After Columbine shooting, I combed through the internet's dark corners. Will we ever learn?

By Lisa Strohman, PhD
Published in USA TODAY on April 20, 2021

Following the 1999 shooting at Columbine High School, I sat in an FBI conference room in Quantico, Virginia, as profiling agents combed through hundreds of pages of legal history, online chatroom discussions and website posts from the perpetrators. I was a newly recruited FBI visiting scholar, and bearing witness to these events was both a privilege and a heartbreak.

First, we taped printouts of inflammatory conversations and comments to the walls. When we ran out of wall space, we sorted evidence into boxes. Within a week, boxes of papers and images filled the entire room. The magnitude of content was overwhelming, and as a burgeoning psychologist, I was baffled that no one had seen this coming.

The young men who committed this heinous crime had been radicalized in plain sight through web forums frequented by other angry individuals who fed on each other's insecurities, hatreds and mental illnesses to create a perfect storm of motive and opportunity.

Remember, these were the early days of the World Wide Web. Computers weren't in every home, websites and chatrooms were rudimentary and, for the most part, cellphones were just that — phones. In the decades since Columbine, the number of internet users has skyrocketed. Now, over 4.6 billion people around the world are creating 2.5 quintillion bytes of data daily. The sheer volume of information being shared online is mind boggling.

If it proved difficult to track threats and troubling behavior online in 1999, imagine the difficulty now.

Today, the first thing we do when faced with a tragic event, be it an act of violence like the recent shootings in Boulder and Atlanta or a suicide, is to go online and look for clues. We want to find a motive, an explanation — and we often don't have to search too hard before we find one that fits.

A new analysis from the U.S. Secret Service reviewed 67 disrupted plots against schools over a dozen years and confirmed that, in nearly every instance, the perpetrator shared their violent intentions through "verbal statements, electronic messaging, and online posts." Many of the

plotters (63%) were also struggling with emotional or psychological symptoms, including suicidal thoughts and mental health issues, and half were victims of bullying or harassment.

People post things online because they want to be seen. It is human nature to want to fit in, to make connections, to share how we're feeling. In some cases, and I see this often in my clinical practice with kids, we hope someone will see our content and try to help us.

Lisa Strohman in Quantico, Virginia, (left) in the summer of 1999 and at the FBI headquarters in Washington, D.C., in the summer of 1998.

This raises a fundamental question: If the information is being shared, particularly by a vulnerable individual or child, don't we have an obligation to keep watch and intervene whenever necessary?

A growing cadre of policy experts and medical professionals are warning of a mental health crisis as rates of depression and anxiety among teenagers continue to climb. From 2007 to 2018, youth (ages 10-24) suicide rates increased 60%, becoming the second-leading cause of death among children and young adults. COVID-related isolation, uncertainty and stress have only made things worse.

Combine these mental health concerns with the fact that kids are online more than ever thanks to the rise of remote learning and stay-at-home orders, and you have a recipe for disaster.

Students have found new avenues beyond social media to exercise risky behavior, using online learning platforms and web-based shared files like Google Docs as chatrooms or as vehicles to circulate worrisome messages.

Some schools and districts have seen the writing on the (virtual) wall and have been wisely investing in tools to help filter and flag disturbing content. Unsurprisingly, they're uncovering a lot of information.

One school safety company tasked with this work, Gaggle, reported a 67% rise in student threats of suicide and self-harm and a 67% increase in threats of violence against others on

school-owned devices and platforms since the start of the 2020-21 school year, as compared with the previous year. Perhaps most disconcerting is the dramatic increase in flagged incidents and threats coming from elementary school children.

Fortunately, in these instances, schools have the information they need to proactively intervene if warranted.

So, here we are, 22 years after Columbine — what have we learned?

We've learned we are facing a watershed moment in youth mental health that has been exacerbated by the pandemic. And we have learned that the internet can cut both ways, nurturing dangerous impulses while also forewarning potential violence.

As adults, we have a responsibility to protect our children however possible — despite what they might say when begging to download Snapchat or pleading for their own iPhone, kids still need our help to mindfully and safely navigate the internet. They need us to stay vigilant and attuned to the warning signs that are often right at our fingertips.

The alarm bells are ringing. This time, we should be listening.

Lisa Strohman is a licensed clinical psychologist and founder of Digital Citizen Academy.
https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/opinion/voices/2021/04/20/columbine-high-school-shooting-online-suicide-children-column/7208911002/