

# Isonnection: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Virus

by DR. TONY BELIZ

I first used this term in 2009 to describe individuals who were on a pathway to violence. My duty at the time was to develop and oversee two programs in Los Angeles County charged with preventing targeted violence. The School Threat Assessment and Response Team (START) was dedicated to the prevention of targeted school violence (TSV). The Special Problems Unit (SPU) focused on individuals planning targeted violence (TV). From the inception of these programs until the present I have interviewed, supervised, and consulted on numerous cases where the individual planned a mass shooting.

The recent events in Dayton, Ohio, Gilroy, California, and Christchurch, New Zealand highlight what I consider to be one of the most significant threats we face today: marginalized, isolated individuals who are connected to the world in negative ways nursing extreme ideology and endorsing violent remedies.

Isonnection refers to the management of emotional, psychological, and/or social isolation through social media. The Internet has significantly enhanced our ability to communicate and work and has improved the quality of life for all. Unfortunately, social media has also created a forum for isolated, marginalized individuals harboring grievances to band together and share not only their distorted views of the world but promote social change through violence. The exchange of information in real-time fosters a sense of unity and conviction previously unavailable when the world was not connected.

Admiration for those engaged in targeted violence are found in the social media posts from perpetrators in Norway, the United States, New Zealand, Germany, and other parts of the world. They appeal to marginalized individuals attempting to find meaning in a world where they have not succeeded. This has resulted in performance terrorism featuring manifestoes, video recorder assaults, and social media posts designed to promote ideology and inspire others to act.

Emerging trends include planning an event, posting a manifesto, and operationalizing the event. Social media functions to maximize exposure, provide tactical information to the base, inspire further acts of violence, and ultimately, global rule.

Those of us on the prevention side of the equation work to identify the communications, behaviors, and dynamics of persons endorsing violence as a remedy. Of equal significance, however, is the harnessing of modern technology to reduce the isolation and hopelessness of those who have not found meaning and success in their lives and therefore vulnerable to extreme ideology.