Times of India ND 11.07.2017 P-17

Bad behaviour online inspiring kids in real life

Thousands Of Shares For Rude Posts Sending Children Mixed Message About Morality

Young children know that name-calling is wrong. Tweens are taught the perils of online bullying and revenge porn: It's unacceptable and potentially illegal.

But celebrities who engage in flagrant attacks on social media are rewarded with worldwide attention. US President Donald Trump's most popular tweet to date is a video that shows him fake-pummeling a personification of CNN. Reality TV star Rob Kardashian was trending last week after attacking his former fiancée on Instagram in posts so explicit his account was shut down. He continued the attacks on Twitter, where he has over 7.6 million followers.

While public interest in bad behaviour is nothing new, social media has created a vast new venue for incivility to be expressed, witnessed and shared. And experts say it's affecting social interactions in real life.

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Social media has created a vast new venue for incivility to be expressed

"Over time, the attitudes and behaviours that we are concerned with right now in social media will bleed out into the physical world," said Karen North, a psychologist and director of the University of Southern California's Digital Social Media Program.

Catherine Steiner-Adair, a psychologist and author, said she's already seeing the effects. She said she's been confronted by students asking why celebrities and political leaders are allowed to engage in activities for which they would be punished.

On some school campuses, 'Trumping' means to grab a girl's rear end, she said. And teenagers have killed themselves over the kind of slut-shaming and exposure of private images Kardashian levelled at Blac Chyna.

Cyber incivility, particularly when practised by cultural leaders, can have a profound impact on human relations, North said. Studies show that young people who witness aggressive behaviour in adults model and expand on that behaviour. She pointed to Stanford University psychologist Albert Bandura's famous 'Bobo Doll Experiment', which found that kids who saw adults hit a doll in frustration not only hit the doll as well, but attacked it with weapons.

Social media is an atmosphere devoid of the social cues that mitigate behaviour in real life, she said. When violating social norms in person, there's immediate feedback from others through body language and tone of voice. No such indicators exist online, and retweets can feel like validation.

Cruel posts often become "an instant hit online", Steiner-Adair said. "It's one of the best ways to become popular." Viral posts then get mainstream media attention, spreading digital nastiness into everyday conversation.

By not expressly rejecting hateful online behavior, "we are creating a bystander culture where people think this is funny", she said. Young people, who may be the most plugged in, are getting mixed messages as they form their moral concepts. "It behooves us all to question why we are participating in this mob of reactivity," Steiner-Adair said, "and what are the character traits we need to model for our children". AP