

Responding to the rise of violent extremism and disinformation online



CHRISTCHURCH MOSQUE ATTACKS: A DEVASTATING WAKE-UP CALL FOR THE WORLD

On 15 March 2019, people around the world watched a livestream video of a terrorist killing 51 Muslim men, women and children in Christchurch mosques.

The video was amplified by algorithms on platforms like Facebook, and even reached victims' family members and friends. It was a horrific wake-up call to how digital technology can be weaponised in new and devastating ways.

Globally, we have since seen attacks with clear links to the Christchurch terrorist attacks and a growing movement of white supremacists, "incels", and violent extremist action often linked to disinformation and conspiracy theories spread online.

WHAT HAS THE RESPONSE BEEN?

- Immediately after the attacks, Chief Censor David Shanks used his legal power to "call in" the livestream video and manifesto document for classification, banning both publications.
- New Zealand co-led the Christchurch Call with France – bringing country leaders and the digital sector together to agree on interventions to stop the spread of violent extremist content. Alongside this was the adoption of the GIFCT Content Incident Protocol by digital platforms, a process to identify and rapidly respond to content from a violent extremist event.
- The Government introduced the Films, Videos, and Publications Classifications (Urgent Interim Classification of Publications and Prevention of Online Harm) Amendment Bill in the last Parliament. This Bill proposes a government-controlled filter to detect and block online content that is, or is likely to be, objectionable (banned)¹; makes it an offence to livestream objectionable content; and enables DIA to issue "takedown notices" to an online content host.
- The Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Terrorist Attack on Christchurch Mosques is due to publish its report on 26 November 2020, and may call for further Government action.

COVID-19 HAS OPENED THE FLOODGATES OF FAKE NEWS AND DISINFORMATION

Disinformation and fake news are not new issues, but there is growing concern worldwide about social media accelerating people's exposure to and the intensity of false information. During the COVID-19 pandemic we've seen a rapid rise in disinformation and conspiracy theories, which are influencing people's actions.

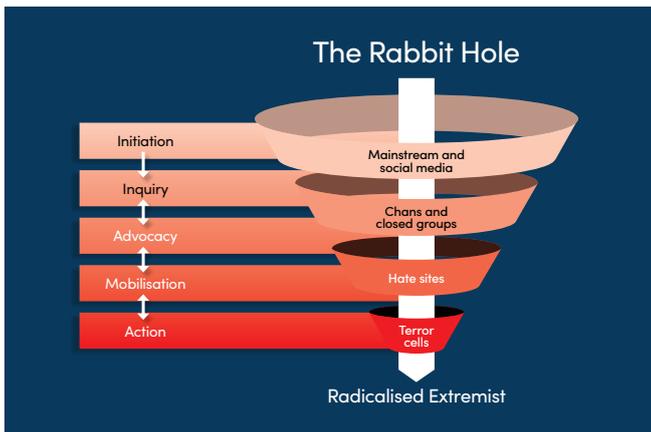
For example, the conspiracy theory that 5G cell phone towers cause COVID-19 has led to towers being attacked in New Zealand and around the world; and the QAnon and "Plandemic" conspiracies have contributed to violence and crime overseas, and public health controls being ignored.

¹ Current policy is to restrict it to violent extremist content.

THE LINKS BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA, DISINFORMATION AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Social media is being used by violent extremist groups as a tool for recruitment and radicalisation, to plan attacks, and to cause chaos.

A clear pattern has emerged where violent extremists engage people on mainstream social media platforms and intentionally move them 'down the digital rabbit hole' into closed groups, hate sites, and terror cells in encrypted services and the dark net.



Disinformation and violent extremism are amplified online by:

- Algorithms: which recommend and expose users to targeted content that aligns with their demographics, content preferences and influences who they engage with online;
- Sensational headlines or claims, and the use of humour – such as memes – which are more likely to be shared on social media;
- Mistrust in, or a lack of, official sources of information;
- “Influencers”: for example, a reality TV star supporting *Plandemic* on social media;
- Technology: such as “deep fakes” where images and videos are manipulated by software to substitute faces with convincing results; and “bots” where disinformation is artificially generated and published online, under the guise of being a human participant.

We’re seeing disinformation being used online by both state and non-state actors to gain “soft power” by spreading an alternative narrative to cause chaos or set an agenda, including to influence the democratic process.

Key opportunities this term

- **Shaping the Government’s broad review of media regulation:** We need up-to-date tools and interventions that are fit for purpose in the digital age. A broad review of the regulatory system for media was signalled last term, but the scope of this is yet to be defined. There is an opportunity now for you to shape the parameters of this review to ensure it addresses current and evolving digital harms, and that the consultation engages the right experts and stakeholder groups.
- **A strategy to address violent extremism online:** We have started work on an integrated strategy to counter violent extremism online, and are looking at what research could help tackle disinformation in New Zealand. Building on the Christchurch Call, there is an opportunity to further collaborate on emerging evidence and interventions with international experts and governments, the digital sector, regulators, and civil society.
- **Films, Videos, and Publications Classification (Urgent Interim Classification of Publications and Prevention of Online Harm) Amendment Bill:** There is an opportunity to consider how this Bill could form part of an integrated strategy to counter violent extremism. For example, the proposed filter could be used to block websites that are known to promote violent extremism and terrorist propaganda. Such a filter requires effective checks and balances, as well as high levels of transparency to build public confidence, and we are well placed to support this work.