

Roundtable Discussion on Media and Violent Extremism

Summary Report
August 2022

Centre for Media Transition
University of Technology Sydney



Acknowledgment of Country

We pay our respects to the traditional owners and elders of this land - past, present and emerging. We acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, the Booroberongal people of the Dharug Nation, the Bidiagal people and the Gamaygal people, upon whose ancestral lands UTS stands.

We also support the Uluru Statement that 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tribes were the first sovereign Nations of the Australian continent and its adjacent islands' and that First Nations sovereignty 'has never been ceded or extinguished'.

This summary report is written by Prof Monica Attard and Dr Ayesha Jehangir from the Centre for Media Transition at the University of Technology Sydney for the New South Wales (NSW) Department of Premier and Cabinet.

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Event Overview

The 'Roundtable Discussion on Media and Violent Extremism' was held at the University of Technology Sydney, Ultimo NSW, on Friday, 29 July 2022. The event was planned and executed by the Centre for Media Transition and sponsored by the New South Wales Department of Premier and Cabinet.

The purpose of the event was to:

- facilitate a discussion among journalists, policy makers, academics, the tech industry and community representatives on key issues around how terrorists and extremists use and exploit the media to amplify their messages, and how they use disinformation tactics;
- understand whether, and if so, how, Australian media may be platforming extremists;
- understand how media coverage of extremism and the government's stance impact minority communities in Australia, especially Muslim community;
- share expert insight on some of the ways extremists and terrorists use technology to their benefit, including the recruitment of young Australians from overseas, spreading disinformation, misinformation, and mal-information;
- identify key challenges in devising and implementing counterstrategies to map and combat these digital mobilisation attempts;
- understand how editors and journalists cover extremism and terrorism in Australia, and define their key challenges and experiences; and
- gauge if there was an appetite to find agreement on a set of principles upon which Australian newsrooms can agree when reporting on extremism and terrorism.

Roundtable Discussion

The roundtable was an all-day closed event held under Chatham House Rule. It was attended by 33 participants, including panellists, keynote speakers, delegates and CMT moderators. Two delegates joined via Zoom. All keynote speakers and panellists were invited by the CMT, while all delegates in attendance were invited on the joint recommendations of the corresponding teams at the CMT and the Social Policy Branch at the Department of Premier and Cabinet.

The Panels

The overarching topic of media and violent extremism was divided into four sub-topics and discussed individually across four panels. The panels were titled:

- Panel 1: Extremists' Use of Media: Realities, Demands and Drivers of News Outlets
- Panel 2: Extremists and Technology: Regulation and Free Speech
- Panel 3: Media, Extremism and Impacts on Social Cohesion
- Panel 4: Principles of Reporting Violent Extremism

Each panel started with a 15-minute keynote address, followed by a one-hour discussion among panellists. Each panel concluded with 15 minutes dedicated to questions from delegates.

Panel 1: Extremists' Use of Media: Realities, Demands and Drivers of News Outlets

Objectives

This panel aimed to explore the realities, demands and drivers of news outlets with regards to coverage of extremism and extremists. In an attempt to identify whether Australian media may be platforming and/or humanising far-right extremists, the panel focused on whether media has the ability to deter or encourage extremist ideologies through thoughtful or sensationalised reporting, respectively – and if so, how? The panel also raised some concerns about whether the available ethical codes were sufficient to prevent sensationalist or misreporting of extremists and terrorists.

Key points discussed and issues raised

- Journalists agreed that the way an event is reported can give or deny oxygen to extremists and/or extremist ideologies. It was agreed that 'maximum caution' was generally needed about what was reported and how it was reported, especially during a live event.
- News demands and drivers often lead to the reporting of performative stunts by extremists: it was agreed that on occasion, these performative stunts by extremists receive more media attention than they deserve, thus receiving the publicity they aim for, particularly when these acts are framed as justifying their patriotism
- In some situations, even if coverage is critical and questioning of expressed extreme ideologies, it can still rehabilitate and mainstream extremist ideologies. Examples discussed include media coverage of Eli Mosley, the organiser of the 2017 neo-Nazi rallies in Charlottesville, US; Australian far-right extremist Blair Cottrell, who also founded the United Patriots Front; and Jack van Tongeren, the leader of a right-wing extremist group called the Australian Nationalist Movement.
- Delegates also discussed elements of confirmation and inherent bias in starting conversations that are critical to the current media framing of extremism and terrorism. One delegate noted that while editorial and public conversations ended if the person involved in a terrorist attack was a Muslim, on the other hand, the conversation would begin if the perpetrator was a white person.
- The elements of newsworthiness, human interest, and relevance trigger reporters' interest in covering extremism and terrorism. If coverage is inevitable, because of the scale of the event or national security, it was suggested that three values must be kept in mind: proportionality of the event (asking how big the story is and how big is its impact), the context in which it happens (asking what's really going on), and the significance/consequences for the public (asking what impact the story will have and if reportage will serve the public interest).
- It was agreed that journalists needed 'to do their job better' and 'more responsibly' in terms of scrutinising information and providing context in reportage. A panellist suggested an instrumental use of media in the coverage of extremism and terrorism, wherein journalists stress the *what* and the *how*, thereby using the medium not only for the dissemination of information, but to develop public understanding of the issue. It was agreed that this approach was not always taken in coverage of terrorism and extremism. Thoughtful journalism is about knowing the stakes that are involved in covering certain kinds of stories and understanding the value of doing journalism 'rigorously.'
- There is a need to identify the tipping point, where reportage starts humanising extremists and legitimising far-right ideologies, becoming a gateway for other young people to be attracted to these ideologies and seeking more information, thus amplifying their cause.

- Mainstream media’s approach to coverage of extremism and extremists was not consistent, and there may be a bias at play in the editorial process which, over decades, has enabled newsrooms to decide the length and breadth of coverage and also which violent events gets more coverage than others.
- In most Australian newsrooms, the careful, thoughtful, ethical editorial justification for a story happens after the event, not before it is published.
- Some speakers claimed that these discussions are starting to happen in some local newsrooms such as Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) as an event is occurring.
- Social media has made journalists’ job more complicated in terms of certain stories getting more national and international attention than others.



Image: Panel 2 focused on some of the ways extremists use technology. (Credit: CMT)

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Journalism can often be seduced by something that journalists and editors know people will be interested in, rather than (the) public interest. (Panellist)

Panel 2: Extremists and Technology: Regulation and Free Speech

Objectives

This panel aimed at highlighting and discussing some of the ways extremists and terrorists use technology to their benefit, including the recruitment of young Australians from overseas, spreading disinformation, misinformation, and mal information. Panellists highlighted some of the key challenges in devising and implementing counter strategies to map and combat these digital mobilisation attempts; and discussed the responsibility and capacity of tech platforms to be vigilant.

Key points discussed and issues raised

- Extremists and terrorists use digital technology the same way others do. Regulation to make digital communication and online spaces safer has been a focus of government, however there is a balance to be struck which protects those who do not seek to use the digital space for nefarious purposes. However, content platform moderation policies may not solve all problems as some are exploited by extremist actors and can lead to forms of engagement, promotion, and possible radicalisation. In addition, extremist actors are quick to shift conversations to different platforms; this calls for a thorough interrogation of not only a few mainstream or alternative social media platforms, but of all digital platforms to identify how they may be platforming extremists and terrorists. In reality, all digital platforms are operating under the same structure, incentives and paradigm, and therefore need decentralised attention from regulators, authorities and researchers.
- It was noted that some recent studies on extremists' use of social media have found that the posts that receive the most traction were reposting of newspaper and television stories with extremist actors adding comment or editorialising.
- Modern online far-right extremism has developed alongside digital cultures, with extremist groups feeling as attached to their cause online as they do offline, making the online-offline dichotomy irrelevant and suffused into one broader issue of concern.
- There is a contrast between internet users' broader understanding of freedom of speech and how they exercise this freedom on digital platforms. Users are more likely to take caution if their extremist views may attract the attention of government and security agencies and possibly result in prosecution. When there is no direct threat of surveillance via moderation which may trigger the regulatory instruments, users are more prone to freely expressing their extremist ideas.
- There are limitations to both human and automated content moderation using artificial intelligence. While human moderation has shown to be more effective in terms of response speed and accuracy in detecting tricks to obscure problematic content, the underlying factors of prejudices and human error among human moderators are of significant concern.

Panel 3: Media, Extremism and Impacts on Social Cohesion

Objectives

This panel raised issues with the mainstream media reportage of extremism and terrorism impacts on communities and more broadly, on social cohesion. The panel discussed racial profiling of minority communities, the extent of disinformation within communities which is contributing to a trust deficit between society and government, and the media's role and responsibility in resolving community mistrust of journalism. The panellists also discussed whether there is an acceptable role for security agencies and relevant government institutions to assist news media understand community dynamics, and the nexus between mistrust of media and government with extremism, and thus contribute to social cohesion.

Key points discussed and issues raised

- Media professionals continue to face challenges in interrogating hate without platforming it.
- Attitudes and perceptions towards people from Muslim backgrounds have slowly started to change for the better in the last few years, however, it is unclear if this trend reflects a shift of negative focus from Muslims to Asians, especially the Chinese community, at least during the pandemic.
- Regardless, Muslim-Australians do not feel that they are accurately or justly represented in mainstream media. In the coverage of extremism and terrorism, Muslim-Australians believe news media are more likely to mention a person's race/nationality if they are from a Muslim background than when they are not. It was also noted that there were more negative stories in news media about minority communities than those that framed them in a positive light. Speakers and delegates agreed that in order to gain trust from audience, Australian media needed to adopt an 'upstream approach' in their coverage of minority communities for better representation and broader acceptance into society. An upstream approach is focused on ethical journalism, in which "reporters can follow important lines of inquiry that reveal the structural roots of disparity."¹
- The ways news media covers issues of extremism and terrorism have long-term impacts on communities. It was noted that Muslim communities in Australia were still facing the fallout from the 2005 Cronulla riots and the way the conflict between the Muslim community and other Australians was reported in mainstream media.
- News media is conflicted in its understanding of its role as a communication bridge between communities and the government. This likely reflects the schism between news media organisations which implicitly reject 'advocacy journalism' and those which embrace it.
- Mainstream media have misrepresented the Muslim community multiple times in terms of accuracy, stereotyping and misrepresentation, according to the community. However, news media sometimes fails to rectify mistakes even in follow up reportage, according to the Muslim community. This, they contend, can tend to leave the public with inaccurate information about Muslim communities, and consequently a distorted reality about them and other minority communities such as the refugee and asylum seeker communities.
- Journalism is about discourse whilst government focuses on action. While the Australian government has introduced many inclusion and support programs for migrants and people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, these may not have much impact on their integration and acceptance into the host

¹ Lehrman, S., & Wagner, V. (2019). Reporting the Story Upstream. In *Reporting Inequality* (pp. 105-125). Routledge.

society. However, panellists agreed that the ways media represent these communities in their coverage have a direct impact on their social integration and, in some cases, treatment by the wider society.

- It was noted that in some cases the lexical choices political leaders make when talking about minority communities have been damaging in terms of impact on social cohesion. The shift in language used by security agencies about ‘types’ of extremism was also contested (such as ‘Islamic terrorism’, ‘right-wing extremism’, ‘far-right extremism’ and more recently ‘ideologically motivated extremism’). Concerns about possible politicisation of these terms were also raised by a delegate, who questioned whether these lexical shifts reflected alignment with certain political parties or electoral bases.
- It was noted that over the past five or so years, the appetite for diversifying the media in Australia has increased. However, despite this, Australian newsrooms still show a broader lack of interest in issues that are significant to minority communities.

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If the person involved in a terrorist attack is a Muslim, that’s the end of the conversation. If it’s a white person, that’s the start of the conversation.” (Panellist)

Panel 4: Principles of Reporting Violent Extremism

Objectives

This panel highlighted some of the experiences of editors and journalists in covering far-right extremism and terrorism in Australia and discussed whether there was a set of principles for journalists and editors to follow when covering these issues, including ‘best practice’. Panellists also discussed if there was variance in how different media organisations approached the coverage of extremism and terrorism.

Key points discussed and issues raised

- News media has an urgent obligation to tackle some of the issues, such as casual racism in coverage, and needs to catch up with its international counterparts in terms of ethical reporting on issues of extremism and terrorism by developing a newsroom culture where open discussions are possible. One delegate said a reason this was not happening in Australian newsrooms may be because media have not been forced to confront these issues on a routine basis which would create an impetus to create an internal debate.
- A set of cohesive internal principles for coverage of extremism and terrorism is missing, and media organisations take disparate approaches when applying their standards of practice and codes of ethics to coverage. Delegates were divided on whether specialised guidelines for editorial decisions on coverage of extremism and terrorism – in addition to brief references enshrined in the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance code of ethics and proprietorial ethical codes and reporting guidelines– were even needed in the first place.
- One delegate said that most editorial conversations were focused on the extent to which government could control what journalists reported, when it should be more focused on public interest.

- Some speakers agreed that public comments on social media pages of news outlets have the potential to harm audiences and therefore it is important to have a uniform media moderation policy.
- Journalists and journalism are integral to the political process, and there is a need for journalists to understand the consequences of their reporting, especially reporting that reinforces stereotypes and/or humanises extremists. There was also a level of disagreement among attending media organisations on baseline issues such as whether or not to name a perpetrator of a terrorist attack.
- It was noted that most existing codes and reporting standards/guidelines do not make any specific mention of how and when to use the words ‘terrorism’ and ‘terrorist’.
- It was noted that during the 2022 federal election campaign, some mainstream media organisations were more likely ‘to politicise certain issues’ such as asylum seekers. Additionally, some speakers also noted that during previous election campaigns, certain media organisations had politicised the issue of African crime gangs in Melbourne.
- It was also noted that news media need to invest in public trust by allowing the public to provide feedback on the coverage of issues which impact them, including extremism and terrorism, and incorporate the feedback in the editorial process.
- Delegates also noted the ‘toxic’ relationship between journalists and security agencies in Australia that causes self-censorship. Delegates stressed the need for legislative reform and more openness and transparency around the risks of publishing stories on issues of national security.

Key observations

- Journalists and editors were divided on the idea of providing oxygen to extremists and terrorists. Some speakers argued that a certain level of coverage was crucial for the audience’s clarification and understanding, and this may include exploring the attackers’ childhood and adult life, social circles and motivations for the violent event; while other speakers expressed concern over extended coverage that it may provide extremists unnecessary airtime and thus amplify their cause.
- Journalists and editors present did not fully appreciate the impact of their coverage of extremism and terrorism on minority communities, especially Muslim-Australians. Additionally, it was observed from the discussions that there is a gap between what mainstream media think is the best way to cover extremism and terrorism and how it really impacts minority communities, who expressed dissatisfaction with their representation in news media.
- A clear media strategy for reporting extremism and terrorism is missing. There are certain ambiguities when it comes to a common set of principles for reporting extremism and terrorism. Panellists agreed that there was no clear inclination amongst journalists and editors for an overarching set of principles to inform reportage. It was also noted that journalists, and especially editors, were divided on when a story is a crime story and when it is a national security issue. For example, the coverage of Sydney’s Lindt Café siege in 2014, and the arrests of African crime gangs in Melbourne at different times have been reported as issues of national security which, in hindsight, is open to dispute on both counts.

Ways Forward

1. Agreed definition of terrorism and when the descriptor should be used.

There is neither consistency nor depth to the definitions and guidelines provided by the editorial policies of news media organisations.

- ABC Editorial Policy states:” A useful definition of terrorism is “communicative violence that send a message to ‘terrorise, polarise and mobilise’ different segments of the public...”² This defines terrorism but provides little indication to journalists on how and when to apply the word “terrorism” in reportage. In its guidelines on accuracy, the policy states:” Do not report unsourced and unverified speculation on the responsibility for, or intent of attacks”, however this does not indicate what a reliable source is, nor when sourced commentary can be taken as definitive. The guidelines further state:” Claims of responsibility for attacks by terror groups should never be taken at face value. They should be carefully qualified and should not be highlighted before they have been verified.” This does not provide guidance on which authority should provide verification.
- The Code of Conduct of News Corp’s The Australian³ does not specifically define acts of terrorism, or those of extremist groups and does not provide parameters for reporting them beyond the provisions contained under Accuracy and Reporting guidelines. Under a subheading ‘Weapons and Threats’, it states: “Do not report threats to use bombs or other weapons or threats of extortion unless public interest justifies it, or when the authorities request you to do so, or when it is necessary to explain public disruption caused by the authorities’ reaction to such a threat. “Under ‘Accuracy and Reporting’, the code states:” Journalists should rely only on credible sources.”
- The Nine Entertainment group metro papers, The Sydney Morning Herald and The Age, commit to an in-house Code of Ethics^{4,5} which commit its reporters to honesty, accuracy, impartiality and fairness, independence, privacy and respect. Beyond this, the group is a signatory to the Australian Press Councils (APC) standards, none of which specifically refer to when an act of violent is to be described as an act of terror, nor how to report it. The APC has issued a guideline to its members on the use of religious terms in headlines which states: “.the linking of words with religious connotations to terrorist groups may be, in the strictest sense, accurate - but it is often unfair. For example, terrorists may be Muslims, but Muslims are not necessarily terrorists, as some headlines have implied.”⁶ This appears to follow the APC General Principle 8 which states:” Publications should not place any gratuitous emphasis on the race, religion, nationality, colour, country of origin, gender, sexual orientation, marital status, disability, illness, or age of an individual or group. Where it is relevant and in the public interest, publications may report and express opinions in these areas”.

Similar to the ABC, the BBC provides an explicit explanation of when the word ‘terrorism’ should be applied in reporting. This is contained in Section 11: War, Terror and Emergency

² ABC Editorial Policies (2019). ‘Hate Speech, Terrorism & Mass Killings’. <<https://www.abc.net.au/edpols/hate-speech-terrorism-and-mass-killings/13644814>>

³ News Corp Australia Editorial Professional Conduct Policy. <<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/editorial-code-of-conduct>>

⁴ The Sydney Morning Herald code of ethics. <https://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/0726_smh.pdf>

⁵ The Age Code of Conduct. (1998). <<https://accountablejournalism.org/ethics-codes/Australia-Age-Code#:~:text=The%20Age%20and%20its%20staff,be%20reported%20to%20the%20Editor>>

⁶ Australian Press Council. ‘Guideline: Religious terms in headline’. <<https://www.presscouncil.org.au/document/guideline-religious-terms-in-headlines-2>>

Guidelines in the organisations Editorial Policy⁷ and specifically states:” We should not use the term ‘terrorist’ without attribution.” In other words, the BBC permits the descriptor of ‘terrorism’ to be applied only when citing an authoritative source or when describing a person convicted of terrorism.

2. Alignment of principles around reporting terrorism, including understanding the nexus between terrorism and media.

Given the relative infrequency of terror events in Australia, the news media’s experience in reporting them and even discussing the ethical and lexical decisions around such reporting is understandably limited. However, given recent events in Sydney (Lindt Café Siege) and Christchurch, New Zealand, it is timely to open discussion around a set of principles which might be uniformly adopted by commercial and public media. Such principles could define the circumstances in which descriptors such as ‘terrorism’ are used, when the word ‘terrorist’ is a barrier rather than an aid to understanding an event (including defined differentiation between ‘terrorist’, ‘gunman’, ‘kidnapper’, ‘insurgent’, ‘militant’), and how to avoid the malignment of whole communities with racial descriptors, beyond the proscriptions in the various in house of Codes of Ethics and the Code of Ethics provided by the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA). The MEAA provides further general information in its Guidelines on Reporting Hate Speech and Terrorism⁸, which advises against platforming hate speech. Whilst there will be resistance to the formation of a set of principles to guide journalists in the reporting of violent extremism, reflecting proprietorial inclinations, they may provide a useful protection against undesirable outcomes such as negative impact on social cohesion, mistrust of both journalism and government, and inaccuracy. The principles may serve as a one-stop, agreed upon document on how to report violent extremism which brings together the principles of the various codes as well as the principles enshrined in the state, territory and federal racial/anti-discrimination instruments.

3. Alignment of newsroom cultures to embrace discussion of ethics and language around race.

It is widely accepted within news media that resources are limited. This has repercussions on the ability of news journalists to undergo training in cultural sensitivity, diversity and inclusion, and ethics. For reasons of competitiveness and differences in newsroom cultures, these workplaces differ in their approach to both the frequency and content of training and need for it. Whilst some organisations do better at such training than others, an alignment across newsrooms, editorially recognised, might better serve the public interest. Amongst the initiatives which could be implemented are quarterly meetings between editorial policy leaders across news media organisations to align ideas and priorities and develop a commonality of ethical approaches and language. It would be critical that this is communicated to the newsroom floor of each participating outlet.

4. Greater diversity within newsrooms.

As a result of low pipeline numbers, and the lived experience of journalists of diverse background in Australian newsrooms the demographics of these workplaces remains heavily skewed towards racial and socio-economic uniformity. Whilst this is slowly changing, the need for greater newsroom diversity is recognised by editorial leaders across the spectrum of news media organisations along with an anticipated outcome of greater diversity. Reporters of diverse background may better understand the cultural sensitivities within different communities, how to speak with community members in order to arrive at more accurate reporting, the differences between organised and non-organised violent actions and race descriptors. This is not to imply that only journalists of diverse background

⁷ BBC Editorial Guidelines. ‘Section 11: War, Terror and Emergencies - Guidelines’.
<<https://www.bbc.com/editorialguidelines/guidelines/war-terror-emergencies/guidelines/>>

⁸ Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance. ‘MEAA Guidelines on Reporting Hate Speech and Extremism’.
<<https://www.meaa.org/meaa-media/code-of-ethics/hate-speech-guidelines/>>

can report acts of violent extremism but rather, it is recognition of the impact of more newsroom diversity on broader culture and as a point of reference for journalists on non-diverse background, in addition to their reporting contributions.

5. Research and practice built around use of technology by extremists and extremist groups.

There is a disconnect between academic research and knowledge in the journalism community around the use of technology by extremists and extremist groups. The gap has implications for journalism practice. For example, there is a considerable body of academic research around narrative formation on social media⁹, the use of messaging apps for recruitment and ideology dissemination¹⁰, measuring and predicting engagement with online videos¹¹, AI solutions to the slippage of extremist discussion into online communities¹² amongst other issues. At the same time as this considerable research is being undertaken, there is a reluctance (due to time limitations and historic bias) within the journalism community to access this academic research to inform reportage. Methods can be developed to bring the two communities closer together. Whilst this requires funding, it may be a recommendation, if adopted, that would reap benefits for the news media industry, the research community and the government's broader aim of achieving social cohesion.

Feedback

The overall response was very positive. All speakers and delegates said they found the roundtable extremely useful in providing them a clearer understanding of terrorists' and violent extremists' exploitation of the Internet, and how extremists challenge democracy. They also said the discussions greatly increased their knowledge about the social implications of media reporting on extremism and its impacts on communities.

A number of the participants, however, suggested that future roundtable sessions on these topics be kept smaller to facilitate in-depth discussion, and that more time be allocated for question-answer sessions.

⁹ Droogan, J., Waldek, L., & Blackhall, R. (2018). Innovation and terror: An analysis of the use of social media by terror-related groups in the Asia Pacific. *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism*, 13(2), 170-184.

¹⁰ Baulch, E., Matamoros-Fernández, A., & Johns, A. (2020). Introduction: Ten years of WhatsApp: The role of chat apps in the formation and mobilization of online publics. *First Monday*, 25(1).

¹¹ Wu, S., Rizoïu, M. A., & Xie, L. (2018, June). Beyond views: Measuring and predicting engagement in online videos. In *Twelfth international AAAI conference on web and social media*.

¹² Kong, Q., Booth, E., Bailo, F., Johns, A., & Rizoïu, M. A. (2022, May). Slipping to the Extreme: A Mixed Method to Explain How Extreme Opinions Infiltrate Online Discussions. In *Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media* (Vol. 16, pp. 524-535).