

Issues in the Control and Regulation of Suicide Promotion and Assistance over the Internet

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Message over the internet

“I need help in killing myself. I know I need to do it, but the courage to do so has thus far escaped me.”

INFORMATION PROVIDED IN RESPONSE:

“It may be valuable to form a **"suicide pact"** whereby you both end your lives simultaneously or within a group. Ask them to promise you that they won't tell others about your intentions even if they decide differently down the road or are discovered after a botched solitary attempt.

Pacts can assist in any method by virtue of their participatory character. It is easier to do challenging things in a group than it is to do them alone. Knowing that one is not utterly alone at death can be a comfort.

With regard to particular methods, again, those which require particular skill, such as a familiarity with weapons, chemicals (e.g., pharmaceuticals), injection devices, constructed suicide devices, or the like, can be assisted by the pact in that coverage by at least one individual who is a part of it makes the method possible to all.

A pact can also assist in circumstances where the context must be arranged (such as a large weight tied to the ankles) and this context may be frightening for the person themselves to coordinate. Arranged (and consensual) killing of another may be easier to handle than self-termination. A single individual with the courage, for example, could bind, gag, and blindfold all others present, and set a shotgun pointed at the proper angle before each, triggered to shoot all pact members simultaneously and end their lives. Perhaps the triggering person would choose to die via the [Death-By-Police](#) method after calling 911, or be killed by the same triggering device (e.g. a bomb).”

Advice on how to react to a person who says he is considering suicide

" ...if someone you know tells you that they feel suicidal, above all, listen to them. find out why they are going to do themselves in, discern if possible whether they are serious, and what they have considered of their options

. ...some are going about it all wrong, have inadequate information and would only hurt themselves and become a drain on social resources in a coma or brain-damaged. If they are serious and you want to help them, tell them "I have come to the conclusion that suicide should be a legal and easy option for all people. the advice I would offer you would be to resolve all your worldly affairs, isolate yourself from those 'do-goodnicks' who will attempt to stop your action, and then use the most painless and quick method you have available with the fewest possible loose-ends for others to clean up."

More advice to people considering suicide...

“Death-by-Police

Buy a cheap toy gun that looks real enough from a distance. Get stopped by a police officer and, from a distance, get emotional and pull the weapon. Refuse to put it down when they command it. Take a firing stance and aim the toy. Best to obscure your body except for your head when beginning the escapade.”

The Issues:

- 1) Do internet sites “cause” suicides or increase the risk of suicide?
- 2) What are the ethical considerations involved?
- 3) If so, what may reduce the suicide risk associated with internet contact?
- 4) Practical considerations that complicate matters

1) Do internet sites “cause” suicides or increase the risk of suicide?

● Case examples are abundant, for example:

- Bill in Danish Parliament Feb 2004
- Gilles & Gooden case in the UK
- Japan coal stove suicides & internet
- Krein case in Oregon, murder charged
- US case: encouraging overdose and watching

1) Do internet sites “cause” suicides or increase the risk of suicide?

- Well documented effects of media on suicide (e.g Hawton & Williams, 2001; Pirkis & Stack, 2003 reviews)
 - -the more the publicity, the higher the contagion effect
 - -but no research on internet effects

1) Do internet sites “cause” suicides or increase the risk of suicide?

- How can we know?
 - -or, can case histories substitute for epidemiological data?
- Legal jurisprudence standards for causality
 - Temporal proximity
 - Physical proximity or contact
 - Actions related scientifically to outcome beyond reasonable doubt
- How strong a scientific case can we make today?

2) Some Ethical Issues

- Legal obligations do not necessarily correspond to what is ethically\morally acceptable
 - -do not cover many important ethical choices
 - -it is legal to kill yourself
 - -little jurisprudence holding persons responsible for rescue failures

2) Some Ethical Issues

- Implicit (and explicit) moral premises matter (affect behaviours by researchers and practitioners)
- People have identifiable ethical perspectives (even if they never thought about it)

Ethical Perspectives on Suicide

Moralist Approaches: Priority to protect life

- Based on religious philosophy, responsibilities to others and society, "categorical imperative"
- obligation to intervene and protect

Libertarian perspectives: Free choice to live or die

- hedonist; utilitarian-rational perspectives
- obligation respect choice to die (some would encourage)

Relativism:

- Contextualism
- Cost-benefit (Risk-Advantage) analyses (utilitarian)
- Principle of least harm
- Culture
- =Equity and communitarian analyses
- Consequentialism
- Obligations depend upon context or consequences

2) Some Ethical Issues

- Do ethical standards differ for “push” vs “pull” technologies? How is the internet different?
 - Ease of access, graphic nature, anonymity, can not verify authenticity, provides for “glorification,”
- Do different standards apply for different internet situations?
 - Suicide predators
 - Suicide encouragers
 - Suicide means providers
- The ethics of protection of minors (and the case of media violence – vs suicide)
- What justifies (if ever) compromising freedom of expression?

3) What may reduce the internet associated suicide risk?

● A) Self Regulation

- e.g. EU Decision No276-1999 “The EU Safer Internet Action Plan,” Britain: Internet Watch Foundation, Canada, most of Europe, New Zealand
- Effectiveness criticized,
- May go against constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression
- E.g.Skyblog: automatic alert when word: nazi, pedo, hooker, suicide, 80,000-100,000\day

3) What may reduce the internet associated suicide risk?

- B) Rating and Filtering Techniques
 - Who rates the sites?
 - Software issues in filtering:
 - Blocking the good with the bad?
 - Useless if ratings disregarded, filter not activated or user surfs on another computer
 - Useful for parental controls
 - -if the ratings and filters work as desired
 - World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) PICS Standards –creators self-rate

3) What may reduce the internet associated suicide risk?

- C) Control of Access by Mandated Blocking
 - Internet content blocked in:
 - Algeria, Bahrain, China, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, South Korea, Sweden, United Arab Emirates, Vietnam
 - e.g. Saudi Arabia – pornography, believed to cause religious offence & containing information on bomb making
 - e.g. Sweden – instigation of rebellion, racial agitation, child pornography, illegal description of violence, infringed copyright law
 - e.g. Germany – media morally harmful to youth (“pornographic, extreme violence, war mongering, racist, fascist or anti-semitic content”)
 - Australia NSW Internet Censorship Bill
 - Overturned in many countries (e.g. US, UK, NZ) because of constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression

Australian Criminal Code Amendment (Suicide Related Materiel Offences) Act 2005

- A person is guilty of an offence if:
 - a) the person uses a carriage service
 - to access material
 - to cause materiel to be transmitted to the person
 - to transmit material
 - to make material available
 - To publish or otherwise distribute material **and**
 - b) the material directly or indirectly counsels or incites suicide **and**
 - b) the person
 - Intends to use the materiel to counsel or incite suicide; or
 - Intends that the material be used by another person to counsel or incite suicide

- b) the material directly or indirectly :
 - Promotes a particular method of committing suicide; or
 - Provides instruction on a particular method of committing suicide **and**
- c) the person
 - Intends to use the material to promote that method of committing suicide or providing instruction on that method of committing suicide; or
 - Intends that the material be used by another person to promote that method of committing suicide or provide instruction on that method of committing suicide; or
 - Intends the material to be used by another person to commit suicide



4) Practical considerations

- Cross-border jurisdiction (which laws and who has jurisdiction to apply them?)
 - Jurisprudence distinguishes between
 - passive (operate web site) and active (sending, interacting, doing business)
 - actual impact vs. claims of potential damage
 - Braintech Inc vs Kostivk (1999) denied “need better proof defendant entered Texas than the mere possibility that someone in Texas may have reached out to cyberspace to bring defamating material to a screen in Texas”
 - The Calder Test (US Calder vs Jones, 1981) 1) defendant’s intentionally tortious actions are expressly aimed at the forum state; 2) causes harm to the plaintiff in the forum state, of which the defendant knows is likely to be suffered
- How do we determine what poses a real and significant danger?
- Developing standards consistent with other media or justifying the special case of internet activity
 - e.g publishing Hume’s treatise on suicide in a book vs encouraging suicide on the internet
 - e.g. providing information on means which is available in medical textbooks?

Conclusions

- 1) We need good hard data on the extent internet sites contribute to increasing the risk of suicide, who is vulnerable and which activities relate to increased risk.

Conclusions

- 2) After clarifying the ethical basis for any suicide prevention actions, the specific ethical premises concerning the different types of internet activity must be considered in the context of freedom of expression concerns.

Conclusions

- 3) Global access makes for complex jurisdiction issues

Conclusions

- 4) Even if data to document high relative risk existed **and** we determined that our ethical beliefs obligate preventive interventions despite the consequences **and** we were able to resolve the complex legal and jurisdiction issues, interventions may still be practically impossible unless draconian censorship measures are implemented, and even then we are not sure.

Conclusions

- 5) Because of the above, alternatives to control should also be considered, such as suicide prevention activities on the internet and better public education on suicide prevention.

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