

Dee knew that cyberbullying was on the rise, especially cases of doxxing that targeted police and politicians whose personal information was dug up and made public, but never imagined he would become a target himself.

Experts say the year-long political unrest, which divided Hong Kong into rival camps, and the Covid-19 pandemic, which led to people spending more time online, have contributed to the rising trend of cyberbullying.

The Office of the Privacy Commissioner for Personal Data (PCPD), an independent statutory body overseeing enforcement of the city's data protection law, received 157 complaints of cyberbullying from January to June this year, more than twice the 69 complaints over the whole of last year.

Since anti-government protests erupted in June last year, police officers, politicians, protesters, journalists and others have seen their personal information, including home addresses and contact lists, being revealed openly, along with intimidating messages. Supporters from both sides of the divide have attacked rivals online, exposing their personal information.



Police say the personal information of more than 3,400 officers, their family members and friends has been disclosed unlawfully since June last year. Photo: Nora Tam

According to police, the personal information of more than 3,400 officers, their family members and friends has been disclosed unlawfully since June last year.

The culprits instigated others to harass or intimidate the officers and their families, and in some cases, the personal details were used to apply for loans or other services, police say.

In an online survey of more than 1,000 people between June 18 and July 2, more than 98 per cent of respondents rated cyberbullying in Hong Kong as serious, and almost 60 per cent said they or someone they knew had been victims.

According to the survey, by think tank Youth Vision, more than four in five said cyberbullying affected free speech online, and about the same proportion said they dared not voice political opinions online for fear of being attacked.

Jody Kwok Fu-yung, who established the group with two others this year, says while cyberbullying is not new, it took a turn for the worse during the city's political unrest.

"The trend of cyberbullying has been growing, and the social unrest magnified the problem," she says.



Kwai Tsing district councillor Jody Kwok says cyberbullying took a turn for the worse during the city's political unrest. File photo

Kwok, a Kwai Tsing district councillor, is in favour of tightening regulations to protect the public, but those who disagree fear it will mean censorship of the internet and curbing freedom of expression.

A heavy toll on victims

Dr Oliver Chan Heng-choon, associate professor of criminology with the department of social and behavioural sciences at City University, says that unlike physical bullies, online bullies can remain anonymous and what they say about their victims can spread quickly.

Children aged 12 to 15 are the most vulnerable, he says, both as perpetrators and victims of cyberbullying.

He says adolescents in this age range are less able to protect themselves and deal effectively with their emotions. They are also at the stage where peer recognition and relationships are important to them.

Chan says there are various reasons adolescents resort to online bullying, including to establish superiority among peers, boost self-esteem and achieve self-satisfaction. Some former victims become perpetrators themselves, to get back at those who bullied them.

They post humiliating messages, spread rumours and exclude victims from online discussion forums or chat groups. Victims who are unable to cope, including by seeking help from parents and others, may suffer in silence. In extreme cases, some attempt suicide.



Children aged 12 to 15 are the most vulnerable, says Dr Oliver Chan, both as perpetrators and victims of cyberbullying. File photo

A 2018 survey by the concern group Anti-Pornographic and Violence Media Campaign found that more than 15 per cent of Hong Kong secondary school students were cyberbullied over social media.

Chan says cyberbullying is common in the workplace as well, mainly when colleagues gang up to target particular individuals, such as recruits, who may be left out of social or even work-related activities.

The reasons vary, but the victims' well-being may suffer to the point where they become socially withdrawn or isolated. In extreme cases, violence can occur when victims self-harm or get back at their tormentors.

Clinical psychologist Dr Paul Wong Wai-ching, associate professor at the department of social work and social administration of the University of Hong Kong, says cyberbullying takes a toll on victims' mental health.

It can leave individuals experiencing anxiety or depression, and drive some to use alcohol or drugs. In serious cases, victims may harm themselves by banging their heads against the wall, cutting themselves or becoming suicidal, requiring the support of their families and friends, as well as professional help.

Wong says while victims need attention, the bullies need help too as some end up feeling guilty or worry about being found out.

Children need protecting

Donna Wong Chui-ling, director of the charitable organisation Against Child Abuse, is concerned about the impact of widespread cyberbullying on children, one of the most vulnerable groups.

“When society is prone to violence, children may indirectly learn to deal with problems this way and apply it to their daily interactions with others,” she says.

Lam Yu-sing, a Youth Vision convenor who led the recent survey, says the city's existing regulations on cyberbullying have limited power, and wants the government to strengthen the law and empower the police and PCPD to enforce laws.

Lam, spokesman of the pro-establishment political party Civil Force, says he was a victim of online harassment himself when he contested last November's district council elections in Sha Tin unsuccessfully.

After his personal information, including his home address and mobile number, was made public, he received more than 100 phone calls every day for a month, and numerous bullying messages online, including death threats. He reported it to police.

Information technology sector lawmaker Charles Mok is against stiffening the law to give the authorities more power to police the internet. He says this will not solve the problem, but only add to growing internet censorship, especially with the introduction of the national security law in Hong Kong.



Dr Paul Wong, associate professor at the University of Hong Kong, says cyberbullying takes a toll on victims' mental health. File photo

"I do understand that this is a problem, but I never believe that monitoring laws and censorship are the solution," he says.

He adds that the key lies in education and understanding the nature of cyberbullying as a social problem.

"The problem is that our society is so divided, and people try to pick at each other by every means," he says.

Hong Kong has no specific laws against cyberbullying, but all bullying activities that involve criminal offences are governed by relevant legislation.

Privacy Commissioner for Personal Data Stephen Wong Kai-yi says complaints to his office may be followed up under the Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance and anyone found to have contravened the laws on misuse of data may be served an enforcement notice.



Privacy Commissioner for Personal Data Stephen Wong says anyone found to have contravened the laws on misuse of data may be served an enforcement notice. Photo: May Tse

Failure to comply with the notice is a criminal offence punishable by a maximum fine of HK\$50,000 (US\$6,500) and jail term of two years. If the offence continues, the culprit may be fined HK\$1,000 per day.

Netizen Dee did not make a report after he was harassed online, but he takes more care now to protect his personal information, by registering proxy accounts and installing software to ensure anonymity.

Despite the scare, he is not about to abandon his online presence.

“If I stop exercising my right to free speech, the bullies win,” he says.

**Name changed at interviewee's request.*

參考資料 Reference:

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