Foreword

Sophisticated democracies feel increasingly as if at war with themselves, vacating the centre ground and succumbing to a divisive politics. Regrettably, the last few years in Britain and the US exemplify this point.

Facilitated by the swift and universal access to social media, heated disagreement is endemic in public discourse.

The scholars brought together for this thoughtful collection of essays were motivated by the egregious inhumanity of the deadly Christchurch mosque attacks of 2019, and the failures of governance, security and community that contributed to it.

But the attention of these authors is far wider.

From an array of perspectives, they consider the wellsprings of religious and politically motivated violent extremism, the exponential growth and contributory role of social media platforms, the extent and influence of hyper-violent gaming, the shortcomings of internet regulation, and the ways in which these developments both reflect history and threaten to overturn it.

Their conclusions are challenging in multiple ways, inviting readers to look beyond glib solutions like blunt censorship, deplatforming and heavy-handed government restrictions of free speech.

Yet they also ask us to consider the ways in which an overall atmosphere of incivility has become normalised, suggesting that the absence of social standards in cyberspace may validate and even concentrate grievance and intolerance.
For some (usually anonymous) individuals, this disinhibits the public expression of misogyny, homophobia and racism – forms of hate speech that, while not always causal, invariably precede violent extremism when it does occur.

This book is the first in a bold series from The Australian National University’s Australian Studies Institute and I’m delighted to commend it to readers interested in this and the rich variety of subject offerings to come.

I would also like to personally congratulate the editors of this timely volume, professors Shirley Leitch and Paul Pickering for their outstanding work in compiling it.

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