

Forum tackles cyberbullying

Community discusses online safety issues

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Facebook Safety Forum

Lt. Gov. John Bohlinger and Sen. Jon Tester share a laugh before the start of the Facebook Safety Forum Thursday in Kalispell.

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By HILARY MATHESON/The Daily Inter Lake | [9 comments](#)

With 800 million Facebook users worldwide, safety — particularly cyberbullying — is a huge concern and was the focus of a community forum Thursday at Flathead High School.

Corey Owens, Facebook’s associate manager of public policy, gave a presentation on the tools and resources available to report abusive content on the site. About 200 students and 100 parents and teachers attended the forum.

While social media gives users the ability to connect with people around the world, it also gives the ability for people to remotely bully, intimidate and harass, often without many consequences beyond the content’s removal.

Owens called Facebook the largest “neighborhood watch,” and said it relies on its users to report abuse.

“Bullying has been a social activity long before social networking,” he said.

He said the way to prevent cyberbullying is education on how Facebook works and how to apply the social rules of the real world online. Owens called this “digital citizenship.”

“We’re talking about the places we go, work, school. It raises the question, if we are doing things online now that we used to do offline, how do we think about safety?” he said.

“You don’t walk into the street without looking both ways. ... You put on a seatbelt when you get into a car. How do we think about that online?”

The event was organized by U.S. Sen. Jon Tester, D-Mont. The audience had a chance to ask questions to a panel made up of Tester, Lt. Gov. John Bohlinger, Attorney General Steve Bullock, Office of Public Instruction Denise Juneau, Kalispell Mayor Tammi Fisher and Kalispell Public Schools Superintendent Darlene Schottle.

The question that did not seem to have an answer was, who is responsible — beyond Facebook removing content — to create and enforce consequences?

Montana does have laws against stalking, harassment, intimidation and threats, but there are not any specifically to incidents online or for schools to create cyberbullying policies.

Bullock said that during the last legislative session, he and Juneau tried to push legislation requiring all Montana school districts to have policies covering this topic. That bill did not pass.

Juneau and Flathead High School Principal Peter Fusaro acknowledged their concerns about cyberbullying occurring outside school and how it becomes a school concern when it affects learning in the classroom.

“How do schools start working to change that a bit? How do we get a handle on things happening outside of school, but that you have access to 24/7 in the palm of your hands?” Juneau asked.

Juneau said she often discusses the cyberbullying problem with a student advisory board consisting of 40 students from around the state. The board came up with five actions they wanted to see, including punishment for perpetrators and staff training.

“I think we need to be more aggressive — that includes cyberbullying,” Juneau said.

While there is accountability on Facebook accounts, there still is a level of anonymity. Users only need to provide a name, email and birthday when signing up for an account. Users also have the ability to control who views what information on their page, whether they report abuse and whether to block other users.

But Facebook’s response to cyberbullying is limited to content removal. Owens said users need to have a trusted adult to tell if they are victims of cyberbullying.

Alison Schmaltz, a school counselor at Elrod Elementary had a question about students under 13 who have profiles. Facebook policy requires users to be at least 13 years old; users under 13 are promptly removed.

But some young users slip through. Schmaltz said it is even occurring at the third-grade level.

Schmaltz, who is unfamiliar with Facebook, said she was glad to learn she could report the pages herself with the click of a button.

One student pointed to a school's role in a Flathead High Facebook page called "Flathead Drama" that was created to post gossip. She said lists that praise or slander students are compiled on the site, and that because of the anonymity associated with the account, there were no consequences for the posters.

After the event, Fusaro said the Flathead High school resource officer is investigating a few Facebook pages, including the site the student referred to. He likened tracing specific people online to "chasing the rabbit down the hole."

"It's somebody who posted something about somebody else, and somebody else tells them, 'Hey did you look at what so-and-so posted about you?' and then once that gets reported, it's just going around," he said.

Later, Fusaro added that once it's reported, a site may be taken down, but that doesn't mean another page won't pop up under another user's account, or under a different name, and the cycle continues.

"A lot of those things start outside the classroom where we don't have jurisdiction," he said.

Interrupting this cycle is the goal of educators and legislators.

For more information or to view Facebook safety tools, visit www.facebook.com/safety.

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