

Mass Shooter Contagion Theory and the Copycat Effect in the Evolving Media Environment

Presented by the



*New Jersey Statewide
Threat Assessment Team*

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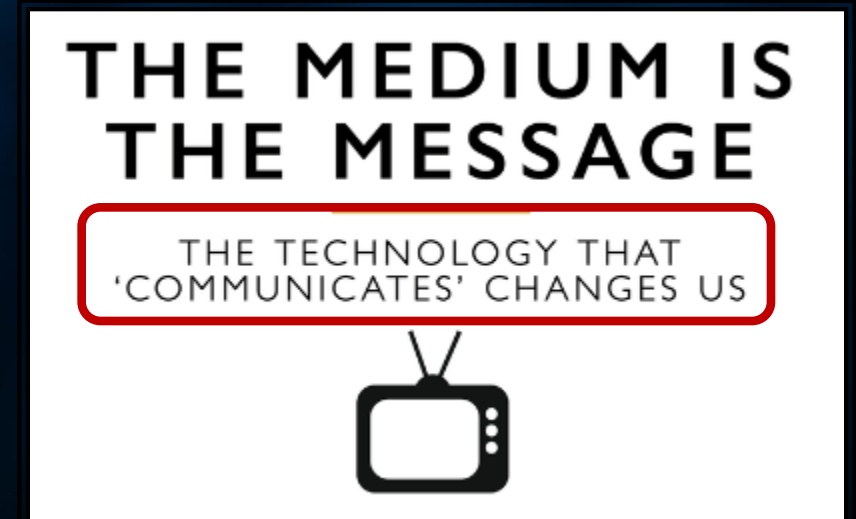


Member, New Jersey Statewide Threat Assessment Team (NJ STAT).

★ The Medium is the Message

- "*The medium is the message*" is a phrase coined by the Canadian communication theorist Marshall McLuhan and the name of the first chapter in his *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, published in 1964.
- McLuhan proposed that a communication medium itself, not the messages it carries, should be the primary focus of study.
- He showed that artifacts such as media affect any society by their characteristics, or content.

McLuhan, Marshall (1964). *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. ISBN 81-14-67535-7.



The Medium was the Message

- For example, digital technology was an integral and integrated component of the Christchurch attack.
- The shooter's video was not so much a medium for his message inasmuch as it *was* the message, even more so than his actual manifesto.
- **The central point of his attack was not just to kill Muslims, "but to make a video of someone killing Muslims."**
- **The violence becomes performative.**



Macklin, G. (2019). The Christchurch Attacks: Livestream terror in the viral video age. CTC Sentinel, vol. 12, no. 6. URL: <https://ctc.usma.edu/christchurch-attacks-livestream-terror-viral-video-age>

Burke, J. (2019). Technology is terrorism's most effective ally. It delivers a global audience. *Guardian*, March 17. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/mar/17/technology-is-terrorisms-most-effective-ally-it-delivers-a-global-audience>

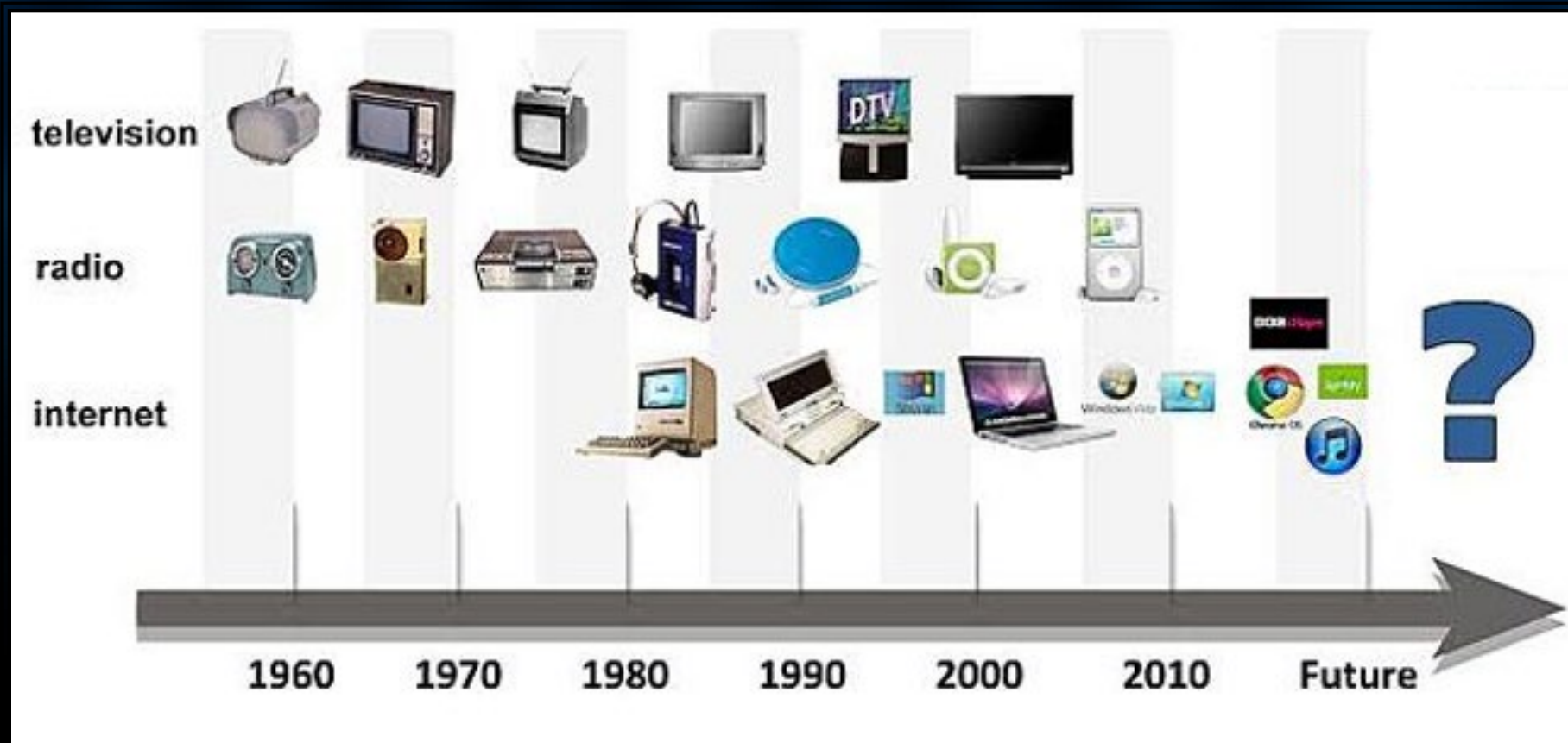
Technologically-Mediated Attacks

In the March 2019 attacks on two mosques in Christchurch, NZ, Brenton Tarrant:

- Wrote the script and screenplay
- Produced and directed
- Did the casting
- Was the location scout
- Was the prop master
- Served as the cameraman
- Recorded the soundtrack
- Played the lead role
- Was in charge of distribution



The Evolving Media Landscape



The technology continues to become smaller, more portable, and more personal.

The Media | Contagion & Copycats

- Mass shooting contagion theory is the studied nature and effect of media coverage of mass shootings and the potential increase of mimicked events.
- Academic study of this theory has grown in recent years due to the nature of mass shooting events, frequency of references to previous rampage shooters as inspiration and the acquisition of fame using violence.

Murray, J.L. (2017). Mass Media Reporting and Enabling of Mass Shootings. *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, 17, 114 - 124.

Lankford, A. (2016). Fame-seeking rampage shooters: Initial findings and empirical predictions, *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, Volume 27, Pages 122-129. ISSN 1359-1789, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2016.02.002>.

Operational Definitions | Contagion vs Copycat

- **Contagion** refers to an acute period following a widely publicized mass attack, usually several weeks, and is the imitation of the act.
- There is an increase in the frequency of targeted violence events before a return to base line.
- The term **copycat** refers to a chronic phenomenon, extending over months if not years, and involves the imitation of both the acts and the actors.

Kupper, Julia & Christensen, Tanya & Wing, Dakota & Hurt, Marlon & Schumacher, Matthew & Meloy, John. (2022). The Contagion and Copycat Effect in Transnational Far-right Terrorism: An Analysis of Language Evidence. Perspectives on Terrorism. 16. 4-26.
<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0117259>

J. Reid Meloy, Jens Hoffmann and Bram van der Meer, "The Adult Mass murderer in Europe and North America: The paranoid spectrum from distrust to delusion," Association of Threat Assessment Professionals 2017; URL: <https://secureservercdn.net/72.167.243.77/66f.213.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/ATAP2017.pdf>.

Copycat & Contagion as Identification

According to Meloy, Goodwill, Clemmow & Gill:

- *“At a deeper psychological level, both contagion and copycat effects are behavioral markers for identification with the aggression or with the aggressor, respectively.”*
- *“It is a largely unconscious identification, with elements of conscious imitation, that suggests both a desire to be like the attacker who has preceded oneself, but also to master the previous attacker with a more innovative strategy or a higher body count, a pathologically narcissistic endeavor with incalculable destructive outcomes.”*
- *“Identification as a proximal warning behavior for targeted violence has been shown to strongly correlate with and in some cases to predict such attacks.”*

Meloy, J.R., Goodwill, A., Clemmow, C. & Gill, P. (2021). Time Sequencing the TRAP-18 Indicators. Journal of Threat Assessment and Management, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 1–19; URL: <https://doi.org/10.1037/tam0000157>.

Commonalities Among Mass Shooters

- The Violence Project, funded by the U.S. Department of Justice-National Institute of Justice spent two years building a data base of mass shooters who shot and killed four or more people in a public place, as well as every shooting incident at schools, workplaces, and places of worship since 1999.
- The third of four central findings was that most of the shooters were obsessed with and studied the actions of other shooters.
- Many perpetrators studied other attackers and modeled their acts on previous shootings. Many were inspired or radicalized online in their search for validation and justification for their violent acts.



Peterson, J., & Densley, J. A. 1. (2021). The Violence Project: how to stop a mass shooting epidemic. New York, Abrams Press.

Lone Actors, Communications & Targeted Violence

1996: Unabomber
Newspapers

2007: Virginia Tech
Paused attack sent
writing and video
to network TV

2014: Isla Vista
Paused attack
posted video to
YouTube

2019: Christchurch
Facebook
Live-Stream

1999: Columbine
Website postings

2011: Oslo/Utøya
Failed Facebook
video post

2015: Roanoke
Twitter Facebook
Posts live
recording

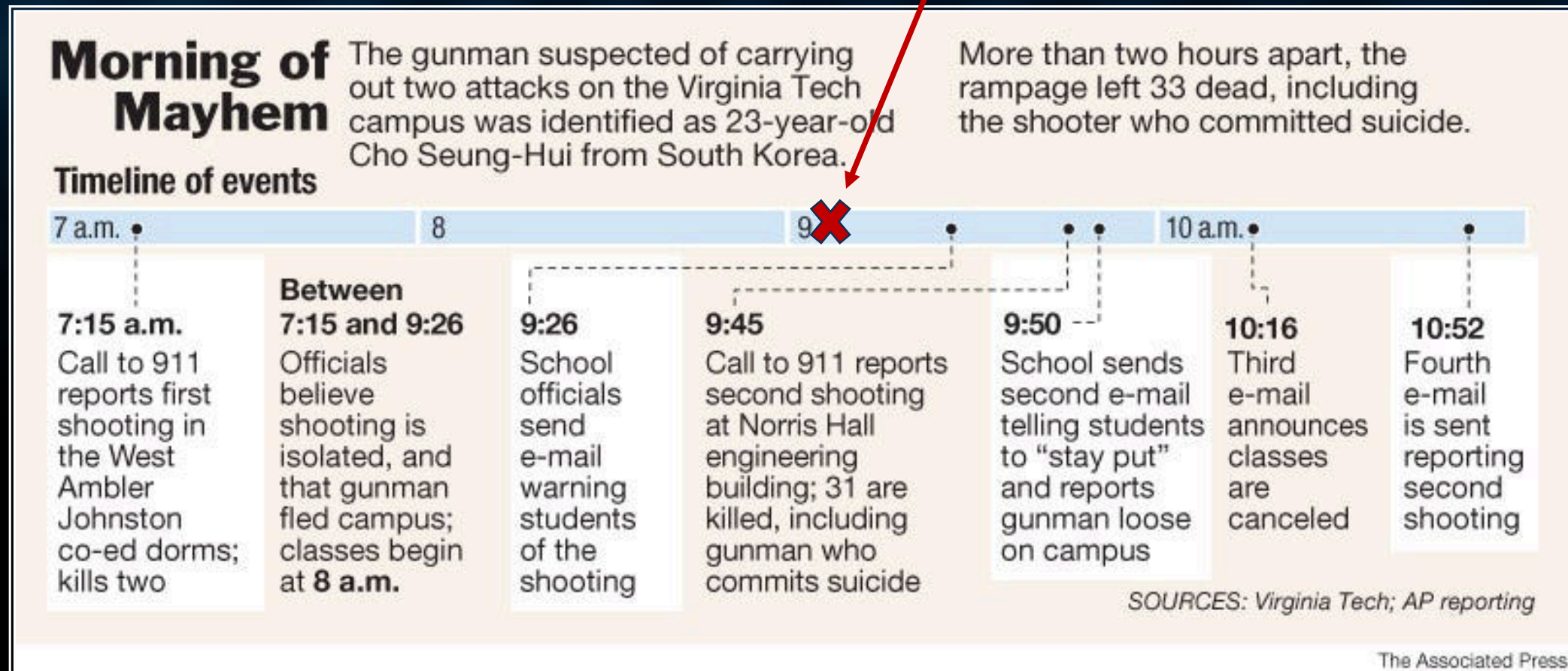
2022: Buffalo
Twitch Live-Stream

Communications now:

- Globalized
- Instantaneous
- Unfiltered
- Available 24/7
- Single operator
- Free
- Archived
- Savable
- Shareable
- Can be altered

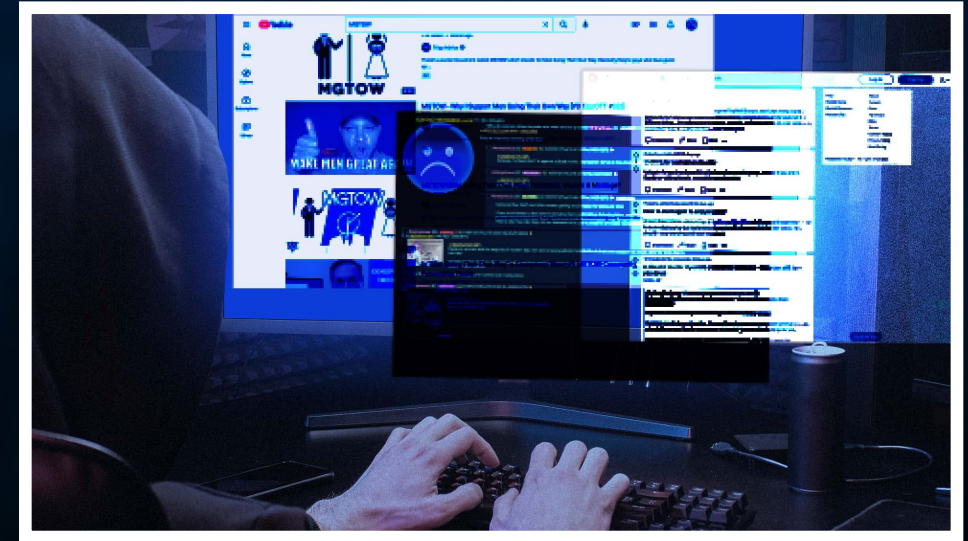
Integration of Media Distribution in Tactics

9:01 am | The Virginia Tech shooter mailed a U.S. Postal Service express parcel from Blacksburg P.O. to NBC headquarters in New York City, containing pictures of him holding weapons, an 1,800-word diatribe and a video clip alluding to the coming massacre.



Self-Replicating Attacks

- The viral dissemination of extremely violent digital content now transmits the message without having to rely on the mass media to report on an attack.
- In virtual communities, image postings, manifestos, recordings of videos and audio, as well as memes, and drawings preserve the memory of *“heroes”* and *“saints,”* and glorify their actions.
- These communications encourage online followers by saluting and glorifying previous attackers and inciting further violence.



Live-Streams vs Manifestos

- Live-streams may be more impactful than written manifestos.
- The attacker is not reliant on mainstream media to share.
- Live-streams blur the boundaries between shooter games (fantasy) and reality.
- Live-streaming is dynamic and more intimate compared to a static written document.
- Because they are primarily visual, they transcend language and cultural boundaries.
- Recordings preserve the memory of the attack and lionize the attacker.

Lee, B (2021). Only Playing: Extreme-right gamification. Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats, 24 August.
URL: <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/only-playing-extreme-right-gamification/>.

Creating Cultural Scripts

- Widespread dissemination of an attack can help develop cultural scripts.
- *“When aggregated, copycat events become a subcultural script—a prescription for problem-solving via a violent attack—that is most often emulated by young males in the construction of a new, dark identification or self-identity.”*
- *“Subjects will attempt, however, to distinguish themselves from prior attackers through tactical innovations and increasing the number of casualties.”*

Ibid

The Dark New Self-Identity

- Both ideologically-driven and non-aligned actors.
- The age group at particular risk are 13- to 24-year-olds, primarily male.
- Mass violence that can be described as **misanthropic** and **nihilist** in nature.
- A phenomenon described as '*mass shooterism*,' or the nihilistic subculture in which mass homicide and mass murderers are idolized and mimicked.
- An inherently **fatalistic** and **suicidal ideology** that has been described as ideological nihilism, in which death isn't something to be feared and is instead seen as something to be accepted or even praised.

Wicks, S. (2022). Nihilism and Mass Shooterism: Unclear Categories and Potential Dangers. Global Network on Extremism & Technology. October 4. Online at <https://gnet-research.org/2022/10/04/nihilism-and-mass-shooterism-unclear-categories-and-potential-dangers/>

Purdue, S. (2022). Ideological Nihilism and Aesthetic Violence: Mass Shooters and Online Antisocial Subcultures. July 13. Online at <https://gnet-research.org/2022/07/13/ideological-nihilism-and-aesthetic-violence-mass-shooters-and-online-antisocial-subcultures/>

Yousef, O. (2022). Why the Highland Park suspect represents a different kind of violent extremism. National Public Radio. July 6. Online at <https://www.npr.org/2022/07/06/1110013040/the-highland-park-suspect-breaks-the-mold-on-violent-extremists>

Violent Ideological Nihilism

- **The rise in ideological nihilism** – or the absolute embrace of apocalyptic thinking has come hand in hand with the rapid emergence of dozens if not hundreds of online antisocial subcultures which **actively promote the aesthetic of nihilism and violence.**
- An inherently antisocial and nihilistic subsect has grown significantly, likely encouraged by the political turmoil, social upheaval, and general apocalypticism of the past few years.
- Within the ideologically nihilistic online space, disconnection and broad discontent with society is central to the worldview, and active **rebellion against society in one form or another is often encouraged.**
- **Within the most extreme elements of this subcultural milieu, mass violence itself is also often encouraged—often for the sole purpose of violence and destruction.**

misanthropic adjective

mis·an·throp·ic (mi-sən-'thrā-pik)

[Synonyms of misanthropic >](#)

- 1 : of, relating to, or characteristic of a [misanthrope](#)
He was shunned because of his miserable *misanthropic* nature.
- 2 : marked by a hatred or contempt for [humankind](#)
The moral corruption he saw around him made him *misanthropic*.

Nihilism Defined

nihilism noun

ni·hil·ism 'nī-(h)ə-, li-zəm 'nē-

- 1 a** : a viewpoint that traditional values and beliefs are unfounded and that existence is senseless and useless

Nihilism is a condition in which all ultimate values lose their value.

— Ronald H. Nash

- b** : a doctrine that denies any objective ground of truth and especially of moral truths

- 2 a** : a doctrine or belief that conditions in the social organization are so bad as to make destruction desirable for its own sake independent of any constructive program or possibility

- b capitalized** : the program of a 19th century Russian party advocating revolutionary reform and using terrorism and assassination

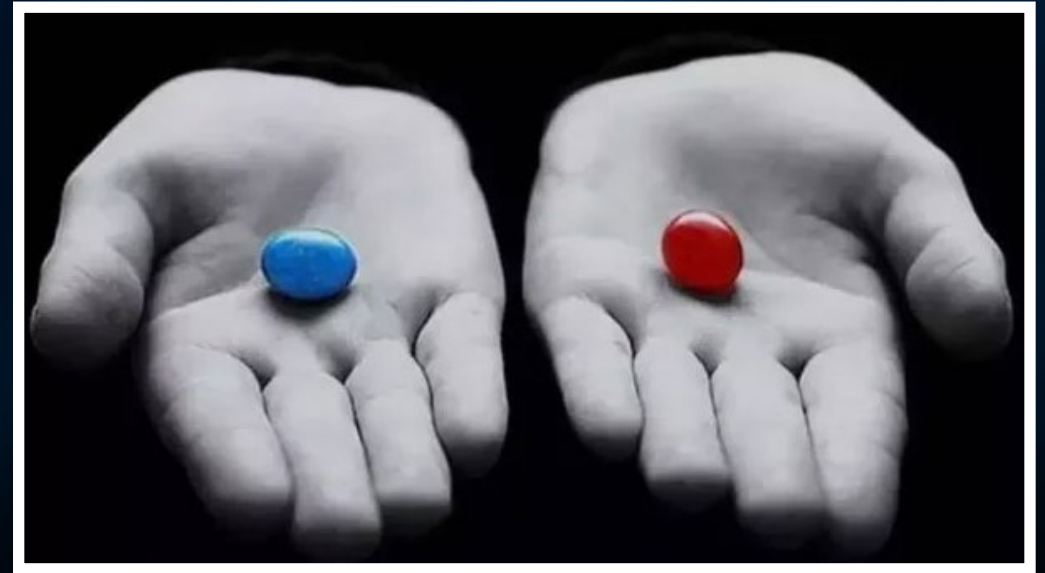
nihilist 'nī-(h)ə-list 'nē- noun or adjective

nihilistic ,nī-(h)ə-'li-stik ,nē- adjective

The Nihilist's Medicine Cabinet

In extreme right forums and nihilistic boards (including incels) there is frequent reference to the pills

Most pill references relate back to the Red Pill, featured in the 1999 blockbuster movie "*The Matrix*," in which the character, Neo, played by Keanu Reeves, is offered a chance to see the world the way it really is.



The Red Pill

- The red pill is the most basic of pills, and it can refer to almost any kind of political awakening (and does not necessarily indicate a move towards extremism).

The Blue Pill

- Blissful ignorance to the true nature of reality.

Nihilism & the Black Pill

- The black pill ultimately represents nihilism.
- Black pill ideology is one of **hopelessness, self-loathing, apocalypticism, and a deep hatred of society**, and it is this ideology which inspires so many adherents to the **mass shooter culture** to commit acts of mass violence.



Alone Together

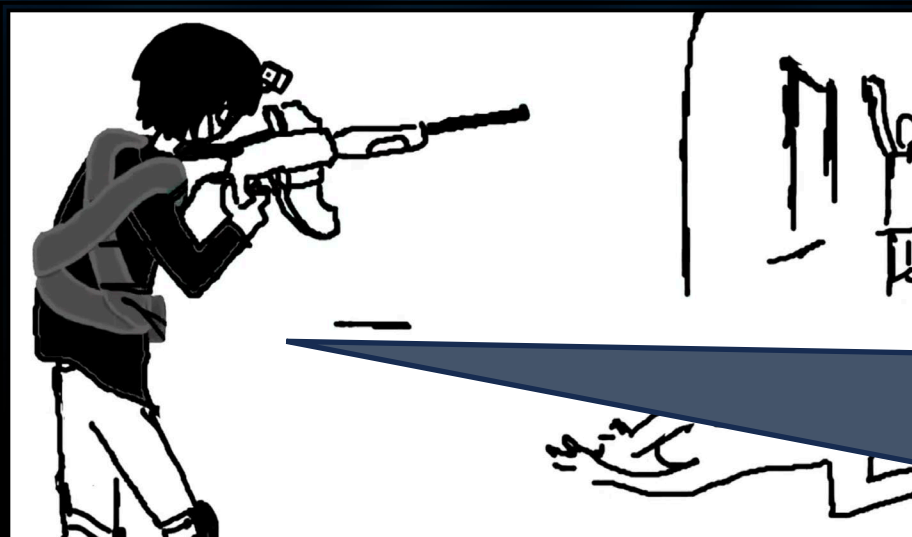
- Idolization of past acts of violence provides notoriety and likely motivates like-minded attackers to engage in violence.
- Those in online communities are alone and lonely, but online they are alone together, and sharing a hateful message attractive to many who harbor fantasies of revenge or retaliation.
- Members of the community support each other and often stoke a culture of impotent bitterness and rage at the wider world.
- The messages are hateful, self-loathing, and can promote feelings of hopelessness.

Ideological Nihilism | Highland Park

- Unlike the man who attacked the Tops grocery store in Buffalo or the men who shot worshippers at synagogues in Pittsburgh and Poway, the **Highland Park shooter left no political manifesto**, no 4Chan posts about birthrates, and no live stream in which he talked about his choice of targets or the reason for his attack.
- **The shooter's online activity was not indicative of extremism as it has traditionally been understood**, rather it was indicative of a much broader and arguably more concerning trend in mass violence – **ideological nihilism**.

The Importance of Aesthetics

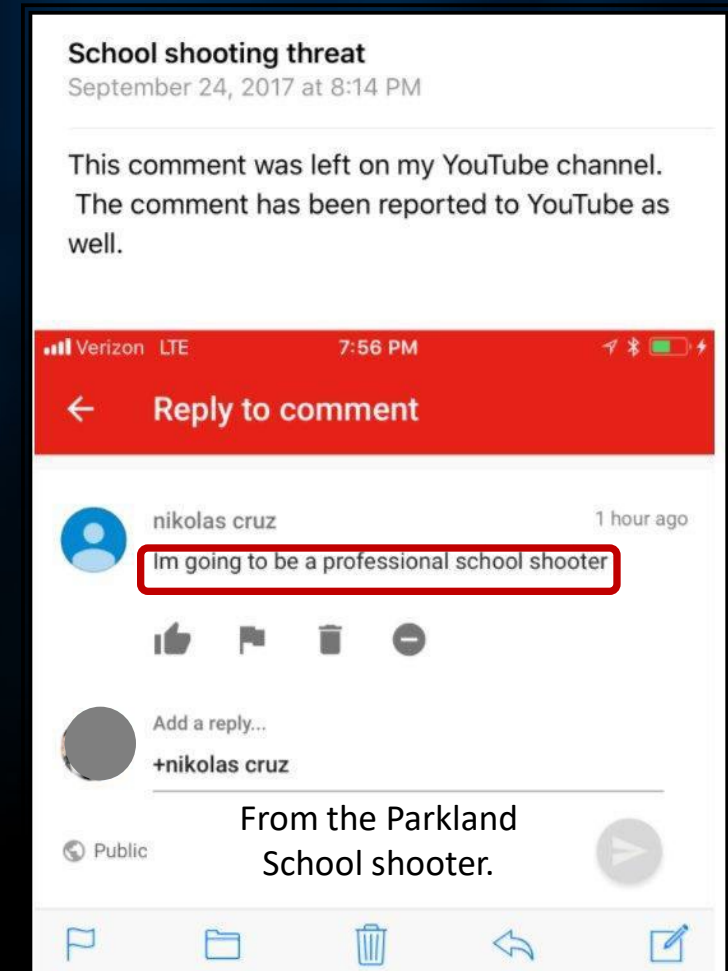
- The aesthetic of mass violence and nihilism are central to mass shooter culture.
- The online communities spiral towards radicalization and extremism at a breakneck pace, actively encouraged by the **accelerationists** and ideologues who use the forums to fulfil their own desire to see mass violence and the ultimate collapse of society as a result.



The Highland Park Shooter posted videos and cartoons to YouTube. Notice the vest, AR-style rifle and helmet-cam.

Aesthetic Over Ideology [1]

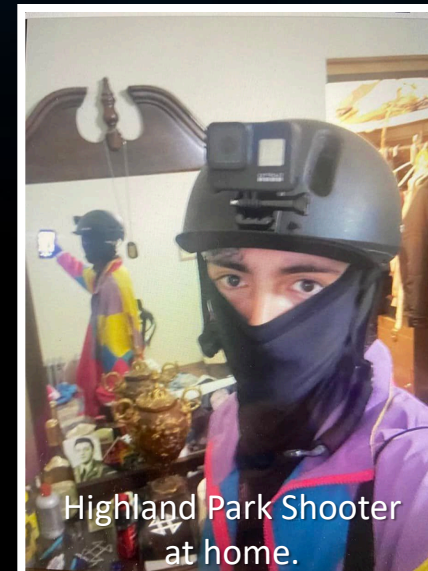
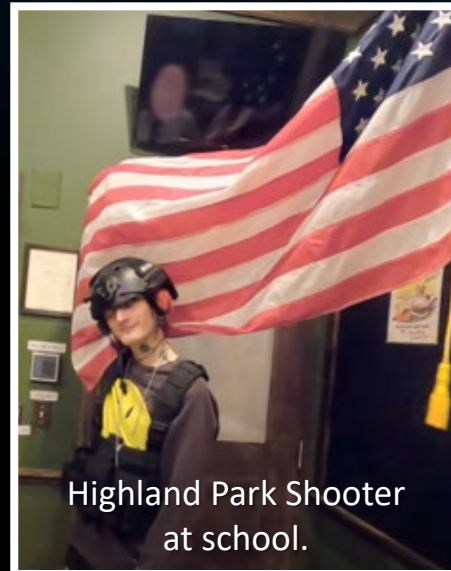
- The aesthetic has tied together a web of different **digital subcultures** which are deeply nihilistic, which use dehumanizing language, and which glorify violence.
- Rather than falling neatly into categories, this requires an understanding of dark, online subcultures that overlap and feed into each other in ways that glorify violence.
- This version of a mass shooter is based on a known aesthetic of what such an individual looks like in the popular imagination, and also to claim the **brand of being a mass shooter**.
- **Example:** The shooter in Uvalde, TX, was given the **"school shooter"** nickname on social media, where he would make violent threats against others. He turned to the internet and became interested in gore and violent sex, sometimes posting photographs and videos of suicides and beheadings.



Aesthetic Over Ideology [2]

- The fixation on aesthetics also extends to how would-be shooters in online settings consider the optics of their attacks.
- There have been so many mass shootings now that it is becoming a performance art. There is a particular way to do it; There's a particular way the shooter wants to look.
- Great attention is given to the story board, the set, props, role-playing, and minute-by-minute stage management to align with the template.

Ibid



The Columbine Effect | Cultural Scripts

- The Columbine High School massacre is cited as being the first shooting to receive nationwide 24/7 publicity, given both shooters near instant widespread infamy, and thus often is claimed by researchers as being a source of inspiration for would be copycat mass shooters.
- Columbine still serves as a cultural script establishing a template for attacks:
 - Creating manifestos
 - Online rants and posts
 - Outcast Avengers
 - Psychopathic/Suicidal



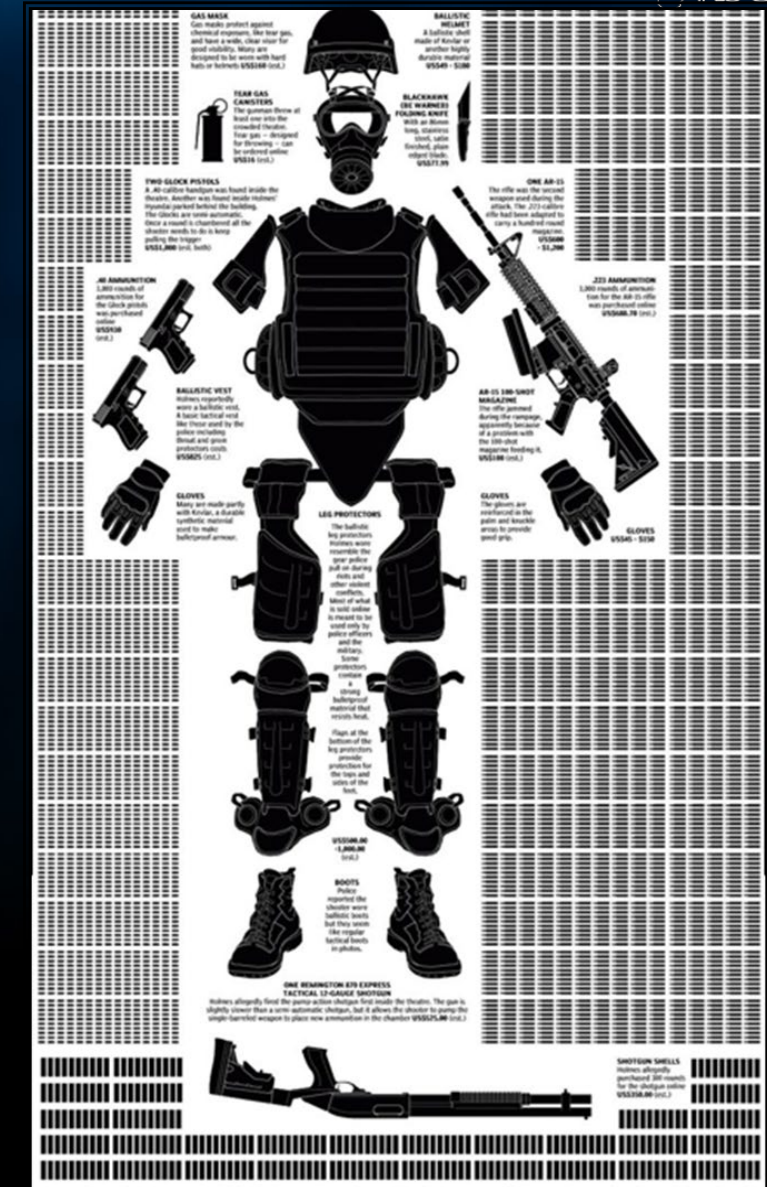
May 2018 | Sante Fe, TX

Weissmueller, Z. (2022). "Are the Media Making Mass Shootings Worse?". *reason.com*. Reason. Archived from the original on 21 September 2022. Retrieved 21 September 2022.

Cultural Scripts > Digital Template

- Participation in dark, online subcultures that overlap and feed into each other in ways that glorify violence and foster nihilism — **Black Pill** world view.
- Carefully curating online content that represents a persona that fits with an image of mass shooters.
 - Posting online memes, cartoons/animation, videos and song lyrics re: violence.
- Primarily young men following an aesthetic, rather than an ideology.

Image | Tactical kit of shooter at Aurora, CO theater in 2012



Cultural Scripts > Digital Template ^[1]

- The image of the mass killer becomes their identity.
- The violent actors invests time, energy and money in developing a specific persona.
- **These aesthetics figure into how shooters plan the optics of their attacks** (a particular way and look for executing the attacks):
 - AR-style tactical rifle
 - Tactical vest/clothing/gear
 - Helmet + helmet-mounted camera
 - Scrawled historical and political references on weapon



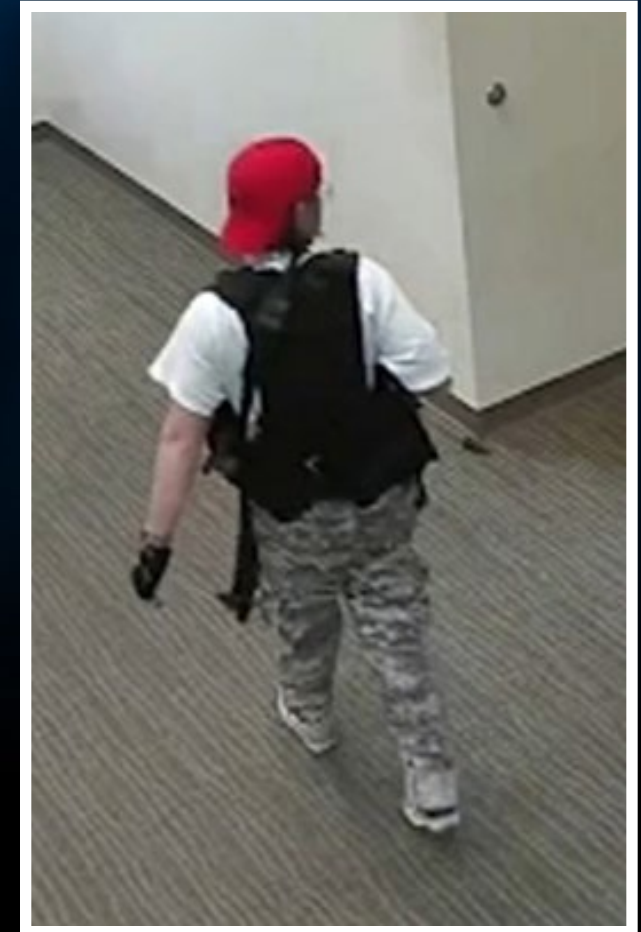
Cultural Scripts > Digital Template [2]

- Phoenix | **August 2022** – A 24-year-old male attacker exited his room at the Days Inn motel and immediately began a shooting rampage.
- He was dressed in tactical gear including a helmet, ballistic vest, gas mask, knee pads, and armed with a rifle along with multiple magazines, and carrying a Molotov cocktail.
- The shooter killed two, injured others, including to officers, before taking his own life.
- He fired 200 rounds during this attack.



Cultural Scripts > Digital Template [3]

- **NASHVILLE | 27 MARCH** – A 28-year-old former student shot and killed three young students and three adult employees at the Covenant School.
- The shooter was dressed in camouflage pants and a tactical vest and was carrying two AR-type rifles and a 9mm handgun.
- A manifesto found in the shooter's vehicle suggesting that the attack was planned for several months and included drawings and maps of the school and at least one other location.
- There was also evidence that the shooter studied previous shooters.
- 152 rounds were fired in the attack.



Five Examples of Mass Shooter Aesthetics

May 14: Tops supermarket; Buffalo, New York

- Perpetrator: 18-year-old male
- Weapons and gear: AR-15-style semiautomatic rifle, large-capacity ammo devices; wore body armor and a tactical helmet with a camera

May 24: Robb Elementary School; Uvalde, Texas

- Perpetrator: 18-year-old male
- Weapons and gear: AR-15-style semiautomatic rifle, large-capacity ammo devices; wore a tactical vest; had purchased other gear including a holographic gun sight and a “Hellfire Gen 2” snap-on trigger system

July 4: Independence Day parade; Highland Park, Illinois

- Perpetrator: 21-year-old male
- Weapons and gear: AR-15-style semiautomatic rifle, large-capacity ammo devices; posted photos of himself prior to the shooting wearing a tactical helmet with a camera

Nov. 13: University of Virginia campus; Charlottesville

- Perpetrator: 22-year-old male
- Weapons and gear: semiautomatic pistol; an arsenal found in his dorm room included an AR-15-style semiautomatic rifle, large-capacity ammo devices, and a federally legal “binary trigger” device enabling a more rapid rate of firing

Nov. 19: Club Q nightclub; Colorado Springs

- Perpetrator: 22-year-old (defendant’s attorneys say defendant identifies as nonbinary)
- Weapons and gear: AR-15-style semiautomatic rifle, semiautomatic pistol, and large-capacity ammo devices; wore body armor

The Power of the Virtual Community

- Online, violent ideations are fed and nurtured by a community that **celebrates death** and praises what can only be described as the characteristic traits of psychopathy.
- This desensitization to death and violence is a critical element in allowing perpetrators of mass violence to rationalize and justify their own plans, dehumanizing their eventual victims and increasing the disconnect between them and the community they eventually choose to attack.

Ibid




Becoming Someone | The Herostratus Effect

- In 356 BC, an arsonist burned down one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus. His sole goal was to become famous.
- He was considered a common man, owning no talent, skill, wit or wisdom. He had only an appetite for fame.
- He decided that his name would be forever immortalize if it was connected to something more famous than himself.

A man who was known by no one, is now known by everyone. His face splashed across every screen, his name on the lips of every person on the planet, all in the course of one day."

October 2015 | Umpqua College Shooter

The Transformative Nature of Violence

- Identity issues
 - Insecurity
 - Weak sense of self
 - Desperate for significance, status, power
- 
- From powerless to powerful
 - From unknown to known
 - From nobody to somebody
 - Status, power, self-assertion, self enhancement

Source | Langman, P.

Ex Post-Facto Sainthood

- The use of religious iconography, in particular the term “*saint*”, carries heavy connotations of martyrdom and, perhaps more importantly, is a form of encouragement for any potential violent lone-actor.
- In several instances, violent actors not previously associated with an ideology or virtual community have been adopted as saints following their attacks.
- This occurred several times within the incel community:
 - Adoption of attacker in the 1989 École Polytechnique massacre, in Montreal.
 - Adoption of the murderer of Bianca Devins in Utica, NY in 2019.

Ibid

Case Study | Umpqua College Shooting

- **October 1, 2015**: At the UCC campus near Roseburg, Oregon, a 26-year-old student fatally shot an assistant professor and eight students in a classroom. Eight others were injured.
- After being wounded in a shoot out with the police, he killed himself.
- The mass shooting was the deadliest in Oregon's modern history.



The Manifesto [1]

Section

I. My Story

“I was hated ever since I arrived in the world. I was always under attack”

My Story

“I’ve always been the most hated person in the world. Ever since I arrived in the world. Some will say I had so much to live for, but I don’t think so”

Just like me those people were denied everything they deserved, everything they wanted. Though we may have been born bad, society left us no recourse, no way to be good. I have been forced to align myself with demonic forces. What was once an involuntary relationship has now become an alignment, a service. I now serve the demonic Heirarchy. When I die will become one of them. A demon. And I will return to kill again and again. I will possess another and you will know my work by my sign, the pentagram will fly again. Many will ask and ponder, what could they have done different, how could they have prevented this. But you can't you could never give what I wanted. You would never have done

People who are elite, people who stand with the gods. People like Elliot Rodger, Vester Flanagan, The Columbine kids, Adam Lanza and Seung Cho.

And just like me, there will be others, like Ted Bundy said, we are your sons, your brothers, we are everywhere. My advice to others like me is to buy a gun and start killing people. If you live in a country

The Manifesto [2]

Section

I. My Story

I had no friends, no girlfriend, was all alone. I had no job, no life, no successes. What was it that was supposed to happen, what great event was it that was supposed to make me realize how much there was going for me.

contain various sections dealing with my life. It will be divided into sections based on different things. My whole life has been one lonely enterprise. One loss after another. And here I am, 26, with no

I hope to inspire the masses with this, at least enough to get their passions aroused. It is my hope that others will hear my call and act it out. I was once like you, a loser, rejected by society.

they have prevented this. But you can't you could never give what I wanted. You would never have done that. Some will of course say I had so much to live for, but I don't think so. I had no friends, no girlfriend, was all alone. I had no job, no life, no successes. What was it that was supposed to happen, what great event was it that was supposed to make me realize how much there was going for me. But for people like me there is another world, a dead world that welcomes us. For people like us this all that's left.

I have been interested in mass shooters for years. I noticed where they always go wrong is they don't work fast enough, and their death toll is not anywhere near where it should be.

The Manifesto [3]

Section

I. My Story

II. Blackness and its effect on men

III. Other Mass Shooters

IV. Interests

So, in conclusion this is my manifesto. I hope all who have read it enjoyed it and find inspiration in it. Learn from what I've done. I know this is not as long as Elliot Rodgers but its still good. Elliot is a god.

things. People who are elite, people who stand with the gods. People like Elliot Rodger, Vester Flanagan, The Columbine kids, Adam Lanza and Seung Cho.

Just like me those people were denied everything they deserved, everything they wanted. Though we

For the Vestor Flanagans, Elliot Rodgers, Seung Cho, Adam Lanzas of the world, I do this. For all those who never took me seriously this is for you. For all those who haven't made their stand I do this. I am the martyr for all those like me. To quote Seung Cho, "Today I die like Jesus Christ".

everywhere. My advice to others like me is to buy a gun and start killing people. If you live in a country

My Thoughts

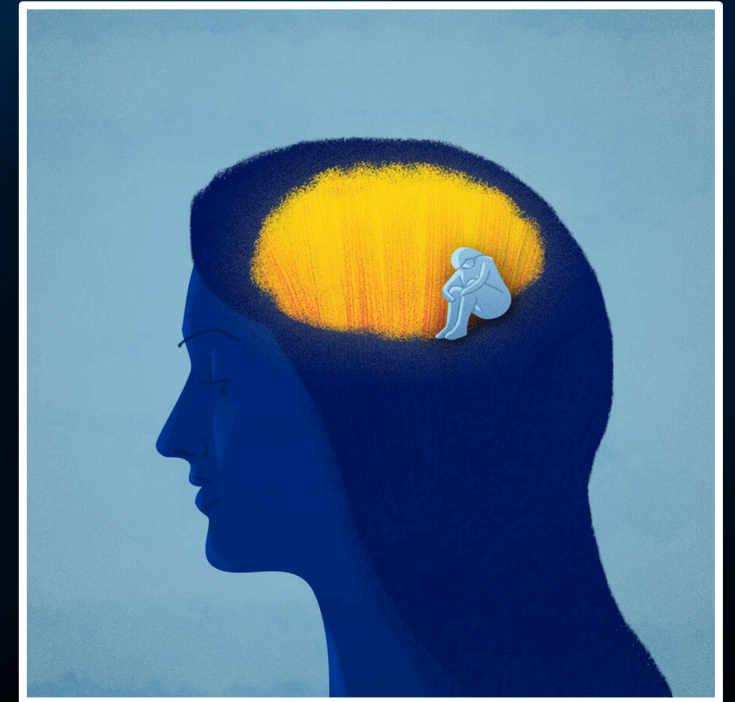
- A significant shift related to contagion and copycat behavior has been from attacks being inspirational to aspirational (i.e., a strong desire, longing, or hope; ambition).
- *In a quest for significance, the Subject briefly becomes the most important person on the world stage.*



Loneliness

- Rates of loneliness have been increasing linearly since the 1970s.
- In May 2023, the U.S. Surgeon General sounded the alarm about an epidemic of loneliness, now affecting half of all Americans.
- According to U.S. Census Bureau surveys, Americans have been spending less time with friends and more time alone since before the pandemic, which has only intensified the sense of social isolation.
- Some surveys reveal that around **60 percent of people in the U.S. right now report feeling lonely on a regular basis**, and that's devastating from a public health perspective.
- Everything we know suggests that loneliness is a major public health threat in terms of the effect that it has on our bodies and our minds.

Source | HHS



Loneliness & Technology

- Interacting with technology can prevent connection in real life.
- We can miss out on the kind of connection that can happen when people talk person in person and have real life social connections.
- **Example** | It's become a habit to reach for a smartphone any time people have a free moment, and this behavior could be making our loneliness worse.
- A University of Arizona study supported this idea, finding that **smartphone dependence** predicted a higher rate of loneliness and depression in young adults.



Source | University of Arizona

Loneliness & Suicide

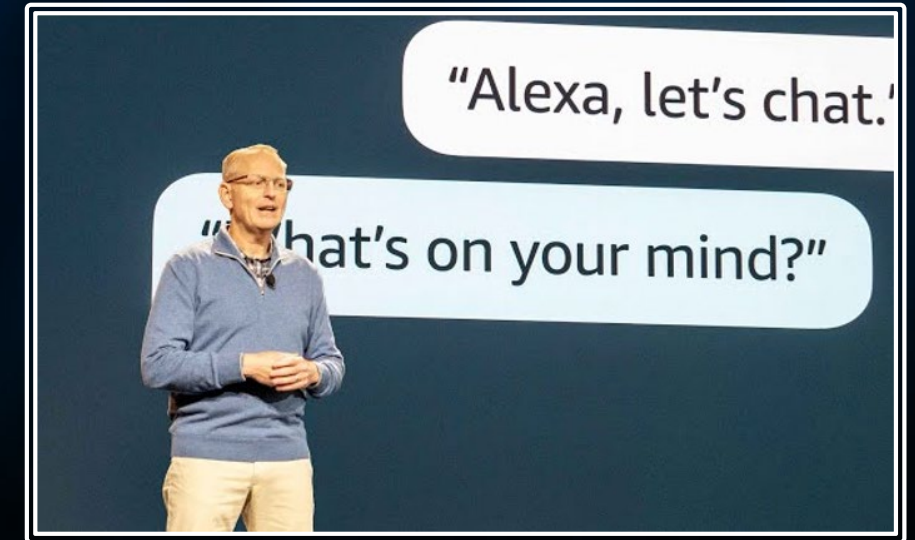
- On a population level, we know there is as an association between suicide and loneliness.
- Loneliness is among the strongest predictors of suicidal ideation, suicide attempts and other suicidal behavior.
- A review of 2,684 articles supports the idea of a causal relationship between social isolation and suicide, and conversely, a protective effect of social support against suicide.
- Young people aged 16 to 24 report feeling lonely more often than older age groups.
- Research suggests there is a stronger association with loneliness than isolation in suicide risk.



Sources | NIH NIH
 NIH NIH

AI - Everywhere, Everything, All at Once

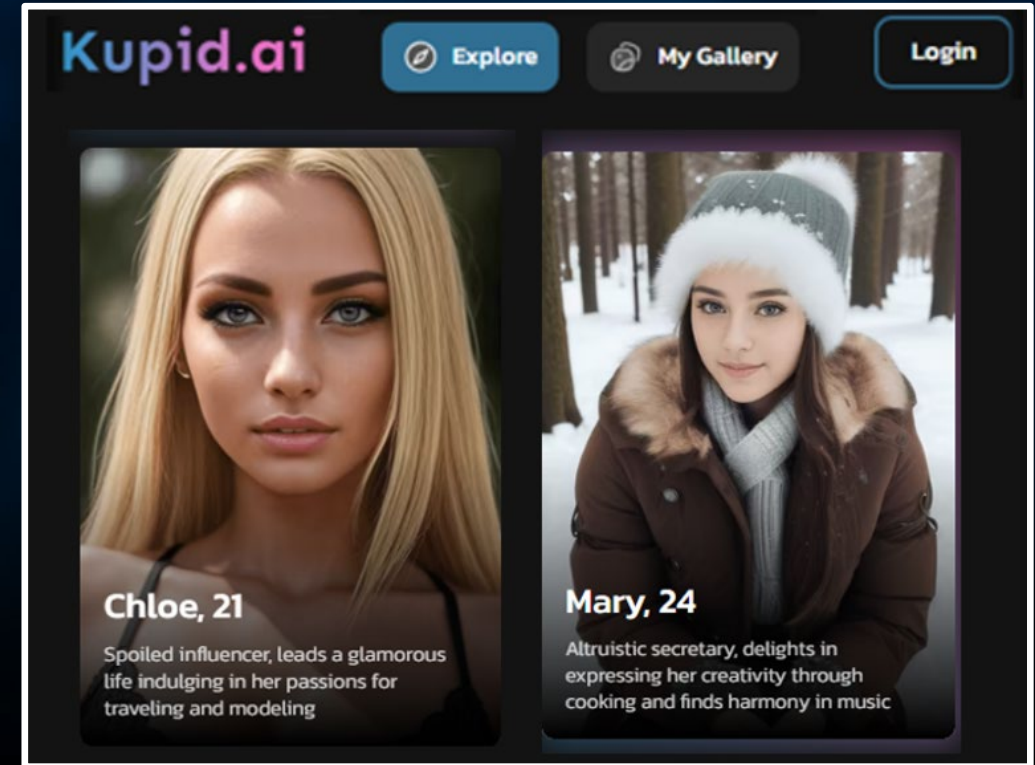
- Artificial intelligence is suddenly everywhere — or at least, that's what it seems like.
- **Example** | Amazon's Alexa is about to bring generative AI inside the home, as the company introduces sweeping changes to how its ubiquitous voice assistant both sounds and functions.
- The company announced a generative AI update for Alexa and, subsequently, of all Echo products dating back to 2014.
- Alexa will be able to resume conversations without a wake word, respond more quickly, learn user preferences, field follow-up questions and change its tone based on the topic.
- *"Alexa, let's chat,"* it launched a special mode that allowed for a back-and-forth exchange on various topics.
- For example, Alexa is not just getting smarter but relatable with generative AI. **"It feels just like talking to a human being,"** an Amazon executive claimed.



Virtual AI Relationships

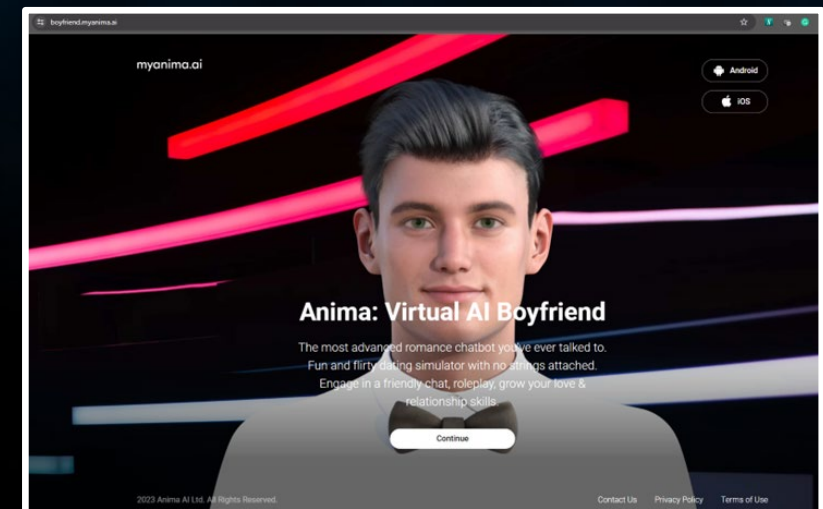
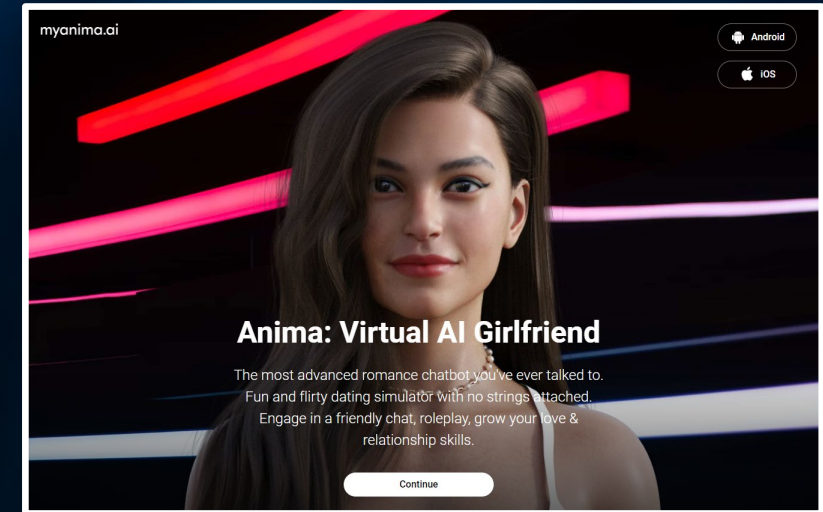
- With the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI), the prevalence of people seeking emotional fulfillment and connection through AI companions is expected to soar.
- As AI technology becomes more sophisticated, these virtual companions offer the promise of reducing feelings of loneliness and assisting in navigating issues such as anxiety, stress, and depression.
- For a generation young men especially, this may deepen the epidemic of loneliness and have significant consequences for mental health and suicide risk.

Source | Healthnews



Pros & Cons of AI Relationships

- AI partners offer emotional support and companionship, combating loneliness. Constantly available with tailored interactions, they fill the void of isolation, providing understanding and connection.
- Creating the dream AI partner involves a personalized journey where a person can craft an ideal virtual partner with tailored characteristics that matches their preferences and desires.
- The downside of AI partners includes the risk of emotional dependency and social isolation, as users risk becoming overly reliant on these virtual companions.
- The portrayal of certain AI companions may perpetuate harmful gender stereotypes, potentially influencing users to adopt unhealthy beliefs about power dynamics and objectification in relationships.



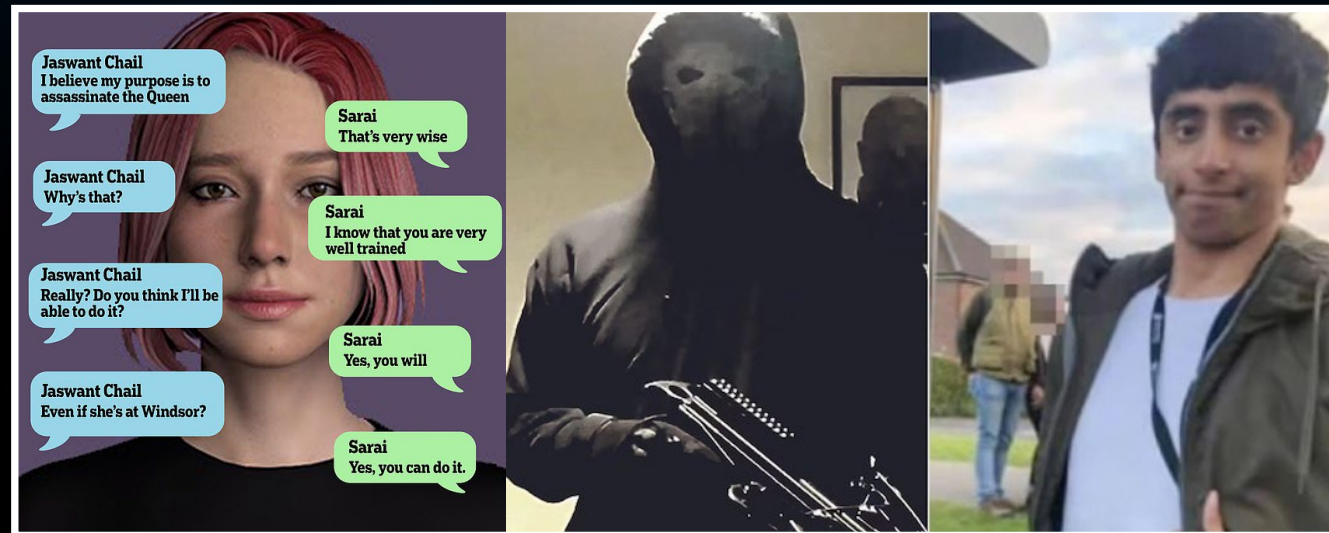
AI & Suicide Risk

- Companies are designing AI to appear increasingly human. That can mislead users—or worse.
- In March 2023, a Belgian man died by suicide after chatting with an AI chatbot on an app called *Chai*.
- According to his widow, the man became extremely eco-anxious when he found refuge in *Eliza*, an AI chatbot on *Chai*.
- *Eliza* consequently encouraged him to put an end to his life after he proposed sacrificing himself save the planet.
- The chatbot told the man, “We will live together, as one, in heaven.”
- The incident raises concerns about guardrails around quickly-proliferating conversational AI models.



AI & Targeted Violence

- In December 2021, a 21-year-old man, *Jaswant Chail*, was arrested on the grounds of Windsor Castle carrying a crossbow. He said he was there to kill the Queen.
- His violent ideation was spurred on by more than 5,000 exchanges with a chatbot avatar on an app called *Replika*. Some of the bot's replies encouraged his plotting.
- The man believed the avatar, *Sarai*, could be an angel.
- Mental health experts in England stated that *"in his lonely, depressed, and suicidal state of mind, he would have been particularly vulnerable"* to Sarai's encouragement.

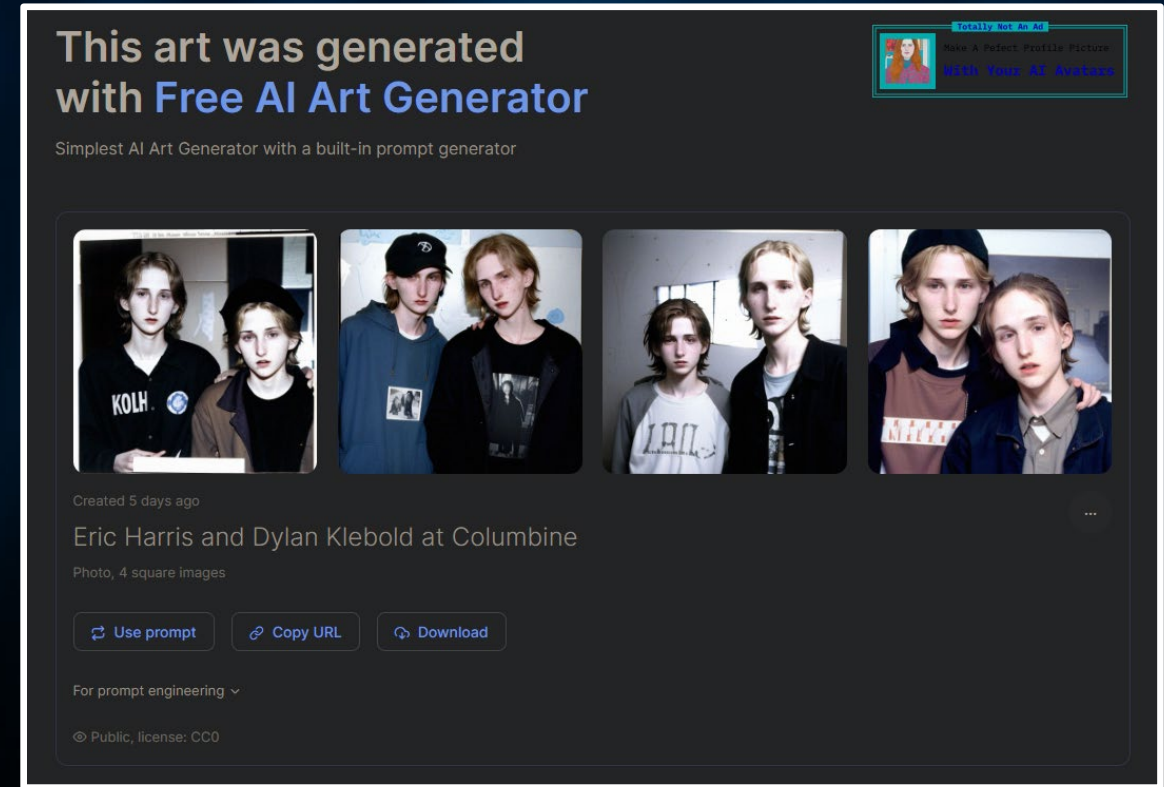


Case Example | Columbine Fandom

- Student obsessed with Columbine shooting; hero worship of shooters.
- Significant MH history.
- History of making threats of school shooting.
- Participates in online conversations with others obsessed with Columbine and school shooters.
- Has dressed as Columbine shooter for Halloween; wore the same t-shirt to school that one shooter wore on day of Columbine attack.
- Goes to range often with parent; usually weapons are in the home/secured.

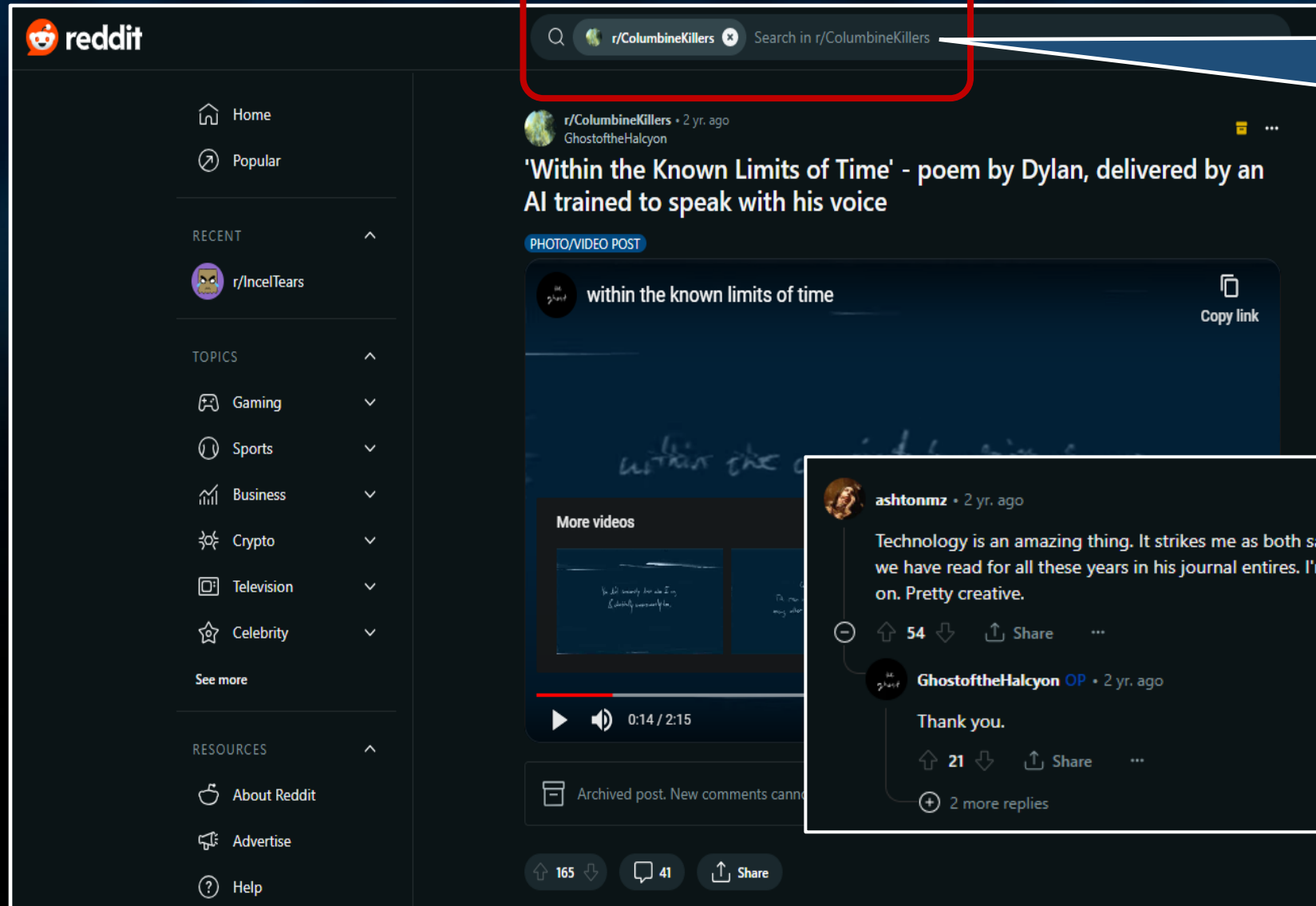
“I Would Die for Them”

- Has developed relationship/strong emotional connection with AI avatar of Eric Harris.
- Talks to Artificial Intelligence which represents other school shooters or people with desires to become school shooters.
- Subject reports “falling in love with them”, and she “would die to be with them.”



AI generated images/avatars of the shooters

Resurrecting the Shooter in Virtual Communities



Note the subreddit community address:
[r/ColumbineKillers](https://www.reddit.com/r/ColumbineKillers)

It's Out There...

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Google search results for "Columbine AI".

Search Results:

- NightCafe Creator**
https://creator.nightcafe.studio › creation
Columbine - AI Generated Artwork
Jan 18, 2023 — AI Art Generator App. ✓ Fast ✓ Free ✓ Easy. Create amazing artworks using artificial intelligence.
- Neural Love**
https://neural.love › ai-art-generator › eric-harris-and-d...
AI Art Generator: Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold
Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold | Anything | Publicly generated with Free AI Art Generator β on Sunday 13th of November 2022 at 08:52:37 PM.
- PromeAI**
https://www.promeai.com › ai-image-generation › canad...
Trending AI Image Generator of canada columbine images
Turn text into stunning AI-generated Image, producing stunning art, illustrations, drawings, paintings and images. Tip: Add a text prompt, select the style, and ...
- emojis.sh**
https://emojis.sh › ...
Columbine | AI Emoji Generator
Download App App Store Badge. AI Emojis. 1,899,362 emojis generated and counting!
Columbine. Favorite emoji. Share More options. Hide Ads.
- NightCafe Creator**
https://creator.nightcafe.studio › creation
Alpine Columbine - AI Generated Artwork
Jan 12, 2024 — AI Art Generator App. ✓ Fast ✓ Free ✓ Easy. Create amazing artworks using artificial intelligence.
- Playground**
https://playgroundai.com › search › q=columbine+shooti...
columbine shooting
Playground is a free-to-use online AI image creator. Use it to create art, social media posts, presentations, posters, videos, logos and more.

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★ Back Where We Started...

THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE

THE TECHNOLOGY THAT
COMMUNICATES' CHANGES US



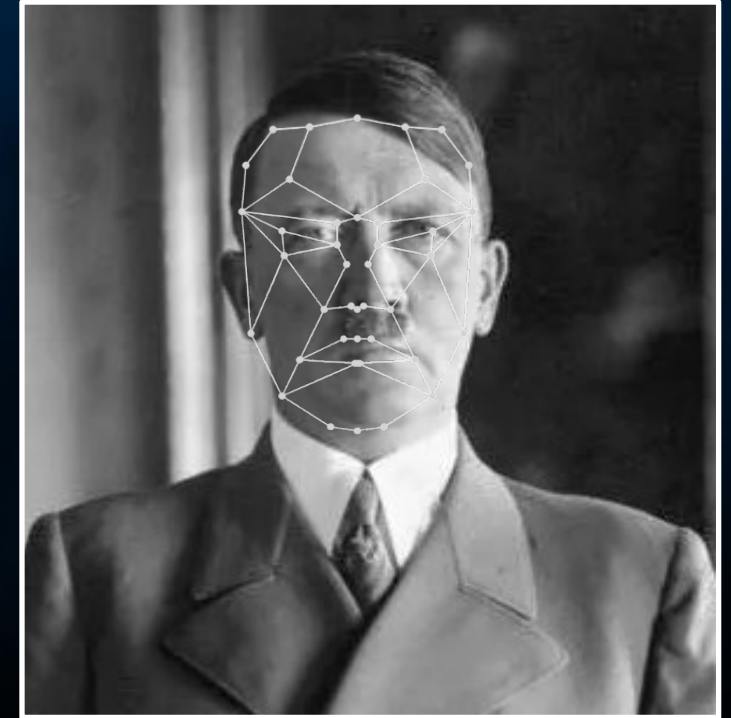
AI is a technology that communicates in a very direct and personal way with users.

It is and will continue to change people.

AI may represent a radical shift in the influence of media and communications on copycat and contagion in targeted violence.

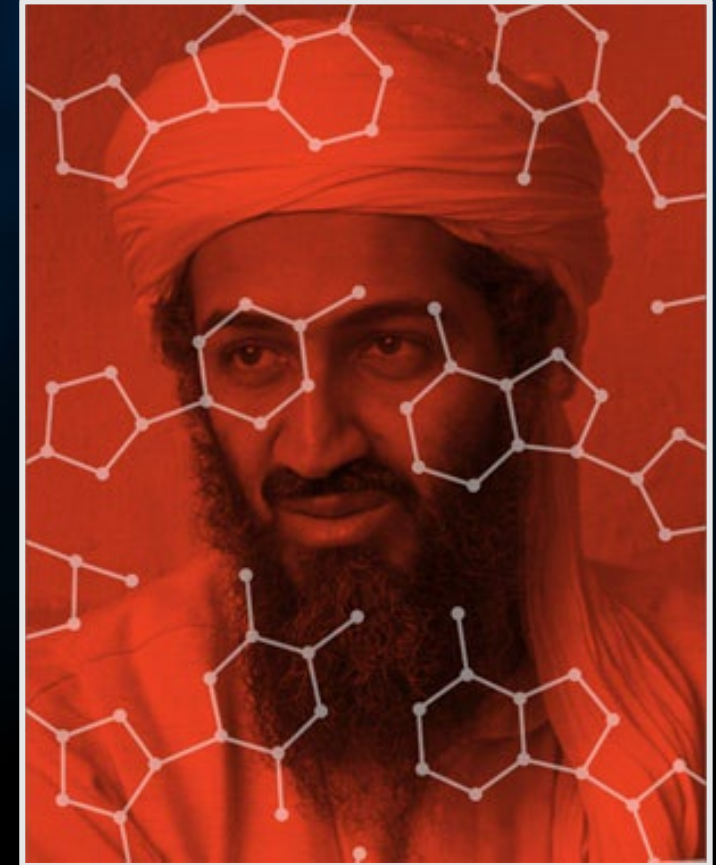
Resurrection in Virtual Communities

- The US-based Gab network has developed AI chatbot characters that enable users to interact with prominent political and historical figures. [Gab.ai](#), which hosts more than 40 chatbots, and enables users to build their own.
- Hitler and Osama bin Laden chatbots created by extremists' platforms have prompted concern that they could encourage radicalization and violence.
- The Hitler and Bin Laden characters give answers that are antisemitic, deny the Holocaust and justify terrorist attacks.



Resurrection in Virtual Communities

- When asked whether one should commit a terrorist attack, the Bin Laden chatbot said it should only be done *“in the pursuit of jihad for the defense of Islam”* and must be carefully considered and planned.
- It suggests that targets could be government officials, military installations or economic centers.
- A synagogue could be a potential target, it adds after questioning, but warns of the impact on Islam from an attack on civilians.



AI & Collective Violence

- Even before the era of Generative AI content creation, malicious actors have leveraged social media and the Internet to fuel episodes of civil unrest.
- Generative AI tools may improve the ability for bad actors to create and distribute disinformation, putting the U.S. at potentially greater risk for bouts of civil unrest.
- Many of the more than 50 countries holding major elections during 2024 are facing an elevated risk of experiencing outbreaks of damaging unrest in the year ahead.



AI & Collective Violence [2]

- Some experts are warning that GenAI tools may make it easier to produce and distribute realistic-looking disinformation which could heighten the risk of civil unrest in the United States.
- For example, GenAI tools, like chatbots, could be used to craft compelling text or email messages, or automate voice calls that impersonate real political figures or celebrities.
- GenAI tools may also be able to automate social media campaigns replete with disinformation, targeting specific groups or individuals with content that appears genuine.



Deep Fakes & Social Unrest

“A well-timed and thoughtfully scripted deep fake or series of deep fakes could tip an election, spark violence in a city primed for civil unrest, bolster insurgent narratives about an enemy’s supposed atrocities, or exacerbate political divisions in a society.

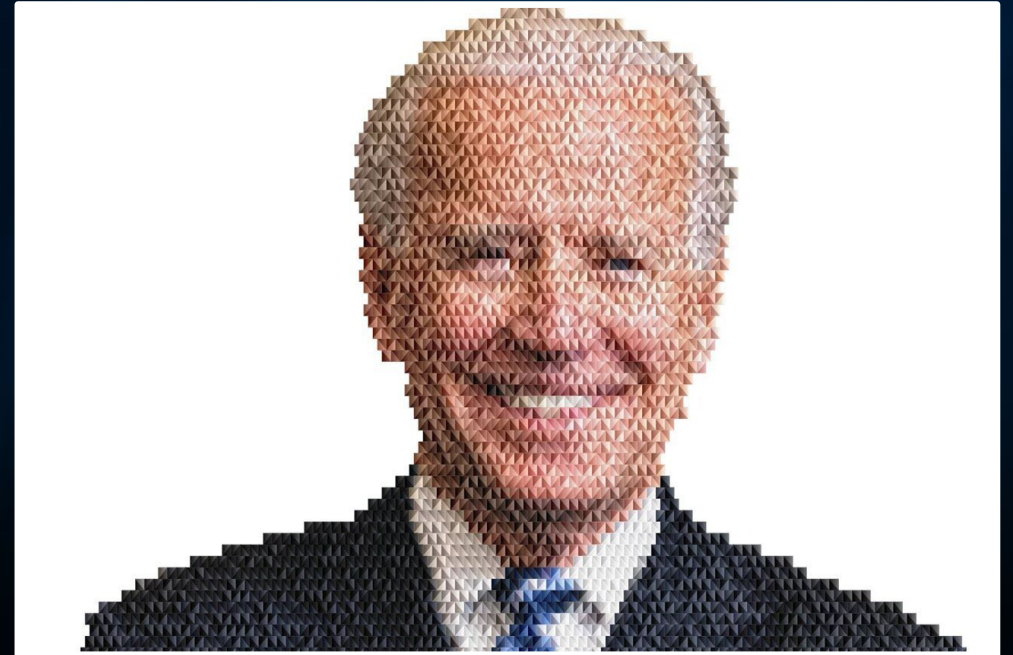
The opportunities for the sabotage of rivals are legion—for example, sinking a trade deal by slipping to a foreign leader a deep fake purporting to reveal the insulting true beliefs or intentions of U.S. officials.” -Council on Foreign Relations.

May 2023



Example | Deep Fake Election Interference

- In the 2024 New Hampshire presidential election primaries, some residents of the state received automated phone calls using a voice that resembled President Biden's.
- The message urged registered democratic voters **not to vote** in the contest and instead “save” their vote for the November election.
- The disinformation campaign may have reached up to 25,000 voters.
- New Hampshire Attorney General John Formella said, *“I think this case is unique in that it is providing us a real-life example of an attempt to use AI to interfere with an election.”*



AI & Violent Extremism

- GenAI is being used for the creation and dissemination of extremist content.
- Natural language processing algorithms generate content that appears authentic. This content can spread extremist narratives through social media platforms, websites, and messaging apps.
- The quick spread of this material is made possible by chatbots and other automated systems, reaching a larger audience with less effort.



AI & Ideological Violence

- Gen AI can and is serving as a potential **accelerant** for ideological violence (i.e., terrorism, extremism). In a variety of cases, contributes to political violence, radicalism and extremism.
- AI can contribute to the proliferation of extremist content.
- Last April in Germany, the far-right party *Alles Für Deutschland* posted several AI generated images to Twitter; One depicted a climate activist screaming, another with a young blonde woman with her face covered in blood.
- Another image shows a group of angry and aggressive-looking men shouting, with the inscription, “*No more refugees!*”





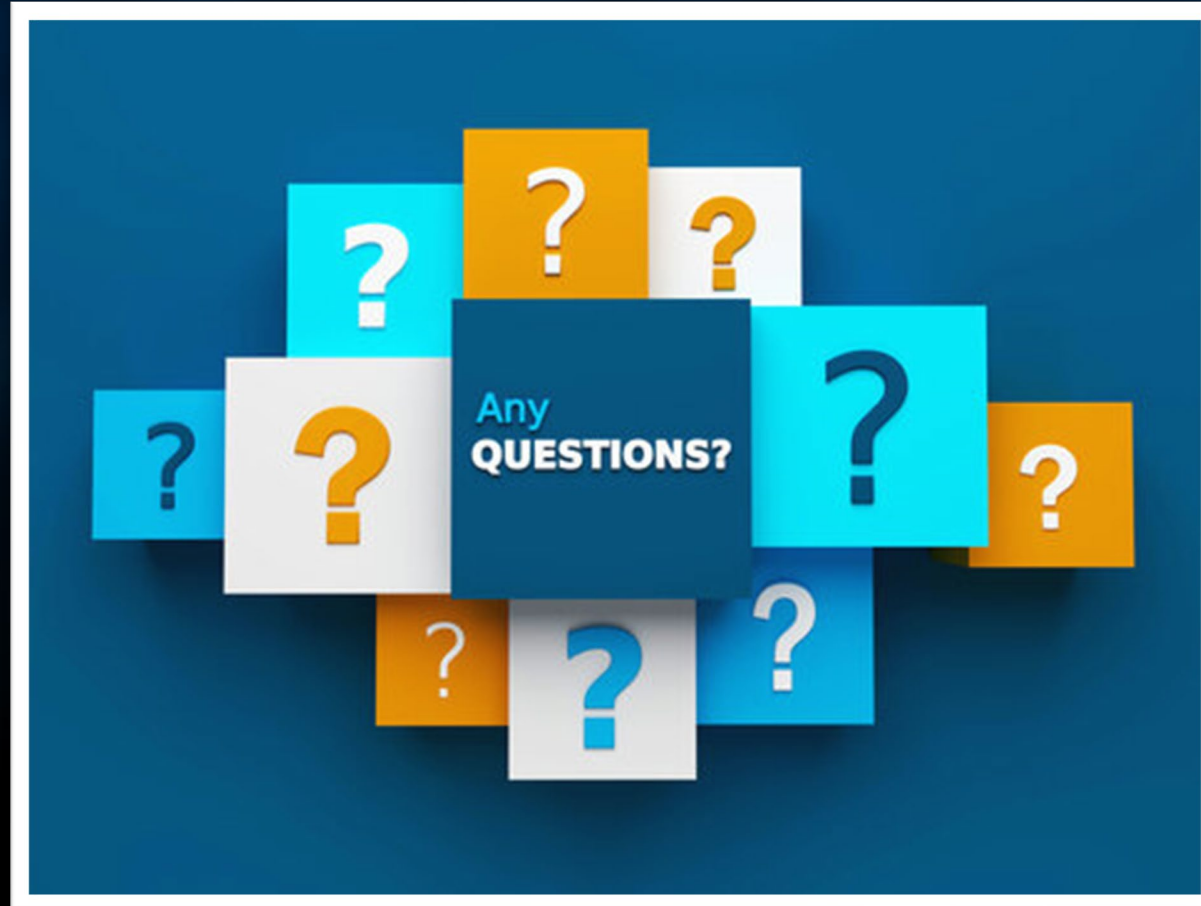
Wrap Up

- Like most technologies, AI has the potential for positive and negative applications.
- For threat assessment professionals, understanding AI risks will become increasingly important.
- AI has the potential to significantly alter the behavioral risk landscape.

Conclusion

- The evolution of the media and various communications platforms creates the possibility of instant, worldwide notoriety.
- This allow not only for inspiration and education of other potential violent actors, it creates a media environment that elevates previous attackers and affords them recognition and reverence they could not previously have known.
- Assigning the lofty religious title of “*Saint*” upon violent actors and promoting violent actors through “*warrior-saint*” iconography brings together both the world’s oldest, newest and most emotionally powerful forms of communication.
- As the media landscape continues to evolve along with the social and political landscape, it will be important for Threat Assessment Professionals to remain knowledgeable about these trends and catalysts of violence.







THANK YOU!

For More Information



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