

New project investigates the internet's impact on suicide

February 19 2014



Researchers at the University of Bristol are joining forces with Samaritans to carry out groundbreaking research into the role the internet plays for those with suicidal thoughts.

It is the first time this hugely important issue will be researched by talking to people with actual experience of using the internet when they were feeling suicidal.

The announcement comes amid growing concern that the internet is playing an increasing role for those experiencing suicidal feelings. The

media has highlighted a number of cases where it is claimed that suicides have been heavily influenced by online content in various self-harm and suicide-related websites and social networking forums.

Others maintain that the internet can provide a space where those with [suicidal thoughts](#) can express their feelings and find support. Attempting to shut down websites or ban content could drive discussion underground, exacerbate the stigma and taboo already associated with suicide and criminalise vulnerable people.

This research, funded by the Department of Health Policy Research Programme, aims to find out what the actual risks and benefits of the internet might be to people with suicidal feelings and how often it plays a role in [suicidal behaviour](#). By combining academic research with Samaritans' experience of delivering services and user-involvement, the project will make a vital practical difference to those at risk of suicide.

The provision of the necessary evidence to identify both harmful and positive content will assist in the development of 'good practice' guidelines, better regulation and policy. The project will also pinpoint specific sites that require urgent action.

The research team plan to use their findings to provide evidence-based advice on [suicide prevention](#) in order to influence the [internet industry](#), advise policy makers, develop online support, and assist clinicians in supporting patients.

By using surveys, interviews with those who have been suicidal and those bereaved by suicide, talking to clinicians and reviews of on-line material, the research will explore:

- How, why, and when people who are feeling suicidal use related content online

- How common the use of this online material is and the impact it has on suicidal behaviour
- The characteristics of people more likely to turn to the internet when they are vulnerable
- The range of suicide-related content online (including support materials) and how this is interpreted and used by people.

The project is due to last until March 2016 and will see the Bristol University team, led by Dr Lucy Biddle in the School of Social and Community Medicine, work in partnership with Samaritans.

Dr Biddle said: "The internet poses considerable challenges for suicide prevention. It provides readily accessible information that may increase the risk of suicide and allows an immediate exchange of unregulated user-generated content through social media and chatrooms.

"Regulating and policing this is extremely challenging. A more effective approach may be to try to understand why and where people go online so that we can direct our efforts at supporting vulnerable web-users and working with the industry. As part of this we should recognise and capitalise upon the great potential the Internet has to reach out to and help those in need. This essential research is long overdue."

Drawing on 60 years of experience, one of Samaritans' key contributions will be organising and analysing a series of in-depth qualitative interviews with people who have turned to the [internet](#) when they were struggling to cope.

Joe Ferns, Executive Director of Policy, Research & Development at Samaritans, said: "This is a crucial piece of research. Until now politicians, journalists and campaigners have been debating in a vacuum, with insufficient hard evidence to support or refute their views. The findings of this project will be turned into practical actions, helping us

understand how to best support our callers in the future. They will also inform the debate both here in the UK and around the world."

Provided by University of Bristol

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