

Coping with School Bullying and Violence Using the Internet

International Online Conference
for Providers of Web Resources on
School Bullying and Violence

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Conference Report



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Introduction

School bullying and violence is a phenomenon that is in the focus of public attention in most Western societies. Since the nineties there has been a growing awareness on the problem of SBV followed by an increasing number of studies, the development of programs and in recent years also the establishment of a growing number of web resources (cp. Smith, 2005, Minton & O`Moore, 2004,).

When focusing on the latter point - web resources on SBV – various questions come up such as:

- What kinds of web resources on SBV are available?
- What are the potentials and the benefits but also the limits and dangers of web resources on SBV?
- How do users and experts judge the reliability and quality of web resources on SBV?
- Which role do web resources play in the process of SBV prevention?

The answers on these questions are as unsatisfying as surprising: There is no clear answer as web resources on SBV have not been subject of research yet. Of course there are commented link lists, anecdotic user reports about the usability of web sites or publications and studies emphasising the importance of web resources (e.g. Jäger et al., 2003; O`Moore, 2004). Nevertheless, so far there is no systematic research dealing with one of the questions above. Considering that not only much time but also much money is invested in creating web resources on SBV this is not only surprising but rather astonishing.

This first online conference of the VISIONARIES-NET project aimed at bringing together people from different countries and cultures in order to make them exchange experiences, point of views and ideas. All participants were offering portals, web sites or other web resources on SBV. While some participants offer one of many web sites on this topic in their countries; others can be regarded as pioneers in their countries as they offer one of very few or even the only web resource there.

This conference - for all we know the first online conference for providers of web resources on school bullying and violence - aimed at being the starting point for further research activities, for networks of web sites on SBV, for quality initiatives and much more.

In this report we give an overview about the conference's main objectives, its structure, its participants and of course its main outcomes.

VISIONARIES-NET: the project behind the online conferences

The online conference “Coping with School Bullying and Violence Using the Internet” is one of five online conferences that is held as part of the VISIONARIES-NET project funded by the European Commission within the Socrates Minerva program. Before we present some selected outcomes of this conference we first would like to outline some basic ideas of our project, its background, objectives and the partners that cooperate in this project.

Background and starting point of the project

School and juvenile violence have been rising constantly over the past decade and have wide-ranging implications on our societies (cp. Jäger, Bradley and Rasmussen, 2003). The growing number of national and International conferences on violence in school points out the importance of meetings and networks. Nevertheless, it is obvious that only a very limited number of experts and practitioners get the chance to participate in conferences and exchange their experiences with others, especially on an International level.

The Internet offers new possibilities: One of the benefits of online-discussions or conferences is that they have the potential of bringing together users with different backgrounds - e.g. in terms of culture, education, experiences or citizenship – who would hardly meet in real life.

The overall idea behind this project, the VISIONARIES-NET project, is that in spite of all differences in terms of culture, educational or professional background, age and target group (pupils, parents, researchers etc.) we assume that there are many people from different countries who face similar problems and who can learn from each other.

In the VISIONARIES-NET project we invite people affected by and dealing with school bullying and violence to online conferences in order to facilitate discussions, to analyse the situation in a selected field within the broad topic of school bullying and violence and to work out common, sometimes innovative solutions.

The VISIONARIES-NET project, its partners and sponsors

The VISIONARIES-NET¹ project is a European cooperative project from institutes and organisation from four European countries - Germany, France, Spain and Romania. The partners are:

- Centre for Educational Research, University Koblenz-Landau, Germany (co-ordination)
- Department of Education, Faculty of Sciences of Education, Universidad de Córdoba, Spain
- European Forum for Urban Safety, Paris, France
- CONCEPT Foundation, Bucharest, Romania

The project that started in October 2004 and ends at 2006 was supported by the Socrates/Minerva program of the European Commission.

The VISIONARIES-NET project builds on the VISIONARY project (2000-2003) – also funded by Socrates/Minerva program of the European Commission - that focused on implementing a European Internet portal on school bullying and violence that aimed at providing information and facilitating communication on school bullying and violence

¹VISIONARIES-NET is an acronym for ‘violence in school - initiative on the net archiving resources for European states: net of experts’.

(www.bullying-in-school.info). The portal that includes background information, link collections, news section and much more was created by partners from Germany, Denmark, Finland, Portugal and the UK.

As a part of the VISIONARIES-NET project this portal was completely updated and extended by additional sections such as blogs, best practice sections and online polls. Apart from this the portal is available in three further languages now: French, Spanish and Romanian.

Objectives of the project

As mentioned above one of the main ideas behind the VISIONARIES-NET project is that in spite of differences in terms of countries, cultures or educational background there is much people can learn from one another.

The VISIONARIES-NET project mainly addresses persons engaged in different kinds of activities related to violence prevention in school. Its main objective is to bring these persons together in online conferences that unite selected groups of experts and practitioners.

Apart from networking the participants of the online conferences themselves another goal of the project is not only to inform a broader public about the conferences' outcomes but to include them in the discussion process. This will be realized by means of web logs that aim at publishing selected outcomes of the conferences' discussions and that encourage users of the VISIONARY portal to continue the discussion.

The Online Conference “Coping with SBV Using the Internet”

The online conference ‘Coping with School Bullying and Violence Using the Internet’ was the first from five online conferences of the VISIONARIES-NET project. An overview about the other four online conferences can be found at <http://www.bullying-in-school.info/en/content/forum-conferences/online-conferences.html>

Objectives of the conference

The objective of this online conference was to get to know web sites and the people behind these sites, their experiences, ideas and visions. The conference aimed at making its participants discuss the potential as well as the limits the Internet has when dealing with school bullying and violence. Furthermore it aimed at bringing together and networking people who share similar interests.

The discussions intended to find out more about ...

- the ways the Internet can help when tackling school bullying and violence
- capabilities, benefits, challenges and limits of the medium Internet
- intercultural similarities and differences of national Internet resources

Furthermore the conference aimed at giving the participants the opportunity ...

- to meet others who also offer web resources on school bullying and violence
- to find out more about approaches and ideas from other parts of the world
- to learn and profit from others who deal with the same problems and challenges
- to network with experts from other countries and cultures

Concept, Methodology and Duration

The conference: an asynchronous forum that is open for four weeks

The online conference was not an online conference in the traditional sense that includes multimedia online presentation and is limited to a 2-3 days period.

The “heart” of the conference was a virtual meeting room in form of a so called *asynchronous forum* that was open 24 hours a day to our participants. The form of an asynchronous forum was chosen because there were participants from different countries and time zones and because none of the participants should have been excluded by the time discussions take place or the techniques that were used. In an asynchronous forum, postings from other participants can be read and commented whenever the participants want, so that the participation can easily be integrated in the participants’ time schedule.

The forum was open for *four weeks*. As all participants were supposed to be involved in several other activities a timeframe was chosen that is long enough to accommodate the participants’ professional and other responsibilities and give both – the participants and the moderators - enough flexibility to participate at the online conference. Experiences show that it takes some time to establish good discussions, especially when crossing time zones and when the discussions include intercultural exchange.

The topics: the participants help precisising the topics

The **topics** that were discussed in this conference highly **depended on the interests** of the participants. The participants were considered to be the experts for the potential as well as the challenges and the limits of Internet resources. For this reason we came back to their expertise for specifying the topics to be discussed at this conference.

In order to make sure that the experiences, interests and expectations of all participants can be considered for the selection of the topics of the week and the single discussion threads a method was applied that resembled the so called **Delphi approach**. According to a definition of Linston and Turoff (2002) the Delphi method “may be characterized as a method for structuring a group communication process so that the process is effective in allowing a group of individuals, as a whole, to deal with a complex problem.” One significant element of a Delphi study is that in a multi-level process a series of questionnaires is applied to a group of pre-selected experts. This series of questionings aims at structuring a field of research that is widely unstructured and which has not been subject of research yet. Within the VISIONARIES-NET project a modified Delphi approach was applied. Questionings of all participants preceded the discussions related to the topics of the week. All participants were asked to answer 3-4 short questions related to each of the four topics of the week. The participants’ answers were categorised and served as a starting point for the conference’s discussions.

The structure and framework of the conference

As mentioned above the conference’s forum was open for a time span of four weeks. According to our original plan it was foreseen to open a new topic of the week with the

beginning of the week. For each **topic of the week** it was intended to focus on 2-4 selected topics in separate threads. In order not to have too many discussion threads open at the same time all open threads related to the former topic of the week were intended to be closed once the new threads related to the new topic of the week was opened. In practice this original plan was handled rather flexible in order not to interrupt good and productive discussions and to give participants more time to contribute to the discussions. In consequence the topics of the week partly overlapped so that more than 3-4 topics were open at the same time.

In a four-weeks-conference with several parallel discussions and numerous postings, that is open for 24 hours a day for most participants it's hardly possible to follow all discussions. Therefore the main points of the discussions were summarised in form of short **interim and final summaries** for all threads in the topic of the week section. The interim summaries made it possible to keep track of the discussions even if the respective person was not able to participate actively at the discussions on a daily basis. Apart from this a **daily newsletter** was sent to all participants of the conference in order to inform them about new threads, new interim and final summaries or interesting topics that came up in the discussions.

The first discussions revealed that there was a need to discuss topics that were not directly related to the overall topic of the conference "coping with SBV using the Internet". For this purpose an **off-topic section** was introduced that gave room for discussions about e.g. how to encounter victims and bullies in general, terms used for bullying and violence in different countries, presentations of some of the participants' sites or projects and several others more.

The conference blog: continuing the discussions with a broader audience

It is one of the conference's purposes not to restrict it to a limited group of experts but to include a broader audience of Internet users. For this purpose selected outcomes of the conference were published in a web log at the VISIONARY portal in order to inform the users of the blog about the conference's outcomes and above all in order to continue the discussions with a broader public.

The conference blog is available at <http://blog.bullying-in-school.info/>

Participants and moderators of the conference

The first online conference "Coping with School Bullying and Violence Using the Internet" was moderated by:

Thomas Jäger (Germany) (main moderation)
Agnès Pradet (France) (co-moderation)
Joaquín Mora-Merchan (Spain) (co-moderation)
Oana Mateescu (Romania) (co-moderation)

The conference included the following 28 participants from five continents:

Ben Furman (Finland)
Jacques Nimier (France)
Kristian Klett (Germany)

Manfred Schreiber (Germany)
Oliviero Facchinetti (Italy)
Jörgen Stouten (Netherlands)
Helga Johannessen (Norway)
João Amado (Portugal)
Isabel Freire (Portugal)
Andrew Mellor (Scotland)
Angela Serrano (Spain)
Marc Thiébaud (Switzerland)
Liz Carnell (UK)
Emma-Jane Cross (UK)
Fergus Crow (UK)
Noa Shapira-Azulay (Israel)
Shlomo Zis (Israel)
Booki Kimchi (Israel)
Amos Rolider (Israel)
Daniel F. Martínez (Argentina)
Aramis Lopes (Brazil)
Claire Beaumont (Canada)
Susan White (Canada)
Bill Belsey (Canada)
Tom Letson (USA)
Sandra Peters (USA)
Chris Henderson (Australia)
Richard Beach (New Zealand)

Topics of the Discussions

In the following the outcomes of our discussions related to the topics of the week will be presented. For the first two weeks of the conference the outcomes of the Delphi questionings – that aimed at working out the participants’ main interests – will be presented as well. The time of the conference was limited and therefore also the possibility to discuss all topics of interest related to the overall topic of the conference. For this reason the outcomes of the Delphi questionings give a revealing insight in a topic that has not been subject of research yet.

Topic 1: Coping with School Bullying and Violence - the Role of the Internet

In this first week of the conference the discussions focused on the general role the Internet can play in the process of school bullying and violence prevention. The topics that were chosen for this first week of the conference were inspired by the outcomes of the initial Delphi questioning of all participants as well as the first postings of the participants in the introduction round.

The main threads that were opened subsequently in this first week were:

- National specifics and International commonalities of Internet resources on SBV
- What makes a good web site on SBV?
- How can users profit from the benefits of the Internet?

The following summaries related to the first week do not follow these overall topics of the three main threads as in the first thread several sub-topics emerged that will be given a broader room below.

Outcomes of the first Delphi-questioning

As previously the Delphi-questioning preceded the discussions related to the topic of the week in order to include the participants in the process of precisising the topics of this week’s threads. Below there is a short overview about the overall questions given in this first Delphi-questionnaire together with keywords that resulted from the categorisation of the participants’ answers.

Question 1: Where do you see the benefits of the Internet for dealing with school bullying and violence (SBV)? Is there any “additional value” the Internet offers compared to other media or personal encounters?

The following categories – that more or less correspond with the outcomes of other studies related to the benefits of the Internet in other fields – resulted from the evaluation of the participants’ answers. Each of the categories is illustrated with one selected quotation.

- Easy access and availability of information
Example: “The benefits I can see is the internet's capacity to disseminate the information with a low cost and the easy access.”
- Low costs
Example: “The economic benefits of the Internet dealing with SB is from our side that it is cheaper to use than sending brochures which is rather expensive. For free you can give a lot of information on a web site“

- A good way to disseminate information
Example: "The internet is the best way to disseminate the information. By the way, the visitors must know about the theme they are looking for."
- Almost unlimited amount of information
Example: "Internet has the capability to give information just about everything, most victim's are more 'open' to us if we show that we take their problems serious. You have the ability with internet to share each other's experiences, problems, just about everything. If you can put all of this in a good controlled information-flow, you have a powerful tool of helping people with each others experiences."
- Outlasting information
Example: "The information on the Internet is staying there eternally in antagonism to other media."
- The Internet ensures anonymity
Example: "The benefit of the internet in bullying prevention and intervention is without measure. The Internet provides students (who are appropriately orientated by school officials) with a tool where they can safely report bullying without being -seen- by other students walking into an administrator or counsellor's office. This anonymity cannot be matched. It is surprising that this effective use of the internet has not been widely discussed among experts in the field of bully prevention."
- The Internet facilitates communication
Example: "We can deal with school bullying and other violence; but there are many additional values if we lead with internet, mainly, the possibility to make a large dialog with many people, for example about a specific problem or a incidental case."

Question 2: Are there specific problems or challenges related to SBV for which the Internet is a more appropriate medium than other media are? Are there other kinds of problems for which the Internet is rather contra productive?

The following categories resulted from the evaluation of the participants' answers:

- Information quality can not be ensured
Example: „Information online are not supervised and anybody can present wrong information. It could be dangerous in this way."
- The Internet has the potential to greatly increase the consequences of bullying
Example: "The internet and cyberspace have the potential to greatly increase the consequences of bullying. For example, negative comments written on a toilet wall can be erased with only a few students seeing them. Hate websites set up by bulllys can reach many students instantly, and can never truly be erased. You could 'google' the site for ever."
- Anonymity increases the risks for some groups
Example: "People are anonymous which means if a child is suicidal for instance it may not be so easy to find them if they have taken an overdose etc."
- Internet is contra productive if it is the only way of help and support
Example: "Internet is contraproductive if you rely too much on it, you have to keep a social connection with everyone you help or support."

Question 3: If there are any groups of persons who do profit more from Internet resources on SBV than other groups, which groups do rather profit, which not?

The evaluation of this question brought up the following categories:

Persons who do profit from Internet resources on SBV:

- Persons who share similar problems
Example: "Moreover, the internet facilitates to contact people with the same problems and easily makes visible the projects and solutions."

- Groups who profit from a good socioeconomic situation
Example: "I would think groups with more access would benefit more i.e. wealthy, highly literate groups."
- Groups who are familiar with the Internet
Example: "Maybe kids -victims- have more occasions to use internet (friendless, social exclusion...) and this medium is useful to help them to face their problems of school bullying . "
- Teaching staff
Example: "School directions and teachers can profit too from internet resources on school bullying to prevent and also to find news intervention pathways"
- Victims and their parents
Example: "Groups which do profit from internet are victims, school/workplaces who actively want to support their students/employees."

Persons who do not profit from Internet resources on SBV

- Groups with socioeconomic problems who don't have access to the Internet
Example: "Here in Brazil we have some difficulties because most Brazilians don't have access to the internet, or even have a computer"
- Groups that already have found their own solution
Example: "Groups who don't profit, are groups which already have found their own solution against bullying, people who bully"

Thread: Internet and SBV - The situation in different countries

The discussion on the **relevance of the Internet in the field of SBV** in different countries was part of the thread "National specifics and International commonalities of Internet resources on SBV". This topic emerged as one of several sub-topics in this thread. Due to its broad room, as one of the most discussed sub-topics in this thread the main outcomes of the discussion will be summarised in this separate paragraph below.

The discussions made clear that **school bullying is not on the public agenda in all countries** that are represented in this online conference. In some countries like Germany, the UK or the USA, school bullying is in the focus of the public attention. Nevertheless, depending on incidents such as school shootings, murderers or other extreme incidents that draw the attention of the media the public attention seems to oscillate considerably. In other countries SBV doesn't seem to be amongst the "hot topics" yet. While in some countries other topics like e.g. workplace bullying (e.g. New Zealand, Norway), domestic violence or violence in the media (Romania) seem to have a higher attention, other countries don't have a broad awareness of the bullying problem at all or even don't have an appropriate term for bullying (like e.g. Brazil).

The "supply" with websites on SBV differs considerably from country to country. As the discussion revealed the situation in the rather **developed countries** like e.g. the USA, the UK or Germany not surprisingly differs from the **less developed countries** like e.g. Brazil. While developed countries comprise of a broad range of different types of web sites on SBV that include big portals, a huge range of information sites or sites that facilitate communication between the users, less developed countries don't have more than one web site on the topic.

One factor that limits the role the Internet can play in the process of SBV prevention is the **Internet infrastructure**. Some countries like Brazil, Romania or Portugal lack of a good

infrastructure so that most schools are not connected to the Internet at all. At the same time most people also don't have access to the Internet from other places (like at home) (note: at least this has not been the case at the time when we held our conference). In other countries like New Zealand "the uptake of broadband technology has been rather slow. This hampers the creation of online resources for schools" (Richard Beach, New Zealand). One reason for the lack of sites on SBV in some countries might also be in the teachers and other persons involved in SBV prevention who "still don't see the Internet as an effective tool for them" (Noa Shapira, Israel).

Of course the **size of a country** plays a significant role in terms of the supply with web sites on SBV in a country. Bigger countries like the USA, the UK or Germany comprise of a broader range of web sites on SBV as smaller countries also highly developed countries like Norway or New Zealand. Nevertheless, the fact that big developed countries like Canada with more than 30 Millions inhabitants only have "only about 4 agencies who specifically have bullying only websites" (Susan White, Canada) makes clear that a number of factors apart from a country's size determined the supply with sites on SBV.

A situation that Helga Johannessen exemplified for Norway certainly fits to other countries as well: In spite of numerous link collections with hyperlinks that point to other sites on SBV in the respective country there is a **lack of networks of websites on SBV** in most countries.

At the same time there are no mechanisms that give users hints about the **quality of a site**. As Tom Letson (USA) pointed out "a recognized bullying specialist license, certification or credential does not exist at present either on the state or national level". Most participants of the discussions widely agreed with a posting of Susan White (Canada): "perhaps there could be **an international certification group**; people could submit their site for certification, and then have a logo to put on the site that it was certified by the group".

Thread: General versus specific sites on SBV: what do users need?

This discussion also came up as a sub-topic in the thread "National specifics and International commonalities of Internet resources on SBV". The discussion focused on the question whether it is possible to find one common, International "model" for web sites on school bullying and violence or whether differences between countries, target groups etc. prevail that make necessary the creation of rather specific sites.

Several participants opted for having **one common model of web site** with basic information about bullying and its prevention. Especially the idea of having one International site that could be connected to an International network of websites found favour with all participants of the discussion. In this context an international certification group was suggested. As Susan White (Canada) proposed "people could submit their site for certification, and then have a logo to put on the site that it was certified by the group". This idea was deepened in the thread "The quality of information on SBV".

In spite of numerous advantages of an overall, International web site the discussions also revealed the necessity of having rather **specific web sites** that focus on specific target groups or country- and culture-specific topics.

Noa Shapira (Israel) illustrated the necessity of having **culture-specific web sites** on the examples of Jewish and Arab people in Israel: "I think Israel is an interesting example for

that. Our site is used by Jewish and Arabs as well. From one hand we found some differences because of the different culture, from the other hand it is obvious that we deal with the same problems and try to use the same solutions. We have four Arab people in our staff; they adapt, translate and write program for the Arab population, but actually we are talking about the same things. Because our site deals with civic and social education, the examples and events that meant to demonstrate the ideas must be adapted to every culture, but the situations and solutions are quite the same.”

Tom Letson (USA) pointed out the importance of having **web sites for single schools**: “I feel each individual school in the world understands (or at least it should) its respective school climate at any given time better than anyone else. They understand the ethnic, racial, religious, gender, and socioeconomic makeup better than anyone else. They have a better understanding of community relations and tensions that exist which subsequently permeate into the school building.” “Each individual school should then be able to provide their students with: A well researched list of web sites and what specific service or information each provides in the area of bullying for students, parents and staff.”

Aramis Lopes (Brazil) basically backed this idea but emphasised that “it is impossible to do in a country like Brazil and other developing countries in the world” as most schools and most children in Brazil do not have access to the internet yet.

Thread: What makes a good web site on SBV?

This discussion resulted from the thread "National specifics and International commonalities of Internet resources on SBV" in which one participant - Aramis Lopes (Brazil) – suggested to start a discussion on what the participants expect from a good web site on school bullying and violence.

A first answer on this was question “**What makes a good web site on school bullying and violence?**” was given by Sandra Peters (USA): “**Basically, the same things that make any website effective.**”

Sandra Peters as well as other participants have contributed numerous good ideas and suggestions that are summarised in form of keywords below.

The **start site** should state clearly:

- What the purpose of the site
- Who the target group is
- Who the owner of the site is
- That the owner of the site is a credible source of information

In terms of **navigation** it’s important:

- To keep it simple
- For complex sites: to offer a site map and/or an internal search engine

In terms of **target group orientation** it’s important (see also the respective thread):

- To state clearly who the target group is
- To address the target group properly (in forums in a personal way)
- To find out if the site is really used by this group
- To offer separate sections for different target groups

In terms of **administration** a good web site should:

- be constructed in a way that it can be administered easily
- be updated regularly

The **credibility** of a site can be demonstrated by

- Links to other credible sources such as authorities, other credible sites etc.
- Stating the name of the own credible institution (e.g. a University)
- Stating references
- Stating clearly who is responsible for the site in the “about us” section

Sections that can be part of a web site on SBV are for instance:

- Background information
- National laws related to SBV
- Link collections
- Forums
- News section
- Audiovisual material

The site should offer **interactivity** such as

- Email addresses
- Feedback forms
- Online polls
- Forum / chat etc.

Thread: How can users profit from the benefits of the Internet?

The question we discussed in this thread of our 1st conference was what providers of web sites on school bullying can do to ensure that people in need find the information or the communication facilities they need for coping with their problem.

The **background** of this discussion was that one of the *characteristics of the Internet* is that it provides an almost *unlimited amount of information [...] in an easy, fast and cheap way*. Nevertheless, though theoretically there is a lot of information in the Internet that should help people coping with their problems related to school bullying and violence people still do not manage to find the information they need. At the same time there is some reason to assume that *much of the information that is available is not reliable*, non-engaging and ‘middle of the road’ (see also the thread “The quality of information on SBV in the Internet” in the conference blog)

The **discussions focused on two overall questions:**

- A) What can we - as providers of web sites and part of the internet infrastructure - do to ensure that people in need find the information they are searching for?
- B) What can we do to ensure that they can judge if this information is good and reliable, so that they can profit from the benefits the Internet offers?

A) What can we do to ensure that people in need find the information they are searching

for?

We concluded that the best key word for summarising our discussions on this issue is “**good advertising**”.

The following **strategies** on how we can make our sites more popular were suggested:

- Producing pamphlets and posters
- Producing online banners and distributing them
- Press releases and contacts with media
- Choosing a good url that is easy to remember and contains important keywords
- Optimising strategies that lead to a good ranking in search engines
- Working out a glossary of terms used for SBV in different countries
- Building links with large, commercial organisations
- Building links with law enforcement
- Linkages between web sites on SBV
- Linkages with internet youth portals
- Collaboration with school area (e.g. by making available a PC combined with addresses of useful web sites)

B) What can we do to ensure that users can judge if this information is good and reliable?

The discussions related to this topic focused on the **credibility of information**.

The following **strategies** that aim at ensuring a high credibility of information were suggested:

- selecting only information from credible sources
- aligning the own web site with credible sources

In order to ensure the credibility of information furthermore a certification group was suggested that issues logos for web sites that have been certified by this group.

Topic 2: Information Sites on SBV

In the second week of the conference we focused on information sites on school bullying and violence (like for instance sites that include background information, project descriptions, materials, link collections, news sites etc.). The topics that were chosen for this second week of the conference were both inspired by the outcomes of the second qualitative questioning of all participants and issues that came up in the discussions of the first week

Outcomes of the second Delphi-questioning

Question 1: There are different types of information on SBV that are offered in the Internet such as background articles or address lists that are available. What further types of information come in your mind?

The following categories resulted from the evaluation of the participants' answers:

- Concepts of programs
Examples: "prevention & intervention programmes", "school community programmes", "partner programs", "explanation simple of concepts allowing to analyze a situation"
- Tips and advice
Examples: "Regards for teachers about how to deal with SBV", "Some orientations to children about the bullying behaviour, and how to cope with it", "Advices for the parents/family - what to do when the child is to become a victim of SBV"
- Documents and materials
Examples: "Presentation of books", "audio and video clips", "policy documents", "online catalogues and databases", "online catalogues (including publishers' and library)", "online databases"
- News
Example: "news alert services"
- Links
Example: "Web links"
- Polls
Example : "online polls (eg young people answering questionnaires)"

Question 2: What are the problems, limits or maybe even dangers of the Internet as a medium that provides information on SBV?

The evaluation of this question brought up the following categories:

- Information quality
Example: "Could be hard to judge and monitor the accuracy of the information - a technologically sophisticated site doesn't guarantee high quality advice and accurate information Internet must not be seen as substitute for direct personal contact"
- Misinformation
Example: "Information quantity"
- Information flood
Example: "To much information"
- Dominance of information
Example: "the internet though its possibility of interactivity is often just a passive medium, that hold information."
- Qualification of online counsellors
Example: "Danger= email advice this should be provided by trained advisors/counsellors who put safety first"
- Advice on country specific problems
Example: "some advice may be relevant in one country but not in another (eg the responsibility of schools regarding monitoring bullying incidents). This could prove to be misleading and even dangerous."
- Tailoring target group oriented information
Example: "I think the limits are the impossibility of talk directly with the visitor. So, the biggest challenge is the site has the information that the visitors are looking for."

Question 3: What can be done to minimise these problems, limits or dangers?

The following categories resulted from the evaluation of the participants' answers:

- Portals, online communities and networks
Example: “Perhaps an international network can be able to give advises what site is good or which is not. I mean like The Norwegian electrical material control (NEMCO) is to be placed at all electric tools/instruments. If we had a organ which put approved/approvement on the websites they find good enough for SBV.”
- Directing users to experts or self-help groups
Example: “It is useful that the site can direct the people towards specialists or groups of accompaniment. The site can be a manner of making known these guides and of -/dédramatiser/- this step”

Thread: Target group orientation of web sites

The starting point of the discussion was the assumption that **we actually need different web sites for different target groups** - such as pupils, teachers or parents – as these groups differ in terms of their problems, their ways of coping with the problem of school bullying and violence (SBV) or the vocabulary or the tools that fit to a specific group.

As Manfred Schreiber (Germany) pointed out one of the main problems for **many web sites** seems to be that they **do not know who their users are**. So, in consequence, the providers of such web sites are acting blind and in the worst case waste time and money by providing information that is not appropriate for their main target group(s).

Sandra Peters (USA) cut on the chase the main difficulty of finding out if the web site is indeed used by the target group it is intended for:

“What I realized was that there is, in reality, no way to know who your site's audience is unless visitors decide to write to you and identify themselves. This, of course, seldom happens. Random responses, moreover, do not give you an overall of who is visiting your site or why.”

In the following discussions we focused on the question **how we can identify who the users of our site are**.

In this context one of the biggest challenges is choosing an appropriate **method of finding out who the users are**. Nevertheless, simply including a questionnaire at one's web site doesn't seem to be sufficient as very often such online questionnaires get ignored by users.

One point that seems to be important for motivating users to fill in online questionnaires is the *level of interactivity* of a web site. While some sites invite users for expressing their opinions and doing this seems to be a kind of natural thing to them, on other sites surveys, feedback forms etc. rather look like an “alibi”.

Here are **some methods that aim at finding out who the user groups of a web site are** that were suggested in the course of our discussions:

- Questions on the start site (Aramis Lopes, Brazil)
- Automatic response forms (Sandra Peters, USA)
- Surveys (Tom Letson, USA)
- Guest book (Sandra Peters, USA)
- “Focus groups”, groups of 30-50 persons who discuss what is relevant (Noa Shapira-Azulay, Israel)
- “Online focus group”, groups who discuss about the site e.g. in a forum (Thomas Jäger, Germany)

- Delphi method, a qualitative multi-phased online questioning (Thomas Jäger, Germany)

Thread: The quality of information on SBV in the Internet

The background of this discussion was that **in other thematic areas** - such as health information - the **discussions on the capabilities, the limits and the dangers of the Internet** have already started some years ago.

One of the most heavily argued topics in the area of health information was the one of the quality of health care information in the Internet. Discussions were focusing for instance on the question whether users can tell the good from the bad information, whether the majority of information is useful at all, whether information can be dangerous or harmful and criteria for good quality information.

Our discussions focused on different aspects of this topic that can be paraphrased by the following keywords:

- A) Low quality information and its sources
- B) Repetitive, non-engaging web sites
- C) The dangers of copying information from other countries
- D) Strategies for ensuring good quality

A) Low quality information and its sources

In **other fields of research** like e.g. on health information in the Internet there are numerous **articles and studies** that say that the **quality of information in the Internet is very poor** if not wrong and sometimes even dangerous for the users.

The question whether this also applies for web sites on SBV didn't have a broad resonance in our discussion. The statement of Tom Letson (USA) that "**there may not be any sites on the internet that are truly harmful to students**" didn't provoke any protests, nevertheless, it's difficult to say whether this applies for the majority of our countries.

One possible **source for low quality information** can lay in **high competition for funding**. As Richard Beach (New Zealand) wrote "if organisations with similar goals are competing for the same funding streams (from government for example) this can lead to one or more of the organisations releasing advice which is sub-standard, simply to get their hands of some of the money."

Richard Beach also pointed us to another sources of low or at least mixed quality: "The **freedom the internet allows to express any opinion**, can mean that mixed messages are sent out."

B) Repetitive, non-engaging web sites

As Tom Letson wrote "in the USA, most sites on bullying seem to be informational in nature and very **repetitive**." He also writes "while there may not be any sites on the internet that are truly harmful to students, there are many sites that are bland, "middle of the road", **non-engaging**, and **do not provide the hope kids are looking for**."

As many sites quote from other sites (often without stating clearly the source of this information) and in the net information is spread without any control “it can happen easily that information that is not appropriate is quoted again and again. So, when some users visit several sites and find this “wrong” information repeatedly they might consider it to be correct.” (Thomas Jäger, Germany).

C) The dangers of copying information from other countries

One possible **problem** in this context might be **when information is just copied from English sites** as it might offer information that is country-specific (Thomas Jäger). Nevertheless, in countries in which there are not many online resources on SBV yet there is no other choice. One **appropriate strategy** described by Aramis Lopes (Brazil) is to **choose carefully information** from other countries that might fit for one’s own country and to **replace it by updated information later on** in case it gets evident that some information does not fit to the country’s reality.

D) Strategies for ensuring good quality

The following strategies that aim to ensure high quality information were reported and suggested in the course of our discussion:

Choosing carefully the information (e.g. news, laws) published on the own web site (Helga Johannessen, Norway)

A first step towards a **certification group** (Susan White, Canada) that aims to ensure high quality information could be a **deontology charter** for the web site of SBV, a collection of principles “which could set up some rules e.g., to be anonymous, to respect the private life of each other, to be sure of the information we give ...” (Agnès Pradet, France).

Topic 3: Communication and Self Help Sites on SBV

In this third week the overall topic of our discussions was the Internet as a medium for communication and self-help. Amongst others it was intended to discuss and analyse why communication and self-help sites - such as forums, mailing lists or newsgroups - work and why they very often don’t work. A second main topic that came up in the discussions of the previous two weeks was the topic of Cyberbullying. Unlike in the first two weeks of the conference there was no qualitative questioning preceding this third week, mainly for the reason not too overstrain the participants with extra work.

Thread: Cyberbullying

One focus of the discussions was on **cyberbullying**, a problem that is heavily discussed in many Western countries. - like e.g. New Zealand, Australia, Canada or the United States - while in others - like e.g. Portugal or Germany - it does not seem to be in the focus of public attention to the same extent. Bill Belsey (Bullying.org, Canada) gives the following definition of cyberbullying (cp. www.cyberbullying.ca) that makes clear what exactly cyberbullying is:

"Cyberbullying involves the use of information and communication technologies such as e-mail, cell phone and pager text messages, instant messaging, defamatory personal Web sites,

and defamatory online personal polling Web sites, to support deliberate, repeated, and hostile behaviour by an individual or group, that is intended to harm others."

Cyberbullying can occur in **different forms**. The following examples given in our discussion give a rough idea of the broad spectrum of cyberbullying:

"The main problem in Norway at the moment is children, both in primary and secondary school, using mobile phone with camera and takes pictures of other pupils in shower during gymnastic. Then they lay out pictures of naked youth on the Internet." (Helga Johannessen, AFAM, Norway)

"From time to time we read about pupils who bully others by taking photos from them with the cameras of their mobile phones, who put videos from others in the Internet etc." (Thomas Jäger, VISIONARY, Germany)

"Every week we get stories of how mobile phones are being used in new and more bizarre ways, often to instigate abuse - from 8 year olds pack harassing a peer till she feels suicidal, to children using the cameras to send pornographic images of themselves to their friends." (Richard Beach, NetSafe, New Zealand)

Our discussion revealed that cyberbullying is **not on the public agenda in all of our countries**. While in some of our countries it is (like New Zealand) in others it isn't (yet) or is only mentioned incidentally by the media in other countries (such as Israel, Portugal, Norway or Germany). The following reasons for this were suggested in our discussions:

- People are not aware of cyberbullying yet (Joao Amado, VISIONARY, Portugal)
- There is no term for cyberbullying in the national language (Thomas Jäger, VISIONARY, Germany)
- The media "make the rules" and haven't put it on the public agenda yet (Helga Johannessen, AFAM, Norway)

Richard Beach (New Zealand) pointed out that cyberbullying very probably is already a problem also in those countries in which it is not on the agenda yet:

"As for those countries that think cyberbullying is not on the radar yet. Look harder and you'll see it. It's just that it's flying in under the radar!"

Thread: Forums on school bullying and violence

One question that came up in the discussion in several threads was why many forums on school bullying and violence (SBV) do not 'work' and under which circumstances they do work.

The discussion was based upon the following four questions:

- A) Why do many forums not work?
- B) Is the problem of SBV really too heavy for open forums?
- C) How can the security of users be ensured?
- D) Under which circumstances does a forum work?

A) Why do many forums not work?

Tom Letson (USA) first of all specified the term “work”. He mentioned that a forum is also useful when it only helps a small percentage of users or when the users profit by merely reading the postings from others without posting own comments. So maybe the extent to which a forum ‘works’ should not (only) be measured by the number of active users.

Throughout the discussion, the following factors were identified which could be responsible for the fact that a forum doesn’t work (in the sense that it is not used):

- The **forum’s popularity**: Not a lot of people have heard about the existence of the forum, yet.
- **Moderation**: Forums don’t work when the moderators are either not qualified or they don’t manage to establish an effective leadership. The problems get even worse when the forum is not moderated at all.
- The forum and the threads in it are neither interesting **nor helpful**:
- The forum is **poorly structured**, which might only lead to confusion in the users, so that they neither know where to find information nor where to post it.
- The **users don’t trust the forum** as it doesn’t ensure anonymity
- The **technology** used for the forum is too **difficult to handle** for the users.
- **People prefer other channels of communication**, i.e. they prefer to talk to someone they know and/or can trust in person or on the phone.

Helga Johannessen (Norway) named another reason why victims or others affected by SBV don’t use forums, namely because they have discussed their problems on many occasions and with many different people already, so they simply do not see any need to further discuss the subject on the internet.

B) Is the problem of SBV really too heavy for open forums?

There were **two different views**, both of them plausible and also not necessarily incompatible. Some of us (e.g. Tom Letson, Joao Amado, Claire Beaumont, Thomas Jäger) think that **forums** (preferably closed forums) **are a good place for discussing problems** related to SBV. Others (like Helga Johannessen, Claire Beaumont, Thomas Jäger) point to the **problems of forums** due to comprehensible difficulties victims have when posting sensitive issues such as problems related to SBV in a forum which theoretically could make it possible to identify the poster.

C) How can the security of users be ensured?

One aspect, which was mentioned rather often, was the problem of safety issues. Although, as Helga Johannessen said, generally speaking **100% security** can never be guaranteed and it is **essential to make that clear** to all users of a forum, maybe more people would participate in online forums if they felt safer to expose themselves there. The following suggestions for increasing safety among the users came up throughout the discourse:

- moderation of the forum
- password protected closed forums
- protected forums in which members have to pay a small fee for access
- completion of an online questionnaire or application before receiving a user name and password
- personal email exchange with moderator as a precondition for getting access to the forum

- personal chats between the victim and the moderator, or an experienced member of the forum (who could get a special status like sort of a co-moderator after having participated in the forum's discussions for a while)

D) Under which circumstances does a forum work?

The last question is rather similar to the first question, as the circumstances under which a forum **does work**, logically evolve from the reasons, why it **doesn't work**.

In addition to the answers already given to the first question the following other **suggestions** aim to optimise the quality of forums and the discussions on SBV:

- merging several smaller forums to one big forum
- using a specific colour (e.g. "orange" as Helga Johannessen suggested) to signalise strength
- avoiding the usage of the term "victim"
- offering target oriented closed conferences for small groups from time to time
- establishing peer support systems to help victims
- if we suspect children are not willing post questions because of privacy issues: moderators should post the questions children might be likely to ask, then provide an answer to the question for all visitors to read.

Conclusions and Outlook

The online conference "Coping with School Bullying and Violence Using the Internet" brought first light into a field that has not been subject of research yet.

Within our discussions and the Delphi questionings that preceded the discussions we examined the topic from different perspectives. We outlined the supply with web sites on SBV in different countries and discussed reasons for the differences; we worked out benefits and advantages but also limits, disadvantages and dangers of the medium. We tried to specify which persons and groups do and do not profit from the Internet; from a provider's view we compiled criteria that make good and usable web sites, ways to promote a site in order to increase its popularity and methods that help finding out who the users of a site are in order to tailor target group oriented web sites. We debated the problem of how to ensure a good quality of information on SBV in the Internet and concluded that certification groups that issue quality labels for web sites on SBV would be a promising way to promote a network of high quality web sites. We discussed why many forums on SBV do not work and what we as providers could do to create forums that meet the users' needs. Finally we debated about the dangers of Cyberbullying, a relatively new form of bullying that builds on new media such as the Internet or mobile phones.

The discussions of this conference can be regarded as a starting point that aims at stimulating further discussions and research. Though the outcomes of the conference already draw a complex picture of the role the Internet plays in the process of coping with SBV, it is clear that due to the limitations of a merely discussion based, 4-weeks-conference with a limited number of participants, the results are neither representative nor exhaustive. Nevertheless, they give a first, rough structure to a formerly widely unstructured field.

There are numerous questions that could build on our conference's outcomes and that might be of interest for future research and discussions like e.g.:

- How do *different groups* such as victims, parents, teachers or researchers make use of the Internet?
- Which kind of information sources or communication sites do they use in which way?
- What exactly are users searching for and does the current supply with web sites meet these needs?
- Where are limits and challenges of the Internet and in which way could web sites be improved to meet the users' needs?
- What will new developments (such as "web 2.0", semantic networks etc.) bring and will they contribute to make web sites on SBV more usable and useful?

Finally, our discussions revealed that there might be a need of national and International certification groups that issue quality labels and trustmarks for web sites, so that users know that they can trust the information on this site and the safety of the communication facilities they can find there. Such certification groups would have to precise quality criteria and ways how to issue quality labels and how to implement a system of (self-) control. The idea of developing and implementing an International quality label for web sites on SBV was deepened in the Socrates/Minerva proposal QUALIVISION that was submitted to the European Commission in 2006.

Another necessity seems to be the foundation of national and International networks of web sites on SBV in order to coordinate efforts and activities of sites that cover different aspects of the SBV problem. Online conferences such as our conference might help forming first rather informal networks. In the long run more formalized networks, supported by external funding, are needed for making a starting point for creating a system of web sites on SBV that coordinate their activities and provides the infrastructure different user groups need for coping with their specific problems.

Several aspects that were scribed in this conference like for instance the problem of Cyberbullying, definitions of SBV and many others will be deepened in our further four online conferences of the VISIONARIES-NET project. Apart from this selected outcomes of this conference will be presented to the public in form of a "conference blog" that does not only aim at informing users but that also explicitly aims at including them in the discussion process.

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