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ABSTRACT

Recent years have witnessed a growing multi-disciplinary engagement with the importance of quantification across social, political, and economic life. In this article, I seek to build on this work by offering the first sustained exposition of the significance of numbers for critical scholarship on (counter-)terrorism. Three arguments are made. First, there is evidence of greater appetite for engaging with numbers in critical terrorism studies scholarship than might be intuited, given this work's widespread association with linguistic and discursive approaches. Second, notwithstanding the above, existing scholarship in this area tends to be limited, fragmentary, and characterised by illustrative or exemplary engagement. And third, there is significant opportunity to move towards a more substantive critical engagement with (counter-)terrorism numbers through inspiration from cognate debates within sociology, rhetorical studies, and critical security studies. To address this, the article therefore provides a new research agenda for critical terrorism studies scholarship and quantification, organised around five themes: (i) the production of (counter-)terrorism numbers; (ii) the form taken by (counter-)terrorism numbers; (iii) the mobility of numbers across sites of (counter-)terrorism knowledge; (iv) the political and other functions of (counter-)terrorism numbers; and (v) the reception of (counter-)terrorism numbers by relevant audiences.

Introduction

In September 2021, the UK Home Office announced that seven 'late stage' terrorist plots had been successfully stopped since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. As the Counter-Terrorism Policing (2021) news service reported, this took 'the total number of foiled terrorism plots since March 2017 to 32 – with 18 related to Islamist extremism, 12 to Extreme Right Wing Terrorism (XRWT) and two to Left, Anarchist or Single Issue Terrorism'. In its quarterly update the following September, the same institution (Home Office 2022) announced that the previous 12 months had witnessed '190 arrests for terrorist-related activity in Great Britain' of which, 'at the time of data provision, 54 arrests resulted in a charge (28%)'. Sandwiched between these two announcements was publication of a new House of Commons Library briefing entitled, *Terrorism in Great Britain: The Statistics*. This

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briefing offered new numerical data on a wide range of (counter-)terrorism related topics, including: Deaths due to terrorism; Stop and Search Legislation; Terrorism Arrests; Pre-Charge Detention periods; Prosecutions and convictions for terrorism; Terrorist prisoners; The use of TPIMs; and, Foreign Fighters in Syria (Allen, Burton, and Pratt 2022, 5).

Examples such as these offer some indication of the extent to which terrorism discourse finds itself saturated with quantitative or numerical illustration and argumentation. Political speeches, academic articles, think tank publications, government documents, oppositional media, news reports and so forth are *all* heavily populated by statistical claims: all heavily populated by the counting of terrorist campaigns, organisations, deaths, attacks, plots, arrests, convictions, financing, and much else besides. Such practices are not, to be clear, a uniquely or distinctively British phenomenon. President Biden's recent *National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism* (US National Security Council 2021), for instance, is introduced through enumeration of the death-tolls of attacks, including at Charlottesville, El Paso, and the 1995 Oklahoma City Bombing. The US State Department's (2021) most recent Country Reports on Terrorism, relatedly, contains an annex of statistical information running to some 49 pages.

Efforts at counting, enumerating, and quantifying (counter-)terrorism like these serve multiple, and often heterogeneous, ends. They can, for instance, help to emphasise or de-emphasise the threat posed by terrorism through numerically representing the scale of past atrocities or future risks. They may demonstrate, justify or appeal for political resolve in light of such threats, including through evidencing political commitment to financial or other forms of counterterrorism activity. Numbers, of course, provide opportunity for comparison – between types of terrorism, over time, across space, and so on – and for tracking continuity and change within particular (counter-)terrorism indicators. And, in all of this – as with so many other things, enduring perceptions of terrorism's exceptionality notwithstanding – (counter-)terrorism simply replicates a wider 'avalanche of numbers' (Hacking 1982) that has taken place across social, political, economic, scientific, and everyday life.

Where the prevalence, prominence and significance of quantification has attracted growing attention in relation to diverse areas of socio-political life, its role in relation to (counter-)terrorism, specifically, remains surprisingly neglected. In this article, I address this neglect by outlining some of the ways in which critical scholarship on (counter-)terrorism might more systematically engage with the discursive and political power of numbers. My overarching argument is that although there exist important examples of critical engagement with numbers across Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS), such work remains often illustrative rather than substantive, fleeting rather than sustained, and fragmented rather than integrated into a coherent research agenda. To address this, I propose that we take inspiration and insight from rhetorical, sociological, and critical security studies literature in order to expand and strengthen this work, and to move, perhaps, towards a more sustained engagement with the prominence, power, and productivity of (counter-)terrorism numbers. Doing so has value for adding theoretical complexity to CTS research, allowing it to benefit from the insight of scholarship with experience and expertise relating to numbers. It will also, moreover, help to connect potentially isolated and idiosyncratic contributions to this literature, adding to their collective presence and capacity. The outcome, as detailed in the article's conclusion, may be a more plural – and therefore a more vibrant – critical scholarship on terrorism, with new opportunities for engagement with diverse academic and other audiences.

In making this argument, I offer three contributions to knowledge. First, synthetically, the article provides the first systematic overview of the diverse ways in which CTS research has engaged with quantification. Specifically, I identify four distinct strategies in this work in which numbers are seen to provide opportunity: (i) for contesting dominant discourses around terrorism; (ii) for illustrating injustices in counterterrorism practices; (iii) for generating original knowledge via quantitative scholarship; and (iv) for unpacking the working of (counter-)terrorism regimes with their reliance on algorithmic and statistical practices.

The article's second, interdisciplinary, contribution is to bring CTS research into closer contact with wider debates on the constitutive and persuasive power of numbers, highlighting opportunities for learning from scholarship in fields such as rhetoric and sociology. Such work, I argue, provides conceptual and analytical impetus and resources for better understanding the role and importance of quantification in (counter-)terrorism discourse and practice. In so doing, it also helps us to situate (counter-)terrorism practices in relevant wider social contexts, developments, and dynamics.

The third, analytical, contribution is to outline a new research agenda for future CTS scholarship on numbers organised around five themes: (i) the production of (counter-) terrorism numbers; (ii) the form taken by (counter-)terrorism numbers; (iii) the mobility of numbers across sites of (counter-)terrorism knowledge; (iv) the political and other work done by (counter-)terrorism numbers; and (v) their reception by relevant audiences.

The remainder of the article proceeds in four stages. I begin by briefly exploring the close association of CTS with discursive scholarship, emphasising the ontological emphasis on the productive power of language and associated methodological preference for qualitative research techniques within this area. A second section then argues that CTS work is less guilty of linguistic reductionism than often assumed, and that the field houses heterogenous understanding of, and engagement *with*, numbers and their production. While this engagement remains relatively cursory, a third section then demonstrates this need not be the case by introducing adjacent literatures on the sociology, rhetoric, and security work of numbers. This research, I argue, offers impetus and insight for further unpacking the ubiquity and significance of diverse efforts to count (counter-)terrorism. A fourth section then builds on this insight to set out a new research agenda for critical terrorism scholarship on numbers. The article concludes by arguing that work of the sort called for here would have significant benefits for CTS including broadening the field's analytical horizons; opening new opportunities for interdisciplinary engagement; facilitating collaboration with more obviously problem-solving forms of terrorism research; and, opening additional scope for impact on policymakers and others.

Critical terrorism studies, discourse and language

Although critical terrorism studies constitutes a heterogenous and increasingly plural research field (Jarvis 2016, Martini and da Silva 2023), it is a field that stands also frequently accused of discursive or linguistic reductionism (Porpora 2016, 80). In the least generous of critiques, CTS is condemned (amongst other things) for importing the 'confusion and inconsequentiality' of post-structural philosophers such as Foucault and Derrida (Jones and Smith 2009, 296): philosophers, of course, heavily associated with discursive approaches. More sympathetic engagements, such as

Jonathan Joseph's (2011, 33) critical realist take, appeal for greater reflection on the non-discursive foundations of (counter-)terrorist institutions and practices, such that: 'It would be ridiculous, for example, to suggest that something like the war on terror or the Northern Ireland peace process is all about discursive construction and nothing to do with material interests or socio-economic relations'. Joseph (2009, 96), in an earlier piece, pointed similarly to the epistemological and normative implications of failing to look beneath or beside hegemonic constructions, arguing, 'there is little point in 'destabilising dominant interpretations' unless there is something about reality that we want to explain better'. Doug Stokes (2009, 89), too, took similar issue with CTS' ostensibly reductivist ontology, seen here to risk, 'falling into a discursive echo chamber where discourses constitute other discourses that in turn constitute other discourses and so on without any relationship to other social structures or indeed to any notion of political economy or national interests' (Stokes 2009, 89). And Douglas Porpora (2011, 49), finally, writing also from a critical realist standpoint, highlights potential methodological shortcomings within CTS' concomitant reliance on qualitative techniques and its lack of engagement with potentially valuable statistical data.

The purported reliance of critical terrorism studies on discursive and linguistic approaches within evaluations such as these has some merit. A 2011 survey piece in the field's flagship journal, for instance, categorised 60% of published articles as post-structuralist, thick constructivist, or thin constructivist (Herring and Stokes 2011). Some of the most influential work associated with CTS (Jackson 2005) applies critical discourse analysis to linguistic constructions of threat and identity in (counter-)terrorism discourse (see also, Jarvis 2009b). Efforts to flesh out CTS' conceptual commitments (Jarvis 2009a, Stump and Dixit 2012) tend to situate it within interpretive or discursive paradigms, often enthusiastically. And a critical engagement with the productive power of written or spoken language underpins much CTS research, enjoying application to a range of policy contexts from the normalisation of torture (Jackson 2007b) to the assassination of terrorist leaders (Jarvis and Holland 2014); geographical contexts including in relation to elite representations of terrorism in the Anglosphere (Holland 2012), European Union (Baker-Beall 2009) or Morocco (Bartolucci 2010); and, historical contexts whereby Kirkpatrick's (2019) analysis of parliamentary discourse on proscription in the North of Ireland since 1887, say, complements the contemporary focus of much of this work.

Moving beyond the language of political elites, discursive methods have also been applied in CTS scholarship to constructions of terrorism and extremism in a wide range of texts including media narratives (Martini 2018), school textbooks (Ford 2019), and the everyday or 'vernacular' language of 'ordinary' citizens (Jarvis and Lister 2013). It is, perhaps, no surprise, then, that Jack Holland (2016, 204–205) titles his summary of CTS research 'Why so much critical discourse analysis?', arguing:

> A focus on language and discourse has been a consistent theme of CTS research since its emergence as a subdiscipline. This is because CTS has often adopted a discursive ontology and a linked (sceptical) epistemology [with a methodological commitment] ... to deconstructing dominant discourses, through a critical discourse analysis approach.

Numbers and counting in critical terrorism studies

As the above discussion indicates, there exists a not-unreasonable tendency to associate Critical Terrorism Studies with discursive scholarship, given the field's ontological emphasis on the productive power of language and its methodological preference for qualitative research techniques. This association, as we have seen, is evident in work located within, sympathetic towards, and critical of this field. My argument in this section, however, is that this emphasis on the linguistic has not entirely forced out the numerical or quantitative, and that it is, in fact, possible to identify at least four ways in which numbers are taken to be somehow useful or important for CTS scholarship, namely, in: (i) counting threats; (ii) counting injustices; (iii) original statistical research; and, (iv) critical reflection on counting practices.

Two points of clarification are merited before making this argument. First, my approach to critical terrorism studies here is deliberately broad. It is one that incorporates literature on (counter-)terrorism self-identifying as such, published in the field's core journal (*Critical Studies on Terrorism*), or mobilised by an explicitly critical ethos that goes beyond an attempt to contribute to more effective or efficient forms of counter-terrorism, including through problematising or deconstructing official policy, actions, and rhetoric. This reflects my own 'small-c' understanding of critical terrorism studies (Jarvis 2019) as a 'living research programme' (Jarvis 2016, 35) better characterised as an orientation than a theoretical approach (see Williams and Krause 1997: x-xi). This understanding clearly speaks to, but is wider than, more explicit statements of CTS' core theoretical and political commitments that were particularly influential in carving out space for critical terrorism research (see Jackson, Breen Smyth, and Gunning 2009). A second point of clarification is that I take a similarly broad approach to 'numbers' in this section and in the argument that follows (see also, Jarvis 2023). As will become clear, my interest here spans the range of numerical practices, technologies, devices, outcomes and arguments brought into (counter-)terrorism, from simple rote counting to complex algorithms, from numerical data to non-numerical quantifiers (Mitra 2012; Billig 2021).

The first, and most prominent, engagement with numbers in critical terrorism scholarship is to illustrate inaccuracies or inconsistencies in dominant or hegemonic understandings of the terrorism threat. Such use of statistical evidence is particularly apparent in literature on the importance of state terrorism, much of which is constructed around a juxtaposition between the over-counting or over-estimation of non-state terrorism, on the one hand, and the under-counting/estimation of state terrorism, on the other (Jarvis and Lister 2014, 48–49). Blakeley's (2009, 1) influential *State Terrorism and Neoliberalism*, for instance, opens with estimates of deaths by state and non-state terrorisms in the twentieth century, highlighting how the former far exceeds the latter. In this work, Blakeley (2007, 230) builds on her earlier critique of the prominent RAND-St. Andrews dataset on terrorism for its flawed and inconsistent exclusion of acts of state terror. A similar set-up is found, too, in Jackson *et al's* (2010, 1) collection on contemporary state terrorism which begins with the argument:

> state terrorism remains as one of the single greatest threats to human and societal security and well-being today ... the few thousand deaths and injuries caused by [non-state] 'terrorism from below' every year pales into relative insignificance besides the hundreds of thousands of people killed, kidnapped, 'disappeared', injured, raped, abused, intimidated, and threatened by state agents and their proxies in dozens of countries across the globe.

Another, related, use of numerical data to illustrate (counter-)terrorism inconsistencies is found in work on the exaggerated or 'overblown' (Mueller 2006) construction of the threat posed by terrorism. Mueller and Stewart (2021) do this in a recent piece by juxtaposing the annual fatality risk of terrorism to a diverse range of threats including cancer, peanut allergies, and homicide to argue, 'it makes more policy sense to expend limited funds on hazards that inflict far more damage' (Mueller and Stewart 2021, 140). This argument builds numerous earlier publications (e.g. Mueller and Stewart 2011) in which they combine statistical insight with mathematical modelling to undertake cost-benefit analyses of counter-terrorism spending. As they argue in one piece on the US: 'for much counterterrorism spending to be justified, it would need to avert an implausibly high number of attacks of very substantial size every year ... [or] one attack of 9/11 magnitude every 60 years' (Mueller and Stewart 2014, 245). Jessica Wolfendale (2007, 2016) engages in a similar exercise to argue that counterterrorism measures represent a greater threat to individual well-being and security than does terrorism. And, Richard Jackson's (2005, 92) *Writing the War on Terrorism* begins its discursive analysis of constructions of danger with diverse illustrative numerical examples to argue that: 'The actual risk from terrorism is minute: in statistical terms the risk of being killed in a terrorist attack ranks somewhere near the risk of being killed by DIY accidents, lightning strikes or bee stings'.

Taken together, this critical literature on state terrorism and on the threat of non-state terrorism engages with numerical data as a source of factual evidence capable of correcting inaccurate or misleading narratives about the agents or danger of terrorism and the underpinning assumptions on which they are built. Through quantitative comparison – to other threats, or to the (unconstructed) realities of risk – statistical measures are called upon to rank and evidence the (lack of) threat posed by non-state terrorism. Although the depth of engagement with numbers varies in this work – from limited illustrative use to highlight research puzzles, on the one hand, to more sustained engagement with quantitative methods, on the other – this scholarship shares a faith in the corrective potential of numbers to illuminate camouflaged (counter-)terrorism realities.

A second engagement with numbers in CTS scholarship involves demonstrating biases and injustices in counterterrorism initiatives. Fitzgerald's (2015, 164–165) analysis, for instance, cites government statistics to demonstrate the disproportionate targeting of people of colour by immigration officers applying 'Schedule 7' powers at UK ports.[1] In a related vein, Gilks (2020, 25) draws on polling data to pull attention to the continuing significance of Islamophobia as a social problem in the UK. Lakhani and James (2021, 68) utilise Home Office data to highlight the threat posed by far right extremism, returning, in the process, to a source used in Lakhani's (2020, 661) earlier research on erroneous counter-radicalisation referrals. Away from the UK, Shayan (2020, 449) draws on Statistical Centre of Iran data to demonstrate evidence of discrimination against the Baloch people following the 1979 revolution.

Literature such as this, with its aspirations to spotlight the failings of counterterrorism policies, tends to share a confidence in the ontological viability of numbers with the above scholarships on the terrorist threat and state terrorism. It is noteworthy, moreover, that a normative concern here with the state's ability to act justly does not become an epistemological concern with the state's ability to produce reliable statistics: noteworthy, put otherwise, that government numbers are seen as trustworthy tools with which to

problematise flawed government actions. This might, in part, be because this work tends to use statistical claims for illustrative purposes – often as a platform for 'richer' forms of qualitative research such as autoethnography (Fitzgerald 2015) or qualitative interviews (Lakhani and James 2021).

A third body of work offers a more in-depth engagement with statistics by applying quantitative methods to generate new (critical) knowledge of terrorism and counterterrorism. Given the association between CTS and qualitative methods considered above, there is more of this work than one might imagine.[2] Powers (2014), for instance, uses proportions tests to identify a statistically significant correlation between the frequency of US drone strikes and Al Qaeda's rhetorical portrayal of the US. Skoczylis and Andrews (2022) apply regression analysis to findings from an online survey to explore the roots of far-right attitudes and behaviour. Kirisci (2020) applies a Seemingly Unrelated Regression analysis to existing datasets to test theoretical arguments on how terrorist groups respond to increasing state capacity. Kattelman (2021) investigates the importance of electoral politics, population vulnerability, and public fear as explainers of counterterrorism expenditure via OLS and logit regression models. His results indicate that although counterterrorism funding is influenced by the risk of terrorist attack, also important are the psychological benefits of such spending to the public, and more parochial political concerns (Kattelman 2021, 530). And, Chapekis and Moore (2019), finally, use data from their own Prosecution Project dataset to compare prosecutions for terrorism felonies of 'othered' individuals – defined as having a Muslim, Arab/Middle Eastern, and/or foreign-born status – to those of non-othered counterparts using comparative and descriptive statistical analysis.

Where the scholarship considered previously in this section tends to rely on existing data for illustrative purposes, this third literature goes a little further in generating its own quantitative data or analysis thereof. The employment of dedicated mathematical techniques and tests here provide a deeper engagement with the numerical, meaning we encounter the sort of sustained reflection on variable and test selection, for instance, that one would expect from quantitative scholarship. This is not, importantly, to suggest that this work is somehow 'uncritical' or inherently 'problem-solving'. Rather, it is to note that its criticality emerges from the deployment of methodological tools to problematise intuitive or dominant understandings of (counter-)terrorism (Kirisci 2020), to bring forth relatively neglected cases and dynamics in the terrorism universe (Skoczylis and Andrews 2022), or to add quantitative ballast to the conceptual arguments of CTS researchers (Powers 2014). Such work, of course, speaks to a longer, perhaps increasing, trajectory of quantitative scholarship in terrorism research more broadly (Horgan and Braddock 2012, ix) – albeit one that has suffered its own criticism (Silke 2009, Stohl 2012).

Slightly different to the above is a final, and smaller, body of critical scholarship that spotlights the power of numbers themselves within dominant terrorism discourses or dispositifs. Charlotte Heath-Kelly (2017, 299), for instance, highlights an important shift in the UK's Prevent Strategy from a pre-crime statistical rationality imported via epidemiology and crime prevention campaigns (Heath-Kelly 2017, 302–303), to an algorithmic rationality structured around big data and the idea of complexity (Heath-Kelly 2017, 311–312). Heath-Kelly's emphasis here on the constitutive importance of calculative practices is echoed by Zulaika and Douglass (2008, 30) with reference to productions of the terrorism threat in intelligence communities and the news media. In one example they

offer: 'Until the 1970s, the *New York Times Index* and the *London Times Index* had no statistical indices for 'terrorism' and therefore there were no 'terrorist acts' (only kidnappings, assassinations, bomb explosions, threats, and the like)' (Zulaika and Douglass 2008, 30; see also Qureshi 2015, 185–186). Hamilton (2011, 132–134), with reference to Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon, does something similar by documenting the use of calculative practices such as the counting of civilian bodies in the moral quantification of violence (see also, Auchter 2016). And, Miller (2019, 203), more recently, points to cultural and political biases within the algorithmic modelling of terrorism by intelligence analysts and scholars, arguing that such algorithms 'mask and therefore perpetuate ongoing forms of racialised violence and empire'.

Work in this vein has also begun to explore the productivity of numbers in *scholarship on* terrorism. Hayward (2011, 60), for instance, highlights the valorisation of statistical methods and claims in research on contemporary wars on terror, crime and drugs, which have spawned 'constant demand for numbers, league tables, quantitative incomes and outcomes'. In his cutting summary of this work's positivist leanings, Hayward (2011, 60) argues: 'Data that are in fact technically weak and, by their very nature, contested, blurred, ambiguous and unsuited for quantification are mindlessly churned through personal computers'. Lyness (2014, 84) points to the importance of statistical modelling in work on suicide bombers, viewing this as part of a 'problem-solution set defined by US state-led counterterrorism'. Pope (2017) questions the turn to statistics by academics and activists critical of drone programmes, arguing that this diminishes relations with distant Others. Meanwhile, Ali (2014, 141–143), finally, highlights the use of statistical knowledge in constructions of the 'British Muslim' identity and experience in radicalisation research.

Scholarship such as this takes us a little further than that considered above precisely because it demonstrates the *importance* of mathematical techniques and knowledge to counter-terrorism regimes. In doing this, it situates the critical gaze upon numbers themselves, and encourages us to begin thinking through their constitution, partialities and functions (political, discursive, normative, and so on). Although, to date, this work is very limited in scale, largely focused on the particularities of specific case studies, and rarely taking quantification as its primary focus, it matters, I argue, because it highlights opportunities for a more sustained critical terrorism scholarship on numbers. Such scholarship would be one in which the production, circulation and political work of numbers moves from the periphery to the centre, becoming a worthy focus of sustained investigation in its own right. In the following, I take inspiration from literature beyond CTS to begin my move towards a research agenda capable of doing just this.

Numbers and counting beyond critical terrorism studies

In the above section, I attempted to demonstrate three key features of CTS scholarship on quantification and numbers. First, most simply, I showed that, while limited in scale, this work is a little more expansive than one might intuit, given the widespread association of CTS with qualitative methods and discursive approaches. As we have seen, there are at least four distinct forms of CTS engagement with the numerical, each with their own research ambitions and agendas. Second, this work is clearly heterogeneous, moving between different understandings and engagements with numbers for a range of critical ends, including contestation of dominant discourses, illustrating injustices in counterterrorism

practices, and reflecting on the political importance of statistical techniques for (counter-) terrorism regimes. Third, I argued that there is scope for a more sustained and systematic engagement with numbers in CTS to build on the insight of recent work here. Important though existing CTS work in this area undoubtedly is, it tends not to take numbers as its primary focus, often reflecting on these in passing or for illustrative purposes. What work there is tends also, moreover, to focus on specific case studies, meaning that this scholarship remains relatively fragmented rather than integrated or connected.[3]

In the remainder of this article, I therefore outline some of the ways in which scholarship in this vein might begin to move beyond the illustrative and exemplary in order to more thoroughly engage with modes, methods, discourses, and outcomes of counting. To do so, I propose we take inspiration from three relevant literatures beyond the broad field of terrorism research: rhetorical scholarship on numbers; sociological scholarship on numbers; and, work on numbers and international security (see also, Jarvis 2023). Let us take each in turn.

The first, and most substantial literature of interest here is on the sociology of quantification. Following early appeals for a more sustained engagement with 'the production and communication of numbers – and its consequences for the organization and character of modern life' (Espeland and Stevens 2008, 402), this work has proliferated dramatically in recent years. One recent review article (Berman and Hirschman 2018) highlights the sheer diversity of this literature, identifying four questions of fundamental significance to the field: What shapes the production of numbers?; When and how do numbers matter?; How do/should we govern quantification?; and, How should quantification be studied? A related agenda-setting effort takes a more sectoral approach to chart four domains of burgeoning quantification and scholarship thereon across the past 30 years: administration, democratic rule, economics, and everyday life (Mennicken and Espeland 2019). As these overviews suggest, this work has considerable purview, with case studies at the global (Hansen and Porter 2012, Freistein 2016), national and everyday levels of analysis, although much of it highlights the importance of interconnections across these.

For our purposes here, this scholarship is important for two reasons. First, it highlights the sheer ubiquity of numeration practices and the range of functions they perform in the management of people, ideas, and objects. This, alongside the CTS work considered above, alerts us to their likely significance for, say, governing the threat posed by terrorism. Second, it also demonstrates the *productivity* of numbers as a social practice that constitutes or creates that which it purports to reflect. Numbers, put simply, don't simply represent or count that which already exists; they *create* that which exists through the act of counting. As Mennicken and Salais (2022, 15) put it: 'Quantification technologies, such as poverty measurements or social credit scores, reconstitute the very object they are asked to help create ("the ideal city" or "the ideal citizen")'. For Rose (1991, 676), similarly:

> numbers do not merely inscribe a pre-existing reality. They constitute it. Technologies of inscription and accumulation of facts about "the population", "the national economy", "poverty" render visible a domain with a certain internal homogeneity and external boundaries. ... Numbers here delineate "fictive spaces" for the operation of government, and establish a "plane of reality", marked out by a grid of norms, on which government can operate.

This insight into the productivity of numbers matters, I argue, because it resonates with a wider CTS orientation towards terrorism and counter-terrorism as social outcomes (Jackson et al. 2011). Although CTS is – as we have seen – a diverse field of scholarship, it remains marked out from earlier terrorism scholarship precisely because of its curiosity towards the construction or 'making up' (Hacking 1986) of terrorist violences and their responses. As Richard Jackson (2007a: 247) put it in one of the earliest statements on CTS' ontological commitments:

> while extreme physical violence is experienced as a brute fact, its wider cultural–political meaning is decided by social agreement and inter-subjective practices. In this sense, just as 'races' do not exist but classifications of humankind do, so too 'terrorism' does not exist but classifications of different forms of political violence do.

The value of sociological work on quantification here, therefore, is its potential to demonstrate just how essential numbers are to definitional, classificatory, and interpretive practices – such as those which separate terrorism from other potentially comparable acts of violence.

A second scholarship of relevance concerns rhetorical work on the influence of numbers in different contexts. Numbers, here, are seen to have *persuasive* as well as constitutive power, helping to shape how audiences understand, evaluate and negotiate socio-political worlds. Mitra, for instance, demonstrates the importance of quantification rhetoric in the governance of the 1943 Bengal famine, highlighting the discursive flexibility such rhetoric generates and its conduciveness to the construction of (competing) political arguments (2012, 156). Importantly, as Mitra (2012, 155) notes, quantification rhetoric can be approached through a wider analytical lens than might be anticipated, to include, 'not only ... numerical data but a host of structural devices like enumeration, listing and non-numerical quantification rhetoric like 'vast' and 'overwhelming' that develop a sense of scale'. This emphasis on the discursive potentialities of numbers is shared in Potter *et al*'s (1991:, 336–337) analysis of cancer on television, in which they ask, 'through which procedures is quantification – either numerical or non-numerical – put to work in arguments?' Billig's (2021) recent work on the COVID-19 pandemic, meanwhile, gives us a useful contemporary case here through which to grasp the rhetorical – and, subsequent, political – value of certain types of numbers, with its demonstration that precise, rather than round, numbers possess a 'semi-magical' power in communicating government targets and achievements (see also, Jarvis 2022, Finlayson, Jarvis, and Lister 2023). Related scholarship, finally, takes us further still by highlighting the rhetorical power of data visualisations in presenting and communicating quantitative arguments (Hill 2017, Allen 2021).

If sociological scholarship on numbers offers potential for assisting CTS to think through the ontological construction of terrorism, rhetorical work sheds vital epistemological light on the communication of (counter-)terrorism in different contexts. Numerical rhetoric, as scholarship such as this demonstrates, benefits from particular connotative qualities that make it highly useful for the presentation or 'selling' of arguments, priorities, and decisions. Uppermost amongst these are, first, an association of numbers with objectivity, such that statistical claims appear to represent the world accurately (Fioramonti 2014, 21). And, second, an association with transparency such that numerical

claims are often deemed amenable to external verification, and less tainted, perhaps, by the political machinations to which language is susceptible. As Baele et al (2017, 23) summarise the insight of Joel Best:

> the gradual oversight of statistics' origins and initial purpose, leading them to become treated as accurate facts – invests numbers with an authoritative force that resists questioning, producing inertia in the domain within which they work or the object upon which they exert their sway.

On top of this, the sheer empirical diversity of case studies and examples in this rhetorical scholarship – which takes in famines, diseases, pandemics, and so forth – is again suggestive of the likely prominence of quantitative claims in contemporary constructions of (counter-)terrorism – a prominence not yet reflected, as we have seen, in existing CTS literature. Unless we presuppose that (counter-)terrorism enjoys a rhetorical structuration distinct from other areas of (security) policy, the breadth of this research should offer encouragement to scholars pursuing related lines of enquiry in our area of interest.

A third body of work is an emerging critical scholarship on quantification within Security Studies and International Relations (IR) (Barkin and Sjoberg 2017). This literature is newer – and therefore smaller – than those considered above, although numbers, of course, have been vital to more mainstream or traditional forms of research within international security for some time (Lauretig and Braumoeller 2018, 133). The so-called 'golden age' of Security Studies in the mid-twentieth century (see Walt 1991) was committed – especially in the US – to ''scientific' methods (positivism, quantification, game theory)' (Buzan and Hansen 2009, 89), and this broad positivist hegemony has arguably continued to dominate the field (Smith 1999). Yet, as security studies began its broadening and deepening in the 1990s (Krause and Williams 1997), much of the emergent critical scholarship took issue with the historical emphasis on quantitative methods. As a result, numbers were essentially left to the (state-centric, positivist) 'mainstream' with critical research associated, overwhelmingly, with qualitative approaches (Sjoberg and Horowitz 2013, 103–105).

In recent years, however, this trend has undergone a little correction, and we have witnessed a growth of explicitly critical scholarship on the role and importance of numbers for international security. Such work builds on some of the scholarship considered above for a number of purposes, including to demonstrate limitations and conceits in the construction of disciplines like IR (Barkin and Sjoberg 2015); to add sophistication to critical security theories (Baele and Thomson 2017), or to interrogate the proliferation and consequences of quantification in specific security practices and contexts (Baele, Balzacq, and Bourbeau 2018, 22–25). The diversity of those contexts – from the counting of war casualties (Auchter 2016, Toom 2020), to pandemic rhetoric (Jarvis 2022), aviation security (Salter 2008), the global governance of security challenges (Pichelstorfer and Paul 2022, Rocha de Siqueira 2017), and performances of statehood (Busse 2015) – again highlights the ubiquity of numerical practices within the global politics of (in)security. At the same time, recent work shifting analytical focus away from elite producers of numbers and towards audience responses to numerical arguments (Baele, Coan, and Sterck 2018) brings additional levels of analysis to discussion. Such work, for proponents, adds robustness to contemporary conceptual frameworks such as securitisation theory and the underpinning assumptions upon which they are built (Baele, Coan, and Sterck 2018).

Critical security scholarship on numbers has value for our purposes here because of its intellectual proximity to critical terrorism studies. While mindful not to homogenise the above – this work frequently shares important meta-theoretical and methodological affinities with critical terrorism research, for instance with the work of social theorists such as Foucault, Bourdieu and Latour prominent in each. Both literatures, clearly, share a thematic proximity, given their emphasis on the politics of harm, violence, insecurity, and threat. There are also, of course, shared normative affinities, given the common concern of these literatures with contesting the narrowness of traditional interpretations of violence, such as security's historical association with warfare or terrorism's connection to non-state actors. Given all of this, security scholarship such as that above offers, again, helpful starting points for CTS not least with its head-start in grappling with such issues in something of a sustained manner.

Numbers and critical terrorism studies: towards a research agenda

To summarise, briefly, I have made three arguments to this point. First, CTS scholarship has more of an appetite for engaging with quantification and numbers than its association with language and discourse would suggest.[4] Second, this appetite remains as yet unfulfilled, with existing work in this area both limited and fragmentary. And third, that we might move towards something more substantial through inspiration and insight from cognate debates in fields such as sociology, rhetoric, and critical approaches to IR and security studies. In this final section, I now seek to do precisely this by setting out a new research agenda for critical terrorism scholarship on numbers and quantification. As outlined above, this proposed agenda is organised around five broad themes: (i) production; (ii) form; (iii) mobility; (iv) functions; and (v) reception.

Production

A first, and vitally important, set of questions concerns the *production* of numerical claims in relation to terrorism and counter-terrorism. Terrorism researchers, of course, have long noted (and bemoaned) the lack of accurate data with which they are able to work (Lum et al 2006, LaFree 2010, Schuurman & Eijkman 2013), highlighting the implications of this for reliable knowledge and effective policymaking. Although the post-9/11 period saw advances in quantitative datasets, methods and knowledge (Mahoney 2018), as well as greater accessibility of open-source data, fears around the availability and adequacy of numerical data in this area endure (Schuurman 2020, 1020–1021). This perception of a stymied access to reliable data receives endogenous and exogenous explanation, which are often connected. Under the former, responsibility has been attributed to the internal culture of terrorism research(ers), including suggestions that a field more characterised by 'visitors' than 'residents' is more heavily populated by descriptive than scientific work, or (less generously) by the prevalent recycling of second-hand assumptions and truisms (Jackson et al. 2011, 14–18). In exogenous explanations, the emphasis is on scholars' ability to access dependable data, exacerbated by the reluctance of intelligence and policy communities to share such information with academics. In Marc Sageman's (2014, 576) memorably pithy summary: 'we have a system of terrorism research in which intelligence analysts know everything but understand nothing, while academics understand everything but know nothing'.

Without diminishing these concerns' sincerity, there is, I suggest, no shortage of numerical data available to (counter-)terrorism scholars in the contemporary period. Governments publish considerable statistical information in relation to terrorism, from periodic overviews such as the UK Home Office's annual reports on Prevent referrals (UK Home Office 2021), through to the *ad hoc* reports of designated national statistics offices (UK Office for National Statistics 2022). Non-governmental sources of numerical data are also widespread, not least the datasets and repositories of academic, activist, and other organisations intended either to catalogue the activities of governments or hold them to account (Dronewars n.d.). Polling organisations such as YouGov (n.d.) provide accessible data on public opinion relating to terrorism and extremism, while online archives such as the UK Data Service (n.d.) curate, aggregate and share data from academic projects, including in relation to terrorism. Indeed, the open-access academic journal *Perspectives on Terrorism*, has now published four inventories of terrorism databases and datasets totalling 120 different resources with academic, think tank, commercial, government, and other origins (see Bowie 2021). Although not all of these contain statistical data, many provide open access to numerical information and visualisations thereof.

The key questions for *critical* scholarship on terrorism here are not, however, around the fullness, objectivity or statistical accuracy of numerical data in any of these locations. Rather, it is questions of production that should be centred. Such questions include those of agency: *Who*, for instance, is responsible for, or able to generate, numerical knowledge on terrorism and counter-terrorism? What institutions, and which individuals therein, perform this role in specific contexts? Is the counting of (counter-)terrorism done by methodological or subject specialists, or is it the work of generalist 'visitors'? And, around which temporal imperatives is counting organised: does terrorism data gathering and sharing connect, for instance, to identifiable political calendars such as electoral cycles or financial years?

Also important here are questions relating to *how* (counter-)terrorism numbers are produced. What models, algorithms, and data collection methods underpin their production, and what are the biases or blind-spots therein? How apparent are the calculative processes and evidence sources beneath numerical claims to, say, terrorism arrests or prosecutions? What categories, concepts or typologies inform the construction of numerical (counter-)terrorism knowledge, and how are sources identified, evaluated, triangulated by the counters themselves? Perhaps most important for CTS, though, are questions of *interest*: who benefits, or who gains, from particular numerical constructions of (counter-)terrorism? For what explicit or implicit purposes do (counter-)terrorism counts exist? Where questions as these have been prominent within critical terrorism research focused on the sort of discursive constructions of terrorism with which we began (Jackson 2005), it is vital that we begin to ask them of quantitative accounts, too. Taking inspiration from the sociological work above with its emphasis on the constitutive power of numbers, I suggest, offers a particularly valuable first step here (Jarvis 2023, 7–8).

Form

A second set of questions concerns the form taken by (counter-)terrorism numbers in particular contexts. Taking inspiration from rhetorical work such as that discussed above, there is considerable scope for future research into the prominence and regularity with which numbers appear in the (counter-)terrorism ecosystem and the particular ways in which they become manifest. Are numerical constructions present, for instance, as statistical representations or as estimations in constructions of (counter-)terrorism? Do they appear as whole numbers, or as percentages and fractions encouraging comparison between discrete entities? Are figures typically given in rounded or precise form and how does this impact their persuasiveness for potentially relevant audiences? How are numbers visualised through charts, graphs or infographics, and what user engagement is facilitated therewith? Which numbers are absent, forgotten or silenced – or, what is not counted – in (counter-)terrorism constructions?[5] And, do different sites of terrorism discourse work with different quantification norms or practices? The wider rhetorical work on numbers discussed above is of particular value here for its documenting and providing tools for unpacking the persuasive power of numerical claims that vary from, say, precise counts of attacks thwarted by the intelligence services, to the calculated probabilities of future acts of WMD terrorism, or estimations of civilian casualties in counter-terrorism programmes. Here, and elsewhere, are numbers employed, for instance, to appeal to the emotionality of audiences, or as ostensibly descriptive, dispassionate descriptors of the realities of security politics (Roeh and Feldman 1984)?

Mobility

A third set of questions concerns the ability of (counter-)terrorism numbers to travel from one site of knowledge to another. Which numbers – and whose numbers – are picked up and reproduced by others in this arena? Whose data, estimates, predictions, or models are cited, how, where, and by whom? And, of course, which (counter-)terrorism numbers become lost, mistranslated, or forgotten? Are the numbers of others cited approvingly, or are they contested or ridiculed? What information is lost or added in the processes through which quantitative claims migrate? What does the mobility of numerical constructions tell us about the (assumed) legitimacy or authority of particular sources of data? And, regarding directionality, is the travel of numerical constructions unidirectional, multidirectional, or reversible? Do governments, for instance, draw on academic data with similar frequency to academic reliance on government data?

As with linguistic work on intertextual analysis, research into such questions will offer potentially revealing insight into the connections and relations between 'conversational partners' in the area of (counter-)terrorism (Fairclough 1992, 205–208). In so doing, it would shed important new light on issues relating to authority and discursive power that have been integral to the evolution of work within CTS, and earlier work, too, within critical security studies. The contemporary enthusiasm for numerical fact-checking, including via dedicated media columns and programmes such as BBC Radio 4's 'More or Less', provides interesting avenues for exploring examples of numerical contestation,

while dedicated content such as the BBC's (2014) 'Can maths combat terrorism?' or 'The maths of spies and terrorists' (BBC 2013), offers opportunity to explore the public communication of numerical methods, findings and their socio-political significance.

Functions

Numbers are important for critical scholarship in large part because they *do* things. As we see from sociological and rhetorical work on quantification, numerical claims do not simply, or only, describe or count, pre-existing objects; statistical techniques and tools are not neutral instruments enabling ever-better access to an independent world. Numbers are *constitutive*: they create or produce the things they purport to describe in the very act of counting them. They also, moreover, play vital communicative roles, enabling politicians and others to justify and 'sell' their decisions or actions to diverse audiences. As Rose (1991, 675) argued with specific reference to democracies: 'Democratic power is *calculated power*, and numbers are intrinsic to the forms of justification that give legitimacy to political power in democracies'.

Numerical constructions likely perform multiple, heterogeneous functions in (counter-)terrorism discourse. Taking inspiration from frameworks such as Andone's (2022, 694), CTS would benefit by asking how numbers, amongst other things: increase knowledge by offering new data for engaging with the problem of terrorism; present solutions for addressing that problem; justify the pre-determined decisions and positions of governments, counter-terrorism agencies and others; tactically address, rebuff or deflect criticism; and, enlighten audiences by highlighting the reasoning behind particular decisions and thought processes. To give one example, Ken McCallum, current head of the UK'S MI5 Security Service, is regularly described as a 'mathematician' – or, indeed, a 'maths and tech boffin', in one memorable headline (Wells 2020) – due to his graduating with a mathematics degree from the University of Glasgow. In one recent lecture, McCallum (2023) emphasised the 'crucial role' of 'maths and statistics … in keeping our country safe', reflecting on the importance of Bayes' Theorem in risk assessment, machine learning and AI, amongst other things. Reflecting on the discursive and political work done by 'mathematics' in examples such as this would facilitate new connections with wider critical security scholarships such as securitisation theory, in order to explore whether numerical framings help to securitise or desecuritise terrorism or particular types thereof, in specific ways.

Reception

Related to the above is a final set of questions on the ways in which different audiences *respond to* numerical claims around terrorism and counter-terrorism (see Baele, Coan, and Sterck 2018). So, in a broad sense, which factors contribute to perceptions of numerical credibility or otherwise here? How are those numbers accessed by different constituencies: through which media, when and where, and what financial, practical and other obstacles need negotiating in the process? What levels of trust are there in government, police, media, or academic numerical constructions, and (how) does this vary over time? And are such constructions more likely to be accepted (or shared by specific audiences) if they are delivered or packaged in particular ways, under particular conditions, or by particular individuals? How, where and when do particular audiences challenge numerical

constructions of (counter-)terrorism? Do we see different forms of challenge in 'below-the-line' commentary on news articles or social media posts to those found in the publications and presentations of advocacy groups such as, say, Prevent Watch or Cage Prisoners? More creatively, how do publics draw upon official forms of knowledge to estimate, imagine or hypothesise the scale of, say, terrorist organisations or counter-terrorism operations? Are there identifiable differences between public constructions of this sort, and from what demographic, experiential or other factors do these derive?

Research on questions such as these would not only add descriptive depth to critical terrorism work by enabling better understanding of the linguistic 'games' through which (counter-)terrorism is communicated. It would also advance the more explicitly political research ambitions of much of this work, enabling insight into, amongst other things, the impact of audience reception on the wider world, for instance, in spurring dissent or other forms of oppositional engagement. CTS work of the sort suggested here would build, of course, not only on the diverse numerical scholarships considered above, but also on a long history of audience research within fields like reception studies with their frameworks for evaluating the interpretative relationships between producers and audiences of diverse media (Livingstone 1998). In so doing, it would add sophistication to our understanding of the political power of numbers in specific contexts, and to the role and agency of 'number audiences' who remain under-theorised and underexplored in critical security research (Baele, Coan, and Sterck 2018, 461–462).

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that scholarship within Critical Terrorism Studies would benefit significantly from more substantive engagement with numbers, counting and quantification. By drawing on research in sociology, rhetoric, and critical security studies/IR, I offered a future research agenda organised around five particularly important questions: (i) the production of (counter-)terrorism numbers; (ii) the form taken by (counter-)terrorism numbers; (iii) the mobility of numbers across sites of (counter-)terrorism knowledge; (iv) the political and other functions numbers perform; and (v) their reception by relevant audiences. This work, I suggested, would both complement and strengthen existing CTS scholarship in this area, helping to address the tendency therein towards illustrative, fleeting and fragmented work. Such research would, crucially, enable us more successfully to investigate the pervasiveness and power of (counter-)terrorism numbers in specific contexts, and to conceptualise and evaluate their productive and persuasive importance for diverse audiences. To conclude the article, I want now to emphasise the value of an engagement such as that sketched above for scholars pursuing critical terrorism studies research by highlighting four potential benefits.

In the first instance, critical research on (counter-)terrorism numbers would add significant descriptive depth to existing understanding of the ways in which (counter-)terrorism is empirically constructed in diverse discursive contexts. Where existing work within and beyond CTS has done an outstanding job of unpacking terrorism's linguistic construction around metaphors, binary pairings, subject positions, visual images, and the like, far less emphasis – as demonstrated at the article's outset – has been afforded to practices of articulation that work through numerical and non-numerical quantitative claims. Such claims, I have argued, are abundant within (counter-)

terrorism discourse, doing vital work in the construction of threats, responses, costs, benefits, political legitimacy, and much else besides. Taking them seriously, at a minimum, would therefore significantly broaden CTS' analytical horizons, providing researchers with important new (and relatively untouched) research material, themes and questions.

Second, a research agenda of the sort suggested here would also open new opportunities for CTS to engage with, learn from, and contribute towards scholarship in related areas. Since its emergence CTS has always pursued, and indeed enjoyed, an interdisciplinary energy, taking inspiration from multiple fields including media studies, memory studies, and gender studies to thicken critical understanding of the politics of (counter-)terrorism. Indeed, in the very first article published in the field's primary journal – *Critical Studies on Terrorism* – a 'commitment to disciplinary pluralism and inclusivity' (Breen Smyth et al. 2008, 4) was signalled. Greater engagement with the dynamics of quantification would therefore enable further bridge-building of this sort, beginning with some of the literatures discussed above but subsequently travelling to other scholarship within the humanities, social sciences and beyond, with proximate aspirations and interests (see also, Jarvis 2023).

Third, such work would also open opportunities for productive new forms of dialogue with more 'mainstream' or 'problem-solving' forms of terrorism research. Although often disparaged – from within as well as outwith – 'traditional' terrorism scholarship has tended to showcase greater numerical literacy and interest than its more explicitly critical counterparts. This is, not least, because of enduring (and contestable) associations between epistemological and methodological approaches (Barkin and Sjoberg 2015, 853–854). Engaging more forcefully with the political power and productivity of (counter-)terrorism numbers might therefore facilitate fruitful collaboration and learning by researchers with diverse meta-theoretical and normative commitments, or with distinct understandings of the prospects and purposes of scholarly research.

Fourth, given the discursive, political and wider currency of numbers for a range of diverse audiences, greater familiarity and more sustained engagement, with, say, practices, technologies and methods of counting will also likely benefit CTS scholars seeking to impact policymakers and others. Whether such impact constitutes a valid aspiration remains a live and contested question for critical terrorism studies researchers (compare Jackson 2016, Toros 2016), one that is inseparable from wider socio-political developments, not least in relation to higher education funding. And my argument here is not, of course, that qualitative research has – or should have – less value when researchers try to communicate beyond academic audiences and readers (see Lieberson 1992). It would, though, be naïve to discount in advance the potential strategic or instrumental value of harnessing the power of numbers towards critical ends, such as seeking to problematise or contest dominant terrorism discourses and their injustices. This is especially true given the continuing preference for quantitative research amongst policymakers working across a wide range of national and policy contexts (Nastow 2022, 109–110).

The third and fourth calls in the above, in particular, are likely to elicit mixed reactions. There may be some who fear they risk, or perhaps even require, a sacrificing of the very criticality that renders CTS such a distinctive and urgent rejoinder to the traditional undertaking of terrorism research and counter-terrorism practices. The aspiration running throughout this article, though, has been to show that CTS can move in relatively unfamiliar directions without having to diminish or dilute its theoretical, methodological

or political commitments. This article, I hope, provides one attempt to demonstrate how more of this might be done going forwards.

Notes

1. Schedule 7 of the Terrorism Act 2000 enables the stopping, searching, and questioning of travellers at ports of entry to the UK by designated officers.
2. All of the articles discussed in this paragraph are published in the journal *Critical Studies on Terrorism*.
3. A parallel may be drawn here with critical reflections on terrorism prior to the emergence of critical terrorism studies (see Jackson et al. 2011, 33).
4. For a related argument exploring engagements with language and logic across positivist and post-positivist divides, see Fierke (2002).
5. As General Schwarzkopf was reported to have said of the 1990–1991 Gulf War by the *New York Times*: "I have absolutely no idea what the Iraqi casualties are, and I tell you, if I have anything to say about it, we're never going to get into the body-count business" (cited in Krishna 1993, 397).

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Notes on contributor

Lee Jarvis was Professor of International Politics at the University of East Anglia, UK at submission of this article. He is now Professor of International Politics at Loughborough University, UK, and an Adjunct Professor in the School of Social Sciences at the University of Adelaide, Australia. Lee is author or editor of fifteen books and over fifty articles on the politics of security, including Times of Terror: Discourse, Temporality and the War on Terror; Security: A Critical Introduction (with Jack Holland); and Banning Them, Securing Us? Terrorism, Parliament and the Ritual of Proscription (with Tim Legrand). His work has been funded by the ESRC, the AHRC, the Australian Research Council, NATO, and others.

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