

Is Facebook making our kids violent?

Hugh Tobin

Moral panic is never too far away from the Australian media.

The widespread claims that the internet is corrupting youth and encouraging violent behaviour completely misunderstands technology, the people who use it and the nature of crime itself.

In July *The Australian* reported that Australia was facing a 'Facebook and YouTube ... crimewave'. According to a Griffith University academic, police statistics show that violent crimes amongst young people are on the rise.

Indeed, as *The Australian* noted, violent crimes such as homicide, assault, sexual offences and robbery committed by those aged between 10 and 19 in NSW, Victoria, Queensland and South Australia have risen from 17,944 in 1996-7 to 23,382 in 2005-6. Conspicuously, these figures do not take into account population changes, but they are nevertheless striking.

But trends, of course, need explanations. Professor Paul Mazerolle, Director of Griffith University's Centre for Ethics, Law, Justice and Governance, who compiled the figures, attributed the rise in violence to the internet and alcohol. One of Mazerolle's major arguments was that social networking sites caused the rise in violence by encouraging a mob mentality in groups of youth.

As Mazerolle claimed, 'a birthday party that might once have been attended by 20 teenagers will now have

200 gatecrashers.'

However, this claim falls down when we examine the history of social networking in Australia. Mazerolle's statistics only go to 2005-6. But Facebook, the most popular social networking site, was only founded in 2004—it didn't reach a high penetration in Australia until mid 2007, when it was opened to public registration. YouTube itself was only launched in 2005. These types of social networking sites cannot be blamed for an increase in violence spanning a decade—they have only recently been available for us.

Another of Mazerolle's claims was that violence had increased because young people wanted to record their crimes and post them on the Internet for notoriety. 'Young people want to demonstrate superiority and toughness. That's why we've seen a proliferation of things like the videotaping of violent

confrontations.'

But does the fact that some crimes are posted on the internet mean that they would not have been committed if the technology did not exist?

There is no strong evidence of a causal link between new internet activities and violence amongst young people—just a specious correlation and an eagerness by the media to drum up a moral panic.

Indeed, such hasty analysis trivialises the causes of crime. Violent crimes of the severity of homicide, sexual assault and robbery have more complex explanations than technological change. One possible explanation for the increase in reported crimes is the growth in public awareness campaigns that encourage people to come forward if they are a victim of crime.

Social networking sites are primarily used for entertainment and have mechanisms that allow users to report or 'flag' inappropriate content so that it can be removed.

Anyone who suggests that violent assaults are caused by Internet usage is simply making excuses for these crimes. The internet is not dangerous. But people can be. And the internet is just a reflection of the real world that we all live in, both good and bad.

Every time a new technology comes along commentators blame it for all of society's new problems. Social networking sites such as YouTube and Facebook are just the latest target.



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