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THEFUTUREOFEXTREMISM

A Taxonomy for the Classification of Post-Organisational Violent Extremist & Terrorist Content

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About this report

This briefing outlines a prototype taxonomy for classifying terrorist and violent extremist content. It is designed to inform content moderation decisions made by social media platforms, including adjustments to the hash sharing database of the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT) which provides unique digital "fingerprints" of known terrorist content which has been removed from social media platforms.

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Summary

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In particular, this taxonomy is developed in recognition of 'post-organisational' violent extremism and terrorism – that is to say violent extremist and terrorism where the influence or direction of activity by particular groups or organisations is ambiguous or loose. Accordingly, it is designed to be group-agnostic and is instead shaped around analysis of content which is influential to violent extremism and terrorism beyond that produced by proscribed terrorist organisations.

The creation of this taxonomy was informed by analysis of content shared in post-organisational violent extremist and terrorist spaces online, and online material which has been referenced in the conviction of terror offenders in the United Kingdom and in inquiries into terrorist attacks. This included analysis of the 'Terrorgram' network of violent white supremacist channels on Telegram; the conviction of Jack Reed, the youngest individual to be convicted of terror offences in the UK; the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the 2019 Christchurch attack; a cache of online content maintained by supporters of ISIS; and analysis of material referenced in the convictions of Islamist terrorists in the UK.

Based on assessments of these emblematic case studies relating to contemporary post-organisational terrorism our group-agnostic taxonomy divides violent extremist and terrorist content into three overarching categories: 'inspirational' content designed to reinforce a violent extremist mind-set; 'ideological' content designed to further a violent extremist world-view; and 'instructional' content designed to inform operational aspects of violent extremist activity.

This paper provides an overview of the taxonomy and the process behind its creation, a discussion of the parameters of content included in the content and 'edge cases', case studies demonstrating its application, and considerations around the its practical implementation.

Background: the challenge of post-organisational violent extremism & terrorism

In recent years terrorism and violent extremism across the ideological spectrum has been marked by a 'post-organisational' trend.[1] Membership of and support for particular groups has become more ambiguous, with online activity facilitating the growth of more fluid transnational movements. Attacks are committed by individuals with no, or very loose, connection to specific organisations, and violent extremists instead draw on a shared culture and ideology.

This post-organisational phenomenon is not new. The notions of 'leaderless resistance' and 'leaderless jihad'[2] were first discussed decades ago by extremist ideologues such as white supremacist Louis Beam Jr and the al-Qaeda-linked Abu Musab al-Suri[3]. However, recent high profile terrorist attacks in New Zealand, the US, Germany and Norway have shone a light on self-radicalising, logistically autonomous individuals with little or no relationship with proscribed terrorist groups, but rather connections to loose transnational extremist networks largely operating online. As Colin Clarke and Bruce Hoffman have noted in the US domestic violent extremism context, organisational structure is becoming less relevant as "a confluence of ideological affinities is [becoming] more powerful in inspiring and provoking violence than the hierarchical terrorist organizational structures of the past".[4]

Despite the fracturing and franchising of violent extremist movements and the proliferation of decentralised online extremist spaces, responses to terrorist content online are still hampered by rigid organisational conceptions of the challenge.

In particular, post-organisational dynamics strain responses which focus solely on the proscription of specific organizations. Moves have been welcomed to proscribe extreme right wing groups as terrorist organisations in national contexts, such as National Action in the UK and Blood & Honour in Canada, as well as the US' listing of its first 'Racially and Ethnically Motivated' foreign terrorist organisation — the Russian Imperial Movement. But the result has been that groups are banned in some countries but not others, even if, like Combat 18, they have transnational membership.

Furthermore, when groups appear they are often relatively short-lived, with new movements springing up drawing inspiration from similar core texts and ideologies. For example, in 2020 the UK proscribed the neo-Nazi group Feuerkrieg Division after it had officially disbanded. [5]

This rapid evolution of groups and movements means that proscription-based approaches follow a 'whack-a-mole' dynamic, constantly re-calibrating to address the latest iteration of a movement rather than addressing its roots. Accordingly, relatively slow moving proscription based responses to terrorism are not effectively equipped to deal with the current dynamic nature of terrorist mobilisation.

While tech companies have been developing their own internal guidelines and terms of service around 'hateful' and 'dangerous' groups, specific policies around violent extremism and terrorism are partly hamstrung by the limitations of international lists of proscribed terrorist groups, such as the UN Designated Terror Groups list, which are focused almost exclusively on ISIS and al-Qaeda related threats. Structurally, international counter-terrorism efforts are therefore still geared towards combating an organised Islamist threat. This has had a knock-on effect on the scope and definitional framework lying behind the combined efforts of tech companies through the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT), in particular its hash sharing database.

The hash sharing database provides unique digital fingerprints, or 'hashes' of known violent terrorist imagery or recruitment videos.[6] This tool has increased cross-industry cooperation on the detection and possible removal of illegal terrorist content. The GIFCT's July 2020 transparency report reveals the sort of content currently covered by the tool.[7] This includes public postings which represent an imminent, credible threat of violence; depictions of graphic violence against defenceless people; glorification of terrorist acts; material that seeks to recruit individuals or give them operational guidance; and content from specific attacks (those in Christchurch, Halle, and Glendale).

However, such tools have not been designed to tackle the increasingly diffuse, 'post-organisational' threat emerging from extremism across the ideological spectrum. This briefing will seek to answer the question of how we develop policy frameworks that move beyond a group-centred approach to understanding the threat from violent extremist groups, whilst ensuring approaches remain robust, transparent and protective of fundamental freedoms.

Designing a group-agnostic framework for classifying post-organisational terrorist & violent extremist content

To help inform responses to violent extremism and terrorism online (including, but not limited to hash sharing approaches), we have devised a theoretical framework for classifying content aimed at moving beyond solely group-centred approaches. The creation of this framework was derived from analysis of a number of case studies of unequivocally violent extremist environments – all of which demonstrate the real-world fluidity associated with classifying violent extremist content, and the shortcomings of purely group-based analyses.

In an effort to develop an ideologically agnostic framework, ISD analysts examined content shared in several violent extremist spaces online from across the extremist ideological spectrum, as well as content which has been used in evidence in the prosecution of terror offenders or in inquiries into terrorist attacks, much of which currently falls outside the remit of GIFCT's existing hash sharing database.

The case studies which informed the creation of the framework are:

1. **Terrorgram**: A network of 208 accelerationist white supremacist channels on Telegram, from which ISD gathered over 1,000,000 messages sent between 2016 – 2020;
2. **Jack Reed:** Content identified in the prosecution of Jack Reed, a neo-Nazi and the youngest person to be prosecuted for terror offences in the UK;
3. **Christchurch attack:** Content identified in the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the terrorist attack on Christchurch masjidain on 15 March 2019;
4. **Caliphate Cache:** Content gathered from a pro-ISIS file storage site containing 2 terabytes of violent and non-violent Islamist content used by ISIS supporters to archive the ideology of the Islamic State;
5. **Islamist terror content:** Commonly shared content which identified in the trials of UK Islamists convicted of terror offences.

Qualitative analysis of these diverse violent extremist environments allowed for the identification of cross-cutting categories of content, playing distinct purpose in the motivation, radicalisation and facilitation of violent extremist or terrorist activity, which form the basis of the framework outlined below. As we will go on to explain, these distinct roles can be highly contextual, and any single item of content might appear innocuous in isolation.

Across the case studies we identified three broad categories for the classification of content, which will be unpacked in greater detail in the following section:

1. **Instructional material** which contains guidance on operational aspects of terrorist and violent extremist activity. This includes guidance on the manufacture and perpetration of attacks, as well as guides on combat drills, fitness and non-violent activism such as sticker campaigning.
2. **Ideological material** which is designed to specifically further a violent extremist or terrorist world view. This includes key texts and lectures which provide the theoretical underpinning for a terrorist or violent extremist cause, and which provide explanation around why the world is a certain way.
3. **Inspirational material** designed to reinforce a violent extremist or terrorist mind-set. This includes a wide range of content which is designed to elicit a reaction or response in the radicalised mind. This includes material intended to provoke hatred towards a particular group of people or promote pride and support for a particular cause. Notably, this category of content is the least well-defined in the existing literature.

Our analysis also revealed two further significant axes of division within the content in these violent extremist environments. Within the categories above, content divided into explicitly violent and non-violent material, as well as a dichotomy between 'official' group-based violent extremist material, and content not associated with a formal organisation.

Therefore, in addition to the three content categories outlined above, our framework also incorporates the following distinctions for classifying content:

1. **Violent/non-violent content:** Violent extremist content includes both material which depicts acts of violence, alludes to the preparation of violent acts, or is specifically designed to legitimise or inspire violent activity, as well as relevant extremist material that instead relates to another non-violent theme. This category reflects the ambivalent role of violent content within online extremist environments and offline radicalisation pathways, recognising that some platforms may want to focus counter-efforts more narrowly on explicitly violent content, as a minimalist approach to tackling violent extremism online.
2. **Group/non-group content:** Reflecting the overall focus of this paper, this category relates to whether or not content has been produced by a particular violent extremist group. We selected this for inclusion as although this framework is seeking to establish a group-agnostic taxonomy of terrorist or violent extremist content, branded material produced by violent extremist groups still played a major role in our analysis of ostensibly 'post-organisational' spaces. When seeking to apply this framework tech companies might consider 'groups' in relation to specific proscribed organisations or adopt a broader approach, recognising that certain tech companies already ban content from movements such as QAnon which are not proscribed.

Based on the different content categories outlined above we constructed the following taxonomical framework, with content falling into one or several boxes, outlined in Figure 1.

To help ground each of these sub-categories more practically, sub-definitions were established to describe the different content types encompassed within the framework, outlines in Figure 2.

	Inspirational material Content which can reinforce a violent extremist or terrorist mindset		Ideological material Material which is specifically trying to further a violent extremist or terrorist worldview		Instructional Material Content which contains instructions on operational aspects of terrorist activity	
Violent	Non-Group	Group	Non-Group	Group	Non-Group	Group
Non-Violent	Non-Group	Group	Non-Group	Group	Non-Group	Group

Figure 1. Classification framework for post-organizational violent extremist content.

	Inspirational material Content which can reinforce a violent extremist or terrorist mindset		Ideological material Material which is specifically trying to further a violent extremist or terrorist worldview		Instructional Material Content which contains instructions on operational aspects of terrorist activity	
Violent	**Non-Group** Violent material not associated with a specific violent extremist group, designed to inspire extremism or terrorism, including copycat attacks.	**Group** Violent extremist group material designed to inspire violent extremism or terrorism.	**Non-Group** Material not associated with a specific violent extremist group, which makes the ideological case for extremist violence.	**Group** Violent extremist group material which makes the ideological case for violence.	**Non-Group** General instructional material providing operational guidance on carrying out acts of violence and terrorism.	**Group** Violent extremist group material providing operational guidance on conducting acts of violence and/or terrorism.
Non-Violent	**Non-Group** Material not associated with a specific violent extremist group, which nonetheless inspires and provides the mood music for violent extremism.	**Group** Violent extremist group material designed to inspire supporters, but not necessarily to violence.	**Non-Group** Material not associated with a specific violent extremist group, which nonetheless helps to build the "system of meaning" underpinning a violent extremist ideology.	**Group** Violent extremist group material designed to build the "system of meaning" underpinning a violent extremist ideology.	**Non-Group** General instructional matrerial providing operational guidance on carrying out non-violent activities relevant to non-violent extremism.	**Group** Violent extremist group instructional material providing operational guidance on non-violent activities.

Figure 2. Sub-definitions of post-organisational violent extremist content.

Parameters of the framework, edge cases & definitional challenges

When testing and developing this framework we identified a number of definitional questions and instructive edge cases sitting at the borders of the categories, which are informative when considering its practical application. The permeability of the categories outlined in our framework and breadth of content contained within show the importance of a more sophisticated understanding of the interplay between different types of 'organisational' and non-group-based content, as well as violent and non-violent material, contained within the wide constellation of online violent extremist communities.

Multi-category content

It is recognised that certain documents, lectures or sermons, particularly those which are of significant length, may sit across several of the above categories. For example, the 2011 Norway attacker's manifesto document contains instructional sections relating to the selection of targets for attacks, a wide range of ideological material designed to explain his world view, but also a wide range of statistics which help inspire hatred towards minority communities. To help circumnavigate this challenge we sought to establish through qualitative analysis the primary function for a piece of content.

Inspirational vs ideological content

In distinguishing between inspirational and ideological violent extremist material, this framework separates out, firstly, content intended to reinforce a violent extremist or terrorist mind-set and, secondly, material which is trying to further a violent extremist or terrorist worldview. This is an important distinction, recognising that some violent extremist propaganda seeks to imbue its audiences with what Haroro Ingram describes as a "competitive system of meaning" which acts as a lens through which supporters are compelled to perceive and judge the world,[8] as opposed to texts which do not engage in ideology construction per se, but rather seek to motivate and inspire (for example, by bolstering in-group identity or emphasising the urgency of crises which 'require' extremist solutions). In reality, a considerable proportion of the content analysed in the case studies below serves both an inspirational and ideological purpose, designed to both consolidate an extremist worldview and encourage adherents to mobilise around it. However, whilst it is perfectly viable (and indeed to be expected) that content can serve multiple violent extremist ends, it is likely useful when classifying violent extremist content – and considering proportionate responses – to assess whether it is primarily serving an ideological or an inspirational purpose, when it is clearly not instructional in nature.

The thresholds of inspirational content

When defining inspirational material which reinforces a violent extremist mind-set, the importance of the intent behind the creation of a piece of content became apparent - that is to say whether material was designed to reinforce a terrorist or violent extremist mind-set, or whether it incidentally reinforces extremist narratives. This distinction is evident when you explore the range of seemingly innocuous material which is referenced, shared and promoted by violent extremists and terrorists. For example, the manifesto document produced by the Oslo attacker contains references and quotes from articles written by a wide range of figures including British journalists Melanie Phillips and Jeremy Clarkson.

In these instances, the source material referenced was clearly not originally designed to inspire violent extremism, and therefore should not be seen as inherently inspirational. However, it was nevertheless repurposed in a way which was intended to reinforce a violent extremist mind-set. This corpus of material which has the potential to inspire violent extremist activity is vast - in the case of the extreme right wing this could include for example official government figures relating to the changing ethnic make-up of a country and material which is critical or immigration. Meanwhile, religious extremists might selectively quote scriptural sources out of context to support their ideology.

Accordingly, when testing and applying this framework in the case studies outlined below, we primarily focused categorisation on material where an intent to inspire violent extremism can be demonstrated or adequately inferred. We recognise this can present a challenge for classification, but is nevertheless crucial for increasing the precision of this framework and decreasing creep to otherwise innocuous content which has been instrumentalised for violent extremist purposes.

Ambiguity in distinguishing between group and non-group content

It may not always be easy to make clear distinctions between group and non-group content. In some cases, specific pieces of content may have been created by individuals who are closely associated with a specific movement. While David Duke and his work are often celebrated in extreme right circles, his name is intimately tied to his former position as the grand wizard of Ku Klux Klan. Similarly, while the Salafi-jihadist cleric Anwar al-Awlaki ultimately became associated with al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), much of the material he produced preceded that association. Similarly, violent extremist groups may reference content by individuals as a source of inspiration without these individuals having a firm affiliation with the group. In determining whether content was 'group' or 'non-group' produced, we thus paid close attention to whether content was specifically affiliated with a group, for example through branding, or direct support for a violent extremist organisation. In the case of content which wasn't branded we also chose to include texts by individuals with leadership roles in movements as 'group' produced, if this content was made at the time the individual was affiliated with the group.

Understanding the role of non-violent content

The creation of this framework is specifically intended to nurture a better understanding of violent extremist activity, however we nevertheless include non-violent content within our framework. This is justified through reflection on the fact that violent extremism doesn't just relate to violent actions, but also broader activity which seeks to dehumanise and delegitimise societal out-groups, as well as a wide range of non-violent efforts to build and strengthen movements and radicalise individuals. Recent post-organisational terrorism highlights the blurred and ambiguous boundaries between so-called 'violent' and 'non-violent' extremism and necessitates the inclusion of non-violent content in this taxonomy. For example, the Identitarian movement and the 'great replacement' theory were particularly influential in inspiring and providing the ideological underpinning of the 2019 Christchurch terrorist attack despite being nominally non-violent.

Applying the framework to 'real world' cases

The following case studies apply this prototype taxonomy to real-world instances of terrorism. They shine light on the diverse range of online content which underpins terrorist and violent extremist activity.[9]

Case study: "Terrorgram"

The encrypted messaging platform Telegram represents a major online hub for contemporary violent extremist activity. White supremacist groups have proliferated on the platform, forming a network of public channels that has been referred to as "Terrorgram".[10] Previous ISD research found over two hundred pro-terrorist channels glorifying terrorism, calling for violence, spreading extremist ideological material and demonising minority groups, without having any formal affiliation with a specific group, lending itself well to a case study in post-organisational violent extremist mobilization.[11]

Through our analysis of the network we found a wealth of content fitting each of our overarching content categories. In particular, we found a wealth of inspirational material shared across the channels analysed. This included a large amount of violent content produced by groups such as Atomwaffen and The Base, as well as manifesto documents produced by lone actor terrorists and material glamorising individuals who have committed attacks. However, notably the largest amount of content identified actually fit the category of non-group affiliated, non-violent inspirational material.

This included white supremacist music and a vast-array of user-created memes which convey racist, antisemitic and misogynist ideas or celebrating extreme right ideologues. Beyond material which more obviously was designed by and for extremists, we also identified a vast amount of cultural material, and material relating to sex, gender and the family. This cultural material included historical photographs, photographs of 'traditional' looking beautiful women, and pictures of classical art, at times superimposed with inspirational slogans designed to reinforce a white supremacist world view, such as "embrace tradition, reject modernity" (common features of fascist rhetoric as identified by Umerto Eco).[12]

Importantly, such apparently innocuous images were shared in the context of communities which actively advocate for extreme violence, illustrating the role which non-violent content can play in reinforcing a violent extremist mind-set, and suggesting that such material could be an indicator in certain circumstances of more concerning activity within a community.

Groups also commonly shared long-form ideological content including PDF's and audio recordings of books by a range of ideologues, and key antisemitic texts such as the forgery "Protocols of the Elders of Zion". Additionally, we encountered a range of instructional material including guerrilla warfare manuals that include training and equipment recommendations, videos providing advice on firearm construction or images of religious buildings that could serve as potential targets, as well as more innocent looking material such as advice on self-sufficiency.

Although some of the channels identified were devoted to one specific type of content (such as several devoted to pictures of attractive, apparently fascist women), many contained mixtures of the content types outlined above. This suggests that post-organisational violent extremist communities draw from a wide range of content, and raises questions around whether a narrow focus on particularly violent material is sufficient in capturing the reality of contemporary violent extremist activity online.

	Inspirational material Content which can reinforce a violent extremist or terrorist mindset		Ideological material Material which is specifically trying to further a violent extremist or terrorist worldview		Instructional Material Content which contains instructions on operational aspects of terrorist activity	
Violent	**Non-Group**	**Group**	**Non-Group**	**Group**	**Non-Group**	**Group**
	Oslo manifesto Christchurch manifesto Charleston manifesto Saint memes	AWD videos Azov videos The Base Serbian military videos and songs Calls for violence Glorification of historical fascists	Turner Diaries SIEGE	Hitler Codreanu O9A books	Advice for firearm construction	National Action manuals
Non-Violent	**Non-Group**	**Group**	**Non-Group**	**Group**	**Non-Group**	**Group**
	Antisemitic memes White Genocide memes Aesthetic images of European beauty Fashwave White supremacist rock music Images of 'degeneracy' Christian/pagan symbols		Books by Julius Evola and David Irving	Jewish Supremacism by David Duke	Images of target buildings	

Figure 3. Examples of content identified in "Terrorgram".

Case Study: Jack Reed

In December 2020 the teenager Jack Reed became the youngest individual convicted for terrorism-related offences in the United Kingdom.[13] Reed's online-searches and materials he possessed were used as evidence in his trial. This case study outlines some of the materials that may have inspired Reed, helped shape his ideology, and informed his preparations to attack targets in the Durham area as well as inspirational and instructional content Reed produced himself.

Reed's case closely follows a post-organisational paradigm. He self-radicalised largely through online engagement with extremist communities, was not a member of a proscribed terrorist organisation, and at the time of his arrest was preparing for a lone actor act of terrorism. Accordingly, this case study is particularly useful for the purposes of testing this framework.

An analysis of Reed's online activity and material in his possession that was revealed in his trial demonstrates how he was likely influenced by a wide range of content types. This included a diverse range of inspirational, ideological and instructional material, including hateful memes, a range of ideological core texts, and instructions around making and detonating explosives.

Interestingly, some of this material crosses over with some of the content identified in the 'Terrorgram' case study, suggesting a set of core texts which are particularly influential to post-organisational white supremacist terrorism. Accordingly, producing lists of books which repeatedly reappear in convictions could be helpful when considering ways to bolster platform moderation efforts. Additionally, this would suggest that expanding current hashing technology beyond images and videos could be helpful in identifying particularly important violent extremist material.

	Inspirational material Content which can reinforce a violent extremist or terrorist mindset		Ideological material Material which is specifically trying to further a violent extremist or terrorist worldview		Instructional Material Content which contains instructions on operational aspects of terrorist activity	
	Non-Group	**Group**	**Non-Group**	**Group**	**Non-Group**	**Group**
Violent	Charleston manifesto Reed's manifesto/manual	Field Manual (FM) 6-2003 Ethnic Cleansing Operations	Fascist forge usage SIEGE	Historical fascist literature (Hitler, Speer and Codreanu) Texts by AWD, O9A and Tempel ov Blood	Reed's to-do list Online searches for material on firearms, explosives, ammunition and weapons including: 21 Techniques of Silent Killing by Hei Long Homemade C4 by Ragnar Benson Big Book of Mischief by David Richards	Atomwaffen manual
Non-Violent	**Non-Group** Antisemitic, homophobic and neo-Nazi memes Selfie with Tommy Robinson	**Group**	**Non-Group** The Way of Men by Jack Donovan The Synagogue of Satan by Andrew Carrington Hitchcock The Myth of German Villainy by Benton L. Bradbury	**Group** White Power by George Lincoln Rockwell	**Non-Group** Online searches for synagogue details	**Group**

Figure 4. Examples of content identified in the Jack Reed case.

Case Study: Christchurch attack

In December 2020, the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the March 2019 terrorist attack in Christchurch was published.[14] The 800-page report provided an in-depth assessment of the attackers' background and radicalisation pathways. Crucially for this briefing, the report makes reference to a range of online materials and activities the terrorist engaged in leading up to the attack.

	Inspirational material Content which can reinforce a violent extremist or terrorist mindset		Ideological material Material which is specifically trying to further a violent extremist or terrorist worldview		Instructional Material Content which contains instructions on operational aspects of terrorist activity	
Violent	**Non-Group** Oslo manifesto Christchurch manifesto Christchurch Facebook page image collection	**Group** Azov Battalion Mein Kampf	**Non-Group** Turner Diaries comments	**Group** True Blue Crew Lads Season Two group comments	**Non-Group** Oslo manifesto	**Group**
Non-Violent	**Non-Group** Black Sun symbol	**Group** 14 Words (The Order)	**Non-Group** Great Replacement by Renaud Camus Black Sun symbol The Decline of the West by Oswald Spengler A Short History of Decay by E M Cioran	**Group**	**Non-Group** Footage of Masji an-Nur	**Group**

Figure 5. Examples of content identified in the Christchurch inquiry.

Central to the Christchurch attacker's radicalisation trajectory was violent non-group content such as the Oslo manifesto, which played a crucial inspirational and instructional role. This also served a more instructional purpose, with the Commission report showing that actions of the Oslo attacker provided a blueprint for the Christchurch attacker during the planning stages. This included activities such as joining a gym, using steroids, practicing his rifle skills, manifesto writing as well as publication timing and operational security, including digital hygiene. While some of the sub-sections of the Oslo manifesto may appear innocuous in isolation, they were designed as a coherent call for violent extremism when looking at the entire body of the text. It is therefore worth platforms considering whether quotations from violent extremist manifestos should be treated as terrorist content, even if the content in question appears innocent when separated from its original text.

The Christchurch attacker possessed a range of ideological literature that was either explicitly violently extremist in nature or is widely read by the extreme-right, even though it was not produced for this purpose. In addition to the "Great Replacement" by far-right French philosopher Renaud Camus, which was referenced in the title of the attackers' manifesto, the Commission report lists works by Oswald Mosley, Oswald Spengler and E M Cioran as books purchased by the Christchurch attacker. In comments posted on the United Patriots Front Facebook page, the Christchurch attacker expressed hope he would be taking part in their execution on the "Day of the Rope", a reference to The Turner Diaries, a novel about a race war that has inspired numerous major violent attacks in the decades since its publication in 1978. On the same Facebook page, the attacker makes clear he had engaged with the writings and ideas of Adolf Hitler. Referring to Mein Kampf, the attacker argued that perceived victimhood and political grievances of whites should be the centre of any political communication aimed at recruiting new followers. While there can be a legitimate interest in historical fascist literature, this could perhaps be distinguished from discussions that take positive inspiration from such works or advocate for the ideas expressed in it.

The white supremacist Azov Battalion in Ukraine also appears to have been a source of violent group-based inspiration for the Christchurch attacker. According to the Royal Commission, the mother of the Christchurch attacker became extremely worried her son was about to move to Ukraine in order to fight for Azov. The attacker also appeared to have been attracted to Ukraine due to its cheaper cost of living and more ethnically homogeneous society. It therefore appears likely he would have watched Azov propaganda material, which is widely circulated among extreme right communities online.

Important non-violent instructional content during the preparatory stages for the Christchurch attack was a video from inside Masjid an-Nur, which the attacker had taken from a public Facebook page and saved to his phone four days before the attack. The individual who posted the video was not known to the attacker, or affiliated with the far-right. This suggests that even entirely innocuous content created for benign purposes may contain information that could be relevant for the preparatory stages of a terrorist or violent extremist attack. Identifying what types of innocuous content may contain such relevant information, and should raise flags in combination with more overtly violent extremist content, presents a major challenge.

Case Study: Caliphate Cache

In the wake of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's death in October 2019, ISD researchers discovered a network of ISIS supporters sharing links to one of the largest known online repositories of ISIS material. Provisionally analysed by researchers from ISD and West Point's Combating Terrorism Center,[15] this two terabyte self-contained 'archive' represents an important case study of the breadth of violent extremism related-material collected by ISIS supporters, who are not formally affiliated with the group. It's post-organisational dimension is derived from the broad range of both group-based as well as non-official 'supporter' material and predecessor content, spanning ideological, inspirational and instructional content, as well as many items which straddle these categories.

	Inspirational material Content which can reinforce a violent extremist or terrorist mindset		Ideological material Material which is specifically trying to further a violent extremist or terrorist worldview		Instructional Material Content which contains instructions on operational aspects of terrorist activity	
Violent	**Non-Group** Global Islamic Resistance Call - Abu Musab al-Suri (while al-Suri was linked, the work itself has been promoted by a range of groups, including those inclined to violence and those that are not.)	**Group** Archives of the Martyrs	**Non-Group** Scholars of Jihad (al-Maqdisi) Unofficial pro-ISIS support groups	**Group** Scholars of Jihad (Zarrouk, al-Awlaki, al-Anbari) Emirs of Jihad ISIS 'fatwas over the airways'	**Non-Group** Management of Savagery by Abu Bakr al-Naji Mujahid's Bag	**Group** Archive of Military Science Four Easy Ways... - Al Saqri media collection
Non-Violent	**Non-Group** Nasheeds Poetry	**Group** Photo essays of Eid and life in the "Wilayat" of the "Caliphate"	**Non-Group** Tafsir by al-Maqdisi, Suliman al-Alwan, Abdulaziz al-Tarefe	**Group**	**Non-Group** Tactical guides for evading security	**Group** Hamas manual on fooling prison authorities, e.g. evading jailhouse snitches

Figure 6. Examples of content identified in the Caliphate Cache.

The Cache contains a relatively comprehensive archive of 'official' ISIS material. However, this stands in considerable contrast to content such as the 2004 seminal text, the 'Management of Savagery' by Abu Bakr Naji, which provides much of the instructional and ideological roadmap for global Salafi-jihadism, but is not associated with any specific terrorist group. Meanwhile Tafsir (commentary and scholarly interpretation of every verse in the Quran) hosted in the archive from scholars amenable to the Salafi-jihadi cause, provide important non-group-based ideological underpinnings to ISIS. There are 53 non-official ISIS-linked groups archived in the Cache within a folder dubbed 'Support Organisations'. These groups are all individually branded, and could either be classified as non-group or group content, depending on how this is defined. The status of these groups represent a critical missing piece of the puzzle in identifying and classifying branded terrorist support materials across platforms.

Instructional content in the Cache ranges includes formal violent operational texts such as the 'Archive of Military Science' and 'Four Easy Ways' series by the ISIS media agency al-Saqri, which includes guidance on making explosive belts. The cache also includes user-generated folders of assorted operational documents such as 'The Mujahid's Bag', as well as a large folder on operational security which includes a range of group and 'supporter' content, not clearly linked to ISIS.

Finally, inspirational materials include a comprehensive "Archives of the Martyrs" which stretches all the way back to the death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in 2006. More ambiguous from a classification perspective are numerous folders containing nasheeds (religious anthems), which seek to provide the literal 'mood music' for jihadi violence but are not necessarily explicitly associated with ISIS as a group. In a similar vein, a large collection of jihadi poetry in the archive contributes to the cultural backbone for the Salafi-jihadi 'system of meaning' whilst not being explicitly associated with the group or even explicitly inciting violence.

Case Study: UK Islamist terrorism cases

The following case study is drawing on an amalgamation of content from across several UK terrorism cases published in an article by Donald Holbrook.[16] The repetition of key ideologues and materials is a useful way to understand not only what specific content speaks to the Islamist terrorist mind-set, but how old and new resources intersect to justify violence in modern context.

One of the challenges of clearly delineating Islamist terrorist content is the volume of inspirational material that has been produced. Much of it is not explicit in any calls for violence but for those with their minds set on joining the violent jihadist cause, there are veiled allusions to the legitimacy of violence, often rooted in Islamic history.

Even with the more recent wealth of ISIS propaganda which included more obvious calls to violence, the overwhelming majority of Islamist terrorist content found in UK terrorism investigations are the enduring historical and theological justifications for jihad given a refreshed lease of life by al-Qaeda. Consequently, when analysing the presence of Islamist propaganda, the authors (and sometimes narrators) of the materials are as important to consider as the titles and content. Similarly, publishers become an important feature of this content, with as-Sahab Media, Azzam Publications and the Maktabah al-Ansar bookshop being most notable, along with ISIS' more recent Amaq News Agency.

	Inspirational material Content which can reinforce a violent extremist or terrorist mindset		Ideological material Material which is specifically trying to further a violent extremist or terrorist worldview		Instructional Material Content which contains instructions on operational aspects of terrorist activity	
	Non-Group	**Group**	**Non-Group**	**Group**	**Non-Group**	**Group**
Violent	Babar Ahmad/Azzam publications: In the Hearts of Green Birds (aka Martyrs of Bosnia)	ISIS videos Al-Qaeda videos: speeches by Osama bin Laden	Awlaki: The Book of Jihad (also the original Ibn Nuhaas version) Awlaki: Allah is Preparing us for Victory Azzam: Join the Caravan Azzam: Defence of the Muslims Lands: The First Obligation after Iman Azzam: The signs of Allah the Most Merciful Ar-Rahmaan in the Jihad of Afghanistan Awlaki: Constants on the Path of Jihad Azzam: The Lofty Mountain	Inspire Magazine (Al-Qaeda) Dabiq Magazine (ISIS)		Inspire Magazine (Al-Qaeda) Dabiq Magazine (ISIS)
Non-Violent	**Non-Group** Awlaki: The Life of Mohammed (both Makkan and Median periods) Awlaki: The Hereafter/The Afterlife/Al-Achira Awlaki: Lives of the Prophets Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi: This is our Aqidah	**Group** ISI videos: state building; camaraderie	**Non-Group** Awlaki: Umar Ibn al Khattab - His Life and Times Babar Ahmad/Azzam Publications: Under the shades of the swords Sayyid Qutb: In the shade of the Quran Sayyid Qutb: Milestones	**Group** ISIS videos: legitimacy of the group; illegitimacy of other Islamist groups	**Non-Group**	**Group**

Figure 7. Examples of content found in UK Islamist cases.

The nature of Islamist texts leads them to be relevant to both inspirational and ideological content, rooted as they are in Islamic history and theology. Anwar al-Awlaki is popular for his lectures that bring Islam's history and that of the prophet Muhammad and his companions to life. They are inspirational, not in relation to violence, but cement Awlaki's credibility as a scholar of Islam. In turn, this makes his radicalising content more compelling to his audience. While the inspirational texts do contain some endorsements of violence, they could not be construed as direct incitement to jihad.

In terms of violent extremist ideology, the majority comes from just a small handful of ideologues. Once again, Awlaki is the most prominent and in his later years his content became more militant and more explicitly endorsed violence, however a range of other individuals also featured throughout the cases analysed including Abdullah Azzam, and the joint ideological / instructional content of al-Qaeda's Inspire magazine and ISIS' Dabiq. These magazines have been popular due to their framing of the ideological justification for terrorism, fetishising and canonising killed terrorist 'martyrs' and offering step-by-step practical guides for building bombs, selecting targets and conducting attacks.

It is clear from the materials in this section that authorities, authors and ideologues continue to inspire even after they are dead. Material by Awlaki is still popular even though he was killed in September 2011. Abdullah Azzam, killed decades earlier, also continues to resonate, albeit via more contemporary gatekeepers and Saudi-born commander of Chechen militants, 'Ibn al-Khattab' has achieved iconic status. Islamist terrorists do not just consume recently created content, but draw ideological succour from a varied and long literary tradition.

As far as established terrorist organisations are concerned, al-Qaeda seems to be more prominent than ISIS (or any of AQ's own offshoots around the world), but materials from al-Qaeda do not feature in isolation. People seeking to become involved in terrorism collect a broad repertoire of media publications conveying religious, political and ideological content from a variety of different sources and publishers. No single group, cluster or school appears to dominate, and the range of influencers is diverse. Attempts to flag and respond to this content should be able to cross-reference the multiple ideologies and sources and determine a growing interest in understanding the permissibility, or even obligation of violence.

Using this framework for cross-platform efforts to respond to violent extremist content

Part of the rationale for the development of the framework laid out in this paper is to find an approach to defining and labelling violent extremist material that might be useful to a variety of technology platforms. Platforms define groups and content relating to violent extremism differently, as well as diverging in the actions taken in response to these groups or materials on their services. The utility of a framework therefore partly lies in whether it can adequately capture some crossover between platform policies that will inevitably continue to differ, in order to streamline responses to cross-platform violent extremist activity. This could therefore apply to platforms' application of the hash-sharing database, but could also provide considerations relevant to crisis response decision-making or individual instances of platform collaboration tackling new iterations of violent extremist threats across services.

A framework can also be useful to help identify gaps in individual platform policies in the context of an ever-changing violent extremist online environment. By assessing if and how current platform policies are covered by the conceptual framework laid out here, we can start to ascertain where types of violent extremist activity are currently described by platform policies.

To start to understand if and how such a framework might be useful despite the complications of individual platform policies and responses, it is possible to plot existing individual company policies against the framework to start to see commonalities and gaps.

As an illustrative exercise (Figure 8), we use the current policies of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube as a sample to identify some initial ways the framework can provide insights into the types of violent extremist activity that are largely covered by most companies' existing policies, covered by some but not others', and that are currently largely outside of companies' terms of service or community guidelines.

Here it remains likely that the policies outlined above will only partially cover content in a particular sub-category of the framework. For example, with instructional content it will not always be immediately obvious that it is tied to violent extremism and may not be covered by Facebook's 'coordinating harm and publicising crime' policy.

With this caveat in mind we can see that most explicitly violent activity is fully or partially covered by the three platforms used in this test, as is most group activity, yet as the analysis detailed above emphasises, not all violent extremism is driven by 'dangerous organisations', but looser digital communities and content groups. The areas which platform policies do not appear to currently cover are non-violent, non-group material. However, this content appeared across all of the case studies analysed above.

This content is the most challenging to develop moderation policies around. Much of it relates to the use of symbols, memes, literature and cultural material where links to violent extremism are not always explicit or apparent without expert understanding of violent extremist mobilisation and ideology. Yet it is clearly an important cornerstone of violent extremist communications online, and a persistent presence in contemporary post-organisational violent extremism and terrorism. Creating responses to such material will thus require responses which go beyond individual pieces of content and instead attempt to interrogate the intention behind their circulation and the behaviours of communities involved in this.

	Inspirational material Content which can reinforce a violent extremist or terrorist mindset		Ideological material Material which is specifically trying to further a violent extremist or terrorist worldview		Instructional Material Content which contains instructions on operational aspects of terrorist activity	
Violent	**Non-Group**	**Group**	**Non-Group**	**Group**	**Non-Group**	**Group**
	Twitter's 'Violent threats' policy Twitter's 'Glorification of violence' policy YouTube's 'Harmful or dangerous content' policy YouTube's 'Violent or graphic content' policy	Facebook's 'Dangerous individuals and organisations' policy Twitter's 'Violent extremist groups and violent organisations' policy YouTube's 'Violent criminal organisations' policy	Twitter's 'Violent threats' policy Twitter's 'Glorification of violence' policy YouTube's 'Harmful or dangerous content' policy YouTube's 'Violent or graphic content' policy	Facebook's 'Dangerous individuals and organisations' policy Twitter's 'Violent extremist groups and violent organisations' policy YouTube's 'Violent criminal organisations' policy	Facebook's 'Coordinating harm and publicising crime' policy Twitter's 'Violent threats' policy Twitter's 'Glorification of violence' policy YouTube's 'Harmful or dangerous content' policy YouTube's 'Violent of graphic content' policy	Facebook's 'Dangerous individuals and organisations' policy Twitter's 'Violent extremist groups and violent organisations' policy YouTube's 'Violent criminal organisations' policy
Non-Violent	**Non-Group**	**Group**	**Non-Group**	**Group**	**Non-Group**	**Group**
		Facebook's 'Dangerous individuals and organisations' policy Twitter's 'Violent extremist groups and violent organisations' policy YouTube's 'Violent criminal organisations' policy		Facebook's 'Dangerous individuals and organisations' policy Twitter's 'Violent extremist groups and violent organisations' policy YouTube's 'Violent criminal organisations' policy	Facebook's 'Coordinating harm and publicising crime' policy	Facebook's 'Dangerous individuals and organisations' policy Twitter's 'Violent extremist groups and violent organisations' policy YouTube's 'Violent criminal organisations' policy

Figure 8. Areas of the framework currently covered by platform policies.

Current definitions of terrorist content do not cover such content and instead focus on material which is either associated with proscribed organisations or explicitly with the incitement or preparation of terrorist offences and violence. This includes those proposed by the European Commission,[17] and given by the European Parliamentary Research Service,[18] the UK Government,[19] and Digital Europe – the trade association representing digitally industries in Europe.[20] Neither is such content covered by the GIFCT hash-sharing database.[21] However, such material is covered in broader analysis of extremist content online, such as Holbrook's Extremism Media Index where it is presented as 'fringe material' which exists on a spectrum with violent content.[22] It is similarly likely covered in-part by individual platform policies governing hate speech and harassment.

This poses the question if it is helpful or desirable to incorporate non-violent, non-group created material into broader conceptions of terrorist activity? Securitising non-violent ideological content such as Camus' "The Great Replacement", or non-violent inspirational material such as memes and cultural references is doubtlessly problematic. To approach such content in an unnuanced, ham-handed fashion would almost certainly bring with it the prospect of banning legitimate content and would have a disastrous impact on freedom of speech. However, completely isolating such content from frameworks addressing terrorist activity denies the role it plays in radicalisation and movement-building by violent extremists and terrorists, and negates the fact that such material is used as circumstantial evidence in the prosecution of terror offenders. Indeed, in the current post-organisational landscape where self-radicalisation, and fluid online coordination are superseding more structured group-based dynamics, the role of key texts and material which conveys core violent extremist tropes is arguably more important than ever. This itself raises further questions around whether the removal of content is the only appropriate tool when addressing activity which is relevant to violent extremism, and opens up broader possible approaches.

Accordingly, should a company decide to expand their policies to include the broader types of content associated with violent extremism identified in this briefing, then there is an absolute need for definitional clarity and the parameters between potentially dangerous material and free speech. Finding ways to effectively implement this framework in a sensitive but robust fashion will be key in negating broader concerns around infringement on civil liberties. Such technical operationalisation will require careful planning beyond the scope of this briefing, however to help inform any future implementation of this taxonomy we have identified the following approaches which could shape content moderation efforts:

1. **'Relevant' content flags:** A tiered approach could be adopted where non-violent, non-group content which is circulated by terrorist and violent extremist communities and individuals is flagged as potentially relevant. Here, when an account or community is removed from a platform for terrorist or violent extremist activity the broader content they shared would be flagged for future reference but would not be subject to automatic or immediate removal. This would mean that should such content be shared online in the future, the communities and users sharing this content could be marked for further investigation, with tiers of potential risk ascribed for the volume of potentially relevant content shared. In essence, this raises the possibility of creating a hash sharing database which isn't entirely focussed on the takedown and removal of content, instead using the technology inform subtler approaches to countering online mobilisation by violent extremist communities.

2. **High-risk content flags:** Where non-violent, non-group based content is commonly featured in the conviction of terrorists such material could be flagged as 'potentially high-risk'. The appearance of this content could thus be used to identify an online community or account as sharing material which may be relevant to violent extremism and terrorism, and worthy of further investigation. Accordingly, an academic discussion group focussed on French new-right philosophy sharing The Great Replacement would be treated differently from a community or individual promoting ethno-nationalism sharing the same text.

3. **Alternative approaches to content:** The hash sharing database is currently designed to inform the removal of terrorist content. However, raised above is the possibility of creating hashes of potentially risky or insightful content which doesn't cross the threshold for immediate removal. Such hashes could be used to inform other less-blunt approaches to content which go beyond takedowns, including removing communities hosting large quantities of potentially high-risk content from recommendation systems.

4. **Behaviour-sensitive moderation efforts:** To supplement purely content based approaches platforms could seek to analyse the broader activity of communities regularly sharing non-violent, non-group material. This could include the extent to which these communities are networked with other extremist hubs on the same or other platforms or whether users appear to be deliberately radicalising other users of a platform by, for example, spamming large quantities of potentially violent extremist content or directing users to other violent extremist communities.

5. **The possibility of cross-platform moderation**: In the case studies of the Christchurch attack and Jack Reed discussed above both individuals were operating across multiple social media platforms and forums. There are clearly limits to how much a company can do with regards to activity outside of their platform. However, this does raise the suggestion that companies should consider approaches to communities using their platforms which are directing people to insightful or risky content elsewhere.

Conclusion

Based on our analysis of five real-world case studies we have created a prototype framework for the classification of violent extremist content in a way that is group-agnostic. This framework recognises the nuances of violent extremist content online and helps advance beyond myopic conceptions which emphasise the role of specific organisations, branded terrorist material and explicitly violent content in the inspiration of violent extremism.

Our framework broadens these conceptions and recognises the influential role that non-violent content like user-created memes and key ideological texts can have. However, through analysis of real-world case studies we can see that such content may appear innocuous or falls under protected speech. Accordingly, implementing this framework will require a careful approach which is conscious of fundamental rights. This will likely require the consideration of policy approaches which are less blunt than the blanket removal of content.

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