



CYBER BULLYING

GOES TO COLLEGE

For those on
the sharp
end of online
harassment,
campus life can be
a virtual hell
**BY CALEB
DANILOFF**

IN SUMMER 2007, a music professor at BU was shocked to learn that he had a Facebook page — in his name, with a recent photo and a spot-on bio. But, the professor recalls, “embedded in the document were really scurrilous things that were reputed to have been said by me, and they were quite unpleasant and ugly and immature.”

The remarks provoked a steady stream of online rants and insults. The professor, who asked *Bostonia* not to publish his name, had no idea how long the page had been up or what to do about it. He suspected a disgruntled former student — there had been a few over the years — but had no clue which one.

After many phone calls and sleepless nights, with the help of a friend’s daughter who knew someone at Facebook, the professor persuaded site administrators to remove the page. “It was incredibly anxiety-producing,” he recalls. “I didn’t know how long this would go on. You’re forced into the fairly lonely situation of going to see an attorney and facing the prospect of some kind of litigation.”

Welcome to Cyberbullying 2.0., the adult version of the meanest pastime on MySpace and Facebook. In recent years, the dangerous game has grown up and grown calculated, and its consequences now include adult-sized miseries — dashed career opportunities, ruined professional relationships, crippling anxiety, even thoughts of suicide.

In 2007, a Yale Law School student was the target of sexually violent rants, among other attacks, in the comments section of AutoAdmit, an online college admissions discussion board. She became the second person to sue the Web site for IP addresses, real names, and hundreds of thousands of dollars in damages when she joined the lawsuit of another female law student at Yale. That same year, a single mother from Colorado was smeared for two months by her ex-boyfriend



Does Rate My Professors Rate? // Students read it. Professors hate it.

How much credibility does Rate My Professors (RMP) have? It is difficult to find a professor shaking a pair of pom-poms. While a 2007 University of Maine study found a significant correlation between RMP ratings and formal student evaluations on overall quality and a course's relative difficulty or ease, the prevailing attitude among BU faculty seems to be that RMP ratings are inaccurate at best and libelous at worst. Robert Weller, a professor and chair of the College of Arts & Sciences anthropology department, says information posted on the site is not factored into any decisions related to hiring, tenure, or salary recommendations.

"We have better information on student views of faculty teaching," Weller says. "Everyone thinks Rate My Professors is problematic because the ratings are usually either horrible or wonderful and don't really represent what the faculty member does."

Weller acknowledges that he once visited RMP after noticing low enrollment for one of his professors' classes. "The person in fact had been slammed on Rate My Professors," he says. "I think that was the explanation for low enrollment. Students were taking it at face value. As a chair, I have alternate sources of information. I have my own class visits, and I have access to all the students' evaluations, but the students don't."

Like countless college students across the nation, BU undergrads scour RMP to help choose courses, and those who don't, like Danielle Beneville (SED'09), are in the minority. Beneville says she logs on only after a class to see what her classmates thought of the instructor. In most cases, she disagrees. "I don't let people I don't know choose what I do on a daily basis," she says, "so I don't rely on them to choose the classes that I take." CD

in the Rants and Raves section of Craig's List. Last fall, forty-year-old Korean movie star Choi Jin-sil killed herself, apparently devastated over malicious Internet rumors and online harassment related to her divorce and finances.

While research into cyberabuse among young teens has exploded, authoritative studies of adult online malfeasance are hard to find. Grown victims are embarrassed to come forward. Some are still working with, or for, their bullies, and fear talking to authorities or reporters. One Web site, Working to Halt Online Abuse (WHOA), created in 1998, reports an average of 100 requests for help a week from people eighteen and older. In 2007, its latest reporting year, the site documented 249 cases of online harassment, with white females between the ages of eighteen and thirty

making up more than 60 percent of the victims. That harassment began via e-mail in 36 percent of the cases and by Instant Messenger in 11 percent.

"Anytime you have disembodied aggression like cyberbullying, it's likely to be more severe," says Gary Naime, founder of the Workplace Bullying Institute (WBI), an online nonprofit started in 1998. "There's a whole body of old social psychological research showing that impersonal contact desensitizes people to aggression."

While the main focus of Naime's outfit is real-life bullying, his research may offer a

glimpse into the future of the American workplace, as more business communications take place online. Some of WBI's statistics, such as the number of female victims — 57 percent — line up with the number from WHOA. In 2007, according to a study conducted by the polling company Zogby International, 37 percent of American workers, an estimated fifty-four million people, were bullied at work in person. Women are targeted 71 percent of the time by other women.

In the United Kingdom, a country that prides itself on having a low tolerance for real-life bullying, the Dignity at Work Partnership, a quasi-public effort that bills itself as the world's largest antibullying project, surveyed 1,072 workers and found that 20 percent had been cyberbullied at work by e-mail and 6.2 percent by text message.

The disembodied aggressors are not only likely to be more severe, they are definitely harder to identify. The online tormentor of a college professor could be a bitter former student who graduated years ago or the neatly dressed sophomore in the third row who crashed and burned on a recent midterm.

At BU, one faculty member who asked not to be identified claims that a colleague defamed her on the site Rate My Professors (RMP). Another, who also prefers to remain anonymous, complains that a student accused him of showing up for class high. And another reports finding veiled comments suggesting that he might be sexually harassing students.

Some who find themselves in the virtual crosshairs seek help at the Faculty and Staff Assistance Office, a free and confidential counseling resource. Associate director Thierry Guedj (GRS'01) declines to provide numbers, but says over the past five years, online harassment cases have been spiking, in particular through Rate My Professors. "It really hurts

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faculty members badly when they read these things about themselves online,” says Guedj, a Metropolitan College adjunct assistant professor of psychology. “People have become quite depressed about it.”

Ben Bierman, a College of Fine Arts lecturer, says he was flamed by a former graduate student he caught plagiarizing when he taught at Brooklyn College. It started with belligerent e-mails and then morphed into a nasty two-year campaign on RMP. “I’ve stopped looking,” Bierman says. “It just caused so much stress. But one of the problems is that it’s one of the first things that pops up on a Google search for me. I’ve worked hard my whole life in developing a positive public profile. There’s no recourse, and it’s extremely public.”

Rate My Professors, the online host of Bierman’s nemesis, now boasts more than eight million student-generated ratings of more than a million professors at 6,000 schools. Founded in 1999, the site allows students to anonymously rate their professors in several categories and comment on such traits as humor and classroom style, not to mention the tightness of their sweaters and the flattering cut of their jeans (look for the chili pepper symbols). MTV’s twenty-four-hour college channel, mtvU, acquired the site in 2007 for an undisclosed amount.

Officially, RMP guidelines prohibit threats, violence, intimidation, hate, and other abusive posts, as well as impersonation. The site also offers a video rebuttal system for professors, although faculty complain that it’s a slow and labor-intensive way to combat comments that spring to life — and into search engines — with the speed of electrons. Carlo DiMarco, vice president of university relations for mtvU, says a team of five people monitors the nearly 3,000 daily posts. Random samples are also collected, and the site has a flagging system, which allows users to alert visitors to credibility issues. DiMarco believes



PAINFUL ALLEGATIONS

One comment on Juicy Campus, a social networking site that closed up shop, falsely claimed that College of General Studies student Dylan Norton’s accent was the result of drug use.

that his moderators have “developed a pretty good eye with respect to things that are, and are not, legitimate.” He says he hadn’t heard of RMP being used by professors to bully one another.

THE NEW BATHROOM WALL

While online aggression among youths tends to peak in high school, according to cyberbullying experts, there is increasing spillover among college students. With Facebook groups, pilfered passwords, uploaded drunken party pics, and naked-ex photos, the means to torment and humiliate on campus are seemingly endless. A 2004 study of online harassment at the University of New Hampshire, published in the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, found that one in ten students reported cyberabuse by an acquaintance, a stranger, or a significant other. “Students may be especially vulnerable to stalking

and cyberstalking because they live in a relatively closed community where class schedules, phones, and e-mails are easy to find,” the study’s author writes. “Most college students (eighteen to twenty-nine) are in the age group that fits the stalking victim profile.”

And that was before the birth of Juicy Campus, a site that posted anonymous gossip by anyone and about anyone from more than 500 college campuses — the new wall of the bathroom stall, but open to the world. The Web site closed shop in February after a year-and-a-half of very controversial life. CEO Matt Ivester, a Duke University grad, says he shuttered his doors for economic reasons, but Juicy Campus had come under legal scrutiny from several states’ attorneys general, had been blocked by some universities, and was the target of a federal lawsuit filed

Fighting Back, or Not /// *It's hard to sue someone you can't identify*

• What kind of recourse is available to someone whose reputation has been sullied online?

"Very little, if you don't know who's behind it," says Urs Gasser, executive director of Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet and Society. "It also depends on what type of message is posted. If it's a nude picture, you have a greater possibility of getting rid of that by contacting Facebook or the respective platform and saying clearly that this is inappropriate content and is violating the terms of service of the platform."

Hiring lawyers and suing for IP addresses is another avenue, "but it's a long way to go, and in the meantime the message may still be up there," Gasser says. "And if you go down this path and start to work with legal remedies, the case gets even more attention, especially in the media, and would actually point people to the offensive pictures or story. So generally it's not the best strategy."

Thomas Nolan, a Metropolitan College associate professor of criminal justice and a twenty-seven-year veteran of the Boston Police Department, is similarly discouraging. "The Massachusetts General Laws are so far behind that they don't even refer to the Internet with a capital I," he says. "Much of what relates to the Internet pertains to commerce, not to criminal statutes. So prosecutors are challenged to find some kind of an applicable law that can work in particular circumstances."

One problem, according to Nolan (SED'91,'00), is that in order to win cases of libel and criminal harassment, the burden of proof is very high. "A lot of what goes on on social networking sites, while it may be aggressive bullying behavior, does not rise to the standard of a criminal offense," he says. "The law is set up to protect people's safety, ultimately. Cyberstalking may be every bit as troublesome and unsettling and terrifying as stalking, but there really isn't any way to address it legally unless it comes

up to the level where somebody actually hurts someone."

Another problem for those who have been maligned, he says, is that the 1996 Communications Decency Act protects Web sites from being sued for unmonitored posts, because it considers site operators to be distributors rather than publishers of content. Think newsstands rather than newspapers.

Nolan believes that cultural self-regulation may be the answer. But, he says, it will take time for meaningful legislation, if necessary, to follow.

Meanwhile, a response industry has begun to emerge with Web sites such as Reputation Defender devoted to rehabilitating reputations maligned online. For a fee, the company will track down any negative information in cyberspace and try to have it taken down.

"There was a time when sexual harassment in the workplace was commonplace," Nolan says. "It took people having bad things happen to them and bringing people to court that prompted legislative initiatives to outlaw this kind of behavior. In any progressive workplace in the twenty-first century, there should be no tolerance whatsoever for any kind of cyberbullying." CD



PLAYING CATCH-UP

MET Criminal Justice Professor Thomas Nolan says it will be a while before legislators address the injustices of cyberspace.

by a University of Delaware student who demanded the identities of those writing about her.

At BU, the site also did its share of damage. Last fall, Dylan Norton (CGS'10) found herself the subject of public ridicule, her diction mocked and her looks likened to an "elephant fetus."

"I was shocked and quite offended, because it made fun of my accent and said it was a result of drug use in the past, which is absolutely incorrect," Norton says. "I was hurt at first, but didn't let it get to me. It's hard for someone to create their own identity when people try to make it for them."

Mike Carollo (CAS'12) is another victim. His name — and "any thoughts?" — was first posted by a friend as a lark, but things quickly turned ugly. That one question spawned a thread of fifteen to twenty mostly nasty responses. "There were a lot of things written about my sex life," says Carollo. "Slut' and 'whore' were the nice words. It was totally malicious. I tried to blow it off."

Eventually, he says, someone impersonated him, posting his dorm and room number and the suggestion of a sexual encounter. "The intensity was kind of shocking," he says. "It was very unsettling."

And like a game of cyber Whac-a-

Mole, within days of Juicy Campus's farewell post, College Anonymous Confession Board, owned by a Wesleyan grad, took its place. Same premise, fewer ads.

Fima Potik (SMG'08) thinks he has a better answer: offer students a civil and entertaining alternative. Last October, the finance major launched Posh Society, billing the Web site as the "anti-Juicy Campus," a site in the style of the popular celebrity gossip page TMZ.com, where verified college kids on fourteen campuses can dish on their peers in a safe environment. "We don't want to be anything hateful, because as you saw, models like that don't last; they're not sustainable," Potik says.

Consequently, he says, Posh Society employs filters, keyword software, and a team of sharp-eyed staff members to monitor content. "We want to make the average college kid a celebrity on their own college campus," he says. "If we see anything hateful, we pull it down. We're not in the business of ruining people's lives."

THE RULE BOOK, PLEASE

What, if anything, should a university do about cyberbullying? Urs Gasser, executive director of the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University, says administrators and higher education experts around the country are trying to figure that one out. The most important step, he says, is to make cyberbullying an audible part of the campus conversation.

"Universities should create a climate where, if teachers or workers are affected, they can speak up and know that 'it's not only me,' but a general problem of our time," Gasser says. "There should be a person within the organization they can call and say, 'What can I do, and how can we work together to resolve this issue?' And not to further victimize the person by isolating them."

Gasser, who is researching student-on-teacher online attacks, believes that as more interaction takes place between "digital natives," those raised in the Internet age, and adults, the more responsibility schools will feel to shield their staff. "You could even argue that there's a legal obligation for employers to take measures to protect their teachers. I just learned of a case in Switzerland where the school director was able to identify the class where harassing messages most likely came from. He not only gave them a warning, but explained how harmful the harassment was, because the teacher in this particular case wasn't able to work anymore due to psychological problems."

Boston University does have a policy on computer ethics, and it forbids the transmission of offensive, annoying, or harassing material. There are also a code of ethics for faculty and staff and comparable guidelines for

students. Guedj, of the Faculty and Staff Assistance Office, says the University is exploring the development of a special program for emotionally distressed employees, and that resource would welcome victims of cyberbullying.

Guedj's boss, FSAO director Bonnie Teitleman, says the psychological impact of cyberbullying can be intense. "It's very intrusive on people's lives," she says. "It leaves them unable to concentrate on their academic or professional work. They feel helpless, foolish, vulnerable. It's hard even to suffer in silence because everybody knows about it on Facebook. It's public humiliation. There's no place to hide."

Guedj encourages faculty members who believe they have been victimized to act quickly and tell their department chairs that false rumors are being spread. Staff members should

ONE IN TEN STUDENTS HAS REPORTED CYBERABUSE BY AN ACQUAINTANCE, A STRANGER, OR A SIGNIFICANT OTHER.

immediately inform a supervisor and seek help through the FSAO, which can help arrange legal and psychological support.

In this brave new digital world, Guedj says, BU is ahead of most colleges and universities. Still, he'd like to see campuses offer a fully coordinated

institutional response with a formal investigative structure. "The research literature shows that bullying behaviors are not effectively stopped by intervening in a haphazard, case-by-case basis," he says. "Isolated supervisors and department heads who have little to no experience in such matters are usually in way over their heads."

Guedj calls for a united approach. "It's like the 1960s and 1970s, when women came out about rape and workplace sexual harassment. It took women getting together and saying, 'No more.' We need the same type of consciousness-raising with cyberbullying." ■



NO PLACE TO HIDE

Thierry Guedj, a counselor and assistant director of BU's Faculty and Staff Assistance Office, says every campus should offer an "institutional response with a formal investigative structure."