

# I

## The Many Faces of Evil Online

*Human wickedness is sometimes the product of a sort of conscious leeringly evil intent... But more usually it is the product of a semi-deliberate inattention, in a swooning relationship to time.*

Iris Murdoch<sup>1</sup>

### I.1 Introduction

In May 2008, hackers bombarded the website of the Epilepsy Foundation of America with hundreds of pictures and links. The site provides advice, news on scientific research and contacts for people who suffer from epilepsy. People who suffer from epileptic seizures have to manage their condition carefully and need regular checkups and medical advice. Epilepsy patients often take precautionary measures to deal with situations where they may be incapacitated and unable to act. Some patients suffer from what is called “photosensitive epilepsy,” which means that flickering and flashing images may trigger epileptic seizures. The hackers who attacked the Landover site exploited a security flaw and inserted links to pages with rapidly flashing images. These images were perceived inadvertently by epilepsy patients who were looking for medical information on the website and triggered severe migraines and near-seizure reactions in some site visitors. “They were out to create seizures,” said Ken Lowenberg, senior director of web and print publishing for the

---

<sup>1</sup> Iris Murdoch, *The Black Prince*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973, p. 189.

foundation.<sup>2</sup> The hackers did not seem to be interested in money or in control over the victim's computer; they just wanted to create this impact on vulnerable people. "I count this in the same category of teenagers who think it's funny to put a cat in a bag and throw it over a clothesline – they don't realize how cruel it is," said Paul Ferguson, a security researcher at antivirus-software maker Trend Micro Inc.<sup>3</sup>

This is just one of the many examples of evil online that we present in this book. The evils we discuss are not situated on a faraway deserted island, but in another place much closer to home, yet unfamiliar at the same time: our new world of the Internet and social media. Attitudes and conduct may no longer be set in a world of uncharted waters and land, but now they are set in the uncharted territories of our new virtual worlds in cyberspace. This is where our children grow up and teenagers hang out pretty much all day. It is where socialization, moral education, and psychological development takes place. It is the space where young adults live and meet their partners, work, and relax. It is a world that surprises us every day with new inventions and services. And it is a world that is not well-ordered, and that is weakly regulated, monitored, and policed.

This protean cyberdomain is growing and developing at breakneck speed, and it is far from clear who is responsible for what. Facebook and Google earn astronomical amounts of money from the online social and information revolution, but when it comes to taking responsibility for contributing to the social infrastructure of future societies, they are not very active. The responsibility for fake news, the live streaming of suicides, and cascading violence are cases in point. The application of legal principles and moral values in this new territory is deeply problematic. New digital environments constitute a different world, where the voice of traditional moral authorities and the constraints of old social institutions are largely screened from

---

<sup>2</sup> See, <http://www.cbc.ca/world/story/2008/05/08/tech-hackers-epilepsy.html> (accessed 24 June 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Similar phenomena have occurred victimizing other vulnerable groups. For example, malicious code was released that disabled software that read text aloud from a computer screen for the blind and visually impaired (although the target seemed to be users of illegal copies of the software).

view. Laws often cannot be enforced because of confusion about the nature and status of the phenomena, lack of clarity about jurisdiction, the ineffectiveness of enforcement, and the anonymity of the perpetrators.

It has become clear over the last decade that online contexts have created wonderful opportunities for a vast range of crimes, from cybercrime to child abuse, from cyber-jihad to identity fraud. We are, however, not primarily interested in the online versions of the obvious and straightforward forms of wrongdoing, such as fraud, crime, deception, scams, war, aggression, hate, and violence, with which we are all too familiar from the *offline* history of humanity. These are, by now, all well-known, extensively studied, and are usually referred to by means of prefixing “cyber,” “digital,” or “online” to the traditional catalogue of crimes and misdemeanors: cyber fraud, digital crimes, identity theft, online deceit and so on. As such, they are not so much novel, surprising, and puzzling as merely recent chapters in a long-lasting arms race between criminals and crime-fighters, between high-tech frauds and cyberforensics.<sup>4</sup> Neither are we primarily interested in the gross depravities that are sometimes seen in serious mental illness, and are now so easily supported and accommodated online. Paraphilias have blossomed online and there is no entry in the DSM classification under that heading without a large online repository of videos, images, and communities associated with it.<sup>5</sup>

Our primary interest is to assess how our new online habitats work against the “better angels” of our nature, and against aspects of our traditional environments and our relationships with others that

---

<sup>4</sup> As we will point out a few times throughout our discussion, this is not to say that there is “nothing new” so far as these more familiar problems go. See, for example, Chapter 3’s discussion of alarmism about online child sex predation, and Section 5.5, “Nothing new under the sun.”

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the early phenomenon of apotemnophilia, in which individuals desire that their arms or legs be amputated, that we present in Chapter 2. Recently, Mary Aiken has also reported cases where peculiar sexual preferences have apparently spread through the Internet. See, Mary Aitken, *The Cyber Effect: A Pioneering Cyberpsychologist Explains How Human Behaviour Changes Online*, London: John Murray (Publishers), 2016.

enable our moral and prosocial capacities. We identify and investigate features of our online worlds that erode empathy and moral character, and that stifle moral and prosocial development.<sup>6</sup> In so doing, we try to understand how young people, among others, are especially vulnerable to becoming victims of the online environments in which they increasingly spend their time. We do not want to take a Luddite or alarmist stance (more on this in Chapters 3 and 5 ahead), or add to the moral panic that sometimes surrounds discussions about social media and the Internet. On the other hand, evil online is an increasingly disturbing phenomenon across a wide range of fronts, and, as is invariably the case with revolutionary technology – and perhaps never more so than with the Internet revolution – our recognition of worries about where we are headed, much less our understanding of these worries, is lagging badly behind. More investigation into the rise of various forms of evil online, and the ways in which our online worlds differ “morally speaking” from our traditional worlds, is well overdue.

We evolved as moral and social beings in our traditional worlds of good old-fashioned causality, contiguity of time and space, unity of action, physical proximity, and face-to-face interaction. In fact, it is in light of these conditions that the evolution of human beings as moral and prosocial creatures (of the kind that we are) makes sense. We have already struggled in the first part of the twentieth century with globalization and the stretching of our moral frameworks and sensibilities beyond the boundaries of our families, clans, cities, regions, and nation states. Now we are well into the twenty-first century, we need to come to grips with our colonization of a digital space that operates under very different conditions, and obeys very different laws.

---

<sup>6</sup> Simon Baron-Cohen has accounted for evil and cruelty in terms of a lack of empathy. Empathy deficiencies and pathologies are accounted for, however, in terms of genetic dispositions and neuroscience. Little attention is given to how relatively ordinary people might lack empathy and commit evil or cruelty in ways that are facilitated by the interplay between human psychology and circumstantial factors. See, Simon Baron-Cohen, *The Science of Evil: On Empathy and the Origins of Cruelty*, New York: Basic Books, 2011.

One thing that is clear is that the Internet and social media disinhibit people and easily escalate conflicts and problems. Once in existence, problems of any nature can cascade like a row of dominoes, and spread like a contagious disease in a large population of interconnected individuals. Chat and comment spaces are regularly filled with abusive language and denigrating remarks. The revolution in speed and access to wonderful ideas has just as effectively been a revolution in the spread of bad ideas. As indicated in our preface, the flourishing of evil online is not confined to the “usual suspects” – those already inclined from deranged, immoral, or criminal intentions. On the contrary, much evil flourishes online (as it long has offline) from the minds of more ordinary and normal people. In developing our account of this territory of evil online, we identify and bring together various characteristics of the online social environment, and of our capacities for evil, and illustrate how the latter may be appeased or summoned depending upon the former.

What we observe and experience at the surface of our online worlds is significantly determined by how the underlying contact network is structured, and by which software and algorithms are at work. All of these ingredients together guide people’s conduct online, and make them inclined to do things they could not have (easily) done offline.

A good deal of recent empirical research has shown the ways in which the design of the technology, the mechanisms, circumstances, imperceptible sensory cues, and the design of choice situations are hugely important for the way people behave online. So, for instance, in his book, *The Dark Net*, Jamie Bartlett provides excellent, well-researched descriptions of the spread of some worrying phenomena online, such as assassination markets, suicide and self-harm forums, racism and white supremacy networks, and anorexia and bulimia web sites. He is, however, reluctant to provide a normative analysis of the phenomena encountered online: “it is a series of portraits about how these issues play out at the fringes. I leave it entirely to you to decide what to think it means.”<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Jamie Bartlett, *The Dark Net: Inside the Digital Underworld*, London: William Heinemann, 2014, p. 7.

Some other scholars in the field have been a little more inclined to provide some moral evaluation.<sup>8</sup> We aim to add to, and move beyond, these very useful though largely descriptive accounts of worrisome cyberphenomena. Not so much by means of more detailed description, but by means of morally relevant explanations, evaluations, and a general framework for ethical understanding of the moral life, and of the conditions under which it is enabled and sustained, or otherwise. As mentioned in our preface, while Hannah Arendt's description of evil as banal has been massively influential, and much evil online may be seen as providing new ways in which evil can flourish and exhibit its banality, we argue that evildoing is often better understood as undertaken in a moral fog. Varieties of this moral fog can be encountered on a deserted island, or a remote and unruly corner of the world, or in an anonymous section of cyberspace with evocative names such as the "Deep Web," "Dark Net," or "Silk Road." It may also be encountered on Facebook, Instagram or Twitter, in a WhatsApp group, or on a chat forum of a high school website. The odds of washing up on the shores of a deserted island are not very high, but all of us are regularly stranded on one of these online places.

There are many kinds of moral fog that apply across cases involving those of otherwise relatively prosocial minds. Thousands of visitors are surrounded by it when visiting the hundreds of websites and forums specializing in self-harm, suicide, anorexia, pedophilia, body dysmorphia, hard drugs, white supremacy, racism, misogyny, anti-Semitism, and terrorism. We identify and discuss various kinds of moral fog throughout this book, from both our online and traditional worlds, and illustrate how thinking of evildoing in this way

---

<sup>8</sup> See, in particular: Aiken, *op. cit.*; Nancy K. Baym, *Personal Connections in a Digital Age*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010; Danah Boyd, *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014; Howard Gardner and Katie Davis, *The App Generation. How Today's Youth Navigate Identity, Intimacy, and Imagination in a Digital World*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013; and Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology And Less From Each Other*, New York: Basic Books, 2011. All have recently discussed such issues in the contexts of online psychology, socialization, and moral development.

provides broader and deeper explanations of the territory of so-called “banal evil,” and takes our understanding of evildoing a long way beyond banality.

## 1.2 Some Trends and Cases

In the case of the epilepsy hack with which we started this chapter, quite a few questions force themselves upon us. Who were the people who took the trouble to make these posts with the intention of inducing epileptic seizures? They spent many hours applying their computer skills to do so. Why? It wasn't about money or material gain of some sort. Did they really understand the significance of the harm they set out to cause? Or, was it, as the security expert suggested, done just for “fun” without realizing how bad their action was? (Like teens might do in torturing a cat?) The fact that they could not be present to witness the suffering they caused apparently did not make it less “fun.” Indeed, it's more likely (perhaps) that not really being there to see the damage inflicted on their victims enabled their lack of moral understanding. Such cases drive us to search for further explanations beyond that given by the seemingly banal description: “it was fun.”

Malicious practical jokers on the Internet are called *trolls*; there are many of them around, although they are not usually as bad as this one. Some perpetrators think they are doing the morally right thing, or at least a morally acceptable thing. Often however, application of their moral understanding is somehow suspended in the circumstances, and so they see little need for justification or excuse. The emotional damage and other negative effects that accrue to their victims are often not directly intended, and often not even foreseen.

Much the same is generally true of “catfishing.” Catfishing is a form of online identity fraud and deception. The “catfish” is the person who deceives others online. He or she benefits (typically psychologically) by getting attention of some sort, such as romantic attention, or admiration or empathy, from being in a sustained relationship with the victim or the “catfished.” Catfish can often sustain a relationship with their victim for a long time without being found out. They typically

create an elaborate system of lies and deception, such as about their age, gender, education, health, accomplishments, or socioeconomic status, and may go to extremes to uphold their deceptive schemes and enhancing their fake biographies. A now-famous MTV series, *Catfish*, has unraveled many interesting cases, in emulation of the documentary film, *Catfish*, that gave the phenomenon its name.<sup>9</sup> The original film tells the story of a married woman in a small rural town in Michigan, who presents herself online to a journalist as a young attractive woman, and mother of a girl, a child prodigy in art. The journalist comes to be interested in this very special family and starts to correspond with her and buys paintings by the child prodigy that are shipped to him in New York. Hardly anything in the woman's story turns out to be true, as the journalist finds out when he starts to check the facts and eventually visits her in Michigan. The documentary unravels the elaborate web of lies and deceit. Towards the end of the film her husband responds to the lying and identity fraud of his wife with a story that suggests he neither knew nor wished to know about the second life of his wife, and implies that he even approves of his wife's secret masquerade. He explains that when sailors used to ship live codfish from Alaska to China, the fish would turn mushy in their crates from staying still too long. Then one day, a sailor got the idea of putting catfish in the crates to "keep the cod agile" during the trip. The husband goes on to say that "in life, some people are catfish. They keep things lively." This is a very interesting way of characterizing what in fact amounts to the staging of elaborate lies that cost others significant emotional investment and often money.

The Internet provides many instances of similar redescriptions of actions and behavior that strike others (typically people less embedded in online social worlds) as morally inappropriate or even outrageous. The redescriptions commonly make the acts look harmless, innocent, inadvertent, clueless, funny, a game, even creative or lively – anything but morally wrong. We discuss a number of these cases, and we argue

---

<sup>9</sup> *Catfish*, Production: Relativity Media, Rogue Pictures. Distribution: Universal Pictures, 2010. See also <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/more-chemistry/201306/catfish-and-secrets> from which we have taken some description of the codfish/catfish story.

that the Internet and the online context provides cyberbullies, catfish, trolls, racists, neo-Nazis, white supremacists, misogynists, terrorists, and other perpetrators of evil online with benign descriptions of their actions that help justify their behavior to themselves and to others. They eventually fool themselves and others into thinking that they are heroic, funny, creative, right, or just interestingly “different.”

A notable online trend in which disturbing, even plainly appalling, conduct is often given a light touch and made to look innocent, is the proliferation of so-called prank videos. Indeed, “It’s just a prank” is a description of conduct that has become a notable form of moral fog online. One extreme case was provided by the abusive family “Vlogs” (Video blogs) of the Martin family. In one episode, the mother and father aggressively scream and yell at their 9-year-old boy Cody: “What the hell is that? There is ink all over the floor.” Cody is crying and clearly very distressed, and sobs that he didn’t do it. He is right: he didn’t do it, his parents did it. He is the victim of a staged prank. After 3 minutes of yelling at the terrified kid, the parents pull out a bottle of trick ink and say: “It’s just a prank, bruh!” This is just one episode in a series of abusive Vlogs on the Martins’ YouTube channel, DaddyOFive.

Other nauseating episodes are available in the series. There is one where the father instructs his son to slap his little sister in the face until she cries and one where the father smashes the boy’s computer game. Their channel on YouTube made the family \$200,000 (or more) annually from the views of their estimated 750,000 subscribers. The case has been brought into the open, the content has been removed, and the parents have lost custody of their children.<sup>10</sup>

You might be inclined to react to this story by thinking that this is just an exception. A spectacularly disconcerting anecdote perhaps, but as rare a form of entertainment as it is extreme. You would be wrong. Many others have engaged in (or supported) this type of abusive content production in pursuit of likes, clicks, and money from advertisements. Vlogging and Live streaming, and especially the

---

<sup>10</sup> We take these facts and description of the case from Rachel Dunphy, “The abusive ‘pranks’ of YouTube Family Vloggers,” *New York (Magazine)*, 28 April 2017.

pranking genre, is a global multibillion-dollar business, and millions of people are producing and consuming this type of material. In 2013, YouTube reported that the top ten producers of these prank videos were good for 3.5 billion views. According to Tubular Labs, prank videos accounted for a startling 17.7 billion views in 2015. By 2016 there were an estimated 2.5 million prank videos online on YouTube, created by 1.3 million producers.<sup>11</sup>

According to Caitlin Dewey of the *Washington Post*, “certain pranksters have become increasingly transgressive in a bid to stand out in saturated waters.”<sup>12</sup> Roman Atwood is a good example of someone who is pushing the boundaries. He has staged pranks where he pretended to kill his son before the eyes of his wife. He convincingly suggested that a specially prepared car had caught fire with their child inside while the mother was watching. It was viewed 8.6 million times. The video in which he was about to throw his kid off a two-story balcony was viewed 34.7 million times. Atwood described his actions in this way: “I think I am one of the kings of the Internet, of being controversial. I give every website in the world something to talk about – something to cry about. I make the world laugh and cry all at the same time. I’m hard to figure out.”<sup>13</sup>

A number of the pranksters enjoy significant notoriety. Ken Duchamp staged a number of fake stabbings and has now, as Dewey puts it, “moved to classier stunts.” He is now pretending to have a heart attack in front of girls he has started dating. The stress and anxiety on the part of the girls is usually settled with the words: “relax, relax, it’s just a prank.” Sam Pepper inappropriately touched young women in public in his prank videos and defended his conduct by saying, “Guys it’s OK that I sexually assaulted random women on the street! I didn’t mean it. It was a prank... a social experiment.” Pepper also deals in more impactful work. He staged a kidnapping of two of his friends by masked men. One of his friends was in the complot, but

---

<sup>11</sup> Geoff Weiss, *Tubefilter*, “The good, the bad and the fake: the rise of YouTube’s Prank video genre,” 13 April 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Caitlin Dewey, “What ‘parody,’ ‘prank’ and other common defenses for dumb internet stunts mean in reality,” *Washington Post*, 24 September 2014.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

the other (the victim) believed that they were being abducted by terrorists. Pepper had them sit in front of a camera and pretended to shoot the friend (who was in on the stunt) in the head. After which he screamed: "It's just a prank..."<sup>14</sup>

Abusive and violent pranks have been going on online under the name of "happy slapping" for more than twenty years. Unsuspecting victims are attacked, humiliated, or degraded while an accomplice records the assault (commonly with a smartphone) for distribution online. The publication through file-sharing or posting of the event is the rationale for the crime. Most "happy-slappers" are teenagers or young adults. Incidents can be extremely violent, and people have been killed. Often "happy slappers" are encouraged by bystanders, and (just as above) will say they were merely "happy slapping," as if this somehow silences any concern that they may be doing something wrong.<sup>15</sup> For the perpetrators, along with many who consume their product, describing the activity as "just a prank" invokes the relative innocence and fun of fairly harmless pranks, enabling everyone to fool themselves that it is somehow okay.

Tyler Clementi, student at Rutgers University, committed suicide on a September day in 2010. He jumped off the Washington Bridge in New York. As it turned out, he had had sex with a male partner in his room in the university dorm. His intimate moments were recorded live by a webcam secretly installed by his room-mate Dharun Ravi. Ravi had also invited friends via Twitter to watch what was going on in the room in real time and post comments. Ravi later apologized for the "thoughtless, insensitive, immature, stupid, and childish choices..."

---

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> "Happy slapping" is known to have started in South London, in particular the London Borough of Lewisham, in a format known as "Slap TV," where a "happy slapping" video would be recorded, and then watched by people like a TV show. Nowadays this is a common form of entertainment, sometimes difficult to tell apart from the Jackass programs where people intentionally risk significant harm to themselves and their friends for a laugh. The perpetrators in these cases often spur each other on, and worries about transgressing moral boundaries (or being part of, or very close to, the "entertainment value" of the broader, including morally awful, happy-slapping scene) sometimes seem to easily get lost in the framing of the conduct as "a joke."

which at no time were motivated by hate, bigotry, prejudice, or the desire to hurt, humiliate, or embarrass anyone.”<sup>16</sup> What was Ravi thinking? Did he want to impress his Facebook friends? Did he think it was funny? Did he give any thought to what this would mean in the real life of his roommate? Again the excuse, and lack of explanation, is baffling. How could someone have missed that this is the ultimate humiliation for someone?

The married woman who inspired the description of catfishing, the prankster video producers, and Ravi all seem guilty of fairly self-centered conduct, and misguided about what is funny, interesting, and entertaining, and about what is harmless and innocent. And, of course, they are seriously blind to and wrong about the effects their actions have on others. Their lack of moral imagination and thought about the consequences of their conduct is astounding. A landmark case from the early years of the Internet shows similar characteristics. A Missouri woman created the persona of a 16-year-old boy, Josh Evans, to flirt with and then cruelly spurn her neighbor’s daughter, Megan Meier. The 13-year-old girl hanged herself in the wake of the rejection by Josh, communicated to her in the form of a message on her MySpace profile: “The world would be a better place without you.” The woman had set-up the “Josh Evans” account after her own daughter had a falling out with Megan.

At the time, the prosecution of the woman sparked a fierce debate about identity online. Authorities initially struggled to find a law which she could be prosecuted for violating, but public outrage over the alleged bullying was intense. Missouri prosecutors were unable to find a state law that had been violated. Federal indictment eventually followed, based on hacking law, alleging that the woman violated MySpace’s terms of service when she invented “Josh Evans,” and that this amounted to unauthorized network access. US legal experts at the time worried that a successful prosecution could criminalize anyone who posts fake information online. But how could a mother

---

<sup>16</sup> See, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/9299179/Dharun-Ravi-issues-apology-for-his-part-in-Tyler-Clementis-death.html> (accessed 12 November 2017).

do such a thing? It required detailed planning, the setting-up and maintaining of an account, and the most callous bullying.<sup>17</sup>

“The Star Wars Kid” is the name of an Internet video which became a viral sensation. Shot in 2002, the then 14-year-old, Ghyslain Raza, was seen practicing with a golf-ball retriever, pretending it was a light saber (as in the *Star Wars* film series). He left the tape without realizing that two of his classmates would find it, convert it to a digital video, and post it online. He inadvertently became an Internet sensation, being dubbed “The Star Wars Kid.” Many parodies of the video were created, and his likeness was included in television shows such as “Family Guy” and “Arrested Development.” Raza himself, however, suffered immensely due to relentlessly being bullied and taunted by his classmates. His condition deteriorated so much that he stopped attending his Quebec high school and was admitted to a children’s psychiatric ward. In an interview he gave (his first) ten years later in 2013, he recalled: “What I saw was mean. It was violent. People were telling me to commit suicide [...] No matter how hard I tried to ignore people telling me to commit suicide, I couldn’t help but feel worthless, like my life wasn’t worth living.”<sup>18</sup> Fortunately, Raza managed to overcome this dark period. As an adult, he earned a law degree from McGill University, and publicly speaks up about his experience in order to help others who have suffered similarly, to “overcome [their] shame.”<sup>19</sup>

Nowadays, various forms of cyberbullying, humiliation, harassment, and shaming (more ahead) are widely recognized as significant trends in our online-transformed worlds. The availability of mobile phones at very early ages seems to have triggered and stimulated various forms of cyberbullying. Such problems have become regular business for law enforcement units, agencies, and courtrooms across the globe, and educational programs and

---

<sup>17</sup> This landmark case raised significant awareness about cyberbullying. In particular, see the Megan Meier Foundation and its work on the prevention of bullying and cyberbullying.

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.macleans.ca/news/canada/10-years-later-the-star-wars-kid-speaks-out/> (accessed 12 November 2017).

<sup>19</sup> <http://gawker.com/star-wars-kid-breaks-silence-says-online-fame-made-h-499800192> (accessed 18 November 2017).

therapeutic instruments to address them have likewise widely appeared. So why the explosion? Some of the main drivers of cyberbullying and harassment can be gleaned from comments that the perpetrators report themselves (in hindsight). Common responses to the question “What made you do this?” are: “Because I could,” “I didn’t realize...,” “I’m anonymous,” and “Everyone is doing it.” An account representative of many cyberbullies goes like this:

He thought that it might be fun to act out his fantasies online. He also was convinced that he couldn’t get caught. When I asked him why he did it, he said simply, “Because I can.” He is a good kid. He’s the kind of kid that you’d want your children to be friends with, the one we refer to when we say “Why can’t you be more like...?” He never forgets to say please or thank you. He’d never dream of threatening anyone offline. But online he’s not a well-mannered honors student. Online he’s the tough and violent kid he always fantasized about being. He plays at being someone else. It’s the cyberspace version of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. And he does it from the safety of his bedroom, after his homework is finished.<sup>20</sup>

Many teenagers get entangled in the Web and lose track of what is real, what is virtual, and where the boundaries between offline and online are. The eighteen-year-old David Sunboli was addicted to violent computer games, which he played for hours, even days, on end, often reversing night and day, and gave himself names such as “God” and “Psycho.” He was excluded from online chat groups because of his aggressive behavior. He had been very active online, looking at material on Anders Breivik and high school shootings. Sunboli hacked into the Facebook account of a friend, and posted an invitation to his classmates to come and have a free hamburger at the local McDonalds in a suburb of Munich. When the classmates showed up he embarked upon a killing spree with a semi-automatic hand gun and killed nine children. There was a history of bullying by his classmates, long hours playing violent computer games and long hours in contact with extremist and racist white supremacy content. David lost his orientation in a confusing and

---

<sup>20</sup> See, [http://stopcyberbullying.org/doc/because\\_i\\_can.doc](http://stopcyberbullying.org/doc/because_i_can.doc) (accessed 13 October 2017).

fogged up moral social world. The online environment was part of his problem, and also part of his solution.

In August 2012, a heavily intoxicated teenage girl was sexually assaulted by high school football players after passing out at a party in Steubenville Ohio. She was dragged around and sexually assaulted many times. Bystanders took pictures, made videos with their cellphones and shared them via Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and text messaging. One tweet read: “Song of the night is definitely ‘Rape Me’ by Nirvana.” The latter was meant as a joke. In a toxic mixture of alcohol, drugs, social media, smartphones, and fraternity “partying,” the most horrible things happened, yet were given a relatively light touch by soshed.”<sup>21</sup>

Many people, often parents and educators, are understandably worried about these and similar stories. They fear that children and young people may become victims, and they fear that somehow they may also become perpetrators. Is it just the unfamiliarity with a new medium and new technology? Or is there something special about the online environment that keeps the perpetrators from understanding the moral nature of their actions and what the consequences for others could be? Are there properties of the online environment that encourage or facilitate this type of behavior, or will (perhaps, in any case) these evils subside once we all have become more accustomed to social media and the online environment and how to navigate it?

We describe most of our cases in some detail to show how the digital technology of the online world may shape our moral lives, our moral thinking, feeling and sensibilities. There are many more stories and cases of morally worrying behavior that might be used to draw attention to the downsides of the Internet and its features that might enable such problems. We discuss many of the latter features in the chapter ahead. A large number of the cases we discuss throughout this book are unique to the online world, or uniquely enabled by the online environment. All of the cases involve some significant derailing and deformity of moral and prosocial identity. On the basis of these and

---

<sup>21</sup> For this and other cases of young people running amok online, see, Carrie James, *Disconnected: Youth, New Media and the Ethics Gap*, Cambridge, MA., MIT Press, 2014.

other cases we argue that there is a special sort of confusion at work – what we refer to as “moral fog” – that envelops the online world and brings forms of moral disorientation that facilitates evildoing.

This applies especially to young people who are growing up, and being introduced to the meaning and importance of moral values, and to the needs and interests of other human beings. A large part of socialization and moral education now takes place in digital environments not at all designed with the education of morally sensitive, pro-social future citizens in mind. This is in stark contrast to the history of our cultures and civilizations, which (with varying degrees of success) have invariably concerned themselves with the design of cultural, social, and institutional environments that facilitated the moral development (by their lights) of their future citizens.

Moral fog can also form a danger to oneself. Many children, for example, fall under the spell of eating disorders: anorexia, bulimia, and most recently “orthorexia.” In all of these cases, their disorders are a threat to themselves rather than to others.<sup>22</sup> Anorexia is an eating disorder prevalent among girls in their puberty and adolescence which consists in compulsive fasting and extreme dieting. It may eventually result in life-threatening malnourishment and death. One in every hundred girls in the Western world suffers from mild or severe forms of anorexia. It is, of course, very difficult to treat anorexia precisely because those who suffer from it are victims of distorted views of their own body. Ideals of beauty and fashion dictate to young girls in a vulnerable period of their identity formation that they should have slim, even skinny, figures, and preach extreme ideas about health. Fashion models seem thinner every year, and being skinny is glorified and seen as reflecting an admirable lifestyle. Although anorexic girls have Body Mass Indexes which are agreed by medical specialists to be unhealthy, and even dangerously low given their age, height and physical constitution, they compulsively keep seeing themselves as too fat.

---

<sup>22</sup> One exception would be the impact one’s conduct has in influencing others to take up self-destruction. In the anorexia case this is a notable impact since, as in many other case types, the online community significantly reinforces self-destructive behaviors.

The Internet has significantly facilitated the coming together of anorexic girls in online communities. These so-called “pro-ana sites” glorify anorexia. What are the people behind these sites thinking? Don’t they realize they are endangering the lives of vulnerable teenagers? The condition is portrayed on these sites as an intentionally chosen way of life which is valuable and deserves respect – not as a morbid interest in losing weight and being unhealthily skinny. The sites provide tips on how to lose weight and burn calories, how to fast and starve, and how to hide all of this from parents. You can have a normal meal with the family, but throw up afterwards. In order to hide this from members of the family, it is advised to do so while having a shower, because the noise of vomiting is then masked by the noise of the shower. The sites also encourage people to harden themselves against the exhortations of their caretakers and parents to eat.

A website dedicated to the promotion of anorexia, allegedly the largest of its kind, has many postings by young girls who want to lose weight. A girl writes the following: “Okay, so today was going so well ... I got to 3pm with only 200 cals, then I was practically forced to eat cake and stuff so as not to cause suspicion. Oh my God I’m at 800 cals. I hate this.” Yet another posting in the early afternoon, by the same girl: “So far, I have had a cup of tea, hoping to keep it that way.” Another girl bemoans the arrival of her period: “I feel so bloated, water weight has added a devastating 1lb to 3lb.” Girls post pictures of themselves, bones protruding from skin, looking like famine victims. With their skinny bodies they adopt the sexy poses of fashion models. Yet they claim to feel good, as one teen wrote on the website: “Yesterday I skipped dinner ... so I had about 250 calories. I’m gaining control. Yes.” And so it goes on. These are the kind of websites which had been visited regularly by Imogen D’Arcy, a 13-year-old girl from Leeds who hanged herself in despair because she thought that she was too “fat” and “ugly.” In the weeks before her death her self-destructive obsession with her own body image was fueled by scouring the Internet for information on anorexia and suicide.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> For discussion of the case, see, e.g., <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/3525738/Perfectionist-schoolgirl-hanged-herself-while-worried-about-appearance.html> (accessed 12 November 2017).

Orthorexia Nervosa<sup>24</sup> is an eating disorder which is essentially an obsession with *healthy* food. This is rapidly becoming a large problem as a result of its contagious spread on social media: “Networks such as Facebook and Instagram are a haven for social comparison, and it is extremely easy for people, in particular adolescents, to get caught in negatively comparing themselves to others, based on highly crafted images... With the constant barrage of images, women and men are daily, and even hourly, reminded of how they are falling short next to these unrealistic standards.”<sup>25</sup> This is one of the reasons why orthorexia has been referred to as the digital-age eating disorder.

On the basis of in-depth interviews and study of online communities, Bartlett observes: “Every day, thousands of people from all over the world visit the sprawling networks of forums, blogs, and websites dedicated to various types of self-harm: anorexia, self-mutilation, suicide.”<sup>26</sup> There are hundreds of suicide forums that welcome their visitors with “Sorry you’re here.” An overview of the research indicates that there are circa 500 pro anorexia sites, and roughly the same number of “pro-cutting and suicide sites.” Bartlett reports, for example, how the sites provide practical advice on how to cut oneself if parents limit the number of cutting tools in the house, and concludes: “Tips and tricks are arguably the most harmful and destructive parts of these subcultures, transforming what might be vague, ill-thought out plans into a concrete set of instructions.”<sup>27</sup>

Sometimes people gather to watch live suicide attempts. The contagiousness of these type of behaviors are, by now, well-known, researched and validated. People support each other, but also encourage each other’s destructive behavior: “By wrapping up negative behavior in an ordinary, positive, and romantic way – by surrounding each user

---

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/national/orthorexia-why-the-too-clean-diet-spreadby-social-media-is-pure-hell/news-story/0c7e5bc3ca2ea7970a882e09220646d0> (accessed 12 November 2017).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 194

<sup>27</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 206

with peer support – it insidiously makes an illness feel like a culture, a life style choice, something to be embraced.”<sup>28</sup>

The early days of the Internet gave us a striking example of how free-wheeling from moral realities online contagion can be, with the case of “Nevada-tan,” the name used to describe an 11-year-old Japanese schoolgirl who was charged with murdering her classmate.<sup>29</sup> The name derives from the fact that in a school photo she can be seen to wear a University of Nevada sweater, and “tan” is an honorific suffix in Japanese.

“Girl A,” as she is referred to in the police reports, had retreated into an online fantasy world of horror and death, collecting “flash” horror movies on a website she had started, visiting violent sites and constantly searching for bloodier ones, and appealing to others to join her by commencing her own blog containing many gruesome stories... and some cooking recipes. The murder occurred in 2004 at an elementary school and involved slitting her friend’s throat and arms with a retractable knife after the friend had made hurtful and humiliating remarks about her during exchanges in Internet chat rooms.

As a result Japanese media were led to identify some of the dangers of the Internet. “We must make children understand even more the basic importance of life,” the *Yomiuri* newspaper said in an editorial. “What children need most is to be able to piece together real things and real experiences,” wrote Hisashi Sonoda, an Internet crime expert at Konan University.<sup>30</sup> The *Tokyo Shimbun*, a major metropolitan newspaper, also observed: “Over a computer... you can’t see the person’s face, so it’s easier to use increasingly violent language. If that’s the case, it’s an incident that reflects a pathology of

---

<sup>28</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 217

<sup>29</sup> Most of our description of the case is taken from [www.tvwiki.tv/wiki/Nevada-tan](http://www.tvwiki.tv/wiki/Nevada-tan) (accessed 12 November 2017). See also, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sasebo\\_slashing](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sasebo_slashing) (accessed 12 November 2017).

<sup>30</sup> Cited and translated by the BBC, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/3772737.stm> (accessed 12 November 2017).

society in the age of the Internet.”<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless Girl A soon became an Internet sensation. Japanese web communities Futaba Channel and 2channel “adopted” her. Artists on 2channel turned Girl A into a cute anime character dubbed “Nevada-tan.” Her personal website became very popular, and when it was taken down, mirror sites were put up. Copies of her artwork circulated on the web, and others copied her stuff. Fan songs, such as “Cutie NeVaDa” appeared.<sup>32</sup> Nevada Tan is also the name of a German Rock band that rose to significant popularity with songs like “No one hears you.”<sup>33</sup>

A very different kind of case, also evident from the early days and now among the more widely recognized examples of how evil can get enormous traction online, is online pedophilia. In one case, a decade ago, two suspected pedophiles went on trial in northern France accused of planning to kidnap, rape and torture a little girl, and boasting of their plans on the Internet. Christian Cadart, a 49-year-old telecommunication technician from the northern Rouen region, and Herve Limbour, 41, a painter–decorator from the Riviera city of Nice, were arrested in May, 2007, after a tip from a fellow web user. According to the prosecution, the two men plotted in detail, over the Internet messaging service MSN, how they would kidnap, sexually torture and possibly kill a child. Cadart, who went by the pseudonym “Herrio,” was arrested as he showed an undercover officer the disused electric power transformer where he said he planned to sequester his victim. His alleged accomplice, Limbour, who called himself “Diablo,” was arrested after making telephone calls describing sexual assaults on girls in his home town. The men had met in a pedophile chat forum and had been reinforcing one another’s sexual fantasies about

---

<sup>31</sup> Cited and translated by Fox News, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/2004/06/03/girl-says-internet-tv-led-her-to-slay-friend.html> (accessed 12 November 2017).

<sup>32</sup> In June 2005, the online store that sold the University of Nevada hooded sweatshirt reported it to be their best-selling item (this was reported in the site’s online statistics, and, a few weeks later, the University temporarily removed the sweatshirt from their catalog).

<sup>33</sup> On the German rock band, see, for instance, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Panik\\_\(band\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Panik_(band)) (accessed 12 November 2017).

young girls for a long time, along with kidnap-planning on MSN. Both insisted, however, that the kidnap plans were a mere fantasy never intended to be carried out. They admitted that everything was coherent and feasible, but claimed they never really thought about putting it into practice. As they described it, they were in a state of “delirium” online. The court disagreed and the men were sentenced to ten years’ imprisonment.<sup>34</sup>

The grooming of young people for sexual purposes is widespread online. The act of grooming a child or young person sexually often includes ordinary activities, not illegal or immoral in themselves, that later leads to sexual contact. Typically, this is done to gain the child or young person’s trust, as well as the trust of those responsible for their wellbeing. Sex abusers of children and young people find the Internet a very supportive environment for their activities – for instance, due to the anonymity of the medium. Thus, for example, online abusers often pose as children in order to facilitate arrangements to meet with their victims in person. Online worlds have also provided atypical access for sexual predators to their victims in other ways. So, for instance, predators have been able to use Trojan horses, malicious software that allows them to hijack the webcam of their victim, and generate images which the predator can then use for themselves, or to blackmail their victim, say, by threatening to post the images so they will go viral on the web. Grooming and sex predation has flourished online. As with cyberbullying and harassment, many studies have now been carried out, many laws enacted, and many enforcement agencies and educational programs set up around the world to address the phenomena directly.

Revenge porn is another significant and well-known online trend. This is a form of sexual abuse that involves the distribution of nude/sexually explicit photos and/or videos of an individual without their consent. The general term for making available personal documents without a person’s consent is “doxing.” Revenge porn is a special case of doxing, sometimes called cyber-rape or non-consensual pornography,

---

<sup>34</sup> See, [www.lexpress.fr/infos/pers/christian-cadart.html](http://www.lexpress.fr/infos/pers/christian-cadart.html) (accessed 20 June 2017).

and is usually posted by a scorned ex-lover or friend in order to seek revenge after a relationship has gone sour. The explicit photos and videos are often posted using the victim's full name, address, email, telephone, links to their social media profiles, and sometimes even links to their employers. Certain sites such as "Is Anyone Up" run by Hunter Moore, have played a crucial role in hosting revenge porn and adding information identifying the victim and connecting them to the material posted. As a result, victims are often harassed by strangers, cyberstalked, sent unsolicited emails and phone calls, and receive unwanted visitors at their home.

Victims of revenge porn have even lost their jobs after their photos or videos were posted online. In turn, many have then found it difficult to get a new job, since prospective employers are easily directed to the photographs or videos. Many find themselves publicly ridiculed or condemned, and they are often inclined to blame themselves, thinking that they should not have made the photographs or videos in the first place. Several activists are fighting for new laws that criminalize the publication of private material without explicit consent. At the forefront has been Charlotte Laws, an activist who started a legal fight against Hunter Moore, owner of the "Is Anyone Up" website, after her daughter's topless photo was uploaded there. The growth of revenge porn has also led to prenuptial social media agreements about the use of any nude or sexual material.

Online shaming is now a widely recognized (and increasingly opposed) online trend. It is a form of digital vigilantism, where social media and websites are used in order to expose and possibly punish people or businesses who are considered to have behaved in an immoral, cruel, or discriminatory fashion. The shaming can take many forms, including revealing information about the person's identity, calls to their employer to fire them, disparaging tweets, and even death threats. At its best, online shaming can be used as a way to shed light on systemic injustices (consider, for example, the Twitter account @EverydaySexism which documents women's experiences worldwide with sexist behavior and harassment). At its worst, online shaming can turn into a form of digital witch-hunting, where reputations are destroyed, and victims are slandered.

Jon Ronson has examined several cases of people who have been shamed online, and whose lives, as a result, have been irrevocably changed.<sup>35</sup> He notes that the original motives behind online shaming can be “pure”: we notice someone behaving in an immoral way, and we seek to make clear to this person, and perhaps generally, that this conduct will not be tolerated. However, even in cases where there is some righteous outrage to be had, such acts of online vigilantism often cascade into massively unjustified consequences, such as hate campaigns and death threats, causing extreme and long-lasting psychological damage to their victims.

One of the cases Ronson discusses is that of Lindsey Stone, a young woman in her twenties. Stone, who used to work in a foundation for learning disabilities, had a tradition of making rather crass jokes, such as taking photographs with her friend, “smoking in front of a no-smoking sign or posing in front of statues, mimicking the pose.” As she says: “We took dumb pictures all the time.”<sup>36</sup> On a day when she visited the Arlington Military Cemetery, she and her friend took what they thought was a funny picture of her posing in front of a “Silence and Respect” sign. Stone pretended to yell and flip her middle finger towards the sign. The photo was posted by her friend on Facebook. However, the privacy settings were set to public, so anyone was able to find the photograph. Soon enough (and sure enough), people started reacting to the picture, accusing Stone of disrespecting the Armed Forces, the veterans, and the soldiers who gave their lives. A Facebook group demanding her firing was started, more than 30,000 Facebook users joined, and another 3,000 signed a petition demanding that she be sacked.<sup>37</sup> The foundation for which she was working fired her a few days later.

This marked the beginning of a terrible period for Stone. She became depressed and for a year found it difficult to leave her house.

---

<sup>35</sup> Jon Ronson, *So You've Been Publicly Shamed?* London: Picador (Pan Macmillan), 2015.

<sup>36</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/feb/21/internet-shaming-lindsey-stone-jon-ronson> (accessed 12 November 2017).

<sup>37</sup> <http://gawker.com/5962796/happy-now-good-employee-lindsey-stone-fired-over-facebook-photo> (accessed 12 November 2017).

She became obsessed with reading everything that was posted online about her, and no one would reply to her work applications. Eventually, she did find employment in caring for the autistic children of a family. She remained, however, constantly terrified that her new employers would find out about the photograph, and the extraordinary online shaming that had ensued. It also became very difficult for her to meet new people: “It really impacts the way you view the world. Since it happened, I haven’t tried to date anybody. How much do you let a new person into your life? Do they already know?”<sup>38</sup>

A more recent example is the case of Walter Palmer, an American dentist. He caused a worldwide uproar when it became known that he had killed a beloved lion called Cecil during a safari trip in Zimbabwe. Cecil was a part of a lion pride that lived in Hwange National Park in Zimbabwe. Cecil wore a GPS collar, and his whereabouts were monitored by a team of researchers. He was allegedly lured away from the protected area of the park, where Parker shot and wounded him with an arrow. On July 1 2015, about 40 hours after he had been shot by the arrow, Cecil was shot dead with a rifle, decapitated and skinned.

When Palmer was identified as the hunter who killed Cecil, a tidal wave of negative reactions followed. People were calling for his arrest, for a boycott of his dental practice, and even for his death. His home and work addresses were revealed, and protesters started gathering outside his private dental practice, holding signs with slogans such as “Punish Palmer” and “Stop Trophy Hunting.” The words “Lion Killer” were spray-painted on the garage door of his vacation house.<sup>39</sup> Even celebrities, and people like Jane Goodall, the world-famous primatologist, expressed their anger and disgust over Cecil’s killing.<sup>40</sup> Palmer maintained that he had paid for and obtained a license which allowed him to hunt lions, that he trusted the knowledge of his guides, and that he did not know that the lion he killed belonged in a

---

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/feb/21/internet-shaming-lindsey-stone-jon-ronson> (accessed 12 November 2017).

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/cecil-the-lion-vandals-attack-vacation-home-of-dentist-who-killed-lion/> (accessed 12 November 2017).

<sup>40</sup> See, <http://qz.com/467277/jane-goodall-on-cecil-the-lions-death-i-have-no-words-to-express-my-repugnance/> (accessed 12 November 2017).

protected national park. Had he known this, he said, he would not have killed Cecil.<sup>41</sup> Finally, the Zimbabwean authorities decided on October 2015 that there was no basis to press charges against Palmer, and he would be allowed to come back to Zimbabwe – though as a tourist, not a hunter.<sup>42</sup>

Online shaming is global and everlasting for the victim; it is also easily open for the rest of us to join in. Monica Lewinsky (also interviewed by Ronson) is another who, like Lindsay Stone, had their identity and ability to relate to others utterly swamped by online shaming. Like many others who are shamed and bullied online, who these people were and who they could be was reduced to a particular episode. An episode, which plainly, in itself, did not warrant the near all-encompassing and ongoing reduction and devastation of their lives.<sup>43</sup>

One of the more spectacular and widely recognized ways in which our online-transformed worlds have enabled evil has been the growth of terrorism, and radicalization to terror. In his contemporary history of home-grown terrorism in the United States, Peter Bergen has analyzed hundreds of young people (both Christian and Muslim) who have been led astray in the labyrinth of extremist jihadist online content.<sup>44</sup> Half of the 330 militants that Bergen researched were very active online. One story, representative of many, exemplifies a number of the features to which we have drawn attention. It is the story of Zac Chesser, an American high school student. Chesser was a well-rounded, good student who had no problems with math, Latin, or Japanese, and who rowed and played football. His parents were successful college-educated professionals – a lawyer and an economist.

---

<sup>41</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-34508269> (accessed 12 November 2017).

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-34508269> (accessed 12 November 2017).

<sup>43</sup> Lewinsky is now an active campaigner against online bullying. For the Ronson interview see, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/apr/16/monica-lewinsky-shame-sticks-like-tar-jon-ronson> (accessed 18 November 2017).

<sup>44</sup> Peter Bergen, *Homegrown United States of Jihad: Investigating America's Homegrown Terrorists*, New York: Crown Publishers, 2016.

His grandfather was a retired army colonel who went to West Point and served in Vietnam. Over a period of a couple of years Chesser transformed from a nice high school kid into a young man who posted a message on a militant jihadi website. His message was a detailed plan on how to “desensitize Federal agents” by planting a number of fake bombs before planting real bombs; then, as he put it, “Boom! No more *kuffar*” (non-believers).<sup>45</sup>

It all started when he fell in love with a Muslim girl, a daughter of Somali immigrants.<sup>46</sup> He started to look into Muslim culture and religion. Gradually his lifestyle changed as he increasingly spent time hanging out with Muslim friends and consuming jihadist propaganda online. He joined groups that were spreading the ideas of Bin Laden and Awlaki. Within a year he developed into a bearded, extremist Muslim, one of the hubs in a virtual Holy War. He had rapidly built a significant reputation in a cybercommunity of jihadis, creating websites, online magazines, blogs, and password-protected online forums that spread extremist jihadist content. As Chesser himself understood: “The Internet led to a rapid rise in Jihadism as it offered up a podium...”<sup>47</sup> In his book on terrorism and the Internet, Gabriel Weimann concluded that by 2006 religious Muslim extremism had increased its online basis in a decade from a dozen to more than 5000 websites.<sup>48</sup> Many of the subjects he examined admitted that pro-jihad online videos and blogs played a very important role in their conversion and radicalization. Chesser, for instance, told a special agent that he was watching online videos “almost obsessively.”<sup>49</sup>

In the online community of self-radicalized jihadism, Chesser was able to significantly advance his reputation by making good use of his

---

<sup>45</sup> See Bergen’s description of the Chesser case, *Ibid.*, pp. 131–136.

<sup>46</sup> Of course, our intimate relations have, in various ways, long been more than sufficient to send us astray. Obviously we are highlighting here the phenomenal additional and distinctive traction that the Internet provides.

<sup>47</sup> Bergen, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

<sup>48</sup> Gabriel Weimann, *Terror on the Internet: The New Arena, The New Challenges*, Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2006.

<sup>49</sup> Bergen, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

computer skills. He had set up three YouTube channels<sup>50</sup>, and launched the idea of an “open source jihad,” envisaging easy access to sources that provide information about making bombs and weapons, tactics, and information on counterterrorism and screening policies by government agencies. He was carefully tracking visits to his site, and was proud that counterterrorism officials were consulting with him. In 2010, he boasted:

both my YouTube page and several others have seen more traffic than in all of 2009... The growth of my page and some others I pay attention to is looking to hit a rate that would produce more than 1,000,000 views per year. There are currently no Jihadi YouTube pages with even that many total views.<sup>51</sup>

As Bergen observed: “In his own mind Chesser was the world’s foremost Internet holy warrior...”<sup>52</sup> He had certainly become thoroughly confused in the maelstrom of his sudden notoriety. He daydreamed about joining the real holy war, joining Al Shabaab and travelling to Somali, to see action. He planned, for instance, to travel to Uganda with his orthodox Muslim wife. She was 9 months pregnant at the time. Half a year later he thought he could fly to Uganda, from there to Kenya and on to Somalia, with the last leg in a speedboat. To top it off he planned to fly from New York’s JFK airport (where he was stopped at security, because he was by that time on a no-fly list) to Uganda with his 7-month-old son, go by foot to Kenya, and then continue their walk into Somalia.

Again (as we suggested earlier in regard to extreme pranks), you might agree that such specific cases depict some terrible corruption, and you might even agree that the online world seems implicated. However, you might well also think that the online worlds of Chesser and the like are very rare, and so a very small part of online activity. And so you might well think that such cases do not really present much of an indictment against life in our online-transformed worlds.

---

<sup>50</sup> Bergen, *op. cit.*, p.145

<sup>51</sup> Bergen, *op. cit.*, pp. 149–150.

<sup>52</sup> Bergen, *op. cit.*, p. 157.

Again, none the less, you would be wrong. Sites promoting terror are nothing like marginal dark alleys. As, for example, Bartlett reports, the FBI estimates that one of the sites Chesser was involved in belonged to the 1% of sites on the Web that generated the most traffic.

The organization and dynamics of the opposing camp of anti-Muslim activists exhibits the very same features, as white supremacists and white pride advocates organize themselves online. Bartlett describes how the Internet plays a central role in spreading ideas about white supremacy, white pride and neo-Nazism. The website Stormfront.org has hundreds of thousands of members who together have posted ten million messages. In 2013, The Simon Wiesenthal Center estimated that there were 20,000 active hate websites (and rising). The typical modern nationalist and potential radicalized member is, according to Bartlett's profile: "young, time rich, technologically literate—able to quickly and easily connect virtually to like-minded people around the world."<sup>53</sup>

Bartlett held interviews with many nationalist and right-wing enthusiasts, and describes how social media played a crucial role in the development and dissemination of the extremist ideas of Anders Breivik. Lone wolves like Breivik, who do not necessarily prepare their heinous crimes with others, still benefit from virtual communities. They reach out to like-minded people and create environments that echo their views. In this way they receive positive feedback, which reinforces their ideas. Breivik intentionally created a vast network of thousands of Facebook friends among right-wing groups, collected thousands of high quality e-mail addresses, suggested that Wikipedia could be subtly infiltrated to plant his ideas, and practiced his shooting skills by playing the online shooting game *Call of Duty*.

Bartlett's study of small groups of extreme nationalists and their anti-fascist opponents illustrates how the same picture holds everywhere:

[T]he same dynamic allows hundreds of small often closed communities and individuals to surround themselves with information and people that corroborate their world view, and gives violent racists

---

<sup>53</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 52

and xenophobes a platform on which to spread their message quickly and effectively.<sup>54</sup>

After having been exposed to racist, white supremacist, and neo-Nazi content and communities online, Dylann Storm Roof, a 21-year-old from South Carolina, confessed to killing nine people at a historic black church in Charleston. He hoped it would start a race war. Roof created a website called “The Last Rhodesian,” a reference to the white-ruled African country which fought a civil war against black majority rule before it became Zimbabwe. The website features a manifesto in which Roof wrote how he had been radicalized via the Internet. He said he had researched “black on white violence,” which took him to the website of South Carolina-based hate group the Council of Conservative Citizens (formerly the White Citizens’ Council). “N\*\*\*\*\* are stupid and violent,” Roof wrote, and further:

I chose Charleston because it is the most historic city in my state, and at one time had the highest ratio of blacks to whites in the country... We have no skinheads, no real KKK, no one doing anything but talking on the Internet. Well someone has to have the bravery to take it to the real world, and I guess that has to be me.<sup>55</sup>

One of the most broad and transformational impacts of the Internet has been upon the social lives and psychological development of young people. Recently, based on the findings of a large research project (“Project Zero”), Howard Gardner and Katie Davis have reported on the influence of social media upon the education and psychological development of children, teenagers and young adults.<sup>56</sup> They indicate how 3 million apps (and rising) available to the young can either increase their imagination and options, or have the opposite effect by making them dependent upon the technology. It is clear from their findings that young people think of the world as an

---

<sup>54</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 70.

<sup>55</sup> <https://www.thedailybeast.com/dylann-roofs-racist-manifesto-is-chilling> (accessed 12 November 2017).

<sup>56</sup> Gardner and Davis, *The App Generation*, *op. cit.*

ensemble of online tools and platforms, an “app milieu,” and they suggest that there are some distinctive differences between the app generation, and previous generations.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, they say: “generations may be defined by their dominant technologies, with the length of a generation dependent on the longevity of a particular technological innovation.”<sup>58</sup> In the spirit of the slogan, “The medium is the message,” technology is no mere tool. Instead, it can re-create human psychology.

Gardner and Davis also find that young people do not generally distinguish between their online and offline selves, that there is considerable evidence young people take care to present a “socially desirable, polished self, online,” and that:

Features such as asynchronicity and anonymity (or at least the feeling of anonymity) allow young people to craft strategic self-presentations by deciding what information to highlight, downplay, exaggerate, or leave out entirely.<sup>59</sup>

They sketch a picture of constant networked individualism, networked publics and constant (micro) performance that is propelled by the metrics of likes, endorsements, visits, and followers. All of this, they say, can render individuals insecure due to a lack of self-knowledge, and a lack of any robust sense of themselves.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, there is some evidence that the more prominent is someone’s online presence, the weaker is their sense of self.<sup>61</sup> Further still, they say many social scientists observe a “positive connection between narcissism and on-line behavior.” This is especially evident in the very high

---

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21. And, as they correctly remark: “Most of what we accomplish online is the result of procedures that have been created by others...” p. 24.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63. And also: “Digital media give youth the time and tools to craft an attractive identity, as well as an audience to view and respond to it,” p. 70. We analyze the transformation of self-presentation and social communication online, and its impact upon key aspects of our basic values, in detail in Chapter 3.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

levels of self-promoting content found in social activity on sites such as Facebook, and in “tweeting.” In offline conversation, people talk about themselves 40% of the time. Online this doubles to 80% of the time.<sup>62</sup>

Gardner and Davis (along with Turkle<sup>63</sup>) paint a fairly bleak picture of the online social milieu. They see a lot of connectivity but no real connections. Instant intimacy, or “instamacy”: a pick and choose mentality, distracted by gadgets and constant availability, interruptions, and the checking of e-mail and messages. A milieu marked by the coarsening of language, and of the logic of face-to-face contact (in order to make it look as if you are looking someone in the eyes, you have to look into the camera – not into their eyes). They discuss reports in dropping levels of empathy in youth, and ask: “Could viewing the world through our apps be hurting our ability to view the world through another’s eyes?”<sup>64</sup> They observe how the online environment allows shortcuts and enables us to bypass time-consuming face-to-face contact, but that this convenience comes at a cost. Risks of social interaction are diminished, connectivity replaces richer connections. So while we may no longer put ourselves “on the line” so much, we also do not truly connect with others and so, Gardner and Davis worry, “we can’t put ourselves in their shoes.”<sup>65</sup> In our analysis of our online-transformed social worlds in Chapter 3, we aim to show how various aspects of our basic values are being undermined and perverted by the kinds of self-presentation and communication enabled and favored by the design of these worlds.

---

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76. They also refer to other research that reports increasing moodiness, restlessness, worry, sadness, and feelings of isolation in this context. See, p. 77.

<sup>63</sup> Turkle, *Alone Together*, *op. cit.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119. And, also: “We realized early on that aspects of the new media – their speed, their public nature, the ease of accessing, transferring, and transforming information, the possibilities for anonymity or for multiple identities – were creating a virtual Wild West. Ethical issues... were necessarily coming up for re-examination and perhaps for reconceptualization,” p. 170.

The list of trends and cases we have discussed, can, unfortunately, be built upon endlessly with examples from newspapers every day, all over the world. They all indicate how the design and nature of communication contexts, and many kinds of related environmental cues, impact in ways that play an important role in determining antisocial behavior, and in corrupting the moral life. In describing our trends and cases we have noted some specific features of our online environments that seem important in enabling the evils we have canvassed, such as isolation, connection, contagion, positionality, and anonymity. We now turn our focus more directly to describe these and many other features of our online-transformed worlds, and to illustrate how they play a crucial role in shaping our lives, including in ways conducive to evil.