

Internet search engines as both an aid and a danger for people at risk of suicide

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If someone is thinking about suicide, the Internet often serves as a source of information. The dangerous thing about this is that content containing harmful information that can potentially encourage suicide ranks higher in search engines' hit lists than sources of help. These are the findings of a recent study by Benedikt Till and Thomas Niederkrotenthaler from the Institute of Social Medicine at the MedUni Vienna's Centre for Public Health.

The study, which was published in the August issue of the highly respected "*Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*", investigated which websites can be found by searching for information on suicides using popular search engines (Google, Bing/Yahoo) in Austria or the USA. The positive news about the results is that information of a more protective nature is significantly more plentiful than harmful information, both in Austria and in the USA. In fact the ratio is around 2:1. Consequently, there is on the whole more protective information for those seeking help.

"However the type of website and quality of information found depends greatly on what search terms are used. There is considerably more potentially harmful web content available when method-based search terms are used (such as "how do I hang myself?") and more potentially protective content with help-orientated terms (e.g. "[suicide](#) help")," notes Thomas Niederkrotenthaler. "People at greater risk of suicide probably use method-based terms, which is why it is extremely relevant what appears in the search lists," continues Niederkrotenthaler.

"Websites also appear much earlier in the search list - i.e. they are ranked higher in the search engine results - the more harmful and less positive characteristics they have," adds Benedikt Till. According to the study's authors, this is dangerous for affected individuals because information with harmful content is generally easier to find in search engines than information with a more protective character. The ratio of harmful to protective content is therefore only positive at first glance.

Specific improvements can be achieved using simple means

The study also makes it clear that, in terms of [suicide prevention](#) on the Internet - especially in Austria - there is still room for improvement in relation to user-friendliness and rankings. By way of a specific improvement, the study authors recommend that operators of prevention websites improve the rankings of their own websites for searches performed using method-oriented search terms. This can be achieved partly by enabling ads for their website to appear when [search terms](#) of this kind are entered, but also by enhancing their own website with suitable meta tags (e.g. suicide methods).

Integration of [social media](#) and active collaboration with search engines can be useful

The integration of social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter) or a higher number of links leading to the website (e.g. through cooperation with other aid organisations) can help to further improve an organisation's ranking in the search engines. According to the two researchers, talks are also currently ongoing with Google about ways to rank websites about suicide prevention more effectively. In some countries, Google already allows the pop-up of prevention websites when certain terms are entered. "In Austria, for example, a search for "suicide" returns a link to the crisis

intervention centre. These links also need to be used more frequently for other terms," says Till.

Results of relevance to the entire German-speaking region

The study's significance also lies in the fact that the relevance of the study results goes way beyond the comparison of the USA and Austria. This is because 66.6% of the websites in the Austrian results were from Germany, 2.4% from Switzerland and only 21.2% came from Austria. In searches using US search engines, 80.6% of the results came from the USA, 5.6% came from the UK, 4.5% from Australia and 2.8% from Canada. This study is therefore a comparison between the English and German-speaking regions.

More information: "Surfing for Suicide Methods and Help: Content Analysis of Websites Retrieved With Search Engines in Austria and the United States." Benedikt Till and Thomas Niederkrotenthaler. *J Clin Psychiatry*. [DOI: 10.4088/JCP.13m08861](https://doi.org/10.4088/JCP.13m08861)

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