

# The Memo – Episode 3

## Cyberbullying: how to survive the digital playground

— Josh:

Hayley's roughly 15 or 16, and the lead character in a short video. She lives the life of a regular teenager: she goes to school, watches TV with her parents...but she seems depressed most of the time. She's not sleeping well, complains about having to get up in the mornings. One day she runs out of her classroom to go throw up in the toilets. Her parents are worried.

When the video ends, viewers are prompted to leave their numbers--then watch the short film again. Except this time, they'll receive the same text messages Hayley has been getting...all day, anonymously.

*Chloe: "UGH your body is GROSS...Stupid (BIP)...your life is over LOL"*

— Jo:

Things go from bad to worse. One day Hayley can't stand it anymore. She finds a bottle of pills in the bathroom cabinet...and the video ends with her in the hospital.

Promoted widely over the past few weeks this campaign is called The Epidemic and is one of the latest initiatives against cyberbullying in the United States.

The person behind the campaign has a U.S. political sex scandal named after her: Monica Lewinsky, who experienced bullying first-hand and has been fighting it for years.

*[Jingle]*

— Jo :

Hello everyone, hello Chloe!

— Chloe:

Hi, Jo!

— Jo:

Welcome to the latest episode of The Memo. Today we're talking about cyberbullying among teenagers and young adults. Chloe, Monica Lewinsky's campaign is compelling, but is it realistic?

— Chloe:

Yes, it is. The texts in the campaign were inspired by real-life messages that young girls received...messages that poisoned their lives. You can find scores of

stories like this in the media. But the one that really stood out to me was reported in Wired, the tech magazine.

— Jo:

Where does it take place?

— Chloe:

In Belmont, New Hampshire, in the north-east of the United States. It all started back in 2012, when a detective tried to track down a man who went by the name of Seth Williams. Williams had harassed several girls from the area: demanding explicit photos, forwarding them to all their classmates and blackmailing them by hacking into their Facebook accounts...

In the end, it's through his message service provider that the detective finally tracked Williams down: surprise! the girls all knew him. Williams was in fact a shy kid from school, who didn't have many friends. The article ends with an account of the legal battles that followed: it took them 7 years and 2 lawsuits to have him sentenced to jail. His victims are still under shock.

— Jo:

... because the bullying was related to a highly sensitive topic: their sexuality...

— Chloe:

Yes! Girls are much more likely to be targeted by bullying of a sexualized nature: Fake rumors, naked photos circulating without their consent...that's what the U.S. think tank Pew Research Center found in their report.

— Jo:

But aren't boys also sometimes affected by cyberbullying?

— Chloe:

Yes, in fact, just as much as girls. UNICEF polled young people in 30 countries and found that one in three had experienced cyberbullying. One in five said they'd even skipped school because of it. But don't worry--one negative interaction online isn't going to push your teenage son or daughter into a deep depression. It's the incessant, repetitive nature of it that's dangerous. And three-quarters of those polled said they were bullied through social media.

— Jo:

So what are the social media giants doing to fight this?

— Chloe:

According to a British study, Instagram is where the worst kind of bullying happens. Forty-two percent of twelve to twenty year-olds report having experienced harassment of some kind on this network. The New York Times says the company takes this very seriously. They've even organized focus groups with teenagers and parents: the idea is to define what, exactly, offensive

content looks like, so that AI algorithms may be able to recognize and automatically delete it.

— Jo:

And how's that going? What have they taught the machine?

— Chloe:

Turns out, it's not that easy. Imagine a teenage couple. They take a selfie and post it, with the tagline: "Wish you were here, Amanda." Seems harmless, right? But what if Amanda is the boy's ex-girlfriend...and is upset when she sees the post? Or what if they've tagged her alongside the picture of a whale, to make fun of the way her body looks? You get the idea. Until now, AI hasn't been able to understand this kind of subtlety...content gets filtered through algorithms, and then passed on to human moderators.

— Jo:

The problem with cyberbullying is that it often comes from somewhere nearby, sometimes even from within the classroom...

— Chloe:

Exactly. According to experts, that's what creates the feeling of an inescapable dead-end. Telerama interviewed Justine Atlan, at the helm of an NGO that defends children's rights online. She says that at such a young age, school--whether it's primary or secondary--feels like it's the entire world. And online abuse often comes hand-in-hand with bullying in real life as well.

— Jo:

And always on the touchiest of subjects.

— Chloe:

Yes: sexuality, yet again...according to Justine Atlan, bullies rarely act alone--they often gang up on a target, so there are always more abusers than victims. That's where parents come in: they need to make sure that when their child sees something like this, rather than going along with it, they sound the alarm. That's also the responsibility of the school.

— Jo:

And have school administrators and educators taken steps on their end?

— Chloe:

Yes, a number. In Germany for instance, schools regularly host organizations to raise awareness of these issues. For the first time this year, the Free University of Berlin offers a prevention course, the Fairplayer Manual. The Tagesspiegel reports that Berlin's senator for education, Sandra Scheresse, created a new post whose mission is to fight psychological abuse. Students can elect their own spokesperson to be in touch with this official.

— Jo:

And in the United States?

— Chloe:

In the US, some schools even monitor their students' email correspondence! That's what I read in the Guardian. Until recently, they used to manually search all emails for words like "marijuana" or "suicide." But a start-up in California found a way to automate all that: their software is called bark, and it sends automatic alerts, night and day.

By the way, at 3 billion dollars, the surveillance sector is booming--particularly the surveillance of minors across all digital channels.

— Jo:

Got any advice for parents listening in?

— Chloe:

I read some great tips in the New York Times. Here's what Dr. Mildred Peyton has to say, an expert on cyberbullying: it's not just the victims of cyberbullying who need help--it's their bullies as well. This kind of behavior reveals an alarming instability...one that needs to be taken seriously. Then, it's important to recognize the signs: a hike or sudden dip in your children's screen time, anxiety whenever they check their phone, disrupted attention spans.

— Jo:

Because you can't expect teenagers to let their parents know if they've witnessed or been victims of cyberbullying.

— Chloe:

No. Sixty percent won't mention it. Once you're aware of the situation, don't forget to take screenshots--as evidence, to show the school. Then if the school doesn't react, to take further up the chain of command. But the most important point is that parents should speak with their children: so that if such a situation were to occur, they'll know how to behave, whether as victim, or witness.

— Jo:

Thank you, Chloe, and thanks to everyone for listening. You can find links to all the articles we mentioned in the episode description. Until next time for a new episode of the Memo !

### **Sources :**

- [A new anti-cyberbullying campaign sends participants messages inspired by ones sent to real victims \(CNN\)](#)
- [He Cyberstalked Teen Girls for Years – Then They Fought Back \(Wired\)](#)
- [A Majority of Teens Have Experienced Some Form of Cyberbullying \(Pew Research Center\)](#)

- [UNICEF poll: More than a third of young people in 30 countries report being a victim of online bullying \(Unicef\)](#)
- [Instagram Is Trying to Curb Bullying. First, It Needs to Define Bullying. \(New York Times\)](#)
- [Cyberharcèlement : “Pour les ados, on a crié dans le désert un certain temps” \(Télérama\)](#)
- [Cyberharcèlement à l'école : un député propose une réunion annuelle obligatoire pour les parents \(Numérama\)](#)
- [How to Safeguard Children Against Cyberbullying \(New York Times\)](#)