

# Bullies find a new playground

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As internet message boards become another arena for bullying, schools are facing tough legal battles to get sites taken down, reports Heather McLean

Once upon a time you could escape the school bullies when you reached the safety of your own home. Now, not even a bolted front door can keep them out.

They've found a new tool - the internet message board. A recent case has involved students from some 20 state and independent schools in north London. They have been acting as webmasters or sending and receiving offensive content posted on a series of messageboards.

The results have spilled over into school time, leaving a very upset group of teenagers and some worried parents. Two sites quoted by teachers are [www.mouth2mouth.tk](http://www.mouth2mouth.tk) and [www.whatyousayin.tk](http://www.whatyousayin.tk), which carry the full names of many students and enough information for anyone to identify and potentially locate them.

Discussions on the boards include alleged sexual encounters, whether students as young as 11 are sexually attractive, and comments on deemed physical faults and drug use.

"Partly this is kids being kids, but this forum is causing severe grief," says a senior teacher at one of the affected schools. "It's all the usual adolescent fantasies, but by naming people it feeds back into school life. Because all the posts are anonymous, it encourages the most horrific, gross comments. Students even take on the identities of others who have been gossiped about and reply to posts as if they were them."

It is a simple process for budding young webmasters to set up a similar message forum. In the case of mouth2mouth-style sites, students are able to download Canadian-based Atomic Boards' software for free, which provides them with a message board template.

The Canadian authorities have no control over who controls a message board. As in this country, the emphasis is more on whether the content contravenes any local laws, in which case the internet service provider (ISP) supporting the site must be notified. The ISP will then contact the offending site's webmasters, who must take action by removing the offensive or illegal content, or potentially face closure.

Atomic Boards enables students to customise the software and recommends domain names ending with .tk, which the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) has traced to the Netherlands. The webmasters then choose an ISP, which can host a site from a server anywhere in the world.

The foundation says the ISP hosting a website is not responsible for content. For UK watchdogs to take sites down, the ISP must be notified that content is illegal and it must be hosting a UK-based site. However, neither of these criteria apply in this case, says the teacher.

"The site seems to be registered to a small island off the coast of New Zealand." The webmasters are largely English teenagers aged 13-15, and under UK law the content of the sites is not illegal.

"There doesn't seem to be the framework in British law, so what the heck can you do?" the teacher says. "It is difficult to get a company on the other side of the world that has no liability under UK law to help."

So what can schools do? This teacher's school became aware of trouble stemming from a site when a fight broke out at school because of posted comments. After searching the site in question, the school told any students that could be identified to stop using the site or face expulsion - a warning they took seriously.

It also asked form tutors to talk to pupils in tutorial lessons about the site and verbal bullying, in an adult and discursive manner, so as to encourage them to consider the question of personal responsibility. The school also wrote a letter to the webmaster and the ISP, detailing the abuse.

"The service provider took the site off line for 24 hours while the webmasters took the worst of the abuse off, but then it went back up again, with a changed disclaimer that covers the webmasters' back."

Two other north London schools also contacted the ISP and webmasters but took different approaches. The head at one school wrote to all parents urging them to look at the site with their children and to calmly discuss the issues it brought up. This approach achieved good results, with the school receiving numerous phone calls from supportive parents. Students who had been bullied through the sites spoke to their teachers, expressing relief that the school and their parents had got involved.

Students at another school were not involved in postings on the site, although they were often referred to in the offensive gossip of others.

"The mouth2mouth site is bullying in a whole new realm," says the school's head. "We've been working with our lawyers to get the site closed down, or at least make it difficult for them to operate and to remove all references to our school. I've worked very closely with parents and we also spoke to the police. Unfortunately, mouth2mouth is not unique."

Thanks to the involvement of this school's lawyers and the collective action of all the schools referred to on the messageboards, the names and nicknames of the schools have at least been removed from the mouth2mouth.tk site.

However, because the webmasters have been unable to control the bullying nature of the postings on mouth2 mouth, in the middle of last month they closed the site down. In a statement on the site they said that this had been done "due to the excessive amount of 'bitchin', slander and abuse found on the message board".

Liz Carnell, spokeswoman for Bullying Online has issued a statement on the mouth2 mouth.tk site on the seriousness of online bullying.

It includes a warning to others who decide to start their own message board or post offensive messages on one: "If you make repeated offensive postings, or invite others to do so, you could be breaking two laws. One is the Harassment Act 1997 and the other is the Telecommunications Act 1984."

She also stressed that no posting is truly anonymous, as police are able to trace the internet protocol (IP) address of each computer used to post a message, which acts like a digital fingerprint.

"It's up to schools to get a grip on the issue in this electronic age," warns John Carr, internet adviser to the charity, National Children's Homes. "[Schools have] a pastoral responsibility to deal with it, because it is having consequences in school by affecting the quality of life for pupils, even though the bullying does not take place on school grounds."

Michelle Elliot, director of bullying aid charity Kidscape, advises teachers to offer rewards for information on who is posting gossip anonymously and to send letters to parents requesting better web supervision. Meanwhile, the north London teacher believes legislation is the key. Internet watchdogs need to be given the power to monitor and take down sites that allow verbal bullying.

"Clearly this is a matter for public concern," he says. "There isn't an easy manner of redress for anyone who has something written about them on a board. There is no clear legislation to deal with it. A watchdog is required that can say this constitutes verbal bullying, so that it will be taken off the internet."