

Commentary on language variables found within lone actor terrorist manifestos and the directions for future research

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 31 October 22

Received in revised form 18

April 23

Accepted 17 May 23

Keywords:

Lone Actor terrorism,
terrorist manifestos,
counter terrorism,
criminal narratives,
language variables,
linguistic features

ABSTRACT

Investigating lone actor terrorism presents many challenges, not only in the discourse surrounding the appropriate terminology to use when discussing the phenomenon, but also within counter terrorism investigations and identifying perpetrators. With identifying lone actor terrorists online seen as a needle in a haystack, research needs to identify new ways to investigate lone actor terrorism. The creation of a manifesto by a lone actor terrorist provides researchers with the opportunity to analyse criminal narratives within terrorism. Previous research has used surface methods such as computer software to analyse manifestos, however, a deeper psychological analysis is needed to overcome some of the issues generated with automated software. Current literature on language within lone actor manifestos is discussed and examines some of the currently identified commonalities in language between manifestos. Areas for future research to develop are also discussed indicating how future research could be used to investigate lone actor terrorism through the implementation of a language variable dictionary.

Introduction

Lone actor terrorism is a sub-branch within the wider field of terrorism that mainly focuses on an individual's route into, and engagement with, terrorist action. A wealth of academic literature discusses the topic of lone actor terrorism, yet there is still no agreed upon academic definition of the phenomenon. Instead, the literature debates on which term should be used to refer to these individuals. A variety of terms have been suggested to describe lone actor terrorism including a 'lone operator' (Borum et al., 2012), 'stray dog' (Jenkins, 2011), 'self activating terrorist' (Rapoport, 2013), or 'lone wolf' (Schuurman et al., 2019). While the term lone wolf terrorism is frequently used within the field, Schuurman et al. (2019) argue that the term 'lone wolf' needs to be reconsidered as these individuals may not be as isolated as the name

suggests, which can have detrimental effects within the professional field. To add to the misunderstanding within the academic literature, all of the suggested names for lone actor terrorism come with slightly different definitions which add to the confusion when trying to understand the phenomenon of lone actor terrorism. Due to the range of definitions, different individuals are often considered when studying lone actor terrorism, leading to a range of research aiming to look at the same topic, however, with widely different case studies. A cohesive definition would help not only with academic research, but also to identify specific case studies that are considered to be lone actor terrorists.

The closest to a cohesive definition of lone actor terrorism, has been suggested by the Dutch Crisis Management Team (COT) which defines lone actor

terrorism as ‘an individual who operates individually, that is not associated with any group or network, and carries out an attack using methods that are outside the command and direction of others’ (COT, 2007). The COT definition presents an interesting perspective which focuses on the individual’s actions not being under the direction of others, however, the definition does not mention anything further about communication with a wider group of individuals. This definition suggests that an individual can be part of a community, such as an online community, where they may discuss their hateful rhetoric; however, if they conduct an attack which is not under the direction or command of others, they would still be considered a lone actor terrorist. This is the argument presented by Schuurman et al. (2019) identifying that the term ‘lone wolf’ should not be used, as individuals who engage in this behaviour do not live up to the stereotype of the moniker of a ‘lone wolf’ such as an isolated individual, instead they can be engaging with an online community.

Lone Actors’ use of the Internet

Lone actor terrorists do not engage in the typical methods of terrorism often seen in group or organisation-based terrorism, making lone actor terrorists harder to identify as sole perpetrators. As the internet ever increases, more information is easily accessible online, where an individual can engage in extremist content and disseminate their own views (Cohen et al., 2014). As the internet advances and individuals are exposed to more radicalised content, there is a possibility of increasing levels of lone actor terrorism due to the consumption of online content. Asongu et al. (2019) suggest that as social media platforms are still a relatively new subject area, research should look at the importance of the impact of information dissemination on lone actor terrorists within the online community. Cohen et al. (2014) argue that as methods, especially online methods, of lone actor terrorists change and develop, the field of counter terrorism also needs to develop new methods to tackle the evolving nature of the threat.

Lone actor terrorists have been known to engage in the behaviour of creating a manifesto, an act which can be seen as ‘broadcasting intent’ ahead of conducting a terrorist attack (Hamm & Spaaij, 2017). Rasmussen and Lowin (2021) suggest that lone actors create manifestos to disseminate online, in the hope of inspiring others and furthering their ideological beliefs, in a figurative ‘passing on the baton’. Analysis of manifestos created by lone actor terrorists has identified that individuals will often reference other lone actor terrorists within their manifestos, a known example being Brenton Tarrant, the perpetrator of the 2019 Christchurch terrorist attack, making reference in his manifesto to Anders Breivik, the perpetrator of the 2011 Norway terrorist attacks (Rasmussen & Lowin, 2021). The creation of a manifesto has become a copycat type behaviour, for example Brenton Tarrant was inspired by previous lone actor terrorists which are referenced in his manifesto. Tarrant later became an inspiration to further lone actor terror attacks including Patrick Crusius the perpetrator of the 2019 El Paso shooting (Rasmussen & Lowin, 2021). This suggests that by creating a manifesto and publishing it online, the notoriety that follows a terrorist attack may cause the perpetrator to become an inspiration to others.

The act of creating a manifesto is not a new phenomenon. An early example of a lone actor terrorist manifesto was created by Ted Kaczynski, in what is known as the ‘Unabomber manifesto’ (Barnett, 2015). Kaczynski’s bombing campaign across the United States between 1979 and 1995 resulted in the deaths of three individuals and injured a further 23 individuals (Barnett, 2015). Analysis of Kaczynski’s manifesto identifies his violent rhetoric on social revolution, attempting to encourage others to follow in his environmentalist extremism (Barnett, 2015). While research suggests that manifestos are created to inspire others, the publication of Kaczynski’s manifesto ultimately led to his capture. In 1995, Kaczynski demanded his manifesto be published in two prominent newspapers, arguing that he would continue his bombing campaign if it were not published (Barnett, 2015). Excerpts from Kaczynski’s manifesto were

published in the newspapers, where Kaczynski's brother recognised his own brother's writing style and duly notified authorities (Barnett, 2015).

While Kaczynski wanted to bring attention to his environmentalist and anti-technology social movement through writing a manifesto, other manifesto authors want to gain notoriety for their attack and become inspirations for others (Rasmussen & Lowin, 2021), which can include signing their name on a manifesto or using live streams. A recent method seen due to the advancements of the internet, is the method of 'live-streaming' an attack to an online platform, with Wardel (2019) describing this method as an attack designed to go viral. Alongside his manifesto, Brenton Tarrant also 'live-streamed' his 2019 New Zealand terror attack to Facebook via a body-worn video GoPro device (Peacock, 2019). Other attacks have since copied this method with Stephan Balliet streaming his 2019 attack to popular gaming site Twitch (Baele et al., 2020) and Payton Gendron streaming his 2022 supermarket attack via Twitch and linked to Discord (Kupper et al., 2022). While popular social media sites have been used to disseminate terrorist content, online fringe forums such as Reddit or the now defunct 4Chan, allow individuals to disseminate terrorist content such as previous attackers' manifestos with increasing anonymity (Collins & Clark, 2021).

The large amount of terrorist content available online, means individuals have access to engage with high-choice media, which can be used to self-radicalise (Van der Meer et al., 2020). Confirmation bias is a key component in forming a radicalised opinion, as once an individual finds information that may be false or incorrect but supports their pre-existing ideology, it deepens their connection to their self-radicalised beliefs (Van der Meer et al., 2020). While there are over 10,000 terrorist sites available online (Weimann & Hoffman, 2015), it is not only terrorist content that can be used as inspiration; seemingly innocent content can be used to radicalise opinions. Stephen King's 1977 novel 'Rage' can be described as a representation of the repression of an individual within modern day

society (Pourteau, 1993). The story follows a high school student who takes his class hostage at gunpoint, however, following the release of the novel, a number of attacks in schools have taken place either with similar details to the story or where the perpetrator made reference or had a copy of the novel 'Rage' (Seth, 2022). In an interview following the incidents, King acknowledged that while his book is unlikely to be the sole inspiration for an attack, it may have acted as an accelerant for individuals with psychological problems (Seth, 2022). King has since withdrawn the book from print, in an attempt to stop copycat behaviour. Considering this explanation further suggests that whilst a manifesto may not be the sole reason for an individual going on to engage in copycat behaviour and conducting a terrorist attack, a previous manifesto could instead be an accelerant to terrorist behaviour.

Personal Criminal Narratives

By analysing manifestos or other writing produced by lone actor terrorists, researchers can begin to understand an individual's motives for their terrorist actions as well as the personal narratives behind an attack (Sandberg et al., 2014). Creating a manifesto provides an author with the opportunity to try and control the narrative outcome of their attack (Kupper et al., 2022). When an individual who is unaffiliated to a terrorist group commits an act of terrorism and has not written a manifesto, their intent can become unclear, leaving the individual seen as a "mad man" (p. 27) rather than a lone actor terrorist (Horgan et al., 2016). An example of unknown intent can be seen in the 2017 Las Vegas shooting perpetrated by Stephen Paddock, who did not declare his intentions with a manifesto, leaving his motive for the attack unclear (Kupper et al., 2022). Those who do leave manifestos provide researchers with a rich understanding of their mindset at the time of writing, so further personal narratives can be identified.

Personal narratives can come in a variety of forms such as diaries, letters, blog posts or manifestos, and

they provide an example of a firsthand account of an individual's lived experience (Pavlenko, 2007). They can be everyday communications where an individual documents their life; however, some individuals have begun to use these communications to discuss their criminal intent, leading to criminal narratives in the form of a lone actor terrorist manifesto. The benefit to analysing criminal narratives, allows for firsthand accounts to be written by the author whereby they explain their intent and provide a narrative on their own self-identify and life story (Sandberg, 2013). Presser (2012) further suggests this method allows an author to attempt to explain their own criminal behaviour. Therefore, as lone actor terrorists are using manifestos to provide an explanation of their own criminal behaviour and ideological process, research can begin to develop methods to understand these manifestos and generate new counter terrorism methods to tackle this new type of terrorist action.

Analysing Lone Actor Terrorist Manifestos

At present, research on manifestos surrounding lone actor terrorism tends to focus on a particular individual and conduct a thorough analysis of that individual's manifesto. Recently, more research has started to explore the linguistic comparisons between manifestos to identify any language commonalities (Kupper & Meloy, 2021; Kupper et al., 2022; Siggery et al., 2022). As the academic literature on the area of lone actor terrorist manifestos is still developing, other areas of criminal behaviour can be analysed for comparative behaviour. Kupper and Meloy (2021) widened the research field to not only include lone actor terrorists, but other individuals who have committed targeted violence such as school shooters. Using a widened research scope, analysis can look beyond simply lone actor terrorists and consider other violent attacks with similar behavioural outcomes, allowing for a greater understanding of the research field by looking at comparative crimes.

School shootings are a global phenomenon, while prevalent in the USA, do also occur in other countries including Germany, Finland and Brazil (Sandberg et al., 2014), which like terrorism, attract attention from the media and public as well as academic and scholarly research due to the nature of the attack. As suggested by Kupper and Meloy (2021), widening the research field to consider other violent attacks could provide a wealth of information and thus, analysing school shootings and their corresponding behaviours could help to provide further understanding of sudden violent behaviour. In a similar way to terrorism, school shootings can be seen as form of symbolic violence, whereby the perpetrators intend to send a message to a broad audience through their attack (Malkki, 2014). Böckler and Seeger (2013) noted that the nature of the internet allows individuals to research and then express admiration or sympathy to school shooters, which further continues the cycle of individuals becoming inspired by previous attacks. Langman (2018) identified that an individual can be inspired by a previous attack in a number of different ways such as through curiosity, imitation, and subtypes of inspiration such as general inspiration or being sympathetic with the cause. Langman (2018) noted that this type of inspiration can be through imitating language used by previous attackers. The 1999 Columbine school shooters wrote about 'natural selection', with one of the shooters wearing the words 'natural selection' on his shirt during the attack. Years later, the manifesto title of the 2007 Jokela school shooter, echoed this belief using the title 'Natural Selectors Manifesto' (Langman, 2018). This links back to the idea that individuals can find inspiration through other attacks, should they be genuine attacks or fictional attacks such as within Stephen King's 'Rage'. This behaviour of referencing previous attacks is not limited to school shooters, Kupper et al. (2022) noted that within targeted violence manifestos, authors will often make reference to other attacks of the same genre.

As lone actor terrorists can come from a variety of different ideological backgrounds, it can be difficult to develop a profile of a lone actor terrorist

(Moskalenko & McCauley, 2011). Perpetrators of lone actor terrorism can come from a variety of different ethnic backgrounds, social circumstances, and age ranges (Moskalenko & McCauley, 2011). All the different circumstances that can lead an individual into terrorist action should be coded for when analysing a manifesto, therefore, further research should consider linguistic features relating to these key variables of ethnicity, social circumstance, and age.

Recent research has identified that lone actor terrorists are beginning to move away from a set ideology and are instead engaging in a behaviour known as 'salad bar' or 'cafeteria' ideologies, whereby an individual picks and chooses different parts of a variety of ideologies (Kupper & Meloy, 2021). An example of how a 'salad bar' ideology can develop can be seen within eco-fascism, an ideology heavily based within white supremacist beliefs, which has begun to incorporate areas of environmentalism, leading to mixed belief system of eco-fascism (Hoffman & Ware, 2020). A mixed ideology example can be seen in the manifesto of Brenton Tarrant who is categorised by the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) as an Anti-Muslim extremist. However, Tarrant's manifesto covers a wide range of ideological topics including conspiracy theories as well as Anti-Semitic and environmentalist views, showing an unclear or mixed ideology. Since ideologies can be mixed from a variety of different viewpoints, it would therefore be beneficial to compare lone actor terrorist manifestos with each other and look for a variety of different motives and intentions beyond the initial ideology.

As lone actor terrorists can engage in salad bar ideologies, it can be difficult to identify where their ideology truly lies, instead some ideologies can appear more personal than others. Lone actor terrorists are more likely to discuss their own personal grievances, compared to a terrorist organisation which will have a shared collective (Hamm & Spaaij, 2017). It would therefore be important to understand the intricacies of a lone actor terrorist's personal grievance further, as this

could indicate motive and personalised ideologies. With ideologies becoming more unique and niche to an individual's personal grievances, lone actor terrorists are engaging in behaviour attempting to encourage others into their niche ideology. Kupper et al. (2022) identified that 86% of targeted violence manifesto authors attempted to encourage others to disseminate either their manifesto or links to their live stream, indicating that even with a niche personal ideology, lone actors will still attempt to encourage others into their radical mindset. As ideologies can be varied and personal, it would be important to code for this variability when analysing lone actor terrorist manifestos such as looking at personal grievances.

Due to the nature of a terrorist attack, an individual engaging in this type of behaviour would have an understanding that they may not live through an attack, therefore, comparative analysis on suicide notes can help develop key language features. Altruistic suicide is the act of taking one's own life on behalf of an ideology or an organisation, a behaviour often associated due to its nature with terrorists and martyrdom (Leenaars et al., 2010). Individuals engaging in altruistic suicide are often more depressed about an external factor such as the government or a global enemy and see suicide as the solution to their problems (Leenaars et al., 2010). When altruistic suicide is combined with a terrorist ideology mindset, this can lead to acts such as suicide bombings or other terrorist attacks where the individual does not intend to survive.

Analysis of suicide notes written by terrorists identified that those who write about being more willing to die for their cause inflict increased levels of damage to their target as they are prepared to die (Pape, 2003). Further analysis of seven targeted violence manifestos identified that 71% of authors make a reference to the potential outcome of their planned attack and therefore include religious references (Kupper et al., 2022). As death, either by suicide or responding police officers, is a potential outcome of an attack, analysis of manifestos should consider a variety of language variables that could be indicative of an individual's mindset regarding

death. The mental health of an individual as suggested by Leenaars et al. (2010) could be a helpful factor in understanding the lone actor terrorist mindset and again would be a key language variable to consider. A deeper understanding of the impact of religious references identified by Kupper et al. (2022) which relate to an individual's acknowledgement of their own potential death could also be a helpful investigative language variable in understanding the lone actor terrorist.

Current Linguistic Analysis

To improve our understanding of lone actor terrorism and the language used within their manifestos to aid in counter terrorism initiatives, language analysis of manifestos needs to take place. The Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) software is a computer programme that analyses linguistic features within a document (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010). When first created, the LIWC analysed a document and compared the words within to a dictionary of words and coded them to be either positive or negative (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010). The LIWC has since been expanded to include over 80 language categories, identifying both style words such as how people are communicating as well as content words looking at what an individual is saying (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010).

The LIWC has been used to analyse documents created by lone actor terrorists and identified eight different LIWC categories that can be attributed to the terrorist mindset (Kaati et al., 2016). Research identified that factors such as the use of big words, third person plurals and positive/negative emotions are important language variables within manifestos (Kaati et al., 2016). While this research identifies that language variables can be identified within lone actor terrorist manifestos, there are however, some drawbacks to using software such as the LIWC. Kaati et al. (2016) identifies that the LIWC does not code for slang, misspellings, and domain specific language, suggesting that language may not accurately be coded if the author has misspelt a word or used non colloquial language found within

the dictionary. Tausczik and Pennebaker (2010) also argue that the LIWC cannot detect irony, sarcasm, and idioms, again meaning words may not be accurately coded if the author has written a word with a different intent. An example of this is the word 'mad', which is coded as an anger word, however, depending on the context of the sentence it could be used in a positive way or within idiom such as 'mad as a hatter' which is not using the word in an anger context, however, it would be coded under anger (Tausczik & Pennebaker., 2010).

While text analysis software can be a good starting point for understanding language within lone actor terrorist manifestos, further analysis needs to take place to gain a deeper psychological understanding of the words being used. Cohen et al. (2014) argue that a fully automated computer software that analyses the language in lone actor terrorist manifestos would be impossible to create as it will only look at the surface language and not deeper meaning. Analysis software also only looks at physical language and not other things within a text file such as images or videos (Cohen et al., 2014). By not analysing other materials, a wealth of potentially helpful information is missed. For example, Brenton Tarrant's manifesto opened with a cover page including an image containing writing which would not have been coded in an image format, as well as a symbol known as the 'Black Sun', a symbol associated with neo-Nazism. This information would not be coded for in language software such as the LIWC, therefore manual analysis can look at various types of imagery as well as considering some of the issues raised with the LIWC such as misspellings and sarcasm.

Future Research

While there are some issues associated with computer automated software, it is, however, a good starting point for language analysis. Future research should look at how a combination of methods should be used including automated software as well as manual psychological analysis. As noted by Kaati et al. (2016) there are identifiable language variables within lone actor terrorist

manifestos, therefore using automated software could act as a starting point to see if a manifesto is consistent with the current research. Deeper psychological analysis should then take place to identify anything missed from the software as well as providing a contextual understanding. Future research should therefore focus on creating a framework of psychological analysis that could be identified within lone actor terrorist manifestos.

Previous research on lone actor terrorist manifestos has noted that there are some commonalities between manifestos. Manifestos can be written with the intent of inspiring others to follow their ideological beliefs (Rasmussen & Lowin, 2021), therefore wording or language relating to inspiring others, such as asking others to follow their beliefs, should be manually coded for. While inspiring others and asking others to disseminate their manifesto can be seen as similar areas, they should be coded separately. As identified by Kupper et al. (2022), 86% of targeted violence manifesto authors wanted further dissemination of their publications and thus, language relating to this such as providing external links should be coded separately. As an external link may be written in internet short form language such as www., this would be seen as a misspelling in the LIWC and therefore, the context of the language would need manual coding.

As noted by Langman (2007) relating to school shooters and Kupper et al. (2022) relating to targeted violence manifestos, individuals will often make reference to previous attackers. As names can have unusual spellings, again this is unlikely to be coded for by the LIWC. Therefore, if a variation of the LIWC or separate advanced software were able to scan manifestos for the names of previous attackers, depending on who was mentioned and the context of that reference, it could help to understand the motive or mindset of the individual and who they have been inspired by.

As noted by Kupper and Meloy (2021), lone actor terrorists are moving away from a single traditional ideology and engaging in mix and match 'salad bar' ideologies; this would make it difficult to attribute

an individual to a single ideology, especially if the language they use within their manifesto is linked to multiple aspects of different ideologies. It would therefore be imperative to consider a variety of ideological language that may be used within a manifesto. As previously mentioned, the LIWC does not detect irony, sarcasm, and idioms (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010), therefore, it would not pick up the intricacies of radicalised language or terms not commonly found within the dictionary including conspiracy language or meme culture language.

While automated software such as the LIWC can be a beneficial starting point for understanding lone actor terrorist manifestos and the language that lone actors use, it should not be the only type of analysis. The LIWC can provide an understanding of the surface language; however, deeper psychological analysis is needed to further understand the key language variables. While some language themes within lone actor terrorist and targeted violence manifesto have been identified, a dictionary of relevant language should be developed, so that manifestos can be specifically analysed for these key variables. A dictionary of relevant language variables would be beneficial, however, it would need to be constantly updated as new material is available, as language develops and changes, and as lone actor terrorist methods change such as the recent inclusion of live streaming. A language content dictionary can then be used to develop an investigative framework that can be used to aid security services and counter terrorism.

To create this type of framework, a large-scale study of lone actor terrorist manifestos needs to be performed. Conducting psychological thematic analysis on a variety of manifestos would provide deeper psychological understanding of important factors within the lone actor terrorist mindset when the individual is producing a manifesto. As manifestos provide a personal narrative of the author, having an investigative framework for understanding relevant language would aid in the investigative process, therefore, future research should look at developing a relevant language

profile. Cohen et al. (2014) note that searching for a lone actor terrorist can be similar to searching for a needle in a haystack. If an effective method was developed identifying key language variables, while it may not identify all individuals, it could be a starting point for a greater investigative framework relevant to lone actor terrorists.

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