



Abstract

Online Right-Wing Extremism: New South Wales, Australia [†]

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[†] Presented at the Global Safety Evaluation Workshop, Online, 1 July–31 December 2020.

Abstract: Academics and policymakers recognize the absence of empirically grounded research to support the suppositions on which terrorist focused policies are based. (Sageman, Marc. 2014. “The Stagnation in Terrorism Research”. *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26 (4): 565–80) We developed our project, Mapping Networks and Narratives of Online Right-Wing Extremists in New South Wales, (Department of Security Studies and Criminology. 2020. Mapping Networks and Narratives of Online Right-Wing Extremists in New South Wales. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4071472>) to illuminate this space. Using the analysis of large-scale online data to generate evidence-based insights into online Right-Wing Extremism (RWE) across the state, our research focused on four key questions: (1) What is the nature of the online RWE environment in New South Wales, Australia (NSW)? (2) How is this movement distributed across NSW? (3) How are themes and narratives framed in different online contexts to mobilize support? (4) What level of risk does the online right-wing environment pose? These questions were left purposely broad to facilitate an exploratory project into what was, in 2018–2019, still a relatively little studied milieu. We combined expertise from computational science, security studies, and behavioral science. We were funded by the Department of Communities and Justice, NSW. We identified two distinct—yet connected—levels of risk. The first was a creeping threat to democracy fueled by networks and content that challenged the fundamental principles of pluralistic liberal democracy. The second was a risk of violence perpetrated by individuals and/or groups that advocate and/or support the use of violence as a tactic to achieve an ideological end. The communities we examined were primarily characterized by networks of individuals as opposed to formal groups. The role played by individual influencers has important ramifications for policy communities: attention should be paid to issues of proscription and moderation. While this milieu engaged with Australian issues and events, it was notably far more obsessed with American issues: particularly those focused on populist narratives and Trumpism. Despite being hateful and extreme, online RWE communities are, firstly, spaces of sociability for users, where social networks are maintained by shared values and norms. For those involved, these spaces engender positive experiences: individuals might share an image of their dinner cooking in their kitchen interspersed with “shitposting” and virulent hate speech. While we identified a variety of narratives that focused on the delegitimization of government and dehumanization of others, the central theme was that of “white identity under threat”. We observed five distinct stages of moderation approach and echo chamber strength. A series of issues for future consideration were identified from the analysis: (1) Awareness raising for key stakeholders across different levels of government and civil society about the revolutionary and anti-social agenda of RWE communities. (2) Building awareness about the civic underpinnings of representative liberal democracy and the threat that RWE poses. (3) Expanding current Countering Violent Extremism infrastructure provided by the NSW government to individuals and communities vulnerable to right wing extremism. (4) The local government is well positioned to deliver programs in rural communities impacted by RWE. (5) Upskilling front-line workers to recognize the risks associated with RWE, and providing pathways into CVE intervention programs for individuals identified as being at-risk.



Citation: Ballsun-Stanton, B.; Waldek, L.; Droogan, J. Online Right-Wing Extremism: New South Wales, Australia. *Proceedings* **2021**, *77*, 18. <https://doi.org/10.3390/proceedings2021077018>

Published: 27 April 2021

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Keywords: right-wing extremism; Australia; New South Wales; social media; terrorism; Christchurch

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee, reference 5201955659213.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was waived due to collection of public data.

Data Availability Statement: Mediated access to aggregated and deidentified data will be available upon completion of the studies, please contact the authors for more details.