

# A NEW DIGITAL AGE AND ETHICAL DILEMMAS: ASK.FM – A WEBSITE FOR ENTERTAINMENT OR CYBERBULLYING

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## **Abstract**

Unlike Web 1.0, which was primarily used to gather information, we are today dealing with Web 2.0, which could be perceived as social software as it enables communication and sharing of information between users. Thus, when speaking about the Internet of today, we are referring to a medium that uses social networks, blogs and other virtual communities to connect people, which further emphasize its social dimension in the new digital age. The students of today spend over two thirds of their time online on entertainment and the reason for this lies in Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The study conducted among the students of seventh and eighth grades in a Croatian elementary showed that 69 percent of participants had an active account on the internet social network Ask.fm, which now has 134 million registered users. As a website with all traits of a social network, Ask.fm enables people to ask questions to each other and respond to them whenever they want. The questions can be asked anonymously or with a revealed identity. The study conducted on a sample of 1000 questions and answers showed that 17.3 percent of those questions open up certain ethical dilemmas – from inappropriate words (swearing), sexist terms, denial of positive life values to cyberbullying, and seven fatalities which ended in Ask.fm bullying-related suicides have been recorded among the youths. The study has shown that Ask.fm has no positive traits.

*Keywords:* Ask.fm, cyberbullying, ethical dilemmas

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## **1. Introduction**

Upon its creation, the World Wide Web was described in diametrically opposite terms by different researchers. While some pointed out that it was a new form of socialization which encouraged gregariousness, others talked about its negative effects in terms of social isolation and termination of social relations [1]. This paper will examine whether the Internet in this digital age is used to initiate and maintain social relations and to which extent it is associated with positive effects (deepening of relationships, quality free time, learning), or if it has negative effects as well (deviant behavior), using the example of the website Ask.fm which has attributes of a social network. The purpose of this paper, or rather that the purpose of which is to give a new contribution to this subject matter, is to establish whether Ask.fm has any positive characteristics and which ethical contentions that Internet social network raises.

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## 2. Youth in a new digital age

Where the digital age is concerned, Vilović states the four principles proposed by the Poynter institute which can be applied to the digital age [2]: “the truth and reporting the truth”, “minimizing damage”, “acting independently”, “being trustworthy”.

According to Vilović, anonymous sending messages can be “an abuse of a public, virtual space and psychological mistreatment which deprives another person of their dignity, their honour and even their life”. This ability to play hide-and-seek, where we often do not know who is hiding on the other end, or rather who the interlocutor is, creates the possibility of hate speech and electronic abuse over the Internet (i.e. cyberbullying), the victims of which are largely children. Until recently, this problem was not discussed often, nor was it known to the general public, and the problem of Internet violence has never been so prevalent as today [3].

Today, violence in the broadest sense is understood [4] as application and use of force, and a society of violence implies the existence of a reality and social environment where violence and the use of force are perceived as acceptable, desirable and ultimately legitimate behaviour. The social control mechanism should be most involved in children, considering that they are, on the one hand, the most at-risk group, and on the other hand, because aggressiveness and violence in children can predict aggressiveness and violence in those persons as adults. However, it is not enough for early prevention to be included into the social control mechanism, but the definition of violence must also be specified considering that children spend almost all of their time in cyber-space. Today, the definition of violence must inevitably and explicitly include virtual violence [5] because it is only that it begins to receive the attention it needs (from parents, teachers, the public). In cyber-space, indirect verbal aggression takes place. Since the victim is damaged or injured indirectly, by endangering their social relations, this type of aggression is often called social, affiliative or relational aggression [5] because it includes behaviours such as exclusion from peer groups, termination of friendships, destroying another person's reputation and spreading rumours.

Today, not only are children exposed to inappropriate sexual content on the Internet, but peer violence is more frequent over the Internet. The term cyberbullying includes situations where “a child or a teenager is exposed to assault from another child, teenager or a group of children over the Internet or a mobile phone (cellular phone, chat, forum, blog, social network, Internet in the broadest sense)” [6]. This includes every sort of harassment, attack on the child's privacy, comments with offensive or violent content, group hate, threatening messages, choosing the most unpopular, the ugliest, the fattest or the dumbest (!) person in the school or, as is very often the case, asking somebody to describe and evaluate another person, while the anonymity of the perpetrator of violence, or rather the communicator, gives them a sense of security of getting away unpunished.

Cyberbullying as a form of indirect aggression has more powerful consequences because the victim can re-read everything and experience everything again. Unlike direct aggression, that is the “face-to-face” aggression, with cyberbullying the perpetrator is very often anonymous [7], so the meeting of the victim and the aggressor is very often easily avoided. The victim is thus exposed 24 hours a day and they cannot “escape” as they would in cases of direct

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aggression, as is the case in a fight in a nightclub or a football club, where the victim can change their venue, their club or the sports they are involved in. The only course of action with cyberbullying is to turn off the computer and never turn it on again. But is that truly the solution? Aside from this, in cases of electronic peer abuse, the offensive content directed at the victim can be read not just by the victim but by the whole cyber community.

### **3. Ask.fm and cyberbullying**

Ask.fm is an Internet social network which has 134 million registered users today [8]. It was launched on June 16th 2010 by two Russian brothers, Ilya and Mark Terebin, sons of an affluent former Red Army officer. They both graduated from the Faculty of Economics in Riga, the capital of Latvia, where they had grown up. They began their career in the furniture business, but they soon saw that the Internet presented a more lucrative way of earning money. They used the American question-and-answer page Formspring as an idea. Ask.fm was launched and grew so quickly that by 2013 the site already had 80 million users who posted up to 30 million questions and answers per day [8].

Considering the fact that the founders of the Ask.fm social network noted that teenage years are often a journey to self-knowledge, and that Ask.fm makes that journey easier by giving its members the option of anonymity because it encourages uninhibited and spontaneous conversations, it encourages opinions and builds self-esteem, it is possible to conclude that they wanted Ask.fm to help young people mature and develop psychosocial skills. This is supported by the stated core values emphasized by the owners of the social network: “curiosity, anonymity, safety, respect and community” [9]. They explain this by the fact that curiosity, that is, asking questions – as no group of people has more questions than young people, who make up the Ask.fm community – can only encourage human development, and anonymity gives the young the incentive and the self-confidence to ask a question which will answer a challenge in their maturation. Respect and intolerance of inappropriate behavior are the values which are meant to ensure the safety of the Ask.fm community, whose founders envisioned it as a “fun, happy, instructive and life affirming place”.

Ask.fm, as a website with all the characteristics of an Internet social network, enables people to ask and answer each other's questions when they like. The questions can be asked anonymously or with a visible identity, and the owner of a profile decides whether they will receive (and answer) all questions, thus the anonymous ones as well, or only those from a known source. The question is asked by typing the question into the designated field on someone's profile site, and there are also computer generated “random questions” and “questions of the day”. Only the owner of the profile sees the unanswered questions, and as soon as they are answered, the questions and the answers can be viewed on the owner's profile by everyone, including those who are not registered on Ask.fm. It is also worth mentioning that you do not need to have a user account on Ask.fm to ask somebody questions. This gives Ask.fm characteristics of a more open social network than Facebook. The fact that Ask.fm has been translated into 49 languages and that users from 150 countries have so far answered 25 billion questions attests to how open it is [8].

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Other than the fact that a user registered on the social network can share a link on their Ask.fm profile (e.g. a link to the profile of the author of this paper is [ask.fm/DenisVincek](http://ask.fm/DenisVincek)) and on other social networks, like Facebook for example, and thereby invite others to ask them questions, they can also use links to share their answers on other social networks (Facebook, Twitter).

As far as the use itself is concerned, Ask.fm points out in Terms of Use that no one under the age of 13 is allowed to have a user account on the social network and they must follow all laws and regulations of the country in which they live. Text responses, photographs and video clips may be posted on Ask.fm, but there are rules about what is acceptable. It is thus stated that it is not permitted to post or send both in questions and answers [10]:

- Anything mean, bullying towards someone or intended to harass, scare or upset anyone;
- Anything designed to provoke or antagonize people, especially trolling;
- Anything which uses rude words or is intended to upset or embarrass anyone;
- Anything that depicts horrible, shocking or distressing things;
- Anything which is obscene or pornographic, contains any pictures of naked people, is sexually explicit or depicts graphic violence;
- Anything which contains any threat of any kind;
- Anything which is racist or discriminates based on someone's race, religion, age, gender, sexuality, or the color of their skin;
- Anything which encourages people to get involved in anything illegal (e.g. drugs, violence or crime);
- Any lies about another person – whether you know it not to be true or whether you are not sure if it is true (even if you think it might be)
- Anything which constitutes spam, attempts to sell anything to other users or extorting money from other users
- Anything which does not belong to you or can present copyright infringement (e.g. music and films) or a breach of confidence
- Anything which contains any computer virus or other malicious codes designed to attack, damage, divert, take over, disable, overburden, or otherwise impair the Services;
- Anything which attempts to scrape or collect any personal or private information on Ask.fm;
- Anything which you pretend comes from someone other than you, or where you are impersonating someone else;
- Anything which may cause any harm or damage to you or anyone else.

Ask.fm has resources which limit abuse of the social network (filters for rude and offensive words and the removal of such inappropriate content) [11]. But the sentence: “We will attempt to limit the wrongful use of our website” is noticeable. This means that the owners of Ask.fm do not completely guarantee the absence of inappropriate content and are using this sentence to distance themselves from them – both in questions and answers.

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Considering this statement and, as was previously said, the option to ask questions anonymously, the cyberbullies are given an opportunity on Ask.fm to attack their victims without, so to the speak, any fear of being discovered when they break any of the 15 previously mentioned “forbidden” rules.

In most cases the bullies are friends with the victim on Facebook, but the bullies often use Ask.fm to display their vicious side by using the option of anonymity on the site. Bullied teenagers are left hurt and in agony, not knowing which of their friends has turned on them [12].

Literature has noted seven unfortunate incidents [13] related to bullying on Ask.fm social network which have ended in suicides of young people. The most cited case is that of Hannah Smith (14), a girl from Lutterworth, Great Britain, who hanged herself after succumbing to brutal cyberbullying on Ask.fm. For months, anonymous users wrote despicable comments such as “Die” or “Get cancer”, Hannah was insulted by malicious users on account of her weight, the death of her uncle and her propensity for self-harm, and they also tried to convince her to drink bleach. It was only two weeks before she hanged herself that Hannah begged her bullies, who hid behind the veil anonymity, to stop the bullying, but they did not stop and it ended in tragedy [14].

Bullying on Ask.fm is also related to a suicide which took place in May 2013 in Croatia [15]. The girl in question was Marta Jureković (15) from the small town of Lohor, who was a first-year student in secondary school. On her Ask.fm profile, insults and exceedingly vulgar sentences were found to have been directed at her. She was called a “moron”, “a stinking two-faced piece of shit”, “a stupid whore”, “fucking ugly”, and she was explicitly told to kill herself. However, it was never proven that the suicide was directly related to the comments written on the Internet social network Ask.fm.

Krmek, Buljan Flander and Hrpka note [16] that there are four areas which have proven to be successful in reducing electronic violence:

- Raising awareness
- School rules
- Supervision
- Programmes

When talking about the prevention of Internet violence, the first place is usually given to raising awareness. Peer violence, online and in general, is neither a joke nor being playful, and in order for the prevention to be successful, the teachers, the parents and the students need to become aware of peer violence in general and then cyberbullying. Individual interviews conducted in the staff room of a Croatian primary school have shown that only two of the teachers knew what Ask.fm was and the dangers this Internet social network brings. The teachers are required to talk about the prevention of electronic violence not only without knowing about the places where electronic bullying takes place but also without being systematically educated on applying said prevention.

The authors point out that it is necessary for every school to devise a plan of prevention intervention on a school-wide level. Such prevention programmes against violence exist in Croatian schools, but the attention given to electronic violence in them is insufficient.

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Considering that the prevention of electronic violence is something relatively new, the process and the manner of creating an individual way of fighting against cyberbullying and the daily application of established rules are also important in addition from the end result. Covering up abuse or making unreasonable decisions by the people who are completely incompetent in the area is not the solution.

The third area, supervision, refers to checking whether the students are following the accepted rules when using information and communications technology. While this is the parents' task at home, in school it is the teachers and other school staff who must be concerned with that, just like teachers are concerned with the behavior in the halls during breaks.

Programmes can be the most helpful aspect of raising awareness, and Krmek, Buljan Flander and Hrpka emphasizes the importance of those observing the violence and how compassion must be awakened in them so that they inform their teachers, associates, or parents – adults in general – about the violence taking place, and so that they do not silently approve of it.

Stanić [17] also speaks of the need for the observers, but also the victims, to confide in adults. In school, those are the homeroom teachers and the school psychologists engaged in correctional-educational work with students with inclination towards cyberbullying or those that had already engaged in it. Along with them, the counsellors and the librarians need to be included into the prevention activities process, since they are actually the only information experts in the school, apart from the IT teachers.

#### **4. Research methodology**

In order to answer the question which specific ethical issues the social network Ask.fm raises, content analysis was selected. Answers to the questions asked were selected as units of analysis. In quantitative content analysis, the purpose is not only to establish the existence or absence of a specific manifestation or characteristic, but also to determine precise quantitative values in which those manifestations or characteristics are represented. In other words, while qualitative content analysis answers the question “what” and, albeit less frequently, “how”, quantitative content analysis, alongside questions “what” and “how” also answers the question “how much”, thereby displaying the frequency and/or volume of the content determined [18].

The advantage of the analysis chosen is that in this case the qualitative properties are expressed through quantitative indicators which are measured and compared by the researcher. Additionally, the advantages are small expenses, the possibility of quicker data analysis and greater objectivity of results. Although we use quantitative content analysis to analyze the contents of a message, or rather of the unit of analysis, or, specifically in this paper, the contents of the questions and answers on the Internet social network Ask.fm, we cannot help but note there is additional value in the analysis in that we will ultimately acquire the characteristics of the senders and receivers of the message, which is to say of those who ask the questions and of those who answer them.

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The focus groups [19] were primarily used to answer the question whether or not the social network Ask.fm has any positive characteristics, or rather the second question which this paper has tried to answer.

A deliberate “pattern according to the researcher's decision” [20] has been selected. The main characteristic of this research pattern is the researcher's assessment in which they themselves decide which examinees can give the best information to achieve the goals of the research. Only the units which the researcher feels contain the necessary information and are ready to share it are included in this pattern. The pattern according to the researcher's decision is used in situations where the intention is to describe a phenomenon or investigate something about which little is known. This is the case with the Ask.fm website where the author decided that the pattern which makes up the focus group will contain 17 teenagers who have answered more than 1000 questions on Ask.fm.

Focus groups are used because participants encourage and support each other in their debates, encourage discussions and opposing opinions and talk about different aspects of the topic which they may not even touch upon in private conversations. This manner of group facilitation enables the person conducting the interview, i.e. the moderator, to get more information than they would in the matching number of individual interviews.

The quantitative content analysis was done on 1000 questions by a random pattern selection of questions or answers of one of the members of the focus group.

## 5. Results and discussion

The research conducted in June 2013 in Franjo Horvat Kiš Primary School in Lobar and the Ante Kovačić Primary School in Zlatar, Croatia has shown that 69 per cent of examinees have an active user account on the Internet social network Ask.fm.

Of the 1000 questions and answers encompassed in the quantitative content analysis, 827 questions and answers contained none of the characteristics expressly listed in the Terms of Use on Ask.fm as something which should not be mentioned in questions and answers. The remaining 173 questions, which is as many as 17.3 per cent, presented some form of an ethical dilemma.

The specific 53 questions which contained no questionable (insulting, unpleasant, offensive etc.) details, were answered YES without being YES/NO type questions, but were questions which demanded descriptive answers, which tells us about the flippant approach to answering questions on the part of the owners of Ask.fm profiles.

A large number of answers were noted to be related to something not appropriate for a young person just in their teen years – specifically, it concerns alcohol and its consumption and going out late at night, the main purpose of which is the consumption of alcohol, and even about consuming alcohol during the educational process. In total, 38 such answers were noted, including: “you drink during practice”, “go out and get pissed”, “come home not sober”, “the whole class shows up for school drunk”, “going out to the pub and coming home in the morning”, “a day with five litres of wine”, “relationship with a glass of jägermeister still going strong“, “no gift like a glass of schnapps”, “happiest at the pub”, “I got

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drunk”, „I would take jägermeister with me to Mars”, “if I had to go on a 14-hour flight, I would want a glass of jäger next to me”, “favourite candy – schnapps”, “like I haven't had “a taste” since Saturday”, “how much can you drink – that is a redundant question”, “I'm celebrating New Year's by getting pissed and making a mess at the club”. As an answer to the computer generated question to show the best moment of their summer, an owner of a profile on Ask.fm posted a photograph of himself drinking some hard liquor from a one-litre bottle.

As many as 30 answers contained foul language and swear words. 28 answers contained obscene, pornographic or sexist language. The answers contained seven disturbing messages, i.e. messages containing the denial of positive life values (“dumb school, I hope (school) burns down one day”, “it pays to lie”, “thinking of what to say to the doctor, why I wasn't at school”).

And last, but not least, five answers were noted containing elements of classic electronic abuse, i.e. cyberbullying – whether it was labelling other people, harassing them and making them uncomfortable or classic threats.

On the other hand, when it comes to the questions themselves, out of a 1000 questions there were 12 questions with characteristics of electronic abuse (“... is stupid”, “...is a whore”, “rotten bastard”, “gay”, “you're a gigolo”, “you're an idiot”, “drunk” etc.).

When asked the first question, whether Ask.fm had any positive characteristics and what they were, the members of the focus group answered that they thought that it had them, arguing, albeit somewhat hesitantly, that we can learn things about other people, we can ask them what we want to know but are ashamed to ask publically, we can meet somebody new. On the other hand, we can learn what people think about us, who is against us, and who are our friends who defend us. It appears to be a case of a priori exclusively positive connotations, and not a single person asked associated Ask.fm with anything negative in the beginning of the interview. In this portion of the conversation, no participant spoke out of turn, and their answers were rather short.

So the researcher started to get the participants talking about the site with all the characteristics of a social network from different aspects with additional questions. Most of the participants learned about the existence of Ask.fm through links on Facebook, and only three from their friends. They are young people in their early teens and have been on the social network Ask.fm between half a year and two years. They answer questions every day and they like anonymous questions, and they would be all right, they claim, without Ask.fm. They assert that Ask.fm does not take away from their studying time.

But the participants were divided on the question whether their answers on Ask.fm were honest or if they were meant to be jokes. They agreed that their answers become flippant statements when they are asked offensive questions, but also when they are bored. Also, offensive questions and questions with inappropriate content is, for a half of those asked, the reason they would not want their parents to see their Ask.fm profiles.

Only two examinees in the focus groups had not had any negative experiences, everyone else had received offensive and unpleasant questions. The examinees were divided on the answer to what they do about the offensive questions – they do not answer them, they delete them

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or they answer them flippantly, and some even use inappropriate vocabulary. Two participants said that they had reported/blocked those who asked questions with offensive content.

After it had become evident that the participants often used the words “offensive”, “inappropriate”, “flippant”, the researcher suggested that the question about the potential positive characteristics of Ask.fm be reconsidered. It was at this moment that the facilitation of the focus group came to light. The examinees answered the question Why they began to use Ask.fm in the following ways: “out of boredom”, “it seemed interesting”, “everyone had Ask.fm profiles, and I wanted to be included”, “out of curiosity”, “for fun”, “girls fell for it”.

In the end the researcher repeated the question Does Ask.fm have any positive qualities and what are they? The members of the focus group, obviously under the influence of the answer to the previous question, were now almost unanimous in that there were not very many positive characteristics about that website with characteristic of a social network, and for the first time, the exact term cyberbullying was first heard in the focus group – associated as a result of offensive and unpleasant questions.

## 6. Conclusion

Research has shown that as many as 17.3% of all questions and answers raise some sort of ethical dilemmas. If we analyze those 173 questions and answers, we can see which ethical concerns are in question, how we answered / what we answered to “what” and “how” and about their frequency (in percentiles), or rather the question “how often” they arise in questions and answers on the Internet website Ask.fm. The results of the quantitative analysis of the content are shown in the Figure 1.

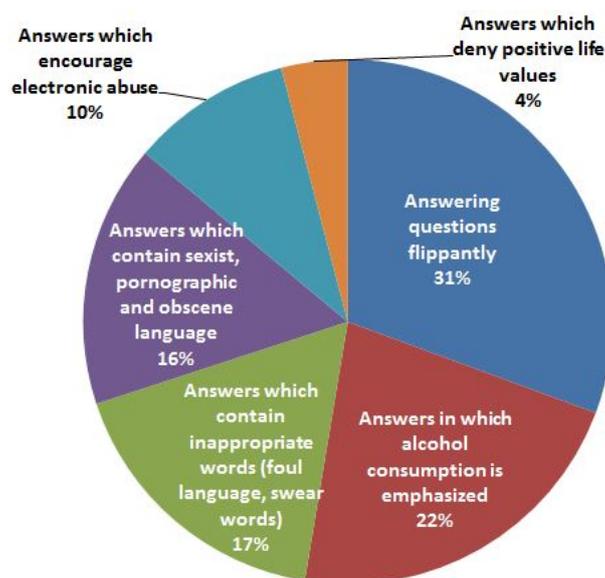


Fig. 1. Ethical dilemmas which arise in questions and answers on the Ask.fm website

The issues mentioned are a list of ethical dilemmas, among which electronic abuse or cyberbullying must be emphasized, which take place every day, as pointed out by Gordana Vilović, professor of ethics of mass communication, and so we can rightfully ask ourselves “does ethics live here” [2]. This refers to the modern age of communication, of which Ask.fm is a part. Obviously the filters for rude and offensive words do not exist and/or do not work, at least not on the Croatian version of the site, because, as this paper has shown, inappropriate content is not removed, and so it never goes further than the mentioned (if even that) attempt to limit misuses of Ask.fm, which gives the participants of the communication absolute freedom to breach ethics. At the same time, the members of the focus group were in the end almost unanimous that Ask.fm has no positive characteristics.

We can conclude that in this case information-communication technology, i.e. computer-mediated communication, enables teenagers to experiment in a social context, but we cannot say that the content, which they come to using the technology, is used as help, or rather a role model in maturing and acquiring psychosocial skills.

The research confirms Vilović’s claim which points out that anonymous messages can present a misuse of cyber space and electronic abuse among the members of generation C.

All this leads us to conclude that Ask.fm, as a new and powerful two sided “one-to-one” medium [21] is actually also an unethical information channel, because it sends ethically contentious messages, which puts into question the intention of the communication participants as they are the producers of these messages.

Although the owners of Ask.fm advise [22] those who have been made to feel uncomfortable by anything they read on the site to talk to their parents, guardians, teachers or good friends – and that they should not in any case keep it to themselves – it should be noted that research has shown that the teachers consider direct aggression to be more serious and are more prepared to react when a student shows direct aggression. Indirect aggression, as Keresteš points out [5], is ignored in schools and it is uncertain how much the teachers about know what Ask.fm is. It is the same with students, who are less likely to reject indirectly aggressive students than those who show direct aggression, which indicates that education of children, parents, and teachers about the consequences of indirect aggression due to cyberbullying, or rather electronic abuse, can only be stopped through prevention and education.

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