

When cyber gets ugly

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Cyberpunk, cyber-terrorism, cybersex, cyber-crime, cyberculture, cyberspace, cyber-activism: all neologisms attempting to make sense of our awe at what our world has become. It could be argued that we are undergoing a process of transhumanism, transforming ourselves into cyborgs, or cybernetic organisms.

'Cybernetic' is defined in the Free Dictionary as "the theoretical study of communication and control processes in biological, mechanical, and electronic systems, especially the comparison of these processes in biological and artificial systems" and is derived from the Greek word for governor.

The "cyber-" words that are a part of our modern lexicon define our complex relationships with the technologies of the Information Age.

The anonymity of cyberspace gives us a unique platform to become the other. Nerdy boy becomes cyberstud, wimp becomes cyberbully, gender vanishes, human interaction is redefined altogether and the possibilities for manipulation of other humans can turn the world of electronic communication into a battleground.

Last year, in a report called Cyberbullying: A Preliminary Profile of Offending and Victimization by S. Hinduja and J.W. Patchin, a survey of 1500 internet-using teenagers revealed that one third of participants had been victimised online and over 16% of respondents admitted to cyberbullying others. In March 2005, People magazine reported the case of a 13 year-old boy who committed suicide after he had been taunted via instant messages for a month about his inadequate size.

Unprecedented access to communication devices, where text is king and it is no longer necessary to face one's adversary in the flesh or work around the added danger of having others witness one's misdeed, means that we can give reign to our most base fantasies and desires. The Seven Deadly Sins are all present: our cyberidentities can be enhanced merely by what we say about ourselves, without having to offer material proof. Online markets allow us to consume more than ever before (sex sells particularly well). Theft has never been easier; if your computer is unprotected by an ever-increasing list of vital anti-virus software and personal firewalls, you could become the target of an attack by a syndicate intent on stealing your money, your identity or your domain name.

Cyberterrorists spend their time making us even more scared; their intention is to spread discontent with the aim of furthering their own religious or political goals. Because electronic information is spread so quickly and access to the enemy's secrets is much easier than during say, World War II, online dissent can quickly escalate into action and acts of sabotage are initiated with ease.

Never before has social engineering been so widely used; we see it in online marketing as information is extracted from potential consumers under the guise of philanthropy and concern.

Clearly our tendency to migrate towards ego-driven behaviour is only enhanced by the inter-connectedness offered by the technologies that in themselves are not inherently evil.

In 1985, Donna Haraway, a post-modernist, neo-Marxist feminist professor of social studies and technoscience published A Cyborg Manifesto which, while endorsing technology, equally exposes its shortcomings which can only be overcome when we reject the traditional boundaries of politics, culture, gender, race and economics created by White Capitalist Patriarchy and recognise that affinity is the result of "otherness, difference and specificity".

The internet has gone a long way to removing some of these boundaries by enhancing communication and broadcasting information, but it seems to be our avarice, lust, pride, anger, sloth, gluttony and envy that make cyberspace such a dangerous place to be. © Debbie Smit – The Sunday Independent