Chapter 15

A Threat Assessment Model for Posts in The Online Sphere

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ABSTRACT

Since it has been suggested that social media offers an unprecedented view into the mindset of “persons of concern” with regards to mass shooters, this research study focuses on the comments about “school shootings” expressed on the social media and video sharing website YouTube. As a form of targeted violence that tends to be planned well in advance of the attack, there are opportunities to intervene and assess a school shooting threat before it transpires. Since previous studies have purported that the majority of school shooters had communicated their intention to carry out their attack in advance of it occurring—something which has become known by the term “leakage”—the authors have chosen to develop the foundation for a threat assessment model that is based upon the internet postings that relate to school shootings. The proposed model entitled “online threat assessment of school shooters” (OTASS) could be a tentative starting point for carrying out assessments of threats into online postings.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter seeks to develop the foundations for a threat assessment model based on internet postings related to “school shootings.” These types of incidents are mass shootings where the perpetrator(s) intends to kill as many people as possible in a short period of time (see Harding et al., 2002). A collaborative study by the Secret Service and Department of Education in the United States found that the majority of school shooters had shared their intention to carry out an attack with other students prior to the incident (Fein et al., 2002, p. 13). Communicating intent to cause harm beforehand to third parties — a term encompassing not only other people but different forms of communication such as letters, social media posts and voicemails — is known as “leakage.” This can inform “threat assessment” processes, where the likelihood of an attack transpiring is assessed using the context and nature of the threat, coupled with any other available evidence (Meloy & O’Toole, 2011).

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Since social media is said to offer an “often unparalleled view into the thoughts, feelings, plans and intentions of a person of concern” (Burton et al., 2017, p. 50), the research conducted by the authors centers on the writings expressed in the social media and video sharing site, YouTube. This became particularly relevant during the write-up of this chapter in early 2018, when the Stoneman Douglas High School occurred. In this particular incident, “leakage” by the shooter was left on YouTube prior to the attack (Goldman and Mazzei, 2018). The internet offers a virtual platform, allowing “fans” of school shooters to freely communicate, share ideas, strategize, and relive the massacres perpetrated by their “heroes.” The internet also allows these “fans” of school shooters to view first-hand the visual (videos) and threads of text messages posted online by the school shooters prior to them engaging in their acts of violence. This familiarity with how to effectively interact with advanced technology is indicative of just how much more sophisticated the communication methods of the perpetrators have become since the days of hand-written suicide notes and manifestos. The authors assessed a number of comment threads on YouTube for a selection of twenty of the most popular videos about four well-known school shootings. Of interest within the analyses is the language people use to refer to school shooters, particularly expressions of admiration.

“School shootings” are a particular type of mass violence, where the perpetrator(s) aim to shoot and kill as many people as possible in a short period of time. The “school” component extends to kindergarten, K-12 schooling, as well as further and higher educational institutes. Further information can be found about mass shooting trends more generally in Follman, Aronsen & Pan’s (2018) updated guide. From the wider population of school shootings, four case studies were chosen for this chapter based on the notoriety of the incidents and the perpetrators’ usage of videos and other materials to promote their “legacies,” portraying how they wish to be remembered after death: Columbine High School, Colorado (1999); Virginia Tech University, Virginia (2007); Sandy Hook Elementary School, Connecticut (2012); Isla Vista University, California (2014). The four case studies span the course of several decades and involve a mixture of K-12 schooling and higher education institutes. To begin with, the incident at Columbine High School took place in April 1999, where two students at the school planned to bomb the school with hand-made explosive devices. When the bombs failed to detonate, the students shot and killed twelve students and a teacher. It was discovered that the two perpetrators had compiled a “manifesto” explaining their motives for the attack in the form of blueprints, video recordings and journal entries. This was at a time when the Internet was still relatively new, so there was not much in the way of “online fandom” at this time. Despite this, the Columbine incident is said to have influenced twenty-one mass shootings, as well as numerous copycat plots (Follman, 2015).

The next case study was perpetrated by a current student at Virginia Tech University, resulting in thirty-two murders. This shooting took place in 2007, when the Internet was more commonly used and sites like YouTube had been created. Prior to the shooting, the perpetrator recorded a video manifesto and posted this to broadcast news station National Broadcasting Corporation, who made the decision to air this recording.

The third case study took place five years later in 2012 and was perpetrated by an adult at Sandy Hook Elementary School, who killed his mother, twenty children and six faculty members. Although no “manifesto” was left by this perpetrator, investigators did find journal entries, drawings and a spreadsheet compiling previous mass shooting incidents. Moreover, the shooter posted frequently on the “Shocked Beyond Belief” forum, particularly about topics relating to mass shootings, and was also a YouTube user. Prior to the shooting, the perpetrator became well known for being reclusive and spending much of his