

What Types of Media Do Terrorists Collect?

An Analysis of Religious, Political,
and Ideological Publications Found
in Terrorism Investigations in the
UK

This Research Paper presents results from the study of media usage by convicted terrorists in the UK. The purpose is to shed light on the nature of the media environment in which individuals convicted of participation in terrorist plots operated in the weeks and months prior to their arrest. The Paper concentrates on those media publications that convey religious, political, or other ideological sentiments and describes the analytical tools developed to dissect this material. The Research Paper is directed towards practitioners, scholars and students interested in the sources of influence that help shape the perspectives of those planning to carry out terrorist attacks. The Research Paper is also intended to facilitate further comparative research within this field of study.

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About the Author

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Donald Holbrook's research has focused mostly on beliefs, ideas, and media in the context of terrorism and political violence, especially on how terrorists interact with published media and social media and how this engagement has changed over time. He has published on a wide variety of topics relating to these themes, including a book, edited volumes, journal articles, as well as reports and other deliverables for counter-terrorism practitioners and policymakers. He currently manages a large-scale research project dissecting ways in which individuals involved in terrorism use different types of media, developing case studies and thematic analyses of different ideological milieus (including far-right and Islamist extremism), different types of activity (including domestic terrorism and 'foreign fighters') and various organisational contexts (such as groups versus lone actors), as well as comparisons across sections.

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About ICCT

The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT) is an independent think and do tank providing multidisciplinary policy advice and practical, solution-oriented implementation support on prevention and the rule of law, two vital pillars of effective counter-terrorism. ICCT's work focuses on themes at the intersection of countering violent extremism and criminal justice sector responses, as well as human rights-related aspects of counter-terrorism. The major project areas concern countering violent extremism, rule of law, foreign fighters, country and regional analysis, rehabilitation, civil society engagement and victims' voices. Functioning as a nucleus within the international counter-terrorism network, ICCT connects experts, policymakers, civil society actors and practitioners from different fields by providing a platform for productive collaboration, practical analysis, and exchange of experiences and expertise, with the ultimate aim of identifying innovative and comprehensive approaches to preventing and countering terrorism.

Introduction

Individuals who become involved in terrorism are driven and guided by a host of different needs, desires and motivations in a variety of different circumstances. The burgeoning literature on concepts such as ‘radicalisation to violent extremism’ develops theories, models and typologies elucidating these factors.¹ Whilst these theoretical models may help us to visualise what an individual’s journey towards engagement in terrorism may look like, our understanding of these processes still suffers from a shortage of available data that can be subjected to systematic empirical analyses. This report is designed to contribute to a stronger knowledge base by detailing and analysing evidential material uncovered by law-enforcement agencies in the UK during counter-terrorism investigations that resulted in convictions for serious terrorism offences. The material in question concerns the media publications conveying religious, political or other ideological content that were found in searches of properties (including digital devices) during investigations into ten major terrorist plots involving Islamist-inspired extremists in Britain.

This collection of media publications, which we can term the ‘media environment’ of convicted terrorists, sheds important light on the context and frames of reference that shaped the perspectives of individuals as they became involved in terrorist activities.

Normally, this dimension is approached through analysing reflections of former terrorists or studying their own output such as memoirs. We have, for instance, a rich understanding of the media products that terrorists themselves have produced. Indeed, this output has offered the most straightforward way in which to study terrorist organisations and their objectives as the material has usually been easily accessible, especially in the internet age.²

We also have an anecdotal sense of how some individuals engaged with such content, usually from press reportage and court proceedings. In this way, for instance, we know that William Pierce’s *Turner Diaries* inspired Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City bomber, and excerpts from the novel were found in his car when he was arrested.³ Thomas Mair, who murdered British Member of Parliament Jo Cox was reportedly an avid collector of far-right literature and subscribed to a magazine called *SA Patriot*.⁴ Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel, who murdered 86 people in Nice in July 2016, was said to have made repeated searches online for *nasheeds*, Islamic vocal songs, in the days before his attack.

From memoirs, too, we catch glimpses of what this media environment might have looked like through the post-hoc reflections of the participant. Morten Storm, the

¹ The indispensable guide to these is Alex Schmid’s “Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review”, *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 4, no. 2 (March 2013), <https://icct.nl/publication/radicalisation-de-radicalisation-counter-radicalisation-a-conceptual-discussion-and-literature-review/>.

² What I mean by ‘media’ in this context will become clearer later in this paper, but Paul Wilkinson’s broad definition is useful at this stage: “Media is a generic term meaning all the methods or channels of information and entertainment”, Paul Wilkinson, *Terrorism versus Liberal Democracy: The Liberal State Response* 2nd edition (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 144. Emphasis in original.

³ Jo Thomas, “Behind the Book that Inspired McVeigh,” *The New York Times*, June 9, 2001, <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/06/09/us/behind-a-book-that-inspired-mcveigh.html>.

⁴ Ian Cobain, Nazia Parveen and Matthew Taylor, “The slow-burning hatred that led Thomas Mair to murder Jo Cox,” *The Guardian*, November 23, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/nov/23/thomas-mair-slow-burning-hatred-led-to-jo-cox-murder>.

jihadist-turned-spy, described how “books, lectures and conversations late into the night” guided him on his path towards militancy and how collective viewing of films from Chechnya and other battlegrounds solidified his radical cohort.⁵

What we lack, however, is a systematic way in which to navigate this media environment and develop analytical tools that can facilitate comparative research across different contexts and cases. This study addresses this deficit by examining and grading media publications that convicted terrorists in the UK collected before their arrest. It is important to concentrate on activities that were recorded *during* attack planning or engagement in terrorist activities, rather than relying on post-hoc attitudinal recording, in order to gain an accurate and empirically sound picture of the terrorists’ selection of published media as they were planning terrorist activities.⁶

The individuals in the cases examined had access to vast repositories of published media, from extremist organisations, religious movements, mainstream publishers, online media sharing sites and a host of other bodies and outlets. A plethora of existing studies have examined the composition of this milieu. The selections terrorists have made when faced with such an abundance of choice and the patterns that emerge between cases, however, have not been examined in detail. This perspective, though, sheds important light on their outlook and worldview.

It is important to understand this media environment based on terrorists’ choices because it is so central to what makes terrorism different from apolitical acts of violence. The British legal definition, for instance, defines terrorist actions as those designed to advance political, religious, racial or ideological causes.⁷ Other legal definitions emphasise similar components.

The following discussion maps the ‘political, religious, racial or ideological’ media publications, to use the British legal definition cited above, that terrorists assembled before they carried out or attempted to carry out their attacks. Strengthening this knowledge base is an important prerequisite to ensuring that efforts to counter those arguments to which individuals involved in terrorist plots have been exposed reflect the nature and type of media content which appeared to appeal to them in the first place.

In total, just under 1,700 media publications with political, religious, or other ideological content were identified in the ten cases examined. These were all graded using a simple schema that was created for this project, called the ‘Extremist Media Index’. This consists of a three-pronged categorisation of content dividing titles into ‘moderate’, ‘fringe’, and ‘extreme’ material. Additionally, the ‘extreme’ content category contained three main subdivisions, where the nature of targeting and facilitative detail was assessed further. These grading criteria constitute analytical yardsticks to identify variation in the content conveyed.

Assessment of content such as this is always subjective and there are many different ways in which it can be measured. The grading criteria applied here were tested for inter-rater agreement and subsequently honed in order to increase accuracy to

⁵ Morten Storm, Tim Lister and Paul Cruickshank, *Agent Storm: A Spy Inside Al Qaeda* (London: Penguin Books, 2015), 49-51.

⁶ Michael Bryan Kelly, “A review of academic permanent-product data collection and reliability procedures in applied behavior analysis research,” *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis* 9, no. 2 (Summer 1976): 211.

⁷ UK Terrorism Act 2000, Part 1 (1): <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/11>. Includes subsequent amendments.

facilitate systematic analysis between cases. This framework is explained further in the chapter on research design below.

Whilst this study is unique in the material assessed and in the systematic approach adopted, some caveats and limitations of this research also need to be considered. This report is not intended as an exhaustive account of a very dynamic field of study. Ten cases from a twelve-year period are studied, and whilst this is a substantial inquiry, it is still a snapshot of a larger milieu. All the cases are also from the UK alone. Furthermore, the study is not designed to offer or support any predictive assessments based on media material found in the cases. We know very well that far more people are exposed to the media publications described below than ever seek to become terrorists.

Terrorism, after all, is a method of political violence perpetrated by individuals who are each driven by divergent factors and who react to events differently. No part of the process leading to terrorism is exclusive. In understanding terrorism, we must always seek to understand how different factors combine and result in terrorism in some circumstances. The current study does not engage with the difficult question of when, how and to what extent the material was consumed. It does not, by extension, make inferences about ways in which the body of content described here impacted the individuals in question or assume that exposure to or collection of the types of media described results in any specific or inevitable outcome. Such patterns are not predetermined or static. These are important questions that require more in-depth work that can be undertaken once the descriptive findings discussed here have been established. The conclusions of this report offer twelve key findings that will aid such further enquiries.

Research Scope and Design

Media Publications

As noted in the Introduction, 1,695 unique media publications that conveyed political, religious, racial or ideological content were identified in the cases examined. The vast majority of these were found on computers, mobile phones or storage devices such as thumb drives or recordable CDs that had been recovered during searches of properties and traced back to individual subjects who were subsequently convicted of involvement in terrorism. The subjects in each case had procured these publications in the days, weeks or months prior to their arrest or execution of the attack.

This collection of media publications thus constitutes the 'dataset' analysed for this study. This dataset includes written publications, audio material and videos. Images were not included as they do not convey sufficient data to be coded according in a meaningful way using the aforementioned Extremist Media Index where content is assessed as 'moderate', 'fringe' or 'extreme' based on the language and content conveyed.

Cases

The media publications examined were recovered in ten distinct investigations concerning acts or attempted acts of terrorism in the UK. These activities took place over a twelve-year period between 2004 and 2015, although in some cases it took many

years before the individuals who had been arrested were ultimately convicted in court. These ten investigations involved 44 perpetrators who were ultimately convicted of involvement in terrorism although in some cases a wider network around these individuals had been subject to investigation without charges being brought.

It should be noted that terrorism legislation in Britain is broad and includes offences such as collecting information likely to be useful for carrying out a terrorist act,⁸ which normally results in short custodial sentences. The ten cases under review here all concerned involvement in dedicated attack planning that posed a serious threat to life or successful attacks resulting in casualties. The cases under review here, therefore, all concern attempts to carry out terrorist attacks domestically, using explosive devices or other simpler methods to kill. Cases involving ‘foreign fighters’, individuals who travelled abroad to join terrorist organisations or participate in foreign wars, were not included in order to ensure the cases examined all involved broadly comparable sets of activities.

All perpetrators in the cases examined received either long prison sentences or died as they carried out the attacks. Nevertheless, it should be stressed that the dataset analysed here only constitutes a sample of a much larger cohort of individuals who have sought to carry out attacks in the UK. It is important to limit studies such as these to ensure the dataset analysed is manageable. These ten cases, spread over a relatively long period, all concern ‘typical’ acts or attempts of domestic terrorism on home soil.

As noted, the cases all examine Islamist-inspired individuals who were seeking to carry out acts of terrorism purportedly in the name of Islamic religious causes. Other ideological motivations such as right-wing extremist or racist agendas that have also featured in counter-terrorism investigations in the UK were excluded, again to ensure a manageable and comparable dataset. The Extremist Media Index used to categorise media publications, however, was developed and tested with a sample of far-right extremist texts as well, in order to ensure its applicability to more than one ideological context.

Extremist Media Index

In order to understand variation in the language and scope of the media publications under review and to ensure the analysis was systematic, each of the titles in the dataset was assessed using a grading tool, termed the ‘Extremist Media Index’, which was developed for this study.⁹ Six different types of content were defined in the Index. The first three, as noted, divided titles into ‘moderate’, ‘fringe’ and ‘extreme’ material. Additionally, three subcategories of extreme content denoted the level of facilitating detail conveyed and the nature of targeting.

The rationale behind this Index was to devise a simple mechanism by which individual publications could be identified and categorised according to the nature of the content conveyed. This way, a proportional distribution between different types of publications (based on content) and across cases could thus be assessed. The subdivisions within the ‘extreme’ category, in turn, are necessary in order to highlight nuances within media publications that endorse different *degrees* of violent tactics. For instance, is violence

⁸ Section 58 Terrorism Act 2000, <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/11/section/58>.

⁹ See further, Donald Holbrook, “Designing and Applying an ‘Extremist Media Index,’” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 5 (October 2015): 57-68, <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/461>.

justified against soldiers only, or against non-combatants as well? If violence against non-combatants is celebrated or endorsed, does the author provide any details that would help a consumer of the particular title to carry out the prescribed act?¹⁰

Table 1 details the definitions in the Extremist Media Index that are used to determine whether individual publications fall within 'moderate', 'fringe' or 'extreme' categories and how the subcategories of extremist content are defined.

¹⁰ Donald Holbrook & Max Taylor, "Developing Grading Processes for Ideological Content," *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* 9, no.1 (March 2014): 32-47; Donald Holbrook, Gilbert Ramsay and Max Taylor, "Terroristic Content' - Towards a Grading Scale," in *Terrorism and Political Violence* 25, no. 2 (March 2013): 202-223.

Table 1. Extremist Media Index Definitions

Grading Category/Subcategory	Definition
1 - Moderate	General religious, political, philosophical, or historical material and news commentary containing no endorsement of violence or hatred towards identified communities with generally moderate content along the lines found in mainstream religious/political texts and news media output.
2 - Fringe	Content is religiously or ideologically conservative and isolationist, politically radical and confrontational, but without any justifications conveyed for violence in present-day scenarios. Anger and hostility might be expressed towards a given group of people, therefore, such as the 'kuffar' or immigrants, without the added assumption that these people are somehow 'subhuman' and legitimate targets of violence.
3 - Extreme	Material that legitimises and/or glorifies the use of violence, especially serious and potentially fatal violence, to achieve particular goals, as well as the fighters and martyrs who die for the cause, with some allusion to the view that such prescriptions continue to be relevant for contemporary activists. Also included within this category is material that focuses on dehumanising particular communities, citing issues of race, sexuality, origin or other aspects that render such people 'subhuman', thus undermining their right to life. This category thus captures both publications advocating 'jihadi' violence against troops or civilians, as well some works of the extreme right wing, for instance, that can be more opaque in terms of references to violence but focus on presenting people such as Jews and non-whites as subhuman in the context of imagined or envisaged confrontation with these groups of people.
Extreme Level 1	Serious violence (i.e. potentially fatal) is only justified/promoted/welcomed with reference to combatants or is vague, without any detail, e.g. talk about the virtues of collective violence, glorification of insurgency warfare.
Extreme Level 2	Serious violence (i.e. potentially fatal) clearly justified/promoted/welcomed against non-combatants, but without any detail, e.g. "kill the Jews", "kill the kuffar".
Extreme Level 3	Serious violence (i.e. potentially fatal) justified/promoted/welcomed against non-combatants and with some detail regarding facilitation, scope or direction: i.e. "do suicide attacks" (against non-combatants), "target the economy".
Extreme Level 3b	Same as '3' but specific and directly applicable details offered, e.g. bomb-making recipes.

These categories are not designed to capture all aspects of content. The focus is on the extent to which hostility towards identified groups of people is expressed in published media, including whether violence, especially lethal violence, is legitimised against them in current, contemporary scenarios. Since the cases where these publications featured all concern attempts to carry out violence against specific targets identified through an ideological, religious, racial or political prism, it is important to highlight differences that emerge in this content with respect to the treatment of identified 'out-groups'. A simplified version of the criteria detailed in Table 1 emphasising this focus on treatment of outgroups is illustrated in Figure 1.

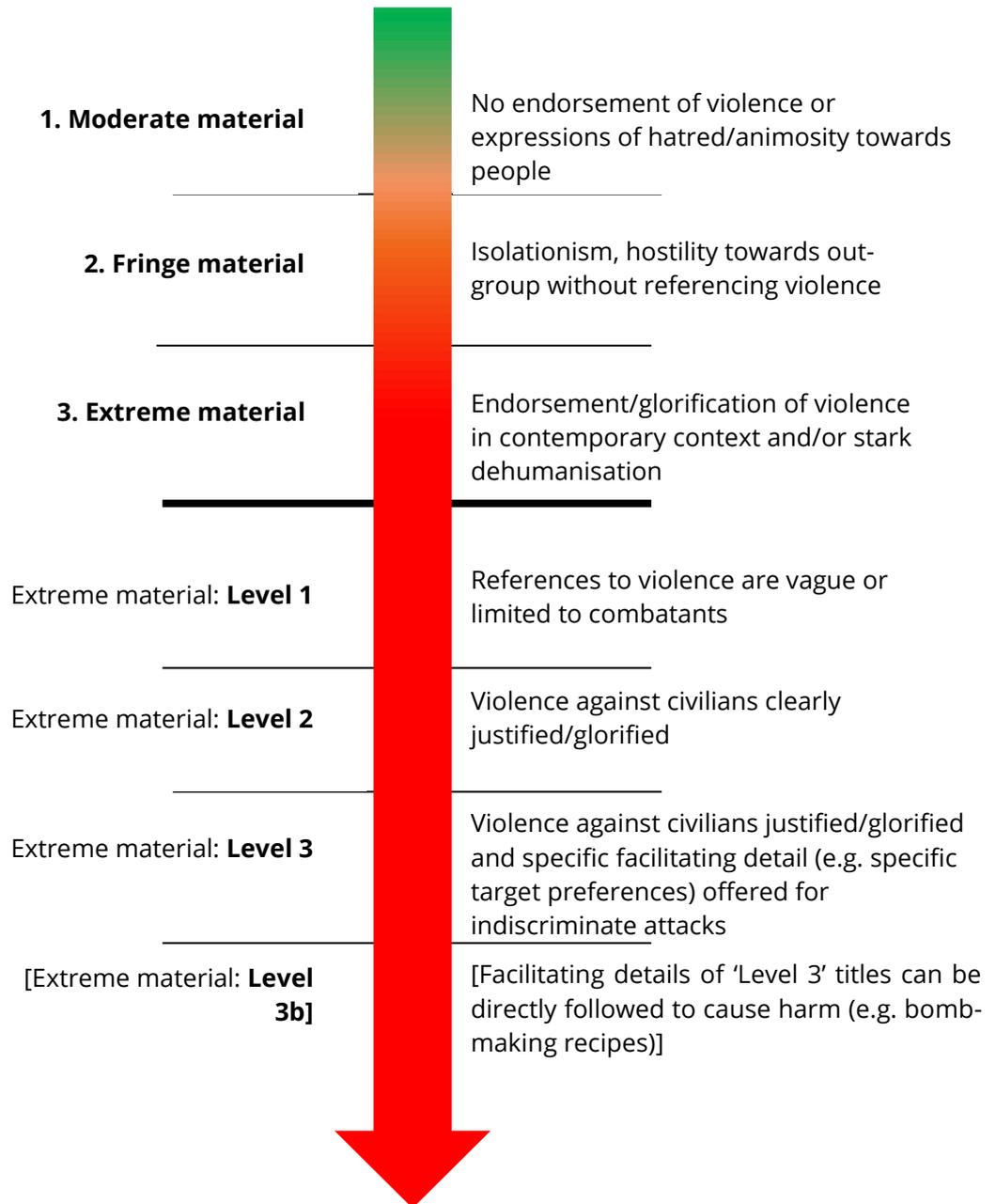


Figure 1. Extremist Media Index

Subjectivity, Reliability, and Replicability

Notions of 'extreme' or 'non-extreme' political sentiments or ideological content, of course, are both dynamic and subjective. What is considered an 'extreme' form of religious, ideological or political practice or expression in one epoch, culture or geographic locality may well be considered perfectly normal or acceptable in others. When approaching content such as this, therefore, it is important to identify and delineate the criteria used to judge the material in question and to acknowledge their limitations. The criteria defined in the Extremist Media Index highlight intuitive notions of extremism, such as the use of violence to promote a cause or hostility towards identified groups of people for political, religious, racial or ideological reasons. We thus have systematic parameters with which to compare different publications along the lines described in the Index.

Whilst subjectivity is an unavoidable hazard, another problem concerns the reliability or validity of any standardised criteria such as these. In order to ensure the definitions were sufficiently accurate as the Index was applied to different publications, a team of coders was assembled to grade a representative sample of publications blindly in order to test inter-coder agreement.¹¹ Such tests are normally applied to texts that can be more easily measured, such as survey results, or where the subject offers more objectively detectable features of content. Whilst the results suggested there was still overlap between the categories, especially within the subcategories of extreme content, the results nonetheless revealed acceptable levels of agreement, suggesting there was a strong chance different coders would apply these categories to the same sample of publications.¹²

Findings

Nature of Publications Found

Of the 1,695 publications found, 215 featured in more than one investigation. Some of these titles appeared to be very popular indeed and were found in as many as five of the ten investigations under examination. Figure 2 illustrates how the total number of publications found spread across the ten cases. 1,480 titles, 87% of the total, featured only in a single investigation, 13% appeared in more than one. Of these titles that were uncovered in more than one investigation, 65 appeared in two cases, 40 titles in three, 97 in four, and 13 in five investigations.

¹¹ To test agreement three coders graded 145 into 'moderate', 'fringe' and 'extreme' categories from both far-right and Islamist cases and then re-graded the 'extreme' titles according to the definitions in the second phase of grading.

¹² The coding results from the first phase were fed into Deen Freelon's ReCal online reliability calculator: "ReCal: reliability calculation for the masses," *dfreelon.org*, accessed September, 2015, <http://dfreelon.org/utills/%20recalfront/>; Freelon, Deen G., "ReCal: Intercoder Reliability Calculation as a Web Service," *International Journal of Internet Science* 5, no. 1 (2010), http://www.ijis.net/ijis5_1/ijis5_1_freelon.pdf; The results for the first phase of grading revealed a Fleiss' Kappa of 0.665, Cohen's Kappa of 0.669 and a Krippendorff's Alpha of 0.666. Whilst hovering around the limit of acceptable agreement for Krippendorff's more stringent Alpha, the results suggest an intermediate to good result from Fleiss and Cohen. Agreement for two coders was understandably higher with Krippendorff's Alpha of 0.69. The coding results for the smaller cohort of 'extreme' texts in the second phase of grading were weaker. For three coders, Fleiss was 0.586, Cohen was 0.593 and Krippendorff was 0.59. For the first two coders, however, agreement was significantly higher with Cohen's Kappa of 0.766 and Krippendorff's Alpha of 0.796.

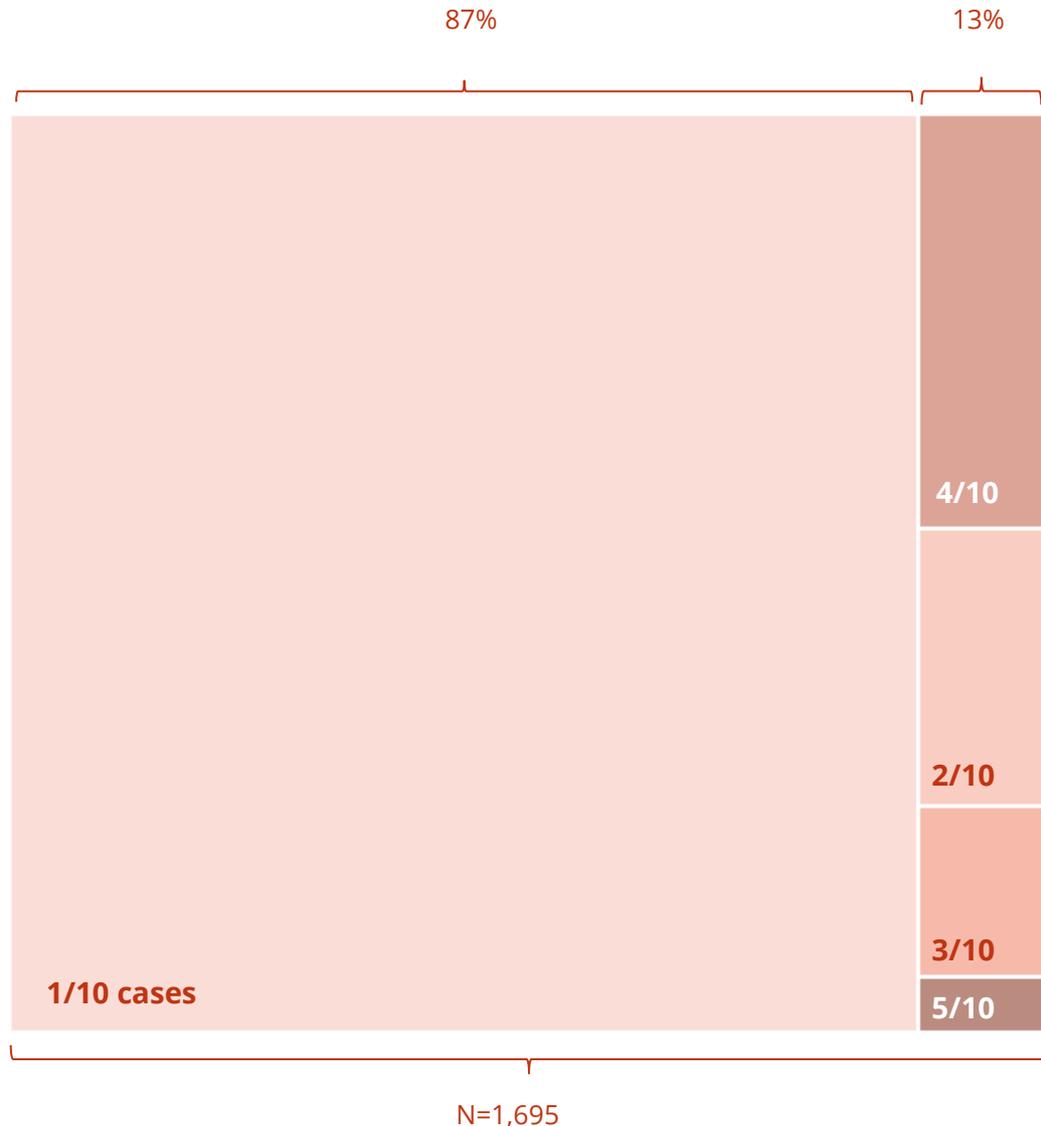


Figure 2. Distribution of Publications across Cases

Almost all these publications were in English. The most common foreign-language material consisted of *nasheeds*, vocal songs that often conveyed emotive religious themes or endorsed jihadi causes such as fighting or dying in battle. These were invariably in Arabic, whilst some video versions were subtitled in English. The lyrics of these *nasheeds* were normally very simple, consisting usually of repeated chanting climaxing in a chorus. One common *nasheed*, for instance, titled ‘Al-Qawlu Qawlu Sawarim’ (the word is the word of the sword) called on believers to use force (the sword) to protect their holy sanctuaries. These *nasheeds* are short, dramatic and simple and thus appear to appeal to non-Arabic speakers as well.

The media publications found featured in different formats: as published written material (including books, pamphlets and articles published online); audio recordings; and video content. Surprisingly, perhaps, audio recordings, primarily of lectures and sermons, usually with at least partly a religious message, were the most common type of publication. Some of these, such as lectures by the Yemeni-American cleric Anwar al-Awlaki (see further below) were professionally produced and many extended for hours, as multi-part series. Subjects also collected a large amount of written material, from

short pamphlets to extensive treatises. Videos were less common. An illustration of this distribution is shown in Figure 3.

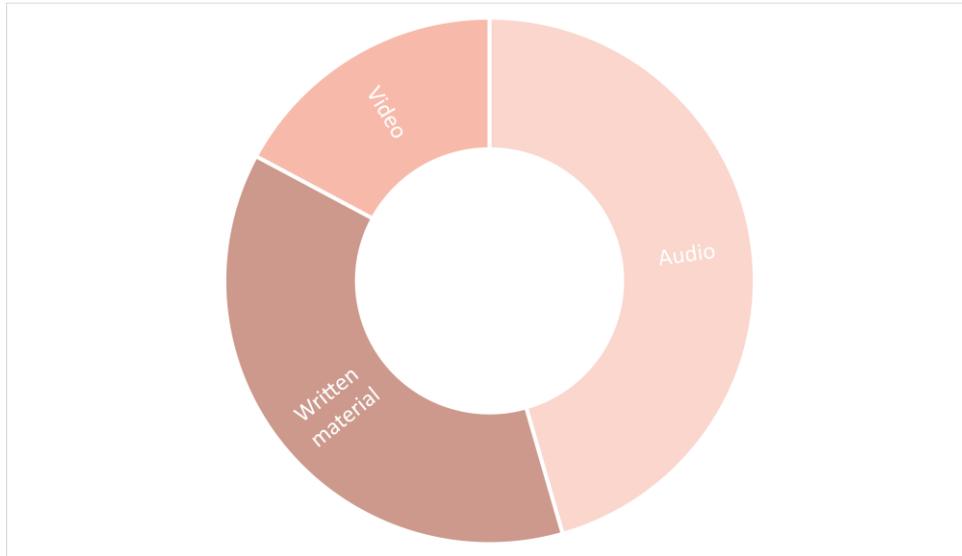
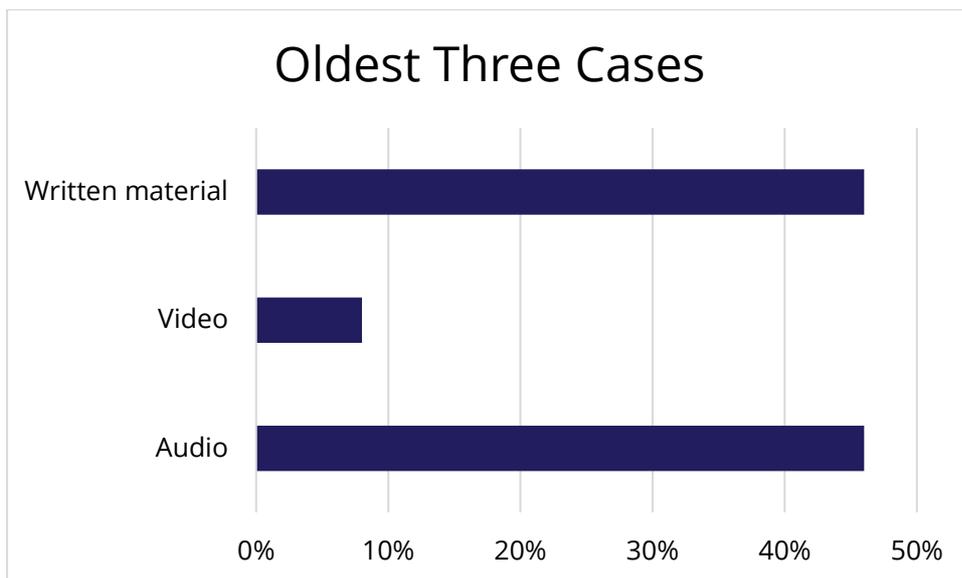


Figure 3. Distribution of Items According to Type of Publication

This distribution between types of publication remained fairly stable across cases. Videos, especially short and user-generated content from websites such as YouTube became more popular in more recent cases but the prominence of audio publications as displayed in Figure 4 remained consistent.

Figure 4 compares the distribution by type for three of the oldest and three of the newest cases in the dataset to illustrate this trend. Whilst newer cases contained more data, perhaps due to the possibilities of downloading and storing larger volumes of digital material, the overall distribution looks similar.



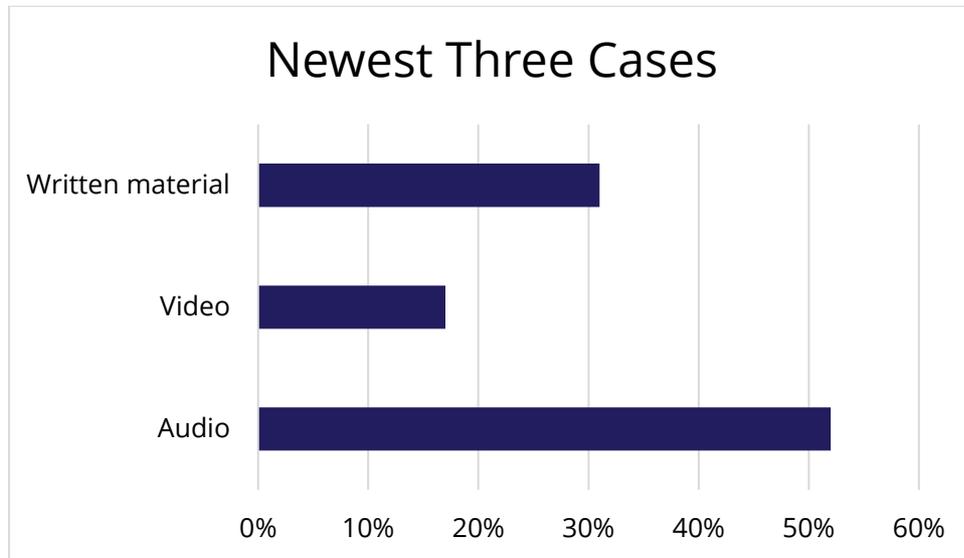


Figure 4. Distribution by Type in Old and New Cases

These findings may not tell us much in isolation, but they do highlight the importance of ensuring that efforts to counter those arguments to which individuals involved in terrorist plots have been exposed reflect the nature and type of media content which appeared to appeal to them in the first place. In this regard, dense, lengthy, and often emotional and content-rich sermons, stories and lectures which can be downloaded as audio files from the internet or played as CDs clearly continue to feature.

Content According to the Extremist Media Index

We now turn to the content and substance of the material found. All 1,695 media publications were graded using the Extremist Media Index described above.

The results of this coding are presented in Figure 5.

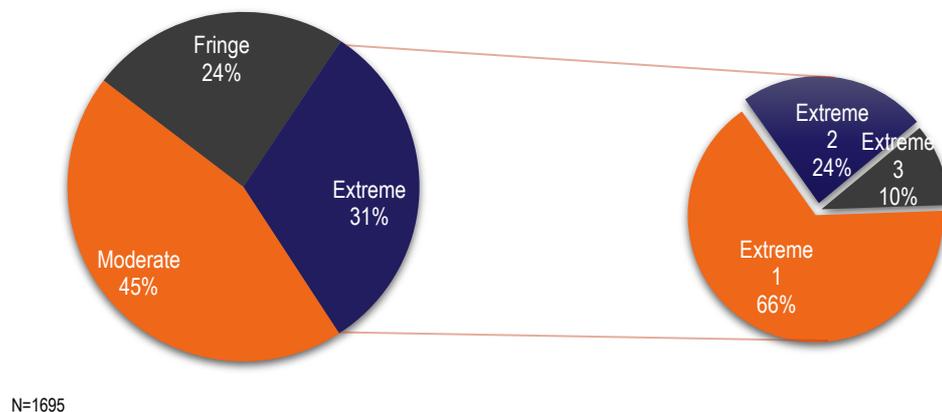


Figure 5. Content Grading Results

Moderate, Fringe and Extreme Content

As shown, publications graded as 'moderate', that offer no endorsement of violence or expressions of hatred or animosity towards people constitute the most frequent category. According to these results, therefore, those involved in terrorist plots, do not predominantly collect material that is exclusively extreme. Examples of material under this category included extensive religious sermons or treatises covering day-to-day religious concepts and themes, innocuous interpretations of scripture, stories from the formative years of Islam, guidelines on etiquette and accounts of conversion. Less religious material featured too, including political analyses and documentaries covering a variety of related topics.

Notably, some of the material found as part of these investigations was not only moderate in content but contained arguments that condemned violence and the types of interpretations put forward in the extremist publications. In one search location that had been used to assemble an improvised explosive device, for example, officers found CDs from a lecture series where speakers emphasised the importance of respecting human rights and working towards social cohesion between communities. A book found at the same location condemned Islamist-inspired suicide attackers, such as the 9/11 hijackers. Whilst these 'counter-extremism' publications were not found in great volumes, especially when compared to the extremist content found, material containing these arguments was nonetheless uncovered in most of the cases under review, suggesting the subjects involved in these terrorist plots had at least some exposure to a counternarrative being lodged against the extremist interpretations that they also collected and which they sought to realise through their actions.

Just under a quarter of the media publications found were graded as 'fringe', material that would express notions of superiority, hostility, or isolation from defined out-groups. Material within this category included some of the output from radical preachers and scholars such as Anwar al-Awlaki, Sayyid Qutb, the Australian cleric Feiz Mohammed, and Jamaican-born convert Abdullah Faisal, though, it should be stressed, these figures also authored copious amounts of extremist content too. Material from radical cohorts such as Al-Muhajiroun and its derivatives also featured. Material from these authors that featured within this 'fringe' category contained no direct references to the use of violence but instead promoted an identified group of people above others and used derogatory language and references to undermine outsiders in distinctly malign ways, without explicitly suggesting they should be targeted or harmed.

A third of the material, in turn, contained extremist content which endorsed or promoted violence or the targeting of particular communities in contemporary settings. These titles included obvious output from terrorist organisations, extremist preachers, and other content that promoted the use of violence to achieve desired objectives.

Subcategories of Extreme Content

The 'extreme' category, as illustrated in Figure 5, was split into three subcategories. As described above, the first subcategory, contained extremist content where references to violence are vague or limited to combatants; the second contained arguments unambiguously justifying violence against civilians; the third subcategory involved endorsement of violence against civilians where specific facilitating detail is included.

As a further marker within this third subcategory a separate division denoted material where facilitating details could be directly followed to cause harm.

A large majority of these publications offered very little detail concerning the direction or manifestation of the violence that was being promoted. They simply emphasised the need to recognise the importance of violent means, without presenting any arguments about where the violence ought to be directed. A smaller number of publications that were also placed within this subcategory did offer some specific guidelines on targeting but these were heavily caveated and directed towards scenarios depicting battlefield or insurgency violence rather than targeting of non-combatants.

The purpose of the Index, as described above, is to pry out these references to more indiscriminate forms of targeting. The second subdivision of 'extreme' items, therefore, focused on material that endorsed the killing of civilians, without offering specific details concerning the concentration of that violence. A quarter of the extremist publications were judged to fit within this category.

Only a tenth of the 'extreme' material presented arguments that rationalised or glorified the targeting of non-combatants *and* offered specific details that can be defined as broadly facilitative, in terms of targeting and methods. A handful of titles within this subcategory, in turn, conveyed specific actionable step-by-step guidelines embedded within their narrative, with examples including the first and sixth issues of the *Inspire* magazine, published by Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

Overall, however, subjects appeared to source expertise, recipes and guidelines related to directly actionable processes such as bomb-making, operational security, or tactics through publications that were dedicated to such topics, thus separating this body of content from those publications conveying beliefs and ideas that appeared to appeal to the subjects that constitute the focus of this study.

The subcategories of extreme content thus highlighted nuances that exist within a set of media publications that may otherwise be seen to convey similar forms of extremist interpretations. In his essay titled 'Defence of the Muslim Lands: The First Obligation after Iman', for instance, which was found in four out of the ten cases under examination, Abdullah Azzam declared militancy an obligation and responsibility of all true believers. His writing, however, focused predominantly on areas of war-fighting, especially Afghanistan, and the religious evidence that rendered, in his view, jihad an individual rather than a collective duty. A more recent essay, written by convicted terrorist Dhiren Barot and found in three of the ten cases, also focused on religiously-inspired insurgency in South Asia but in pursuing these objectives, the author offered the following advice:

In the face of such an adversary the solution may only be 'Flank Protection' to be carried out upon the soil of all interfering nations. The indigenous Believers that reside in these meddling countries however can only do this. For it is they, the locals, and not foreigners who understand the language, culture, area and common practices of the enemy whom they coexist amongst.¹³

¹³The publication was found in three of the ten cases under review: Esa al-Hindi (a.k.a. Dhiren Barot), *The Army of Medinah in Kashmir* (Maktabah al-Ansaar Productions, 1999).

Barot thus presented explicit justifications for targeting non-combatants in cities as a way to support the campaign in Kashmir. These different interpretations and messages are identified through the second phase of the grading.

Grading Categories According to Type

Further nuances of content were identified when each grading category was broken down into the three main different types of media format identified: audio recordings, videos or films, and written material. Results are presented in Figure 6.

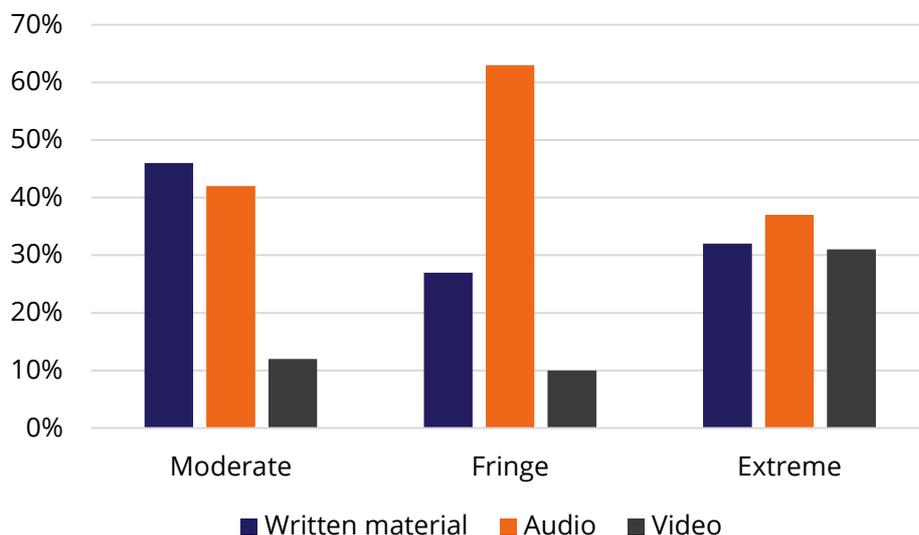


Figure 6. Grading Distribution According to Publication Type

As already noted, audio material constituted the most popular publication type overall. Split across grading categories, audio material was overwhelmingly the most popular type of fringe content, consisting mostly of conservative religious sermons, whilst the proportion of written and audio material in the moderate and extreme categories was similar.

The majority of the videos uncovered in the dataset contained extremist content. These included slick and professionally produced videos by Al-Qaeda, the so-called Islamic State organisation (IS) and other terrorist groups as well as more amateurish user-generated content from sites such as YouTube. Some of these publications were quite old, such as videos glorifying fighters in Bosnia and Chechnya. An example of the latter includes a video titled 'Russian Hell', produced by Babar Ahmad's *Azzam Publications* and released in December 1999, which was found in two of the investigations. The video glorifies jihadi fighters in Chechnya, including prominent leaders such as 'Ibn al-Khattab' and Shamil Basayev. Some of these older videos were found on copied CDs whilst others had been digitised and accessed online. Many continued to feature in newer cases.

Popularity

Popularity in this context is an elusive term as it evokes notions of resonance and impact which are beyond that which can be discovered from studying seized media alone. There are, however, different ways in which we can shed some light on the types of content that appeared to be sought-after by the subjects involved in the cases under investigation.

Authors

If we look at the whole dataset, for example, we can identify those authors who were responsible for the largest number of publications found in the cases examined. Within these ten cases, the authors listed in Figure 7 were responsible for the largest collections of individual publications, although it should be noted that in over 500 publications, no specific author could be identified.

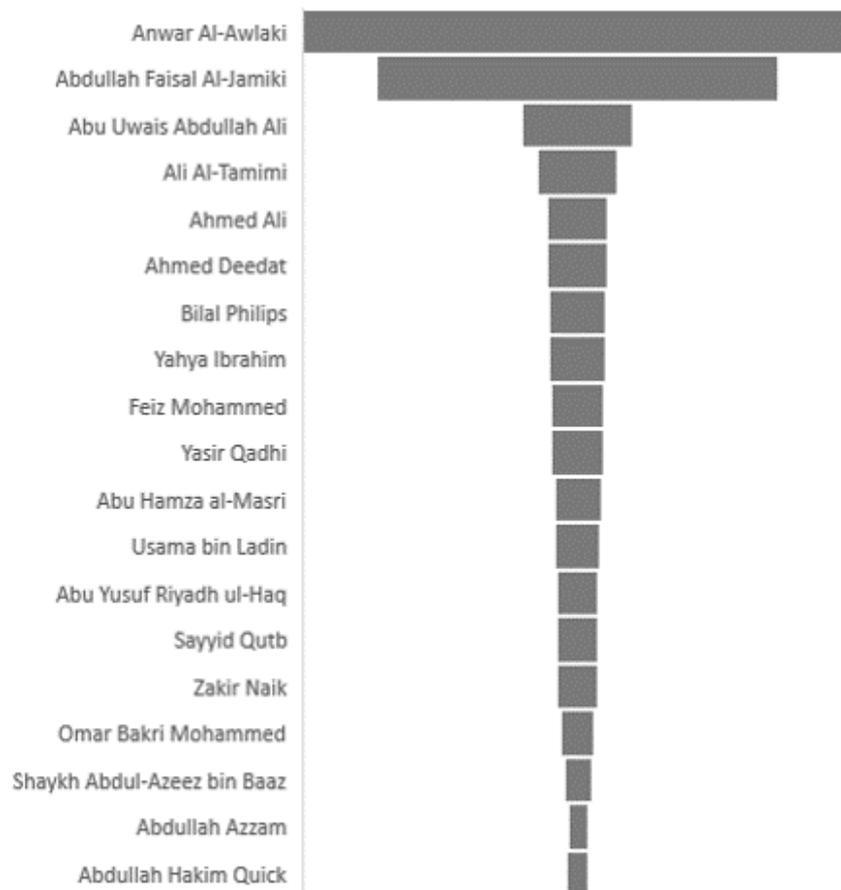


Figure 7. Authors Listed by Number of Publications in Dataset

Some temporal changes emerged in terms of the concentration of output from these authors. Material by Anwar al-Awlaki, for instance, began appearing in cases dating from 2005 but remained a prominent feature of all subsequent cases analysed. Abdullah Faisal, meanwhile, was particularly prominent in the earlier cases whilst his output became less common in the more recent investigations.

It should be stressed, of course, that not all authors listed in Fig. 7 necessarily produced extremist content. Even the most prominent authors listed, Anwar al-Awlaki and, to a lesser extent, Abdullah Faisal al-Jamiki, produced content, especially audio lectures, that were not always extreme.

The list in Figure 7 includes only individual authors of content, that is specific ideologues, scholars and other persons who could be identified, not groups or organisations. If the latter are included, some predictable concentrations or collectives emerge, especially with content authored by leaders or media networks linked to Al-Qaeda or its affiliates (such as Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula) or, in the more recent cases, the IS group. As noted, however, most of material, apart from *nasheeds*, was authored in English or had been translated.

Publishers

Several distinct publishers of content were also prominent. Three publishers of primarily extremist content were particularly notable. These were *Maktabah al-Ansaar*, a bookstore with a large online service that operated out of Birmingham, UK, but has since been closed; *At-Tibyan Publications*, which specialised in creating abridged versions of extreme treatises in English and making them available online, and the aforementioned *Azzam Publications*, a pioneer in the generation of original content glorifying Islamist militancy. All labels have been linked to convicted extremists. I revisit the influence of some of these publishers below.

Overall, a relatively small number of authors, distributors and organisations appeared to be responsible for a large share of the extremist content. The moderate output, which of course constituted the overall majority, was much more diverse. In other words, the moderate publications contained within this dataset were collected from a host of different sources and directions with far fewer comparative trends between cases than emerged with the extremist, and to a lesser degree, the fringe content.

Aggregate Titles

A different way of gauging popularity, however, may be the aggregate of titles that emerged within these ten cases under investigation. This approach relies less on particular selection preferences in individual cases where an unusually large collection of a particular type may skew the overall picture. Studying titles that appear in more than one and often in several cases thus provides us with a more accurate and stable assessment of the most popular content.

As illustrated in Figure 2, above, 215 (13%) titles appeared in more than one of the cases under review. Half of these featured in at least four out of the ten cases (see Figure 8).

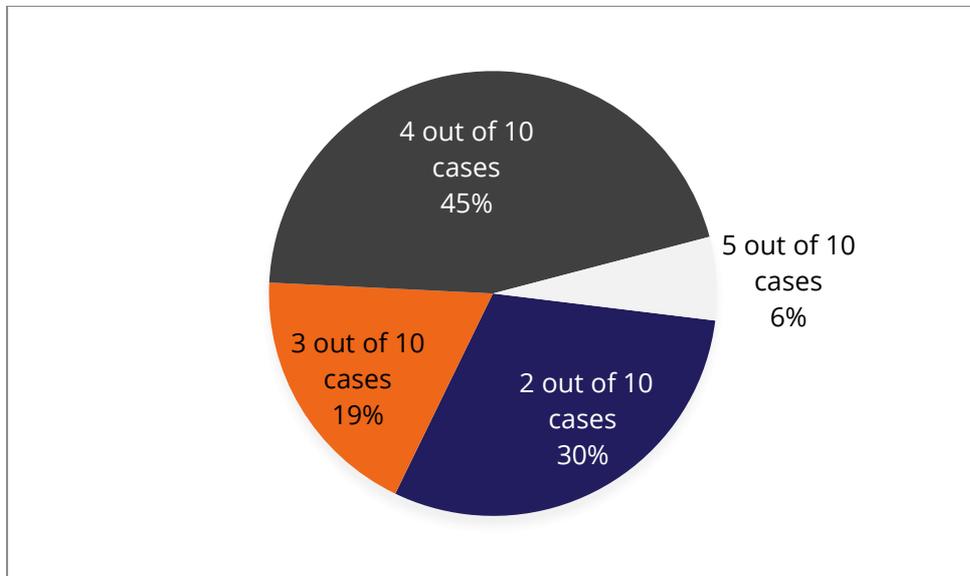


Figure 8. Distribution of Most Popular Titles

Unlike the grading breakdown for the whole dataset, only a small proportion of these most popular titles was moderate (Figure 9). Most of the titles that appeared in more than one case, therefore, contained either extreme or fringe content.

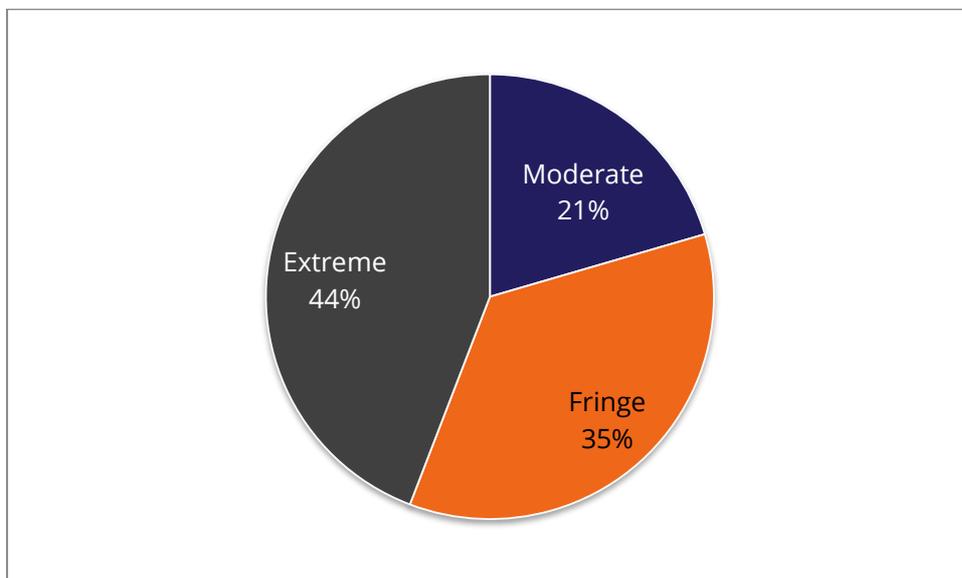


Figure 9. Grading Distribution of Most Popular Titles

Let us look at this material in detail. Table 2 lists the titles that featured in at least three out of the ten cases. Many high-profile titles featured as multi-part series, especially as extensive lecture courses covering a broad theme that were then broken down into individual topics. Since these individual components often existed as stand-alone publications and remain accessible as such online and because the nature of the content (and therefore grading category) varied within these multi-part series, they were coded as separate entries. For ease of analysis, though, I condense these in the following Table.

Table 2. Titles Arranged According to Popularity

Author/speaker	Title/description	Type	Publisher/Source
Anwar al-Awlaki	Mashari Al-Ashwaq ila Masari al-Ushaaq: 12-part series	Audio	Dar Ibn Al Mubarak (Beirut) 2003
Abdullah Azzam	Join the Caravan	Written material	Maktabah al Ansaar
Anwar al-Awlaki	Lives of the Prophets: 20-part series	Audio	Al-Basheer Publications
Anwar al-Awlaki	The Life of Mohammed (Makkan Period): 16-part series	Audio	Awakening Media
Anwar al-Awlaki	The Life of Mohammed (The Medinan Period 1): 27-part series	Audio	Awakening Media
Anwar al-Awlaki	The Life of Mohammed (The Medinan Period 2): 11-part series	Audio	Zenith Productions
Anwar al-Awlaki	The Hereafter/The Afterlife/Al-Achira part 1: 9-part series	Audio	Al-Basheer
Anwar al-Awlaki	The Hereafter/The Afterlife/Al-Achira part 2: 12-part series	Audio	Al-Basheer
Anwar al-Awlaki	Lessons from the Companions: Living as a Minority	Audio	N/A
n/a	Contemporary Heroes of Islam (1): Khattab 1 and 2	Video	waislamah.net
Abdullah Azzam	Defence of the Muslim Lands: The First Obligation after Iman	Written material	Maktabah Al-Ansaar (and others)
Anwar al-Awlaki	Abu Bakr al Siddiq: His Life and Times: 15-part series	Audio	Al-Basheer publications
Osama bin Laden	1998 Fatwa	Written material	Multiple
Anwar al-Awlaki	Constants of Jihad/Constants on the Path of Jihad: 6-part series	Audio	Islambase
Abi Zakaryya al Dimashqi al Dumyati, a.k.a. 'Ibn-Nuhaas' (d. 814 hijri) translated by Noor Yamani	The Book of Jihad or Mashari al-Ashwaq ila Masari al-Ushaaq wa Mutheer al-Gharaam ila Daar Assalaam	Written material	N/A
Abdullah Azzam	The Signs of Allah the Most Merciful Ar-	Written material	Maktabah Al-Ansaar

	Rahmaan in the Jihad of Afghanistan		
Mohammad 'Abdus Salam Faraj	Al-Jihad: The Absent Obligation	Written material	Maktabah Al Ansaar
Abdullah Azzam	The Lofty Mountain	Written material	Azzam Publications (also Maktabah al Ansaar)
Anwar al-Awlaki	Umar Ibn al Khattab - His life and times: multipart series	Multiple file types	Noorpro media
Anwar al-Awlaki	Stories from Hadith: 4-part series	Audio	N/A
Sayyid Qutb	Milestones (or Signposts on the Road)	Written material	N/A
Moulana Mohammed Masood Azhar	The Virtues of Jihad	Written material	N/A
As-Sahab	The wills of the martyrs of New York and Washington aka 19 Martyrs	Video	As-Sahab
Abdullah Faisal al-Jamiki	Declaration of War	Audio	Islambase
Anwar al-Awlaki	Experiences and Ultimate End of Those who Followed and Opposed the Prophet Mohammed s.a.w.s	Audio	JIMAS 10th International Da'wah Conference Talks
Abdullah Azzam	Martyrs: The Building Blocks of Nations	Written material	Azzam Publications
Esa al-Hindi	The Army of Medinah in Kashmir	Audio	Maktabah Al-Ansaar
Safi ur-Rahman al-Mubarakpuri	The Sealed Nectar: Biography of the Noble Prophet	Written material	N/A

As with the volume-focused gauge of popularity, presented in Figure 7, material from the Yemen-American preacher Anwar al-Awlaki dominates in this table. He authored a number of multi-part audio lecture series that were very popular among the subjects involved in these ten cases.

The most popular title listed in Table 2, 'Mashari Al-Ashwaq ila Masari al-Ushaaq', also known as 'The Story of Ibn al-Akwa' or 'The Book of Jihad'. This recording is presented as an audio rendition of a mediaeval book by a scholar called Ibn Nuhaas (d. 1411 CE), which also features a little further down in Table 2, although the reciter adds much of his own input. In this series, Awlaki translates, reads, interprets, and supplements the original medieval text. Nuhaas's original book was dedicated to the concept of jihad, in the meaning of fighting for Allah's cause. It is a dissection of evidence from scripture relating to the essence of war-fighting, including specific tactics and the glory bestowed on the martyrs who die in the battlefield facing their enemy. The topic may seem dated

for contemporary audiences but different translations, including Awlaki's own, seek to put this in a more modern setting. It is this interpretive effort that renders Awlaki's audio lecture version of 'Mashari', particularly extreme, as the preacher cites numerous scenarios and examples where, according to his presentation of arguments, evidence can be found both from Nuhaas and the scriptural evidence that Nuhaas cites, legitimising acts of terrorism today. Awlaki introduces his series as a 'purely academic exercise' but sets out a number of detailed prescriptions regarding desired targeting and modern methods that could be used to kill enemies, including non-combatants. In a section where the author of the original work glorifies acts of sacrifice on the battlefield as martyrdom, Awlaki, in his version, adds: 'there is nothing that puts fear in the hearts of the enemy of Allah like martyrdom operations, it is 'the most powerful weapon that the Muslims possess'. Martyrdom, operations, in this context, refer to suicide bombings or attacks, not bravery on a battlefield, thus constituting a profoundly different message. In another episode, Awlaki recounts Nuhaas's story of a man who leaped into the thick of enemy ranks and fought until his death. Awlaki responded, 'he might as well put on an explosive belt, what is the difference'. Elsewhere in the series, Awlaki stretches other accounts and allegories into justifications for civilian targeting. I revisit this topic of reinterpretation of classic texts in the section on publishers as gatekeepers, below.

Other extensive series by Awlaki, many of which were much less extreme, featured in this list of most popular titles too. Close to the top was his series on the 'Lives of the Prophets', which tells the story of prophets in Islam before Mohammed, dwelling in particular on key figures such as Moses. Equally popular was Awlaki's comprehensive series on the 'Life of Mohammed', which weaves together vivid accounts from witnesses and companions, as well as scripture and other sources to tell the story of the formative years of Islam. This series is widely available, professionally produced and mostly moderate. As is typical of Awlaki's output, however, even at this relatively early stage in his career, there are moments in these lectures where the speaker digresses to offer stark and extreme justifications for indiscriminate violence, delivered as prescriptions to his audience. Reciting fables from pre-Islamic Arabia, for instance, Awlaki cites religious references that in his mind legitimise suicide attacks.¹⁴ Similar trends can be observed in Awlaki's popular talk dedicated to The Hereafter (*al-Achira*) which discusses death, the day of judgement and paradise.

Abdullah Azzam is another author who features prominently in the list of titles in Table 2. Azzam (d. 1989 CE) was a key figure in the organisation of foreign fighters and other members of the resistance against Soviet forces in Afghanistan during the 1980s. He is also seen as one of Osama bin Laden's mentors and facilitated the latter's involvement in the 'Afghan jihad'. Azzam wrote a number of essays reflecting on his experiences in Afghanistan or making the case for Arabs and Muslims to join or support the fighting. Prominent titles by Azzam were clearly popular among the subjects in these cases. An essay which Azzam published in the late 1980s titled 'Join the Caravan' featured in half the investigations under review. Here Azzam set out the religious case for fighting and supporting jihad against those who occupied Muslim lands. In another seminal and similarly popular text by Azzam titled 'Defence of the Muslim Lands: The First Obligation after Iman', the author argued that participation in militancy had become an individual obligation for all Muslims who were duty bound as individual believers, due to the conditions that existed within the religious community, to aid the resistance against aggressors. Similarly themed texts from this period featured slightly further down the

¹⁴ Anwar al-Awlaki, *The Life of Mohammed (Makkan Period): 03 - The religious situation of Pre-Islamic Arabia*.

list, including an essay by Egyptian jihadist Mohammad 'Abdus Salam Faraj titled 'Jihad: The Absent Obligation', which presented popular support for militancy as a neglected responsibility of contemporary faith communities.

Other prominent figures on this list include bin Laden, and Sayyid Qutb. In the latter case, though, it should be noted that several different versions of the author's seminal essay 'Milestones' or 'Signposts' exist, which is a point that I revisit in the next section as I discuss the significance of publishers as gatekeepers and interpreters who filter and edit content as they produce more contemporary English-language versions.

Most of the titles listed in Table 2 are either written documents or audio files. The most popular video within this dataset, 'Contemporary Heroes of Islam' published by Waislamah.net tells the story of 'Ibn al-Khattab', (d. 2002) who was a Saudi-born Islamist rebel leader who rose to prominence during fighting in Chechnya and elsewhere in the North Caucasus.

The presence of titles covering fighting in the North Caucasus, or Afghanistan in the 1980s, or in other conflict locations like Kashmir suggests that material that is dedicated to topics concentrated in particular geographical locales can still be selected by those seeking to carry out violence in a completely different setting. In the same way, the subjects in these ten cases who were planning terrorist attacks in the UK between 2004 and 2015 seemed equally preoccupied with publications authored to capture specific circumstances that existed in the 1990s, 1980s or before. Whilst these ostensibly obsolete publications presented specific appeals, however, they were embedded in a holistic narrative presenting religiously-based arguments that may well be seen to be equally valid today.

Another apparent theme to emerge from aggregation of titles between cases is the prominence of biographical stories that trace the lives of prominent figures. Such narratives and fables were at the heart of Awlaki's popular series on the Prophets, but featured equally prominently in relation to newer material, such as accounts from the battlefields in Afghanistan or more dedicated content relating, for instance, to Ibn al-Khattab.

These stories, moreover, continued to be collected in the latest cases under review, where substantial collections of Awlaki's audio series, by then more than ten-years-old, and Azzam's books, for instance, were found. Subjects towards the end of the twelve-year timeframe, of course, had access to a vastly greater variety of accessible media publications associated with extremist Islamist causes than those in the older cases, especially with the rise of IS which declared its 'caliphate' just before the penultimate plot in our dataset concluded. Numerous IS titles were uncovered in these newest investigations, including issues of the English language *Dabiq* magazine; *nasheeds* glorifying the 'state', the group's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and its martyrs; statements from other key figures such as Abu Muhammad al-Adnani and selections of videos from some of IS's slick propaganda outlets.

It should be noted, of course, that the subjects in the cases we are looking at here sought to carry out attacks on their home soil, not become 'foreign fighters', suggesting this former cohort has an interest in selecting this material too.

Despite the availability of newer material, therefore, much older publications continue to be popular. Even with *nasheeds*, where collections produced by or directly linked to IS are readily available as stand-alone publications online, ‘classics’, such as the aforementioned *nasheed* ‘Al-Qawlu Qawlu Sawarim’ (the word is the word of the sword) remain popular.¹⁵ Despite the rift between Al-Qaeda and IS, moreover, material from both organisations continues to feature in cases such as these, although closer examination of future ‘IS-linked’ plots would be needed to determine whether that is a consistent trend. Examination of future cases will also shed light on the extent to which the subjects involved continue to select these older texts and publications, with their genesis in the first ‘modern’ jihads of Afghanistan in the 1980s.

In terms of studying the nature of this material, however, we must consider the importance of publishers as gatekeepers, interpreters, and filters of the overall narrative. As noted the material found in these cases, irrespective of grading category, was invariably in English, aside from *nasheeds*. Much of the written material, however, originated in Arabic and was aimed at a predominantly Arabic-speaking audience and presented in relation to their circumstances. The audio material, especially from speakers like Awlaki, Faisal al-Jamiki and others is directed at predominantly western audiences and shaped with their experiences in mind. For the written content, therefore, the publisher of the English-language versions, has put some effort into presenting these seminal classics in ways that may resonate with a western audience.

The next section looks at how the *versions* of the seminal jihadi texts that featured in this dataset were presented and sometimes altered by the publishers and distributors that made them available to an English-speaking audience.

Publishers as Gatekeepers, Interpreters, and Filters of Content

The authors of the most popular extremist texts in this study published their material as early as the beginning of the 15th century (CE), in the case of Ibn Nuhaas, or in the 1960s in the case of Sayyid Qutb and 1970s-80s in the case of Azzam and Faraj. The gap between the year of publication and the date of these plots, therefore, is substantial. The versions that the subjects in these cases collected, however, differed substantially from the originals. None of the titles listed in Table 3, which gives the most popular extreme *written* publications, were originally authored in English but were translated and adapted by publishing networks, especially the aforementioned *Maktabah al-Ansaar* and *Azzam Publications*. Individuals behind both publishers featured in terrorism investigations in the UK and these publishers have since ceased operation. Their output, however, continues to be widely available online. As I have shown above, moreover, this output continues to feature in recent terrorism investigations.

¹⁵C.f. Gilbert Ramsay, “Consuming the Jihad: An Inquiry into the Subculture of Internet Jihadism” (PhD diss., University of St Andrews, 2011), 31, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/13120350.pdf>.

Table 3. Most Popular Written Publications That Were Graded 'Extreme'

Author/speaker	Title/description	Type	Publisher/source
Abdullah Azzam	Join the Caravan		Maktabah al Ansaar
Abdullah Azzam	Defence of the Muslim Lands: The First Obligation after Iman		Maktabah Al-Ansaar (and others)
Abi Zakaryya al Dimashqi al Dumyati, a.k.a. 'Ibn-Nuhaas' (d. 814 hijri) translated by Noor Yamani	The Book of Jihad or Mashari al-Ashwaq ila Masari al-Ushaaq wa Mutheer al-Gharaam ila Daar Assalaam	N/A	
Abdullah Azzam	The Signs of Allah the Most Merciful Ar-Rahmaan in the Jihad of Afghanistan		Maktabah Al-Ansaar
Mohammad 'Abdus Salam Faraj	Al-Jihad: The Absent Obligation		Maktabah Al Ansaar
Abdullah Azzam	The Lofty Mountain		Azzam Publications (also Maktabah al Ansaar)
Sayyid Qutb	Milestones (or Signposts on the Road)		Multiple, including Maktabah al-Ansaar
Moulana Mohammed Masood Azhar	The Virtues of Jihad	N/A	
Abdullah Azzam	Martyrs: The Building Blocks of Nations		Azzam Publications

These publishers were set up by entrepreneurs sympathetic to the Islamist extremist cause, some of whom had had a history of prior involvement in militancy. Through their translation and online dissemination of digital copies of seminal treatises on jihad, these nascent publishing networks, therefore, provided a new generation of potential recruits and sympathisers with access to a narrative that will have gained an aura of legitimacy and importance within these circles. Works by Qutb, Faraj and Azzam continue to be revered within Islamist militant camps and widely cited as influential in shaping subsequent campaigns and organisations, including Al-Qaeda.

These digital English-language versions, moreover, offer little suggestion, that these modern editions digress from the original. Great care has been taken to translate the title so it reflects the form used in the language in which it was written and no overt suggestions are offered implying content has been altered from what the author, who is stated as the sole authority on the cover, wanted to convey.

In reality, however, the content can differ substantially from what the author originally intended. For instance, Sayyid Qutb's seminal treatise *Milestones on the Road (or Signposts)* which calls for religious revolution to topple the secular order, exists in several different formats in English. Some editions downplay the section on 'jihad' where Qutb makes the case for mass support for militant action to recreate an Islamic

civilization. The essay was originally authored as a short, concise, activist manifesto. In 2006, however, over forty years after it was first published, Maktabah al-Ansaar created a 'Special Edition' which runs for over 400 pages. Whilst this edition cites Qutb as the author and features the original title of the work in Arabic on the front cover, it is markedly different from other more mainstream editions of the book that exist in English. Chapter 4, on jihad, offers explicit endorsement of violence against alleged unbelievers, traitors, and adversaries. Vast collections of supplementary material are also added, including Ibn Nuhaas's aforementioned *Mashari al-Ashwaq*, with seventeen chapters glorifying warfighting and martyrdom in the interest of religion.

Other, more blatant examples can be found in this dataset. Two different editions of Mohammed Salam Faraj's highly influential book titled *Jihad: The Absent [Neglected] Obligation* were found in the collections under review. Faraj's original was published around the early 1980s and called for all Muslims to embrace warfighting as an individual duty. It was Faraj's intention to call believers to fight against local leaders first in order to establish Islamic governance and thus create the conditions where the larger, external enemy could be challenged. Striking at the far enemy, the global imperialists, first, without sufficient control of territories back home in countries like his native Egypt, Faraj argued, would be foolish. This delineation is kept in one version of Maktabah's rendition of the book. In another edition from the publisher, however, the distinction was replaced with a page emphasising hostility against the West, complete with a footnote citing terrorism legislation in the UK as evidence of the illegitimacy of British rule and its hostility against Islam. Again, the author and title cited on the cover suggest the reader is presented with an unadulterated version of the original works. In reality, the meaning and interpretation being conveyed have been substantially altered. There were other examples of such doctoring or substantive amendment, including additions of contemporary accounts of jihad and martyrdom in established works by Abdullah Azzam and others.¹⁶

There are lessons here that may inform further work in this field. When we think about the impact a collection of media publications such as those under examination here might have on a group of individuals, we first need to identify the particulars of the group in question. Those involved in the dataset here spoke very little Arabic or no Arabic at all and relied on translations of those original texts they sought to collect. These included seminal publications that are widely respected within these cohorts. Since they could not access this material in the original language, however, they were reliant on translations and some of the nascent 'rogue' publishers of digital content that have facilitated access to this high-profile jihadi literature online. These publishing networks are much more obscure than the authors of the original content, that have been studied in numerous books and analytical papers. Yet, in order to study the nature of the narrative from these sources to which subjects who rely on translations are exposed, we need to understand the important role publishers play as gatekeepers to and transmitters of a narrative that they often repackage in ways which can fundamentally alter the original intended meaning.

¹⁶ See Muhammad 'Abdus Salam Faraj, *The Absent Obligation* (Birmingham: Maktabah al-Ansaar Publications, 2000) [with the stated ISBN 0-9539847-2-9]; Muhammad 'Abdus Salam Faraj, *The Absent Obligation*, (Birmingham: Maktabah al-Ansaar Publications, 2000) [second printing, with no ISBN]; Abdullah Azzam, *The Lofty Mountain* (London: Azzam Publications, no date); Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones* (special edition) (Birmingham: Maktabah Booksellers, 2006) [stated ISBN is: 0-9548665-1-7].

Conclusions

This study has analysed the nature of media publications that conveyed ideological, religious, or political content that were found in ten investigations into terrorist plots and attacks in the UK. The focus was on cases that resulted in or were designed to inflict serious violence and harm. The timeframe was large in order to gauge any temporal changes that emerged in terms of the substance of media content over time. To facilitate systematic and comparative analyses between cases, each dataset was processed in the same way with items graded into categories of 'moderate', 'fringe' and 'extreme' content, with items graded as 'extreme' processed further on a three-point scale identifying facilitative and discriminative detail.

This study, therefore, helps us map the media material which subjects involved in terrorism have collected. There has been much speculation about the way in which this environment takes shape in the weeks and months before plots are planned or carried out and the results presented here provide systematic ways in which to understand the intricacies involved in this domain. This is a relatively small sample, but it has been presented in such a way that it can be applied to different sets of cases, such as plots informed by far-right extremism, cross-country comparative studies, or different types of cases, such as engagement in insurgency warfare as 'foreign fighters'.

The study does not, it should be emphasised, uncover details relating to consumption of media material or ways in which such a body of content may have been interpreted. Nor does it seek to explore the impact of this material or contrast this with other sources of influence. Such nuances would need to be explored on a case-by-case basis focusing on ways in which individuals interact with this content in their unique circumstances. In order to explore these other dimensions, however, we need to establish a clear idea of what media exposure looks like and the choices inherent in the assembly of such collections. This has been the objective of this Research Paper.

Twelve key findings seem to stand out:

1. All 44 subjects in these ten Islamist-inspired terrorist plots sought to collect material that conveyed ideological, religious, or political content.
2. Most of this material was in English, apart from nasheeds that were in Arabic. Local language skills may thus shape the nature of the 'global jihadist narrative' that sympathisers in a particular area are exposed to.
3. 13% of the 1,695 unique titles uncovered in these cases featured in more than one investigation. Most of the repetition was with extremist ideological publications.
4. The most prominent type of publication was audio files, especially recordings of lecture series and sermons. Audio files continued to be popular in the most recent cases examined.
5. A third of the material graded was extreme, whilst almost half was moderate, conveying no justifications for violence.

6. Most cases also uncovered examples of moderate content that directly condemned violence and extremist interpretations of religion, suggesting (would-be) terrorists' knowledge of 'counternarratives' is greater than often assumed.
7. Most extremist publications conveyed very little detail concerning the direction or manifestation of the violence that was being endorsed. This material presented justifications as to *why* violence was justified but usually presented few detailed actionable guidelines.
8. A relatively small number of authors, distributors and organisations appeared to be responsible for a large share of the extremist content.
9. Anwar al-Awlaki dominated the list of most popular authors, in both old and new cases, and material by Abdullah Azzam also featured prominently. Output from ideologues thus continues to be sought-after even after they have died.
10. Material that concerned topics concentrated in particular geographical locales and periods was selected by those seeking to carry out violence in a completely different setting. Notionally 'dated' material thus continued to be popular.
11. Stories, fables, and biographical accounts conveyed as gripping and heroic narratives seemed to be an especially popular form of presentation.¹⁷
12. Publishing entrepreneurs often seem to act as gatekeepers to and interpreters of a written narrative that was not originally authored in English. But some alter the meaning and direction of the original message.

What do we take from this? Based on these cases we see that individuals involved in the planning of terrorist acts are not simply exposed to an isolated extremist or 'terroristic' narrative. The repertoire of media publications which they have sought to collect is much more diverse and complex. They may well be concerned with matters beyond engagement in violence and their digital and physical libraries and collections of audio-visual content reflect this. When they do concentrate on extremist material, they rely on a relatively small number of sources, some of which appear to be very popular, appearing in multiple cases. The story-form appears to be a particularly popular and attractive way in which these arguments are presented.¹⁸

When we design rhetorical countermeasures or other interventions to undermine these extremist arguments, therefore, we need to acknowledge the complex context in which they appeared. We need to acknowledge the nature of the extremist narrative that appears to be popular, such as expansive audio recordings, and we need to be conscious of the fact that subjects may well be aware of a moderate alternative, which is rejected in favour of extremist interpretations that are seen as more authentic, exciting, appropriate or rewarding.

¹⁷ For the importance of such narrative presentations: Andrew Glazzard, "Losing the Plot: Narrative, Counter-Narrative and Violent Extremism," *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 8, no. 8 (2017).

¹⁸ Though popularity, in this regard, refers simply to the aggregate of titles and authors that featured in cases, and does not imply assumptions of what they meant for the individuals involved.

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What Types of Media Do Terrorists Collect? An Analysis of Religious, Political, and Ideological Publications Found in Terrorism Investigations in the UK

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The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT) is an independent think and do tank providing multidisciplinary policy advice and practical, solution-oriented implementation support on prevention and the rule of law, two vital pillars of effective counter-terrorism.

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