Mourners in Newtown, Conn. join to grieve over lives lost in the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting on Dec. 14, 2012.

For criminologists, the social media footprints of school shooters and mass killers are becoming a new kind of Rorschach test.

Online — where almost every thought and action is recorded for posterity — the Facebook accounts, message board posts and YouTube videos left behind by assailants are providing experts with a more in-depth picture of mass shooters, and in some cases, an effective way to prevent them.

Yet it's a double-edged sword, providing some killers with a place to find solace — and potentially to plan.

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The new kind of journal

Adam Lanza, the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooter, left anonymous posts in online message forums. Jared Loughner, who shot former Arizona Rep. Gabrielle Giffords and killed six others, left MySpace messages and YouTube videos.

Some have Facebook profiles. Eric Harris – one of the two Columbine High School shooters – used AOL pages to post violent rants, said Dave Cullen, the author of Columbine.

Before the Internet and social media, forming a portrait of the killer after a shooting, police once would have to depend a lot on the recollections of others, who might forget things, play them down or be too scared to say anything, Cullen said.

Some shooters may have been loners who never spoke to anyone, he said. “You didn’t have that stuff captured on the record like we do now.”

In the case of people such as Lanza – loners, with few friends and little social interaction – their online activity can be one of the best ways to understand what made them tick after their violent exits, said Matthew Lysiak, the author of Newtown: An American Tragedy.

People have always kept journals, he said, but social media posts are less formal, more raw and honest looks into a killer’s mindset over time.

“These are (Lanza's) thoughts at one in the morning, talking to like-minded people who, for the most part, aren't going to call him out for weird behavior,” Lysiak said.

In the best cases, though, some do get called out on this ‘weird behavior.’

In March 2012, for example, campus police at the University of Maryland in College Park received a tip that someone was making “anonymous threats” of a school shooting on Reddit, a social news and entertainment website.

Within hours, with assistance from Reddit administrators, the university tracked down the IP address of the student who later was charged with disturbing school activities and entered into
mental health treatment, said David Mitchell, the chief of police at UMD.

After the Virginia Tech shooting in 2007, most colleges, including University of Maryland, have set up teams — usually made up of campus police and administrators — to handle tips related to suspicious student behavior, including anonymous Internet activity, said Brian Van Brunt, president-elect of the National Behavioral Intervention Team Association.

Teams like these have become one of the most effective ways college campuses are dealing with, and preventing, serious violent crimes, Van Brunt said.

“You have to take every single threat seriously,” Mitchell said.

The key thing about psychopaths like Eric Harris, Cullen said, “is they love giving us clues” ahead of time.

Mary Ellen O’Toole, an author and retired FBI profiler, uses another term, “leakage,” to describe a phenomenon where many killers hint or even announce their plans far in advance of carrying them out. Social media has emerged as a new place to do it.

“When you start dealing with young people, college age, high school,” O’Toole said, “they gotta tell you what they’re doing. It’s part of their age.”

“We can learn a lot more about them through that.”

And school shooters and mass killers can learn a lot, too.

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The devil in them

“On the flip side, it also kind of exacerbates the problem to a degree,” said Jeffrey Tuer, an assistant professor of criminology at Notre Dame of Maryland University.

While the Internet can be used to intercept and stop violent crime, it’s also fueling it, O’Toole said.

“You can go on social media now and find people to chat with about anything,” she said.

That kind of unlimited access to violent or sexual deviancy is fueling more violent crimes like ever before, she said. Exactly the type witnessed at Sandy Hook Elementary.

Many of them find thrill in the planning of their crimes online.

They’re able to slowly put all the pieces together, gather the information they need and buy all the equipment they need. Now, killers can browse through online stores of weapons, ammo and tactical gear from the comforts of their own home, she said.

“If you look at a shooting like the one in Aurora, Colo.,” she said, “not only do these crimes take a long time in developing the mind-set for them, but they’re not quickly planned crimes anyway.”

Lanza probably knew about his plans when he left a lot of his posts, Lysiak said, making them that much more interesting to anyone trying to unwrap his thinking.

In one, Lanza opened a new thread with a question: “Was there any difference in saying someone had the devil in them, or someone was afflicted by psychopathy?”

“These were the questions he was wondering,” Lysiak said. “And at the time he’s asking this, he knows he’s going to commit a mass shooting.”

“We knew he was fascinated with violence before the postings were found,” Lysiak said. “We just didn’t know the extent of it.”
Lysiak, who moved to Newtown, Conn., to research and write his book, said he wonders what Lanza—an extreme antisocial personality who reportedly had Asperger’s syndrome—would have been like without the Internet.

“A hundred years ago,” Lysiak said, “somebody like Adam, who’s suffering this paralysis of social awkwardness, he wouldn’t have been able to surround himself with the kind of violence he could now because of Internet.

“Would it have prevented it? Well, it didn’t help.”

Memet Walker is a senior at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
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