Blaming Instagram is too easy: politicians must do more to help teens

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Article Commentary

"To suggest simple causation with suicide is deeply dangerous, because it risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy for the most vulnerable."

Hadley Freeman is a columnist at the *Guardian*. In the following viewpoint, Freeman argues that members of the news media often act irresponsibly in their reporting on teenage suicide. The author criticizes media outlets for ignoring the best practices guidelines that mental health organizations have developed for media coverage of suicide. Providing the case of a fourteen-year-old who died by suicide as an example, Freeman characterizes media coverage as quick to assign blame on social media and showing no restraint in reporting specific details of the death. While Freeman acknowledges that tech companies have enabled potentially dangerous cultures to thrive on social media, she warns that attributing any suicide to a single cause ignores the larger issues contributing to the mental health crisis among young people.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. According to Freeman, why do Molly Russell's parents believe that Instagram contributed to their daughter's death?
2. For what reasons does Freeman compare social media of the twenty-first century to fashion magazines of the twentieth century? Do you find this comparison strengthens her arguments about teenage mental health?
3. Do you think teachers have a responsibility to monitor the mental health of their students? Why or why not?

Technology changes the medium but not the message. We still send out party invites and birth announcements, but by text and email as opposed to Royal Mail, and we take photos of ourselves on holiday, but put them on Facebook instead of in family albums. And we worry about the images our children are seeing, but where once those images came from fashion magazines, now they're piped directly into kids' phones and laptops.

Molly Russell was only 14 when she killed herself in 2017, leaving behind a devastated family and a lot of anguished questions. Her father, Ian, has been extraordinarily brave in talking about his daughter. He has described his horror at discovering the images of self-harm she had been looking at on Instagram and Pinterest, encouraged by those sites' algorithms, which had noted Molly's interest in certain subjects. According to Ian, even after Molly died, Pinterest was emailing her harmful photographs. "There's no doubt that Instagram played a part in Molly's death," he said last weekend.

Matt Hancock, the health secretary, offered up his tuppence, saying he felt "physically sick" about Molly's death. He added: "I feel the fear of a parent that our children can be torn away from us, aided by new technology. So I am determined to do what is necessary to stop teenagers falling into a suicide trap."

The shrug-face emoji irresponsibility of big tech companies is a hot topic at the moment, from Facebook's apparent inability to stop promoting fake news to Amazon's decidedly lax approach to workers' rights. The Russell family is absolutely right to call out Instagram's failure to filter out clearly toxic images, just as parents were right 15 years ago to call out fashion magazines for using too-skinny models. Admittedly, I have some scepticism about whether that earlier outcry changed much: as anyone who has picked up a fashion magazine recently can tell you, they are still full of skinny models. But it is always worth pointing out immoral (or amoral) behaviour instead of allowing it to become quietly normalised.

As happened with fashion magazines two decades ago, the story has been seized on, especially the trendy social media angle, and

it's coverage like this that proves Chris Morris's The Day Today was not satire but a prediction of the future. One newspaper columnist made the jaw-droppingly irresponsible claim that "I can state without a shadow of a doubt that if Instagram had existed when I was a teenager, I too would be dead," while TV reporters shoved photos of slit wrists at tech bosses while crying out "There's a dead girl!" and demanding apologies (https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6636247/LIZ-JONES-Jailing-social-media-bosses-way-stop-deaths-girls-like-Molly.html).

To suggest simple causation with suicide is deeply dangerous, because it risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy for the most vulnerable; there is a reason why the Samaritans strongly advise against it (https://www.samaritans.org/about-samaritans/media-guidelines/). And in fact, buried within the news stories about Molly's "normal, happy childhood" are more telling details that have received less play. In an interview, Ian Russell described finding notes in Molly's journal after her death: "She tried to describe what depression was like. She likened it to being in a little boat and a storm bearing down on her."

I'm sure it's satisfying for members of this government to wag their fingers self-righteously at wealthy tech bosses in San Francisco. But if Hancock is really so "determined" to help unhappy teenagers, he could start by sorting out the child and adolescent mental health services (Camhs), which have been decimated under his party's austerity programme. Despite the Tories' frequent platitudes about mental health, this has not been matched by anything close to sufficient funding. Mental health trust budgets and funding for early intervention services have been slashed, and rates of depression and self-harm in young people have rocketed. We are now in what is widely agreed to be an adolescent mental health crisis, with waiting lists for psychiatric services as long as 18 months. Schools are trying to fill the gap, but teachers are overwhelmed. They have asked for more training in spotting potential problems and educating kids about coping with their feelings, and handling, yes, social media—but that requires funding, which is not coming any time soon.

These are not sexy discussion topics, certainly less sexy than Instagram. But they are central if we are serious about helping vulnerable adolescents, rather than sensationalising other families' tragedies. Of course, social media companies should abide by their own codes of conduct and not host harmful images; but the problem is not that these images exist, but that so many young people are seeking them out, and being affected by them. Just as not everyone who looked at a photo of a skinny model in the 90s became anorexic, so not everyone today who sees an image of self-harm on Pinterest will act on it. But some—children, teenagers and adults—will, and that is because these images are a symptom, not the root problem. Focusing on them is like concentrating on which Instagram filter to use: you're not looking at the actual picture.

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