

Shooter's online rants were like trees in forest

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Emergency workers help a woman from the back of an ambulance after treating her in front of an LA Fitness location in Bridgeville, Pa. on Tuesday, Aug. 4, 2009. A Pittsburgh television station says the shooting at the suburban health club has left four people dead, including the shooter. (AP Photo/Tribune Review, Joe Appel)

(AP) -- In hindsight, it seems so obvious. We look back at the creepy online ramblings of a tortured soul like George Sodini and realize we should have known all along of the horrors to come.

That is, if anyone actually read Sodini's Web page before he sprayed bullets into a suburban Pittsburgh fitness class, killing three women and then himself.

But in an age where publishing your thoughts online is as easy as

scribbling them in a notebook - where millions broadcast the details of their lives to anyone who will listen - were Sodini's murderous rants the equivalent of a cybertree falling in a cyberforest?

Certainly, anyone happening upon Sodini's tortured online thoughts before his rampage Tuesday would have had ample cause for alarm.

His date of death is listed right at the top, under his name and birthdate: "DOD 8/4/2009." Later, a description of his first attempt at what he calls "this project," in January. "It is 8:45 p.m.: I chickened out! I brought the loaded guns, everything. Hell!"

And then, on Monday: "Tomorrow is the big day."

It was more than enough to alert authorities, to be sure, even without Sodini's hate-infused musings on his inability to find a girlfriend and how long it had been since he'd had sex. But did anyone know?

"Perhaps no one at all ever read this Web site," says Chris Hoofnagle, a lecturer at the Berkeley Law School who specializes in [Internet privacy](#). "There's this obscurity in being in a cacophony of different voices."

How many voices? According to the Pew Internet & American Life Project, some 14 percent of adult Internet users said in a 2007 survey that they had created or worked on their own Web page.

To put that in perspective, 79 percent of U.S. adults are Internet users, according to an April 2009 Pew survey. "So assuming the segment of people who have created or worked on their own Web page is at least as big as it was in 2007, that 14 percent of Internet users would translate into roughly one in 10 U.S. adults," says Pew researcher Mary Madden.

At the same time, and perhaps as a result, we as a society are becoming

more and more comfortable with less and less privacy, Madden says. For example, a quarter of Internet users have posted some kind of writing online using their real name.

"In the age of digital footprints, those people who don't have some kind of online trails left behind them are really becoming the exception rather than the rule," Madden says.

So Sodini certainly had an online trail. But it was on a personal Web page, not on a social network, and that makes a big difference, notes Madden. "His Web page may have been posted to an audience of one," she says. By contrast, "people become more accountable when they're connected to a network. There are cases where kids post things on their pages - perhaps suicidal tendencies - and that will raise an alarm."

In February, Jesse Coltrane in Camden, N.J., was corresponding with a despondent California teenager when suddenly he saw, on his webcam, the teen starting to cut the skin of his forearm with a razor blade. The teen then logged off his computer.

Coltrane called Sacramento police. By the time officers found the teen he had decided not to go through with the attempt.

Months earlier, on the other hand, some Internet users did nothing as they watched a Florida college student, Abraham Biggs, kill himself by overdosing on pills in front of his webcam on a site for bodybuilders. Biggs' father said those who watched - and the Web site operators, too - shared blame for his son's death.

While that latter case evokes images of an Internet-age Kitty Genovese story - hers is the now-challenged tale of a New York woman killed in 1964 while callous bystanders ignored her calls for help - one can't say the same in the case of one man venting on a Web page.

"There are a lot of personal Web sites where people vent," says Hoofnagle, the Berkeley lecturer.

Is there any way to monitor these sites, and perhaps prevent crimes like Sodini's killing spree? "To my knowledge, there's no organized effort to look for the foreshadowing of this type of event," Hoofnagle says.

Some federal agencies do monitor Web sites as part of their enforcement of specific federal statutes, like those barring crimes against the president or interstate child abuse or some terrorist statutes. In some cases, if they stumble upon indications of potential criminal activity outside their jurisdiction, they refer it to state or local law enforcement.

The numbers are certainly daunting. There are about 100 million registered domain names in the world, says Christine Jones, general counsel for godaddy.com, the world's largest domain registrar. Her company has 36 million of them (Sodini's domain is not one.) It depends on third parties to report issues, and it has two departments investigating public complaints, both of which operate 24/7.

"We do as much as we can do," Jones says. "For us, on our scale, it's impossible to monitor all the domains ourselves - no number of humans could do that, especially because Web sites can be changed all day."

Sodini's site had been taken down by Wednesday afternoon.

Jones says that when she saw the content on it, she was surprised that no one had seen it and alerted authorities because he had apparently been writing dangerous things for months - though it remains unclear when the Web page was posted and whether it had been updated repeatedly since November or posted in its entirety recently.

"Even one person who read that would probably have alerted

authorities," Jones says. "There must have been no traffic on that site."

Sodini's domain was registered with DomainDiscover.com, a San Diego-based company, but it was hosted by a provider in India, gohsphere.com, which could not immediately be reached. At DomainDiscover, supervisor Jenny Dempsey said her company's security department does monitor traffic on sites, but not sites that are not hosted by them.

Allegheny County police Superintendent Charles Moffatt said Wednesday that investigators would try to determine if anyone had read the [Web site](#) early enough to stop the attack.

As for Sodini himself, he seems to have known he would only get page views once he was gone.

"Why do this?? To young girls? Just read below," he writes at the beginning. "I kept a running log that includes my thoughts and actions, after I saw this project was going to drag on."

And now, tragically, he has not an audience of one, but a worldwide audience.

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