

# Japanese Internet suicide clubs targeted by police

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Finding a soul mate is one of the great rewards of the Internet for many across the globe. Yet in Japan, cyberspace is also a convenient location for those trying to find someone to die with, as the country continues to grapple with its ever-increasing suicide rate.

On Wednesday Japan's national police agency announced guidelines requiring Internet providers and telecommunications groups to report any postings they find on the Internet about potential suicides. The police emphasized the need for quick action when the supposed date of the suicide is indicated or if the location or method of killing oneself is indicated.

The police pointed out that the number of suicidal people who go about either declaring on the World Wide Web that they are about to kill themselves or seek others to commit collective suicide continues to rise and argued that by cracking down on such sites they may be able to prevent a significant number of suicides from occurring.

As a rule, ISPs are obliged to preserve the individual's right to privacy in cyberspace, but if the postings they find appear to fit what the authorities designate as a so-called emergency under law, they are free to notify the police about the suicide dialogue, even though the definition of an emergency situation is largely open to individual interpretation. Nevertheless, such requests from the government are antagonizing critics who object to such bureaucratic intervention in freedom of speech and the right to privacy.

At the same time, there is no doubt that suicide -- and group suicide among strangers who find one another on the Internet -- is a serious concern for Japanese society at large. In fact, suicide is the single-biggest cause of death for those between the ages of 20 to 39, according to the health ministry. The number of suicides has exceeded 30,000 for the fourth year in a row, and the per capita rate of suicides is about twice that in the United States. In fact, Japan has the second-highest suicide rate in the world after Sri Lanka, according to the United Nations.

Meanwhile, the interior ministry reported in August that four major Japanese telecommunications groups -- the Telecommunications Carriers Association, the Telecom Services Association, the Japan Internet Providers Association and the Japan Cable and Telecommunications Association -- must work closely with the government to identify and ultimately stop suicidal individuals from seeking each other out and killing themselves.

Some bloggers argued that talking about killing oneself anonymously on the Internet is an important way for many young people to think about their lives and living in general.

"Telling someone who's suicidal that killing yourself is wrong just doesn't work ... It's more important to listen to what they have to say, and try to empathize with their feelings in order to prevent them from committing suicide," one blogger wrote on a Web site dedicated to studying the psychology of those who are suicidal.

At the same time, stories like that of one man and two women killing themselves in a suburban Tokyo apartment continue to shock the nation. The three seemingly unrelated people found each other through a so-called suicide club Web site that called upon like-minded people to get together to muster up the courage to end their lives together. The 30-year-old man had recently lost his job, while one 22-year-old woman had just

gone through a divorce and the other woman had been under pressure about her growing debts. They killed themselves by starting up a coal-burning stove and sealing windows and doors with duct tape to ensure they would all die of carbon-monoxide poisoning.

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