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A Comparison of Email Versus Letter Threat Contacts toward Members of the United States Congress*

ABSTRACT: To better understand inappropriate correspondence sent to public officials, 301 letter cases and 99 email cases were randomly selected from the United States Capitol Police investigative case files and compared. Results indicate that letter writers were significantly more likely than emailers to exhibit indicators of serious mental illness (SMI), engage in target dispersion, use multiple methods of contact, and make a problematic approach toward their target. Emailers were significantly more likely than letter writers to focus on government concerns, use obscene language, and display disorganization in their writing. Also, letter writers tended to be significantly older, have more criminal history, and write longer communications. A multivariate model found that disorganization, SMI symptoms, problematic physical approach, and target dispersion significantly differentiated between the correspondence groups. The group differences illuminated by this study reveal that letter writers are engaging in behavior that is higher risk for problematic approach than are emailers.

KEYWORDS: forensic science, risk assessment, threat assessment, threat management, targeted violence, problematic approach, threats, government official, written communication, email

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, introduced a heightened sense of awareness to the threats that exist toward the United States. Law enforcement personnel responded to the 9/11 events in record numbers to protect our government and secure the safety of the American people. In the weeks and months that followed these attacks, our nation functioned under a more guarded climate and the American public became aware that there are those, operating as individuals and groups, both foreign and domestic, who pose a threat to our institutions. While the widespread perception of threat toward our government seems to be a renewed and strengthened concern in the consciousness of the American public, law enforcement agencies have continued to be aware of the threats. In addition to being apprised of existing threats, law enforcement and protection agencies also attempt to predict and prevent violence that may stem from these threats.

Over the past 20 years, the scientific and law enforcement communities have made increasing efforts to assess risk of violence and predict dangerousness. These efforts have focused on cataloging factors that might effectively predict violent attack by an individual. However, most of this research has focused on predicting a general risk of violent behavior toward unspecified victims (e.g., 1–3). Subsequent research in the growing fields of threat assessment and threat management has focused on assessing the subject's risk of engaging in violent or problematic approach toward a specific and identifiable target. This research has sought to identify the subject, behavioral, motivational, and contextual characteristics that significantly predict the level of danger posed by the subject, thus

allowing law enforcement to more effectively prevent future incidents of targeted violence or problematic approach (e.g., 4–11). The literature on threat assessment has been steadily growing but more scientific research is necessary. Furthermore, law enforcement, intelligence, and defense agencies are calling on social scientists to conduct behavior-based and operationally relevant research on threatening and terroristic acts (12).

Borum, Fein, Vossekuil, and Berglund (5) articulated a threat assessment approach pertaining to targeted public officials that attempts to identify, assess, and manage persons who *pose* a threat of violence rather than persons who simply *make* a threat of violence without attempting violent behavior. This distinction is important because the ultimate goal of threat assessment is to identify and intervene in cases that *pose* a threat, or have characteristics predictive of actual violence and danger. Many studies of targeted public figures have revealed that simply *making* a threat of violence, or verbalizing the intention to do harm, has not been found to be predictive of engaging in a targeted violent approach (4,6–11). For example, in an analysis of inappropriate written communications sent to members of the United States Congress, Dietz, Matthews, Martell et al. (7) found that subjects who approached their targets used significantly less threatening language (i.e., any offer to do harm) in their letters. Scalora, Baumgartner, Zimmerman et al. (10) analyzed 4,387 cases of problematic contacts toward Congressional targets and found that subjects who made direct or veiled threats were significantly less likely to engage in approach behavior. In a follow-up study of 316 cases of threatening or inappropriate Congressional contacts, Scalora, Baumgartner, Zimmerman et al.'s (11) results indicated that approachers were significantly less likely to have used threatening language prior to or during the incidents being examined.

Additional subject, contact and content/language characteristics have also been related to problematic or violent approach in the studies that have examined targeted Congressional officials of the U.S. federal government. Dietz, Matthews, Martell et al. (7) found

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that subjects who engaged in problematic approach sent significantly more and significantly longer letters to a particular member of Congress. Scalora et al. (10) found that approachers were more likely than nonapproachers to be younger. Both studies by Scalora et al. (10,11) found that those who made problematic approaches were more likely to make fewer attempts at anonymity, display more evidence of mental illness, have more prior arrests, and have contacted multiple targets. Content of the communications was more likely to contain personal themes (such as help-seeking and entitlement issues), and less likely to have target-focused themes (such as insulting, fear-inducing, obscene, sexualized or racial language). Scalora et al.'s (11) follow-up study additionally found that approachers were more likely to be male and to display more evidence of incoherent or disorganized thought. They were also more likely to have made contact toward the target prior to approach and less likely to have communicated domestic or foreign policy issues.

A number of contact characteristics have been related to approach behavior across multiple studies. These studies have shown that approachers are more likely to use multiple modes of contact (i.e., contacting the target with a combination of letters, emails, telephone calls, etc.) and to make multiple contacts to their target prior to approach (7,8,10,11). While these studies have highlighted various risk factors for problematic targeted approach, further examination of subject, contact and content/language variables is warranted to gain a more complete understanding. Some of these studies (e.g., 10,11) have also highlighted the various written modes of communication and called for additional attention in threat assessment research to the differential risk factors associated with each type of written communication.

Written letters have always been a prominent mode of corresponding with public officials. In October 2001, the United States witnessed an unexpected form of letter threat when anthrax appeared in envelopes shipped via the United States Postal Service. Because of this new bio-chemical threat, government officials increasingly encouraged constituents to contact them via email. American culture has been increasingly relying on the computer and has seen a boom in Internet use as a means of communicating, delivering information, initiating and maintaining interpersonal relationships, and conducting business. Accordingly, electronic modes of communication have become increasingly common. In a Congressional Management Foundation study on how the Internet has impacted citizens' communication patterns with Congress, Fitch and Goldschmidt (13) found that "Congress received four times more communications in 2004 than 1995—all of the increase from Internet-based communications" (p. 4).

In the sphere of political and public life, an increase in email correspondence has brought with it an increase in the number of threats received electronically. As inappropriate emails have increased in number, there has grown an enhanced need to identify and assess the electronic medium, related content characteristics, and the corresponding risk factors for problematic approach. Previous research related to problematic written contacts toward political officials has focused solely on postal letters and faxes, and has not yet considered email contacts.

The rise in the number of email communications has brought with it a rise in Internet-related crime. FBI Supervisory Special Agent J. R. Fitzgerald (personal communication, April 15, 2003) highlighted at least 12 steps involved in completing a postal letter:

1. If evidence conscious, put on gloves prior to handling any paper products.
2. Attain paper and a writing instrument.
3. Write or type the threatening message.
4. Attain a transmittal envelope.
5. Address transmittal envelope.
6. Place the appropriate postage upon it.
7. Place the threatening communication inside transmittal envelope and seal it.
8. Leave the place (home, office, etc.) where it was prepared.
9. Travel to postal facility and/or mailbox.
10. Place transmittal envelope inside mail slot.
11. Wait one, two, or three days for the target to receive the communication.
12. Target opens and reads the communication (p. 4).

On the other hand, Fitzgerald asserted that there are only five steps required to send an electronic (email) letter threat:

1. Attain access to a computer with Internet hookup.
2. Log on to an email account (possibly under a fictitious name/account).
3. Complete email boxes with address of target and threatening message.
4. Hit "Send" icon.
5. Target computer receives message virtually instantaneously, victim opens and reads the communication the next time he logs on (p. 4).

As Supervisory Special Agent Fitzgerald (personal communication, April 15, 2003) pointed out, the different number of required steps illustrate the fact that the computer and Internet have "streamlined" the process of sending problematic or threatening communications. Postal letter contacts can take hours to complete and days to reach their destination, whereas email contacts can be done in a matter of minutes and arrive in the target's inbox nearly instantaneously. Fitzgerald concluded, "[W]ith less than half the required steps, and a fraction of the time, the computer-based threatener has many fewer actions in which to partake. Thus, he has much less time to think, or 'decompress', about halting a potentially illegal activity before completing it" (p. 5). Based on Fitzgerald's assertions regarding the speed with which emails are completed and the subject's lack of time to "think" about what he is doing, it is hypothesized for the current study that email contacts will contain more expressions of threatening language and more indicators of anger when compared with postal letter contacts.

The literature that compares the content of email versus written postal letters is sparse. It appears that this area has been studied mostly in the fields of marketing and business, and has primarily examined the differences between mail and email survey methods. A number of these studies have found specific response characteristics. It has been repeatedly observed that the length of responses to open-ended questions is significantly longer in email surveys than in mailed letter surveys (14–16). In addition to a higher average word length in email responses, Mehta and Sivadas (15) observed that email respondents tended to give explanations to close-ended questions and to more thoroughly clarify their expressed attitudes. From this, they concluded that written responses to email surveys were more "insightful" than written responses to mail surveys. Kiesler, Siegel, and McGuire (17) and Sproull (18) conducted studies that revealed the tendency for email respondents to be more "self-absorbent" and more "uninhibited," and subsequently described email responses to be more candid (19). Lastly, it is interesting to note that Mehta and Sivadas (15) found that the quick and interactive nature of email allowed potential respondents of the email survey condition to "complain to the offending researcher" (p. 431).

Taken together, these studies show a trend in email surveys such that the email responses tended to be longer, more detailed and less

inhibited. Furthermore, displeased individuals actually sent complaints to the researchers over email, while no such complaints were received through postal mail. Therefore, it is hypothesized for the current study that inappropriate email contacts toward public officials will present similarly to these email survey responses by being longer, containing more explicit language, and demonstrating less inhibition as evidenced by the presence of more threats and more indicators of anger.

Even though violence base-rates are low, law enforcement professionals charged with protecting political figures need to be able to effectively assess threat and manage threatening cases based on the information available when threats present themselves. Furthermore, these initial threat assessments usually need to be conducted with limited information and under time constraints. Thus, it is important to continue building the empirical literature in identifying operationally relevant risk factors for problematic and targeted approach behavior.

The goal of the current study was to conduct an analysis of the subject, contact behavior, and content/language characteristics of inappropriate emailers versus letter writers, and to investigate these variables for their power to predict problematic approach toward Congressional targets. This study specifically aimed to determine which variables significantly differentiated the email versus letter writing groups, and whether the mode of communication used in the preapproach contact impacted the level of risk for problematic approach behavior. It was hypothesized that emails would contain longer, angrier, more explicit, and more threatening language than letters. It was also hypothesized that those who communicated with hand-written and mailed letters would have a higher incidence and severity of approach behavior than those who communicated via email. Additional subject, contact behavior, and content/language characteristics were examined as well to develop a better understanding of the nature of these written contactors.

Methods

Data were collected from the case files of the Threat Assessment Section (TAS) of the United States Capitol Police (USCP). The USCP is the law enforcement agency charged with protecting United States Congressional Members and their staff. Threatening or suspicious incidents are reported to the TAS who make threat assessment and threat management decisions so as to prevent problematic approaches and violent attacks toward Congressional targets. These incidents are referred to the TAS by the affected parties. The affected parties are geographically and politically diverse and have been instructed to report correspondence that appears highly inappropriate or that is threatening in a direct or veiled nature. Content in the case files of the TAS reviewed for this study included letters, emails, police reports, victim statements, as well as subject criminal and mental health histories.

Cases of subjects who sent inappropriate or threatening letters or emails were randomly selected from the TAS files for correspondence received from January 2001 to December 2004. Letters were identified as any communication received on paper via the U.S. Postal Service or delivered by hand. Emails were identified as any computer-based communication sent electronically to the Congressional target's email account. The cases selected for the samples were exclusive of each other—the letter cases were comprised of subjects who contacted their target through written letters and never utilized emails while the email cases were comprised of subjects who predominantly made contact using email. A total of 400 randomly selected written contact cases were included in the sample

for the current study. Of these 400 cases, 301 contained only letter contacts and 99 utilized emails.

Subject, contact, and content/language characteristics were coded to compare across written modalities and to examine their predictive utility. Subject characteristics that were analyzed included demographic information, such as gender and age, mental illness, and criminal history. Mental illness was considered to be present if there were observable indicators of serious mental illness (SMI) symptoms and/or accompanying disordered behaviors as determined by TAS investigators trained in detecting mental illness or by the data coders reviewing the subjects' written correspondence. Symptoms and behaviors considered to indicate the presence of mental illness included reported hallucinations, delusional beliefs (e.g., paranoid or persecutory delusions, delusions of being controlled), and disorganized thought content. Threat-control override symptoms were considered to be present if the subject displayed a co-occurrence of psychotic symptoms that induce feelings of being threatened (e.g., paranoid ideation) and symptoms that override feelings of self-control (e.g., command hallucinations, not feeling in control of one's own thoughts). Also coded was information pertaining to the subject's criminal history, which was drawn from National Crime Information Center (NCIC) records and from local law enforcement contacts. The subjects' criminal history was coded for the total number of charges in the categories of threat/harassment, violent crime, property crime, drug/alcohol, traffic, and other, as well as combined into a total past charges category.

A number of contact characteristics were examined between the letter and email groups. Target dispersion was considered to be present if the subject made contact with or identified multiple targets. Multiple methods of contact was coded when the subject used one or more different means of making contact in addition to the written letter/email correspondence, such as telephone or fax. Lastly, contacts were assessed based on a subject's total number of contacts overall, total number of contacts made prior to the initial TAS referral or notification, number of nonwritten contacts made prior to the initial TAS referral, total number of contacts made following the initial TAS referral, and number of nonwritten contacts made following the initial TAS referral.

Content and language characteristics were coded dichotomously for their presence or absence. Government-related concerns were considered to be present if the subject made reference in their correspondence to domestic or foreign policy issues (e.g., policy regarding public health care, unemployment, government spending, war, or foreign aid). Target-oriented themes were coded when the subject's correspondence was preoccupied with insult to the target (e.g., language that was insulting, degrading, harassing, sexist, racist, or sexualized). Personal themes were considered to be present if the subject's correspondence focused on issues salient in their own lives (e.g., entitlement claims regarding benefits, help-seeking regarding child custody, or financial difficulty). Threatening language was defined as any direct or veiled statement expressing a desire to do harm or have harm occur to the target (e.g., death, physical harm, political harm, unspecified/vague harm). The presence of demands, disorganized language, and obscenities were also examined. Anger/agitation was coded if the subject's written correspondence contained references to these emotions or had characteristics indicative of these emotions (e.g., sentences in which every letter was capitalized and followed by numerous exclamation marks). Additionally, the length of each correspondence in total number of pages was inspected.

Problematic approach behavior was defined as any attempt by the subject to gain physical proximity to the target in an inappropriate manner that was intercepted by staff or law enforcement, any

action by the subject that resulted in the disruption of Congressional activities, or any threatening physical gesture made by the subject toward the target. Threatening gestures included acts of physical violence, property damage, or the delivery of a potentially dangerous or inappropriate object (e.g., weapons, objects hoaxingly represented as dangerous). Problematic approach behavior was coded dichotomously for its presence or absence, as well as for the total number of approaches made by the subject. Problematic approach was considered not to have taken place if the subject did not engage in any of the above approach behaviors and the case did not escalate beyond the written communication. When defined for the logistic regression analysis, cases of subjects who engaged in problematic approach behavior were compared against cases of subjects who did not engage in problematic approach behavior (i.e., the variable was used in its dichotomous form).

To evaluate inter-rater reliability, 20% of the cases were randomly selected and coded independently by one rater other than the primary investigator. Inter-rater reliability for continuous variables was computed using Pearson's product-moment correlation and categorical variables were examined using the Kappa statistic. Inter-rater reliability was no lower than 0.88 across all variables studied.

Results

In this sample of written contacts ($n = 400$), 75.25% ($n = 301$) of the cases were comprised of letters and 24.75% ($n = 99$) of the cases involved emails. The overall sample was 68.0% male, 14.5% female, and 17.5% unknown gender. This gender breakdown is similar to that of previous studies of inappropriate contact with political officials, which have shown a male majority in their samples ranging from 60.4% to 83.2% (4,10,11). The average age of the overall sample was 41.49 years, which falls within the average age range of 39.2–44.1 years found in the samples of previous studies (4,10,11).

Univariate analyses revealed that the letter and email groups were significantly different on multiple variables. As noted in Table 1, univariate chi-square analyses indicated that letter writers were significantly more likely than emailers to exhibit indicators of

SMI [$\chi^2(1) = 13.830$, $p < 0.001$]. It was also found that significantly more letter writers than emailers engaged in target dispersion, in which they identified or contacted more than one target [$\chi^2(1) = 10.594$, $p = 0.001$]. Letter writers were significantly more likely than emailers to use multiple methods of contact in addition to their written correspondence (e.g., telephone calls) [$\chi^2(1) = 4.608$, $p < 0.05$]. When compared with letter writers, emailers were significantly more likely to focus their correspondence on government-related concerns (e.g., foreign or domestic policy issues) [$\chi^2(1) = 4.193$, $p < 0.05$], to display disorganization or incoherence in their writing [$\chi^2(2) = 25.269$, $p < 0.001$], and to use obscenities in their correspondence [$\chi^2(1) = 8.414$, $p = 0.004$]. Univariate analyses also revealed that letter writers were more likely to make a problematic physical approach toward their target than were emailers [$\chi^2(1) = 12.253$, $p < 0.001$]. In the overall sample, 45.5% of subjects engaged in problematic approach behavior. In previous similar studies of inappropriate contact with political officials, 22.5–32.9% of the sample was comprised of subjects who made problematic approaches toward their targets (4,10,11).

As noted in Table 2, univariate ANOVA statistics revealed that emailers were significantly younger than letter writers [$F(1, 341) = 60.120$, $p < 0.001$]. Regarding past criminal activity, letter writers were found to have significantly more total past criminal charges [$F(1,398) = 7.041$, $p = 0.008$], significantly more past property charges [$F(1,398) = 5.741$, $p = 0.017$], and significantly more past "other" charges [$F(1,398) = 5.276$, $p = 0.022$] than emailers. Letter writers wrote significantly longer communications than emailers when measured in number of pages [$F(1, 251) = 5.480$, $p = 0.021$].

With the goal of arriving at a multivariate model that identified the variables that best differentiated between the letter and email correspondence groups, a linear discriminant function analysis was performed. This multivariate analysis revealed a model that significantly differentiated between the letter and email groups [$\lambda = 0.179$, $\chi^2(19) = 63.719$, $p < 0.001$, R^2-canonical $= 0.151$]. This model correctly re-classified 93.0% of the written group, but only 31.3% of the electronic group, with a 77.5% correct re-classification overall (310 out of 400). An examination of the standardized canonical coefficients and structure weights, as can be seen in

TABLE 1—*Univariate chi-square analyses of letter and email samples.*

Characteristic	Letter Group ($n = 301$)	Email Group ($n = 99$)	Total Sample ($n = 400$)
Gender			
Male	196 (65.1)	76 (76.8)	272 (68.0)
Female	45 (14.9)	13 (13.1)	58 (14.5)
Unknown	60 (19.9)	10 (10.1)	70 (17.5)
Serious mental illness symptoms***	200 (66.4)	45 (45.5)	245 (61.3)
Threat-control override symptoms	95 (31.6)	35 (35.4)	130 (32.5)
Target dispersion***	89 (29.6)	13 (13.1)	102 (25.5)
Multiple methods of contact*	131 (43.5)	31 (31.3)	162 (40.5)
Government-related concerns*	156 (51.8)	63 (63.6)	219 (54.8)
Target-oriented themes	219 (72.8)	70 (70.7)	289 (72.3)
Personal themes	154 (51.2)	50 (50.5)	204 (51.0)
Threatening language	159 (52.8)	47 (47.5)	206 (51.5)
Demands	167 (55.5)	48 (48.5)	215 (53.8)
Disorganization/incoherence***	84 (27.9)	55 (55.6)	139 (34.8)
Obscenities**	55 (18.3)	36 (36.4)	91 (22.8)
Anger/agitation	50 (16.6)	25 (25.3)	75 (18.8)
Problematic physical approach***	152 (50.5)	30 (30.3)	182 (45.5)

Values given in parenthesis are percentages.
*$p < 0.05$, **$p \leq 0.01$, ***$p \leq 0.001$.

TABLE 2—*ANOVA analyses of letter and email samples.*

Characteristic	Letter Group ($n = 301$) Mean (SD)	Email Group ($n = 99$) Mean (SD)	Total Sample ($n = 400$) Mean
Age***	45.99 (18.54)	27.80 (21.65)	41.49
Total number of contacts	8.15 (23.85)	9.41 (36.77)	8.46
Total prereferral contacts	2.11 (9.53)	5.47 (30.83)	2.94
Prereferral nonwritten contacts	0.02 (0.30)	0.00 (0.00)	0.015
Total postreferral contacts	6.03 (22.02)	3.94 (8.97)	5.51
Postreferral nonwritten contacts	0.06 (0.49)	0.01 (0.10)	0.05
Total past charges***	3.86 (9.08)	1.39 (3.13)	3.25
Threat/harassment charges	0.51 (2.75)	0.24 (1.04)	0.44
Violent charges	1.21 (5.01)	0.32 (1.17)	0.99
Property charges*	0.96 (3.38)	0.14 (0.65)	0.76
Drug/alcohol charges	0.36 (1.42)	0.17 (0.66)	0.31
Traffic charges	0.18 (0.83)	0.23 (0.82)	0.19
Other charges*	0.86 (2.28)	0.32 (1.06)	0.73
Problematic physical approaches	2.29 (23.74)	0.20 (0.80)	1.77
Length of communication (in pages)*	8.19 (24.42)	2.50 (7.30)	6.78

*$p < 0.05$, **$p \leq 0.01$, ***$p \leq 0.001$.

TABLE 3—*Standardized canonical coefficients and structure weights for the model differentiating letter and email samples.*

Variable	Standardized Coefficients	Structure Weights
Disorganization/incoherence*	0.459	0.612
Serious mental illness symptoms*	0.304	0.445
Problematic physical approach*	0.905	0.417
Target dispersion*	0.241	0.393
Property charges	0.208	0.285
Other charges	0.029	0.274
Multiple methods of contact	−0.661	0.252
Government-related concerns	−0.210	−0.240
Violence charges	0.354	0.208
Total prereferral contacts	−0.214	−0.197
Drug/alcohol charges	−0.014	0.154
Demands	0.131	0.147
Gender	−0.300	−0.145
Threat/harassment charges	−0.271	0.112
Total postreferral contacts	0.041	0.109
Traffic charges	−0.057	−0.069
Target-oriented themes	0.063	0.045
Threat control override symptoms	−0.149	−0.022
Personal themes	−0.020	0.017

*Significant contributors based on a structure weight cutoff of 0.300.

TABLE 4—*Summary of binary logistic regression analysis related to problematic approach and nonapproach behavior.*

Predictor	β	SE	Wald Statistic
Problematic written type***	−1.751	0.534	10.761
Threat control override symptoms	0.803	0.420	3.646
Target-oriented themes	−0.515	0.417	1.523
Personal themes	0.593	0.425	1.946
Government-related concerns	0.103	0.406	0.065
Serious mental illness symptoms	0.442	0.439	1.015
Disorganization/incoherence*	−1.140	0.450	6.430
Multiple methods of contact***	5.734	0.542	111.975
Threatening language	−0.498	0.395	1.585
Demands	0.518	0.401	1.668
Prereferral contacts	−0.001	0.015	0.010
Postreferral contacts	−0.004	0.011	0.104
Target dispersion	−0.285	0.492	0.335

*$p < 0.05$, **$p \leq 0.01$, ***$p \leq 0.001$.

Table 3, revealed that disorganization/incoherence, SMI symptoms, problematic physical approach, and target dispersion all significantly contributed to the model. Figure 1 gives a graphical depiction of the multivariate results. As can be seen, this function found that when compared with subjects who contacted their Congressional targets via email, subjects who contacted via letters were less likely to show disorganization/incoherence, more likely to evidence symptoms of SMI, more likely to engage in problematic approach behavior, and more likely to have target dispersion.

To ascertain a model that would differentiate between subjects who engaged in problematic approach versus nonapproach behavior, a binary logistic regression analysis was performed. The resulting model was nearly significant in its ability to differentiate between the approach and nonapproach groups [$\chi^2(13) = 350.041$, $p = 0.064$] while accounting for 58.4% of the variance. This model correctly re-classified 85.1% of problematic approachers and 96.3% of nonapproachers, with a 91.0% correct re-classification overall (364 out of 400). Table 4 shows the beta weights, standard errors, and Wald statistics, revealing that problematic written type, disorganization, and multiple methods of contact contributed to the model.

Discussion

This study revealed significant differences between those who contact their Congressional targets with written letters and those who use electronic emails. This study found support for the hypothesis that the letter-writing group would be more likely than the emailing group to engage in problematic approach behavior toward their targets. Analyses also found that letter writers were more likely to engage in target dispersion and to utilize multiple methods of contact. When compared with the email group, letter writers tended to be older in age, to be more likely to display evidence of SMI symptoms, and to have a greater number of past criminal charges in the areas of overall criminal history, property violations, and "other" charges. Emailers were more likely to display disorganization/incoherence, more likely to include obscenities/explicit language, and were more likely to contain specific government concerns (i.e., domestic or foreign policy concerns). This study did not lend support to some of its hypotheses, finding instead that there were no significant differences between letters and emails on the variables of threatening language and anger/agitation. Analyses also revealed a relationship in the direction opposite of what was hypothesized in the finding that letters tended to be longer in page number than emails. This last finding contradicts the survey/marketing literature (e.g., 14–16), which has found that subject will write more/longer responses to open-ended questions via email, rather than via paper-and-pencil questionnaires.

There has not been any previous literature that has compared written contact modalities in relation to targeted violence. The results of the current study appear to be consistent with Supervisory Special Agent Fitzgerald's (personal communication, April 15, 2003) conceptualization of letter writing as a more deliberate and lengthy act in the sense that those who make contact via letters may spend more time ruminating about their concerns and the people involved, and will thus be more likely to identify multiple
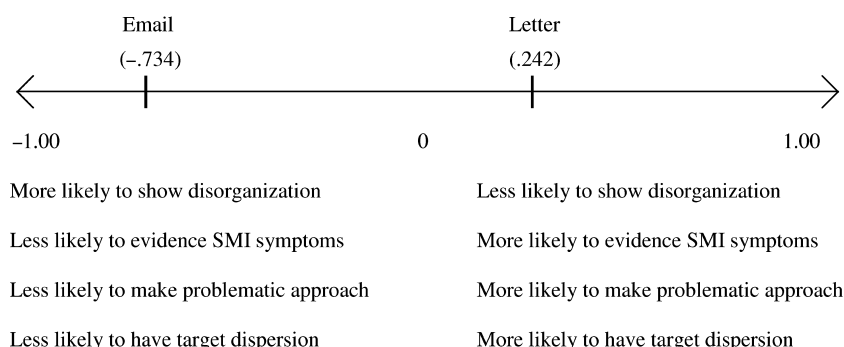

Email
(−.734)

Letter
(.242)

−1.00   0   1.00

More likely to show disorganization   Less likely to show disorganization

Less likely to evidence SMI symptoms   More likely to evidence SMI symptoms

Less likely to make problematic approach   More likely to make problematic approach

Less likely to have target dispersion   More likely to have target dispersion

FIG. 1—*Graphical depiction of the linear discriminant function results.*

targets, cross contact modalities, and escalate to approaching their target. Email, on the other hand, tending to be a more impulsive and quickly executed act, showed patterns of focusing on one target, containing more explicit/obscene language, and addressing a particular government-related concern. It is interesting that letter writers were more likely to show evidence of mental illness symptoms, while emailers were more likely to show disorganization/incoherence. The hastiness of composing email may be a contributing factor in the perception of more disorganized content.

The differences between letter writers and emailers that are illuminated by this study reveal that letter writers are engaging in higher risk behavior according to previous studies on risk factors for problematic approach behavior. For instance, Scalora et al. (10,11) found that subjects who made problematic approaches toward their targets were more likely to have a prior arrest record, to evidence mental illness symptoms, and to contact multiple targets, and were less likely to focus their content on government-related concerns. In the current study, letter writers were found to exhibit this same pattern of behaviors when compared with emailers. This is a valuable piece of information for protective law enforcement professionals who need to be able to effectively assess threat and manage threatening cases based on the limited information available when situations present themselves. While emailers may still pose a threat to their targets and all inappropriate contacts should be evaluated, the results of the current study suggest that letter writers are engaging in behavior that is indicative of posing a greater threat.

It is interesting that the regression model in the current study was only nearly significant ($p = 0.064$) and did not pass the field's standard cutoff of $p < 0.05$. The current study is consistent with prior research examining characteristics predictive of problematic approach behavior (4,6–11) supporting the notion that approachers display different behaviors as compared to nonapproachers. However, the existing body of literature, in combination with practical threat assessment experience, suggests that approachers are not categorically, taxonomically different in their profile, but rather engage in certain behaviors more or less often than nonapproachers. In this nearly significant regression model attempting to predict approach behavior, written contact type (email vs. letter) would have been a predictor. Continued research efforts on the nature of threatening and inappropriate written communication are needed to arrive at more conclusive results.

There are a handful of limitations to the present study. The data were drawn from files compiled by law enforcement personnel, and some of the file content consists of observations offered by government staff and trained law enforcement personnel. Therefore, some information, such as a subject's mental illness status, cannot be verified or tested for reliability. In addition, the subject files are opened when Congressional staff report an inappropriate or threatening occurrence to the USCP. While the USCP conduct extensive training with staff that emphasizes the importance of reporting, there is no way to measure the number of inappropriate incidents that remain unreported. Therefore, the results of the current study cannot reflect characteristics of subjects who are not brought to the USCP's attention.

Future research into the nature of inappropriate written contacts is needed with an emphasis on delineating the behavioral characteristics of those who make inappropriate electronic communications. Internet use has become a part of daily life in the United States. Sixty percent of adults in the United States use the Internet and 75% of households have Internet access in their homes (13). Currently, there is a paucity of research that investigates the electronic medium and the need for understanding Internet-based forms of communication will only continue to rise as U.S. society becomes more and more electronically savvy.

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