Digital Drama

How do kids experience social drama online? In many cases, it is in ways that you might not notice – even if you're looking closely.

Explicit cases of cyberbullying have garnered considerable attention from the adult community over the past several years. To be sure, cyberbullying can be deeply troubling and distressing for everyone involved. But many teens who experience stressful social issues online don't actually consider their experiences "cyberbullying." In this conversation case, we consider a range of different forms of digital drama and cyberbullying. The goal is not necessarily to label particular cases as cyberbullying (or not), but instead to start to think in a more nuanced way about the challenges teens face as their friends and foes from offline life connect with them through new mediums.

The Case

The following excerpts are from an article written by a high school student named Justin Fowler. The piece is titled "The Powerful Subtweet."

This two-part case is a longer read. Invite everyone to read the case quietly to themselves or consider "popcorn reading": Ask for a volunteer to start by reading a paragraph or two, and then ask them to point to another willing volunteer, who will continue reading.

The Powerful Subtweet

Emotions tend to be popular among 13-17 year old high school students.

I'm a senior in high school. I have friends my age, I hang out with them, talk to them, all that stuff. But as I've started to follow them on social media, something has come up, and it isn't too pretty.

I'd like to start off by saying that I am not complaining. I can very easily remedy this situation for myself (the unfollow button is a click away), it isn't a big deal for me. I just fear what my friends and other teens are doing to themselves.

The Subtweet

Not everyone knows what a subtweet is, but you've probably seen one. Urban Dictionary puts it nicely: "It's the shortening of 'subliminal tweet' which is directly referring to a particular person without mentioning their name or directly mentioning them". These tweets typically call someone out for an undesirable action, attribute, or decision without directly placing any names. I'm starting to see this all the time from some of my friends. The odd part is that I get these sort of updates (I see this behavior on Facebook, too) from some people who I didn't think would be the type of person to subtweet. I will say that I see more of these emotionally charged updates from the females in my class, but I also see some of them coming from the guys. It's odd seeing one type of behavior being expressed online and quite another being expressed offline.

Subtweets are a bad way to deal with issues or problems we have with other people. First of all, these issues should be kept off of social networks, or even completely private. Instead, these problems are being broadcasted to the world for potential employers, college recruiters, and friends to see. **Strong negative emotions and social networks do not mix well.** Subtweeting never solves problems. Unless, for you,

your problem is having too many friends. On the off chance that the person who is being talked about does see the update in question, what help is it going to do? If the problem is serious enough, one should simply speak with the person in question about that particular problem. I'll admit, it isn't easy. I've never had to confront a friend in such a way, but I can tell you that it would be a little awkward for me. I'm usually awkward, though. If someone has serious problem with someone else, communication is going to be key.

With that said, I don't think subtweets are meant to solve problems. I think the writer is simply venting to a social network, which is never a good idea. The writer is simply hurting their reputation with their own friends and anyone who sees the update. **The biggest victim of the subtweet is the author.** I see these updates. Parents see the updates. Emotional pleas do not belong on social networks, so please stop. There are much better ways to vent and confront others.

Complaining is the Worst

Social media provides a unique outlet. I can post anything on my Twitter (or Medium!) account without thinking twice. No teacher is going to reprimand me. I've found that some people can act completely differently on social media than in the real world. Everyone knows that nobody likes someone who complains. A lot of people still complain (I know I do) despite that fact. I find that people sure do like to use social media as a way to complain about just about anything, but the main topics typically have to do with other people. The lack of a boyfriend or girlfriend has been the loudest, lately.

Let me make this clear: **If a behavior is typically regarded as undesirable in the real world, that also applies to social media.** And no, I'm not complaining. That sure would be ironic, though. I've yet to see a complaint fix a single problem. In some cases, complaining sure can hurt yourself. Complaining about not having a boyfriend sure isn't getting you one. Heck, I'd even say it hurts your chances. I understand posting legitamate complains to your social accounts, especially when the story is notable. Just as in real social situations, there is such thing as too much complaining. It drags people down. It gets old. It depreciates your self image.

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Social Media Solutions

At a young age I was told not to interrupt people's conversations. I was taught that hitting my brother was not a good idea. I was shown how to share my toys and make friends. I learned many of these social behaviors from my parents and other adults in my life, and later through experience. But who is going to tell today's teens that what they are doing on social media is hurting themselves? There's not really an authority on social media, which is probably why teens flock to it in the first place.

I've considered the idea of some sort of social media behavior class. I don't know how well that would work out with teens, but it is certainly an option. And maybe I need to confront my friends myself about their habits, but that's going to be very difficult. Perhaps we should just allow for teens to keep making these mistakes. It is very possible that the consequences suffered will be very small or minimal. **So, Medium, I'm asking you. How should we solve the problem of social media misbehavior?**

Full article can be accessed at: **https://medium.com/tech-talk/the-powerful-subtweet-3a3aa44aebda**

Consider

- Have you ever heard of sub-tweeting? What is your reaction to reading about this type of online sharing?

- What do you think is the appeal of sending a sub-tweet rather than confronting someone directly?

- Do you think sub-tweeting is an issue that merits parents' attention or is it just a case of teens being teens?

- Were you surprised to read that both males and females in Justin's high school engage in this kind of behavior? Why or why not?

- How would you react if another adult sent a sub-tweet about you? Would you confront him or her – or would you just let it go?

- Justin suggests the idea of a social media behavior class. What do you think about this idea? What would it look like in practice (What kinds of topics would you want covered? Where and how often would it meet?). Do you think social media etiquette is something that should be covered at school or at home?

Mix it up! Feel free to move from question to question, you don't need to do them in order. Ask follow-up questions based on how the discussion goes. For example, if someone says that they were surprised by the culture of sub-tweeting, then follow up with the question of *"What do you think is the appeal of sending a sub-tweet rather than confronting someone directly?"*

The Case, Continued:
Other forms of cyberbullying and digital drama

Beyond sub-tweeting, there are a number of other ways that teens experience and perpetuate drama online.

"**Vaguebooking**" is the Facebook equivalent of sub-tweeting. This essentially involves writing a status update on Facebook about someone to call them out without actually naming them. For example, a teen may post: "I hate it when people in English class suck up and say they've finished the book." If you were just in English class and raised your hand to share that you finished the reading, you would likely know that this post was about you. However, because the post did not "tag" you, include your name, or explicitly call you out, the poster has plausible deniability if and when they are confronted.

There are other ways to get sneaky about acting out frustration or embarrassing someone. Online, teens can hurt each other by impersonating one another. **Impersonation** happens mainly in two ways: either by hacking onto the individual's profile and producing fake posts "as them" or by creating new fake profiles ("**fake pages**") using their information. Either way, impersonation can be hard to defend against.

These two types of impersonation are illustrated by the following two personal accounts, which were both posted to MTV's A Thin Line platform (a place where teens can share their own stories and get feedback from others): "*I was 14 & there was this boy I really thought liked me I told him a lot of personal stuff about me that no one knows. We were really close to, & then one day he asked me out & I told him no, so he hacked my fb and posted a lot of mean stuff..*" In this story, the teen describes someone hacking into her account and posting as her.

A second version of impersonation involves creating new accounts. For example, "*so someone created a fake fb and twitter account saying they were me now almost everyone hates me for what they wrote.*" Whereas the first story involves someone breaking into her account, the second involves someone creating new accounts (on Facebook and Twitter) and using the poster's information – name, and likely his or her picture – to pretend to be the victim. Sometimes fake pages are created "as a joke," other times the intention is less benign. Either way, they can quickly complicate the impersonated teen's reputation and relationships.

Teens also experience digital drama through **direct messages**, sent to them by text, instant messaging services, or privately through social media accounts. These messages don't have an audience, but they allow the person bullying to interrupt and creep into home life with hurtful messages. In this case, they may or may not know who is behind the messages. Even if a text comes from a particular friend's cellphone number, that person might claim the next day that someone else was texting from his or her phone.

Shaming, on the other hand, does involve an audience. A Facebook group called "100 reasons why we hate Sara James" isn't sent directly to Sara, nor is it impersonating her – but it capitalizes on the public or semi-public nature of social media sites in order to embarrass and shame Sara. For this type of explicit bullying, teens can officially report pages, groups, or sites to the platform (e.g., Facebook) and request that they are taken down.

Another type of digital drama may be even less clear: when a teen sees something, perhaps a picture online, and feels instantly excluded. For example, if a teen sees a picture of a group of friends together, he or she may not know whether or not they were excluded intentionally. Regardless of the intention, however, the teen may understandably be upset and hurt.

> If reading individually, remind everyone to look up at you to let you know when they're finished reading.

To review, several features influence how teens might experience and respond to drama and cyberbullying. These include (1) whether or not there is an audience or they are the sole recipient of the message, (2) whether or not they know who is behind the message, (3) whether or not the attack is explicit (as in the case of the public shaming Facebook page) or implicit (as in the case of a sub-tweet), and (4) whether or not they interpret the attack as intentional or unintentional and as joking or purposely cruel.

Consider

- In some forms of cyberbullying or digital drama, the victim may know exactly who posted the offensive content. In others, the victim may have no idea who is behind the cruelty. And still in others, the victim may suspect a particular person is cyberbullying them, but may be unable to "prove it." Consider these three different scenarios for a few minutes: first, knowing who did it and having proof; second, not knowing who is responsible; and third, suspecting someone is responsible but lacking the evidence. How might you respond differently as a parent to each of these situations?

- Which of these three situations concerns you most? Why?

- Now, consider a situation in which it's not even clear if the sender or poster was actually intending to hurt your teen's feelings, as in the example of seeing a picture online and feeling left out. How would you respond similarly or differently to this type of situation? What could you say to try and support your teen?

- What do you want your teens to know about digital drama? How do you share your values about how to treat others in the context of online communication?

> If your group seems hesitant or quiet, suggest a "think-pair-share": Have participants turn to the person sitting next to them to share their answers to a question. Then, come back together as a group and ask what came up in their paired conversations.

> **Wrapping up:** Feel free to look at the tip sheet together and invite reactions. You can again invite people to read quietly and then react by posing questions, such as: *Which of these tips resonates most for you? Are there any tips you would definitely try? What is missing?*
> If you are running low on time, distribute the tip sheets at the end of your meeting. The trick is to make sure people are leaving with some concrete information, rather than feeling overwhelmed and wondering what to do next.

Fowler, Justin. 2014. "The Powerful Subtweet." *Medium*, September 2, 2014.
   https://medium.com/@SomewhatJustin/the-powerful-subtweet-3a3aa44aebda

Note – Examples and definitions for this case are adapted from:
Weinstein, Emily C., and Robert L. Selman. "Digital stress: Adolescents' personal accounts." *New Media & Society* (2014).