

Going Dark Redux: The 2018 Capital Gazette Mass Murder

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On June 28, 2018, a lone offender conducted a mass shooting at the Capital Gazette newspaper office in Annapolis, Maryland, killing five and injuring two. Seven years prior to the incident, the newspaper published an article, reporting the assailant had been convicted and put on probation for harassing an acquaintance from his high school days, which resulted in a defamation lawsuit against the paper in 2012. The case and several others he filed were ultimately dismissed before the highest court in the state of Maryland in late 2015. During the litigation, the perpetrator sent hundreds of concerning social media communications on Twitter to the newspaper, utilizing metaphorically violent language, identifying with other mass attackers who killed journalists, engaging in target dispersion toward others, but communicating no direct threats that could have resulted in criminal prosecution. He suddenly went dark in January 2016, and over the next 2.5 years, he planned and prepared for the attack, while his targets assumed he had moved on. This case is an extreme illustration of the phenomenon of “going dark” (Kupper & Meloy, 2023) and the inverse correlation between observable online and on-the-ground behaviors in targeted attackers. We structured our retrospective threat assessment of the case with the indicators of the Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol–18, which we also applied to more than 800 tweets that the subject posted between 2011 and 2018. The analyses highlight the risk management importance of the proximal warning behaviors of *pathway*, *fixation*, and *identification* (Meloy, 2017); evidence of target dispersion as a risk accelerant; and the devolution of a personal violence-justifying ideology into a misanthropic state of mind.

Public Significance Statement

This retrospective study applied the Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol–18 to the Capital Gazette shooter, who was positive for six out of eight proximal warning behaviors and eight out of 10 distal characteristics, with a total 78% of indicators present in this case. When the Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol–18 was applied to the offender’s preattack Twitter history ($n = 871$), *fixation*, *identification*, *leakage*, *directly communicated threat*, *personal grievance and moral outrage*, *dependence on the virtual community*, and *changes in thinking and emotion* were detected in his online language evidence.

Keywords: threat assessment, targeted violence, tactical linguistics, misanthropy, Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol–18

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The reports and testimonies cited in this study are available upon request from J. Reid Meloy. The authors would like to warn the readers of the violent language and graphic imagery that is used throughout the study. This article does not use the perpetrator’s name, in agreement with the “No Notoriety” campaign to deny

offenders the infamy and attention they often seek (Lankford & Madfis, 2018). J. Reid Meloy derives income from the licensing and training for the Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol–18 through Multi-health Systems (<https://mhs.com>).

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Freedom of the press is enshrined in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution—it is one of the pillars of any democracy. As James Madison wrote in the late 18th century, “To the press alone, checkered as it is with abuses, the world is indebted for all the triumphs which have been gained by reason and humanity over error and oppression” (Library of Congress, 1965). Yet global attacks on the freedom of the press have intensified over the past years. The World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders (n.d.) has documented an overall decline in press freedom and a steep rise in political repression of media outlets; and in the United States, there have been at least 16 journalists murdered since the beginning of this century.

The worst of these attacks occurred at the Capital Gazette newspaper office in Annapolis, Maryland, on June 28, 2018. Five people were murdered—Gerald Fischman, Rob Hiaasen, John McNamara, Wendi Winters, and Rebecca Smith—in their first floor suite at 888 Bestgate Road. Within 3 min, the 38-year-old male perpetrator, utilizing a 12-gauge Mossberg shotgun, ended their lives to avenge the humiliation of a factually accurate article published about his misdemeanor harassment conviction seven years prior. It was entitled “Jarrod wants to be your friend.”

Such attacks cannot be specifically predicted but they can be prevented. And prevention is accomplished by identifying the threat, assessing the threat, and managing the threat (Fein et al., 1995). Management entails strategic prevention (a multidisciplinary team) and tactical reaction (a fully implemented plan for physical and behavioral security of the target). In this study, we test the usefulness of the Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol–18 (TRAP-18; Meloy, 2017) by applying it to the Capital Gazette mass murderer who was without any articulated ideology that would be traditionally recognized by counterterrorism or threat assessment professionals. We also introduce misanthropy as a simple, binary, and absolute cognition—an extreme overvalued belief (Rahman, 2024)—that is emotionally characterized by anger, contempt, and disgust for humanity and may be the final devolution in the mind of some targeted attackers. In addition to these primary tasks, we also attempt to (a) further our understanding of a previous hypothesis concerning the inverse relationship between online and on-the-ground behaviors in the period before a premeditated attack (Kupper & Meloy, 2023); (b) expand the

scope of our theory in a research setting that the TRAP-18 can be applied to language evidence only, in this case social media postings (Kupper & Meloy, 2021); (c) examine the enhanced risk posed by target dispersion; and (d) emphasize the importance of *pathway*, *fixation*, and *identification* as proximal warning behaviors in targeted attackers.

Methodology

J. Reid Meloy was retained as an expert witness in the civil case by the families of the victims against the owners of the Capital Gazette newspaper—a large corporate entity—for their failures to identify, assess, and manage the threat of violence that the offender posed toward the journalists and support staff whom he murdered. He has been given permission to both access and use all of the primary source materials from both the criminal and civil litigation, which provided the database for this study. The case is analyzed through the lens of the Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol (Meloy, 2017).

The TRAP-18

The TRAP-18 (Meloy, 2017) has been found to have substantial reliability and validity when utilized to assess violence risk among lone-actor terrorists (Allely & Wicks, 2022). This structured professional judgment instrument has been tested with a variety of subjects who have both carried out terrorist attacks and also who were stopped from likely doing so (Dmitrieva & Meloy, 2022; Meloy & Gill, 2016). Case studies have explored the intrapsychic dynamics of lone-actor terrorists with the TRAP-18 (Allely et al., 2024; Kupper et al., 2023), and group studies have shown its comparative and postdictive validity (Böckler et al., 2020; Challacombe & Patrick, 2023). The TRAP-18 is now widely used in North American and European counterterrorism efforts and has been officially adopted by the Australian government (Corner & Pyszora, 2022).

The TRAP-18 was also developed to be agnostic, that is, without the need for a particular belief system such as Salafi jihadism or militant white supremacist extremism, to assess the risk of an attack. The subsequent testing of ideological neutrality has supported its generalizability regardless of the ideology of the subject (Meloy & Gill, 2016). Results have ranged from the TRAP-18

correctly classifying incarcerated violent and nonviolent jihadists in Germany (Böckler et al., 2020), Sovereign Citizens in the United States (Vargen & Challacombe, 2023), and discriminating between violent and nonviolent offenders in the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol in 2021 (Challacombe & Patrick, 2023). The sensitivity and specificity in the first study were 0.80 and 0.93, respectively. A multidimensional scaling analysis (Goodwill & Meloy, 2019) has shown the clustering of proximal warning behaviors in targeted attackers, and a time sequencing analysis (Meloy, Goodwill, et al., 2021) has demonstrated that the distal characteristics typically precede the proximal warning behaviors, which in turn forego an attack. An aggregated subject database indicates that across all targeted attackers, there appear on average five proximal warning behaviors per subject, and there has yet to be identified one targeted attacker in a database >500 attackers where there were no proximal warning behaviors when retrospectively studied. When the TRAP-18 was applied to 30 targeted violence manifestos authored by lone offenders who planned to or committed a premeditated attack (Kupper & Meloy, 2021), 94% of its indicators were present in just the language evidence.

Definitions of TRAP-18 behaviors are cited below from Goodwill and Meloy (2019) and are displayed in abbreviated forms. They should not be used without proper licensure, training, and use of the TRAP-18 manual (Meloy, 2017).

Proximal Warning Behaviors

1. *Pathway* warning behavior is research, planning, preparation, or implementation of an attack.
2. *Fixation* warning behavior indicates an increasingly pathological preoccupation with a person or a cause, accompanied by a deterioration in social and/or occupational life.
3. *Identification* warning behavior indicates a psychological desire to be a pseudocommando or have a warrior mentality, closely associate with weapons or other military or law enforcement paraphernalia, identify with previous attackers or assassins, or identify oneself as an agent to advance a particular cause or belief system.
4. *Novel Aggression* warning behavior is an act of violence that appears unrelated to any targeted violence pathway and is committed for the first time.
5. *Energy Burst* warning behavior is an increase in the frequency or variety of any noted activities related to the target, even if the activities themselves appear innocuous, usually in the hours, days, or weeks before the attack.
6. *Leakage* warning behavior is the communication to a third party of an intent to do harm to a target through an attack.
7. *Last Resort* warning behavior is evidence of a “violent action imperative” and “time imperative”; it is often a signal of desperation or distress.
8. *Directly Communicated Threat* warning behavior is the communication of a direct threat to the target or law enforcement beforehand.

Distal Characteristics

1. *Personal Grievance and Moral Outrage* joins both personal life experience and particular historical, religious, or political events. The personal grievance is often defined by a major loss in love or work, feelings of anger and humiliation, and the blaming of others. Moral outrage is typically a vicarious identification with a group that has suffered.
2. *Framed by an Ideology* is the presence of a belief system that justifies the terrorist’s intent to act.
3. *Failure to Affiliate With an Extremist or Other Group* is defined as rejection of or by an actual extremist or other group.
4. *Dependence on the Virtual Community* is evidence of the individual’s active communication with or learning from others through social media or the internet concerning terrorist activities or beliefs.
5. *Thwarting of Occupational Goals* is a major setback or failure in a planned occupational life course.
6. *Changes in Thinking and Emotion* is indicated when thoughts and their expression become more strident, simplistic, and absolute. Argument ceases, and preaching begins. Persuasion yields to the imposition of one’s beliefs on others. There is no critical analysis of theory or opinion, and the mantra, “don’t think, just believe,” is

adopted. Emotions typically move from anger and argument, to contempt and disdain for others' beliefs, to disgust for the outgroup and a willingness to homicidally aggress against them.

7. *Failure of Sexual-Intimate Pair Bonding* is coded if the subject has historically failed to form a lasting sexually intimate relationship.
8. *Mental Disorder* is coded if there was evidence of a major mental disorder by history or at present.
9. *Greater Creativity and Innovation* is defined as an act of planned terrorism that is innovative or likely to be imitated by others.
10. *History of Criminal Violence* is coded if there is evidence of instrumental criminal violence by history.

Online Behaviors

Tweets are state-of-mind data in real time and offer compelling and powerful evidence for conducting prospective and retrospective threat assessments. To evaluate the offender's online activities leading up to his targeted attack, 173 pages of archived Twitter data were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. For the quantitative assessment, we manually counted every tweet and used the numeric output to create an overview of the perpetrator's digital behaviors from November 2011 to June 2018. For the qualitative assessment, the proximal warning behaviors and distal characteristics of the TRAP-18 were coded to the perpetrator's tweets to broaden the scope of our theory in a research setting that a behavioral-based threat assessment tool can be applied to a thin slice of data (Kupper & Meloy, 2021). Given the large amount of linguistic evidence in this case ($n = 871$ tweets), it was of particular interest to assess the time sequence of the evolution of the TRAP indicators for tactical purposes, and to examine if and how his language progressed over a period of seven years regarding the level of threat he posed toward his targets.

All tweets and dates were manually copied/pasted into a spreadsheet to determine if the definitions of the TRAP-18 indicators met the language of his online postings in a preliminary assessment by the second author. The findings were subsequently cross-referenced with the coding from the first author's assessment of the

tweets during the civil case. It became evident that the most concerning communications ($n = 154$) needed to be extracted and analyzed in more detail due to the extensive use of metaphorically violent language that lacked a clear intention of the author to personally execute—or be responsible for—a physically or psychologically harmful act against a specific target. We define “concerning communications” as problematic, inappropriate, and unwanted messages that elicit concern for the safety of targeted individuals or groups without meeting the threshold for any of the proximal warning behaviors or distal characteristics.

A closer look at this type of ambiguous language in his tweets resulted in the warning behavior *leakage* only being coded as present if there was a clear intent or declaration of violence through a harmful attack by the writer. The indicator *directly communicated threat* was only coded as present if (a) a clear intent or declaration of violence through a harmful attack by the writer was detected, and (b) the target or law enforcement were tagged in the tweet. Discrepancies in coding were evaluated and discussed until consensus was reached between the authors.

An additional focus centered on the development of the offender's misanthropic mindset in relation to the target dispersion he displayed in his verbal attacks on his Twitter feed. Misanthropy is defined as the hatred of humanity (Mirriam-Webster Dictionary, 2023) and is the opposite of philanthropy—the love of humanity.¹ Target dispersion is movement from targeting an individual to targeting the group to which the individual belongs. For example, a young man may harbor intense anger toward a young woman that has rejected his advances, but after immersing himself in the online “manosphere” and starting to identify with the incel movement, he now feels intense anger toward all young women. Target dispersion may be evident toward many different groups, including immigrants, people of color, LGBTQIA+² communities, Jews, Muslims, Democrats, Republicans, globalists, nationalists, or even delusional groups. The latter are often referred to as “paranoid pseudocommunities” (Cameron, 1943)

¹ We examine the concept of *misanthropy* in detail in the Discussion section.

² The abbreviation *LGBTQIA+* stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and/or questioning, intersex and asexual. The plus sign is intended to represent other sexual and gender identities that are not included in the acronym.

and may be the product of a psychotic individual who believes that certain individuals are conspiring against him—when, in fact, they have no actual relationship with each other.

To investigate the potential correlation between the perpetrator's misanthropic beliefs and target dispersion, we created a spreadsheet, first noting and counting all mentions of targets (i.e., names of individuals and entities) in his tweets. These were then divided into the following categories: Capital Gazette newspaper and staff, other newspapers and staff, individuals associated with the judicial/governmental system, and others. Second, the tweets were analyzed to identify if a person or entity was merely mentioned but not threatened or intimidated; only references to targets accompanied by clear expressions of concerning language were counted. This overview allowed us to evaluate if and how the perpetrator's initial pathological preoccupation with his cause (*fixation*) evolved into his psychological desire to become an attacker (*identification*) and eventually expanded into a devaluation of humanity (misanthropy).

On-the-Ground Behaviors

The entire criminal investigation database was reviewed to construct an understanding of the on-the-ground behaviors of the offender. In addition, the psychiatric and psychological evaluations completed by the experts retained by both the defense and prosecution for the sanity phase of the criminal trial were assessed. Although the civil trial was settled prior to opening statements, all of the available depositions of the plaintiffs, the defendants, and the declared experts were reviewed. Since the offender pled insanity, he waived all privileges to his psychiatric and psychological data and history. When possible, his self-report has been corroborated with other evidence. Most of the quotes from him are taken from the report of Sameer Patel, MD, the court-appointed forensic psychiatrist who spent approximately 20 hr evaluating him. Both his report and testimony were relied upon.

Results

What is most compelling about this case is the complete inverse relationship between the perpetrator's online (2011–2015) and on-the-ground (2016–2018) activities. There was not just a diminution of his online behaviors and an increase in

his terrestrial behaviors, but instead, there was little evidence of research, planning, and preparation for an attack on-the-ground until there was a complete cessation of his *observable* digital behaviors. There was a hard stop evident in January 2016 wherein *visible* online behaviors came to a complete and sudden halt, and then his on-the-ground planning and preparation behaviors began in earnest; however, he was still dependent on the internet for actionable intelligence, which substantially contributed to the success of his attack—in particular, his newly acquired knowledge of local police behavioral policies and procedures regarding their tactical response to an active shooter.

The most coherent analysis is to take these in the time sequence within which they unfolded, first reporting the online behaviors, followed by reporting of the on-the-ground behaviors, both through the lens of the TRAP-18.

Online Behaviors and the TRAP-18

Quantitative Assessment of the Twitter Profile

The offender created the Twitter profile @EricHartleyFrnd in November 2011, a reference to *Eric Hartley*, the journalist who authored the article about him in July 2011 with the abbreviation “Frnd,” referring to *friend*. The Twitter bio read, “Dear reader: I created this page to defend myself. Now I’m suing the shit out of half of AA County and making corpses of corrupt careers and corporate entities.”³ He circulated his first tweet on November 19, 2011, a few days after his harassment case entered “probation before judgment.” He noted in his defamation suit that he began the “publication of a personal website to rival the false and defamatory publicity of the Article.”

During the first year of activity, the perpetrator disseminated a total of four tweets in November 2011. After a five-month break, he made 172 posts between May and December 2012 and distributed a total of 229 tweets throughout 2013. The following year, the offender tweeted 330 times, the highest number of movements, with September being the most active month ($n = 54$). In 2015, his online behavior decelerated to 126

³ As the social media platform was called *Twitter* when the perpetrator was active, we label it as such instead of its current name X. “AA” is a reference to Anne Arundel County in Maryland, south of Baltimore, where the offender resided.

postings, with an additional decrease to nine posts in January 2016. The offender discontinued his tweets that month after the Court of Appeals denied his final appeal of the defamation suit against the Capital Gazette newspaper. Subsequently, he went dark for 2.5 years from February 2016 to June 2018 as he went operational, pretending he had moved on with his life. He reemerged from the shadows of the digital sphere on the day of the attack after he had killed five individuals when he tweeted, “Fuck you, leave me alone @judgemoylanfrnd.” This was a reference to Judge Charles Moylan, who upheld the dismissal of the defamation case in 2015. He then called 911 to report that he was the active shooter at the newspaper office and that he was “done.” Across a time span of seven years, he had circulated 871 postings; see Table 1 and Figure 1 for a detailed breakdown of his online activity.

Qualitative Assessment of the Twitter Profile

Application of the TRAP-18 to the Tweets. When the indicators of the TRAP-18 were coded to the perpetrator’s tweets ($n = 871$), four out of eight proximal warning behaviors and three out of 10 distal characteristics were prevalent in the language of the online postings: *fixation, identification, leakage, directly communicated threat, personal grievance and moral outrage, dependence on the virtual community, and changes in thinking and emotion*. Tables 2 and 3 show the occurrences of TRAP-18 indicators between 2011 and 2018.

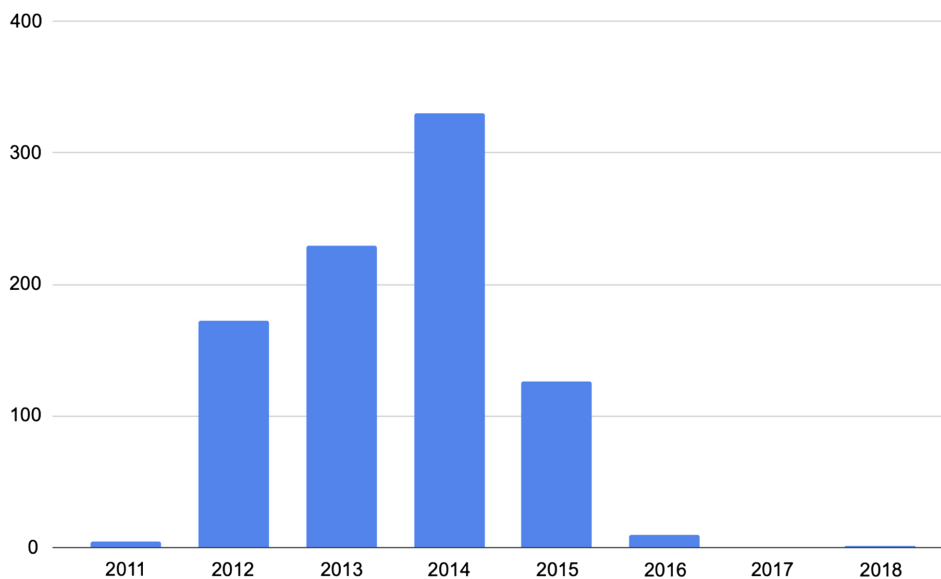
His feelings of anger and humiliation against the Capital Gazette newspaper and blaming its staff (*personal grievance*)—most notably journalist Eric Hartley and editor Tom Marquardt—and subsequently numerous judges connected to his court proceedings were visible from his first tweet in 2011 to the last one in 2018. We coded *dependence on the virtual community* as present throughout all active Twitter years, as the subject posted his line of thinking on a mainstream social media platform. The offender’s *fixation*—his increasingly pathological preoccupation with his cause against the news agency and judicial system—was also prevalent throughout every year. His *changes in thinking and emotion* were most notable in the language of his tweets between 2012 and 2015 as he became more strident, with an increase of violent and grandiose fantasies.

In 2012 and 2013, the perpetrator showed the first signs of transitioning from an angry victim with a *personal grievance* to an aggressor with a warrior mentality (*identification*) in his online postings: “Just like in my Raw Deal days, my opponents know what’s coming, and they can’t stop it. The mood is about to change @capgaz-news @ethartley,” was tweeted on June 28, 2012. The earliest example of the subject paying close attention to other targeted attackers was in February 2013 when Christopher Dorner, a former police officer at the Los Angeles Police Department, killed four victims and injured six during a killing spree across Southern California. We detected shared language between Dorner’s targeted violence manifestos and three of the

Table 1
Monthly Twitter Activity of the Offender (2011–2018)

Timeline	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
January	0	0	21	22	20	9	0	0
February	0	0	23	9	10	0	0	0
March	0	0	24	8	12	0	0	0
April	0	0	20	18	16	0	0	0
May	0	7	26	31	18	0	0	0
June	0	10	13	38	13	0	0	1
July	0	14	16	26	10	0	0	0
August	0	35	27	45	4	0	0	0
September	0	24	12	54	8	0	0	0
October	0	19	10	25	0	0	0	0
November	4	30	20	40	7	0	0	0
December	0	33	16	14	8	0	0	0
Total	4	172	229	330	126	9	0	1

Figure 1
Overall Twitter Activity of the Offender (2011–2018)



Note. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

offender's tweets: "Damages will be HIGH. I am unpredictable, and imprectable. I was Evil Tom's [Marquardt] high value target, and I know your testimonies and secrets. NAME" (February 9, 2013). Dorner (2013) called himself "unpredictable" and listed several individuals and groups within the Los Angeles Police Department as "high value targets" in his manifesto. Furthermore, the tweets "Don't blame the courts @capgaznews. You just fucked with the wrong person. You have awakened a sleeping giant-fucker" (February 9, 2013) and "Back to bed for the awakened sleeping giant pussy. #bully Watch from

Hell how you expose liars, and burn with Phil in the suiciders' corner" (February 13, 2013) are a direct reference to Dorner's writings: "You have awoken a sleeping giant" and "You have misjudged a sleeping giant" (Dorner, 2013, pp. 8 and 11). This not only evidences that the offender read Dorner's manifesto but the lexical overlap shows that his—perhaps at this point unconscious—identification with other killers had begun, studying and tailoring Dorner's words to his own specific needs. However, after initially idealizing the spree killer, the assailant disparaged him as a "scared little bitch" in a tweet after Dorner committed suicide on

Table 2
Prevalence of Proximal Warning Behaviors Across the Offender's Tweets

Timeline	Pathway	Fixation	Identification	Energy burst	Novel aggression	Leakage	Last resort	Directly communicated threat
2011		x						
2012		x	x			x		x
2013		x	x			x		x
2014		x				x		x
2015		x	x					
2016		x						
2017								
2018		x						

(No tweets)

Table 3
Prevalence of Distal Characteristics Across the Offender's Tweets

Timeline	Personal grievance and moral outrage	Framed by an ideology	Failure to affiliate with extremist/other group	Dependence on the virtual community	Thwarting of occupational goals	Changes in thinking and emotion	Failure of sexual-intimate pair bonding	Mental disorder	Greater creativity and innovation	History of criminal violence
2011	x			x						
2012	x			x		x				
2013	x			x		x				
2014	x			x		x				
2015	x			x		x				
2016	x			x						
2017					(No tweets)					
2018	x			x						

February 4, 2013. Thus, his *identification* with Dornier may have been short lived, but was later reflected in his detailed planning about how to survive a mass attack that he would carry out five years later.

We did not detect any specific *identification*-related language in the offender's tweets throughout 2014; however, on March 13, 2014, he mentioned the "Columbia shooter," Darion Aguilar, who randomly killed two employees at a mall in Columbia, Maryland, before turning the gun on himself postincident in January of that year. On May 25, 2014, the perpetrator also referenced Elliot Rodger's "Day of Retribution" YouTube video—Rodger had killed six and injured 14 during a mass shooting next to U.C. Santa Barbara, California, 2 days prior. On September 4, 2014, the perpetrator made a remark about two American journalists that were captured and beheaded by the Islamic State in August and September of 2014, James Foley and Steven Sotloff: "Foley and Sotloff are not dead (yet). Journalists making a living (literally) by participating in propaganda is nothing new. Think about it." These references were not coded as *identification*, but the emergence of the warning behavior in the assailant's language—and the development of his fantasies to homicidally aggress against his targets during this incubation period—is noticeable between 2012 and 2014.

The progression from victim to attacker (i.e., soldier, warrior) solidified in January 2015 when two brothers killed 12 and injured 11 journalists, cartoonists, and police officers during the jihadist-motivated Charlie Hebdo shooting in Paris, France. Charlie Hebdo is a French satirical magazine that had published a series of cartoons depicting the Islamic prophet Muhammad in 2012, which caused great outrage in the Muslim community. On January 7, 2015, the newspaper held their weekly editorial meeting when the premeditated attack began—which likely inspired the offender's tactical decision to conduct his act of violence during the Capital Gazette's board meeting. We think that this mass shooting was a turning point in his transgression, not only in advancing his cause against the newspaper and targeting journalists, but also in identifying himself with the attackers, which is reflected in seven tweets that he disseminated during the month of the French attack. Once more, the perpetrator intertwined his *personal grievances*

Figure 2

Offender's Tweet on January 16, 2015



Note. BFM = Brennan fucking McCarthy. Image by J.R., n.d. [@EricHartleyFrnd]. In the public domain. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

and *fixation* with a current event and began using the phrase “Je suis Charlie” (French for “I am Charlie”), a slogan that was adopted by French supporters of freedom of speech and freedom of the press in the aftermath of the incident, first used on Twitter. Figure 2 depicts the original cartoon published by Charlie Hebdo before the attack (French for “still no attack in France this week . . . wait”), which was superimposed by the offender with a picture of the French publication director’s face and one of the victims, cartoonist Stéphane Charbonnier, covered in blood and a bullet hole. Additional photomontages included the faces of Brennan McCarthy (lawyer of the offender’s first victim, Lori Sondervan), Tom Marquardt (editor of the Capital Gazette), and Judge James Lombardi (one of the civil suit judges). Furthermore, he added the phrase “BFM Akbar (just like Evil Tom),” a reference to attorney Brennan McCarthy and editor Tom Marquardt; “Akbar” is likely referencing “Allahu Akbar” (God is great), often used to evoke notions of jihad.⁴ The image shows a clear shift from observing and commenting on the murders of journalists Foley and Sotloff to specific tactics against the assailant’s targets, which is also reflected in the following tweet from February 18, 2015: “The problem with [Eric] Hartley, @mhengel, is he’s a veteran bad

journalist and proudly irresponsible, like @Charlie_Hebdo_.”

He also recycled the Dorner-inspired reference “sleeping giant” once more on February 16, 2015: “October 23, 2014: a date which will live in infamy. We will never forget (credit the awakened sleeping giant-fucker).”

The second significant event that spurred an immediate reaction and new tweets from the perpetrator with *identification* language occurred on August 26, 2015, when Vester Flanagan murdered news reporter Alison Parker and photojournalist Adam Ward during a live-streamed television interview on CBS in Roanoke, Virginia. The same day, the offender tweeted, “It’s not the journalist-on-journalist violence that shows @bryce_williams7 is a fake journalist; it’s the fake name.” The tagged account belonged to the gunman, a former employee of the company whose stage name was “Bryce Williams” when he was on air as a reporter at the Roanoke television station. Accompanying the post is Figure 3, a screenshot of the final image recorded by cameraman Ward: Flanagan holding the gun and pointing it at him, seconds before he was shot and killed. The Capital Gazette shooter overlaid an image of journalist Eric Hartley, clearly identifying him as one of his targets, suggesting a desire to commit a homicide specifically against Hartley and also generally on journalists.

The forensic psychiatrist Sameer Patel testified (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 209) that the offender explained:

I posted the pics because they’re scary to look at. I wanted to instill fear. It was psychological warfare. I had to be careful not to make outright threats. I just wanted to insinuate danger and instill fear. I didn’t want them to call the police.

He might have researched the legal threshold of what constitutes a *threat* in the state of Maryland and understood the criminal lines that should not be crossed in order to avoid drawing attention to himself. We suggest that the perpetrator’s profile acted as a double-edged sword of propaganda, similarly to targeted violence manifestos and live-streams (Kupper et al., 2022): On the one hand, it was meant to intimidate his victims; on the other hand, it created a platform for an audience that might have sympathized with his cause. These

⁴ “BFM” is short for “Brennan fucking McCarthy,” and “Evil Tom” is a reference to “Tom Marquardt,” both used in other tweets by the subject.

Figure 3
Offender's Tweet on August 26, 2015



Note. Image by J.R., n.d. [@EricHartleyFrnd]. In the public domain. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

two components were part of his communication strategy and desire to kill not only the Capital Gazette's staff but also the newspaper itself, thus changing a social institution and exerting influence over journalism.

The indicators *leakage* and *directly communicated threat* were visible in the years 2012, 2013, and 2014. As discussed in the Methodology section, many of the perpetrator's concerning communications included metaphorically violent but ambiguous language that did not meet the threshold of these two warning behaviors; they lacked a clear intention of the offender personally executing a physically harmful act against one of his targets.

In 2011, we detected no concerning communications across his four postings, but such did increase to 34 in 2012, approximately 20% of all tweets that were disseminated that year. In 2013, 43 of his postings were classified as concerning, roughly 19% of all communications. In 2014, about 13% of all tweets were categorized as concerning, which escalated to 24% in 2015. With his decelerated online behavior between

2016 and 2018, the number of inappropriate messages also diminished: 11% in January 2016, 0% in 2017 (no tweets were posted that year), and the one tweet that was published in 2018 was classified as concerning.

The offender was deliberately careful to not be explicit about any intentionality and instead used words that would propose death, homicide, and other forms of fatalities without clearly stating his proposed actions. One of the recurring themes was a *suggestive suicide* for his targets, which included the Gazette newspaper and its staff, as well as judges, lawyers, and his first victim, Lori Sondervan. Though the tweets below are problematic and inappropriate and may elicit concern for the safety of the targeted individuals, they do not merit a clear intent or declaration of violence through a harmful act by the writer. Examples include:

- November 22, 2012: “[Judge] George Nick Lundskow, do the world a favor and kill yourself. I don’t say that out of rage, but public concern. What a phony fuck you are.”

- December 4, 2012: “@SenatorBarb [Senator Barbara Mikulski] You’re sitting in my chair, Barb. No, really. I’m going to own that and Evil Tom [Marquardt] is going to blow his many brains out.”
- September 23, 2014: “The only way Lori Michelle Sondervan killing herself would interest me now is if it also led Eric Thomas Hartley or Evil Tom [Marquardt] to do the same.”
- November 28, 2014: “The next headline appearing BELOW Eric Hartley’s column? ‘Police are aiming for ‘Zero Deaths.’ Pull the fucking trigger indeed, Evil Tom [Marquardt].”
- January 21, 2016: “I’d say [Judge Charles] Moylan should kill himself, but I hope he lives to see this. Then the crooked prosecutor can fuck off like Frank (i.e., like Phil).”

In contrast, we think the following selected online postings meet the definition of *leakage* as the offender expresses that he will inflict some type of violence or punishment, or leaves the impression that harm will be delivered. If one of the targets or law enforcement were tagged, *directly communicated threat* was also coded as present—though it is noted that the selected tweets below only include veiled or vague threats:

- September 21, 2012: “As permitted by law—to wit, in court and before a jury—I am going to murder @ethartley’s career and the ‘paper’ @capgaznews. #♥1stAmendment♥”
- November 27, 2012: “Hi, John Smith. I’m Femto. I can also do whatever I want. I will have my own kingdom. I will choose the place you die.”
- March 9, 2013: “I’m ROR, not guilty, and unreported @capgaznews. Look who apparently isn’t: capitalgazette.com/news/for_the_r... Judge Nick [Lundskow], Open Season awaits. Your ass.”
- April 23, 2013: “Rob Hiaasen [one of the victims killed during the mass shooting], you’re one of his enabled asshole aristocrats @capgaznews. Come punitive damages, you’re still not ready. Love, /The Killjoy/.”
- September 14, 2014: “Mass shootings cannot happen anywhere, @ChiefKevinDavis [police chief]. For example: 2000 Capital Drive

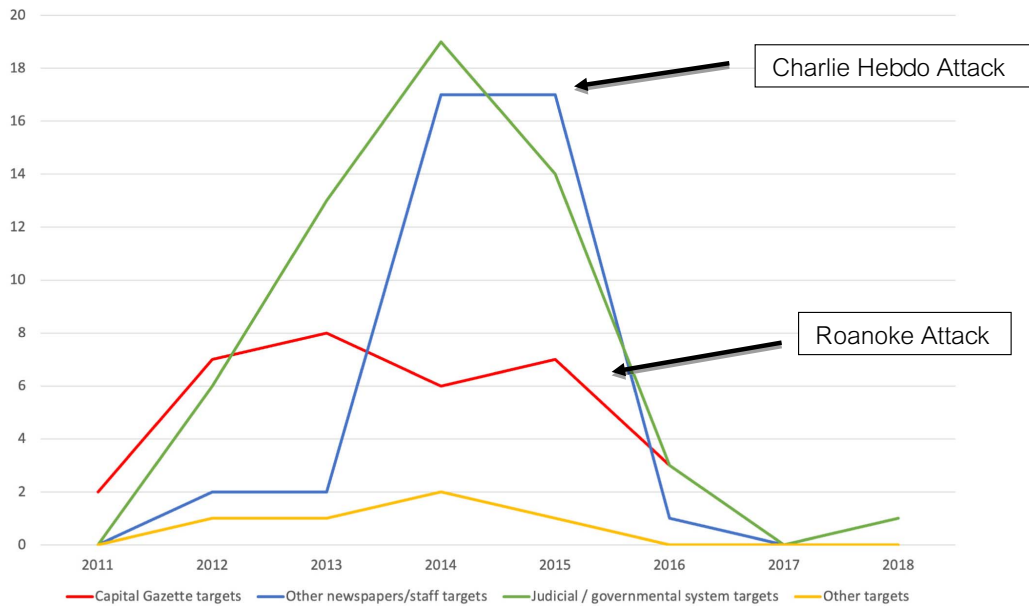
[address of Capital Gazette office]. No one left there to shoot.”

The last example includes a specific type of linguistic tactic: He negates the threat by stating “mass shootings cannot happen anywhere.” There were no instances of *leakage* or *directly communicated threat* in 2015, which is likely correlated with the observed increase in *identification*-related language, with a shift from verbally threatening his victims to forming plans to kill them.

Target Dispersion and Misanthropy. Given the large amount of language data in this case, we were keen to investigate the subject’s target dispersion in his online posting behavior, specifically assessing his verbal attacks and intimidations of different groups: the Capital Gazette newspaper and its staff ($n = 11$), other newspapers and their staff ($n = 29$), individuals associated with the judicial/governmental system ($n = 34$), and others ($n = 2$). The classification “Capital Gazette newspaper and staff” included reporters, an editor, and a former manager of the paper. The category “other newspapers and staff” incorporated reporters, editors, and a number of newspapers from Maryland, Nevada, and California. The grouping “individuals associated with the judicial/governmental system” was comprised of a large number of judges involved in the offender’s court proceedings: the Chief of Police and Sheriff of Anne Arundel County; Maryland’s senator, the attorney general, and several state attorneys; and a variety of attorneys that were involved in representing the Capital Gazette and his first victim. The latter was included in “others,” along with a therapist.

Figure 4 displays the total number of targets per year and visualizes the subject’s psychological movement from *fixation* to *identification* in his tweets. His pathological preoccupation focused on the Capital Gazette newspaper and staff in 2011 and 2012 and expanded to members of the judicial and governmental system in 2012 and 2013, with a small number of references to further newspapers and their staff and others. This motion highlights the perpetrator’s sequential target dispersion, which initially blamed the Capital Gazette and the author of the article, Eric Hartley. His *personal grievance* and *fixation* then expanded to encompass similar people—other reporters at the newspaper and its editor, Tom

Figure 4
Target Dispersion in the Offender's Tweets



Note. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

Marquardt. This framework of animus was again widened as his court proceedings occurred and broadened to include other individuals outside of the Gazette, including judges, law enforcement officials, politicians, and finally other newspapers and their staff. The highest number of total targets across all categories was recorded in 2014 ($n = 44$) and the second highest in 2015 ($n = 39$). As argued in the previous section, we believe that his identity as an attacker became more conscious and crystallized with the Charlie Hebdo shooting in January 2015 and the killing of the two journalists in Virginia in August 2015.

However, there was a clear decrement in numbers of individuals and entities attacked in his tweets across all data groups during 2015, which suggests that the offender's target dispersion phase was likely complete at the beginning of that year. Enemies had been identified far and wide, and there was no longer a psychological need to magnify his animus toward different targets online as the idea of homicidally aggressing against them in the offline world was now criminal intent. What we see in Figure 4 during 2015 is a clear decrease in his need to rant at all his targets as his self-identity as a targeted attacker fully formed in his mind.

The development of his misanthropic mindset is also reflected in the numbers of his target dispersion: As he was moving along the pathway to violence, his disgust against humanity expanded, and so did the number of his targeted individuals and entities in 2014 and early 2015. However, when the devaluation of the human race was completed in his mind and the perpetrator consciously decided to attack, his visible online behaviors diminished and served as a prelude to his "going dark" period from January 2016 to June 2018; his offline preparations dominated his thinking.

On-the-Ground Behaviors and the TRAP-18

By the end of 2015, the multiple civil actions that the offender had filed were dismissed by the courts, primarily since defamation as a legal concept—the centerpiece of his litigation—relies on both the communication of false statements and injury to the reputation of the person. In his case, the courts ruled that the published story was completely factually accurate.

Despite the absence of explicit pathway behavior during the years 2011–2015, people were concerned. The victim of his harassment

(Lori Sondervan) retained an attorney (Brennan McCarthy), who sought a psychiatric evaluation of the offender that was dismissed by the courts in 2013. Eventually, she moved to a southern state, changed her name, and married, but remained in fear of him until the attack. He had actually sent her a tweet as she was beginning her move out of state: “Within five minutes of pulling out of my driveway to move down here, he tweeted something along the lines of ‘You can run but you can’t hide. I know where you’re going.’” He also attempted to have her served with legal papers at her new address. “Before my tires even hit the highway, he knew that I was leaving the state. ... He tweeted about it. He was very bold” (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 102).

The newspaper staff were also quite concerned for their safety. The reporter who wrote the original article took another job, and the editor and publisher of the Capital Gazette at the time retired, but target dispersion evoked fear in others. There was one telephone conference call with a detective from the local police who reviewed the perpetrator’s communications in May 2013, but he decided the offender was not a threat. He did urge monitoring and wrote, “there is a safety concern and this may escalate;” however, there was no other threat management intervention (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021d, pp. 60–61).

Distal Characteristics

Personal Grievance and Moral Outrage. The offender’s *personal grievance* was initially against Lori Sondervan, a young woman he knew casually in high school, but who did not remember him when he emailed her a decade later. She did, however, respond to his desire to correspond, but eventually rejected his overtures. This began a two-year period of harassment, culminating in his misdemeanor conviction in 2011. His grievance toward her did not end, and he avenged her rejection by orchestrating her loss of her job by sending unflattering images of her from her Facebook page to her employer. Nevertheless, the newspaper article became his primary grievance in the summer of 2011 and he filed his first civil action one year later, with a subsequent full defamation civil suit in October 2012. He particularly focused on the word “rambling” in

the newspaper article (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County and Maryland, 2021b, p. 60), which he believed communicated to the world that he was crazy and ridiculed him, and he became increasingly outraged by the injustice that was delivered to him.

The perpetrator’s *moral outrage* was clear, but his vicarious identification with another suffering group—perhaps those he thought were victimized by the press—was less so.

He told me that there was a revenge element in this. That he couldn’t get certain people but that he could harm certain people indirectly, like [Eric] Hartley and [Tom] Marquardt. He discussed survivor’s guilt. And he told me that he felt that people like Hartley and Marquardt probably had significant survivor’s guilt. And he was very happy about that, that he could inflict pain on people that were not even present by indirectly harming their colleagues. (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 69)

The perpetrator stated that, “What Hartley did to me was like first degree murder. But I only recognized it as manslaughter” (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 167).

Framed by an Ideology. In the last several years before the Gazette shooting, we see evidence of a simple and rigid ideology in his life when he developed a misanthropic mindset. The assailant stopped working and became solitary and socially isolated: he was estranged from his father and sister, with no evidence that he attempted to socialize with others (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021c, pp. 59 and 69). He also made specific statements not just about being disgusted and disliking humanity, but also not wanting to be around humanity and finding solace and comfort in the fact that he would be sent away to prison for the rest of his life (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021c, p. 59). Postattack, he expressed his disappointment that he was unable to kill everybody in the newsroom.

His misanthropy was communicated to Dr. Patel, the forensic psychiatrist who assessed him:

- “I wasn’t suicidal and I didn’t want to die. I rejected humanity. ... I no longer cared to be living among the people in this world ... [my cat] was one of the reasons my last three years were the best of my life ...” (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 66).

- “I consider (prison) a high standard of living ... being away from people. Not having contact with people. That is preferable to me.” (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 79).
- “... it’s like I’m retired. My basic needs are met. I will live out my remaining days feeling content ...” (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 80).

Although there was some speculation that the offender was motivated by comments that former President Donald Trump made declaring the press “the enemy of the people,” he denied any such influence, and there is nothing in the record that would support such a link other than the general time frame (2015–2018). If there was such a connection, his massacre would be considered stochastic terrorism (Amman & Meloy, 2024).

Mental Disorder. Preoffense records indicate diagnoses of adjustment disorder (preoffense clinicians; Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 36); schizoid personality disorder suspected (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 82); perhaps obsessive–compulsive traits; and also, preoffense dysthymic disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, personality disorder not otherwise specified, and major depressive disorder were considered by various clinicians. In addition, there were preoffense medical diagnoses of cardiac arrhythmia, narcolepsy with cataplexy, and hyperparathyroidism by history with a self-described hypochondriasis.

Postoffense diagnoses included adjustment disorder, narcissistic and schizotypal personality disorders (court psychiatrist and psychologist), autism spectrum disorder, obsessive–compulsive disorder, and delusional disorder (defense psychiatrist and psychologist).

Failure to Affiliate With an Extremist or Other Group. Not present.

Dependence on the Virtual Community. His voluminous Twitter postings continued until he purposefully went dark in January 2016 to mislead targets into believing he had moved on. “He wanted to appear threatening and scare them but in a way that wouldn’t be actionable” (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 59). The psychiatrist also testified:

And he told me the reason why he remained off Twitter was because he wanted the future victims to think that he had moved on with his life, that he was no longer interested in them, to give them a false sense of security. (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 60)

The perpetrator subsequently used the internet to gather intelligence on the building, as well as Anne Arundel County Police Department’s policies and procedures for responding to an active shooter, which were posted online by an officer.

Thwarting of Occupational Goals. The offender’s contract position with the Bureau of Labor Statistics was terminated, likely due to chronic litigation, in July 2014; his employment was considered a “suitability concern” by this federal government organization (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 53).

Changes in Thinking and Emotion. The application of this distal characteristic is best completed by focusing upon changes in the perpetrator’s interpersonal behavior, changes in his internal fantasy life, and changes in his emotional state toward the target. In this case, he initially sought reparations through the justice system and devoted both time and energy to legally representing himself; he became disenchanting and then eventually disgusted with the process and those associated with it. During the two years before the attack, the assailant became a misanthrope, completely separating himself from his father and his sister, as well as any other social relationships. His gainful employment had ended, and he solely focused on his plan for a mass attack over the course of 2.5 years. His internal fantasy life, most accurately glimpsed through his online postings, evolved from target dispersion to identification as a mass attacker of journalists in very explicit communications posted during 2015.

Failure of Sexual-Intimate Pair Bonding. The offender was in no sexually intimate attachment relationships from puberty until the mass murder. He referred to his cat as his “fur wife,” and he was a virgin (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021b, p. 56); he also had never actually kissed a woman. The assailant had no sexual contact with another living being and would masturbate for sexual release.

Greater Creativity and Innovation. This case was the most detailed planning we have ever seen for a lone offender mass murderer.

Criminal History. The perpetrator had no recorded offenses that would be considered instrumentally violent. His only conviction was for the misdemeanor harassment of Lori Sondervan in 2011.

Proximal Warning Behaviors

Pathway. The perpetrator's earliest fantasies of shooting up the Capital Gazette were in March 2013, five years before the attack—a very long incubation period. He considered modeling it after the Oklahoma City terrorist attack in 1995, “a Timothy McVeigh style bombing” (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 60). These thoughts followed dismissal of his first legal case. He had “fully decided to do something” by January 2016 but stated to the court examiner prior to trial, “after the point of September 2015, there would have to be some shooting . . . in November 2015 I decided it wouldn't be the court of appeals, but the Gazette.” (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 60). The offender had surveilled the Court of Appeals building in Maryland that fall—“I wanted to kill judges in their courtrooms” (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 60)—and decided armed security was too prevalent to mount an attack. “So he didn't think he could create a reliable safety plan that would ensure his safety and allow him to kill judges. It was considered a hard target. And that's when he switched his attention to the Capital Gazette” (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 40). His motivation was clear in his mind: take revenge through killing, leaving those who survived racked with guilt, and put the Capital Gazette out of business.

He also waited for his cat to die (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 60), which was euthanized several weeks before his attack. The attack date was chosen to correspond with community members of the paper's editorial board being present on Thursday; this would create further liability due to public citizens being killed (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 60). Fortunately, there was no board meeting that day.

The perpetrator went silent on Twitter in January 2016 to “make them assume I had moved on with my life . . .” (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 61). They

did. However, the offender conducted online research and had plans to deceive police to slow down their response. He went on various websites and secured floor plans for the building from the commercial real estate website and also photos of the inside of the Capital Gazette offices from the paper's website. He rented ebooks on Amazon since he was trying to figure out how SWAT and law enforcement would approach a particular situation—his response to this new information was to develop countermeasures through the use of smoke bombs and dragon's breath (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 54).⁵

Following his firearm research, he settled on a 12-gauge shotgun; “in an indoor environment that's where a shotgun excels” (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 62). The perpetrator also studied a Remington or Mossberg pump action and chose the latter due to its left-handed availability; he researched purchase law and finally bought it in February 2017 for \$550 mail order out of state after he had surveilled the office building. Furthermore, the offender purchased side-by-side laser sights for accuracy and a strap around the stock to wear the weapon like a necklace when not engaged with the target. He practiced only at an indoor range in Upper Marlboro with dummy rounds, stating, “Wow this is a sexy weapon” (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 64). The assailant did reconnaissance inside the building on the coldest day in February 2017, so he could be bundled up and not recognized (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 61). He did it “to know where the doors were, which way they opened, how they could be secured” (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 62). He videotaped this visit and then destroyed the cell phone.

In developing his countermeasures, the perpetrator came across so-called “Barracudas” discussed on an Anne Arundel County Police Department officer's personal website. It was “like preparation to know the enemy” (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 63). During his research, he also discovered that the new police department training required them to

⁵ Dragon's breath is an incendiary type 12-gauge shotgun round utilizing magnesium pellets which burn at 3,000–4,000 °F, more than sufficient to set someone on fire. They are illegal in several states, including Maryland.

form a small contact group of four or five officers before they went into an active shooter scenario for the safety of the victims and the police (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021b, p. 31).

He went on to a website that was I think hosted by an Anne Arundel or former Anne Arundel police officer called—I believe it was called Anne Arundel Police Guardian Shield. And from that website he got the idea of the barracuda which was a device that could stop a swinging door from opening. So he purchased initially one barracuda to block the door of the Capital Gazette because in his plan for the attack he assumed that people would be running towards the back door. He subsequently bought a second barracuda because he was afraid that employees of a neighboring insurance company might be able to run out and pull their barracuda from the Gazette door out and help the staffers escape. So he brought the second barracuda with him and he employed both barracudas on both those doors in addition to a tie on the outside door to stop responders from coming in from the outside to respond to the attack. (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 43)

One of his biggest concerns was that there would be a first responder in the building at the time (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 63).

The assailant also purchased smoke canisters but did not use them (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 63). He noticed nothing in the police manuals about smoke as a deterrent, and if there were suspected Improvised Explosive Devices, it would slow down the law enforcement response (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 64). “I took pleasure in the next few years,” as the assailant stated (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 79).

In the fall of 2016, the offender did a drive-by of the building during the day to see if the windows had a reflective surface that would prevent first responders from seeing into the Capital Gazette suite as they arrived at the building (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 61). Planning was largely completed by mid-2017, with small adjustments remaining (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 65).

The week of the massacre, the perpetrator rented a KIA car from Budget on June 24, 2018 with a return date of June 28, the day of the homicides. On June 27, 2018, he spent his final \$1,500 on a lifetime membership in the U.S. Chess Federation.

He had sold his car ... sometime around Memorial Day. He was running out of money. He told me he sold it for four thousand dollars, he would have accepted three thousand dollars. And he kept a computer file of kind of everything he wanted to do before the offense. And one of the things was to rent the car prior to the offense. He told me specifically that he rented it four days before the offense knowing that he would commit the offense on the 28th and would not have to return the rental car that day. (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 41)

On the day of the massacre, the assailant sent a letter to the newspaper’s attorney, Bob Douglas, postmarked June 28, 2018. He discussed the tort law of defamation and had typed, “I further certify that I did proceed to the office of respondent CG at 888 Bestgate Rd, in Annapolis with the objective of killing every person present” (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 92). He also sent a letter to Marsha Moylan, the wife of Judge Charles Moylan, who upheld the dismissal of the defamation case in 2015. “Welcome, Mr. Moylan, to your unexpected legacy. YOU should have died. Friends forever, signature.” (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 92). The offender also sent a letter to the Maryland Special Court of Appeals with the same signoff. His final mailing that morning was a Compact Disk to Eric Hartley, the journalist who had written the original story: “it’s your day and all eyes are on you!” (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 92). The Compact Disk contents to Hartley included an article on the Marjory Stoneman Douglas shootings dated February 17, 2018. He also preidentified a community board member whom he believed would be present to kill and sent him a photo of his children with the notation, “orphans 1,2,3,4” (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021b, p. 122).

The offender stated that he “wanted to look like someone walking into one of the law offices” (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 69).

So the day before he shaved and he cut his hair shorter because he wanted to fit in when he was getting into the building the next day. He normally wore t-shirts and specific pants. He wore a button-up shirt. He was specific in that he wore the button-up shirt and a tie. He also disguised the weaponry. He told me he had about a thirty-six-inch black bag in which he could fit the shotgun and a lot of the equipment he used. The barracudas which you saw are very long so he bought mailing tubes and sawed off the ends of the mailing tubes so they would cover up the barracudas that were sticking out of the bag. He wanted to look like

somebody who was walking into one of the offices, just a normal person who wouldn't attract any attention. (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 42)

One of the examiners during his trial inquired if he wavered, to which the assailant responded: "Never. I was calm and ready for what I was going to do. ... There were no second thoughts. There were no doubts" (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 69).

He put in earplugs upon arrival and entered the building through an unsecured side door and was now in a hallway. He assumed people would flee toward the back, but the first Barracuda did not fit correctly. The perpetrator was going to use dragon's breath fired from the shotgun into the hallway to set it on fire, and left the black bag by the door so it would be a suspected Improvised Explosive Device—but the smoke canister also did not work. This was the cancellation of Plan A; he had four contingency plans. The offender eventually did Plan D, which was to go to the back and sweep forward through the offices. "So the whole construction of the plan and the implementation was influenced by his knowledge that a cop would probably be there or law enforcement would be there within five minutes of the initiation of the attack" (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 54). The assailant then put his wristwatch under his wrist so he could see it while shooting and started his stopwatch timer just before pulling the fuse on the smoke bomb. He figured he had five min; it actually took less than two min (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 75). He had also put his hair in a ponytail before the attack.

The perpetrator expected the glass front door to be unlocked; however, it was locked, so he shot and shattered the door. He first shot at Rebecca Smith twice and missed from 10 ft away. The third time was from 3 ft.

His second victim was Wendy Winters. "When I shot them, I didn't feel anything. ... I felt calm throughout the whole thing. ... I felt confused a few times, like when I missed Smith twice and when Winters was still standing after I hit her ..." (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 72).

He methodically moved through the office cubicles and reloaded two more rounds.

I see Rob Hiaasen standing at the desk area. ... I wanted to kill Rob. ... He threw a coffee mug at me and missed. ...

I shot him in the right ribcage. He screamed and went down. ... I knew he would die faster. ... (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 72)

"I saw John McNamara curled under a desk. ... I walked up and shot him twice ... at that time I was disheartened that I had only shot four." (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 73).

As the offender came back to the newsroom:

I started to feel a little nervous. ... I knew the responders would be there soon. ... I was intent to survive the attack. ... I never heard sirens but I knew they were coming. ... If you were to ask me about one of my greatest regrets from that day, it was missing Phil Davis. (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 73).

The perpetrator moved to another computer to tweet because the first one was a MacBook and he did not like flat keys and stated that his eyes lit up when he saw Gerald Fischman curled under a desk. "I jogged back to the conference room, got the shotgun and came back ... that tells you how good it felt to me ... it broke protocol but it felt so good. ... I stood over him and taunted him, 'It's Gerald time!,' and described taking great pleasure in delivering that line just prior to ending his life." (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021b, p. 74). "I paused for a moment to enjoy myself ... that was the first time I had taken extra personal pleasure in what I had done that day" (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 74). The offender said nothing during the shootings (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 97).

Five were slain in this order: Ms. Smith, Ms. Winters, Mr. Hiaasen, Mr. McNamara, and Mr. Fischman.

The assailant then tweeted, "fuck you, leave me alone @judgemoylanfrnd." He logged out and called 911: "This is your shooter. The shooting is over. I surrender. I'm at 888 Bestgate Suite 104. I surrender" (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 93). He specifically said that this was not a suicide mission; his goal was to kill as many people as possible and surrender as safely as possible (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 48).

Prior to the police entering the suite, he crawled under a desk to pretend he was a surviving victim. "While I was laying down I began saying, help, help, but no one heard me. ... I mimed a victim, but became quieter and quieter" (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 76).

He did not disclose his name and refused the police interview for 8 hr. He wanted them to learn his identity through the Capital Gazette.

After the massacre, he reported that his “high value targets” were the editorial board, but he was also hopeful three community members would be there, and perhaps some politicians, especially Anne Leites, who was the State’s Attorney during part of the time he faced criminal prosecution: “I want to give a black eye not only to judges but also the State Attorneys.” He regretted he only killed five out of 11 present that day (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021b, p. 78), and believed by also killing members of the editorial board from the community, they would bankrupt the paper in subsequent civil actions since they did not know of the threat he posed when they came for the meeting. There were people there specifically that he wanted to kill that he missed, and he later found out they were hiding there (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 35).

During the psychiatric and psychological exams, the perpetrator described his emotions after the offense: “immediate satisfaction,” “mission accomplished,” and “I have no regrets about doing it. ... I never had any regrets. I never wavered. I have no regrets today ... the average person would have killed themselves” (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 78).

At this point I’ve settled down. ... I had a release at the time of the shooting. It was a good feeling. ... I had all those years living under a cloud. Those four years I withdrew and insulated myself from the impact of the defamation ... now it doesn’t matter. (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 79)

Fixation. The offender initially focused on Lori Sondervan, a high school acquaintance, and his pursuit of her, both online utilizing emails and then defending himself in the courts (2009–2012). His *fixation* on her continued until she moved to another state, and then primarily shifted to his humiliation regarding the article published in 2011, following his misdemeanor conviction for harassment. The personal grievance continued as a pathological fixation on the Capital Gazette, target dispersed over the years as outlined above in the Online Behaviors section, until the final rejections of his appeals in January 2016, a five-year period of time. The *fixation* continued with his resolve to carry out a violent attack against the Capital Gazette and his planning and preparation until June 2018. Revenge was his

primary motive, fueled in the opinion of the forensic psychiatrist who evaluated him for 20 hr as a narcissistic wound. The length of the fixation from insult to attack was seven years. When his therapist who treated him from November 2010 until January 2013 asked him, “So how’s the rest of your life going?” he answered, “There is no life outside of this” (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 55).

Identification. As outlined above in the Twitter analysis, the first brief *identification* was with Christopher Dorner in February 2013, which was disavowed when Dorner committed suicide. However, the strongest movement to *identification* occurred during 2015 with the Charlie Hebdo attack against journalists in Paris on January 7, 2015, and then the attack in Roanoke, Virginia, against news reporter Alison Parker and her cameraman, Adam Ward, on August 26, 2015.

Fourteen individuals associated with journalism were murdered across these two attacks. The perpetrator briefly alluded to Timothy McVeigh, Elliot Rodger, and other mass murderers over the course of his postings from 2013 to 2015, as discussed above.

Novel Aggression. Not present.

Energy Burst. Not present.

Leakage. In October 2014, Brennan McCarthy (Lori Sondervan’s lawyer) petitioned the court for a mental health evaluation of the offender:

There exists a very real possibility that at some point in time [name] will take these violent fetishes as expressed in print and will try to carry them out in person, and the nature of the posts provides proof that threats have escalated over time.

Lori Sondervan filed an affidavit in support, “I have chosen to move from Maryland to escape Mr [name] who is unstable, I am physically afraid of [name] and that he may cause me serious physical injury and/or death.”

The leakage occurred via postings on Twitter between 2012 and 2014, as outlined in the Online Behavior Analysis above. He also wrote in one court filing, “If not illegal, (he) would kill the living body of Hartley [the reporter who authored the 2011 article]” (Amended complaint, [name] v. Hartley, October 9, 2012).

Last Resort. While the offender made few explicit *last resort statements* via social media, he did engage in *last resort behaviors* in the days,

weeks, and months prior to the killings. For instance, he used his credit cards to live, knowing he would trash his credit score and likely max them out before the shooting (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 62). He would pay the monthly minimum and had 10 cards, which ran up \$90,000 in debt before the murders. He also destroyed the hard drive on his computer before the shooting; on the day of the killings, he mailed a DVD and other notes to various individuals to both induce guilt and to ensure that they would be at his trial (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 67). The offender also burned his “life audit” before the massacre and told the forensic psychiatrist that burning was “representative of leaving the past behind before the shooting” (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 34). Moreover, he burned other items in his apartment in the months leading up to the shooting and stated that “burning was a symbolic way of letting go of things” (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 68).

Finally, the assailant euthanized his cat, which had cancer for four years per the veterinarian medical records, and stated, “goodbye you were great” (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 91). He had lived alone with his cat for several years and had decided the attack would not be carried out until his cat had died. In the weeks prior, he had stayed with the cat 24/7, feeding and nurturing it as they laid together on the couch, disregarding his own personal hygiene.

Directly Communicated Threat. He tweeted *direct threats* between 2012 and 2014, but none which met a threshold for criminal prosecution in the state of Maryland (see analysis of his Twitter direct threats above). He also wrote a letter to the editor of the Capital Gazette in the first year of his litigation: “Now I’m going to cripple your company forever” (October 4, 2012, letter to the editor).

Discussion

Although the *personal grievance* in this study is not the primary focus of our attention, it goes without saying that the news article was a deep source of humiliation for the offender. A fair amount of literature exists on humiliation—and in particular humiliation in the workplace—but managing a case such as this, wherein the threat is from the outside, is extremely difficult.⁶ In this

case, there was no attempt whatsoever to try to mitigate the risk through management of his humiliation, and a failure to understand the sensitivity of a narcissistic personality disordered individual to such events. The clinical centerpiece of management in a case like this is to assess and mitigate the subjective experience of the individual who has been the focus of humiliation (Meloy & Hoffmann, 2021; Ronningstam, 2005).

TRAP-18 Analysis of the Tweets

The *concerning communications* posted on the subject’s Twitter profile highlight the complexity of a linguistic analysis in a tactical environment. A canny subject of concern can be aware of legal boundaries that s/he should not cross to avoid detection and prosecution, and might instead opt for metaphorically violent language that does not meet the definitions of the TRAP-18 indicators. In a previous study on *targeted violence manifestos* (Kupper & Meloy, 2021), the TRAP-18 was applied to 30 written and spoken manifestos that had been authored by lone offenders who planned to or committed an act of targeted violence between 1974 and 2021. The average number of proximal warning behaviors was 4.5 and distal characteristics 3.8 across that sample, and 17 out of the 18 indicators were coded in total, with *history of criminal violence* being the only indicator that was not visible in the assailants’ writings. In this case study, the offender’s language evidence on social media was only positive for four out of eight proximal warning behaviors and three out of 10 distal characteristics, which highlights the importance of investigating and assessing both online and on-the-ground behaviors.

When all indicators coded as *present* were observed through a diachronic lens, we noted that the evolution of the warning behaviors in his tweets ($n = 871$) was personal grievance \rightleftharpoons dependence on the virtual community \rightarrow fixation \rightarrow changes in thinking and emotion \rightarrow identification \rightarrow leakage \rightleftharpoons directly communicated threat.⁷ This temporal sequence suggests that the distal characteristics preceded the proximal warning behaviors and that *identification* was followed in close proximity by *leakage* and *directly communicated*

⁶ For instance, see Gibson et al. (2024).

⁷ The symbol \rightleftharpoons indicates that the TRAP-18 indicators occurred at the same time in his tweets.

threat. These findings correlate with a time sequence analysis of the TRAP-18 that assessed the temporal relationship of its risk indicators in a sample of 125 lone-actor terrorists (Meloy, Goodwill, et al., 2021).

Crucial linguistic takeaways for an operational setting are as follows:

1. We may not be able to determine when and where a person will attack. Nonetheless, given what a threat assessor might know about the concerning behaviors of a subject—including his/her language use—we can make statements about who is most likely to carry out an act of violence and implement strategic, preventative measures to reduce the risk of such an event. Such measures *almost always* involve direct, face-to-face contact and interview with the person of concern; avoidance of direct contact should always be the exception to this general rule and done for very good reasons.
2. Due to the dynamic nature of a threat assessment, continually monitoring and reassessing concerning language is imperative to evaluate if and how a subject of concern is progressing or regressing along the pathway to violence. Tackling the issue with a multidisciplinary team of trained investigators, mental health specialists, and tactical linguists to conduct a holistic review is suggested.
3. Certain problematic, inappropriate, and unwanted messages may not warrant the coding of TRAP-18 indicators but may elicit concern for the safety of targeted individuals and groups. However, the language of these types of *concerning communications* should be monitored closely to observe any changes, particularly if they evolve into proximal warning behaviors such as *pathway*, *identification*, or *last resort*. Subsequently, the impact of those changes needs to be assessed to determine the best course of action for the threat assessment team.
4. The results of this and previous studies (Cowan & Lankford, 2024; Kupper & Meloy, 2023; Meloy, Goodwill, et al., 2021) indicate that the observance of proximal warning behaviors in online postings should alert the threat assessment team to manage a case more frequently and

urgently. The articulated level of threat should be increased as a correlate of the management tempo.

5. In accordance with our preceding study on targeted violence manifestos (Kupper & Meloy, 2021), the proximal warning behaviors *identification* and *last resort* should be seen as a flashing red light in language evidence.

TRAP-18 Analysis of the Entire Case

The results of the retrospective coding of the TRAP-18 for the entire case suggest valid use with targeted attackers who do not have a traditional ideological orientation. The offender was positive for six out of eight proximal warning behaviors—he did not evidence *energy burst* or *novel aggression*. He was also positive for eight out of 10 distal characteristics—he did not evidence a *failure to affiliate with an extremist or other group*, nor a *history of instrumental criminal violence*. He was retrospectively coded on 14 out of 18 indicators, or 78% of the TRAP variables; the indicators that were absent are notable. *Energy burst* occurs in 43% of targeted attackers ($n = 479$; Kupper & Meloy, 2023). *Novel aggression* is evident in some targeted attackers, and his absence of a need to test his ability to be violent in the context of no *history of criminal violence* is noteworthy since he had no previous opportunity to test his aggressive mettle. The majority of all targeted attackers do not have a violent felony history, with the likelihood of such a history most apparent in members of terrorist cells (Gill, 2015; Meloy et al., 2015). The two distal characteristics that were absent, *failure to affiliate with an extremist or other group* and *history of criminal violence*, are not unusual since both radicalization and preparation for targeted attacks increasingly unfold online and without the need for any actual on-the-ground contact with an extremist or other group. However, so-called lone actors are not actually alone in their activities and are highly dependent on the virtual community for both reinforcement of their beliefs and skill building for their attack (Gill, 2015; Kupper et al., 2022). Researchers have also noted that online networking among lone actors is extensive and obviates the need for actually meeting another true believer (Schuurman et al., 2019). Furthermore, the assailant's *pathway* behavior is consistent with his diagnoses of both narcissistic and schizotypal

personality disorder (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a).

The management of a complex case such as this one poses many difficulties and few easy solutions. The planning of management involves two complementary domains: (a) perimeter security and tactical reaction to an imminent threat if one should occur, and (b) strategic prevention through the activities of a threat management team over the course of the case. Much improved physical security is essential for newsrooms, and we note that the lethality risk for journalists when they are targeted for violence and attacked is 100% due to the general inadequacy of any physical and/or behavioral protection for the news media profession (Meloy & Amman, 2016). This contrasts with a lethality risk of 55% for politicians and 38% for judges when targeted, given their heightened security (Meloy & Amman, 2016). The tactical response of the police in this case was excellent, but we note that most mass attacks will be completed within minutes—in this case two min—precluding the effectiveness of a reactive response. One of the failures in this case was the unwitting leakage of information about police procedures on one of the patrol officer’s Facebook pages. Police policy and procedure must be kept confidential, if at all possible, with the exceptions typically being civil or criminal litigation.

Strategic prevention, especially given the fact pattern in this case—an intense fixation for four years followed by complete silence on social media—*mandates immediate face-to-face contact with the subject of concern* by a member of the threat assessment team. Why? For the purpose of intelligence gathering regarding his on-the-ground activities and rapport building for ongoing contact with the subject. A case such as this should never be a “one and done” direct contact given the stark change in his behavior. These types of interventions are both costly and time consuming and might raise legal issues of privacy, but we would argue that such an assertive and ongoing approach is rarely needed given the uniqueness of this fact pattern and is therefore warranted given the potential catastrophic downside. Simons (A. Simons, personal communication, November, 2024) refers to ongoing interventions with a person of concern who has significant life stressors—even before concerning behaviors emerge—as “aggressive caretaking.”

“Going Dark”: Online and On-the-Ground Preoffense Behaviors

In recent work, we have hypothesized that there is an inverse relationship between online and on-the-ground behaviors in targeted attackers’ behavior, particularly in the final week just prior to the chosen violence. Kupper and Meloy (2023) traced these two domains of behaviors in three militant right-wing terrorists who committed mass attacks on a synagogue, a supermarket, and an LGBTQIA+ bar in the previous five years. Although this was a very small sample pilot study, the results were compelling enough to invite further analysis of more cases due to the implications for threat assessment and management.

In this particular case study, the timeline for this inverse relationship was very different—the social media postings of the offender stopped 2.5 years before the attack, which also then commenced his on-the-ground planning and preparation—but the inverse pattern was the same: the sudden emergence of use of social media and the U.S. Postal Service mail the day of the attack as his final messages. What is most striking was the complete cessation, rather than a diminution, of his *visible* social media activity and his clear intent to mislead his targets and those third parties concerned with their safety into believing that he had moved on with his life (see Dr. Patel interviews cited above). His *invisible* online behaviors, for instance, including intelligence gathering on his target locations, as discussed under *pathway*. Threat assessors should be urgently concerned about an increased level of risk if a subject of concern suddenly goes dark, particularly if this turning point was preceded by months or years of intense online postings about a specific cause and/or target.

Misanthropy

Misanthropy has a very long history in religion, literature, philosophy, culture, and science, beginning with the writings of the pre-Socratic Heraclitus, and threading its way through the work of Moliere, Hobbes, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and even Ebenezer Scrooge and the Joker in popular culture. In its most aggressive forms, it may drive the behavior of the psychopathic personality (Garofalo et al., 2019; Meloy, 1988, 2001).

The presence of misanthropy—such as in this case—begs the questions of motivation and maladaptation: Can misanthropy be the final devolution in the mind of a targeted attacker? What emotions may be stimulated by, or cause such a simple belief? And do these cognitive and affective drivers contribute to a risk for targeted violence? We would answer the last portion of this question affirmatively and now unpack the others.

The belief that humanity is hated and cannot be trusted is simple, binary, and absolute. There are no qualifying aspects to this *simple* belief, such as an exception for some people; it is a *binary* choice, either you hate/distrust or do not hate/distrust humanity, rather than the more nuanced recognition that some people can be trusted and others cannot; and it is *absolute*, as such a belief does not harbor the possibility of being wrong or even questioned by others. It would be heretical to think otherwise. Misanthropy is an extreme overvalued belief (Rahman, 2018, 2024) and may be shared by others, although it is unlikely that misanthropes would gather for a party to celebrate their hatred and distrust of each other. Rahman and his colleagues (Rahman, 2018, 2024; Rahman et al., 2019, 2020) have traced the provenance of extreme overvalued beliefs to the work of the physician and neurologist Carl Wernicke in Germany in the 19th century. They have elaborated upon, redefined, tested, and applied it to the field of threat assessment, wherein such beliefs may cause harm to others: “the individual has an intense emotional commitment to the belief and may carry out violent behavior in its service” (Meloy & Rahman, 2021, p. 5). Such beliefs are often the driver of *fixation*, a proximal warning behavior for targeted violence that is defined as a preoccupation with a person or a cause that results in social and/or occupational deterioration (Meloy et al., 2012; Meloy & Rahman, 2021). In this case, misanthropy became the perpetrator’s central extreme overvalued belief in the two years leading to the attack. How do we know this? His complete social estrangement during this period of time from previous friends and family, the stated happiness he felt being completely alone with only his cat, and his Twitter statement, “fuck you, leave me alone @judgemoylanfrnd” immediately following his mass murder. He also made the following comments to one of the forensic examiners prior to his sanity trial: “he said if

by some magical act of God he was found not guilty he was sick of human beings. He had nothing left in the world. He would just murder more people” (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 70). “He didn’t want to be back in society” (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 96).

I was done with litigation and no longer cared to live in the world I was done. I wasn’t suicidal and I didn’t want to die. I rejected my humanity. I wasn’t just sick of Hartley, Marquardt, or the Gazette. I was sick of human beings. That’s a sentiment I carry to this day. (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021a, p. 173)

We have noted other such misanthropic quotes earlier in this study.

Beliefs, moreover, especially extreme ones, both magnify and are magnified by emotion. What are the emotions felt by the misanthrope? We think this simple belief is sustained by anger, contempt, and disgust, the arguable elemental emotions of hatred (Matsumoto et al., 2017), and provides an empirical understanding of misanthropy’s nexus to targeted violence. The emotions of anger, contempt, and disgust—the acronym ANCODI is used by researchers—have been studied and determined to be the key emotions associated with intergroup aggression (Matsumoto et al., 2012, 2016, 2017). From a functional perspective, “anger facilitates the removal of obstacles, contempt makes a statement about inherent moral superiority, and disgust helps to eliminate or repulse contaminated objects” (Matsumoto et al., 2017, p. 94). All humans are capable of these emotional states, and they are both distinctive as well as related to each other. The facial musculature of each of these emotions has also been mapped and is found cross-culturally (Ekman, 2007; Ekman & Friesen, 1971). Matsumoto et al. (2012, 2016) found that political leaders expressing anger, contempt, and disgust toward their outgroup—typically characterized as presenting an imminent, existential threat—lead to aggression and violence toward that outgroup, whereas other emotions, including anger alone, did not correlate with aggressive acts. They noted that a shift appears to occur from a temporary assessment of a group’s behavior (anger), to a permanent assessment of the nature of the group (contempt), to its future status (disgust). Matsumoto et al. (2017) recently demonstrated that these emotions *cause* hostile cognitions toward specific groups.

In a larger ideological context, misanthropy can be a crucial component in extremist belief systems, as seen in the transnational accelerationist network M.K.Y. (Maniac Murder Cult), which combines nihilism with terrorism (Argentino et al., 2024). Their propaganda, for example the third edition of their targeted violence manifesto *Haters Handbook*, promotes lethal attacks through “total misanthropy,” thus widening the net of targets instead of focusing on one specific minority group.

Adolph Hitler was a master at characterizing outgroups as disgusting, often by portraying them as carriers of disease. Here are his words from *Mein Kampf*, published a decade prior to his appointment by President von Hindenburg as Chancellor of Germany in 1933 (Hitler, 1925):

Don't be misled into thinking you can fight the disease without killing the carrier, without destroying the bacillus. Don't think you can fight racial tuberculosis without taking care to rid the nation of the carrier of that racial tuberculosis. This Jewish contamination will not subside, this poisoning of the nation will not end, until the carrier himself, the Jew, has been banished from our midst.

Disgust is a universal, evolved, and primitive emotion that does keep us safe from real contaminants and toxins in our environment. However, if individuals or groups—such as Jews, immigrants, homosexuals, or people of color—are defined and labeled as contaminants or toxins, anger is not the primary emotion that is aroused. Are we angry at snakes, spiders, maggots, cockroaches, or other vermin? No, but some of us are disgusted by them, and the impulse is to eliminate them and purify our surroundings; *disgust bypasses anger and goes straight to homicide*.

Hatred, the defining emotion of misanthropy, appears to be composed of the elemental emotions of anger, contempt, and disgust (Matsumoto et al., 2017). Anger breeds the passion, contempt breeds the devaluation, and disgust breeds the dehumanization and desire to eliminate. This is the violence risk for the misanthrope. Not only does he feel anger toward other humans, he views them from a position of moral superiority and equates them with contaminants to be eliminated. Such are the conscious thoughts and emotions of the misanthrope, the hammer and nails of his narcissistic architecture.

But what is within the unconscious of the misanthrope? The psychodynamics of misanthropy typically depend on the unconscious emotions of

both envy and shame. Envy is the wish to destroy goodness (Klein, 1975), while shame is the feeling of public exposure of the self as being grossly deficient in the eyes of others (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Both of these emotions are normally evident at times in the young child and typically precede the more Oedipally mature emotions such as guilt, remorse, admiration, and gratitude. The misanthrope's envy of the actual goodness within others, and the shame in believing that he does not possess such positive traits, leads to his gross devaluation of humanity (*misanthropy*), which, in turn, permits the extreme violence to obliterate the humanity around him. The *act* of destroying all goodness in others, which of course is impossible to do, is a primitive and violent attempt to change the playing field—we all become despicable—to manage feelings of oblitative envy and intense shame within the self (Knoll et al., 2022).

In this case, the evolution of the perpetrator's misanthropic state of mind was correlated with the shift from his initial *fixation* on the Capital Gazette newspaper and staff to *identification* behavior, likely ignited by publicized targeted attacks on journalists. This, in turn, was visible in his target dispersion and sequential movement from one individual to another in his Twitter feed while bringing in others as an (online) audience (Meloy, Amman, et al., 2021). This resulted in generalizing from one individual to the group within which the individual belonged, both in terms of journalists and judges, as alluded to in earlier sections and summarized in the next one.

Target Dispersion

In one study of preoffense behaviors of targeted attackers conducted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (Silver et al., 2018), target dispersion was considered an accelerator of risk due to general animus, and within extremist groups the belief that the outgroup poses an imminent, existential threat often mandates hostile action toward that group (Berger, 2018). In this case study, we see clear evidence of both target dispersion and target sequencing, first toward the journalists, then toward management of the newspaper, then toward the judges ruling against the offender in the Maryland courts, and finally toward those he murdered—four journalists and a sales assistant—during his attack on the newsroom in June 2018. Lanum et al. (2024) found that target sequencing significantly correlated with

approach behavior. The frequency of postings concerning target dispersion in this case reached their peak and then began to decrease in the beginning of 2015; at the same time, his *identification*, or self-identity as an attacker, was becoming more fully conscious and clear to him. The naked display of his generalized hatred was finished, and he could now attend to his newly formed and dark identity.

It appears that the offender's inflection point—his decision to carry out his own event and advance on the pathway to violence from the *grievance* and *violent ideation* stages to *researching*, *planning*, and *preparing* for an attack—was between September 2015 and January 2016 when the Maryland Court of Appeals finally dismissed his suit (Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 2021b, p. 91). The perpetrator initially considered mounting an attack on the Court of Appeals in Annapolis, Maryland, and scouted the target location in November 2015. However, since the courthouse was a government building, it was a well-protected hard target with armed security, not only at the entrances but also within each courtroom. Therefore, he decided against an act of violence at that location and instead began considering the Capital Gazette newspaper office: a soft target with a lack of adequate perimeter security.

Here, we have two important operational takeaways for threat assessors:

1. Target dispersion, especially sequential dispersion, is a likely indication of acceleration of the risk of approach in a case.
2. A sudden drop in need to target disperse in cyberspace may signal the cessation of being a victim to crossing into criminal conduct by becoming a warrior or soldier for a cause. Mobilization for homicidal aggression may have begun.

Pathway, Fixation, and Identification

The extant research has found that *pathway*, *identification*, and *last resort* are the most validated proximal warning behaviors that correlate with, and in some studies postdict, targeted violence (Meloy et al., 2023). In this particular case, two of these proximal warning behaviors—*pathway* and *identification*—are apparent and preceded his attack, and a third, *fixation*, emerged as the first proximal warning behavior seven years before the

attack. We have referred to such a long period between the onset of the *personal grievance* and the attack as an example of a tail risk case, and this is certainly one of them. Moreover, time sequence analysis has found that *fixation* is typically the first proximal warning behavior to appear in a case (Meloy, Goodwill, et al., 2021), and for the threat assessor, this means that active management is necessary, but the risk is neither high nor imminent if there are no other proximal warning behaviors. Most people with pathological fixations do not carry out a targeted attack, so it becomes an error to use *fixation* as a predictor of violence. *Fixation* is very similar to *leakage* in two ways: Most subjects who only evidence these proximal warning behaviors will not carry out an attack, yet most perpetrators, typically 60%–80%, will have displayed both *fixation* and *leakage* before their attack. They are correlates of risk but not predictors of risk, with high sensitivity but low specificity. The operational learning here is that all cases of *fixation* and *leakage* must be investigated, but most of them will turn out to be false positives.

The development of the offender's *identification* behavior, first visible in his online posts beginning in 2012 and through 2015, and subsequently detectable in his on-the-ground activities, was the critical period of time that marked his advancement on the pathway to violence. *Identification* was noticeable in his language use on several levels: He identified as a pseudocommando (Dietz, 1986) with a warrior mentality (Hempel et al., 1999), he identified with previous targeted attackers (Kupper et al., 2022), and he saw himself as an agent to advance a specific cause (Meloy et al., 2015). As discussed in our previous study on targeted violence manifestos where *identification* was detected in 93% of the writings (Kupper & Meloy, 2021), this indicator should be seen as a flashing red light in language evidence, particularly if it occurs with other proximal warning behaviors.

Conclusion

The offender committed the worst attack on American journalists in the history of the United States. He did it to avenge the humiliation he experienced because a reporter wrote a factually accurate story about his harassment of a young woman whom he knew as a casual acquaintance in high school. The story of the Capital Gazette massacre is complex and fraught with human

tragedy that we have only touched upon (Marquardt, in press). In the interests of threat assessment and management, the focus of this study has been upon the inverse relationship between his online and on-the-ground behavior in the period before the act of violence; the enhanced risk posed by target dispersion; the importance of *pathway*, *fixation*, and *identification* as proximal warning behaviors in targeted attackers; the application of the TRAP-18 to a grievance-fueled perpetrator and his social media postings; and the devolution of his state of mind to fully embrace misanthropy, an extreme overvalued belief captured in his hatred for humanity, which ultimately provided the rationale for him to murder five other human beings.

Operations within a threat assessment environment or forensic investigative work during criminal proceedings are often ahead of research because the latter, if done well, is tedious and slow. However, as this study illustrates, conducting a retrospective deep dive into concerning preincident behaviors of a targeted attacker provides systematic insights which can be utilized to prevent future acts. Furthermore, areas of refinement can be suggested in hindsight when more data are available, especially in an aggregated manner.

Limitations

This study is not without its limitations. It is a retrospective study of a case and therefore subject to hindsight bias, availability bias, and confirmation bias. It is also a case study, which has no predictive or postdictive power, yet it serves as an example of the dynamic tension between idiographic and nomothetic research that does advance science. The first author played a direct role in the civil litigation in this case and likely had some allegiance bias toward the plaintiffs. And the meta-goal within such work—to prevent further acts of targeted violence—carries within it the risk of elevating the public welfare above the privacy rights of any one individual.

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