

**HOME AFFAIRS PORTFOLIO
DEPARTMENT OF HOME AFFAIRS**

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY SPOKEN QUESTION ON NOTICE

Select Committee on Social Media and Online Safety

1 February 2022

QoN Number: 01

Subject: Christchurch Call - Countering the messaging in violent extremist propaganda

Asked by: Tim Watts

Question:

The Christchurch Call, which we signed onto in the wake of the Christchurch atrocity, asks governments to work together with online service providers and civil society to counter violent extremism in all its forms, including through the development and promotion of positive counter messages to these dehumanising violent extremist narratives. In response to questions on notice through Senate estimates, the department has previously said that it 'undertakes a range of activities to promote positive alternatives and counter the messaging in violent extremist propaganda'.

Can you give me the specifics about this range of activities that the department has engaged in to counter the messaging of violent extremist narratives on social media. Ms Spencer: Apologies, that is outside my remit. I'm happy to take it on notice but might just see if Mr Dowling has any more information.

Mr Dowling: We'd like to give you a bit more detail, because there are quite a range of activities that are undertaken, but, at a high level, there is engagement directly with the community through liaison officers that we have, and there's work with civil society around what messaging is useful and appropriate to respond to the extremist narratives. But I think it would be better if we could get you the full suite of details on notice.

Answer:

- The Department undertakes broadly focused programs of work to promote Australia's inclusive national identity, liberal democratic values and social cohesion.
- The Department also undertakes the following dedicated programs to counter and contest the appeal of terrorist and violent extremist narratives and propaganda online:
 - Events for young Australians focused on building awareness of online extremism, developing critical thinking and encouraging the development of practical solutions to address online hate, extremism and radicalisation.

- This program of events has included:
 - '*Digi Engage*': four separate two-day events delivered between 2016-2020 with 369 attendees in total;
 - '*CommUNITY*': a training program delivered to 185 participants between 2018-2020;
 - '*Generation Change*': an online event delivered on 23 June 2021 in partnership with Macquarie University attended by 18 participants.
- Ongoing, dedicated strategic communications programs to counter the appeal of religious and ideologically motivated violent extremism. This includes:
 - *Rapt!* was launched in August 2016 and consists of a multi-channel communications platform encompassing a website, Facebook, Instagram and You Tube pages.
 - *Rapt!* contests the appeal of religious extremist narratives and propaganda through the provision of ongoing information, communications and messaging that showcases the positive experience and resilience of young Muslim Australians and connectedness to community.
 - *Fearlessly Australian* was launched on 20 September 2021. It is an online platform consisting of a website, podcast/videocast series, and social media channels, including Instagram, Facebook and YouTube.
 - The platform, which is designed to engage young Australians, contests the appeal of ideologically motivated extremist narratives by hosting positive role models who deliver content that:
 - is frank, informative and provides constructive and practical insights into dealing with uncertainty, change or adversity; and
 - promotes a socially cohesive community.
 - To support, guide and strengthen these programs, the Department engages closely with and provides ongoing information to communities in all states and territories through its Community Liaison Officer network.
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Select Committee on Social Media and Online Safety

1 February 2022

QoN Number: 02

Subject: Christchurch Call - Program costs and specific Communities

Asked by: Tim Watts

Question:

Mr WATTS: Okay. If you don't have the answer, you don't have the answer, so taking it on notice is fine. When you do come back on notice, can you give me some dollar figures on what those program costs are. Also, there was reference to direct engagement with communities. Can you specify which communities those are and the funding levels for engagement with which communities. I'm thinking in particular about what proportion of the spend is going to countering narratives that are appealing to right-wing extremism, for example, compared to other forms of violent extremism.

Answer:

- In 2021-22, the Government allocated more than **\$8 million** to CVE in Australia, with approximately **\$3 million** allocated towards combatting terrorist propaganda online, including:
 - Strategic communications to counter all forms of violent extremism online, and strengthen social cohesion
 - Referral of terrorist and violent extremism content to digital platforms for removal.
- On 2 February 2022, the Government announced an additional **\$61.7 million** over four years to further strengthen national CVE efforts.
 - The funding package included a further **\$4.7 million** over four years to build on and extend CVE strategic communications efforts to combat terrorist propaganda online. This will ensure Australia is well positioned to:
 - identify and counter the circulation of all types of violent extremist content;
 - track and contest violent extremist propaganda and narratives; and
 - counter online extremism by building resilience and strengthening digital literacy among young Australians.

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Select Committee on Social Media and Online Safety

1 February 2022

QoN Number: 03

Subject: Christchurch Call - Australian Taskforce to Combat Terrorist and Extreme Violent Material Online - Meetings since June 2019

Asked by: Tim Watts

Question:

Mr WATTS: In answers to questions on notice about the government's response to the Christchurch Call, there's a great emphasis on the work of the Australian Taskforce to Combat Terrorist and Extreme Violent Material Online, a joint initiative between the government and industry participants, including social media platforms. Can I confirm whether that task force has met since it issued its report in June 2019, and, if so, how many times.

Ms Spencer: Again, I don't have the details on the meetings, but we do continue to engage with industry on that. I came into this role in September, and I've had a number of conversations with industry on the issue, associated with the task force. Given the action items in the report were finalised, there may not have been any further formal meetings. But we've continued with those informal discussions, and I know through the conversations I've been having recently with industry and with some of the work going forward that we may look to re-utilize the forum beyond the action items of the Christchurch Call, which had been delivered.

Mr WATTS: Okay. Can you take on notice whether that task force has met formally since June 2019.

Ms Spencer: Yes.

Answer: Yes the Taskforce has met twice since June 2019. The Taskforce met in October 2020 and in April 2021.

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Select Committee on Social Media and Online Safety

1 February 2022

QoN Number: 04

Subject: Christchurch Call - Formal Assessment of Actions Detailed in Final Report

Asked by: Tim Watts

Question:

Mr Watts: It sounds like you don't know this at this point, given the time you've been in the role, but can you take on notice whether the government has undertaken a formal assessment of the actions detailed in the final report of the Australian Taskforce to Combat Terrorist and Extreme Violent Material Online and whether that has been a sufficient step forward? Literally on the first page of that report was a commitment that the government would assess that. I'd like to find out whether that has been undertaken or whether it's fallen through the cracks.

Ms Spencer: Absolutely. I'll take that on notice and we'll get you a detailed response.

Answer:

The Government undertook a formal assessment of the actions detailed in the final report of the Australian Taskforce to Combat Terrorist and Extreme Violent Material online in March 2021. The actions of Government, digital platforms and internet service providers were found to be adequate in response to the recommendations listed in the Report.

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PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY SPOKEN QUESTION ON NOTICE

Select Committee on Social Media and Online Safety

1 February 2022

QoN Number: 05

Subject: Has Home Affairs sought membership of the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT)

Asked by: Tim Watts

Question:

Mr WATTS: You mentioned the GIFCT—the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism. The Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism's independent advisory committee comprises the governments of Canada, New Zealand, the UK and the US, our major strategic allies, and includes several others. Why isn't Australia a member of this advisory committee?

Ms Spencer: We work closely with the GIFCT. We've been very involved. My understanding is that the membership of those committees is determined by the industry groups, but it is something that the government has expressed an interest in, and at a working level we've been very involved and put forward a keenness to be involved in those committees.

Mr WATTS: This is not an insignificant point. The Christchurch terrorist was an Australian; that puts a special obligation on us in leading these policy responses internationally. Can you take on notice whether we've sought membership of this advisory committee in the past?

Ms Spencer: Yes, I will.

Answer: Australia is not included on the GIFCT's Independent Advisory Committee, nor holds any oversight role in relation to the organisation. Australia sought membership to the GIFCT Independent Advisory Committee in 2020. Membership on the Independent Advisory Committee is by invitation only and is rotated every three years. The terms of reference specify that Government seats for the Independent Advisory Committee must not constitute a majority of the total seats.

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Select Committee on Social Media and Online Safety

1 February 2022

QoN Number: 06

Subject: Recommendation 4.3 - Final Report - Share information with Digital Platforms

Asked by: Tim Watts

Question:

Mr WATTS: Recommendation 4.3 of the final report of the Australian Taskforce to Combat Terrorist and Extreme Violent Material Online commits the department—government agencies more broadly, as well—to proactively share information with the digital platforms regarding indicators of terrorism, terrorist products and depictions of violent crimes. Can you provide the committee with some detail about what has been shared with the digital platforms by Home Affairs and Australian government agencies in this regard, in accordance with this recommendation?

Ms Spencer: Unfortunately I can't share that at the moment, but I'm happy to take that on notice and provide it.

Mr WATTS: When you report back, can you provide us with some details around which terrorist groups and individuals are involved, the numbers of these groups and perhaps an indication of how many reports have been provided to the digital platforms in the years since this final report? I'm happy if you want to segment that against the major platforms compared to the smaller ones. Again, I'm particularly interested in whether indicators of terrorism have been provided to digital platforms regarding far Right extremist organisations, in accordance with the recommendations of this report. In this inquiry we've heard repeatedly from the social media platforms that they are seeking guidance from government about what constitutes hate speech and where the guardrails are. So I'm very interested in understanding what support government is providing to the platforms at an operational level to understand which purveyors of this content are out of bounds and which ones are viewed by the government as representing a risk of violent extremism and radicalisation.

Ms Spencer: We'll cover that, definitely.

Answer:

In line with Recommendation 4.3 of the Report of the Australian Taskforce to Combat Terrorist and Extreme Violent Material Online, the Department of Home Affairs has shared a collection of academic research and Government products including:

- A *Literature Review of Terrorist and Violent Extremist Use of the Internet* which is government funded research to inform digital industries' policies,
- A paper on *The Roles of Women in Supporting and Opposing Violent Extremism: Understanding Gender and Terrorism in Contemporary Australia Report*, and
- A *Terrorism and Extreme Violent Material Product List* which summarises a number of relevant and accessible products including:
 - A report *Mapping Networks and Narratives of Online Right-Wing Extremists in New South Wales* using systematic mining and analysis of online data, and
 - A series of ASIO products, available through their Outreach portal, addressing online ideologically motivated violent extremism and religiously motivated violent extremism.

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PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY SPOKEN QUESTION ON NOTICE

Select Committee on Social Media and Online Safety

1 February 2022

QoN Number: 07

Subject: Countering the Great Replacement theory narrative

Asked by: Tim Watts

Question:

Mr WATTS: We know from research from Victoria University that narratives on social media grounded in racism and conspiracy theories, like the Great Replacement theory, are fuel for this radicalisation online. The first commitment of the Christchurch Call specifically permits government to 'counter the drivers of terrorism and violent extremism by strengthening the resilience and inclusiveness of our societies to enable them to resist terrorist and violent extremist ideologies, including through education, building media literacy to help counter distorted terrorist and violent extremist narratives, and the fight against inequality'. What work has the department done to counter the Great Replacement theory narrative as a driver of the radicalisation of violent extremists on digital platforms?

Mr Dowling: I think we'll have to take that on notice as it relates to specific work to counter that particular narrative, and some of the work you detailed in that recommendation, to give you the full details.

Mr WATTS: This is the violent ideology that motivated the Christchurch terrorist. You are the department responsible for responding to this, for dealing with Australian social cohesion, for countering violent extremist narratives. This should be core to your business.

Mr Dowling: Absolutely. As we detailed earlier, there are a range of areas across the department that deal with the different aspects of online harms. We have dedicated teams to deal with violent extremism narratives and to deal with the social cohesion impacts of that. They are very focused on this issue but, unfortunately, they are not appearing as witnesses today. So we would like to give you more detail.

Mr WATTS: My frustration stems from the fact that in the answers to questions on notice we have put to the department on this through Senate estimates those exact words—'a range of activities' and 'a range of policies'—appear in nearly every one, without a lot of specificity or detail. So when you come back on this on notice I'd be really keen for some detail and not just a range of activities or a range of policies.

Mr Dowling: Understood.

Answer:

- The Department undertakes broad-based programs of work to promote Australia's inclusive national identity, liberal democratic values and social cohesion.
- The Department also undertakes dedicated CVE strategic communication programs that provide ongoing information, content and messaging to counter the appeal of religious and ideologically motivated violent extremist propaganda and narratives online.
- One of these programs, *Fearlessly Australian*, includes an online platform that is designed to engage young Australian men who may be vulnerable to ideologically motivated violent extremist narratives.
 - *Fearlessly Australian* supports a cohesive community by hosting positive role models who deliver content that is frank and informative and encourages resilience, critical thinking, and practical insights into dealing with uncertainty, change or adversity.

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1 February 2022

QoN Number: 08

Subject: Offences against those provisions prosecuted in the context of racial hate speech

Asked by: Tim Watts

Question:

Mr WATTS: Thank you for that answer. Could you please take on notice offences against those provisions have been prosecuted in the context of racial hate speech?

Ms Spencer: Yes. I understand that that might be being prepared already, so we will report back on that.

Answer:

The key provisions in the schedule to the *Criminal Code Act 1995* (Cth) (Criminal Code) regarding hate speech are:

- section 80.2A – Urging violence against groups
- section 80.2B – Urging violence against members of groups
- section 471.12 – Using postal or similar service to menace, harass or cause offence
- section 474.17 – Using carriage service to menace, harass, or cause offence

Questions on prosecutions under these offences are a matter for the Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions.

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1 February 2022

QoN Number: 09

Subject: Dr Andre Oboler from Online Hate Prevention Institute - Efforts to have terrorist manifesto removed

Asked by: Tim Watts

Question:

Mr WATTS: There's a striking contrast here between the government's willingness to regulate and to legislate in respect of other forms of online safety but it hasn't regulated; it hasn't legislated. It's happy to work through the platforms on this issue of online hate speech and radicalisation, but the platforms have been very clear with us through this inquiry process that they want legislative guidance about how to moderate online hate speech targeting racial and religious groups. That slowness to act in a legislative sense on this issue is in striking contrast compared to other areas of online safety—I don't expect you to respond to that.

I just have one final specific example that I want to put to you for a response before I hand back to the chair. Dr Andre Oboler of the Online Hate Prevention Institute gave a number of examples to this committee about his work, including one specific example about his efforts to have a terrorist manifesto that was accessible from Australia removed. This was a terrorist incident in Germany, the attack on Halle, and he says:

From Australia we got the two original copies of the terrorist manifesto removed by the hosting companies. We did that from Australia. One was removed within three hours of our notification; the other within 26 hours. We tracked the further spread of that during that period. We found further copies of this terrorist manifesto. We found some of them literally using a Google search. We found other copies via links from other places that we were monitoring.

We notified eSafety Commissioner. We requested that these manifestos be sent for the classification, to the film and television Classification Board, to be made proscribed content, which then makes it easier for us to talk to Google and other companies to say: 'You need to take action. This content is illegal in Australia.' That didn't happen. The only terrorist manifesto that has ever been proscribed in that way is the Christchurch manifesto. The end result of that was that we found a copy of the manifesto accessible from Australia. We found Google advertising around it.

... ..
We actually had taxpayers' money now funding terrorism. These are issues that

should not be happening.

Can you, on notice, give me a response to what happened in that particular incident and a view about whether that reveals any gaps in the regulatory regime here?

Given that the industry group representing the platforms has asked for a more proactive approach from the department on the prescription of terrorist groups, particularly with right-wing extremist content, with the view that it flows through to the classification regime and, legally, for the eSafety Commissioner to deal with. So if you could take that on notice that would be appreciated.

Ms Spencer: I'm happy to take that on notice. I noted you said you didn't needed response, but, in regards to your previous point around the defence and response to terrorism versus other online harm such as child abuse, I would note that in our engagement with industry we have found much more engagement on the terrorism aspects, and even in regards to the GIFCT, which is an industry developed and funded and lead forum, we don't see that in relation to some of the other online harms, so there is much more industry engagement on those issues that we're able to work with them on.

Answer:

This is a matter for the Office of the eSafety Commissioner.

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Select Committee on Social Media and Online Safety

1 February 2022

QoN Number: 10

Subject: Baseline for online hate speech targeting racial groups

Asked by: Tim Watts

Question:

Mr WATTS: I just need to be explicit: the platforms have told us that they want a baseline for online hate speech targeting racial groups, and part of the reason they say that is because the larger platforms may behave more responsibly here but their view is that that's not replicated on the smaller online platforms where some of the more extreme content is shared and some of the more active radicalisation occurs. So have you had good engagement from some social media platforms, like Gab, on dealing with radicalising content and extremist content dealing with people on race or religion? On Telegram?

Ms Spencer: As I said, I'm aware of the operational aspects of that, so we'll take the point on issue.

Answer:

The Department does not have any history of specific engagement with Gab or Telegram.