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## **Beyond the schoolyard** ***Bullies take their intimidation to digital media***

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*Messenger photo illustration by Brian Kellogg*  
and other digital technology.

Bullying isn't just on the playground anymore. In today's digital world, the schoolyard bullies have taken to the World Wide Web, instant messages, cell phones and other digital media, demeaning their victims in front of a globalized audience.

Cyberbullying, first coined by Canadian researcher Bill Belsey, is a relatively new phenomenon, a problem that has developed over the past three years in the face of new digital technologies. Cyberbullying involves bullying through electronic media, including e-mail, blogs, text messages on cell phones

Cyberbullying is a problem that has deeply concerned Ohio University researcher Christine Suniti Bhat ever since she first noticed it while working with young clients as a counselor in California a few years ago. Bhat, an assistant professor of counselor education at OU, dedicated more than a year of research to studying cyberbullying, examining the causes, trends and relationships involved in this new form of schoolyard intimidation.

"When I was looking at training to counteract cyberbullying, there really wasn't anything being developed that was researched-based," Bhat said. "I wanted to approach the problem from a research point of view."

With the help of research students Kelly Roberts and Heidi Llewellyn, Bhat surveyed 239 freshmen and sophomore college students, focusing on younger college students because they were closest to high-school age. Surveying minors for the research would have been difficult because parental approval would have been necessary. Bhat also included portions of the survey in which the students could respond in their own words. Bhat explained that it was very important for the research to be qualitative and not quantitative.

"I wanted to hear from the victims of cyberbullying in their own words," Bhat said. "I wanted to hear from them how exactly it made them feel."

A few respondents admitted that the intimidation made them feel suicidal. Very few respondents stated that they discussed the cyberbullying with school counselors, many only sharing it with school friends and several simply keeping it to themselves.

"Victims of cyberbullying can become very lonely and alienated, and school counselors are often not considered the first resource," Bhat said. "Often, it's their friends they turn to. Young people need to be educated about the seriousness of the issue and think about its repercussions."

The recent case of Megan Meier proves the seriousness of cyberbullying, Bhat said. Meier was a 13-year-old from Missouri who suffered from depression. She had formed a friendship on-line with someone claiming to be "Josh," who later broke off the friendship, telling her she was a bad person and the world would be better without her. Shortly after getting that message, Meier took her own life. The real identity of "Josh" turned out to be the parents of a neighborhood friend.

One problem with cyberbullying is its relentlessness, Bhat said. With traditional schoolyard bullying, at least the victim has the sanctuary of home. But cyberbullying, taking place on the Internet and through cell phones, can happen to the victim anytime, and really doesn't go away, Bhat said.

"The real difference is there is no respite," Bhat said. "You can be a target 24/7. When a bully beats you up on the playground, home is a safe haven. In the digital world, communication is always possible. And, it can take place in front of a global audience where anybody can look at it, which can be very devastating for the victim."

Parents should be aware of who their children are communicating with on-line, and keep an open relationship with their children regarding online communication, Bhat said. When parents have concerns, however, it is very important to not just cut out use of the computer outright, Bhat cautioned. Keeping their child off the computer might lead to isolation, cutting the child off from communicating with friends.

"When it comes to the use of computers, there really is a generational difference," Bhat said. "For older people, a computer is used to pay bills and do work. But for young people, a computer is their social hub. Parents should be aware of their child's online relationships and have open communication."

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