

Title

Terrorism as process narratives: a study of pre-arrest media usage and the emergence of pathways to engagement

Abstract

Terrorism is a highly irregular form of crime where multiple factors combine to create circumstances that are unique to each case of involvement, or attempted involvement, in terrorist violence. Yet, there are commonalities in the way in which efforts to become involved unfold as processes, reflected as sequential developments where different forces combine to create conditions where individuals seek to plan acts of violence. The best way to frame this involvement is through analytical approaches that highlight these procedural dimensions but are equally sensitive to the nuances of each case. Analysing pre-arrest media usage of convicted terrorists, this paper focuses on the ways in which belief pathways and operational pathways interact in five distinct cases of terrorist involvement in the UK in what are termed 'process narratives'.

Key words

Terrorism, beliefs, media usage, processes, attack planning

Introduction

Terrorism can helpfully be described as having qualities of criminality that results from a complex set of processes. The shape and duration of these processes depends on a variety of factors affecting individuals and their perceptions in their distinct environment and under distinct circumstances. Affordances, perspectives, social dynamics, beliefs, desires, and needs construct the facilitative and justificatory context from which these processes emerge. Whilst we may be able to detect broad commonalities and characteristics between processes, it seems unlikely given the current state of knowledge that we will ever arrive at their definitive constructs. Terrorism is too diverse, irregular and rare, and subject and context dependent to enable us to detect holistic interpretations of antecedents that remain stable.

Terrorism is also vague. Setting aside definitional ambiguities

¹, the 'repertoire'² of terrorist actions incorporates a host of roles and responsibilities, formal and informal, legal or illegal, such as fundraising, propagandising, logistics, networking³, and weapons procurement, that are beyond direct participation in actual violence.⁴ The *actors* that embrace terrorism are equally divergent, from states to individuals, operating with varying degrees of secrecy and connectedness. Spatial *scenarios* vary too, some fight 'abroad', others 'at home' with notions of kin, diaspora or movement sometimes combining the two.⁵ Beyond such analytical headaches, manifestations of 'terrorism' differ in legal contexts too. Terrorism legislation in the UK, for instance, criminalises acts that are not 'terroristic' in any conventional sense, such as the promotion of particular ideas and methods that are seen to be supportive of

terrorism.⁶ These notions have become further embedded in statutory obligations to aid the prevention of terrorism too.⁷

Considering these uncertainties, this paper focuses on cases that are irrefutably terroristic in the British legal context, as they concern individuals convicted in court for breaches of terrorism legislation, and conceptually, in the sense that they involved attempts to carry out serious acts of political violence where the objective was to kill to gain publicity. These cases are developed as ‘process narratives’. Process refers to the fact that they illustrate a set of sequences and developments that can be analysed on a temporal spectrum. Narrative refers to our effort to convey particulars of each case, where a specific story emerges that is unique to the case but informative of the way in which these processes more broadly unfold.

This paper focuses on five cases alone in order to expand on each in some depth. It presents these through the prism of personal media usage in the months leading up to arrest. The objective is twofold: to illustrate how such process narratives can aid our understanding of terrorism, including terrorist threat mitigation; and to highlight patterns of media usage that emerged during these periods. The construction of these narratives is based on Taylor and Horgan’s (2006) elucidation of a processes-based approach to understanding terrorism.⁸ More broadly, this exploration is based on lessons drawn from theorising in relation to complex systems.

The purpose is not to develop new conceptual models, abstract sequential illustrations, or other related frameworks, but rather to combine case-specific narratives with more standardised temporal analyses that would be equally applicable to a larger dataset. The purpose, by extension, is not to generalise from such a small set of narratives, as such attempts, unless approached much more holistically, rarely bear much fruit. Instead, the focus is on exploring activities that took place *before* subjects were arrested, creating a comparative template based on ‘permanent products’⁹ rather than post-hoc attitudinal recording that recounts the narrative of each case. This contrasts with much of the existing literature on the topic which often relies on post-conviction narratives, where accounts may be coloured by self-justification or other contamination. The data consists of logs recorded by counterterrorism law enforcement agencies in the UK detailing media usage by convicted terrorists in the weeks and months before arrest, to which authors were given exclusive access. This media usage consisted of online activities, social media engagement and interaction with published media. The subjects involved in these cases received extensive prison sentences and remain in prison and are for this reason are anonymised in the analysis.

This paper is divided into three parts. The first sets out the structure of the inquiry based on Taylor and Horgan’s understanding of processes-based approaches to terrorism research, notions of different pathways that interweave within these processes and the metatheoretical implications of this approach, especially in terms of our understanding of complex systems. The second presents the cases examined as process narratives. The third discusses the implications of the findings presented in terms of analytical utility and counterterrorism more broadly.

Sequential approaches to terrorism

In a paper published in 2006 Taylor and Horgan argued that:

an under-explored alternative to an account in terms of individual qualities is to see involvement in terrorism, at least in psychological terms, as a process rather than a state; this implies a focus not on the individual and their presumed psychological or moral qualities, but on process variables such as the changing context that the individual operates in, and also the relationships between events and the individual as they affect behaviour.¹⁰

The observation was based on a wider understanding among scholars that participation in terrorism involves dynamic, not static features.¹¹ ‘Terrorism’, Borum noted ‘is most usefully viewed not as a “condition,” but as a dynamic “process,” although the nature of those processes, he argued, remained poorly understood.¹² Whilst we might be unclear on the different factors that combine to create and shape these processes, a broad consensus exists that sees terrorism, at an individual level, emerging as a result of complex and intertwined sequences that may share common properties whilst being ultimately determined by a person’s unique circumstances and setting. Process-based approaches, in turn, often define the way in which government agencies understand terrorism¹³ and the components and sequences that are presented in conceptual models.¹⁴ Related objects of study have generated similar approaches, such as Rambo’s stages of religious conversion.¹⁵

The purpose here is not to offer an exhaustive review of such processes-based approaches, but merely to note that they are an established method to understand terrorism. Whilst these frameworks may be accepted, however, many gaps in our understanding of how such processes unfold or what they might look like remain. To this end, we need to be especially vigilant to ensure that our models and approaches account for the contextual nuances that shape these processes and do not constrain our analytical framework. Understanding the ‘narrative’ that emerges in each case, therefore, is essential.

Process in this context, though, does not imply linearity. The change that is experienced involves a ‘complex transformation of state’¹⁶ where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.¹⁷ There is nothing inevitable about the emergence of terrorism, irrespective of how many ‘necessary’ conditions that we can identify. The literature on complex systems helps us appreciate these transformative qualities in non-linear ways. As Byrne explains:

In non-linear systems small changes in causal elements over time do not necessarily produce small changes in other particular aspects of the system, or in the characteristics of the system as a whole. Either or both may change very much indeed, and, moreover, they may change in ways which do not involve just one possible outcome.¹⁸

Such complexities would seem to be central to the emergence of terrorism and highlight problems associated with prediction of threat.¹⁹ With complex systems, ‘evolution, is produced by both deterministic historical factors and chance events that may push social phenomena to new patterns of behavior’.²⁰ Terrorism is thus best seen as the fusion of micro, meso and macro dimensions that form different combinations in each case without simply being an aggregate of these dimensions.

As Taylor and Horgan noted, different factors, events, agencies and influences generate a ‘*reciprocal relationship*’ between ‘political context (and especially its ideological qualities), organisational framework, and the individual’.²¹ Della Porta and others have adopted similarly tiered approaches to understanding terrorism where the macro, meso and micro combine to

create conditions from which terrorism emerges.²² The individual, of course, encounters pressures and opportunities at each level which s/he *interprets*, and these forces combine to shape effects. Hence the importance of reflexive non-linearity. Perspectives from different analytical layers and disciplines thus need to combine to aid our understanding of terrorism.

From criminology, especially, the concept of pathways as subdimensions of these wider processes is particularly relevant. In developing their own conceptual model, Taylor and Horgan identified different hypothetical pathways that they grouped within three stages of involvement in terrorism: *setting events*, relating to past contextual influence; *personal factors*, relating to individual experiences; and the broader social, political, and organisational *context*. In discerning these pathways, they argued,²³ that the convergence of political, ideological, and organisational issues constituted the ‘most significant factor that distinguishes terrorist from criminal violence, and it might be hypothesised that it is in accessing this quality that the process that changes the disaffected and troubled individual into a terrorist may lie.’ The process narratives developed in the next section, therefore, pay particular attention to these dimensions.

If processes are made up of different pathways, it would seem important to categorise or at least elucidate clusters in which they might be grouped in order to solidify the structure of our analysis, whilst reiterating notions of non-linearity as described above. Some of the existing literature on these topics can aid this task. In differentiating ‘radicalism’ and ‘terrorism’, for instance, Borum referred to radicalisation as movement towards ‘developing extremist ideologies and beliefs’, whilst movement towards ‘engaging in terrorism or violent extremist actions’ was labelled ‘action pathways’.²⁴ In their modelling of lone actor terrorism, McCauley and Moskaleiko somewhat similarly differentiated between ‘radicalization in action’ and ‘radicalization in opinion’ and devised procedural models for each.²⁵ Since a focus on media usage, of course, involves a significant number of ‘actions’ (different choices and preferences are expressed, material is selected, exchanged, critiqued or disseminated) even if they may be virtual, these categorisations are not directly applicable to the current study, but they offer an initial point of departure. ‘Action’ and beliefs or opinions, in other words, do not constitute mutually exclusive pathways, as far as these cases are concerned, as progression in relation to the latter involves a number of observable *actions* too that can take place both within physical and virtual spaces. This point is important and is revisited towards the end of the paper.

If ‘actors’ and ‘opinions’ or ‘beliefs’ do not constitute appropriate labels for the pathways adopted here, which alternative form of clustering can we identify? It seems that whilst these categorisations do not adequately capture the elements of the processes presented in this paper they nonetheless allude to significant developments that are commonly and intuitively associated with pathways leading to terrorism, namely belief-orientated and operationally-orientated preoccupations. The former concerns interactions with (including consuming and sharing) a body of content that conveys beliefs, ideas and interpretive frames²⁶ that legitimise, rationalise or promote terrorism in some way or contribute to an individual’s ‘moral education’.²⁷ The latter relates to activities where expression of such activities takes physical form and there are efforts to exert impact and affect people’s lives directly and *physically* through forms of protest or other acts, including those that might harm or kill others. Both sets of pathways contain behaviours, expressions, and actions where the individual is proactive, not passive. These sets are also inevitably intertwined rather than mutually exclusive.

The process narratives set out below, therefore, can be seen to contain two clusters of pathways, one of them '*operational*', the other '*belief-orientated*'. These are not perfect labels and are by no means intended as rigid frameworks or exhaustive in capturing different dimensions. But they constitute appropriate designations that capture different activities that emerge within the process narratives. They are also consistent with the literature on involvement in crime more generally, especially the distinction between criminal events and criminal involvement. The former, according to Cornish and Clarke, concern 'decision processes involved in the commission of a specific crime' that are usually short and dependent largely on immediate circumstances, whilst the latter involve a longer decision processes where individuals choose to become involved in crime, to continue and to desist.²⁸

Five different process narratives

In order to hone and explore these process narratives, five different cases of involvement in terrorism in the UK are examined where the subjects involved were convicted of attempts to orchestrate terrorist attacks and as a result received lengthy prison sentences. Cases were chosen that differed substantially in contextual and organisational terms in order to explore how the process narrative approach compared. The data input, as noted, consists of police logs detailing how each subject engaged with published or broadcast media material and social media in the weeks and months before arrest, which is contextualised in each case. Most of the data for the belief-orientated pathways consisted of published matter found on digital storage devices such as computer hard drives, phones or memory sticks. This content was reviewed in its entirety, in the format that it was originally found. The social media logs analysed consisted of entries that had been transcribed in order to prepare cases for court. Additionally, prosecution case summaries for each case that were presented at court were studied in order to contextualise substantive media usage and place these activities on a timeframe. These documents detailed the dates and timings of particular activities. These were collated in order to construct the temporal analyses and timelines. The timelines conclude when subjects were arrested for planning terrorist attacks, and thus put into custody, although in some cases there had been prior arrests (and release) for other suspected offenses.

The first case involves a 'lone dyad', two individuals who worked together to plan a series of attacks whilst not being part of a wider network or group that could be linked to attack planning, even though they had some wider social contacts, both virtually and physically. The second case involves a 'socially active' lone actor seeking to carry out an attack on his own whilst socially embedded with like-minded associates (again, both virtual and physical) who nonetheless could not be connected to the plot itself. The third case concerns a completely isolated lone actor who both operated alone and appeared detached from his wider social surroundings. The fourth case involves an individual who was part of a dyad and a wider organisation as well as a social network of like-minded friends and online contacts. The fifth case relates to a close-knit group with some semblance of a hierarchy seeking to orchestrate attacks whilst retaining close ties both to a larger social network and a broader, more sophisticated terrorist organisation.

Case A: The 'lone dyad'

The relevant events of this case span thirteen months. The timeline begins with the first signs that both members were engaging with extremist material. This consisted of downloading extremist texts and lectures off the internet or acquiring them through other means such as purchased or copied CDs. Later in police interviews, they spoke of listening to these lectures, sharing videos or downloading extremist texts. Whilst there may have been some signs of engagement with extremist content prior to this date for one member of the dyad, these activities became concentrated by the first month of the timeline. Just before the fifth month and then on a sporadic basis throughout the remainder of the period, both subjects began engaging on social media where they openly declared their support and sympathy for extremist causes such as militancy or extreme prejudice against identified groups of people. They expressed their position on these topics through other public means too, such as choice of logoed attire. Their particular ideological affiliations, therefore, were overt, not just through their exchanges but also through choice of profile names, memes and other identifiers; and they were extreme, where support for violence and aggressive separation from others in the interest of a 'cause' was openly expressed.

By the end of the eighth month, attack planning appeared to begin in earnest. The initial step was hostile reconnaissance: online research and physical surveillance of potential targets that lasted for approximately 75 days. By the beginning of the twelfth month the focus turned to researching and experimenting with weapons, tools and substances that can be used for an attack, although there was some overlap between these activities and hostile reconnaissance. The focus of weapons and substance procurement to begin with was primarily online, especially through downloading of large quantities of relevant recipes and manuals that contained information likely to be useful for carrying out an attack. Most of this material was not presented as part of an ideological narrative but was bespoke, dedicated to particular technical topics, even though some of it originated in mainstream and legal content such as military manuals or scientific guidelines. In other words, much of the 'operational' information, at least in terms of volume, was gathered from documents that detailed ways in which to kill and cause harm without elucidating any particular religious or political purpose of such violence. Separately, as noted, the subjects continued engaging with more dedicated ideological content (which in turn normally did not convey tactical or operational information) that they had started to look at in earnest about a year prior to the device assembly phase. At the very end of this period, just before they were arrested, the subjects began researching ways in which to hide their tracks and evade surveillance, both electronic and physical.

These events are placed on a timeline in Figure 1 that depicts the process narrative, the different sequences that tell the story of this case.

FIGURE 1

As shown, the process narrative consists of two clusters of pathways. One related to activities concerning operational planning, the other engagement with beliefs and ideas. Both sets of pathways contained both virtual and physical 'actions'. Virtual actions involved searching for guidance online or exchanging material via social media. Physical actions consisted of

surveying targets, experimenting with improvised explosives, procuring relevant components or listening to audio lectures and discussing their content. We can thus delineate the operational and belief pathways as part of this process narrative as illustrated in Figure 1.

To reiterate the lessons from complex systems, described above, however, it is not assumed that any set of events or sequences were a direct cause of what came after or that these processes were in any way linear. We merely have a sequential narrative that illustrates how the case unfolded based on the subjects' media usage and the circumstances in which they occurred. As always, particular events whose repercussions would have been unique for the individuals involved in this case would have sparked, shaped or directed the way in which specific pathways actually and potentially unfolded.

Case B: The "socially active" lone actor

This case concerns a single individual who was in the final stages of planning an attack when he was arrested. Police had become aware of his extremist sympathies early on in this process and tried to get him involved in an intervention programme called Channel, that is designed to guide individuals away from extremism, but he refused to engage. Channel is part of the UK government's Prevent strategy, which constitutes the preventative aspect of its counterterrorism policy. Channel is designed as a multi-agency effort to 'provide support at an early stage to people who are identified as being vulnerable to being drawn into terrorism'. Different types of interventions are identified for individuals identified as being 'at risk' but they need to be willing to engage with the programme.²⁹

The timeline of this case is very short and less than half the length of the pathways in Case A. By the end of the first month the earliest signs of engagement with extremist ideological content that glorified violence, prejudice and other topics that might fall under that category were recorded and consisted of the subject's own postings of extremist content on online forums.

As with the dyad in Case A, this individual also openly expressed support and sympathy for radical and extremist causes and cohorts through choice of online identifiers, clothing and other expressions of what we might call 'subcultural styles'.³⁰ Online promotion of extremist causes spanned virtually the entire period and ran in parallel with the subject's own preoccupation with ideologically extreme media as well as his engagement with related physical and virtual social networks.

Two events are identified on the timeline in Figure 2 as they are significant for the evolution of this particular process narrative and the lessons we can draw from it. The subject's friends and associates from a previous social network to which he belonged, confronted him in the second month via social media and urged him, repeatedly, to desist from his support and promotion of extremist platforms. They communicated passionate, emotional and personal pleas urging their friend to alter the course he had taken. These interventions might be seen as a form of 'counter-narrative', communicated by actors that in this context would presumably be seen as credible. Yet, they had no effect. The subject continued to express and act upon his promotion of extremist platforms and isolated himself from those who disagreed. A month later he was arrested and questioned by police for these extremist outbursts and, as noted, invited to

join programmes that would help him choose a different path, but again, he resisted. He was not detained or charged at this point.

By the third month we see the subject's first efforts to 'operationalise' these sentiments through participation in protest marches and rallies that were often organised by a radical political outfit to which he belonged. He continued to participate in these marches for the next two months. By the fifth month, however, these expressive activities ceased. In particular, the subject's active social media presence came to an abrupt stop. Consumption of extremist ideological content continued, however, and with increased intensity, which merged with the initial stages of the attack planning. The likely method of attack was to be simple which meant that the subject did not appear to seek the same technical sophistication that the subjects in Case A sought to acquire.

FIGURE 2

The sequences and events of this case are illustrated in Figure 2. The two beliefs-orientated pathways run in parallel and span most of the period, whilst the open, social-media aspect of these pathways is halted before attack planning begins in earnest. Whilst it may seem logical that public expressions of extremist sympathies are curtailed or terminated as the clandestine operational pathways gather pace, the case illustrates the way in which the absence or sudden disappearance of observable data can form part of a broader assessment of risk. In this case, in other words, the voluntary cessation of public promotion for extremist causes, which up to that point had been brief but intense, was not a sign of decreased risk.

As with Case A, the operational pathways are shorter and begin to emerge in the second half of this narrative. They begin with increasingly regular attendance at campaign marches and demonstrations that involve active forms of protest, including open celebration of extremist causes and emphatic confrontation with rival political platforms. This activity ceases a few days before attack planning begins, where, perhaps, an alternative form of political expression, through violence, has been chosen.³¹ Arguably, therefore, we can observe a distinct escalation in the way in which the operational pathways unfolded.³²

Case C: The isolated lone actor

This case involves an individual who sought to carry out a complex attack using home-made explosive devices. He was arrested in the final stages of the plot. The subject planned his attack alone but also seemed to be relatively socially isolated. He did express his thoughts and opinions among some of his peers but lacked a network of similarly-minded individuals who might have shared some of these ideas, which the subject in Case B enjoyed. He was also absent from social media and relatively inactive on other communicative platforms online.

The duration of this timeline is similar to that of Case B, or just under six months. The first signs of engagement with extremist beliefs and ideas, including material that promoted and glorified the use of violence in the pursuit of political causes or for political impact were

detected towards the end of the first month on this timeline. This engagement mostly took place online, where the subject began by listening to or viewing content on websites such as YouTube before downloading and saving particular titles and engaging in more dedicated research involving media publications relating to issues that appeared to be of interest. He did not, however, participate in online discussion forums or related social media.

By the fourth month, the nature of these online activities had changed in important substantive ways. Whilst the preoccupation with publications that conveyed political, religious, or ideological content continued and intensified, the subject began to make additional enquiries online relating to distinctly ‘operational’ content concerning chemical components, combustible and explosive substances, detonators and other topics relevant to the assembly of an explosive device. Searches on websites and forums led him to download large quantities of documents and videos that were dedicated to these themes. These publications, moreover, were distinct from the more ideologically orientated media in which the subject continued to be interested and rarely conveyed any political messages. The same pattern emerged in Case A where subjects also researched ways in which to assemble explosive devices.

Over a three-month period, the subject searched for ‘operationally’ relevant material on approximately 375 occasions, according to police logs. As a result of this research he downloaded or saved approximately 100 identifiable publications. He subsequently sought to implement some of this knowledge, experimenting with recipes and chemical substances which eventually resulted in the creation of a viable explosive device, although we do not know when he began experimenting with the assembly itself.

As noted, the subject in this case spent much more time researching topics concerning political or religious topics, conducting over a thousand internet searches in this regard in just under five months. He downloaded, saved and stored just under 300 individual titles as a result of these searches.

The social network surrounding this individual, as noted, was small and insignificant which means he was never confronted by concerned friends who had observed a change in the way in which he projected his online persona or other forms of behaviour, as was the case with the previous example. However, at the same time some of the same ‘counternarrative’ dimensions can be discerned in this case too, albeit without direct external intervention. Thus on at least two occasions, the subject’s searches for material covering religious and political topics uncovered publications that warned against arguments exploited by extremist platforms to promote violence and sought to undermine and discredit extremist content with which this subject otherwise seemed to be preoccupied. In other words, this individual had researched, and apparently consumed, material that condemned the violent arguments that he had been exposed to in a different set of media output. Whilst he may have operated in isolation, therefore, he was nonetheless exposed to a wider repertoire of arguments, including those that condemned violence, as he moved towards planning his attack. These episodes of exposure to anti-extremist ‘counternarratives’ were concentrated in two sessions of online activity, during the latter part of the third month and, interestingly, just before arrest towards the end of the sixth month when device assembly was in the final stages.

The pathways in this process narrative are depicted in Figure 3.

FIGURE 3

As before, the belief pathway preceded and then overlapped with the operational pathway, although in this case the activities are simpler and concentrated online. The timeline is very short, as in Case B, and, again, around the mid-point we can detect activities that are distinctly operational in terms of engaging in or preparing activities that influence others, in this case through serious acts of violence. Whilst the circumstances of this case are markedly different from the previous example, meanwhile, both subjects confronted different types of interventions where the extremist interpretations that featured on the belief pathways were challenged.

Case D: The individual in a group

The individual in this case was involved in at least two tiers of organised groupings. One was mostly informal and set up by the subject himself and consisted of peers and more senior authority figures to whom the subject reached out. The second group of individuals was more distant and formal and formed part of a more comprehensive organisation responsible for supporting terrorism. Both groupings were involved in our subject's attack planning. He appeared to seek much of the initiative within the local network but received guidance and direction from his more distant contacts, although there was a degree of overlap between the two.

This case has the longest timeline of those examined, spanning over twenty-five months, although interest in extremist beliefs and ideas is said to have emerged earlier still. These activities, however, appear to have gathered pace in the first few months of the timeline.

The subject made his first recorded public references in support of some of these extremist themes in the ninth month and these expressions then became a steady feature of this case. He was vocal in his support for causes and platforms associated with political violence, and celebrated indiscriminate acts of such violence, and became very active online, where he assembled YouTube playlists, engaged on Twitter and used other platforms to promote extremist ideas and express his admiration for them. His choice of social media profile pictures invariably reflected some of the iconography that glorified these platforms, as would some of his online nicknames, although he also shared this content using his real name.

Inevitably, our subject attracted a lot of attention for these outbursts and was eventually enrolled in Channel in the twelfth month. Six months later and after an array of different initiatives the programme was concluded. Throughout this period, however, the subject continued his vocal support and promotion of extremism and violence, both online and offline. These activities continued after Channel concluded, when he also made repeated threats to kill. As a result, his engagement with Channel was restarted towards the end of this timeline, in the twenty-second month. Shortly after reengaging with Channel, however, during which time, again, he continued to be active in his promotion of extremism, the subject became involved with at least two individuals who were interested in carrying out a terrorist attack. Our subject

in this case was quick to become proactive within this small group, researching targets and suggesting modes of attack. He was eager for the attack to have as much impact as possible and spoke openly and confidently, through private messages on social media, about the need to kill non-combatants in the process. After three months of active participation in these plans, which were seen as viable and close to fruition, the subject was arrested. Other key participants were later arrested too and the plot unravelled.

Two themes that we have seen in the other cases appear here too. Firstly, there was a long and uninterrupted period, which eventually overlapped with dedicated attack planning, when the subject expressed his extremist sympathies openly. Secondly, and as a related theme, the subject in this case was repeatedly challenged and confronted on these views. Such interventions, of course, were part of the Channel procedures, with which the subject engaged but that appeared to have little effect on him. Aside from these 'official' initiatives, however, the subject met with considerable resistance online from other social media users who sought to refute or counter his promotion of extremist causes. Since these outbursts, including those in favour of indiscriminate violence, were particularly extreme, those who responded to our subject included social media users who otherwise identified with broadly the same ideological milieu, albeit with a milder approach to the role of violence and militancy. They admonished our subject and sought to present evidence refuting his claims in support of more limitless use of violence. Aside from official measures, therefore, interventions from within the peer group or reference group³³ were encountered but ultimately rejected or ignored.

This case is illustrated in Figure 4.

FIGURE 4

The belief pathway reaches back at least to the first month, when the first signs of heightened activities online were recorded. However, the subject's own references suggested that there had been intermittent engagement with this material for some time, possibly even as far back as two years prior to the events depicted on this timeline. But expressions in support of this content and promotion and distribution of related media did not begin till the ninth month. The operational pathway, in turn, is much shorter. However, unlike the subject in Case B, who also had an active social media persona, this public expression of support continued as attack planning intensified.

Case E: Group within an organisation

The final case concerns two individuals convicted of plotting a complex terrorist attack using contacts who were active in criminal gangs at the time of attack planning who had access to firearms and ammunition due to their social networks. These criminal contacts were convicted of aiding their attack planning. The two primary subjects were also part of a larger network of individuals who communicated both online and offline. Some claimed or aspired to have contacts with more established terrorist organisations. The timescale of this case is short and

similar to the duration of processes in cases B and C. However, as with the previous case, the subjects appear to have engaged with and collected extremist media for a far more extended period that reached beyond the focus of this case. Furthermore, the subjects were also active on social media where they promoted extremist causes and adopted extremist labels and paraphernalia as part of their online motifs as we have seen in the other cases under examination. These exchanges were both fully public, through posts on Twitter for example, or partially closed, through invite- and member-only groups on other platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram.

The point of departure in this case is the escalation of these exchanges which gathered pace and intensity towards the end of the first month on the timeline, when the notion of directly supporting terrorist movements was introduced. There were debates about how best to do this and about ways in which direct support and direct action could be justified and realised. The two subjects participated in these debates, but so did many others in their group of friends and online peers. These closed and open forum exchanges continued for the remainder of the period as illustrated in Figure 5. Whilst no direct interventions were detected, the subjects did engage in debates with their like-minded friends about the appropriate scope of violent campaigns and other related concerns where there was disagreement about the scale of violence that could be justified.

By the latter half of the third month a separate set of exchanges between the two subjects began. These were fully private peer-to-peer conversations that mostly took place via encrypted messaging services such as WhatsApp and there is no sign of wider participation from other members of the network of individuals who engaged in the more ideologically focused discussions. In these private exchanges, the subjects left out any debate about doctrine, belief, or politics and concentrated on what was to become an elaborate plan to carry out acts of terrorist violence. The focus of this conversation was on procuring the right type of equipment, tools and substances needed for the attack, with attention turning to target identification and hostile reconnaissance only towards the very end of the timeline. About four weeks into these discussions, as some of these items had been secured via contacts in criminal gangs, one of the subjects, who had been under surveillance, was arrested. This, in turn, led to the arrest of his co-conspirator a few days later.

Just over a week after serious attack planning commenced, the subjects began to research and implement anti-surveillance countermeasures, such as hidden communication and web browsing. As with the subjects in Case A, therefore, operational security appeared to be an afterthought, introduced after attack planning began in earnest.

FIGURE 5

A familiar pattern, therefore, appears in Figure 5. There is an existent engagement with extremist media content, which is being downloaded, viewed or discussed or there is more active engagement with some of these ideas via social media where these views are promoted,

celebrated and defended. The belief pathway thus precedes the operational pathway. The latter then consists of a much more clandestine set of activities that concentrate on overcoming practical challenges in order to carry out an attack.

Discussion and Conclusions

What can we learn from these cases and the way they are presented? These five accounts each involve sequential dimensions, where a particular set of activities gathers pace on a continuum that coexists or overlaps with or replaces other sequences that unfold as the attack planning takes shape. All these cases have something in common. They each involved attempts to carry out serious acts of violence within the UK that were foiled before the planned attack. Subjects in each case were convicted by juries for planning terrorist attacks and sentenced to lengthy terms in prison.

All the cases saw subjects engaging with different types of media in divergent ways which can inform our understanding of how specific sets of pathways formed before arrest. The way these pathways took shape in the cases examined seems intuitive: individuals have an existent preoccupation with relevant beliefs and ideas before, in some cases, exploring actionable solutions. This, it would seem, is the essence of political violence where religious and political ideas inform and contextualise participation in violent action, which in turn is *caused* by a host of different factors.

With each of the cases examined, belief pathways preceded operational pathways. Subjects began by engaging with different types of media that glorified, promoted, or justified political violence or other extremist causes. In some cases, these activities appeared to have an abrupt beginning. In others, interest in this content had germinated for years. Subjects would search for particular titles online or acquire them through friends, associates or a wider network on copied CDs or other means. The individuals in these cases would share some of this material online, or perhaps quote from it, posting excerpts on social media forums. They debated aspects of content, or compared notes via social media. In short, therefore, they interacted with beliefs and ideas for some time before turning to more operational activities where they planned to put these ideas into action. This interaction was inherently social, not merely an absorption or internalisation of new discourses. This is not to suggest that there is a causal relationship between the two sets of pathways. In each case a number of specific unknown events, traumas, opportunities, or other unique circumstances may have triggered, shaped or directed the formation of each pathway. The sequential pathways elucidated here help us to develop a systematic understanding of processes leading to terrorism based on an empirical assessment of pre-arrest data. Within this context, however, causal catalysts unique to each individual and their circumstances will constitute tipping points in each case. Here, again, as the literature on complex systems highlights, the whole (in the sense of engagement with violence) is greater than the sum of its parts, and much is dependent on individuals' interpretations and reactions.

How does this help us understand involvement in terrorism? With this approach, we have distinct pathways within these cases that all depict a process, but also case-specific stories where different events and contextual variables merge to create the conditions from which the pathways emerge. We have endeavoured to draw out these distinctions, as well as areas where commonalities emerge, by selecting cases that all differ in organisational and actor-specific

terms. With these process narratives, in short, we thus have a way in which to visualise and compare different cases, focusing on a broad set of comparable components, without losing the richness offered by structuring bespoke narratives or being constrained by more rigid and formulaic depictions of processes as distinct tiered trajectories or stages.

With media usage, moreover, we have a more solid way in which to gauge dimensions within belief-orientated pathways than the measurements that are usually offered. McCauley and Moskalenko, for instance, traced signs of ideological commitment in their model of extremist behaviour where different levels of support for violent action constituted distinct stages in a pyramid.³⁴ This categorisation was supported with references to results from opinion polls where respondents answered questions relating to their support for violence, terrorist action and other related themes. Opinion, measured in such a way, however, is *passive*. Responding to anonymous polls is costless and effortless and the consequences are negligible. Searching for specific publications or content types online or through a network, acquiring this material, which in some cases can be illegal in certain contexts thus adding an element of risk, sharing these titles, quoting from them, sharing thoughts about them, promoting their arguments, or presenting counter-arguments, even donning external signs through attire and online memes that celebrate aspects of this discourse; these are all *actions*. This is proactive engagement, not passive acquiescence, where the activities involved can even be risky if they attract unwanted attention from the authorities or detractors. ‘Action’, therefore, should not be removed from our analysis or understanding of ideational aspects of processes leading to terrorism since physical and virtual executions, choices and performances form part of this repertoire of activities.

As noted, there is nothing linear or inevitable, of course, about the transition from these activities to involvement in terrorist attack planning. As with McCauley and Moskalenko’s group of committed believers, the cohort of extremist media ‘users’ is much larger than the small number of individuals who eventually seek to engage in attack planning, or indeed other forms of terrorist involvement. As Ramsay explored in his study of jihadi subcultures online, moreover, some of these ‘engagement’ activities seem to constitute repertoires of action in their own right.³⁵ That is, individuals seeking to join a movement of resistance or revolution may well be satisfied with the spectrum of online activities on offer without needing to seek more ‘physical’ forms of action. Detecting when and how individuals might traverse pathways or seek to move from promotion of ideas to inflicting harm is also inherently difficult, as, for instance, the investigation into Michael Adebolajo’s role in the murder of fusilier Lee Rigby established.³⁶

Yet the process narratives that have been traced in this paper offer ways in which to think about pathways that consist mostly of belief-orientated activities on the one hand and operationally-relevant activities on the other. We can then seek to visualise how these pathways interact, as we have done in this paper. This approach facilitates further work. For instance, once sufficient data has been collected for more comprehensive longitudinal analyses, we can explore ways in which different compositions of belief pathways relate to particular outcomes. Whether, for example, different types of activities such as participation in domestic attack planning and participation in foreign conflict are preceded by fundamentally distinct forms of media usage. More holistic analyses might also include more detailed dissection of the nature of media content uncovered, how it can be quantified and variance that emerges between

cases.³⁷ Such enquiries can only be constructed once these distinctions have been defined and established through examples, as we have done in this paper.

These are not perfect definitions, as noted above, and there is a degree of overlap between them. This is inevitable with such specific human activity. But they help us think about different sequential components that emerge before attack planning commences. Importantly, the data upon which these illustrations are based represent snapshots of activities *before* attack planning, not post-hoc reflections of what may have led to this involvement. There are, in turn, explicit ways in which these pathways become distinct. Some of the observable activities are dedicated to practical concerns relating to attack planning, such as researching targets and assessing their vulnerabilities or attractiveness, acquiring skills and substances needed for an improvised explosive device (IED) or establishing countermeasures to evade surveillance or capture during attack planning. Some of these same subsets of the operational pathways emerged in different cases. Belated adoption of countermeasures, for instance, featured both with our isolated dyad in Case A and the integrated group in Case E.

Subtler signs of separation between belief and operational pathways, however, also emerged. Where there was a need for expertise regarding IED assembly, for instance, the media content used to this end was normally explicit and dedicated to these topics. There was very little convergence, in other words, between interaction with published media relating to operational and ideational concerns. The former was mostly sourced from *apolitical* entities, specialists, or enthusiasts where the focus was on the mechanisms and procedures needed to create an IED or related operational concerns. The latter was sourced from websites, publishers, authors, groups, or other actors dedicated to advancing particular political, religious or ideological causes or movements. A small number of ideological texts, it should be noted, especially some issues of the *Inspire* magazine by Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, have conveyed bomb-making guidelines in dedicated sections, but these are an anomaly. Interactions surrounding these two pathways also differed. In Case E, for instance, the two key subjects involved in attack planning engaged in two separate channels of communication. One concerned debates about beliefs and ideas, that was wide-ranging, encompassing many different points of conversation, viewpoints, and participants. The latter emerged later and consisted of discussions between the two individuals alone where all exchanges concerned overcoming operational challenges in attack planning, not conversations about why the attack was justified or necessary.

Implications for threat assessment and mitigation

Beyond visualising what progression towards terrorism can look like, the process narratives presented in this paper can help us think about threat assessment and mitigation. The first observation to make is how *open* these subjects were in expressing their sympathy and support for extremist causes and organisations, including acts of violence. Public expression of extremist sympathies featured in all the cases examined to different degrees. In three cases, moreover, this overt promotion and identification with extremist camps ran in parallel with covert attack planning. As individuals were scoping targets, preparing methods for attack, even taking care of operational security such as counter surveillance, they continued to engage in rhetorical support for extremist causes and platforms online and offline, sometimes using their real names.

Whilst there seems to be an appreciation for secrecy about operational attack planning, this does not appear to translate into comparable discretion when debating the religious, political, or ideological context that is used to justify those acts. In short, overt and vehement, even reckless, expressions in support of political violence are not an indication that the individual in question is *not* seeking to carry out acts of violence himself. Perhaps for the individual involved such utterances appear fundamentally legitimate or representative of the ‘true’ interpretation of these debates, thus rendering any effort to conceal them unnecessary. If the extremist interpretations are seen as the correct interpretations, they thus need to be shouted from the rooftops, not whispered in alleyways. This is facilitated further by the disinhibiting qualities of internet communication. For most subjects in these cases there seemed to be no contradiction between avid and public expression of support for political violence and clandestine efforts to engage in such acts of violence.

The risks associated with such a publicly articulated extremist profile, however, seem obvious. In fact, in all five cases, bystanders³⁸ emerged who were conscious and often critical of these sentiments and sometimes sought to intervene. This corresponds with existing research on bystanders that emerge on the margins of terrorist plots. Friends, family members, neighbours or other associates are frequently aware that there is an intention or desire to cause harm. Even lone actors often feel the urge to tell someone about at least some aspect of what they are seeking to carry out.³⁹ Some of the bystanders uncovered in the cases examined in this paper, however, not only had knowledge of the involvement in extremist activities described, but sought themselves to intervene in some way. These interventions, in turn, had less to do with aspects of the operational pathways and were more focused on activities within the *belief pathways*, which were, as noted, much more observable. Whilst bystanders, individuals with knowledge of some worrying dimensions relating to the subjects, featured in all the cases, with some emerging quite late in the process, bystanders in Cases B and D interjected, seeking to convince their friends to change their course and disassociate from extremism. In Case B, the subject’s close friends intervened, issuing heartfelt pleas and expressing concern over what they saw as a very sudden shift in attitudes. In Case D, the subject was challenged repeatedly, both online and offline, and urged to abandon his flirtation with extremist beliefs and activities. In both cases those intervening were credible actors from within the subjects’ inner social circles. Some even identified with a shade of the same extremist causes, whilst arguing against the violent or excessive interpretations that the subjects in question promoted. These internal interventions were thus distinct from the external attempts from Channel providers or the police. But they appeared to have no effect on the individual and were rejected or ignored.

Case C involved a virtually isolated lone actor where few bystanders emerged, apart from a loosely connected group of individuals who eventually expressed some concern and alerted the authorities towards the end of the timeline. Earlier on during this process, however, we see some semblance of similar interventions occurring within the belief pathways. As noted in the previous section the subject spent a lot of time on the internet gathering material that both conveyed ideological content as well as operational guidelines. Part of his exploration of the former, however, included a collection of hand-picked articles and publications that specifically refuted the type of extremist activity in which he planned to engage. These ‘interventions’ even occurred very late during the course of these events, when the explosive device was already being assembled.

This presence of different forms of *internal* interventions has significant implications for our approach to countermeasures. Taken together, these interventions within the belief pathways show us that subjects are exposed to and have interacted with a well-articulated counter narrative that is communicated not by distrusted external bodies but by close associates and members of the subject's own social surroundings. There has been much debate within the study of terrorism and counterterrorism about ways in which to communicate a counter-message that, if correctly constructed, may undermine processes leading to terrorism. The findings from the cases examined here, however, suggest that subjects are much more resilient, at least at this advanced stage in the process, than many may have assumed. It would seem plausible, based on these cases, that individuals involved in terrorism are well aware of 'moderate' arguments designed to dissuade them from embracing extremism, but have chosen to ignore them. The knowledge environment in which they operate is not one of a 'single narrative', but rather a variety of narratives where less exciting, convincing or satisfying alternatives have been rejected in favour of other rationales that provide the answers for which subjects may have been searching. This does not necessarily suggest that counternarrative work is futile, but rather that such rhetorical or ideational components of counterterrorism need to be tailored to specific circumstances and communicated as early in the process as possible.

The process narratives that are developed and illustrated in this paper are intended to enhance our understanding of the events that lead to terrorist involvement. Each case is unique as the individuals concerned and the circumstances with which they interact are dependent on their own interpretation of the events and developments that surround them. We need to acknowledge this nuance as we explore ways in which to analyse and compare examples of terrorism at an individual level of analysis. Tracing this involvement as a set of belief-orientated and operationally orientated pathways that together form a process that we can illustrate as a sequential narrative can help us appreciate the intricacies of this involvement, as well as identifying commonalities that emerge when different narratives are contrasted. Stories are often easier to articulate than abstract models. By devising a way to tell a story of terrorist involvement that highlights notions of progression and sequence in systematic, yet adaptable ways, we can thus aid our understanding of the diverse forces at play.

Figure 1: Case A: 'lone dyad'

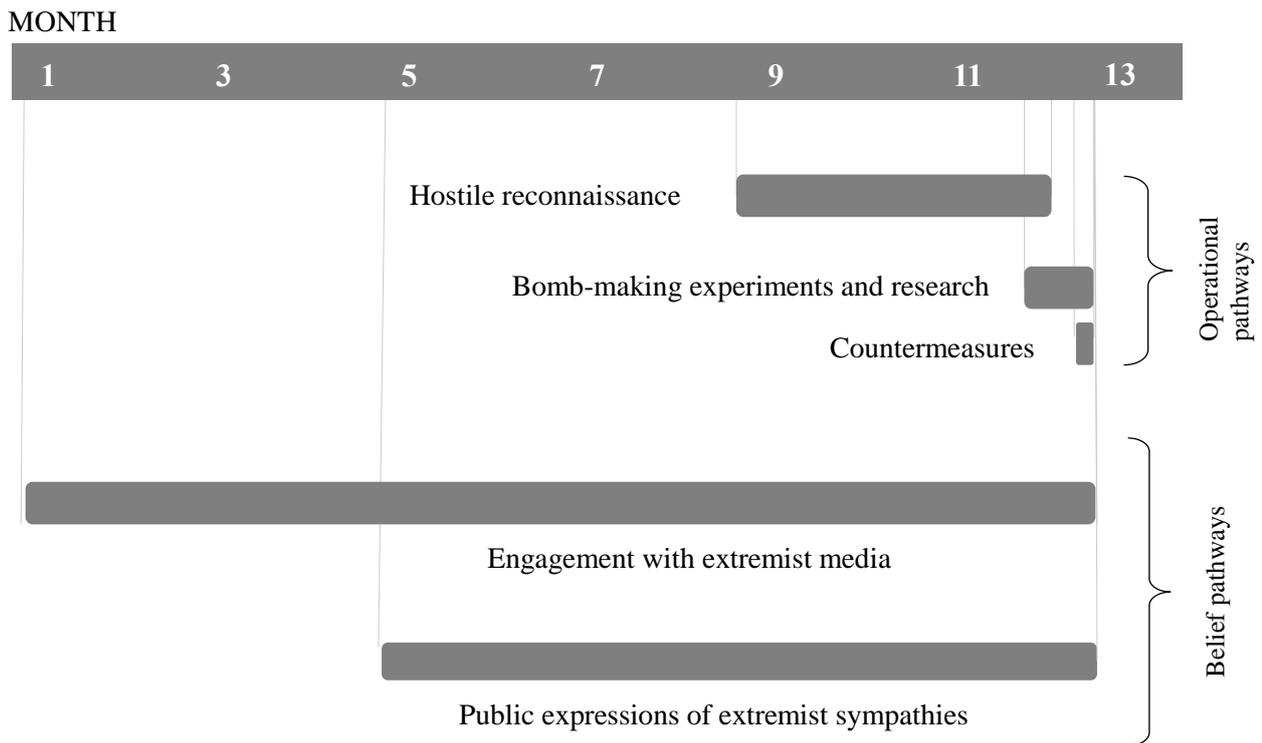


Figure 2: Case B: Lone actor in a network

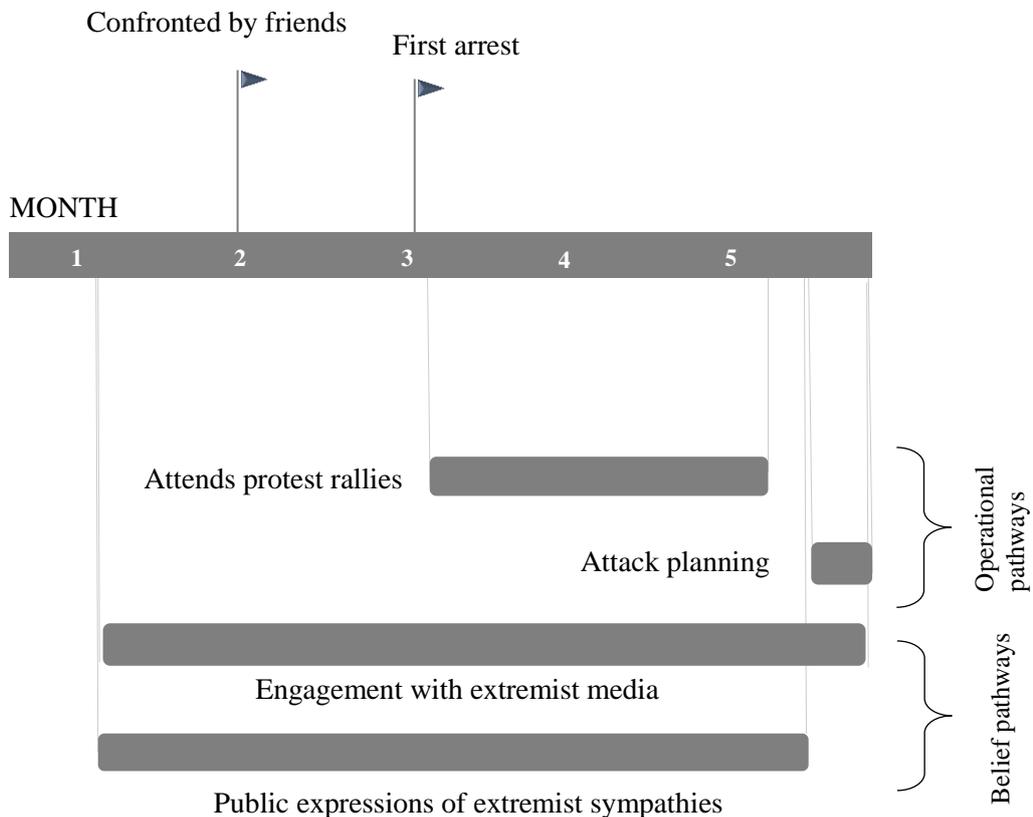


Figure 3: Case C: Isolated lone actor

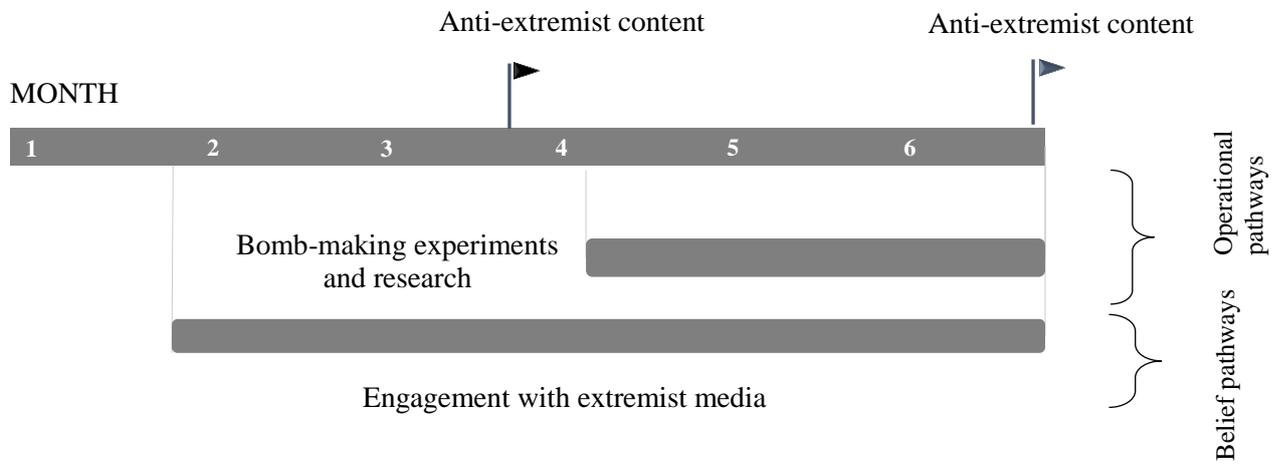


Figure 4: Case D: Individual part of network

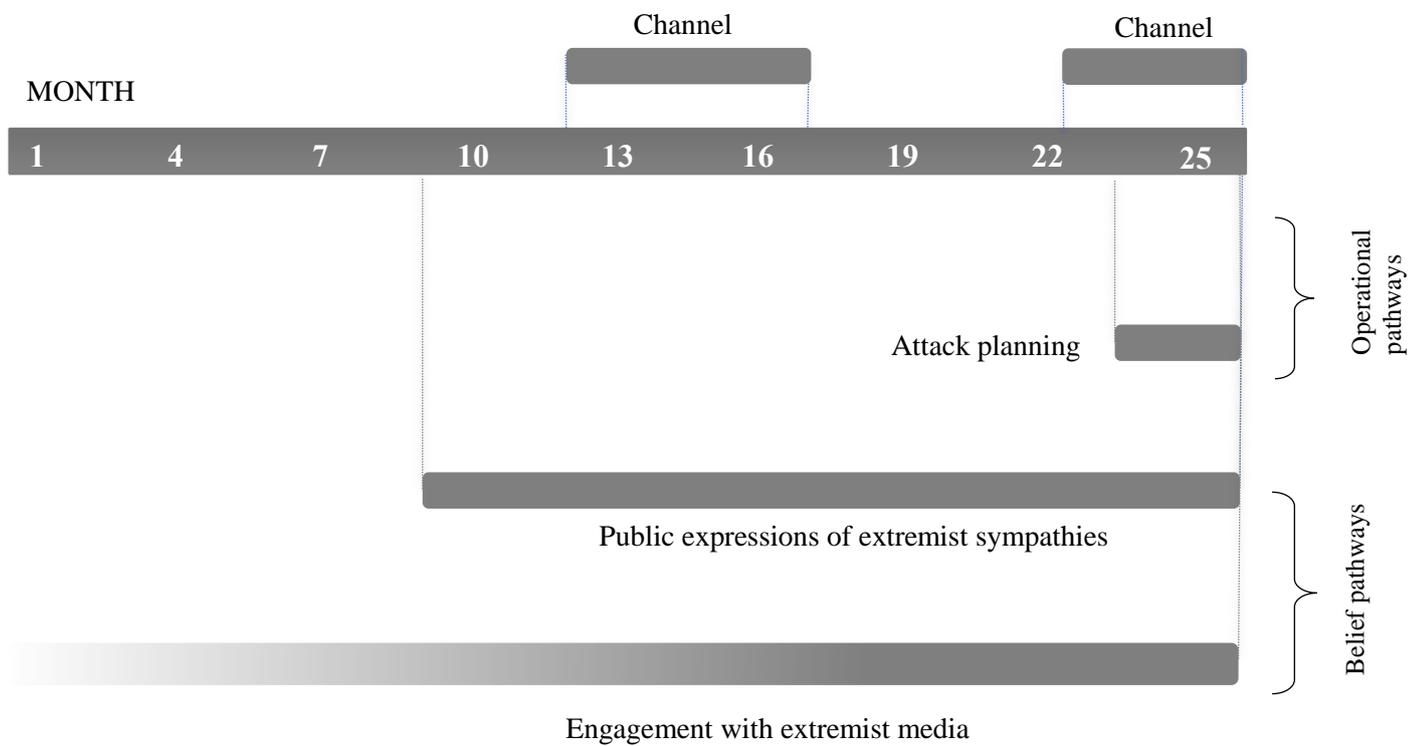
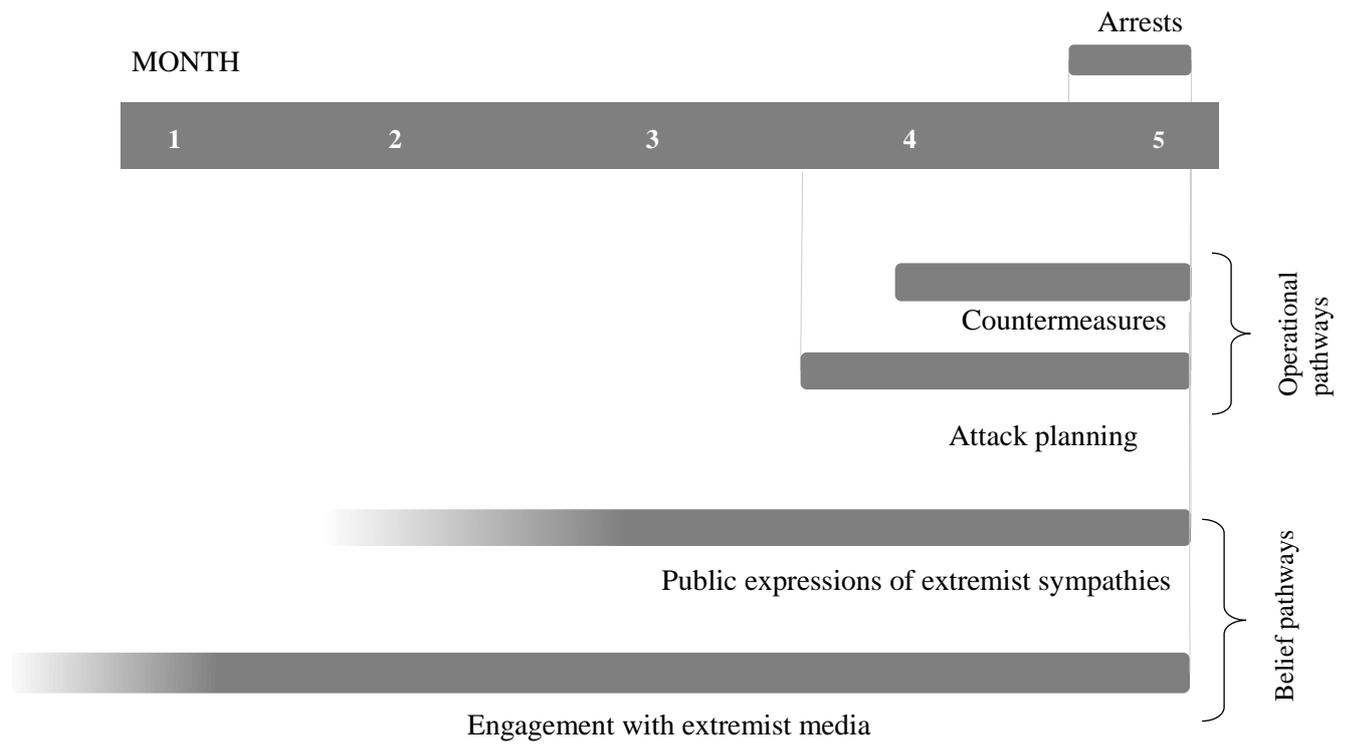


Figure 5: Case E: Network



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