

Assessing Threat in Written Communications, Social Media, and Creative Writing

Overview: Most of those who plan violent attacks communicate their intentions before the attacks via social media and written communication, either through unintentional “leakage” or intentionally through “legacy tokens” used to explain their motivations. Most attackers share this information prior to the attack as a fantasy rehearsal to gauge the reaction and level of the attention that will come to them after the actual attack.

Key Points:

1. Written communication and social media posts provide insight into an attacker’s motive for the attack. Attending to these materials can aid in prevention.
2. The most effective way to assess threatening, concerning or dangerous writing is the use a structured process to determine the risk of violence based on models grounded in research and risk factors informed by case studies.
3. A good threat assessment should review the writing and social media posts to determine the presence of risk factors. These factors include:
 - a. **Fixation and Focus:** Imagine a camera narrowing from a broad group (i.e., all women) to a specific group (i.e., sorority members) or person (i.e., the president of the local chapter). When the target is specifically named, repeated, objectified, emphasized (as with all CAPS) and described in graphic language, the risk is increased.
 - b. **Hierarchical Thematic Content:** Here the author or protagonist sees themselves better, more powerful and more entitled than everyone else. They use disempowering, militaristic, language to make themselves a glorified avenger -- a corrector of real or perceived wrongs. They often use paranoid language and reference past attacks.
 - c. **Action and Time Imperative:** The writing implies or states an impending time and location for the attack. They describe the details such as what weapons will be used, what obstacles need to be overcome (e.g., metal detectors, security) and often include a “do this or else” conditional ultimatum.
 - d. **Preattack Planning:** Writing that includes a discussion of how to acquire weapons, research into the details about the target, or descriptions of what they will wear (or costume) during the attack is of increased risk. There is often a rehearsal quality to preattack planning where the attacker relishes the idea of planning for the attack.
 - e. **Injustice Collecting:** The injustice collector perseverates on past wrongs and often the threat is described to be about creating justice. This individual holds on to past slights, many going as far back as childhood, and sees the world from this singled-out viewpoint, often having poor coping skills to deal with personal frustrations. These injustices often are centered on work, academic progress, or unfulfilled romantic desires. They often narrow their fixation and focus onto an individual and express a sense of hopelessness and desperation at their predicament.

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From the Article:

- “Leakage containing details of an impending attack could be unintentional or part of a “legacy token” used by the attacker to explain his motives and provide a rationale for his actions.” (p.78)
- “When violent writing or social media content is discovered or shared hinting to a potential attack, it should be explored and analyzed.” (p.78)
- “No set of risk factors or list of concerning behaviors can predict a future violent event. Any violence risk assessment involves static and dynamic risk factors, contextual and environmental elements, and mitigating factors.” (p. 78)
- “...context becomes important to ascertain. Writing and social media posts should be viewed against the backdrop of a host of additional risk factors, including mental stability, environmental stressors, hardened and in- flexible thoughts, existing coping mechanisms and supports, and the overall relationship between the individual and society.” (p. 79)
- “The writing or social media content should be assessed to see if the writer or protagonist is described as an all- powerful figure or someone who is smart, knowledgeable, and able to avenge and punish those who have wronged him.” (p. 81).
- “...most direct communicated threats do not lead to violence, it is important to explore the contextual risk factors related to the specific case at hand.” (p. 79)
- “Fixations are strongly held beliefs and obsessions about a certain group being responsible for the pain or suffering that an individual is experiencing. Focus is a further narrowing that occurs when an individual with a particular fixation begins to zero in on an individual, system, or location.” (p. 80)
- “Many who move forward with violent attacks write and plan in detail before these attacks. Sometimes, this preattack planning is boastful and can be described as a “howling” behavior designed to intimidate others toward compliance. Other times, the preattack planning is unintentionally leaked before the attack and discovered by a third party.” (p.83)
- “Has the writer offered evidence of studying the details of a particular location for the attack? This could include obtaining the schematics of a building or studying police response times, security camera placement, or building lock-down procedures. Has the potential attacker discussed obtaining certain tools or items needed to overcome potential obstacles, such as tape, spray paint, or chains to bar doors?” (p.84)