



WEB 2.0

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Online Suicide Watchers - Connected but Detached



By Erika Morphy
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The Internet allows people to be more connected than ever. Live streaming webcams let strangers participate in the intimate details of each others' lives. In the case of Abraham Biggs, that social intercourse extended to his death. What mechanisms of social behavior led those observing the 19-year-old as he took his own life to do nothing but watch?

Last Wednesday, a troubled teenager went home, logged onto the Internet, and discussed his unhappiness with strangers at a discussion board he liked to frequent. He wanted to kill himself, he said. And then Abraham Biggs Jr. did just that -- on live videocam. The camera stopped running approximately 12 hours later when the police came to the door.

Biggs had told viewers what he was going to do. Some reportedly urged him on. Some discussed among themselves whether the dosage of pills he was taking was enough. The sequence of these events is unclear, as the video-streaming site connected to the discussion forum, [Justin.tv](#), has removed the video.

The site has issued a statement of regret over the young man's death. The incident is now under investigation by the police.

It may be that Justin.tv and the people who watched Biggs' suicide will not find themselves in legal jeopardy. It is not against the law to fail to stop a suicide in most states, although a few do outlaw people advising someone else to commit suicide. Also, it is well established that Web sites cannot be liable for illegal activity that takes place on their domain unless they are notified specifically about it.

On the other hand, it may be that officials will find an existing piece of legislation that can form the basis of a prosecution, much as attorneys have done with the current prosecution of Lori Drew, the woman accused of provoking the suicide of a 13-year-old girl through fraudulent online activity.

Even if the site, a forum moderator, or a viewer who encouraged Biggs is prosecuted, though, it is unlikely that any legal action will scratch the surface of the big questions surrounding the tragedy: Why did this happen? How could this happen? And, perhaps worst of all, what have we done to ourselves?

Cause and Effect?

There is a school of thought suggesting that the Internet and the collaborative nature of Web 2.0, specifically, is desensitizing people to violence and tragedy to an unprecedented degree. Worse, the Internet is making possible crimes that may not have otherwise occurred.

Indeed, there are many horror stories -- several of which have found their way into the "Law and Order" television franchise -- from murder to rape to kidnapping, whose beginnings were traced to online activity. The events surrounding Biggs' suicide, according to this view, suggest that human behavior has reached a new tipping point.

"This event was tragic on so many levels," Corinne Gregory, founder and president of [The PoliteChild](#) and [SocialSmarts](#), told the E-Commerce Times. Society's devaluation of life and loss and human tragedy is not new, "but the Internet is accelerating that trend to a new level."

Still, no discussion of societal trends is ever that pat. There is plenty of anecdotal evidence, for instance, to suggest that at least some viewers thought Biggs was joking.

"From what I understand, Biggs was a well known 'troll' on Justin.tv," said Cord Silverstein, EVP of interactive communications at [Capstrat](#) -- "troll" meaning someone known to frequent sites specifically to try to get a rise out of the other participants. "

"Anyone familiar with Biggs' past comments and behavior might have easily decided he wasn't serious," Silverstein told the E-Commerce Times.

That it apparently took 12 hours for the police to be summoned may not have been utter callousness on the part of the viewers, but rather an assumption that someone else would do it. True, such a "dispersion of responsibility," said Richard Shadick, director of Pace University's counseling center and an adjunct professor of psychology, is hardly humankind's finest impulse. It is an online version of the [Kitty Genovese](#) phenomenon -- another horrifying societal touch point. Genovese was a young woman who was violently murdered in 1964 in view of 38 onlookers who failed to go to her assistance or even call the police.

"The more people that are witness to a tragic event, the less likely it is they will step in," Shadick said. "That is one possibility why those individuals didn't contact the police in time."

New Responsibilities

This discussion will no doubt continue as our lives become ever more intricately entwined with the Internet. One area of growing consensus, though, appears to be the need to put more

safeguards in place.

"It is essential to drill home that whenever someone talks about suicide, that person needs to be taken seriously, no matter what," Shadick said.

"People -- younger people in particular -- are comfortable with sharing every aspect of [their] lives online now," said Armen Berjikly, founder and CEO of [Experience Project](#) -- a social experience site that has archived more than two million individual experiences. "[That's] something that many of us are only coming to grips with right now."

It is essential for sites to impress upon their visitors that some subjects require more than a layperson's response, Berjikly told the E-Commerce Times. The Experience Project, for instance, offers several links to suicide prevention for that reason.

No Going Back

It should not go unmentioned that the Internet has helped many people who were isolated connect to others. "I just read about how a woman blogging about losing her son could be therapeutic," Paulette Kouffman Sherman, a licensed psychologist, told the E-Commerce Times. Blogging gives her an outlet to express herself -- and could help assuage another parent's grief as well.

But does that advantage outweigh the damage the Internet can potentially cause? Unlike the angst over how or whether society has devolved into something lesser, that particular existential discussion will not have much value.

Useful or destructive, the Internet is here to stay. [EOT](#)

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