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The Addressing Violent Extremism and Radicalisation to Terrorism (AVERT) Research Network

Submission to the Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee of the Senate

Inquiry into right wing extremist movements in Australia

April 5, 2024

The AVERT (Addressing Violent Extremism and Radicalisation to Terrorism) Research Network welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the Senate's efforts to understand and address the evolving nature and threat of extremism through this submission to the Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee of the Senate's inquiry into extremist right wing movements in Australia.

This inquiry is particularly timely, as the violent extremism landscape is increasingly diverse and complex, motivated and mobilised by a wide range of actors and movements, particularly within the space of the extreme right.

This submission was prepared by the following AVERT Research Network members: Ms Lydia Khalil (AVERT Convenor), Associate Professor Mario Peucker, Professor Michele Grossman, Associate Professor Joshua Roose, Dr Imogen Richards, Dr Jared Dmello, Dr Helen Young, Dr Shannon Zimmerman and Dr Vivian Gerrand. Biographies of each contributor explaining their expertise can be found on the AVERT website. This AVERT Research Network submission has been endorsed by AVERT's Executive Committee. For more information on AVERT, please see: www.avert.net.au.

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About the AVERT Research Network

The AVERT (Addressing Violent Extremism and Radicalisation to Terrorism) Research Network is a multidisciplinary, multi-institutional research network based in Melbourne, Australia supported by Deakin University's Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation (ADI). AVERT members conduct research into a wide array of topics related to terrorism, radicalisation and violent extremism. Our Network is comprised of highly engaged and critically informed social science, humanities and multidisciplinary research academics from a variety of universities and research institutions who believe in conducting meaningful evidence-based research for the public good.

A critical aim of AVERT is to foster evidence-based understanding and to reduce the social harms created by violent extremism. We are committed to engaging in research that delivers social benefits and informs effective policy and practice as well as constructive critique and dialogue. As an Australian based research network, we remain strongly grounded in our local context while engaging globally with colleagues, institutions, issues and trends.

Engaging with stakeholders is an important part of the AVERT Research Network's mission to understand, address and reduce the harms caused by radicalisation to violent extremism and terrorism. Through our Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Department of Home Affairs, we provide empirically based research and capacity-building to inform policy and practice and advance relevant understandings of violent extremism both in Australia and internationally. We also work regularly with other relevant government agencies at the Commonwealth and State level as well as a range of community and civil society stakeholders. More information on the AVERT Research Network can be found in the AVERT Brochure which is attached as Addendum 3 to this submission.

Addressing the Terms of Reference

This submission will focus on the following terms of reference:

Right wing extremist movements in Australia, with particular reference to:

> (a) the nature and extent of movements and persons holding extremist right wing views in Australia, with a particular focus on:

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(i) the threat posed by extremist movements, including right wing extremism,

(ii) the motivations, objectives and capacity for violence of extremist groups and individuals holding such views,

(iii) links between individuals and groups with international movements,

(iv) how individuals progress to committing acts of violence, and

(v) the role of the online environment in promoting extremism;

(b) the terms and operation of the Counter-Terrorism Legislation Amendment (Prohibited Hate Symbols and Other Measures) Bill 2023;

(c) measures to counter violent extremism in Australia, with particular focus on young people.

In places, this submission draws on contributions made in separate individual submissions by the authors as well as their previously published research work. This submission also includes the following Addendum documents:

1. AVERT Research Network Submission to the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security Inquiry into extremist movements and radicalism in Australia, February 12, 2021

2. AVERT Research Network Submission to the Victorian Parliament Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee Inquiry into extremism in Victoria, May 30, 2022

3. AVERT Brochure

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> *(a) the nature and extent of movements and persons holding extremist right wing views in Australia, with a particular focus on:*
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> *(i) the threat posed by extremist movements, including right wing extremism,*
>
> *(ii) the motivations, objectives and capacity for violence of extremist groups and individuals holding such views.*

What is right wing extremism?

Right wing extremism (RWE) is best understood as a *spectrum* of socio-political movements and one that is increasingly complex, fragmented and eclectic. Examples of movements that fall within RWE in Australia are most obviously white supremacist and neo-Nazi groups but also include movements and ideologies that promote exclusivist nationalism, fascism, racism, chauvinism and certain anti-government and conspiracist movements. Broadly speaking, RWE movements and ideologies share an 'anti-democratic opposition to equality.'[1] They reject democratic governance and use, or justify the use of violence, to effect societal and political change.

The 2024 Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) Threat Briefing notes that 'ideologically motivated extremists' – the terminology that ASIO has adopted to express RWE – are 'switching between ideologies and merging components from different ones to create new, hybrid beliefs; a perverse 'choose your own adventure' approach to radicalisation.'[2] This dynamic of picking and choosing different elements of ideologies to give voice to their grievance has also been referred to as 'ideological promiscuity.'[3]

While ideologically motivated movements are increasingly fluid, fragmented and hybrid, it is important not to overlook the ideological convergences between RWE extremist groups.

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[1] Elisabeth Carter, "Right-wing extremism/radicalism: Reconstructing the concept," *Journal of Political ideologies* 23, no. 2 (2018): 157-182.

[2] Mike Burgess, Director General of Security, "ASIO Annual Threat Assessment 2024," 28 February 2024, https://www.oni.gov.au/asio-annual-threat-assessment-2024.

[3] John Horgan, "Keynote Address - Terrorism in a Time of Ideological Promiscuity: A Catalyst for Re-thinking Approaches to Motivation," AVERT (Addressing Violent Extremism and Radicalisation to Terrorism) Research Network Research Symposium, 2022, https://www.avert.net.au/ars2022-recordings.

RWE milieus and movements *are* connected in important and relevant ways. In addition to their 'anti-democratic opposition to equality', RWEs view the current order as corrupt and on the brink of a conflict for which they must prepare. The predominant state is one of being under siege from a perceived enemy, whether it be the Marxist left, corrupt cultural and political elites, immigrants or inferior yet menacing races.

Individuals and movements on the RWE spectrum often share entrenched xenophobic, anti-Semitic, often Islamophobic, anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQ+ attitudes. RWE also centres on exclusion – a conceptualisation or creation of 'the other' or the 'out group', made up of the aforementioned, that is dehumanised and made a threat, thereby becoming a legitimate target for violence.[4] RWE also conceptualise their 'in group' as superior and their success as inseparable from the exclusion or destruction of others.[5]

The extreme right also has a long history and association with conspiratorial thinking.[6] The contribution of conspiratorial belief to violent extremism is well researched. Recent research corroborates this conspiratorial tendency in modern RWE movements, finding that people with RWE views are more likely to engage in conspiratorial thinking, have paranoid ideations and a strong distrust of government.[7]

Acknowledging the similarities and throughlines[8] between the RWE milieus can help us make sense of the diversity of its manifestations and identify their potential to give rise to new and as yet unidentified forms of RWE.

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[4] J. M. Berger, *Extremism*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2018.

[5] Berger, *Extremism*.

[6] Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab, *The Politics of Unreason: Right-Wing Extremism in America, 1790–1970*, New York: Harper and Row, 1970; Richard Hofstadter, "Paranoid Style in American Politics," *Harper's Magazine*, November 1964, https://harpers.org/archive/1964/11/the-paranoid-style-in-american-politics.

[7] Sander van der Linden, Costas Panagopoulos, Flávio Azevedo and John T. Jost, "The paranoid style in American politics revisited: An ideological asymmetry in conspiratorial thinking," *Political Psychology* 42, no. 1 (2021): 23-51.

[8] Lydia Khalil, *Rise of the Extreme Right: the new global extremism and the threat to democracy*, London: Penguin, 2022.

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Motivations and Drivers of RWE

The rise in RWE is connected to broader political and social factors. The world has undergone profound stress and upheaval in the past two decades: environmental crises, a global financial crisis, growing inequality and a global pandemic. This has corresponded with the growth of far-right populism, disaffection with democracy, neoliberalism and global capitalism which has increased the lack of trust in government and institutions.

There have been deep and rapid societal changes resulting from the decline of the welfare state and key societal institutions, including trade unions and organised religion. Neoliberal economic policies have led to precarious and insecure work and declines in traditional blue- and white-collar work that typically benefited men.[9]

While Australia has comparatively high levels of welfare and wellbeing[10], it has not been immune to these dynamics and the accompanying growth of extreme and far-right tendencies. The latest Edelman's Trust barometer warns that Australia is headed toward greater polarisation: 'almost half of Australians (45%) say the nation is more divided today, than in the past.' Perceptions of inequality and anti-elite sentiment seem to be driving most of this, with 72% identifying the 'rich and powerful' as the major dividing force, followed by hostile foreign governments (69%), journalists (51%) and government leaders (49%).[11]

Additionally, the lack of effective coordinated action on climate change has opened space for the revival of fascist ideas that promote chauvinistic solutions to environmental concerns. For RWEs, protecting the environment has become not a global collective effort that will benefit humankind and the natural world, but a means to exclude or eradicate certain segments of the population for the benefit of those believed to be organically connected to a particular place. Eco-fascism has emerged as one response to the degradation of the

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[9] Joshua M. Roose, *The New Demagogues: Religion, Masculinity and the Populist Epoch*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2021.
[10] "Measures of welfare and wellbeing for Australia and similar countries", Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, September 7, 2023, https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/international-comparisons-of-welfare-data
[11] Edelman Australia, "Trust Barometer 2023 Australia", accessed April 4, 2024, https://www.edelman.com.au/sites/g/files/aatuss381/files/2023-02/2023%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer%20Report%20-%20AUS%2002-2023.pdf.

environment and alleges a link between the environmental effects of climate change and overpopulation and global migration.

The rise in RWE is also correlated with global democratic decline. Anti-establishment and anti-elite sentiment is rife within RWE and so too is the feeling that democratic governance is ineffective at best and corrupt at worst.[12] Measurements around the effectiveness of government to provide solutions to people's problems in democracies have shown a sharp drop.[13] Political accountability and competitiveness in democracies are declining, with many people feeling like the system is rigged. Australia's democratic health is strong by many measures, yet, as referenced above, levels of trust in government in Australia are among the lowest in the world.[14] There are an increasing number of citizens with grievances who are seeking solutions outside establishment politics and institutions.

In periods of social, political and economic uncertainty and growing polarisation, extremism can grow, and the disaffected can be recruited into these movements. Violent extremists attempt to exploit these insecurities and widening rifts. They amplify narratives emphasising perceived victimisation and marginalisation, attributing blame for these issues to identified out-groups. Additionally, two recent phenomena – the election of US President Donald Trump and the COVID-19 pandemic – have contributed significantly to the rise in RWE.

The Trump Factor

The election of President Trump in 2016 became a galvanising force for RWE in the US and other countries around the world, including Australia. Research has demonstrated that both online and offline violence and aggression perpetrated by RWE groups increased globally in

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[12] Richard Wike, Laura Silver and Alexandra Castillo, "Many across the Globe are Dissatisfied with How Democracy is Working," Pew Research Center, April 29 2019, https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/04/29/many-across-the-globe-are-dissatisfied-with-how-democracy-is-working/.

[13] "Democracy Index 2020: In Sickness and in Health?," The Economist Intelligence Unit, accessed April 4, 2024, https://www.satp.org/Docs/Document/1192.pdf.

[14] Mark Evans, Will Jennings and Gerry Stoker, "How Does Australia Compare: What Makes a Leading Democracy?," *Democracy 2025*, Report No. 6, April 2, 2020, https://www.democracy2025.gov.au/documents/Democracy2025-report6.pdf.

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the wake of the 2016 US Presidential election.[15] Studies of Australian RWE online accounts have shown that the top five images and hashtags 'all reference either Trump himself or related political events linked to the President.'[16] Online narratives and themes around white identity and white nationalism are 'often US centric with a strong focus on Trump.'[17]

Trump has repeatedly minimised and even incited RWE violence, creating a more permissive environment for it to grow. It reached a crescendo with the Capitol attack and the January 6 insurrection. Trump spent weeks undermining the validity of the 2020 presidential election result and ultimately refused to peacefully cede power. Pro-Trump RWEs mounted an ultimately unsuccessful insurrection to disrupt the Electoral College count and ratification on the Congressional floor.

The Big Lie around the US election results that was used to justify the January 6 insurrection and the storming of State legislative bodies were all referenced and adapted to the Australian context, particularly in protests centred around COVID restrictions and the 2022 federal election.[18] In an echo of the January 6 riots, anti-lockdown protesters dragged a gallows in front of the Victorian State Parliament House and threatened to hang 'treasonous' politicians when pandemic-specific legislation was being considered.[19] This also highlights the risk of spill over of international misinformation discourses into physical manifestations of extremism.

The prospect of Trump's re-election, despite the violence of the January 6 insurrection, demonstrates that deepening polarisation and democratic erosion persists and that his

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[15] Jared R. Dmello, Arie Perliger and Matthew Sweeney, "The violence of political empowerment: electoral success and the facilitation of terrorism in the Republic of India," *Terrorism and political violence* 34, no. 7 (2022): 1281-1304.

[16] Brian Ballsun-Stanton, Lise Waldek, Julian Droogan, Debra Smith, Muhammad Iqbal and Mario Peucker, "Mapping Networks and Narratives of Online Right-Wing Extremists in New South Wales," *Zenodo: European Organization for Nuclear Research* (2020).

[17] Ballsun-Stanton, Waldek, Droogan, Smith, Iqbal and Peucker, "Mapping Networks and Narratives of Online Right-Wing Extremists in New South Wales."

[18] Australian Electoral Commission, "Disinformation Register, 2022 Federal election," last modified January 10, 2023, https://www.aec.gov.au/media/disinformation-register-2022.htm.

[19] Stephanie Convery, "Australia Covid protests: threats against 'traitorous' politicians as thousands rally in capital cities," *The Guardian*, November 20, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/nov/20/australia-covid-protests-threats-against-traitorous-politicians-as-thousands-rally-in-capital-cities.

fascist appeal still resonates with many. The prospect of further far right violence incited and inspired by Trump has intensified during the 2024 presidential election campaign.[20] Election related violence and other forms of political violence in the US will have global implications, including in Australia.

The COVID-19 Pandemic

RWE was also bolstered by the pandemic. Many movements capitalised on the fear and uncertainty of the pandemic and government intrusions in the name of public health. Research studies, as well as government and professional reporting, have found that the pandemic contributed to an increase in radicalisation to violent extremism.[21] Violent extremists, particularly RWEs, used the pandemic to bolster their existing frameworks and beliefs and to make direct calls for action.[22] This led to numerous plots, attacks and other acts of violence against scapegoated communities and in protest against lockdown measures and other government mandates. The pandemic also provided opportunities for ideologically-based extremist movements to recruit others with existing or developing anti-government sentiments.[23]

Australia's pandemic response amounted to some of the strictest public health measures in the democratic world. Many Australians endured extensive periods of 'lockdowns' which limited employment, mobility and social support. While these public health measures reduced the spread of the virus and helped reduce the risk of illness and death, they also had negative consequences and effects[24] that contributed to violent extremism.

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[20] David Smith, "'It'll be bedlam': How Trump is creating conditions for a post election eruption," *The Guardian*, March 23, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/mar/23/donald-trump-political-violence-fears-us-election.

[21] "Update on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on terrorism, counterterrorism and countering violent extremism," Report of the United Nations Security Council Counterterrorism Committee (CTC), June 2021, https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/ctc/content/update-impact-covid-19-pandemic-terrorism-counter-terrorism-and-countering-violent-extremism.

[22] Lydia Khalil, "The impact of natural disasters on extremism," *ASPI Yearbook* 2021, https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep31258.24.pdf.

[23] Abdul Basit, "COVID-19: a challenge or opportunity for terrorist groups?," *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* 15, no. 3 (2020): 263-275.

[24] Valeria Saladino, Davide Algeri and Vincenzo Auriemma, "The psychological and social impact of Covid-19: new perspectives of well-being," *Frontiers in psychology* 11 (2020).

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Some demographics who harboured grievances from their experiences of the pandemic, such as those without adequate psychological or social support and those experiencing financial hardship, found themselves vulnerable to disinformation and conspiracist messaging that purported to explain their genuine and/or perceived experiences of deprivation. They thus became targets for anti-democratic conspiracy theories and extremist social movements. Some joined locally-rooted but globally-connected 'Freedom Movements', encompassing a diverse array of actors with fluid ideologies.[25] These include anti-vaccine mandate campaigners, religious conservatives, wellness influencers, conspiracy theorists, sovereign citizens, alt-right media and far-right figures- all of whom were still able to mobilise during periods of physical restriction and isolation thanks to the affordances of digital technologies in addition to their flouting of restrictions, which they did as a form of protest.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed resource disparities that exacerbated both real and perceived deprivation. It engendered grievances among a diverse set of the population, some of which mobilised into violent extremism. This experience underscored the fact that violent extremism is a phenomenon that could involve anyone. It also demonstrates the impacts that natural disasters, (which include pandemics and other disasters like floods and bushfires, to which Australia is increasingly susceptible) can have on violent extremism.

According to the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction and the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters, major natural disasters are on the rise.[26] Alongside this is the unprecedented spread of misinformation, disinformation and contestation of the causes and origins of those crises.[27] In future, multiple and concurrent emergencies and crises in a post-truth age may not only challenge government's disaster response and recovery efforts, but

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[25] Lydia Khalil and Joshua Roose, "Anti-Government Extremism in Australia: Understanding the Australian Anti-Lockdown Freedom Movement as a Complex Anti-Government Social Movement," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 17, no. 1 (2023).
[26] Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED) and United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, "Human cost of natural disasters- an overview of the last 20 years 2000-2019," October 12, 2020, https://www.undrr.org/publication/human-cost-disasters-overview-last-20-years-2000-2019.
[27] Matteo Cinelli, Walter Quattrociocchi, Alessandro Galeazzi, Carlo Michele Valensise, Emanuele Brugnoli, Ana Lucia Schmidt, Paola Zola, Fabiana Zollo and Antonio Scala, "The COVID-19 social media infodemic," *Scientific reports* 10, no. 1 (2020): 1-10.

potentially spur anti-government sentiment and violent extremism. This is something that should be accounted for in the disaster and emergency management plans of advanced economies and democracies like Australia.[28]

Research findings have demonstrated that natural disasters such as bushfires, hurricanes, earthquakes and pandemics have the potential to act as push factors towards violent extremism. Disasters can have structural effects that affect the distribution of resources, income and wealth and can provide the motive, incentive and opportunity for violent action. They can also heighten grievances and provide openings for groups with pre-existing grievances to act violently against the state.[29] This hypothesis was borne out by the COVID-19 pandemic; as the crisis created turmoil that exacerbated vulnerabilities and grievances that violent extremists then exploited.

But RWE are actors not only reacting to the government response during a crisis or disaster but *pre-emptively* undermining it by using crises and disasters as *opportunities* to challenge government legitimacy, spread disinformation and conspiracy theories, sow distrust and foment polarisation.[30] They have also instrumentalised and exploited recent disasters and crises to justify and extend their narratives. Extremist groups have latched on to disasters as catalysts for 'accelerationism', a theory of creative destruction adopted by neo-Nazi RWE actors and movements that proposes that any point of upheaval – like natural disasters and emergencies – can be an opportunity to accelerate the demise of current societal structures and governments and impose new ones.[31]

Manifestations of RWE in Australia

Due to the fragmentation, diversity and promiscuity of Australia's RWE milieus and movements, they are often characterised by relatively low organisational structures. They typically have limited leadership capacity and are comprised mostly of small and often

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[28] Khalil, "The impact of natural disasters on extremism."

[29] Cooper A. Drury and Richard Stuart Olson, "Disasters and political unrest: An empirical investigation," *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management* 6, no. 3 (1998): 153-161.

[30] Drury and Olson, "Disasters and political unrest: An empirical investigation."

[31] Anti-Defamation League, "White Supremacists Embrace 'Accelerationism'," April 16, 2019, https://www.adl.org/blog/white-supremacists-embrace-accelerationism.

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informal cells and networks. One significant exception is the case of two closely connected openly neo-Nazi white nationalist organisations, the National Socialist Network (NSN) and the European Australian Movement (EAM). The EAM is essentially an extension of the NSN and were both formed in Victoria and have branches in other states. They have established themselves as the most prominent and active organisational movements within Australia's RWE scene.

White nationalist movements have long existed in Australia and have a well-documented history. They have re-emerged more prominently in Australia in the past decade, in particular, since the 2016 US presidential election. Trump's candidacy and presidency resonated with and emboldened local actors such as the 'True Blue Crew', 'United Patriots Front', 'Antipodean Resistance' and the 'Lads Society' – many of them now dispersed groups. These groups developed their public profiles through a range of activities including protests on the steps of Parliament House,[32] pamphleting and stickering, foot patrols by groups such as the 'Soldiers of Odin', the creation of men's only clubhouses and by increasing their social media presence. Over time, many individuals who made up this disparate collection of groups and men's clubs consolidated into a committed core of hard-line activists that made up the NSN and EAM. This core group is also supported by a broader community of alt- and far-right social media actors. RWE involving Australian nationals also encompasses lone actors embedded within domestic or transnational online movements and networks.

Online activities by RWE actors in Australia include spreading hate-filled messages on alternative platforms such as Telegram and Gab, and now the mainstream platform 'X' (formerly Twitter), which recently loosened its content moderation and platform policies.[33] This has enabled Australian RWEs to build a de-territorialised movement and connect with

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[32] Australian Associated Press, "Nazi salutes performed on steps of Victorian parliament as protesters clash over trans rights," *SBS News*, March 18, 2023, https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/nazi-salutes-performed-on-steps-of-victorian-parliament-as-protesters-clash-over-transgender-rights/yr7gzkevn.
[33] Finn McHugh, "Australian neo-Nazi Thomas Sewell on X after Elon Musk fires content moderators," *SBS News*, December 6, 2023, https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/notorious-australian-neo-nazi-appears-to-be-posting-on-x/jmppst9dp.

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fellow RWE globally. RWEs hold online forums and conversations, like, share and comment on each other's posts, and attack the various 'out-groups' they stand against. These range from politicians and academics to traditionally targeted out-groups like migrants, feminists and LGBTQ+ activists. Additional information on RWE online activities and their international connections can be found in the sections below which address a) iii and v of the Terms of Reference.

It is important to note that RWE is not exclusive to white Anglo-Saxon males. Since the introduction of multiculturalism in Australia, new migrants have maintained links with the politics of their homelands. This can result in far-right politics becoming central consolidating and organising features of their community identities, which can in turn spill over into RWE. A more detailed discussion of this dynamic is addressed in the section addressing Terms of Reference (a) (iii).

Threats Posed by RWE

ASIO lowered the overall national terrorism threat level from 'probable' to 'possible' in November 2022. In 2024 the Director General stated that other security threats, such as foreign interference, have surpassed terrorism as Australia's principal security threat.[34] But there remains a consensus among security agencies, extremism scholars and practitioners that political violence, including violent extremism and terrorism, remains a serious concern in Australia. There is increasing recognition that RWE poses a range of key threats to national security, community safety and democratic resilience that include, but are not limited to, manifestations of terrorist or political violence.[35]

The threats that RWE actors and movements pose in Australia are manifold and include the following interconnected hazards:

Violence: While to date no RWE motivated act of violence on Australian soil has been legally considered an act of terrorism, the capacity for violence of Australian far-right extremists has

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[34] Burgess, "ASIO Annual Threat Assessment 2024."
[35] Burgess, "ASIO Annual Threat Assessment 2024."

been well established. One of the worst RWE terrorist attacks in recent years was committed by an Australian man who killed 51 people at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, in March 2019. Phillip Galea, a Victorian man with ties to several far-right and RWE groups, was also convicted and sentenced to 12 years imprisonment for 'doing acts in preparation for, or planning, a terrorist act and for attempting to collect or make a document likely to facilitate a terrorist act.'[36] Several other RWE individuals, including within the leadership of NSN and EAM, have been charged with or convicted of other offences seemingly related to their political activities (e.g. violent assault, preparing explosives, violent threats) in recent years, although the courts did not always acknowledge the ideological and political motivations of these offences.[37] The NSN also engages in explicit and implicit violent rhetoric, with references to the national socialist regime and the Holocaust. It is known that Christchurch terrorist Brenton Tarrant contacted the group the Lads Society[38] (a progenitor to the NSN) and that initial efforts to recruit him were unsuccessful.

RWE political violence also 'often [has] fluid boundaries between hate crime and organised terrorism'. Because a lot of RWE violence manifests as hate crimes in addition to rarer instances of mass casualty attacks targeting the general population, its scope can often be underappreciated and may not be captured in the actions of identified movements. RWE also engage in what they call 'defensive' violence by taking part in rallies and protests where confrontation is likely with law enforcement and counter protesters.[39]

Far-right extremist ideology also has the strong potential to incite acts of violence by individuals through stochastic terrorism.[40] Stochastic terrorism is the public demonisation

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[36] Danny Tran, "Far-right terrorist Phillip Galea jailed for 12 years after plotting against 'Muslims and lefties' in Melbourne," *ABC News*, November 20, 2020, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-11-20/far-right-terror-plotter-phillip-galea-sentenced-in-melbourne/12903588.

[37] Australian Associated Press, "Neo-Nazis' sentences over attack on hikers don't reflect level of violence, Victorian prosecutor tells court," *The Guardian*, March 22, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2024/mar/22/neo-nazi-victoria-hiker-attack-charges-thomas-sewell-jacob-hersant.

[38] Patrick Begley, "Lads Society leader makes veiled violent threats, claims of attempted Christchurch shooter recruitment," *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 2, 2019, https://www.smh.com.au/national/threats-from-white-extremist-group-that-tried-to-recruit-tarrant-20190501-p51j5w.html.

[39] Sam Jackson, *Schema of right-wing extremism in the United States*, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2022.

[40] James Angove, "Stochastic terrorism: critical reflections on an emerging concept," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* (2024): 1-23.

of a particular group which then incites violence towards that group by other, typically lone, actors. Like Tarrant, such actors may not be affiliated with a particular group, but are inspired by key actors, movements, narratives and literature and seek to further RWE ideology through carrying out violent attacks.[41] RWE literature, such as *The Turner Diaries*, which refers to a day of reckoning known as the 'Day of the Rope' in which enemies are executed, or *Siege*, a collection of essays encouraging lone actor terrorism in order to precipitate race wars in multicultural societies,[42] have often been cited when RWE actors and movements commit or plan acts violence, including 'accelerationists' who wish to bring forth the collapse of the current socio-political order.[43]

In addition to incidents involving RWE actors' alleged and convicted criminal behaviour, it is important to note that there are challenges in determining exactly when the violence threshold is reached. Groups like the NSN, for example, in their online communications seek to draw a fine line between their extremist views and 'violent extremism', claiming that they are not violent and instead are unjustly persecuted for their beliefs. However, their far-right ideology is inherently hate-filled. It is both symbolically violent and can manifest as explicit violence against those targeted by its rhetoric and stated aims. Violent rhetoric or 'violent talk'[44] particularly in RWE online spaces, can help socialise individuals to violence by communicating values and norms. Violent rhetoric can also help establish in-group and out-group boundaries which identify and dehumanise potential targets for violence and valorise the violent individuals and in groups.

According to the Australian *Living Safe Together* program, violent extremism refers to 'a person or group who is willing to use violence; or advocates the use of violence by others, to

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[41] Jonathan Lewis, Joshua Molloy and Graham Macklin, "The Lineage of Violence: Saints Culture and Militant Accelerationist Terrorism," *GNET Insights*, April 27, 2023, https://gnet-research.org/2023/04/27/the-lineage-of-violence-saints-culture-and-militant-accelerationist-terrorism/.

[42] Bethan Johnson and Matthew Feldman, "Siege Culture After Siege: Anatomy of a Neo-Nazi Terrorist Doctrine," International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, July 2021, https://www.icct.nl/sites/default/files/2022-12/siege-culture-neo-nazi-terrorist-doctrine.pdf.

[43] Kieran Aarons, "Genealogy of Far-Right Accelerationism," (2023).

[44] Mario Peucker, Cécile Guerin, Thomas J. Fisher and Jacob Davey, "A Snapshot of Far-right Activity on Gab in Australia," May 2021, https://vuir.vu.edu.au/42091/1/A%2BSnapshot%2Bof%2B%2BFar-Right%2BActivity%2B%2Bon%2BGab%2Bin%2BAustralia_final.pdf.

achieve a political, ideological or religious goal.'[45] This suggests that RWE violence encompasses more than physical acts of violence and includes expressions and rhetoric that indicate willingness to use violence or advocate for it. '[I]n short, violent talk clearly plays an important role in terms of fomenting actual violence.'[46]

For example, the NSN's primary motivating ideology is to build a white ethno-state in Australia, expelling migrants and non-whites. This is inconceivable in a modern Australia defined by multiculturalism and could only occur through a systematic program of 'remigration' or ethnic cleansing, which is strongly alluded to by key NSN activists[47] who idealise and praise Hitler, his national socialist policies and the Holocaust. Members of the movement and its leaders cloak their deeper aims in calls for 'ending migration', which ties into a broader narrative borrowed from far-right actors overseas – the 'great replacement'[48] of whites by migrants from the developing world. Further information on role of the Great Replacement narrative and conspiracy theory is found in the section addressing Terms of Reference (a) (iii). To this end, focus is placed on fertility rates and tapping into deep-seated resentments of feminism,[49] which has brought women into the workforce and out of traditional roles as wives and mothers, which they argue has damaged the white race.

Threats to democratic principles and institutions: Violent threats also include 'soft violence'[50] or efforts to fray, erode or attack the cohesion and multiculturalism that are the hallmarks of Australia's national identity. The Australian government's *Living Safe Together* program highlights the fact that the threats of violent extremism, including RWE, go beyond actual violence to include threats to 'Australia's core values and principles, including human

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[45] "Get the facts", Living Safe Together, last modified April 17, 2020, https://www.livingsafetogether.gov.au/get-the-facts.

[46] Pete Simi and Steven Windisch, "The culture of violent talk: An interpretive approach," *Social sciences* 9, no. 7 (2020): 120.

[47] Nick McKenzie and Joel Tozer, "Inside Racism HQ: How home-grown neo-Nazis are plotting a white revolution," *The Age*, August 16, 2021, https://www.theage.com.au/national/inside-racism-hq-how-home-grown-neo-nazis-are-plotting-a-white-revolution-20210812-p58i3x.html.

[48] Mattias Ekman, "The great replacement: Strategic mainstreaming of far-right conspiracy claims," *Convergence* 28, no. 4 (2022): 1127-1143.

[49] Christine Agius, Alexandra Edney-Browne, Lucy Nicholas and Kay Cook, "Anti-feminism, gender and the far-right gap in C/PVE measures," *Critical Studies on terrorism* 15, no. 3 (2022): 681-705.

[50] Candyce Kelshall, "Soft violence, social radicalisation, and violent transnational social movements (VTSMs)," *The Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare* 3, no. 3 (2021): 144-150.

rights, the rule of law, democracy, equal opportunity and freedom'.[51] These threats to democracy have ideological, behavioural and social dimensions.

First, RWE is defined by its opposition to basic democratic principles of equal human dignity, egalitarianism and democratic governance. Many RWE groups espouse fascist beliefs and seek to, directly or indirectly, undermine and ultimately overthrow our democratic system to usher in an authoritarian, even fascist, ethno-nationalist regime through exclusivist appeals to race, ethnicity, nation and/or gender.[52]

Second, RWE threats to democracy do not only lie in the ideological outlook of RWE but can also manifest in certain *actions*. In addition to the January 6 insurrection discussed above, and the copycat actions it has elicited, far-right mobilisation in the local context can intimidate democratically elected representatives and thus illegitimately influence democratic decision-making processes.[53] This is in addition to the growing threat of violence against parliamentarians and candidates. For the first time the Australian Federal Police has set up a taskforce to protect federal politicians and candidates, prompted by growing threats from RWE and adjacent conspiracy-driven movements.[54]

There have also been concerns around the risk of RWE actors trying to infiltrate mainstream political parties. In 2018, extremists attempted to branch-stack both the NSW Nationals. Their aim was clearly laid out on social media in a now-deleted post: 'One of the ways to realise our goals in our lifetime is taking over an already existing party from the inside without anyone being the wiser.'[55] When it was exposed by investigative reporting that a NSW

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[51] "What is violent extremism?", Living Safe Together, accessed April 4, 2024, https://www.livingsafetogether.gov.au/Documents/what-is-violent-extremism.PDF.

[52] Ballsun-Stanton, Waldek, Droogan, Smith, Iqbal and Peucker, "Mapping Networks and Narratives of Online Right-Wing Extremists in New South Wales," 2.

[53] Mario Peucker, Ramon Spaaij, Debra Smith and Scott Patton, "Dissenting citizenship? Understanding vulnerabilities to right-wing extremism on the local level: a multilevel analysis of far-right manifestations, risk and protective factors in three local municipalities in Victoria," (2020): 1-48.

[54] Nour Haydar, "AFP Creates New Task Force ahead of Federal Election to Protect Politicians, Candidates," *ABC News*, March 30, 2022, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-03-30/afp-new-task-force-federal-election-protect-politicians/100952804.

[55] Alex Mann, "Manifesto Reveals Alt-Right's Plans to Go Mainstream after 'Infiltration' of NSW Young Nationals," *ABC Background Briefing*, October 13, 2018, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-10-13/alt-right-plans-shake-up-of-mainstream-politics-in-australia/10368972.

branch of the Young Nationals had been infiltrated by alt-right members,[56] the individuals were thrown out and the Nationals vowed to investigate and take preventative measures.[57]

More broadly, RWEs aim to shift the bounds of debate, or shift the 'Overton Window,' in order to normalise hate speech and make it acceptable to voice extremist hate-filled ideas with the objective of shaping the wider body politic and permeating mainstream political discourse.[58] Other activities of the NSN and other Australian RWEs, such as congregating in Jewish communities, pamphleting and protesting in public symbolic spaces on symbolic days in an attempt to capture headlines also help serve that goal.

Third, the RWE milieu in Australia has also created parallel online and offline communities. These parallel fringe communities not only oppose basic liberal-democratic principles but isolate their members from engagement with the rest of society. This isolation serves as a fundamental rejection of democratic processes of engagement and deliberation and cultivates 'a level of hostility to democratic conventions and institutions that in general exceeds... even the most permissive notion of an 'agonistic' public sphere.'[59]

In addition to online forums and communities which serve as reinforcing echo chambers, RWE white supremacist neo-Nazi groups like the NSN seek to establish parallel communities in the real world. They have created separate enclaves through gyms and 'fight club' style arrangements that are popular with a variety of alt-and far-right groups such as the Proud Boys[60] and has been important in the formation of paramilitary style recruitment and setting a fascist organisational ethos. The NSN has also sought to obtain land[61] in rural settings to

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[56] "Haircuts and Hate: The Rise of Australia's Alt-Right," *ABC Background Briefing*, October 14, 2018, https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/backgroundbriefing/haircuts-and-hate:-inside-the-rise-of-australias-alt-right/10365948.

[57] Mann, "Manifesto Reveals Alt-Right's Plans to Go Mainstream after 'Infiltration' of NSW Young Nationals."

[58] Lise Waldek, Debra Smith, Muhammad Iqbal and Julian Droogan, "Right-wing extremism weaponises democracy against itself," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, August 16, 2021, https://www.smh.com.au/national/right-wing-extremism-weaponises-democracy-against-itself-20210816-p58j5g.html.

[59] Mark Davis, "The online anti-public sphere," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 24, no. 1 (2021): 143-159.

[60] David Estcourt, "Inside the Melbourne boxing gym with a neo-Nazi underbelly," *The Age*, December 24, 2022, https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/inside-the-melbourne-boxing-gym-with-a-neo-nazi-underbelly-20221223-p5c8ga.html.

[61] Nick McKenzie, "Neo-Nazi probe: Australian Army launches investigation after discovering soldiers have links to extremist groups," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, March 18, 2023,

establish alternative white-only enclaves on which they can grow their movements and train. The far-right globally have sought to link their movements to rural settings and nature, drawing upon the *Völkisch* movement and the Hitler Youth, which emphasise physical fitness, outdoor activity and paramilitary training.

Recent studies further confirm conspiratorial epistemology within these parallel communities which puts them at odds with mainstream world views, consensus reality, democratic processes and expressions of dissent.[62] More broadly, these conspiratorial beliefs contribute to the 'transformational delegitimation,'[63] of democratic governance, the state and other institutions.

Community safety: Public stunts, protests and other actions of RWE groups create significant concerns around public and community safety as many people feel intimidated and/or threatened by the display of far-right, neo-Nazi or white supremacy ideologies, agendas and symbols. This applies in particular to those who identify with targeted communities such as the LGBTQ+, Jewish and Muslim communities and other minority groups. For these communities, the public presence of RWE groups is often perceived as a more immediate threat to physical safety.

Minority groups and women are more vulnerable to online targeting and victimisation by RWE actors and movements. Research has shown that far-right ideologies, including misogynistic and toxic masculinity groups, tend to organise themselves around themes of anti-feminism and male dominance in addition to anti-queer narratives.[64] This can create toxic and sometimes dangerous environments both online and offline for women, Jewish, Muslim and other cultural and ethnic minorities, and LGBTQ+ communities.[65] Aggression

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https://www.smh.com.au/national/soldiers-of-hate-army-investigates-neo-nazis-in-its-ranks-20230314-p5crvv.html.

[62] Mario Peucker and Ramón Spaaij, "Alternative epistemology in far-right anti-publics: a qualitative study of Australian activists," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* (2023): 1-22.

[63] Ehud Sprinzak, "The process of delegitimation: Towards a linkage theory of political terrorism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 3, no. 1 (1991): 50-68.

[64] Esli Chan, "Technology-facilitated gender-based violence, hate speech, and terrorism: a risk assessment on the rise of the incel rebellion in Canada," *Violence against women* 29, no. 9 (2023): 1687-1718.

[65] Jo Smith, "Bystander experiences of online gendered hate," in *The Palgrave handbook of gendered violence and technology*, eds. Anastasia Powell, Asher Flynn and Lisa Sugiura, Palgrave: London 2021: 395-413.

and violence are directed against these groups through various avenues including hate speech, slurs and threats of rape or death.[66] Gender trolling is another behaviour that is increasing, particularly towards women and trans people.[67] Online hate has resulted in individuals being placed in physical danger as well as having their personal information leaked – a form of doxxing.[68]

In a 2020 large-scale survey among Muslims Australians, 93% of respondents expressed concerns about RWE.[69] According to a 2021 study,[70] the local anti-mosque mobilisation in the regional town of Bendigo in the mid-2010s (which at a later stage also included RWE actors) had serious negative impacts on the sense of safety among the local Muslim community, with some of them feeling too unsafe to leave their homes alone or at night.

These feelings have been further exacerbated by the 2019 Christchurch terror attacks. According to a recent report of the Australian Human Rights Commission the vast majority of surveyed Australian Muslims (80%) stated, 'that this act of terror made them more afraid for their community.' Some noted the long-term effects of the attack, describing the emotional and mental toll the attack took on their everyday lives.[71]

RWE is a compelling and urgent threat to liberal democracies in its commitment to undemocratic, authoritarian and fascist modes of governance and the erosion or dismantling of universal human rights and dignity.[72] Recognising the efforts of RWE to shift politics and culture away from a shared commitment to liberal multicultural democracy is as important as ensuring that their efforts to undertake terrorist violence are disrupted.

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[66] Jacqueline Ryan Vickery and Tracy Everbach eds. *Mediating misogyny: Gender, Technology, and Harassment,* Cham: Springer Nature, 2018, 9-49.

[67] Karla Mantilla, "Gendertrolling: Misogyny adapts to new media," *Feminist studies* 39, no. 2 (2013): 563-570.

[68] Amanda Paananen and Arleigh J. Reichl, "Gendertrolls just want to have fun, too," *Personality and Individual Differences* 141 (2019): 152-156.

[69] Halim Rane, Adis Duderija, Riyad H. Rahimullah, Paul Mitchell, Jessica Mamone and Shane Satterley, "Islam in Australia: A national survey of Muslim Australian citizens and permanent residents," *Religions* 11, no. 8 (2020): 419.

[70] Peucker, Guerin, Fisher and Davey, "A Snapshot of Far-right Activity on Gab in Australia".

[71] "Sharing the Stories of Australian Muslims," Australian Human Rights Commission, last modified July 20, 2021, https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/race-discrimination/publications/sharing-stories-australian-muslims-2021.

[72] Khalil, *Rise of the Extreme Right: the new global extremism and the threat to democracy.*

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> *(a) the nature and extent of movements and persons holding extremist right wing views in Australia, with a particular focus on:*
>
> *(iii) links between individuals and groups with international movements*

The challenges and threats from RWE are an international issue. There has been upwards of a 320% increase in right-wing extremism globally from 2016 to 2021.[73] The United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee has released multiple threat assessments in recent years outlining the increasing concern of member states about the growth and threat of RWE and terrorism around the world.[74] RWE is on the rise across Five Eyes countries, Europe and Asia.[75] There is a growing trans-nationalisation of RWE that has linked Australian individuals and movements to international actors. There is also the trans-nationalisation and globalisation of RWE narratives, cultures and conceptualisation of identities.[76]

RWE and far-right movements have always cooperated across borders,[77] despite the conventional wisdom that they are usually nationally oriented and locally focused. For example, white supremacist individuals, groups and ideologies cross national borders through shared investments in so-called white heritage and culture. But they also look to other national and ethnic contexts for inspiration and validation of their ideologies. For example, white supremacist groups turn to exclusivist Hindu nationalism and the Hindutva movement. They reference the Indian caste system as an example to justify human hierarchies. They also cite Japan, a country white supremacists extol as an exemplar society that has maintained its racial purity and not succumbed to multiculturalism.[78]

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[73] United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, "Member States Concerned by the Growing and Increasingly Transnational Threat of Extremism Right-Wing Terrorism," CTED Trends Alert, April 2020, https://www.statewatch.org/media/documents/news/2020/apr/un-cted-trend-alert-right-wing-extremism-4-20.pdf.

[74] United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, "Member States Concerned by the Growing and Increasingly Transnational Threat of Extremism Right-Wing Terrorism."

[75] Khalil, *Rise of the Extreme Right: the new global extremism and the threat to democracy.*

[76] Counter Extremism Project, "Violent Right-Wing Extremism and Terrorism – Transnational Connectivity, Definitions, Incidents, Structures and Countermeasures," November 2020, https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/CEP%20Study_Violent%20Right-Wing%20Extremism%20and%20Terrorism_Nov%202020.pdf.

[77] Johannes Dafinger and Moritz Florin (eds), *A Transnational History of Right-Wing Terrorism: Political Violence and the Far Right in Eastern and Western Europe Since 1990,* Abingdon: Routledge, 2022.

[78] Vice News, "A Lot Of White Supremacists Seem To Have An Asian Fetish (HBO)," September 12, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ogjXbywmIT4.

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The United States has also become a major exporter of right-wing ideology and narratives. The centrality of US right-wing discourse among RWE movements is clearly borne out by the evidence. A recent study tracked the online posts of extremists from across the English-speaking world and found that extremists in Canada, Australia and New Zealand were almost as focused on divisive social and political issues in the US as they were on their own domestic issues. The study found that, 'what's happening in America has an out weighted effect on the English-speaking extremist landscape. Events which happen in America serve to energise and mobilise extremists internationally.'[79]

Trans nationalisation of white nationalism and white supremacy

There has been more frequent cooperation among white supremacist RWE actors and organisations across borders as well as a common conceptualisation and narrative of a shared struggle and shared goals that extend beyond national boundaries.[80] White supremacist and white nationalist RWEs are increasingly convinced that they must organise globally to meet global challenges.

One unifying narrative that has emerged is of a white civilisation and white race in decline, and the need to defend it.[81] As the propaganda material of Combat 18, a neo-Nazi brand that started in the United Kingdom puts it, 'Our National Socialist family now transcends national borders, we do not owe our allegiance to any nation, our only allegiance is to our race – The white race. Our countries are just geographical areas in which we just happen to live, but our race knows no national boundaries in this eternal struggle.'[82] This is ironic, given

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[79] Jacob Davey, "Global Perspectives on the Transnational Far-Right Online Connections," Conference presentation at the RUSI Global Perspectives on the Transnational Far-Right Threat and Response, November 3, 2021, https://rusi.org/events/conferences/global-perspectives-transnational-far-right-threat-and-response/session-two-online-connections.

[80] Counter Extremism Project, "Violent Right-Wing Extremism and Terrorism – Transnational Connectivity, Definitions, Incidents, Structures and Countermeasures."

[81] Kai Bierman et al, "The Brown Internationale," *Zeit Online*, 11 February 2021, https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/zeitgeschehen/2021-02/fascism-international-right-wing-extremism-neo-nazis-english/seite-2.

[82] Perry Barbara and Ryan Scrivens, "White Pride Worldwide: Constructing Global Identities Online," in *The Globalization of Hate: Internationalizing Hate Crime?*, eds. Jennifer Schweppe and Mark Austin Walters, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

that Combat 18 and similar neo-Nazi organisations have 'blood and soil' beliefs and anti-globalisation and anti-migration stances. But now, when RWEs conjure the slogan 'blood and soil', they are likely to use it in reference to their defence of a 'global white race' as much as to their own nation states.

There has also been evidence of direct links between Australian individuals and groups and international movements, regarding both their recruitment into these movements and coordinated plotting. Recent investigative reports have uncovered previously unknown connections between Australian RWEs and other international extremists, particularly in the United States.[83] For example, in 2023 a US-based member of Attomwafen Division, who was charged with plotting attacks on the power grid in the US state of Maryland, shared instructions on how to carry out similar attacks with an Australian far-right channel on Telegram and exchanged encrypted emails with Australian neo-Nazis. This documented exchange is a clear example of international communication and cooperation between extremist cells and individuals.[84]

There are also documented examples of US-based RWE extremist groups attempting to recruit individuals and form cells in Australia. The Base, a now largely defunct accelerationist neo-Nazi movement that has been listed as a proscribed terrorist organisation in Australia, is/was a relatively small paramilitary white supremacist group based in the US. The Base operated as a decentralised movement modelled on 'leaderless resistance', in which regional cells adhered to a shared ideology and common purpose but had limited contact. While the Base's main membership and activity was in the United States it also attempted to establish a presence in Canada, Europe, South Africa and Australia. Base members globally could access encrypted online chat rooms where they could engage virtually with others. They also had access to white supremacy materials and a large volume of PDF documents on practical

[83] Alex Mann and Kevin Nguyen, "The Base Tapes," ABC Background Briefing, March 26, 2021, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-03-26/the-base-tapes-secret-recordings-australian-recruitment/13255994
[84] Joey Watson, "US neo-Nazi accused of sniper plot appears to have shared instructions with Australian far-right figures," The Guardian, April 17, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/apr/17/us-neo-nazi-accused-of-sniper-plot-appears-to-have-shared-instructions-with-australian-far-right-figures?CMP=Share_AndroidApp_Other.

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and operational issues such as guerrilla warfare, survival skills, building firearms and chemical weapons and 'escape and evasion' tactics. The leader of the Base currently resides in St Petersburg, Russia.

The leader of the Base made connections with individuals in Australia via online forums and later by VOIP calls to discuss organisational plans and recruitment strategies within Australia. Investigative articles describe how these Australian individuals would serve as the core of a 'virtual franchise' in Australia who could then go out and find other recruits among the ranks of Australian RWEs – including one highschooler and another a former candidate for local political office.[85]

RWE among migrant communities

As previously noted, RWE is not only an issue in Western countries nor is it restricted to white Anglo-Saxon males. RWE manifests across and among Australia's various ethnicities and communities. Examples include Australian Croatian ultranationalists[86] drawing upon Ustaše fascist symbology, elements in the Greek community linked to Golden Dawn,[87] a Greek fascist movement, Serbian ultranationalists,[88] or the belief and promotion of Hindutva exclusivist nationalism within the Indian community.[89] Far-right ultranationalist activists aligned with the Putin regime including 'Aussie Cossack' Simeon Boikov allegedly launched a campaign of targeted hate and harassment of the Ukrainian ambassador to Australia.[90] Recently, ethnic-affiliated football clubs have also been sites of violence and far-right rhetoric in Australia. In 2022, a controversy arose from fans affiliated with Croatian

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[85] Mann and Nguyen, "The Base Tapes."
[86] Drew Cottle and Angela Keys, "Fascism in exile: Ustasha-linked organisations in Australia," in *Histories of Fascism and Anti-Fascism in Australia*, eds. Evan Smith, Jayne Persian and Vashti Jane Fox, Abingdon: Routledge, 2022, 115-139.
[87] Michael Safi, "Golden Dawn: Australian branch of far-right Greek party raises cash," *The Guardian*, September 29, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/29/golden-dawn-australian-branch-of-far-right-greek-party-raises-cash.
[88] John Elder, "Divided we fall," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, August 21, 2011, https://www.smh.com.au/national/divided-we-fall-20110820-1j3ir.html.
[89] Goldie Osuri, "Transnational bio/necropolitics: Hindutva and its avatars (Australia/India)," *Somatechnics 1*, no. 1 (2011): 138-160.
[90] Jessica Bahr and Tom Canetti, "Australian YouTuber reported to police by Ukrainian ambassador over alleged 'harassment campaign'," *SBS News*, January 7, 2023, https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/australian-youtuber-reported-to-police-by-ukrainian-ambassador-over-alleged-harassment-campaign/niawn7hp2.

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community affiliated clubs Sydney United 58 and Melbourne Knights when their members were giving Nazi salutes during games.[91]

The views held by sub-groups such as those listed above are inherently violent and grounded in ultra-nationalist far-right ideology. Ultranationalism within these communities has historically been framed in opposition to a perceived enemy, against whom significant historic animosity continues to play out. The objectives of these groups are typically focussed on either an enemy within Australia or externally. One of the earliest modern terrorist attacks in Australia, the 1972 George St bombing of a Yugoslav travel agency that injured 16 people,[92] was believed to have been carried out by a Ustaše group, and it is estimated that several hundred Croatian Australians fought in the Croatian war 1991-1995.[93]

Overseas conflicts and sectarian tensions also have the potential to spill over into local conflict. Violence in 2023 between Hindu nationalists and Sikhs is one of the latest manifestations of an ongoing overseas conflicts and tensions playing out in Australia.[94]

The extreme Hindu nationalist Hindutva ideology is considered a variant of RWE.[95] It seeks to dismantle India's multicultural and secular state and argues that India should be considered a solely Hindu nation. It espouses Hindu superiority and constructs an exclusionary Indian identity, extolling Hindus as 'real Indians' and casting non-Hindus, mainly Indian Muslims, as outsiders and usurpers.[96] Like European fascists, Hindutva adherents promote a version of 'blood and soil', arguing that being Hindu is 'a matter of race and blood'

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[91] Samantha Lewis, "How the Sydney United 58 controversy highlights 'old soccer' tensions at heart of 'new football'," *ABC News*, October 4, 2022, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-10-04/sydney-united-australia-cup-analysis/101498652.

[92] Kristy Campion, "The Ustasa in Australia: A review of right-wing Ustasa terrorism from 1963-1973, and factors that enabled their endurance," *Salus Journal* 6, no. 2 (2018): 37-58.

[93] Mark Aarons, *War criminals welcome: Australia, a sanctuary for fugitive war criminals since 1945,* Collingwood, Black Inc., 2020.

[94] Stephen Dziedzic, "Australian authorities on alert as Sikh-Hindu tensions over Khalistan separatist movement boil over in Sydney," *ABC News*, June 10, 2023, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-06-10/tensions-over-khalistan-separatist-movement-boil-over-in-sydney/102463024.

[95] Khushwant Singh, *The end of India*, New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2003.

[96] Eviane Leidig, "Hindutva as a variant of right-wing extremism," *Patterns of Prejudice* 54, no. 3 (2020): 215-237.

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geographically bound to India.[97] The embrace of Hindu nationalism in India has led to growing connections to other RWE and alt-right strains in addition to emboldening the extremist Hindutva movement globally.[98]

There has been a well-documented growth of Hindutva extremism in India and the communal violence it has engendered. Hindutva extremism and communal tensions have also spilled over into Australia.[99] Community leaders have raised alarms that divisions within the Indian-Australian community have grown. Sikh students were targeted in Sydney over tensions from the ongoing farmers protests and the Sikh separatist movement (which has its own history of political violence and terrorism), as Sikhs in Australia were seen as an extension of those activities in India.[100]

In 2022 men armed with bats and hammers attacked four Sikh students in Harris Park in western Sydney. In 2020 an Indian student in Australia was arrested as a suspect for a spree of anti-Sikh violence. He later pled guilty, served prison time and was deported.[101] Extreme Hindu nationalists use community online messaging groups to spread divisive rhetoric targeting Indian minority groups including Sikhs and Muslims.[102] State agencies are aware of ongoing tensions, incidents and future risks of violence, especially around protests and counter protests around diaspora Sikh separatist referendum voting, and have been working closely with the Indian community in Australia to address these challenges.[103]

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[97] Marzia Casolari, "Hindutva's foreign tie-up in the 1930s: Archival evidence," *Economic and Political Weekly* (2000): 218-228.

[98] Daly, Ghazi and Pundir, "How Far-Right Hindu Supremacy Went Global."

[99] Max Daly, Sahar Habib Ghazi and Pallavi Pundir, "How Far-Right Hindu Supremacy Went Global," *Vice News*, October 26, 2022, https://www.vice.com/en/article/n7z947/how-far-right-hindu-supremacy-went-global.

[100] Mostafa Rachwani, "Fears of escalating violence as online 'hate factories' sow division within Australia's Indian community," *The Guardian*, March 19, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/mar/19/fears-of-escalating-violence-as-online-hate-factories-sow-division-within-australias-indian-community.

[101] Daly, Ghazi and Pundir, "How Far-Right Hindu Supremacy Went Global."

[102] Rachwani, "Fears of escalating violence as online 'hate factories' sow division within Australia's Indian community."

[103] Malcolm Haddon, "De-escalating Hate: Sikh Separatism, Hindu Nationalism, and the Shadow of Communal Violence Among Australia's Indian Communities," AVERT International Research Symposium 2023, September 26, 2023, https://www.avert.net.au/airs2023-recordings-1.

Attempts to raise awareness of Hindu extremism by academics, civil society activists, journalists and politicians has also led to intense trolling, doxing, threats, lawsuits and targeted violence against these individuals by extreme Hindu nationalists and Hindutva extremists.[104] The South Asia Scholar Activist Collective has even resorted to creating a 'troll survival guide' called Hindutva Harassment Field Manual to deal with the harassment and threats of violence. This tactic is not exclusively to used by Hindu extremists however. Harassment and targeted violence against experts and community activists who seek to raise awareness of RWE is a common intimidation tactic of RWE movements and individuals across the spectrum.[105]

There are additional dynamics at play when it comes to migrant communities that do not have ongoing conflicts or communal tensions in their home countries or that have a longer history of migration. Numerous studies of migrant communities have indicated that as the physical and familial connection to a homeland fades, communities often become increasingly focused on a memory of their homeland that no longer exists.[106] Ultranationalism has been a consolidating bond for these communities and serves to preserve an image of an idealised past and homeland.

In addition to personal and networked linkages across RWE movements, organisations, national histories and contexts, RWE extremists are linked globally through shared elements of RWE culture and shared conspiracy theories.

Transnational conspiracy theories

Belief in various conspiracy theories also unites RWE across borders. The QAnon movement, a US-centric right-wing pro-Trump extremist conspiracy movement, has steadily gained a

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[104] Daly, Ghazi and Pundir, "How Far-Right Hindu Supremacy Went Global."
[105] Annemarie van de Weert, "Between extremism and freedom of expression: Dealing with non-violent right-wing extremist actors," Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2021, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-10/ran_dealing_with_non-violent_rwe_actors_082021_en.pdf.
[106] Anh Hua, "Diaspora and cultural memory," *Diaspora, memory, and identity: A search for home*, ed. Vijay Agnew, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005: 191-208.

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following all over the world by adapting to local conditions and preoccupations.[107] Support for QAnon grew in Australia thanks to various affordances of online platforms, Australia's strict lockdown response to the pandemic and through its cross over with anti-vaccination and anti-lockdown movements.[108] One analysis found that Australia was the fourth-largest producer of QAnon content worldwide.[109] Anti-Semitic New World Order conspiracy theories that are progenitor conspiracies to QAnon also permeate RWE movements globally.

The global spread and belief in the Great Replacement conspiracy theory among RWEs across the world serves as another example. The Great Replacement conspiracy theory argues that white Europeans are being replaced by non-white immigrants from Africa and the Middle East, and the result will be the erasure of European culture through the 'Islamification' of European societies. An entire political and ideological movement emerged that was centred on the Great Replacement conspiracy theory: Génération Identitaire, or Generation Identity (GI).

GI, and the broader Identitarian movement it evolved from, advocates for the preservation of homogeneous ethno-cultural countries and is against migration and 'cultural mixing'. The movement promulgates the idea that multiculturalism is a scam and that integration and assimilation are impossible. The Identitarian movement has also made inroads in Australia.[110] Though GI describes itself as a non-violent patriotic nationalist movement, undercover investigations revealed that GI members were involved in and advocated for violence.[111] GI not only frames immigration as a type of invasion, its solution of 'remigration' is a call to action to engage in forced displacement and has directly incited violence.

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[107] Frida Ghitis, "QAnon is an American Invention, but it has become a Global Plague," *The Washington Post*, March 10, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/03/10/qanon-japan-germany-colombia-conspiracy-theories-disinformation/.
[108] Van Badham, "QAnon: How the Far-Right Cult Took Australia Down a 'Rabbit Hole' of Extremism," *The Guardian*, November 14, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/nov/14/qanon-how-the-far-right-cult-took-australians-down-a-rabbit-hole-of-extremism.
[109] Aoife Gallagher, Jacob Davey and Mackenzie Hart, "The genesis of a conspiracy theory," *Institute for Strategic Dialogue Report*, London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2020.
[110] Imogen Richards, "A philosophical and historical analysis of "Generation Identity": Fascism, online media, and the European new right," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 34, no. 1 (2022): 28-47.
[111] "Generation Hate," *Al Jazeera*, December 10, 2018, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/12/10/what-is-generation-identity.

Great Replacement ideas have featured in at least four recent right-wing terrorist mass shootings, including the attack against the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 2018 which killed 11 people, the El Paso, Texas mass shooter who killed 23 people, the 2022 mass shooting in a predominantly African American community in Buffalo, New York and it played a part in the motivation behind the 2019 Christchurch attack. The title of Brenton Tarrant's 74-page manifesto was, in fact, 'The Great Replacement'.[112]

Pictures of Tarrant's weapons, which he posted on his Facebook page days before the attack, referenced an adjacent white replacement conspiracy theory out of the United States. His weapons had 'the 14s' painted on them, which is a reference to a 14-word slogan written by the American neo-Nazi David Lane, well known among white supremacists for reflecting their existential concerns around the preservation of the white race. Tarrant also made donations to GI branches in Austria and France.[113]

Culture

Though formal cross-border organisational ties and networking are important aspects of the globalisation of RWE, equally important are the transnational cultural, music and sporting events and international speaking tours and conventions that bind RWE actors and movements. Music is an important aspect of the globalisation and transnational coordination of these movements and influencers. Sharing and supporting extremist music online and attending music festivals in real life are important means of networking, building solidarity as well as contributing to ideological convergence. Music festivals and rallies from Germany to Greece to Ukraine help establish links across countries and serve as safe spaces for RWEs to loudly '*Sieg Heil*' to death metal or racist rap.[114]

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[112] "Report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Terrorist Attack on Christchurch Mosques on 15 March," November 26, 2020, www.christchurchattack.royalcommission.nz.
[113] "Report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Terrorist Attack on Christchurch Mosques on 15 March."
[114] "Inside a Neo Nazi Music Festival: Decade of Hate," Vice, September 19 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zKX9OjNy_NI.

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Participation in sports has many positive aspects and can even serve as a protective factor against engagement in violent extremism and other types of anti-social behaviour.[115] However, sports can also serve as a recruiting mechanism for violent extremism groups and exposure to RWE ideas.[116] Mixed martial arts (MMA) has emerged as the sport *du jour* for RWE and there are subcultures within the sport that serve as recruitment and radicalisation grounds for extremist organisations.[117] The sport has also served as a forum for international networking and connection. RWE groups in different countries organise and converge at international MMA tournaments, blending martial arts, sport, merchandising and extremist ideology.[118]

Medievalism Online

Medievalism is the appropriation of medieval European history to create shared white identity, heritage and culture. Though they are a misappropriation of history, medievalist historical narratives have been used to lend credence to violent white masculinity and white nationalism espoused by groups like the NSN in Australia and other neo-Nazi groups around the world. RWE medievalism has the capacity to contribute to real violence as actors are encouraged by online materials and social relationships (online and offline) to see themselves as warriors for a white future, inspired by a white past.

Medievalism is rife in RWE meme culture, manifestos and political writing, and on both alternative platforms such as Telegram and Gab and mainstream platforms like YouTube which tends to attract younger demographics, particularly attracting primary and secondary

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[115] Amelia Johns, Michele Grossman and Kevin McDonald, ""More Than a Game": The Impact of Sport-Based Youth Mentoring Schemes on Developing Resilience toward Violent Extremism," *Social Inclusion*, 2, no. 2(2014): 57-70.

[116] Julia Handle and Sophie Scheuble, "The role of sports in violent right-wing extremist radicalisation and P/CVE," *Radicalisation Awareness Network*, 2021, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-04/ran_role_of_sports_in_violent_right-wing_extremist_radica_pcve_2021_en.pdf.

[117] Tim Hume and Tom Bennett, "Neo-Nazi Fight Clubs: How the Far-Right Uses MMA to Spread Hate," *Vice News*, November 2, 2021, https://www.vice.com/en/article/7kbpxq/neo-nazi-fight-clubs-how-the-far-right-uses-mma-to-spread-hate.

[118] Karim Zidan, "RAM's Revival and the Ongoing Struggle against MMA's Far-Right Fight Clubs," *The Guardian*, November 27, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2019/nov/27/rams-revival-and-the-ongoing-struggle-against-mmas-far-right-fight-clubs.

school students.[119] Therefore, interest in and discussion of European medieval history and culture online is highly likely to bring mainstream audiences, including young people, into contact with RWE perspectives and ideologies through mainstream online platforms.

For example, one YouTube channel highlights how a common interest in history can bring mainstream people into contact with RWE beliefs and ideologies in online environments. The channel homepage describes it as 'a history channel which focuses on the pagan religions of ancient Europe' but it has promoted recognisably RWE content, including 'Aryan Invasion' merchandise that openly features the swastika. Comments from viewers include references to antisemitic and anti-left-wing conspiracy theories. The channel is also run by an individual who holds reported ties to RWE groups, including the fascist UK National Front and GI.

Books

Books are another means for RWEs to disseminate their ideas and propaganda.[120] This includes through digital publishing on mainstream platforms such as Amazon and through book review sites such as *Goodreads* where commercial algorithms have been shown to draw audiences into engaging with significant amounts of RWE material.[121]

RWE fiction is a particularly powerful mode of extremist ideological dissemination as it can evade censors and gives its authors plausible deniability against accusations of inciting violence through the creation of imaginative scenarios that project RWE ideologies into fictional narratives and characters with which readers can identify. Fiction can also serve as an effective means of influencing people who would not be reached by political tracts.[122]

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[119] The AVERT Research Network, "Submission to the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee Inquiry into Extremism In Victoria," attachment 3, 27 May 2022,
https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/490d02/contentassets/eb5e56d74963429da457fffd03844368/attachment-documents/017_attach3_final-avert-research-network_redacted.pdf.

[120] Jacob Aasland Ravndal, "From bombs to books, and back again? Mapping strategies of right-wing revolutionary resistance," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 46, no. 11 (2023): 2120-2148; Michael, G. "Blueprints and Fantasies: A Review and Analysis of Extremist Fiction," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 33, no. 2, (2009): 149–70.

[121] Geoff Boucher and Helen Young, "Digital Books and the Far Right," *Continuum* 37, no. 1, (2023): 140–52.

[122] George Michael. "Blueprints and fantasies: A review and analysis of extremist fiction," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 33, no. 2 (2010): 149-170.

Two of the most influential RWE publications today are novels published in the 1970s: *The Turner Diaries* and *Le Camp des Saints*. *The Turner Diaries* describes a guerrilla insurgency against the US government and has directly inspired terrorist acts that have led to the deaths of hundreds of people. It is considered the 'murderous bible of the far-right' and continues to inspire hate-based terror groups and anti-democratic political activity.[123] *The Camp of the Saints* is similarly widely read, not only in RWE circles, and influenced Renaud Camus, the author of the 'Great Replacement' conspiracy theory' that has been adopted by the global far-right.[124] Both novels continue to circulate widely online .

More recent fiction, such as *Harassment Architecture*, and *The Siege*, an collection of essays and commentary, are influential in accelerationist circles.[125] A significant and growing number of recent novels influenced by Pierce and Raspail, often written by authors linked to militias and/or 'prepper' survivalist subcultures, depict social collapse scenarios that promote accelerationist viewpoints and typically align with RWE ideologies even when they do not actively call for violence. These books are typically self-published and circulate in the mainstream via commercial ebook platforms (where some are bestsellers) and as PDFs and are sometimes promoted through RWE social media.[126]

Additionally, engagement with popular culture, through social media discussion and audience (fan) forums, has been part of the RWE online environment since at least the early twenty-first century. For example, there have been forums dedicated to 'High Fantasy and Lord of the Rings' on the notorious white pride website *Stormfront* where the aim was to recruit people interested in the films to white nationalism by capitalising on what was called the 'white aesthetic' of Peter Jackson's block-buster film trilogy.

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[123] J. M. Berger, "The Turner Legacy: The Storied Origins and Enduring Impact of White Nationalism's Deadly Bible," *Evolutions in Counter-Terrorism*, 1, (2020): 19–54.
[124] Corina Stan, "Invasion and Replacement Fantasies: Jean Raspail's The Camp of the Saints and the French Far Right," in *The Palgrave Handbook of European Migration in Literature and Culture*, eds. Corina Stan and Charlotte Sussman, Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023: 37–59.
[125] Mike Ma, *Harassment Architecture* (Independently Published, 2019); Michael Loadenthal, "Feral fascists and deep green guerrillas: infrastructural attack and accelerationist terror," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 15, no. 1 (2022): 169-208.
[126] Boucher and Young, "Digital Books and the Far Right."

RWE engagement with *The Lord of the Rings* and J R R Tolkien's entire oeuvre go back to the 1980s, but the franchise has been increasingly used to mainstream RWE positions and talking points in recent years. This was most visible in 2022 when casting of actors of colour in Amazon's *The Rings of Power* television series was leveraged to incite international outrage.[127] 'Outrage events' of this kind, which often centre on casting actors of colour in roles or productions seen as white, western heritage and cultural property (often these have some link to medievalism), operate across different parts of the complex online environment, and have potential to draw mainstream audience members into RWE spaces through mainstream media coverage of these controversies.

> (a) the nature and extent of movements and persons holding extremist right wing
>   views in Australia, with a particular focus on:
> (iv) how individuals progress to committing acts of violence

There is no one pathway of radicalisation to violent extremism and terrorism; it is a highly idiosyncratic process and involves a mixture of psycho-social factors and societal and political environmental dynamics. However, in a general sense, certain pathways can be identified. This submission will focus on two influencing factors that can help explain how individuals progress to committing acts of violence that are present in the Australian context in relation RWE: masculinities and misogyny and the role of emotion, in particular, anger.

Masculinities and Misogyny

The concept of masculinity, understood here as 'the social construction of what it is to be a man'[128] defines the social expectations of manhood and the social structuring of hierarchies based on that understanding. Participants in violent extremist groups are often men, but beyond this, the origins, ideologies, internal processes and means of recruitment of these

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[127] Helen Young, "The Rings of Power is suffering a racist backlash for casting actors of colour – but Tolkien's work has always attracted white supremacists," *The Conversation*, September 8, 2022, https://theconversation.com/the-rings-of-power-is-suffering-a-racist-backlash-for-casting-actors-of-colour-but-tolkiens-work-has-always-attracted-white-supremacists-189963.

[128] Tristan S. Bridges and Michael Kimmel, "Engaging Men in the United States: Soft Essentialism and the Obstacles to Coherent Initiatives in Education and Family Policy," in *Men and Masculinities Around the World: Transforming Men's Practices*, eds. Elisabetta Ruspini, Jeff Hearn, Bob Pease and Keith Pringlepp, New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011: 159-173.

groups are tied in powerful ways to masculinity.[129] That is, they are tied to the political, cultural and economic relations of many men's lives, to the influential ideologies about men and gender and to the narratives about men's roles and position in society.

The deep societal change resulting from the decline of the welfare state and key societal and economic changes brought about by free market economics discussed in earlier sections has led to a decline in jobs that traditionally benefited men, greater competition and lack of job security. The notion of the job for life, a guaranteed pathway to middle-management and the possibility of purchasing a home on a single income are less and less possible. This is reflected in far-right preoccupations with the role of women and the push for the domestication of women and a hatred of feminism.[130]

Masculinities defined by misogyny play integral roles in the power of extremist groups' narratives and ideology, their recruitment processes and their propensity to engage in acts of violence.[131] Misogyny provides a 'linking thread, a kind of fuse, along which violence runs'[132] and connects male supremacy, alt-right, far-right, fascist and white supremacist ideologies.[133] Misogynists view women's efforts for equal rights as a threat to men's status. They believe that feminism has gone 'too far' and has begun to discriminate against men. This aligns with far-right and RWE ideologies which identify women and minority efforts at equality as threats to 'traditional values' and the cause of a perceived loss of male prestige.

Deeply held beliefs of male entitlement and a perceived right to pursue 'justice' through violence has been linked to individuals' participation in extremist communities – notably the

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[129] Joshua M. Roose, Michael Flood, Alan Greig, Mark Alfano and Simon Copland, *Masculinity and violent extremism*, London: Palgrave, 2022.

[130] Joshua M. Roose, *The new demagogues: Religion, masculinity and the populist epoch*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2020.

[131] Syed Haider, "The shooting in Orlando, terrorism or toxic masculinity (or both?)," *Men and Masculinities* 19, no. 5 (2016): 555-565; Melissa Johnston and Jacqui True, "Misogyny & violent extremism: Implications for preventing violent extremism," (2019).

[132] Cynthia Cockburn, "Gender relations as causal in militarization and war: A feminist standpoint," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 12, no. 2 (2010): 139-157.

[133] Aja Romano, "How the alt-right's sexism lures men into white supremacy," *Vox*, April 26, 2028, https://www.vox.com/culture/2016/12/14/13576192/alt-right-sexism-recruitment

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far right.[134] There are feelings of 'aggrieved entitlement'[135] amongst some men who feel that the privileges once attached to manhood no longer exist.[136] These feelings can be used as justification for acts of violence, as individuals attempt to reclaim lost masculinity and its perceived benefits.[137]

However, the challenges are deeper than this. For some men, no sense of entitlement exists at all. Men on these stagnating or downward social trajectories are increasingly unlikely to attract partners, resulting in higher levels of singledom and, as in the case of 'involuntary celibates' or 'Incels', sexual frustration driven by anger and resentment. These individuals within incel communities also very often share the misogynistic and racist views with the far right.[138]

There is a gendered political psychology of extremism.[139] The pull factors of an extremist ideology such as the identity, camaraderie, community, meaning and purpose – as well as the obstacles to obtaining these things – are all gendered. This means that individuals who already have gender beliefs such as misogyny, may be more susceptible to engagement with extremist movements. Research has identified that misogyny is a factor in extremist involvement, making it both a gateway to extremist ideologies and a warning sign of vulnerability to radicalisation.[140] Some studies have shown that support for violence against

[134] Simon Cottee, "Incel (E) motives: Resentment, shame and revenge," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 44, no. 2 (2020): 93-114; Bruce Hoffman, Jacob Ware and Ezra Shapiro, "Assessing the threat of incel violence," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 43, no. 7 (2020): 565-587.

[135] Michael Kimmel, *Angry white men: American masculinity at the end of an era*, New York: Nation Books, 2017.

[136] Michael S. Kimmel, "Globalization and its mal (e) contents: The gendered moral and political economy of terrorism," *International Sociology* 18, no. 3 (2003): 603-620; Shannon Zimmerman, "The ideology of incels: Misogyny and victimhood as justification for political violence," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 36, no. 2 (2024): 166-179.

[137] Alison J. Marganski, "Making a murderer: The importance of gender and violence against women in mass murder events," *Sociology Compass* 13, no. 9 (2019): e12730; Joshua Roose, "'Ideological masculinity' that drives violence against women is a form of violent extremism," *The Conversation*, May 25, 2018, https://theconversation.com/ideological-masculinity-that-drives-violence-against-women-is-a-form-of-violent-extremism-99603.

[138] Robin Mamié, Manoel Horta Ribeiro and Robert West, "Are anti-feminist communities gateways to the far right? Evidence from Reddit and YouTube," in *Proceedings of the 13th ACM Web Science Conference 2021*, 2021: 139-147

[139] Michael Kimmel, *Healing from Hate*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018.

[140] Pablo Castillo Díaz and Nahla Valji, "Symbiosis of misogyny and violent extremism," *Journal of International Affairs* 72, no. 2 (2019): 37-56.

women is a stronger indicator of support for violent extremism than religiosity, age, gender, education, employment or geographic location.[141]

Ideologically, misogynists are more likely to find extremist ideologies appealing. Men have turned online and found communities of likeminded actors who they may never otherwise have encountered face to face, resulting in the formation of an online ecosystem[142] driven by a deeply visceral emotional response to social change amongst those men who do not perceive themselves to be doing well - a cresting space for RWE and anti-women grifters such as misogynistic influencer Andrew Tate. Individuals with misogynist values are not only more vulnerable to extremist ideologies, they are also more likely to be exposed to such ideologies. Individuals who already have a misogynistic bias, in just few clicks, can find themselves consuming extremist content.

Emotional Drivers: Anger

The emotional pitch of RWE messaging is highly calibrated and framed to capture anger. Anger is a common emotion that is primarily personal but can be effectively mobilised toward societal issues. The core drivers of anger as an emotion are disempowerment and associated feelings of shame, humiliation and grief resulting from unfairness, injury and frustration. Research demonstrates that when there is a gap between expected and actual life trajectories, a process of shattering can occur.[143] This can result in the search for an alternate source of meaning, where suffering makes sense.

This search driven by anger can then lead to hatred, resentment, blame, the desire to hurt and punish, avenge perceived wrongs and reclaim a subordinated manhood. This phenomenon used to be limited to younger men. However, we are increasingly seeing a cohort of radicalized and angry men and more recently, women, in middle age.[144]

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[141] Johnston and True "Misogyny & Violent Extremism."
[142] Manoel Horta Ribeiro, Jeremy Blackburn, Barry Bradlyn, Emiliano De Cristofaro, Gianluca Stringhini, Summer Long, Stephanie Greenberg and Savvas Zannettou, "The evolution of the manosphere across the web," in *Proceedings of the international AAAI conference on web and social media* 15, (2021): 196-207.
[143] Isaac A. Friedman, "Burnout in teachers: Shattered dreams of impeccable professional performance," *Journal of clinical psychology* 56, no. 5 (2000): 595-606.
[144] Michael Jensen, "The Link Between Age and Extremism," *Generations*, March 15, 2023.

Consequently, we are seeing status frustration combined with a sense of nostalgia for a time and place in which men were successful and had a pathway toward a guaranteed upward economic and social trajectory.

Research based on interviews with Australian men revealed that over half experienced anger at least weekly, with over three quarters of men experiencing anger at least monthly.[145] Over a third of men discussed wider societal injustice as driving their anger. Hatred linked to anger, whilst rejected by the majority, was experienced by almost half of the respondents as due to an experience of personal injustice or maltreatment by another. This is precisely what extremist narratives target. A sense of having been mistreated or slighted is a core mobilising element for the attraction to extremist narratives, as they can help make sense of these complex emotions. Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count Analysis reveals that anger and hatred is critical and central to the messaging of violent extremist groups, terrorists and their narratives. Such groups are also adept at framing violence through a defensive, rather than offensive lens, asserting that any attack, no matter how violent, is righteous and just.[146]

> (a) the nature and extent of movements and persons holding extremist right wing views in Australia, with a particular focus on:
> (v) the role of the online environment in promoting extremism

A growing body of evidence demonstrates that the internet can be an important factor in facilitating radicalisation to violent extremism. However, the concept of online radicalisation itself is contested as there is a complex interplay between online and offline factors in the radicalisation process[147] which is neither homogeneous nor linear. Online radicalisation, recruitment and mobilisation occur across all types of digital platforms, though some platforms offer more affordances that facilitate this process. Violent extremists also use many different online platforms for various operational, recruitment and propaganda purposes. Therefore, the signals of violent extremist expression online can look different

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[145] Joshua Roose, Michael Flood and Mark Alfano, "Challenging the use of masculinity as a recruitment mechanism in extremist narratives," *Department of Justice and Community Safety* (2020).
[146] Roose, Flood and Alfano, "Challenging the use of masculinity as a recruitment mechanism in extremist narratives,"; Roose, Flood, Greig, Alfano and Copland, *Masculinity and violent extremism*.
[147] Lydia Khalil, "Digital Threats to Democracy Dialogue: summary report," (2023).

depending on the platform. It is also important to note that online extremist activity, networking and extremist content consumption can, though does not necessarily, lead to offline action. In most cases, being extremist online does *not* lead to violent action offline.[148] Additionally, terrorist or extremist violence is not the only harm that is concerning or negatively impacting democracies as a result of online extremist content and ecosystems. A focus on violence obscures broader challenges to social cohesion and democracy as well as the cumulative ill effects that engaging with extremist content and within online extremist communities can have on interpersonal relationships and community relations.

However, research evidence also demonstrates that the internet does play an increasingly prominent role in individuals' involvement in extremist movements. For many RWEs today, the internet is where they first encounter extreme ideologies and communities. As one academic review of the internet and extremism summarised, 'Today, the internet is no longer just one part of the spectrum of extremist activism – it has become a primary operational environment, in which political ideologies are realized, attacks planned, and social movements made.'[149] The internet has also helped transform the identity and purpose of local RWE groups and individuals, facilitating its trans-nationalisation and the interchange between various RWE strands. It has allowed them to more easily connect and cross between political and ideological goals, narratives, strategies and subcultures.[150] In the post-COVID world, increased engagement with extremism, conspiracy and hateful rhetoric in online spaces has increasingly contributed to radicalisation and aggression.[151]

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[148] Ibid.
[149] Charlie Winter, Peter Neumann, Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Magnus Ranstorp, Lorenzo Vidino and Johanna Fürst, "Online extremism: research trends in internet activism, radicalization, and counter-strategies," *International Journal of Conflict and Violence (IJCV)* 14 (2020): 1-20.
[150] Khalil, *Rise of the Extreme Right: the new global extremism and the threat to democracy.*
[151] See, for example: Heather Alaniz, Kimberly D. Dodson and Jared R. Dmello, "Race, rallies, and rhetoric: How Trump's political discourse contributed to the capitol riot," *Journal of Criminal Justice and Law*, 5, no. 1 (2021): 22-39; Sophia Moskalenko, B. S. Burton, J. Fernández-Garayzábal González and M. M. Bloom, "Secondhand conspiracy theories: The social, emotional and political tolls on loved ones of QAnon followers," *Democracy and Security* 19, no. 3 (2023): 231-250; Neil Shortland, Elias Nader, Nicholas Imperillo, Kyrielle Ross and Jared Dmello, "The interaction of extremist propaganda and anger as predictors of violent responses," *Journal of interpersonal violence* 36, no. 3-4 (2021).

The rise of the Islamic State awoke policymakers and the public to the use of online platforms by terrorist groups and the role of the internet in violent extremism. But the internet was simultaneously having an enormous impact on the extreme right as well. RWEs were some of the earliest adopters of internet technology, recognising its huge potential as a communications and mobilisation tool.[152] The US-based Anti-Defamation League (ADL) reported as early as 1983 that American white supremacist groups were among the first to use dial-up bulletin board systems[153] and they remain active and innovative actors in online spaces.

Despite efforts to de-platform them, RWEs still have a presence on mainstream social media platforms as these have served as very effective tools for RWEs to disseminate propaganda and narratives, build communities, communicate with others that share their ideologies and to recruit new members. Research has shown that 40% of all terrorism-related material is shared via social media.[154] Those that have been de-platformed have migrated to alternative social media sites with little to no content moderation such as Gab and Telegram. RWEs are also active on unmoderated forums and chan sites.

Internet culture and far-right culture have always been intertwined and often overlap. What is part of one becomes a part of the other. Modern RWE expression and culture is heavily dependent on the internet for its aesthetics and tone, especially through the use of memes. Memes are an effective way to communicate and increase receptiveness to extremist ideas, identify the like-minded and even spur violence, all under the guise of plausible deniability. Memes, which are often ironic, humorous or both, are successful at engaging people in extremist content because it is difficult to discern intent online – posts could be facetious or serious, or both.[155] This ambiguity is a fundamental aspect of online culture and one that

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[152] Maura Conway, Ryan Scrivens and Logan McNair, "Right-wing extremists' persistent online presence: History and contemporary trends," *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism* (2019): 1-24.
[153] Lynne Ianniello, "Anti-Defamation League press release," 1985, https://ia800203.us.archive.org/13/items/ComputerizedNetworksOfHate/ADL_news_release.pdf.
[154] Megan Stubbs-Richardson, Jessica Hubbert, Sierra Nelson, Audrey Reid, Taylor Johnson, Gracyn Young and Alicia Hopkins, "Not Your Typical Social Media Influencer: Exploring the Who, What, and Where of Islamic State Online Propaganda," *International Journal of Cyber Criminology* 14, no. 2 (2020): 479-496.
[155] Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner, *The ambivalent internet: Mischief, oddity, and antagonism online,* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017.

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helps spread extremist views. Known as Poe's law, the concept is that without a clear indicator of a poster's intent, a parody of an extreme view can be misinterpreted as a sincere expression of that very position. Additionally, because modern RWE has developed alongside online culture writ large, it can be difficult to discern what is extremism and what is just trolling – the lawlessness, ironic, chaotic nature of many online spaces.

Participating in trolling, shitposting and subversive dark humour serves another purpose. It fosters belonging among online extremist communities.[156] Transgressive, supposedly edgy humour strengthens collective identity and bonds between anonymous and atomised online actors. They are all in on the joke while the rest of us are left offended or wondering if they are serious.

This is most exemplified in the chan (short for channel) sites that first began in 2003 and were referenced in the Christchurch Royal Commission. Chan sites were foundational to the modern internet. They were 'the original incubators for a huge number of memes and behaviours that we now consider central to mainstream internet culture'.[157] Much of the content is about run of the mill topics but chans were 'lawless by design'.[158] The logic and affordances of the sites made them synonymous with bad behaviour and an unaccountable, ironic, nihilistic, anything-goes culture that merged all too easily with RWE ethos. Chan sites were responsible for the internet's biggest hoaxes and cyberbullying incidents, and for hosting its most abhorrent and vile content. They soon came to be associated with a string of mass shootings by RWEs, including the Christchurch attacker, as the killers would spend copious amounts of time engaging with chan board content and its community. Chans were also where many RWE mass shooters, including Tarrant, would later post their manifestos.

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[156] Lisa Bogerts and Maik Fielitz, "The visual culture of far-right terrorism," *Global Network on Extremism and Technology*, (2020).

[157] Caitlin Dewy, "Absolutely Everything You Need to Know to Understand 4chan, the Internet's Own Bogeyman," *The Washington Post*, September 25, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2014/09/25/absolutely-everything-you-need-to-know-to-understand-4chan-the-internets-own-bogeyman/.

[158] Matthew Prince, "Terminating Service for 8chan," *Cloudfare Blog*, May 8, 2019, https://blog.cloudflare.com/terminating-service-for-8chan/.

For individuals who become radicalised into RWE, it is not just the content that appeals, but the community that comes with it. Finding a sense of community and belonging is a strong motivating factor for involvement in violent extremism. Especially since many traditional community forums and spaces are decreasing IRL or 'in real life.' As more time is spent online, more communities are found online. One doesn't need to travel, formally sign up to an organisation or even attend a meeting to feel and be part of a network or community. Rather, individuals and groups can engage in an extremist movement through 'the connective tissue' of the internet.[159]

This is especially true for RWE violent lone actors. They are called 'lone actors' because they are often socially isolated, acting of their own volition and seemingly unconnected to any broader movement, however, many of these attackers have emerged out of their enmeshment with RWE online cultures and communities.[160] Their lone action belies their interconnectedness to a broader movement facilitated by the internet, making it more difficult to distinguish between individual action and networked provocation.[161]

For example, Brenton Tarrant, though he acted alone, was deeply enmeshed in these digital worlds. The Christchurch Royal Commission report details just how much:

> 'He was... an avid internet user and online gamer... his relationships with others have been limited and superficial... his limited personal engagement with others left considerable scope for influence from extreme right-wing material, which he found on the internet... As a child he had unsupervised access to the internet from a computer in his bedroom. He spent much of his free time at school accessing the internet on school computers. In 2017, he told his mother that he had started using the 4chan internet message board when he was 14 years old... [As he got older] [w]e have no doubt that he visited right-wing internet forums, subscribed to right-wing channels on

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[159] Weiyi Cai and Simone Landon, "Attacks by White Extremists Are Growing. So Are Their Connections," *The New York Times*, April 3, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/04/03/world/white-extremist-terrorism-christchurch.html.
[160] Bart Schuurman, Lasse Lindekilde, Stefan Malthaner, Francis O'Connor, Paul Gill and Noémie Bouhana, "End of the lone wolf: The typology that should not have been," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42, no. 8 (2019): 771-778.
[161] Maik Fielitz and Reem Ahmed, "It's not funny anymore. Far-right extremists' use of humour," *Radicalisation Awareness Network*, 2021, https://utveier.no/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2021/10/ran_ad-hoc_pap_fre_humor_20210215_en.pdf.

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YouTube and read a great deal about immigration, far-right political theories and historical struggles between Christianity and Islam... he also posted some right-wing and threatening comments.[162]

The manifesto that Brenton Tarrant posted before his shooting spree is both an artefact of this culture and draws heavily *from* online culture. The entire document referred liberally to memes and in-jokes that only the extremely online radical subculture would understand and appreciate. It also incited others to create memes in the aftermath of the attack. Tarrant's example demonstrates that while trolling, creating 'dank memes' and engaging in extremist and abusive discourse online is a problem in and of itself, it sometimes does not just stay online. Although his act of terrorism grew out of extremist shitposting culture, Tarrant wrote in his manifesto that 'it's time to stop shitposting and time to make a real life effort'.[163] Tarrant livestreamed his massacre with the goal of 'making the act itself a meme'.[164]

Video games and gaming

An estimated 3.2 billion people worldwide play video games. A minuscule amount become mass shooters, so exposure to gaming alone does not lead to radicalisation. But video games and gaming have become particular venues of concern for RWE recruitment of young people. Studies have found that video games, in combination with other factors, can have an influence on a player's perception of violence. The interactive nature of games and their ability to fulfil psychological needs of competency and social connection can also facilitate the radicalisation process.[165] There is also a significant history and culture of racism, misogyny and homophobia in gaming communities, including among players and game makers. This creates a 'gamer' subculture that can be highly conducive to RWE positions and recruitment.

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[162] "Report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Terrorist Attack on Christchurch Mosques on 15 March," Part 4, Chapter 3.

[163] Robert Evans, "Shitposting, Inspirational Terrorism and the Christchurch Mosque Massacre," *Bellingcat,* March 15, 2019, https://www.bellingcat.com/news/rest-of-world/2019/03/15/shitposting-inspirational-terrorism-and-the-christchurch-mosque-massacre/.

[164] Bogerts and Fielitz, "The Visual Culture of Far-Right Terrorism."

[165] Linda Schlegel, "Jumanji Extremism? How games and gamification could facilitate radicalization processes," *Journal for Deradicalization* 23 (2020): 1-44.

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RWEs have long history of using videogames with the specific aim of targeting young people. American former white supremacist Christian Picciolini has explained on Reddit how far-right extremist recruiters target 'marginalised youth' using popular games such as Fortnite, Minecraft and Call of Duty.[166] The Australian Federal Police have highlighted extremist uses of video games and gaming communities for recruitment in recent years and warned gamers and their families of the risks.[167] Australian examples reported in the media include: users on the game platform Roblox setting up recreations of the Nazi Third Reich[168] and a young person posting a game recreation of the 2019 Christchurch terror attack.[169] RWE organisations, including the proscribed terrorist accelerationist group Atomwaffen Division, have created their own games, modified popular existing games, posted freely on mainstream gaming sites and used in-game chat functions and game-adjacent platforms (such as Twitch) for recruitment.[170]

Games allow RWEs to act out violent fantasies, such as murdering Jewish people, people of colour and queer people. Playing games, including mainstream popular titles, together also allows RWEs to reinforce each other's beliefs and bond over so-called 'dark humour.'[171] RWEs are also adept at interpreting the storylines of popular games to suit their worldviews in gaming forums. This might include pointing to a game with a conspiracy theory at the

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[166] Christian Picciolini, @cpicciolini, "I am Christian Picciolini, a former white supremacist leader turned peace advocate, hate breaker, and author. Is America succumbing to hate again? Here, unfiltered, to answer your questions. AMA!" Reddit, r/IAma, June 28, 2018, 2:07PM, MThttps://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/8umemf/i_am_christian_picciolini_a_former_white/?rdt=4924 1.

[167] "Extremist recruitment reaching young Australian gamers," *Australian Federal Police*, October 16, 2022, https://www.afp.gov.au/news-centre/media-release/extremist-recruitment-reaching-young-australian-gamers.

[168] Chloe Overington Whelan, "Nazis create Third Reich for videogames," *The Australian*, October 24, 2022, https://www.theaustralian.com.au/subscribe/news/1/?sourceCode=TAWEB_WRE170_a&dest=https%3A%2F %2Fwww.theaustralian.com.au%2Fnation%2Fplayers-posing-as-nazis-discovered-in-popular-childrens-video-game.

[169] "Extremist recruitment reaching young Australian gamers," *AFP Media Release*, October 16, 2022, https://www.afp.gov.au/news-centre/media-release/extremist-recruitment-reaching-young-australian-gamers.

[170] Ciaran O'Connor, "The Extreme Right on Twitch," Institute for Strategic Dialogue, September 2, 2021, https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/gaming-and-extremism-the-extreme-right-on-twitch/.

[171] Nicola Heath, "Alt-right groups are targeting young video gamers — and finding a culture where extremist views can flourish," *ABC News*, July 15, 2022, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-07-15/alt-right-groups-video-games-radicalising-young-men-extremism/101212494.

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heart of its narrative as reflecting realities of corrupt government, or to the inherent superiority of a fantasy game species to draw false and racist parallels with reality.[172]

Video-gaming has also contributed to the 'gamification' – or the application of gaming elements outside of said games – of RWE.[173] Online supporters of real-life mass shooters do not speak of deadly violence, instead, they refer to 'scores'. The concept of low and high scores is a direct reference to kill counts in video games and points to how 'gamification' is adopted.[174] Interlinked with the use of humour and irony, it has made killing and other abhorrent actions akin to a game. If it is just a game, it lowers the threshold for participation in violence. If you are a 'player' instead of a person – collecting points, upping your ranking to get on a leader board – you see your potential victims not as humans but as avatars or points to score and it becomes easier and even fun to kill.[175]

RWE mass shooters Tarrant and Anders Breivik who was responsible for the 2011 mass shooting in Norway, are perversely praised for having the highest scores. Some lone attackers, however, are regarded with disdain or mockery by their own online communities for having a 'low score'. In other words, they are ridiculed and shamed because they did not kill enough people.[176] The livestreaming of the Christchurch massacre and the copycat attacks in El Paso, Halle and Buffalo also borrow from video game culture. The Christchurch Royal Commission report detailed how Tarrant was enmeshed in online role-playing and first-person shooter games and how the live streaming of his attack recalled popular shooter games such as *Call of Duty.*

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[172] Helen Young, "AVERT Webinar with Dr Helen Young", The AVERT Research Network, November 8, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=eeZwi2GHbNU.

[173] Linda Schlegel, "Connecting, Competing, and Trolling," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 15, no. 4 (2021): 54-64.

[174] Sebastian Deterding, Dan Dixon, Rilla Khaled and Lennart Nacke, "From game design elements to gamefulness: defining "gamification"," in *Proceedings of the 15th international academic MindTrek conference: Envisioning future media environments,* 2011: 9-15.

[175] Graham Macklin, "The Christchurch attacks: Livestream terror in the viral video age," *CTC Sentinel* 12, no. 6 (2019): 18-29.

[176] Thorleifsson and Duker, "Lone Actors in Digital Environments."

Intersection of online disinformation and violent extremism

Disinformation and belief in conspiracy theories are not new phenomena. Disinformation has always been a feature of violent extremist narratives but is increasingly becoming more so. Conspiratorial beliefs have often contributed to radicalisation to violence and involvement in extremist movements[177] and now conspiratorial movements and conspiracy driven individuals are now emerging as stand-alone domestic extremist threats. The US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has assessed that, 'Anti-government, identity-based, and fringe political conspiracy theories very likely will emerge, spread, and evolve in the modern information marketplace over the near term...occasionally driving both groups and individuals to commit criminal or violent acts.'[178]

Extensive internet use amid lockdown conditions during the pandemic also increased individuals' exposure to both harmful disinformation and conspiracy theories – what the World Health Organisation termed the accompanying 'infodemic – too much information including false or misleading information in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak.'[179] Conspiracies and disinformation around the pandemic not only undermined public health efforts, but also fuelled societal divisions, a rise in hate speech, and anti-government sentiment and action.

The COVID-19 pandemic spurred the further proliferation of conspiracy and disinformation online. 5G and 'anti-vax' conspiracies inspired a number of plots, attacks and violations of government lockdown measures in Australia and around the world. Online disinformation has also radicalised people to target political leaders, public health facilities and minority communities they believe are responsible for the spread of the virus.[180]

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[177] Jan-Willem van Prooijen, Andre M. Krouwel and Thomas V. Pollet, "Political extremism predicts belief in conspiracy theories," *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 6, no. 5 (2015): 570–578.

[178] "(U//LES) Anti-Government, Identity Based, and Fringe Political Conspiracy Theories Very Likely Motivate Some Domestic Extremists to Commit Criminal, Sometimes Violent Activity," *Federal Bureau of Investigation*, May 30, 2019, https://www.justsecurity.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/420379775-fbi-conspiracy-theories-domestic-extremism.pdf .

[179] "Infodemic," *World Health Organization*. February 26, 2021, accessed April 8, 2024, https://www.who.int/health-topics/infodemic#tab=tab_1.

[180] Harald De Cauwer, Dennis G. Barten, Derrick Tin, Luc J. Mortelmans, Bart Lesaffre, Francis Somville and Gregory R. Ciottone, "Terrorist attacks against COVID-19-related targets during the pandemic year 2020: a

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Anecdotal evidence from government practitioners across Australia notes an increasing number of individuals who use hate speech that has been spread in Australia through malign international disinformation campaigns. Countering violent extremism (CVE) professionals in Australia are engaging with an increased number of referrals of individuals exhibiting risk factors of radicalisation who have been exposed to, and have subsequently adopted, false narratives from abroad.

The way disinformation and conspiratorial beliefs can radicalise individuals to extremism is encapsulated most prominently in the QAnon phenomenon. QAnon's core myth is that a secret cabal is taking over the world by kidnapping children, abusing them and drinking their blood to gain power, and that this cabal comprises individuals in elite positions financed by Jewish money. It is a modern internet rehashing of the same anti-Semitic blood libel conspiracies around ritual murder and harm of children that have existed since the twelfth century.

QAnon first emerged as an online subculture around 2017 but grew exponentially during the pandemic. Its conspiracies culminated in the January 6 Capitol attack. The insurrection demonstrated how a networked online conspiracy movement can migrate from the online environment and radicalise individuals to violence. QAnon adherents, narratives and symbols were prevalent in the Capitol attack, along with other groups and individuals fuelled by online consumption of disinformation claiming that the election was rigged. The insurrection was the culmination of years of the dissemination and uptake of QAnon theories that began on the anonymous online forum 4chan, then spread and flourished on mainstream platforms.

Social media and computer-enabled communications have made extremist conspiracy theories like QAnon participatory and interactive. People are not just passively receiving conspiratorial information by exposure to posts discussing the theories via online conspiracy

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review of 165 incidents in the Global Terrorism Database," *Prehospital and disaster medicine* 38, no. 1 (2023): 41-47.

influencers. Rather, the conspiracy has gone viral and been amplified through a process of gamification. Conspiracy influencers drop clues for followers to find and believers connect on the internet to compare clues. Gamification invests the believer even more deeply in the conspiracy. It reinforces the social connection and bonds between conspiracy believers, which further reinforces their conspiratorial worldview. This process can also mobilise believers to commit violence on behalf of those beliefs. QAnon is not the only extremist movement that has employed gamification techniques. As discussed above, elements from games and gaming culture are utilised by a variety of extremist organisations to support their radicalisation and recruitment efforts.

The internet and computer mediated communications have enabled the spread of misinformation and disinformation at scale. This has had a number of adverse effects on democracy in addition to the growth in extremism, including affecting citizens' ability to access accurate information, which is essential for deliberation and decision making. Disinformation has contributed to increased polarisation, reduced trust in government and institutions.[181] There are other individual harms. For example, in addition to the events around the Capitol attack, adherence to QAnon conspiracies and others like it, has divided communities and families, distorted politics and governance by seeping into mainstream politics and hijacked legitimate social welfare advocacy efforts around human trafficking.

> **(b) the terms and operation of the Counter-Terrorism Legislation Amendment (Prohibited Hate Symbols and Other Measures) Bill 2023**

The Counter-Terrorism Legislation Amendment (Prohibited Hate Symbols and Other Measures) Bill 2023 seeks to provide government and law enforcement agencies with additional tools to monitor and prosecute dangerous violent extremist actors. The proposed legislation signals that expressions of hate, dehumanisation and violence have no place in Australian society and is a step towards depriving RWEs of the hateful symbols they use to

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[181] W Lance Bennett and Steven Livingston, "The Disinformation Order: Disruptive Communication and the Decline of Democratic Institutions," *European Journal of Communication* 33, no. 2, (2018): 122–139.

intimidate and spread fear.[182] The measures have broad bi-partisan political support and the support of many within effected communities.

However, the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security inquiry on this legislation solicited concerns from various stakeholders about its effectiveness and the potential for unintended consequences. The critiques highlight that focusing on criminalising extremist semiotics does not effectively tackle the root causes of violent extremism and, in fact, could provide opportunities for extremist provocation in response to the laws. While the legislation would assist law enforcement in early intervention efforts, it may also have the effect of intensifying the anti-establishment sentiments of a prosecuted person, as well as solidifying their identity against perceived 'oppression' through a perceived infringement of democratic freedom.

There are also concerns that it may have unintended negative impacts on freedom of expression, journalism and activism.[183] The provisions within the legislation regarding the distribution of violent extremist material via a carriage service also risks the criminalisation of activities that are crucial for public debate and understanding. The lack of a clear intention element to promote terrorism could also ensnare individuals sharing such materials for educational or condemnatory purposes (including in the promotion of expository narratives and counter-narratives.) Additionally, there are implications for open or limited access archiving of extremist material, which can play an important role in research, advocacy and public awareness.

Further, the prohibition of specific symbols, while intended to counter the harms of hate speech and extremist propaganda, does not account for violent extremists' noted

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[182] Josh Roose, "Alt-right groups are targeting young video gamers - and finding a culture where extremist views can flourish," *ABC News*, January 21, 2023, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-01-21/victoria-law-banning-nazi-salute-effective-enforceable/101877788.

[183] See for example: Law Council of Australia, *Review of the Counter-terrorism Legislation Amendment (Prohibited Hate Symbols and Other Measures) Bill 2023*, https://lawcouncil.au/publicassets/642fdfa1-2542-ee11-948a-005056be13b5/4409%20-%20S%20-%20Counter-terrorism%20Hate%20Symbols.pdf; The Australia Institute, *Submission: Prohibited Hate Symbols and Other Measures Bill 2023*, https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/submission-prohibited-hate-symbols-and-other-measures-bill-2023/.

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adaptability. Extremists might easily alter symbols to circumvent the law, impacting the efficacy of such legislation. Extremist groups often use signs and gestures that have an anodyne or double meaning to troll efforts to counter their expression. White supremacist and neo-Nazis have done this most recently with the 'OK' hand gesture. The 'OK' hand gesture,[184] a gesture made by connecting the thumb and index finger to create a circle and spreading the other three fingers apart, is used to signal the letters 'W' and 'P', standing for white power. This appropriation shows how easily RWEs can change symbols to avoid prosecution.

Additionally, concerns about the inadvertent capture of benign or unrelated imagery highlight the difficulties in targeting extremist symbolism without impacting religious cultural or political expressions that utilise similar visual elements. Though the act identifies religious uses as an exemption so that it could exclude the display of Buddhist and Hindu religious symbols with a similar appearance to the Swastika, another issue arises in relation to the understanding of religion. There are religious elements to many white supremacist ideologies (eg Christian Identity Beliefs, Odinism and Paganism, Apocalyptic and Millenarian Views, Esoteric and Occult Elements, and Aryanism) though they may represent superficial or distorted uses of religious doctrines. As such, extremists could argue that they are using these symbols as part of their religious practice.

There are additional exemptions intended to protect legitimate uses of prohibited symbols for academic, educational, artistic, literary or scientific purposes. However, it might still be argued that these provisions do not offer sufficiently clear guidance to ensure that such activities are not unduly penalised, particularly in light of diverse and ever-evolving societal standards and interpretations of the public interest, public safety and what constitutes harm.

For example, the Nazi salute has been used in satire across the decades. These artistic and satirical expressions use hateful symbols and gestures but, for the most part, society deems them acceptable because it is understood that they do not intend to vilify. However, this

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[184] David Neiwert, "Is that an OK sign? A white power symbol? Or just a right-wing troll?," *Southern Poverty Law Center* 18 (2018).

means that individuals who make a Nazi salute or fly a Nazi flag with genuine hateful intentions can potentially argue their behaviour is also a form of satire, allowing them to avoid sanction and to provoke, troll and confuse the discourse.

The provisions also empower police to make judgments on what constitutes a 'prohibited symbol' in public spaces. There is concern that this could lead to the suppression of symbols that are not inherently related to terrorist or violent extremist organisations but may be perceived as such due to visual similarities. The risk is particularly acute for counter-narrative symbols, like swastikas with strikes through them, which are clearly intended to oppose Nazi ideology but could potentially be misinterpreted as prohibited symbols under the law. Law enforcement agencies have also voiced concerns about enforceability, particularly the enforceability of the outlawing of gestures, such as the Nazi salute, that are now also included in the legislation.[185] All of these concerns underscore the need for clearer guidelines and safeguards.

(c) measures to counter violent extremism in Australia, with particular focus on young people

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Current Australia CVE Frameworks

Australia has generally robust frameworks for countering terrorism (CT) and CVE at both the Commonwealth and State/Territory level. Various iterations of the Australian CVE framework have been successively developed and implemented since the first framework published in 2006 to the most recent 2022 Counter-Terrorism Strategy. At State and Territory level, there are a range of policy and program settings across jurisdictions that support localised case management, early intervention and diversion and community cohesion-building initiatives, as well as efforts to disengage and reintegrate terrorist offenders in and beyond correctional settings.

The broad aims of countering violent extremism centre largely on:

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[185] Matthew Knott, "Alt-right groups are targeting young video gamers — and finding a culture where extremist views can flourish," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, November 28, 2023, https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/nazi-salute-to-be-banned-as-federal-government-changes-mind-20231128-p5enfy.html.

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- implementing early prevention, intervention and diversion efforts at pre-criminal thresholds to help avoid or minimise escalation to more serious violent behaviour and its consequences for both community safety and those on radicalisation pathways;
- reducing, challenging or disrupting the influence, appeal and reach of violent extremist narratives and propaganda; and
- addressing individual and community vulnerabilities and strengthening individual and community resilience to offset the likelihood of using violence to cope with grievances, challenges or hardships by providing meaningful and effective coping resources and support.

In Australia, CVE policy and interventions have also targeted violent extremist *behaviours* rather than *beliefs*, which is in line with the freedom of thought and expression afforded to citizens of liberal democratic societies. ASIO has repeatedly highlighted that, given its mandate, it is only interested in political violence or violent extremism and does not focus its attention on 'extremist views'. The *Living Safe Together* definition of 'violent extremism' focuses squarely on the behavioural dimensions of violence, defining this as 'a person or group who is willing to use violence' or who 'advocates the use of violence by others to achieve a political, ideological or religious goal'.[186]

This approach is consistent with the emerging best practice around effective interventions which identifies addressing psycho-social needs rather than ideological commitment to extremism. Australian approaches also prioritise building and sustaining community resilience to violent extremism to create more generally resilient communities that can meet and cope with a range of potentially destabilising uncertainties, dynamics and transformations of violent extremism.

These overarching approaches remain appropriate and have served Australian national security, resilience and wellbeing. However, as many academics, practitioners and government experts have concluded, the threat from RWE has been either escalating or, at

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[186] For Australia's existing policy emphasis on the 'violent' in 'violent extremism', see: "Get the facts", Living Safe Together.

the very least, becoming more complex and thus more challenging for response and intervention. A soon-to-be published study on RWE intervention capability, found that the fragmentation, complexity and 'eclectic-ness' is something which many CVE prevention and intervention practitioners identified as a major challenge.

The increasing threat of RWE, and its broader impacts on democracy that were discussed earlier, has created some pressure to supplement Australia's existing policy emphasis on the 'violent' in 'violent extremism' in order to invest in efforts to counter 'hateful extremism', as has been done in the UK.[187] However, this creates a dilemma of how to develop strategies to combat the harms created by RWE while recognising the elasticity[188] and relativity of terms like 'extremism' and without adopting illiberal methods[189] of doing so that can potentially undermine the core principles of liberal democracy.

When RWEs use democratic means to promote anti-democratic values and agendas, it creates an overt challenge to governments to consider the extent to which they are prepared to diminish or abandon their own liberal democratic values in their efforts to address this. In any iteration of a new or revised CVE strategy, Australian policy and programming needs to tread carefully and thoughtfully in relation to both its legislative posture and its socio-political positioning of efforts to counter RWE. Therefore, one of the tasks for updating the current national CVE strategy is to have a clear, shared definition of 'harms' in relation to violent extremism, understand where the threshold lies between violent extremist harms and other forms of social harms (including other forms of violence) and clearly justify such definitions and thresholds.

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[187] "Challenging Hateful Extremism," Commission for Countering Extremism, October 2019, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5d95ef45ed915d39ad386a65/Challenging_Hateful_Extremism_-_summary_report.pdf.

[188] Lee Jarvis and Stuart Macdonald, "Extremism (Re)defined: Online and Wider implications," VOX-Pol, March 21, 2024, https://voxpol.eu/extremism-redefined-online-and-wider-implications/.

[189] Fareed Zakaria, "The rise of illiberal democracy," *Foreign Affairs* 76 (1997): 22.

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CVE, RWE and young people

Successive ASIO threat assessments since 2020, as well as intelligence and observations from a range of law enforcement agencies at federal and State/Territory level, have demonstrated increasing radicalisation to varieties of RWE and the decreasing age of those who are drawn into these violent extremist ideologies and networks. In 2021, minors (under the age of 18) accounted for almost 15% of ASIO's counter-terrorism investigations and more than half of their priority counter-terrorism investigations.[190] Subsequent threat assessments have continued to emphasise the increase in the number of minors coming to ASIO's attention. The picture is similar across Five Eyes countries such as the US, UK and Canada.

There are a number of hypotheses for this trend, including the affordances of social media and the impacts of the pandemic on the violent extremist landscape, particularly for young people. The pandemic exposed resource disparities that exacerbated both real and perceived deprivation. Young people arguably bore a disproportionate burden and experienced losses on multiple levels, including disrupted schooling, dwindling or precarious employment, missed opportunities and greater mental health and housing challenges.[191] In addition, there are also the typical psycho-social vulnerabilities involved with youth and the particular susceptibility of young people to influence and peer pressure. An analysis of young people radicalised to violent extremism using the Profiles of Individual Radicalisation in Australia (PIRA) Dataset found that, among this sample, poor educational achievement, mental health issues, active online social media engagement, exposure to radicalised peers and networks, triggering events and personal grievances were all factors contributing to youth radicalisation.[192]

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[190] Brendan Nicholson, "ASIO chief flags alarming increase in children lured to extremism," ASPI The Strategist, February 11, 2022, https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/asio-chief-flags-alarming-increase-in-children-lured-to-extremism/.

[191] Michele Grossman, "How has COVID-19 changed the violent extremist landscape?,'" *CREST Security Review*, October 14, 2021, https://crestresearch.ac.uk/comment/how-has-covid-19-changed-the-violent-extremist-landscape/.

[192] Adrian Cherney, Emma Belton, Siti Amirah Binte Norham and Jack Milts. "Understanding youth radicalisation: an analysis of Australian data," *Behavioral sciences of terrorism and political aggression* 14, no. 2 (2022): 97-119.

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Addressing young people's vulnerability online

RWE influencers and movements connect with young people, young boys and men in particular, through a variety of online platforms, but particularly those that have a high adolescent footprint like Reddit, 4chan, Twitter and YouTube.[193] Young people use these platforms to explore different group identities, socio-political ideologies and to search for social significance.[194] In the process, young people are frequently exposed to extremist content but have limited ability to recognise its dangerous nature. During the pandemic, they also spent considerable amounts of unsupervised time online. Under these circumstances, the vulnerability of young people to the online social harms of violent extremist and/or conspiratorial ideologies intensified.[195]

Online environments, including online games and gaming communities, pose significant challenges for CVE practitioners. Moderation of sites to remove extremist content (including games, conversations and users) is an important tool but a complex one to employ effectively. It requires active collaboration from companies that provide gaming platforms; most of which are based outside Australia. Moderation also has technical, ethical and legal complexities, particularly in the context of liberal democratic values. RWEs are adept at finding ways to void automated moderation tools, such as using coded language and deliberate spelling 'mistakes'. Moderation should, therefore, not be relied on as the only method for addressing RWE activity in video-gaming.

RWE uses of video-gaming and methods for countering them are significantly under-researched in Australia, and internationally; more research is needed to understand them and to develop effective countermeasures. One key challenge is that game platforms and subcultures can be very difficult to understand and navigate for people who are not themselves gamers. Building partnerships with experts in games and gaming, as well as

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[193] Monica Anderson and JingJing Jiang, "Teens, Social Media & Technology," Pew Research Center, May 31, 2018, https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/05/31/teens-social-media-technology-2018.
[194] Kamaldeep Bhui, Sokratis Dinos and Edgar Jones, "Psychological process and pathways to radicalization," *Journal of Bioterrorism & Biodefense*, 5 no. 3 (2012); Anna Naterstad Harpviken, "Psychological vulnerabilities and extremism among western youth: A literature review," *Adolescent Research Review* 5, no. 1 (2020): 1-26.
[195] Michele Grossman, "How Has Covid-19 Changed The Violent Extremist Landscape," *CREST security Review* 12 (2021).

gamers themselves, to develop and test countermeasures has potential to address this challenge. Working with platforms to track and manage how algorithms move viewers from mainstream to extremist historical materials would help intervene in the spread and use of RWE content. Collaboration with platforms is similarly essential in addressing RWE uses of video-gaming and content recommendation platforms.

Developing literacy in the use of ideological histories by RWEs will increase understandings amongst analysts and front-line workers as to the role such narratives play in processes of radicalisation and recruitment to violent extremism. Front-line workers' lack of literacy in the sub-cultures in which RWEs often operate has been identified as a significant gap. Online communications that may seem innocuous or technical, could in fact be indicators of growing far-right consciousness and agitation. Working with content-providers and educators to provide counter programming to extremist historical narratives, both on online platforms, and in educational environments would enable interventions and propagation of counternarratives developed through innovative interdisciplinary research.

Given that the vast majority of gamers, including those who encounter RWEs and RWE material, do not become radicalised, overall, gamers and gaming should be approached positively. Game makers, designers, high-profile players and companies, as well as researchers, are variously engaged in pro-social activities, developing for example anti-racist games. Although many are based internationally rather than in Australia, this existing pool of experts with pro-social interests and orientations has potential for the development of partnerships.

CVE frameworks for youth

In Australia, while a number of government-led CVE frameworks, and the policy and programs underpinning them, have remained for the most part ideologically agnostic some programs at State/Territory level have focused specifically on either RWE, or youth, or both. In addition to the PIRA study mentioned above, the research base in Australia has investigated and identified protective factors for youth resilience to violent extremism

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through a comparative study in Australia and Canada.[196] These protective factors comprised cultural connectedness and identity; bridging capital between diverse social groups; linking capital with institutions and authorities; violence-related behaviours, and violence-related beliefs. The modest evidence base from research conducted on or with Australian young people on issues related to their involvement in violent extremism, and the similarly modest range of youth-focused programs for which public information is available, suggests that while there is strong work being done by both government and civil society agencies, organisations and institutions, there remain significant gaps in addressing the specific needs of young people in relation to far-right violent extremist influence and involvement.

Chief amongst these is the role of educational institutions. There is a greater need to develop young people's cognitive *and* emotional skills through school and university-based education to equip young people with the tools to evaluate and argue against the extremist interpretations and narratives of religion, history, politics and identity.[197] There is also the lack of clear and accessible resources to which family and friends may turn if they are concerned about a young person's potential involvement in violent extremist activities or networks. Only NSW at present offers a non-securitised channel through their *Step Together* program to which family, friends and others in the community can turn for advice and support.[198]

Additionally, taking a 'demystifying' approach to violent extremism can also mitigate the sense that violent extremism and terrorism is a 'higher form of social action' that seems to reach beyond the ordinary and the everyday and point to a more wholistic approach to CVE.

There is potential for combatting violent extremism not only through CVE but also 'upstream' interventions, in what is sometimes called preventing violent extremism (PVE),

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[196] Michele Grossman, et al. "Youth Resilience to Violent Extremism: Development and Validation of the BRAVE Measure," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 34, no. 3 (2022): 468-88.

[197] Michele Grossman, "Tough is not enough: ten smarter ways to counter violent extremism," *The Conversation*, October 23, 2014, https://theconversation.com/tough-is-not-enough-ten-smarter-ways-to-counter-violent-extremism-32690.

[198] "Home Page", Step Together, accessed April 4, 2024, https://steptogether.nsw.gov.au.

that focus on building social cohesion, pro-sociality and resilience to extremist messaging. For example, providing alternative narratives that directly tackle underlying issues such as real and perceived grievances and the psycho-social needs that can drive engagement with extremist discourse can also be an important element of P/CVE. They acknowledge the core elements of truth within extremist narratives and employ credible messages and messengers that actively engage audiences, redirecting rather than de-radicalising them. In contrast to counter-narratives, which may at worst reinforce existing discrimination paradigms and at best have limited effectiveness,[199] these narratives are context-specific, advocating for something rather than against it, grassroots-driven rather than top-down, and empowering.[200]

Alternative narratives function both online and offline, and offer the chance to transition from 'us versus them' mentalities to a collective 'we'. Most importantly, they encourage audiences to move away from binary thinking towards a more nuanced appreciation of complexity.[201] Creative and strategic uses of multimodal communication platforms combining image, text and sound can help to more effectively reach young people, in the same way that sophisticated violent extremist propaganda routinely achieves.[202]

It is also important to ensure that CVE programs, policies and strategies are based on broad and genuine community relationships and go beyond engagement with self-selected community leaders. Engagement and partnership structures need to include and incorporate the participation of women, young people and voices of difference or dissent within communities, since these groups are precisely those we need to engage with if we are to mount credible alternatives to violent extremism in developing and implementing

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[199] Olivier Roy, "The power of a narrative, the weakness of a counter-narrative," paper presented at *The role of image-making in the prevention of violence*, Max Weber Multidisciplinary Workshop, European University Institute, July 5, 2018.

[200] Joshua Roose, Vivian Gerrand and Shahram Akbarzadeh, "Rapid Evidence Assessment: Alternative Narratives," Report to AVERT Research Network, Melbourne, 2021.

[201] Vivian Gerrand, "Communicative channels for pro-social resilience in an age of polarization," *First Monday* 27, no. 5, (2022); Roose, Gerrand and Akbarzadeh, "Rapid Evidence Assessment: Alternative Narratives."

[202] Vivian Gerrand, "Young people, radicalisation and resilience," in Richard McNeil-Willson and Anna Triandafyllidou eds. *Routledge Handbook of Violent Extremism and Resilience*, London: Routledge, 2023.

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effective prevention and diversion strategies.[203] There is a clear and comprehensive need to develop a strategy on youth engagement in relation to violent extremism that leverages both federal resources and local networks and capacity across States and Territories. The approach of Public Safety Canada's National Strategy on Countering Radicalization to Violence serves as a potential blueprint for effective engagement with youth online.[204]

Finally, it is also important to consider developing shared definitions or consensus on how to define 'youth' and 'young people' for the purpose of policy and program development in this area. Federal and State/Territory instruments offer different understandings of the age range that categorises young people and minors. Across the Australian Commonwealth, States and Territories, consultation of the most recent available documents online relating to youth strategies or other instruments such as legislative acts shows that the age range for 'young people' are various ranges between 0 and 25.

Even within the most commonly adopted age range of 12 – 25 to define 'young people', there are major differences in developmental and life-course needs, vulnerabilities, protective factors and capabilities between a 12-year-old, a 16-year-old, and a 20-year-old, for example. Calibrating engagement, resourcing and support of young people to bolster their ability to resist and challenge efforts to engage them in violent extremist ideas, platforms and actions both online and offline needs to account for these significant differences across the 'youth' cohort as a whole by drawing on evidence from relevant disciplines and clinical expertise that can assist in this endeavour.

Conclusion

The counterterrorism and countering violent extremism frameworks of many democracies were established in the immediate post-9/11 context and evolved to address threats from both foreign terrorist organisations and their home-grown manifestations. Today,

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[203] Grossman, "Tough is not enough: ten smarter ways to counter violent extremism."
[204] "National Strategy on Countering Radicalization to Violence," Canada Centre for Community Engagement and Prevention Of Violence, 2018, accessed April 4, 2024, https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrcs/pblctns/ntnl-strtg-cntrng-rdclztn-vlnc/ntnl-strtg-cntrng-rdclztn-vlnc-en.pdf.

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