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Cybersuicide: Exhibitionism's final frontier

Abraham Biggs once wrote that the online community had “become like a family to me.” But they “hardly acted like a family” when he needed them, said Brian Stelter in *The New York Times*. Biggs, 19, last week took an overdose of prescription pills while broadcasting his suicide live on the Internet via webcam. Scores of online spectators watched him die, cheerfully swapping OMG!!!s and LOL!!!s in an adjacent chat room, with no one bothering to call the police until Biggs had visibly stopped breathing. Worse, said Bill Berlow in the Tallahassee, Fla., Democrat, before Biggs took his final pills, some of these “virtual sadists” were actively egging him on, telling him to “do it” and “stop wasting our time with your mindless self-pity.” Biggs’ death represents more than the tragic loss of a single, troubled young man. It’s a deeply troubling illustration of the “loss of humanity” we have all suffered in this fractured, virtual age.

That’s a little extreme, said the *Montreal Gazette* in an editorial. The more outrageous something seems on the Internet, the more likely it is to be a hoax. Many of those who reacted too slowly to Biggs’ actions undoubtedly thought he was faking—at least until he stopped moving. A “harsher verdict is appropriate for those viewers who urged Biggs on,” but we should avoid the temptation to blame the Internet itself for their behavior. The fact is, there have always been those monsters who shout “Jump!” at suicidal wretches trembling on window ledges, and there have always been—and always will be—depressed, lonely people who choose to take their own lives, whether or not there’s anyone watching.

It’s not quite that simple, said Fred Tasker in *The Miami Herald*. Experts say that for adolescents especially, the presence of an audience can be a crucial factor in prompting them to do what they would otherwise not. Had Abraham Biggs not had “access to a blog and a webcam,” there’s a good chance he would have been forced to share his pain with his actual friends and his non-virtual family. The anonymity and “depersonalization” of cyberspace also encouraged abnormal behavior in Biggs’ audience, said Oren Dorell in *USA Today*. Of course his viewers should have told him to stop. But their greater sin was to deny him the kind of basic human-to-human communication the Internet was designed to facilitate. All Biggs wanted and needed—and in the end didn’t get—was someone to talk to.