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# Charlie Kirk was killed by a meme

Making sense of our dark new era of extremely online political violence



Ryan Broderick & Adam Bumas

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This morning a suspect was taken into custody in connection with the killing of conservative influencer Charlie Kirk. The alleged shooter's name is Tyler Robinson, a 22-year-old from Utah. Footage of a person of interest matching Robinson's description was circulated this week by law enforcement, who were offering a [\\$100,000 reward](#) for more information.

Robinson is registered to vote in Utah, but [is not affiliated](#) with any party. (There is another Tyler Robinson registered as a Republican in Utah that many users are sharing the voter records of currently.) Law enforcement told reporters this morning that they used Discord messages along with the security camera footage to ID him. Discord is [disputing](#) this.






We still don't have a clear motive, but we do have a slightly clearer picture of what inspired the attack. As we wrote yesterday, the shooting was obviously staged to maximize impact on social media. And according to the FBI, the attacker's bullet casings had meme references inscribed on them.



(Photo by Chris Samuels/The Salt Lake Tribune via Getty Images)

The use of memes in political mass violence started in earnest in 2019, when a man filmed himself attacking a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand. Just before he started, he told viewers, “[Subscribe to PewDiePie](#).” Months later, in Halle, Germany, an attacker livestreamed the shooting of a synagogue [on Twitch](#). In 2022, an 18-year-old white nationalist [livestreamed](#) a shooting in a grocery store in Buffalo, New York. Investigators later discovered that he was planning it openly on 4chan and Discord, calling it a “real life effort shitpost.” And in the last year, Luigi Mangione allegedly gunned down UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson with bullets [that read](#), “deny”, “defend”, “depose.” Days later, a 15-year-old posed for a photo flashing the right-wing “[ok hand symbol](#)” before allegedly carrying out a school shooting in Madison, Wisconsin. And just last month, Robin Westman allegedly carried out a shooting in Minneapolis with bullets that had a [range of messages](#) from all around the political spectrum, including “I’m the woker baby why so queerious”, “skibidi” and the simplified line version of [the Loss.JPG meme](#).

According to law enforcement, the messages on the bullet casings believed to have belonged to Robinson were equally politically confusing. The bullet that struck and killed Kirk had “Notices bulge OwO whats this?” written on its casing. A reference to a longtime internet joke that originally comes from text-based furry roleplay. It is not proof, however, that Robinson was a furry. The meme has long since become part of the extremely online canon.

The unfired bullet casings had other phrases written on them, including, "Hey fascist! Catch! , , , "O bella ciao, bella ciao, ciao, ciao," and "If you read this you are gay lmao." The first message is a reference to the [satirically fascist](#) video game *Helldivers* 2, the arrow combination triggering the most powerful bomb attack in the game. The second message is a reference to an Italian antifascist folk song, which has gotten renewed interest online and offline after its use in Netflix's *Money Heist*. "Bella Ciao" is also used in the video game *Far Cry 6*. The third is just boilerplate edgelord speak, given extra layers of irony by the much more online jokes on the other casings.



([knowyourmeme.com/memes/notices-bulge-owo-whats-this](https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/notices-bulge-owo-whats-this))

The terminally online nature of the messages does somewhat explain the conflicting reports released yesterday. Conservative influencer Steven Crowder published a screenshot of an email "from an officer at the ATF," which claimed that the bullet casings were engraved with "transgender and antifascist ideology." This was then [corroborated](#) by *The Wall Street Journal*, though they eventually walked back their story about it. *The New York Times* [reported](#) that that hadn't been actually confirmed by law enforcement. Crowder [is now claiming](#) that his team is being subpoenaed by the ATF over the leak.

The leak and the eventual reveal of what was on the bullet casings is important, if only for illustrating exactly how unprepared for this current moment both law enforcement and the mainstream media are. Two law enforcement sources [told CNN](#) they initially believed the *Helldivers* reference was "a connection to the transgender community." And making the initial picture of who Robinson is and what he believes even more complicated are photos

from his mother's Facebook page, which are currently being shared on social media as the internet hunts for clues as to why he allegedly carried out the attack.

In 2017, Robinson appears to have dressed up in a costume of President Donald Trump, with the Trump's face painted green. A possible reference to [the Pepe the Frog edit](#) of Trump that the president first shared in 2015. And in 2018, Robinson [appears](#) to have dressed up as a "[squatting slav](#)" [Pepe meme](#). As easy as it is to point to these costumes as proof that Robinson was a far-right extremist radicalized online by 4chan posts, it's just as likely that he was a teenage boy dressing up as memes he saw online. This kind of content is basically the water young people swim in now.

It's also possible Robinson genuinely believes in antifascist principles. But his alleged use of random internet brainrot is notable. Many extremism researchers this morning are wondering if Robinson is a self-identified "groyper," or follower of far-right streamer Nick Fuentes. As we wrote yesterday, Fuentes has spent years attacking Kirk online. Groypers believed that Kirk was a sellout and blocking a much more extreme version of Trumpism from taking root. For years, Groypers have been carrying out what they call "Groyper Wars," [attending](#) Kirk's events and trying to disrupt them. For what it's worth, 4chan users [think](#) Robinson was a Groyper.

Anonymous (ID: vly7yfAO) 🇺🇸 09/12/25(Fri)07:37:20 No.515693707



127 KB JPG

>>515691052 (OP) #

Groyper confirmed. Nick is so fucked it's unreal.

(4chan)

But the conflicting tone of the bullet casings' inscriptions may also point to a connection with the Com network and the 764 terror cell offshoot. We've [covered](#) these groups [several times](#) on Panic World. They primarily exist inside of Discord and Telegram group chats. They recruit vulnerable young people around the internet, including inside of multiplayer games like *Minecraft* and *Roblox*. They encourage their members to commit horrible crimes with the promise of internet clout, intentionally using conflicting political messages to obscure any larger motive besides inspiring other members of the group to do the same. A month after a school shooter made an "OK" hand sign post, mentioned above, another teenager in Nashville made the exact same joke before allegedly shooting classmates at their high school. *ProPublica* found they [crossed paths](#) several times in

these online communities, and the Nashville shooter was making a deliberate reference to his fellow community member. Which is what is so existentially terrifying about our current political moment.

We have let school shootings in America persist long enough that we have created a culture where kids grow up seeing them as a path towards fame and glory. Another consequence of how thoroughly the internet has flattened pop culture, politics, and real life violence. All of it now is just another meme you can participate in to go viral. Made even more confusing by a new nihilistic accelerationist movement that delights in muddying the waters for older people who still adhere to a traditional political spectrum. Many young extremists now believe in a much simpler binary: Order and chaos. And if you are spending any time at all trying to derive meaning from violent acts like this then you are, by definition, their enemy.

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**Carrie Kaufman** • 36 minutes ago

Thank you for this. I am not your target audience, and sometimes get lost in the terms you use. But you are right on the nose about so many things and it helps me be a better journalist and parent.

♡ LIKE(1)



**J C** • 54 minutes ago

The perspective you bring is so important - massively appreciate your work. Brings new weight to the Chaos Culture trend that started unfolding in the 2010s.

♡ LIKE(1)



**Michael Ben Silva** • 1 hour ago

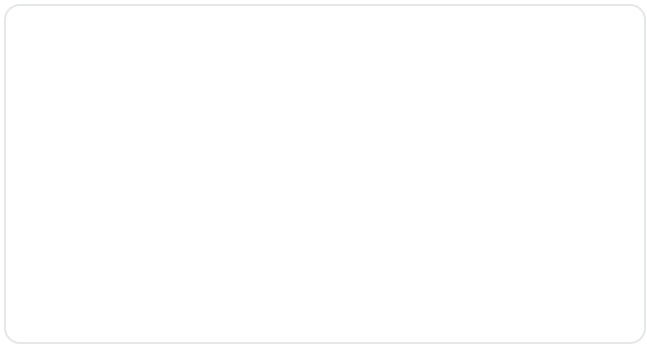
Your reporting has been really helpful to me over the last few years, Ryan/Garbage Day team. I find it to be the only palatable way I can take in news these days, and I really value



your insights. I keep thinking about what you wrote in July of last year—"...I'm unclear why both mainstream media and Democratic leadership are finding it so hard right now to express what I think is a fairly basic point. Political violence is bad and a second Trump presidency means more of it." Anyway, just commenting to say thanks for helping me understand and process the huge range of issues you've covered, and that I finally signed up for the paid subscription.

♡ LIKE (1)

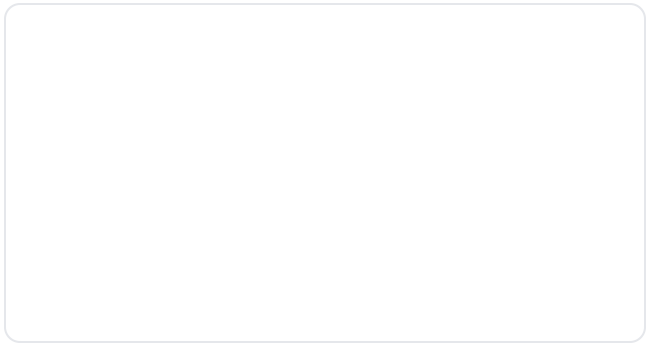
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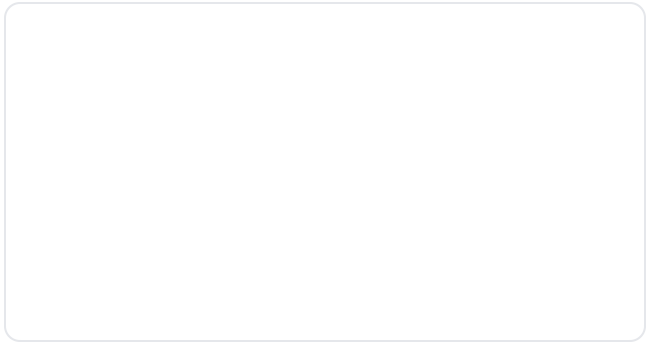
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