

## Cyberspace – Threats to Young People and the Family

### Cyberprzestrzeń – zagrożenia dla młodzieży i rodziny

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**Abstract:** Cyberspace is an important communication area that can be considered both from the perspective of external and internal (family) communication. One can also look at this space of communication from the perspective of threats and opportunities for the family and young people. The article was based on non-reactive research techniques, mainly on the analysis of existing data. The author, based on the literature on the subject and the results of nationwide research on the use of the Internet by young people (“Teenagers 3.0,” 2021; “Teenagers 3.0,” 2023, “Teenagers towards digital pornography,” 2022 reports. NASK-PIB), raises the issue of threats related to cyberspace in the context of family and family communication. The author also pays attention to the features of virtual communities, presents communication threats related to young people’s entry into the world of the Internet and cyberspace, and points to the challenges that modern families come up against in the face of these threats. The presented research results indicate many discrepancies in how parents and children perceive the rules regarding the use of the Internet and the threats related to cyberspace. In a situation where there is no open communication in the sphere of family communication, problems resulting from young people using the Internet inappropriately are hidden in silence. This poses an important challenge for modern families.

**Keywords:** cyberspace, youth, family, virtual communities, communication

**Abstrakt:** Cyberprzestrzeń stanowi ważny obszar komunikacyjny, który można rozpatrywać zarówno z perspektywy komunikacji zewnętrznej, jak i wewnętrznej (rodzinnej). Można również spojrzeć na tę przestrzeń komunikacji z perspektywy zagrożeń oraz szans dla rodziny i młodych ludzi. Artykuł oparty został na niereaktywnych technikach badawczych, w tym głównie na analizie danych zastanych. Autorka, bazując na literaturze przedmiotu, wynikach ogólnopolskich badań odnoszących się do wykorzystania przez młodzież Internetu (raport „Nastolatki 3.0”, 2021; „Nastolatki 3.0”, 2023, „Nastolatki wobec pornografii cyfrowej”, 2022. NASK-PIB), porusza problematykę zagrożeń odnoszących się do cyberprzestrzeni w kontekście rodziny i komunikacji rodzinnej. Autorka, zwracając również uwagę na cechy społeczności wirtualnych, przedstawia zagrożenia komunikacyjne związane z wejściem młodzieży w świat Internetu, cyberprzestrzeni, oraz wskazuje na wyzwania, przed jakimi w obliczu owych zagrożeń staje współczesna rodzina. Prezentowane wyniki badań wskazują na wiele rozbieżności w zakresie tego, jak rodzice i dzieci postrzegają zarówno zasady dotyczące wykorzystania Internetu, jak i zagrożenia związane z cyberprzestrzenią. W sytuacji, w której brak jest otwartości komunikacyjnej w sferze porozumiewania się rodzinnego, milczeniem osłonięte są problemy wynikające z korzystania w niewłaściwy sposób przez młodych ludzi z Internetu. Stanowi to ważne wyzwanie dla współczesnych rodzin.

**Słowa kluczowe:** cyberprzestrzeń, młodzież, rodzina, społeczności wirtualne, komunikacja rodzinna



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## INTRODUCTION

Cyberspace as an environment, a space for online contacts, provides new opportunities and threats for both adults, and children and young people. The modern family faces challenges related to the changes that cyberspace creates in the area of communication and building relationships. The Internet has become an integral sphere of family communication. Research shows that the time spent by teenagers on the Internet increased to 5 hours 36 minutes in 2022. In 2020, it was 4 hours 50 minutes. On days off from school, this time is even longer and amounted to an average of 6 hours and 16 minutes. The percentage of teenagers deciding to meet an adult they met online is also increasing, from 14.1% in 2020 to 17.9% in 2022. What is also disturbing is the fact that every fourth teenager did not inform anyone from his or her environment about it (25.3% in 2022) (*Nastolatki 3.0*, 2023, 7). In the context of family communication and communication rules, attention should be paid to discrepancies in the responses of teenagers and their parents and guardians. Almost 60% of parents (59.1%) declare that they set rules regarding children's use of the Internet (30.8% declare that they do not set such rules). Establishing this type of rules is confirmed by only 24.4% of teenagers, and more than half, 53.7%, declare that parents do not set rules regarding the use of the Internet. Similar discrepancies are visible in the context of answers regarding the establishment of specific rules. For example, over half of parents and guardians declare that they talk to their children preventively to prevent threats (51.6%), and only 19.9% of teenagers indicate this type of conversations with their parents (*Nastolatki 3.0*, 2023, 163,169)<sup>1</sup>. The results of other studies are also disturbing, in which the majority of children and young people (just over 70%) declared that it is easy to find pornographic content on the Internet, and the average age at which they saw pornographic content for the first time is 11 among 12-14 year old teenagers, and 12 among young people aged 16 years old (*Nastolatki wobec pornografii cyfrowej 2022*, 4)<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, it is worth paying attention not only to

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<sup>1</sup> The study was carried out between October and November 2022 (CAWI method). Sample – 4,984 students and 1,255 parents and legal guardians.

<sup>2</sup> The study was carried out at the turn of September and October 2021 (CAWI method). Sample size – 4,827 students (including 3,226 students of the 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade of primary school and 1,601 students of the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade of secondary school)

the possibilities and opportunities provided by cyberspace, but also to the threats that become a challenge for modern families.

### 1. Cyberspace – definitions and threats

Cyberspace is an area of interest for many scientific disciplines. This space of communication can be considered from various points of view, paying attention to the various threats and benefits resulting from humans “entering” the world of cyberspace. So how can we define this space of communication?

Cyberspace can be defined as an information exchange environment, a specific communication environment. It is “a virtual space in which communication takes place between computers connected by the Internet network” (*Słownik języka polskiego*). It is a virtual world created by connections between computers, Internet-enabled devices, servers, routers and other elements of the Internet infrastructure (*Britannica*). U.M. Mbanaso, E.S. Dandura emphasize that “cyberspace includes a combination of Internet and telecommunications technologies that enable recording, storing, searching and transmitting information” (Mbanaso and Dandura 2015, 18). K.J. Lippert, R. Cloutier define cyberspace as a digital ecosystem and a global domain of the information environment (Lippert and Cloutier 2021, 1-2).

M. Marczyk notes that “cyberspace is, among others, communication space created by Internet connection systems. It allows its users to communicate online and establish relationships in real time. Cyberspace is an environment for exchanging information using networks and computer systems” (Marczyk 2018, 59). It is commonly identified with the virtual world, virtual space. The concept of cyberspace is no longer only considered an IT term, but is also used in social sciences, sociology, pedagogy, psychology and family sciences. It is an ambiguous and extremely complex term. The focus may be on various definitional aspects of this concept depending on the field of science that undertakes research in the field of cyberspace. At the same time, it should be emphasized that this term is extremely important because it concerns an important and wide area of communication activity of modern man (Przyklenk 2020, 17-18). “The concept of cyberspace can be formulated as a synthesis of all physical and technical means enabling digital exchange by electronic means, and the relationships of users having access to its resources. All these phenomena happen in a parallel space, which is a new field for human activities, to

which behaviours and solutions used in the real world are transferred” (Chałubińska-Jentkiewicz 2019, 10-11). In the context of social sciences, family sciences, it can be stated that cyberspace appears to be a specific platform for social communication and entertainment. Therefore, it can be considered a computerized space for information exchange (Marczyk 2018, 61-62).

The specific nature of this communication environment is related to the use of networks and computer systems. This area of communication provides its users with new possibilities, “communication opportunities,” but also threats.

The threats related to cyberspace include, among others (*Rodzaje cyberzagrożeń – zagrożenia nietechniczne (społeczne)*; Król and Zawadzki 2020, 181-183):

- 1) Cyberstalking – intrusive, insistent, malicious and annoying tormenting and harassment of a person, a group or an entire organization using information technology or the Internet. This type of prowler is called a stalker. Cyberstalking can therefore be defined as “persistent behaviour unprovoked by the victim, including repeated threats and behaviour that harasses the victim, despite the victim’s suffering and requests to stop, using communication tools as well as information, as a result of which the victim fears for his or her own safety” (Cyrklaff-Gorczyca 2017, 204).
- 2) Trolling – this phenomenon is characteristic of various types of discussion groups and chats, i.e. places where Internet users can chat, exchange thoughts and observations. It means taking deliberate and intentional actions aimed at disrupting the Internet group, causing confusion in the group, for example by deviating from the topic of the conversation, deliberately raising controversial and offensive topics. M.D. Griffiths defines trolling as the act of deliberately provoking and/or antagonizing users of the online environment, often leading to a desired and sometimes predictable result for the troll (Griffiths 2014, 85). A troll is a person who provokes others into discussions in an extremely intrusive and vulgar way, usually sending false and controversial messages. His behaviour is unfriendly and unpleasant, and inconsistent with netiquette. He sends information that is supposed to lead to negative emotional reactions and arguments. These are usually provocative messages that are unrelated to the

topic of discussion in a given Internet group, chat or forum. Of course, to create the desired effect of confusion, a troll may send messages that appear to be sincere, are designed to provoke, and also lead to fruitless arguments that become a waste of time. A troll is therefore a person who starts and/or intensifies a conflict in an online group for entertainment and fun, and is also tactically aggressive, which is intended to increase emotional reactions. Such a person disrupts regular discussions on online platforms in order to attract attention, and is, so to speak, “deceptive” because he usually uses a different/second social media account (Jachyra 2011, 253-255; Volkmer et al. 2023).

- 3) Flaming – leads to increased aggression in statements. In the literature on the subject, you can find many different definitions of this concept, which is approached and defined from different points of view. Some authors point out the difficulties in defining this phenomenon, generally referring flaming to hostile Internet communication (online communication) and pointing to its various aspects, including its complexity (Andersen 2021; Jane 2015, 65-87). It is important to note the difference between criticism and insult. In this context, many researchers refer to flaming as hostile comments referring to a person (Internet user) and not ideas (Waller and Aiken 2000, 65-96). It can be assumed that flaming “consists of the escalation of aggression between Internet participants during a discussion, usually resulting from differences of opinion. Starting with minor insults, it may turn into an exchange of more and more serious invectives or insults” (Jabłońska 2016, 68-69).
- 4) Cyber-prostitution – this phenomenon involves obtaining material benefits in exchange for sharing erotic and pornographic materials generated with one’s own participation via the Internet (photos, videos, live transmission using a webcam).
- 5) Sexting – this phenomenon concerns sending messages (photos, videos) of a sexual nature to others via the Internet and mobile devices. “Young people discovering their sexuality, encouraged by their peers, engage in sexting, which results in unwanted publication of this information and then ending up in the wrong hands. Moreover, it is associated with a specific perception of physicality (because if someone deviates from certain canons of beauty, he or

she is negated) and with disorders in establishing intimate relationships” (Król and Zawadzki 2020, 182). Of course, this phenomenon applies not only to children and adolescents, but also to adults.

- 6) Grooming – a phenomenon that concerns the seduction of children, especially via the Internet, for the purpose of sexual abuse (Kamińska-Nawrot 2022, 111). This crime consists in misleading minor children up to 15 years of age and is intended to serve purposes such as the production of pornographic materials or making sexual propositions to the child, or the dissemination and promotion of pornographic content.

The example threats presented above do not exhaust the list of various dangers related to cyberspace. Taking into account cyberstalking, for example, its different varieties can be distinguished. The motivation of stalkers remains an important issue, which allows us to distinguish their different types. Among them (Cyrklaff-Gorczyca 2017, 204-205):

- a. Erotomaniac type – the perpetrators of this type of violence are more often women who usually do not know their victims personally. Their obsessions last for a year or more, which is the longest compared to other types of stalkers. The basis of a stalker’s obsession is the false belief that the victim and the perpetrator of violence are destined to be together. In the case of this type of stalker, the threat of physical attack by the victim is the lowest.
- b. Obsessively in love type – this type of stalker usually knows his victim personally. His actions are based on a pathological obsession with the victim. The obsessively in love type is usually a man who has been diagnosed with a mental disorder/illness. If such a stalker has delusions “of a sexual nature, they will always be secondary to the primary mental illness” (Cyrklaff-Gorczyca 2017, 205).
- c. Obsessive type – usually a man who is addicted or abusing drugs and has a personality disorder. Although the duration of obsession in this case is the shortest (usually lasting up to a year), the risk of violence is the highest. This type of stalker is known

to the victim with whom he was or remains in a close relationship, wither intimate or professional.

- d. Another type of stalker is the type that M. Cyrklaff-Gorczyca describes as “made up” in the so-called false victimization syndrome. In this case, we are dealing with a person who claims to be a victim of persecution by a person known or completely unknown to him. “In most of these cases, the alleged victim was found to have a personality disorder, which may also influence the motives for feeling persecuted, which may be conscious (as a form of alibi), subconscious (resulting from seeking attention) or delusional (feeling of being persecuted)” (Cyrklaff-Gorczyca 2017, 205).

Actions taken by stalkers may take a variety of forms, from offensive content sent in e-mails, through threats and insulting comments sent to the victim via messaging software or posted in discussion groups, to ordering goods or services (also in excessive amounts) on behalf of the victim of such action paying for them from his or her account. Such activities may also include attempts to damage the victim’s computer using malware, attempts to obtain confidential data stored on the victim’s computer, or even identity theft related not so much to impersonating the victim, but to completely taking over his or her features, or searching information on the Internet that could embarrass the victim or lead to public ridicule, also negatively affecting family and professional relationships (Cyrklaff-Gorczyca 2017, 205-206).

Of course, a diverse perspective on threats in cyberspace can be adopted. In the context of discussing threats resulting from the development of information technologies, W. Furmanek distinguishes psychological, technical, medical, legal and social threats as well as information threats resulting from the development of modern times (Furmanek 2014, 23-24).

## 2. Communication threats in the context of the features of virtual communities

When considering issues related to threats related to cyberspace, it is worth paying attention to five features of virtual communities, which were distinguished by M. Smith. These are the features that allow us to distinguish virtual communities from groups that exist in the real world. These include (Szpunar 2004, 107-108; Kondracka 2009, 108-109; Baran and Misiewicz 2014, 9):

- 1) **Aspatiality** – no territorial or geographical limitations of such communities. Virtual communities are therefore not described in terms of spatial boundaries (village, city, housing estate).
- 2) **Asynchrony** – members of virtual communities may (e.g. chat), but do not have to communicate at the same time. A characteristic feature of this type of communication is delayed feedback. In the case of real communities we talk about the unity of time and place, in this case both time and place may be different.
- 3) **Acorporality** – means that the main means of transmitting information is the written word. Text seems to be the most important thing here. Non-verbal communication, which largely complements verbal communication, has been largely replaced by emoticons, which often convey emotions instead of body language.
- 4) **Astigmaticity** – it can be said that virtual communities are free from stigmatization. Age, gender, race or physical appearance do not matter in virtual contacts. However, they may affect the communication and contacts of real communities.
- 5) **Anonymity** – the social space of cyberspace is a space that, thanks to its specificity and characteristics, gives its users a sense of anonymity. A person who cannot be seen, heard or met in direct contact may use anonymity for their own communication purposes.

Through the prism of the above features, we can consider both the threats and opportunities that cyberspace offers to people. Taking into account the feature of acorporality, attention can be paid to changes in the process of interpersonal communication. Offline communication, traditional face-to-face communication, allows the use of non-verbal signals, which by complementing words enable easier reception and interpretation of verbal messages. A greater number of diverse messages is the strength of interpersonal communication. However, in online communication, communication on the Internet, focusing messages only on the written word largely limits the message. Therefore, some researchers claim that this type of communication is more sparse (Ben-Ze'ev 2005, 48). What's more, non-verbal communication is primarily used to convey emotions. Emoticons are used on the Internet to replace the transmission of emotional information through non-verbal signals that are invisible and absent on the Internet. However, it should be remembered that the lack of all the possibilities provided by non-verbal signals



in the sphere of communication may lead to a situation in which online communication is different from interpersonal communication, because, as P. Wallace notes, it sometimes happens that “what we write is not necessarily the same as we would say directly” (Wallace 2001, 27). Therefore, other communication possibilities can also be considered from the perspective of the image being build. In face-to-face contacts, a person can use a whole range of non-verbal behaviours to create an impression on others. In the case of shaping this impression online, the Internet user has significantly fewer means of communication. And here we can look at image issues as a kind of opportunity and threat. A chance for those who prefer to build their image based only on verbally expressed thoughts, observations and views, without revealing information from appearance and body language. A threat to the recipients of messages sent by those who consciously have greater control over the impression they make on others thanks to the limitations of online contacts in the sphere of non-verbal communication. A person’s image is largely based on non-verbal behaviour – physical appearance, body signals, etc. It should be noted that in face-to-face communication, a person has no control over many non-verbal signals, so they influence how she/he is perceived by the recipients, even though some of them have no influence in the sense that she/he is not aware of them. In the online communication, in the world of the Internet, you can build your own image in a controlled and thoughtful way, and the issues of physical appearance do not play such an important role as in the case of face-to-face contacts and building relationships in the offline world. This means that easier control of the impression made on others in online contacts may make it easier for dishonest Internet users to build a well-thought-out image that is not true.

On the one hand, online communication limited only to communication through the written word (excluding online meetings using a webcam) is a limitation and makes the exchange of information scant and poorer. On the other hand, these communication limitations in the sphere of the use of non-verbal signals and greater control over the verbal message constitute an opportunity for those who want to build their image without using the communication signal such as physical appearance. In this sense, poorer and scant offline communication becomes an opportunity to build the desired image for those who believe that their physical appearance may be an obstacle to establishing offline contacts. Therefore, poorer communication is their strength (Ben-Ze’ev 2005, 50-51). However, the threat appears when the

Internet user uses greater control over the process of shaping the impression made on others in order to deceive, manipulate and lie to other Internet users, other members of virtual communities.

Taking into account another feature of virtual communities and online meetings, i.e. anonymity, it can be pointed out that on the one hand, it provides opportunities and on the other hand, it leads to threats. It should be kept in mind that anonymity, on the one hand, allows you to hide certain information about yourself, and on the other hand, allows for openness. As A. Ben-Ze'ev notes, "Greater anonymity, however, usually facilitates deeper self-disclosure and, consequently, greater familiarity and closeness (...). In online relationships, you can maintain partial or full anonymity: hide your identity or important aspects of it. Anonymity makes it easier to open up online because it reduces the risks associated with revealing information about yourself". Being anonymous online allows you to express yourself freely thanks to anonymity, which is associated with less responsibility. Internet users therefore feel less vulnerable (Ben-Ze'ev 2005, 51). So this leads to more openness. And here we can see two dimensions of threats. On the one hand, the lack of responsibility for the words expressed may lead to situations in which the Internet user will express himself in a more literal, rude and offensive manner to others, bearing in mind the fact that he will not suffer any consequences. It should be kept in mind that "anonymity and lack of practical consequences make it much easier to express honest opinions" (Ben-Ze'ev 2005, 54). On the other hand, deeper self-discovery in online relationships with another anonymous Internet user may become dangerous if the interlocutor – recipient is dishonest and his/her image is false. The assumption that anonymity gives a sense of security and that one can freely open up to another anonymous Internet user is undoubtedly illusory. Just as some train passengers open up to an unknown travel companion, talking about their life, problems, health and family, believing that they will never meet this person again, similarly, being anonymous on the Internet can lead to greater openness and revealing intimate information about yourself and your loved ones. "The web allows people to hide behind a form of communication that is somewhat removed 'removed from life'. It is easier to open up to a stranger you don't have to look at or see the next morning" (Ben-Ze'ev 2005, 53).

Communicating with a stranger can be risky. However, according to research conducted in 2020, only every twelfth teenager (8.5%) and only 44% of parents and guardians consider accepting invitations

from strangers on social media as risky behaviour. Children are less likely than their parents and guardians to perceive sharing photos, videos and personal information on social media as a threat to privacy. 69.5% of parents see an even greater threat in using social networking sites – teenagers see this threat to a lesser extent (40.3%) (*Nastolatki 3.0.*, 2021, 6).

#### CONCLUSION

To sum up, it should be emphasized that the communication space itself, such as cyberspace, does not constitute a threat. The Internet is one of many communication tools that can be used to implement basic communication functions, such as information, entertainment and education. A. Ben-Ze'ev emphasizes that just as the problem of overeating does not result from food itself, but from eating habits, the Internet itself is not the cause of problems, but the way of using it and communication habits can lead to difficulties and problems. The point is not to avoid using the Internet, to avoid “entering” the communication space that is cyberspace, but to learn how to use it in a way that reduces the threats and maximizes the benefits that this tool brings (Ben-Ze'ev 2005, 253). And here we see the role of the family, parents, and schools to teach children and young people the proper use of available communication tools, because, as W. Furmanek notes, “it is not the information itself that constitutes a threat, but the unreasonable and irresponsible choice of it as well as its use and exploitation” (Furmanek 2014, 23).

Parents face the challenge of not only teaching children the rules of traditional communication, but also the rules of using the Internet, rules on how to move safely in cyberspace and minimize the risk of threats. Awareness of threats, transparent rules for the use of communication tools and their control can increase security in the use of the Internet. However, research conducted in 2022 shows that parents are not fully aware of the existing threats. The overwhelming number of parents, i.e. 80.1% declared that their children had never received a naked or semi-naked photo via the Internet or mobile phone. Only 5.6% of the surveyed parents declared that their children had received such photos. However, teenagers' declarations show that 32.7% of them received such photos. What's more, when faced with violence, teenagers are most often silent – they do not react and do not say anything to anyone. Such passivity towards online violence is increasing compared to 2020 (2022 – 38.5%, 2020 – 32.4%) (*Nastolatki 3.0.*, 2023, 7, 86).

Therefore, attention should be paid to the threats of cyberspace from the perspective of the silent house. Breaking down the silent wall that surrounds teenagers and young people who are at the threshold of cyberspace threats remains a challenge for parents. Therefore, the online communication, traditional face-to-face communication, become the challenge, which allows for mutual understanding and openness in the face of contemporary threats affecting young people. Awareness of these threats, as well as teaching how to use communication tools, including the Internet, are challenges for the communication sphere of modern families.

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