

Experts sound the alarm: “Cyberbullying is the ticking time bomb in the Internet”

An international trend: increasingly young victims, the workplace severely affected as well, schools facing increasing pressure, government challenged to react, the Internet industry to help with an SOS button

Berlin, 31 May 2016. Cyberbullying continues to advance in Germany and other countries as well. The erosion of personal rights in the Internet is accelerating rapidly. Neither in Germany nor elsewhere in the world is this trend attracting the attention it deserves in the form of preventive and corrective measures. Providers of social media platforms are also failing to meet their responsibility to provide adequate protection for the victims of bullying.

Thus reads a brief summary of the essential findings of the international ARAG Digital Risks Survey presented to the public in Berlin today. The views of leading international scholars from Great Britain, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Spain and the US on the consequences of cyberbullying are documented along with an assessment of the phenomenon and its future development in this first transnational trend study.

“The findings are alarming and cannot help but startle us all,” says Dr. Catarina Katzer, Director of the Institut für Cyberpsychologie and Medienethik in Cologne and the leading German expert on cyberbullying, who authored the study. “Cyberbullying threatens to become the time bomb of the Internet,” explains Catarina Katzer, “because children and adolescents are not the only people who are helplessly exposed to the phenomenon. More and more adults are now becoming victims of cyberbullying as well.”

Thus cyberbullying and cyber-violence have evolved from phenomena of youth culture into a social problem affecting all age groups. The scholars surveyed within the context of the ARAG Digital Risks Survey emphasize the growing threat of violation of personal rights in the Internet.

Dr. Dr. h.c. Paul-Otto Faßbender, CEO of ARAG SE, summarizes one of the key conclusions based on the findings published in the ARAG Digital Risks Survey in the following words: “Patterns of behaviour focused on the systematic violation of personal rights are demonstrated, learned and applied through cyberbullying and cyber-violence.”

The absence of digital empathy makes cyber-perpetrators strong, according to 88% of the experts surveyed. The behaviour patterns involved in bullying are practiced in the virtual realm and are very likely to be applied “offline” in real life later on.

Smartphones as digital weapons

Smartphones are the most commonly used cyberbullying tools in all of the countries represented by the experts surveyed in this study, and have contributed to a significant increase in the prevalence of cyberbullying attacks. Thus cyberbullying is becoming increasingly mobile, as 93% of the respondents confirm. The constant availability of these devices reduces the inhibition threshold significantly. Photos and downloaded videos reinforce the harmful impact and the psychological pressure. Thus researchers also refer to smartphones as “smart weapons.”

Children and adolescents are exposed to the severest risks / Victims of cyberbullying are growing progressively younger

Cyberbullying has a particularly aggressive impact on younger children. Substantial public exposure, the endless nature of attacks and the absence of safe havens result in severe injuries. 84% of the experts surveyed regard this as a virtual time bomb with incalculable potential effects. One out of every four school students in Germany has been a victim of cyberbullying at least once. Over 30% of all schools record a cyberbullying incident every week. The damage suffered by victims ranges from psychosomatic complaints to suicide attempts.

Insufficient prevention in schools and families

The efforts of German schools to educate students with regard to cyberbullying are inadequate. Only 16% of schools offer in-depth information about the dangers of cyberbullying to students. Institutional measures devoted to education and the prevention of cyberbullying as well as help systems are lacking at German schools all over the country.

Primary and comprehensive schools exhibit the lowest level of preventive activity, although such measures are needed most in these types of schools. The status of prevention efforts at schools is deficient on the whole in all of the countries surveyed. National action plans designed to combat cyberbullying in schools are in force only in Great Britain. Norway obligated schools to carry out prevention programs 10 years ago. The Dutch adopted this approach a year ago.

Thus nearly all experts (94 %) demand the application of a holistic approach to “prevention management” with nationwide structures and systems. “Schools are exposed to massive pressure and are more or less helpless in the face of this phenomenon,” says Dr. Katzer in emphasizing both the urgency and the necessity of a reassessment of policy by government, law enforcement and cultural authorities.

Business cyberbullying is increasing at an alarming rate

While the victims of cyberbullying grow younger and younger, on the one hand, cyberbullying is spreading progressively among adults, on the other – and with increasingly severe consequences. Based on the assumption of 5 to 6 days of absence from work due to illness resulting from anxiety, experts estimate total damages caused by business bullying and the consequential costs of illness at roughly three billion euros per year in Germany alone – and that figure is expected to rise. Over 90% of the scholars surveyed predict a progressive increase in business cyberbullying at the international level.

Requiring social media providers to install a mandatory SOS button

The scholars surveyed expressed an urgent appeal for a comprehensive catalogue of preventive measures. Protection for victims tops the list, however. According to the experts, people who feel helplessly exposed to attacks by cyberbullies should be able to access personal help with the aid of an SOS button, which social media platform operators would be obliged to install and finance.

Bullying incidents could also be reported to providers using the same button.



National prevention ranking: Great Britain in first place, Germany in the middle of the pack

If one were to prepare a national ranking list, Great Britain would appear as the unrivalled leader. The country appears to have made the most progress with respect to the status of prevention activities in schools, in particular. In terms of research, however, Great Britain and the USA are neck and neck – they have earned their reputations as pioneer nations in the field of research on cyberbullying, followed by Norway and Netherlands.



Yet despite its success in the field of research, the record of the USA in terms of prevention is still unsatisfactory. That explains why the USA ends up along with the Netherlands, which has been under obligation to implement a school prevention program since 2015, and Norway, where a bullying prevention program has been in force at school for the past 10 years, in second place.

Germany is ranked in the middle of the pack. In the field of research we are on a par with the USA, the Netherlands and Great Britain, but deficiencies and shortfalls abound when it comes to prevention. Poland, Italy and Spain lag far behind the other countries. In spite of good research results, the experts rank them at the bottom of the list when it comes to implementing preventive measures, establishing networks and developing tools for prevention.

A 10-point program should help alleviate the problem. Prevention and a “cyberbullying law” will play key roles

In addition to protection for victims, the participating experts appealed emphatically for the implementation of a catalogue of preventive measures. The essential elements of the catalogue include the mandatory obligation of schools to establish prevention programs (which has been the law in the Netherlands since 2015) and introduce regional networks of school in which schools collaborate in developing and implementing prevention concepts. The catalogue also calls for the enactment of a “cyberbullying law” which would cover business cyberbullying as well. Dr. Katzer’s appeal for social and political responsibility is expressed in the following words: “This is not the time to wait. This is the time for action.”

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