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## WHEN A “DOPE” CAN’T BE “ROPED”

*Can social media identify killers before they strike?*



*For Police Issues by Julius (Jay) Wachtel.* As we write, “the safest big city in America” – New York City, according to former three-term Mayor Michael Bloomberg – reels from an [April 12 mass shooting](#) that wounded ten subway riders, five critically, during the morning commute. Clad in a construction gear and a mask, the gunman entered a subway car, discharged two smoke grenades, then pulled a 9mm. pistol and unleashed a thirty-three shot fusillade.

One day later the sixty-two year old gunman, Frank R. James, called the cops and was promptly arrested.

A maintenance worker and factory hand, James was born in New York City, but as an adult he became estranged from his family and [wound up drifting between jobs](#) in Chicago, Newark, Milwaukee and, most recently, Philadelphia. James had few if any friends, and former neighbors described him as “gruff, standoffish and prone to losing his temper.” Along the way he amassed a long string of arrests for offenses including possession of burglary tools, disorderly conduct, “criminal sex act,” trespassing and larceny. New Jersey authorities once charged him with “making terroristic threats.” But in the end he pled guilty to harassment, wound up on probation and – not for the first time – was ordered into counseling. Throughout, James avoided either a felony conviction or a mental commitment, so he remained legally qualified to buy guns. As he did a decade ago at the Ohio pawn shop where he bought the pistol he would use – then leave behind – in the subway.

James, aka “prophet of truth 88,” was a prolific YouTuber and frequently posted long-winded, expletive-laden monologues about politics, race and crime. Although his

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channel has been taken down, “[VideoMattPresents](#)” preserved a couple dozen of his videos. (Click [here](#) for one of the milder examples.) James’ rants were replete with homophobia and misogyny, and his chronic invective [cut across both race and ethnicity](#). Obsessed with issues of race, crime, homelessness and other intractable human problems (he even ranted about the invasion of Ukraine), James seemed convinced that they could only be resolved by driving those who might disagree with his answers to their knees.

Did the subway attack represent a lashing out? James openly conceded that he had long suffered from mental problems (he complained, though, that “treatment” only made things worse.) But as of late, his head trips may have turned worse. Here’s an outtake from a March 20 video that he posted while driving to Philadelphia:

...just thinking ‘cause I’m heading back into the danger zone, so to speak, you know, and it’s triggering a lot of negative thoughts, of course, because I do suffer...have a bad, severe case of post-traumatic stress after the s---t I’ve been through all the f-----g years...



More ominously, in his most recent video, posted one day before the rampage, James announced that he once harbored thoughts of killing but had put them aside because of the likely consequences:

And so, this is why it’s important to think about what you’re going to do before you do it. Let’s not be...I’ve been through a lot of s---t. What I can say ‘I want to kill people, I want to watch you die right in front of my f-----g face immediately.’ But I thought about the fact, hey, man, I don’t want to go to no f-----g prison....

These comments, and more, [have been mentioned](#) in the print media. They were extracted verbatim from videos preserved by the YouTube channel mentioned above. **Click on James’ image for our compilation.**

James isn’t the only social media addict to act on his worst impulses. “[Preventing Mass Murder](#)” focused on three once-nobodies who left their despicable marks in 2018:



Bowers

Sayoc

Beierle

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- Robert Bowers, a middle-aged recluse, used an AR-15 rifle and three pistols to kill eleven and wound six, including four police officers, at Pittsburgh’s “Tree of Life” synagogue. An “[isolated, awkward man who lived alone and struggled with basic human interactions](#),” Bowers frequently posted comments disparaging Jewish persons on [Gab](#), an alternative online platform that reportedly [remains popular with extremists](#).
- Cesar Sayoc, a middle-aged bodybuilder with an extensive criminal record for property and violent crime, mailed thirteen explosives-laden packages to politicians and past and present Government officials. With his personal life long in the dumps, Sayoc apparently felt he had nothing to lose, and [he used Facebook and Twitter](#) to rant at his intended victims. California Congresswoman Maxine Waters got a tweet that read “see you soon.” Former Attorney General Eric Holder, Jr. received a similar message, appended with “tick tock.”
- But the third middle-aged guy, Scott Beierle, was different. (We say “was” because he killed himself.) His “thing,” though, wasn’t politics – it was that women paid him no heed. His YouTube posts glorified “[Incel](#)” (involuntary celibacy) and praised the movement’s former head, sometime [Santa Barbara college student Elliot Rodger](#). We say “former” because Rodger, who knifed and shot six students dead and injured a dozen others during his vengeful spree in 2014, also killed himself. At the ripe old age of twenty-two.

And the carnage continued. In April 2019 [John Earnest](#), 19, posted a vitriolic, anti-Semitic rant on “8chan” (now “8kun”), a message board described as a “[megaphone for mass shooters](#).” He then stormed into a San Diego-area synagogue and opened fire, killing one and wounding three. Four months later [Patrick Crusius](#), a 21-year old Texas man, posted a hateful anti-Mexican, anti-immigrant diatribe on 8chan. Wielding an AK-style rifle, he went on a shooting spree at an El Paso Walmart, killing twenty-three and wounding an equal number. It’s thought that Crusius, who “[spent countless hours on the Internet](#)” following white supremacy, essentially learned to hate online.

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Alas, despite gun laws and physical security measures (the Poway massacre led President Trump to suggest posting armed guards at religious services) mass killings persist. But is it possible to act before twisted killers strike? Absolutely, says the FBI. Consider, for example, the case of [Robert Hester](#), whose online posts glorifying ISIS and justifying violence drew the attention of undercover agents. Ultimately roped in to an

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FBI-fabricated scheme to stage “a mass casualty attack,” Hester pled guilty in 2019 to attempting to provide material support to a terrorist organization. He got twenty years.



There have been dozens of such cases. Yet our posts (see, for example, “[Written, Produced and Directed](#)”) have persistently voiced skepticism about the viability of the threats. Lacking an undercover agent’s friendly “guidance,” many wannabees seemed unlikely to act on their own. Prediction, though, is a tricky business (see, for example, “[Missed Signals](#)”). Consider the flack the FBI got for supposedly overlooking the many social media posts [that warned about a forthcoming Capitol assault](#). As we mentioned in “[Chaos in D.C.](#)”, the phrase “storm the Capitol” supposedly came up online 100,000 times during the preceding month.

According to *NBC News*, part of the FBI’s hesitancy to investigate the Capitol plotters may have been that a massive online “dig” for incriminating information could harken back to the scandalous “snooping” of the Hoover years. Another roadblock – the sheer mass of the content, and how to separate the wheat from the chaff – was mentioned by FBI Director Christopher Wray [during his testimony to the Homeland Security Committee](#) as it investigated the lack of preparedness for the assault:

And how to separate who’s being aspirational versus who’s being intentional, it won’t shock you to learn, and hopefully not other members of the committee, that the amount of angry, hateful, unspeakable, combative, violent, even rhetoric, on social media exceeds what anybody in their worst imagination is out there. And so trying to figure out who’s just saying, “You know what we ought to do is X.” Or, “Everybody ought to do X.” Versus the person who’s doing that, and actually getting traction, and then getting followers, and of course, that’s assuming that they’re not communicating through encrypted channels about all that stuff, is one of the hardest things there is to do in today’s world with the nature of the viral extremism threat we face.

As he agonized about making sense of the disjointed chatter, Director Wray was alluding to a key issue. Unlike the wannabe terrorists that his agents occasionally snared, the Capitol plotters didn’t clearly appropriate the language of crime. Protesting, after all, is a Constitutional right. Given the chaotic online scene, gathering compelling evidence that specific persons will seek regime change through lawbreaking is no simple task. These “dopes” didn’t set themselves up to be “roped.”

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It's not just about the Capitol assault. Consider subway shooter Frank R. James. He ranted extensively, and over a long period. Yet as far as we know, his first allusion to shooting *anyone* came only one day before his attack. And even then, no specific targets were announced. Bowers, Sayoc and Beierle also posted profusely. But only Sayoc delivered individualized threats, and these came very late in the process. Similar obstacles would have beset anyone examining the online trails left by John Earnest and Patrick Crusius. To be sure, both seemed potentially dangerous. But building a criminal case takes a whole lot more.

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Set “criminal case” aside. Restraining orders are often granted after episodes of domestic violence. In some places their use has expanded to include persons whom family members and police deem untrustworthy with a gun (see “Red Flag” [I](#) and [II](#).) There are also many provisions for dealing with the mentally ill (see “[A Stitch in Time](#)”). But massacres are something new. The threat they pose to educational institutions has [led many school districts](#) to adopt the “[threat assessment](#)” approach. Developed in the nineties, it's a comprehensive process for identifying possible perpetrators, evaluating their risks, and moving them away from violence through counseling, social services and other supports (for a new book about the technique click [here](#).)

Threat assessment relies on referrals from police officers, family members and friends. Could it be expanded to encompass the online world? Perhaps. But [as FBI Director Wray testified](#), given the massive nature of online chatter, distinguishing between the “aspirational” and the “intentional” would require special tools and dedicated analysts:

So there's a data analytics piece, because the volume is so significant that we need to get better at being able to analyze the data that we have to do it in a timely way, to separate the wheat from the chaff. And that requires both tools, analytical tools, and we've had requests for those in the budgets the last couple of years, but also people, data analysts, who can devote their time to that who have the experience.

According to an article in the October 2018 NIJ Journal, “[Using Artificial Intelligence to Address Criminal Justice Needs](#),” A.I. could help. Although the emphasis is clearly on other things, a section about crime forecasting mentions that A.I. could



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scan media to “identify criminal enterprises” and “predict and reveal people at risk.”

We thought the approach intriguing. It seemed especially applicable to our three killers of note, Bowers, Sayoc and Beierle, as each had an expansive, long-standing online presence. Yet [as the Brennan Center recently cautioned](#), Government monitoring of social media platforms raises a host of civil liberties issues. Participants at [a 2019 NAS symposium on human rights](#) worried that AI’s use by the authorities could worsen bias and inequality. Such concerns likely drove Senator Ben Sasse to spill his drink on Director Wray’s great notion:

I would love to hear your big national pitch for these data analysts because we need more great human capital to serve their country in this way. But I also want to be sure that our training for these data analysts have First Amendment sensibilities about what they’re there to do. They’re looking for violence, they’re not looking there to be the national speech police.

Actually, the good Senator need not worry. At present, the “craft of policing” isn’t about trolling for lunatics, online or otherwise. As your writer can personally attest, law enforcement agencies – including the FBI – have always focused on crimes, investigations and arrests. That’s what their budgets are built on. It’s how their employees earn promotions and advance through the ranks. So while our epidemic of mass shootings and the Capitol assault may have caused some reconsideration, America’s law enforcement agencies remain firmly planted in the offline world. As long as wackos and killers don’t accidentally cozy up to an undercover Fed, they can likely keep using the Internet to their twisted hearts’ delight.