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Suicide Watch: How Netflix Landed on a Cultural Landmine

By Shabnaj Chowdhury

In retrospect, perhaps it's not surprising that Netflix didn't seem to see it coming.

A week before the first season of "13 Reasons Why" dropped on the streaming service on March 31, 2017, positive reviews began coming in from television critics.

"A frank, authentically affecting portrait of what it feels like to be young, lost, and too fragile for the world," wrote Entertainment Weekly's Leah Greenblatt.

The L.A. Time's Lorraine Ali also gave a rave review, saying the show "is not just about internal and personal struggles—it's also fun to watch."

But then the show debuted, and suddenly the tenor of the conversation changed.

Executive-produced by Brian Yorkey and pop star Selena Gomez, "13 Reasons Why" centers around the suicide of 17-year-old Hannah Baker (Katherine Langford), a high-school junior who leaves behind a series of audiotapes she recorded, detailing the thirteen reasons why she decided to kill herself.

Over the course of thirteen one-hour episodes, we learn about the events leading up to Hannah's death, as she dedicates each tape to a person she feels has wronged her, including Clay Jensen (Dylan Minnette), her friend, and whose perspective is interwoven with Hannah's, offering two timelines between the past when Hannah was alive, and the present day, two weeks after her death. Instances of bullying, harassment, and rape are uncovered through the course of the season, which unfolds like a mystery.

But the scene that became intensely controversial was Hannah's suicide itself—a disturbing and graphic sequence that appears midway through the show's season finale.

Hannah, after being brutally raped and let down by the adults in her life, settles into her bathtub and takes a razor blade to both of her forearms. As blood spurts out, she gasps in shock and pain. The camera steadily stays on Hannah the entire time, never turning away from her face while she cries in agony. She then leans her head back and closes her eyes.

In the next moment, Hannah's mother, played by Kate Walsh, comes into the bathroom after noticing the overflowing water right outside the door. Desperate to help her daughter, she tries to lift her lifeless body up from the tub.

As far as media experts have judged, showing a teen commit suicide on camera in a television show is entirely unprecedented.

Kate Langrall Folb is the director of [Hollywood, Health & Society](#), a program at the University of Southern California's Annenberg Norman Lear Center, which provides the entertainment industry with supporting background-research information for storylines on health and safety. She says "13 Reasons Why" crossed a boundary by showing the act.

"It wasn't official, but it was very much agreed upon in the entertainment industry to *never* depict the actual suicide," says Folb. "If someone on your show commits suicide, you might see the aftermath, you might see them [lying] dead in their bed from an overdose, you might see them hanging from a noose, but you're not actually going to see them hang themselves. "13 Reasons Why" changed that."

So, what made Netflix decide to go where no TV creators have gone before? If a desire to generate attention was their main goal, they succeeded, because, with this unflinching and explicit depiction, Netflix stepped squarely on a cultural landmine, stirring a controversy that is still unsettled.

Netflix's show is based on the eponymous 2007 New York Times [best-selling](#) young adult novel by Jay Asher. The 350-page book has sold over 3 million copies in the United States to date. The original suicide in the novel, which involved Hannah swallowing a handful of pills, was changed in the series to be more gruesome.

It's a choice that the show's writers have defended. On the day the show dropped, Brian Yorkey, the showrunner [told The Hollywood Reporter](#) that the writers didn't want to shy away from revealing how disturbing the act of suicide is by showing a seemingly more innocuous scene, where the character is drifting off to sleep.

"There's nothing peaceful or beautiful about it at all," Yorkey said in the interview.

"It's horrific to endure and it's horrific for the people that a person who commits suicide leaves behind," Yorkey said. "We wanted to tell that story truthfully. And as difficult as it is to watch, it should be difficult to watch. If we make it easy to watch, then we're selling goods that we didn't want to sell."

Yorkey, who is a Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright for "Next to Normal," a musical about bipolar disorder, continued to do interviews even after controversy erupted, defending the choices he and the writers made on the show.

It was reported that after the first season came out, the show was linked to a spike in suicide-related internet searches, based on a [study](#) by JAMA Internal Medicine published August of 2017. By examining Google Trends data, the study found that people were searching "how to commit suicide," "how to kill yourself," as well as "suicide prevention" and information about suicide hotlines. Whether the searches were made out of curiosity or by people contemplating suicide cannot be easily determined, but the show did cause a heightened awareness on suicide.

Phyllis Alongi, the clinical director of the Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide, has been a fierce critic of the show and says that popular entertainment about suicide can be detrimental to audience members who are already at risk for self-harm.

"13 Reasons Why really romanticized suicide," says Alongi. "Hannah came back and came back to blame people."

Part of the criticism has to do with the revenge fantasy that Hannah's actions purport. Because of these problematic characterizations, viewers have reacted to the show in different ways. Some were intensely affected by it.

Jenni Lynne, a journalist from Oregon who works for Elephant Journal and covers wellness, is strongly against the show.

"I am opposed to it completely," says Lynne, 47. "To me they glorified it, they showed kids how to hurt themselves and others."

Rose Richardson from Indiana has a more conflicting opinion about it.

"It was definitely hard to watch," says Richardson, 30. "It took my breath away when she actually did it. It made me see it could become my reality and I could be the mom finding her daughter. I cried that night as I held my sleeping daughter."

Yet at the same time, Richardson feels the show had important lessons in it. As someone who battled with suicidal thoughts in the past, she says the show made her realize how horrible the act was.

“I think it needed to be seen,” she says. I think they gave the appropriate warnings to let people know it was all a potential trigger.”

Much of the differing reaction has centered on the Netflix creative team’s bold choice to change Hannah’s actual method of killing herself. Showrunner Yorkey’s argument that a visceral scene would awaken viewers to the tragedy of suicide has been countered by some critics who feel that the consequences of this creative decisions are serious, even morally indefensible—and perhaps not fully thought through.

Constance Grady is a culture writer for Vox. She has written and reported on suicide in popular media, including in a piece from October of 2017 on how there has been a [boom in teen suicide stories](#) in different mediums, including books, musicals, and television. In it, she argues that America has always been interested in stories about self-destruction, and the popularity of suicide stories is replacing dystopian stories for young people.

Grady says she understands the impulse writers have to show a suicide scene that’s uncensored and gut-wrenching but believes it can do more harm than good.

“The job of the TV show usually is to create empathy with an audience and the character,” says Grady.

“From that point of view, when you shoot a suicide scene, you want the audience to feel like they’re there with the character in the moment actually doing this act, and the idea is that will make them understand how terrible and devastating it can be. But, the science we have on suicide depictions seems to say it’s super harmful for people with suicidal ideation. It will actually make them get used to the idea of suicide,” she says.

Folb, from Hollywood, Health & Society, explains how investing in a fictional character or storyline can have powerful consequences.

“We know that a narrative storyline and an entertainment program can inform audiences better and possibly affect attitudes and personal behaviors around their health, more so than a PSA or a news story,” says Folb.

“When you’re watching a narrative story, you’re rooting for the character and you’re transported into that story yourself. You lose all sense of surrounding. When that phenomenon happens, the information that’s presented in that time sinks in on a deeper level.”

One thing intensifying viewers’ experience of the show is that it did not unfold in the traditional model of one episode per week. The binge model, where viewers watch multiple episodes in one sitting, makes it so that audiences take in all the information at once, having little time to process what they’re watching. At the end of 2017, Netflix [revealed in a statement](#) that “13 Reasons Why” was their third most binge-watched show of the year.

The effects of binge-watching—which studies have said can make viewers lethargic and depressed—combined with the phenomenon Folb describes could have strongly affected viewers of the show. In fact, there have been allegations of copycat suicides made against the show.

In 2017, two families in California [claimed that their teens were triggered](#) by the show and killed themselves after watching it. They repeated these claims to a number of local TV news programs and publications with no substantiation. However, despite these accusations, it does not appear that any civil lawsuits have been filed against Netflix. There was very little follow-up or investigation done in the

media—which seemed primarily interested only in sensationalizing the events rather than dispassionately investigating them. Though serious, to date these allegations have had little lasting impact on the show. In fact, they may simply have helped to promote it further.

It's been documented that media and entertainment play vital roles in how suicide is addressed and perceived in our culture and society.

Suicide contagion, which refers to a phenomenon where indirect exposure to suicide can influence others to attempt suicide themselves, is a real problem and has been examined by many media outlets in recent years. For example, a 2014 New York Times [piece](#) reported that suicide contagion accounts for at least 5 percent of youth suicides, according to Madelyn Gould, professor of epidemiology and psychiatry at Columbia University.

Suicide is the [second leading cause of death](#) for people in the United States ages 10 to 34, ranking behind unintentional injury, according to data compiled in 2016 by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In that year alone, 45,000 people died by suicide as rates continue to increase in nearly every state. Between 1999 and 2016, the total suicide rate rose 28 percent from 10.5 to 13.4 per a population of 100,000. The total population was 272 million in 1999 versus 322 million in 2016.

Given that suicide is a major public health issue, advocacy and nonprofit organizations are working within Hollywood to help change the way suicide narratives are told. And thanks to the outcry over “13 Reasons Why,” these groups—who've been operating more or less under the radar for some time—are getting fresh attention.

The [National Action Alliance](#), a suicide prevention group based in Washington D.C., is one of these long-standing behind-the-scenes advocacy groups.

Launched in 2010, the group is made up of 200 separate organizations working to advance the National Strategy for Suicide Prevention, and is funded through public-private partners. Its parent organization, the [Education Development Center](#), is a global nonprofit that promotes health and education, funded by government grants.

Through their Changing the Conversation Priority Group, which was launched in 2012, Action Alliance aims to identify and target three audiences that control the dialogue on suicide in the country: news media, entertainment, and suicide prevention messengers, like elected officials.

One television show they've been working closely with is “A Million Little Things” which debuted on ABC in fall of 2018. The series, created by D.J. Nash, centers around the suicide of Jonathan Dixon (Ron Livingston), a successful business man in his 40s who takes his own life by jumping off his office building. His tight knit-group of friends are left with figuring out what drove him to make the decision, while also confronting issues in their own lives.

While the series got only mixed to negative reviews, with a 52 percent rating on Rotten Tomatoes, it did manage to avoid the sort of backlash that “13 Reasons Why” received. And by all indications, that has had a lot to do with Action Alliance's influence.

For one thing, “A Million Little Things” never explicitly shows the act of suicide on screen. It happens in the first couple of minutes of the show's pilot episode, but the camera cuts away before showing the actual death.

David McFarland is a social impact consultant who has his own consulting firm. He corresponds with nonprofits, startups, and Hollywood professionals to influence change in the way people think about and respond to social and cultural issues.

He is also a member of the Action Alliance Executive Committee, and says that ABC contacted the organization for their help and expertise. While Action Alliance says that ABC wasn't directly motivated by "13 Reasons Why" when they reached out, McFarland acknowledges that the divisive show brought attention to a very serious problem.

"The first season of "13 Reasons Why" raised consciousness among [people in] the entertainment community about responsible messaging," McFarland says.

Part of Action Alliance's goal was promotional and was about equipping producers, executives, and the talent with the proper messaging tools through interviews, social media, and PSAs before and after the show.

Even though Action Alliance wasn't in the writer's room debating over scripts, they did provide consultation after the scripts were completed, by giving the creators guidelines on how to talk about suicide in a preventative way.

Despite the fact that "A Million Little Things" isn't geared towards younger audiences the way "13 Reasons Why" is, McFarland says the network still took it upon itself to be responsible, which might have been more a matter of necessity than an act of extraordinary conscientiousness. In addition to being subject to broadcast standard and practices, which are more restrictive than cable or streaming stations' standards, it's notable that ABC has been owned by the Walt Disney Company since 1996, perhaps giving them more incentive to work hard not to alienate family audiences.

For Kimberly Torguson, who is Action Alliance's Director of Communications and who also manages the Changing the Conversation Priority group, making suicide stories about hope and survival would be a nice change of pace in how suicide narratives are told.

"So often, we just focus on the death alone. Stories of recovery can be really uplifting," Torguson says.

But sticking to non-fatal depictions, meaning suicide attempts that don't end in death, isn't always possible or realistic.

Suicide depictions have been tackled in entertainment for a long time and in different ways. In television, an early example occurred in the early 90s on NBC's E.R., when Carol Hathaway, one of the main characters, attempted to kill herself in the show's pilot episode, swallowing a handful of pills off-screen. In HBO's "The Sopranos," Tony's teenage son AJ tried to drown himself in his family's pool in a 2007, 6th-season episode.

In recent years, post-apocalyptic shows, like HBO's "The Leftovers" and AMC's "The Walking Dead" have had characters kill themselves in response to their heightened, supernatural worlds. These examples have not garnered mass criticism perhaps because of the nature of these shows. Being that they're dystopian and take place in extreme circumstances, the suicides are less central to the larger stories at hand.

For Vox writer Constance Grady, The CW's "Crazy Ex-Girlfriend" stands as one of the more sensitive portrayals in recent years.

The show, starring its co-creator Rachel Bloom, has presented a suicide attempt in fall of 2017, during its third season. The character had been experiencing depression, anxiety, and OCD, and the show focused on these psychological conditions leading up to the attempt, as well as the ramification afterward.

"They really delved into the psyche of their main character, Rebecca, who attempted suicide, and what led her to that point in her life, and what a recovery looks like for her," says Grady, who found that

storyline smart and careful in its exploration of mental illness. In comparison, she says “13 Reasons Why” failed to show Hannah as an unstable person on the brink of suicide leading up to the actual act.

While Action Alliance deals with suicide prevention specifically, there are other programs and advocacy groups that help provide Hollywood professionals with expertise on a number of different complex and sensitive topics.

One example is the Hollywood, Health & Society program of the University of Southern California’s Annenberg Norman Lear Center, which formed in 2001. Funded by the Centers for Disease Control Prevention, and other agencies and foundations, the program works with the entertainment industry by providing up-to-date information for storylines that deal with different health issues, including mental illness and suicide.

They offer consultation and research to networks and showrunners, who reach out for their services. From 2009 to 2015, the group has worked with 91 TV Series on 35 networks. It worked with nearly 500 experts and covered almost 700 topics in inquiries to ensure accurate portrayals.

“In order for me to maintain a positive relationship with the entertainment industry, I make a point of not finger-pointing and blaming and criticizing,” says Folb, the director of the group.

“I’d rather be their ally in the future and help them develop better content next time around. I’m positioned as “I’m your library. I can help you do the research. I can give you that statistics. I can give you the language that a therapist might use when talking to a suicidal patient.” But the point of view is up to them,” she says.

With these resources available to showrunners, it makes seeking expert advice even more crucial when accurately depicting heavy subject matters, which reportedly, Netflix tried to do with “13 Reasons Why.”

According to a [report](#) by Syracuse.com, Netflix reached out to a mental health professional, Dan Reidenberg, the executive director of Suicide Awareness Voices of Education, a month before the show’s release for guidance. Reidenberg claims he warned them about the potential harm the show could do to young audiences and told Netflix to pull the show entirely, which they, not surprisingly, declined to do. It isn’t clear whether Netflix conferred with other experts besides Reidenberg, though based on the Syracuse report, they claim they did.

Still, the company has had to deal with the fallout, and in the months after the show’s debut, some details emerged in reporting about what Netflix did and didn’t do to anticipate the backlash it received.

Initially, Netflix placed warning cards about viewer discretion ahead of two specific episodes that depict rape and Hannah’s suicide. But a month later, following the uproar, Netflix issued a statement [to BuzzFeed](#) about their plans to alter their warnings by adding a new warning card before the first episode as an extra precaution to new viewers starting the show.

At the same time, it also launched a website, [13reasonswhy.info](#). The site is filled with information on services for people struggling with substance abuse, sexual assault, and bullying, all of which the show tackles in its storylines.

Netflix also supplemented the series with a 30-minute after-show called “Beyond the Reasons.” In it, the show’s actors, writers, and various outside experts discuss the heavy themes of the show and explain the motivations of the characters.

When the show’s second season dropped in May of 2018, Netflix worked to further increase its resources and warnings.

In Season 2, the storyline shifted slightly with Hannah's suicide still anchoring the series. The show expanded to threats of school shootings and turned its focus to a courtroom trial wherein Hannah's parents sue the high school for negligence.

Television critics were even more displeased with the second season, which is off-book since all source material was used up in the first season. It fared so poorly among reviewers that it only got a 27 percent on Rotten Tomatoes, compared to 78 percent rating for Season 1.

When Season 2 dropped, Netflix added a new advisory video at the beginning of the first episode with members of the cast cautioning viewers "struggling" with related issues that "this series may not be right for you, or you may want to watch it with a trusted adult." The same video was also added to the first episode of Season 1. Netflix also continued its special feature, "Beyond the Reasons," but expanded it to over an hour in length, and in front of a live audience.

Despite the criticisms of the show, a [survey](#) released in March of 2018 was conducted by Northwestern University on how teens and parents responded to "13 Reasons Why," revealed surprising results. Over 5,000 parents, teens and young adults ages 13 to 22, were polled from around the world, including the U.S., U.K., Australia, New Zealand, and Brazil.

Among viewers of "Beyond the Reasons," 70 percent of parents, 77 percent of teen and young-adult viewers would have liked more access to informational resources. The research also found that 67 percent of adolescent and young adult viewers felt that the intensity of the show was appropriate for them, and about three-quarters of teen and young-adult viewers found the show "relatable."

But this study comes with a major caveat: Netflix commissioned it.

When the study came out, a mere two months before Season 2 dropped, Netflix issued a [statement](#) explaining their part in the research, which yields positive results about their own show.

A Netflix spokesperson said the streaming service hopes that the show will "help support more meaningful conversations" as its sophomore season comes out.

Since then, a more recent study published November of 2018 in the journal [Psychiatric Services](#) found very different results that were not nearly as rosy. It focused not on a "general" audience, but on a very specific audience: People who'd already experienced suicidal ideation before watching the show.

The study alleges that "13 Reasons Why" may increase teen suicide risk. Conducted by professors at the University of Michigan, the study, which is very small compared to one done by Northwestern, surveyed 87 young people ages of 13 and 17. Everyone in the sample had gone to a psychiatric emergency department with "suicide related concerns." 49 percent of the sample surveyed said they watched at least one episode of the show. Of those people, 51 percent said it increased their risk of suicide.

Netflix's stance has consistently been that "13 Reasons Why" is a conversation starter, and that talking about real issues that people deal with is part of prevention. But despite its efforts to extinguish the fire it created, it still caused a storm of angry viewers.

When the series was renewed for a third season on June 6, 2018, just a little over two weeks after Season 2 dropped, Reed Hastings, Netflix's chairman and CEO, issued a fresh statement defending the show.

"It is controversial," Hastings said in a [Variety report](#) about a Netflix shareholders meeting. "But nobody has to watch it. We're an on-demand service, and we feel great about the possibility of Season 3 and look forward to supporting the team's work in that."

Netflix representatives declined to provide a comment for this story.

A major difference between Netflix and standard, non-streaming TV and cable network is that Netflix is a subscription-based service, delivered on a multitude of platforms (not just TVs but laptops and mobile too), and doesn't rely on sponsors. The company isn't bound by restrictions of the Federal Communications Commission the way any network television is, therefore they're able to get away with more graphic scenes.

For broadcast executives, there are two issues here at work: What the current laws permit; and what is morally the right thing to do.

Tom Nunan, who teaches television and film production at the UCLA School of Theater, Film, and Television, and was the former head of NBC Studios and UPN, now known as the CW, offered some insight into the thinking that occurs on an executive level.

Nunan, who oversaw various departments including business affairs, development, production and marketing, says the fear of copycat suicides is always prevalent for TV executives, but it's not actually that much of a legal concern.

"It's almost impossible to make a legal case for cause of death," says Nunan about shows that depict suicide. "Even if the person is duplicating what they saw on the show, it's very difficult to prove that the show is responsible for it. It's not really about the legal considerations. It's about your conscience. It's about your brand. I personally think [Netflix] took a hit. But, it wasn't a consequential hit."

Conversations about what is appropriate to show on screen are of course, not new, but an ongoing debate.

"It's an age-old question," says Nunan. "It's artistic integrity versus social responsibility. At the end of the day, with all due respect, social integrity always has to win in my opinion."

Nunan cited an example where he was confronted with problematic content when he was head of UPN. He says he decided not to put the show "Jackass" on the air out of fear that kids were going to duplicate the lewd acts of the show.

"I can't afford that. I can't have that on my conscience. MTV ultimately bought it, but they aired it at 10'clock. That's on them. But I don't want some 8-year-old kid jumping off the roof of their house, which happens, you know?"

The debate over what should be allowed on screen is not restricted to suicide. Violence, sex, and rape are all subject to intense examination in pop culture.

"Whenever you are portraying something on camera, it matters," says Nunan. "Whether you intend to or not, you're glorifying it. You're making it special. On some subconscious level, there are audience members that get triggered by this."

Over the last two seasons, "13 Reasons Why" has pushed the envelope hard on this very debate. Breaking boundaries and stirring heated conversations about artistic responsibility and suicidal ideation, the show has made a huge impact on culture by asking questions about what can or should be shown on television.

How the show advances the story in Season 3 remains to be seen, as does the future of suicide depiction in entertainment at large.

But as long as the public health issue of suicide continues to plague society, we can anticipate narratives that reflect these issues to recur on our screens.