

Foreword

In this age of social media, society finds itself paying extraordinarily close attention to phenomena that have, through past decades or even centuries, lurked well under the radar of public attention. The bullying and hostilities that occur among children at school and elsewhere have long been dismissed as banal—just what kids do, hardly deserving of public scrutiny or effortful intervention. The ambiguities of children’s play, including the dubious pleasures of testing personal boundaries, transgressing adult norms, and, on occasion, experimenting with hurting others, have until recently been firmly relegated—if noticed at all—to the private realm, a matter for parents, perhaps teachers.

But today, many of children’s interactions—what they like or say, who they know or hate, when they behave well or badly, and whether they are happy, bored or desperate—all of this is recorded, tracked, monitored, and monetized on proprietary networks. Thus, children’s troubles are newly accessible to intervention and regulation, in principle at least, and not just by the parents, teachers, or community actors who know them as individuals, nor even by the government that, after all, bears the ultimate responsibility for their welfare. Also implicated are the biggest multinational corporations the world has ever seen: technology companies headquartered elsewhere, driven by financial and political interests to innovate fast in the global competition to dominate society’s collective attention. Their corporate concerns are so distant from the realities of their users’ lives that many of these companies even refuse to recognize that children use their services, let alone take responsibility for them. Why should these corporations care that their services have become so meaningful to children that they couldn’t live without them, checking for updates every few minutes, pinning their hopes on the next notification and, sometimes, tragically, dreading the next message so intensely that they may take their own life.

The loudest chronicles of this transformation are the news stories that proclaim with indecent relish the suffering among young social media users. Often cavalier in their reporting of prevalence statistics and simplistic in inferring technological causes for psychological effects, the news media are proving effective in banging the drum for society to “do something.” But what exactly should be done, who should do it, and will it work? Tijana Milosevic’s insightful book shows how complex and difficult it is to find effective solutions to cyberbullying, among other online problems. And there are a host of reasons why this is true. As Milosevic clearly explains for the benefit of those new to this field, there are some genuine organizational, technical, and regulatory challenges, which dispel any hope of a quick-fix technical solution. But there are also some political challenges arising from shifting power struggles between states and corporate entities, being played out in the esoteric but crucial domain of internet governance.

While the media, NGOs, children’s rights activists, and parenting groups call for action to prevent cyberbullying, the numerous small companies they try to target keep changing, thus continuing to be blind to the needs of children on their networks. Meanwhile, the public relations and corporate social responsibility teams at the big companies have become proficient at claiming the operation of proprietary solutions, albeit with little transparency or accountability to the public, thereby adeptly evading regulatory responsibility for children’s welfare. Further complicating matters, it is also the case that society does not want multinational corporates acting *in loco parentis* (or, as one of Milosevic’s informants puts it, as “judge and jury” when relations among children become fraught). And, for reasons of free speech, expression, and rights to privacy, society does not want social network companies surveilling and intervening in the everyday interactions of either adults or children.

In trying to unravel the pressing conundrum of incidence, causation, responsibility, and practicalities regarding cyberbullying, Milosevic urges us to look more deeply at the ethical infrastructure of the society that has both produced and failed to address this problematic behavior. As she argues, it is incumbent on society now to debate the critical consequences of the privatization of the digital public sphere, and to address the challenges this poses to human dignity—for children in particular, but also for those who live among them. In this sense, cyberbullying is a highly visible manifestation of a much larger set of problems facing all of us. If society would commit to taking forward Milosevic’s recommendations to reduce cyberbullying, children and the wider public would benefit. I hope

the host of stakeholders currently scratching their heads, investing their scarce resources, and generally worrying about cyberbullying will read this book and take its advice. What do we have to lose?

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