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Lucy Biddle, Jenny Donovan, Keith Hawton, Navneet Kapur and David Gunnell

BMJ 2008;336:800-802
doi:10.1136/bmj.39525.442674.AD

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SUICIDE AND THE INTERNET

Recent reports of suicide by young people have highlighted the possible influence of internet sites. **Lucy Biddle and colleagues** investigate what a web search is likely to find

Media reporting of suicide and its fictional portrayal on television are known to influence suicidal behaviour, particularly the choice of method used.¹⁻³ Indeed, epidemics of suicides using particular methods have occurred after media portrayal of their use.³⁻⁵ As some methods of suicide are more likely to cause death than others,⁶ such influences may affect the outcome of suicide attempts and national suicide rates.⁷

The influence of the internet on suicidal behaviour is less well understood, although it is an increasingly popular source of information, especially for people confronting embarrassing issues such as mental illness, and concerns have been raised about the existence of sites that promote suicide.⁸ Some people report being encouraged to use suicide as a problem solving strategy by suicide web forums⁸ and cases of cybersuicide—attempted or completed suicide influenced by the internet—have been published in the popular and academic press.⁹⁻¹² Suicide sites are also claimed to have facilitated suicide pacts among strangers who have met and then planned their suicide through the internet.¹¹

Despite recent controversy, no one knows how easy it is to find sites relating to suicide on the internet and what sort of information they contain. Recent studies of internet search behaviour suggest that most people

use search engines, that queries are broad—mostly composed of a few words and rarely including Boolean operators or phrase searches—and that users rarely look beyond the first page of results.^{13 14} We searched the internet in May 2007 for sites providing instructions and information about methods of suicide using the four most popular search engines (Google, Yahoo, MSN, and Ask¹⁵) and 12 simple search terms (see box).

What searches find

We analysed the first 10 sites from each search, giving a total of 480 hits. Altogether 240 different sites were identified. Just under a fifth of hits (90) were for dedicated suicide sites (see table 1 on bmj.com). Half of these were judged to be encouraging, promoting, or facilitating suicide; 43 contained personal or other accounts of suicide methods, providing information and discussing pros and cons but without direct encouragement; and two sites portrayed suicide or self harm in fashionable terms. A further 44 (9%) hits were sites or pages that provided information about suicide methods in a purely factual (24), partly joking (12), or completely joking (8) fashion. Twelve hits were chat rooms or discussion boards that talked about methods of suicide.

Sites focusing on suicide prevention or offering support and sites forbidding or discouraging suicide accounted for 62 (13%) and 59 (12%) hits respectively.

The nature of sites retrieved with the four search engines varied. Google and Yahoo retrieved the highest number of dedicated suicide sites (Google 29, Yahoo 24, MSN 16, ASK 21), whereas MSN had the highest number of prevention or support sites (21), academic or policy sites (27), and irrelevant or unavailable hits (31).

Sites providing factual information about suicide, pro-suicide sites, and chat rooms occurred most often within the first few hits of a search and thus are more likely to be accessed. Dedicated suicide sites and sites providing factual information about suicide had the highest proportion of number one ranks across searches (25% and 27%, respectively,

TOP 10 RETRIEVED SITES*

- Alt Suicide Holiday (ASH) suicide methods file (pro-suicide)
- Satan Service (pro-suicide)
- Suicide methods.net (pro-suicide)
- Wikipedia (information)
- Extreme River (against suicide)
- Satan Service (page not available)
- New Hope Health Clinic (against suicide)
- Amazon (advert for book on suicide)
- Soon (prevention and support)
- 23nl people§ (Not relevant to search term)

*See table 2 on bmj.com for additional detail.

of all first ranked sites). Addresses that were not available or relevant to the search term were the third most likely to be top ranked. This is partly because of eight references to a withdrawn Satan Service page.

The box above shows the 10 most frequently occurring sites found in our searches. The three most frequently occurring sites were all pro-suicide. Alt Suicide Holiday (ASH), whose material on methods of suicide was accessed using 10 different web addresses, appeared in half of all our 48 searches. Wikipedia was the fourth most frequently occurring site. The top four sites provided not only information but also evaluation of methods of suicide. This included, for instance, detailed information about speed, certainty, and the likely amount of pain associated with a method.

Just under half of the 480 web pages visited provided some information about methods of suicide. Almost all dedicated suicide and factual information sites provided such information but, notably, a fifth (21%) of support or prevention sites, over half (55%) of academic or policy sites, and all news reports of suicides also provided information about methods. A quarter of the hits provided more detailed evaluation of methods, most of which were dedicated suicide sites or other information sites. Chat rooms and discussion boards also regularly provided information about methods. A third of the hits referenced hanging.

This research shows it is very easy to obtain detailed technical information about methods



Soon gives advice on prevention and support, including reasons not to kill yourself and case studies

