

Study shows harmful elements prevalent in suicide posts on social media while protective elements are rare

7 July 2020, by Bob Yirka



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A trio of researchers, two with Facebook, the other the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, has found that posts that feature elements considered harmful to people at risk of committing suicide are prevalent on shared social media sites, but those with protective elements are rare. In their paper published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (and on Facebook's research [page](#)), Moira Burke, Farshad Kooti and Steven Sumner describe their study of suicidal content on social media sites and what they learned about it.

Prior research has shown that suicide is on the rise—current rates in the U.S. are at a 20-year high. Though it is not known why the rate is climbing, research has shown that there are steps people can take to reduce the chances of people with [suicidal tendencies](#) from killing themselves. One such organization, [reportingonsuicide.org](#), provides guidelines for those seeking advice. As the suicide rate has risen, some in the [mainstream media](#)

have suggested that [social media](#) is at least partly to blame. Many sites such as Facebook and Instagram have posts that not only glamorize suicide, but provide guidance on how to carry out such acts. In this new effort, the researchers combed [social media sites](#) for suicidal content and compared what they found with social [media](#) reporting guidelines to gain a better perspective on the problem.

In all, the researchers found 664 suicide-related news articles that had been posted on social media sites between October 20 and November 19, 2018. They found that over 60 percent of such articles that had been shared with others contained no helpful information, such as where those at risk might seek help. They also found that more than half of the articles contained information that is considered harmful to those at risk, such as details of a suicide, or inclusion of the word "suicide" in the headline. The team also found that articles that did contain helpful information for those at risk received more engagement on social networking sites—they were 19 percent more likely to be shared than those with harmful information.

The researchers suggest that posts on social media that adhere to reporting guidelines may not only benefit those who read them, but may also support the goals of the social media sites.

More information: Steven A. Sumner et al. Adherence to suicide reporting guidelines by news shared on a social networking platform, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2020). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2001230117](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2001230117)

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APA citation: Study shows harmful elements prevalent in suicide posts on social media while protective elements are rare (2020, July 7) retrieved 18 May 2021 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-07-elements-prevalent-suicide-social-media.html>

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