

Columbine Subculture as a Threat to Information Security

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Abstract. This study is based on the analysis of law enforcement practice, monitoring of social networks, analysis of media materials and theoretical works of Russian and foreign scholars on the topic of school shooting. The paper presents characteristics of the columbine subculture at the present stage of its development in the Russian-speaking segment of the Internet. The authors describe the main provisions that form the basis of the ideology of school shooting, substantiates that this ideology has an expressed political essence and has signs of a terrorist ideology. The authors analyse the relationship between the propaganda of school shooting and the propaganda of other destructive subcultures (right-wing and leftist-anarchism, incels, AUE (an extremist organization banned in the Russian Federation), etc.). They come to the conclusion that the columbine subculture in the Russian-speaking segment of the Internet, on the one hand, intersects, merges with other (sometimes diametrically opposed) destructive movements that promote hatred, enmity and (or) violence, and, on the other hand, opposes itself to other destructive ideologies.

1 Introduction

One of the current destructive threats to the information security of Internet users is the spread of the Columbine subculture (school shooting).

Columbine is ‘a phenomenon which means that young people develop destructive behavioural installations, arrange bloody massacres in crowded places under the influence of modern mass culture (horror films, action films, computer games – “shooters”, etc.) and under the influence of “destructive groups” in social networks’ [1].

Since 2014, at least 19 armed attacks in educational institutions have been recorded in Russia, the most resonant of which are incidents in Ivantsevka (09/05/2016), Perm (01/15/2018), Ulan-Ude (01/19/2018), Shadrinsk (03/21/2018), Sterlitamak (04/18/2018), Kerch (10/17/2018), Volsk (05/28/2019), Kazan (05/11/2021).

In the fall of 2020, journalists stated that the Russian regions were overwhelmed by the Columbine movement, and 13 teenagers detained on the eve of September 1 lived in different regions of the Russian Federation, but were part of one closed Internet community. In August 2020, the Security 2.0 Center identified several thousand videos (on the TikTok social network), in which terrorist attacks in schools were justified to one degree or another. Videos tagged with #columbine have over 3.5 million views on TikTok. In 2019-2021, adolescents who consider themselves to be ‘Columbiners’ were discovered by law enforcement agencies in Adygea, Tatarstan, Khakassia, Crimea, on Sakhalin, in the Zabaikalsk, Krasnoyarsk and Khabarovsk regions, in the Nenets Autonomous territory, in the Kirov, Sverdlovsk, Volgograd, Tyumen,

Saratov, Chelyabinsk, Moscow, Smolensk regions and other territories of Russia.

As at 2019 ‘there were more than 300 accounts (groups) in various Russian social networks in which publications about the intention to attack an educational organization or commit other acts of an extremist nature were posted’ [Methodological guide for identifying signs of risk behaviour in social media. Digital hygiene (Kribrum, 2019)]. According to experts, the total number of participants in the Columbine movement in Runet as of 2019 was 470,000 people, including 112,000 adolescents; the increase for the year from March 2018 to March 2019 amounted to 125,000 and 20,000 people, respectively [2].

Monitoring of ‘VKontakte’ and ‘Instagram’ social networks showed that there are 662 communities promoting the Columbine ideology (430,166 accounts have been subscribed to these communities) in these social networks (as of May 2021).

2 Research methodology

The research included the examination of 10 criminal cases related to the commission of the Columbine acts or preparation for them. Materials of administrative cases on the recognition of information posted on the Internet are prohibited for distribution in the Russian Federation, for the period 2019-2021, including media materials covering cases of armed attacks on Russian educational organizations for the period 2014-2021.

The research is of an interdisciplinary nature and based on academic works in jurisprudence, forensic linguistics, psychology, political science, sociology and other academic areas.

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The study also included semi-automated monitoring of VKontakte and Instagram social networks for communities and accounts of the Columbine discourse (the automated information system database includes over 15 thousand destructive resources dedicated to various destructive subcultures, including ‘school shooting’, as well as accounts of several million users). The legal and linguistic analysis of the content of 42 online communities (accounts), promoting the Columbine subculture, was carried out. The authors used the methods of semantic, content statistical, and critical discourse analysis.

3 Results

3.1. Columbine as a delinquent subculture

In its most general form, Columbine act can be defined as an armed attack on students and employees of an educational organization by a student or other person.

The Columbine movement, which had originated in the USA, spread in the Western world and has been actively developing in Russia in recent years, while the location of the school shooting acts covers not only schools, but also university buildings [3], as well as other places of mass gathering of people. For example, in 2020 the media published an article titled ‘Danchik is a smart, educated person. He was inspired by the guys from Columbine’. The ‘hero’ of the article (Danchik) is 18-year-old Daniil Monakhov who shot his grandmother and several passers-by at the bus stop (URL: <https://dailystorm.ru/obschestvo/denchik-umnyy-obrazovannyy-chelovek-on-vdohnovilsya-chuvakamiz-iz-kolumbayna>).

In this regard, the following definition of ‘Columbine’ proposed by V.A. Saprykin deserves attention: ‘bloody massacres in crowded places, determined by the impact of modern mass culture’ [1].

The term ‘school shooting’ used in this study as a synonym for ‘Columbine’ is somewhat arbitrary, since the analysed Columbine acts were tied with the usage of explosive devices, incendiary mixtures, cold weapons, axes, etc. instead of firearms.

The tragedy at Columbine School (USA) in 1999 was far from the first outbreak of violence in educational organizations (for example, in 1927, 44 people were killed and 58 were seriously injured as a result of a mass shooting in a school in Bath (USA)), but Columbine tragedy became a pop-cultural phenomenon, a cult, a symbol of the followers of school shooting and made the name ‘Columbine’ a common (household) word, synonym of the term ‘school shooting’.

As David McWilliam notes, the reach of Columbine’s legacy is so great that the very word has become cultural shorthand for school shootings [4]. Kiilakoski and Oksanen argue that the Columbine school shooting spawned a cultural ‘script’ for imitation by adherents of mass school shootings [5]. This is mainly due to the active media coverage of the incident at Columbine School, the creation of a crime myth of the ‘juvenile super predator’ [6]. As Shellie McMurdo notes, ‘the

media coverage focused on the perpetrators, rather than the victims’ [7], this almost obsessional focus on E. Harris and D. Klebold turned alienated youth into ‘an exotic new species to be observed’ [8].

Ralph W. Larkin, revealing the importance of the Columbine incident as a cultural phenomenon, calls it a ‘cultural watershed’ that has attained a ‘mythical existence’ [3].

Diary entries of E. Harris and D. Klebold, video recording of the school shooting, texts and videos from the website hosted by E. Harris (Trench Coat Mafia Web site), information about hobbies, favourite films and music groups of these criminals have been actively spreading in the media. A number of movies telling about the mass shooting at the Columbine school were also released (‘Bowling for Columbine’, ‘Elephant’, ‘Zero Day’, ‘Zero Hour’, ‘Class’, ‘Hello, Herman’ and others). According to Shellie McMurdo, this media fixation on E. Harris and D. Klebold can be regarded as a continuation of the ongoing serial killer culture that exists in Western civilization [7].

TCC – true crime community – acts as a fandom. Materials about E. Harris and D. Klebold, as well as about their most famous followers, are transformed into objects of fan creativity (fanfiction), content of creepy paste, etc. This trend is observed both in the English and Russian-speaking segments of the Internet.

The ideology of columbiners is characterized by a kind of dichotomy. A typical columbiner, on the one hand, feels his/her lameness, considers himself/herself to be an outsider, expresses resentment against his/her peers and life in general, feels like a lonely person who ekes a meagre living out and cannot be saved. On the other hand, he/she postulates its superiority over classmates and (or) over all of humanity, identifies itself as God (statements such as ‘I am God’, ‘I have power over everyone’, ‘I will prescribe a death sentence for you’, ‘they are expendable, and I am great’, ‘I am not a human. I am better’). Columbiners position themselves as arbiters of destinies, carrying out ‘natural selection’ and sending ‘into space’ (killing) people who, in their opinion, are worse than they are. The Columbine followers argue the ‘right’ for such selection, violence; enslavement is in human nature in which there are no prohibitions. As the monitoring showed, columbiners often openly postulate their desire to kill on social networks and sometimes accompany such postulates with such comments as ‘yes, I’m a complete nutcase, and I’m proud of it’.

Thus, the Columbine ideology, which is generally aggressive in nature, has depressive and self-destructive features at the same time: the publics of the Columbine discourse contain, among other things, suicidal content, and the idea of committing a mass school shooting includes subsequent suicide for most columbiners (including on the script, as E. Harris and D. Klebold did it).

The mass shooting at Columbine School became a guiding force for school shooters, while in almost all analysed cases columbiners had the aim to surpass the number of victims killed by E. Harris and D. Klebold (13 people were killed and 23 injured) and become more

famous than them. One of these columbiners, Vladislav Roslyakov, who committed school shooting in Kerch (Crimea) on October 18, 2018, surpassed his ‘teachers’ (21 dead and 67 injured) and therefore became no less important ‘hero’ than E. Harris and D. Klebold for Russian followers of school shooting subculture.

Adherents of the Columbine ideology position themselves as fighters for the idea of restoring justice and revenge on offenders of the same outcasts as they are: peers; teachers; girls (who only care about appearance and do not pay attention to boys’ inner world, their uniqueness, etc.). The society as a whole that, in their opinion, condones bullying and unfair treatment to them; employees of law enforcement and other executive authorities; the state as a whole, which ‘has chosen such a policy’ etc. According to columbiners, the society and the state disfigure people, make them sociopaths and murderers, and the only way to release their hatred and draw public attention to the need to change the social and state structure is, in their opinion, committing a mass execution.

The Columbine ideology is characterized by anti-regime rhetoric and is often accompanied by calls to make a revolution, to destroy ‘this stupid state’, etc.

The study showed that columbine propaganda in social networks merges with other destructive ideologies. To the greatest extent, this is observed in relation to National Socialism: the majority of columbiners, as the study showed, are at the same time followers of the ideology of Nazism. To a certain extent, this is due to the fact that the ‘icon’ of Columbine – E. Harris – was also an adherent of Nazism and an ardent fan of A. Hitler. A number of school shooting followers are associated with the skinheads or punks’ movements. It should be noted that April 20 (the day of the tragedy at the Columbine School) is also the birthday of A. Hitler. And columbiners and modern fans of Hitlerite Germany are united not only by their interest to this historical period but also by the ideology of misanthropy (‘people hatred’), declaring unmotivated hostility to humanity as such and its individual representatives.

On the other hand, a number of school shooting followers adhere to the leftist ideology of anarchism, glorify the actions of the so-called ‘Arkhangelsk bomber’. A 17-year-old anarchist blew himself up in the Federal Security Service building in the Arkhangelsk region of Russia, 2018). And the ‘Khabarovsk shooter’ Anton Konev shot two people in the Federal Security Service reception room in the Khabarovsk region of Russia, 2017.

The research also showed that a number of columbiners adhere to the ideology of hatred towards Muslims, ethnic minorities, and LGBT. On the other hand, a number of school shooting followers, who consider themselves unfairly deprived of female attention, adhere to misogynistic views (while some of them identify themselves as persons of non-traditional sexual orientation). Moreover, a frightening trend in the Russian-speaking segment of the Internet over the past 2 years has been the active ‘splicing’ of columbiners and incels (involuntary celibate) who promote misogyny, racism, violence against sexually active people and

demand to provide male adolescents from the age of 14 with access to sex, placing womankind into the position of sex slaves. Monitoring of the ‘VKontakte’ social network showed that a number of modern columbiners justify their desire to carry out a mass school shooting by the ideology of incels.

In addition, the followers of Columbine on social networks sometimes oppose themselves to other destructive subcultures, expressing contempt for AUE (an extremist organization that promotes the prison subculture and is banned in the Russian Federation), calling for a war with ‘cattle-liberals’, arguing that terrorist attacks are better than murders by serial killers, etc.

Thus, the columbine subculture intersects, merges with other (sometimes diametrically opposed) destructive movements promoting hatred, enmity and (or) violence in the Russian-speaking segment of the Internet, and the degree of this ‘stratification’ is variable.

As the study showed, the sphere of school shooters’ interests includes true-crime; collecting firecrackers, bombs, Molotov cocktails, etc.; military topics; weapons; videos with scenes of violence; creepy paste; thrillers, etc. On the other hand, such a passion for violence may not be outwardly expressed. As the research showed, in most cases the individuals involved in mass school shootings were characterized as quiet, exemplary students. Some of them were model students and girls involved in the columbine subculture touched by ‘cute kittens’ and everything that is associated with ‘cute’ and ‘girly’.

A number of objective and subjective factors act as prerequisites for the involvement of adolescents in the columbine subculture: family problems; bullying; cruelty in computer games; personal psychological problems; health problems, etc. [9].

3.2 Columbine as a terrorist ideology

The study demonstrated the non-uniformity of legal qualification of school shootings in Russia. In some cases columbine acts were classified as terrorist acts (Article 205 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation). In others they were as murders of two or more persons committed in a generally dangerous way (p. “a”, “e” of part 2 of Art. 105 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation). Illegal acquisition, transfer, sale, storage, transportation or carrying of weapons, its main parts, ammunition and (or) explosive substances or explosive devices and (or) illegal manufacture of explosive substances, illegal manufacture, alteration or repair of explosive devices (Articles 222, 222.1, 223.1 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation) are often concurrently imputed.

By equating school shooting with school terrorism, L.A. Goncharov notes that this type of terrorism is ‘politically unmotivated, holding large groups of people at bay; in fact, an entire educational environment is being taken hostage’ [10]. In general, we agree with this idea, however, the thesis about the political unmotivation of columbine acts seems to be disputable.

Ralph W. Larkin, considering acts of school shooting (and even more broadly – ‘rampage shootings’) as political acts, emphasizes that post-Columbine ‘rampage shootings’ differ from pre-Columbine shootings by the following characteristics: motivation - revenge in the name of a collectivity, desire to make a statement; use of media to gain attention, etc. [3]

The pre-Columbine mass shootings were motivated by perceived injustices, petty hatreds, bullying and public humiliation, misogyny, lack of attention from females, etc. [11, 12]. Columbine accident, according to Ralph W. Larkin, has become a ‘new paradigm’ that 1) set the scenario for planning and implementation of school shootings; 2) provided inspiration for new rampage shootings as acts of revenge for past mistakes, humiliation and social isolation; 3) set a record for the number of victims of a mass school shooting, which the followers of columbine tried to surpass; 4) gave E. Harris and D. Klebold a mythical status in the pantheon of outcast student subcultures [3].

According to E. Harris and D. Klebold, they wanted to launch a revolution among the humiliated and despised students all over the world [N. Gibbs, T. Roche, *The Columbine tapes*. Time Magazine, Dec. 20, 1999], i.e. they were overtly political in their intentions to commit a mass shooting at the school [13].

Ralph W. Larkin comes to the conclusion that after the incident at Columbine School, the acts of school shooting ceased to be just revenge acts of psychologically deranged loner students, but grew into political acts in the public consciousness [3].

As our own study of Russian law enforcement practice and monitoring of the Russian-speaking segment of social networks have shown the following. The political and terrorist essence of school shooting is manifested in the fact that columbiners, in addition to striving to commit an act of revenge, are guided by the desire to see a feeling of authorities’ powerlessness, their failure to exercise control over everything. The mass shootings, according to columbiners, will help to ‘change the system’ and reduce the number of people who will ‘feel like victims’.

Thus, violent actions promoted by the columbine subculture are aimed at intimidation of the population, destabilization of the authorities’ activities and / or influence on their decision-making.

According to M.A. Nagoyeva, terrorism is a fact of protest against the current social system [14] that, in our opinion, allows us to classify the columbine ideology as a terrorist one.

4 Conclusion

In this study, based on the analysis of law enforcement practice, monitoring of social networks, analysis of media materials and theoretical works of Russian and foreign scholars on the topic of school shooting, we presented the characteristics of the columbine subculture at the present stage of its development in the Russian-speaking segment of the Internet.

Taking into account the substantiated thesis about the political and terrorist essence of the columbine ideology as a whole, we consider it necessary to carry out the legal qualification of school shooting propaganda as the propaganda of terrorism (Article 205.2 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation). This is in case the political orientation is expressed in columbiner’s messages (including multimodal – verbal and nonverbal texts). If there are no markers of the politicization of the promoted violent actions in a columbine discourse, it is necessary to qualify these speech actions as propaganda of murder motivated by hatred or enmity, i.e. as propaganda of extremism (Articles 280, 282 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation).

For forensic diagnostics of speech acts of the columbine discourse, we recommend using forensic diagnostic complexes of extremist speech acts [15]. They serve as clear and objective criteria of the legality / illegality of the dissemination of a concrete text and allow maintaining a balance between measures aimed at countering extremism and terrorism, on the one hand, and protection of freedom of speech and pluralism of opinion, on the other hand.

Internet resources (including public pages and user pages in social networks), glorifying mass murderers, violence and cruelty, are a ‘breeding ground’ for communities of the columbine discourse. Such pages prepare subscribers for more radical content that promotes school shooting. In this regard, there is an objective need to develop new methodological approaches to forensic diagnostics of the content of such ‘near-columbine’ posts, tactics of their detection and, undoubtedly, to improve legislation, to tighten responsibility for this kind of propaganda. At the moment, in accordance with Part 2 of Art. 5 of the Federal Law of the Russian Federation ‘On the Protection of Children from Information Harmful to Their Health and Development’ such speech products belong to the category of information prohibited for distribution among children, however, as the monitoring of the ‘VKontakte’ social network has shown, a huge amount of such destructive information is freely distributed via the Internet.

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