The Internet and Suicide

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Abstract

This paper discusses two issues involving the Internet and suicide: one is the impact of the Internet on suicide; the other is how the Internet can be used to deter suicide. As for the impact of Internet, this paper reviews actual cases in which the impact of the Internet was noticeable; it also examines previous studies of the Internet's impact on suicide and, subsequently, the characteristics of the Internet that could influence the occurrence of suicide, as well as the processes of influence therein. The characteristics and processes common to the Internet and mass media, as well as those unique to the Internet, are described, and it is suggested that the Internet could perhaps have a stronger impact on suicide than the mass media. As for the deterrence of suicide using the Internet, actual deterrence activities as found in Japanese society were reviewed. Representative activities related to the prevention, intervention, and postvention of suicide, as found worldwide, are described; some activities unique to Japan are also reviewed, and subsequently the strengths and weaknesses of Internet-based activities are argued. Thus far, only a small number of studies have been undertaken on the impact of the Internet on suicide, or on how the Internet could act as a suicide-deterrence factor; therefore, many more such studies should be conducted.

Key words: Internet, Suicide, Children, Mass media, Prevention

Introduction

The term "Internet suicide" is a term that has been used for some time. There have been concerns about the Internet facilitating suicides, and it remains a controversial area of Internet-related discussions. However, on the other hand, a variety of approaches have been adopted to use the Internet as a means of *saving* people from suicide. When we speak of the Internet and suicide, their inter-relatedness is dual in nature.

This paper deals with both sides of the relationship between these two factors. First, with regard to how the Internet could facilitate suicide, possible processes are discussed. Second, the Internet-based efforts to deter suicide are introduced.

Impact of the Internet on Suicide

Today, so-called "Internet suicides" or "Internet joint suicides" (i.e., Internet suicide pacts),—in which would-be suicides collect information through the Internet concerning suicide and/or contact other would-be suicides, in order to commit suicide collectively—are becoming more frequently reported and are thus garnering attention. It has been pointed out that the use of the Internet—in particular, websites that deal with themes of suicide (e.g., "Suicide sites")—may be promoting suicide and thus contributing to an increase in the number of Internet suicides.

The "Doctor Kiriko" case in 1998 occurred just as the Japanese public's attention was starting to focus on the impact of the Internet on suicide. The case involved a suicide would-be's acquisition of poison over the Internet and her use of it in committing suicide.

What reignited the Japanese public's interest in this topic was a series of Internet joint suicides that started at the end of 2002. (In an "Internet joint suicide," unacquainted individuals get to know each other through the Internet and then gather in one location to commit collective suicide.) At that time, Internet joint suicide received considerable media coverage—attention, many claimed, that contributed to a chain-reaction of further Internet joint suicides. Internet joint suicide became a key research theme and it attracted wide social interest, prompting research by Hashimoto and Takeshima (2003) and Ueda (2005). An analysis on this matter was also published by Shibui (2004).

In 2008, a number of cases occurred where would-be suicides learned via the Internet how to produce hydrogen sulfide and use it to commit suicide. This too garnered considered social attention.

Triggered by these incidents, the issue of how the Internet facilitates suicide has been actively discussed.

Outside Japan, the issue of the Internet facilitating suicide has likewise attracted attention. Baume, Cantor and Rolfe (1997) and Alao, Yolles, and Armenta (1999) each published different papers entitled "Cybersuicide," in which they analyze cases where the Internet was believed to contribute to the occurrence of suicide. Mehlum (2000), Thompson (1999), and Becker and Schmidt (2004) each undertook studies in which they describe the process of using the Internet to commit suicide. Furthermore, Rajagopal (2004) focuses attention on cases of Internet joint suicides in Japan, stating that they symbolized a new problem concerning the Internet and suicide. Internet joint suicide has also been cited as a phenomenon highly unique to Japan (A. Naito, 2007).

In practical terms, research on Internet-related suicide is still in its nascent stages; there is little empirical evidence that the Internet has increased the occurrence of suicide. However, the Internet does bear certain attributes that allow for the assumption that it facilitates the commission of suicide. Here, while summarizing such attributes, this paper postulates several hypothetical processes through which the Internet may promote suicide.

The media has been known to have an effect on suicide, in what is known as the Werther effect. Phillips (1974) originally made this connection, and M. Naito (2007) provided demonstrative evidence of this effect. In response to such findings, the World Health Organization (WHO) has presented guidelines concerning the media's reportage of suicide, advising a non-affirmative approach towards suicide and a tendency not to simplify the causes thereof. However, those guidelines touch upon mass media—namely, newspapers, television, and radio—from which the Internet is both distinct and unique.

Given this trait, this paper will first address the attributes of the Internet held in common with mass media that may contribute to the facilitation of suicide, followed by those unique to the Internet. Finally, countermeasures for Internet suicide are addressed.

Internet as mass media

Mass media comprise media where a single source communicates information to a multiplicity of receivers; typical mass-media venues include television, magazines, and newspapers. With the Internet, when the user receives only information posted on websites or receives information presented through the mass distribution of emails, then its function is similar to that of mass media.

Regarding the Internet as a mass-media venue, the following three traits are attributes that may contribute to suicide.

First, the Internet releases information that affirms the idea of committing suicide. The Internet is a powerful information database, equipped with massive amounts of information concerning suicide and Internet suicide. So-called suicide sites may contain information affirming the act of suicide; moreover, site users can learn about many prior cases of suicide and Internet suicide. Particularly, successful cases of suicide could promote would-be "copycat" suicides.

Second, the Internet releases information on the means of committing suicide. For example, when a number of Internet suicides that featured the use of charcoal briquettes were reported, that method of suicide was introduced and detailed on suicide sites.

Third, tools for the commission of suicide may actually be obtained through the Internet; the aforementioned Doctor Kiriko case is proof of this. Also, through the Internet, would-be suicides frequently look for other would-be suicides, so that they can die together; in some cases, such would-be suicides announce that they already have the required tools. If other would-be suicides become part of a suicide pact with individuals who have already planned out the act of suicide, they can also easily access the medium by which they can commit suicide.

As seen with the second and third points, information about and tools for the commission of suicide can be easily acquired through the Internet. This not only facilitates the execution of the suicide, but may also steer would-be suicides to specifically consider carrying out suicide.

Conventional mass media venues such as television and magazines can also provide information that may promote suicide; however, the Internet has two attributes that traditional mass media venues do not. First of all, conventional mass media venues are generally run by organizations, and each therefore tends to contain a censorship system for preventing the release of information that encourages suicide. Nevertheless, in the case of the Internet, individuals normally communicate information without any censorship, and this characteristic creates conditions where suicide-encouraging information can be easily released. Second, while users of mass media merely receive information, Internet users can also search for and access information of their choosing. As a result, would-be suicides can readily access through the Internet information that encourages suicide.

Suicide-related information released by mass-media venues—such as celebrity suicides—is often delivered at once and therefore its impact may seem prominent, but the two aforementioned attributes may suggest the understated magnitude of the impact of the Internet.

The Internet as an inter-personal medium

The Internet critically differs from mass-media venues in that it is a medium that also mediates communication among individuals. As mentioned, the Internet as a mass-media venue offers information that can affirm the idea of committing suicide, but the Internet as an inter-

personal medium exhibits this function even more strongly, on account of the following four attributes.

First, on the Internet, individuals who affirm suicide can meet others with the same idea, beyond geographical limitations. Without the Internet, would-be suicides are basically restricted to contacting individuals around them—individuals who would be unlikely to sympathize when the would-be suicide divulged his or her desire for suicide. While on the Internet, visiting certain websites would allow would-be suicides the opportunity to encounter other would-be suicides in Japan, who would certainly be more likely to affirm the would-be suicide's desire to die.

Second, the Internet provides an environment where individuals feel anonymous and are therefore more inclined to reveal their honest opinions and feelings. Text-based communication on the Internet does not transmit the expressions or appearances of others, making it difficult to sense others' true presence. This enables individuals to discuss true opinions and feelings that would otherwise, in a face-to-face conversation, create embarrassment. By revealing their inner feelings about their desire to commit suicide and receiving support from others, would-be suicides can obtain strong feelings of affirmation.

Third, it is human nature for individuals to interpret Internet messages in an exaggerated fashion. Communication on the Internet is text-centered and bears exiguous amounts of nonverbal cues, such as tone, expression, gesture, and body language; receivers of a message can frequently interpret messages incorrectly or in a skewed fashion. As would-be suicides are intrinsically looking for affirmation of their own suicide desire, they are inclined to interpret messages directed at them as something affirmative.

Fourth, it is thought that in many cases, other persons with whom an individual interacts over the Internet are idealized, and so any affirmations of suicidal ideation from such persons would only reinforce the effect.

Based on these points, would-be suicides can have their ideas *vis-à-vis* the commission of suicide affirmed, which draws them closer to actually committing suicide.

In addition, the Internet is a place where would-be suicides can meet and connect with potential suicide companions—connections that they would not otherwise have had been able to make. As outlined in the following points, this fact itself facilitates the occurrence of suicide.

First of all, companionship makes a would-be suicide feel less miserable about his or her own suicide. A lone suicide seems forlorn and miserable, even to other would-be suicides, and this perception thus creates resistance to the commission of suicide. However, if would-be suicides were to find suicide companions, such misery would be reduced, consequently facilitating the commission of suicide.

Second, once would-be suicides gather and form a suicide pact, even when a would-be suicide changes his or her mind, it becomes difficult to escape, due to group pressure. It is possible that in some cases, suicide would have been committed only in such a group-pact situation.

The third point is that, as mentioned previously, being part of a group makes it easier to obtain the means of suicide. In some cases, if only one member of the group has the means to commit suicide, this may suffice as a means of suicide for all within the group.

As such, the presence of suicide companions encourages suicide—and the Internet is useful in gathering such suicide companions.

Efforts to prevent internet suicide

Traditionally, the degree to which the mass media "promotes" suicide has been a concern; as seen with the aforementioned WHO recommendations, efforts have been made to mitigate such a promotional effect. Nevertheless, as discussed, the Internet has attributes that create even more concern than those of the conventional mass media, and its impact seemingly requires due caution. Furthermore, aside from the previously raised points, the Internet "meshes" with the social isolation of its users and may invite pathological conditions, consequently inducing the occurrence of suicide (Becker & Schmidt, 2004).

The impact of the Internet on suicide—including both lone and joint suicides—has attracted public attention; in particular, Internet suicide pacts have earned considerable publicity in the press. This attention is perhaps due to the fact that Internet joint suicides reflect the attributes that distinguish the Internet from conventional mass media. However, in reality, such Internet joint suicides do not account for a large proportion of suicides in general. For instance, according to 2005 statistics, 91 deaths resulted from Internet suicide pacts in Japan (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2006); this is a mere handful of the more than 30,000 suicides that happen each year in Japan. The majority of Internet suicides are in fact lone-committed suicides, encouraged by the affirmation of suicidal ideation and learning about suicide methods, both of which were acquired via the Internet.

It is unclear, how many suicides are actually Internet-related; such investigations are nearly impossible. In any case, preventive measures with regards to Internet suicides are not only desirable but necessary. Recently, there have been many cases in which a suicide pre-notice was posted on a suicide site, the police contacted the person who had posted the comment, and they subsequently protected the would-be suicide (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2008).

Arguments have been made recently, that suicide sites should be regulated by law; however, a number of counterarguments suggest that such regulation would be

inappropriate: (a) there would be a conflict between such regulations and freedoms of speech and communication, (b) suicide sites provide suicidal people with a sense of security (Backer & Fortune, 2008) and can thus function as a preventive measure, and (c) the Internet is not a push-style medium from which users passively gain information, but a pull-style media from which users access information by their free will. Rather than regulation, approaches involving suicide-prevention and media-literacy education (Sakamoto, 2005) perspectives have been suggested (Mishara & Weisstub, 2007).

Furthermore, as mentioned, despite active discussions of the problematic nature of Internet suicide, empirical research regarding the matter has yet to be advanced. Regardless of the extent to which the Internet contributes to the facilitation of suicide and what subjects are strongly affected by such an effect, definitive demonstrative findings on such basic questions remain elusive. While this paper discusses various hypothetical processes by which the Internet could be fostering suicide, each requires empirical investigation to prove or disprove its significance. Naturally, empirical findings are crucial for devising preventive measures against Internet suicide, and the promotion of research to this end is strongly required.

Suicide Deterrence via the Internet

Thus far, the possible role of the Internet in facilitating suicide has been discussed. On the other hand, attention has also focused on the use of the Internet as a suicide deterrence tool; this approach has already been implemented. In subsequent sections, such an approach—as seen both in Japan and abroad—will be introduced, with reference made to the advantages and disadvantages of using the Internet to deter suicide.

Suicide deterrence approaches

The deterrence of suicide occurs in three stages—namely, prevention, intervention, and postvention (Takahashi, 2003)—and for each, Internet-based approaches are being developed on an ongoing basis (Krysinska & De Leo, 2007).

Prevention involves the obviation of suicide by resolving the cause and disseminating accurate information. Internet-based prevention can involve support and information provision via websites directed at high-risk individuals. Krysinska and De Leo mention the "Reach Out!" site of the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care (2000) as a representative example.

Intervention involves the deterrence of suicide by applying an appropriate intervention to in-progress suicide planning or attempts. Most Internet-based deterrence approaches are geared towards intervention,

and one typical approach is the British "jo@samaritans. org" (Howlett & Langdon, 2004). With this approach, emails are used to provide consultation and intervene with at-risk individuals. This approach is taken by "The Samaritans," the pioneers of the telephone-based Lifeline system, who have since expanded Lifeline to an email-based system. The service started in 1994 and by 2001, they had received 64,000 emails. While only 26 percent of callers disclosed their suicidal intentions, the percentage among emailers was 52 percent. Email offers a higher degree of anonymity than a person-to-person telephone conversation and, as mentioned previously, people are more inclined to reveal their true opinions and feelings under such conditions. This enhanced openness seems to increase the effectiveness of intervention activities. As such, the utilization of emails has had an effective impact in deterring suicide.

SAHAR, an Israeli nonprofit organization, also reaches out to suicidal individuals by providing information on its website and offering emotional support via forums. According to Barak (2007), the website receives 350 hits per day and garners about 1,000 cases of personal contact per month. At least one-third of such contacts are with individuals clearly at risk of suicide, and 200 messages are submitted to the forum every day. The service, in principle, targets native Hebrew speakers; considering the limitations that this language characteristic necessarily imposes, these numbers are quite high.

Other suicide-deterrence services outside of Japan include those provided through a collaborative effort by Emory University and the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, in which suicide risk is assessed on the website to pinpoint suicidal individuals (Ellen, 2002).

Postvention involves the provision of appropriate care to the family of suicide victims after the suicide has taken place, thus mitigating the emotional aftermath. This is not "suicide deterrence" *per se*, but such undertakings provide information to bereaved families via the Internet, and they initiate support groups in a mailing-list format (Stoney, 1998). Participants in Internet-based support groups take part, often citing a lack of support from those around them in the bricks-and-mortar world (Feigelman, Gorman, Beal & Jordan, 2008); in this way, this Internet-based approach fills a grievous support gap.

In addition, a number of education and training efforts have been made with regards to suicide deterrence. In efforts that target the general public and mental health professionals, suicide prevention skills-training and awareness programs relating to the issue of suicide prevention are conducted through the use of websites. For instance, the U.S. National Center for Suicide Prevention Training conducts online workshops that aid suicide-prevention practitioners, policy-makers, and community organizations in carrying out effective suicide prevention programs and policies. According to Stone,

Barber, and Potter (2005), every three years, the Center conducts three workshops in which more than 1,200 people from the United States and abroad enroll.

Efforts in Japan

The use of the Internet in preventing suicide is an issue of interest in Japan, too. Hashimoto and Takeshima (2003) highlight the need for a suicide prevention website in Japan, and recommend that it provide the following services.

To start, they assert the importance of counseling as a consultation-related service. Specifically, through an examination of case studies, they highlight the need to introduce services related to regular mental-health care and counseling for the prevention of suicide.

Hashimoto and Takeshima also point out the importance of information that allows people to know where to go for a consultation when they actually want it. In relation to this, they emphasize that the choice of consultation provider to whom suicidal individuals are referred should be determined by the problems experienced specifically by each suicidal individual, including economic or medical constraints; puberty-related reasons, such as unrequited love; or occupational or business-related reasons, such as layoffs or investment losses.

In addition, Hashimoto and Takeshima also propose the establishment of Internet-based suicide prevention consultation systems similar to the aforementioned telephone-based system Lifeline. However, they assert the importance of guiding an at-risk person in a face-to-face consultation in the final stage of consultation.

Hashimoto and Takeshima also make several proposals concerning services that relate to suicide-prevention education. A specific example would be the posting on the website of personal experiences and themes by the bereaved children and family members of suicide victims and communicating the impact of suicide on those left behind, not to mention posthumous information from victims themselves. Another would be the presenting of cases of people who have recovered from suicidal crisis.

Furthermore, since depression is a great risk factor for suicide, Hashimoto and Takeshima also recommend providing on suicide deterrence websites accurate information about depression; engaging depressed individuals at an earlier stage and linking them with appropriate care; and providing a self-diagnostic service for depression, to encourage the use of consultative services at medical institutions.

Other than these consultation or education-related services, Hashimoto and Takeshima highlight the need for an enhanced routing mechanism to suicide-prevention websites whenever Internet users search for suicide-related words on a search engine and request various websites. This routing mechanism would create a more easily accessed link to a suicide-prevention website and promote the use of suicide-prevention websites.

The Integrated Suicide Prevention Center, established in October 2006, offers a webpage called the "Life Support Consultation Contact." It introduces consultation contacts who are located and accessible within each prefecture or government-decreed city, with respect to 13 different topics: child-rearing, child abuse, bullying, domestic violence, social withdrawal, work/workplace, economic issues, addiction to alcohol and/or gambling, nursing, suicidal feelings, bereaved individuals, community life issues, and mental and physical health (i.e., mental disorders including depression and other disorders of the body and/or mind). Certain information—including the name of the consultation contact, the administrative body involved, telephone number, URL, open hours, and regular closed days—are given, along with messages from consultation providers and bereaved families. This webpage in linked to "Yahoo! Japan," a major internet search engine; when a user enters into this search engine a suicide-related word—such as *shinitai* ("I want to die")—the message "Please tell us your feelings. Don't hesitate to seek help—that's what's most important" is displayed, along with a link, at the top of the listing, to the Integrated Suicide Prevention Center website. In this way, suicidal people can access this webpage quickly and easily.

Other such vehicles in Japan include Usui's (1997) website. This website, which contains many messages to individuals at risk of suicide, is run by an individual researcher, but has seen much traffic. Other examples include those that use email-based consultation and support group activities (for example, Tamura, 2003, 2005)—which, although they do not necessarily specialize in suicide prevention, are considered meaningful in preventing suicide.

Advantages and disadvantages of suicide prevention efforts

Efforts to prevent suicide through the use of the Internet have been outlined in the foregoing. These efforts can be broadly divided into two groups: (a) consultation services using email messages and the like, and (b) information-provision services via websites. These two approaches have developed independently, and they bear two advantages.

First, by using the Internet, one can easily access specific information useful for suicide prevention. The Internet allows for the acquisition of information at anytime, and from anywhere. Second, as mentioned, the Internet is a medium that allows one to remain highly anonymous and free of social pressure, and this allows for honest and candid discussions. For this reason, the Internet may give suicidal individuals the courage to voice their suicidal intentions, and this may in turn lead

to the problems being treated or otherwise addressed.

On the other hand, these two approaches also bear two disadvantages. First, Internet-based interactions generally lack nonverbal cues such as facial expressions and tone of voice; this condition, overall, creates a shortage of information, making it difficult to assess the client's condition accurately. Second, emergency measures and medical care cannot be sufficiently provided via Internet-based approaches; Internet-related emotional support may not suffice in some cases, and so guiding the at-risk person to a face-to-face consultation is considered important.

Indeed, Internet-based suicide prevention programs and systems have their advantages and disadvantages; they cannot be promoted blindly and must be considered carefully. Hence, it is critical that researchers undertake empirical research that proves the actual effectiveness of these approaches, under what circumstances and by which means they can be rendered most effective, and the like. However, as mentioned, research on this matter has yet to be advanced, just as the Internet's impact on suicide remains relatively unexamined.

Conclusion

As mentioned several times in this paper, when speaking of Internet and suicide, the Internet has both suicide-fostering and suicide-preventive aspects, manifesting both its problematic nature and its beneficence. In the future, the Internet will become more powerful and more prevalent in our lives, and it is highly unlikely that it will be used less than it currently is. Therefore, if the Internet continues in its current format and there continues to be a relative absence of governmental regulation regarding Internet content, both the problematic nature and beneficence of the Internet will continue to grow; consequently, finding ways to minimize the former and maximize the latter will become increasingly important. For this reason, future efforts related to these issues are highly desirable, including the promotion of sociological and psychological research.

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