

Inquiry into right wing extremist movements in Australia

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

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The views expressed in this submission are the author's own and do not reflect any official position of the Lowy Institute

Introduction

In my capacity as a Research Fellow and Project Director for the Lowy Institute, I welcome the opportunity to make a submission to Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee's inquiry into right wing extremist movements in Australia. This inquiry is both relevant and timely, as right wing extremism is an urgent and compelling threat to liberal democracies.

As part of my work as a Research Fellow in the Transnational Challenges Program, I study the emergence and growth of international and Australian terrorist and extremist movements, with a particular focus on the extreme right, anti-government conspiracy motivated and jihadist movements, as well as the intersection of technology and extremism. The Lowy Institute is a highly regarded Australian think tank with a global outlook that produces policy relevant research on both global and Australian foreign policy and national security issues. Extremism is one of those issues that has intersecting global and national dimensions.

This submission draws upon my recent book, [*Rise of the Extreme Right: The new global extremism and the threat to democracy*](#). A copy of the publication can be made available to Committee members and the Secretariat upon request.

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:

(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;

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

Defining right wing extremism and understanding its manifestations

Right wing extremism (RWE) is best understood as a *spectrum* of socio-political movements. 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, anti-Semitism, 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 politics and use or justify the use of violence as a means to effect societal and political change.

As a United Nations report notes: '[RWE] is not a coherent or easily defined movement, but rather a shifting, complex and overlapping milieu of individuals, groups and movements (online and offline) espousing different but related ideologies.'² In addition to ideological fragmentation and variety, many variants of right wing extremism incorporate religious motivation and ideas, appropriating extreme forms of Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, pagan and even millennialism and satanic theologies. But while these movements are fragmented, there are a number of convergences between RWE groups.

RWE milieus and movements *are* connected in important and relevant ways. In addition to their 'anti-democratic opposition to equality', RWE groups view the current world 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, feminists, LGBTQ+ communities, immigrants, or inferior yet menacing races.

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

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

² *Member States Concerned by the Growing and Increasingly Transnational Threat of Extremism Right wing Terrorism*, CTED Trends Alert, (United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, April 2020), <https://www.statewatch.org/media/documents/news/2020/apr/un-cted-trend-alert-right-wing-extremism-4-20.pdf>.

becoming a legitimate target of violence.³ RWE groups also conceptualise their 'in group' as superior and their success as inseparable from the exclusion or destruction of others.⁴

The extreme right also has a long history and association with conspiratorial thinking.⁵ The contribution of conspiratorial belief to extremist violence 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 and have paranoid ideations and a strong distrust of government.⁶

Acknowledging these similarities and throughlines⁷ 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.

RWE political violence also 'often [has] fluid boundaries between hate crime and organised terrorism'. Because a lot of right wing extremist 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 groups 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.⁸

While right wing extremists reject democratic politics in favour of revolutionary violence, RWE can often intersect with reactionary right elements that are not necessarily RWE but oppose political and societal transformations and advocate the return of an imagined idealised past, or more often, promote far right political ideas characterised by nativism and authoritarian tendencies.

³ J. M. Berger, *Extremism*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2018.

⁴ Berger, *Extremism*.

⁵ Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab, *The Politics of Unreason: Right wing Extremism in America, 1790–1970*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1970); and Richard Hofstadter, 'Paranoid Style in American Politics', *Harper's Magazine*, November 1964, <https://harpers.org/archive/1964/11/the-paranoid-style-in-american-politics>.

⁶ 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.

⁷ Lydia Khalil, *Rise of the Extreme Right: the new global extremism and the threat to democracy*, London: Penguin, 2022.

⁸ Sam Jackson, *Schema of right wing extremism in the United States*, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2022, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep19625>.

While the reactionary right and the far right might work within a democracy or the electoral system instead of directly advocating for and conducting violent attacks, the far right does not believe in *liberal* democracy and rejects pluralism and minority protections.⁹ These shades of far right and extreme right wing belief are not static, nor are they separated by bold lines. Rather, the barriers can be blurry, which is part of what makes the risk of RWE so diffuse and difficult to combat, particularly in a democracy where elements of the extreme right bleed into far right movements and the far right engages with the extreme right.

Statistics on right wing extremist violence and plots also do not touch on the observable growing acceptance of extreme right wing ideas and narratives promoted by nominally non-violent groups and political parties within both established and emerging democracies. Additionally, in Australia, we have seen an increase in the targeting and disruption of democratic governing and procedures, particularly at the local council level, and particularly in the wake of the pandemic. RWE groups, sovereign citizens and anti-democratic conspiratorial movements have fixed on local council-run events, attempting to shut down public events for the LGBTQ+ community in the name of child safety and have spread conspiracies about local council planning around such things as 15 minute cities, spreading disinformation that these planning decisions are part of a global plot to surveil and control citizens' movements.¹⁰

Taking a page out of the US RWE playbook, Australian RWE groups have also directly disrupted local council proceedings and events. Though this has been a relatively common tactic since the mid-2010s by RWE groups, it has generally been inner city Australian local councils that have faced disruption by RWE actors. We are now seeing an increase in the targeting and disruption of suburban and rural councils from a wide spectrum of anti-government and conspiracy movements. Concurrently, we are seeing that these actors are also running as candidates in local elections. Local councils are targeted because they are a more accessible level of government. In addition to the disruption of democratic governance proceedings, these disruptions also serve as opportunities for the creation of propaganda

⁹ Cas Mudde, 'The Far Right and the European Elections', *Current History*, 113, No.761, 98–103, (2014).

¹⁰ David Gilbert, "The 15-min conspiracy theory goes mainstream," *Wired*, 2 October 2023, <https://www.wired.com/story/15-minute-city-conspiracy-uk-politics/>

material to demonstrate their influence and gain media attention, as disruptive actors often film their confrontations and disruptions

Motivations and drivers of right wing extremism

There is no single process to radicalisation. Individuals involved in violent extremist movements come from a wide variety of backgrounds and circumstances. The process of radicalisation to violence and extremist beliefs is an idiosyncratic mix of psycho-social factors. What we know about human behaviour and how it intersects with structural conditions and social movements remains incomplete. While we might not be able to predict who exactly may become involved in violent extremism or know the precise concoction that motivates these individuals, we can identify broad factors and trends driving its growth. Across the Anglosphere, in Europe, Asia and elsewhere, there are broad political, economic and social factors that are fuelling individual grievances, and resentments that are funnelling people into right wing extremist beliefs and movements.

Right wing extremist movements have been around for a long time and there is a large body of work examining their history. However, there are multiple factors in the present day that are colliding and colluding, resulting in a perfect storm that has brought about an unprecedented surge of RWE.

Rise in inequality

Globalisation and the accompanying rise in inequality are key structural elements driving RWE. Since the 1980s, most countries have experienced rising inequality in wealth, and the share of income going to the top one per cent has risen sharply.¹¹ A wealthy transnational global elite is sucking up global wealth, and mainstream national political parties on the right and left share responsibility for promoting neoliberal economic policies that have allowed for this.

However, neoliberalism, particularly in advanced economies, has failed to live up to its promise of providing equitable economic stability and freedom. This has led many to reject

¹¹ Facundo Alvaredo, Lucas Chancel, Thomas Piketty, Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman, *World Inequality Report*, World Inequality Lab, (Paris: World Inequality Lab, 2018), <https://wir2018.wid.world/files/download/wir2018-full-report-english.pdf>

global governance and free trade, and built resentments against the elites who championed this system.¹² But this phenomenon also feeds into conspiracy theories about a corrupt global cabal that wants to create a 'New World Order' — a far right conspiracy theory with origins going back hundreds of years, but which really took off after the establishment of the United Nations. The New World Order conspiracy claims that a powerful but secret global elite aims to take over the world and establish a global dictatorship.¹³ What was once the province of the crackpot fringe has now moved into the mainstream, with more and more people believing in versions of a conspiracy theory 'that global elites are manipulating us and taking away our rights and conspiring to abrogate national sovereignty and establish the world state'.¹⁴

The post-1990s period of hyper-globalisation has also left many displaced. In multiple advanced economies, international economic integration has occurred alongside domestic disintegration, deepening the divide between winners (those who are professional, educated, cosmopolitan, skilled) and losers (the less educated, those working in industries that cannot globalise).¹⁵ This has inflamed anti-elite sentiment within democracies and triggered a turn towards authoritarianism and exclusionary nationalism by those who feel economically, socially or politically ostracised by globalisation. Far right political parties and extremist movements have responded by stoking anti-elite sentiment and inflaming cultural and identity divisions for political gain.

While Australia has better social safety nets than other Western democracies, it has not been immune to these dynamics and the accompanying growth of extreme and far right tendencies. It is also important to clarify that many people involved in RWE come from comfortable, stable and secure backgrounds. In fact, many far right influencers and proponents are themselves from the elite. It is not so much that economic inequality and precarity stemming from globalisation are driving the growth of the extreme right, but that

¹² Liz Fekete, 'Flying the Flag for Neoliberalism', *Race and Class*, 58, No.3 (January 2017): 3–22, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396816670088>.

¹³ Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

¹⁴ 'Why is 'New World Order' Ideology Spreading?', CBS News, 6 November 2013, <https://www.cbsnews.com/video/why-is-new-world-order-ideology-spreading/#x>.

¹⁵ Dani Rodrik, 'Why Does Globalisation Fuel Populism? Economics, Culture, and the Rise of Right wing Populism', *Annual Review of Economics*, 13, 133–170, (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-economics-070220-032416>.

these factors are contributing to insecurity and anxiety around *status* — particularly the status of ethnic, racial or national majorities that are used to being the ‘winners’ of the system. Their resentments about loss of status¹⁶ are driving anti-establishment, anti-elite and anti-immigration attitudes. They are also driving the appeal of RWE narratives about the perceived causes of this loss of status, as well as right wing extremist solutions.

Therefore, it is not the objective conditions of participants in extremist movements that matter most, but their perceptions of their circumstances, their grievances and sense of injustice.¹⁷ Influencers and leaders of right wing extremist movements exploit these anxieties and resentments, particularly among young men, and focus them towards a clear and concrete point of blame. The leader of an Australian neo-Nazi organisation exploits this and appeals to young male followers in this manner:

“They are going to see that they are never going to afford a home. If they do, it’s going to be in the middle of nowhere. They are going to be spending two hours in traffic to get to work in some dead-end job [that they] had to go to university for four years [to get]. They are in all this debt. The whole thing is geared against them. Probably not until they get to 40 can they even afford a family, so they can’t even breed. So can we continue white people existing in this country if we don’t have the economics geared for us to breed?”¹⁸

Environmental degradation and immigration

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 RWE groups, 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

¹⁶ Sophie Kaldor, *Far-Right Violent Extremism as a Failure of Status: A New Approach to Extremist Manifestos through the Lens of Ressentiment*, ICCT Research Paper, May 2021, (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, May 2021), <https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2021/05/Far-Right-Violent-Extremism-as-a-Failure-of-Status.pdf>.

¹⁷ Martha Crenshaw, *Explaining Terrorism: Causes, Processes and Consequences*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2011).

¹⁸ Joey Watson, ‘Everyone Wants to be Fuhrer, Part 2’, ABC Radio National, *Earshot*, 14 March 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/earshot/everyone-wants-to-be-fuhrer-ep-2/13785880>.

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

Patrick Wood Crusius, who was inspired by the Christchurch attack and committed a copycat mass shooting in an El Paso Walmart that killed twenty people in 2019, revealed in his manifesto that, in addition to anti-immigrant sentiment, he was motivated by environmental concerns. His manifesto was pithily titled 'An Inconvenient Truth', a reference to Al Gore's famous documentary on climate change.¹⁹

Eco-fascism draws an erroneous link between the environmental effects of climate change and overpopulation and global migration. It posits that 'population cleansing' is the solution for the climate crisis. It reworks old Nazi ideas of the *völkisch* movement rooted in the notion of 'blood and soil', a belief that a racially defined people were organically connected to a particular land and that a return to agrarian life was a counterweight to a corrupt, polluting cosmopolitanism.²⁰ Eco-fascist ideas also motivated the Christchurch terrorist and movements such as the Atomwaffen Division.²¹ This is a new generation that idealises Nazi Germany as a paragon of environmentalism.

Eco-fascists blame the 'capitalist class' and corporate elites for the degradation of the environment. They oppose industrialisation and globalisation and believe immigration and multiculturalism are threats to the natural world.²² They mix their programs of agrarianism, natural health and alternative wellness with racism. Eco-fascism has also become a vehicle to promote anti-Semitism, with Jews presented as a de-racinated, corrupt, cosmopolitan elite destroying the land through industrialisation, mass migration and global capitalism at the expense of 'real people'.

Fears among certain right wing extremists about ecological disaster from climate change are intertwined with opposition to immigration. Posts from an Australian eco-fascist Facebook

¹⁹ Patrick Crusius, 'The Inconvenient Truth', August 2019.

²⁰ Bernhard Forchtner, 'The Far Right has Moved from Climate Denial to Obstructing Climate Action', Open Democracy, 1 November 2021, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/author/berhard-forchtner/>.

²¹ Alexander Reid Ross and Emmi Bevensee, 'Confronting the Rise of Eco-Fascism Means Grappling with Complex Systems', CARR Research Insight, Centre for Analysis of Radical Right, July 2020, https://www.radicalrightanalysis.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Ross_Bevensee_2020.3.pdf.

²² Peter Staudenmaier, 'Understanding Right wing Ecology: Historical and Contemporary Reflections', *Ideology Theory Practice*, 26 July 2021, https://www.ideology-theory-practice.org/blog/understanding-right-wing-ecology-historical-and-contemporary-reflections#_ftn21.

page are rife with memes advocating for a return to the White Australia policy and denigrating progressive political parties for claiming to be for the environment while also welcoming refugees.²³ As the climate crisis grows, there is a temptation to find an easy enemy to blame — another race, another nation, another group of people. Right wing extremists not only blame those groups for the climate crisis, but advocate targeted violence against them.

Democratic erosion

The rise in RWE is also correlated with global democratic decline. Right wing extremism is both a symptom and a cause of democratic erosion. 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.²⁴ There has concurrently been growing polarisation and eroding social cohesion across many democracies.²⁵ Measurements around the effectiveness of government to provide solutions to people's problems in democracies have shown a sharp drop.²⁶ Political accountability and competitiveness in democracies are also declining, with many people feeling like the system is rigged.

The latest Edelman Trust Barometer also warns that Australia is headed towards 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%).²⁷

While Australia's democratic health is strong by many measures, the levels of trust in government and institutions in Australia are among the lowest in the world and are an

²³ Posts from 'Australian Ecofascist Memes', Facebook.

²⁴ Richard Wike, Laura Silver and Alexandra Castillo, 'Many across the Globe are Dissatisfied with How Democracy is Working', Pew Research Center, 29 April 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/04/29/many-across-the-globe-are-dissatisfied-with-how-democracy-is-working/>.

²⁵ "Democracy Index 2020: In Sickness and in Health?," *Economist Intelligence Unit*, (2020), <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2020/>.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Trust Barometer 2023 Australia, "Australia on the Path to Polarisation," <https://www.edelman.com.au/sites/g/files/aatus381/files/2023-02/2023%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer%20Report%20-%20AUS%2002-2023.pdf>

increasing concern.²⁸ In periods of social, political and economic uncertainty and polarisation, extremism can grow, and the disaffected can be recruited into these movements. An increasing number of citizens are seeking solutions outside establishment politics and institutions.

Democratic decline has provided opportunities for anti-democratic forces to capture the disaffected and disenfranchised. As a result, we see a growth in the appeal of the 'strong man' model of governance — a 'get things done' type of leadership that also tends to embrace nativism, intolerance and disregard for democratic processes and institutions. The political appeal of far right politicians has emboldened the extreme right. They find legitimacy in leaders who echo their talking points and who are willing to scuttle liberalism and egalitarianism. Yet for extremists, these leaders do not go far enough, convincing RWE actors that their ideological goals have to be pursued by violence.

The world has undergone profound stress and upheaval in the past decades: environmental crises, a global financial crisis, growing inequality, and a global pandemic. 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 an inspiration and galvanising force for RWE in the United States and countries around the world, including Australia. Research has demonstrated that both online and offline violence and aggression perpetrated by RWE groups increased globally in the wake of the 2016 US Presidential election.²⁹ 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'.³⁰ Online

²⁸ Mark Evans, Will Jennings and Gerry Stoker, 'How Does Australia Compare: What Makes a Leading Democracy?', *Democracy 2025*, Report No.6, <https://www.democracy2025.gov.au/documents/Democracy2025-report6.pdf>.

²⁹ 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. doi:10.1080/09546553.2020.1761342.

³⁰ Macquarie University Department of Security Studies, 'Mapping Networks and Narratives of Right wing Extremists in New South Wales', Technical Report for Department of Communities and Justice NSW, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.5281/ZENODO.4071472>.

narratives and themes around white identity and white nationalism are 'often US centric with a strong focus on Trump'.³¹

Trump has repeatedly minimised and even incited RWE violence, creating a more permissive environment for it to grow. In August 2017, various RWE movements converged in a massive rally called 'Unite the Right' in Charlottesville, Virginia that resulted in the killing of a counter-protester and injuring of others. When pressed to condemn the protesters, President Trump said there was violence on 'both sides' and that 'there were some very fine people' peacefully protesting, essentially applying a false moral equivalence to the white supremacists and counter-protesters.³² During the 2020 Presidential debate, when Trump was asked to condemn white supremacist violence, he initially equivocated and then made an appeal to the Proud Boys, a neo-fascist 'Western chauvinist' movement, to 'stand back and stand by', saying that 'someone's got to do something about antifa'.³³

What exactly that 'something' is was left unsaid but was well understood, with Trump essentially giving the green light — live and on national television — for right wing armed groups to stand at the ready to commit violence on his behalf.³⁴ It reached a crescendo with the Capitol siege and the January 6th insurrection. Trump spent weeks undermining the validity of the 2020 Presidential election result and refused to peacefully cede power. Pro-Trump RWE actors mounted an ultimately unsuccessful insurrection to disrupt the Electoral College count and ratification on the Congressional floor.

A number of right wing extremists who have since faced trial, have used the 'Trump made me do it' defence, underscoring his influence on RWE milieus. White supremacist leader Matthew Heimbach, who was on trial for assaulting a Black woman at a Trump rally, filed a counter-suit saying that if he were found liable for damages it was because he 'acted pursuant to the directives and requests of Donald J. Trump and Donald J. Trump for

³¹ Ibid.

³² Glenn Kessler, 'The 'Very Fine People' at Charlottesville: Who Were They?', *The Washington Post*, 8 May 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/05/08/very-fine-people-charlottesville-who-were-they-2/>.

³³ Peter Baker, "A Long History of Language that Incites and Demonizes," *New York Times*, 31 August, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/31/us/politics/trump-police-protests.html>

³⁴ Lydia Khalil, "Inciter in Chief," *The Interpreter*, 29 October, 2020, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/inciter-chief>

President', and that 'any liability must be shifted to one or both of them'.³⁵ A number of people arrested for taking part in the Capitol siege have also proffered the 'Trump made me do it' defence.

Trump's influence and that of the conspiracy theories connected to him — including The Big Lie around the US election results that was used to justify the January 6th insurrection and the previous storming of State legislative bodies and the QAnon conspiracy movement — were all referenced and adapted to the Australian context.³⁶ For example, in an echo of the January 6th riots, anti-lockdown protesters dragged out a noose in front of the Victorian State Parliament House and threatened to hang 'treasonous' politicians when pandemic-specific legislation was being considered.³⁷

The prospect of Trump's re-election, despite the violence of the January 6th insurrection, demonstrates that the deepening polarisation and democratic erosion that contributes to the rise in RWE persists and that Trump's fascist appeal resonates with many. The prospect of further far right violence incited and inspired by Trump has continued and has even intensified during the current Presidential election in 2024.³⁸ Election-related and other forms of political violence in the United States will not only impact the United States but will have global implications, including in Australia.

The Covid-19 pandemic

RWE was also bolstered by the pandemic, leading to numerous plots, attacks and other acts of violence in protest against lockdown measures and government mandates. RWE 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 Covid-19 pandemic contributed to an increase

³⁵ Attachment to Form Answer of Defendant Matthew Heimbach to Complaint of Plaintiffs Kashtya Nwanguma, Molly Shaw and Henry Brousseau, Case 3:16-cv-00247-DJH-HBB, Document 31-2, filed 17 April 2017, <https://www.politico.com/f/?id=0000015b-7dcc-dbo4-ad5b-7ded76a30002>.

³⁶ 2022 Federal election, Disinformation Register, *Australian Electoral Commission*, <https://www.aec.gov.au/media/disinformation-register-2022.htm>

³⁷ Stephanie Convery, "Australia Covid protests: threats against 'traitorous' politicians as thousands rally in capital cities," *The Guardian*, 20 November 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/nov/20/australia-covid-protests-threats-against-traitorous-politicians-as-thousands-rally-in-capital-cities>.

³⁸ David Smith, "It'll be bedlam: How Trump is creating conditions for a post election eruption," *The Guardian*, 23 March 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/mar/23/donald-trump-political-violence-fears-us-election>

in radicalisation to violent extremism.³⁹ Violent extremists, particularly RWE actors, used the pandemic to bolster their existing frameworks and beliefs and used the crisis to make direct calls for action.⁴⁰ The pandemic also provided fertile ground for ideologically based extremist movements to recruit others with existing or developing anti-government sentiments to their cause.⁴¹

Australia's pandemic response amounted to some of the strictest public health measures in the democratic world. Many Australians endured extensive periods of 'lockdown', which limited employment, mobility and social supports. 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 effects⁴² that contributed to violent extremism.

Some demographics who harboured grievances from their experiences of the pandemic found themselves vulnerable to disinformation and conspiracist messaging. A few were enticed to engage with RWE groups in Australia, such as neo-Nazi and sovereign citizen movements, but many others joined locally rooted but globally connected 'Freedom Movements' encompassing a diverse array of actors with fluid ideologies but who all shared a conspiratorial worldview and anti-government and anti-democratic sentiments.⁴³ 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 restrictions thanks to the affordances of digital technologies.

³⁹ "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>.

⁴⁰ Lydia Khalil, "The impact of natural disasters on extremism," *ASPI Yearbook* 2021, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep31258.24.pdf>

⁴¹ Abdul Basit, "COVID-19: a challenge or opportunity for terrorist groups?" *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism*, Vol 15, No. 3: 263–275, <https://doi.org/10.1080/18335330.2020.1828603>.

⁴² Saladino, Valeria, Algeri Davide, Auriemma Vincenzo, "The psychological and social impact of Covid-19: New Perspectives of well-being," 11 (2020), <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.577684>.

⁴³ 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*, Volume XVII, Issue I: 144–170, March 2023, <https://doi.org/10.19165/DUYA5041>

The Covid-19 pandemic also demonstrates the impacts that natural disasters — of which pandemics are one, but also other disasters to which Australia is increasingly susceptible, such as floods and bushfires — 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.⁴⁴ Alongside this evidence is the equally unprecedented spread of misinformation, disinformation and contestation of the causes and origins of those crises.⁴⁵ In future, multiple and concurrent emergencies and crises in a post-truth age may not only challenge governments' disaster responses and recovery efforts, but potentially spur anti-government sentiment and violent extremism. This is something that should be accounted for in the disaster and emergency management (DEM) plans of advanced economies and democracies such as Australia.⁴⁶

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.⁴⁷ 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.

RWE actors are 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.⁴⁸ They have also instrumentalised and exploited recent disasters and crises to justify and extend their narratives. Extremist groups have also latched onto

⁴⁴ 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>.

⁴⁵ 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.

⁴⁶ Lydia Khalil, "The impact of natural disasters on extremism," *ASPI Yearbook* 2021, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep31258.24.pdf>

⁴⁷ 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.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

disasters as catalysts for 'accelerationism', a theory of creative destruction adopted by neo-Nazi RWE actors and movements proposing that any point of upheaval — such as natural disasters and emergencies — is an opportunity to usher in and accelerate the demise of current societal structures and governments and impose new ones.⁴⁹

Links between international movements and individuals

The challenges and threats from RWE are not only an Australian, but a global, issue. There has been upwards of a 320 per cent increase in right wing extremism globally from 2016 to 2021.⁵⁰ 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.⁵¹ RWE is on the rise across Five Eyes countries, Europe and Asia.⁵² 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.⁵³

RWE and far right movements have always cooperated across borders,⁵⁴ despite the conventional wisdom that they are nationally oriented and locally focused. 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, having not succumbed to multiculturalism.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ Anti-Defamation League, "White Supremacists Embrace 'Accelerationism'," April 16, 2019, <https://www.adl.org/blog/white-supremacists-embrace-accelerationism>

⁵⁰ "Member States Concerned by the Growing and Increasingly Transnational Threat of Extremism Right wing Terrorism," CTED Trends Alert, (United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, April 2020), <https://www.statewatch.org/media/documents/news/2020/apr/un-cted-trend-alert-right-wing-extremism-4-20.pdf>.

⁵¹ United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, "Member States Concerned by the Growing and Increasingly Transnational Threat of Extremism Right wing Terrorism."

⁵² Khalil, *Rise of the Extreme Right: the new global extremism and the threat to democracy*.

⁵³ 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.

⁵⁴ Johannes Dalfinger and Moritz Florin (eds), *A Transnational History of Right wing Terrorism: Political Violence and the Far Right in Eastern and Western Europe Since 1990* (Routledge, 2022).

⁵⁵ Johannes Dalfinger 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.

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 clear. 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 focused almost as much on divisive social and political issues in the United States 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.'⁵⁶

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 global struggle and shared goals that extend beyond national boundaries.⁵⁷ White supremacist and white nationalist RWE actors 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.⁵⁸ 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.'⁵⁹ This is ironic, given that Combat 18 and similar neo-Nazi organisations have 'blood and soil' beliefs and anti-

⁵⁵ Vice News, "A Lot Of White Supremacists Seem To Have An Asian Fetish (HBO)," September 12, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ogjXbywmlT4>.

⁵⁶ 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>.

⁵⁷ Counter Extremism Project, "Violent Right-Wing Extremism and Terrorism – Transnational Connectivity, Definitions, Incidents, Structures and Countermeasures."

⁵⁸ 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>.

⁵⁹ Perry Barbara and Ryan Scrivens, "White Pride Worldwide: Constructing Global Identities Online," in *The Globalization of Hate: Internationalizing Hate Crime?*, eds. Jennifer Scheppe and Mark Austin Walters, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

immigration stances. Now, when right wing extremists 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 RWE actors and other international extremists, particularly in the United States.⁶⁰ For example, in 2023, a US-based member of Atomwaffen 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 months earlier with an Australian far right channel on Telegram and exchanged encrypted emails with Australian neo-Nazis on the same platform. This documented exchange is a clear example of international communication and cooperation between extremist cells and individuals.⁶¹

There are also documented examples of US-based RWE groups attempting to recruit individuals and form cells in Australia. The Base, a now largely defunct organisation that has been listed as a proscribed terrorist organisation in Australia, is/was a relatively small paramilitary accelerationist neo-Nazi movement based in the United States. The Base operated as a decentralised movement modelled on 'leaderless resistance', in which regional cells adhere to a shared ideology and common purpose but have limited contact. While the Base's main membership and activity was in the United States, it also has 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 and operational issues such as guerrilla warfare, survival skills, building firearms and chemical weapons, and 'escape and evasion' tactics.

⁶⁰ 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>

⁶¹ 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.

Its leader made connections with individuals in Australia via online forums and later phone conversations 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 and could then go out and find other recruits among the ranks of Australian right wing extremists — including one high-schooler and a former candidate for local political office.⁶²

Russia's role

The leader of The Base currently resides in St Petersburg, Russia⁶³ — an example of how Russia has cultivated white supremacist movements such as the Atomwaffen Division and The Base. His residency there points to a broader dynamic, which is the centrality of Russia to the cultivation of RWE globally as a means of foreign influence and geopolitical posturing.

Russia has many connections to neo-Nazi movements and other right wing extremists around the world. Even as Russian President Vladimir Putin wages a war of naked aggression against Ukraine based on a flimsy predicate of 'denazification', neo-Nazis, ultra-nationalists and white supremacists look to Russia as the last bulwark against the decaying liberal West's turn to post-modern progressivism and corruption. One examination of Russia's role concluded that it is 'running an active-measures campaign to cultivate right wing support to undermine the West'.⁶⁴ It is doing so in typically opaque Russian fashion, through various actors and methods including 'the Kremlin, covert branches of the state, regime-linked oligarchs and state-tolerated right wing groups in Russia itself that sometimes work with the government but at times oppose it'.⁶⁵

President Putin is considered by right wing extremists as a guardian of Western civilisation. He is admired for his strongman persona and supposed resistance to the encroaching

⁶² Alex Mann and Kevin Nguyen, "The Base Tapes," *ABC Background Brief*, 26 March, 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-03-26/the-base-tapes-secret-recordings-australian-recruitment/13255994>

⁶³ Daniel de Simone, et al, "Neo-nazi Rinaldo Nazzaro running US militant group The Base from Russia," *BBC* 24 January 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-51236915>

⁶⁴ Shelby Butt and Daniel Byman, 'Right wing Extremism: The Russian Connection', *Survival*, 62: No.2 (2020) 137–152, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00396338.2020.1739960>.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

corruption and decadence of Western societies. He is perceived as a defender of traditional values and an opponent of the LGBTQ+ rights that right wing extremists believe threaten the traditional family. They consider him the last line of defence against Islamist threats and the crusher of corrupt elitist global institutions such as the European Union (EU), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the United Nations (UN). As one right wing extremist declared, 'Russia is our biggest inspiration.' He and many other extremist colleagues consider Vladimir Putin 'the leader of the free world'.⁶⁶

Putin's conceptualisation of nationhood and statehood — ethnically based and autocratic — is also compatible with the far right and stands in contrast to the liberal idea of a state based on civic responsibility, rule of law and individual rights.⁶⁷ Russian information campaigns have amplified RWE discourse and narratives around immigration, government corruption and threats from the left, helping to bolster mainstream exposure of these ideas. Russia's Facebook equivalent, VK, has welcomed extremists after they were deplatformed by Facebook and other social media outlets. Russian intelligence services sponsor fight clubs in multiple European countries, which have been used to spread Russian influence and act as a liaison point for extreme right wing actors.⁶⁸

Russia has also used the Russian Orthodox Church in its cultivation of the far right, and the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR) has attracted a number of RWE figures. Conversion into Eastern Orthodox Christianity has become a trend within RWE circles — particularly among white supremacists, neo-traditionalists and male supremacists. It is a trend that is both aided and encouraged by the Russian state.⁶⁹

There is a Russian connection to the Australian far right, too. A marginal pro-Kremlin group called the Zabaikal Cossack Society of Australia considers Australia to be a 'hostile state'. It has mounted demonstrations in support of Russian separatist claims in Crimea, clashed with Ukrainians in Australia, and intimidated the Russian community in Australia when it has

⁶⁶ Alan Feuer and Andrew Higgins, 'Extremists Turn to a Leader to Protect Western Values: Vladimir Putin', *The New York Times*, 3 December 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/03/world/americas/alt-right-vladimir-putin.html>.

⁶⁷ Steven Erlanger, 'Putin's War on Ukraine is About Ethnicity and Empire', *The New York Times*, 16 March 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/16/world/europe/putin-war-ukraine-recolonization.html?referringSource=articleShare>.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Sarah Riccardi-Swartz, *Between Heaven and Russia: Religious Conversion and Political Apostasy in Appalachia*, first edition, (Fordham University Press, 2022).

displayed insufficient allegiance to Putin.⁷⁰ The group also associates with other Australian white supremacist figures and its leadership has reportedly travelled to Ukraine to liaise with pro-Russian forces. An ABC News report confirmed that its members have spent time with separatists involved in Russian-supported battalions in eastern Ukraine and met with others who are subject to Australian government sanctions.⁷¹

There are reports of at least five Australians fighting for Russian-backed militias in Ukraine. Ukrainian officials notified the Australian government and pushed for the individuals to be charged under counter-terrorism legislation.⁷² However, because their movements were not proscribed under Australian law, the men were free to return home and did not face charges.

Right wing extremism among migrant communities

As previously noted, RWE is not only an issue in Western countries, nor is it relegated to white males. In Australia, as a multicultural society, RWE manifests across and among various ethnicities and communities. Though there are many examples within various diaspora and migrant communities, one emerging RWE challenge in Australia is Hindutva extremism.

The extreme Hindu nationalist Hindutva ideology is considered a variant of RWE.⁷³ 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, like European fascists, Hindutva adherents promote a version of 'blood and soil', arguing that being Hindu is 'a matter of race and blood' geographically bound to India.⁷⁴ Hindutva ideology constructs an exclusionary Indian identity, extolling Hindus as 'real Indians' and casting non-Hindus, mainly Indian Muslims, as outsiders and usurpers.⁷⁵

⁷⁰ Kyle Wilson, 'The Strange Case of Putin's Self-Declared Fifth Column in Australia', *Inside Story*, 12 August 2020, <https://insidestory.org.au/the-strange-case-of-putins-self-declared-fifth-column-in-australia/>.

⁷¹ Nino Bucci, 'Five Australians Free to Return after Fighting in Ukraine Far-Right 'Finishing School' alongside Russian Nationalist Militia', ABC News, 23 April 2019, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-04-23/five-australians-free-to-return-after-ukraine-conflict/11004438>.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Khushwant Singh, *The end of India*, New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2003.

⁷⁴ Marzia Casolari, "Hindutva's foreign tie-up in the 1930s: Archival evidence," *Economic and Political Weekly* (2000): 218-228.

⁷⁵ Eviane Leidig, "Hindutva as a variant of right wing extremism," *Patterns of Prejudice* 54, no. 3 (2020): 215-237.

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 spilled over into Australia.⁷⁶ Community leaders also raise alarms that divisions within the Indian–Australian community have grown. Sikh students were targeted in Sydney over tensions from the ongoing farmers protests and Sikh separatist movement (a movement that has its own history of political violence and terrorism) as Sikhs in Australia were seen as an extension of those activities in India.⁷⁷

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.⁷⁸ Extreme Hindu nationalists use community online messaging groups to spread divisive rhetoric targeting minority groups including Sikhs and Muslims.⁷⁹ State agencies are aware of ongoing tensions, incidents and future risks of violence, especially around protests and counter-protests related to diaspora Sikh separatist referendum voting, and have been working closely with the Indian community in Australia to address these challenges.⁸⁰

The embrace of Hindu nationalism in India has led to growing connections to other RWE and alt-right strains in addition to the emboldening of the extremist Hindutva movement and its actors globally.⁸¹ Attempts to raise awareness of Hindu extremism by academics, civil society activists, journalists and politicians have also led to intense trolling, doxing, threats, law suits and targeted violence against these individuals and their efforts by extreme Hindu nationalists and Hindutva extremists.⁸² 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. These tactics are not

⁷⁶ 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>

⁷⁷ 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>.

⁷⁸ Daly, Ghazi and Pundir, “How Far-Right Hindu Supremacy Went Global.”

⁷⁹ Rachwani, “Fears of escalating violence as online ‘hate factories’ sow division within Australia’s Indian community.”

⁸⁰ 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>.

⁸¹ Daly, Ghazi and Pundir, “How Far-Right Hindu Supremacy Went Global.”

⁸² Ibid.

exclusive to the Hindutva extremists. In general, harassment and targeted violence towards experts and community activists calling out and raising awareness of RWE activities is a common intimidation tactic of RWE movements and individuals across the spectrum.⁸³

In addition to personal and networked linkages across RWE movements, organisations, national histories and contexts, right wing 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 following all over the world by adapting to local conditions and preoccupations.⁸⁴ Support for QAnon grew in Australia thanks to various affordances of online platforms, Australia's strict lockdown response to the pandemic, and through its crossover with anti-vaccination and anti-lockdown movements.⁸⁵ One analysis found that Australia was the fourth-largest producer of QAnon content worldwide.⁸⁶

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 is comprised of individuals in high 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. Other anti-Semitic New World Order conspiracy theories that are progenitor conspiracies to QAnon also permeate right wing extremist movements around the globe.

⁸³ 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

⁸⁴ 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/>.

⁸⁵ 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>.

⁸⁶ Aoife Gallagher, Jacob Davey and Mackenzie Hart, "The genesis of a conspiracy theory," *Institute for Strategic Dialogue Report*, London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2020.

The global spread and belief in the Great Replacement conspiracy theory among right wing extremists 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 movement emerged that was centred on the Great Replacement: *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 made inroads in Australia.⁸⁷ Though GI describes itself as a non-violent patriotic nationalist movement, undercover investigations revealed that GI members were involved in and advocated for violence.⁸⁸ 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.

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 in which 11 people were killed, the El Paso, Texas mass shooting in which 23 people died, and the 2022 mass shooting in a predominantly African American community in Buffalo, New York, which 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'.⁸⁹

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

⁸⁷ 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.

⁸⁷ "Generation Hate," *Al Jazeera*, December 10, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/12/10/what-is-generation-identity>.

⁸⁸ "Generation Hate," *Al Jazeera*.

⁸⁹ "Report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Terrorist Attack on Christchurch Mosques on 15 March," November 26, 2020, www.christchurchattack.royalcommission.nz.

reflecting their existential concerns around the preservation of the white race. The Christchurch attacker also made donations to GI branches in Austria and France.⁹⁰

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 their influencers. Sharing and supporting extremist music online and attending music festivals in real life are important means of networking and 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 right wing extremists to loudly '*Sieg Heil*' to death metal or racist rap.⁹¹

Participation in sports has many positive aspects and can even serve as a protective factor against engagement in violent extremism. However, sports can also serve as a recruiting mechanism for violent extremism groups and a source of exposure to RWE ideas.⁹² Mixed martial arts (MMA) has emerged as the sport du jour for RWE and has developed a reputation for creating subcultures within the sport that serve as recruitment and radicalisation grounds for extremist organisations.⁹³ 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.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ "Report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Terrorist Attack on Christchurch Mosques on 15 March."

⁹¹ "Inside a Neo Nazi Music Festival: Decade of Hate," *Vice*, September 19, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zKXgOjNy_NI.

⁹² 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.

⁹³ 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/7kbpqxq/neo-nazi-fight-clubs-how-the-far-right-uses-mma-to-spread-hate>.

⁹⁴ 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-mmms-far-right-fight-clubs>.

The role of the online environment and digital technologies

A growing body of evidence demonstrates that the internet can be an important factor in facilitating radicalisation to violent extremism, but the concept of online radicalisation itself is contested as there is a complex interplay between online and offline factors in the radicalisation process,⁹⁵ 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 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.⁹⁶ 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. Many of these intersecting dynamics were explored in the Lowy Institute's [Digital Threats to Democracy Project](#) and associated [report](#) and [policy paper](#). However, research evidence also demonstrates that the internet does play an increasingly prominent role in individuals' involvement in extremist movements. For many right wing extremists 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.'⁹⁷ The internet has also helped transform the identity and purpose of local RWE groups and individuals, facilitating the interchange

⁹⁵ Lydia Khalil, "Digital Threats to Democracy Dialogue: summary report," (2023), <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/digital-threats-democracy-dialogue-summary-report>

⁹⁶ Lydia Khalil, "Digital Threats to Democracy Dialogue: summary report," (2023).

⁹⁷ 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.

between various RWE strands. It has allowed them to more easily connect and cross between political and ideological goals, narratives, strategies and subcultures.⁹⁸

The rise of 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 having an enormous impact on the growth and transnationalisation of the extreme right as well. Right wing extremists were some of the earliest adopters of internet technology, recognising its huge potential as a communications and mobilisation tool.⁹⁹ 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. They remain active and innovative actors in online spaces.

Despite efforts to de-platform them, right wing extremists still have a presence on mainstream social media platforms as these have served as very effective tools to disseminate propaganda and narratives, build communities, communicate with others that share their ideologies, and to recruit new members. Research has shown that 40 per cent of all terrorism-related material is shared via social media.¹⁰⁰ Those that have been de-platformed have migrated to alternative social media sites with little to no content moderation, such as Gab and Telegram. Right wing extremists 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

⁹⁸ Khalil, *Rise of the Extreme Right: the new global extremism and the threat to democracy*.

⁹⁹ 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.

¹⁰⁰ 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.

or serious, or both.¹⁰¹ This ambiguity is a fundamental aspect of online culture and one that 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 lawless, 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.¹⁰² Transgressive, supposedly edgy humour strengthens collective identity and the 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'.¹⁰³ Much of the content is about run-of-the-mill topics but chans were 'lawless by design'.¹⁰⁴ 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 right wing extremists, 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.

¹⁰¹ Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner, *The ambivalent internet: Mischief, oddity, and antagonism online*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017.

¹⁰² Lisa Bogerts and Maik Fielitz, "The visual culture of far-right terrorism," *Global Network on Extremism and Technology*, (2020).

¹⁰³ Caitlin Dewy, "Absolutely Everything You Need to Know to Understand 4chan, the Internet's Own Bogyman," *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/>.

¹⁰⁴ Matthew Prince, "Terminating Service for 8chan," *Cloudflare Blog*, May 8, 2019, <https://blog.cloudflare.com/terminating-service-for-8chan/>.

For individuals who become radicalised into right wing extremism, it is not just the content that appeals, but the community that comes with it. The importance of communities is often underestimated when examining extremist movements. 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 does not need to travel to a conflict zone, 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.¹⁰⁵

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.¹⁰⁶ 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.¹⁰⁷ For example, Brenton Tarrant 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] We have no doubt that he visited right wing internet forums, subscribed to right wing

¹⁰⁵ 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>.

¹⁰⁶ 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.

¹⁰⁷ 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.

channels on 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.”¹⁰⁸

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’.¹⁰⁹ Tarrant livestreamed his massacre with the goal of ‘making the act itself a meme’.¹¹⁰

In 2019 alone, 8chan was directly implicated in several high-profile right wing extremist terrorist attacks.¹¹¹ John Earnest, who shot at worshippers at a California synagogue, killing one, was enmeshed in the far right message boards of 8chan. The El Paso shooter who killed 23 people at a Walmart store was also radicalised via 8chan. Before the attack, he posted his manifesto on the site, saying he was inspired by Brenton Tarrant’s manifesto and the unmoderated discussions on 8chan that glorified his mass shooting. Philip Manshaus, who killed his stepsister before going on to shoot up a mosque in Norway in 2019, was also inspired by Tarrant and was a frequent user of chan sites, where he admitted his extremist views were formed.¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ “Report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Terrorist Attack on Christchurch Mosques on 15 March,” Part 4, Chapter 3.

¹⁰⁹ 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/>.

¹¹⁰ Bogerts and Fielitz, “The Visual Culture of Far-Right Terrorism.”

¹¹¹ Conway, Scrivens and Macnair, ‘Right wing Extremists’ Persistent Online Presence: History and Contemporary Trends’.

¹¹² Cathrine Thorleifsson and Joey Duker, ‘Lone Actors in Digital Environments’, Radicalisation Awareness Network Report (European Commission: 2021), https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/system/files/2021-10/ran_paper_lone_actors_in_digital_environments_en.pdf.

Video games and gaming

An estimated 3.2 billion people worldwide play video games. Clearly, not all of them become mass shooters, so exposure to gaming alone does not lead to radicalisation. But 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 online radicalisation process.¹¹³

Video gaming has contributed to the 'gamification' — or the application of gaming elements outside of said games — of RWE.¹¹⁴ 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.¹¹⁵ 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.¹¹⁶

RWE mass shooters like 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.¹¹⁷ 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 livestreaming of his attack recalled popular shooter games such as *Call of Duty*.

¹¹³ Linda Schlegel, "Jumanji Extremism? How games and gamification could facilitate radicalization processes," *Journal for Deradicalization* 23 (2020): 1-44.

¹¹⁴ Linda Schlegel, "Connecting, Competing, and Trolling," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 15, no. 4 (2021): 54-64.

¹¹⁵ 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.

¹¹⁶ Graham Macklin, "The Christchurch attacks: Livestream terror in the viral video age," *CTC Sentinel* 12, no. 6 (2019): 18-29.

¹¹⁷ Thorleifsson and Duker, "Lone Actors in Digital Environments."

Video games and gaming have become particular venues of concern for RWE recruitment of young people. The Australian Federal Police have also highlighted how gaming communities have been used for recruitment in recent years.¹¹⁸ Users on the game platform Roblox have set up recreations of the Nazi Third Reich and a young person has posted a game recreation of the 2019 Christchurch terror attack. As experts have noted, RWE organisations 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 in recruitment.¹¹⁹

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 contributed to radicalisation to violence and involvement in extremist movements¹²⁰ and now conspiratorial movements or conspiracy-driven individuals are 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.'¹²¹

Extensive internet use amid lockdown conditions during the pandemic also increased individuals' exposure to both harmful disinformation and conspiracy theories — what the World Health Organization termed the accompanying 'infodemic — too much information including false or misleading information in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak'.¹²² Conspiracies and disinformation around the pandemic not only

¹¹⁸ "Extremist recruitment reaching young Australian gamers," *AFP Media Release*, October 16, 2022, <https://www.afp.gov.au/news-media/media-releases/extremist-recruitment-reaching-young-australian-gamers>

¹¹⁹ Helen Young, "Extremists use video games to recruit vulnerable youth. Here's what parents and gamers need to know." *AVERT Commentary*, 10 November 2022, <https://www.avert.net.au/commentary/extremists-use-video-games-to-recruit-vulnerable-youth-heres-what-parents-and-gamers-need-tonbspknow>

¹²⁰ Thorleifsson and Duker, "Lone Actors in Digital Environments."

¹²¹ "(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>.

¹²² "Infodemic," *World Health Organization*. February 26, 2021, accessed April 8, 2024, https://www.who.int/health-topics/infodemic#tab=tab_1.

undermined public health efforts, but also fuelled societal divisions, a rise in hate speech, and anti-government sentiment and action.

The Covid-19 pandemic has 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 radicalised people to target political leaders, public health facilities and minority communities they believed were responsible for the spread of the virus.¹²³

QAnon

The way disinformation and conspiratorial beliefs can radicalise individuals to extremism is encapsulated most prominently in the QAnon phenomenon. QAnon first emerged as an online subculture but grew exponentially during the Covid-19 pandemic. Its conspiracies culminated in the January 6th Capitol siege. 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 siege, along with other groups and individuals fuelled by online consumption of disinformation claiming that the US Presidential election was rigged. The insurrection was the culmination of years' worth of the dissemination and uptake of QAnon theories that began on the anonymous online forum 4chan, but then spread and flourished on mainstream platforms.

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

¹²³ Harald De Cauwer, Dennis G. Barten, Derrick Tin, Luc J. Mortelmans, Bart Lesaffre, Francis Somville and Gregory R. Ciotto, "Terrorist attacks against COVID-19-related targets during the pandemic year 2020: a review of 165 incidents in the Global Terrorism Database," *Prehospital and disaster medicine* 38, no. 1 (2023): 41-47.

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 and 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 and reduced trust in government and institutions.¹²⁴ There are other individual harms. For example, in addition to the events around the Capitol siege, 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.

Conclusion

Democracies around the world, including Australia, are facing additional challenges such as increasing polarisation, declining trust in institutions and governments, and growing adherence to anti-government conspiracies, all of which have gone hand in hand with far right populist tendencies and a diverse and complex array of RWE movements, narratives and ideologies, as well as individuals who are mobilised by a complex range of anti-government and sometimes anti-democratic sentiments and ideas.

This submission has attempted to address the complex RWE threat landscape in Australia. RWE has the potential to result in violence and risks to community safety. However, it also poses social, cultural and political challenges to the multicultural, pluralistic identity of modern Australia. The root causes and potential solutions to RWE and anti-democratic manifestations arguably go well beyond countering violent extremism paradigms. Because

¹²⁴ W Lance Bennett and Steven Livingston, "The Disinformation Order: Disruptive Communication and the Decline of Democratic Institutions", *European Journal of Communication*, Volume 33, Issue 2, April 2018, 122–139, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323118760317>.

RWE is both a symptom and cause of democratic decline, in seeking to understand and address anti-democratic RWE movements and trends within Australia, we must employ a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach as well as continually acknowledging and affirming that our responses cannot be at the expense of democracy either.