

Research Article

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People Do Not Just Snap: Watching the Electronic Trails of Potential Murderers

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Abstract

The author argues that the international community should continue working together to devise rules for monitoring specific Internet sites, as human lives are at stake. Preemptive measures could prevent the translation of murderous thoughts into murderous actions. Designated monitoring mechanisms for certain websites that promote violence and seek adherents for the actualization of murderous thoughts could potentially prevent such unfortunate events. The intention is to draw the attention of the international community's multi agents (law-enforcement agencies, governments, the business sector, including Internet Service Providers, websites administrators and owners, civil society groups) to the urgent need of developing monitoring schemes for certain websites, in order to prevent violent crimes.

Keywords: Internet governance; Internet monitoring; Internet security; Surveillance; Violent websites

Introduction

In April 1999, two teens Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold entered into their school, aiming to take revenge at their peers and teachers. They felt neglected, isolated, bullied, underappreciated, and their rage was translated into a carefully calculated mass murder. The two angry men devoted much time to plan their lethal attack [1]. At the end of the Columbine slaughter trail, thirteen people were killed. That murderous event set the benchmark for many killers. It had also set the tone for them regarding the use of the Internet to publicize their notorious thoughts and their intended evil schemes. The two murderers perceived themselves as superior natural selectors destined to eliminate some unworthy lives. In profanity-laden postings, killer Eric Harris began warning months earlier [2]. On his personal Web page he wrote: "I hate you people for leaving me out of so many fun things." Relating to natural selection, he wrote - it is "the best thing that ever happened to the Earth. Getting rid of all the stupid and weak organisms" [3]. Harris could not be more explicit: "i WILL be armed to the fu... teeth and i WILL shoot to kill and i WILL fucking KILL EVERYTHING" [4]. Since then we can discern a phenomenon by which time and again people who attempt violent acts are making explicit graphic threats on Internet discussion boards and websites. I am not claiming that each and every one who decides to go on a killing spree necessarily vents his intentions on the Net; but enough do.

In recent years, in different parts of the world, a certain pattern can be discerned: People do not just snap. They often vent their violent intentions on the Internet. Thus, monitoring certain sites that are likely to be a platform for such venting may save human lives. The emerging pattern warrants close scrutiny of security officials.

To confront the violent dangers it is suggested to monitor dangerous, anti-social websites as well as ones that are likely to be used for creating social support groups for potential criminals. The idea is not to implement surveillance of the entire Internet, something that I oppose on principled, free speech grounds, but to monitor the areas of the Internet that are potentially harmful in order to detect and forestall crimes. Technology is not the problem. The problem is created by individuals who abuse technology to advance criminal agendas. The intention is to draw the attention of governments, law-enforcement agencies and civil society groups -- to the urgent need of developing

monitoring schemes for potentially problematic websites, in order to prevent homicide.

This article is the last in a trilogy I published about this matter. It updates and supplements the previous two [5]. I hope it will stimulate a debate and raise awareness regarding a growing and important phenomenon. As the Internet is global, addressing the challenge requires international cooperation. The gravity and importance of the matter cannot be underestimated, human life at stake.

Internet Warnings

The catharsis theory holds that venting anger produces a positive improvement in the psychological state of an angry person. The word "catharsis" comes from the Greek word Katharsis which means cleansing or purging. According to the catharsis theory, accumulated aggressive energy needs a release. A person who bottles up his rage often seeks ways to let off steam. Furthermore, catharsis theory holds that releasing aggression is an effective way to purge or reduce angry and aggressive sentiments [6].

Scientific tests, however, have supported the catharsis theory only in part. The tests confirmed the first assumption: people need to vent. The second hypothesis, that releasing aggressive sentiments reduces aggression, was disputed and negated. Venting involves behaving aggressively often against safe inanimate objects. It keeps angry feelings alive in memory and increases the likelihood of subsequent aggressive responses [7]. Venting, thus, does not reduce anger and aggression. Repeated tests show that subsequent interpersonal aggression remains high after venting, in stark contrast to what the pro-catharsis theory led people to believe [8]. Expressing hostility breeds more hostility.

Often, killers do not just snap and start shooting. Kevin Cameron, a traumatic stress expert, explained that "Serious violence is an

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evolutionary process [9]". If not stopped, said Canadian anthropologist Elliott Leyton, the end result of "those who had looked upon their own lives and pronounced them unlivable," and then decide to exact revenge for which they were willing to sacrifice their lives, is gore, death and suicide [10].

On March 21, 2005, 16-year-old Native American Jeff Weise, wearing a bullet proof vest which belonged to his grandfather, a police officer, and armed with three guns and multiple rounds of ammunition, went on a killing spree. Within 10 minutes, Jeff Weise had killed nine people (his grandfather and his female companion, a security guard, a teacher and five students) and severely injured seven more people, before shooting himself in the head [11]. Checking Weise's online presence reveals his distorted mind and tormented soul. Reading his MSN profile page is very disturbing [12]:

Occupation: Doormat

My MD category interests: Military, High Schools, Death and dying

A little about me: 16 years of accumulated rage suppressed by nothing more than brief glimpses of hope, which have all but faded to black. I can feel the urges within slipping through the cracks, the leash I can no longer hold....

Favorite things: Moments where control becomes completely unattainable....

Times when maddened psychopaths briefly open the gates to hell, and let chaos flood through....

Those few individuals who care enough to reclaim their place....

Hobbies and interests: Planning waiting hating

Favorite quote: "We are little flames, poorly sheltered by frail walls against the storm of dissolution and madness, in which we flicker and sometimes almost go out."- Wehrmacht Private Paul Baumer, All Quiet on the Western Front [13].

Weise had created a violent, blood-soaked 30 second animated video. The simple animation, entitled "Target Practice" [14] describes a man shooting four people and blowing up a police car before he commits suicide. He had uploaded this video, under the epithet "Regret" to NewGrounds.com, a multimedia website, in October 2004 [15]. Several weeks later, he posted a second short video (50 seconds long) entitled "Clown", which describes a character who is eventually strangled by a clown [16]. In a brief bio attached to his Regret NewGrounds.com profile and accompanying his Flash animations, Weise mentioned some of his favorite movies. Among them he referred to Gus Van Sant's 2003 film, *Elephant*, whose main theme is a Columbine-style school shooting. On his above-mentioned MSN profile page, he had included a still picture from this movie showing two teenage characters, camouflage dressed and carrying duffle bags containing weapons, heading for the school door [17].

Jeff Weise left violent digital trails also on the Neo-Nazi website, Nazi.org. Under the names NativeNazi and Todes Engel ("Angel of Death" in German) he had posted 34 messages on the website forum [18]. In one of the messages, Weise had claimed that he had been questioned by the police in 2004 regarding an alleged plot to shoot up the school on Adolf Hitler's birth date, but denied any connection [19]. In another message he exclaimed, "I guess I've always carried a natural admiration for Hitler and his ideals, and his courage to take on

larger nations [20]". The warnings were on the public digital walls, long before the horrific massacre took place.

On September 13, 2006, Kimveer Gill went on a shooting spree at Dawson College in downtown Montreal [21]. He killed 18 year-old Anastasia Rebecca De Sousa, a Dawson college student, and injured at least 20 people [22]. Kimveer Gill was a depressed and troubled young man. He was an unemployed loner who lived in his parents' basement in the Montréal suburban neighborhood of Laval [23]. He lived most of his last months in the virtual world of a website named VampireFreaks.com, dedicated to Goth culture where he explicitly expressed his intention to kill. His screen name was Fatality666 [24]. His favorite video game was Super Columbine Massacre. The player becomes Dylan Klebold or Eric Harris and embarks on a cartoon slaughter, walking through Columbine High School shooting students and teachers [25]. Nine months before his rampage he wrote specifically that the day in which he planned to seek revenge would be grey, "A light drizzle will be starting up [26]". Indeed, such was the weather on the day of his rampage. The explicit warnings were visible and easily accessible on the Vampire Freaks site. Possibly because of this openness, Gill thought the police was after him. In February 2006, on his blog he wrote, "I know you're watching me mother-f-----s. I laugh at thee. There is nothing you can do to stop me. HA HA HA HA HA..." [27]. Later that month he claimed that officers were pretending to be "nice little Goth girls" as part of their surveillance [28]. Unfortunately, the police did not monitor Gill's actions. If they had, then the policemen would have undoubtedly come across Gill's explicit threat: "Turn this f---ing world into a graveyard/Crush all those who stand in your way/Let there be a river of blood in your wake/Walk through that river with pride" [29].

On April 16, 2007, 23-year-old, South Korean born student Cho Seung Hui went on a campus rampage at Virginia-Tech University and murdered 32 students and faculty members, before committing suicide [30]. Cho chose to document his hateful rants on video and sent the tapes to NBC on the day of the shooting. His package contained 1800 word manifesto, photos and 27 QuickTime videos. In this manifesto, he blamed everyone else for his mental condition, "You had a hundred billion chances and ways to have avoided today...but you decided to spill my blood. You forced me into a corner and gave me only one option. The decision was yours. Now you have blood on your hands that will never wash off" [31]. Cho had also discussed "martyrs like Eric and Dylan" [32] referring to the Columbine High School massacre gunmen Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold.

Less than two years earlier, in November 2005, Cho was declared mentally ill by a Virginia special justice, due to a few students' complaints regarding his misbehavior towards them. A temporary detention order from the General District Court in the Commonwealth of Virginia said that Cho "presents an imminent danger to himself as a result of mental illness" [33]. Two staff members had noticed his menacing and troubled behavior and had turned to the police and university administrators for help, but the threats "seemed to be underneath the surface...they were not explicit and that was the difficulty the police had" [34]. In spite of the preceding noteworthy signs, Cho continued his life without any surveillance, till that tragic day in April 2007.

In another part of the world, Finland, 18-year-old Pekka-Eerik Auvinen was watching Cho Seung Hui's rampage and tried to copycat him less than 7 months later. On November 7, 2007, in Jokela, a small town in the municipality of Tuusula north of Helsinki, Auvinen, armed with a handgun, shot the school principal, the school nurse and six more pupils (five male and one female) [35]. He also wounded ten other people before committing suicide [36].

As in other instances, signs warning of the ensuing massacre were found on the Internet: In some pictures Auvinen was shown holding a gun, wearing a black T-shirt with the caption – “Humanity is overrated” [37]. Auvinen wrote: “I am prepared to fight and die for my cause. I, as a natural selector, will eliminate all who I see unfit, disgraces of human race and failures of natural selection” [38]. In another titled “Manifesto of a Natural Selector” Auvinen said: “I cannot say that I am of the same race as this miserable, arrogant and selfish human race. No! I have evolved a step higher,” the man wrote. The text ended with the words “To each what they deserve.” He had also outlined the planned course of events for Wednesday, November 7, 2007. The text was last revised on Tuesday, November 6th, 2007 at 11:44 PM [39].

Pekka-Eric Auvinen left plenty of visual material on the Internet over the previous hours, days and weeks. Before the shooting, Auvinen placed a video on the YouTube website entitled “Jokela High School Massacre - 11/7/2007”. The Jokela High School clip was one of about 89 videos posted on the site, under the username of “Sturmgeist89” (“Storm Spirit” in German) [40].

After the massacre, glorifying videos of Jokela were posted on the Net [41]. Only 10 months later, another violent massacre occurred, alarmingly similar to the previous incidents. A misanthropic young man, 22-year-old Matti Juhani Saari from Kauhajoki, a provincial town in western Finland, arrived at the town’s School of Hospitality, the vocational college where he was a Culinary Arts student. He walked into a class where an exam was in progress and opened fire, dressed in black and wearing a ski mask [42]. In a killing spree, he gunned down nine students and one teacher, before shooting himself in the head [43]. Once again, the writing was on the wall. Under the username of Wumpscut86 (Wumpscut is the name of a German electro-industrial Goth band), [44] Saari had uploaded to the YouTube website four videos showing him using his 22-caliber handgun [45]. One of them has a chilling resemblance to the video posted on YouTube by Pekka-Eric Auvinen. In the videos, the shooter shows off his handgun and fires it outdoors, while in the photos, the shooter poses defiantly with his weapon and points it straight at the camera. Both men had photo-manipulated one of the images so that its colors were red and black [46].

On the morning of the shooting, both men acted similarly. Auvinen and Saari had updated their web profiles within hours of getting out and killing several people. There was a fire at the Kauhajoki School of Food Management, apparently set by Saari, caused by a number of Molotov cocktail-style bottle bombs [47]. Both were fascinated and inspired by the Columbine massacre [48].

On January 21, 2009, Yang Xin, a 22-year-old Chinese female graduate student, was decapitated by her Chinese fellow student Zhu Haiyang in a café at Virginia Tech University, the same academic institution where Cho Seung Hui committed the worse school shootings in US history [49]. Only 21 months separate these two incidents from one another. Xin Yang’s head was cut off with a kitchen knife, just weeks after arriving in the United States from Beijing to study accounting [50]. As in the preceding cases, the killer vented his anger and frustration over the Internet. Zhu Haiyang expressed frustration over problems, including stock losses. The post on a Chinese-language blog dated January 7, 2009 said: “Recently I’ve been so frustrated I think only of killing someone or committing suicide” [51].

Killing Sprees in the USA and Norway

On January 8, 2011, Jared Lee Loughner emptied a semiautomatic pistol on a constituent event held by Congresswoman Gabrielle

Giffords in Tuscon, Arizona. He killed six people and injured 13 others. Congresswoman Giffords was gravely injured. Loughner, who pleaded guilty [52], posted very disturbing posts over the Internet prior to the shooting [53].

Anders Behring Breivik perpetrated Norway’s largest massacre since World War II. On July 22, 2011, Breivik took multiple steps to “warn” the Norwegian people and authorities about the threat of Muslims. He used a car bombing to hit one of Norway’s governmental buildings in central Oslo, killing 8 people and injuring 15 others. The six story building was most heavily damaged. Later that same day, Breivik, dressed as a policeman, opened fire at a Labour Party youth camp on the island of Utoya, about 15 miles outside of Oslo, killing 69 people, mainly children and adolescents [54]. After the massacre it was found that Breivik expressed his hatred of Muslims on a Norwegian anti-Muslim website named Document.no.

On December 14, 2012, 20-year-old Adam Lanza killed 26 people, 20 of them young children, inside Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn. After the tragedy, police searched Lanza’s home and his computers. Lanza, however, meticulously destroyed his computers, deleting all digital traces; thus we do not know whether or not he shared his violent ideas with others prior the vile shooting spree. This mass murder of primary school children shocked the nation and may bring about a welcome policy change. Top intelligence officials in the New York Police Department met to examine ways to search the Internet to identify potential “deranged” gunmen before they strike. They explored cyber-searches of language that mass-casualty shooters have used in e-mails and Internet postings in the past, aiming to identify the shooter in cyberspace, engage with him and intervene, “possibly using an undercover to get close, and take him into custody or otherwise disrupt his plans”.

Another move in the right direction is the Report of the Bipartisan Policy Center’s Homeland Security Project whose recommendations advise taking full advantage of violent extremists’ and terrorists’ presence in cyberspace and make utmost use of the information they are sharing with others. The Report rightly notes that this information can be used “to gain strategic intelligence on terrorist groups’ intentions and networks, on tactical intelligence on terrorist operations and the people who are involved in them, and on evidence that can be used in prosecutions”.

The Monitoring of Potentially Problematic Websites by Security Agencies

At the UN World Summit for Information Society (WSIS), held in Tunis in November 2005, a new international body was established: The Internet Governance Forum – IGF comprised of governmental representatives, public figures, businesspersons and industrialists. The Forum is not just a body that deals with the technical infrastructure of the Web, but rather a substantive body, a “form of international cooperation which is both inclusive and egalitarian... with the opportunity to work together towards a sustainable, robust, secure and stable Internet”.

The forum cautioned against imposing unnecessary restrictions on Internet content, given the benefits of increased information flow. Simultaneously it stressed its public policy objectives “such as protecting the general public, and particularly children, from objectionable Internet content and prohibiting the use of the Internet for criminal activity”.

Although awareness is on the rise among interested parties

(governments, civil society organizations, the business sector, law-enforcement agencies and individuals) concerning child pornography and hate speech (mainly in Europe), this is not the case with murderers who use the Internet to publish their malicious plans. The good news is that we can use the international cooperation which was developed through many national and international Internet watch organizations to increase awareness among people and to operate a constant monitoring scheme for problematic websites that provide social networking for criminal, anti-social ideas. Operating a monitoring scheme and educating people to alert and report whenever they encounter online threats of murder and other violent crimes could potentially prevent murders, save lives and cut down crime. Examples of online report options can be found, for instance, on Facebook as well as on YouTube. In Facebook, one can report specific posts (named “stories”), report or block personal profiles, block or report adverts and personal messages. On YouTube, one can flag a specific video clip as inappropriate or send the website administrators a request to remove the video clip.

In this regard I should mention PHAROS -- Platform for Searching Audiovisual Resources across Online Spaces. This is an Integrated Project co-financed by the European Union under the Information Society Technologies Programme (the 6th Framework Programme). PHAROS provides personalized search results matching the user profile. The platform allows adding and deleting keywords to queries based on the user’s preferences. It also possible to query by providing examples: a tag description of the selected example is used as a query and a set of results is returned to the user. PHAROS has been used to detect and report child pornography and racism. Monitoring scheme as well as surfers’ alerts can assist law-enforcement agencies to track down planners of crimes before they execute their plans. In addition, when public awareness regarding the subject arises, potential criminals will not receive praise from their readers but rather critical and opposing responses. This initiative in turn will fight the copycat phenomenon.

The police should monitor specific websites and social networking forums known for their problematic violent content. At present even explicit threats on the Internet before an attack do not necessarily prompt action from police.

Conclusion

The Internet has produced major leaps forward in human productivity and has changed the way people work, study and interact with each other. The Internet is characterized by innovation. In a rapid pace, new uses of the Internet continue to emerge and with them an increased amount of volume and traffic. The mix of open standards, diverse networks, and the growing ubiquity of digital devices makes the Internet a revolutionary force that undermines traditional media such as newspapers, broadcasting, and telephone systems, and that challenges existing regulatory institutions based on national boundaries. The result is the most impressive web of communications in the history of humanity. Millions of people around the globe cannot describe their lives and function as they wish without the Internet.

The Internet’s design and *raison d’être* are open architecture, freedom of expression, and neutral network of networks. This design can also serve for negative purposes. Soon people began to exploit the Net’s massive potential to enhance partisan interests, some of which are harmful and anti-social. As the Internet makes available cheap, instantaneous, *prima facie* anonymous, uncensored distribution that can be easily downloaded and posted in multiple places, it became an asset for anti-social people who use the Internet to transmit ideas and

provide information about their aims, to allow an exchange between like-minded individuals, to vindicate and legitimize the use of violence, and to enlist public support. The important lesson learned from the above tragic incidents is the urgent need to monitor websites which are known for their problematic nature to prevent prospective tragedies. The police must develop the ability to monitor a suspect’s Internet activity.

In the year since Adam Lanza took the lives of 26 people at Sandy Hook Elementary, another school shooting has taken place in the United States every two weeks on average. Two thirds of these horrible incidents took place on high school and college campuses. The remainder took place in middle or elementary schools. Copycat killers adopted the natural selection reasoning to justify their gruesome actions. There is a pattern, and this pattern should not be ignored. We witness a distinct phenomenon of murderers who announce their intention to kill on the Internet, yet until now not enough was done to stop them. Indeed, the nature of the Internet is such that it serves a certain function for would-be-killers. Usually people do not just snap. There is a psychological process, a mental journey that killers experience from the inception of thoughts to the actual action. The global Internet, where people adopt different personalities and have a perceived sense of anonymity, is becoming a vital component of this crystallizing process. As the Internet continues to grow, the responsibility of the reader who encounters murderous thoughts, of the ISP that hosts those thoughts, and of the law-enforcement agencies that exist to protect the lives of innocent people are all important in the identification of websites that serve as a vehicle for the crystallizing process of potential murderers.

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