

Webcam Suicide Spectators Respond With Ghastly Online Comments

Freedom of expression is precious, there is no doubt, but sometimes I wonder whether freedom *from* expression is even more precious. This never occurred to me before the advent of the internet, which revealed to me as nothing else had ever done the vile nature of the thoughts of some, or many, of my fellow beings. Had they always had in mind the kind of things they now confided to the world via the internet, or had the latter, like the sleep of reason in Goya's famous etching, brought forth its monsters? I suppose that we shall never know; suffice it to say that I often wish that people would keep their nastier thoughts to themselves.

A paper in the *British Journal of Psychiatry* for December analyzes the online commentary before, during and after the suicide of a young Swedish man who hanged himself in public, or at least on screen. At 11.51 a.m. on October 11, 2010, he started a thread on a Swedish internet forum called *Flashback* titled "Hanging." He wrote (in Swedish):

I have now decided to kill myself by hanging... Took some painkillers a few minutes ago... now waiting for them to start working. Have turned on my webcam that makes a screenshot every 2 seconds... where images will be available.

The first response was "Good luck then!"

About a third of the messages before he hanged himself were what the authors called "encouraging" (i.e. encouraging him to

proceed, not encouraging from the point of view of our estimate of human nature). Here are two:

*Stupid f**k, strangulation is no pleasure. Don't you have a car...carbon monoxide rules.*

And:

In the way you write, one can see that you're just a faker, go and hang yourself.

After he had hanged himself, about half the messages (of 344) thought it was a tragedy, but even here the language used was sometimes less than dignified:

*Go****mn sh*t, so fu**ing tragic.*

In other words, coarseness has invaded even finer feeling. The commentators on the event were, of course, a self-selected sample, not representative of the population as a whole; but still one cannot help but wonder whether this deeply unpleasant (and inexpressive) way of expressing oneself in public has become more general with the ease, and lack of consequence, of doing so.

Even after his death by hanging, when his body was visible to all, there were those who doubted the reality:

Well who cares... one tramp less, moreover it is probably a fake.

Some people found the whole business amusing:

Call me sick, but have never laughed so much in my life...

And:

Ha-ha-ha, this was a good day...

And:

High-level humour in all this. Especially I laughed at the image where the cops just discovered that they are being broadcast on the interweb.

Another asked:

Give me some more pictures please! Ideally a video of all images...

Only 38 of the 638 messages commented on or wondered about the young man's reasons for killing himself. Of those who considered the opportunities for prevention, 38 percent (of 95) thought that he should not have been prevented even if it had been possible to prevent him:

Ha-ha, awesome, if you want to kill yourself it's your decision, no one should interfere.

And:

This is sick, but as I said, Why stop the guy? It is up to him to make the decision whether to do it or not.

And:

... after all it is their life and their body, and I think they should be allowed to do what they like with those things.

Philosophical crudity can go no further. The thread had 5 million viewers, a number equal to half the population of Sweden. I noticed in a newspaper on the very same day that I read the paper that the Swedish government is to distribute an African feminist tract to all secondary school pupils.

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