Lone Actors: Challenges and Opportunities for Countering Violent Extremism

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Abstract. This paper explores some of the key challenges and opportunities concerning the prevention and control of lone actor terrorism. It is argued that lone actors do not operate in a social vacuum and that the interaction points between lone actors and their social environments can render lone actors both visible and vulnerable. This is explored through a particular focus on lone actors' use of, and engagement with, social media and the internet, which presents both challenges to and opportunities for the prevention and interdiction of lone actor terrorism.

Keywords. Lone actor, terrorism, counter-terrorism, social media, internet

Introduction

The phenomenon of terrorists acting alone is commonly referred to as "lone wolf" or "lone actor" terrorism, terms that are used to highlight the autonomous and unaffiliated nature of these attacks. In short, lone actors operate individually, do not belong to an organized terrorist group or network, and their modus operandi is conceived and directed by the individual without any direct outside command or hierarchy.[1] However, the terms "lone wolf" and "lone actor" can also be misleading because lone actors in the strict sense of the term – that is, those who act in complete isolation, without *any* contact with peers or outsiders – are very rare. Most of whom we might classify as lone actors have had at least some external contact, interaction, or influence. Indeed, in most cases there are at least some points of social interaction with the outside world, for example with regard to ideological formation. Moreover, we know that lone actors do not operate in a social or ideological vacuum.[2] The main idea that the term lone actor conveys, then, is that whereas in the past they communicated with several people, now they often only communicate with a few others, and sometimes only online.

Building on this idea, this paper explores some of the key counter-terrorism challenges and opportunities posed by lone actors. It seeks to highlight how the interaction points between lone actors and their social environments can render them visible and meaningful, but also vulnerable to detection and prosecution. This issue is examined through a particular focus on lone actors' use of, and engagement with, social media and the internet, which is seen to present both challenges to and opportunities for the prevention, interdiction, and prosecution of lone actor terrorism. The final part of the paper will focus specifically on the kinds of opportunities for

counter-terrorism that present themselves in this area, as well as their broader implications with regard to security and human rights considerations. The paper builds on nearly a decade of research by the author, first individually [3], and currently in close collaboration with Professor Mark S. Hamm at Indiana State University [4] through a U.S. National Institute of Justice Grant (Grant No.: 2012-ZA-BX-0001).

1. The counter-terrorism challenge

Lone actors present particular challenges to authorities for a number of reasons. Firstly, one could argue that the smaller the group, the harder it is to detect it. Lone actors appear to face fewer "trip wires" that could expose them before their strike, due in large part to their unaffiliated and relatively isolated nature. Secondly, they display a variety of backgrounds with a wide spectrum of ideologies and motivations, including highly idiosyncratic ones [5], which makes it difficult to predict from which environment they will stem. Thirdly, lone actors' self-tasking and "self-radicalizing" may be difficult to interdict, especially where it involves a potentially shorter radicalization period than is common for group-based terrorism.

A key political concern in this regard is that lone wolves have a critical advantage in avoiding detection before and after their attacks because most of them do not communicate with others regarding their intentions. As former US Department of Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano once noted, lone actor terrorist attacks are "the most challenging" from a law enforcement perspective, "because by definition they're not conspiring. They're not using the phones, the computer networks…they're not talking with others."[6] Sixteen months later, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation Director-General, David Irvine, pointed out that "the rampant use of the Internet" had resulted in "new and effective means for individuals to propagate and absorb unfettered ideas and information and to be radicalised – literally, in their lounge rooms."[7] Irvine's concern reflects a recurrent theme in public statements by law enforcement and security agencies: the opportunities new information and communication technologies afford to lone actors.

From a counter-terrorism perspective, all of this raises questions about the need to intervene earlier in the attack cycle than in the past, for example through the criminalization of preparatory acts to terrorism.[8] This question is particularly pertinent when considering that conventional strategies, such as following and disrupting terrorist financing may be less helpful as a strategy to prevent lone actor terrorism. For example, Irvine predicts that future terrorist attacks on Australian soil would be low-cost, locally financed, involve minimal training and a short planning cycle, and use weapons fabricated or sourced from readily available materials that were unlikely to arouse suspicion.[9] The vast majority of lone actor terrorist attacks have been self-funded and relatively inexpensive, with no major suspect transactions taking place, except perhaps the purchase of considerable quantities of fertilizer needed for the production of a major improvised explosive device (Anders Breivik's July 22, 2011, bombing of government buildings in Oslo, Norway, comes to mind here; this case is discussed in depth in Hans Brun's contribution to this volume).

While some of the above concerns are well-founded, the popular assumption that lone actors do not communicate with others needs to be revisited. In many cases, lone actors *are* doing precisely that. We can identify an intriguing paradox in this respect. While the lone actor may have certain advantages in avoiding detection by virtue of being unaffiliated and autonomous, without "reaching out" to and engaging with others the lone actor will often struggle to give meaning to their cause. Lone actors tend to

perceive their acts as symbolic strikes in an asymmetrical war against their enemies and to portray themselves as historical characters seeking to change the course of history. In their view, violence is the only way to defeat their enemies and take the blinders off their audiences. They feel that they have the moral authority to attack a morally corrupt enemy, often regardless of the collateral damage inflicted as long as the "greater good" is achieved. The lone actor defines himself or herself through a total commitment to the cause for which he/she is the self-proclaimed vanguard and the embodied consciousness of all who have been alienated or are under threat.[10] In his closing trial statement on June 22, 2012, Anders Breivik expressed this as follows:

> "The attacks of July 22nd were preventive attacks, serving the defense of the Norwegian indigenous people, ethnic Norwegians, our culture, and I cannot declare myself guilty before the law for conducting them. I was acting in defense of my people, my culture, my religion, my city, and my country."

This struggle for subjectivity is not only a political, but a highly personal quest. Lone actors clamour for attention from audiences, demand audiences to acknowledge the actor in their very existence and uniqueness. Terrorism is hence a performative act which renders both the actor and the act visible and recognizable.[11] A number of lone actors have expressed this in terms of wanting to gain notoriety, become famous, or "be somebody" in society. For example, David Copeland, who carried out three bombing attacks in England in 1999, described how he "wanted to be famous ... [cause] murder, mayhem, chaos, damage – to get on the news as the top story, really".[12] He continued: "Personally I wanted to get caught ... To be famous in some sort of way ... *If no one remembers who you were, you never existed*" [my emphasis].[13] Copeland further stated that he felt "exhilarated" by the media coverage of the attacks and "cheated" when local right-wing organizations claimed responsibility for his actions. He called the groups that claimed responsibility for one of his bombings "a bunch of yobs" trying to take his glory.[14]

Although the kind of visibility and recognition sought by Copeland and other lone actors shows in their attacks and in the aftermath thereof, it often also shows earlier on in the terrorist attack cycle or radicalization process. The archetypal lone actor who lives in self-imposed reclusion, such as Ted Kaczynski and Eric Rudolph, has become a figure of folk legend that permeates popular culture as well as official counter-terrorism discourse. This representation is misleading because it conceals the dynamic relations between lone actors, their social environment and wider society. Lone actors typically communicate their political agendas and even their intent to commit violence using media technologies such as websites, online forums, YouTube, or Instagram. By reaching out via social media and other means, the lone actor becomes both visible *and* vulnerable to detection and prosecution. Therefore, they are often not as undetectable as is often thought. Indeed, as argued later on in this paper, engaging with others online or offline can actually contribute to their premature downfall. In what follows, I will consider these issues with particular reference to the role of social media and the internet in contemporary lone actor terrorism.

2. The role of social media and the internet

The media, and particularly the internet and social media, are critical to lone actor terrorism in the contemporary period. Building on David Rapoport's four wave theory of international terrorism [15], Jeffrey D. Simon refers to the internet as the "fifth wave"

of terrorism.[16] This "technological wave", argues Simon, is empowering all types of terrorists, including lone actors, with information and confidence to launch attacks and publicize their cause. Online activity includes downloading material, posting videos of terrorist attacks in order to attract potential recruits, using forums and chatrooms to encourage people to stay or become engaged in the struggle, and calling on lone actors to initiate their own operations in their own countries or overseas. In the same vein, a recent report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime found that the internet and social media are currently being used for reasons as diverse as propaganda, training terrorists, planning terrorist activities, financing terrorism (collecting funds, donations, etc.), execution (acquiring equipment, concealing identities, for example through encryption), and as a target (cyber-attacks).[17]

We ought to exercise caution not to overstate the change in the way technology and media influence lone actors (and vice versa), and instead also be sensitive to continuities. The use of technology by radical actors is by no means new. What is relatively recent, however, is the influence of the internet and social media as a platform through which lone actors can access and engage with like-minded individuals, extremist movements, radical ideologies, and practical information regarding methods of political violence, as well as providing new ways to broadcast intent and moral justification, and to gain visibility and notoriety. As such, lone actors' relationship with media technology has evolved considerably. This becomes evident when, for example, we compare the 1995 Unabomber manifesto (entitled "Industrial Society and Its Future"), written by Ted Kaczynski on a type writer and posted to leading U.S. newspapers, to Kaczynski's contemporary counterparts such as Jared Loughner, James von Brunn, and Anders Breivik, all of whom were highly active on the Internet and on various social media in the lead-up to their attacks.

The trend toward lone actors' growing use of and engagement with the internet and social media has been well documented and reflects broader developments in the terrorism-technology nexus.[18] Key features of this engagement are its *multimodal* and *multidirectional* nature. It is multimodal in the sense that meaning is constructed through simultaneously intersecting communication modalities – visual, verbal, textual, and aural.[19] "Online" in this context refers to the entire range of social digital technologies, including social media such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram; as well as web and mobile environments including public, semi-public, and 'dark' Internet and mobile app locales. It is multidirectional in the sense that the online influence flows in various directions: from above (e.g., grooming, recruitment, and the provision of collective action frames or narratives that lone actors can draw upon); from below (e.g., self-tasking, bottom-up engagement with communities of belief and ideologies of validation); and horizontally (e.g., interaction between like-minded individuals). Let me explain some of these directions in more detail below.

2.1. From above

Extremist groups and networks are increasingly using social media strategies to encourage lone actors to take up arms against the enemy at home or overseas. This is arguably part of a strategic rationale for lone actor terrorism: a terrorist group, no matter how secret or well organized, cannot evade law enforcement; therefore, terrorism is more readily accomplished by lone actors, or by isolated, autonomous cells. A range of extremist groups advocate solo attacks which are often deemed less vulnerable to detection, infiltration, and prosecution by the state. For example, in recent times Al Qaeda and Islamic State (IS) have promoted lone actor attacks as an effective

strategy to strike against Western targets. The best known of these efforts is the English-language online magazine *Inspire*, published by Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which has published several articles on lone actors and "open source jihad". An example of Al Qaeda's attempt to encourage Islamist militants to undertake lone actor operations in the West is the video "You Are Responsible Only for Yourself". The video, released on 2 June 2011 by Al Qaeda's media arm As-Sahab, urges Islamist militants in the West to take up arms and target major institutions and public figures. The core message: "Do not rely on others, take the task upon yourself."[20] The video asserts that it is easy and effective to strike the enemy in their home countries. The American Al Qaeda operative Adam Gadahn states in the video: "Muslims in the West have to remember that they are perfectly placed to play an important and decisive part in the jihad against the Zionists and Crusaders." On other occasions, Gadahn openly praised Major Nidal Hasan, who killed 13 people at Fort Hood military base in 2009, and called upon other Muslims to follow his lead.

More recently, in November 2014, following a grand jury's decision not to indict a police officer in the fatal shooting of a black teenager in Ferguson, Missouri, the pro-IS social media group Al-Nusra Al-Maqdisiyya called upon IS supporters in the United States to use the protests in Ferguson as a cover to carry out lone actor attacks.[21] The group wrote on its Twitter account: "O lone mujahid, you must use the breakdown of security in #Ferguson to increase the burning in America. They are squabbling over worldly [matters], so you send them to hell! #ISIS." Another tweet read: "O supporters of the Islamic State in America, what is happening in #Ferguson is a valuable opportunity that will not return. Rise up and engage them with themselves, away from the mujahideen. Spill their blood in the roads and in the neighborhoods."[22]

2.2. From below

The use of social media is not restricted to extremist groups or networks seeking to spread their message and their appeal. From the perspective of the lone actor, consuming and producing online and social media content can have several significant functions or meanings:

- Social networking and interaction between like-minded individuals who otherwise might not have met;
- Social expressiveness and the formation of ideological belonging;
- Intersubjectivity and emotional entrainment;
- The collection and sharing of material and propaganda;
- Broadcasting of intent;
- Inspiration/mimicry.

The accessibility of extremist material online means that individuals can teach themselves the extremist creed and use this material to define and justify their actions and worldview.[23] Some lone actors bear characteristics of an autodidactic, self-taught person. American anti-abortion activist Paul Ross Evans, who in 2007 attempted to bomb an abortion clinic in Austin, Texas, wrote how "days were spent at the local library reading countless books and accessing the Internet. There is a lot of knowledge out there, just floating around, and if you are courageous enough to obtain it, you can possess the might to torment those who are your enemies".[24] What is particularly interesting about Evans's account is that it not only highlights the instrumental uses of

the internet and social media, but also the role of emotions and affect. Evans describes his vigorous learning activities as follows:

> "As I began to contemplate taking action, I had a lot of free time on my hands. ... During this period of intense research I was driven by a great inquisitiveness. I encountered numerous organizations which either directly threatened the future of Christendom, or violently killed innocent children. I grouped these various organizations into categories, and began to realistically contemplate targeting one or several of them with terrorism. I began to be *consumed with an overwhelming motivation* to attack specific entities with mail bombs." [my emphasis] [25]

I interpret this account as an illustration of what, following the American sociologist Randall Collins [26], I would call intersubjectivity and emotional entrainment. Collins argues that occasions that combine

> "a high degree of intersubjectivity, together with a high degree of emotional entrainment—through bodily synchronization, mutual stimulation/arousal of participants' nervous systems—result in feelings of membership that are attached to cognitive symbols; and result also in the emotional energy of individual participants, giving them feelings of confidence, enthusiasm, and desire for action in what they consider a morally proper path."[27]

These moments, Collins contends, are the "high points of experience," "the key moments of history, the times when significant things happen" and through which individuals enter the tunnel of violence. While Collins' emphasis is on *interpersonal* experience and *mutual* focus of attention, I believe that it is nonetheless valuable to view lone actors and their social media activity through this lens. As noted earlier, while lone actors act autonomously by definition, they do not operate in a social vacuum. Their interactions – physical and virtual – and their identification with broader political struggles or extremist discourses are critical to understanding their radicalization and the moral meaning they give to their actions. The internet and social media can provide a platform for these interactions and identifications, and, in so doing, play a role in the lone actor's construction of ideological belonging.

Let me further illustrate this argument by examining the case of Richard Poplawski, who killed three Pittsburgh police officers in April 2009. Poplawski was active on a number of white supremacist and conspiracy online discussion forums.[28] He visited and posted comments on the white supremacist website Stormfront.org. One of Poplawski's favorite places for conspiracy theories was the website of the conspiracy radio talk show host Alex Jones. Poplawski visited the site, Infowars, on a number of occasions, shared links to it with others, and posted to it three times. He also boasted online about the guns he owned and that he would need these for the "outbreak of politico-racial violence" that he believed was inevitable. He posted comments online stating that he would not "bend for them [police] in fear as so many people do." His last internet postings show an increasing desire to be confrontational. For example, in November 2008 he urged fellow white supremacists to achieve "ultimate victory for our people" by "taking back our nation". The reference to "our" in these posts is indicative of the ideological belonging developed by Poplawski during this period, which linked his own beliefs and actions to a broader political and racial struggle. In

the weeks before the fatal shootout with police, he changed his online screen name from "Rich P" to "Braced for Fate," perhaps a further indication of the emotional entrainment he was experiencing online. His last log-in to Stormfront was just hours before the attack.[29]

This example further directs our attention to social media as a means for broadcasting intent. In the aftermath of the shootout, the media reported that two years earlier Poplawski and his friend Edward Perkovic had recorded an Internet radio show in which he talked about his plans to "take out" police officers. He talked of how he had created a hit list, which included several individuals he hated and "in a random measure a couple of members of the Pittsburgh police." Poplawski also praised the Virginia Tech massacre that had taken place earlier that year.[30]

There is a broader issue here of lone actors' often very vocal and public expression of their ideology prior to their attacks, including online. My current research with Mark Hamm indicates that more than two-thirds of lone actors broadcasted their intent to commit violence in the weeks, days, and even hours prior to an attack.[31] This is an important finding from the standpoint of prevention. If lone actors broadcast their violent intentions to others through letters, manifestos, posts, YouTube videos, and spoken threats, then presumably steps may be taken to identify and stop a forthcoming attack. For example, FBI sting operations against lone actors, which have become a major component of U.S. domestic counterterrorism since 9/11, are sometimes initiated following a lone actor's online communication of grievance and intent.[32] It is to the issue of opportunities for countering lone actor terrorism that I will now turn.

3. Opportunities for countering lone actors

This paper has highlighted the paradox that while lone actors may have a critical advantage in avoiding detection by virtue of being unaffiliated and autonomous, their quest for meaning and subjectivity can render them both visible and vulnerable to detection and prosecution. This paradox plays out both online and offline, yet in this paper I have examined it with a particular focus on the internet and social media. In this section, I will briefly discuss a number of issues that bring to the fore opportunities to counter lone actor terrorism.

A first lesson that can be gleaned from existing knowledge of lone actor terrorism is that it is not necessary to develop an entirely new or different counter-terrorism strategy to respond to lone actors. Countering terrorism, in whatever form, depends on the ability of law enforcement, intelligence, and judicial authorities to cooperate, to detect crime at the earliest possible stage, and to work closely together with the shared goal of bringing terrorists to justice, within a framework of respect for human rights and the rule of law.[33] Although, as noted earlier, lone actor terrorism has certain particular features that distinguishes it from group-based terrorism, many of the strategies and tactics used to combat collective terrorism also seem to apply to the issue of lone actors. I should point out, however, that there can be no one-size-fits-all approach to countering lone actor terrorism. Not only do the experiences of different countries with lone actors vary considerably, but counter-terrorism approaches are still largely a product of national legal systems and political cultures. Hence, important differences between countries are likely to remain, for instance with regard to questions of how to prosecute cases of terrorist incitement or recruitment, and how to determine the criminal threshold to the use of special investigative powers.

What may be some of the key "ingredients" of successful prevention and interdiction in the context of lone actors? I consider this an ongoing discussion, as much is still to be learned about what "works," in what circumstances, and with what intended and unanticipated consequences. In general terms, what is required is an *integrated, coordinated approach* in which law enforcement, intelligence, prosecution, and civil society work closely together both within and across (local, state, and national) jurisdictions. In addition, my own research suggests the following issues, some of which are more contentious and country-specific than others.

3.1. Engaging with communities and raising public awareness

Building trusting and inclusive partnerships with civil society is critical, especially in the prevention stage.[34] Having meaningful and mutually respectful interactions, and developing rapport, with communities is often key for law enforcement and intelligence agencies in gathering early warnings of threats, as well as for enhancing the legitimacy of counter-terrorism operations. We know that intelligence on prospective lone actor terrorist activities relies heavily on information provided by the public, such as witnesses, family members, friends, work colleagues, and business. There have been a number of occasions where authorities were only alerted to a lone actor plot after reports from an alert public, such as store owners or personnel. Getting the public to become more alert and to report suspicious behaviour is thus a key strategy, while at the same time having to ensure that they are not alarmed and that civil liberties are sufficiently protected. This may include awareness raising among physicians, doctors, street-level police officers, and school teachers. This strategy is in line with my earlier argument that along the pathway to terrorism lone actors tend to have at least some interaction points where intervention might be possible.

3.2. Monitoring extremist ideologies and groups

Monitoring extremist ideologies and groups. Even though lone actors are, by definition, not part of an organization or group, important information and knowledge may be gleaned from monitoring extremist ideologies and groups.[35] Lone actors often draw on broader ideologies of validation and communities of belief through direct or indirect communication or interaction online or offline. Importantly, some lone actors had been part of, or tried to join, a radical group or were ousted by a group because they were deemed too radical or "loose cannons". For example, David Copeland, Anders Breivik, and Timothy McVeigh had all tried to connect to other activists, yet failed. Their search for connection and ideological belonging can provide clues for law enforcement and intelligence.

3.3. Detecting and monitoring the broadcasting of intent

In the previous section, I pointed out that many lone actors broadcast their intent to commit violence in the weeks, days, and even hours prior to an attack. They may do so explicitly or less explicitly, through letters, manifestos, spoken threats, online posts or blogs, You Tube videos, and so forth. There is the potential for the authorities to draw on this information to take steps to prevent or quell a lone actor plot. However, we also know that monitoring hate speech online is highly complex. Put simply, too much of it can be found online, therefore overburdening monitoring and analytical capabilities. It is also very difficult to get good leads, yet this is something that authorities are seeking to improve through the development of new data mining and mapping techniques. This area has been identified by authorities as one of the critical gaps in the fight against lone actor terrorism in particular, and terrorism more generally. Still, a number of gains have already been made, especially with regard to identifying those individuals who are reaching out to extremist groups or materials online (e.g., with regard to downloading the well-known Inspire magazine article "How to build a bomb in your mother's kitchen").

3.4. Focusing on suspicious/signature behaviours

It is important to know how lone actor attacks are formulated and what signature behaviours or indicators may be involved. Lone actor terrorist attacks are usually preceded by a protracted preparatory phase, the so-called "left of the bang" (see also the paper by Patrick Chagnon in this volume). Lone actors are thus vulnerable to detection at different stages of their attack cycle, notably in the planning stage when weapons are acquired and in the surveillance of their targets. This period can potentially provide authorities with some early indicators or red flags regarding suspicious behaviours. For example, in the aftermath of the 22 July 2011 attacks in Norway, questions emerged as to whether the authorities could have done more to identify Anders Breivik's purchases of bomb-making material at 36 stores in five different countries as suspicious and to cross-check it against other information on file, such as his purchase of firearms (see Hans Brun's paper in this volume).

3.5. Criminalizing preparatory actions to terrorism

The issue of criminalizing preparatory acts to terrorism is essentially about reducing and policing the space within which the lone actor reaches out to others. Authorities might seek to intervene at the preparatory phase, which typically involves research, acquisition of weapons, and reconnaissance. As noted, it is during this preparatory pahse that the lone actor's risk of identification or exposure is often the highest. The way this has been exploited by authorities varies considerably across different countries (dependent on national legal frameworks). Countries like the United Kingdom and Germany have gone down this route by prohibiting and prosecuting the possession of information likely to be useful to a person committing or preparing an act of terrorism, including material downloaded from the internet or shared through social media. Yet, other countries (e.g., United States and France) have not (yet) followed this path due to it being interpreted as contravening their constitutions. More generally, the criminalization of preparatory actions to terrorism has raised questions and concerns about civil liberties and human rights.

4. Conclusion

This paper has explored some of the key counter-terrorism challenges and opportunities posed by lone actors. I have sought to show that the interaction points between lone actors and their social environment can render them visible and meaningful, but also vulnerable to detection and prosecution. This dynamic is of particular interest within the context of the growing use of, and engagement with, social media and the internet among both lone actors (from below) and terrorist recruiters (from above). While there are considerable challenges for authorities in terms of how to respond to the novel forms of communication and (self-)radicalization this trend enables, this paper has argued that there are also a number of counter-terrorism opportunities arising from this development, for example with regard to the broadcasting of intent and the identification of preparatory actions to terrorism and attendant (early) indicators. In so doing, this paper has sought to contribute some new ideas and issues to the academic and policy debate on countering lone actor terrorism.

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