community
 - Complex membership rules
 - Secrecy of membership

Professor Akers identified 4 factors influencing the social learning of deviant behaviours:

Differential social organization – the common characteristics of a group. Churches tend to have closely-knit groups with many things in common. Age, socio-economic grouping, cultural or educational background are all uniting factors. I live in Europe where expatriate groups tend to be very closely-linked owing to their common language which differs from that around them. There are so many jokes and comedies about groups of English expats on the Costa del Somewhere, but in ministry it is visibly true in many places.

Differential location within a social structure – i.e. membership of groups, their statuses and roles within a wider community can have a major impact on an individual's social learning. Membership of Golf Clubs, Art Groups, even church choirs or bible study groups can facilitate social learning. If the group operates behind complex membership rules or any degree of secrecy about membership, it can enhance the process of social learning every easily. This takes one to the third factor:

4 Factors influencing Social Learning

3. Theoretical Structural Variables

Social disorganisation

Conflict

Other inequalities

4. Differential Social Location within Group

Personal status within the group

Leadership by poor example

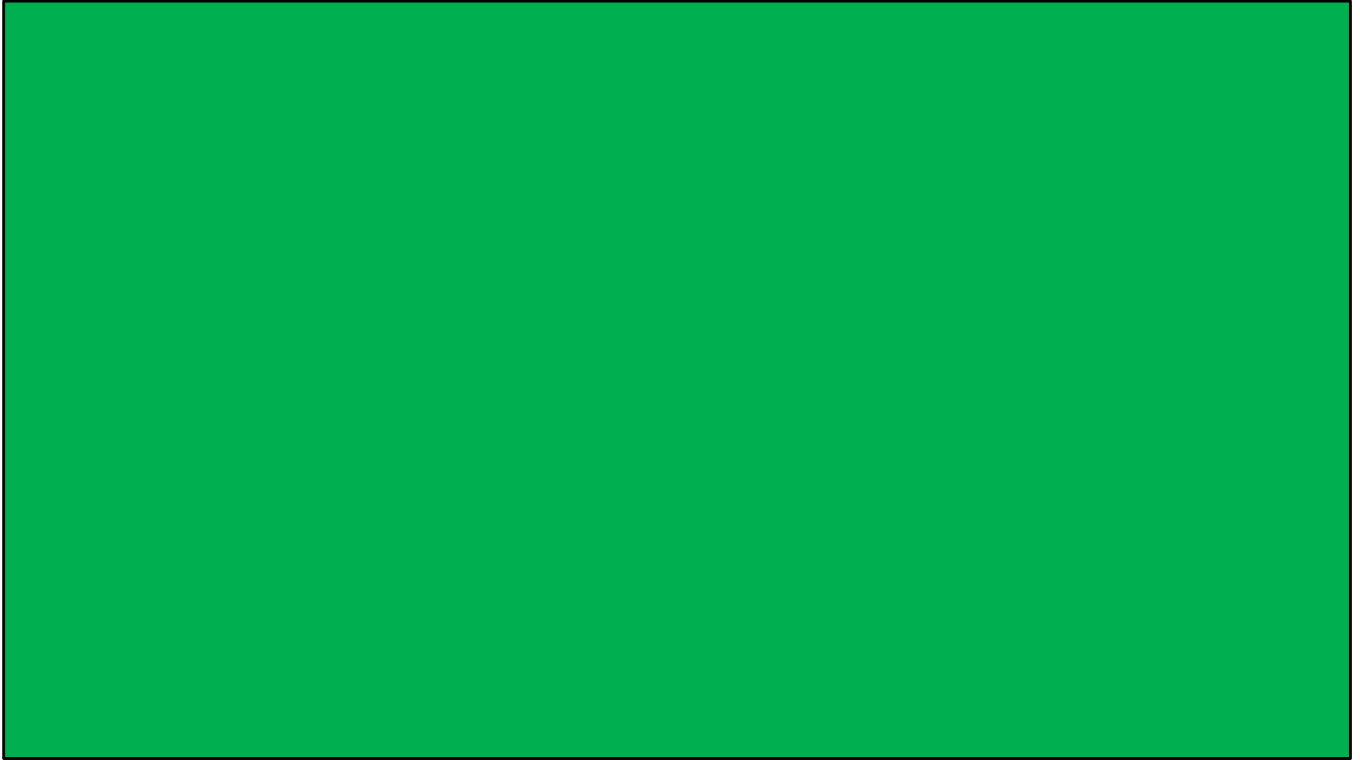
Peer pressure

Fear of group rejection

Fearful compliance => Natural behaviour

Theoretical Structural Variables – Weaknesses and flaws within an organisation can promote deviant behaviour. If a group is already experiencing disorganisation or even internal conflicts, deviant behaviour can creep in and will quickly be adopted as a behavioural norm. In a Church where there are already any kind of problems, bullying can easily gain a hold because the normal controls which would prevent this are already weakened or ineffective.

Finally, there is the issue of Differential Social Location within a group itself – the size, organisation and power structures of the group, together with an individual's personal position within that group can increase peer pressure. This is especially true if the deviant behaviour is being driven from a senior or influential position. Fear of group rejection driven by the leadership can accelerate the social learning, and what starts out as fearful compliance can quickly become natural behaviour since it goes unchallenged.



So – that in general terms is how deviant behaviour can be propagated. Now, what has the internet done to facilitate this ?

Cyberbullying

- Professor Susan Limber:
- Cyberbullying vs Cyberharrassment vs Cyberstalking
- **Cyberbullying:** “Cyberbullying generally refers to deliberate and hostile behaviour intended to harm people using the Internet by leveraging the imbalance of power between bullies and victims. Cyberbullying tends to be viewed as repeated behaviour.

I will start with definitions around cyberbullying offered by Professor of Psychology Susan Limber, who has proposed 3 different behaviours

Cyberbullying
Cyberharrassment and
Cyberstalking

Cyberbullying generally refers to deliberate and hostile behaviour intended to harm people using the Internet by leveraging the imbalance of power between bullies and victims. Cyberbullying tends to be viewed as repeated behaviour although this is potentially a flawed approach since the impact is experienced by the target from the first incidence, and cyberbullies may launch attacks at multiple targets.

<https://cyberbullying.org/what-is-bullying>
<https://cyberbullying.org/what-is-cyberbullying>

Cyberbullying

- **Cyberharrassment:** “repeated or one-off malicious Internet behaviours that are unsolicited but noticed by victims, which are intended to upset, disturb, or threaten other people”
- **Cyberstalking:** “series of repeated intrusive behaviours performed via the Internet, such as gathering private information or direct communication, that are intended to convey implicit and explicit threats and thus induce fear in online victims”

However, there is also *Cyberharassment*, defined as repeated or one-off malicious Internet behaviours that are unsolicited but noticed by victims, which are intended to upset, disturb, or threaten other people and *Cyberstalking* which generally refers to a series of repeated intrusive behaviours performed via the Internet, such as gathering private information or direct communication, that are intended to convey implicit and explicit threats and thus induce fear in online victims.

These are both just highly refined versions of cyberbullying, so I'll stick with that word for today.

Jaishankar's "Space Transition Theory"

- Persons with repressed criminal behaviour in physical space have a propensity to commit crimes in cyberspace that they otherwise would not commit due to their status and position.
- Identity flexibility, dissociative anonymity, and lack of deterrence factors in cyberspace may provide the offenders with the means to commit cybercrimes.
- Individuals from closed social groupings are more likely to commit crimes in cyberspace than individuals from open social groupings.
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Etip83zfPpw>

Supplementing this is Indian Criminologist Dr Karupannan Jaishankar's Space Transition Theory
Dr Jaishankar's talk on TED about this is very interesting and I recommend it to you
The theory proposes that people with criminal inclinations will often suppress them in the physical world for fear of being caught
But on the internet they can more easily conceal their identity, mix with a wider group of people and there are lower risks of being caught
Also, the less connected that people are to wide social groupings, the more likely they are commit socially deviant behaviour.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Etip83zfPpw>

Prof Paul Lowry Virginia Tech

- Anonymity
- The Internet enables “Diffused Responsibility”
- Efficiency of computers raised effectiveness of attacks

Professor Paul Lowry who is a Professor of IT at Virginia Tech, and is one of the most prolific publishers of papers on online deviance, online harassment and computer ethics has observed that the internet has enhanced the social learning model I have just described, by adding the opportunity for anonymity. There is overwhelming research evidence that people are more likely to adopt deviant behaviour online than offline.

The internet allows abusers to benefit from “diffused responsibility”, a distancing from their target, and the ability to hide personal accountability within a crowd.

And the Internet gives the ability to carefully target an individual with a high degree of certainty that a bullying attack will be successfully completed by the computer owing to the efficiency of the systems.

Akers - Differential Re-Inforcement

- The effect of observing positive and negative consequences for people who indulge in deviant behaviour:
- 4 Re-Inforcement Mechanisms
 - Positive Re-inforcement (behaviour brings rewards)
 - Negative Re-inforcement (absence of punishment)
 - Positive Punishment (actual punishment)
 - Negative Punishment (removal of rewards)

And so, given that deviant behaviour is generally learned by individuals from others, there is also the concept of 'differential re-inforcement' – the effect of observing the positive and negative consequences for others who engage in deviant behaviour.

Professor Akers proposes that there are 4 re-inforcement mechanisms which can encourage or discourage such behaviour. These are

Positive reinforcement – being rewarded in some way for a behaviour, including rewards or benefits of deviant behaviour.

Negative reinforcement – the removal of punishments.

Positive punishment – experiencing punishment and

Negative punishment – the removal of rewards.

Deterrence Theory

- Specific deterrence – the experience of punishment by the individual
- General deterrence – the experience of witnessing others being punished

In criminology this is expressed as deterrence theory – which comprises specific deterrence - the experience of punishment by the individual and general deterrence – the observed experience of others being punished.

Rational Choice Theory

- The economist's analysis to crime:
- Rewards of deviant behaviour vs possible costs
- Reduce rewards
- Increase costs

This is linked to Rational Choice Theory – otherwise known as “the economist’s analysis to crime” – in which the rewards of deviant behaviour are assessed against the possible costs.

So in order to combat deviant behaviour, we have to reduce the possible rewards while increasing the possible costs

Otherwise the more that people observe deviant behaviour being successful, the more likely they are to initially imitate it. How many times have we heard about youngsters having their first experience with alcohol, drugs or even shoplifting because they observe their peers acting in specific way without negative consequences.

The internet can skew the balance here by increasing potential rewards while reducing possible costs

<https://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=6670&context=jclc>

Right vs Wrong

- “Neutralisation Techniques”
- Deviant behaviour judged “acceptable under certain conditions”
- “Disinhibition” driven by anonymity and lack of negative punishment
- Diffuse Responsibility
- Lack of Proximity
- Lack of Knowledge of Others
- Confidence in the System

But what about people’s inherent sense of right and wrong ? Surely that should inhibit deviant behaviour ?

These can be overcome by what are known as ‘neutralization techniques’ in which a person accepts deviant behaviour as “all right under certain conditions”.

The rationalisation process is that the circumstances are exceptional and therefore an act which would otherwise be morally unjustifiable feel justifiable.

Everyone has social affiliations – the group of people with whom one normally mixes. These social affiliations tend to create behavioural norms

In cyberbullying, these can be replaced by ‘virtual affiliations’. Any sense of anonymity or the lack of negative punishment for deviant behaviour can contribute to

Disinhibition and also de-individualisation as one joins in a group behaviour which exaggerates the individual’s perception of reward.

And anonymity is not just about a deviant not being identified. It is about the the sense of diffused responsibility – if enough people commit a deviant act, no one individual can be selected for sanction or held accountable;

lack of proximity – no one else will see what a deviant is doing on their computer;

lack of knowledge of others – the deviant believes that other people who witness what they do will not know them well enough to be able to respond to them

and finally confidence in the system – that there will be no real-time monitoring or mechanisms to

moderate their behaviour or bring them to the attention of a system administrator.

Suler's Disinhibition Categories

- Benign vs Toxic Disinhibition
- Disassociative Anonymity (You don't know me)
- Invisibility (You can't physically see me)
- Asynchronicity (This is not happening now – stone over the wall)
- Solipsistic Introjection (I can't see these people)
- Dissociative Imagination (This is not the real world and I don't really know these people personally)
- Minimising Authority (No one will stop me)

Professor of Cyberpsychology John Suler has coined the phrase Disinhibition Categories to propose that people conduct themselves differently online to in the real world.

He has compared Benign Disinhibition, where people are more open about sharing information about themselves and will undertake great acts of care and kindness for almost complete strangers – look at how Go Fund Me has sprung up and how generous people can be to complete strangers to Toxic Disinhibition where people's online behaviour goes into darker places.

And he has also proposed that a sense of anonymity can encourage people to behave badly

There is Disassociative Anonymity (No one knows who am I, or even if they do, they can't reach back to me)

Invisibility (No one can see how you are reacting or behaving as you write something)

Asynchronicity (There is no real-time reaction. A malicious e-mail is sent but takes time to arrive and this delay reduces any sense of the consequence of a deviant act. It is a bit like ringing a doorbell and running away before the owner gets to the door)

Solipsistic Introjection (How often do we imagine conversations in our heads) and we allow what is going on in our heads to get out into the real world, so you do say the nasty things you fantasised about saying

Dissociative Imagination - People think that they can walk away from what they did on a computer because it isn't the real world and there is no sense that any actions taken on the internet have any impact on the real world.

Minimising authority – there is no sense of being subject to disapproval or liable to sanction

<https://truecenterpublishing.com/psycyber/disinhibit.html>

Online vs Offline Personality

- Rationalisation of a separation of online and offline activities
- Averts sense of responsibility for deviant online behaviour
- Suspension of Moral Cognitive Processes
- Anonymity => De-Individualisation
- Loss of self-awareness for actions
- Qing Li – “Playful disinhibition”

So in summary we find that the human mind is capable of rationalising major contrasts between the way they behave towards others online and in the real world and an individual can adopt two entirely different personalities.

The virtual world of the internet reduces a sense of guilt for bad behaviour

The normal moral cognitive processes which we apply in deciding on our behaviours involving decision-making, reasoning, emotion, and the heuristics, rationalizations, and biases that influence our moral behaviour can be distorted or even disabled when interacting on the internet

People can rationalise a separation of their online activities from their offline identities and so avert any sense of responsibility for deviant online behaviour. In effect, they “suspend their moral cognitive processes”. Anonymity also brings a sense of “deindividuation” which enables a person to lose their sense of self-awareness for their actions.

Professor Qing Li has suggested that computer-mediated communications can start by fostering playful disinhibition, which, unless moderated, can deteriorate as a person’s sense of social accountability reduces over time.

<https://esteemjourney.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Cyberbullying-in-Schools.pdf>

How to Address This

- Prevention and Deterrence
- Create Definitions
 - Positive
 - Negative
 - ~~Neutralising~~
- Reduce Disinhibition
- Positive and Negative Punishments
- Address Diffuse Responsibility and Social Accountability

So what can discourage cyberbullying ?

My proposal is that in the Church we have to build from the ground up, creating layers of prevention reinforced by layers of deterrence.

The first area for focus is the creation and application of “definitions” – orientations, rationalizations, definitions of the situation, and other evaluative and moral attitudes that define the commission of an act as right or wrong, good or bad, desirable or undesirable, justified or unjustified.

These come in 3 categories – positive, negative and neutralising.

Positive definitions generate approval or acceptance of deviant behaviour. Negative ones represent disapproval and neutral ones can result in behavioural justification which then become temporary positive ones.

Neutral definitions are the ones which are seen as permitting deviant behaviour under certain exceptional conditions.

Therefore deviants use neutralising techniques to characterise conditions as exceptional and justify their behaviour to both themselves and to others.

So the first thing to be done is to create and promote negative definitions of cyberbullying within our Church for the good of society as a whole as well as for our own worshipping communities.

I have referred in other research I have done to the creation of a non-triangulation covenant in which faith communities publicly commit themselves to reject certain types of behaviour.

Cyber-bullying should certainly become part of such a covenant.

This has to come from the very top of the Church and to be mirrored at every level.

Then we need to reduce the sense of disinhibition by education – by making people using systems under our control understand that there are serious consequences in the real world for deviant behaviour online.

The next step is harder.

The Church is institutionally reluctant to punish, especially parishioners and people who are volunteers, and there is a myth that there is no ability to create sanctions against laity.

But it is essential to apply differential re-inforcement using positive and negative punishments with cyberbullies.

Let us start with negative punishments – the removal of rewards. If the deviant is using any church resources for their cyberbullying – e.g. church-controlled email accounts or mailing lists or even the church news bulletins – immediately withdraw their permission to use them. If they hold positions of responsibility or authority within the Church, they must be immediately suspended from those positions. This not only reduces the risk of repetition of cyberbullying, but it also serves to assure the targets that the risk of a repetition is being mitigated.

Whether or not there is a need for a positive punishment will depend on individual circumstances. If one accepts that cyberbullying, or in fact any kind of bullying, is a safeguarding issue, then the Church of England already has well-defined risk management protocols which can include suspension from office. In the case of members of the Church who are subject to disciplinary or HR processes, these must of course be followed.

Moving further up the hierarchy, the Church must address the twin issues of 'diffuse responsibility' and 'social accountability'.

Because cyberbullying is frequently a group activity, it must be made clear that all members of a group of cyberbullies will all be expected to be held accountable for their actions.

Similarly, even if perpetrators are not publicly identified, Church authorities must make it clear to everyone that prompt, remedial action is being taken.

And the word prompt here is all-important. Cyberbullying can be a fast-spreading disease within any group and if not halted quickly, it can quickly become endemic.

Many people are drawn into participating in cyberbullying because of disinhibition, social learning and neutralisation.

Under other psychological and social conditions, they would not initiate such behaviours, and

would discontinue them if the negative stimuli were withdrawn.

Cyberbullying is generally regarded as a cowardly act perpetrated by people who lack the courage to physically confront someone or to have their actions witnessed by third parties. They fear the repercussions which might arise were they to be individually identified and associated with their actions. The reliance on anonymisation and diffuse responsibility demonstrates that the perpetrator internally acknowledges that the use of cyberbullying methods are a deviant behaviour and/or might expose them to social, criminal or other sanction.

So simply a commitment by an organisation to address cyberbullying seriously, to recognise it, to take technical measures to inhibit it and to identify and sanction the perpetrators may change the balance in the Rational Crime Theory and dissuade people from even participating in cyberbullying.

The Extra Steps for a Church

- Acknowledgement
- Repentance
- Atonement / Restitution
- Rehabilitation
- Reconciliation
- Review and improvement

But a Church has to go further.

In a company you simply sack an employee

You can prosecute in a really serious case

But a Church has a role to maintain and heal a community.

Both perpetrators and victims require ministry.

So there are extra steps to be taken:

Cyberbullying is sinful. There is no argument with that statement. The Church must therefore address its involvement in the commission of the sin if its systems, offices or structures are being misused to perpetrate it.

The Church of England has been widely criticised for its failure to adequately acknowledge and support the victims of wrongdoing and abuse. Given the deep physical harm that scientific research has repeatedly shown is done to people who are bullied, it is important that the Church of England not only takes this very seriously but will be pro-active and committed in addressing the sin.

Firstly, there must be acknowledgement to the target and to the community that the sin has occurred. Prayer for the target may offer much comfort as well as strengthening the community of faith's values and a determination to oppose it.

Then there must be repentance by the person who has sinned against the person targeted. There is an interesting theological issue here about how public any repentance should be. The answer suggested in Matthew 18:17 is that the repentance should be as wide as the knowledge of the original sin was – but no wider. This is not the typical behaviour of the Church.

“Having a quiet word” or “marking their card” is the often-adopted response of church managers.

But how effective are they when, as I have witnessed, someone sent out a Church newsletter to dozens of people containing an encouragement to shun, sent to Coventry, someone of whom they disapproved.

In that case, an Archdeacon with whom the matter was raised did nothing to retract or have an apology issued for the original act. They just ‘had a word’. There can therefore be no certainty of repentance in that situation.

Which brings us to atonement and restitution. Firstly, there must be some positive or negative punishment. For a person in a position of trust and authority, they must consider or have considered their suitability to hold that position. For clergy, the CDM exists. For Lay Readers and Lay Worship Leaders, Webmasters, Churchwardens and lay church officers the position is not so clear. Where someone holds a Permission to Officiate, the Bishop can remove it summarily. For other church officers, if one holds that cyberbullying can constitute a safeguarding matter then they can be suspended from that office or barred from office for a period of years

There may also need to be some form of restitution to the people targeted – this may only be restoring their reputation but it could be anything.

But then there need to be healing processes

Rehabilitation for the perpetrator

Trying to reconcile the parties so life can go on and finally

Looking at what went wrong, how it happened, and how the situation can be prevented from recurring

And now I want to leave you with one final thought.

Remember Vicarious Liability

'Employer vicarious liability' is essentially where an employer is held liable for the wrongful acts or unlawful conduct of an employee, **or by someone whose role is akin to that of an employee**, even where the employer has done no wrong itself.

Anyone in authority within an organisation must remember the principles of Vicarious Liability.

If someone uses a Church email or website to bully someone, or does so while acting in performance of their office – e.g. a PCC Member sending an e-mail round a Church mailing list, the Church itself could be held legally vicariously liable if their role is seen as being “akin to that of an employee”. And Churches with insurance may make much juicier targets for a nice lawsuit than an individual sitting in their own home sending nasty e-mails to someone.

And the church, as an institution, has a moral, as well as a legal duty, to protect its membership from this evil, which can corrupt and corrode our faith community and disrupt the fulfilment of Christ's Great Commission.