



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

Who's to blame for cyberbullying?

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Recent events from eastern to western Massachusetts have focused our attention and concern on the widespread problem of cyberbullying among children and adolescents. Sad but true, it had to take a tragedy like Phoebe Prince's suicide to push this challenging problem to the top of our agenda.

In certain respects, cyberbullying is just an old theme in a new arena. What at one time may have been scribbled on the wall of a bathroom stall, only seen by relatively few people (and potentially not the victim), can now be broadcast widely through online blogs, chat rooms, and social networks. Compounding the problem is that the technical skills of teenagers—not to mention the enormous hours spent online—far exceed the limited skills of parents and other guardians to use the technology or comprehend the cryptic language of cyberspeak (e.g., “ih8u”), thereby interfering with their ability to detect or monitor this behavior.

But it would be unfair and misguided just to blame the Internet and various social networking sites for intensifying the hurtfulness of bullying, cattiness, name-calling and slander. Rather, we adults are in large part responsible for showing kids how to use and misuse the medium, especially under the shroud of anonymity. It is also the fact that basic civility has gone the way of the Edsel.

What kind of examples of "free speech" do our youngsters have before them? On-air comedians ridicule disgraced politicians from John Edward to Mark Sanford (I would have included their treatment of Bill Clinton, but many of today's teenagers are too young to distinguish Monica Lewinsky from Bo Belinsky). Entertainment news programs gossip endlessly about shamed celebrities from Tiger Woods to Jesse James. Radio talk-blasters are quick to call public figures all sorts of hateful epithets from "bitch" to "Nazi."

The problem runs far deeper than media folks who at least must stand by their words. Millions of Americans feel free to vent their rage with the inappropriate and caustic terms through blogging, online comments and e-mails, hiding their identity with contrived monikers. Like others who routinely put their ideas out into the public forum, I am used to being called an "idiot"--or worse--by some unidentifiable reader just because I happen to have a different point of view.

By bringing criminal charges against the South Hadley 9, District Attorney Betsy Scheibel is hoping to send a strong message that bullying in classrooms or chat rooms and tormenting classmates by posting messages on bathroom walls or *Facebook* walls, will not be tolerated. We all hope the message will be heard. However, punishing a few of the millions of school children who harass their school mates may not be enough.

We can all send a much louder message through silence of a sort. To resurrect an old adage, "If you have nothing good to say, say nothing at all." Of course, there is nothing inappropriate about criticism, so long as it comes with a healthy dose of civility.