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The Assassination of Charlie Kirk: Online Dynamics of Radicalization and the Normalization of Political Violence

Dr. Liram Koblentz-Stenzler
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Abstract

This paper examines how Charlie Kirk became a target of online hostility long before his assassination, and how the killing was later interpreted across loosely moderated digital spaces. Drawing on posts from Reddit and 4chan, the study shows how Kirk was repeatedly mocked and dehumanized in the months leading up to the attack. These early conversations treated him less as a political figure and more as a caricature, lowering the emotional and moral barriers that usually make violence feel unacceptable.

After the assassination, the responses that were examined in the paper fell into several clear types: humor that erased empathy, conspiracy narratives, and moral arguments portraying the killing as deserved. Taken together, these responses illustrate how digital environments can accelerate radicalization, making hostile ideas seem ordinary, hardening existing divisions, and making political violence easier for some people to rationalize. The dynamics identified in this case reflect a broader shift in which online discourse plays a growing role in normalizing political harm. Recognizing these patterns is essential for assessing emerging risks and understanding how online conversations shape an environment in which political violence becomes more imaginable.

Keywords: Political Violence; Online Radicalization; Digital Dehumanization; Moral Justification; Political Polarization; Charlie Kirk; Assassination

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Introduction

On October 9, 2025, conservative public figure Charlie Kirk was assassinated while speaking at Utah Valley University. His assassination came less than a year after two assassination attempts against Donald Trump during his 2024 presidential campaign: one in Pennsylvania in July and another in Florida that September. According to recent RAND research, political violence in the United States remains a persistent concern. The analysis points to deepening political and social divides, with digital environments playing only one part in a broader landscape where tensions can harden quickly.[1]

The assassination of Charlie Kirk highlights how political polarization and digital ecosystems intersect to create an environment where ideological hostility can evolve into moral justification for violence.

In a report published in the days following Kirk's assassination, ASIS International similarly warned that "political violence is now at its highest level in the United States since the 1970s," noting that the number of politically motivated attacks in early 2025 had nearly doubled compared to 2024.[2] This assessment, detailed in Political Violence Risks Rise Ahead of U.S. Elections and reinforced by Charlie Kirk Assassination Highlights Growing Political Violence Threat underscored growing concern among security professionals that political polarization was fueling a sustained rise in violence across the United States.[3]

Charlie Kirk was a prominent American right-wing activist best known for mobilizing conservative youth and advancing Trump-aligned causes. As the founder of Turning Point USA, an organization that quickly grew to more than 800 college chapters, he became one of the most influential figures of the MAGA movement and a visible defender of free speech and conservative values on U.S. campuses. Kirk's rhetoric advocating free markets, limited government, and pro-Israel positions while fiercely opposing what he called "woke Marxism and Islamism", made him a polarizing public figure. His unapologetic style and moral certainty inspired many but also

[1] RAND Corporation, "On Reducing Public Fears and Threats of Political Violence," RAND Commentary, December 2024. https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2024/12/on-reducing-public-fears-and-threats-of-political-violence.html

[2] ASIS International, "Charlie Kirk Assassination Highlights Growing Political Violence Threat," Security Management Magazine, September 2025. https://www.asisonline.org/security-management-magazine/latest-news/today-in-security/2025/september/charlie-kirk-assassination

[3] Ibid.

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provoked significant hostility, both from far-left activists and from elements of the extreme right who saw him as a "traitor" for his pro-Israel stance. [4]

Kirk's assassination is not an isolated event. It took place in a political climate marked by growing distrust, sharper divisions, and online spaces that can make hostile reactions feel routine. Online spaces play a role in this environment because they can turn moments of political violence into material for jokes, anger or quick moral claims. The speed and tone of these reactions do not create violence on their own, but they can make it easier for people to treat such events as understandable or even expected.

This paper argues that the assassination of Charlie Kirk illustrate how engagement driven online platforms and hyper-polarized discourse weaken democratic resilience and make political violence increasingly imaginable. To explore this dynamic the paper is organized into three sections. The first section, Kirk's Political and Digital Profile Before the Assassination, examines Kirk's political and digital profile, show how he became a point of tension in ongoing debate about free speech, conservatism, and Israel, and how these tensions set the conditions for the hostility that later developed online. The second section, Pre-Assassination Dehumanization and Humorous Hostility, examines the dehumanizing and humorous hostility that circulated before the assassination, demonstrating how ridicule, mockery, and playful references to violence helped weaken empathy toward Kirk and normalize aggression. The third section, Moral Justification and the Digital Architecture of Violence, analyzes the online reactions that followed the killing. It is divided into four parts: i. Celebration as Moral Permission ii. Political and Moral Justification. iii. Conspiracy as Moral justification iv. Explicit Calls for Violence.

Kirk's Political and Digital Profile Before the Assassination

Understanding the reactions to Kirk's assassination requires first understanding what he represents to both his supporters and opponents. His activism, public image, and online presence made him a symbolic figure in ongoing national debates about free speech, conservatism, gender, and Israel. By 2025, these tensions were no longer limited to social media. They increasingly surfaced in the real-world events where Kirk appeared. His scheduled lecture at Utah Valley University, where he was ultimately killed, had already become one of those point of tension. Nearly 1,000 students signed a petition demanding that the university cancel his talk,

[4] Reuters, "Who is Trump ally and conservative activist Charlie Kirk?", *Reuters*, September 10 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/us/who-is-trump-ally-conservative-activist-charlie-kirk-2025-09-10

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accusing him of spreading hate and misinformation. The university administration rejected the request, citing academic freedom and the importance of free speech,[5] highlighting the deep divisions over what free speech means on American campuses today.

Campus conflict was not new. For decades, American campuses have echoed the country's biggest moral and political fights - from the Vietnam War protests in the 1960s to more recent debates about race, gender, and identity and most recently the Israel-Hamas War.[6] What has changed is the speed with which campus incidents now move online, shaping narratives that effect the wider national conversation.[7]

To understand why Kirk became such a divisive symbol, it is important to look at the movement he built and the values he championed. An evangelical and right-wing activist, Kirk consistently emphasized free speech, free markets, and limited government.[8]

Kirk's prominence grew out of the movement he built. An evangelical and conservative activist, he frequently emphasized free speech, free markets and limited government. He founded Turning Point USA at age 18, aiming to create a youth-focused conservative organization in the way that MoveOn.org mobilized progressives. On 2024 he described in a podcast he recorded "In my local high school, progressive, left-wing Marxist ideas were widespread, and I looked around and I was unimpressed by the conservative organizations that were out there." Turning Point made Kirk the face of the young MAGA movement since it created a space that acts as a

[5] Agancies and Toi staff, "Conservative influencer and Israel advocate Charlie Kirk shot dead at Utah event", The Times of Israel, September 10 2025, https://www.timesofisrael.com/conservative-influencer-and-israel-advocate-charlie-kirk-shot-dead-at-utah-event/

[6] Brookings Institution, "How tech platforms fuel U.S. political polarization and what government can do about it," Brookings, September 2021.

Cirrone James, "MAGA influencer Charlie Kirk sparks outrage with controversial advice to female students", Daily Mail, September 2025, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14829793/charlie-kirk-maga-influencer-college-advice-female-student.html

[7] Pew Research Center. "Americans Are Divided on How Colleges Should Balance Free Speech and Inclusion." Pew Research Center, 2023. https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/05/15/americans-are-divided-on-how-colleges-should-balance-free-speech-and-inclusion/

[8] Reuters, "Who is Trump ally and conservative activist Charlie Kirk?", *Reuters*, September 10 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/us/who-is-trump-ally-conservative-activist-charlie-kirk-2025-09-10

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counterweight to what he saw as the liberal politics that largely dominate on college campuses across the country., established more than 800 college chapters.[9]

Kirk also expressed deeply conservative and even paternalistic views about gender roles. At a Turning Point event in Dallas in September 2025, when a 14-year-old girl asked him about higher education, Kirk replied that the primary goal for young women is "to get married and have children." The comment drew sharp criticism online, as it confined women's roles to the private sphere and diminished their opportunities for self-realization through education and professional advancement.[10]

In his social media posts, including those shared on his Telegram channel with more than 180,000 followers, Kirk often warned that "woke Marxism and Islamism" were the greatest threats to America, claiming that both "target family values and safe neighborhoods."[9] He argued that progressive movements and what he called "Islamist influences" were working together to undermine Western traditions and impose a "gender agenda" in schools.[11]

Kirk's messaging also reflected his pro-Israel stance, which became a recurring theme in his speeches and online debates. Turning Point USA maintained ties with pro-Israel groups and regularly hosted Israeli speakers at its conferences. These positions strengthened his influence within conservative and evangelical circles but also drew criticism from both far-left activists and segments of the far right who viewed him as a "traitor" for supporting Israel.[12]

The controversy surrounding Kirk's appearances exemplified the fragile balance between freedom of speech and the limits of tolerance in a polarized democracy. Online reactions to Kirk's campus events, both supportive and hostile, frequently went viral on platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Telegram, and YouTube, generating outrage cycles that reinforced echo

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[9] Moore Elena, "Charlie Kirk, a Trump ally and voice for young conservatives, dies at age 31", npr, October 10 2025, https://www.npr.org/2025/09/10/nx-s1-5537045/charlie-kirk-shot-utah

[10] Cirrone James, "MAGA influencer Charlie Kirk sparks outrage with controversial advice to female students", Daily Mail, September 2025, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14829793/charlie-kirk-maga-influencer-college-advice-female-student.html

[11] Telegram, Charlie Kirk channel, September 8 2025

[12] Agancies and Toi staff, "Conservative influencer and Israel advocate Charlie Kirk shot dead at Utah event", The Times of Israel, September 10 2025, https://www.timesofisrael.com/conservative-influencer-and-israel-advocate-charlie-kirk-shot-dead-at-utah-event/; Moore Elena, "Charlie Kirk, a Trump ally and voice for young conservatives, dies at age 31", npr, October 10 2025, https://www.npr.org/2025/09/10/nx-s1-5537045/charlie-kirk-shot-utah

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chambers on both ends of the political spectrum.[13] Kirk, through Turning Point USA, positioned himself at the heart of this struggle. His supporters portrayed him as defender of conservative students, while critics accused him of spreading divisive rhetoric that stigmatized minorities and progressives.[14]

Beyond the campus setting, Kirk had long been a lightning rod for online polarization.[19] His videos and posts attacking what he called "woke Marxism" or "Islamist ideology" attracted massive engagement but also made him a target of coordinated online hostility.[20] Previous incidents illustrated the danger: in 2021, a Turning Point event in Seattle was canceled following violent and arson threats that were made against church leaders hosting him; another event in Oregon was similarly called off following threats attributed to far-left activists; and in 2024, an Arizona high school teacher was arrested after posting threats directed at both Kirk and Donald Trump Jr after receiving an invitation to a TPUSA event .[15]

These episodes illustrate how digital ecosystems can serve as accelerators of grievance, mobilizing online outrage into offline intimidation.[16] By 2025, hostility toward Kirk and toward political figures more broadly, had been normalized through meme culture, and reactive online discourse. In such an environment, the distinction between speech, incitement, and action becomes dangerously blurred.[17]

Pre-Assassination Dehumanization and Humorous Hostility

Before examining the online reactions directed at Charlie Kirk in the months preceding his assassination, it is essential to understand how such expressions fit within a broader process of

[13] Brookings Institution. "How tech platforms fuel U.S. political polarization and what government can do about it." Brookings, September 2021.https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-tech-platforms-fuel-u-s-political-polarization-and-what-government-can-do-about-it/

[14] Cirrone James, "MAGA influencer Charlie Kirk sparks outrage with controversial advice to female students", Daily Mail, September 2025, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14829793/charlie-kirk-maga-influencer-college-advice-female-student.html

[15] Hindustan Times, "Charlie Kirk Killed: Past Instances When Turning Point USA Founder Was Threatened," Hindustan Times, September 11, 2025, https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/us-news/charlie-kirk-killed-past-instances-when-turning-point-usa-founder-was-threatened-101757545444844.html

[16] Brookings Institution. "How tech platforms fuel U.S. political polarization and what government can do about it." Brookings, September 2021.https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-tech-platforms-fuel-u-s-political-polarization-and-what-government-can-do-about-it/

[17] "On Reducing Public Fears and Threats of Political Violence." RAND Commentary, December 2024.

https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2024/12/on-reducing-public-fears-and-threats-of-political-violence.html

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radicalization. Radicalization rarely begins with ideology or explicit commitments to violence. It develops slowly, as people are exposed to messages and communities that change how they think and feel about others. Over time, this kind of exposure can weaken basic moral restraints and make hostility Even violence can seem more acceptable. It often unfolds in stages: people begin in a state of pre-radicalization, living without overt signs of extremism; they move into self-identification, exploring radical ideas and separating from their previous identities; they then enter indoctrination, where their views are reinforced and hardened through exposure to like-minded communities. A minority eventually reach the point of violence, where taking actions becomes not only conceivable but morally justified. In today's digital environment, these stages often accelerated by online spaces that amplify echo chambers and normalize calls for violence.[18]

In the digital era, this process has been significantly accelerated by social media platforms. Research shows that online environments foster echo chambers, where individuals are mainly exposed to like-minded voices, leading to ideological homogenization and the reinforcement of extreme views[19]. Algorithms that privilege engagement amplify proactive and polarizing content, further deepening extremist narratives.[20] Moreover, online communities provide immediate access to global networks of sympathizers, lowering barriers to radicalization and normalizing violent rhetoric as part of everyday digital discourse.[21]

The hostility toward Kirk did not emerge suddenly. In the months before the shooting, online conversations moved along a clear progression: from mockery, to joking suggestions of physical harm, and eventually to framing violence as a form of entertainment.

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[18] Mitchell D. Silber and Arvin Bhatt. Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat. New York: NYPD Intelligence Division, August 21, 2007. Public Intelligence. https://info.publicintelligence.net/NYPDradicalization.pdf

[19] Matteo Cinelli, Gianmarco De Francisci Morales, Alessandro Galeazzi, Walter Quattrociocchi, and Michele Starnini, "The Echo Chamber Effect on Social Media," Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences 118, no. 9 (2021): e2023301118, https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2023301118

[20] Brent Kitchens, Steven L. Johnson, and Peter Gray, "Understanding Echo Chambers and Filter Bubbles: The Impact of Social Media on Diversification and Partisan Shifts in News Consumption," MIS Quarterly 44, no. 4 (2020): 1619–1649, https://doi.org/10.25300/MISQ/2020/16371

[21] National Institute of Justice, The Role of the Internet and Social Media on Radicalization (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, 2024), https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/305797.pdf

; Program on Extremism, George Washington University, The Third Generation of Online Radicalization (Washington, DC, 2023), https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs5746/files/2023-06/third-generation-final.pdf

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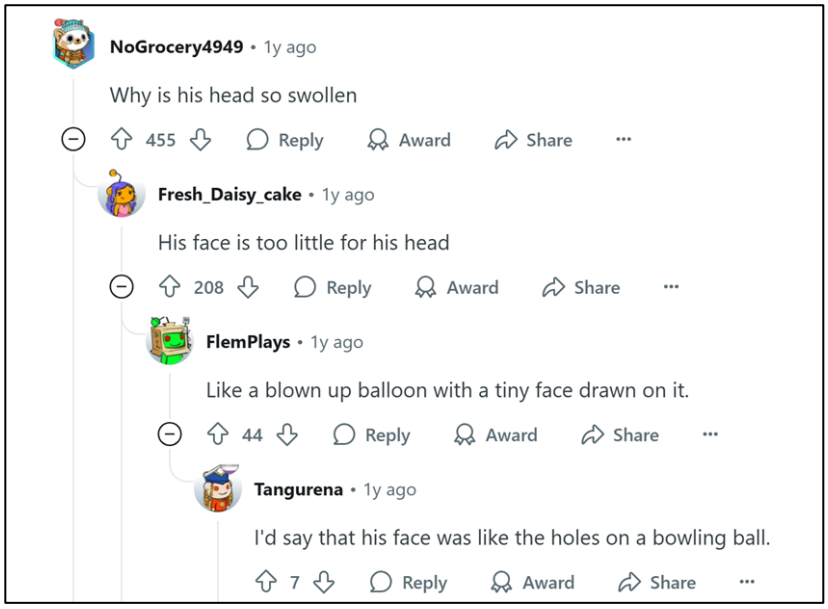
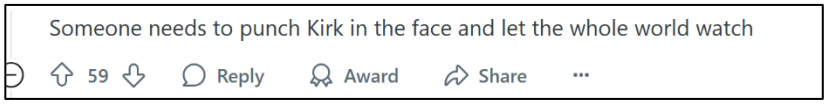
These posts did not engage only on his political ideas. Instead, they targeted his appearance, identity, and body, turning him into a caricature rather than a human being.

In a Reddit thread posted more than a year before the assassination users mocked Kirk's appearance. One asked why "his head is so swollen," followed by responses that compared his face to an undersized drawing on a balloon and to the holes of a bowling ball.

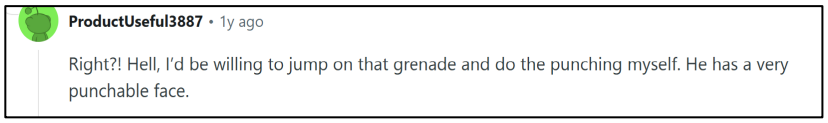


Source: Reddit 2024

Alongside the mockery of Kirk's appearance, some users shifted to open suggestions of physical harm. Other users began incorporating playful aggression into the discussion. One user stated:



Source: Reddit, September 17, 2025



Source: Reddit, September 2024

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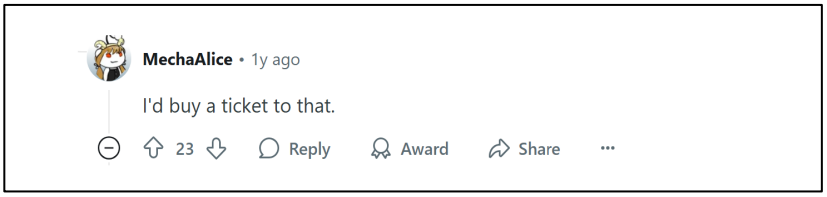
These kind of remarks treats violence as something that should not only happen but be performed publicly. Some users responded in the same spirit. Turning the idea of physical harm into public display of violence. One user wrote The phrase “I’d buy a ticket to that” uses the language of entertainment to suggest that watching someone strike Kirk would be enjoyable much like paying to see a show or a fight.



Source: Reddit, September 2024

In this framing imagined violence stops being troubling and becomes something amusing to observe. This entertainment framing appeared even more explicitly in another thread, where a user proposed to make it a PPV event.

Source: Reddit, 2024

PPV (Pay-Per-View) is a term used for paid broadcasts of combat sports such as boxing or MMA. Describing an attack on Kirk as a PPV event reframes imagined violence as a commercial spectacle , not as a moral violation, but as something theatrical, staged, and monetized.

Even when presented as jokes, this type of humor still contributes to soft dehumanization. It softens the moral weight of hostility, recasts animosity as entertainment, and creates emotional distance between the audience and the person being targeted. Researchers note that disparaging humor can weaken empathy, make aggressive attitudes feel more acceptable, and open the door to harsher forms of expression toward the same individual. They also observe that when ridicule becomes repetitive, it reshapes how audiences perceive the target: the person is no longer viewed as a full social actor but as a character, a symbol, or a running joke. This shift makes it

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easier for more extreme rhetoric to enter the conversation, because the emotional and moral barriers that normally protect individuals from harm have already begun to erode. [22]

Taken together, these posts demonstrate a shift: from light mockery to joking about inflicting harm to imagining violence as entertainment. Even in humorous form, this progression normalizes aggression and distances audiences emotionally from its target, lowering the moral barriers that typically restrain violence.

Moral Justification and the Digital Architecture of Violence

The assassination of Charlie Kirk and the reaction to it shows how online spaces do more than mirror political anger. They help shape how people come to see violence as acceptable, even justified. In many cases, this shift does not occur suddenly. It is part of a broader process of digital radicalization, in which repeated exposure, the tone set by the community, the reactions people receive and even humor that softens hostility, can gradually make harmful ideas feel less troubling.

Radicalization rarely begins with ideology or calls for violence alone. It is a gradual process through which individuals may shift from ordinary lives into adopting extremist worldviews and, eventually, violent action. It often unfolds in stages: people begin in a state of pre-radicalization, living without overt signs of extremism; they move into self-identification, exploring radical ideas and separating from their previous identities; they then enter indoctrination, where their views are reinforced and hardened through exposure to like-minded communities; and finally, some reach the point where some turn to violence as they see it both necessary and legitimate. in today's environment, is often accelerated by online spaces that amplify echo chambers[23] and normalize calls for violence.[24]

[22] Julia Schmid, Silvia Schulze, and Nora Drexel, "Memes, Humour, and the Far Right's Strategic Mainstreaming," Information, Communication & Society (2024).

[23] Echo chambers are information ecosystems in which individuals are exposed only to content that confirms their pre-existing beliefs, while opposing views are either not encountered or are systematically discredited.

Fondation Descartes, "Filter Bubbles and Echo Chambers," July 2020, https://www.fondationdescartes.org/en/2020/07/filter-bubbles-and-echo-chambers/

[24] Silber, M.D. and Bhatt, A. (2007) Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat. New York: NYPD Intelligence Division. Available at: https://info.publicintelligence.net/NYPDradicalization.pdf

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i. Celebration as Moral Permission

The immediate online reactions to Kirk's killing made the dynamic visible. Within hours after the attack, many users reacted with shock, but many others reacted with approval, jokes, conspiracy theories and even sometimes framing the killing as entertainment. What might in the past have been unthinkable - celebrating a political murder - became a shared online excitement.

In anarchist channels user posted comments celebrating Kirk's death saying "ding dong the witch is dead"[25] or "The Witches got him".[26]

Political and Moral Justification

Beyond celebration many users framed Kirk's death as something he had brought upon himself. Many users on both the far left and the far right described the killing as justice. They claimed Kirk "deserved it" because of his conservative views or his support for Israel. Others described him as a "puppet" serving harmful political interests, arguing he had caused serious damage to the United States.

Anonymous (ID: lwM1fXAh) 09/10/25(Wed)19:18:54 No.515347240 ▶ >>515350614

Rest in piss, lmao. Seriously fuck this loser puppet and the damage he has done to this country.

Source: 4Chan, September 10, 2025

This comment goes beyond celebrating his death. It offers a reason why the killing should be seen as justified, portraying it as a response to the damage Kirk was believed to have caused. In doing so, it turns political violence into a form of payback that appears understandable instead of alarming.

[25] Telegram, October 10 2025

[26] Telegram, October 10 2025

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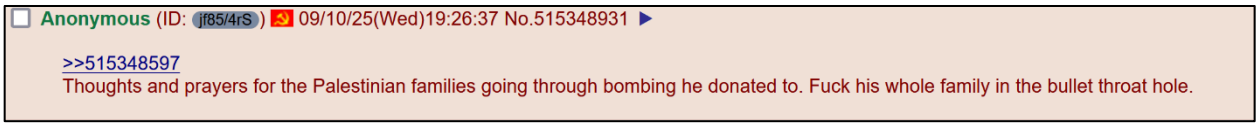
A different user expressed this logic, writing that his "thoughts and prayers" were with Palestinian families affected by "bombing he [Kirk] donated to," and than went on to wish harm on Kirk's entire family. Here, the killing becomes as a justified response to the moral harm the user believes Kirk caused. Violence reframed as deserved retribution rather than an escalation.



Source: 4chan, October 9,2025

Another user went even further. In a far-right thread on 4chan, Kirk was described as a "shabbos goy who should have been hanged in public," with the poster calling his assassination a "travesty" because he would "never be held accountable for his pattern of anti-White criminal activity." Here, the killing is not portrayed as excessive but as insufficient — a missed opportunity for a harsher, more public form of retribution.

Source: 4chan, September 10, 2025

These kinds of reactions do more than justify the violence after the fact. They stretch the boundaries of what is seen as acceptable, normalizing the idea that political opponents deserve severe physical punishment and making future acts of violence feel more reasonable, even expected.

ii. Conspiracy as Moral justification

At the same time, some users claimed that the killing wasn't real and that it was planned by "Zionists" or "the Mossad."

Posts framed the killing as a "false flag" operation, tying it to antisemitic conspiracy theories that portray Israel as orchestrating violent events for political purposes.

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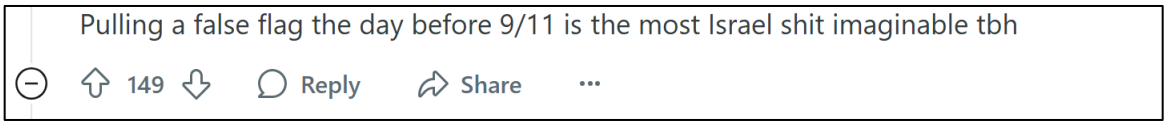

Source: 4Chan, September 10, 2025

Another post said his killing was not the act of a lone civilian but a carefully planned operation: the suspect arrested was described as merely a decoy to cover for the "real" shooter, and even the rapid response of Israeli officials online was cited at the post as supposed evidence of orchestration.

Source: 4Chan, September 10, 2025

These conspiracy theories repeat the same old antisemitic ideas — that Jews secretly control events and manipulate the world. They shift blame away from the killer and make the murder seem like part of a bigger plan.

Like the celebratory posts, they give people a sense that the violence makes "moral sense," even if that sense is built on hate and lies.

iii. Explicit Calls for Violence

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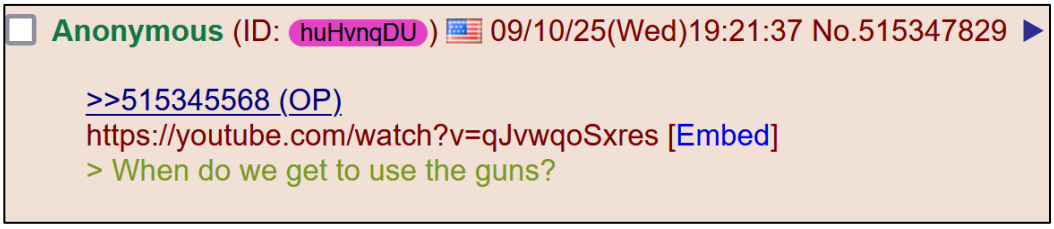
While many users reacted with mockery or celebration, others pushed the rhetoric further. Even before explicit threats appeared, some comments were already shifting the tone toward action. In one thread, the escalation is already clear: just hours after the assassination, a user asked, “When do we get to use the guns?” a remark that even though doesn’t name a target, shows a readiness for further violence.



Source: 4chan, September 10, 2025

Even though the post doesn’t name a target or call for a specific attack, it signals excitement for escalation, treating the killing as the moment when violence might become possible or even expected.

A little further down in the same discussion, the tone hardened dramatically. Another user wrote, “Kill all Zionists,” followed by graphic descriptions of rape, torture, and extermination. The language is openly dehumanizing, portraying Jews and Zionists as less than human and therefore acceptable targets. Together, these posts illustrate how quickly a conversation about a political killing can shift toward imagining, and even endorsing, far broader violence.

Source: 4Chan, September 10, 2025

Conclusion

Charlie Kirk’s assassination occurred during a period of rising political violence in the United States. What once would have been considered an exceptional act now sits within a wider pattern

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in which political divisions, wakening public trust, and online spaces that often create conditions where violence feels less surprising and, at times, more explainable. The response to Kirk's assassination illustrates how quickly political violent event can be pulled into everyday digital discourse, becoming something people joke about, defend, or dismiss instead of treating it as a moment of shared alarm.

The responses examined in this study, ranging from celebration to moral claims, to explicit calls for further harm, do not by themselves cause violence. What they do, however, is signal a shift in how political actors and their opponents are imagined. Through repetition, anonymity, and the speed of online interaction, opponents become caricatures, and acts of violence against them appear less morally unacceptable. In such an environment, the boundary between rhetoric and action narrows in ways that weaken democratic stability.

These dynamics matter because they reveal how certain online reactions can accelerate a process of radicalization, making hostile ideas feel more familiar and violence easier for some people to justify. The tendencies that surfaced after Kirk's assassination, humor that strips away empathy, conspiracy narratives, and moral arguments that present the killing as deserved, appear in many other political disputes as well. Even though the 2024 election is behind us, the political atmosphere has not settled, and the 2026 midterms are already coming into view. These shifts shouldn't be ignored; they can signal early moments when political hostility begins to move in a more dangerous direction.

Building resilience requires paying closer attention to how people talk about political events online. Removing individual posts will not solve the issue; the challenge lies in the ways conversations can quickly shift the tone around violence and make it seem less troubling. What matters is understanding how these discussions pick up speed, how certain framings spread, and how easily a violent act can be pulled into everyday online talk. Without that awareness, the same conditions that shaped the reaction to Kirk's killing are likely to reappear and with them, a higher risk that political violence will deepen.

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