

YouTube AND /K/: Cross-Platform Firearms Content and its Influence on the Buffalo Shooter

On its own, extremist ideology merely represents an in-group motivation and poses a limited threat to public safety. In this context, the Department of Justice and the Federal Bureau of Investigation have acknowledged the legal complexities that are compounded by the fact that groups who constitute domestic terrorist threats often espouse ideologies through largely constitutionally protected activities.¹ However, when the means (weapons), and opportunity (real-world, sociopolitical events) are incorporated into the equation, violence becomes increasingly likely. Many of the deadliest attacks among domestic extremists that have taken place over the last three decades all occurred because motive (conspiracy), means (firearms), and opportunity (real-world, sociopolitical events) aligned with deadly intentions. Violent extremists are by definition oriented towards identifying opportunities where these three factors converge and acting on them.

Introduction

On May 14, 2022, an 18-year-old white male killed ten people and wounded at least three others in a meticulously planned mass shooting at the Tops supermarket in Buffalo, New York. Prior to the shooting – which was live-streamed on Twitch – he pre-planned the release of a manifesto on Google Drive and posted a 589-page diary-style document to a Discord server in order to maximize the public impact of his crimes.² The 589-page diary, an ostensible archive of his messages and daily routines documented on Discord from November 2021–May 2022, sheds light on the various online communities and associated content that informed his decisionmaking in the months leading up to the mass shooting. He described his full radicalization journey, which began with an interest in survival and guns after playing *Apocalypse Rising* on Roblox, leading him to hunting and shooting and eventually, a deeper interest in firearms on Reddit and 4chan.³

The shooter described entering into the world of 4chan during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, lurking and participating in discussions on the **/k/** (weapons) message board before making his way to the **/pol/** (politically incorrect) message board. In many ways, the messages show a desperate teenager trying to fit in and impress an online firearms community. He regularly documented his firearms tests, bemoaning when certain custom parts failed to function, which, more than anything else, shows how limited his firearms knowledge was. He frequently, and in great detail, talked about the aesthetic choices he made regarding his firearms and equipment, underscoring the extent to which he tried to appeal to a specific firearms community like the 4chan **/k/** message board.⁴

The overarching purpose of this research is to better understand the intersectional relationship between online gun culture and far-right communities inhabited by the Buffalo shooter. His radicalization funnel from 4chan firearms communities like **/k/** to far-right spaces like **/pol/** is one of the few elements of this mass shooting that differentiate it from Christchurch, El Paso, Poway and other far-right attacks. In his Discord diary, the shooter posted links to firearms-related YouTube videos during the same time that he was a participating member of 4chan's **/k/** weapons board, highlighting a critical platform relationship. Through the lens of the shooter's own experiences, this inquiry can facilitate an exploration of the intersectional relationship between firearms-related YouTube communities and 4chan's **/k/** weapons board, and an analysis of how gun culture played a role in the Buffalo shooter's path to radicalization.

¹ Homeland Security Digital Library. "Domestic terrorism: an overview." August 21, 2017. <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=803523>

² Swaine, Jon, and Dalton Bennett. "Buffalo Shooting Suspect Wrote of Plans 5 Months Ago, Messages Show." *The Washington Post*, May 16, 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/2022/05/16/buffalo-shooting-previous-supermarket-confrontation/>.

³ Cohen, Adi, and Ben Decker. "Internet Trolls Should Not Dictate the Terms of Public Exposure to Hate." *Tech Policy Press*, May 18, 2022. <https://techpolicy.press/internet-trolls-should-not-dictate-the-terms-of-public-exposure-to-hate/>.

⁴ Cohen, Adi, and Ben Decker. "Internet Trolls Should Not Dictate the Terms of Public Exposure to Hate." *Tech Policy Press*, May 18, 2022. <https://techpolicy.press/internet-trolls-should-not-dictate-the-terms-of-public-exposure-to-hate/>; Crawford, Blythe. "K/ and the Visual Culture of Weapons Boards." *Crest*, October 28, 2020.

<https://crestresearch.ac.uk/comment/k-and-the-visual-culture-of-weapons-boards/>.

This research study is by no means intended to place direct blame on 4chan /k/ or YouTube for the Buffalo shooter's actions. However, the shooter's Discord diary and 4chan /k/ consumption habits provide a unique opportunity to study the chronological, cross-platform radicalization of a single individual, as well as the far-right firearms community as a whole.

Understanding the Shooter's Interests

Because the foundational context of this study comes directly from a primary source, researchers are faced with the dilemma of taking the Buffalo shooter at his word through documents he created (the Discord diary and manifesto), knowing they would be read and circulated after committing a mass shooting. As a result, it's not unlikely that it misrepresents and obfuscates elements of his past. According to the shooter's diary and manifesto, he claims that he was interested in firearms well before he came to any white supremacist ideology. However, there's a lack of internal consistency on this subject since he also claims to have been exposed to white supremacist ideas and content through a WWII themed server on Roblox around the same time that he was playing a zombie apocalypse-themed Roblox server, which he claimed led to an initial interest in firearms.

Understanding the YouTube Firearms Community

Firearm companies often use social media as an ad hoc advertising platform in order to facilitate traffic from YouTube viewers to websites that sell guns, frequently relying on influencers to promote gun consumerism.⁵ Both YouTube and Twitter subsidize their gun advertisement efforts by providing server and streaming services to gun manufacturers, while simultaneously commercially reaping the benefits of corporate ownership.⁶ Many well-known firearms content creators on YouTube are explicitly sponsored by firearms manufacturers and/or producers of firearms accessories, non-firearm tactical equipment, and advocacy organizations – and many firearms manufacturers have YouTube channels themselves.

In 2017, YouTube enacted a controversial moderation shift that demonetized a large amount of videos across a variety of topics. Many firearm and military channels could no longer generate income via ad revenue, and while a majority of the outcry against what was referred to as the “Adpocalypse” was regarding non-firearm related channels that were demonetized, there was still significant frustration from within the firearms community. Many firearms channels were eventually able to remonetize their videos as long as they did not violate YouTube's new policies, but others continued to be periodically demonetized, leading some to form alternative video hosting platforms with fairly limited success. For the purposes of this study, it should be noted that only two of the top 20 YouTube channels are monetized today, while two other channels have paid product placements.

Understanding 4chan /k/

/k/ is a message board specifically dedicated to firearms on 4chan. The /k/ message board is notably less active than more prominent message boards, averaging approximately 16,265 posts per day, paling in comparison to boards like /pol/ and /vg/, which average almost ten times the volume of daily discussions with 158,581 and 113,427 posts, respectively.⁷ In the later 2010s, there was an increase in anti-government and extremist ideology content on /k/ (and 4chan as a whole) that culminated in the board effectively becoming ground zero for what is now called the “boogaloo movement” in 2018–2019.

⁵ Jordan, Lisa, James Kalin, and Colleen Dabrowski. “Characteristics of Gun Advertisements on Social Media: Systematic Search and Content Analysis of Twitter and YouTube Posts.” *Journal of Medical Internet Research* 22, no. 3 (March 27, 2020): e15736. <https://doi.org/10.2196/15736>.

⁶ Jordan, Lisa, James Kalin, and Colleen Dabrowski. “Characteristics of Gun Advertisements on Social Media: Systematic Search and Content Analysis of Twitter and YouTube Posts.” *Journal of Medical Internet Research* 22, no. 3 (March 27, 2020): e15736. <https://doi.org/10.2196/15736>.

⁷ Crawford, Blythe. “/K/ and the Visual Culture of Weapons Boards.” *Crest*, October 28, 2020. <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/comment/k-and-the-visual-culture-of-weapons-boards/>; 4stats. “4stats.io - Live 4chan Board & Thread Statistics.” n.d. <https://4stats.io/>.

Accelerationism – the interest in accelerating the collapse of organized society by actively attacking the government – became a major theme of the content on /k/ during the later half of the 2010s. While a majority of conversations on /k/ still revolve around firearms themselves, these conversations are deeply embedded with anti-government, anti-Semitic, and white supremacist ideology. Furthermore, threads specifically discussing the firearms, equipment, and tactics used by mass shooters, terrorist groups, domestic extremists, and law enforcement remain prevalent today.⁸

METHODOLOGY

Memetica established and deployed a methodology to explore the relationship between the Buffalo shooter’s radicalization process, his firearms-related YouTube consumption, and 4chan’s /k/ weapons board YouTube consumption during the time frame of his Discord diary entries, from November 2021–May 2022.

This mixed-methods inquiry intended to answer the following questions:

1. Which YouTube firearms content creators were most relevant to the Buffalo shooter?
2. Which YouTube firearms content themes were most relevant to the Buffalo shooter?
3. Which YouTube firearms content creators are most relevant to the 4chan /k/ community?
4. Which YouTube firearms content themes were most relevant to the 4chan /k/ community?
5. How relevant were the themes defined for the buffalo shooter to the 4chan /k/ community?
6. How similar were the Buffalo shooter’s YouTube consumption habits to the wider 4chan /k/ community?

Step 1: Qualitative Thematic Analysis:

With the help of a Subject Matter Expert (SME), researchers utilized a grounded theory qualitative approach. Relevant words and phrases directly from the shooter’s diary and manifesto – as well as from the descriptions of the specific YouTube videos that were shared in the diary – were extracted to create a searchable “dictionary.”⁹ The SME then undertook a contextual analysis to distill this “dictionary” of terms and phrases into four main themes that describe the content¹⁰: *Firearms, Non-Firearms Equipment, Tactics, and Ideology & Culture*.

Step 2: Quantitative Data Collection

Researchers collected all YouTube links from the shooter’s Discord diary from Nov. 2021–May 2022 and then used the same process for all YouTube links shared on 4chan /k/ during the same time period. The data collection generated the following number of videos for each data set:

- 76 YouTube videos in the shooter’s Discord diary.¹¹
- 5,187 YouTube videos (and accompanying descriptions) from 4chan /k/.¹²

⁸ Newhouse, Alex, and Nate Gunesch. “The Boogaloo Movement Wants To Be Seen as Anti-Racist, But It Has a White Supremacist Fringe.” Middlebury Institute of International Studies: Center on Terrorism, Extremism, and Counterterrorism, May 30, 2020. [https://www.radicalrightanalysis.com/2020/11/13/k-and-the-visual-culture-of-weapons-boards/](https://www.middlebury.edu/institute/academics/centers-initiatives/ctec/ctec-publications/boogaloo-movement-wants-be-seen-anti-racist-it-; Crawford, Blythe. “/K/ And The Visual Culture Of Weapons Boards – Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right.” CARR: Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right (blog), November 13, 2020. <a href=).

⁹ Based on SMEs’ contextual understanding of gun culture and extremism, auxiliary terms were added to account for similar words or niche ideas that were not directly mentioned by the shooter. This includes brands of firearm and non-firearm equipment such as AR-15 style rifle manufacturers like Ruger, Palmetto State Armory, and Daniels Defense).

¹⁰ Before finalizing the “dictionary” of words and phrases, the SME ran a preliminary manual analysis of the /k/ dataset to understand the intersectional relevance of the identified terms.

¹¹ The shooter’s manifesto only included one YouTube video, which was deemed out of scope for this study.

¹² Memetica’s data science engineer originally identified a total of 8,299 YouTube videos posted on 4chan /k/ during the reporting period and then used a Python script to flag only the relevant videos, bringing the total number of YouTube links down to 5,187.

Step 3: Mixed-Methods Data Analysis

Researchers used a Python script and keyword analysis tools to run the aforementioned set of “dictionary” terms against both data sets to find videos that discuss one or more of the four themes (*Firearms, Non-Firearms Equipment, Tactics, and Ideology & Culture*) and are present on both platforms. All of the 4chan /k/ Youtube videos that were “tagged” with one or more of the four themes were manually verified by the team’s SMEs to ensure that the tags were correctly identified.¹³

Step 4: Mixed-Methods Comparative Analysis

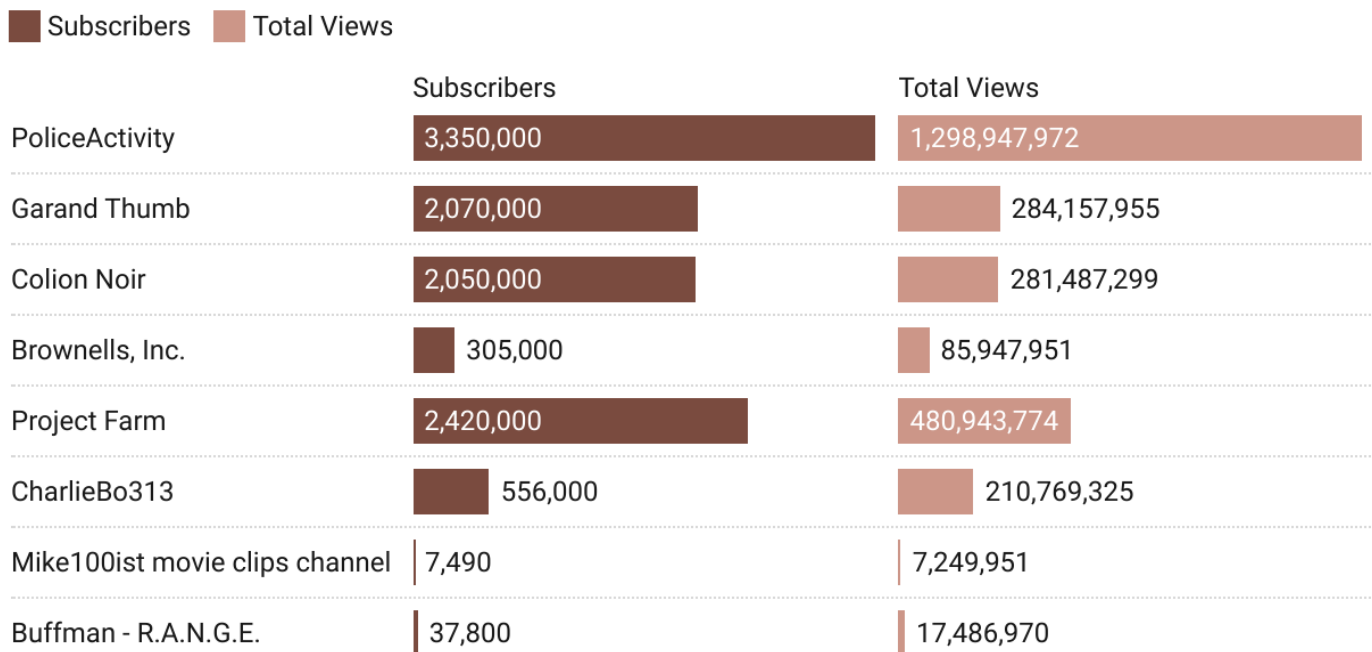
The result of the qualitative and quantitative analyses was a cross-referenced list of YouTube links from both data sets that identified video matches, content creator matches, and thematic similarities.¹⁴

FINDINGS

Which YouTube firearms content creators were most relevant to the Buffalo shooter?

The Buffalo shooter consumed the most content from firearms creators that offered one or more of the following: 1) information on AR-15 style rifles, 2) tactical advice or video evidence of firearms being used to shoot people in a tactical or law enforcement capacity, 3) pro-gun political ideology, and/or 4) gun modification, repair advice, and tutorials. The most frequently posted videos came from: PoliceActivity, Garand Thumb, Colion Noir, Brownells, Inc., Project Farm, Vice News, CharlieBo313, Mike 100ist, and Buffman - R.A.N.G.E. Two of the most frequently referenced YouTube content creators, Colion Noir and Brownells, Inc., are closely affiliated with the NRA.

Most Frequently Posted YouTube Channels on Buffalo Shooter's Discord Diary



¹³ The manual audit of tagged videos did not include the 3,112 videos that were not identified as relevant by the query.

¹⁴ Researchers used the following comparative analysis tools to inform the findings in the following section: theme frequency charts (Airtable), content creator frequency charts (Airtable), content creator analyses (Social Blade), and network analysis of adjacent Youtube firearms content (Raditube).

PoliceActivity: With 3.35 million subscribers and approximately 1.2 billion views, PoliceActivity ultimately serves as an aggregation channel for bodycam, helmet cam, CCTV, and cell phone footage of US law enforcement officers engaging individuals with firearms. In the shooter's diary, he explicitly noted that he watched the PoliceActivity channel to learn how law enforcement would likely respond to his attack. The Buffalo shooter shared eight videos from this channel in his diary – more direct shares than any other single channel in the data set.

Garand Thumb: With 2.07 million subscribers and approximately 284 million total views, Mike Jones (aka Garand Thumb) is one of the most popular firearms YouTube content creators in America.¹⁵ His channel reviews firearms and firearms accessories, gives tactical advice, and provides commentary on US gun politics. A large portion of his content is focused on a domestic and civilian application of special operations firearms, equipment, and tactics. Jones is often utilized as an aesthetic touchstone because of his attire, which is regarded as an ideal “greyman” aesthetic within the community.¹⁶ The shooter admired Jones, and even referred to him when deciding what kind of eye protection to use during the attack. The Buffalo shooter shared seven videos from this channel in his diary.

Colion Noir: With 2.05 million subscribers and approximately 281 million total views, Colion Noir is one of the most prominent Black firearms content creators on YouTube. Formerly affiliated with the NRA and now an independent firearms content creator, his channel is somewhat typical of the YouTube firearms space (firearms, accessories, tactics and Second Amendment politics). The Buffalo shooter shared three videos from this channel in his diary¹⁷

Brownells, Inc.: With 305,000 subscribers and approximately 85 million total views, Brownells, Inc. is one of the oldest firearms parts, ammunition, and accessory retailers in America.¹⁸ Currently owned by the Brownell family-run parent company 2nd Adventure Group, the current CEO, Pete Brownell, was previously the President of the NRA from 2017–2018. The Buffalo shooter shared three videos from this channel in his diary.¹⁹

Project Farm: With 2.42 million subscribers and approximately 480 million total views, Project Farm is well known in the firearms community. From boots to welding equipment, the channel is viewed as a reliable source that informs purchasing decisions. Project Farm is known for rigorous methodologies to test and compare different versions of a product, and tutorials on various methods for farming, machining, engine, and home repair. The Buffalo shooter shared three videos from this channel in his diary.²⁰

Vice News: With 7.85 million subscribers and approximately 2.6 billion total views, Vice News is a notable outlier within the data set. The Vice News videos shared by the shooter in his diary are all documentary films the news outlet produced investigating far-right groups, white supremacists, and the rise in auto-sear components which convert semi-automatic

¹⁵ Jones is a former commissioned officer in the US Air Force, qualified Tactical Air Control Party specialist (TACP) and Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape (SERE) instructor.

¹⁶ “Greyman” describes an aesthetic of wearing nondescript clothing and equipment to blend into an environment and be virtually unidentifiable as an armed and dangerous individual. It is often a rejection of the “militia” aesthetic, eschewing camo and highly visible tactical equipment for flannel shirts, muted colors, and other non-military clothing to blend in with civilian environments. There is an explicit awareness within /k/ and the accelerationist movement that being a “greyman” makes one a more effective insurgent against uniformed US military or law enforcement officers as it is more difficult to target someone who blends in with civilians (this awareness comes from watching US counterinsurgency wars against non-uniformed forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, where even the most advanced military in the world struggled to achieve a strategic and tactical victory).

¹⁷ Colin Noir's pro-firearms stance impressed the Buffalo shooter despite the fact that as a Black man, under the Great Replacement theory he poses an existential threat to the Buffalo shooter and the white race as a whole. The Buffalo shooter uses very patriarchal white supremacist language when he shared Noir's videos in his diary (all of the shared videos were political commentary about gun control, not firearm reviews or tactical advice).

¹⁸ Since 1939, the Brownell family has been involved in the firearms trade, with Brownells Inc. being their longest running company.

¹⁹ All shared videos were focused on the technical aspects of how to make an AR-15 style rifle properly seat a 30 round magazine. He was researching this because after modifying his rifle to accept variable capacity magazines, he noticed they would not fully seat in the rifle and he had to smack the bottom of the magazine to ensure it was fully seated. However, this is well known with M-16/M-4 rifles and civilian AR-15 equivalents and is one of the first things US military are instructed to address in basic training.

²⁰ Two of the three videos shared were focused on comparing rechargeable AA batteries, and one comparing water bottles.

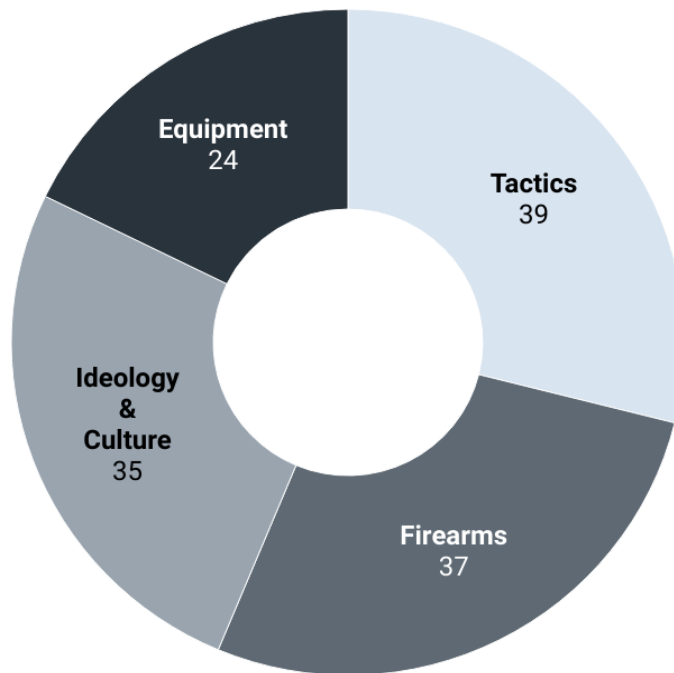
firearms into automatic firearms. The shooter explicitly stated that his interest in watching Vice News was to understand people who don't think like him.²¹ The Buffalo shooter shared three videos from this channel in his diary.

CharlieBo313: With 556,000 subscribers and approximately 210 million total views, CharlieBo313 contains video sharing of driving or walking through communities they describe as “poor” or “ghetto.” There is little other commentary, and while the channel does not make any explicitly racist characterizations, the majority of the videos depict minority communities, with frequent racist comments posted under these videos. The Buffalo shooter shared two videos from this channel in his diary.²²

Mike100ist: With 7,490 subscribers and approximately 7 million total views, Mike100ist is a Youtube content creator who posts clips from popular films with no apparent consistency or thematic thread. It appears that the Buffalo shooter found this channel because it was likely one of the first videos to show up when he searched for a specific scene from the movie *127 Hours*. The Buffalo shooter shared the same video from this channel twice in his diary.

Buffman R.A.N.G.E.: With 37,900 subscribers and approximately 17 million total views, Buffman R.A.N.G.E. largely focuses on testing different types of firearms, ammunition, and body armor, as well as Second Amendment politics. This channel informed what type of ammunition the shooter would use based on muzzle velocity and the ability to penetrate body armor and soft targets. The Buffalo shooter shared two videos from this channel in his diary.²³

Thematic Content Analysis: Buffalo Diary Data Set



²¹ He also makes explicit reference to Jewish far-right researchers featured in the films about white supremacy, suggesting that he considers Vice News and those involved in white supremacy investigations as oppositional figures.

²² One of the videos the shooter shared was used to identify backup targets, and another shows a block party which he said would also be a viable target.

²³ One of the videos shared pertained to the ammunition used by most AR-15 style rifles (5.56 ammunition), and the other criticized the Biden administration's efforts to enact gun control legislation.

Which YouTube firearms content themes were most relevant to the Buffalo shooter?

Based on the previously identified thematic buckets, the most relevant theme to the Buffalo shooter was “*Tactics*,” with 39 videos shared, followed by “*Firearms*” (37 videos), “*Ideology & Culture*” (35 videos), and “*Non-Firearms Equipment*” (24 videos). Almost all of the YouTube videos shared by the shooter were either preceded by or followed by his own commentary. For the “*Firearms*,” “*Non-Firearms Equipment*,” and “*Tactics*” themed videos, he frequently tied the content of the video back to his planned attack, often by: 1) noting how the content informed what firearms and equipment to use, 2) how the content informed his tactical approach to the attack itself, 3) what type of resistance he could expect, and 4) how to then counteract it. The “*Ideology & Culture*” content was either posted without commentary (the case with much of the “shitposting” content, video clips, and music) or included explicit white supremacist language and commentary.²⁴

Which YouTube firearms content creators are most relevant to the 4chan /k/ community?

The most relevant YouTube channels to the wider 4chan /k/ community based on frequency of posts were: Iron Pilled II: Martial Futurism, Aux Phoques !, Forgotten Weapons, WarLeaks - Military Blog, TFB TV, Garand Thumb, RT Documentary, Military Arms Channel, InRange TV, and Task and Purpose. The two most frequently posted YouTube channels on /k/ – Iron Pilled II: Martial Futurism and Aux Phoques ! – are unique in that, outside of /k/, they have almost no online footprint with some limited viewership. Unlike the other eight most shared channels on /k/, which predominantly share firearms and combat footage, these two channels are almost exclusively focused on sharing music and other ideological and cultural content associated with /k/. The other channels were exclusively focused on firearms and combat footage. The tenth most posted channel, Task & Purpose, is an online news outlet focused on US military and veteran stories, but the videos shared from that outlet’s YouTube channel were all videos relating to new military firearms and tactical assessments of the military conflict in Ukraine.

Most Frequently Posted YouTube Channels on 4chan /k/

■ Subscribers
 ■ Total Views

	Subscribers	Total Views
Iron Pilled II: Martial Futurism	135	26,187
Aux Phoques !	4,150	609,176
Forgotten Weapons	2,390,000	1,041,683,875
WarLeaks - Military Blog	2,140,000	550,736,418
TFB TV	1,200,000	359,007,027
Garand Thumb	2,070,000	284,157,955
RT Documentary	1,520,000	488,399,812
Military Arms Channel	1,250,000	256,966,410
InRangeTV	425,000	105,303,504
Task & Purpose	707,000	116,263,160

²⁴ Most of the non-entertainment related “*Ideology & Culture*” content was dedicated to white supremacy, the Great Replacement Theory, or other forms of anti-Semitic and anti-Black hate.

Iron Pilled II: Martial Futurism: With only 135 subscribers and approximately 26,000 total views, Iron Pilled II is largely an aesthetics-focused channel. The majority of the content reinforces far-right ideological aesthetics and serves as an ostensible feedback loop for content largely associated with 4chan message boards, including /k/ and /pol/. When the person running Iron Pilled II was referred to as a /k/ommando – a term used by /k/ users to refer to one another – in a YouTube comment, they “liked” the comment, implying an endorsement and appreciation for being characterized as a product of the /k/ community. There were 111 videos from this channel featured in the /k/ data set.

Aux Phoques: With 4,150 subscribers and approximately 609,000 total views, Aux Phoques ! is also predominantly an aesthetics-focused YouTube channel. The majority of the content appears to highlight and emphasize European paintings paired with lo-fi songs and themes largely associated with Anglo-European cultural tropes celebrated by various far-right communities.²⁵ The channel also displays a level of self awareness about YouTube’s recommendation algorithm that likely contributes to the channel’s high total view count.²⁶ There were 75 videos from this channel featured in the /k/ data set.

Forgotten Weapons: With over 2.4 million subscribers and approximately one billion total views, Forgotten Weapons is one of the most prolific firearms YouTube channels of all time. The host almost always presents a different historical firearm, showing its unique mechanical characteristics and the historical significance of its design and implementation. Forgotten Weapons is known for an apolitical approach to firearms, utilizing an academic presentation of the firearms, a sharp contrast to most firearms content creators.²⁷ There were 73 videos from this channel featured in the /k/ data set.

WarLeaks – Military Blog: With over 2.14 million subscribers and approximately 550 million total views, WarLeaks represents one of many aggregated firefight video channels on YouTube. WarLeaks shares firefight videos from conflicts around the world, as well as videos produced by various military forces showcasing firearms, artillery, and other military equipment and technology. There were 52 videos from this channel featured in the /k/ data set.

TFB TV: With over 1.2 million subscribers and approximately 359 million total views, this is the official channel for The Firearms Blog, a long standing website that reviews firearms, firearms accessories, and non-firearm equipment. While the YouTube channel uses the tagline “firearms not politics,” it covers political events and developments in firearms regulations. There were 52 videos from this channel featured in the /k/ data set.

Garand Thumb: With over 2.07 million subscribers and approximately 284 million total views, Mike Jones (aka Garand Thumb) is one of the most popular firearms YouTube content creators in America.²⁸ His channel reviews firearms and firearms accessories, gives tactical advice, and provides commentary on US gun politics. A large portion of his content is focused on civilian application of special operations firearms, equipment, and tactics. Jones is often an aesthetic touchstone because of his attire, which is regarded as an ideal “greyman” aesthetic within the community. There were 44 videos from this channel featured in the /k/ data set.

RT Documentary: With over 1.5 million subscribers and approximately 284 million total views, RT Documentary is a documentary channel for the Russian state media outlet Russia Today. In early March of 2022, YouTube made a policy decision in response to the invasion of Ukraine to “block access to YouTube channels associated with Russian state-funded media globally.”²⁹ The videos featured in the /k/ data set were all posted into the channel before the global ban. There were 40 videos from this channel featured in the /k/ data set.

²⁵ These videos predominantly revolved around musical theory themes that are largely associated with European musical canon.

²⁶ Within the comments of several videos, various linguistic terms were identified that are frequently used by 4chan users, including specific references to the /k/ and /pol/ message boards. The low view counts on the videos, a stark contrast from other content creators like Garand Thumb, provide further evidence that the content is designed for anonymous message board users on 4chan.

²⁷ Despite a strict aversion to politicizing the content of the channel, Forgotten Weapons was briefly demonetized in 2018.

²⁸ Jones is a former commissioned officer in the US Air Force, qualified Tactical Air Control Party specialist (TACP) and Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape (SERE) instructor.

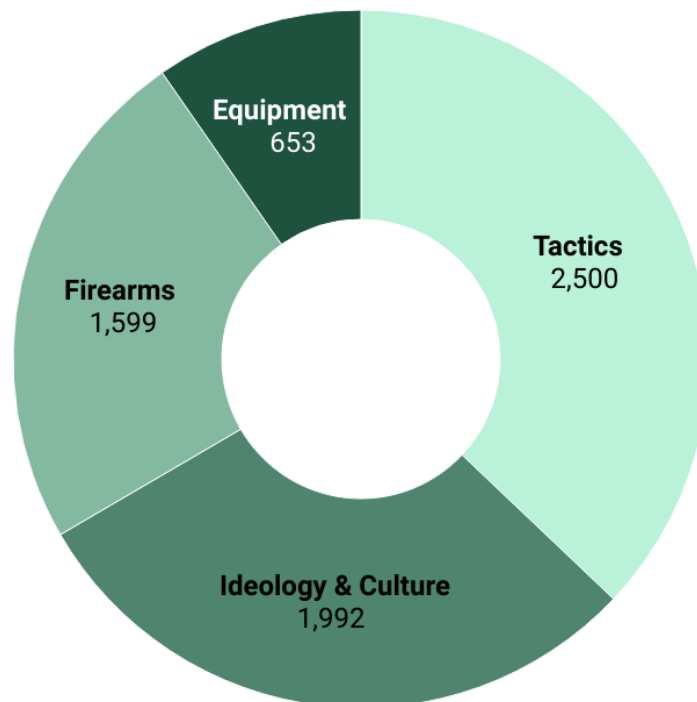
²⁹ Lomas, Natasha. “YouTube Is Now Blocking Russia State-Affiliated Media Globally.” TechCrunch (blog), March 11, 2022. <https://social.techcrunch.com/2022/03/11/youtube-is-now-blocking-russia-state-affiliated-media-globally/>.

Military Arms Channel: With over 1.25 million subscribers and approximately 284 million total views, the content is largely based around reviewing different firearms and firearms accessories. However, it is somewhat unique from the other channels identified in that it explicitly leans into political stances regarding gun control and firearms. Many of the videos shared on /k/ from the Military Arms Channel were focused on weapons systems currently used or soon to be adopted by the US and foreign militaries, while other content is sponsored by firearms and firearms equipment manufacturers. There were 31 videos from this channel featured in the /k/ data set

InRangeTV: With over 425,000 subscribers and approximately 105 million total views, InRangeTV focuses on reviewing firearms, firearms accessories, tactics, and equipment in live-fire.³⁰ While InRangeTV covers more contemporary firearms than Forgotten Weapons, it is also known as an intentionally apolitical channel. Unlike most YouTube firearms content creators, InRangeTV does not have sponsorships from the firearms industry and claims to pay retail price for all firearms and firearms accessories that are reviewed. There were 31 videos from this channel featured in the /k/ data set.

Task & Purpose: With over 707,000 subscribers and approximately 116 million total views, the Task & Purpose channel is an offshoot of the popular online publication, covering general defense topics and various tactical and strategic analyses. While Task & Purpose does not focus on one particular topic, there have been an elevated number of tactical analysis videos due to widespread coverage of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. There were 27 videos from this channel featured in the /k/ data set.

Thematic Content Analysis: 4chan /k/ Data Set



Which YouTube firearms content themes were most relevant to the 4chan /k/ community?

Within the 4chan /k/ community, the most relevant them was “*Tactics*” with 2,500 videos, followed by “*Ideology & Culture*” (1,992 videos), “*Firearms*” (1,599 videos), and finally, “*Non-Firearm Equipment*” (653 videos).

³⁰ The channel is hosted by Karl Kasarda and Ian McCollum, who is also the host of Forgotten Weapons.

Firearms

A majority of the “*Firearms*” content was live-fire footage focused on the features and function of specific small arms platforms. These included reviews of weapons systems by YouTube channels, reviews of various types of ammunition, and videos of tactical engagements using firearms (including combat footage and law enforcement footage) that emphasized a specific firearm being used. When examined by weapon type, the most common weapon systems discussed were civilian variations of the M-16 rifle and M-4 carbine, most commonly known as “AR-15” style rifles or “AR” rifles.³¹ There was a notable prevalence of videos documenting the effect of specific types of ammunition on targets, predominantly the impact on ballistic gel – a type of gel block designed to emulate human biomass – and body armor. This emphasis shows that on /k/, there is an innate interest in firearms’ ability to kill humans, rather than on hunting, shooting competitions, or hobbyist target shooting.³²

Non-Firearms Equipment

An overwhelming majority of the “*Non-Firearms Equipment*” was focused on military technology and weapons systems that are not categorized as “*Firearms*” in this research, but are nonetheless lethal weapon systems. Specifically, a large amount of content surrounded artillery, rocket artillery systems, tanks, armored personnel carriers, rocket launchers, anti-tank missile systems, electronic countermeasure weapons (ECW), aircraft and aircraft based ordinance, and various explosive devices. This appears to be largely a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and /k/’s obsession with documenting the equipment being used by militaries around the world, but especially within the US and Russian military. Much of the remaining content honed in on body armor and armor plating found in personal body armor systems. This content often fell under “*Non-Firearms Equipment*” and “*Tactics*,” as they overwhelmingly involved the video’s host shooting live ammunition at body armor plates and discussing the resulting penetration. Information on how effective body armor types are at preventing ammunition from penetrating is information that can exclusively be used to inform tactical decision making.³³ The rest of the content focused on hand-to-hand weapons (knives, axes, and swords), military and survival rations, machinist equipment, plate carriers, pouches, etc., but was vastly overshadowed by the amount of content on body armor and armor plating.

Tactics

An overwhelming majority of “*Tactics*” content pertained to the 2022 Russian invasion in Ukraine, including strategic level analysis of the conflict, tactical analysis of specific military engagements or operations, and broader geopolitical speculation. The remaining content largely focused on law enforcement responses, advice on how to use firearms in a tactical situation, survival instructions in remote and urban settings, firearms proficiency training, and the tactical aspects of testing the penetration power of different kinds of ammunition and weapons on body armor. Most of the combat footage revolved around squad to platoon sized military units engaging in firefights with soldiers and/or enemy vehicles – a type of military engagement largely unique to insurgency and counterinsurgency warfare.³⁴ As /k/ has increasingly transitioned into a community that opposes the US government, the decades-long consumption of tactics through the lens of counterinsurgency practitioners has now shifted toward viewing it through a lens of potential insurgents against the US government itself.³⁵

³¹ In the context of firearms, “AR” does not refer to “assault rifle,” but is an acronym for “ArmaLite Rifle,” a specific weapon system configuration that has become the single most popular rifle platform in America today.

³² While there were a number of videos showing professional competition firearms matches, these were vastly outnumbered by those focused on lethality against human targets.

³³ Outside of situations where someone is being shot at, the relative effectiveness of body armor has no utility.

³⁴ For the past 21 years, the US has been engaged in counterinsurgency wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and elsewhere as part of the Global War on Terror, therefore, the influence of this type of conflict on the weapons systems and equipment fielded by the US military cannot be overstated.

³⁵ Newhouse, Alex, and Nate Gunesch. “The Boogaloo Movement Wants To Be Seen as Anti-Racist, But It Has a White Supremacist Fringe.” Middlebury Institute of International Studies: Center on Terrorism, Extremism, and Counterterrorism, May 30, 2020. <https://www.middlebury.edu/institute/academics/centers-initiatives/ctec/ctec-publications/boogaloo-movement-wants-be-seen-anti-raci>

Ideology & Culture

Perhaps the most prevalent type of content in “*Ideology & Culture*” can largely be described as shitposting, a nihilistic posting behavior that incorporates a wide range of fringe Internet subculture aesthetics. On /k/, shitposting is often imbued with white supremacist and extremist themes such as stylized depictions of WWII Wehrmacht soldiers, the use of Pepe the frog, references to American mass shooters, anti-Semitic conspiracies, and vaporwave aesthetics among others. There is a large amount of content on /k/ that explicitly supports the Russian invasion, often celebrating Russian victories over Ukrainian forces or mocking the response of pro-Ukraine allies. RT Documentaries, a Russian state-sponsored propaganda channel on YouTube, was among the most shared YouTube channels on /k/ during the timeframe of the research study. Other major topics discussed in the videos within “*Ideology and & Culture*” include: 1) US military recruitment, 2) COVID-19 conspiracies, 3) anti-mandate Trucker Convoys in Canada and the US, 4) support of the January 6 Capitol Insurrection, and 5) the Kyle Rittenhouse trial.

How relevant were the themes defined for the Buffalo shooter to the 4chan /k/ community?

In a comparative thematic content analysis of the themes featured within the YouTube videos in each data set, the general breakdown of themes was relatively similar. At the granular level, there are some differences in sub-themes, however, the overall thematic content consumption was consistent.

The YouTube content on 4chan /k/ tended to focus more on “*Tactics*” and “*Ideology & Culture*,” while the Buffalo shooter's Discord diary YouTube content showed a slightly higher emphasis on “*Firearms*” and “*Equipment*.” “*Firearms*” were relevant in approximately 27% of the YouTube videos mentioned in the shooter’s Discord diary, compared to 24% of the YouTube videos mentioned in the 4chan /k/ data set.

Thematic Content Analysis: Buffalo vs. 4chan /k/

Each theme is broken down as a percentage of the total volume of videos in each data set

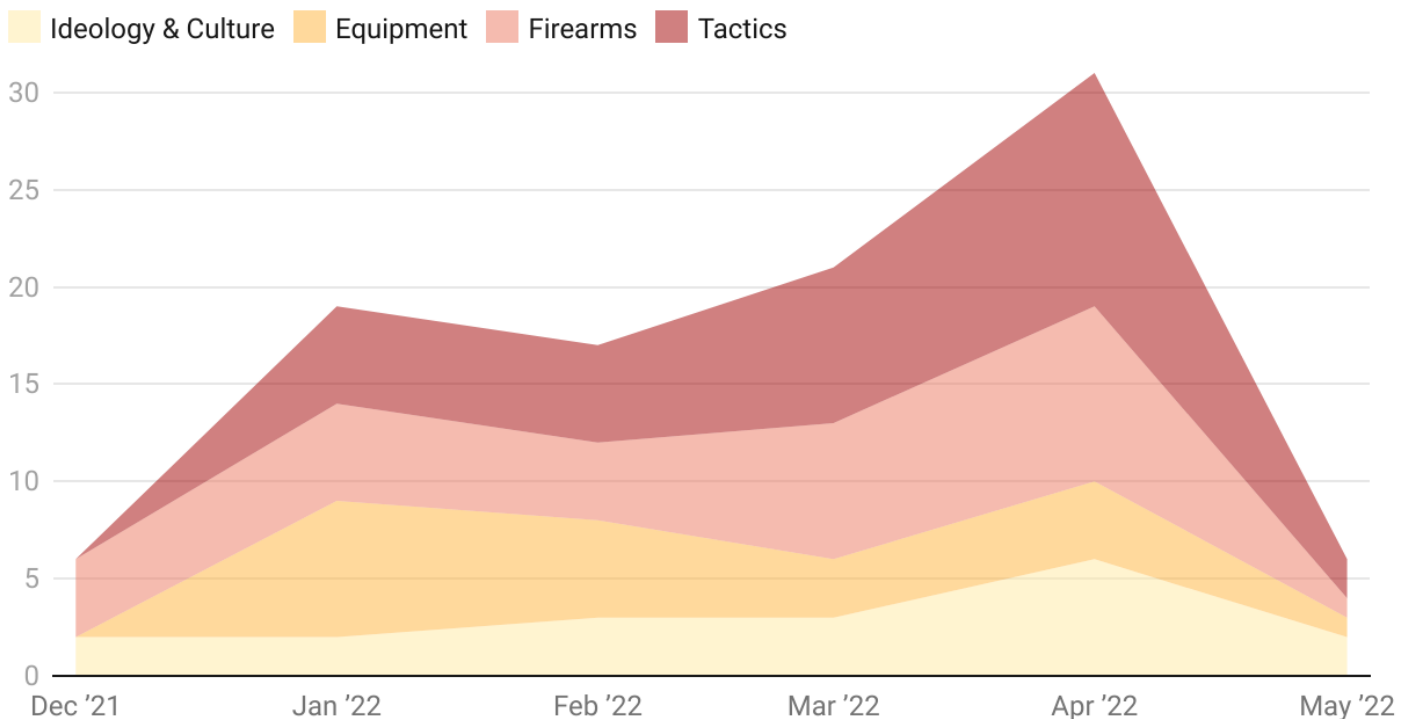


How similar were the Buffalo shooter's YouTube consumption habits to the wider 4chan /k/ community?

There were four videos identified in both data sets: two videos about police shootings (a police shooting that occurred in Houston, Texas and footage of the police shooting of Amir Locke), one video about bullet proof vests, and one video by Garand Thumb about retro rifle setups. Both of the police body cam videos were shared on 4chan /k/ and in the Buffalo shooter's Discord diary within 24 hours of being posted to YouTube.

Given the lack of available metadata around the Discord diaries, namely time stamps, it was not possible to ascertain whether or not the Buffalo shooter was exposed to the video by the 4chan /k/ community, or alternatively, if he may have posted the videos himself to /k/. According to the Buffalo shooter's diary, he claimed to have originally planned to conduct the attack in April of 2022. A month prior, in March, his YouTube video consumption habit surged, with a noted increase in videos about "Tactics" and "Firearms".

Chronology of Content Themes: Buffalo Shooter YouTube Consumption



Garand Thumb is the only YouTube content creator that was among the most shared video channels across both the Buffalo shooter's Discord diary and 4chan's /k/ message board. The Garand Thumb video shared on both /k/ and the diary focused on "retro rifle setups."

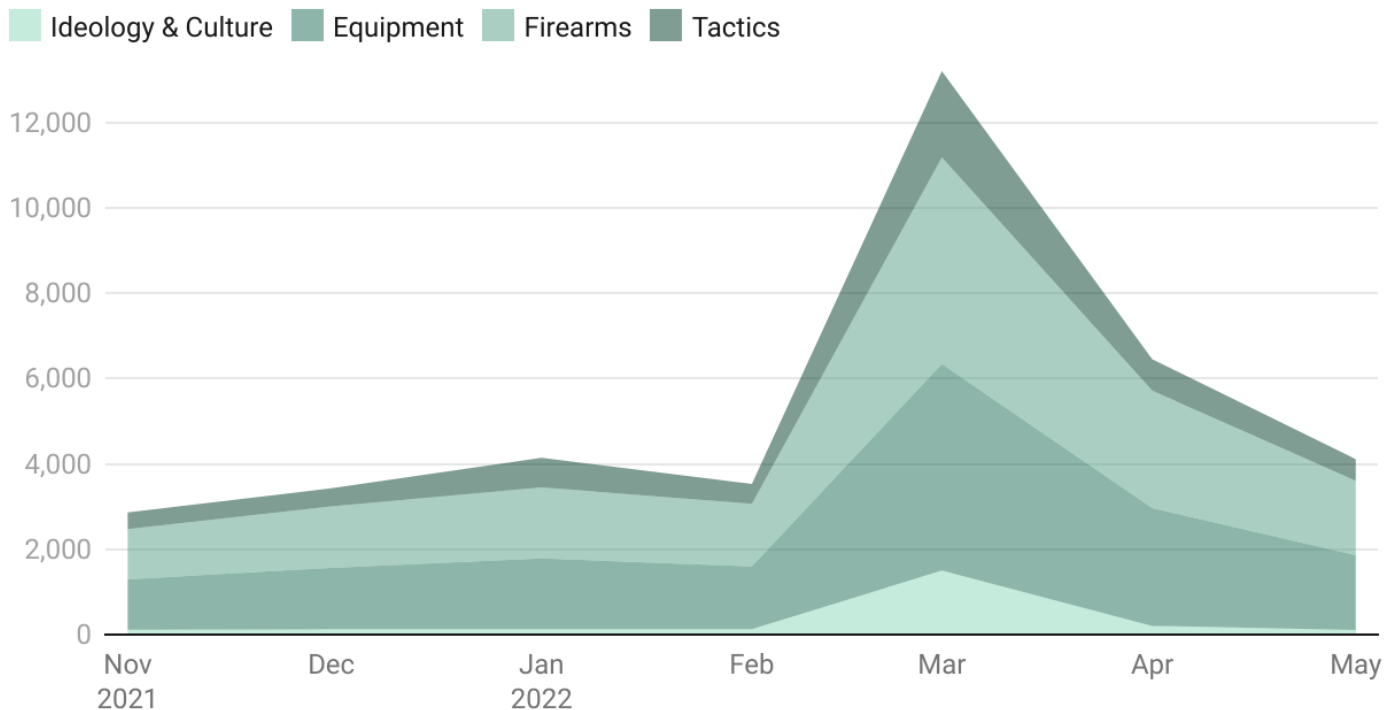
The Buffalo shooter expressed repeated concern that his AR-15 style rifle – a Bushmaster XM-15 with a 20" barrel – did not possess many of the modern features he believed were desirable for a mass shooting.³⁶ This video explicitly endorses rifles with features like the one used by the Buffalo shooter as "viable" rifles to use in modern tactical situations.³⁷

³⁶ Namely, a shorter barrel and picatinny rail on top of the upper receiver and handguard for mounting optics.

³⁷ The Bushmaster XM-15 rifle was used by the Buffalo shooter, the Sandy Hook shooter, and by the 2002 Beltway sniper shooters.

Within the /k/ data set, “Firearms” and “Equipment” were consistently the most prominent themes throughout the timeframe of the research project. The significant spike in overall volume of relevant YouTube videos in March 2022 can be attributed to the large volume of conflict zone content related to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Some of the increased “Ideology & Culture” content can be attributed to RT Documentaries, a Russian state-sponsored propaganda channel, showing a notable difference in ideological content consumed by 4chan /k/ compared to the Buffalo shooter, at least according to his Discord diaries.

Chronology of Content Themes: 4chan /k/ YouTube Consumption



DISCUSSION

What did the findings tell us about the Buffalo shooter’s YouTube influences?

It is clear that the Buffalo shooter considered content readily available on YouTube to be a reliable source of information for planning his attack. From target selection, firearm and equipment considerations, tactical guidance, and training with firearms, the Buffalo shooter treated YouTube content as a resource for executing an act of domestic terrorism. While the shooter undoubtedly used other online resources to inform his attack, it is clear that firearms content on YouTube served as a significant source used in his decision-making process.

The Buffalo shooter relied heavily on popular firearms content creators on YouTube to inform the material and tactical approach to his attack. The shooter was able to gather enough actionable information from content creators who explicitly create content for the civilian firearms community in the US to modify his rifle to accept variable capacity magazines, determine which level of body armor would likely protect him from security personnel and law enforcement, train with his rifle in preparation for the attack, analyze potential back up targets for an attack, and find reinforcing material for his white supremacist ideology and aversion to gun control in the US.

The research also shows the prevalence of law enforcement-produced video content consumed by both the Buffalo shooter and the broader /k/ community to inform real-world activity. Using a single channel, the Buffalo shooter was able to view enough bodycam, gopro, and CCTV footage of tactical situations involving law enforcement and American civilians to draw conclusions and inferences about the tactics and weapons that would be used against him during his attack. While nobody sharing this content on YouTube intended that this information be used to inform domestic terror attacks, it highlights a growing trend noted elsewhere in this report that anti-government communities are increasingly consuming content of the American state security apparatus. This relatively sophisticated use of publicly available content on YouTube is hardly unique to the Buffalo shooter; similar activity has been documented around other domestic extremist groups and threat actors across the US over the past several decades.

The shooter shared seven videos by the highly influential YouTube content creator Garand Thumb, and although he shared more direct videos from PoliceAcademy, Garand Thumb and his content is mentioned by name far more than any other entity in the data set. A notable portion of the Buffalo shooter's discussion and description of how he thought about firearms were directly informed by Garand Thumbs' content. The way Garand Thumb discusses and reviews firearms, firearms accessories, and their tactical applications, is done through the hypothetical lens of firearms being used in tactical settings against human adversaries. In other words, Garand Thumb's content almost exclusively discusses firearms in the context of using them to shoot people.

The channel is heavily imbued with US military iconography, references to the creator's military experience, and the application of firearms in a military context. The channel currently has 2.07 million subscribers – and there are only 1.4 million active duty military personnel in the US military. Even if every active duty service member subscribed to Garand Thumb, there would still be half a million civilian subscribers consuming content about how firearms can be used to shoot humans.³⁸ The Garand Thumb channel is the most prevalent channel between both data sets, and our data confirms, at least in the case of the Buffalo shooter, that Jones' content has been consumed by individuals who have aspired to commit politically-motivated violence against civilians.

What did the findings tell us about 4chan /k/'s YouTube influences?

4chan /k/ is primarily interested in small arms weapons and their application to a variety of situations where humans use firearms to kill other humans (e.g. warfare, law enforcement engagements, and civilian-on-civilian violence). With increased attention on gun control legislation, the large amount of YouTube content discussing gun control is not exactly a surprise. However, 4chan /k/ is also consuming content about real world combat across a variety of global conflict zones.

/k/ also shows that their sources, in terms of YouTube channels and content creators, appear to have a certain level of consistency in terms of what channels and creators they consider to be authoritative sources on the subject of firearms. Channels like Garand Thumb, TFB TV, and Paul Harrell are highly sought after sources of information regarding firearms and tactics. All of the most shared channels with a consistent host or central "character" are similar in that the individual(s) who present the content have military experience in combat arms roles, and often served in "elite" military units that specialize in small arms combat engagements.

They are all white American men, with decades of collective experience in the firearms industry, either through their YouTube channels or working as instructors or consultants with firearms manufacturers, after having already served in the United States military.

³⁸ While there are 1.4 million active duty military personnel in the US military today, only a fraction of that total personnel count serve in combat arms roles where using a firearm is their primary job.

How are these influencers tied to gun manufacturers and 2nd Amendment advocacy groups?

Most of the content shared between both datasets (the shooter's Discord diary YouTube content and 4chan /k/ YouTube content) centered on reviewing commercially sold firearms and tactical equipment. Within the Buffalo shooter's Discord diary, two of the most frequently referenced YouTube content creators, Colion Noir and Brownells, Inc., have had prior professional relationships with the NRA. Because an overwhelming majority of the firearms content on YouTube is describing the differences between different brands of the same firearm model or firearms part or accessory, the end result of this content being consumed drives potential customers towards firearms and firearms accessory manufacturers.

Many of the most prominent firearms YouTube content creators have some relationship with different firearm and accessory sellers, such as offering discounts for online firearm and accessory purchases using a discount code thematically linked to the YouTube channel's name. The relationships between high profile firearms content creators and different brands are largely analogous to the relationships between social media influencers and various brands and products, with endorsements and partnerships between firearms content creators and brands being a fairly common occurrence.

Tragically, this can, at times, create a dangerous feedback loop for individuals intent on committing mass violence, who, as the research demonstrates, consume this content in order to inform their firearms purchasing decisions. AR rifles are extremely effective and are able to perform regardless of specific parts, brands, or configurations – sustaining semi-automatic fire and taking variable capacity magazines – making a \$200 AR rifle just as lethal as a \$3,000 one. This is partially what makes the AR platform so enticing for mass shooters as they can focus on aesthetic choices for the weapon and still achieve their desired outcome (i.e. killing a large number of civilians in a short amount of time, minimally interacting with the firearm other than pulling the trigger and aiming in the general direction of his targets) without worrying about decreasing overall efficacy.