

## Social media: why the case for teaching digital literacy is so compelling

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As a parent, I can only start to imagine the pain, grief and suffering of the family of Hannah Smith, who committed suicide recently after being bullied on the ask.fm website. Almost daily, fresh headlines emerge about social media sites like Twitter being used to issue threats of rape, violence and murder. My visceral, emotional, immediate reaction is much like everyone else: something must be done.

But principles, and policy, must be driven by reason, logic and a sense of proportion. We must understand what is happening and why. Bullying and intimidation are an integral part of human nature and of society; while the recent media storm might make us believe that all this is new, it has forever been the case.



Professor Russell Beale

Trolling – abusive or obnoxious behaviour on the internet – is about as old as connecting two computers together. Because the effects of comments are often not immediately apparent, trolls push harder to try to ensure they get a reaction – and there are fewer social constraints on their actions. Trolls expend practically no effort and incur miniscule costs, yet reach into the bedrooms, relationships and souls of their victims with disconcerting ease.

Not all abusive behaviour online is initially intentional – investigations we have conducted on transcripts of conversations between people and chatbots (computers that reply to typed comments in as human-like way as possible) suggest that people can become abusive to computers because comments made humorously are not understood appropriately by the computer, and user frustration then can turn to abuse.

The fundamental aspects of human nature are relatively constant. What alters is the institutions and mediums of expression. In earlier times, the introduction of wider access to printing presses led to pamphlets abusing the rich and famous; the introduction of mass schooling allowed playground bullying; and now, in online media, high profile and no profile people are potential targets.

Our institutions provide structures within which such behaviours can occur – in fact, they facilitate it. However, the benefits of institutions are reckoned to outweigh the disadvantages, and we address the negative aspects with laws and societal norms. These laws are fully applicable to the 'new' media forms of bullying: there is little need for new laws to be created as the existing ones will do the job, but there is a greater need to ensure they are applied. Only recently have the police been treating crimes of incitement, racial abuse and terrorist threats made on social media with the seriousness that they deserve, and one wonders at the hypocrisy of leaders who speak for the need for action and then under-resource the very institutions that could provide such action.

It is the social norms that need addressing. Most people can see that the [threats against Mary Beard and Caroline Criado-Perez](http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2013/aug/04/mary-beard-bomb-threat-twitter) (<http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2013/aug/04/mary-beard-bomb-threat-twitter>) are unacceptable – but most were also discomfited by the conviction of [Paul Chambers](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-19009344) (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-19009344>) in 2010 of tweeting a joke on Twitter about blowing up an airport. His conviction was later quashed, but only after three appeals. We have to allow jokes; we have to allow freedom of expression; we have to allow the silent masses to become less silent; and we have to know where to draw the line.

It is becoming imperative that we introduce some form of 'digital literacy' into the school curriculum, so that we can help educate our young, who are both avid users of social media sites and the most vulnerable to their darker side, to understand more about what they are doing, what its impact is on others, and how they should produce and consume it. It is the purpose of education to equip people for the society in which they are participating, and we have conspicuously failed to do this.

Technology may be viewed as the problem, but that does not mean that more technology is the solution. This digital literacy agenda needs to include material such as online pornography, gambling, and internet extremism – whether racial, religious, political, health or body image.

A survey in May by the National Association of Head Teachers found that 83% of parents want schools to teach about internet pornography as part of sex education lessons, partly as a result of increased access through mobile devices. Yet when Education Secretary Michael Gove has introduced regressive changes in sex education in earlier years, which undermine earlier progress on more open and frank discussions, I wonder if learning about the digital environment with its joys and delights, knowledge and misinformation, perils and dangers seem less likely to occur in schools? However, action is needed: our children need to understand that the measure of their self-worth should not be how many 'Likes' they get on a Facebook post.

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