



Self Harm in the Digital Age

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INTRODUCTION

Self-harm and eating disorders have existed throughout the ages, but now as with so many aspects of our lives, that which existed offline, now takes its place in the new and ever expanding digital world.

This report addresses pro-Ana websites, which promote anorexia, pro-Mia sites advocate bulimia and pro-self injury (pro-SI) websites providing guidance on forms and methods of how to self-harm. To generalize, these ‘information resources’ are predominantly located on social networking sites, though they are also created as independent websites and blogs. The content of such sites varies greatly, at their most destructive they provide advice and tips on how to avoid eating food, how best to purge after eating and how to hide self-harm from parents and friends. Furthermore, some sites provide encouragement and incentives to continue to destroy one’s physical and psychological self. This is especially found within sites promoting eating disorders where pictures of emaciated people are displayed. Such images are referred to as ‘thinspiration,’ they are designed to assist users in continuing their course of action to lose weight. The creators and bloggers of this content seek to normalize such extreme behavior contending that it is a life choice rather than a problem.

A. Prevalence

Pro-Ana and pro-Mia sites attempt to glorify eating disorders. The issue of these websites was addressed in the PBS documentary ‘Growing Up Online,’¹ in which C.J Pascoe stated that overtime subscribers, to these sites and their philosophies, began to refer to anorexia as “the goddess Ana” and said that they were “praying to the goddess Ana or they’re asking her for help.” Compulsive viewing, reveling in the camaraderie and support offered, mean that users are driven to continue down this path.

The Internet has provided an invaluable resource in allowing sufferers to find help. It permits them to seek advice and guidance anytime, any day, anywhere. However, this constant access is a double-edged sword. Whilst providing opportunities to seek help to get better, the Internet also provides ways to maximize the detrimental effects of self-harming or having an eating disorder, whether it is to commence or to continue.

B. Types of Content

It is important to draw a clear distinction between two types of web content that can appear to be very similar, those websites that contain information on eating disorders and self-harm that are designed to assist those who are trying to recover, and those aiding the continuation of destructive behavior. Recovery websites may still have tips on controlling eating and methods of self-harm which aim to avoid permanent injury but they differ in their ultimate goal. They exist in order to provide a supportive environment for those trying to stop, rather than acting as a cheerleader for those who wish to continue. No one is advocating the closure or removal of recovery sites, rather they should be supported and encouraged by all involved in the online safety community and by professional experts. It is the other counter-productive sites which require attention.

This report highlights the problem itself, discusses a variety of industry and legislative responses and provides guidance for future action.

I. STATISTICS AND RESEARCH

A. Statistics

Eating disorders are estimated to affect over one million people in the UK² and around 11 million Americans,³ though the numbers may well be higher taking into account the highly private nature of the problem. According to a Truth Hurts report, around 25,000 11-to-25 year-olds are admitted to hospital each year after self-harming in the UK.⁴ Yet again so called 'hard' numbers are difficult to come by given the nature of the issue.

The problems of eating disorders and self-harming tendencies are both physical and psychological, highly specific to the individuals involved. Research conducted by Stanford Medical School shows the influence of the information available on pro-eating disorder sites: In 2006 researchers found that 35.5% of eating disorder patients had visited pro-Ana sites, where 96% of them had learned new techniques for weight loss or purging.⁵ Furthermore, a 2009 survey by parental control software vendor CyberSentinel found that of 1500 female Internet users aged between six and 15, one in three reported having searched online for dieting tips, while one in five reported having corresponded with others on social networking sites or in chat rooms for tips on dieting.⁶

The recent growth of pro-self-injury and pro-eating disorder websites has been attributed to two occurrences. Firstly, the advent of free web hosting in the late 1990's⁷ and more recently the popularity of social networking sites⁸, which provide an easily accessible forum to discuss these issues. A survey by Internet security firm Optenet found a 470% increase in pro-Ana and pro-Mia sites from 2006 to 2007.⁹ This increase has not gone unnoticed by the general public who have demanded action from their elected representatives and from those involved in the industry.¹⁰

II. AN INTERNATIONAL PROBLEM

This highly damaging content has spread across the Internet. It is a global issue that would, generally, result in country specific responses. However, this problem actually requires actions that cross traditional geographical borders and go further than national specific legislation. The issue demands the education of children as well as proactive measures to be taken by all involved in the industry.

A. Legislation

Currently there is no express legislation in any country that deals with websites displaying pro-eating disorders or pro-self-harm content. Attempts have been made around the world to deal with this vacuum, but as of November 2009 when this report was published, no laws had been passed. Whether this is owing to the difficulty of legislating this area, with freedom of speech considerations, or whether it is testament to the work started by the ISPs and the social networking sites, it is unclear.

A brief overview of legislative proposals around the world follows.

1. France

In 2008 the French parliament took action as the number of pro-eating disorder websites rose. Valérie Boyer, a *député*¹¹ from the Bouches-du-Rhône region of France, presented a bill in the French National Assembly calling for a prohibition on material that "provokes a person to seek excessive thinness by encouraging prolonged restriction of nourishment."¹² The proposed legislation imposed a fine of €30,000 (\$44,784) and two years imprisonment. This penalty rose to €45,000, or \$67,176, and three years if there was a resulting death. The bill passed through the National Assembly but was stalled in the Senate where in June 2008, it was recommended that the bill was defeated and replaced with early eating disorder screening programs run by schools and physicians.¹³

2. Netherlands

In 2009 the Minister for Youth and Family in Holland, André Rouvoet, called for click-through warnings to be added to all pro-Ana sites on Dutch hosting services. The measure was defeated citing freedom of speech considerations, but the action itself raised the profile of the issue.¹⁴

3. Spain

The Spanish have been very proactive in combating the spread of pro-Ana sites. In addition to a number of websites that discourage eating disorders and promote healthy eating and a healthy body image, they have also sought to eradicate destructive pro-Ana sites. In November 2007, Microsoft shut down four pro-Ana sites on the Spanish version of its 'Spaces' social networking service after a request by the Internet regulatory body for Catalonia. At the time a Microsoft spokesperson said that pro-Ana sites "infringe all the rules on content created by users and visible on our sites."¹⁵

In addition in 2008, Hispavista, a Spanish based web portal, removed its pro-Ana forums at the request of the Children's

Ombudsman of Madrid who stated that, “while not illegal, the harmful and false information in such forums being disseminated to minors will impair their proper development.”¹⁶

4. UK

The issue of pro-Ana sites has recently come to the fore in the UK with a call from the Royal College of Psychiatrists to redefine sites with pro-eating disorder content to fall within the remit of the UK Child Internet Safety Council (UKCISC). UKCISC was established in September 2008 as a direct result of the recommendations made by Professor Tanya Byron in her report, ‘Safer Children in a Digital World.’ The Royal College has called on the UK Government to:

- Expand its definition of harmful web content to include pro-eating disorder websites.
- Extend its plans to moderate Internet sites that promote harmful behavior to include pro-eating disorder websites.
- Specifically address pro-eating disorder websites in its plans to raise awareness of e-safety among parents and teachers.¹⁷

This is not the first encounter that the British Government has had with the issue. In February 2008 an Early Day Motion was tabled by Mark Hunter, MP for Cheadle, and supported by 40 MPs. The motion urged the Government to take action against pro-Ana sites and was specifically designed to coincide with National Eating Disorders week. No specific action was taken as a result.¹⁸

B. Industry Responses

As a result of the public’s concern and the perceived inaction by the legislators, it has fallen to industry to take the lead on the regulation of this content. They have had to balance the conflicting interests: those of freedom of speech and protection of users. To make this task more complicated they have to make almost daily judgments as to whether the content is designed to assist with recovery or to encourage sufferers to continue. The actions taken, thus far, have been commendable and show that the Internet industry can, for the most part, be relied upon as new problems and issues emerge.

The monitoring has taken two forms. Firstly there has been increased awareness by safety experts within individual companies. Secondly, and perhaps most effectively, companies have relied on users to report problematic content to them. Yet again this serves to underline the importance of educating children to be responsible digital citizens and to be aware of their rights and responsibilities

whilst online. They have the right to surf the Internet free from content which may be distressing or harmful to them; but at the same time they have the responsibility to both themselves and other users to take action if and when they come across such material.

Examples of some measures taken within the industry are listed below.

1. Daily Motion

According to DailyMotion any content pertaining to the promotion of eating disorders or advocating self-harm would be contrary to the terms of use of DailyMotion and to their child protection policy. Once reported, or found, all content of this nature would be immediately removed.¹⁹

2. Facebook

Facebook states that the promotion of self-harm, including eating disorders is a violation of their Statement of Rights and Responsibilities. They encourage users to report this content using the links provided throughout the site. The reports are then reviewed and appropriate action is taken, including the removal of certain groups or events. Additionally, if anyone posts suicidal content on the site, Facebook alerts the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline and encourages users to do the same.²⁰

3. LiveJournal

Since 2008 LiveJournal has banned material that encourages or instructs others on how to engage in destructive behavior including self-injury and anorexia. Access to such material is disabled and if a journal or community is dedicated to such behavior then the account will be suspended. The explanation given by LiveJournal for this position is as follows “LiveJournal does not condone self-destructive behavior in any capacity, such as communities which promote anorexia as a healthy lifestyle choice, but we also recognize that users should be able to discuss and seek support for dealing with problems related to self-harm. We do not, however, allow content which encourages or instructs others on how to engage in self-destructive behavior.”²¹

4. MySpace

MySpace Terms of Use specifically prohibit material that promotes eating disorders or self-harm. Content is banned if it, “promotes or otherwise incites...physical harm against any group or individual.” This content is regularly removed. MySpace, also, works to prevent such groups forming by encouraging users to report offensive content early. Additionally, MySpace takes proactive steps in the area by hosting groups that are designed to assist with recovery from eating disorders or self-injuring tendencies.²²

III. CONCLUSION

A. The Issues

With regard to the problems of eating disorders and self-harm unfortunately, they will always exist and those affected require highly skilled, professional help. The response from the industry, thus far, has been encouraging and they should be urged to continue with their efforts.

Education remains vital, both in general terms in encouraging children to have a positive self-image and to seek professional help when required and in more specific terms in relation to the Internet. Children should be reminded of the importance of being good digital citizens, of not posting material that encourages other to harm themselves and of reporting content they find to be distressing to the appropriate body. Writing in 2008, Adam Thierer, underlined this point in stating that “education and open, informed discussion is the best answer here.”²³

B. FUTURE ACTIONS

FOSI supports the adoption of the following measures by the Internet industry:

- The implementation of an acceptable use policy actively discouraging content which promotes eating disorders or self-harm.
- Clear and prominent report mechanisms displayed on each webpage, since these have been shown to be effective in combating this material.
- Pro-active monitoring, where possible, by companies to remove this content.
- Closer cooperation by industry with law enforcement, medical experts, statutory and voluntary counseling organizations and professional counselors.

C. The Future

At its most basic, these are problems that cannot be solved by industry alone. The problems require individuals seek professional help. However, collaboration between industry experts and medical professionals will go some way to ensuring that fewer people are exposed to this material and that this content is no longer so readily accessible.

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