

## RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

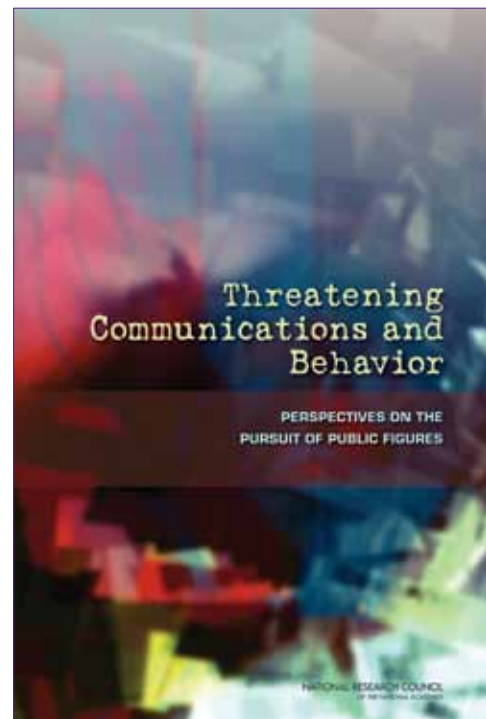
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## THREATENING COMMUNICATIONS AND BEHAVIOR: PERSPECTIVES ON THE PURSUIT OF PUBLIC FIGURES

Politicians, athletes, movie stars, and other figures are more accessible than ever because of the changing world of communication. YouTube, social networking, and blogs provide a level of detail about public figures that can occasionally lead to embarrassing and even dangerous reactions from followers. This can include expressions of strong feelings, such as hatred, obsession, and entitled reciprocity (demand for response or attention). Many followers leave traces of their thoughts and activities on public sites, which are accessible to law enforcement and other security forces responsible for protecting public figures.

When are expressions of strong feelings really dangerous? When might they lead to action?

The Board on Behavioral, Cognitive, and Sensory Sciences of the National Research Council asked several experts to consider three specific aspects of threatening communications and subsequent action: computerized language techniques, communication theory, and forensic psychology. While the theme of this paper collection is threatening and unusual communications to public figures, the research is likely relevant for a wide range of communications, including those by leaders of hostile nations and terrorist groups.



### COMPUTERIZED LANGUAGE TECHNIQUES

In *Using Computerized Text Analysis to Assess Threatening Communications and Behavior*, Cindy K. Chung and James W. Pennebaker draw on their expertise on text analysis of natural language in reviewing techniques for detecting and assessing threats posed through letters, blogs, text messages, and other media. The authors focus not on the content of threatening messages, but the language style of the message—including the relative increase or decrease of pronoun and article usage as an example of a subtle marker of intent. Chung and Pennebaker also review research on deception and intent that may distinguish bluffs from real threats in high-stakes situations.

## COMMUNICATION THEORY

In *Communication-Based Research Related to Threats and Ensuing Behavior*, H. Dan O’Hair, Daniel Rex Bernard, and Randy R. Roper consider research on messages, audience, and credibility for potential application to threatening communications. Their paper analyzes internal processes of conflict and the resulting behaviors, including attention to affect, cognition, and emotion. The approach includes assessing the influence of the communication form—whether face to face, e-mail, social networks, etc.—on what people communicate and the resulting actions.

## FORENSIC PSYCHOLOGY

In *Approaching and Attacking Public Figures: A Contemporary Analysis of Communications and Behavior*, J. Reid Meloy focuses on the operational needs of those who are responsible for protecting public figures. The research on approaches and the research on attacks show some divergent results, and Meloy reviews the role of many factors—such as motivation, mental disorder, and psychopathy—in “approachers” versus attackers. From an operational perspective, he also discusses the behavioral pathway and warning behaviors, such as fixation, skill development, fantasy-based associations, and direct threats. Another topic Meloy considers is “leakage,” which refers to revealing a person’s intent to harm someone to a third party.

## NEXT STEPS FOR RESEARCH

The authors identify the research questions and agendas they think are most likely to have scientific and practical value.

The first two papers call for greater cooperation in research programs between researchers and practitioners operating in both the private and public sectors. They identify opportunities for cross-disciplinary and cross-institutional research, including shared access to databases with detailed annotations, such as context, accuracy, and subsequent behavior. Chung and Pennebaker highlight the importance of communication content analysis that includes utilizing experts in social relationships, culture, and language. O’Hair, Bernard, and Roper note that institutional barriers must be overcome to promote *boundary spanning*: independent organizations from within and outside law enforcement and security organizations need to coordinate experiences, values, context information, expert insight, and actions.

Meloy advocates not only the continued application of rigorous methodology to large-group data randomly drawn from available case files, but also expanded research into better understanding individual perpetrators. To more effectively connect research to reality, individual approachers or attackers cannot be dismissed as anomalies. Instead, analysis of individual behavior must be integrated into comprehensive research programs so that operational decisions more effectively consider normal and abnormal characteristics of problematic individuals.

The three papers reflect both the need and the potential for a broad, cross-disciplinary approach to threat assessment. Although the authors present research and identify gaps within their own expertise domains, the emergence of cross-cutting themes across the three papers is insightful in itself. This work highlights the complexity of the issue and contributes to a deeper understanding of the relationship between threatening communications and potentially dangerous behavior.

**For More Information . . .** This brief was prepared by the Board on Behavioral, Cognitive, and Sensory Sciences (BBCSS) based on *Threatening Communications and Behavior: Perspectives on the Pursuit of Public Figures* (National Research Council, 2011). This publication was made possible by the support of the National Science Foundation (NSF). Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of NSF or the National Research Council. Copies of the publication are available from the National Academies Press, 500 Fifth Street, NW, Washington, DC 20001; (800) 624-6242; <http://www.nap.edu> or via the BBCSS web page at <http://www.nationalacademies.org/bbcss>. Full text of the publication as a free pdf download is also available at <http://www.nap.edu>.

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