

POLICY BRIEFING NOTE

Title: Can “Dangerous Speech” be Used in Explaining “Lone-Wolf” Terrorism?

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Research Question:

“Lone wolf terrorism” challenges security scholars and practitioners alike with its unpredictable and ambiguous nature. One of the greatest of these challenges is contextualizing the part of socialization and indoctrination in such attacks. What role do extremist communities and speech play in shaping the beliefs a “lone wolf” kills for? The concept of “dangerous speech” developed by Susan Benesch is offered as a possible answer to this question. “Dangerous speech” helps to define the line between hate speech and speech which demonstrably incites its audience toward violence. This project investigates whether the guidelines for “dangerous speech” can be applied to analyze “speech” surrounding acts of “lone wolf terrorism.”

Importance:

The significance of “lone wolf” terrorism is thought to be rising in recent years, as concern grows among policymakers and scholars over threats posed by individual attackers unaffiliated with a standing organization. This investigation of the connection between speech and violence is also offered as a contribution to a larger conversation over the relationship between ideology and violence against civilians.

Research Findings:

This paper concludes that “dangerous speech” can be constructively applied toward understanding at least some incidents of “lone wolf terrorism,” as demonstrated by case studies with applicable “speech” to analyze in the form of statements, manifestos, and extremist literature accessed by the perpetrator. All five “guidelines” for dangerous speech can be identified within the two cases of “lone wolf” terrorism examined within this paper.

Implications:

Further research is needed to clarify and strengthen the relationship between the two subjects of this paper, particularly regarding why “extremist” sources of political information are particularly credible to audience members who later resort to violence against civilians. The research findings also call attention to ambiguities surrounding mental health and political violence, as “lone wolves” display signs of mental illness which blur the boundaries between a “rational” political actor and an “apolitical” killer affected by a disorder. On a practical level, the paper suggests the possibility of an “Umati-style” project to analyze extremist speech associated with terrorism and classify it according to how “dangerous” it may be.