

What's on the terrorists' bookshelves?

Mapping demand-side dimensions of 'terrorist' media

CONFERENCE PAPER

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Contents

Introduction	4
Data overview	4
Findings	5
_ The ideological interests of terrorists are broad, not narrow	5
_ Organisations do not dominate the ideological landscape	6
_ Popular extremist material is repetitive and more emotive than strategic	7
_ Temporal changes are limited and subtle	8
Conclusions and next steps	9

This paper discusses research involving evidential material gathered in terrorism investigations into homegrown plots in the United Kingdom between 2004 and 2017 with the aim of examining the nature of extremist material found in these cases. The paper describes how this media landscape can be mapped through a system of qualitative content grading that can define the contour lines as we try to navigate this space. Four key findings are discussed: the nature of media content found in terrorism investigations; the 'levels' of extremities within this collection; the source origin of the material; and longitudinal changes that emerged over time, including preference patterns and popularity across the cases examined.

Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a surge in comprehensive studies dissecting evolving ways in which terrorist organisations have sought to communicate with different audiences and exploit to this end innovations in media technology.¹ Just as groups such as ISIS represent new heights in terrorist propaganda production and dissemination, so have efforts to study this output grown in scope and sophistication.²

Yet significant questions remain about the way in which individuals who have carried out or tried to carry out terrorist violence on their home soil have navigated this media landscape. What sources of ideological inspiration appeal to them? Do these consist of material from terrorist groups? Or other ideologues? What does this material look like? How has this picture evolved over time?

In this paper I seek to address these questions by presenting results from a detailed study of evidential material recovered in police counter terrorism investigations in the United Kingdom between 2004 and 2017. The premise of this paper is that terrorists' ideological sources of inspiration are diverse and can only adequately be understood if

we build an evidence base that traces the selections individual terrorists have made from the wealth of material available to them. This concentrates our minds on the 'demand side' rather than the 'supply side' of available content, especially via the internet, and the patterns of choices that emerge when we examine how terrorists navigated this space.

Such an evidence base is fundamental in order to understand the composition of the terrorist 'grassroots' that may or may not reflect the evolution of terrorist organisations and their strategic priorities. This should be an essential precursor before developing 'counternarratives', alternative narratives or other forms of detection or prevention targeting terrorist use of media and extremist discourses.

Data overview

The dataset discussed here concerns material found on seized devices such as computers, digital storage and phones belonging to 57 individuals involved in terrorism in the United Kingdom between 2004 and 2017. These data are extracted from a wider study into the aspect of terrorists' information environment³ that consists of ideological and facilitative content.⁴

The individuals under investigation were all either in the advanced stages of organising acts of lethal terrorist violence or were successful in carrying them out. Excluded are those convicted for more minor terrorism offences such as facilitation, which arguably involves a different set of roles and activities. All subjects were either convicted for these offences and given life terms or died as they carried them out. The study concerns Islamist extremists only, though the research design was developed looking at far-right extremism as well.

The dataset was divided according to perpetrator type, with categories for individuals operating together in cells or groups (N=50) and those operating alone as lone actors (N=7). The dataset was further divided by day cluster to

gauge temporal developments. I concentrate on the temporal dimension in this paper, highlighting four key observations:

- 1/ The ideological interests of terrorists are broad, not narrow.
- 2/ Groups and organisations do not dominate the ideological landscape.
- 3/ The flavour and origin of popular extremist material is repetitive, and more emotive than strategic.
- 4/ Temporal changes are limited and subtle.

Each point is discussed in more detail below.

Findings

The ideological interests of terrorists are broad, not narrow

The first step in the analysis was to develop a systematic way in which to study the media material that the sample of individuals under examination had collected, thus quantifying the otherwise qualitative tools of measurement. There are various ways in which we might choose to do this. What I did was to measure this content with respect to expressed levels of hostility and violence that could be identified in them, which are commonly associated with our notions of extremist ideological discourse. So I devised a simple system of grading that divided these ideological publications first into three simple categories: ‘moderate’, ‘fringe’ and ‘extreme’ material, and then divided extreme publications further into three subcategories, depending on the nature of violence and the targeting of that violence that was being endorsed. I also did tests of inter-rater agreement and revisited and honed the definitions accordingly.⁵

A shorthand version of these definitions is provided in the table here right.

Moderate	No endorsement of violence (lethal or otherwise) or expression of hostility towards others
Fringe	Isolationist, exclusivist, prejudiced and/or hostile rhetoric towards identified people without explicit endorsement of lethal violence against them
Extreme	Support for lethal violence against identified people and/or explicit dehumanising rhetoric undermining their right to life
Extreme – tier 1	No detail offered in relation to targeting or violence, or when offered, is limited to combatants
Extreme – tier 2	Lethal violence promoted/justified against non-combatants, but without detail
Extreme – tier 3	Lethal violence endorsed against non-combatants with facilitative detail, such as preference for methods

This grading allowed me to determine the concentration of the ideological currents, so to speak, of the ideological media terrorists chose to collect, bringing us to the first chief observation: terrorists are not preoccupied with extreme ideological content alone. The majority of the ideological material they chose to collect is moderate, often in the form of religious stories emphasising a sense of community, brotherhood and sisterhood and kinship, rather than violence. This material includes dedicated narratives that we might term ‘counter narratives’, content condemning the use of violence for religious or political ends and terrorist organisations such as Al-Qaeda.

This brings into questions notions of ‘terrorist ideology’ as the catch-all term for the ideational drivers that appeal to terrorists.⁶ Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of all the publications analysed by grading category.

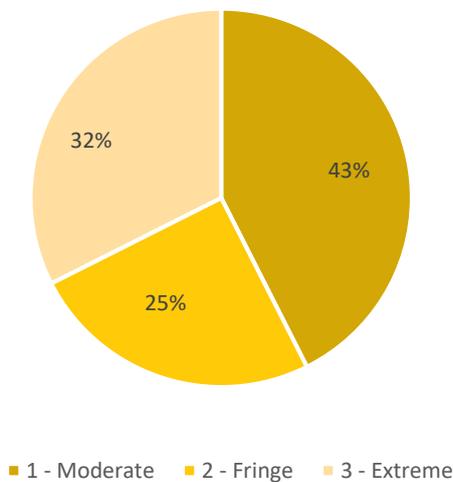


Figure 1: Division by grading category (N = 2 196)

Furthermore, when we look at the extremist ideological material more closely, we see that a relatively small proportion advocates violence against non-combatants, even though this constitutes the mainstay of ideological outputs from terrorist organisations such as ISIS or Al-Qaeda. The focus is on why violence should be conducted, in terms of rewards, religious obligations and ex-

tant conditions, not how. The subdivision of extremist content, dividing extremist ideological publications according to the nature and detail of the violence prescribed, is illustrated in Figure 2.

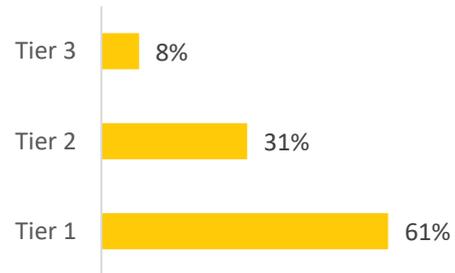


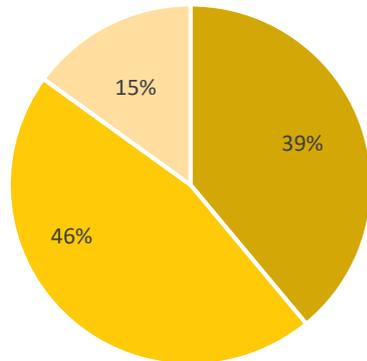
Figure 2: Subdivision of extremist content (N=667)

Organisations do not dominate the ideological landscape

When we talk about extremist or terrorist ideology in connection with terrorism or inspiration of terrorist acts, we often seem to think of groups like ISIS or Al-Qaeda dominating this ideological terrain without unpacking what this influence might look like beyond the abstract. This study suggests that the picture is more complicated than consisting of belonging to or even influenced by specified and identifiable terrorist organisations and their outreach and branding.

In my research I examined the types of authors behind all the extremist material recovered. I found that even if we apply a fairly liberal definition of what constitutes a group, including loose cohorts like Supporters of Sharia⁷ and Al-Muhajiroun — and everyone in them — the majority of extremist material was still produced either by non-aligned ideologues, like Faisal al-Jamiki and Ahmed Musa Jibril, or, and increasingly, by supporters in the form of user-generated content.

The distribution is given in *Figure 3*.



- Groups and spokespersons
- Independent ideologues
- User-generated content

Figure 3: Extremist material by author type (N=629)

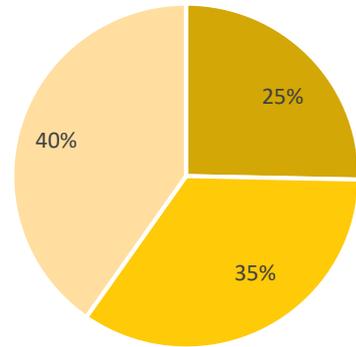
While over a third of the proportion of extremist material is produced by established groups and organisations, the aggregate of extremist ideology that appeals to the terrorists in this sample represents more of a hybrid. Yet there is much less research on these non-aligned and user-generated sources of influence. This reminds us of the complexities of the information environment in which individuals involved in terrorism are immersed and the need to ensure that any assumptions concerning their sources of influence rest on a firm empirical footing.

Popular extremist material is repetitive and more emotive than strategic

An examination of top hits across cases examined revealed that 155 titles of ideological content appeared repeatedly across the investigations. As shown in *Figure 4*, a much higher proportion of these most popular and prominent titles were extreme compared to the overall dataset.

Radical, conservative and extremist content would thus appear to be sourced from a relatively small pool, an

ideological periphery where some of the same authors continue to resonate over time.



- moderate
- fringe
- extreme

Figure 4: Ideological material collected by at least three unconnected subjects (N=155)

The figures who appeared to resonate the most are individuals like Abdullah Azzam, in translated form, and Anwar al-Awlaki: speakers who emphasise collective grievance and collective defence as a religious duty. Those who are largely absent from this category, by contrast, are so-called ‘strategists’, figures such as Abu Musab al-Suri and Abu Bakr Naji, who is often cited as influential. In almost 900 extremist publications, there was nothing by Naji and no reference to his treatise on the ‘Management of Savagery’, for instance, despite the prominence of the treatise in analytical circles. This is not to say that the works of these strategists are unimportant, but rather to suggest that the preferences among the ‘grassroots’ may reflect different prioritisations than high-end strategic thinking. It is a further reminder that context, and empirical evidence, are important when making observations about sources that might influence individuals involved in terrorism.

As noted above, terrorists, at least in this dataset, would appear more interested in questions surrounding *why* they should be fighting, not necessarily on *how* they should do so.

Temporal changes are limited and subtle

Let's look at how this evolves over time. To gauge temporal developments, I divided the thirteen year period between 2004 and 2017 into three clusters: 2004-06, 2008-2013 and 2014 to 2017. I looked first at the format of the material in question.

We hear a lot about improvement in media production and greater sophistication in production of propaganda, which is increasingly glitzy and has a greater professional quality. What I found in this dataset, however, is that audio recordings remain very popular. Subjects, it would seem, enjoy listening to stories, lectures and sermons, as well as to *nasheeds*—religious vocal songs—even though these are mostly in Arabic which the majority of the subjects in this dataset could not understand.

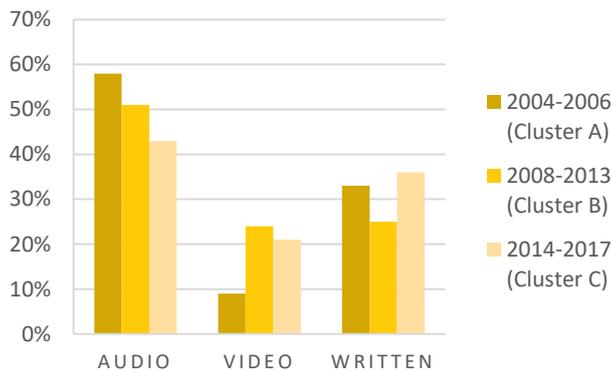


Figure 5: Distribution of ideological publications by media format and date cluster

Figure 5 gives the distribution of three types of formats over the years.

As shown, audio publications were overwhelmingly the largest category by format in the earliest date cluster, and although its proportion is less prominent now, it nonetheless remains the largest category overall. Videos were a fairly distant third, in terms of volume, and this distribution has not changed much over the years. This does not necessarily suggest, of course, that individual publications, including videos, are not impactful, but rather serves as a reminder that the media landscape from the perspective of individual terrorists,

in the UK at least, looks different from what we might expect.

When we look at how grading distribution of publications evolved over time, fairly little change emerges here too.

Figure 6 shows both sets of grading distributions for the three year clusters, and one of the more noticeable differences is that if anything, material endorsing mass-casualty violence is less

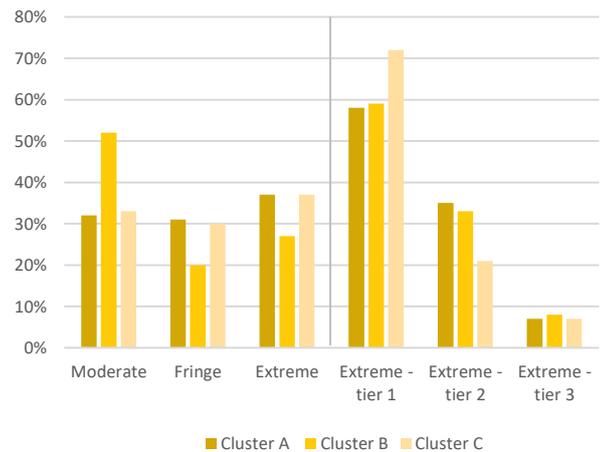


Figure 6: Grading distribution of ideological content over time (N=2,491)

prevalent than it used to be, even though its availability 'out there', may well have increased.

Finally, as regards source origin of this material there has also been little change, with the only exception that supporter- or user-generated content has risen in prominence, perhaps unsurprisingly. This distribution is given in Figure 7.

Even though the global jihadi landscape has changed a lot over the period under examination, especially with the varied fortunes of groups like ISIS and Al-Qaeda and the outbreak of civil war in Syria, some key aspects of the ideological sources of influence that subjects appear to seek out have not reflected these environmental changes.

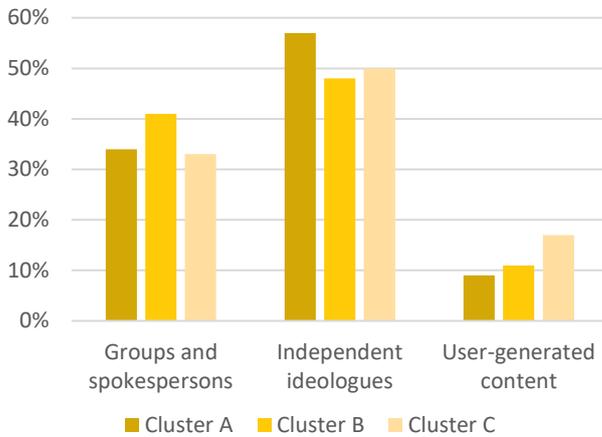


Figure 7: Distribution of extreme ideological publications across three time clusters, divided by author type (N=727)

Conclusions and next steps

This study has shown that, within the UK context at least, convicted and/or successful Islamist terrorists have broad ideological interests, not narrow. Their selection of ideological content reflected day-to-day preoccupations as much as it did interest in political violence, and these narratives were often fused together in individual publications. It is telling in this context too, from the supply-side perspective, that the propaganda repertoire of ISIS sought to represent precisely such prioritisation: mixing combat with a need to provide services, security and religious governance for their ‘community’.

Second, while propaganda material from groups or their spokespersons might be most visible or prominent to the external analyst, this research suggests that the ideological picture from the perspective of individual terrorists is more complex, consisting to a large degree of material from much less visible and non-aligned ideologues.

Thirdly, a proportion of the ideological content collected seems particularly popular, consisting mainly of extremist publications and ideologues that feature repeatedly across cases examined.

An enduring feature of these ‘top hits’ is an interest in community-centric narratives rather than the strategic jihadi narratives that tend to be prominent in analyses of supply-side and top-down aspects of Islamist extremism.

Fourthly, whilst the jihadi geopolitical landscape has changed considerably over the years, the ideological preferences and selections made by the individuals in this study have remained more stable. The material is not becoming more extreme, in terms of content, and the popularity of audio material—including lectures and *nasheeds*—endures. Independent ideologues are no less popular now than they were before the rise in prominence of groups like ISIS, whilst there has been an uptick in supporter-generated output.

Further research would shed light on the extent to which these trends are likely to endure, including questions concerning the future ideological appeal of content related to ISIS.

There might also be scope for further comparative analysis seeking to gauge how these findings from the UK compare with findings from other locations. Research involving data from European countries facing similar threat patterns might reveal interesting comparative insights where local conditions and language are different.

In the UK context, for instance, translators and publishers, usually much more obscure than the original authors, have amended and adapted Islamist extremist narratives for local audiences, sometimes substantially altering their meaning. How does this compare across different countries and linguistic contexts?

Comparative analysis involving the US or other predominantly English-speaking countries, might also shed light on the extent to which an ‘anglosphere’ might exist as regards extremist material, if findings between these countries reveal similar patterns and sources of influence.

The research framework described above was also designed with a sample set of material related to extreme right-

wing terrorism. Developing empirical research concerning to this ideological sphere, which is rising rapidly in prominence, would yield important insights regarding the nature of the extreme right, its different ideological currents, and ways in which such cases might compare with existing findings concerning Islamist extremism.

Finally, a significant challenge that remains is to translate these analytical findings into more tangible deliverables that benefit those working in areas relating to counter terrorism and counter extremism.

Endnotes

- ¹ Europol, 'The evolution of online terrorist propaganda', April 2018, www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/evolution-of-online-terrorist-propaganda.
- ² Charlie Winter, 'The Virtual 'Caliphate': Understanding Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy', Quilliam, 2015; Aaron Zelin, 'Picture it or it didn't happen: A snapshot of the Islamic State's Official Media Output', *Perspectives on Terrorism* (9:4, 2015).
- ³ Donald Holbrook, 'The terrorism information environment: analysing terrorists' selection of ideological and facilitative media', *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2019), www.doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2019.1583216.
- ⁴ Any items that conveyed religious, political, or other ideological opinion prescription were identified and compiled as the "ideological" subset of the data examined, but mainstream news and stand-alone religious scripture without added interpretive input were excluded. Actionable items referred to content that provided facilitative or operational guidelines conducive to overcoming practical challenges in the orchestration of terrorist attacks.
- ⁵ Donald Holbrook, 'Designing and Applying an 'Extremist Media Index', *Perspectives on Terrorism* (9:5, 2015), www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/461/html.
- ⁶ Gary A. Ackerman & Michael Burnham, 'Towards a Definition of Terrorist Ideology', *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2019), www.doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2019.1599862.
- ⁷ Abu Hamza al-Masri's outfit in the 1990s concentrated around Finsbury Park mosque.