Rethinking social media and extremism
Shirley Leitch and Paul Pickering

Terrorism has entered the mainstream of twenty-first century life, with seemingly random attacks in civilian spaces a tragic staple of the daily news flow. Even a global pandemic has not slowed the pace, with the United Nations (2021) warning that terrorists are exploiting our growing, COVID-driven dependence on cyberspace. The innovative use of digital technology for the purposes of terror was a central feature of the 2019 Christchurch massacre and the attack put a spotlight on the prominent role of social media in propagating violent extremism. Christchurch was noteworthy for many other reasons, not least that the neo-fascist affiliation of the gunman clashed with the dominant fear of Islamist terrorism. However, it was the central role of social media that stood out. Put starkly: Facebook livestreamed this massacre. While the terrorist was cast as a ‘lone gunman’, he was anything but alone. Through cyberspace, he had connected with a global network of neo-fascists dedicated to upholding white supremacy in the West. Social media was implicated in every aspect of the Christchurch terror attack – in its inspiration, planning, preparation, execution and ongoing mythic status. It is the relationship between social media and extremism that binds the multiple perspectives within this book together.¹ The book offers reflections from a range of

¹ The chapters within this book were first workshopped at the symposium ‘After Christchurch: Violent Extremism Online’, hosted by the Australian Studies Institute at The Australian National University, 29 August 2019.
disciplinary perspectives but it is in no way intended to be comprehensive either in scope or subject. Rather we see it as an intervention, a provocation and an attempt to bring a multidisciplinary lens to a wicked problem for which there are no risk-free solutions.

Online environments – most commonly social media – are now as important as real-world spaces in shaping and enabling acts of terrorism, amplifying their impact and constraining the ability of nation-states to prevent future attacks. The causes, contributing factors and effects of terrorism are so complex that terrorism itself may be seen as a ‘wicked problem’ that resists simple solutions. It is necessary to invite many perspectives and areas of expertise to the table if we are to address such crises. Any analysis of the genesis of a crisis event like the Christchurch massacre – as well as any attempt to understand how we might reduce the risk of such events in future – leads us rapidly down many interconnected paths. Freedom of speech, globalisation, the adequacy of legal and regulatory frameworks, corporate self-governance, monopoly capitalism, national sovereignty, the rise of populism, the decline of civility, online extremism, fake news and misinformation, and the myriad connections between these issues and the nature of terrorism itself all surface in the following chapters.

Throughout the book, a recurring theme is the role of former US president Donald Trump in enabling the rise of right-wing extremism. During the Trump presidency, neo-fascist groups emerged from the shadows into the mainstream of political discourse. The administration was openly linked with the so-called ‘alt-right’, anti-Islamist and anti-immigration rhetoric of Breitbart News and other far-right websites, with President Trump even declaring that there were ‘very fine people on both sides’ following the murder of a woman protesting against a neo-fascist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia (Reilly, 2017). His statements went far beyond dog-whistling, reaching an apotheosis on 6 January 2021 when he urged a crowd assembled to march on Congress to ‘fight like hell’ to save their country and later gave succour to the violent mob in the process of ransacking the Capitol Building that he loved them and that they were very special. At the same time as Trump’s words were being broadcast to the nation, the insurrection itself was also being livestreamed via mainstream social media platforms as well as on a plethora of sites living in what Rebecca Heilweil and Shirin Ghaffary (2021) have called the ‘dark corners of the internet’. The complicity of Trump and his acolytes in the events of 6 January grabbed the headlines and the insurrection also shone a spotlight of the awesome and unfettered power of social media.
At the time of the Christchurch massacre it was already clear that US-based social media giants, such as Facebook and Alphabet, were providing global, digital platforms for terrorism. After Christchurch, these companies faced multiple threats from US conservatives, not because of their role in enabling extremist networks to flourish but because they took action against some far-right sites and contributors. In the face of such threats – especially of antitrust suits – social media companies have been constrained in their ability and, arguably, their motivation to eliminate content linked to alt-right terrorism. Meanwhile, global censure of, and pressure on, these companies continued to grow.

While international condemnation of the Christchurch massacre was swift, that has been the case following every terrorist attack. Leitch argues in the following chapter that attempts to take action are continually hampered by the competing political agendas, economic drivers and technological capabilities of the actors involved. In the immediate aftermath of the attack, when images of the victims – including small children and elderly men – were still circulating in the media, world leaders came together in Paris to sign up to the Christchurch Call to Action to combat violent extremism online. The US, however, remained an outlier, refusing to sign up to the call and citing free speech concerns about the agreement. In a move that directly undermined the call, the Trump presidency launched its own attack in the opposite direction, including an online tool to report any suspected censorship of conservative opinions directly to the White House. In a tweet supportive of his father’s stance, Donald Trump Jr accused the so-called ‘Big Tech monopoly men’ of the ‘purposeful and calculated silencing of conservatives’ (Trump Jr, 2019). Given that the major nations were so divided over the problem to be solved, it should be no surprise that the numerous agreements signed and voluntary commitments made have not put an end to violent extremism online or that real-world attacks have continued.

The gravity of the events of 6 January in the heart of US democracy was, however, seen by many commentators as not only producing a hitherto elusive consensus among lawmakers about the need to act but also as a turning point for the barons of social media platforms. As noted, it was clear that the major platforms had failed to moderate outrageous content on their platforms and allowed the attack on the Capitol to be organised, coordinated and celebrated right under their noses. As Nurmikko-Fuller and Pickering discuss in their chapter, attempts at self-regulation by Facebook have been widely criticised and, as recent whistleblowers attest,
enthusiasm for self-regulation is waning in the sector. The political consensus quickly evaporated during Trump’s impeachment trials. Although online posts are now being used widely in the prosecution of the rioters, there is little else to cheer about. Moreover, as Leitch observes, it is ironic that the monopoly status and profits that social media companies seek to protect within the US will ensure that extremist content will continue to be globally distributed, increasing the chance that national and supranational regulation will be introduced.

One of the primary stumbling blocks for nations taking action in relation to online extremism is the relatively recent genesis of the internet and the novelty of the innovations it has afforded. The near instantaneous and global connectivity enabled by digital technology has created whole new industries along with mega corporations. Seven of the world’s top 10 companies are now technology companies, including Facebook, Alphabet, Tencent, Alibaba and Amazon. The national and international rules governing such behemoths were written, for the most part, prior to the advent of the internet. Legislative frameworks designed for the analogue age have proven wholly inadequate to the task of tackling a raft of new and serious issues, including violent extremism, online. While policymakers struggle through a growing backlog of legislation, corporations have been largely left to their own devices, self-regulating in ways that best support their business models. The technology companies themselves have expanded so rapidly from homegrown startups to trillion-dollar corporations that their own internal governance has been frequently found wanting. The urgency of transforming these adolescent companies into adult, civic actors is considered in Chapter 3.

Much has already been written about the wisdom of the legal exemptions enjoyed by technology companies with internet platforms that protect them from liability for the content posted by their users. These legal protections are critical to the continuing expansion of social media companies. As Seth Oranburg (2021) has noted:

Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Reddit and Discord are not subject to First Amendment constraints because they are not state actors. These platforms do not ‘censor’ speech, in the technical sense, because only governments can censor. Private actors merely exercise editorial discretion – and they may do so virtually at will.
What this means is that in the US social media platforms are not liable for defamatory or inflammatory tweets.

In the absence of liability for the harm that their content may cause, companies are able to take a reactive stance that is reliant on algorithms and complaint-based responses, which pose minimal interruption to real-time postings. In Chapter 3, Wheeler not only maps out the problems but also moves us beyond them to consider deeper questions of corporate social responsibility, ethics and the social licence of businesses to operate. From this perspective, asking whether or not corporate activities are legal sets a very low bar for their behaviour. Rather than asking what they must do to avoid prosecution, we might ask what they should do to avoid damaging individuals and societies. Wheeler also contends that major companies that provide essential public services might be deemed public utilities and, for this reason alone, be subject to different rules and expectations from those of other types of businesses. The centrality of social media platforms to many critical services was demonstrated by Facebook itself when it blocked many sites during a disagreement with the Australian Government in 2021. The move provoked public discussion of the increasing reliance of government agencies, including emergency services, on a privately owned platform with no legal requirement to maintain those services.

While the dangers of unfettered, monopoly capitalism in the digital age are apparent, there are less obvious problems related to what Wheeler refers to as the ‘tech stack’. There are layers of smaller players within the tech stack, comprising companies that are invisible to internet users, but provide the critical, technical services underpinning the platforms that are household names. In the largely self-regulating world of the internet, each of these players will have its own set of rules relating to, for example, the takedown of extremist content or denial of services to users who offend against these rules. Some companies have also proven resistant to enforcing any rules at all, arguing that it is beyond their remit to regulate free speech or to make decisions about what is and what is not acceptable content. Such was the case after the Christchurch massacre when companies – most notably Cloudflare – who had provided services to the 8chan website used by the terrorist, only took action after concerted public pressure.

It may seem obvious that terrorists should be denied access to services that assist them to commit atrocities. Equally, it may be simply self-serving of companies to eschew any responsibility for the actions of their
terrorist clients in the name of free speech. Yet placing responsibility for controlling content and access wholly onto internet companies is by no means without its own dangers. Nor are the arguments made by the companies themselves that they are ill-equipped and unsuited to setting the rules entirely ill-founded. Wheeler advises caution when it comes to deplatforming users who profess extreme views. In the current era, the push for deplatforming has primarily emanated from the left and has been targeted at hate speech emanating from the extreme right. Yet, during the Cold War, it was the left who were targeted in what became known as the McCarthy era. Unfounded accusations destroyed the lives and careers of many people and created a climate of fear. The dangers of overreach and the difficulty of setting the rules of acceptable speech are evident, especially in the heat of the moment following a disturbing event involving multiple civilian deaths. Deplatforming extremist groups of any persuasion may also lend credence to their claims of victimisation and enhance their status with potential recruits. Wheeler warns that extremists may be pushed onto the dark web and into encrypted apps where their activities become less visible and harder to monitor.

There is already evidence that as Facebook and Twitter have increasingly blocked extremists, such users have simply moved to other online spaces. The chat platforms associated with video games, such as Twitch, have been a popular choice, especially in association with violent games that attract a mostly young and male following. Criticism of violent video games on the basis that the fantasy world of gaming may spill over into real-world violence has been common since their invention. For example, the 1999 Columbine High School massacre was linked with first-person shooter games *Doom* and *Quake*, which were played by the students who committed the massacre. An unsuccessful lawsuit against the manufacturers of these and similar games was even launched by the family of the slain teacher. The same arguments were made in connection with the Christchurch terrorist, who was widely reported in the media as having an ‘addiction’ to video gaming. The video game industry was therefore blamed alongside social media platforms for creating the violent mindset of the terrorist as well as supporting his actions. After all, one of the most disturbing aspects of the Christchurch massacre livestream was its framing as a first-person shooter video game and its subsequent re-emergence as an actual game. Rejecting the kneejerk reaction that Christchurch demonstrates a straightforward, causal connection between violent game content and real-world violent acts, Fleet suggests in Chapter 4 that it may actually
be the reverse. It is our real-world knowledge, skills and predispositions – violent or otherwise – that we carry with us into the virtual world and enact through role-playing. Games may be more interesting for what they reveal about us than for what they cause us to do.

Over 90 per cent of teenagers in the developed world play video games and 90 per cent of the games involve violence of some kind. A major study conducted by Andrew Przybylski and Netta Weinstein (2019), published by the prestigious Royal Society in London, concluded that there was no evidence of a direct correlation between game play and subsequent mass-shooting events or violent behaviour more generally. Of course, their findings fly in the face of a widespread truism. Indeed, their conclusions highlight the fact that policymakers and governments are acting on the basis of a ‘precautionary principle’ rather than empirical research. In one sense, the debate is redundant: if over 90 per cent of young people play games and 90 per cent of the games they play involve violence then *ipso facto* only a tiny percentage of gamers end up as mass murders. Nevertheless, that miniscule percentage of potentially murderous gamers are prime candidates to be drawn into the dark parts of the web. Fleet notes that those who participate in underground games and associated chat groups also constitute the primary demographic of potential recruits for alt-right terrorist groups. Fleet describes the discourses surrounding these underground games as replete with neo-fascist, Identitarian, anti-immigration, racist, homophobic and misogynist themes. He contends that the neo-fascist ideology expressed by the Christchurch terrorist in his manifesto was well aligned with the casual conversation of this community. While community members rarely go on to commit terrorist attacks, they nonetheless provide the supportive environment that nurtures and then mythologises those who do.

Through gaming and social media, the internet has enabled extremists to establish and maintain close connections even in the absence of formal organisational structures and sometimes in the absence of any formal group at all. The commitment of these potential terrorists is ideological rather than organisational. In Chapter 5, Hughes argues that, from a marketing perspective, such ideologically based networks operate like brand communities with racism and misogyny as core brand values. In the alternative reality of extremist brand communities, terrorist attacks are legitimated as the virtuous actions of heroes who often sacrifice their lives for the cause. Their atrocities are celebrated and ranked by ‘kill count’. Hughes explores the creation of intense emotional responses in
individuals through social media as a possible antecedent to so-called ‘lone wolf’ attacks. While the gunmen may act alone, they are in fact acting out their attacks for their online brand community and in the name of shared values.

One of the primary responses to terrorism on the part of governments has been to ban extremist groups. This strategy has proven ineffective in combating the loosely coupled but emotionally intense networks of contemporary extremists. Instead, policy and regulatory responses now often seek to make technology companies more responsible for policing internet content. For example, the Australian Government’s response to the Christchurch massacre was very much focused on internet service providers. Within weeks of the massacre, the *Criminal Code Amendment (Sharing of Abhorrent Violent Materials) Act 2019* (Cth) was rushed through both houses of the Australian Parliament and signed into law. Reportedly drafted in just 48 hours, the new law was always going to be subject to criticism, including for its potential violation of international law. The contentious elements of the law itself, the parliamentary debates that accompanied its passage and the questions raised in the Senate Estimates hearings in April 2019 are the focus of the chapter by Nolan and Dalla-Pozza. Their analysis teases out which elements of violent extremism online were given prominence by lawmakers and which were neglected. In doing so, they reveal how the problem was understood in the immediate aftermath of the massacre. They also identify important areas for future law reform.

There is no doubt that further – albeit more carefully worked through – law reform is needed. The opening up of virtual public space for alt-right hate speech has generated a plethora of new risks for societies. Continuing the theme of the rapid erosion of democratic and social norms in the digital age, Kenny identifies hateful discourses as longstanding levers of power in Australia and beyond. The era of digital self-publishing through social media has given prominence as well as fuel to existing dysfunctions within political discourse. The rise of supra internet companies has seen a corresponding fall in the ability of nation-states to regulate the public exchange of ideas or protect citizens from extremist content. Within democratic states and in a post-9/11 world, attempts to place limits on such content are waved through when they address external ‘Islamist’ threats, but are hotly contested in the name of ‘free speech’ when focused on internal, alt-right hate groups. Situating the tragedy within its broader cultural context, in his chapter, Kenny argues that the general
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decline of civility in public discourse has desensitised us to abhorrent views. Violent outbursts aimed at women, or immigrants, or minorities, or, indeed, at anyone who is perceived to be at odds with the speaker’s identity or worldview, are normalised as though they had no real-world consequences. The step from mainstream public discourse to the hate speech of the dark web has narrowed and the latter has bled through into political life.

The effective regulation of cyberspace to reduce the risk of terrorism requires that we first recognise it as a space where actions carrying real-world consequences may be enacted. Events such as the Christchurch massacre have severely dented the net utopia of early internet advocates with their anarchic vision of a global space beyond the reach and comprehension of governments. In her chapter, Grant turns our attention to these spatial elements of the internet, both as a place for publicly debating democratic ideals, and for the performance of power by elites and reinforcement of social hierarchies. She invites us to compare social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter with the public squares and speakers’ corners of the past. Both have enabled the dissemination of ideas – including the ‘dangerous’ ideas of revolution – and provided space for acts of rebellion and repression. Both have supported revelations and propaganda, and served the state and its enemies. Drawing on historical examples to find points of continuity and rupture, Grant illustrates how space has been negotiated differently in different epochs and cultures.

If we take the long view suggested by Grant, we find that each new communication technology has triggered concern, even panic, especially on the part of the powerful. It is fitting, then, to conclude this book by considering what is old and what is new about the digital age. Nurmikko-Fuller, the digital humanities scholar, debates this question with Pickering, the historian. The long view takes us back to 3400 BCE when an unknown accountant invented writing on clay tablets to keep track of the finances of the Temple of Inanna. So long as writing remained the preserve of the elite, Pickering contends, societies were largely content with communications for many thousands of years. However, the invention of the printing press started to broaden the production and distribution base of communication. Gutenberg’s innovation of moveable type in the sixteenth century vastly increased the speed and flexibility of the printing process, while the electromechanical machines of the nineteenth century brought the written word within reach of all literate people. It was the printing press that sparked the first tech-panic among political elites.
who viewed the written word as a dangerous weapon in the hands of ordinary people. Democratisation of communication, they feared, would ignite revolution in Europe. Pickering suggests that the same kinds of anti-democratic arguments for limiting the use of the printing press to spread ‘socially constructed extremist ideas’ are being used currently to support the heavy-handed regulation and state control of the internet. Viewed in this way, the internet appears less a profound break with the past than a new site of an age-old contest for power.

In her counterpoint, Nurmikko-Fuller sets out an equally compelling case that the internet has changed everything. While agreeing that elite fear of popular communication is an historical constant, Nurmikko-Fuller argues that the internet age is best understood as a point of rupture. The printing press is a one-to-many communication tool, as are broadcast media. Instantaneous, interactive and with an in-built panoptic surveillance function, the internet is fundamentally different. The growth of social media has seen individuals unknowingly, as well as voluntarily, surrendering data and privacy to corporations and governments. Vast databases of aggregated personal information are then used to manipulate everything from mundane purchase decisions to the choices we make at the ballot box. At the same time, we have opened our lives to a whole new set of criminal actors. The scene is set for political corruption, cybercrime and the ongoing erosion of the private sphere. Seen from this perspective, the internet is far more than just the latest in a long line of communication technologies. Where Pickering and Nurmikko-Fuller come together is in relation to concerns over the increasing concentration of ownership and control over the internet in the hands of a small number of poorly regulated companies, along with the privatisation of the personal data that their platforms collect.

Our goal in this book is to offer a series of broad-ranging reflections on violent extremism online and how to stop it. It was the sheer horror and magnitude of the Christchurch massacre that brought such a diverse group of scholars together. If there is a shared conclusion, it is the realisation of just how ill-equipped we are – nationally here in Australia and internationally – to deal with the globally connected world of the internet. Our legal and regulatory frameworks were designed for an analogue age and have not proven fit for purpose in the face of multiple new perils including cybercrime, electoral fraud and the ‘fake news’ that has fuelled the rise of populism. Government responses have proven to be wholly inadequate. Policymakers struggle to understand the magnitude of
the changes that the internet has wrought or to keep pace with the speed of its development. And, what of our rights as citizens? As politicians and lawyers run to catch up to the future as it disappears over the horizon, who guarantees our right to free speech, to free and fair elections, to play video games, to surf the net, to believe ‘fake news’? As one major crisis follows another and a global pandemic accelerates our turn to digital technologies, attending to the issues raised in this book becomes ever more urgent. Clearly, there is much to discuss and more books to write.

References


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