

Panel 4. Violent Extremism Online - New Directions in Preventing Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in the Digital World

When worlds collide: addressing harm, hateful and violent extremism, and disinformation in Aotearoa New Zealand

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the sailor lives, and stands beside us, paying/out into time's wave/the stain of blood that writes an island story

Allen Curnow, 'Landfall in Unknown Seas' (1942)

'*The stain of blood that writes an island story*' has at its heart an image of imperialism. The imperial project, rolled out from Europe over centuries, and formed and shaped by the Doctrine of Discovery, is the foundation of nearly every institution and structure in Aotearoa New Zealand (Ngata, 2019). These underlying and often invisibilised structures – imperialism, colonisation, white supremacy, misogyny, Islamophobia, homophobia, antisemitism – also underpin the human and technical mechanisms of life online. From the founding conceits of social media platforms to objectify and humiliate women to the biases of engineers embedded in algorithms, the digital world reflects the structural and systemic violence towards 'the other' which forms the basis of the physical world we inhabit.

A conceptualisation of 'radicalisation' online has emerged as a truism within the context of competing geo-political narratives. For many here in Aotearoa, and internationally, in both political and academic spheres, the study of radicalisation is fundamentally the study of an alien other, a demonised young brown person from a Muslim faith tradition. The notion of radicalisation and its companion word, extremism, are nebulous, wobbly, manipulatable. Questions about 'our' safety and security further reveal these competing narratives. In Aotearoa New Zealand, in 2021, who is the 'our' whose security and safety is at threat? After March 15, New Zealand responded with 'this is not us', negating the real and lived histories of Māori, and the genocidal implications of 'smoothing the pillow of a dying race (sic)' Featherston, in Buck, 1924). Engaging with these conflicting narratives of national identities and understandings to evaluate and ascertain what radicalisation or extremism means within Aotearoa New Zealand must be a critical outcome of our response to the violence in Ōtautahi, else we replicate again imperial stories of who we are.

Online harm, hateful or violent extremism, and disinformation are global issues – and like other global issues shaped by imperialism – their effects are not experienced evenly in communities, within societies, or between nations. Critically, the impacts of harm, hateful or violent extremism and disinformation are most felt within communities which have experienced the most significant effects of the imperial project. Here in Aotearoa, communities targeted with harmful content and hateful or violent extremism in 2021 include Māori, Pasifika diaspora communities, the Muslim community, Chinese diaspora communities, refugee and migrant communities, LGBTQIA+ communities – in particular, trans communities – and peoples living with the experience of disabilities. These communities within Aotearoa are also the target of much of the disinformation present in national media ecosystems, or alternatively, these communities are the *focus* of disinformation which is being presented to others, largely Pākehā or 'white' migrant communities. These patterns: of online harm targeting indigenous youth, of hateful and violent extremism targeting Muslim families, of disinformation addressing directly minoritized communities' experiences of violent state interventions, and of these communities then also being *blamed* for current social and political turmoil are global.

Aotearoa New Zealand is not unaffected by these global patterns of targeting and blame. Imbricated crises – the climate emergency, the COVID-19 pandemic, the rise of despotic populism, increasing threats to democracy as a global connecting good – all operate to increase uncertainty, undermine social cohesion, and question the roles of governments and experts in decision-making. What is clear, however, is that, increasingly, efforts to re-assess and revise understandings of the fundamental and ongoing impacts of colonisation, and begin to realise justice within the parameters of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, are being intentionally framed as sites of national controversy. These include the announcement of the establishment of the Māori Health Authority, [The Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in State Care](#), a series of investigations including by the Waitangi Tribunal ([WAI 2915](#)) and the Office of the Children's Commissioner ([He Kuku o te Manawa 1&2](#)) into the practise of the removal of pēpi Māori from their whānau by Oranga Tamariki, the revised and compulsory [history curriculum](#) which will be introduced from 2022, and, in May 2021, the release of [He Puapua: a report of the working group on a plan to realise the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in Aotearoa/New Zealand](#).

Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and the partnership relationships the realisation of Tiriti justice enables, are the necessary starting point for any discussion or development of a strategy which seeks to address and make redress for the impacts of online harm, hateful and violent extremism, and disinformation for Aotearoa New Zealand. It is from a position of the partnership that Te Tiriti provides that Aotearoa can make a global contribution to these pressing and immediate issues. We start by correctly accounting for the past: “there are things that are hurtful and some of that hurt and the consequences of history are not dissolved by time. They actually remain present in the lives and communities and contexts of many people” (MacDonald, 2021). The practise of this requires, *demands*, emotional connection. As a researcher, my emotions form an aspect of my ability to ethically engage with the material I study, and to ethically engage with the communities who are most effected by the milieu of that study – the internet. This understanding of emotionality highlights “the ethical obligations of our role as witnesses and storytellers...implicated in the production of meaning through our witnessing, through our storytelling, through the political engagements of our research as it goes into the world” (Barclay, 2018).

The heart of the matter is not the byline. Online violent and hateful extremism is not the core issue: the foundational and ongoing effects of the imperial project on human cultures and societies are. The digital world enables these ideas, some ancient, some newly developed, to be shared easily, and then the technical mechanics of recommender algorithms, parameterisation, content feeds, and ‘engagement’ increase the volume and reach of hateful and violent ideas, expression, image, language, and meme. This material and artefact then makes its way into offline discourses, discussed in the media and by politicians, academics, thought leaders, and civil society organisations, and in this manner, becomes normalised or legitimised.

At present, in Aotearoa New Zealand, hateful and violent extremism is targeting a number of communities, in both the digital and physical worlds. Drawing from the rich data collection approach of the [Disinformation Project](#), reveals patterns of movement of narratives and features of narratives from sub-platforms and closed groups through to mainstream social media platforms and then into media and socio-political discourse, and vice versa. Political discussions of systemic racism and a government report, *He Puapua*, leak through into social media locations for recruitment and ‘radicalisation’, focusing on issues around regulation and fairness which are drawcard themes for groups of largely Pākehā and ‘white’ migrant communities. This then manifests in specific calls for violence against Māori as a group, and specific Māori people as individuals. The movement of ideas and themes back and forth through and across networks and via individual and group narrators enables the development

of a contestable space, language and narrative and ideas which nearly meet existing criteria for objectionable, but which purposefully play in liminal spaces, borderlands.

Since the beginning of May 2021, we have observed a significant increase in anti-Māori racism, particularly within video-based and text-based data sources. Themes range from the quotidian conspiracy theory of pre-Māori Celtic settlement of Aotearoa, which attempts to displace Māori as indigenous people, to a number of versions of the 'Great Replacement' white supremacist narrative, which was prevalent in the language and imagery of the Christchurch attacker. In the specific anti-Māori version of this discourse, we observe frames of Māori (sometimes herein framed as 'iwi') domination, 'separatism', and 'apartheid'. These artefacts have included a highly objectionable video which called for a 'genocide' against Māori, targeted specific Māori individuals including Members of Parliament, and described access to firearms. Similar patterns are present in our observation of digital and physical discourses surrounding a range of narratives related to trans human rights; the current post-Select Committee consideration of proposed updates to the Births, Deaths, Marriages and Relationship Registration Bill; and discourses surrounding, particularly, transwomen and sport, predominate, and result in hateful and violent targeting of transwomen.

Hateful targeting of transwomen reveals the global reach the digital world provides; events in the United Kingdom in particular effect digital discourses here in Aotearoa New Zealand, and show the ways in which radicalised individuals and groups can use social media platforms to incite hate in other locations. The use of bot or bot-like accounts to share and create content specific to Aotearoa New Zealand's particular contexts is a concerning relatively new theme, noted particularly since March 15 and the subsequent gun law reforms.

The digital world enables connection too; varyingly cast as a simulacrum or a shadow, a sideshow mirror or Narcissus' pool, the opportunities and issues with the internet and its structures and tools are conflated. Online communities are derided as 'virtual', online behaviours are pathologized, online communication is constructed as always less effective, less useful. The internet and its technologies are 'the wild west' – a metaphor which implies a number of attitudes and assumptions. Who are the colonised? Who are the colonisers? What is the role of women in this virtual land of cowboys? And where are racialised communities, LGBTQIA+ communities, communities with disabilities safe? Who will provide that safety? The metaphors are not neutral, and neither are the spaces they try to describe. Is the internet the new public sphere? Or is it infrastructure? These attempts to contain a set of tools and technologies within known political structures over simplifies their origins and also their impacts. Kate Crawford writes "at a fundamental level, AI is technical and social practises, institutions and infrastructures, politics and culture" (Crawford, 2021). The internet (the tools and technologies which form a digital world) is handmade, by machine. It is a contradiction always – free and open, but by whom? For whom? In whose interests is it so?

Hannah Arendt wrote in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) that "the ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist." The digital world mimics the physical one, and the unresolved impacts of imperialism become embedded in new ways of interacting, sharing information and knowledge, and working towards just and transparent institutions, one of many United Nations Sustainable Development Goals which overlap with concerns about online ecologies and environments. Globally, the role of the internet and its technologies are of high concern: the [Christchurch Call](#), the Global Partnership on AI ([GPAI](#)), Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism ([GIFCT](#)), UNESCO, and the G7 are all amid programmes of work which seek to explore the role of existing international law

and regulation in addressing the Internet, limit the impacts of violent extremism and radicalisation online, or ensure human safety within the parameters of the right to freedom of expression.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights *must* serve as the starting point for global intergovernmental organisations and global industry to understand their responsibilities to and for the Internet and its technologies. Those rights are both universal, and indivisible, and grounded by the relationship of those rights to the rights of others: “everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others...” (UNDHR, 1948, Article 29).

For Aotearoa New Zealand, the realisation of the partnership provided in Te Tiriti o Waitangi is central to making positive change for all New Zealanders in both the digital and physical worlds. [*Ko iō tatou kāinga tēnei*](#) (The Report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the terrorist attack on Christchurch masjidain) requires us, the peoples and organisations and businesses and government of Aotearoa to ka mua, ka muri - walk backwards into the future. This starts with a reckoning with the fundamental and ongoing impacts of the imperial project, some elements of which are already underway. In practise, this will look like *mediation* of the digital world, including its structures, particularly by those targeted and blamed communities; *moderation* by communities and via co-created platform guidelines for online spaces and the infrastructures that underpin them; *regulation* co-developed with communities and responsible to communities; and, finally, *classification* or *censorship*, within fundamental principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. With these varied tools, communities, civil society, the media, academia, the public service, industry, and Government all have roles to play, in connection with, and in partnership with, each other.

Academic, writer and poet Alice Te Punga-Somerville wrote, for her talk entitled ‘Too Many Cooks’ (2021) a poem which imagines a shared future:

there are captain cooks amongst us too - bullies
throwing their weight around

they think they are at the centre of the room but that’s only because
they have never been anywhere but there
they have no idea about the edges or even how far the room extends
one day they will realise that we in the corners are really in other centres
they will realise there are no corners
no walls

is it a room? is it a room then, when there are no walls?

i used to want to tell them to move over because they take up all the room
but there’s no room
there is no room

no walls, no room – just links and connections and space

you're not at the centre; there are no centres

you're just standing there

one node in a massive network

like the rest of us

Understanding ourselves as connected: from there we can start.

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Alice Te Punga-Somerville (2021), from Twitter, used with permission of the author