

Panel 1: Terrorism Challenges – The Dynamic Nature of the Terrorism and Violent Extremism Risk

Five Key Points on Radicalisation to Extremist Violence in New Zealand

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Introduction: Five Key Points Regarding Contemporary Radicalisation to Extremist Violence in New Zealand

In this paper I make five key points regarding contemporary radicalisation to violence, with reference to the New Zealand context. These points are listed here and expanded upon below.

1. Christchurch was a watershed moment in New Zealand, making the extremism landscape more dangerous.
2. The most dangerous path of radicalisation involves individuals outside groups.
3. The most dangerous path involves individuals who interact with likeminded others only online.
4. There is no direct line from extremist ideas to violent action.
5. There is increasing convergence between violent lone actors motivated by a range of grievances.

1. Christchurch as a watershed

The attacks in Christchurch on March 15, 2019 were a watershed moment in the extremism landscape in New Zealand making the country more dangerous than before. Mass casualty events have a dramatic impact on extremist movements: moderates drop out while a hard core of militants remain; new more radical members join the movement; and groups splinter and compete. In New Zealand, we have seen the dissolution or stagnation of most far right groups after the attacks in Christchurch, and the formation of one new group with (at least initially) a more radical agenda.

I contend however, that the attacks in Riccarton and Linwood had a more extensive effect on the potential for radicalisation among individuals not affiliated with groups. Dramatic violent and highly publicised attacks create a precedent and a model to emulate and inspire those fascinated by violence or who are filled with hatred towards particular communities. One study of mass casualty events finds that they can stimulate similar attacks for up to ten years.¹ The more dramatic the event and the more media coverage, the greater the contagion: the Columbine School shootings were followed by 400 similar events in the years after.²

Terrorism is also contagious: perpetrators copy the acts of individuals and groups elsewhere, particularly those seen as 'successful'. Unregulated social media makes this contagion swift. Witnessing such events can break down inhibitions to violence and provide visual manuals and ideas of how to conduct such attacks. In the most extreme cases, those inspired will seek to emulate or better the devastation of their heroes. For these reasons, there have been a series of white nationalist attacks before and after Christchurch the perpetrators of which referencing, praising and mimicking previous terrorists.

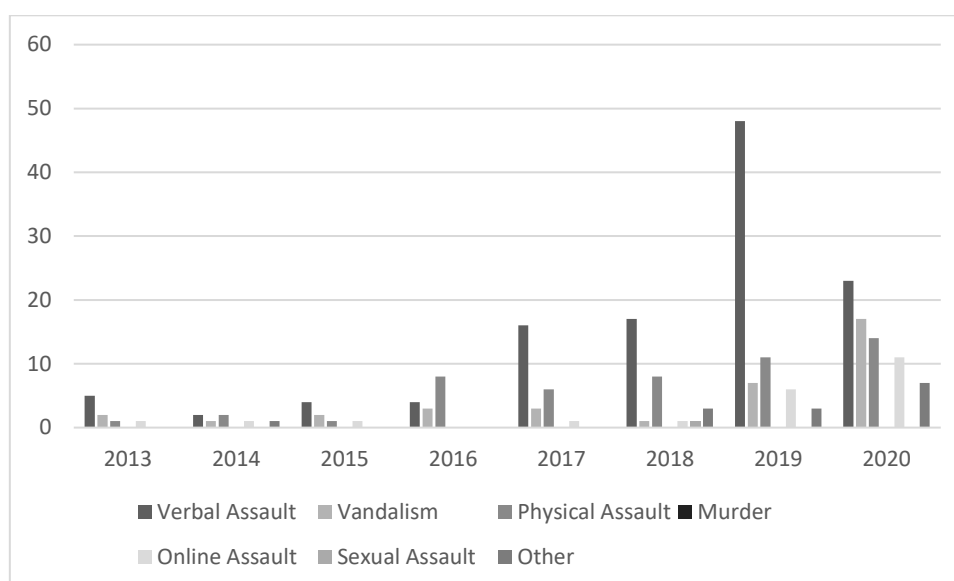
A similar dynamic inspires and excites other individuals who are less inclined to commit a large-scale attack but motivated to engage in more spontaneous verbal abuse, intimidation and physical assault against the community targeted in the terrorist attack. Indeed, this is the very audience which terrorists such as that in Christchurch seek to reach and influence, the Europeans who have not yet woken to the threat facing their race.

One indication of the increased danger posed to the Muslim community after the Christchurch attacks was a spike in verbal and physical assault motivated in part by the victims' religious identity. Because there is no official register of such incidents, my students and I used media reports to establish a dataset of hate crimes in New Zealand from 2012 until 2020. As seen in the graph below, the data showed a dramatic spike in incidents targeting Muslims after Christchurch. This pattern was also followed overseas.

¹ Christopher H. Cantor, Peter Sheehan, Philip Alpers, & Paul Mullen, "Media and mass homicides," *Archives of Suicide Research* vol 5, no. 4 (1999): 287.

² Brigitte L. Nacos, "Revisiting the Contagion Hypothesis: Terrorism, News Coverage, and Copycat Attacks," *Perspectives on Terrorism* vol 3, issue 3 (Sept 2009): 5.

Verbal and Physical Assaults Against Muslims by Year



2. The main threat comes from individuals outside groups

The previous scholarly consensus regarding the process of radicalisation was that 1) that the internet played a limited role in radicalization, acting mainly as a facilitative tool for radicalization while face to face interaction was far more important³ and 2) it was through interaction with groups, whether small cells or larger extremist organizations, that most radicalization occurred.⁴ I contend that this perspective is now outdated. While extremist groups are the most visible and identifiable threat of violent extremism for scholars and media, the perpetrators of most contemporary extremist violence are not closely affiliated with extremist groups. And in most cases, they have radicalised almost entirely online, with little or no interaction with likeminded individuals offline.

This is the case for white nationalist, faith-based, and misogynist terrorism. The perpetrators of recent attacks in Christchurch, El Paso, Escondido and Poway, Quebec, Halle, Hanau, Pittsburgh, Trollhattan, Lafayette, Oregon, Santa Barbara, Atlanta, have all been unaffiliated with extremist groups in any meaningful way. Nor are individual attacks any less planned or lethal than their group-based equivalents. Such incidents continue to take the lives of

³ See for example Charlie Winter et al, "Online Extremism: Research Trends in Internet Activism, Radicalization, and Counter Strategies," *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* vol 14, no. 2 (2020): 10.

⁴ Steven D. Chermak and Jeff Gruenewald, "Laying the foundation for the criminological examination of Right-wing, Left-wing, and Al Qaeda inspired extremism in the United States," *Terrorism and Political Violence* vol 27, no.1 (2015): 133-159.

numerous victims: 51 (Christchurch), 6 (Quebec), 23 (El Paso), 11 (Pittsburgh), 49 (Orlando), 14 (San Bernadino), and 9 (Charleston).

Group membership and offline interaction can and do play important roles in radicalisation. The increased exposure to extremist ideas and reduced exposure to counter arguments, inculcation to a warrior ethic, the gradual induction into illegal activity and the comradeship of membership and the status given to greater extremism and commitment all help push individuals along paths of radicalisation. In addition, a risk of violence comes from the fragmentation of groups into new and sometimes smaller units which compete with each other for attention, resources, recruits and legitimacy. Often the most effective means of doing so is to become increasingly militant and ultimately, violent.

3. The main threat comes from people interacting predominantly online

Yet as discussed above, the most common and dangerous path of radicalisation to extremist violence currently involves individuals outside groups. In almost all cases too, they have interacted with likeminded others entirely or almost entirely online. Part of why this is so relates to the nature of the contemporary internet.

There are several ways in which the contemporary internet has become a key driver of radicalisation of ideas and violent intent. The time people spend on social media and on devices (particularly on mobile) continues to rise, particularly among 18 to 50 years old (the demographic most at risk of extremism). Individuals therefore face increased exposure to extremist content, meaning they have more chance of becoming inured to brutality, fascinated with violence, or enraged by graphic footage of violence against their ingroup.⁵ With more time online comes a greater sense of community and belonging, something driving many who come to adopt extremist ideologies. It also forges a greater connection with a globalised, transnational subculture rather than loyalty to New Zealand identity. This increased time online also means that the 'echo chamber' and groupthink effect of siloed spaces is magnified, with less time exposed to opposed perspectives and information.⁶ The nature of these spaces and anonymity drives users towards more radical positions to more extreme

⁵ Peter R. Neumann, "Options and Strategies for Countering Online Radicalization in the United States," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* vol 36, no. 6 (2013): 435.

⁶ Magdalena Wojcieszak, "'Don't talk to me': effects of ideologically homogenous online groups and politically dissimilar offline ties on extremism," *New Media & Society* vol 12, no. 4 (2010): 637-655.

positions within short periods of time: participants in online forums are pilloried by other users for liberal opinions while praised for racism and misogyny.⁷

The nature of the contemporary internet and patterns of usage also facilitate easier recruitment into extremist spaces and dialogue. The diverse spaces of the contemporary internet, from open access and mainstream to private and encrypted, provide a natural and effective conveyor belt from normality to extreme racism, Islamophobia and misogyny. While research on the radicalising effect of algorithms is mixed,⁸ these varied sites allow for an independent progression to spaces where extremism is encouraged, or allow recruiters to entice users along this path. These very different spaces also allow extremist communities to relocate as they are banned from one platform. Each platform also has different benefits for the extremist community: mass social media such as Facebook and Twitter have the advantages of wide reach, while smaller platforms make up for this disadvantage in other ways, such as being more hidden and having a greater echo chamber effect.⁹

Where older style websites simply provided material and were managed by the administrator with readers as mere observers and consumers, online forums such as Gab, 4chan and 8chan now effectively hand over the administration, oversight and content generation to the members of the community. Users who often have little other sense of community are now invested in maintaining and policing their site, creating memes, videos and other content, and maintaining excitement and interest within the community. This sense of authorship and ownership empowers individuals and enhances the sense of belonging and leadership which is for many a key reason for joining.¹⁰ The interactive nature of social media, imageboards and chatrooms has a number of effects which increase the potential for radicalization. Immediate interaction between two or more users has substantial escalatory potential as users seek to outbid each other with increasingly shocking statements. Over time, veteran users gain a measure of respect and gravitas within the community, something many have not experienced in the offline world.

⁷ Wojcieszak, “‘Don’t talk to me’”: 645.

⁸ See for example Manoel Horta Ribeiro et al, “Auditing Radicalization Pathways on Youtube,” Proceedings of the 2020 Conference on Fairness, Accountability and Transparency, January 2020.

⁹ Ryan Scrivens and Maura Conway, “The roles of ‘old’ and ‘new’ media tools and technologies in the facilitation of violent extremism and terrorism,” in R. Leukfeldt and T. J. Holt (eds) *The Human Factor of Cybercrime* (New York: Routledge, 2019): 304.

¹⁰ Peter R. Neumann, “Options and Strategies for Countering Online Radicalization in the United States,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* vol 36, no. 6 (2013): 434.

3.1 The Division of Online and Offline Personas

Online chat rooms and social media allow users to post anonymously meaning the normal restrictions on offline interaction (social norms, and the threat of facing anger or even violence) are absent. But anonymous online interaction also allows users to create an idealized version of themselves, to create characters which are more confident, charismatic and less neurotic than their real selves.¹¹ Studies have found that this trend is more pronounced in individuals who were more depressed or had lower self-esteem.¹²

Over time this gap between one's "online participation and real-world action is a source of discontent and pain."¹³ In response, most will moderate their extremist online personas. One study found that the radical online posting behavior of most individuals in a right wing extremist forum 'tailed off' after two years.¹⁴ Others will chide each other for inauthenticity and a failure to act in real life, raising pressure on particular individuals, although not take action themselves. But a "select few users...will try to live up to their virtual, extremist, and pro-violent selves in the real world."¹⁵ Several recent perpetrators of extremist violence (including that in Christchurch and Pittsburgh) have demonstrated in their final online posts their desire to prove their authenticity in the offline world.

4. It is important to distinguish between extreme ideas and extreme action

In both the study of radicalisation and in the policy of preventing it, the key and most important question is what causes an individual to move from sympathy for violence to engaging in it. Identifying red flags of impending violence is the most crucial and difficult task of security officials and scholars of extremist violence. In this regard it is crucial to recognise that there is no direct line from extremist ideas to violent action.¹⁶ The vast majority of individuals with extreme ideas (even those who are sympathetic to violence) do

¹¹ Katherine Bessiere, M.A, A. Fleming Seay, Ph.D, and Sara Kiesler, Ph.D, "The Ideal Elf: Identity Exploration in World of Warcraft," *CyberPsychology & Behavior* vol 10, no. 4 (2007): 533.

¹² Ibid., 534.

¹³ Jarret M. Brachman and Alix N. Levine, "You Too Can Be Awlaki!," *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* vol 35, no. 1 (2011): 42.

¹⁴ Ryan Scrivens, Garth Davies & Richard Frank, "Measuring the Evolution of Radical Right-Wing Posting Behaviors Online," *Deviant Behavior* vol 41, no. 2 (2020): 228.

¹⁵ Brachman and Alix N. Levine, "You Too Can Be Awlaki!," p42.

¹⁶ Social sciences literature has long identified a tenuous connection between attitudes and action. See for example studies on protest against busing in the United States.

not become violent. Even more confusingly, many who go on to act violently may not be doing so because they have adopted extreme ideas (or done so to a greater degree than others). They may instead choose to act violently because of more personal grievances or crisis, because of a quest for status, excitement or redemption or for some other reason. This is of course what makes this task so difficult for security agencies (and less consequentially, for scholars).

5. Lone Actor Grievance Fuelled Violence

The final point I wish to make is that the boundaries between many of the forms of extremist violence mentioned above, particularly those involving white males – antisemitic, neo-Nazi, Islamophobic, anti-Maori, white nationalist, misogynistic, school attacks, and workplace or public space attacks (and more recently but to a lesser extent, conspiracy-related ideas) – are becoming increasingly blurred. Recent studies shed light on the similarities between these different forms of ‘grievance-motivated lone actor violence’.¹⁷ The perpetrators of all forms resemble each other in demographic profile, history of mental illness or psychological disturbance, and isolation in ways which distinguish them from both group-based terrorists and the broader population. Many have an interest in weapons or their use outside the military or police. They also all hold some form of grievance against society which motivates violent action and a fascination with violence.

Importantly too, a convergence of these individuals and worldviews is facilitated by contemporary online spaces. Many chatrooms, imageboards and forums now allow the congregation of numerous marginalised, sometime aggrieved individuals seeking a sense of community and meaning, who in the past could not possibly have met. The cross fertilisation of ideas, the identification of common enemies and the escalation of grievance to action now takes place easier and faster than ever before. In effect, an online subculture has formed with little loyalty to national identity, which holds norms in opposition to mainstream society and creates incentives for violent action against it.

¹⁷ Joel Alfredo Capellan and Alexei Anisin, “A Distinction Without a Difference? Examining the Causal Pathways Behind Ideologically Motivated Mass Shootings,” *Homicide Studies* vol 22, no. 3 (2018): 235-255.