

# Barbara Kay: Amanda Todd's death shows the need to expose cyberbullies

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October is National Anti-Bullying month. As a tragic reminder of the need for this, we learn that 15-year-old Amanda Todd, a former “spunky” cheerleader and Grade 10 student at the Coquitlam Alternate Basic Education school in British Columbia, killed herself Wednesday as a result of a cyberbullying campaign against her.

Amanda's story began in Grade 7 when she and friends were fooling around with a camcorder. She was urged on to a topless “flash” that ended up online. A stranger posted it on his Facebook profile and it went viral.

Anxiety ate away at the girl, who posted a video on YouTube about the extreme depression that led to her death. In the video she is seen holding up cards narrating her story, with one towards the end saying, “Every day I think why am I still here.” Kids at her school were well aware of her despair, and yet many of them tormented her further, egging her on to suicide.

How common is this extreme reaction to cyberbullying? Very rare, even though the phenomenon is now a number of years old. Bob Thomson, a professor of popular culture at Syracuse University says, “For every video that goes viral, millions upon millions upon millions don't.” A 2007 survey by the National Crime Prevention Council and Harris Interactive confirmed that cyberbullying is prevalent: about 43% of students polled said they had been targets of cyberbullying in the past year. But the majority of those polled – 61% of the boys and 52% of the girls – said they were “not bothered” by it.

But that's hardly reassuring. Nobody should be made so desperate by public exposure they find the only answer is suicide. At least physical bullying can be reported to authorities and the victim can physically escape the tormentor. But Internet bullying never stops. Ann Frisen, a psychology professor at the University of Gothenburg, studies bullying of different types. She says closing one's computer isn't psychologically helpful: “Victims of internet bullying, or cyberbullying, have no refuge. [They] may be harassed continuously via SMS and websites....”

In late September the Supreme Court of Canada asserted its role in helping to eliminate bullying by clearing the way for a teenager, known as A.B., now 17, to pursue her legal application, launched two years ago, to force an Internet provider to reveal the identities of people who created a Facebook page full of humiliating details, purportedly about A.B.'s sex life.

The unanimous decision was perceived in some quarters as a blow to media rights, but Justice Rosalie Abella defended the decision, saying, “Studies have confirmed that allowing the names of child victims and other identifying information to appear in the media can exacerbate trauma, complicate recovery, discourage future disclosures and inhibit co-operation with authorities.”

This is a reasonable intrusion into media rights. The teenage years are a difficult passage at best. Social confidence for many teens at this stage of life is notoriously fragile. There seems to be no question but that cyberbullying is one of the most humiliating experiences that can befall a vulnerable teenager. Ending anonymity in such attacks will go far to diminish, if not eliminate this cruelly dark side of social media.

“Why is it that no one ever listens or cares until it's too late?” a friend of Amanda's posted on a Facebook memorial page. “If only our generation could listen better. I wish I had known you better, rest in peace Amanda.”

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