What Sort of Evil Person Encourages a Teenager to Commit Suicide?

By Alex Berezow, PhD — May 17, 2019

Credit: Instagram/Wikipedia [1]

A 16-year-old girl uses her social media account to post a question: Should I kill myself? Sixty-nine percent of people who responded said yes. So she did.

This isn't the plot of a twisted new movie. This, according to a report [2] coming from Malaysia, actually happened. The teenager posted a poll on Instagram, "Really Important, Help Me Choose D/L," (D = death, L = life), and she jumped off the roof of a building shortly after the results came in. Some in Malaysia want those who voted "yes" prosecuted for abetting the suicide of a minor, which in Malaysia is punishable by 20 years in prison or the death penalty.

This tragic story represents the intersection of at least four different prominent features of society, so let's consider them individually:

Social media: I've been using social media since the mid-2000s, and I cannot decide if it's a net positive or net negative for society. Almost all of the news I consume comes from stories that pop up in my Facebook and Twitter feeds. Because these feeds are tailored toward my interests, they are an incredibly efficient way for me to keep track of current events. Social media is also great for maintaining contact with friends with whom I would otherwise lose touch.

On the flip side, social media has made it incredibly easy to defame and libel people. Being smeared and harassed is a routine part of my daily existence as a writer. I've even received death threats. I'm unsure if the tremendous pain and anxiety that social media has caused in my life is outweighed by the benefits. I imagine this is true of many people, including for the girl who killed herself.

The banality of evil: What sort of sick person encourages a teenager to commit suicide? Given just a little bit of anonymity and the distance afforded by electronic communication, humans can be incredibly heartless and vicious. In this case, it wasn't just one or two people; it was 69% of this girl's Instagram followers. How could so many people engage in a cruel, pointless act of evil?

This phenomenon was coined the "banality of evil [3]" by author Hannah Arendt. She argues that the average person, like the average Nazi during the Holocaust, is capable of incredible acts of evil through a combination of indifference and stupidity. Every human being, it would seem, is capable of behaving in this way.

Mental health: Any person who posts a poll on social media asking if she should commit suicide is obviously struggling with mental health issues. It is quite possible that this teenager had already made up her mind to end her own life and was seeking some sort of justification for her decision. Of course, a person in this fragile state should be encouraged to seek help, not egged on.

Policy: The trickiest question may be what, if anything, should society do about all this? People who struggle with mental illness can interact with hundreds of mean-spirited, ill-willed people within a matter of minutes thanks to social media. Before the mid-2000s, something like that simply couldn't have happened.

While it may be a worthwhile symbolic move for Malaysia to prosecute the people who encouraged this girl to commit suicide, the reality is that we can't legislate evil away. And in a country like the United States, free speech would serve as a barrier to the creation of any law meant to curb online communication, no matter how nasty.

Perhaps what we need is a cultural change. It is thought that the Scottish minister Ian Maclaren [4] coined what became the common axiom, "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle." More people should follow his advice.