

The background of the entire page is a light teal network diagram consisting of interconnected nodes and lines. The word "RESOLVE" is written in a large, bold, dark teal font, with "NETWORK" in a smaller, all-caps, dark teal font directly below it. A thin black diagonal line is positioned to the right of the word "RESOLVE".

# RESOLVE

NETWORK

## **Primary Data & Individual Worldviews:** Walking through Research on Terrorist Media Choices

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# ABSTRACT

How do we measure terrorists' exposure to extremist narratives and what that suggests about their own worldviews and perspectives? While some degree of engagement with politically or religiously extreme narratives, ideologies, media and movements is seen as part of what frames the emergence of political violence, identifying and measuring these interactions pose significant methodological challenges. Former extremists, for instance, may view their prior involvement in extremism differently with the benefit of hindsight than they might have done at the time of their involvement. Large-scale analyses of online media and communities, in turn, may tell us little about how those who later engaged in violent extremist activities consumed extremist materials and what that may, in turn, reveal about their own perspectives and worldviews.

This chapter describes a research project that sought to address those issues by analyzing evidential material about individual media consumption from concluded terrorism investigations in the United Kingdom. The chapter walks through decisions made by the researcher regarding study framing, data collection, and data structuring, and describes the research methods employed to process large quantities of digital and physical media material that shed light on the ideological and facilitative dimensions of the activities in question. The chapter details the challenges of navigating sensitive and inherently subjective areas of inquiry and how these challenges can be mitigated through systematizing and quantifying elements of the qualitative research. Finally, the chapter describes a ready-to-use grading framework that was developed to further analyze information compiled in the project dataset, how its strength can be assessed, and how it can be applied in other studies researching similar phenomena.

# INTRODUCTION

There were two principal objectives that inspired the research described in this chapter.<sup>1</sup> First was to shed more light on the way in which the world looked from the perspective of the subjects that interest us, in this case those involved in terrorism and political violence, rather than the way that world is perceived by us, the external observers. Second was to strengthen our empirical evidence base of primary source material upon which our assumptions and observations about violent extremists are based.

These two objectives are important since they address key gaps in our understanding of terrorism produced, in part, by challenges to conducting empirical research on the mindset and choices of violent extremists. I sought to address these gaps by undertaking systematic research exploring the type of media publications that individuals who were found guilty of involvement in Islamist-inspired terrorism

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1 Donald Holbrook, "The Terrorism Information Environment: Analysing Terrorists' Selection of Ideological and Facilitative Media," *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2019): 1-23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2019.1583216>

were exposed to or had chosen to consume before or during their involvement in planned acts of violence. This was a challenging research endeavor for two main reasons. First, the volume of data involved meant that I had to be consistent in the choice of methods that I applied to allow for comparative and statistical analysis. Second, given that the media content that I analyzed conveyed subjective rather than objective interpretations, it was critical that my tools of measurement were as accurate as possible. I resolved to address these challenges by designing a coding framework which I cross-validated by measuring the level of agreement between different coders who applied the framework to a sample set of the data.

In this chapter I describe my research journey, starting with setting out the parameters of my research inquiry and defining key terms. I then describe how I clarified the scope of my analysis, noting the limitations that emerged once the research inquiry was narrowed and sharpened. Finally, I describe how I assembled the data and developed my research methods.

The research process described here is relevant to those interested in conducting research examining the worldview of violent extremists, in this case a sample of jihadist-inspired extremists, but also those interested in conducting systematic comparative or statistical analysis of media content or religious or political material. The lessons derived from the processes described here, moreover, may also be relevant to those researching related fields, including political protest movements. For those conducting fieldwork interviews, the coding processes described here provide insights on specific methods for coding transcripts.

## DEFINING GAPS AND SITUATING THE QUERY

Developing research and evidence concerning terrorists' exposure to extremist media is important for multiple reasons. First, little attention has been placed on examining terrorists' outlook, choices or perspectives, partly because solid information in this regard can be hard to come by. Researchers have managed to interview practicing or former extremists, an approach that has yielded invaluable insights. Despite the benefits of this approach, there is a risk that interview respondents may be dishonest or unclear about the factors that motivated them to participate in terrorist activities or political violence, particularly if they no longer feel strongly about such causes.

Increasingly, researchers have also turned to researching expressions recorded online, often through social media, to understand the individual motivations and perceptions of those participating in terrorist activities. However, the degree to which online pronouncements can be tied to specific behavior beyond the online space can be hard to assess without deeper analysis into how these online materials are consumed.<sup>2</sup>

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2 Gilbert Ramsay, *Jihadi Culture on the World Wide Web* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).

Finally, studies examining terrorists' own perspectives have often focused on output from terrorist strategic communications, such as pronouncements, speeches, and publications. The purpose of these pronouncements, however, is invariably propagandistic to some degree, and not necessarily a direct reflection of how the worldview depicted in them was constructed.<sup>3</sup> These issues result in a gap in our current approach to understanding individual exposures to extremist media, particularly online.

Several experts have highlighted this problem. Conway, for example, pointed out that analyses of individuals' online engagement and experiences in "extremist cyberspaces" were missing.<sup>4</sup> This is not a new problem in our research field. While speaking about the dearth of understanding about how online outreach by terrorists actually **played out** among its intended audience at a U.S. Congressional Committee in December 2011, noted that "very little work has been done on the conduits through which [terrorist output] is distributed—and even to what extent anyone is accessing that propaganda other than counterterrorism analysts."<sup>5</sup> A recent UNESCO research synthesis similarly argued: "There is a growing body of knowledge about how terrorists use cyberspace. Less clear, however, is the impact of this use."<sup>6</sup>

This consumer-side blind-spot, in turn, is related to the second driver behind this research, which relates to the overall empirical deficit in this field of study and the weak evidence base upon which our assumptions about terrorism and terrorists are based. This, again, is not a new problem. Silke's 2004 review of terrorism research found insufficient attention placed on rigorous empirical research, individual data generation and, especially, studies that relied on primary sources—original and first-hand information—rather than secondary interpretations.<sup>7</sup> Subsequent contributions, most notably Sageman's lament over the 'stagnation in terrorism research', have reiterated these concerns.<sup>8</sup>

There is, therefore, a dual need to: (a) develop research that documents and examines how terrorists themselves have operated in cyberspaces and made choices about the content which they consume, and (b) ensure such research endeavors strengthen our empirical understanding of terrorism through the systematic analysis of primary sources. The research, described here, sought to address these gaps by creating a systematized means of capturing, categorizing, and analyzing the online behaviors and media consumption of individuals convicted of terrorist crimes to better understand their preferences, worldviews, and exposure prior to their engagement in terrorist activities. In this chapter, I walk the reader through important aspects, obstacles, decisions, and limitations that emerged throughout the research process that are critical to understanding the benefits of the research design utilized and its applicability to similar studies.

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3 Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnel, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, 5th ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2012).

4 Maura Conway, "Determining the Role of the Internet in Violent Extremism and Terrorism: Six Suggestions for Progressing Research," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40, no. 1 (2017): 79.

5 Ibid.

6 Séraphin Alava, Divina Frau-Meigs, and Ghayda Hassan, *Youth and Violent Extremism on Social Media: Mapping the Research* (Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, 2017).

7 Andrew Silke, "An Introduction to Terrorism Research" in *Research on Terrorism: Trends, Achievements and Failures*, ed. Andrew Silke (London: Frank Cass, 2004) 1-29.

8 Marc Sageman, "The Stagnation in Terrorism Research," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 4, (2014): 565-580.

# FRAMING THE INQUIRY: DEFINING TERMS AND NARROWING THE SCOPE

With terrorism research, it is easy to lose focus on the factors driving the inquiry. Definitions are hazy and tend to travel. Concepts such as ‘radicalization’ and ‘countering violent extremism’ have entered the fold and risen to prominence in analyses and commentary about terrorism, without their meaning being universally understood or consistently employed. I will not dwell on definitional conundrums in any detail in this chapter; indeed, such topics have filled entire books.<sup>9</sup> What is necessary, however, as in any study, is to clearly illustrate and demarcate the framework and scope of the research that will be conducted. The initial step in this regard is to define appropriate and measurable data that addresses the research query.

## Narrowing the Field of Study: Selecting and Defining Appropriate Data

To derive observable data that contains insight regarding individual exposure to different media, including extremist narratives, I resolved to focus on the types of media publications that terrorists collected before and during their involvement in violence..

Examining media publications – including written texts, audio recordings, and videos – that terrorists had collected from a wider pool of available content provided ways in which to sample their preferences and selections of material directly. Behavioral scientists refer to such concrete and sampleable outcomes of behavior recorded from when the subjects engaged in it as “permanent products”.<sup>10</sup> Since tens of thousands of items of propaganda associated with the Islamist extremist realm alone remain available via the Internet, subjects are making choices as they select or share publications that interest them or they see as important. These patterns of selection and their outcomes constitute something we can measure, observe, and analyze to better understand terrorists’ outlook and worldview.

Added to this, of course, are more recent forms of interactive social media that utilize innovations of ‘Web 2.0’<sup>11</sup>. Given that this is very broad and somewhat muddled terrain, I first needed to make clear which aspects of this media landscape I was seeking to study. Within a fast-moving research environment, produced or published stand-alone media – recorded audio or video material and written work, whether digital or physical, ‘official’ or user-generated – represents a more stable example of media engagement. Tweets, Telegram posts, or other aspects of interactive communication are less stable since they disappear once a user’s account is deactivated, a common occurrence when users post or promote

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9 Anthony Richards, *Conceptualising Terrorism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

10 Douglas E. Kostewicz, Seth A. King, Shawn M. Datchuk, Kaitlyn M. Brennan, and Sean D. Casey, “Data Collection and Measurement Assessment in Behavioral Research: 1958–2013,” *Behavior Analysis: Research and Practice* 16, no. 1 (2016): 19-33. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/bar0000031>

11 A term used to describe the dawn of the ‘participatory web’ with new opportunities afforded by online tools to share content and interact with others through social media and other interactive channels.

extremist content. Published media, therefore, became my object of analysis: what types of media content that fit this description did terrorists seek to collect and what might that say about their own worldviews and perspectives?

Excluding social media, however, meant excluding a rich resource of terrorist output and consumption.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, focusing on collections of publications meant that questions about consumption of this material, i.e. the extent, sequence or way in which subjects viewed or read these publications, were only partially addressed; such queries would necessitate a more detailed case-by-case analysis that was beyond the specific scope of this research.

## SELECTING MEDIA TYPES

The next content-related question I faced was which type of published material I would study. Again, to ensure that the research remained manageable in terms of scope and that I was consistent in answering my research questions, I focused on collecting and analyzing data on **facilitative** and **ideological** media. **Facilitative media** refers to published content that relates directly to overcoming practical challenges relevant to carrying out acts of violence, such as putting together an explosive device. **Ideological media** refers to material promoting religious or political interpretations or beliefs. Both are relevant to participation in terrorism and have substantial overlap, so I opted to examine both.

If terrorism or violent extremism is essentially political violence, our benchmark for measurement lies partly in the types of ideological content that terrorists seek to collect since this helps us study the political (including religiously political) context of terrorist acts. Moreover, if terrorism involves overcoming obvious constraints inherent in the planning of terrorist acts, such as devising attack mechanisms, avoiding detection and choosing targets, material that guides individuals to overcome such challenges formed an important component of study. Having decided to focus on ideological and facilitative media, I needed to further sharpen my definition and rationale for choosing both.

## SHARPENING DEFINITIONS: IDEOLOGICAL MEDIA

Ideology in the context of terrorism, is a contested term, its definition varying from context to context and person to person. Given the contested nature of the concept, I needed to highlight precisely the type of publications that I placed into this category and my rationale for doing so. Overall, I took a broad approach to the concept of ideology.

Some scholars view ideology in the context of terrorism as relatively ill-defined yet curiously rigid, and consisting predominantly of complex doctrine, the impact of which on individuals presupposes a degree

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12 United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, *Global Survey of the Implementation of Security Council Resolution 1373 (2001) by Member States* (New York: United Nations Security Council, 2016). <https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/news/document/global-survey-of-the-implementation-of-security-council-resolution-1373-2001-by-member-states-2016/>

of knowledge and sophistication.<sup>13</sup> The disciplines that are dedicated to the study of ideology, however, emphasize looser qualities, viewing the concept as a form or system of beliefs that tie people together in real or imagined communities, giving them a sense of belonging, collectivity and a filter to frame events and make sense of the world.<sup>14</sup> This latter understanding informed my approach to the topic since it more accurately captures the fluid nature of ideology which does not exist separately from processes leading to extremism, but rather imbues its components with relevance, context, and meaning.

I chose to define any items that conveyed religious, political or other ideological opinion or proscription as ideological publications. This excluded mainstream news material focusing exclusively on objective reporting as well as material consisting exclusively of unadulterated scripture without additional efforts to translate, direct, or interpret that scripture in a manner encouraging particular outcomes. The rationale behind the selection was both to limit the dataset to more manageable dimensions and to concentrate on publications more directly associated with ideological pronouncements, broadly defined.

Again, however, I needed to be explicit about the limitations that would result in narrowing the scope further. Excluding mainstream media content meant that certain individual preference patterns relating to available media, such as news filtering, were not part of the inquiry. While beyond the feasible scope of my study, mainstream media content would be a worthy subject for future research, as it would likely add to our understanding of how individuals involved in terrorism became informed and influenced by world events.

## SHARPENING DEFINITIONS: FACILITATIVE MEDIA

My facilitative category included pamphlets, books, instructional videos and other guidelines that provided information regarding the assembly of improvised explosive devices (IED), surveillance and counter-surveillance (online and offline), reconnaissance, combat and weapons training, self-defense and other related topics. It is important to note that some publications convey *both* ideological and actionable content, so these had to be categorized according to the best overall fit in each case depending on the primary focus of the material in question. For instance, a series of magazines produced in English by Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula called *Inspire*, often included both actionable guidelines—such as instructions on assembling IEDs using household items as well as ideological tracts, such as articles about religious justifications for violence, updates from combatants in the field or transcripts of prominent Al-Qaeda propaganda. One infamous section in the magazine’s first issue was titled “Open Source

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13 Clark McCauley and Sofia Moskalenko, “Individual and Group Mechanisms of Radicalisation,” in *Protecting the Homeland from International and Domestic Terrorism Threats: Current Multi-Disciplinary Perspectives on Root Causes, the Role of Ideology, and Programs for Counter-radicalisation and Disengagement*, eds. Laurie Fenstermacher, Larry Kuznar, Anne Speckhard, and Sarah Canna (Washington, DC: White Papers, Strategic Multi-Layer Assessment and Air Force Research Laboratory, 2010), 82-91.

14 Jonathan Leader Maynard, “Rethinking the Role of Ideology in Mass Atrocities,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 5 (2014): 824-821; Michael Freeden, “Ideology and Political Theory,” in *The Meaning of Ideology: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Michael Freeden (London: Routledge, 2007), 1-20; John Wilson, *Introduction to Social Movements* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); Clifford Geertz, “Ideology as a Cultural System,” in *Ideology and Discontent*, ed. David E. Apter (Glencoe: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1964), 47-76; Thomas Hegghammer, “Introduction: What is Jihadi Culture and Why Should We Study It?” in *Jihadi Culture: The Art and Social Practices of Militant Islamists*, ed. Thomas Hegghammer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 1-22.



Jihad” which included an article called “Make a Bomb in the Kitchen of Your Mom,” conveying detailed and step-by-step instructions on assembling an IED using common household items.<sup>15</sup> Yet the thrust of all issues of the magazines, both in terms of volume and focus, was to convey ideological content: religious interpretations, grievances, and political narratives with the aim of mobilizing identified constituencies. Indeed, the magazine’s title referred to the need to inspire the believers to rise and fight for their religion. As a result, copies of *Inspire*, and similar publications, were classified as “ideological.”

## Limiting Research Scope: Identifying and Narrowing Research Subjects

At this stage, I had structured my research query to focus on ideological and facilitative media publications that terrorists had collected to shed light on their choices and selection patterns within the environment in which they operated. However, I still needed to establish how the subjects of my study would be selected. An individual’s involvement in terrorism can take on many different roles, and individuals can travel between roles as their participation in or on the margins of political violence and terrorism evolves. Individuals can seek to join militant organizations abroad, develop fund-raising efforts, produce propaganda—either on behalf of a group or on their own initiative—or engage in other support activities, without seeking to carry out terrorist attacks. Individuals’ association with these activities, moreover, can be hard to ascertain, particularly—as mentioned—if most of our data relies on online personas and avatars.

To address this dilemma in my own research, I selected a group of individuals who had been **found guilty** by the court system, where a judge and jury assessed evidence from prosecutors and established that involvement in terrorism was proven. Furthermore, given the range of different types of activities, I concentrated my analysis on those who had sought to carry out acts of terrorism and received life-sentences or died during their attacks. Support activities and more peripheral forms of engagement in extremism, therefore, are discarded. Focusing on this ‘high-end’ of terrorism activities where ‘actual’ terrorism was planned or took place ensures greater consistency in my comparative sampling between individual cases.

Additionally, I limited my study to one jurisdiction: The United Kingdom (UK). This choice was dictated by access to data and thus points more to a practical limitation in conducting research as outlined here. Once one body of knowledge has been established, however, the groundwork is prepared for further comparative research.

Finally, my study was limited to a specific time period, between 2004 and 2017, and to Islamist-inspired terrorism alone, given that these types of activities constituted the most prominent and serious form of non-state terrorism in the time period and jurisdiction under review. Again, however, we have created benchmarks with which to incorporate other forms of ideological dispositions, such as terrorism associated with the far-right.

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<sup>15</sup> The article ““Make a Bomb in the Kitchen of your Mom” appeared in the al-Qaeda magazine, *Inspire*, in summer 2010.

At this point, the first three stages of this research were complete:

- I framed my research inquiry within the existing literature;
- I defined the key terms as they would be used and approached in my research; and
- I gradually narrowed my inquiry to construct a viable set of research tasks that I could follow to answer my research questions, highlighting the limitations inherent in doing so.

The next step was to assemble my data and determine the proper methods of analysis.

## ASSEMBLING AND ANALYZING DATA: CLUSTERS, FILTERS, AND CATEGORIZATIONS

To assemble my dataset, I worked with counterterrorism law enforcement bodies in the UK who provided access to material that had been uncovered in their investigations in cases concluded in the court systems. Given that these were near-exhaustive sets of media content found in each investigation; material from digital devices such as laptops and phones, as well as physical matter, each case contained large volumes of material.

I thus limited my study to 17 distinct police investigations that were concluded in the United Kingdom. The cases were chosen as being typical of the types of Islamist terrorist plots planned or carried out in the UK during this period. The cases also spread evenly across the 13-year timeframe. This is not to say that these were the only cases relevant to the research inquiry, but they offered a comprehensive set of data, without being too voluminous to manage. These investigations involved 57 individuals who were found guilty of participating in—or seeking to participate in—acts of terrorism on their home soil between 2004 and 2017. This may seem like a very small number, but it should be noted that while large numbers of individuals have been convicted in the UK for terrorism-related offences, only a small proportion of this category includes individuals who were in the advanced stages or successful in carrying out acts of lethal violence.<sup>16</sup> As mentioned in the previous section, this research query concerned those involved in ‘high-end’ terrorist activity, not those engaged in more peripheral roles. This was a deliberate choice to ensure that the cases involved individuals planning on carrying out terrorist attacks—not just supportive of them—and thus consistent in the aspects of terrorism that we choose to study.

These 17 cases presented multiple options in terms of filtering and categorizing the data within them. My first task was to sort through the case information and identify and tag any facilitative and ideological media publications, as defined in the previous section, that were uncovered in these cases. I found 2,397 unique publications matching my selection criteria to populate my meta-dataset. “Unique” in this

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<sup>16</sup> As illustrated by the fact that the average prison sentence in the UK for terrorism offenses in 2017 was only five years, because such a large majority only received minor custodial sentences for peripheral and support activities, Europol, “European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report” (2018), 20.

context refers to the total number of individual publications found. However, several publications were found in more than one investigation, as described further in the next section of this chapter.

To create a more comprehensive understanding of terrorists' media preferences and choices, I selected two additional aspects of the cases to interrogate further. The first was the organizational context of the cases, i.e. whether individuals had operated alone or in a group. Of the 17 investigations examined, 10 involved individuals operating together as a group—50 subjects in total—while the remaining seven investigations concerned lone actors operating as on their own. The second additional aspect was the time period of the cases themselves. To gauge temporal developments, I divided the cases into three period clusters: Cluster A, between 2004 and 2006, Cluster B, between 2008 and 2013 and Cluster C, between 2014 and 2017. There were only four cases each in clusters A and B. Nine cases were concentrated in cluster C, reflecting an uptick in the number of cases under investigation from 2014 onward. This clustering divided the meta-dataset into comparable temporal components. In addition, the clusters, as temporally defined, reflected broader developments in the Islamist extremist universe, providing additional context for the examination of the activities involved in each case. For example, Cluster A reflected a period of heightened Islamist extremist activity after the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent insurgency, when complex and deadly attacks were carried out in cities such as Amman, Madrid, and London. Cluster B was characterized more by discussions of “leaderless jihad” and “self-starters”, who carried out attacks on their own initiative in the interests of a perceived greater whole.<sup>17</sup> Finally, Cluster C captured a period of renewed Islamist extremist resurgence, primarily through the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and other jihadist entities exploiting areas of conflict and turmoil.

The final dataset encompassed over 2,000 unique media publications, coded to reflect their collection by both lone and group actors in three separated date clusters within the 13-year period of focus. The next step was to make sense of this material in a way that would help explain how terrorists interacted with the sources of information available to them.

## Choosing Appropriate Research Methods

To begin to analyze and make sense of the information within my newly created dataset, I employed a “mixed-methods” research approach of both quantitative and qualitative inquiry.<sup>18</sup> Such approaches incorporate the nuance of a qualitative process with the systemization and greater generalizability of quantitative processes.

There are many ways to design a mixed methods study. One crucial decision researchers have to make when designing their mixed-methods study is the “sequence decision”: does the qualitative method precede the quantitative method or vice versa, or, rather, is data collection concurrent?<sup>19</sup> My study rested on a largely qualitative foundation, with substantial quantification of the findings. I first used qualita-

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17 Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-first Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

18 Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 5th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 635).

19 Ibid: 638.

tive methods to process media content found in the cases examined to create a dataset, after which I employed quantitative methods to analyze the information within that dataset. I chose this technique because it allowed for statistical analysis of data, and thus greater oversight and comparison between the different aspects of a study.

More specifically, the type of mixed-methods I employed concerned what Creswell and Plano Clark referred to as ‘exploratory sequential design’.<sup>20</sup> This entails the collection of qualitative data before quantitative data is identified, a process that allows for hypotheses or “hunches” to be developed organically during the initial qualitative phase, and then tested later using quantitative means. This approach suited my study since an initial qualitative assessment of the data, through reviewing the media material uncovered, could then be used to develop more specific quantitative tools of measurements to review that same dataset again. Research instruments can also be developed during the qualitative phase that can then be used in quantitative investigations.<sup>21</sup>

## Applying Research Methods: Category Grading as a Unique Approach to Subject-Focused Research

Now that I had defined the scope of my research query, defined key terms, collected my data and developed relevant research methods, I could commence with my analysis. For my study, I identified four observable features of the dataset and two elements that I wanted to measure from the 17 cases examined. The immediately observable features concerned the author and publisher of the items in question when stated in the publication. This could shed light on the origin source of the publications that terrorists had chosen to collect and crucial questions such as prominent interlocuters who appeared to hold appeal with the terrorists involved in the 17 cases examined. I additionally wanted to gauge the format of these publications – much attention, for instance, is placed on video content produced by terrorist organizations, but is this reflected in the type of material (audio, video or written) that terrorists have chosen to collect? Finally, I wanted to assess the extent to which the same media material was present in multiple cases to identify or measure the “popularity” of any one publication among the audiences within my study.

To properly assess these issues, two additional features of my data had to be measured more carefully. The first, as noted, concerned the division of the total number of publications into facilitative and ideological, following the definitions and selection criteria described earlier in this chapter. This division separated the dataset into 201 publications that were deemed facilitative and 2,196 ideological publications. Given the substantially greater proportional size of the ideological subset, I devised a system of grading to map the ideological landscape that emerged in these cases, based on an initial qualitative sampling of 10% of the publications. This type of grading, especially when underpinning quantitative analysis, poses methodological challenges that are addressed below.

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20 John W. Creswell and Vicki L. Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks CA: Sage, 2011).

21 Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 639.

## CATEGORY GRADING IN RESEARCH ON VIOLENT EXTREMISM

To more fully understand the media publications that individuals accused of terrorism-related crimes self-selected prior to their engaging in violent extremist activities, I needed to develop a scale to “grade” the ideological factors within them. In doing so, I chose to categorize ideological material based on the extent to which hostility against people was promoted or endorsed with elevations in grading category dictated by escalations in such pronouncements. In other words, I graded ideological content in a manner that highlighted differences in attitudes towards a given group of people as expressed in the material under examination, including expressions of extremism, hostility, aggression and violence.

The inspiration behind this grading was Max Taylor’s Combatting Paedophile Information Networks in Europe (COPINE) scale which is used by prosecutors to grade child abuse images. This scale “aims to provide a systematic way of grading content, as it presents itself to the viewer, based on heuristic indicators pointing towards an intuitively plausible sense of escalating severity.”<sup>22</sup>

The resulting grading framework consisted of two sets of categorizations: first, a division of ideological content into: (a) ‘moderate’, (b) ‘fringe’, and (c) ‘extreme’ categories; second, a further division of ‘extreme’ content into three subcategories, depending on the extent to which content advocated the targeting of non-combatants, and the extent to which any detail was offered in this regard. The definitions are given in Table 1.

The grading, therefore, detected an element of escalation of severity, similar to COPINE, in the ideological material useful in assessing the extent to which the worldviews of individual’s who were convicted of terrorism-related offense aligned with the severity of the jihadist media content they consumed.

Assessing ideological content, however, is in many ways more complex than assessing other types of content. For one, ideological content often is packaged in different formats, including lengthy recorded sermons or dense written tracts where precise meaning can be hard to ascertain. Furthermore, judgements of what constitutes discursive escalation, or ‘extreme’ discourse are, by definition, variable and dependent on benchmarks of ‘normalcy’ or ‘general acceptance’ that vary across different contexts depending on prevailing norms at a given time or place. Such judgements, moreover, are inevitably subjective and dependent on individual values that are equally colored by existing experiences, associations and perspectives. Categorization of this nature, in short, is not a perfect science or an unproblematic indication of content.

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22 Donald Holbrook, Gilbert Ramsay, and Max Taylor, “‘Terroristic Content’: Towards a Grading Scale,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 25, no. 2 (2019): 207. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2019.1583216>

**Table 1** Grading definitions

<p><b>1</b> <b>Moderate</b></p>	<p>General published religious, political, philosophical or historical opinion containing no endorsement of violence, harming or hatred towards identified communities with generally moderate content along the lines found in mainstream religious/political texts and media output.</p>
<p><b>2</b> <b>Fringe</b></p>	<p>Content is religiously or ideologically conservative and isolationist, politically radical and confrontational, but without any justifications conveyed for serious or potentially lethal 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 serious or potentially lethal violence.</p>
<p><b>3</b> <b>Extreme</b></p>	<p>Material that legitimizes and/or glorifies the use of serious or potentially lethal 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 dehumanizing or demonizing particular communities, citing issues of race, sexuality, origin or other aspects that render such people ‘subhuman’ or ‘animalistic’ with the direct implication that their right to life is undermined. This category captures both publications advocating activist violence against troops or civilians for religious or political causes, as well as references presenting people such as Jews and non-whites as subhuman in the context of imagined or envisaged confrontation with these groups of people.</p>
<p><i>Extreme Level 1</i></p>	<p>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, the ‘essence’ of warfare and its importance, without reference to targeting, scope or any other facilitative detail. Examples: “embrace violence but avoid killing the innocents”</p>
<p><i>Extreme Level 2</i></p>	<p>Serious violence (i.e. potentially fatal) clearly justified/promoted/welcomed against non-combatants, but without any detail. Examples: “kill the Jews”, “kill the kuffar”</p>
<p><i>Extreme Level 3</i></p>	<p>Serious violence (i.e. potentially fatal) justified/promoted/welcomed against non-combatants and with some detail regarding facilitation, scope or direction. Examples: “carry out suicide attack against non-combatants”, “target the economy, market places, tourist venues”.</p>
<p><i>Extreme Level 3b</i></p>	<p>Same as “Extreme Level 3” but with specific and directly applicable details offered, e.g. bomb-making recipes. Examples: “how to make a bomb in the kitchen of your mum”</p>
<p><i>Actionable</i></p>	<p>Actionable, tactical, operational manuals and guidelines, not primarily ideological content</p>

# Establishing Reliability

**Reliability** refers to the consistency of a measure of a concept. There are different ways in which reliability can be assessed, based on the type of measurement applied. The test that is most important for the grading framework described here is called ‘inter-rater reliability’. As Bryman describes, this applies:

when a great deal of subjective judgement is involved in such activities as the recording of observations or the translation of data into categories and where more than one ‘rater’ is involved in such activities, there is the possibility that there is a lack of consistency in their decisions. This can arise in a number of contexts, for example: in content analysis where decisions have to be made about how to categorize media items; when answers to open-ended questions have to be categorized; or in structured observation when observers have to decide how to classify participants’ behaviour.<sup>23</sup>

To test the reliability of the categories and definitions I used to further define media content (see Table 1), and therefore mitigate definitional issues as discussed above, I conducted tests of inter-rater agreement between two to three coders. During the tests, the coders simultaneously and blindly<sup>24</sup> graded representative sample-sets of the data I had collected. Once the tests were complete, I altered the definitions in each of my ideological content categories until inter-coder agreement on the definitions improved, using a calculator developed by Freelon<sup>25</sup> to determine ultimate reliability. Teams of two to three coders, including myself, therefore, graded a sample of the ideological material until the definitions behind the categories seemed as accurate as possible based on consensus within the teams. Doing this ensured that the grading system developed would reflect an objective measure, to the extent possible, of the categorization of otherwise subjective ideological content across those coding it. Such tests of reliability—wherein the definitions of categories are revisited until their overall reliability improves—are an essential prerequisite for conducting quantitative research based on qualitative criteria such as those described in this chapter.

It is important to note that, I never reached anything approaching perfect agreement between coders. Grading results between two coders also had a higher degree of agreement than those between three. Agreement for the second phase of grading, detecting nuances of extreme content, in turn, was weaker than for the initial grading into moderate, fringe and extreme ideological publications. This serves as an important reminder that, particularly within studies that deal with largely subjective content, attempts to increase the specificity and nuance of a unit of analysis may simultaneously blur important distinctions in the interpretation or nature of the content and lead to greater divergences in understanding, which will ultimately impact the research findings. It is, therefore, important to test the reliability of concepts

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23 Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 157.

24 Blind coding’ refers to the application of a coding schema to a dataset by several different coders who do not compare notes on its application until all the coding is complete, in order to avoid any biases emerging during the coding process.

25 Deen G. Freelon, “ReCal: Intercoder Reliability Calculation as a Web Service,” *International Journal of Internet Science* 5, no. 1 (2010): 20-33.

and definitions applied in research, and to be explicit about the extent to which that reliability is likely present in the ultimate research tool.

Despite the challenges, the development of this tool provided a means to accurately and transparently code ideological media publications emerging within my dataset in a more nuanced manner, facilitating greater understanding of what their content might reveal about the worldviews of the individuals who had consumed them, in line with my original, subject-focused research goal.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has described how I undertook research into primary source material related to terrorist exposure to and consumption of media. I began by elucidating why this perspective was worthwhile in terms of the knowledge gaps it filled. I then described how I undertook efforts to define my study, including: framing the inquiry to ensure my research intent and scope were clear; defining key terms, in situating my study in the relevant literature; and narrowing my research design to reach manageable proportions whilst being explicit about the limitations incurred by excluding particular research aspects.

Next, I described the dataset that was produced given these research parameters before setting out how it could be studied to shed light on my principal research query, which was broken down into more observable or measurable components. I described the elements and stages of my mixed research methods, emphasizing the importance of testing reliability and adapting measuring tools accordingly.

While my study was focused on Islamist extremists, the processes described in this chapter are equally applicable to researchers seeking to embark on similar or comparable projects, including those interested in far right and other forms of extremism and those interested in media studies and the impact of the information environment more broadly. It is hoped that the steps described in this chapter might help and guide such future efforts. The dual objectives of this work: enhancing our understanding of involvement in political violence from the perspective of the subjects themselves and shoring up our empirical foundations in this regard will continue to be important research endeavors and worthy of added attention from scholars and students working in this field.



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