

Going Dark: The Inverse Relationship between Online and On-the-Ground Pre-offence Behaviours in Targeted Attackers

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This pilot study examines the correlation of online and on-the-ground behaviours of three lone-actor terrorists prior to their intended and planned attacks on soft targets in North America and Europe: the Pittsburgh synagogue shooter, the Buffalo supermarket shooter and the Bratislava bar shooter.



The activities were examined with the definition of the proximal warning indicator energy burst from the Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol (TRAP-18), originally defined as an acceleration in frequency or variety of preparatory behaviours related to the target.

Preliminary findings from this small sample suggest an inverse relationship between online and offline behaviours across all three perpetrators.

On the actual day of the incident, all assailants accelerated their tactical on the ground actions and resurfaced in the online sphere to publish their final messages in the minutes or hours prior to the attack.

It appears that the energy burst behaviours, in the digital sphere and in offline actions, can be measured in both frequency and variety.

In the week prior to the event, social media activity decreased – with two subjects going completely dark on the day before the respective acts of violence – while terrestrial preparations increased.

The average point of time between the decision to attack and the actual attack was five months, with an elevation of digital activities in the three months leading up to the incident, along with some indications of offline planning.

Operational implications of this negative correlation are suggested for intelligence analysts, counterterrorism investigators and threat assessors, and policy recommendations are proposed for technology companies and policymakers.