

New Zealand: The Christchurch shooting shows how a far-right web culture is driving radicalisation

Saturday 16 March 2019, by [MANAVIS Sarah](#) (Date first published: 15 March 2019).

It's no longer a luxury to understand the niche language of online radicalisation, but a necessity to prevent future attacks.

If you're reading this, you probably know that one of the suspected Christchurch shooters uploaded a video of himself carrying out the attack that has injured 20 and killed 49. Live streamed on Facebook, the video that has been taken down but subsequently reposted online alarmed viewers not just because it literally shows people being murdered but because of how the video begins.

Sitting in his car [at the start of the video](#), the alleged shooter says, "Remember, lads, subscribe to PewDiePie", seemingly telling viewers to follow the channel of [one of the world's highest paid YouTubers](#). But this is not, really, what the shooter is saying. What any person who doesn't spend enormous amounts online won't realise is that his phrase is a reference to the YouTube rivalry between PewDiePie and the YouTube account for T-Series. The reference is, essentially, a well-known, longstanding [meme](#).

There is so much to unpack in this story. There's the [tabloid coverage](#), streams of the video being put up repeatedly on Facebook and YouTube, the 74-page ideological document that's being plastered on news sites and social media, and the language of internet colloquialism. And that's just the mainstream coverage. There's the internet ideology that fuelled these attackers, forums like 4chan and 8chan where they hung out, increasing [threats to other groups](#) in the wake of this attack, and online radicalisation. There's the crucial conversation about the Islamophobia that motivated this shooting and how the hell we keep Muslims safe from copycats.

But, ultimately, there's one simple takeaway that doesn't require unpacking at all. And that is that white supremacist radicalisation is happening – flying under the radar, in many cases, thanks to internet-specific irony and memes. And if it's not addressed now, more people will probably die.

Arguably, this realisation should have happened in 2014 after the Isla Vista Shooting by Elliot Rodger. You could be generous and say it should have happened last year after the Toronto van attack by Alek Minassian. [Both of these men claimed to be incels](#) – involuntary celibates, an online predominantly male community who blame and demonise women for not having sex with them – who recorded and posted violent language about their hatred of women online (in-line with incel ideology). Rodger, specifically, also recorded himself speaking to camera preceding and during the attack, as the Christchurch shooter did, and too wrote a personal, self-aggrandising document that was emailed to friends and family in the wake of his attack. Rodger, despite murdering six people, has gone on to become an "[incel hero](#)".

But the difference between these two killers and the Christchurch shooter is that veil of irony. While

Rodger and Minassian both spoke about themselves in a very straight manner (Rodger referred to himself as “the closest thing there is to a living God”) the shooter today made jokey references that only people who spend a lot of time on Reddit and 4chan will get.

As Robert Evans [wrote brilliantly for Bellingcat this morning](#), a lot of the shooter’s writing is riddled with that very specific brand of online irony commonly known as “shitposting”, in which people write posts that are semi-absurd, laced with references to popular content or figures in the attempt to troll people online and get an emotional response. While anyone reading Rodger’s screed would see it as the ramblings of someone who was mentally ill, the Christchurch shooter’s document is chock-full of shitpost Easter Eggs, designed to only be understood by the like-minded thinkers who also shitpost in those online spaces.

The piece helpfully unpicks the irony from many of the screenshots that have been circling on social media (specifically the references to right-wing commentator Candace Owens and references to the dance “flossing” and the video game Fortnite). Evans describes the manifesto as “a trap itself, laid for journalists searching for the meaning behind this horrific crime.”

Of course, whatever the intended audience for this rhetoric was, or for whom the traps in his manifesto are laid, the irony becomes decidedly unironic the second someone picks up a weapon. Just before carrying out the shooting, he posted on online forum 8chan (according to Bellingcat), “time to stop shitposting and time to make a real effort.” Regardless of the intentions of the shooter, at the end of the day, he became a shooter.

But part of where the foundational problem lies is that this terrorist attack happened and journalists, law enforcement, politicians, and the wider public can’t fully grasp the origins of it. With little digging on particular forums and channels on YouTube, Reddit, and 4chan, you can become inundated with violent, racist, and misogynistic language – all subliminally caveated with the irony of “it’s just a joke, bro!”. But often the language is murkier and more layered than this obviously violent rhetoric; built on memes upon memes upon memes that have becoming increasingly complex over the course of years.

People who spend a lot of time in these spaces will easily recognise this veiled, dangerous language and quickly understand its origins – and they will be able to not only explain how a meme was built, but what that meme/language is actually signalling. But people who don’t take the time to understand these subsections of internet culture wouldn’t even know where to start when faced with bizarre and obscure references. They likely wouldn’t even be able to recognise that this language is worth noting at all.

[Video not reproduced here.]

Now that we are faced with such obvious, horrific facts, it’s time to stop pretending that understanding the internet is a niche luxury. Not understanding the irony of internet language, what drives it, or where it comes from is no longer just a difference between people who are “online” and people who aren’t. Not understanding it is now an act of fatal irresponsibility and it is a choice. By continuing to ignore the language of radicalisation rampant online, we not only make room for more attacks like this to happen, but keep them from being detected early and, ultimately, prevented.

Enough is fucking enough. The language of the Christchurch shooter is nothing new and we’ve had years of warning signs that something like this might happen. Understanding these online groups cannot be left as after-the-fact pieces, churned out by a media playing catch-up on trends that have long existed. It’s time for online radicalisation to finally be taken seriously, because attacks like the one in Christchurch won’t be enough to keep it from stopping.

P.S.

- The New Statesman. INTERNET 15 MARCH 2019:
<https://www.newstatesman.com/science-tech/internet/2019/03/christchurch-new-zealand-shooter-pe-wdiepie-youtube-facebook-video-shows-we-need-take-online-radicalisation>
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