

Cyberbullying case brings big changes

May 25 2009, By Laura Bauer

The July sentencing of a Missouri mom convicted for her part in an Internet hoax that led to a teenager's suicide may disappoint those looking for justice.

Lori Drew faces anything from probation to three years in prison for her role in deceiving Megan Meier on [MySpace](#). But a California judge hinted last week he could throw out Drew's three misdemeanor cases because of the way the law was applied.

Regardless of what happens in court, experts say Drew's prosecution and Megan's death have changed the way many behave in cyberspace. Not only have they prompted parents to become more aware of what their kids are doing, they have caused lawmakers to account for modern communication.

"It made us all realize how out-of-date some of our laws were," said Naomi Goodno, associate professor of law at Pepperdine University in Malibu, Calif., who has written about cyberharassment. "We needed to get caught up with technology."

At least 45 states have changed harassment laws to include cyberbullying. Many, including Kansas and Missouri, pushed for change soon after the news of Megan's death. Several Missouri counties have already used the new law, prosecuting people who harass victims on the Internet or on a cell phone.

Megan hanged herself in her St. Louis suburb bedroom in October 2006

when she was just 13. A fictitious boy named "Josh Evans" she had befriended on MySpace had just told her he didn't want to communicate with her anymore and the "world would be a better place without you in it."

Drew, with her daughter, Sarah, and a teenage employee, created the character. Their goal was to see what Megan, who lived a few doors from the Drew family, was saying online about Sarah.

News of Megan's death made headlines in 2007 after her parents shared their story with a St. Louis area newspaper.

"This case brought to light the number of people who said, 'This happened to me. This happened to my wife. This happens all the time,'" said state Sen. Scott Rupp, R-Wentzville, who sponsored Missouri's legislation last year. "We saw the true level of harassment online going on."

At the time of Megan's death, Missouri's harassment law required the communication be written or over the telephone. Now it includes all types of communication. The legislation also makes the harassment a felony if an adult 21 or older is harassing a victim 17 or younger.

A California jury found Drew guilty in late November of three misdemeanor counts of illegally gaining access to protected MySpace computers based there. They failed to convict on the more serious felony charges of unauthorized access to computers in order to inflict emotional distress.

Jack Banas, prosecutor in St. Charles County, where the Drew and Meier families lived at the time of the harassment, declined to file charges in the case. He said at the time that Missouri law did not cover Internet harassment and the facts of the case did not meet criminal standards.

Even the current law probably would not cover Drew's actions, he said, because testimony in federal court indicated the Missouri mother did not send any of the messages herself.

"I think Mrs. Drew was drug into this for nothing else other than she failed to do something," Banas said. "She failed to say no."

He disagreed with federal prosecutors turning MySpace into the victim, claiming Drew violated the Web site's service terms.

"It's like making Smith & Wesson the victim of a drive-by shooting," Banas said. "In this case, MySpace was used as the weapon."

Some states are now pushing legislation to make schools initiate education programs, as well as disciplinary policies, for kids who bully online.

Because of the hundreds of millions of people using social networking sites, experts say, it is next to impossible to police the Internet. That is why education is key in making kids realize the power of words exchanged in cyberspace, said retired FBI agent Jeff Lanza, an expert in Internet safety.

"When you use those words in person, you can see the power of those words. You can see how they're affecting someone," Lanza said. "When you use them online, you can't see the reaction. You can't see it."

People say things on the Internet they would not be brave enough to say in person, experts say.

"They think the anonymity will protect them, that they can get away with it," said Goodno, the Pepperdine professor. "It's the idea that 'I'm not doing anything bad, it's the virtual world.'"

Megan's case is helping change that perception, Lanza said. When he gives Internet presentations at school, he talks about the Missouri teen.

"People are starting to realize words can do more than hurt somebody. It can cause them to do desperate, desperate things," Lanza said. "Megan Meier should not have died in vain. I think her case should be an example to kids of what can happen on either end of the communication."

PREVENT CYBERBULLYING

Discuss the issue. Set expectations for online behavior and discourage your teen from posting others' personal information or contributing to slam sites. Parents should adhere to those rules, too.

Set rules for Internet use and monitor your teen's use of technology (Internet, cell phones and other devices). As teens get older, they think their parents should be more concerned with what they see and hear online.

Place your home computer in a central place, such as your kitchen or living room. It is easier to monitor your teen's Internet use this way.

Save the evidence. If your teen has been cyberbullied, make sure that you copy all messages and Web sites _ you may need them for reporting purposes.

Learn how you and your teen can block cyberbullying messages through your Internet service provider, social network site or chat room moderator. Seventy-one percent of teens think this is the most effective way to prevent cyberbullying.

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