

Stochastic Terrorism

Background and Discussion

*These opinions are my own and do not represent the opinion or position of the Naval Postgraduate School

Some Definitions

- Stochastic
- It describes a pattern that cannot be predicted precisely but can be analyzed statistically.
- The word *stochastic* means random...
- The idea that the more people who are influenced by an idea, the higher probability that something will happen.

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Author(s): Molly Amman and J. Reid Meloy

Source: Perspectives on Terrorism, October 2021, Vol. 15, No. 5 (October 2021), pp. 2-13

Published by: Terrorism Research Initiative

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/27073433>

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“Stochastic terrorism has been defined as the incitement of a violent act through public demonization of a group or individual. Stated another way, the term has been said to mean “acts of violence by random extremists, triggered by political demagoguery.”

It describes a pattern that cannot be predicted precisely but can be analyzed statistically. In other words, a specific act against the demonized person or group cannot be forecast, but the probability of an act occurring has increased due to the rhetoric of a public figure.”

“There is no formal, legal definition of stochastic terrorism in statutory or case law. Indeed, it is an academic, rather than legal, term.”

“Lone Wolf” - Yes and No

- Yes
- In that an individual inspired to act may do so on their own without any affiliation with a group or organization.
- We try to intervene through attempts at identification of the individual, pre-attack indicators, combatting the narrative, etc.
- We prosecute the actor.

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- No
 - In that the individual inciting or inspiring the act is the terrorist, though avoids prosecution and fall-out from an event.
 - Intervention at the source of the message or its delivery medium is... challenging.
 - Plausible deniability
 - ?

Fit the definition?

- ““Will no one rid me of this troublesome priest?” is a quote attributed to Henry II of England that preceded the death of [Thomas Becket](#), the Archbishop of Canterbury, in 1170.
- The king’s words were misinterpreted as an order, prompting four knights from Normandy to travel to Canterbury and murder Becket.
- The phrase implies that a leader’s desire may be taken as an order by his or her officials. It is frequently used in contemporary settings to convey the idea that a ruler’s wish might be interpreted as a command by his or her subordinates.”

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<https://englishhistory.net/middle-ages/will-no-one-rid-me-of-this-meddlesome-priest/>

“While the severity of the attack caused it to resonate so strongly, we are reminded that San Bernardino is not the first attack inspired by ISIL in the United States. In fact, there have been three attacks in the U.S. dating back to 2014, which were carried out by individuals inspired by ISIL.

It is clear that ISIL poses a threat to the United States through its ability to appeal to a vulnerable demographic predominately of young adults. As of last October, FBI Director Comey reported that his agency is pursuing over 900 active investigations against homegrown violent extremists, the majority of which are linked to ISIL.”

Some Components to Consider

- The Speaker
- The Message
- The Medium
- The Audience

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- The Speaker
- The Message
- The Medium
- The Audience
- Legitimacy?
- Legal?
- Social media, chat groups,
traditional media?
- Size? Attitudes?
Vulnerability?

Challenges

- “*contagion theory*” as it applies to the transmission and propagation of violent messaging that can be interpreted by different audiences as a directive, or guidance, or signaling that violence is acceptable
- “*strategic silence*” - or whether the public safety sector and media should withhold the details of political violence – is it in the public interest to know about the who/what/when of a violent act? Or is it better to limit information?
- “*strategic amplification*” – what messages, actions, speakers need to be amplified to decrease potential violence?

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- First Amendment
- Domestic Surveillance
- Political Divide
- Where’s the crime occurring?
- Is it truly “random”?

Implications for
Emergency
Management, Homeland
Security and Public
Safety writ Large?

PREPAREDNESS?

RESPONSIBILITY?

INTELLIGENCE?

PREVENTION?

APPREHENSION?

?

PROSECUTION?

AGENCY?

MESSAGING?

RESPONSE?

AUTHORITY?

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