



Veneratio Diligentia Vires

*This office building at 901 Cherry Avenue in San Bruno, California was home to the headquarters of YouTube at the time this photograph was taken. Photographed By Coolcaesar 2017 in San Bruno, California. (CC BY-SA 4.0)*

# Assessing the Active Shooter Attack

## Against YouTube Headquarters, on April 3, 2018, and Prevention Measures

By Dr. Joshua Sinai

**T**his article assesses the ramifications of the active shooter attack by Nassim Aghdam on April 3, 2018 at the YouTube headquarters in San Bruno, California. The attack wounded three of the company's employees, with one of them dying from his wounds. Another victim had injured her ankle while escaping from the incident. The shooter then killed herself at the scene of her attack.

The attack is categorized as a psychologically disordered active shooter incident, which to the YouTube company represented, although this is a bit of a definitional stretch, a Workplace Violence, Type 3: Employee on Employee attack. Aghdam, a YouTube vlogger (video blogger), earned a commissioned revenue from the popularity of her videos through the placement by YouTube generated algorithms of advertisements on her YouTube channels. Although it is a gray area, Aghdam basically worked as an independent contractor for YouTube, thus her vengefulness towards the social media company, while not as an employee, was more like a contractor than a customer, which would have not made the attack a workplace violence type 2: customer/patient on employee) or a workplace violence type 1: criminal.

With YouTube, an online video sharing platform, censoring her videos' graphically extremist animal cruelty messaging by pulling them of her channels, thereby lowering her commissioned income, this represented a primary motivator for her vengeful rage against the social media company. One of the lessons about preventing such

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attacks is that although Aghdam's family had reported her proclivity to violence in the days leading up to her attack, they were not triaged appropriately by law enforcement throughout the state of California in a sufficiently effective manner for preemptive prevention. Also, as a social media corporation that features lots of extremist videos on its website, although it has attempted to contain them, YouTube should have instituted a more effective company-wide threat assessment monitoring program, especially one that covered social media postings, to triage such threats for successful preemption. These issues are discussed in the article's final section.

To examine the shooter's trajectory into violence to carry out such a suicidal attack, this article utilizes a triggering, planning, preparation, targeting, and executing (TPPTE) phases methodology to map Aghdam's vengeful motivation and the steps she took to carry out the attack.

### **Triggering Phase**

The triggering phase consists of traumatic events, such as especially traumatic personal, ideological or professional crises, that especially aggrieve an assailant into contemplating taking violent revenge against their perceived target.

In Aghdam's case, her sense of grievance was personal, ideological and professional. She was born on April 5, 1979 in Urmia, Iran. She immigrated with her family to the United States in 1996, at age 16. At the time of the shooting, now aged 38, she lived with her grandmother in Riverside County, outside San Diego, California. She was a member of the Baha'i faith, and regarded veganism as part of her religion. She became a vegan and animal rights activist and a health fitness personality, posting her graphic animal abuse videos, which also included vegan cooking tutorials, on her YouTube channels in English, Farsi and Turkish. Her videos were especially popular on Iranian social media channels. As an extremist vegan and animal rights activist, she also engaged in street protests with the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), considered an extremist movement, including on controversies such as the use of pigs in United States Marine Corps training procedures for victims of trauma.



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In her personal life, Aghdam was considered a social loner and had never married. The ideological and professional triggers behind her attack were her anger at the perceived discrimination by YouTube towards her channels by censoring their content. She became so upset that she ranted online, writing on her website that "Youtube filtered my channels to keep them from getting views!" resulting in the company's demonetizing the content from most of her videos from advertising revenues.

### **Planning Phase**

With the consolidation of the triggers for her attack, the planning phase consisted of deciding to use a weapon, in this case, a firearm, to attack YouTube's headquarters, the target of her vengeful grievement.

### **Preparation Phase**

The preparation phase consists of funding the acquisition of a weapon for the attack, training in its use, and deciding on the tactics for the attack. Accordingly, on January 2, 2018 Aghdam purchased and registered a 9 mm Smith & Wesson semiautomatic pistol from "The Gun Range" store, about 22 miles from her San Diego home. She picked up her registered pistol on January 16, following a mandatory 10-day waiting period. As part of this phase she trained to fire the weapon at a local firing range.

### **Targeting Phase**

In this phase, the attacker selects the date for the attack against the target, including the logistics for arriving at the target. In this case, Aghdam drove her car on April 1 or April 2 (the exact date is not certain) for 470 miles from her home in Riverside County to the YouTube headquarters in San Bruno. It is reported that on April 2 she visited YouTube's campus where she asked employees for directions to the main office, and was directed to the front desk where she inquired about employment opportunities. She spent the night of April 2 sleeping in her car at a Walmart parking lot in Mountain View, some 25 miles south of YouTube's campus, but 3 miles from Google's headquarters in Mountain View (it is reported that she had in her possession directions to Google's headquarters, with Google YouTube's parent company). At 1:40 am, police officers found Aghdam sleeping in her car at the



Walmart parking lot. A check of the license plate revealed that she was the owner of the missing car that had been reported by her family to San Diego police on March 31.

In their 20 minute interview of Aghdam, they did not identify her as a threat, as she told them she had left her family's home a few days earlier "due to family issues" and was looking for a job. She did not mention anything about YouTube and "was calm and cooperative," according to a police report. As a result, the officers let her go while notifying her family of her presence in the area. Her belongings in the car, however, were not checked by the police. Finally, it is reported on the morning of the attack on April 3 Aghdam practiced at a local shooting range.

### Executing Phase

This phase consists of conducting the actual attack. Aghdam arrived at YouTube's headquarters on April 3, a few minutes prior to 12:46 pm when her attack began. She parked her car in a garage adjacent to the YouTube headquarters, which provided her access to the facility's entrance. It is reported that she headed towards an outdoor patio in front of the YouTube building where on the way to it she ignored an employee who asked for a YouTube identification badge and then proceeded to open fire with her semi-automatic pistol, wounding three employees, one of them critically, before killing herself with a self-inflicted gunshot. Another victim suffered an ankle injury while running from the scene.

### Assessment

Aghdam's shooting rampage against the employees at the YouTube headquarters generated several lessons about the components of effective pre-incident attack preemption.

First, Aghdam was known to her family and others associated with her as a highly troubled individual, so it is unfortunate

that she was not referred to a mental health practitioner for treatment until she was reported to be missing by her father to the local police over concern that she might be seeking vengeance against YouTube, on March 31, four days prior to the incident. This raised several questions, such as were any of them aware that she had purchased a firearm in early January 2018? Purchasing a weapon by a person believing themselves to be strongly aggrieved by an injustice is an early warning indicator of a trajectory into violence by those associated with her if they had known about it, so this should have been reported to the appropriate authorities for preemptive prevention at that point. Such intervention could have been through mental health counseling or a law enforcement interview. In Aghdam's case, this window of opportunity for preemptive prevention lasted from early January until late March 2018.

Second, it is unfortunate that although the police officers in Mountain View had followed through by checking Aghdam's car's license plate to locate her, they did not conduct a sufficiently thorough search of her belongings in the car which would have revealed the presence of a handgun.

Third, Aghdam was reportedly asked by a YouTube employee to show her identification badge at the YouTube outdoor patio, which she had ignored, so companies that might be threatened by hostile actors should consider extending their security perimeters to include their outdoor gathering spaces.

Fourth, the presence of an enormous amount of extremist videos on social media sites such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and other platforms requires extensive vigilance by these corporations' security departments. This is due to the fact that vloggers earn revenue from the popularity of their channels, and they might become aggrieved when their sites are censored, thereby depriving them of revenue, with some of them deciding to seek vengeance

against these social media corporations. To avoid shooting incidents such as Aghdam's attack, security departments need to continuously deploy monitoring technologies and services to track the potential threats against them that would be posted on social media sites. Such threats would be prioritized as low, moderate, high, or very high criticality, with appropriate law enforcement response measures taken against such threatening individuals.

Finally, once a violent assailant attack is underway at a corporation's facility, social media monitoring platforms can be utilized to provide near-instant and updated eyewitness reports of the incident posted to social media sites, including live streams and visual images. This would provide early awareness by by-standers on the ground of the event's details, locations (including road closures), response by law enforcement authorities, as well as the fate of the attacker(s). These social media generated reports can precede reports by news organizations by many minutes, thus empowering corporations' security operations centers with wider and faster situational awareness to respond quickly to threats against their personnel and facilities.

It is through such comprehensive threat monitoring frameworks that social media corporations' security departments can effectively monitor and triage threats against them in order to preemptively prevent violent assailant attacks such as Aghdam's against their employees and facilities.

The information for this article was derived from Wikipedia and other news sources about the incident.

### About the Author

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