Bomb makers share recipes on the Web

Chris makes his own bombs with instructions he gets off the Internet. He says he does it for the rush. The ingredients are just lying around the house: Gasoline, Aluminum foil, Ammonia, Bleach, PVC pipe. Match heads. Chris has even gotten water to explode. Instructions for landmines are also available.

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"I got too close and the flame came across my face," Chris says. "I lost both eyebrows." He told his father he got crazy at a party and shaved them. "I'm a quick thinker," he says.

One time, Chris made acetone peroxide. A lot of suicide bombers use a version of acetone peroxide, and it may have played a role in the London subway and bus bombings. Acetone peroxide is shock-sensitive. Bump it too hard and, boom, up in smoke. It's so deadly terrorists call it the "Mother of Satan."

"When I made it, I probably had the biggest heart attack ever," Chris says. "I was afraid of dying."

Chris took his Mother of Satan to a park and stuck it in a tree fort. When he got far enough away, he hit the detonator.

"It just tore everything up," Chris says. "I feel sorry for the tree. It died."

Chris shares his passion for do-it-yourself explosives with other 13-, 14- and 15-year-olds from around the world on the Internet. That's where he brags about his exploits and swaps recipes for bombs made with materials his father keeps under the sink or in the garage. Law enforcement officials say they're keeping an eye on these Web forums, but there's little they can do. It's impossible to outlaw Reynolds Wrap or Clorox. And they can't arrest anyone for talking about how to make bombs.

"Freedom of speech is a double-edged sword," says Capt. Kevin Hartnett of the Bergen County Police Department's bomb squad. "It's a wonderful thing, but it opens up the ability for anyone to get this information easily."

Hartnett knows how scary a little know-how can be. He's familiar with the pipe bomb that took out a drop-ceiling at Palisades Park High School, the Pequannock teenager who was rushed to the hospital after his homemade explosive went off and the bomb a Garfield kid's panicked parents dropped off at a police station. Hartnett and his colleagues neutralize 10 to 15 explosive devices each year. Most of the bombs do no harm, but who can say what mayhem the next one will unleash?

"There's an amazing amount of information out there on the Internet," Hartnett says.

Authorities believe some of that information was used by terrorists in last month's London subway and bus attacks.

"The devices in London were of the same type and the same general characteristics as those described and promoted on some of the Internet sites," says Chris Ronay, a retired FBI agent who headed the bureau's explosives unit for 18 years. "You can identify certain bombs that were identical to those published on the Internet."

Federal, state and local law enforcement agents say they keep tabs on the Internet's explosives makers. Officials are circumspect about the exact nature of that work, saying they don't want to divulge too much about how they operate. One says he types "bomb" into a search engine and hits "go." Another says he routinely monitors the Web sites of "domestic terrorist organizations" that offer bomb-making advice. None of the officials interviewed for this article say they've heard of the Web site Chris visits regularly.

"There are so many Web sites I don't know if anybody can monitor them all," says Joseph Green, spokesman for the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, or ATF.

The federal government has no fewer than a half-dozen agencies assigned to the menace: The Environmental Protection Agency controls certain chemicals that can be used to make bombs in the back yard. The Agriculture Department regulates the sale of fertilizers like ammonium nitrate, which Timothy McVeigh mixed with gasoline in the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. The Transportation Security Administration, part of the Department of Homeland Security, oversees protection on airplanes, trains and buses. The Justice Department rules on the delicate balance between civil liberties and public safety, and the FBI and the ATF track down suspects.

In order for authorities to act on what they read on the Web, they need evidence of a specific threat, says Leo West, a retired FBI agent who spent nine years on the bureau's explosives unit.

"You have to have details," West says. "A plot, a potential victim, a date and a location. If it's coupled with corroborating information from another source, that can open the door for an actual, active investigation."

It's the American public, ultimately, that must help protect itself. Authorities acknowledge that there's little they can do to stop a bomber without cooperation from people who have their eyes peeled.

"We really need the public," West says. "The information we get from citizens and merchants is key to an investigation."

The ATF formalized that appeal after the Oklahoma City bombing when it enlisted the gardening and farm supply industries in a program called Be Aware for America. Dealers were asked to report suspicious people who tried to buy fertilizers, like ammonium nitrate, that could be used to make explosives.

Mark Evans, manager of the Growmark FS store in Hunterdon County, began keeping a closer watch over his supply of ammonium nitrate after the first World Trade Center attack in 1993.

"We restricted sales on it to customers who've dealt with us for years," Evans says. "We had several people come in and ask for prices and we told them we didn't sell it." Evans adds that his store no longer sells ammonium nitrate. "You can replace it with a less dangerous fertilizer," he says.

Pipe bombs are easy

Chris, who's from Ontario, says many of his online cohorts - who live in places as varied as New Jersey, Indiana, California and Australia - probably talk about making explosives a lot more than they're actually doing it.

Even so, Ronay, the former FBI explosives expert, cautions against being fooled by their immaturity.
"It doesn't matter if you believe the people who are doing it aren't sophisticated," he says. "Their bombs can be."

The most popular pipe bombs. "Anyone can easily make one," says one teenager. The pipes are usually fashioned from lead or PVC, but Internet bomb makers suggest more creative alternatives - a plastic M&Ms canister or a section of hollow bicycle frame.

One of the perils of the Internet as a bomb-making school is that there's no way a kid can tell if a particular recipe leaves out an important step, creating an even bigger potential hazard.

That's what one self-described expert says is his justification for posting detailed directions for making grenades, fuses, timed detonators, land mines, nitrocellulose (also known as gun cotton) and a favorite recipe he calls "Make an Explosive From Your Piss!"

"If kids out there are determined to make explosives, they may as well find out the safest way possible of doing so," he wrote in an e-mail message.

"Many people may think it's irresponsible of me to post such instructions, and I'd agree with them to a point, but many of these [kids] have already made up their minds. I'd like to think I help them make sure they don't kill themselves or other people."

The expert, who asked that his real name not be used, says he's a 22-year-old combat engineer in the Irish Army Reserves, where he's gained experience in demolition. He shares his knowledge freely with teenagers on the Internet - for safety's sake, he says.

"For example, if acetone peroxide is not kept below 10 degrees Celsius, you end up making the much more volatile dimeric form which will sometimes explode for no apparent reason at all," he wrote.

The Irish expert - who vigorously denies any involvement in paramilitary groups - contradicts himself when he says he doesn't expect anybody to actually make bombs using his meticulous instructions. His disclaimer is similar to those on Web sites warning readers that instructions for making explosives are for "entertainment purposes only" and shouldn't be attempted.

Ronay says the Irishman is in a state of denial.

"He's a nut case," Ronay says. "Like so many others, he likes to fool around with things that skirt the edge of legality. There's not much merit in his argument."

His first bomb

Sure enough, adolescents who frequent a Web site that offers the Irishman's instructions say they're building bombs all the time. One 14-year-old boy, who asked to be referred to as Your Worst Nightmare, says he started playing around with explosives when he was 10. His first bomb: black powder ripped out of a bottle rocket and wrapped in toilet paper.

"I just like to experiment," Your Worst Nightmare says. "I like the loud noise. My parents don't give a crap as long as I don't make a mess."

A 14-year-old who calls himself Defiler tries to cut a more worldly Internet profile. He touts his experiments as a scientific quest for the Platonic ideal of a bomb.

Defiler recently went on a search for the best homemade napalm he could concoct. He celebrated when, on his own, he "finally" came up with a substance that's "really easy to ignite and burns for a while" - and immediately shared it, complete with photos, with his Internet friends.

Defiler views his hobby as a noteworthy, if unconventional, item on his résumé. The pubescent bomb maker says he wants to be an astronaut, a chemical engineer or a military software developer when he grows up. And he strives to separate himself from the kids he sees as reckless on the so-called information superhighway.

"Most of the information floating around the Internet is usually a lie," Defiler says. "I don't Google 'bomb instructions' and make the first bomb that comes up. It's a very useful skill to know what you are actually doing and understand it, not just following the instructions someone gave you."

Defiler's father supports his experimentation. "My dad was a lot like me when he was a kid, so he understands," Defiler says.

Most teen bomb makers have family troubles, says Dr. Alberto Goldwaser, a Paramus forensic psychiatrist, and setting off ear-splitting kabooms makes them feel powerful.

In response to the e-mail question, "Why do you do it?" a teenager who asked to be called XRAY wrote that his love of loud bangs is a "disease":

"I have a lot of problems at home and I think I might have a disease explosions are my drug they make me feel smart the feeling of u created something makes u proud of ur self its like a drug but better Most kids outgrow their fascination with explosives, Goldwaser says. For some, he says, "a counter-phobic mechanism kicks in, and they grow up to lead respectable lives, even becoming firefighters. For others, however, an abusive upbringing taught them that problems can be handled with violence. "A very small percentage of these kids turn out to be sociopaths," Goldwaser says. "They can be dangerous. Some of them are bombs themselves, waiting to go off." Typical adolescent problems at home, school or work can spark aggression, Goldwaser says.

"They needn't become indoctrinated in extremist politics to pose a danger, says Angela LaBelle, chief of staff at the New Jersey Office of Counter-Terrorism. "Do we worry about kids and bombs? Yes," she says. "All you have to do is look at Columbine."

Chris doesn't follow the news. He didn't know about the July 7 London bombings until a week after they happened. He found out when was watching the British Open golf tournament on TV and there was a moment of silence for the 52 people who died. The worst damage Chris says he's done was a junker car he obliterated with a couple of strategically placed pipe bombs. Then there was the crater he blew with homemade TNT behind second base on a ball field. And of course, there's the tree he killed with an acetone peroxide blast. But he says he learned a lesson from the London bombings.

"I shouldn't buy any more acetone," Chris says. "After what happened in London, if they see some hoodlum buying acetone, it might raise a red flag. I'll stick to gasoline."