

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

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Abstract

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. These should be understood as part of their fantasy rehearsals in the aftermath of an attack. Additionally, searching for and attending to such messages provides an opportunity to intervene and thwart potential attacks. This article provides a framework for reviewing and understanding these messages and assessing them for potential lethality and dangerousness.

Introduction

THERE ARE NUMEROUS EXAMPLES of predatory violence and targeted attacks that were preceded by social media or written communication hinting to the attacks. This “leakage” provides clinicians, law enforcement officers, and campus administrators with an opportunity to intervene before an attacker’s moment of commitment.

Writing and video messages are often part of an attacker’s media package. 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. When violent writing or social media content is discovered or shared hinting to a potential attack, it should be explored and analyzed. This is one of the central recommendations in a 2008 report to the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education by O’Neill, Fox, Depue, and Englander: “Writings, drawings, and other forms of individual expression reflecting violent fantasy and causing a faculty member to be fearful or concerned about safety should be evaluated contextually for any potential threat” (pp. 32–33).

There are limitations to these examinations through risk and threat assessment processes, namely, their inability to be accurately predictive. Even so, multiple agencies (e.g., the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Secret Service, Department of Education, Post Office, ASIS International, the Society for Human Resource Management, and ASME-ITI) have stressed the importance of attending to risk factors as the first step to determining and preventing a targeted attack. Several prominent experts on campus violence and workplace threat assessment have also recommended key con-

siderations that are salient when assessing risk and threat (Meloy 2000; Turner and Gelles 2003; Deisinger et al. 2008; Meloy et al. 2011).

The risk factors in this article are offered as a starting place to review a potential threat from social media postings, e-mails, letters, or creative writing projects. Any violence risk assessment should take place after the assessor has reviewed incident reports, available documents related to conduct in the educational setting and in the immediate community, and any other information available in the context of the writing sample.

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. Violent writings, particularly those involving a direct threat, should be explored and assessed for their level of potential violence. Threat triage, a text analysis company, uses a set of risk factors created by S. Smith (2007) to review threatening written communications. Smith et al. (2014) provided a summary of these risk factors in Table 1.

Although there has been some research to develop prediction models based on writing samples, no current tool or computer model accurately predicts future violence based on a writing sample or social medial post, and no tool is ever a substitute for professional expertise. Therefore, the use of structured professional judgment (Van Brunt 2015a; Hart and Logan 2011) in combination with documentation and consultation with trusted colleagues is the current best practice.

Increasingly, staff at colleges, universities, and high schools are being asked to assess potentially dangerous writing received

TABLE 1. THREAT TRIAGE RISK FACTORS AND THEIR DEFINITIONS

Conceptual complexity:	A scalar measure; the higher the score for conceptual complexity, the more likely it is that targeted violence or approach occurs.
Paranoia:	A scalar measure; the higher the score for paranoia, the less likely it is that the targeted violence or action occurs.
Internally coherent:	The scenario must make sense to us. There cannot be big contradictions. The scenario should be a nice, simple, straightforward story. Don't create a scenario based on a formulation that leaves the reader asking, "If this is the plot, then how did that happen?"
Accepted:	Would other clinicians and referral sources that know about the case accept this scenario as one that makes sense? Would they see it as a good story?
Reliable:	Is the scenario accurate and valid? Would others come up with a similar scenario, or is the story something drawn from left field? If the scenario is tested out, would it produce results?
Identification of the victim:	A dyadic indicator; if the victim's identity is named or implied, targeted violence or approach is less likely to occur (a change in direction from the model of Smith 2007).
Mention of love, marriage, or romance:	A dyadic indicator; if the messages mention love, marriage, or romance, targeted violence or approach is more likely.
Use of polite language:	A dyadic indicator; if any polite language is used in the message, targeted violence or approach is somewhat less likely (a change in direction from Smith's model).
Specification of harm to be inflicted on the victim:	A dyadic indicator; if any long list of violent actions or any of a diverse set of weapons is specifically mentioned, targeted violence or approach is more likely (a change in direction from Smith's model).
Whether the threatener has contacted the victim before:	A dyadic indicator; if the threatener has contacted the target two or more times, targeted violence or approach is more likely.

A scalar measure increases in consistent intervals. A dyadic indicator is either present or not.

from students through e-mails, letters, and creative writing assignments. A challenge for those assessing the writing or social media posts is separating true threat from disturbing content, and sorting out the difference between creative expression and fantasy rehearsal before an attack. Knowledge of risk factors can act like a hammer in the hands of the inexperienced in threat assessment in the same way that a hammer may be used by a toddler. Everything is seen as a threat; everything is seen as nail.

To this end, 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 inflexible thoughts, existing coping mechanisms and supports, and the overall relationship between the individual and society. To further understand the difference between making a threat and being a threat, it is helpful to delve into the research.

Calhoun and Weston (2009) wrote a seminal book on threat assessment called *Threat Assessment and Management Strategies: Identifying the Howlers and Hunters*. They describe the problem of assessing threats that may be written down, posted on social media, or shouted in an office setting this way: "Threat management involves managing two very different types of individuals. One group consists of hunters. They truly intend to use lethal violence to aggrieve some perceived injustice. Hunters develop a reason for committing violence, come up with the idea to do so, research and plan their attack, prepare for it, then breach their target's security and actually attack. Whatever their reasons, those who intend to act violently go through the process of intended violence" (p. 7).

Threats take on various qualities and definitions in the threat assessment literature. Direct threats are expressed in nonconditional language and leave very little to the imagination. An example might be, "I am going to come back to work and shoot my supervisor in the head." Indirect and veiled threats often contain if/then language and options, such as, "If things don't change around here, I'm

going to take matters into my own hands and change them for you."

Although there is evidence that 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. Calhoun and Weston (2009) summed it up this way: "Writing letters is easy; shooting someone or setting him on fire presents a considerably more difficult challenge" (p. 29).

It is challenging to determine whether a violent or threatening behavior (arguably, even "developmentally" appropriate in some instances) is simply a bad decision on the part of an individual, or if the threat or violence is the proverbial "tip of the iceberg" exposing deeper trauma, psychosis, or psychopathic tendencies that portends a more dangerous event to occur in the future. In most extreme events of campus violence, it is the behavior of the student, and not a directly communicated threat of violence, that provides a clue. Scalora et al. (2010) wrote: "Unlike disruptive and other forms of aggressive behavior, violent or directly communicated threat always requires immediate investigation and evaluation... While most communicated direct threats do not end in violence, this can only be determined after directly questioning and assessing the student in question" (p. 5).

If this feels contradictory or confusing, then you have an accurate understanding of the challenges facing those who assess threat in social media and written works, or expressed verbally. How can we differentiate hunters from howlers? Does the writing or the posting of the threat partially fulfill the need to carry out the threat? How do we assess the sheer volume of concerning posts and stories created by individuals? How does free speech enter into this concern?

The following list of risk factors and corresponding cases offers counselors, psychologists, law enforcement personnel, and student affairs professionals some additional tools for their on-gong work assessing threat in written communication, social media posts, and creative writing assignments in K-12 and college settings.

Understanding Fixation and Focus

Fixation and focus can best be described as an individual identifying a specific target. This is a target in real life, who is identified in the writing sample or social media post. Turner and Gelles (2003) suggest that an individual with a fixation and focus to his threats presents a higher risk than those who lack these traits.

Fixations are strongly held beliefs and obsessions about a certain group being responsible for the pain or suffering that an individual is experiencing. Fixation relates to the degree of blame and how it is attributed. A group of individuals is often stereotyped in a grandiose or sweeping manner. *Focus* is a further narrowing that occurs when an individual with a particular fixation begins to zero in on an individual, system, or location.

Naming of target

One aspect of fixation and focus is determining if the target is identified clearly in the writing sample. This may be a person (“e.g., I’m going to hunt down that Mrs. Castor and make her pay for what she did to me”), a place (e.g., “The mosque on campus is a symbol of everything that is wrong with this country. Things will be better when it is destroyed”), or a system (e.g., “The conduct office thinks it can get away with anything, I’ll show them how very wrong they are”).

For example, Robert Flores, a Gulf War veteran, came into the nursing school and killed a nursing professor in her office before finding two other professors and executing them in front of a class as they were administering an examination (New York Times 2002). He bragged to classmates that he received a concealed weapons permit and noted that he had failed a class in nursing and had to retake it. A year and half before the attack, he threatened to “end it all” and to “put something under the college.”

After the attack, he wrote a letter entitled, “From the Dead,” explaining his motives and targets. He wrote, “I guess what it is about is that it is a reckoning. A settling of accounts. The University is filled with too many people who are filled with hubris. They feel untouchable. Students are not given respect nor regard. It is unfortunate but the only force that seems to get any attention from the University is economic force ... One instructor asked why I didn’t go to the health center [to get help with his depression]. I replied that it cost money and I would get kicked out of the program if I was candid” (Van Brunt 2012, p. 4).

Repetition of the target

When assessing fixation or focus, it is helpful to identify if the target is mentioned more than once. Is the target identified and then repeated multiple times for emphasis? Are there multiple targets mentioned? Is there an organization to the plan that narrows the target to a single person, group, place, or system? Or is there a disorganization that spreads across multiple targets and systems? Individuals with disorganized thoughts often do not pose the same level of risk as those with organized thoughts.

An example of this is found with Kimveer Singh Gill, the shooter at Dawson College who killed 1 and injured 19 others on Sept. 13, 2006. He wrote extensively online on

www.vampirefreaks.com concerning his avatar killing others: “The disgusting human creatures scream in panic and run in all directions, taking with them the lies and deceptions. The Death Knight gazes at the humans with an empty stare, as they knock each other down in a mad dash to safety. He wishes to slaughter them as they flee” (Van Brunt 2012, p. 253). This writing is a prophetic account of the actual events that unfolded at Dawson College.

Objectification of target

Fixation and focus begins with an objectification of the target. It can be helpful to assess if there language that indicates a negative view or dehumanization of the target. This language may be hostile, insulting, or diminishing. The language may additionally be misogynistic or focused on separating the author from empathizing or understanding the motives or thoughts of the target. An example might be, “That bitch Carol who runs parking and transportation thinks she is above everyone else. Like her shit doesn’t stink. I’ll show that whore.”

Pekka-Eric Auvinen entered Jokela High School in November of 2007 and killed eight and injured two others before committing suicide. Before the attack, he wrote in his manifesto, “I have had enough. I don’t want to be part of this fucked up society. Like some other wise people have said in the past, [the] human race is not worth fighting for or saving ... only worth killing ... I am ready to die for a cause I know is right, just and true even if I would lose or the battle would be only remembered as evil ... I will rather fight and die than live a long and unhappy life” (Van Brunt 2012, p. 25).

Emphasis of target

During the course of the violence risk assessment, the examiner should ascertain if the writer uses capital letters, quotes, color changes, graphics, parenthetical inserts, or emoji to emphasize the target. This becomes more concerning if related to a theme of retaliation, blaming others, or wounded self-image (e.g., “My life is over”). An example would be, “I have a big problem with the so-called ‘Chief’ Baily, who thinks he runs the kingdom with some kind of iron-fist, but his fist is really nothing but a fist of clay. BAILY will pay, you can be sure of that. His days are numbered ☹️☹️☹️.”

Eric Harris demonstrates this in his writings before the Columbine attack. An example is given here: “You all better fucking hide in your houses because I’m comin [sic] for EVERYONE soon, and I WILL be armed to the fuckin [sic] teeth and I WILL shoot to kill and I WILL fuckin [sic] KILL EVERYTHING!” (Langman 2014d, p. 2).

Graphic language

The graphic nature of the writing related to the target gives can provide insight into the level of perseveration the writer has toward his objective. Does the writer describe what he wants to do to the target in a graphic or detailed manner? Is there a description of torture and killing described in a fantasy or wistful manner?

Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold (Gibbs and Roche 1999) killed 13 and injured 21 people during their rampage attack at Columbine High School on April 22, 1999. Before the

attack, Eric was callous and sadistic. He fantasized about raping girls he knew and also fantasized about mutilating people: "I want to tear a throat out with my own teeth like a pop can. I want to gut someone with my hand, to tear a head off and rip out the heart and lungs from the neck, to stab someone in the gut, shove it up to their heart, and yank the fucking blade out of their rib cage! ... the lovely sounds of bones cracking and flesh ripping, ahhh ... so much to do and so little chances."

Hierarchical Thematic Content

This factor is based on the concept of the writer or protagonist in the story being identified in the writing sample as superior or in an avenging or punishing role. This can occur through the antihero of the story or writer being portrayed as all-powerful and handing down judgment for past wrongs, or the proletariat or targets in the story being portrayed as being weak, stupid, or naïve.

Distancing oneself from a target is a common technique used to avoid any lasting emotional connection that might be a distraction from completing the mission at hand. This technique is used by the U.S. military and law enforcement to train soldiers and officers. When shooting, they are taught to avoid seeing the target as a person, but rather to focus on center mass torso area. Grossman (1996) discussed the phenomena related to this training in his book *On Killing*. He argued that although soldiers are loathe to kill, this aversion has been overridden through sophisticated training methods.

Disempowering language

The writer may use examples to highlight the separation between himself and the target. This may include the person, place, or system being targeted described as a sheep, lemming, cattle, or retarded. In addition, the target might be described as a stupid person or group, unaware of their surroundings or in need of punishment. An example would be a student who writes on social media, "All of those students will find their end, like so many bits of trash floating in the ocean waiting for the tide to sweep them deep under the sea."

Seung-Hui Cho's attack at Virginia Tech in 2007 demonstrates disempowering speech in the video he sent to *NBC News*. He said: "You had everything you wanted. Your Mercedes wasn't enough, you brats. Your golden necklaces weren't enough, you snobs. Your trust fund wasn't enough. Your Vodka and Cognac weren't enough. All your debaucheries weren't enough. Those weren't enough to fulfill your hedonistic needs. You had everything ..." (Johnson 2007, p. 1).

Glorified avenger

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. The author may use a term such as "avenger" or "punisher" to convey a perceived responsibility and role to dole out judgment and make things right. An example would be, "You may think you are safe, but there will come

a time when things are made right. Vengeance will sweep down on the ignorant. Karma is a bitch." There may also be a tendency to use imagery of a gun or other weapon to enhance the attacker's gender status to portray himself as all-powerful or superior.

Kimveer Singh Gill, the shooter from the Sept. 13, 2006, tragedy at Dawson College, wrote for his profile on the website www.vampirefreaks.com (Doug 2006): "His name is Trench. You will come to know him as the Angel of Death ... He is not a people person. He has met a handful of people in his life who are decent. But he finds the vast majority to be worthless, no good, conniving, betraying, lying, deceptive, mother-fuckers. Work sucks ... school sucks ... life sucks ... what else can I say. Metal and Goth kick ass. Life is like a video game, you gotta [sic] die sometime."

Reality crossover

Creative fiction pieces present a challenge in determining if there is a crossover between fiction and reality. Do names sound the same, or are there other identifying factors that give away the author's attempt at using metaphors? If the writing sample is an e-mail or letter, does the writer mention an actual person, place, or system that is being targeted? Additionally, does the writer reference an ideology or historical figure, such as Hitler/Nazis or previous mass murderer as a role model or someone to emulate or copy?

T.J. Lane shot several students at Chardon High School on Feb. 27, 2012. Before the attack, he had been involved in several fights and posted a lengthy rant, which follows below, to his Facebook page on Dec. 30, 2011:

In a time long since, a time of repent, The Renaissance. In a quaint lonely town, sits a man with a frown. No job. No family. No crown. His luck had run out. Lost and alone. The streets were his home. His thoughts would solely consist of "why do we exist?" His only company to confide in was the vermin in the street. He longed for only one thing, the world to bow at his feet. They too should feel his secret fear. The dismal drear. His pain had made him sincere. He was better than the rest, all those ones he detests, within their castles, so vain. Selfish and conceited. They couldn't care less about the peasants they mistreated. They were in their own world, it was a joyous one too. That castle, she stood just to do all she could to keep the peasants at bay, not the enemy away. They had no enemies in their filthy orgy. And in her, the castles every story, was just another chamber of Lucifer's Laboratory. The world is a sandbox for all the wretched sinners. They simply create what they want and make themselves the winners. But the true winner, he has nothing at all. Enduring the pain of waiting for that castle to fall. Through his good deeds, the rats and the fleas. He will have for what he pleads, through the eradication of disease. So, to the castle he proceeds, like an ominous breeze through the trees. "Stay back!" The Guards screamed as they were thrown to their knees. "Oh God, have mercy, please!" The castle, she gasped and then so imprisoned her breath, to the shallow confines of her fragile chest. I'm on the lamb but I ain't no sheep. I am Death. And you have always been the sod. So repulsive and so odd. You

never even deserved the presence of God, and yet, I am here. Around your cradle I plod. Came on foot, without shod. How improper, how rude. However, they shall not mind the mud on my feet if there is blood on your sheet. Now! Feel death, not just mocking you. Not just stalking you but inside of you. Wriggle and writhe. Feel smaller beneath my might. Seizure in the Pestilence that is my scythe. Die, all of you. (GlobalGrind 2012, p. 1)

Militaristic language

Does the writer use militaristic language related to tactical or strategic attacks on a target? Are there phrases such as “advancing on the courtyard,” or is very specific timing included as part of an overall attack plan? Is there mention of particular weapons, tactical gear, black cloaks, or jump-suits? Meloy et al. (2011) referred to this as identification warning behavior, or any behavior that indicates a psychological desire to be a “pseudo-commando” (Dietz 1986; Knoll 2010), have a “warrior mentality” (Hempel et al. 1999), closely associate with weapons or other military or law enforcement paraphernalia, identify with previous attackers or assassins, or identify as an agent to advance a particular cause or belief system (p. 265).

Amy Bishop, the professor who shot six and killed three others during her 2010 attack in Huntsville, Alabama (Smith 2010), wrote a novel called *Amazon Fever*, whose protagonist, Olivia, is a professor worried about being denied tenure while fighting against a worldwide pandemic. The plot parallels Bishop’s life, as she writes about Olivia’s depression and her fear of losing her faculty position at a university.

Another of Bishop’s unpublished books, *Easter in Boston*, describes a protagonist (Beth) in this way: “The empty clip slid into the 9 mm easily. Beth sat on her bed, the gun and its paraphernalia, strewn about, while she worked on it ... [She] sat back down with the dictionary. She mulled over words like love, loneliness, hopelessness, despair. She looked at words like suicide and murder” (Van Brunt 2012, p. 42).

Paranoid content

One way to assess if there is separation between the attacker and the target is to see if the story structure or social media post portrays a sense of paranoia or worry beyond what would be considered normal. Does the writer talk about being plotted against, being the victim of a conspiracy, or feeling that the world is working actively against him? This may also include grandiose themes focused on superiority, references to hearing voices, and a tangled syntax or misuse of language. An example would be, “All of you at the college think you are so smart, having your parties and private conversations about me. There will come a day when things will be equalized. There will be a payback.”

Jared Loughner posted an odd rant on YouTube before carrying out his attack in Tucson, Arizona (Roy 2011). “I know who’s listening: Government Officials, and the People. Nearly all the people, who don’t know this accurate information of a new currency, aren’t aware of mind control and brainwash methods. If I have my civil rights, then this message wouldn’t have happen [sic]” (Gibson 2007, p. 2).

Action and Time Imperative

Does the writing or social media post convey a sense of impending movement toward action? This may be communicated by mentioning a specific time, location, or event, such as a graduation, academic admission decision, or results of a conduct meeting.

The action and time imperative relates to the impending nature of a potential attack. The action imperative, according to Turner and Gelles (2003), refers to the need on the part of the person to take personal action to resolve the situation. The person has determined that all other avenues (e.g., administrative, legal, and criminal) are not going to provide a satisfactory resolution (p. 97). The time imperative refers to a specific period when the attack itself will occur.

Location of the attack

The writing or post should be assessed to determine if the location of a potential attack site is mentioned in detail. Is the site mapped out or highlighted by areas where certain people will be? If assessing a fiction story, is the attack location alluded to through the story’s details. For instance, does the imposing castle with a moat bear significant resemblance to the student union?

Anders Breivik set off a bomb, killing eight people in Oslo, Norway, before continuing onto Utøya and gunning down 69 youths at a labor party camp in July 2011. He claimed that these events were marketing for his 1,500-page manifesto outlining an impending war against the Muslims. During his trial, he shared some thoughts about his selection of targets for the attack. “Giving evidence on the fourth day of his trial, the 33-year-old said he would have preferred to carry out three bomb attacks that target Utøya, where the Norwegian Labour Party was holding its annual youth summer camp on 22 July last year. In the end, he went on the rampage on the island after planting one bomb in Oslo’s government district, killing eight people” (Pidd 2012, p. 1). Breivik detailed the location of his plans for his attack and the steps he outlined to carry it out successfully in his manifesto.

Time of the attack

At the heart of the action and time imperative is identifying the tendency toward a specific time given for the attack (Turner and Gelles 2003). Is there is a specific information mentioned given that offers insight into when an attack might likely occur? This can be specific, such as, “I’m coming for you all at 2 p.m. on Tuesday,” or more vague, like, “If this isn’t resolved by next spring, you won’t have a very happy summer.”

Brian Evans’s plans to attack his school in Puyallup, Washington, on April of 2006 were thwarted when he sent an instant message to a friend about a pending school attack the next day. The message said he wanted to “to finally go out in a blaze of hatred and fury” (Van Brunt 2012, p. 24).

Another example of this comes from Elliot Rodger’s YouTube retribution video about the Isla Vista massacre. In the video, he made reference to the time and his rationale, and stated, “Well, this is my last video, it has all had to come to this. Tomorrow is the day of retribution, the day in which I will have my revenge against humanity, against all

of you. For the last eight years of my life, ever since I hit puberty, I've been forced to endure an existence of loneliness, rejection and unfulfilled desires all because girls have never been attracted to me. Girls gave their affection, and sex and love to other men but never to me" (Langman 2014c, p. 1).

Weapons and materials to be used

Are specific weapons or materials mentioned in the writing or in the social media post that will be used in the attack? Does the individual discuss knowledge of specific weapons or bomb-making skills needed prior to the attack? Is the individual posing with the weapons or brandishing them on social media?

Prior to this attack in Oslo, Norway, Brevick spent a massive amount of time and energy acquiring the weapons he needed to carry out the attack and documented this process through his manifesto/journal. He wrote,

I have now sent an application for a Ruger Mini 14 semi-automatic rifle (5.56). It is the most 'army like' rifle allowed in Norway, although it is considered a 'poor man's' AR-15. I envy our European American brothers as the gun laws in Europe sucks ass in comparison. However, the EUSSR borders to Turkey and the Middle East so acquiring illegal arms isn't exactly rocket science providing you are motivated enough. In any case; I would rather have preferred a Ruger Mini 30, but I already own a 7.62 bolt rifle and it is likely that the police wouldn't grant me a similar caliber. On the application form I stated: 'hunting deer.' It would have been tempting to just write the truth; 'executing category A and B cultural Marxists/multiculturalist traitors' just to see their reaction. (Brevick 2011, p. 1,423)

Overcoming obstacles

Does the writing sample include examples of obstacles that must be first overcome in order to carry out an attack? This might include acquiring a weapon or having a job to earn the money needed to buy a plane ticket to come back to the school. The writer may discuss obstacles in the past that have thwarted an attack but that will no longer stand in the way. An example might be, "You think you can stop me from communicating, but now I will send your communication far and wide to the board of trustees, your boss, and the college president."

Brevick also wrote about his difficult obtaining his weapons and his plans in his manifesto. "Acquiring a pistol, legally, is more tricky. I have been a member of Oslo Pistol Club for a few years but it is required that you train regularly in order to be eligible. I will have to train more often this winter and ensure I build up a solid track record, which in turn should enable me to get a permit" (Brevick 2011, p. 1423).

More recently, James Holmes's notebook was released, providing some insight into the mind of the 2012 Aurora movie theater killer. Its contents can be reviewed in full at https://schoolshooters.info/sites/default/files/James_Holmes_notebook.pdf. In it, he wrote about the various locations he was thinking of attacking, including an airport and movie

theater. He carefully weighs the pros and cons, choosing the movie theater based on the fewer number of obstacles it posed (p. 48).

Conditional ultimatum

Is there an ultimatum attached to the time and the location of the attack that contains a "do this or else" quality? Does the writer demand compliance in order to stave off a potential attack? An example might be, "Change my grade on this paper or else there will be hell to pay," or "You have until next week to take the hold off my account and refund my tuition."

The presence of a conditional ultimatum implies that the person making the threat has given specific thought to carrying out the attack if the target does comply. Although there may be a reasonable argument that the presence of this kind of "out" for the target to avoid violent action may indicate a lack of willingness to carry out violence on the part of the threatener, the conditional ultimatum is included here as it gives evidence that the person making the threat has considered what kind of action might be successful in motivating the target to comply. This level of specificity and thought around the potential attack creates an increased level of concern.

In 2010, David Stebbins sent a threatening e-mail to University of Arkansas staff members. Beyond the threatening content, this e-mail, quoted below, offers a clear example of a conditional ultimatum. His threats caused grave concern on campus, though no attack took place.

So, listen up, you fucking retard, you fucking inbred, cocksucking [sic] piece of shit. I'm not asking you, and I sure as hell am not asking you kindly: You have sixteen business hours—you have until 5PM this Tuesday evening—to do the following:

1. Override the student accounts office (that is why I am talking to you, because, if anyone has the authority to do that, it's you).
2. Remove my suspension. Make it so that, officially, I was never kicked out against my will in the first place; I withdrew on my own.
3. Allow me to re-admit myself to the University of Arkansas on the spot, no applications, no fucking interviews, no jack shit.
4. Send me an email telling me that the above three have been accomplished.

All of them must be completed by Tuesday, June 15, 2010 at 5:00 PM CT. If they are not, I will sue you in your individual capacity and collect \$50,000 in punitive damages from you.

Thank you, and go to hell.

Sincerely, David Stebbins Harrison (Pavela 2013, p. 8)

Preattack Planning

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 un-intentionally leaked before the attack and discovered by a third party.

On the evening of June 17, 2015, a shooting took place at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in downtown Charleston, South Carolina. The shooter, Christopher Roof, posted a manifesto he wrote before the attack describing some of his preattack planning. He wrote, "I have no choice. I am not in the position to, alone, go into the ghetto and fight. I chose Charleston because it is most historic city in my state, and at one time had the highest ratio of blacks to Whites in the country. We have no skinheads, no real KKK, no one doing anything but talking on the Internet. Well someone has to have the bravery to take it to the real world, and I guess that has to be me" (Bertein et al. 2015, p. 1).

Discussion and acquisition of weapons

Is there a brandishing of weapons on social media, or does the writing sample include a specific discussion of what weapons might be acquired or used in an attack? If assessing a fiction piece, is there a reality crossover with the weapons in the fiction pointing to real-world planning? An example might be, "The cloaked figure waited patiently outside of the school's auditorium with his long, black rifle, the scope's optics covered to prevent glints of sunlight from giving away his position."

To assist researchers and law enforcement organizations, Dr. Langman has engaged in a herculean effort to collect the writings and original source documents from school shooting attacks on his website <https://schoolshooters.info/>. He shares the following from Eric Harris's journal, written a few weeks before the June 1999 Columbine shooting, outlining the efforts the two went through to collect weapons and bombs before the attack.

Months have passed. It's the first Friday night in the final month. Much shit has happened. Vodka has a Tec 9, we test fired all of our babies, we have 6 time clocks ready, 39 crickets [small bombs] 24 pipe bombs, and the napalm is under construction. Right now I'm trying to get fucked and trying to finish off these time bombs. NBK came quick, why the fuck can't I get any? I mean, I'm nice and considerate and all that shit, but nooooo. I think I try too hard. But I kinda need to, considering NBK is closing in. The amount of dramatic irony and foreshadowing is fucking amazing. Everything I see and hear I incorporate into NBK somehow. Either bombs, clocks, guns, napalm, killing people, any and everything finds some tie to it. Feels like a goddamn movie sometimes. I wanna try to put some mines and trip bombs around this town too maybe. Get a few extra frags25 on the scoreboard. I hate you people for leaving me out of so many fun things. And no don't fucking say "well that's your fault" because it isn't, you people had my phone #, and I asked and all, but no. no no no don't let the weird looking Eric KID come along, ooh fucking nooo. (Langman 2014a, p. 11)

Evidence of researching or stalking the target

Does the writing provide evidence that the author has conducted detailed research about the potential target? This could be related to stalking the individual's social media, obtaining copies of the target's schedule, or learning per-

sonal information about person's family or home. An example might be, "I've watched you, attending your parties and having your fun at school while I'm made to suffer because of your decisions about my life."

In the Review of the Virginia Tech Review Panel (2007), the committee shares some of the practice behaviors Cho engaged in before his April 16 attack. "On March 31, Cho purchases additional ammunition magazines, ammunition, and a hunting knife from Wal-Mart and Dick's Sporting Goods. He buys chains from Home Depot. On April 14, an Asian male wearing a hooded garment is seen by a faculty member in Norris Hall. She later (after April 16) tells police that one of her students had told her the doors were chained. This may have been Cho practicing. Cho buys yet more ammunition" (p. 24).

Details concerning target

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 lockdown 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? Have concerning factors been posted on social media, such as the method and manner they would use to thwart a security system?

An example of this is from the thwarted Jared Cano attack in Tampa, Florida. Cano was expelled from Freedom High School in 2009 and planned an attack that was stopped after an anonymous tipster notified the police in August of 2011 (Teicher-Khadaroo 2011). Police found quantities of fuel, shrapnel, plastic tubing, and timing and fusing devices for making pipe bombs, along with marijuana and marijuana cultivation equipment. Cano recorded a 60-second video describing his plans for the attack on his cell phone. The text of this recording is as follows:

For those of you retards who don't know who I am, I'm the Freedom High School shooter in Tampa, Florida. Well I will be in a couple months. I thought I would run over my game plan with ya'll. The cafeteria at Freedom. My plan is to set a bomb here at point A, here at point B, point C and point D. Then I got to get to the side entrance of the school by 7:24. The bombs blow at 7:26. I'm going to come in and advance on the courtyard where there'll probably be at least sixty people. [I'll] come through the door then shoot everybody at the front desk. Mr. Costanzo's office is right here, I've got to kill him. Mrs. Carmody is here I've got to kill her. Mr. Pears is here, I've got to make sure he doesn't die, because I like him. There's nothing I can do about it, there's nothing anybody can do about it other than wait for it to unleash. If you don't like it just find a way to find people like me and just line us up and shoot us. (Pow 2012)

Fantasy rehearsal for an attack

Is there evidence of a fantasy rehearsal concerning a potential attack? Does the writer convey a sense of relishing what it will be like to carry out the attack, and how it will

feel to have revenge or to be known or understood by others? Is there a wistful or hopeful air to the individual's social media posts calling to a "brighter tomorrow" or the "end of the scourge?"

In their basement videotapes, Harris and Klebold from the Columbine massacre talked about their plans for the attack. There is excitement in their voices as they fantasize talk to each other a month before the attack. Klebold shared, "We're hoping. We're hoping. I hope we kill 250 of you. It will be the most nerve-racking 15 minutes of my life, after the bombs are set and we're waiting to charge through the school. Seconds will be like hours. I can't wait. I'll be shaking like a leaf" (Langman 2014b, p. 4).

Costuming description

In fiction writing, is there a discussion of elaborate, dark costuming worn by the antihero before or during the attack? This could include a black cloak, tactical gear, or drastic changes in appearance, such as shaving off or coloring his hair, or dressing like a villain in popular media. In e-mails or letters, are there descriptions of tactical clothing or a meaningful outfit that will be worn on the day of retribution? Is there mention of accessories, such as a personally named gun or weapon, or a particular bag or case to be carried to the attack?

From their article on costuming, Van Brunt and Lewis (2014) give an example,

On July 22, 2011, Anders Breivik detonated a bomb, killing eight young people, and then killed an additional 69 youths on Utøya Island in Norway. Breivik believed his attack was justified, and he wrote a 1,500-page manifesto about the evils of the Muslim population and how it should be eradicated from Norway. Prior to his attack, Breivik assembled an intricate military dress uniform complete with medals. Breivik acquired a Ruger mini-14 along with 10 30-round magazines and a rapid-fire trigger modification. He named this gun Gungnir, after the spear of Odin. In this case, we see the degree to which Breivik collected military-style weapons and clothing, going so far as to create a fictitious uniform for himself, emulating a modern-day Knights Templar. He named his weapon after the spear Odin hurled to begin the Æsir-Vanir War. (p. 9)

Injustice Collecting

The term "injustice collector" was coined by Mary Ellen O'Toole as a risk factor in the first prong of the threat assessment approach: the personality of the student.

In her 2012 book, *Dangerous Instincts* (2011), O'Toole describes this individual as "a person who feels 'wronged,' 'persecuted,' and 'destroyed,' blowing injustices way out of proportion, and never forgiving the person they felt has wronged them" (O'Toole and Bowman 2011, p. 186). Thus, the injustice collector keeps track of past wrongs and is often much more upset than what would typically be expected. 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.

Other researchers have made reference to this concept in the threat assessment literature. ASIS International and Society for Human Resource Management published "Workplace Violence Prevention and Intervention" (2011), a set of standards for security and human resource personnel to prevent or intervene in potentially dangerous scenarios. The concept is described as a "chronic, unsubstantiated complaints about persecution or injustice; a victim mindset" (p. 22).

Perseverating on past wrongs

Here, the writer gives evidence of being wronged by others. The writing conveys a sense that the author or protagonist believes that certain individuals have mistreated him through social interactions, business relationships, academic assessment, or administrative action. They see this in a hardened and inflexible manner, unwilling to accept attempts to have their feelings normalized or rationalized. The writer may also use techniques to amplify the message of threat, objectification, or insult through repetition, the use of ALL CAPS, or the selective use of punctuation and spacing to draw emphasis. An example of this might be, "The main issue of me being suspended was ALSO not looked into properly, and if people just use their GOD-DAMN brains to look at the bigger picture in life, you would have not caused what might happen in the future because of this."

In *Harm to Others* (2015a), this concept is explored as follows:

Amy Bishop shot three people dead and wounded another three on February 12, 2010, in Huntsville, Alabama; it was reported that she was upset because she had been denied tenure. Previously, she had assaulted another woman at the International House of Pancakes because she took the last booster seat for her child. She shouted, "I am DR. BISHOP!" and demanded the chair. It is likely that Amy Bishop suffered from additional mental health problems; she had a history of overreaction and irrational thought about how people should treat her and what she deserved. Throughout her story, there are reports of her expectations around tenure; her desires to be at a more prestigious school; and a general disappointment with her life and goals despite a job, relationships, and family that would have been the envy of others, particularly in a difficult economic climate. (Wallace 2011, p. 107)

Unrequited romantic entanglements

Here, the writer discusses past romantic relationships that end in frustrated outcomes, with the writer or protagonist alone and isolated. Often, the nature of the writing is focused on the author's or protagonist's Sisyphean efforts to achieve a relationship or love, and the resulting rejection and frustration that accompany those feelings. There may be social media posts describing the desire to get revenge or harm a past love.

Before Rodger's 2014 Isla Vista attack, he created a YouTube video and wrote a 141-page manifesto entitled, "My Twisted World," in which he expressed his romantic

frustrations (Speer 2014). He wrote, “All I ever wanted was to love women, and in turn to be loved by them back. Their behavior towards me has only earned my hatred, and rightfully so! I am the true victim in all of this. I am the good guy. Humanity struck at me first by condemning me to experience so much suffering. I didn’t ask for this. I didn’t want this. I didn’t start this war ... I wasn’t the one who struck first ... But I will finish it by striking back. I will punish everyone. And it will be beautiful. Finally, at long last, I can show the world my true worth” (Rodger 2014, p. 141).

Desperation and hopelessness/suicide ideation or attempt

This occurs when the story or e-mail has a quality of sadness and isolation, and a lack of positive outcomes or options for either the writer or the main character in the story. Here, we see a tendency on the author’s part to embrace the gloom and focus on a lack of options or choices. It is as if the author or main character is convincing himself that there is no better way to resolve the conflict or find a way out. There is a more specific concern if the writer mentions directly or indirectly a plan to commit suicide. This may be an idea or thought, or an actively described plan.

In May 1998, 15-year-old Kipland (“Kip”) Kinkel was suspended pending an expulsion hearing from Thurston High School for being in possession of a loaded, stolen handgun. He killed his parents to “spare” them the embarrassment before returning to school. He parked two blocks away from school and hid several weapons and 1,127 rounds of ammunition under his trench coat. He shot 2 while entering the school and then shot another 24 students in the cafeteria.

Kinkel wrote some journal entries before the killing spree that shed light on his romantic frustrations: “I don’t understand any fucking person on this earth. Some of you are so weak, mainly, that a four year old could push you down. I am strong, but my head just doesn’t work right. I know I should be happy with what I have, but I hate living ... I am evil. I want to kill and give pain without a cost. And there is no such thing. We kill him—we killed him a long time ago. Anyone that believes in God is a fucking sheep” (Van Brunt 2012, p. 12).

Amplification/narrowing

Is there language that amplifies and narrows the focus of anger and threat to a particular target? This could be accomplished through the use of CAPS, emoji, or color/highlighting. Is there an emphasis and organization of the threat onto a single individual, department, or group?

In early October 2015, the website 4chan revealed a post concerning an impending violent attack in the Philadelphia area. The threat referenced the fatal shooting at Umpqua Community College in Oregon at the hands of Chris Harper Mercer:

“On October 5, 2015, at 1:00 PM CT, a fellow robot will take up arms against a university near Philadelphia. His cries will be heard, his victims will cower in fear, and the strength of the Union will decay a little more” (Tanenbaum 2015, p. 1).

The first of our kind has struck fear into the hearts of America. His cries have been heard, even by the President. This is only the beginning. The Beta Rebellion has begun. Soon, more of our brothers will take up arms to become martyrs to this revelation. If you are in that area, you are encouraged to stay at home and watch the news as the chaos unfolds. His sacrifice will echo throughout the nation.

I plead to thee, brothers! We only have but one chance, one spark, for our revolution. The United States will soon condemn us to the status quo forever. United Nations. Don’t let our one chance at writing history slip away. Martyr yourself for the cause or support those who have the courage to do so. We will make the world a better place for betas everywhere. Hiro have mercy on us all. Lend your strength to fight this evil. (Van Brunt 2015a, p. 20)

Threats to create justice

Here, the writer offers an explanation of how ultimate justice, karma, or payback will be sought. Often, there is a narrative detailing how things will be “made right.” This often includes a veiled threat that could be read as either a threat of physical harm or a punishment related to the person who wronged the potential attacker (e.g., threat of job loss or otherwise “getting what is coming to them”). The injustice collector begins to develop fantasies about finally righting the wrongs to which he been subjected to over the years. These fantasies can involve writing, creation of social media posts, development of a website, creation of a manifesto, or increased conflict with others. The action is often the result of wrestling with insolvable problems.

On April 7, 2011, Wellington Menezes de Oliveira (Barnes 2011) shot 32 students in Rio De Janeiro, killing 12 before committing suicide. In a video explaining his attacks posted days before the shooting, he stated, “The struggle for which many brothers died in the past, and for which I will die, is not solely because of what is known as bullying. Our fight is against cruel people, cowards, who take advantage of the kindness, the weakness of people unable to defend themselves” (Barbassa 2011, p. 1).

Conclusions

Danish physicist Niels Bohr was famously quoted as saying, “Prediction is very difficult, especially about the future.” This sentiment captures the challenges faced by those involved in the work of violence and risk assessment. How do we attend to the sheer volume of threatening and concerning language, particularly given the proliferation of social media? How do we assess risk factors in a way that doesn’t result in so many false-positive reports that the true threats and risks become lost? What about those creative writing students who dream of becoming the next Stephen King or Quentin Tarantino? How do we separate imagination and creativity from true threats? How do free speech and the momentary flash of anger resulting in a threatening utterance factor into the discussion?

There are no easy answers to these questions. Part of the answer lies in the early detection and identification of potentially threatening or dangerous writing by those in the

community. Another part of the answer is using a structured process to assess the risk of violence based on models grounded in research and risk factors informed by case studies. The risk factors and scenarios provided in this article offer a starting place for those given the difficult task of assessing threat in written communications, social media, and creative writing papers.

Moving forward, it would be useful to focus on the structured professional judgment (SPJ) method (Hart and Logan 2011; Hart et al. 2011) to provide a framework to assess written threats and creative writing samples as part of an ongoing process, rather than giving a simple, singular yes-or-no answer when it comes to the risk of the individual moving forward with an attack. The SPJ process can be outlined in seven steps: gather information, determine the presence of risk factors, determine the relevance of risk factors, develop a good formulation of violence risk, develop scenarios of violence, develop a case management plan based on those scenarios, and develop conclusory opinions about violence risk.

The primacy of the person assessing the risk in the process cannot be overstated. Violence risk factors and research are supplemental to the analytical process orchestrated by the person conducting the assessment. A set of risk factors is essential to assessing written threat, yet these risk factors must be used in tandem with a process anchored in the SPJ process.

A first attempt at developing these risk factors into a quantified algorithm has been developed and presented at the National Behavioral Intervention Team Association Conference in late 2015. This new tool, the Violence Risk Assessment of the Written Word (VRAW²), is further explored in the 2015 *Journal of Campus Behavioral Intervention* (Van Brunt 2015b). Three case studies from recent social media threats are scored as examples of the VRAW² methodology.

Copies of the VRAW² and the article can be obtained by e-mailing the author at brian@nchem.org

Author Disclosure Statement

No competing financial interests exist.

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