

Generation Z and the Dangers of the Online World

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In C.S. Lewis' classic book "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe," four English children explore an old country house and find a doorway to a magic world. In Narnia, they become heroes and make friends with talking animals. Perhaps when Tyler Barriss was a boy and he discovered the internet and online gaming, he was like the Pevensie children, yearning for escape, for freedom and adventure.

In December 2017, Barriss "swatted" a house in Wichita, Kansas, by calling emergency services and telling an utterly false story that he was a murderer who was holding hostages and might burn the house down. Barriss' hoax calls sent police to a scene where they expected to face a desperate, unstable, armed killer. But the young man who came to the door was none of those things; he was an innocent, unsuspecting victim whose emergence on the porch startled the first responders, and he was shot to death by a police officer.

At sentencing, Barriss' lawyer argued that he "never intended for anyone to get hurt," adding that what happened was "an outgrowth of the culture within the gaming community." His lawyer described Barriss: "He had no guidance, no education, and no employment – video games became his identity and gaining notoriety as a swatter filled a large void."

Now, at age 26, the young man who was a serial "swatter" has 20 years in federal prison ahead of him; his tweet from jail proclaiming, "I'm an eGod," is a sad commentary.

In some ways, Barriss' story is unique. To my knowledge, no one else has ever engaged in a "swat" that produced a fatal result. But it was only a matter of time: swatting is Russian Roulette; it is not a game or a prank.

In other ways, Barriss' story is far too common. He is hardly the only young person to enter the online world and find trouble because they seem not to recognize the real world harms that can flow from participating in a virtual world. Barriss became a criminal, infamous among the gaming community.

But other young people become victims in the online world.

Online communities are full of false information, fake personas, and dirty tricks. We frequently have seen cases in which an adult male pretends to be a teenage boy and uses Facebook or other media to contact girls and young women to whom he is a complete stranger. What may begin as internet chat can turn into blackmail, child pornography, kidnapping, or even in-person sexual offenses.

Such online manipulation and exploitation is illustrative of many cases we have investigated and prosecuted through the Department of Justice's Project Safe Childhood program. A common thread in so many cases is children and teenagers connecting online with real-world predators who disguise themselves in search of online victims to exploit.

The regularity with which we see these cases is what troubles me profoundly as a prosecutor and a parent. As prosecutors, we sometimes are in a position to catch, punish and incapacitate the swatters and the online predators, but we cannot undo the harm to the victims.

After the Barriss case, I am hopeful that the gaming community will condemn and discourage swatting. But all of us must increase efforts to educate our youth about the dangers of interacting with strangers online. By doing so, we can save a lot of kids from traumatization that no federal prosecution will erase or cure.

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