



[WHITE PAPER]

When Engagement Is Risk:

Understanding Risk Across the TCC–NVE Ecosystem

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1. Introduction

As awareness of nihilistic violent extremism (NVE) continues to grow, an increasing number of researchers and practitioners alike are attempting to distinguish the individuals who are most at risk to mobilize to violence. It is true that most people who engage with violent media, true crime, or extremist content never commit acts of violence, and effective threat identification as well as prevention efforts require identifying which individuals have vulnerabilities and other factors that may convert this engagement into an active threat.

Effective intervention in NVE harms also requires engagement from a variety of sectors. Law enforcement agencies are increasingly dealing with offenders whose radicalization trajectories are in no small part determined by their online influences. Social media, gaming, and other tech companies are being confronted with the reality that there is more they could do to stop extremist exposure, exploitation, recruitment, and grooming. Schools and prevention practitioners are, with limited resources, being asked to educate students about these harms, to monitor for signs of radicalization, and to know when to intervene and escalate certain cases.

2. Classification Challenges

Online ecosystems are rarely distinct or self-contained, making the challenge even greater for all these sectors. Participants move between communities and engage in behaviors that challenge our traditional understandings of radicalization to extremism. These behaviors also challenge efforts to neatly sort participants into low-, medium-, or high-risk categories because the same behavior can serve very different functions for different individuals. In some cases, the same behavior over time within the same individual may also carry different meanings as radicalization and engagement potentially evolve. Accurately assessing who is at risk therefore requires looking beyond the communities in which individuals participate and examining how that participation may be shaping their relationship to desensitization and violence.

This conclusion creates further difficulties when considering feeder or precursor spaces to NVE participation. Roblox, for instance, is prime hunting ground for groomers who seek to target children and lure them to more private, harder to monitor spaces where they engage in a variety of exploitative and manipulative behaviors. Awareness of this problem has exerted pressure on Roblox and other companies to institute new guidelines and policies that are intended to make such predation more difficult, yet fall far short of what is needed to achieve this outcome. Recent lawsuits brought by parents and victims are also beginning to test whether platforms can be held accountable when foreseeable grooming and exploitation occur through their services as one possible route for parents and communities to keep children safer.

And yet, for youth who have added vulnerabilities, such as an unstable homelife, a lack of offline peers, or certain mental health challenges, even brief exposure to grooming may initiate a trajectory that becomes increasingly difficult to disrupt.¹

3. The True Crime Community Ecosystem

Another ecosystem of concern is the true crime community (TCC). Part of the difficulty with this space is that it is enormous, internally diverse, and poorly differentiated in both public discourse and research. One end of the spectrum encompasses an estimated 23,000 podcasts² with millions of listeners as well as countless public social media accounts. These accounts have heavily engaged comment sections where individuals debate aspects of unsolved cases, perhaps, researchers say, with the goals of hardening themselves against similar attacks or attempting to control anxieties about an unsafe world.³

Many participants in this space see themselves as lay-detectives and—whether a realistic goal or not—genuinely aspire to help victims by solving cases that law enforcement have forgotten or otherwise failed to resolve. Their primary draw is to crime as a puzzle rather than to a perpetrator.

Elsewhere in the TCC ecosystem are darker elements that include more private chat spaces where participants openly fawn over serial killers and their violence, searching for the goriest or supposedly new and leaked crime scene images. They sometimes fantasize about being in intimate relationships with killers (some, like the Columbine High School shooters, more than others) and create visuals or short stories reflecting these fantasies.

These two elements of TCC are easy to differentiate when framed as extremes. Some researchers have even suggested alternative terms, such as Crime Gore Community, to focus on the portion of this ecosystem that fetishizes the violence and carnage of real-life attacks and separate it from the spaces noticeably filled with participants fitting the suburban housewife stereotype.

Yet this distinction is not always so clear cut, and efforts to sort users into simple, discrete categories quickly break down. There are also online spaces where both elements are present, and even the public, seemingly innocuous spaces are saturated with commenters who are deeply skeptical of official explanations, convinced that authorities are illegitimate or concealing important truths, or searching for social connection through a shared sense of outsider status—a point of commonality with the ecosystem's more harmful elements.

Some portions of this ecosystem also include chats where these behaviors become increasingly intertwined, with some participants adopting an armchair-detective role while others openly express admiration for attackers. Both groups may share crime scene photographs, attack timelines, or speculate about offender motives and tactics. The result is not merely a classification problem for researchers; it creates opportunities for movement from an interest in understanding violence to an interest in committing it oneself.

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<https://www.counteringextremism.org/analysis/reports/the-digital-crucible-understanding-and-preventing-youth-recruitment>

² <https://talks.co/p/podcast-statistics/>

³ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1948550609355486>;
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/14614448221138768>

4. Where TCC and NVE Converge

One of the more troublesome areas of the TCC space is where it overlaps with Columbiner fandoms. Columbiner subculture centers on shooters Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold and school-based grievances and violence, especially when connected to narratives of bullying, rejection, humiliation, or revenge. In these spaces, individuals can exemplify the full spectrum of TCC behavior, with some claiming to be interested in supposedly unexplored elements of the crime or its perpetrators, others primarily engaging in fantasized romances, and others actively discussing their desire to emulate the shooters' violence and be similarly revered. These differing patterns have led some observers to treat Columbiner spaces as though they contain clearly distinguishable categories of participants and to assume that movement between those categories is both uncommon and easy to identify. Such categories can be analytically useful, but they are nearly impossible to empirically validate in ecosystems where identity, irony, fascination, and violence are intimately intertwined.

However, this assumption ignores two realities that recur across online violence ecosystems. First, the same participant often engages in more than one type of behavior, making clean-cut categorization difficult. Second, much of the worst behavior often happens in comparatively private chats rather than shared spaces, making it likely that researchers and other observers are missing the full quantity and intensity of the most violent aspirations. What's more, the idea that some individuals can romanticize the shooters without romanticizing their actions quickly falls apart under serious scrutiny. These individuals are known and notorious precisely because of their violence. Their identities, mythology, and cultural significance cannot be meaningfully separated from the murders they committed.

Even individuals who say they wish they could go back in time or have an alternate timeline to intervene and "save" the shooters from their actions are operating within the context of their real-world violence—an exaggerated version of the "I can fix him" dynamic often discussed in popular culture. If Harris and Klebold had never committed mass murder, there would be little reason for strangers—many born years after Columbine—to become fixated on them rather than countless other adolescents who experienced bullying, rejection, loneliness, or humiliation. Their violence is not incidental to their appeal; it is the reason their appeal exists.

This problem is most clearly seen in areas where the TCC ecosystem, including Columbiner elements, overlap with NVE spaces. Some channels and servers where many participants are heavily engaged in Columbine worship are also replete with militant accelerationist narratives, a pursuit of "Saints Culture," nihilistic aesthetics, and an interest in other mass violence actors. These spaces are also deeply shaped by the performative culture characteristic of many NVE environments, where jokes, irony, trolling, roleplay, and deliberate ambiguity function as signals that a participant understands and can reproduce the community's cultural script. In some cases, this performative ambiguity is intentionally cultivated to create interpretive noise that obscures intent risk.

5. When Performance Becomes Escalation

Specifically, for individuals in this space who brand their bios or profile pictures of anime-styled versions of the shooters with a version of "do not condone," ostensibly to insist they embrace something about the killers—just not their violence—there's a real risk in taking them at their word in no small part

because of the performative irony embedded in these spaces. It is very commonplace for participants to layer certain images with text that warps the meaning, or vice versa.

For example, a case ICDE recently analyzed included a TikTok commenter noting, “we saw no signs” with a broken heart emoji paired with a laughing baby meme. The pairing meant that the words were ironic, intended to convey the opposite, and were one of many goading influences directed at a youth who was clearly being encouraged to commit a school shooting. Even more tellingly, the youth being groomed described himself as “not your average tccer,” in one of his account bios, thus distancing himself from mainstream TCC while still signaling membership in the broader ecosystem. ICDE has likewise observed numerous cases where individuals claim to disavow violence or, in a similar vein, to be “anti-extortion” in spaces that thrive on coercion, while actively trying to instigate the very harms against which they claim to advocate. One-off observations and even observations in purely semi-public spaces (rather than DMs) make a user’s true intent and risk profile very difficult to determine without fuller context.

It is also increasingly clear that, for some individuals, there is no safe level of engagement, “because the same mechanisms of behavioral conditioning, desensitization, and cognitive restructuring that make engagement performative also make it escalatory.”⁴ That is, the same behaviors put forth as performance in NVE spaces are frequently the exact mechanisms through which participants become more deeply radicalized and invested in violence. For example, expectations in some spaces that individuals change their profile images or aliases to past mass shooters and express admiration for them in chats can actually enhance that individual’s identification with shooters and other violent actors. This is true even if they initiated this behavior as a way of gaining attention, provoking reactions, or fitting into a peer group, rather than preexisting affinity.⁵

This identification process converts performative behavior and information uptake into cognitive and emotional desensitization and alignment such that there is no meaningful distinction between performance and preparation.⁶ Additionally, NVE environments often rely on systems of status-seeking where pressures to conform (and perform) as a way to rise in the ranks create strong incentives to participate in escalating behaviors. This process is amplified in some groups by threats to punish individuals who do not exhibit sufficient engagement by ejecting them from the group or doxxing them and exposing their activities. This clout-chasing framework means that pressures to perform can compound rapidly, accelerating both identification with violent actors and the adoption of increasingly harmful beliefs and behaviors.

6. The Danger of Simplifying TCC

In practice, this means that the challenge for practitioners is that behaviors that appear benign in isolation may be driving desensitization, radicalization, and identification with violence. This makes

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<https://www.counteringextremism.org/analysis/short-analysis/beyond-the-pathway-applying-a-cult-coercion-lens-to-nihilistic-violent-extremism>

⁵ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/chapter/bookseries/pii/S0065260108600246>;

<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9298910/>

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<https://www.counteringextremism.org/analysis/short-analysis/beyond-the-pathway-applying-a-cult-coercion-lens-to-nihilistic-violent-extremism>

simplistic, tiered models not only difficult to accurately apply but also inherently prone to errors that can easily miss a genuine threat.

To be clear, this does not mean that every TCC participant or even every NVE participant is destined for violence. There's an instructive analogy here: Government-sponsored anti-drug campaigns once described marijuana as a gateway drug. The implication was that using marijuana even once would place an individual on a relatively predictable trajectory toward harder substances such as cocaine or heroin. Research later demonstrated that while users of harder drugs had often previously used marijuana, the overwhelming majority of marijuana users never progressed beyond it. Just because an individual engages in one behavior, it does not mean they will progress to more dangerous behaviors, or online spaces.

Based on what we know now about both risk factors and addiction processes, we can make educated guesses about which individuals may become hardcore drug users, but we can't do that based on their marijuana use alone. It's harder to make educated inferences about which TCC participants may become NVE participants because we have less access to their biographical and social variables required to make that determination. We certainly cannot make that determination based on their public TCC engagement alone.

Given the range of harms that can emerge from these overlapping ecosystems, we are faced with an uncomfortable reality that some participants, even in what the individual above described as the "average" or largely normative spaces, will eventually radicalize into increasingly harmful behaviors. The challenge is not that every participant in TCC or other precursor communities represents a future threat, and we do not yet reliably identify these individuals until harmful trajectories are already well underway.

Engagement with digital radicalization and extremism tends to be considerably messier than any color-coded framework would suggest. Our focus should be less on identifying typologies of online groups or sorting individuals into static risk categories and more on the vulnerabilities that make some individuals susceptible to manipulation, the interventions that can reduce those vulnerabilities, and the steps platforms and policymakers can take to limit opportunities for exploitation.

The relationship between online violence communities that encompass elements of TCC, Columbiners, and NVE has distinct though related implications for different stakeholders engaged in combating youth extremist recruitment and exploitation.

6.1 Implications for Tech

Current and future tech policies must be oriented around the understanding that online extremism requires an ecosystem-oriented response rather than a response focused on individual instances of violative content. Extremist actors can exploit any platform, but sites—including mainstream ones such as TikTok—with limited or ineffective moderation are often flooded with violent, exploitative, and otherwise harmful extremist material. This clearly demonstrates the value of policies that prohibit and/or heavily moderate such content. Failures to do so dramatically expand the pool of potential victims and increase the likelihood of eventual offline harms, particularly when algorithmic recommendation systems amplify a user's initial engagement with extremist content.

Given how increased identification with and fetishization of mass killers, school shooters, terrorists, and other notorious perpetrators can emerge through performative engagement, platforms should consider prohibiting self-portrayals of these individuals—including real images, cartoon depictions, AI-generated representations, and similar content—in profile pictures and other aspects of account identity. The same principle should extend to usernames and other references that signal identification with or admiration for violent actors. Similarly, hashtags, images, and other references to self-harm, crime scenes, victim imagery, and certain materials that facilitate NVE engagement and radicalization (e.g., specific occult references, key meme edits, and similar content) should face moderation, while recognizing that there may be legitimate educational or journalistic reasons to discuss some of these materials.

Videos that share playthroughs of, promote, or otherwise glamorize games that recreate real-world shootings should be prohibited due to how they seem to be replacing offline firearms practice before a shooting. Likewise, recommendations and discoverability of gore- or violence-focused communities and similar spaces should be substantially limited.

Counter-messaging should be developed and robustly tested for deployment alongside fan-fiction romances involving the Columbine shooters and other notorious perpetrators in an effort to encourage healthier forms of engagement. The same is likely true of similar expressions that fall short of full storytelling, including references to "saving" past perpetrators or fan-edited content that aestheticizes violent actors.

Chatbots would likewise benefit from a substantial expansion of prohibited-figure lists based on ICDE's engagement with multiple models and the role such systems have played in facilitating several known cases of youth radicalization.

Policies could also more closely follow a behavioral risk framework, with users assigned points based on engagement across multiple communities and specific forms of content and risk assessment emerging from cumulative patterns. Such an approach may better capture behavioral trajectories while creating flags for closer, likely human, review and enabling intervention strategies specifically tailored to violent and radicalizing ecosystems.

Finally, platforms would benefit from greater and more regular collaboration with one another, particularly given how NVE actors intentionally distribute their activities across multiple venues to evade detection and circumvent platform policies. For example, some participants use sites such as TikTok and Pinterest for overt NVE or other extremist engagement while providing instructions for contacting them through direct messages or directing users to more coded and operationally relevant spaces on platforms such as Discord.

6.2 Implications for Law Enforcement

Building and strengthening family and community support pathways before a community incident occurs is crucial for fostering trust, encouraging reporting, and establishing a prevention-oriented culture. For individuals engaged in online extremist communities, their online identity should be fully investigated and heavily prioritized within the overall risk assessment.

At the same time, precisely defining a suspect's group membership, affiliation, or stated interests may be less useful than understanding the relationships among the online communities in which they

participate, particularly given the porous boundaries and frequent overlap between these spaces. Indicators of violence and other forms of risk are likewise only meaningful when interpreted across the totality of an individual's online engagement, including assessment of the channels, platforms, relationships, and broader ecosystems in which they are involved.

It is also important to remember that grooming and radicalization are overlapping and co-constitutive processes for NVE that, for many participants, also rapidly become inseparable from perpetration. One implication of this is that behavior that appears to be larping, trolling, or otherwise performative should still be taken as a sign of possible radicalization. Another implication is that investigations can carry additional stakes relative to some other kinds of extremist threats, and law enforcement would benefit from engaging with local and other officials to establish and strengthen intervention options that are not purely punitive, especially for young offenders, in part to encourage reports from family members and other individuals who observe concerning behaviors.

6.3 Implications for Schools and Prevention Practitioners

School administrators and front-line prevention practitioners face similar challenges with NVE given its youth-based nature and the strong likelihood that schools may be among the first places where young people exhibit signs of radicalization. One key factor these individuals need to understand is that the embrace of performative elements that may initially appear consistent with typical adolescent identity exploration can actually signal the uptake of more serious ideas, identification, and behaviors. Within this form of extremism, repeated exposure, even when genuinely performative at the outset, can quickly evolve into a desire to emulate harmful behaviors and practices. Even "good kids" are not immune from this process; many cases reviewed by ICDE have involved perpetrators with no prior school disciplinary record.

Schools can best protect their communities by building cultures of communication, trust, and self-acceptance rather than relying on shame-inducing or harshly punitive approaches. In particular, "zero-tolerance" policies for bullying and similar behaviors often address problems too late, only after an underlying issue has already produced a visible and harmful outcome. Bullying is known to be detrimental to youth for a variety of reasons and appears to be an especially powerful push factor in numerous NVE cases reviewed by ICDE. In contrast, genuine offline belonging and connection to a peer group are among the strongest protective factors against online exploitation.

Schools and practitioners should also be prepared to serve as bridges to additional supports for children and families struggling with the effects of extremist grooming and exploitation. These supports may include intensive mental health services, social services, and, in some cases, law enforcement. Teachers, administrators, and practitioners alike need to recognize key indicators of extremist engagement and manipulation because they often carry different implications for risk, intervention, and disengagement than other harms youth encounter online. A critical component of community protection is understanding how common youth vulnerabilities can increase susceptibility to extremist recruitment as well as recognizing that some youth face additional challenges that NVE actors are particularly adept at identifying and exploiting.

Finally, schools that require or reasonably expect students to use the internet, computers, or other technologies as part of their education also have a responsibility to teach safe and responsible use of those tools. This should include lessons about protecting personal information, recognizing false and manipulative information, and understanding how individuals may intentionally seek to exploit or harm



youth online. In the same way that individuals and organizations engage in "target hardening" to make themselves less attractive targets for criminal activity, children and their families need community support that makes youth less susceptible to online extremists—people who are often other minors. Providing judgment-free spaces where youth can discuss what they see and experience online and learn how to appropriately identify, report, and disengage from problematic content, is a core element of this process.

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GET IN TOUCH

Let's work together.

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