

Social Responsibility to Investigate Radicalized Posts in Online Chat Forums

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Online Influence of Mass Shootings

In some accounts of mass shootings, shooters have posted their plans online beforehand and, shockingly, other users that see the posts have not questioned them. Why would this behavior not be further investigated or questioned? On the forums that shooters post on, there is a community of hate where other users agree with their words, encourage these individuals, offer tips of weapons, and even paint them as saints (Garsd, 2019). In the past decade, the internet has created a gathering place for hate groups but, “what happens online doesn’t stay there” and can turn into violent attacks (Garsd, 2019). The STS topic explores social responsibility of groups or individuals to investigate radicalized posts online that have language that indicate that hateful rhetoric will be acted upon and cause physical harm through mass shootings. By understanding what factors indicate that a mass shooting might occur and what methodologies should be implemented to recognize and stop a possible threat, mass shootings could be stopped before they occur. The STS framework, Actor-Network Theory, is used to explore radicalization on online chat forums that lead to mass shootings by using individuals and groups involved as actors in a network of online radicalization (Cressman, 2009).

News Articles and Podcasts Explaining Mass Shootings

Is there a method to keep people with radicalized views who post about them online from becoming radicalized in the first place to the point that they will act, and if it is possible to prevent them from being radicalized, then from radicalizing others? Additionally, on what level should the responsibility lie to intervene when hateful rhetoric is being used that sounds like it is going to be acted on? Mass shootings inspired by hate show how in the age of the Internet, there can be extreme physical response to words that sometimes feel like they might exist only in a

virtual space. Much of the information about mass shootings comes out in almost real time as stories unfold through news articles and in the days following, podcasts trying to understand what caused yet another mass shooting. These primary sources are defined as documentary research methods and use evidentiary sources that are combined with other sources to draw conclusions. Additional exploratory podcasts are used. Articles and discussions of five specific mass shootings in Quebec, Pittsburgh, New Zealand, Poway, and El Paso are analyzed together as historical case studies. These shootings in particular were at targeted groups of individuals and the shooters posted online beforehand or used hate sites beforehand indicating that they would proceed with their actions (Eligon, 2019).

Historical Context of Online Extremism

Mass shootings have become an increasingly large problem in the United States in the recent decade, and also have become the focus of a lot of discussion on social media and news media (Densley, 2019). In the past, mass shootings by individuals were often characterized as actions of people who were mentally ill who one day broke. In reality, the actions of mass shooters, particularly those who are also extremists in their views, have been carefully calculated, sometimes even written online and planned out. These mass shootings are sometimes at targeted groups of people, or because the shooters feel their voices are not being heard, such as in the shootings in El Paso and Pittsburgh (Eligon, 2019). A.D.L. research shows that “about 56 percent of the extremist murders committed in the United States over the past decade were carried out by people espousing white supremacist ideology” (Eligon, 2019). In recent years, the use of online forums on the internet have given people with radicalized views a place to discuss them and become even more radicalized. The online chat forums are breeding grounds for hate that is sometimes disguised as satirical humor that is often against minority groups whom the

people on the chat forum believe are replacing them or women whom they believe are not respecting them (Couric, 2019). Message board, 8kun, which was previously known as 8chan, is a popular place for online hate that has been tied to a rise in online extremism according to the Anti-Defamation League. It is a place where multiple shooters have posted their manifestos before their shootings and have even gotten praise for this work by other users (Hatechan, 2019). The rules for the posters on the site are virtually ignored, leaving users to post the most hateful and offensive speech imagined on the message board (Hatechan, 2019).

Computer science researchers are trying to determine the best way to monitor the posts and flag the behaviors that indicate action will be taken on the words written. There are a few specific types of behaviors on social media that are studied when looking at online hate by terrorists such as “*leakage, fixation, and identification* warning behaviours” (Cohen, 2014). These behaviors are indicative that these people might act on their words. If people were able to notice this behavior on more mainstream social media, they might be able to inform officials about the possibility of an attack before action is taken. Leakage is defined as information about an attack that contains words that show intent to act such as “I am going to.” Fixation is defined as an attention to a specific topic or person, and would likely be detected by looking at the frequency of a key term. Additionally, identification is defined as an increased response to positive or negative actions that happen to the group (us) and (them) (Cohen, 2014).

Actor Network Theory as it Applies to Radicalized Forums

STS frameworks are used to gain a better understanding of the mass shootings discussed and provide a “socially contextualized perspective” of the events (Autieri, 2016). Mass shootings have a profound effect on American society. Oftentimes when discussing mass shootings, the news media will explain a shooter as a lone wolf or a crazy person and gloss over the outside

factors that led a person to take such an action. By looking at mass shootings as they fit into the field of STS, one can contextualize the shootings as they relate to society in the United States, and how the use of technology, and specifically the online chat forums on the internet fit into the actions that shooters take. The STS framework, Actor-Network Theory, is used to frame the radicalization of online hate and how it can lead to mass shootings in the United States. Actor-Network Theory is a framework that aims to explore the relationships between different factors, or actors, that all fit together within a larger and defined network (Cressman, 2009). Michel Callon, Bruno Latour and John Law are often considered the first sociologists and STS scholars to use the term and apply this specific approach (Cressman, 2009). The theory develops from most notably the work of Thomas Kuhn and aims to look at science and technology as something that is currently happening and shifting and not a finite definition.

Actor-Network Theory (ANT) has been critiqued by one of the founders himself, Bruno Latour. Latour explains that very phrasing of Actor-Network Theory is confusing in its meaning, especially in the age of the Internet where the word network is thrown around often and is no longer meant to mean a “series of transformations” (Latour, 1999). He explains that though ANT was interpreted as very aggressive and twisted he hoped that after ANT a Post-ANT theory would emerge that is much lighter (Latour, 1999). Latour himself acknowledges the critique of Actor-Network Theory being absent of “morality, humanity, psychology” in its explanation (Latour, 1999). Ten years later, in 2009, Gad and Jensen continue to make the same critique on Post-ANT and question whether it is an acceptable theory to use in more modern times (Gad, 2009). This critique is especially relevant to the application of ANT as it applies to mass shootings, subjects that need morality and humanity that are described as lacking.

There are many human and non-human actors that fit into Actor-Network theory when it comes to mass shootings such as the government, social media, system administrators, service providers, gun manufacturers and legislators, guns, and extremists. Online forums act as the network through which the extremists interact and radicalize their own and others beliefs. The language used in mass shooting manifestos is sometimes reflective of public figures such as the current president of the United States, Donald Trump, indicating that the network does not exist in just an online space but spans further reaching and pulling from even an individual in a position of power (Baker, 2019).

Impact of Research and Administrators to Minimize Online Hate

The motivation for mass shootings in the United States often stems from online communities of hate encouraging violent terrorist acts. This paper investigates the mass shootings that are tied to white supremacist linked attacks. Research must continue to investigate the roots of radicalization and triggers of action. The most effective measures that can be taken to minimize shootings stemming from online hate are precautionary protocols that stop the radicalization before violence occurs. Through speech flagging and tracking, computer science researchers and data analysts better understand what behaviors draw best in audiences to radicalized forums and can effectively understand and mitigate attacks. This must be done in unison with website administrators who monitor the posts. Internet service providers must determine what websites they are providing service to and remove service from popular sites that idolize violent attacks. This challenges large internet companies to think critically about what their community guidelines are. Finally, public facing government officials should be cautious with the language they do and do not use regarding topics shootings, white supremacy, and immigration.

White supremacist hate groups have expanded in the recent years throughout the world, and specifically in the United States. From 2015 to 2018, there was a rise from 892 groups to 917 that the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) were tracking. To break the groups down further, there was 197% increase in anti-Muslim hate groups and 23% rise in neo-Confederate groups. The period saw a fall in physical extremist activity such as rallies and violence but this excluded actions taken after Trump's election and rallies, which often acted as extremist rallies according to the SPLC (Potok, 2017).

As of early August 2019, at least 16 attacks have led to 175 people being killed worldwide in the past 8 years in white nationalist-linked attacks (Beckett, 2019). Many of these attacks received a large amount of news coverage and are largely recognizable and remembered by the general public. The following list describes widely covered attacks that are linked to white supremacist groups in their online postings, and often reference one another or political happenings. This group of shootings are used as a large case study with a through line of reasoning because they have some insight into the shooter's mind through their written texts online.

In January 2017, six people were killed in evening prayer at a mosque in Quebec, Canada by the gunman who claimed he was prompted by prime minister Justin Trudeau's tweet "diversity is strength" in response to a travel ban on people from several Muslim-majority countries implemented by Donald Trump (Beckett, 2019).

In October 2018, 11 are killed in a mass shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, PA by a killer who posted shortly before the shooting on extremist site, Gab, "Screw your optics, I'm going in" in an anti-Semitic rage (Roose, 2018).

In March 2019, 51 were killed, targeted in two mosques in Christchurch, NZ by a shooter who posted a manifesto on 8chan, an extremist message board, before the attack, paying tribute to previous attacks (Beckett, 2019).

In April 2019, 1 woman was killed and 3 injured after a shooter fired at a Passover service in Poway, CA following a post on 8chan referencing inspiration from the shooting at Christchurch (Beckett, 2019).

In August 2019, 20 were killed and more than two dozen were injured in a Walmart in El Paso, Texas, a town that is predominantly Hispanic, by a shooter who drove over 10 hours to the location of the attack following an anti-immigrant manifesto posted online (Arango, 2019).

These attacks are not connected by location, but they are tied together through rhetoric used and the extremist sites on which they post (Cai, 2019). These mass shootings often reference each other or political happenings. Specifically, the shootings in the United States are overarched by a larger immigration debate happening in the country (Bradner, 2019). Not only do these shootings cause irreparable harm to the communities they affect, they incite and fuel the white supremacist communities after the fact, making them even more dangerous than a stand-alone shooting. These shootings are looked at through the STS lens of Actor-Network Theory. If the individuals act as actors in this larger network of mass shootings, it becomes clear quickly that shootings are tied together through a series of online forums that create and breed a community of hate. In this scenario, the actors are the individuals that performed the shootings. They were able to draw inspiration from one another through the Internet, and specifically through the extremist sites.

After a mass shooting at a South Carolina Church, white nationalist forums Stormfront and Vanguard News Network had an influx of posts reacting to the act. One user commented “I hereby nominate this man for the 2015 Nobel peace prize” (Conti, 2015). The creator of the site himself, Alex Linder, later referenced a list of actions for the community to take, including creating a “Roof crew” in reference to the South Carolina shooter, Dylann Storm Roof, that are a group of “self-chosen undergrounders who kill [the] enemy, focusing on the softest targets” (Hatewatch, 2017). Instead of reacting with grief from the shooting, users were galvanized by the action the shooter had taken.

Following the mass shooting in Pittsburgh, Gab, the site the shooter used to post his extremist views, blew up, “boast[ing] that its website was getting a million views per hour in the aftermath” (Roose, 2018). Contrary to hopes that Internet users would stay away from the hateful rhetoric, they instead flocked to the site.

Prior to the mass shooting in Christchurch, the shooter posted a manifesto on extremist site 8chan that specifically referenced other white nationalist attacks such as Anders Breivik’s 2011 attack in Norway and other acts of violence against Muslims (Beckett, 2019). After the shooting, those studying the attack warned that it could be a rallying point for other extremists considering the context of the attack. The live stream of the event along with the manifesto posted beforehand indicated that this attack was meant to be imitated by others. Unfortunately, this hypothesis was correct and the mass shooter of the El Paso shooting referenced the Christchurch shooting in his own manifesto (Noack, 2019).

The shooting in Poway, California echoed the Christchurch shooters words (Noack, 2019). The shooter himself explained that the event inspired him and also referenced the shooting in Pittsburgh as inspiration (Mezzofiore, 2019). Though the post was only on the site 8chan for about 9 minutes before being taken down, in just 4 minutes a user responded to the post with praise and encouraging the shooter to “get a high score” which is a phrase often used meaning to kill a lot of people (Mezzofiore, 2019).

The mass shooting in El Paso, Texas opens with “In general, I support the Christchurch shooter and his manifesto. This attack is a response to the Hispanic invasion of Texas” proving once again that the mass shootings oftentimes derive inspiration from other shootings (Arango, 2019). The Christchurch shooter made his manifesto public in hopes that it would inspire others to follow. Evidently, he was successful because the El Paso shooter opened his manifesto giving

direct credit and reference to the Christchurch shooter. The language used in the Christchurch manifesto was meant to draw readers in, using a tactic called shit-posting, or using niche alt-right language to encourage users to consume more content (O'Neill, 2017). This shows that when manifestos are posted they are not only meant to explain the shooters view point but to spread these views to other in hopes that they too will adopt them and act.

These individualized scenarios' online rhetoric prove that there is a connection between shootings. Additionally, there have been many threats since the El Paso shooting in August of 2019. By the end of August, there were more than two dozen individuals, many of whom were children under the age of 18, threatening to attack through social media posts, videos. One individual physically showed up to a public location in body armor (Almasy, 2019).

There is a reason that these shootings were able to reference each other. The words that the shooters and other sympathizers use is easy to arrive at through simple internet searches that quickly turn into more extreme views. Fathali Moghaddam, a psychologist at Georgetown University, explains that the Internet creates an echo-chamber where radicalization movements happen quickly and are becoming more common, through a process he calls mutual radicalization (Wood, 2019). This radicalization can happen very quickly. The shooter in Poway was only on the site for a year and a half before his views got so radicalized that he acted (Mezzofiore, 2019). In an interview on the Katie Couric Podcast, Next Question, 13-year-old Sam explains how quickly his views were radicalized after being ostracized by his school system for sexist comments. Sam grew up in a progressive Jewish household and in just a short amount of time was radicalized into believing and agreeing with the content that other users were posting online on a subreddit. By the time his views were most radicalized, he was making anti-Semitic

comments himself (Couric, 2019). This type of radicalization is a common trend; users normally start as disgruntled individuals who want someone to blame.

There is a need for these radicalized sites to be driven further underground. On the surface this sounds counterintuitive because it would be harder for researchers and police track potentially threatening online activity. Realistically, analysts and researchers that are tracking the attacks already know the majority of the sites that white supremacists are using. For example, the Southern Poverty Law Center, “track[s] more than 1,600 extremist groups operating across the country” (Southern). The Southern Poverty Law Center is confident that they are able to follow online radical movements and therefore encourage the sites to move further from mainstream media so they do not gain a larger following.

By the nature of the work that the users are doing, these groups can never go fully underground. Not only do these users want to post their views, they want others to adopt these views as well. These users are encouraged to bring other “normies,” or normal people, onto the site so that the groups expand. If the sites ever go too far underground or become too encrypted, the people who typically would be recruited to these sites would not be able to get to them. This draws a line between the fact that researchers need to be able to access the information that is being spread and the less users that access the site the better. In reality, researchers do not think that the sites will ever get to the point that they will not be able to reach them themselves and therefore encourage the sites to go further underground. An encrypted site is by nature more difficult to get to than hate speech that is posted on Twitter or Facebook. If the online forums are harder to reach, this minimizes the amount of exposure that people have to them, and therefore lowers the amount of radicalization that happens. Additionally, it is easier for researchers to track and monitor hate groups online if there are less places that they are posting. (Couric, 2019).

Finally, the administrators of the websites and internet service providers should take these sites offline, particularly the most popular sites that are entrants to extremist views. This would follow in the footsteps of internet service provider Cloudflare that took away service from the extremist site 8chan after the El Paso shooting manifesto was posted on the 8chan site (Prince, 2019). Though the United States places very high importance on the freedom of speech, in the age of the Internet, service providers and websites have the ability to decide what type of behavior is allowed on their sites and what activities may occur on their sites. Some larger sites have already taken some precautions by removing content that does not follow their community guidelines, a practice which should be expanded further to more sites and platforms across the Internet. More precautionary measures by large companies should be taken to ensure that spreading hate is not made easily accessible through their platforms (Fernandez, 2018).

While white supremacists often get their motivation and radicalization from each other, they also derive hate through politics and policy. Inflammatory language by public officials of the United States adds to the rhetoric that extremists pull from in their language in online rants. In the midst of a divisive political debate around immigration in the United States, Trump rallies listeners to lean into racism and inflammatory language. For example, at one rally he asked the crowd how to stop migrants from illegally crossing the United States-Mexico Border to which an audience member replied “shoot them.” Instead of shutting down this language, Trump laughed at the comment and replied, “that's only in the [Florida] panhandle, can you get away with that statemen.” (Rivas, 2019). Comments like these set an example for citizen in the United States who look to officials for political and social direction.

The president of the United States, Donald Trump, ran with speeches targeting minorities, retweeted white supremacists, hired Stephen Bannon a member of the alt-Right, and went on a

talk show with Alex Jones', the well know white supremacist, showing white supremacists that the behavior is acceptable. Multiple white supremacist leaders were enlivened when Trump was elected, including Charlottesville rally leader Richard Spencer, who explained, "Trump's victory was, at its root, a victory of identity politics" (Potok, 2017). Additionally, the shooter in Quebec explained that his motivation for the attack was Canadian Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau's, response to Trump's travel ban, convincing him that refugees were going to come and hurt his family (Cecco, 2018). In the manifesto that the shooter in El Paso wrote before the attack, he used similar rhetoric to Trump, even though the shooter argued that his views predate the presidency. Trump's words bring hateful language into the mainstream with words like "invasion" regarding immigration. (Baker, 2019). This eases use of hateful word by individuals who adopt and incorporate this language.

Public facing government officials should be cognizant that the inflammatory language they use that can be translated into manifestos of extremists that act on their behavior. Internet service providers should continue to review the sites to which they provide service and think critically about whether they support the bylaws of the site or the language that is allowed. Additionally, policy should be written in regards to free speech policy, not removing it, but perhaps implementing a one strike policy after a certain level of hate is written on the site. There becomes a point of free speech that becomes a threat of violence to targeted individuals and should no longer be protected by free speech.

In 2011, the White House's counter radicalization strategy published writings on the impact of the Internet and social networks advancing radical views. In this, the team states "we will develop a separate, more comprehensive strategy for countering and preventing violent extremist online radicalization and leveraging technology to empower community resilience."

(Neumann, 2013). Under the Trump Administration, in October 2018, there was finally a National Strategy for Counterterrorism but states that the principal focus is on “radical Islamist terrorist groups” (Trump, 2018). In this, Trump suggests taking protections such as building strong borders, which does not help to prevent terrorism by individuals that are currently living in the United States. In order to expand prevention of mass shootings, policy must directly state that there are problems within the United States instead of merely indicating that threats happen within our borders, which leaves room for interpretation (Trump, 2018).

There is a continual need for action to be taken to stop extremist radicalized views that lead to mass shootings and other hate attacks for many years into the future. Research in the future must continue to improve abilities to track radicalized speech online that leads to physical harm to others while not promoting the sites that breed this behavior. Researchers should continue to look at indicators of the language markings through overlays on websites and look into predisposition awareness of certain populations of individuals.

Researchers, website administrators, internet service providers, and government officials must work together to minimize mass shootings. Additionally, internet service, website regulations, language flagging, and precautionary language are non-human factors that influence how radicalized individuals will interact with hateful information on online forums. Each of these groups, or actors has a unique ability because of their position influencing the large network of online speech and therefore radicalized individuals. Individually, these groups cannot stop mass shootings but must work together as actors to influence the online network of extreme hate. The network of online hate through online forums is not something that can be seen physically but touches many individuals who interact with the forums and then go on to use the forums as a platform to grow their beliefs. The actors must pivot as new information is

uncovered and trends on online forums shift. Work to understand shooter motivations and minimize attacks must continually adopt and react to the changing trends of online hate whether it be through different forums or types of speech such as manifestos or shit-posting.

A major limitation of this research is the access to hateful writing. Some of the sites where the hateful rhetoric is posted is not as simple as scrolling through Twitter. The site 8chan, now known as 8kun, is not accessed easily through a Google search and some of the others like Gab need an account to gain access. The most extreme sites that users post their radicalized views on are not easily accessible to the general public without some time spent digging into the content through more mainstream sites first, like Reddit and Twitter.

Minimization of Mass Shootings

Ultimately, the research done by analysts must continue to investigate what indicates that someone who posts about a shooting online will take physical action. Additionally, administrators of sites with large amounts of white supremacist language must take their sites offline, and internet service providers should think critically about what websites they approve of hosting to drive these communities further from the general public. Large companies should also challenge themselves and their platform guidelines to decide what type of user interactions they allow to occur on their platform. Finally, policy and government officials in the United States must directly condemn and acknowledge violent behavior, keeping users from echoing public officials' language in their posts and allowing communities to feel comfortable spreading online hate. Through these measures, the expansion of white supremacist hate groups will come to a halt and therefore the physical actions such as mass shootings will end as a commonplace trend in the United States.

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