

Words Can Break Your



By Lianne Trevarthen

Cyber-bullying—attacking vulnerable people on the internet—has been in the news recently.

Not only young people, but adults too, are surprisingly good at using words to cast slurs and fling insults online. Their targets take the comments so seriously that some even think of taking their own lives. The tragic death in February of Charlotte Dawson, internationally renowned New Zealand-born fashion model and TV celebrity who championed campaigns against cyber-bullying and internet trolling, has prompted sympathy and renewed calls to address cyber-bullying through legal reform.

A recent study estimated that every day 10,000 tweets on Twitter are racist, although of those, it was considered that 70% are not written in a hateful or prejudicial way. Think-tank Demos, which conducted a global study of tweets from a nine-day period, estimated fewer than a hundred tweets were directed at individuals or had any violent intent.

But does a view of a nine-day period of tweets give a true view of the problem? What about social media where the messages disappear soon after they are sent? No trace

remains of the message, but the damage has been done.

Celebrities report that they are increasingly becoming targets for online hate mail. Previously postal threats and insults could be managed by publicists and by secretaries, but nowadays, social media frequently bypasses intermediaries. Celebrities can face short-term or prolonged attacks prompted by a recent appearance or comment they have made. Less known is the frequency or type of bullying that happens to average people and businesses, although a 2013 Law Commission report found one in ten New Zealanders have experienced harmful communications on the internet, while other research showed 20 per cent of secondary school students had experienced cyber bullying in some form.

Proposed laws against cyber-bullying will impose penalties for those hiding behind a computer or phone if their comments amount to harassment or cause harm. Yet a law is unlikely to totally change behaviour. Much cyber abuse is anonymous and difficult to trace. Targets of bullying may not report the slurs or try to ignore them, but still be affected emotionally. Psychologist Niki Harre, Associate Professor at Auckland University, comments: '...what we're recognising more and more is sticks and stones may break your bones but words can break your heart—these things do cause real damage'.

It's not just governments that need to confront or prevent cyber-bullying: individuals and organisations need policies and procedures for dealing with cyber communications. Businesses also need to be aware of what their staff may

be saying to customers or potential clients. They need to have policies on acceptable use of social media, what is not okay to put online, and how to deal with insults and attacks on their business. If they don't, they risk endorsing bullying, damaging their reputation, or falling victim to reputational attacks.

The Bible has much to say about the harm of words and slander, encouraging us to speak (and therefore tweet!) good things. Here are a few:

Do not use harmful words, but only helpful words, the kind that build up and provide what is needed, so that what you say will do good to those who hear you.¹

Rash language cuts and maims, but there is healing in the words of the wise.²

But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips.³

May my spoken words and unspoken thoughts be pleasing even to you, O Lord my Rock and my Redeemer.⁴

Let's be aware of the harm that words can do, vigilant to address bullying in any form, encouraging respectful communication by our example.

Notes

- ¹ Ephesians 4:29 (Good News Translation)
- ² Proverbs 12:18 (The Message)
- ³ Colossians 3:8 (New International Version)
- ⁴ Psalm 19:14 (The Living Bible)

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Social Media Commandments

1. Thou shall treat people online as you'd like to be treated.
2. Thou shall give respect and expect respect.
3. Thou shall BE NICE.