Series Preface

The Elements in Forensic Linguistics series from Cambridge University Press publishes across four main topic areas: (1) investigative and forensic text analysis; (2) the study of spoken linguistic practices in legal contexts; (3) the linguistic analysis of written legal texts; (4) explorations of the origins, development and scope of the field in various regions. *Decoding Terrorism: An Interdisciplinary Approach to a Lone-Actor Case* by Julia Kupper, Marie Bojsen-Møller, Tanya Karoli Christensen, Dakota Wing, Marcus Papadopulos and Sharon Smith is situated within the first of these categories and offers a retrospective investigation of the linguistic and behavioral evidence produced by the perpetrator prior to and during the catastrophic event in Germany in 2019.

The first Element of its kind in our series, the authors bring a unique constellation of contributions to this case study. First, the authors have lived and worked in a variety of countries, including the US, Canada, Denmark and Germany, among others. With these varied international experiences, they offer a range of cultural perspectives on the evidence in this case. Second, the authors represent a variety of scholarly fields such as linguistics, psychology and criminology. With this scholarly breadth, the authors have drawn on methodologies such as genre analysis, text linguistics, interpersonal stance, behavioral analysis and uptake analysis, providing insights from a range of complementary lenses. Finally, their collective practical experiences include positions in law enforcement and university teaching, involvement in forensic linguistic and behavioral case work and the provision of threat assessment training seminars, all of which contribute to their investigative and academic understanding of threats from serious violent offenders. The results of this impressive case study clearly highlight the benefits of international and interdisciplinary work, and we encourage more collaborative research and practice moving forward.

Tammy Gales
Series Editor

Prologue: Online Radicalization

Since the advent of the internet in the 1980–1990s, cyberspace has become an important venue for radicalization and cross-fertilization of ideological content (Schwarz, 2020; Simi & Windisch, 2020).[1] Violent extremists leverage the global interconnectivity of the virtual sphere to establish and maintain relationships with like-minded individuals and organizations, and facilitate expansions by spreading

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[1] The main contributor of this section was Julia Kupper.

propaganda to attract and recruit new members (Dittrich et al., 2022; Scrivens et al., 2021). Today's online platforms provide diverse (sub)cultures with extensive opportunities for interaction, enabling the global exchange of content without delay or oversight. Proponents of extreme movements have emerged on all mainstream social media channels to disseminate radical content, including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (now X), TikTok and YouTube, but also on fringe forums, for instance anonymous imageboard forums such as "the chans" (e.g., 4chan or 8chan). Particularly the far-right[2] – right-wing populists, national conservatives and violent revolutionists – has created a parallel universe of alternative platforms where extreme worldviews appear to be reiterated with discourse that evades content moderation, avoids fact checking and disregards opposing opinions (Fuchs & Middelhoff, 2020). Examples of such platforms include Parler (emulating Facebook), Gab (emulating Twitter – now X), Bitchute (emulating YouTube), Metapedia (emulating Wikipedia) and Voat (emulating Reddit).

The Swedish Defence Research Agency (European Commission, 2021) found that the violent right uses specific jargon to strengthen their members' sense of belonging and to enforce their ideological messaging by utilizing toxic language, dehumanization terminology and conspiracy theories in digital environments. Furthermore, the Institute of Strategic Dialogue (Bedingfield, 2021) observed that major game streaming and messaging platforms, such as Steam, Discord and Twitch, host publicly accessible chat servers, channels and groups that are composed of large networks of radical far-right collectives and extremist activities. In a study across twelve chan sites, the Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats (Keen, Crawford & Suarez-Tangil, 2020) found that several imageboards fostered an extremist mindset and promoted violence on the basis of deploying irony and humor in memes and other visual narratives. In addition, the forums promoted an "in-group" status while concurrently targeting "out-groups," an important framework for understanding the *us versus them* mentality (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This identity theory illustrates how individuals and movements categorize themselves and others into competing social groups, with the in-group sharing a national, racial or religious identity (Berger, 2018). Out-groups of the far-right include, for instance, the Jewish, Muslim and LGBTQIA+ communities; immigrants; black and brown people; left-wing politicians and supporters; the media; and women (Schwarz, 2020). While the far-right may not be a uniform group (Booth, 2023), we believe referring to in- and out-groups is a useful concept in the context of online

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[2] The term *far-right* here refers to individuals and groups whose ideologies and attitudes are located at the extreme conservative end of the political spectrum (Perliger, 2020), and who hold the belief that violence against their (perceived) enemies is justified (Bjørgo & Ravndal, 2019).

radicalization and how individuals express (dis)alignments with certain people, groups and ideologies.

The technological changes that have enabled a global network of connectivity have also accelerated the radicalization process for a new generation of lone-actor terrorists born into the digital era (Crawford & Keen, 2020; Thorleifsson & Düker 2021). By engaging in online interactions with other extremists in detached webs, subjects appear to feel a sense of unity and commitment to a certain cause (Simi & Windisch, 2020). This has triggered a number of targeted violence attacks that – despite the digital community – are prepared and carried out autonomously. The focal point of this Element, Stephan Balliet, was part of this far-right ecosystem of interchangeable digital platforms where he partly self-radicalized, for instance, on the darknet and clearnet platforms Kohlchan, Nanochan, 8chan, vch.moe and Julay.World (Kupper et al., 2022; Pook, Stanjek & Wigard, 2021). The main research question of this Element is not whether Balliet fits into any specific group, but rather how he constructs an identity as part of *something* – a collection of transnational online extremists with overlapping ideals and connections. By understanding how Balliet aligns with this network, we can gain insights into his ideological frameworks and motives, which ultimately resulted in a violent act of terrorism. This is important as these digital environments where successful lone-actor terrorists with a *high kill count* are glorified (Macklin, 2022) partly inspired Balliet to escape his mundane reality and design a mass casualty incident.

1 Introduction

Disclaimer: Please note that some of the following sections contain graphic language, such as racial slurs and mentions of death and injury.[3] All textual samples were replicated in their original forms, including any kinds of errors.

1.1 The Terrorism Attack

On October 9, 2019, at 11:54 AM, Stephan Balliet is seated in a rental vehicle in a parking lot near a synagogue in the East German town of Halle, Saxony-Anhalt. Intent on conducting a mass shooting at a Jewish place of worship on Yom Kippur – the holiest day in the Jewish calendar – he publishes a link to his targeted violence manifesto (henceforth, TVM) and live-stream on the imageboard Meguca at 11:57 AM. After initial technical difficulties when configuring his broadcast to the online gaming platform Twitch, he turns the camera of his phone to his face and announces the following scripted message in English:

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[3] The main contributor of this section was Julia Kupper.

(1)   Hi my name is Anon,[4] and I think the holocaust never happened. [unintelligible] Feminism is the cause of the decline of birthrates in the West, which acts as a scapegoat for mass immigration. And the root of all these problems is the Jew. Would you like to be friends?

Subsequently, the twenty-seven-year-old German navigates to the synagogue on Humboldtstraße, dressed in a military-style outfit and equipped with a head-mounted phone camera on his ballistic helmet to live-stream his premeditated attack. Antisemitic music is blasting from an MP3 player and loudspeakers attached to the back of a tactical vest (Pook et al., 2021). Balliet arrives at the target site at 12:01 PM and attempts to break into the building – which holds fifty-one worshippers at the time – with homemade explosives, 3D-printed guns and ammunition while broadcasting his attack online to an international audience. Unable to breach the secured doors at the main and side entrances, the perpetrator shoots and fatally wounds a passerby, a forty-year-old female whose only trans-gression appears to be her vocal complaints about the deafening sounds of the offender's explosives. Visibly agitated, Balliet accidently shoots his car's front tire. When he tries to fire at a second person who has stopped to aid his first victim, Balliet's self-made weapon jams multiple times. Then, the attacker impulsively departs and drives less than 0.3 miles (500 meters), choosing a nearby Turkish restaurant on Ludwig-Wucherer-Straße as a spontaneous second target, and fires shots at several individuals, killing a twenty-year-old male.

The first patrol car arrives at the kebab shop at 12:15 PM – approximately twenty minutes into the incident – and the perpetrator engages in a firefight with several law enforcement officers. Balliet sustains a minor neck injury, drives off, hitting and injuring a Somalian victim walking on the sidewalk, reportedly on purpose. The offender then escapes to the small village of Wiedersdorf, Saxony-Anhalt, nine miles (sixteen kilometers) east of Halle where he attempts to carjack a vehicle at 1:00 PM (Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk, 2019). The car owners, a married couple, refuse to relinquish their vehicle and Balliet shoots and seriously injures them before proceeding to steal a cab to drive towards Munich. Along the way, he discards his phone used to live-stream the attack (Pook et al., 2021). Twenty-five miles (forty kilometers) into his escape, the attacker hits a truck on the freeway and law enforcement apprehends him without further resistance at 1:38 PM (Koehler, 2019). Responding officers discover an escape bag in the vehicle, containing several hygiene and clothing items, as well as food for approximately two days. Balliet explained during his trial that his original plan entailed an escape to the Harz Mountains, a highland area northwest of Halle (Pook et al., 2021).

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[4] *Anon* is an abbreviation for "anonymous," a username given to profiles in online forums to conceal the user's identity.

Extensive criminal investigations revealed that Balliet carried out the act of terror alone. Over 320 witness interrogations confirmed that there were no indications of contact with groups or individuals that could have assisted the offender with planning and preparing for the targeted attack (Pook et al., 2021). In December 2020, the perpetrator was charged with two counts of murder, seven counts of attempted murder and incitement of the masses, and was sentenced to life imprisonment with subsequent preventative detention (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, 2022).

1.2 The Language Evidence

Minutes before driving to the target location, Balliet announced his intentions in a short message titled *Last Post* on the imageboard Meguca with the help of a wireless internet stick and laptop (Pook et al., 2021). The anime discussion forum was reportedly loosely connected to 4chan and shut down three days after the Halle incident, which resulted in a loss of all forum data (Pook et al., 2021; Thorleifsson & Düker, 2021). During the court proceedings, Balliet stated that it was a *coincidence* that he leaked his materials to this specific website, which seems questionable as the perpetrator planned every other aspect of his targeted act meticulously (Kupper et al., 2022). We believe Balliet chose this particular imageboard because of his interest in anime and gaming (see Sections 3.2 and 4.3) and because 8chan had been taken down after three preceding lone-actor terrorists announced their acts of violence on this platform in March, April and August 2019 (see Sections 7.1 and 8.4).

In the online attack announcement on Meguca, Balliet linked to a folder that contained his TVM, which was authored in English and dissected into three separate files:

- A one-page *READ THIS FIRST* file, which contained a link to the Twitch live-stream and a short message. According to investigations, this document was created on October 1 and edited until four days prior to the incident, October 5, 2019 (Pook et al., 2021).
- An eleven-page *short pre-action report*, comprising photographs and descriptions of his self-manufactured equipment (guns, bullets, grenades), as well as an operational plan and gaming-style objective and achievement sections. The original file name was *dokumentation.pdf*, which translates to "documentation." During the Halle trial, it was stated that Balliet began working on this document on March 26, 2019, eleven days after the New Zealand mosque shooting (March 15, 2019). He continuously added to and edited the file until August 17, 2019, and then picked it up again on September 21, 2019, less than two weeks prior to the attack (Pook et al., 2021).

- A four-page *spiritual guide*, consisting of encouraging statements for others to commit similar attacks and an image of an anime cat-girl. The file name was a Japanese translation of the word "Manifesto." Balliet worked on this document from September 21, 2019, until three days before the attack, October 6, 2019 (Pook et al., 2021).

According to investigation files from Balliet's interrogation conducted by Germany's Federal Criminal Police on November 22, 2019, the assailant claimed to have uploaded all of these communications for *entertainment* purposes (Bundeskriminalamt, 2019).

We also obtained an unreleased self-interview titled *Your F&A Guide* but saved as *Manifest0.pdf* on Balliet's hard drive, which he did not distribute publicly with his other materials. *F&A* is a German abbreviation for "Frage & Antwort," the English equivalent to *Q&A* ("question & answer"). The offender stated that he decided against publishing the file "because it sounded too much like a justification. And only those who do wrong have to justify themselves. And there is nothing wrong with taking action against someone that wants you dead" (Bundeskriminalamt, 2019, p. 2). When asked why the document was authored in English during one of his first police interviews, Balliet responded that he intended to reach a wide audience with it (Pook et al., 2021). Furthermore, the perpetrator explained that he created his *short pre-action report* as a follow-up document to the unreleased self-interview, which was meant to be *a joke* (Bundeskriminalamt, 2019).

The thirty-six-minute recorded live-stream was aired on Twitch, a video-game broadcasting and viewing platform, with Balliet switching between English and German throughout the video that was filmed from a first-person shooter perspective. During his trial, the offender declared that he registered the account *spilljuice* on Twitch a few months before the attack for the sole purpose of streaming his event live (Pook et al., 2021). The phrase *spill juice* is a euphemism for bleeding as a result of a gunshot or stab wound. Balliet opted to use Twitch because Facebook had improved its algorithms to detect and eliminate streams of violent acts quicker after previous terrorism attacks were broadcast on there in 2019. Twitch informed investigators that the original live-stream had a total of three viewers based in the United States and Switzerland, who watched the broadcast for ten, fifteen and thirty minutes each (Pook et al., 2021). By the time the platform identified and deleted Balliet's broadcast, the video had been watched by approximately 2,200 people (Koehler, 2019). Similarly to previous targeted violence live-streams, the recording spread like wildfire online (Kupper et al., 2022).

As a number of scholars have called for multidisciplinary research into threatening language that combines theoretical perspectives from linguistics, rhetoric, psychology and law (Bojsen-Møller, 2021; Gales, 2010 and 2019), we fuse several qualitative methodologies for forensic text analysis and behavioral threat assessment in a novel approach to present a holistic review of the Halle terrorism case. Part one of our interdisciplinary analysis provides a deep dive into Stephan Balliet's targeted violence communications by applying different forensic text assessments to his language evidence, such as genre, text linguistic and appraisal analyses. Part two focuses on the perpetrator's pre-attack behaviors to conduct a retrospective threat assessment and organizational review for security agencies, and incorporates an uptake analysis to highlight the contagion and copycat effect of Balliet's communications and attack.

2 Methodology

2.1 Holistic Review

The objective of this Element is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the language evidence associated with the Halle terrorism attack by conducting a scientific and systematic post-hoc examination of select genre, linguistic and behavioral features.[5] This multi-method approach highlights the need for interdisciplinary threat assessment teams composed of investigators, psychologists and linguists to tackle various types of evidence and to approach terrorism cases through different lenses. While intelligence analysts can collect and analyze raw data from the digital sphere to identify a potential subject of concern, detectives can conduct search and seizure procedures and interviews to obtain relevant corroborations. This information can then be analyzed by mental health specialists regarding warning behaviors, while linguists can conduct an analysis of written and spoken evidence. Such cross-disciplinary investigations will deepen the understanding of subjects' motivations, ideologies and networks, and thus enhance the ability to determine the level of risk of an impending attack. As TVMs are often disseminated minutes or hours prior to an attack and provide limited time for intervention, our interdisciplinary analysis demonstrates the importance of looking at language corroborations in their wider context as part of an aggregate social act of terrorism. Furthermore, the scientific interest in describing, analyzing and explaining language data in the form of a case study carries great value that can provide a prism through which we can evaluate other cases. Insights gained from retrospective assessments, such as the examination of how warning indicators may have manifested themselves in pre-attack

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[5] The main contributor of this section was Julia Kupper.

behaviors, contribute to the larger goal of preventing future acts of targeted violence. In concert, the findings assist in enriching our understanding of threat assessment protocols and in devising proactive measures against domestic and foreign threats.

Our analysis first renders a broad overview of the genre of TVMs and of the specific constellation of the TVM that Balliet produced prior to his attack. We then consecutively zoom in on how the language of the TVM relates to the textual and situational context, and on how the language reveals Balliet's stances towards his weapons, his objectives and himself. We then broaden the perspective again to analyze the psychological and behavioral traits that may have caused the attack, and to give an assessment of whether the act of violence could have been prevented through intelligence and investigative measures. Finally, we expand the focus even further to the ramifications in terms of uptakes by other far-right extremists and copycats in different online and offline settings.

This qualitative, multifaceted approach allows us to conduct a critical, in-depth and thorough examination of the perpetrator's communications and actions, and thus provides a comprehensive and nuanced review of the Halle case. All methodologies will be elaborated upon in their respective sections, but here we provide a summary of all manual types of analyses that complement each other to enhance our understanding of the event:

- The *genre analysis* assesses the communicative functions, structure and genre labels of each written communication in the TVM and shows how the perpetrator's self-professed purpose overlaps with and differs from the generic functions of TVMs.
- The *text linguistic analysis* examines the interplay between grammatical, lexical and pragmatic features to reveal the perpetrator's narrative, networks and discursively expressed need for significance.
- The *stance analysis* identifies the assailant's stances through appraisal analysis to provide insights into his motives and ideologies, including his evaluations of the intended targets, his manufactured weapons, his plan and how he presents himself as ideologically (dis)aligned with the audience(s) of his TVM.
- The *retrospective threat assessment* conducts a behavioral analysis of the perpetrator's background, red flags, triggering events and pathway to violence behaviors to accentuate warning indicators that might be utilized to thwart future acts of violence.
- The *organizational review* assesses challenges faced by security authorities when dealing with lone-actor terrorists, including an examination of Balliet's behaviors in the run-up to the crime, to discuss whether information for preventive police measures was available to security authorities.

• The *uptake analysis* examines how the offender's TVM, live-stream and
Q&A are a response to – an uptake on – other targeted violence attacks and
communications, and how Balliet's actions and words have been taken up by
subsequent terrorists and a variety of online communities through different
intertextual connections.

2.2 Data Selection and Aggregation

The authors of this Element opted to study Stephan Balliet for several reasons.
First, there appears to be a lack of research focusing exclusively on the Halle
incident with the exception of a commentary published two months after the attack
occurred (Koehler, 2019) and Balliet's TVM and live-stream having been assessed
in previous studies (Allchorn, Dafnos & Gentile, 2022; Kupper et al., 2022).
Second, far-right terrorism is contemporarily the greatest threat for lone-actor
attacks in North America and Europe (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, 2022;
Wray, 2021). Third, publicly available data on Balliet was sufficient to apply
a multi-method approach to his linguistic corroborations and pre-attack behaviors.
The written and spoken evidence compiled by Balliet (i.e., the multi-document
TVM, imageboard post and recording of the live-stream) was originally reviewed
and analyzed in the days following the attack in the form of an operational analysis
when the first author was embedded within a law enforcement agency. All data are
also available in the public domain and were subsequently securely stored in an
online file system accessible to all authors of this Element. The unpublished file
Your F&A Guide was later obtained from a private source and only reviewed by
the first author to maintain confidentiality. The court trial transcripts were acquired
from *democ. Zentrum Demokratischer Widerspruch e.V.*, an association of scien-
tists, journalists and media professionals who jointly observe, document and
analyze antidemocratic movements.[6] They transcribed the Halle court proceedings
and published their reproduction in Pook et al. (2021).

3 Rhetorical Genre Analysis

In this section, we employ rhetorical genre studies (RGS) to analyze Stephan
Balliet's written communications from a genre perspective, showing how they
are an enactment of the genre of TVMs.[7] We thus analyze the communicative
functions and structure of his TVM and consider how it complies with and diverges
from what we know about the overall genre from the literature (Kupper et al., 2022;
Kupper & Meloy, 2021). It is also described how Balliet uses genre labels and

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[6] We thank Grischa Stanjek for providing us with the entire transcripts of the Halle court case.
[7] The main contributor of this section was Marie Bojsen-Møller.