

## Online bullying has no age limit

In cyberspace, no one can hear you scream unless, of course, you type in ALL CAPS.

The growing world of cyber comments on blogs, networking sites and homemade viral videos allows people to connect and interact in unique ways, including typing in all capital letters to signify anger or yelling.

However, because much of the interaction is done anonymously, the need for polite social behavior goes right out the windows, so to speak, due in part to a lack of “netiquette.”

“People ought to realize that anything on the Internet is for public consumption,” said Mabry O’Donnell, McCoy professor of communication at Marietta College. “It can’t be undone.”

While much of the recent news about cyberbullying focuses on adolescents and teenagers being harassed on the Internet instead of the playground, the problem of online bullying has no age boundaries. It can affect anyone participating in blogs, social networks or using e-mail.

Bullying used to be restricted to physical intimidation, postal mail or the telephone. Now, developments in electronic media offer a new digital arsenal. Computers, cell phones and PDAs are new tools that can be applied to an old practice.

Fortunately, following proper online etiquette can help those surfing the Web to navigate the virtual world with social grace and manners and avoid being labeled a “bully” or a “Web jerk.”

For example, it’s best to use the language you would use in real life, be aware of grammar and punctuation, and be sensitive to others’ beliefs.

As with any culture, social blunders are bound to be made when attempting to fit in. On the Internet, it is easy to offend and be offended because it is so difficult to convey emotions.

“I consider myself to be a sarcastic person in real life, and I really try to back off on that (while online),” said Laura Little, an instructional technologist at Marietta College.

“The biggest piece of advice I can give is to remember the human,” she said. “For every message you read, there is a human being attached to it.”

Little works with faculty and students to help navigate through the online world. She suggests using phrases such as LOL (laughing out loud) or J/K to convey a joke — and keeping everything pretty literal and tasteful.

“I always tell students, ‘Don’t send a message you wouldn’t want your parents to see,’” she said. “Even if you create a new identity, every computer has its own address and can be tracked.”

O’Donnell concurs that total anonymity in the online world doesn’t exist.

“I’m not convinced it’s any different (than the ‘real world’). You’re still representing yourself, and it doesn’t matter what name you’re using — you can be traced,” she said.

For up-to-date information on cyberbullying, Little recommends visiting the Web site <http://couros.wikispaces.com/cyberbullying> .