

Google sends desperate teenagers to chat rooms promoting suicide

Mark Bridge Technology Correspondent
Katie Gibbons, Ben Killick

Google is directing people to suicide chat rooms where members encourage each other and discuss methods.

The Times found that searches linked to methods led to online forums featuring detailed advice and graphic images. The forums, whose users include teenagers, also recommend a book sold by Amazon that identifies dealers of deadly drugs.

Some of the searches are used as often as thousands of times a month. After *The Times* shared the findings with Google, it did not alter its ranking of results, despite warnings of the risks from such material.

A recent report for the government warned that "harmful" suicide material online posed a risk to the young. Grant Shapps, the Tory MP for Welwyn Hatfield and the report's author, said the new findings indicated that further urgent action was required from Google, which must not turn a blind eye to possibly life-endangering information.

Google already directs some search terms that indicate suicidal intent to

suicide prevention resources from the Samaritans and NHS. Experts stress that appropriate online resources have a very positive effect. However, forums that promote suicide appeared prominently, sometimes in second place, in search results for eight terms entered.

One of the worst sites appearing high in search results began as a group on Reddit but was barred from the discussion website for encouraging violence. It is now a stand-alone site whose owners boast that they do not censor posts. They claim that it is based offshore.

The site includes "resources", such as suicide how-to guides, and links to a book that advises readers on methods including the purchase of deadly drugs from overseas. Although the publishers of the book say on their website that it is intended for older people and the gravely sick, it is also available on sites such as Amazon and eBay with no restrictions. The website also includes threads where people seek partners to commit suicide with.

Research by the University of Bristol, cited in Mr Shapps's report, indicates that 8 per cent of people taken to hospital after a suicide attempt had accessed

related material online, rising to 12 per cent of those aged 16 to 24. Among those aged 21 who made suicide attempts, almost three quarters had used or accessed related online material.

Mr Shapps said: "We spent 18 months researching how the internet influences suicide. Our findings suggested that at its best the online world could provide powerful support but at its worst the internet could influence life-ending behaviour. When we circulated an early draft of our report findings to search engines, Google was pretty responsive. However, it's clear from this *Times* research that further urgent action is required.

"The immediacy of search engine results means these organisations are in a unique position to signpost help and support at a moment of significant crisis in someone's life. It is not good enough to turn a blind eye to potentially life-endangering information."

Jayed Khan, chief executive of Barnardo's, said: "It is deeply concerning that material which effectively promotes suicide is so accessible online. Much more needs to be done to protect children from such shocking material.

It's vital the government works closely with mental health charities, internet companies and content creators to work out when and how restricting such items is appropriate and necessary."

Ged Flynn, chief executive of the national charity Papyrus Prevention of Young Suicide, said: "Papyrus has campaigned for many years, pressing for regulation of sites which describe and discuss methods of suicide and, indeed, encourage others to take their own life. Many of the people in touch with Papyrus have lost children to suicide, where evidence confirmed they had accessed pro-suicide sites."

A spokesman for Google said: "We know people turn to the internet for information and advice so when you search for certain queries relating to suicide, we automatically show the Samaritans' 24-hour number to connect people who are depressed, suicidal or in distress with the help and advice they need." Sources close to the company indicated that *The Times*'s searches were considered too specific and unusual to warrant changes to the algorithm.

The Samaritans can be contacted on 116 123 or [online at samaritans.org](http://online.samaritans.org).

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