

THE ANTISOCIAL NETWORK INSIDE THE DANGEROUS ONLINE WORLD KIDS CAN'T QUIT

BY JACK DICKEY / RIGA

ON JAN. 10, 2014, 14-YEAR-OLD MATTHEW HOMYK, FROM THE CLEVELAND suburb of Brunswick, Ohio, killed himself. The news came tragically but only somewhat unexpectedly to Matthew's father Ray Homyk. His son had been medicated and hospitalized for depression intermittently in the months prior to his death.

While Matthew had never been terribly at ease—he cut his arms, worried about his stutter and, along with his younger sister, struggled to cope with his parents' divorce—he always had a pleasant way about him. He had a handful of good friends and a girlfriend. He liked lacrosse. But sometime around October 2013, Ray says, something went very wrong. Matthew had retreated inward further than ever before, and he asked his father for help.

Matthew, who had just started ninth grade, had found a problem online. He told his father people were saying terrible things about him and

The full picture
Matthew Homyk, 14, was a user of Ask.fm, a website where people wrote hateful, anonymous comments about him



Photography by Alan Tanaka for
National Geographic

...the people
...who had the
...the most people were



he couldn't ignore them. He was tethered to his new iPhone and through it to a website, Ask.fm. Ray, 41, had never heard of it.

Many American teenagers have. Out of 120 million users worldwide—nearly half of whom are high school age—some 15 million reside in the U.S., according to Ask.fm. At one level, Ask.fm is a simple electronic bulletin board, a social network where members can publicly ask questions and post answers. But because members can interact anonymously, the reality is more complex. Despite safeguards that allow users to report abuse, people on the site believe they can say almost anything without fear or consequences—and they do.

The tension between transparency and secrecy has defined social interaction on the web since the medium's earliest days, but right now anonymity as a business proposition is having a moment. The prominent secret-sharing site Formspring closed in 2013, but a new wave of websites and apps, such as Secret, Whisper and Yik Yak, have more than filled the void. And Ask.fm's founders—two brothers who grew up in Latvia during the last days of Soviet rule and became passionate about free speech and self-expression—insist they are ready to expand to millions more users.

These prospectors of anonymity have understandably focused more on growing their businesses than worrying about bullying, which, after all, is an age-old problem. What's new is the technology that makes instant personal feedback possible at all hours of the day and night. Combine Ask.fm-like sites and apps with the new prevalence of smartphones—37% of American 12-to-17-year-olds own one, according to a 2013 Pew study—and you get a homeroom that follows you home, a locker room you can never leave.

For parents, this requires facing a new reality: if your child uses an anonymous social-networking site, when her phone buzzes at the dinner table, she's not just ignoring you; she's joining a world that hums with cruelty and insecurity, two enduring features of adolescence newly turbocharged by changing technology. Recent findings in neuroscience have shown how the developing teen brain is ill equipped to override emotional reactions with cooler assessments. Now these fragile and self-destructive minds have a tool to indulge their worst tendencies. Since 2012, press reports have suggested that Ask.fm was a factor in at least 16

adolescent suicides in the U.S. and Europe. Internet researchers and mental-health experts say that no website alone can drive a healthy adolescent to harm himself. So what are the effects of anonymous, constant social networking, cruel or otherwise? This is a global experiment with adolescents as its central subjects. And the conditions are changing faster than the experiment can produce measurable results.

A Billion Questions

ASK.FM USERS GO TO THE SITE TO ASK questions (over a billion are posed each month) and to read the answers that follow them. You can pose a question anonymously or under your name. The site is addictive, because you both wait for the answers to questions you asked and hope for someone to ask you one. Normally, the questions don't concern matters of great import. And sometimes they're not even questions. "Ur pic is so pretty!!!" "Do you like anyone?" "Do you want to go out with me?" read the questions on a typical ninth-grader's page. Her responses hardly resolve the not-so-burning mysteries: "Thank youuuuu," "Ha!" "Probably not."

The standard operating procedure is to ask anonymously and answer personally, an unexpected blend of the Internet's dueling impulses toward openness and secrecy. The Internet's early growth saw message boards and chat rooms swell with new users; you could be yourself without a whit of tethering to your real-life identity. But then arose the massive data hubs of Google and Facebook. Indeed, Facebook's designers intended their users to make digital replicas of their flesh-and-blood lives within a tightly regulated community. The second selves the Internet had once embraced and enabled now had little place on some of its most popular sites.

Yet anonymity has a persistent allure. It is gaining a new hold in the connected world inhabited by the teenagers of 2014, which is unrecognizable even to the teenagers of 2009, let alone their parents. The secret-sharing apps Secret and Whisper encourage users to post unsigned messages to those around them. The scene's most recent debutante is Yik Yak, which can host a stream of anonymous posts for any location.

To hear Ask.fm-using adolescents tell it and to read their pages, the site has become a hotbed of gossip, yes, but banal gossip. When I sat down with a small group of



'IT CREATES A CULTURE AMONG KIDS THAT BACKSTABBING AND LIBEL ARE NORMAL PARTS OF HUMAN INTERACTION.'

—ROSALIND WISEMAN, AUTHOR



The upstarts Brothers Mark, far left, and Ilja Terebin say their website, based in Riga, Latvia, has 120 million users; they are pitching their company to Western investors

ninth-graders from New York with Ask.fm profiles, they told me they were not sure exactly how the site had found a place in their lives. "It's a way to fish for compliments." "You want people to think you're interesting." "If you don't have it, you feel like you're missing out."

Even idle locker-room chatter hurts, says Rosalind Wiseman, an author of well-known parenting books and the writer of TIME's Dec. 2, 2013, feature "What Boys Want," on boys' emotional lives. "It creates a culture among kids that slander, backstabbing and libel are normal parts of human interaction. It normalizes the dehumanization of others."

According to a 2011 Pew study (conducted before the rise of the latest set of anonymous apps), 88% of American teens have witnessed cruelty on social networks, and 13% have felt nervous about going to school the next day because of

something that happened online. Justin Patchin, a cyberbullying researcher at the University of Wisconsin at Eau Claire, says he's seen anecdotal evidence that online bullying affects victims differently from in-person bullying. He and another researcher plan to investigate further.

What we do know: teenagers are wired differently from their parents and even their older siblings. The teenage brain is a confounding organ. Recent neuroscientific research indicates that the brain's quotient of gray matter—neuron-filled tissue responsible for cognitive and emotional functions, among other tasks—peaks in adolescence. But relative to adults, teenagers are short on white matter, the tissue that ensures efficient and steady coordination throughout the brain. The connections between the rest of the brain and the frontal lobe, which is charged with foreseeing the consequences of one's actions

and differentiating between good and bad, don't fully form until one's 20s. In the teenage years, the brain is all brawn.

Toss this brain into the social web, a sea so roiling that it sometimes proves unnavigable even for adults, and what do you get? The adolescent brain, says Dr. Jay Giedd, a neuroscientist at the child-psychiatry branch of the U.S. National Institute of Mental Health, is likelier to seek smaller, earlier rewards than larger, later ones. With adolescence also comes a shift in the usual source of a child's counsel. Adolescents begin to rely more on their peers for support and less on their parents and teachers. The endless fast feedback on social sites like Ask.fm can nurture users' worst tendencies.

Free Enterprise

ASK.FM'S CREATORS, BROTHERS ILJA AND Mark Terebin, now 35 and 29, respectively, grew up in Latvia when it was an austere Soviet satellite. The two boys, their parents and a grandmother squeezed into a two-room apartment in Jelgava, a town 25 miles (40 km) southwest of Riga, the capital, where both now reside. The brothers, who shared absolutely everything, including their ambitions, say they always had their eye on a profit.

When 9-year-old Ilja found out that he would be traveling to New York for a football tournament, he stocked up on Soviet kitsch, including badges, hats and rubles. He spent most of his trip selling the stuff to Americans. When his youth-football travels took him to Poland, he dragged along a sack of coffee grinders and sold every last one of them at a street market. He aspired to become an entrepreneur, even if he pronounced it "interpreter," as he still does.

The Terebins decided to start Ask.fm in 2010. At the time, the only one of their many businesses showing any life was a crudely designed Bulgarian classified-ad site. Social networking—that was the future. They built a site that illustrates and evangelizes for the freedoms they never had when they were kids.

Today, with both firmly situated in independent adulthood, there's not a lot of obvious difference between the brothers. They're both tall, lean, dark-haired and handsome. Both favor black clothes and

boots; they look like graduate students. And despite their business ambitions, they sound a little like that too. (The brothers quit eating meat two years ago after watching the 2005 documentary *Earthlings*. "This is the root of all evil in the world, people eating animals," Ilja says at breakfast one morning, over beets and blintzes.)

The two run their business with 58 employees out of a small, spartan office in the center of Riga. In the style of American technology firms, a handful of long tables are set up in rows, with the largely male workforce seated in front of big computer monitors on either side of the tables.

Extension cords reach the tables in the front of the office, where the newly hired content moderators sit. They work around the clock in eight-hour shifts, plugging posts reported as abusive all over the world into Google Translate, averaging 25 minutes between a user's complaint and the review process, according to Ask.fm. If something seems particularly abusive, they take the post down and warn or sometimes ban the user who sent it. The site has also installed software that scans reader comments for abusive language and thwarts them before they post.

"Stay Out of My Life"

IF THE TEREbins OR THEIR EMPLOYEES had reviewed the comments in the fall of 2013 on the Ask.fm page of 14-year-old Matthew Homyk, they would have found,



"CLOSE DOWN THE WEBSITE? YOU WILL GET ANOTHER WEBSITE!"

—ILJA TEREbin,
CO-FOUNDER OF ASK.FM

woven in among inside jokes and tributes from friends, targeted, hostile remarks that were posted anonymously.

"I hate you. Stay out of my life," read one. Matthew's girlfriend, someone wrote, "deserves so much better than you." "Go date someone else. Damn boy [she] would be so much better without you." "There aren't other girls that want you." "Leave [another girl] alone you had your chance with her and blew it for the whore ... Stay away."

When Matthew went to his father, Ray read his son's page alongside him. He told Matthew that it was typical teenage nonsense, that he should step away from the site. Ray told his son too that he should stand up for himself in person the next day. Matthew knew which classmates were attacking him online. Ray says he assumed that before too long, the boy would realize how frivolous it all was.

Matthew managed to break away from Ask.fm for a few weeks, but it didn't last. He was prone to following others, his father says. He couldn't stop himself from logging on. "I can't not know what people are saying about me," he told his father, Ray says.

A few grim months passed, and they played out online as well. Matthew was hospitalized for periods in November and December after two suicide attempts. The nasty comments persisted. "No friends." "R u a schizophrenic?" "You're a f-ggot." Ray would read the page periodically with Matthew and worry. On Jan. 10, Matthew was released from the hospital, and he hanged himself that night.

There's rarely any one obvious cause for a suicide. Ray knew his son had long struggled with his mental health, and he also knew that teenagers often fail to see past the rocky periods in their lives. To him, Matthew's death was more a tragedy than a mystery.

After Matthew's funeral, a parent in Brunswick went to visit Ray. She gave him a thick file of papers—the complete transcript of Matthew's Ask.fm page. He forced himself to read the packet, poring over the remarks in a new light. It made him sick, he says.

"We Teach People to Bully"

MILLIONS OF PEOPLE USE ASK.FM EVERY day without making headlines. While the stories of suicide by users may be exceptional, they remain indelible. The Terebins say their creation has a role to play in helping young people grow up.



"On Ask.fm, young people become more open-minded. They'll develop more freedom. It's very important in the present society," says Ilja. His brother says, "Older people, they're f-cked up already. But children? They have a chance." On their personal pages, the two tend to hold forth on weighty matters, like equality and resisting the power of institutions, trying to be the change they wish to see on their website.

In support of their broader argument, the Terebins say adolescents will learn from social-media sites if parents let them have freedom online. Kids will learn how to live with others and will understand the consequences of what they say, according to the brothers. Free, open discourse will lead to higher truth and a thriving global democracy.

The Terebins acknowledge the bullying that happens on their site but do



The son When he took his life in January, Matthew Homyk left behind his father Ray, younger sister Aly and mother Amie

not accept blame. That, Ilja says, falls on a complacent society with bad values. "We teach people to bully. Look at the media. Do you have muscles? You're a cool guy. Are you fat? You're a loser. Do you f-ck girls? You're a cool guy. Do you not f-ck girls? You're a loser. We can't do anything about it, if parents are drinking beer, watching TV and reading celebrity magazines."

He continues, "People are looking for someone to blame all the time, and we look like an easy target. We're in Eastern Europe, without a huge budget or proper lawyers. So why not bully us and get some credit?"

In the past year, the site has beefed up its monitoring team and retained the services of Annie Mullins, a leading cyberbullying expert in England. Ilja says these changes are not a response to the bad press the site has received all over Europe but

simply what any company with a large spike in its user base needs to do.

Ilja says Ask.fm not only cooperates with law enforcement but also reads every page of every user whose suicide has been linked to Ask.fm in the press, including Matthew Homyk's. He says he has not once found what he would characterize as genuine cyberbullying.

He points to the case of Hannah Smith, a 14-year-old from Leicestershire, England, who hanged herself in August 2013 after receiving vicious messages on Ask.fm. The Smith case captivated the papers in a way none before it did.

The threats on her page cut deep: "drink bleach," "get cancer," "kill yourself." The Smith case even prompted British Prime Minister David Cameron to urge a boycott of Ask.fm. But an inquest this May confirmed what Ask.fm's founders said all along: Smith almost certainly

sent the dark messages to herself. Ask.fm and the Terebins were vindicated. There had apparently been no cyberbullying, just unanswered cries for help from a teenage girl. (After the inquest, Smith's father told the *Mirror* that he didn't believe she had sent all the messages to herself but would be unable to prove it as long as the police still had her computer.)

In Riga the Terebins' business now sits in limbo. Ilja says they're pitching a stake in the company to deep-pocketed Western tech investors who can help the company grow more quickly. But Ask.fm's bad reputation, he says, has soured their sales pitch. The brothers are proud of what they've accomplished, but Ilja hopes Ask.fm will get much bigger. He wants to build the business he's always dreamed of, spreading his gospel of openness and self-discovery to an office in New York City or London.

To those who want the site shut down, Ilja says, "Close down the website? You will get another website! Close McDonald's! Close the Internet! Close the roads, and ban cars! Everyone wants to ask what's wrong with us. No one wants to ask the important questions. Why is there selfishness? Why is there no laughter?"

Whether you agree with the site's critics or not, they might be onto something. While selfie-loving millennials have been derided as narcissistic and puffed up, perhaps the generation following in their footsteps, which has to navigate this new, difficult climate during an already strained period of emotional development, will be restless and insecure, craving perpetual instant validation from a wide and mysterious sea of peers. These concerns apply equally to the popular and the bullied, to the jocks and the geeks. It's a new world.

Ray Homyk agrees with the Terebins on one matter: the obligation to fix things does not rest with Ask.fm. It falls on parents, teachers and students themselves to forge a gentler society.

This spring, Ray raised over \$1,000 for a scholarship fund in his son's name. The Brunswick High boys' lacrosse team played its season in his honor; his younger sister played too and wore his jersey number, 27.

"Matthew didn't kill himself because of Ask.fm," Ray says. "But I will say it didn't help. It just didn't help." ■