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

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Original Articles

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

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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

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 lence risk assessment should take place after the assessor

media package. Leakage containing details of an impending community, and any other information available in the attack could be unintentional or part of a "legacy token" context of the writing sample. used by the attacker to explain his motives and provide a rationale for his actions. When violent writing or social predict a future violent event. Any violence risk assessment media content is discovered or shared hinting to a potential involves static and dynamic risk factors, contextual and enattack, it should be explored and analyzed. This is one of the vironmental elements, and mitigating factors. Violent writcentral recommendations in a 2008 report to the Massa- ings, particularly those involving a direct threat, should be chusetts Department of Higher Education by O'Neill, Fox,
Depue, and Englander: "Writings, drawings, and other
Threat triage, a text analysis company, uses a set of risk forms of individual expression reflecting violent fantasy and factors created by S. Smith (2007) to review threatening causing a faculty member to be fearful or concerned about written communications. Smith et al. (2014) provided safety should be evaluated contextually for any potential summary of these risk factors in Table 1.

first step to determining and preventing a targeted attack. practice. Several prominent experts on campus violence and work-

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 viohas reviewed incident reports, available documents related Writing and video messages are often part of an attacker's to conduct in the educational setting and in the immediate

No set of risk factors or list of concerning behaviors can

There are limitations to these examinations through risk diction models based on writing samples, no current tool or and threat assessment processes, namely, their inability to be computer model accurately predicts future violence based accurately predictive. Even so, multiple agencies (e.g., the on a writing sample or social medial post, and no tool is ever Federal Bureau of Investigation, Secret Service, Department a substitute for professional expertise. Therefore, the use of of Education, Post Office, ASIS International, the Society structured professional judgment (Van Brunt 2015a; Harr for Human Resource Management, and ASME-ITI) have and Logan 2011) in combination with documentation and stressed the importance of attending to risk factors as the consultation with trusted colleagues is the current bes

place threat assessment have also recommended key conare being asked to assess potentially dangerous writing received

Increasingly, staff at colleges, universities, and high school

The NCHERM Group, LLC, Malvern, Pennsylvania

Most of those who plan violent attacks communicate their intentions before the attacks via social media and written communication, either through unintentional "leakage" 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 of the attention that will come to them after the actual attack.



KEY POINTS



Written communication and social media posts provide insight into an attacker's motive for the attack.

Attending to these materials can aid in prevention and getting out in front of a potential attack.



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.



A good threat assessment should review the writing and social media posts to determine the presence of risk factors. These include fixation and focus, hierarchical thematic content, preattack planning, injustice collecting

ASSESS FOR THE FOLLOWING

FIXIATION AND FOCUS

Look for narrowing from a broad group (i.e., all women) to a specific group (i.e., sorority members.)

Attend to naming of the target that is repeated, objectified, emphasized (as with all CAPS) and described in graphic language.

HIERACHICAL THEMATIC CONTENT

Look for 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.

ACTON AND TIME IMPERATIVE

Look for details such as time and place of the attack, what weapons will be used, what obstacles need to be overcome (e.g., metal detectors, security) and a "do this or else" conditional ultimatum

PREATTACK PLANNING

Look for 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.

INJUSTICE COLLECTING

Look for perseveration on past wrongs and a desire to create justice. Attend to 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.

