

# 'Long tail' of mosque attack felt in Buffalo shootings

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## Extremism

***The Buffalo terror attack is the latest entry in a deadly feedback loop of online hate inciting real life violence, which is then repackaged and redistributed as more online hate, Marc Daalder reports***

**Analysis:** Counter-extremism researchers say the man accused of killing 10 people in a racist terror attack on a Black supermarket in New York was likely influenced by the March 15 shootings.

Like the convicted terrorist who killed 51 people at two Christchurch mosques in 2019, the alleged Buffalo gunman livestreamed his attack and published a manifesto outlining his white supremacist views. That document also provides insight into what radicalised the 19-year-old man, although experts caution against reading too much into writings from individuals steeped in a culture of disinformation and violent memes.

That online subculture continues to produce terrorists, who then film their attacks as a way to provide more radicalising content to recruit and encourage the next wave of shooters. It's a deadly feedback loop, a vortex of online hate inciting real life violence, which is then repackaged and redistributed as more online hate.

The 2011 terror attack in Oslo played a crucial role in radicalising the Christchurch terrorist, whose own attack motivated a synagogue shooter in California, a racist massacre in Texas and now the Buffalo attack. This latest entry in cycle shows that the Christchurch attack has more staying power than others of its ilk and that it has become a central part of this constantly unfolding terrorist mythology.

## **Glorification of terrorism**

Elise Thomas is an analyst at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue and one of the authors of [a 2021 report on Tarrant's ongoing resonance](#) on the far-right fringe. She says it's not surprising that the bigoted, cruel and violent milieu of extremist gaming forums, imageboards and Telegram channels keeps spitting out terrorists.

For a separate report, she spent weeks in these online spaces. Even visiting 4chan, considered something of a gateway to the darkest parts of the internet, on a daily basis "made my brain melt," she said.

"It's so unbelievably steeped in just casual racism, casual sexism, casual violence. The people in those communities

are toxic to each other, not just everybody else. There's a real dehumanising aspect to spending a long time in those subcultures where you gain status by being cruel to other people. It makes perfect sense to me that someone who spent a long time stewing in that, soaking it all in, could be mobilised to violence."

That casual violence includes a pervasive celebration of past, racist terrorists. They are referred to as saints, Thomas said, and appear repeatedly in congratulatory memes.

"Over the past years and shootings, there's been this kind of glorification of most of those shooters. There's a real culture of glorification of those shooters, pouring over their manifestos, and the Christchurch shooter is the head of them all – the chief saint if you will," she said.

"There's visual glorification - memes of the shooter as a saint or a cartoon. Imageboard and chan cultures are visual in their communication. But they're celebrating the character of [Brenton] Tarrant rather than the person of Tarrant."

Understanding this subculture is key to understanding the drivers of white supremacist terrorism, Victoria University of Wellington criminology lecturer Sara Salman says.

"What the research tells us is that white supremacist terrorism is made up of well-connected groups that use the internet to propagate their violent ideology, they call for

violence, they coordinate," she said.

"All of these are lone wolf terrorists, right? They act alone. But they draw on each other's ideas, they reference manifestos and other content online. They make explicit their intent, sometimes to friends or family members, they may do it online as well.

"They're typically isolated. So they do raise red flags that no one sees until it's too late. But that doesn't mean that they have no relation to the outside world. Relations might be fraught, but they're real."

## **Copycat attacks**

The pervasiveness of terrorism-related content in these online spaces means there is also a clear model for what a terror attack looks like. That model, in many ways, comes directly from the March 15 attack.

"Tarrant set the mould for what this kind of attack should look like - a manifesto, a livestream, allowing people to spread the livestream in a viral manner," Thomas said. "You now have these other shooters who are intentionally setting out to copy it."

Terrorist manifestos have almost become a genre in and of themselves. The manifesto of the Buffalo accused runs to 180 pages and includes passages directly copied from the Christchurch document.

"It shows the stylised nature of these attacks," Thomas said.

Kate Hannah, the director of the Disinformation Project, told Newsroom that the Buffalo attack showed the "long tail of any of this type of content".

"Much in the same way that the Buffalo shooter's own livestream will now consist of this kind of content that will repeatedly be accessible and available for viewing," she said. "It's that predictable impact on a young man who clearly had a white supremacist set of ideas and beliefs alongside what seemed to be some suicidal ideation and other mental health issues."

Salman agreed that the Buffalo shooting was a copycat attack inspired by Christchurch. That didn't mean it was "mindless copying" but the Christchurch attack "sets a precedent or sets a standard. If you think about these lone wolves as being loosely connected online through gaming websites or forums, it does allow them to achieve a higher status. When they're copying what Tarrant does, they become celebrated in the same way as Tarrant is celebrated."

There were distinctions between the manifesto of the alleged Buffalo terrorist and that of the Christchurch terrorist.

"I was interested to see that there was more antisemitism than the March 15 manifesto and that it seemed to be a

critical part of his set of justifications for his actions," Hannah said.

"They're all growing on each other," Salman agreed.

Fringe online spaces are certainly to blame for part of this intensifying radicalisation.

"All the interventions that have happened, be they person-to-person interventions or online interventions over that period since [the 2011 Oslo attack], have not decreased young white men's access to complete and utterly revolting lies about other people that they can then turn into a manifesto," Hannah said. "That ability to access that appears to have increased."

Salman said that some of these areas are also making it into mainstream politics. The replacement theory which motivated both the Christchurch terrorist and the Buffalo accused has been a regular feature on America's most watched cable show, *Tucker Carlson Tonight*. That false theory supposes that liberal elites (often Jews) are encouraging migration from non-white countries to weaken white states.

In New Zealand, far-right conspiracy theories have also made it into mainstream politics. Before the March 15 terror attack, the National Party ran a petition against a UN migration pact based on a theory started on extremist forums.

"I caution against relegating all of this and saying, well, this is a subculture and these are extremist people. Of course they are, but replacement theory is platformed on TV," Salman said.

"These people who engage these kinds of acts of violence are exposed to these ideas everywhere, anyway. It's not just online that they find that."