



Toxic Online Spaces and “Ideology-Free Terrorism”

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This white paper is designed to provide analysis of relevant, publicly available information on threat and hazard events/trends and their potential impacts to the interests of the United States, both at home and abroad. This product is not intended to be an all-encompassing assessment of the subject.

Introduction

The Federal Bureau of Investigation classifies domestic terrorism threats into four (4) main categories: racially motivated violent extremism, anti-government/anti-authority extremism, animal rights/environmental extremism, and abortion extremism. The drivers of these domestic violent extremists include perceptions of government or law enforcement overreach, socio-political conditions, and reactions to legislative actions. Many of these domestic terrorism/homegrown violent extremist threats generally radicalize and mobilize to violence on their own. Additionally, many violent extremists are motivated and inspired by a mix of ideological, socio-political, and personal grievances against their targets. Recent violent extremist activity has shown that many violent extremists are active on various forms of social media, particularly toxic online spaces in which they post in various online communities and forums and engage with others that glorify certain concepts such as hatred and mass violence.¹

However, recent reports suggest that an ideology-free form of terrorism may be emerging as seen in recent acts of violence. This “ideology-free terrorism” originates from various online communities and forums in which individuals engage in nihilism and misanthropy that lacks a unified political or ideological motivation that is typically seen amongst violent extremists. This paper will examine these online communities and the potential role they play in radicalizing violent individuals in the absence of a defined ideology.

Growing Presence of Online Communities/Forums

As greater awareness of the impact of online extremism grows within the media, law enforcement, and mental health professionals, there has been a so-called “flight to privacy.” Many online users consent to the moderation practices of mainstream social media platforms, which attempt to monitor and ban extremist content. However, some users have relocated to private groups on services such as Discord and Twitch, private website forums, the Dark Web, and private chat groups on Whatsapp and Telegram.²

The intent of some of these online spaces are clear. For example, the forums on the image-sharing site 8kun are clearly delineated. Some are innocuous, but others are clearly marked as spaces to disseminate racist, anti-government, anti-immigrant, or other extremist beliefs. However, there is an emergent type of online space that seems less directed by a specific brand of extremism. Rather, these spaces feature a combination of nihilism, misanthropy, and a sense of hopelessness that lacks a unified political or ideological motivation. While some of its users may express far-right beliefs, they may also lean into populist disdain for society, feeling that “the system” has failed them. Users driven to these online spaces often share nihilistic views that feed on each other, including celebrating mental illness. Some of them idolize active shooters, including the two (2) students who staged the 1999 attack at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado.³

These spaces sometimes emphasize aesthetics over ideology, with shared imagery cultivated from Japanese animation, video games, and other forms of media. Users may develop inside jokes, slang, acronyms, and other signifiers that become inscrutable to outsiders over time. This body of shared signifiers can then be fodder for memes, videos,

fan fiction, and additional commentary. Law enforcement, the media, and academia often seek a unified, singular message in online forums, such as racism, xenophobia, anti-gun control, or anti-government ideologies. However, these insular online spaces are less directed and are more of a miasma of antisocial and misanthropic beliefs.³

A documented increase in loneliness among adolescents and young adults may draw some users to these online spaces. In turn, other users may create a feedback loop that indulges mental illness and encourages feelings of alienation. Users with a desire for notoriety may share violent thoughts, fantasies, and other expressions to garner approval within those communities. Some have gone as far as filming their actions. The shooter who killed 51 people in March 2019 at two (2) mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand livestreamed the acts on his Facebook page. He alerted members of an 8chan (now 8kun) forum 10 to 20 minutes prior to the massacre. He also posted a confusing, contradictory manifesto that combined elements of both right- and- left-wing extremism. 8chan users viewed and shared the video thousands of times. In August 2020, he was sentenced to life in prison without parole.⁴

Impact of Toxic Online Spaces

Analysts studying trends in recent active shooter events have noticed that some perpetrators share similar digital footprints; specifically, involvement in online communities centered around the glorification of mass violence. Content in these communities is designed to be consumed for hours on end, and often is also intended to be watched while under the influence of drugs, thus potentially accelerating and amplifying pre-existing propensities for violence.⁵

Though researchers have recognized this pattern more often in recent attacks, toxic online spaces are not new, and can trace their history back at least 15 years to Columbine shooter-worship Tumblr boards and nihilist 4chan threads. However, a decade ago, extremist communities were typically housed on specific websites and standard communication platforms, while in today’s social media-dominated internet landscape, toxic online communities and content can be found on open forums, chatrooms, and open social media platforms. Today, an adolescent may click on a few YouTube videos on the Columbine shooting and find himself (and his algorithm-predicted content preferences) deep within an online community centered around the glorification of violence.⁵

Those who engage frequently with these communities may also be prone to isolation, making the online spaces their primary mode of socialization. Alex Newhouse, a researcher of far-right extremism, propaganda, and online communities, notes members of violent online echo chambers detach from reality and may believe that they will “become legends” within their online spaces. Just as ideologically motivated radicalization can occur in online spaces and result in violence, it appears that some individuals may be similarly radicalized to attack in absence of a clear ideological motivator. In many online communities, content from both camps of radicals intermix as the communities do not function as membership spaces, but rather loosely knit ecosystems that overlap in their celebration of violence. Critically, one does not have to seek out or have an existing plan to commit violence or to join a toxic community to regularly encounter one or engage with its content, but if a user

regularly consumes content from these communities, it is likely that the content itself– due to shock value and disturbing themes– may further contribute to a decline in mental health.⁶

In cases such as the July 2022 Highland Park shooter (which will be discussed further later in this paper), experts agree that it is impossible to determine the shooter’s mental health from his involvement in such communities. However, Newhouse notes that these online spaces are designed to plant seeds of hopelessness, nihilism, and lower one’s natural reluctance to violence; often to such a point that returning to normal, healthy content after engaging with dark content is extremely difficult, trapping users in a spiral of radicalization.^{3,6}

Online Violent Extremist Culture and Trends

Based on analysis of the National Institute of Justice’s database documenting active shooter events since 1966, journalists at the LA Times noted that nearly every incident was carried out by a perpetrator with four (4) qualities in common: exposure to trauma or violence at a young age, a crisis point leading to a noticeable change in behavior, time spent studying the mentality and actions of past shooters, and a way to carry out their plan.⁷

According to Newhouse, like many subcultures, the aesthetics of the content within violent online communities is a core piece of their allure and their real-life consequences. For example, Newhouse states “every mass shooting that’s been committed with an AR-15, somewhere it was a little bit about doing a mass shooting with an AR-15 because that is ‘the mass shooter weapon’-- not just because it is the most effective weapon ... There have been so many mass shootings now that it is a performance art. There’s a particular way you do it.”⁶

As these subcultures link together users from backgrounds like extremism, gore fans, horror and dark alternate reality game enthusiasts, experts posit that a keyway in which toxic online communities push users from online chatter to real-life action is by breaking down users’ understanding of what is real and what is fake, and what the consequences of violent actions may be. Additionally, as recent active shooter events have demonstrated, the trends within the subculture can also dictate the plan and presentation of attacks, from the perpetrator’s fashion choices to their target locations and their choice of weapons.^{6,7}

Case Study: 2022 Robb Elementary School Shooting

In the case of the 2022 Robb Elementary School shooter, for example, the internet and the content he engaged with online likely played a key part in his progression toward violence. In addition to the concerning real-life behavior he displayed prior to the shooting, Ramos was known to watch violent videos of suicides, beheadings, and accidents online. “Gore forums”, a feature of many online violent extremist spheres, focus on sharing violent and traumatic content to create a shared experience among users. Similar to cyberbullying, just as one does not need to be physically bullied in person for pain to occur, one may internalize trauma whether they view the content online or witness it in person.⁸

Shortly before he shot his grandmother and attacked his former elementary school, the shooter exhibited signs of reaching a crisis point, even writing on Facebook “I’m going to shoot my grandmother” and messaging his intent to attack the school to a 15-year-old girl in Germany. In the weeks leading up to the attack, Ramos was reported multiple times for his threatening and disturbing behavior on Yubo, a live-stream social media app popular with 25-and-under users. Though Ramos was observed on multiple occasions making personal and graphic threats against others on the platform, users said they didn’t take the threats seriously because “troll-like behavior was commonplace on Yubo”.^{6,8}

Ramos’s social media activity indicates that he may have been part of what Newhouse describes as a digital subculture revolving around violence, and true to his commitment to his chosen community, Ramos, like other recent shooters, considered the optics of his attack. Former classmates stated that Ramos had earned himself the nickname “the school shooter” long before the attack due to his in-person and online behavior and interests, and it would appear that Ramos took to the label, with federal investigators finding Ramos’s main motivation was “fame and notoriety”, like many active shooters before him.⁸

Case Study: 2022 Highland Park Shooting

The shooter responsible for the 2022 attack on a Highland Park, IL 4th of July celebration is one example of “ideology-free” terrorism. Robert Eugene Crimo III killed seven (7) people at a parade with an AR-15 rifle from a rooftop overlooking the celebration. He was apprehended by law enforcement approximately eight (8) hours later in Lake Forest, IL. In August 2022, Crimo pled “not guilty” to 117 criminal charges.⁹

Since the attacks, law enforcement and voices in open source media have expressed confusion over Crimo’s motives. His online footprint included participation in so-called “gore posting” forums, where users share images of extreme violence. He also posted in forums that embraced mental illness and encouraged the sharing of erratic, abstract content. Additionally, Crimo created and shared videos online that glorified school shootings. Some observers attempted to link him to both left- and-right-wing extremism, but virtually all of the allegations remain unfounded, or tenuous at best. However, the individual appeared to embrace a chaotic, conspiratorial worldview that grew increasingly detached from reality. Speaking over social media, an alleged acquaintance denied that Crimo harbored extremist tendencies of any sort and emphasized that his drug use made him increasingly distant and isolated.^{10,11,12}

Reports indicate that Crimo had a lengthy history of family and domestic trouble that included depression and a history of drug abuse. This culminated in an April 2019 suicide attempt. His collection of knives was turned over to police by his father after he filed a “clear and present danger” report in September 2019. Three (3) months later, Crimo’s father signed his application for an Illinois Firearm Owners Identification Card (FOID) because he was under 21. The younger Crimo passed the background check, which allowed him to legally obtain the weapon he used at the Highland Park shooting.¹³

Whether Crimo’s participation in toxic online spaces contributed to his outlook is difficult to discern. Inspiration is not quantifiable, and most users of such spaces do not act on the violent fantasies discussed therein. However, a combination of drug use, mental illness, and a muddled, hostile worldview encouraged by his online compatriots may have driven him to the shooting in July 2022. Some observers also suggest that Crimo became unknowingly enmeshed in imagery propagated by the far-right to recruit disaffected individuals. They argue that, in executing the shooting, he inadvertently supported the long-term goals of those who advocate societal collapse. Reports suggest that Robert Crimo lacked a succinct and coherent ideological motivation for the Highland Park massacre, and his participation in toxic online subcultures cannot wholly be dismissed as a factor. Whether others fall prey to the same combination of malign influences remains to be seen.¹²

Outlook

The internet, social media, and the communities/forum spaces they provide have provided violent extremists an outlet in which they are able to network with like-minded individuals, share knowledge, and open themselves to new ideas that have a history of stimulating violent extremist actions. Although many online spaces are ideologically-focused, recent open source reports have identified violent individuals with no clear ideology who engage in certain online spaces that may be an emerging form of ideology-free violent terrorism. Such online spaces feature a combination of nihilism, loneliness, and sense of hopelessness that demonstrates no unified ideological motivation by the users.

As users integrate themselves into specific online spaces more frequently and network with others that can relate to certain nihilistic feelings, individuals may lead down a new violent extremist path as potentially seen in the 2022 shootings at Robb Elementary School and the Highland Park parade. Monitoring and tracking potentially violent individuals’ social activities online can lead to early detection and potential disruption of acts of mass violence.

RMC’s Intelligence & Analysis division continues to monitor and analyze acts of mass violence (as well as the perpetrators of such acts) in order to assist customers in the development of their respective protection strategies.

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⁹ Jimenez, O. & Riess, R. (2022, August 3). *Highland Park shooting suspect Robert E. Crimo III pleads not guilty to 117 criminal charges*. CNN. Retrieved January 6, 2023, from <https://www.cnn.com/2022/08/03/us/highland-park-crimo-not-guilty/index.html>.

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¹¹ 1cowtools. (2022, July 4). *Twitter*. Retrieved January 6, 2023, from <https://twitter.com/1cowtools/status/1544145566845718529>.

¹² Neiwert, D. (2022, July 7). *Motives of Highland Park terrorist hidden by ugly online subculture exploited by radical right*. Retrieved January 6, 2023, from <https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2022/7/7/2109086/-Layer-of-bloodthirsty-online-aesthetics-obscures-how-far-right-forces-fueled-Highland-Park-terrorist>.

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