**DEPARTMENT OF SECURITY
STUDIES AND CRIMINOLOGY**
Faculty of Arts

Macquarie University
NSW 2109 Australia
ABN 90 952 801 237
CRICOS Provider No 00002J

MACQUARIE
University

Submission to the Inquiry into Extremist Movements and Radicalism in Australia

Dr. Julian Droogan & Lise Waldek

Background: We are two academics specialising in terrorism studies at the Department of Security Studies and Criminology, Macquarie University. Prior to her academic appointment, Lise Waldek had a professional background in defence having worked previously for the UK Ministry of Defence and latterly with PREVENT, UK Home Office. Dr. Julian Droogan has worked extensively on terrorism related issues including with US Defence Department and is the editor of the Routledge Journal of Policing, Intelligence, Counter Terrorism. Our collaboration in applied terrorism research spans ten years. We have worked with stakeholders including the Department of Defence, Home Affairs, Communities and Justice, NSW Parliament, Multicultural NSW, and NSW Police. Our funded research projects have focused both on the nature and threat posed by extremist movements and persons spanning Islamist, far-right and far-left groups and the best practice design and evaluation of countering violent extremist programs in Australia.

Relevant research: The following information details relevant findings from our research portfolio against the Inquiry's terms of reference.

1. *Mapping and understanding the nature of, and threat posed by, extremist movements and persons holding extremist views in Australia, including, but not limited to Islamist, far-right and far-left extremist groups (ToR - 1a, 1b, 3c, 3d, 3f)*:

   1.1. In 2019 we, along with our colleague from Macquarie University Dr. Brian-Ballsun-Stanton, received funding from Department of Communities and Justice, New South Wales, to map networks and narrative of online far-right extremists in NSW and Australia. This work was done in collaboration with the Institute for Sustainable Industries and Liveable Cities, Victoria University and built on the findings of their previous research mapping far-right extremism online and offline in Victoria. The project, in accordance with Macquarie University ethics, collated and analysed empirical data from Facebook, Twitter, Gab, Reddit, 4Chan and 8kun. The project provides insights into the evolving strategies of far-righ extremism in Australia and the published report can be accessed at: https://zenodo.org/record/4071472

   Our research showed how online far-right extremist communities are complex, dynamic, and fluid. They rely on a commitment to shared narratives around 'white identity under threat' and are highly social environments. Individuals may engage in these spaces for sociality first and foremost. We frequently saw users posting content that was purely entertaining, alongside virulently dehumanising, and offensive materials.

**MACQUARIE
University**

Our findings detailed two distinct yet connected levels of risk that speak directly to understanding the nature and threat posed by extremist movements and persons in Australia.

- **A creeping threat:**
  - These are networks, narratives, and content that challenge the fundamental principles of pluralistic liberal democracy through exclusive appeals to race, ethnicity, nation, and gender.
  - The creeping threat operates in a highly social environment with users expressing their beliefs through appeals to critical thinking, a rejection of political correctness, the posing of conspiracy theories, and the use of humour and satire that is designed to shock and offend.
  - Far-right extremists actively appropriate the language of conservative, right-wing political philosophy to reject democratic norms and values. However they reject all political parties and are fundamentally revolutionary in nature.

- **The risk of violent actors:**
  - A smaller yet distinct risk of individuals that advocate and/or support the use of violence as a tactic to achieve their anti-democratic end-states. Users on higher risk platforms such as Gab and 4Chan engaged in increasingly radical and extreme rhetoric including narratives supporting violence.
  - Separating out examples of bragging, irony, and fantasy from real capability and intent is problematic. This makes identifying potential violent actors from within these communities by their posts alone difficult.

Our research noted that far-right extremist communities have a long history in New South Wales and Australia. Many of the groups that have formed over the past decade have done so in Victoria but have chapters or groups in New South Wales. However, when examining the online environment, far-right communities are more accurately defined by networks of socially connected individuals as opposed to formal groups. This point has relevance for the considerations around proscription and those communities/narratives that fall short of the legislative threshold for proscription.

1.2. The Department of Communities and Justice, NSW have funded our team at Macquarie University to complete a second phase of this mapping research. Drawing on social media data including Twitter and YouTube, the project will examine online violent extremism in the context of COVID-19 to identify its broad social and economic consequences. The findings will chart the spread of online far-right

extremist narratives and influence across wider online mainstream Australian communities.

1.3. In collaboration with PhD student Ms. Sarah Holmes, as well as Dr. Mario Peucker from Victoria University and the Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies (CRIS), we have undertaken foundational research into Antifa, the Black Bloc, and the far-left in Australia (parts of this research was conducted within a larger CRIS project). This research encompasses ethnographic observation of far-left communities and meetings, as well as thematic research into the social media usage, iconography and symbolism, and postings of Australian Antifa communities on Facebook and Twitter. This research is in press to be published in a book chapter.

The research shows that while the far-left have been responsible for the great number of terrorist groups and movements during the 20th century, today this movement is not engaged in significant terrorist activity in Australia. Far-left Marxists and Anarchist groups in Australia do present a political challenge, however they largely reject the wholesale use of violence to achieve political change (in contrast to the far-right in which violence to outgroups is central to their identity and movements). Antifa and Black Bloc use of violence in Australia has largely been confined to counterprotesting at far-right rallies, when fascists have taken over public spaces. There is little support within far-left movements to use violent tactics to achieve political outcomes distinct from targeting fascists. Far left online and offline discourse is more concerned with building a broad popular political movement in Australia (as occurred in the early 1970s during the Vietnam War), and for the most part considers the use of violence or terror tactics to be antithetical to that goal.

2. *Further steps that the Commonwealth could take to disrupt and deter hate speech and establish thresholds to regulate the use of symbols and insignia associated with terrorism and extremism, including online giving consideration to the experience of other countries; further steps the Commonwealth could take to reinforce social cohesion, counter violent extremism and address the growing diversification of extremist ideology in Australia (ToR - 3d, 3e)*

2.1. In 2015 we received an Australian Research Council Discovery Grant to examine online violent extremism and youth audiences. The researched aimed to address the stereotype of youth audiences as passive and vulnerable, primed for radicalisation to violent extremism. The findings draw on the results of a survey of over 1,000 young people from across Australia and a series of in-depth focus groups held in March 2020 among young people (18-19 years of age) studying at Macquarie University.

**MACQUARIE
University**

The research demonstrates that young people have complex emotional and behavioural responses to online violent extremist content. They often expressed shock and horror at the same time as discussing their innate curiosity and interest in the content, alongside humour and entertainment. Their behavioural strategies to deal with exposure to the diverse content are indicative of existing resilience that offer policymakers and front-line works opportunities to develop more effective moderation strategies and social cohesion programs.

Young people revealed how they frequently discussed their engagement with online violent extremist content with their peers, but these were usually described as highly superficial conversations. The question raised is what is the effectiveness of superficial versus more informed debate in relation to generating resilience among young people? This is important because there is an argument that in-depth discussion around terrorist content plays into the aims/agenda of the producers of such content.

3. *Changes that could be made to Australia's Counter-Terrorism Strategy in relation to preventing radicalisation to extremist views, including the capacity for further partnership approaches with state, territory, and local governments; further steps the Commonwealth could take to reinforce social cohesion, counter violent extremism, and address the growing diversification of extremist ideology in Australia (ToR 3b, 3e)*

   3.1. In 2015 we were contracted by Multicultural NSW to inform the expenditure of funds in response to the events of the Martin Place siege. We conducted three phases of policy orientated research that resulted in the design and delivery of the highly successfully COMPACT CVE program that has been funded to the value of $12.2 million (over five years) and is still in operation.

   Drawing on our subject-matter expertise and a review of international best practice in CVE, as well as significant state-wide community consultations, COMPACT was designed around an innovative concept of disaster management and community resilience building.

   COMPACT addresses significant criticism levelled at CVE programs in the past through its generation of a community resilience network. Partnerships between communities, private sector, government, and academia form the COMPACT alliance, a society wide network of empowered communities, through which all aspects social cohesion is maintained, even and especially in, the face of future violent extremist attacks.

**DEPARTMENT OF SECURITY
STUDIES AND CRIMINOLOGY**
Faculty of Arts

Macquarie University
NSW 2109 Australia
ABN 90 952 801 237
CRICOS Provider No 00002J

During the design of COMPACT, we embedded the requirement for ongoing evaluation throughout the lifecycle of both the programme grants and the COMPACT alliance. This resulted in the production of one of the only publicly available independently evaluated reports on a CVE program. The evaluation documented the strength of the alliance and its effectiveness in responding to violent extremism and generating societal resilience to the negative impacts of extremism and hate in Australia have on social cohesion.

Our research demonstrates the critical need to reframe CVE programs through the disaster management and resilience model. This overcomes the criticism of CVE programs that they are too broad based and therefore ineffective and unable to be appropriately evaluated. It highlights the importance of building into CVE programs comprehensive evaluation strategies from commencement. The research demonstrated that state governments and agencies can be well-placed to manage community-based CVE programs.

3.2. Between 2016 – 2020 we were engaged as formal evaluators for the Community Action for Preventing Extremism (CAPE) project undertaken by the anti-racism and anti-extremism organisation All Together Now (ATN) funded by COMPACT. This was the first major public CVE program focused on far-right extremism in Australia. It developed a targeted education program for front-line workers working with young people at risk. Our evaluation demonstrates the existence of a significant body of institutional expertise, experience, and capacity that could be drawn upon by Australian policy makers to meet the growing challenges of violent extremism.