

# Death Anxiety, Murder-Suicide, and the Impact of the News

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There is an enormous amount of death anxiety in the contemporary world, despite an extraordinary extension of human life in terms of numbers and length. Despite the ravages of the wars in the first half of the 20th century, according to the United Nations the world population has grown from an estimated 1.7 billion people in 1900 to over 7.2 billion people today (<http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/sixbillion/sixbilpart1.pdf>). The National Research Council reported that, in the United States, life expectancy has risen from 47.9 years for men and 50.7 years for women in 1900 to 75.1 years for men and 80.2 years for women today (<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK62373/>). This trend was mirrored in many other industrialized nations in the 20th and 21st centuries.

The paradox of increasing anxiety about death and an unprecedented period of life extension can be explained by a number of factors, but for the purposes of this essay I will focus on two of them. One way of dealing with the anxiety regarding the inevitability of death is to commit suicide, thus gaining a measure of control over death by choosing the time and place. Secondly, the development of modern communications brings the bad news of the world to our ears, eyes, and fingertips as never before. When death was so much more prevalent in the daily lives of people through loss in childbirth and high rates of infant mortality in a child's first vulnerable years, death came as a more normal, though regrettable, part of life. Similarly, the death of older people was taken as a given.

Today we have this massive extension of life but incredibly higher expectations in terms of standards of living and length of longevity. We also have the realization that there's far more suicide that occurs in society than we ever wanted to acknowledge. According to [suicide.org](http://suicide.org), the U.S.'s suicide rate has grown 60% in the past 45 years, to the current rate of 16 suicides per 100,000 people. Since statistics are such a modern phenomenon, it is very difficult to come up with reliable statistics regarding historical comparisons in terms of suicide. When taking an English historical demography course in graduate school, I was struck by how many suicides of older people were recorded in the parish registers. The explanation offered by the professor was that older people (by their standards, not ours) felt useless and did not want to be a burden or dependent on their children.

So how do we explain the phenomenon of suicidal murder in our modern world? Where does death anxiety fit into this picture? After discussing the function of the news, I will delve into these issues. NEWS, an acronym for north, east, west, and south represents our listening for the dangers of our world. When our ancestors began their day by looking out from the relative safety of their perch in trees or mountainous caves, they wanted to know what dangers would face them from all directions. They could gauge the relative safety of stepping down into their world. The news is geared to the dangers that exist. Of course, if it is only danger, danger, danger in all directions, then the viewer and listener of the news becomes desensitized and, in a sense, immunized against paying attention. This is why amidst all the negativity in news there will be a heartwarming story of a cute baby, animal or something else that's warm and

fuzzy. These generalizations are focused on the general impact of the media, not the specialized media programs for people who are geared to a particular business, industry, or sport. Of late, the focus on news bringing danger is diluted by the newer phenomenon of “entertainment news,” which breaks up the suffering and dangers of the world with gossip, sports, and a focus on celebrities.

Whereas in earlier times people had to deal with the bad news impacting their family and village, today it is the bad news of the entire universe which is brought to them by the marvel of modern electronics. (It is not quite the entire universe, since people in the news business know that if there is little connection to the suffering groups, for example those who have suffered and died in the Congo over the last 30 years, then showing the bodies of dead Congolese will have far more limited viewers than will the pictures of suffering people who are easier to relate to for the viewers.) The news adds a level of fantasy and disconnect between the reality of death and what we see on TV. Adolescents and young men appear to be especially prone to confuse violent fantasies with reality.

When on March 24, 2015 Andreas Lubitz, a German co-pilot, flew 149 other people to their deaths in the Pyrenees, anyone who has flown in a plane or plans or hopes to can relate to this sense of vulnerability. Yet why did this young German feel the need to take others with him in his suicide? In our celebrity culture, did he feel the need to be remembered? Was he in a manic phase of the depression for which he had been treated? Did losing his commercial pilot’s license appear to be a type of death to him? There are some hints as to his motivation that have been revealed, but I doubt that we will ever have a definitive answer. The phenomenon of the “lonely suicide” is one that has puzzled me for a long time. Clearly, some people kill themselves when life becomes unbearable, but why do a few of them feel the need to have companions in their death? When these companions are unwittingly joining a suicidal murderer in death, it is especially troublesome.

Murder-suicides are most associated in my consciousness and that of most people I know with domestic acts of violence and Islamic fundamentalists in the Middle East. Both forms of terrorism clearly seem to be encouraged by the bad news of such atrocities being committed elsewhere. Those involved in terrorist suicides in the Middle East and Afghanistan are likely to be drawn or forced into it because of the ravages of war and the impact of extremist religion. Immigrants and the children of immigrants from Islamic countries are sometimes torn between their new country and their old culture, and in the search for adventure can be drawn to terrorist groups like ISIS (ISIL). Those in the West performing individual acts of terrorism are more inclined to be based on what the French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) called anomie, a lack of clear moral standards leading some individuals, especially young men, to kill themselves.

Many domestic acts of murder-suicide may be disguised since the suicide is by the police. Since the suicide is by the police trained to shoot to kill, police are only too accommodating when the group I call cowardly suicides commit acts of mayhem so that they will either feel there is no way of avoiding death at their own hands or

by the bullets of the police. The gun lobby and conservatives are quick to denounce President Obama or any political opponents who dare to speak for gun control on the grounds that they are “politicizing” the tragedies of the victims, their families, and communities. The high rate of gun violence is definitely political, since public safety is the first responsibility of our President and our political leaders in general. Murder-suicides are likely to be domestic with death by friends and family, typically on the weekend, but these usually make the local news instead of national, as pointed out by one of my students. This is precisely because we do not like to think about the danger posed by our friends, family, and ourselves—in America, suicide is a much greater danger than homicide.

The search for adventure for many young people in the West, not all Muslim, leads them to volunteer to fight for ISIS, which offers such simplistic solutions to the problems of our world. ISIS represents the safe “other” and can be feared and hated without having to change American policies on gun ownership. ISIS is an apocalyptic religion offering its adherents a chance for a cleansing rebirth in the face of a complex world in which tradition and gender roles are being questioned by the images of modern society, which increasingly shows women as equals to men and even leaders with their own emotional and sexual desires and needs. This is very unsettling to people whose societies have been destabilized by new possibilities following George W. Bush’s invasion of Iraq.

Fantasies about death abound and can inspire leaders who create death cults. Hitler, orphaned by the death of his father at age 13 and mother when he was 18, was born into a family where his father’s first two wives and his mother’s first three children had all died prior to him, as did his younger brother, Edmund, when he was 11. He focused on “glorious deaths” of Wagnerian operas and turned Nazi Germany and much of Europe into a death culture that devoured Jews, Poles, Ukrainians, Russians, and ultimately, Germans by the millions. Although before his final suicide he was reported to have tried to kill himself after the Beer Hall Putsch, it took the destruction of his fantasy of symbolically bringing his mother back to life in the “Motherland” for him to finally pull the trigger (see Rudolf Binion, *Hitler Among the Germans*, 1976).

Death anxiety leads some people, especially a comparatively few young men, to embrace suicide and even murder-suicide, and it is exacerbated by the rapid dissemination of bad news in our global society. Although in the end death is a solitary affair, there are some among us who seek to involve others in their own demise.

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**How to Cite This:**

Elovitz, P. H. (2015). Death anxiety, murder-suicide, and the impact of the news. *Clio's Psyche*, 22(3), 123-126.

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Death Anxiety, Murder-Suicide, and the Impact of the News

Clio's Psyche, Volume 22, Number 3, December 2015, Pages: 123 - 223. Section: The  
Psychology of Terror and Terrorism Special Issue. <[cliospsyche.org](http://cliospsyche.org)>

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