A Search for Death: How the Internet Is Used as a Suicide Cookbook

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Literature Review

While reasons for suicides have long been analyzed, the Internet presents a comparatively unexamined influence. Recent news stories have begun to direct attention to the emergence of chat rooms, message boards and other resources on the web as a possible factor in the rise of suicide rates. As the Internet has become an increasingly vital technological development, some people have begun to worry about "suicide websites," a term that refers to websites that promote, encourage and/or offer methods to commit suicide.

Alao and colleagues (2006) address the role of the Internet on suicides in a manuscript composed of three parts. The first describes how the Internet can help users commit suicide; the second looks at cases in which this has happened; and the last explores how the Internet could be used to help suicidal users back to stable mental health. The authors include interesting and pertinent information about suicide websites, and they report that there are more than 100,000 of them that deal with suicide methods. Some sites do not allow entrance to anyone intending to persuade users to not commit suicide. Suicide notes, death certificates, color photographs of people committing suicide, messages supporting suicide or encouraging individuals to carry out planned suicides can all be found on these websites. Some of the websites are very graphic, even including "the best way to point a gun into the mouth for maximum effect," according to the journal article (Alao 490). The article "Cybersuicide: Review of the Role of the Internet on Suicide" also acknowledges that chat rooms, as well as

websites, can provide information on suicide.

Few researchers have considered the idea that suicide websites might decrease suicides, but the second part of "Cybersuicide," though brief, insists that the Internet is also a potential source of help for suicidal people. Alao and colleagues refer to the possibility of online counseling, although they do not include evidence that proves its success (490).

Tam, Tang and Fernando (2007) also introduce the idea that the Internet may serve a double purpose when it comes to suicide, both harming and helping. They note that the Internet romanticizes suicide and that it "provides services and information ranging from general information to online orders of prescription drugs or other poisons that bypass government regulations and custom controls." This, the authors say, "bridges the gaps of locality and accessibility" (453). A suicidal person can use the Internet to learn methods to commit suicide. The person learns what a particular method calls for, be it chemicals, weapons, rope, drugs, etc. Then, inching closer to death, the person can use the Internet to *buy* the tools. CNN reporters Gutierrez and McCabe (2005) illustrate this process in the story of Suzy Gonzales, a 19 year-old college student from Florida, who killed herself by swallowing potassium cyanide. Through an online suicide message board, Gonzales learned how to pose as a jeweler to obtain the lethal cocktail.

While the article by Tam and colleagues makes the problem of suicide websites clear, it goes on to raise the interesting dilemma that the Internet could also help people escape their suicidal impulses. The authors provide little evidence, however, offering the idea as more of an opportunity than a reality. They mention self-help sites for suicidal persons and the potential for therapeutic chat rooms. Yet, once again, evidence of effectiveness is sparse.

Madelyn Gould, Patrick Jamieson and Daniel Romer (2003) researched suicide contagion from the news as well as fiction. Their research suggested a strong relationship between reports of suicide in the media and increased suicide rates. According to Gould (1271), "the magnitude of the increase in suicides following a suicide story is proportional to the amount, duration, and prominence of media coverage." Celebrities' suicides are 14.3 times more likely to result in

a copycat effect than suicides of non-celebrities.

Gould and colleagues analyzed suicide stories from 1998 in the nine most widely circulated newspapers in the United States, tracking the number of suicide stories each paper published, the percentage of stories that were placed in the first nine pages, and the percentage of stories that referred to suicide in the headline. *The Los Angeles Times* reported the most suicides, 176, and *USA Today* reported the fewest, only 3 5. Interestingly, *USA Today* was the paper that most frequently placed the suicide article within the first nine pages, doing so 91.4% of the time, and *Newsday* did so the least. *The Washington Post* was the paper that referred to suicide in the headline most frequently, and *USA Today* did so the least. Gould and colleagues also included the most recently released recommendations for journalists covering suicides and the need for guidelines for fictional programming.

Studies by Katja Becker and colleagues (2004) further support Gould's report that suicides increase proportionally to the amount, duration and prominence of media coverage. They illustrate the Internet's influence on users, particularly adolescents. In a *Nord J Psychiatry* article, Becker and colleagues say suicide contagion is real and prevalent. Reasons include "inadvertent romanticizing of suicide or idealizing it as a heroic deed" (112).

Brian Mishara and David Weisstub (2007) discussed the ethical and legal implications of various ways to prevent using the Internet as an aid to committing suicide, considering self-regulation and blocking access to suicide websites. Viewpoints from a libertarian perspective and also from a moralist ethical position are analyzed. Mishara and Weisstub compare the Internet to other mass media in relation to censorship. Their research raises interesting questions and viewpoints without resolving qualms concerning Internet censorship.

In an article on "Internet Chat Rooms and Suicide" (2005), Becker and Schmidt discuss a 17 year-old female who visited suicide web forums to find suicide methods and a 15 year-old female who reported that "the Internet inspired her to commit suicide as a problem-solving strategy" (229). The article discusses the availability and ease associated with suicide websites, and how many portray suicide as a legitimate, even respectable solution to life's problems. "Ambivalence, an often-precarious balance between a chosen life and a chosen death,

which is considered common to suicide attitude, may tip in the direction of death in response to suicide chat rooms," the article states (229). This warning makes for an adequate summary of the entire article.

Methods and Objectives

This paper aims to explain the existence of websites, newsgroups and online message boards that promote, condone, encourage and/or discuss suicide from a pro-suicide or pro-choice angle. Research involving human participants was conducted, and this project was approved by the Institutional Research Board (IRB) at the College of Charleston.

Interviews were conducted on two groups of participants: 1) people that use suicide websites and 2) creators and supporters of H.R. 940, a current bill aiming to make it illegal to help someone commit suicide via the Internet. To gather participants, I used a convenience sample. Participation was voluntary and communication occurred primarily through e-mail.

Group 1: My objective in interviewing people that use suicide websites, newsgroups and/or message boards was to understand the cause and objective of their participation, and how they are affected by the websites. The following questions were asked:

1. Why did you start using (website's name)?
2. Does (website's name) promote and/or encourage suicide and/or suicidal tendencies?
3. Does (website's name) offer methods of committing suicide?
4. Are you aware of suicides connected with the Internet?
5. If so, do you feel regret upon hearing about suicides in the news?
6. Are you aware of suicides that have been linked to (website's name)?
7. Do you have any ethical issues with the website's content?
8. Are you concerned with the possibility that a law could force (website's name) to shut down?
9. How do you feel toward people who scorn (website's name)?

Each interview's significance lies within the responses, which serve as the primary research for this paper along with text drawn from suicide websites, newsgroups, and message boards. Results are qualitative and often based on case studies.

Group 2: My objective in interviewing creators of H.R. 940, also called "Suzy's Law," was to understand the origin of the bill and its components, so my readers will understand its intent. The following questions were asked to the bill's creators:

1. Explain the law.
2. When did the law come about?
3. How are you trying to get the law considered and passed?
4. Why did you create this law?
5. Are there similar laws that exist now?
6. How long do you think the Internet's influence on suicides has been a problem?
7. Do you think this law will be successful?
8. How does the law avoid impeding on free speech?

Findings

Following the established information revealed in the preceding literature review, I investigated suicide websites for my own research. I found several, and focused on three that appeared to be the most prevalent and frequented online spaces for suicidal people, the alt.suicide.holiday Usenet newsgroup (ASH), the alt.suicide.methods Usenet newsgroup (ASM) and alt.suicide.bus.stop, a channel in Internet Relay Chat (IRC) and known as ASBS.

None of these groups qualifies as a website, so the term "suicide website" loses its precision here, but the term is conventionally used to categorize ASH, ASM, ASBS. ASH, which has sustained many transformations and replacements since it was created in the 1950s, did begin as an actual website as opposed to a message board or chat room. Although the three groups are often called "sister sites," ASH is considered the original, and was first to appear. The creator of the original website, ash.xanthia.com, froze the site in 2002 and removed it in 2003 because, he wrote, "it represents a social space which no

longer exists."

However, the popular Dutch journalist Karen Spaink offered to archive the ASH website materials on her own website, ash.spaink.net, which continues to provide an inactive copy of the former ASH site. Several sites have emerged to take the place of ASH, including ASM and ASBS, and a new site that uses the name ASH. This active version of ASH consists of message boards in which members post about life, depression and suicide-related topics. According to Google, the group has high activity, and "talk about why suicides increase at holidays" is the description. While sources, as well as the name itself, imply that the creation of ASH stemmed from intentions to brew discussion of suicides around holidays, it is no longer a topic of discussion, and certainly not the focal point of the boards it may once have been. As of April 3, 2008, ASH has 2459 subscribers.

ASM is also a Usenet newsgroup through Google, and was inspired by the infamous "Methods File," an extensive compilation of detailed suicide methods featured on the original ASH website. Members of ASM particularly discuss ways to commit suicide, saving less relevant discussion, such as the source of an individual's suicidal impulses, for the ASH newsgroup. However, members of one group are often members of the other, and conversations overlap. ASM also has high activity, according to Google, and is described as "discussions about how to do yourself in." As of April 3, 2008, ASM has 1994 subscribers.

ASBS, unlike ASH and ASM, is a channel in Internet Relay Chat (IRC) found at ashbusstop.org. The site offers live chat with other members, as opposed to message boards. ASBS provides more than the newsgroups, going far beyond interactive chatting and message boards. The website offers a plethora of information about suicide, a seemingly endless consideration of preparation and aftermath. There are pages that examine the purpose of living, offering pro-life and pro-death viewpoints, and information about euthanasia. The "Tying Loose Ends" page reminds people contemplating suicide to consider pets, bills, funeral plans and more. There are links to animal shelters, lists of funeral homes, as well as detailed instructions of how to close e-mail accounts and erase all ASH-related information from a personal computer, so that family members cannot discover the person's identity as an asher. The "How to Write a Suicide Note" page includes an

introduction of suicide notes, with history and statistics, and detailed advice on how to write a note, whether the writer wants closure or revenge, to tell his or her story, or simply to provide an explanation. This page covers the five stages of receiving catastrophic news so that a note-writer can better understand the emotional state of his or her friends and family.

The "Methods" section of ASBS includes a page about the morality of publishing suicide websites, a page about how to compare different suicide methods, and features a Lethality-Time-Agony Method calculator (LTA). The calculator allows people to enter numbers in a space next to each factor—lethality, time and agony—to register the importance he or she assigns to that factor. The sum of the numbers must be 100. For example, if a suicidal person feels that lethality is the most important, but is not worried about experiencing agony, and mildly cares about the time the suicide takes, he or she might assign lethality 70 points, time 30 points, and agony 0 points. By typing these numbers in the calculator, and clicking the calculate button, a list of recommended suicide methods appears. At the bottom of the page, a chart lists 28 suicide methods and their predicted lethality, the time each would take to complete, and a numeric measure of agony. See Table 1.

Upon entering ASH, ASM and ASBS, there is a warning that explains that the pages deal with serious topics intended for mature audiences. People visiting the ASH or ASM newsgroups are welcomed with an "Adult Content Warning" and must click an "I am at least 18 years old" button to proceed. ASBS instructs users to proceed only after reading a "Terms of Use" section and agreeing to not raise any complaints, verified by clicking the "I agree…let me in" button.

I interviewed ten people who use the ASH, ASM and ASBS groups. A convenience sample was used to select participants, and questions were asked and answered through direct email to insure privacy. Users of any of these forums call themselves "ashers," since all three stem from the original ASH website. (From here on, I will refer to ASH, ASM and ASBS collectively as ASH to avoid redundancy.) Ashers use a set of terms that are unique to "ashspace," which they use as a term for these suicide forums. Other significant terms include "catch the bus" or "ctb," which both mean to commit suicide. Ashers tend to

Table 1: Methods of Suicide from Ashbusstop.org

Method	Lethality (%)	Time (min)	Agony
Carbon Monoxide	71	21.5	18
Overdose Rx drugs	12.3	129	8.5
Overdose non-Rx drugs	6	456	22.5
Overdose illegal drugs	43.96	116.25	5.25
Household toxins	77.5	24	54.5
Cyanide	97	1.8	51.5
Gunshot of head	97	2.5	13
Gunshot of chest	89.5	7	21.7
Gunshot of abdomen	65	69	74
Shotgun to head	99	1.7	5.5
Shotgun to chest	96.4	1.4	16
Explosives	96.4	1.6	3.75
Electrocution	65.5	2.4	72
Set fire to self	76.5	57	95
Structure fire	73	52.5	91.5
Cut throat	51.5	15.5	86
Cut wrists/arms/legs	6	105	71
Stab of chest	58.5	96	76
Stab of abdomen	12.5	252	78
Auto crash	78.5	20.5	30
Jump from height	93.44	4.56	17.78
Hit by train	96.18	17.92	7.08
Hit by truck/auto	70	19	63
Hanging	89.5	7	25.5
Plastic bag over head	23	7	23
Drowning: ocean/lake	63	18.5	79
Drowning: bathtub	21.5	18.5	79
Drowning: pool	21.5	18.5	79

find ashspace by researching suicide or suicide methods on the Internet. Many say they were suicidal and ready to die. They began using ASH as a place to vent, to get input on their suicidal ideas and thoughts,

and to feel less alone. Frequent responses to question 1, "Why did you start using ASH?" dealt with the isolation a suicidal person feels from the rest of the (non-suicidal) world.

According to an asher who uses the nickname AnotherRubberDucky, "I feel like less of a freak," [by using ASH]. Another user, LSD, even referred to the cartoon X-Men, saying, "you know, the mutants were so criticized and left out." Like the outcast monsters, suicidal people feel alone in a world that scrutinizes and scorns them. By sharing her feelings with people in Ashland, LSD said she felt like less of an "alien."

While it was not a frequent explanation for using ASH, two ashers I interviewed said they came to ASH looking for someone to die with. User Joy Miller said, "I would like to find a partner, but there's not that many looking [on ASH]." LSD acknowledged that many people use the Internet to find partners to commit suicide, saying she was even involved in a suicide pact that went astray when the other person in the pact "turned out to be a freak with a suicide fetish that liked to watch people hang in the webcam."

More frequently, people use ASH as a place to talk to people with similar suicidal feelings. An asher who uses the name AndSheWas said, "ASH is not often a discussion about suicide. It's a diary of a spattering of people around the world who have been fortunate enough to find a place to vent their inner feelings. Everyone knows talking about your problems can help." Asher Lyllian Croft summed up the most popular reason people use ASH: "For me, it merely provides a place where I know someone is listening."

AnotherRubberDucky, who came to ASH after years of depression and skin disorders, thinks ASH's attractiveness to its users comes from its nonjudgmental atmosphere. She said:

> You'll find that if you talk suicide with a depressed person and you tell them that "it is not an option" or "[it is] a permanent solution to a temporary problem," well, this produces a sort of claustrophobic feeling in the patient. Making suicide in a way, more appealing and inevitable. As soon as you admit that suicide is an option, and that one is not crazy to consider it, the suicidal person can breathe again.

Question 2, "Does ASH promote and/or encourage suicide and/or suicidal tendencies?" garnered a consistent response: that ASH is pro-choice, not pro-suicide, a viewpoint most participants seemed well-versed in defending. Being pro-choice translates to tolerance of, but not advocacy for, suicide. According to an asher named Maija, "suicide is neither to be encouraged or to be condemned; it's treated as a personal choice." LSD said, "It's not a 'yeah, go kill yourself' thing, but more of a 'we understand' thing."

Furthermore, half of the people interviewed said that ashers actually discourage young people from committing suicide. An asher named CTB said:

> One ethical standard that tends to emanate throughout the group is that young people (teens and early twenties) are discouraged from suicide or for that matter even participating in the newsgroup. Many ashers will tell the youngsters to "leave us losers alone and get some life experience. Let your brain develop. If you feel the same way at age 25 then, 'welcome to ash, sorry you're here' (our standard greeting to a newcomer.)"

Maija answered with a similar response and added, "The same thing goes for people who seem to have very hasty reasons for committing suicide, such as a breakup that happened just days before." Suicide is viewed as an option on ASH, but a last resort.

Some participants took their answers a step further, going as far to say that ASH even helps its users to avoid suicide by serving as an outlet for frustration and depression. AnotherRubberDucky said, "In truth, I have all the information that I need for my 'final exit' but I like the support that I get from the group. And this is support to continue living, not to kill myself."

Particular threads on the ASH message board support the answer that ASH prevents suicide, at least in some cases. In a 2004 thread entitled, "How does ASH impact suicidal ideation for you," ashers discussed whether ASH made them more or less suicidal. Many said that since joining ASH, their desire to commit suicide has decreased because they had found a place where suicide was accepted.

Even more straightforward is the thread from November 2005,

"How ASH saved my life," posted by a former asher, jpatti. Jpatti explained that she had not used ASH in years and was no longer suicidal, but said "I'm posting because I'm pissed about the CNN thing." An article about Suzy Gonzales and her involvement in ASH had appeared on CNN.com two days before jpatti's thread. She explained how finding a community of suicidal people and being able to talk openly about suicide helped her out of suicidality. She further observed, "Those who claim to be opposed to suicide, under any circumstances, often have a sick way of expressing it—by attacking suicidal people. It's like coming upon a car accident and finding someone bleeding on the side of the road and *kicking* them as hard as you can because you're 'opposed' to car accidents"

Maija, an asher since 1999, is no longer suicidal, but still visits ASH. "It is always nice to discuss subjects that are taboo elsewhere, and in general to have in-depth conversations with very intelligent and thoughtful people," she said. "These, especially the latter, are the reasons why I still read ASH almost every day and occasionally post as well." Maija's loyalty to ASH wasn't unique; most of the ashers I interviewed seemed to rely heavily on ASH as an outlet or even as a hangout. On the message boards, dozens of new threads appear every day, and not all relate to suicide. Some are random questions or thoughts, or polls to get to know each other—signaling a desire for friendship. As asher AndSheWas said, "Ash is my lifeline."

Ashers' responses to my questions as well as the tone and language used in the message boards reveal a nonchalant and accepting attitude toward suicide. Suicide isn't feared. It is discussed, dissected, awaited and anticipated. It's also something that can happen at any time. One interviewee, Robert Brown, ended an e-mail by politely adding that if I have any more questions, I should feel free to ask. Brown said he planned to kill himself that night, but that an old friend just called and made plans to stop by later that week to give him a tattoo. "So I should be here another week," he wrote. An argument could even be made that the language ashers use makes suicide less daunting and more natural. Saying "I'm going to catch the bus tonight" has a different manner than "I'm going to commit suicide tonight."

Several ashers admitted to knowing of suicides connected with ASH. Although few revealed names, Suzy Gonzales, an asher whose

suicide was scrutinized by the media in 2003, was often mentioned. However, by searching the message boards, there are various memorial lists throughout the years. Ashers list names of fellow ashers who have committed suicide, and they discuss whether or not some missing ashers are dead or have simply stopped using ASH. In a post from March 31, 2008, an asher claimed to know of 26 confirmed suicides of ashers. Others simply listed the former usernames of friends they know to have committed suicide. Ashers expressed sadness over the loss of friends, but happiness for the dead. AnotherRubberDucky said, "Loss of life is always sad, but then again, so is intense suffering."

The Case of Suzy Gonzales and the Introduction of H.R. 940

In 2003, the daughter of Mike and Mary Gonzales committed suicide. Their daughter Suzy Gonzales was a frequent member to the ASH website, where she used the nickname Suzy California. Suzy consulted other ashers for advice on how to complete her suicide; she eventually chose to die by drinking a lethal cocktail of potassium cyanide. With the instruction she received through the online group, Suzy learned how to send her family and the police department delayed messages saying she had died, and how to pose as a jeweler to obtain her drug of choice. She ordered the cyanide along with other chemicals, so that the order appeared authentic, from a Massachusetts-based chemical company (Scheeres 2003). On March 23, 2003, she received the chemicals and, without missing a beat, she fed her kitten, rented a hotel room and lay down to die. "If you compared the information given on these sites and what Suzy did, you would see that she followed their recipes of deadly instructions," her parents said.

Mike and Mary Gonzales pursued their impulse to seek legal consequences for those aiding in their daughter's death. It wasn't that easy. "For two years," they said, "we asked law enforcement and legal firms to investigate what happened and they all told us that there were no relevant current laws to act upon."

Enter H.R. 940, a bill the Gonzales' helped develop to prevent stories like their own. The bill, also called "Suzy's Law," is backed by California congressman Wally Herger, and was introduced to the United States House of Representatives on February 8, 2007. According to Lindsay Bartlett, who assists in maintaining the H.R. 940 website, the

bill "specifically makes it a crime to go on the Internet and tell someone who seems to be thinking of suicide, 'You should go through with it. Here's how to do it and where to get the materials."

To publicize the bill and garner support, Mike and Mary Gonzales have appeared on television shows including *Oprah*, *Dateline*, *Good Morning America* and various news programs, and granted interviews to several newspapers and magazines, among them the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Seventeen* and *Wired*. Across the country, radio stations have also told their story.

Since Suzy Gonzales' death, several threads on ASH have mentioned possible legal action from her parents and the bill they are pursuing. Most feel that their messages continue to be protected by the First Amendment. In relation to Suzy Gonzalez, ashers seem to share the belief that her suicide was inevitable; the support she received from ASH was at most an advancing factor in her death, but in no way responsible. In response to a thread entitled, "Should we be banned," started on February 8, 2008, a user named Dan said:

> Suzy Gonzales' parents should realize SUZY is responsible for her own actions and her own suicide. Maybe she found information on how to obtain cyanide, but reading the archives a year ago, I remember that she was saying that she was so desperate as to resort to jumping, and even fantasizing about guillotines. She may have committed suicide regardless of ever finding ASH.

Mike and Mary Gonzales, Lindsay Bartlett, and Wally Herger, on the other hand, remain optimistic, although the bill is in the first step in the legislative process. "We have two years from date of introduction to get the bill voted on and out of the House to the Senate," Mike Gonzales said. From there, the Senate will discuss and debate the bill, and if the Senate chooses to pass the bill, it goes on to the President. "We'll keep revising it until it does become successful," Bartlett said, "We're in for the long haul!"

Conclusion
The Internet has not received nearly as much consideration as

other suicide factors. While the literature review provided a great deal of relevant information about suicide and its components, this study has uncovered new information. While my data were qualitative and often based on case studies, the results are nonetheless significant. By exploring the content of suicide websites, newsgroups and message boards, and interviewing the people that use them, I have presented a fresh look into the connection between suicide and the Internet.

Previous research provided grounds for further investigation. My investigation unearthed the same graphic suicide paraphernalia Alao and colleagues (2006) discussed. Their article, "Cybersuicide: Review of the Role of the Internet on Suicide" went on to discuss how the Internet can be a potential source of help for suicidal people, a conclusion that other researchers and myself also reached. Alao and colleagues said that the Internet can be beneficial when suicidal people seek counseling online (490). Tam, Tang and Fernando (2007) called the Internet a "double-edged tool" in relation to suicide, explaining how the Internet could help suicidal people by providing online support groups, etc.

However, each instance of research merely illustrated the Internet's *potential* in serving as a source of help for suicidal people. None of the research thus far has offered compelling evidence that pro-suicide websites ironically help some people avoid suicide. In my research, responses to interviews provided evidence that suicide websites, or at least newsgroups such as ASH, can be beneficial to suicidal people and help them to not commit suicide. This is an unexamined perspective, but one that my research strongly supported.

Suicide has always yielded questions, but it is the high-speed development of the Internet and its effect on the age-old quandary of suicide, that calls for even more and newer research. The existence of suicide websites is verified and, as of now, the law does not interfere in their continuation. In an era in which search engines have replaced dictionaries and "Google it" has become a catchphrase, it is clear that suicide methods are only a click away. Websites, message boards, chat rooms and newsgroups can all harbor suicidal people, foster discussion about the best way to die, and reveal the means. Their effect, however, is not yet clear. It is far too soon to rule out the possibility that they might function to counteract suicidal impulses

and hinder attempts.

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