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## AMPLIFICATION BY ANONYMITY, AN UNASSUMING TOOL OF CYBERBULLYING

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### ***Abstract***

*The paper explores the phenomenon of amplification through anonymity as a form of cyber-bullying in the Romanian media, highlighting how online anonymity influences user behavior, through what specialists call "the effect of online disinhibition."*

*In the absence of personal responsibility and identification, users have the possibility of posting multiple comments under different pseudonyms, inducing the perception of a broad consensus around certain opinions. This phenomenon is known as the "False Consensus Effect" and is often used to create false impressions on public opinion, manipulating readers' perceptions and increasing psychological pressure on targets.*

*Diaz and Nilsson (2023) have shown that internet manipulation often tends to alter individuals' behavior. By accepting their comments, by generating a group of supporters, they feel entitled to expose a point of view, to support it beyond the limits of accepted social conventions.*

*In the 2000s, the concept of "cognitive hacking" was launched and it is detailed in the research of Thompson, Trevisani and Sisti (2004). Cognitive hacking is actually a cyber attack against an individual, likely to change the perception and behavior of others towards him. At the same time, the paper highlights how some publications contribute to this manipulation through selective editorial filters and even by involving journalists in comment sections, using a subjective tone, contrary to the editorial objectivity they should respect.*

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*Also, the comment rating systems (through upvotes or ratings) are susceptible to manipulation, allowing users to self-amplify their opinion and create the illusion of collective support.*

*Legally, these practices raise issues related to disinformation and manipulation of public opinion, but also to the responsibility of platforms and publications towards user-generated content. According to the legislation of online communication and protection against cyberbullying, there is a need for stricter regulation of anonymity and editorial control mechanisms. The European Union, for example, has adopted a series of legislative measures in this regard, through the Digital Services Act (DSA), which requires social media platforms to limit the abuse of anonymity and make users responsible for the content posted. Also in this context, a simple and effective mechanism for moral sanitation of the online press forum is at the disposal of editors: filtering comments, as well as displaying the IP address, are ways to highlight multiple comments posted by the same user under different nicknames.*

*Starting from these ideas, the paper proposes an interdisciplinary analysis, examining from a journalistic, sociological and legal point of view the challenges brought by online anonymity and its role in amplifying cyber-bullying phenomena.*

**Key words:** *Cyber-bullying, online offence, cognitive hacking, manipulation, abuse.*

### INTRODUCTION

Cyber-bullying is a common form of harassment in the digital environment. It is usually a repetitive, intentional, hostile action that exerts psychological pressure on the victim, with the aim of creating harm or discomfort. The victim becomes a target.

Clemson University's Olweus Bullying Prevention Program states that bullying occurs when a person is “repeatedly and over a long period of time exposed to negative actions by an individual or a group of people”.

Cyber-bullying has become a ubiquitous phenomenon with the increase in interactions in the digital environment. An essential component of cyber-bullying in the comment section of the Romanian digital media is the anonymity offered by online platforms. Unlike traditional bullying, where the identity of the aggressor is known, and which involves an interaction where the victim and the aggressor face each other openly, in the online environment anonymity allows users to hide their true identity and therefore express themselves more aggressively, without fear of direct consequences. Commenters do not reveal their real identity and the publication does not force them to do so, and anonymously they post several comments on the same article, with different pseudonyms, leaving the impression of the existence of a general current of opinion on the subject.

Research led by Mona O Moore, from the Anti-Bullying Center at Trinity College Dublin, has revealed that individuals subjected to constant bullying are more likely to develop symptoms of anxiety, emotional problems, extreme stress, which in extreme cases leads even to suicide. Bullying can cause low self-esteem, eating disorders, body dysmorphia.

The lack of clear regulations and the cumbersome procedure for identifying and sanctioning harassers allow the development of an anarchic, wild virtual space where the norms of coexistence are optional.

Another situation is that certain publications apply filters for comments. Or, by flagging the fake comments (which they see were posted from the same IP, so they belong to the same person) the editors thus contribute to the manipulation of the reader. Sometimes it is even in the interest of the editorial office to do so, and some of the comments happen to be posted by the journalists themselves. A common phenomenon is the attitude of the journalist who writes the article. In the article he uses an unbiased tone, but in the comments section he uses a subjective, partisan tone, the complete antithesis of what a journalist should be.

Last but not least, some editorial offices have implemented a scoring system for article comments. This means readers can rate the comment. If a comment has a better rating or more positive reactions, then the more relevant it is and appears before other comments. It's just that there is no filtering system for ratings, and they can be given at discretion and without limit even by the author of the comment, and repeated by reloading the page. In the situation where the author of the comment seeks to create the impression that his comment is appreciated, therefore validated by public opinion, he can without any censorship and control mechanism give himself as many upvotes as he wants.

In our research, we took as a case study the local online press from Arad, a city in western Romania, with a population of approx. 145,000 inhabitants. We analyzed a number of four online publications, the most influential in Arad, each with a declared traffic of over 2500 unique visitors per day. We specify that for the local press in Romania, such traffic is considered medium level.

Each of the analyzed publications has a comment section for online articles. Two of them (the most popular) have instituted a comment filtering system. However, both publish anonymous comments under various pseudonyms, some of which are clearly offensive.

We have found out that some commenters have pseudonyms that they frequently use and comment on certain articles. The majority of comments, over 90% of the total, are generated by articles on administrative, political or sports topics.

None of the analyzed publications implemented a comment transparency system. Under these conditions, it is impossible for the receiver to establish the identity of the commenter or the frequency of comments generated by a particular user. Due to the comment posting system, it cannot be determined if a user posts

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multiple comments under different pseudonyms. In our opinion, researching the tone of these comments, some keywords, the topic of the phrase, grammatical errors, figures of speech used, there are frequent situations where a commenter returns to the website of the online publication with several anonymous comments, sometimes even responding to his own comment to validate his message. Through this technique, the aim is to emphasize the idea that the opinions expressed have appeal to the public.

We have also identified frequent situations in which the journalist enters into a dialogue with the readers in the comments section. Again, it cannot be determined, in the absence of a transparent mechanism for posting comments, whether the original comment was also posted by the journalist or by a reader.

### **I. THE CONTEXT OF CYBER-BULLYING THROUGH ANONYMITY**

Amplification through anonymity and cyber-bullying are current phenomena that require in-depth research. Cyber-bullying has become a ubiquitous phenomenon with the increase of the interactions in the digital environment. The phenomenon gained momentum with the development of social networks and mass media, which allow users to anonymously avoid any moral or legal norm of behavior.

In our opinion, this situation is determined by several considerations: the growth of the audience of the platform, the militancy of the online communication channel, the ignorance of the law in relation to offenses in the online environment. Unlike traditional bullying, where the identity of the bully is known, online anonymity allows users to hide their true identity and therefore express themselves more aggressively without fear of direct consequences. Research shows that online anonymity can lower users' inhibitions, causing them to act in ways they wouldn't in real life. This phenomenon is called the "online disinhibition effect" and plays a crucial role in negative behaviors, including cyber-bullying. In this framework, anonymity can be understood not only as a communication tool, but as an element that distorts responsibility and, implicitly, behavior. We can even notice a double measure here: reactions sanctioned by law in real life, sometimes even with custodial sentences or financial fines, are tolerated (and thus encouraged) in the virtual environment.

The concept of the "online disinhibition effect" was proposed by psychologist John Suler in 2004 in an article titled "The Online Disinhibition Effect," published in *CyberPsychology & Behavior*. Suler (*Suler, 2014, p.322*) explored how anonymity and the online environment cause users to behave differently from their real-life interactions, often exhibiting more aggressive or vulnerable behaviors. He identified two types of online disinhibition: toxic disinhibition, which includes hostile, offensive or aggressive behaviors such as trolling or cyber-bullying, and benign disinhibition – which involves behaviors of

emotional openness or increased self-disclosure, allowing users to discuss personal issues, seek support or share private aspects of their lives.

In his article, Suler identified several factors that contribute to this disinhibition effect: dissolved anonymity - users feel that they are not associated with their real identity, invisibility: the feeling that they are not seen by others when communicating online, timelessness - the possibility to respond later, which reduces spontaneous inhibitions, minimized authority – the online environment eliminates or reduces differences in social status or authority, encouraging more direct behaviors.

The study of the disinhibition effect has also been addressed by other researchers. Katelyn McKenna and John Bargh (2000) analyzed differential self-expression in forming relationships on the Internet. In "Plan 9 from Cyberspace: The Implications of the Internet for Personality and Social Psychology," they explored how online anonymity and privacy influence identity formation and interpersonal relationships. They noted that anonymity can provide a safe space for identity exploration, but can also lead to risky behaviors. They claim that "under the protective cloak of anonymity (ie, the Internet) users can express how they really feel and think." ...(p....)

Adam Joinson (2001), in his study "Self-disclosure in Computer-Mediated Communication: The Role of Self-Awareness and Visual Anonymity," investigated how anonymity affects self-disclosure. He concluded that invisibility and anonymity reduce inhibitions and increase users' willingness to share their thoughts and emotions, but that this openness can come with impulsive or thoughtless behaviors.

Although prior to the Internet, the concept of "face" and self-presentation in Goffman's work (especially in "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life") is relevant to understanding online behavior because his theory of assumed public and private roles anticipates how online anonymity encourages people to behave differently depending on their audience.

### **Editorial control and handling of comments**

Some editorial offices use editorial filters to control which comments are visible or to prioritize them. An experiment on Reddit revealed how comments originally downvoted continue to attract negative reactions, and those upvoted continue to attract positive reactions.

Strossen (2012) highlights how this control can lead to the manipulation of information, turning the comment section into a partisan space. The study of Singer (2014) is also relevant, which explains how editorial policies can distort the perception of public opinion, either by hiding opposing comments or by promoting those who support a certain direction. Marwick and Boyd (2011) talk of "digital framing practices" suggests that some journalists contribute to

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comment sections using anonymous accounts, thereby influencing the tone of debates and maintaining a semblance of objectivity in the original text.

The Pew Research Center (2014) report presents data on editorial participation in comment sections and highlights the ethical dilemmas and impact on the credibility of journalism.

### **The legal framework of cyber-bullying in the Romanian press**

In documenting the study, we took steps to identify the ways of action by which a person who considers himself a victim of cyber-bullying by the press, concretely of anonymous comments on online newspaper forums, can protect his right to the protection of his own image.

Procedurally, such a person must file a complaint with the police, the only institution empowered to request editorial offices to identify users' IP. Following the response received from the Police, the injured person can go to court.

The act of cyber-bullying is criminalized by several provisions of the Criminal Code: art. 206 threat, art. 207 blackmail, art. 208 harassment. The criminal action is initiated upon the prior complaint of the injured person. Penalties can go up to seven years in prison.

In the situation where the prosecutors consider that the deed does not constitute a crime, the victim can address the civil court, for moral damages, based on the provisions of art. 72 of the Criminal Code: "(1) Every person has the right to respect for his dignity. (2) Any harm to a person's honor and reputation without their consent is prohibited. "

The Romanian Civil Code stipulates both material and moral damages, in situations where a person suffers damage to his self-image, reputation and sense of security.

Although in theory there are legislative provisions that tangentially refer to the cyber-bullying phenomenon, and there are specialized lawyers, but in practice it is found that the number of cases in which the victim addresses the court is very low because there is a difficulty in identifying the perpetrators/abusers. A failure in such a process can lead not only to the continuation of the phenomenon of harassment, but even to its amplification.

### **CONCLUSION**

*The phenomenon of cyber-bullying is present in the forums of the Romanian media and is growing exponentially. In the local press in Arad, which I researched, the most visible areas are administration, politics and sports, with more than 95% of the comments referring to these topics.*

*The identity of commenters is protected by a system of filtering and publishing comments that allows the use of pseudonyms, which are sometimes proper nouns, names of people (without being able to verify their real existence), sometimes common nouns. Under the protection of anonymity, in the online*

*environment related to the investigated publications, accusations, insults and even threats are launched against the victims of the cyber-bullying phenomenon. This phenomenon can affect a person's image by attracting public opprobrium and can lead to some actions directed against the victims of this phenomenon (dismissal, marginalization, exclusion).*

*The legislation in Romania has not been updated, in the sense of including aspects related to cyber threats to individuals, it operates on the basis of the general provisions in force since 1969 and periodically updated. The phenomenon of cyber-bullying is assimilated to the classic crimes of threat, harassment, blackmail, although there are obviously situations that would require new approaches. The digitization of society generates new, complex phenomena, with a major impact on the psyche and human behavior, for which the Romanian legislation is still not prepared.*

*Under these conditions, newspaper forums represent an anarchic virtual society, where the observance of moral rules depends on the moderators. However, we noticed that slips are allowed and, in some situations, even encouraged, to increase the visibility of the publication or article, to generate views and implicitly traffic, which are in direct correlation with advertising budgets.*

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