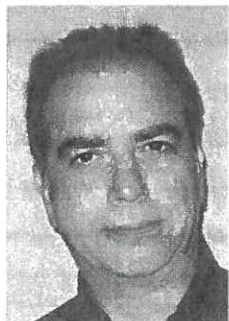


Support your conclusion with colorful descriptions of several ads. Make your descriptions detailed enough so that your readers can “see” the elements of ads you refer to. Be sure to focus on the parts of the ads that support the point you are trying to make. You could organize your essay by devoting a paragraph each to three significant ads. Or you could devote each support paragraph to one of several important points about the subject you’ve chosen. For instance, an essay about fathers helping at home might discuss child care, cleaning, and cooking. A paragraph on each of those topics might refer to two or more ads.



## How Can Cyberbullies Be Stopped?

*Social Networking Web Sites and Other Technologies  
Enable Schoolyard Bullies to Pack a Bigger Punch*

Thomas J. Billitteri

### PREVIEW

Thomas J. Billitteri is a journalist who has worked for the *Dallas Times Herald* and for *Florida Trend*, a business magazine. He has also written for a number of other publications including the *St. Petersburg Times* and *News Observer.com*. Billitteri is the author of two books for young adults: *Alternative Medicine* and *The Gault Case: Legal Rights for Young Adults*. Cyberbullying, the harassing of people through electronic communications devices, is a growing problem among people today. This article appeared in a local North Carolina newspaper on July 20, 2008.

The episodes are hurtful, ugly—and sometimes deadly. In Lakeland, Fla., 1 a group of teenagers records the beating of another teen. The local sheriff says the attack was in retaliation for online trash-talking by the victim.

At a high school near Pittsburgh, an anonymous e-mail list features sex- 2 ually explicit rankings of 25 female students, names and photos included.

In suburban Dardenne Prairie, Mo., near St. Louis, 13-year-old Megan 3 Meier hangs herself after receiving cruel messages on the social-networking site MySpace.

In Essex Junction, Vt., 13-year-old Ryan Patrick Halligan kills himself 4 after months of harassment, including instant messages calling him gay.

The cases, albeit<sup>1</sup> extreme, highlight what school officials, child psychol- 5 ogists, legal experts and government researchers argue is a fast-spreading epidemic of “cyberbullying”—the use of the Internet, cell phones and other digital technology to harass, intimidate, threaten, mock and defame.<sup>2</sup>

Studies show cyberbullying affects millions of adolescents and young 6 adults. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention last year labeled “electronic aggression”—its term for cyberbullying—an emerging public-health problem.

<sup>1</sup>albeit: although.

<sup>2</sup>defame: attack someone’s reputation.

A reliable profile of cyberbullying, a relatively new phenomenon, is difficult to construct. Studies leave little doubt, however, that cyberbullying is growing.

Some cyberbullies are angry loners, sometimes seeking revenge for having been bullied themselves. But experts say it is common for online abusers to be popular students who are trying to strengthen their place in the social hierarchy.

"It's not really the schoolyard thug character" in some cases, said Nancy Willard, executive director of the Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use, a research and professional development organization in Eugene, Ore. "It's the in-crowd kids bullying those who don't rank high enough."

What fuels cyberbullying is "status in schools—popularity, hierarchies, who's cool, who's not," said Danah Boyd, a fellow at the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard Law School who studies teens' behavior on MySpace, Facebook and other social-networking sites.

Of course, bullying itself is nothing new. What's new is the technology.

More than 90 percent of teens are online. More than half of online teens have profiles on social-networking sites.

The sites allow people to post personal facts, photos, gossip and other information for others to read. Social scientists say such sites can serve a useful, and even vital, purpose by helping adolescents build friendships, learn tolerance for others' views and form a sense of self-identity. But critics say the sites have the potential to be incubators<sup>3</sup> for abuse, magnets for sexual predators and embarrassing archives<sup>4</sup> of a student's immature behavior that college admissions officials or employers may wind up seeing.

The rise of Web sites brimming with the minutiae<sup>5</sup> of teen antics and angst has helped to create a rich climate for mayhem.<sup>6</sup> Locker-room photos snapped with cell phones and broadcast on the Internet, fake profiles created on social-networking sites, salacious<sup>7</sup> rumors spread in chat rooms, threats zapped across town in instant messages.

## States Step In

Cyberbullying has impelled lawmakers, especially at the state level, to either pass anti-bullying laws that encompass cyberbullying or add cyberbullying to existing statutes. Some laws are propelled by a mix of concern about electronic bullying and online sexual predators.

But using laws and courts to stop cyberbullying has been tricky and sometimes controversial. "There's a big conflict in knowing where to draw the line between things that are rude and things that are illegal,"

<sup>3</sup>incubators: places to aid the development of.

<sup>4</sup>archives: collections.

<sup>5</sup>minutiae: particulars.

<sup>6</sup>mayhem: chaos.

<sup>7</sup>salacious: sexually explicit.

said Parry Aftab, an Internet privacy and security lawyer who is executive director of wiredsafety.org, an Internet safety group in Irvington-on-Hudson, N.Y.

But the law on that question can be confusing, and the U.S. Supreme Court has yet to decide a case involving student Internet speech. Trying to regulate what students do or say on their home computers or in text messages sent from the local mall could wind up trampling students' constitutional rights or the rights of parents to direct their children's upbringing as they see fit, say free-speech advocates.

Still, many lawmakers are moving to add provisions to existing anti-bullying laws or writing new codes. Iowa, Maryland, Minnesota, New Jersey and Oregon have passed cyberbullying laws recently, and a number of other states are considering such statutes.

"Those who bully and harass stand in the way of learning and threaten the safety of our children," said Matt Blunt, the Republican governor of Missouri, after the state Senate passed a cyberbullying bill in March.

Legislators are overreacting, said the Berkman Center's Boyd. "These laws aren't doing anything. What we desperately need is education and discussion," along with greater attention from parents and other adults to the heavy pressures and expectations weighing on adolescents.

## Off School Grounds

Perhaps the most nettlesome circumstance is cyberbullying that is committed at home or the local mall or skating rink, but that nonetheless causes disruption at school.

"There's always the legal discussion of 'If it doesn't happen at school, can a district take action?'" said Joe Wehrli, policy services director for the Oregon School Boards Association. "If a student is harassed for three hours at night on the Web and they come to school and have to sit in the same classroom with the student that's the bully, there is an effect on education, and in that way, there is a direct link to schools."

But free-speech advocates say educators sometimes punish students whose speech is protected by the First Amendment.

"Off-campus behavior that is not connected to the school in any way—no use of school computers, no transmission of messages in school—is not within the purview<sup>8</sup> of school officials," said Joan Bertin, executive director of the National Coalition Against Censorship, an advocacy group in New York. "It may have some play-out within school, but the actual speech took place in a protected zone. The school can't go after the speech, but it can go after the behavior that occurs on campus" as a result of the speech.

An exception would be speech that constitutes a true threat, Bertin said, but true threats must meet a high standard. "A kid e-mailing another kid saying, 'I'm going to knock your brains out' or 'I wish this teacher were dead'—these are not, in my opinion, true threats."

<sup>8</sup>*purview*: scope or range.

## Teachers and Parents

Willard, at the Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use, advises educators to step in even when cyberbullying occurs away from school if the clear potential exists that it would affect students and the educational climate. Even so, she said, administrators' actions are important.

"They may impose discipline if . . . they're protecting the school's ability to deliver instruction, the security of students coming to school and [to avert] violence," she said.

When juveniles do commit serious online abuses, the question often arises: Where were the parents?

Shouldn't they be held accountable, or at least share the blame?

"The question isn't 'should,' the question is 'can,' and the answer is 'yes,'" Willard said. Under parental-liability<sup>9</sup> statutes or parental-negligence standards, parents may be held liable for the harm caused by their children, she said.

In the civil-litigation system, "financial consequences for cyberbullying are now serious enough to make even the most lenient parent of a bully sit up and take notice," Millie Anne Cavanaugh, a family law attorney in Los Angeles, wrote recently on the Web site of a group that provides programs for troubled adolescents. "In addition to liability against the cyberbully himself on theories such as defamation, invasion of privacy, disclosure of private information and intentional infliction of emotional distress, parents could now [be] held accountable for their child's cyberbullying if they failed to properly supervise the child's online activity."

Susan Limber, a Clemson University psychologist who studies bullying, said many adolescents in focus groups say parents and teachers don't seem to talk enough with them about online behavior. "Kids on the one hand say parents should be a little more involved," Limber said. "But as one kid said, they want supervision, not 'snoopervision.'"

In other words, Limber said, "They want appropriate rules, but they don't want parents poking into every last e-mail or text message. But that's a fine line."

Parents can have an especially difficult time keeping track of what adolescents are posting on social-networking sites. Some child advocates say parents should create their own accounts so they can monitor what their children are doing on the sites.

"Putting something on the Internet is a whole lot different than whispering it on the playground," said Witold "Vic" Walczak, legal director of the ACLU in Pennsylvania.

Many parents and other responsible adults often neglect to impart that message to youngsters.

Weiss, of Operation Respect, said engaging adolescents in "conversation around moral issues" like cyberbullying "is really important for kids" but that many adults—teachers among them—don't know how to do so.

"We're not having this conversation enough," he said. "If we did, it would be the strongest thing we could do."

<sup>9</sup>liability: legal responsibility.

3. Bullying has been around for a very long time, says Billitteri. What has made cyberbullying so popular—so much of a problem these days?
4. Why is it so hard to write and enforce laws against cyberbullying?
5. What can adults do to curtail the spread of cyberbullying?

## WRITING ASSIGNMENTS



### Assignment 1: Writing a Paragraph

Cyberbullying is only one way modern electronic technology can be abused. Can you name another? For example, doesn't talking on a cell phone while driving pose a driving hazard? Don't people who invent and spread computer viruses deserve punishment? What about students who forget to turn their cell phones off in class or who text their friends while the instructor is trying to get an important point across? And what should be done about telemarketers who disturb our quiet and even our sleep?

Write a paragraph in which you describe the abuse of a modern technological device, explain what harm it does, and suggest ways in which it can be stopped.



### Assignment 2: Writing an Essay

In this essay, cyberbullying is defined as an emerging health problem that is getting out of control. Read this essay again; then go online and do some more research about this activity. (You may refer to Chapter 20 for tips on researching.) What makes cyberbullying a health problem? In other words, in what ways does the practice threaten the health of young people?

Take notes on the ways in which cyberbullying threatens the physical, emotional, and/or moral health of young people. Also, find information to explain why a young person might be enticed into becoming a cyberbully.

Read over your notes and add to them if necessary. Next, construct an informal outline from your notes and use it as the basis of an essay that does two things:

1. Shows that cyberbullying is a symptom of moral decay in our society.
2. Explains the physical or emotional damage that it can inflict on both the victims of cyberbullying and on the bullies themselves.

You can conclude your essay in several ways. One of the most effective ways might be to explain what you think we should do to stop or curtail cyberbullying.



### Assignment 3: Writing an Essay

Most young people have no fear of death because they seldom remember that, like everyone else, they too shall die. Teenagers especially engage in behavior that is risky and that is liable to result in permanent physical or emotional damage or even in death.