

October 9, 2013 – Raffi Cavoukian

Remembering Amanda: Protecting kids online

Amanda Todd changed my life. The Vancouver teenager was driven to suicide October 10, 2012, after years of cyber harassment by a sexual predator. A year after her death, that predator has still not been identified or charged by police, and not enough has changed for vulnerable kids online. The tragedy of Amanda's death so shocked me that I wrote a book on the need to reform social media, dedicated to Amanda. I co-wrote an open letter to Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg, urging her to embrace systemic changes that would make social media safe for young users.

Amanda's parting video message went viral. Her story touched millions worldwide, and Canadians responded with calls for anti-bullying initiatives. Various programs sprang up, including BC's "Erase Bullying" and the Red Cross's "Violence, Bullying and Abuse Prevention." The need to reduce cyber bullying and increase privacy had everyone talking. That's not been enough. Just six months ago, online shame and harassment drove Halifax teen Rehtaeh Parsons to take her own life. We've heard reports of similar teen suicides in the US and in the UK.

"Safety by design" has not been part of the service provided by social networks—safety has been an afterthought. That's why protecting kids online is still a challenge for at least two reasons: predators can hide behind anonymity, and they can easily "creep" vulnerable kids who have weak privacy and location settings. But let's consider the big picture.

In nine short years, social media has changed the quality of nearly all personal relationships, with special impacts on young users. Their youth leaves them vulnerable to online dangers; they are prone to making mistakes that can't be erased; their preference for texting over conversation is a worry; and their growing addiction to social media and InfoTech devices should raise a red flag regarding mental health consequences for generations to come.

Kids who engage with social media at too young an age are not mature enough to handle the complexity of online relationships. Although it is against Facebook's terms of use for anyone under 13 to have an account, millions of preteens have joined—with their parents' consent. And Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg has publically stated his wish for kids to be Facebooking at a much younger age; he equates this with learning. There is no child development model, however, that supports the intrusion of InfoTech into early childhood.

Expensive devices such as smartphones and tablets are designed for adults, yet many parents let even little kids play with them. Put aside for a moment the growing concerns about WiFi radiation (a far greater health threat to kids than adults), and think of the addictive nature of InfoTech devices—one obvious reason to keep them

away from small hands. The developmental needs of the very young require games and active play in the real world, with people. Why hook little kids on addictive screens when we know what they really need is screen-free play? Why deprive them of an unhurried grounding in the real world before they are immersed in virtuality?

Social media should not come with extensive “user beware” warnings for parents and teens to master. (Many simply can’t or won’t spend the time.) Instead, the services provided by the billion-dollar companies should be made safe. Period. For that to happen, cyberspace will likely need regulation. To free-speech radicals who might oppose this, our message should be clear: rights come with responsibilities. Young user safety is paramount.

The value of the much-touted InfoTech revolution must be judged by whether it is safe to use, not hazardous, and whether it grows intelligence, not diminishes it. For our developing young, online safety will take more than parental guidance and kids’ agreements to uphold respect, necessary as these are. For one thing, it will require social networks to replace anonymity with ID verification.

Remembering Amanda, let us work to make social media safe for young users. To Amanda’s legacy we owe that much and more.

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