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Internet crime as a threat to children and adolescents

Przestępczość internetowa jako zagrożenie dla dzieci i młodzieży

Abstrakt:

Powszechny dostęp do sieci internetowej – której rola w społeczeństwie w ciągu ostatnich kilkunastu lat stała się znacząca – umożliwia rozwój niemal w każdej dziedzinie życia. Może być narzędziem do zdobywania nowej wiedzy bądź rozrywki. Jednak specyfika sieci internetowej wiąże się również z pewnymi zagrożeniami. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest wskazanie rodzajów tych zagrożeń w odniesieniu do grup dzieci i młodzieży. Przytoczone badania dowodzą, że korzystanie z Internetu może wiązać się z negatywnymi doświadczeniami, takimi jak cyberstalking, cyberbullying czy namowa do popełnienia przestępstwa. Zjawiska te mogą być poważnym zagrożeniem dla osób, które nie są do końca świadome tego, jakie ryzyko wiąże się z użytkowaniem sieci, jak trwałe są informacje, które tam umieszczają oraz jakie intencje mogą kierować osobami „po drugiej stronie”. Doświadczanie ich niesie poważne zagrożenie dla zdrowia psychicznego i integralności młodego człowieka. Z tego powodu istotne jest poszerzanie wiedzy w zakresie przestępczości internetowej, by możliwa była odpowiednio wczesna identyfikacja tego rodzaju zdarzeń i zapobieganie ich skutkom.

Słowa kluczowe: Internet, przestępczość internetowa, cyberbullying, cyberstalking, samobójstwa, wyzwania internetowe

Abstract

Universal access to the Internet - whose role in society in the last few years has become significant - enables the development of almost every field of life. It can be a tool for acquiring new knowledge or entertainment. However, the specificity of the Internet is also associated with certain risks. The purpose of this article is to identify these types of threats in relation to groups of children and young people. Research shows that Internet use may be associated with negative experiences, such as cyberstalking, cyberbullying or instigation to commit a crime. These phenomena can be a serious threat to people who are not fully aware of the risks associated with the use of the network. Experiencing them carries a serious threat to the mental health and integrity of the young person. For this reason, it is important to expand knowledge in the field of online crime, so that it is possible to identify such events early and prevent their consequences.

Keywords: Internet, cybercrime, cyberbullying, cyberstalking, suicides, Internet challenges

1. Introduction

In the last dozen or so years, the Internet network has become one of the most important elements of everyday life. The development of new technologies has significantly influenced changes in the functioning of modern man. One of its results is the improvement

of the state of knowledge, access to it, and - as a result - the development of many areas of life. Currently, thanks to the Internet, it is possible to access an unimaginable amount of information. It gives many possibilities, but it also creates serious threats. For many people, access to the Internet relates to the possibility of development, gaining knowledge, improving competencies and qualifications, or simply finding entertainment. However, there are groups of people for whom the network is a source of illegal income raising, a place where aggression or fantasies can be unloaded. In the real world, such behaviors violate generally accepted norms and are condemned to ostracism, but they are feasible on the Internet, especially when they tempt the illusion of anonymity.

Many studies indicate that cybercrime is a problem in all developed countries and in most developing countries (Clough, 2015). It is a new form of criminal behavior which - thanks to its wide range - becomes a threat not only on the local but also on a global context. Reports on this type of crime can be found in the media, press articles, and scientific magazines. The growing number of them may indicate the importance of this problem in the modern world. Publications in this area and social campaigns - usually of a preventive nature - are created for the safe use of the network. In Poland appeared, among other campaigns such as "Child on the Web", "You never know who is on the other side" - aimed at increasing parents' awareness of the dangers lurking for their children on the Internet - or the "HejtStop" campaign on the currently widespread phenomenon of harassment, hating. The problem of harassment also applies to one of the most famous "Stop Cyberbullying" campaigns. All these actions taken in society indicate that cybercrime is a serious problem that should be addressed with appropriate measures. This article aims to present the problem of cybercrime and to present possible threats to children and young people resulting from using the Internet.

2. Definition of cybercrime

The concept of internet crime is a broad term, and there is no generally accepted definition in the literature on this issue. Also, in the social understanding of the phenomenon, some of its aspects are overlooked, so some of the inappropriate behavior on the Internet from other users are ignored or treated as a minor incident. Although the concept of cybercrime is widely used, it is difficult to create a precise definition of this phenomenon. Ignorance on this subject is unfavorable as regards both the prevention and mitigation of the effects of this type of crime. A study by Gordon and Ford (2006) shows that more and more users are experiencing cybercrime, but there is no reduction in the negative impact on victims.

In the late 1990s, it was assumed that cybercrime is any crime committed using a computer or other network device (Parker, 1998). What is important - the device from which it was made was called the execution means, and the crime scene was the place where it was located. Such understanding has many implications, especially on the legal grounds. Current

literature seeks to identify specific events that can be considered as online crimes. These can be large-scale operations - such as the theft of corporate or minor financial resources that strike individuals. Hyman (2013) emphasizes that for Internet users the result of crime will be not only loss of savings, but also digital documents, results of work, personal photos. The author also points to the fact that identity theft is particularly troublesome for victims and people who have experienced this, devote a lot of time to recover and reproduce lost information. One of the first meetings in the atmosphere of discussing the problem of cybercrime in the world was an international conference organized in 2001 in Budapest. As a result, a definition of cybercrime was prepared, referring to offenses violating personal data and copyrights. It is now assumed that, despite the scope it covers, this definition is still too narrow. The authors dealing with the topic of the impact of digital progress on society, additionally indicate such elements as fraud, unauthorized access to hidden documents, child pornography, cyberstalking, identity theft, forgery etc. (Hyman, 2013). The discussion on the scope of cybercrime indicates that this phenomenon covers a wide range of activities and behaviors recognized as socially undesirable and having serious consequences for victims.

3. Legal regulations in Poland regarding internet crimes

There is no agreement in the literature on the definition of a group of crimes committed via the Internet. Also in Polish criminal law there is no consensus on their understanding (Siwicki, 2012). One of the current legal provisions is the Council of Europe Convention on Cybercrime (Dz.U. 2015, poz. 728), prepared at the Budapest conference on November 23, 2001. The content of the convention division includes the following types of activities characteristic of online crime (see Siwicki, 2012):

(1) actions against confidentiality, integrity and accessibility of information, including: illegal access (breach of security with the intention of obtaining data, etc.) and data interception (inter alia, capturing of non-public data transmission via technical devices), violation of data integrity (intentional, unlawful interference with IT data) and the system (disrupting the functioning of the IT system), improper use of devices (e.g. to commit offenses),

(2) computer crimes, including forgery (e.g. making changes, concealing information as a result of which the inauthentic data is generated, which the offender seeks to indicate as true) and computer fraud (introducing changes to the database, interference in the functioning of the computer system with the intent to cheat or gain),

(3) offenses due to the nature of the information contained - related to child pornography (its production, sharing, dissemination, acquisition, and possession),

(4) offenses related to infringement of copyright and related rights.

The Council of Europe Convention, therefore, covers a wide range of events known as cybercrime. Despite such legal regulations, the problem is often the detection of this type

of situation and identification of the perpetrators. In addition, in some cases, victims may be unaware that a crime has occurred (e.g. in the case of theft of personal data).

4. Types of threats related to cybercrime

Internet crime manifests itself in various forms. Threats associated with it apply to almost every network user. Exposure to hackers, accidental downloads of malware, and phishing are some of the common threats on the Internet. Certain forms of cybercrime may particularly affect children and young people. Some types of threats that may affect these age groups are described below.

4.1. Cyberstalking and cyberbullying

In legal terms, the concept of stalking refers to situations where persecution lasts for a long time, causing a sense of threat and violates the privacy of a given person (Dz.U.2018.0.1600). Stalking also occurs when the persecutor impersonates someone, uses someone's image or data to harm the victim. A variation of stalking - related to the use of the internet network to harass the victim - is cyberstalking, also referred to as cyberbullying. It may consist of sending unwanted messages, photos, impersonating a person on social networks, etc. Some researchers point out that despite its prevalence, little is known about the risk factors, characteristics of perpetrators and victims (Näsi, Oksanen, Keipi, Räsänen, 2015).

The results of research at the Rochester Institute of Technology indicate a surprising incidence of cyberstalking (McQuade, 2007). 17% of students declared that they had been harassed through the Internet in their current life, while threats and intimidation were used against 8%. Of the respondents, 6% were victims of identity theft. The author cites research proving that one out of three people aged 6 to 17 was a victim of cybercrime. People from this group declared that they often did not tell anyone about the event because they were afraid of, for example, restricting access to the Internet. In addition, there is evidence that one in seven people using the Internet is a victim of sexual "solicitation" (receiving sexual material, inciting to upload photos, videos with their participation, etc.) (see Näsi, Oksanen, Keipi, Räsänen, 2015). Some also experience threats related to this.

One example of the dangers of online crime is the story of 20-year-old Amy Lynn Boyer. According to the online anti-cybernetics service of the Electronic Privacy Information Center¹, in 1999 Liam Youens, using the popular Docusearch service, established the date of birth and address of a woman who had been persecuting the Internet for over two years. The service received a payment of \$45 for the information provided. In October of the same year, Youens shot a woman right after she left the building where she worked². At the hearing, he

¹ Source: <https://epic.org/privacy/boyer/>

² After the death of Amy Lynn Boyer, the persecutor's documents were found, describing plans for the murder of her family. Source: http://www.netcrimes.net/Amy%20Lynn%20Boyer_files/Amy%20Lynn%20Boyer.htm

stated that "It's actually obscene [...] what you can find out about people on the Internet."³. After this event, the so-called Amy Boyer's Law, regarding the reduction of access to personal data, including an unauthorized number of people to receive it⁴.

4.2. Internet "challenges"

In recent years, online challenges have been very popular among children and youth. They consist in performing specific tasks of varying degrees of difficulty and praising the results on the Internet, e.g. by providing recordings. There are dozens of translations of such "games" on the web. Some of them are treated as a kind of fun, such as the *Lemon Challenge*, which involves eating a lemon in half with a smile. However, for young people, the boundary between what can be considered entertainment and risky behavior can be thin.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that between 1995 and 2007, at least 82 people (with an average age in the group of 13 years) died as a result of *the game of choking (the Choking Game / Space Monkey Challenge)*⁵. This number only applies to victims in the United States. Until now, there have been cases of death associated with it all over the world. A similar challenge is the plastic bag challenge, which consists of putting a plastic bag on the head until the loss of consciousness. In August 2018, 12-year-old Timiyah Landers, who joined the so-called *Fire Challenge*⁶ was admitted to the hospital with burns of half body. It consisted in applying a flammable substance to the body and setting it on fire. Because of this kind of "game" many people went to hospitals, but the case of Timiyah turned out to be one of the toughest. A similar challenge as a result of which many people had to undergo serious treatment and surgery is the challenge of "Boiling water", consisting in overflowing with boiling water. One of the victims of this "game" was 11-year-old Jamoneisha Merritt, who was doused with boiling water by her friend, with whom she stayed for the night⁷. In 2018, the popular challenge among youth was the so-called *Tide Pod Challenge*, consisting of eating a Tide washing capsule. Only in the first half of January, there were 39 cases of people who went to hospitals because of this⁸. In turn, an example of a dangerous online "game" aimed at the youngest users of the network is the so-called *Fire Fairy Game*. One of the victims is 5-year-old Sofia Ezhova, who suffered extensive burns as a result of a gas explosion⁹. According to the instructions found on the Internet, at night, after

³ Source: <https://epic.org/privacy/boyer/>

⁴ Source: <http://www.privacilla.org/releases/AmyBoyer.html>

⁵ Source: <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5706a1.htm>

⁶ Source: <https://eu.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/detroit-city/2018/08/21/fire-challenge-girl-burned-half-her-body/1051611002/>

⁷ Source: <https://www.ny1.com/nyc/bronx/news/2017/12/14/girl-who-severely-burned-other-girl-in-hot-water-challenge-incident-sentenced-to-probation>

⁸ Source: <https://www.dailydot.com/upstream/worst-youtube-challenges-2018/>

⁹ Source: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4290590/Fire-fairy-game-tells-children-turn-gas-stoves.html>

saying "magic spell" she turned the coxks in the kitchen oven and went to bed, believing that after performing the ritual she would become a "fire fairy". Despite many victims, the popularity of online challenges is high. The specificity of these "games" and their destructive nature is shocking. This is a huge threat to children and young people using the network, who may not understand the possible consequences of their actions and do not know the intentions of people who are urging to take part in such challenges.

4.3. Dangerous websites and online forums

Internet forums are mostly a place for making contact with people who have similar interests, hobbies or views. There are millions of them on the Internet. They can be a source of helpful knowledge and a place to share your own experiences. Some of them, however, contain content that has the characteristics of improper and violating the dignity of another person. Examples are websites that associate neo-Nazis, members of sects, terrorists, satanists, fetishists, "football hooligans", etc.

Young people are often unaware of how persistent information is posted on the Internet and how other users can use it. Through forums, they can also contact criminal groups that will try to recruit new members. The threat posed by sects and terrorist organizations, which in this way attract young people to their ranks, is particularly high¹⁰. In 2015, a 15-year-old was arrested in Blackburn, England. He contacted jihadists through the forum. He planned a terrorist attack and actively sought new members for this organization¹¹. A similar story concerns a 17-year-old from the small town of Kundba, convicted for terrorism. She is the first woman convicted of this crime in Denmark. For more than two years, she planned to conduct a terrorist attack, including in your school.

Over the last few years, Darknet, also known as DeepWeeb, has become the largest crime area in the world. This complicated network of websites that can only be reached thanks to special software (see: Madhavan, Cat, Ganapathy, Rasmussen, Halevy, 2008; Bergman, 2001; He, Patel, Zhang, Chang, 2007). In the Darknet area, there are hundreds of websites where arms are traded, sells illegal substances, and provides child pornography. Special forums bring together various criminal groups, e.g. cartel members. Almost every commodity is available, ranging from drugs, documents, works of art, to human organs. The existence of Darknet is associated with enormous danger. It allows contacting criminal groups, terrorists, access to means posing a threat to the masses of other people, illegal content. Exposed to the action of criminals from the "gray zone of the Internet" are also young people, attracted by curiosity, treating it as a kind of fun or a joke. Access to these

¹⁰ Source:

https://www.parlementairemonitor.nl/9353000/1/j9vvij5epmj1ey0/vkci9mfd3czx?ctx=vh1alt8tl1wf&v=1&tab=1&start_tab0=180

¹¹ Source: <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-lancashire-44930262>

types of websites carries serious risks for people who are not always aware of the many dangers lurking in the network and how much information about them can be obtained.

4.4. "Internet suicides"

An extremely dangerous phenomenon related to online challenges and the functioning of forums are the so-called online suicides. Suicidal acts related to the use of the network may be motivated, among others, (1) by receiving information about the suicide of a celebrity or significant person (e.g., a friend, family member), (2) by persuading suicide and (3) because of experiencing cyberbullying.

Ad 1. In some cases, the decision to take your own life is related to the so-called *Werther effect*. This concept is characterized by a significant increase in suicides, caused by media reporting about suicides of known people. This concept was formulated by sociologist David Phillips in 1974. This effect is inseparable from the psychological social mechanism, called information conformism. The first research focused on the impact of media information on the number of committed suicides was conducted by Bollen and Phillips (1982). After analyzing statistics on the number of suicides in the United States, they proved that within a week after the publication of the suicide report, the number of committed acts leading to death increased by about 7%. The number of committed suicides may also be related to access to such information on the Internet. Unlike other media, it is not subject to such strict controls, which means that information on suicide is publicly available. On some pages there are also photos and videos from places where suicides were committed. Such access to information may affect the decision of persons who are considering committing suicide. The existence of the Werther effect in the context of the network is confirmed by many studies (see Becker, Mayer, Nagenborg, El-Faddagh, Schmidt, 2004, Becker, 2004, Tam, Tang, Fernando, 2007).

Ad 2. The second type of motivation to take action to take your own life is to incite suicide via the Internet. The German daily *Der Spiegel* describes the deaths of three teenagers: Nina, Stefanie and Katji, who met on the suicide forum, and then planned to take their lives together, being confirmed by other users of the site in the right decision¹². Suicide forums are popular, especially among young people who are not yet fully aware of their choices and solutions to problems. In 2011, nurse William Francis Melchert-Dinkel was convicted for urging to commit suicide. One of his victims was a 20-year-old student from Canada. The man found potential victims in the forums, made contact, claiming that he was a young woman and talked about their problems. In the end, he argued that the only possible solution to their problems is suicide and contained "suicide pact" with the person.

Ad 3. There are many confirmed cases of suicides committed by young people due to cyberbullying. Linking this type of crime on the Internet with attempts to take his own life is confirmed by the study, e.g. conducted by Nikolaou (2017). The author indicates that intimidation on the Internet causes an increase in the number of suicide attempts by 8.7%,

¹² Source: <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-80726189.html>

and the effects of this type of action are stronger in women who experience them than in men. A meta-analysis of surveys from 1996 to 2017, covering over 150,000 people under the age of 25, indicates that cyberbullying increases the risk of suicide attempts 2.3 times (John, Glendenning, Marchant, Montgomery, Stewart, et al., 2018). In addition, people exposed to this type of harassment are exposed to the occurrence of certain mental disorders, including depression. In addition, the authors stress that people who were exposed to cyberbullying less frequently than in the case of "traditional" forms of harassment, want to seek help and report such incidents. The number of reports on suicide of young people is surprising. At the beginning of 2018, two 12-year-olds from Florida were accused as a result of their friend's suicidal death. The girl experienced cyberbullying - she had malicious comments about her appearance and used vulgar expressions. On the day of her death, she contacted one of the persecutors and informed her that she was considering taking her own life. In response, she heard: "if you are going to do it, just do it"¹³. There are many descriptions of similar cases in the network and press articles¹⁴.

Suicides of children and adolescents associated with experiences resulting from using the Internet are therefore a significant problem in the modern world. The age of the victims is often surprising - just over a dozen years. Such events make us aware of how certain online situations can affect the young person's psyche and lead to tragedies. It should be remembered that some elements of the Internet network are not subject to any control, which can make them a dangerous tool. Young people often do not know how much information they can get from the Internet. An important issue is the fact that no one, even the closest persons - family, friends may not know what information on the network is sent to the child. It is important to make people aware of the dangers of the users themselves and to support them in every difficult situation.

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¹³ Source: <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/01/23/us/florida-cyberstalking-charges-girl-suicide/index.html>

¹⁴ Source: <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/new-jersey-family-sue-school-district-after-12-year-old-n788506>

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