



November 25, 2008

Web Suicide Viewed Live and Reaction Spur a Debate

By [BRIAN STELTER](#)

For a 19-year-old community college student in Pembroke Pines, Fla., the message boards on [BodyBuilding.com](#) were a place to post messages, at least 2,300 of them, including more than one about his suicidal impulses. In a post last year, he wrote that online forums had “become like a family to me.”

“I know its kinda sad,” the student, Abraham Biggs, wrote in parenthesis, adding that he posted about his “troubles and doubts” online because he did not want to talk to anyone about them in person.

Last Wednesday, when Mr. Biggs posted a suicide note and listed the drug cocktail he intended to consume, the Web site hardly acted like a family. On BodyBuilding.com, which includes discussions of numerous topics besides bodybuilding, and on a live video Web site, Justin.tv, Mr. Biggs was “egged on” by strangers who, investigators say, encouraged him to swallow the antidepressant pills that eventually killed him.

Mr. Biggs’s case is the most recent example of a suicide that played out on the Internet. Live video of the death was shown online to scores of people, leading some viewers to cringe while others laughed. The case, which has prompted an outpouring of sympathy and second-guessing online, demonstrates the double-edged nature of online communities that millions of people flock to every day.

Online communities “are like the crowd outside the building with the guy on the ledge,” Jeffrey Cole, a professor who studies technology’s effects on society at the [University of Southern California](#). “Sometimes there is someone who gets involved and tries to talk him down. Often the crowd chants, ‘Jump, jump.’ They can enable suicide or help prevent it.”

On blogs and forums last week, some people wondered whether Mr. Biggs had hoped that by broadcasting his suicide, he would attract attention and cause someone to intervene. Viewers eventually called the police, but only after he had lapsed into unconsciousness. The video streaming Web site, Justin.tv, said Monday that it hoped its members would be “more vigilant” in the future.

It was not the first time someone had used the Web in this way. In Arizona in 2003, a man overdosed on drugs while writing about his actions in a chat room. In Britain last year, a man hanged himself while chatting online and webcasting. In both cases, other users reportedly encouraged the individual.

Sometimes other users show support in troubling ways. In a number of well-publicized cases in Japan, South Korea and elsewhere, people have formed suicide pacts on the Internet and met in person to carry out their plans.

“If somebody threatens suicide or attempts suicide, it’s never a joke,” said Joshua Perper, the chief medical examiner for Broward County, where Mr. Biggs lived. “It always requires attention. It’s basically a cry for help.”

Much of the evidence of Mr. Biggs's suicide and the reactions of users was removed from BodyBuilding.com and Justin.tv after his death was confirmed. But according to a chronology posted by a fellow user, Mr. Biggs listed the pills he had obtained and posted a suicide note that he had copied from another Web site. He directed people to his page on Justin.tv, where anyone can plug in a webcam and stream live video onto the Internet. In a chat room adjacent to the live video, the "joking and trash talking" continued after Mr. Biggs consumed the pills and lay on his bed, according to the user, who said he tried to reach the local police from his home in India.

Several other concerned users called the police when it appeared that Mr. Biggs had stopped breathing. As officers entered the room, according to a screen capture of the incident that circulated online, 181 people were watching the video. In the chat room, users typed the acronyms for "oh my God" and "laugh out loud" before the police covered the webcam.

After his death was confirmed, words of sympathy were interspersed with complaints about Mr. Biggs's behavior on the free-wheeling "Miscellaneous" section of BodyBuilding.com, where he frequently posted. Some users claimed that Mr. Biggs had threatened to commit suicide repeatedly in the past.

Mr. Biggs's family has said he suffered from bipolar disorder and was being treated for depression. Telephone messages left at the home of Mr. Biggs's father, Abraham Biggs Sr., were not returned Sunday. But in an interview with The Associated Press, the father said he was appalled by the lack of responsiveness on the part of the users and the operators.

"As a human being, you don't watch someone in trouble and sit back and just watch," he said, before suggesting that "some kind of regulation is necessary."

The case remains under investigation by the Pembroke Pines Police Department.

Justin.tv said in a statement, "As a result of this event we are confident that all online community members will be ever more vigilant in monitoring and protecting their fellow users in the future."

While sites like Justin.tv will remove content they find objectionable after the fact, the content of video sites and chat rooms are largely at the control of the users.

M. David Rudd, chairman of the psychology department at [Texas Tech University](#), said the Internet did not fully live up to its potential to help with suicide prevention. "Most of what's available via the Internet only serves to make the problem worse," Mr. Rudd said, whether it is information about how to commit suicide or immature comments from chat room users.

Mr. Cole of the University of Southern California described the death of Alethea Gates, a teenager in New Zealand, who killed herself after using Google to read about different methods of suicide. Rather than blaming the Internet, her parents said they wished that the Google search had turned up links to suicide prevention Web sites. In effect, they wished the Web had shouted "step back from the ledge" instead of "jump." (Many Google searches that include the word suicide include sponsored links to prevention Web sites.)

Mr. Rudd said he believed that Mr. Biggs was not seeking an audience online.

"What he was really doing was expressing his ambivalence about dying and, in an awkward manner, asking

for help,” he said.

But the virtual nature of the community — distant, largely unaccountable and often seeking entertainment — was equally ambivalent. Hours after Mr. Biggs died, some of the forum users still sounded highly skeptical of the case. Others asked to see the video.

“The anonymous nature of these communities only emboldens the meanness or callousness of the people on these sites,” Mr. Cole said. “Rarely does it bring out greater compassion or consideration.”

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