Committee Secretary

Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee

PO Box 6100

Parliament House

Canberra ACT 2600

8 April 2024

Dear Officer,

RE: Right-wing extremist movements

The Australian National University Law Reform and Social Justice Research Hub ('ANU LRSJ Research Hub') welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission to the Legal and Constitutional Affairs Reference Committee, responding to terms of reference (a)(ii), (iv), (v), (b) and (c) of the inquiry.

The ANU LRSJ Research Hub falls within the ANU College of Law's Law Reform and Social Justice program, which supports the integration of law reform and principles of social justice into teaching, research and study across the College. Members of the group are students of the ANU College of Law, who are engaged with a range of projects with the aim of exploring the law's complex role in society, and the part that lawyers play in using and improving law to promote both social justice and social stability.

Summary of Recommendations:

1. Address declining civic engagement by leveraging the school system to introduce young people to local community groups.

2. Commission an independent investigation to examine the exact role that social media algorithms play in recommending far-right content to users, and the consequent effects this has on a user's beliefs and behaviour.

3. Expand regulation of social media recommendation algorithms.

4. Invest in revising national curricula for secondary schools to enhance educational strategies regarding the damaging effects of hate symbols.

If further information is required, please contact us at anulrsjresearchhub@gmail.com.

On behalf of the ANU LRSJ Research Hub,
Authors: Addie Toohey, Ben Archibald, Esther Bornstein, Felix Archibald, and Lola Ogunbambi
Editors: Jae Brieffies

Introduction

Far-right extremism is an invidious and insidious phenomenon which offends the values at the root of the Australian project: democracy, decency, and tolerance. This submission examines the rise of far-right extremism in Australia and makes policy recommendations which could address its rise.

1. Social and cultural causes of far-right extremism and their policy remedies

What are the social and cultural factors at play when individuals progress to radicalisation? Radicalisation is a complex phenomenon – and thus any social or cultural explanation will inevitably only illuminate a small fraction of its causes. Nonetheless, in this submission we draw out one factor which plausibly contributes to right-wing extremism: social isolation.

Humans are social creatures who crave acceptance and belonging in communities. Traditionally, this sense of belonging has been channelled through civic engagement: such as participation in local community groups including sporting clubs, artistic groups, churches and even political parties. Many people lament how young people do not participate in local community groups at the same rates as they previously did. As young people, we believe this view is consistent with our own experience.

There is strong empirical evidence to support this belief.[1] Since the 1970s, civic engagement has been declining in Australia and across the Western world. Two exemplary books in this area are Bowling Alone by Robert Putnam, and Reconnected by Nick Terrell and The Hon. Andrew Leigh MP, Assistant Minister for Competition, Charities and Treasury. We commend these works to the committee. Although we note that a lack of civic engagement does not, in and of itself, entail social isolation, we argue that the former is a common-sense risk factor of the latter.

There is a growing body of scholarship which identifies social isolation as a factor in the radicalisation of far-right extremists.[2] When individuals become detached from those around them, they lose the check on radical beliefs that friends and family would ordinarily provide, and they can channel their underlying hunger for social connection into less desirable social groups. In this way, isolated young people, in particular, are more vulnerable to being absorbed by far-right groups. Pfundmair et al (2022) charted the effects of this phenomenon, arguing that social isolation tends "(a) to increase the willingness to fight-and-die, (b) to promote the

---

[1] See, eg, Nick Turrell and Andrew Leigh, *Reconnected* (Black Inc, 2020) and Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (Simon & Schuster, 2000).

[2] See, eg, Emma Renstrom et al, 'Exploring a pathway to radicalisation: The effects of social exclusion and rejection sensitivity' (2020) 23(8) *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 1204.

approval for extreme, even violent, political parties and actions, and (c) to push the willingness to engage in illegal and violent action for a political cause".[3] Given this strong empirical evidence, we argue that social isolation must be considered by the Committee as important to far-right extremism.

How can social isolation be addressed through policy? The most intuitive answer is that the Government should increase the sum of grant funding for community organisations. Whilst not unhelpful, we argue that this is not an attractive reform option for two reasons:

1.   High cost

Necessarily, an increase in grant funding has a negative impact on the budget. In a fiscal context where Australia has significant federal debt,[4] it will be difficult to persuade the Government to spend the millions that this intervention would require.

2.   Not effective

Even if the Government is willing to spend the requisite money on this intervention, it is unlikely to be efficacious. We note that the problem is not that the community groups do not have enough funding to provide their services; the problem is that not enough people are demanding their services. Accordingly, the mere provision of more funding would not, in and of itself, address this problem.

Instead, we recommend the Government chart a different path. We recommend that the Federal Government engage the State Education Ministers to leverage the school system to engage students in local community groups, so that when students leave school they continue to participate.

For many students who leave school, they no longer participate in organised sport, arts or volunteering. For students at religious schools, it can often also spell the end of their engagement with their faith community. Schools are uniquely placed to address this, having a formative influence on the lives of young people. If school sport were more integrated with community sport, and vice versa for other areas of civic engagement, we believe that it would be easier for students to continue their participation with local community groups after they leave school.

For example, school sporting groups could train with local clubs, school choirs could do a joint concert with a local choir, and for religious schools a service could be held at a local place of worship. By developing relationships between students and their community, the transition from

---

[3] Michaela Pfundmair et al, 'How social exclusion makes radicalism flourish: A review of empirical evidence' (2022) *Journal of Social Issues* 1.

[4] As young researchers, we hasten to note that this debt burden will be disproportionately borne by future generations. Efforts to reduce this debt are consistent with the pursuit of intergenerational equity.

student to engaged citizen would be more natural. We believe this would help address the social isolation which can alienate individuals who thus become vulnerable to radicalisation.

One central advantage of this proposal is that engaging with community groups would not cost schools significantly more. Indeed, it could present an opportunity for under-resourced schools to develop a relationship with a community group whose existing activities might complement the school's efforts to deliver extra-curricular programs.

One disadvantage of this proposal is that its efficacy to address social isolation has not been rigorously tested. To overcome this disadvantage, the Government could first implement a trial program in some schools. This would allow the Government to satisfy itself that the program delivers, in practice, the benefits which are theoretically compelling.

Recommendation 1: Address declining civic engagement by leveraging the school system to introduce young people to local community groups.

---

2. Online causes of far-right extremism and their policy remedies

In this report we have already discussed the ways in which social exclusion leads people towards exclusion and subsequent co-optation by right-wing groups. We also emphasise the importance of more inclusive social environments for young people as a long-term solution towards limiting right-wing extremism.

 Once young people feel socially isolated we see them turn to the online environment. This happens in ways which lead to many types of right-wing extremism. Commonly people will discover "incel" (involuntarily celibate) groups or (and often together) racially motivated hate/terrorist groups.

 Online radicalisation isn't something that happens overnight. People turn to mainstream sites like Tik Tok, Reddit, Instagram, and YouTube first. In these contexts these ideologies exist under the surface of comedy content. Then a level of community may be found in the comments. As social exclusion becomes more serious in the user's real life, they turn further into the online world and seek out advice content on YouTube or Reddit.

These advice callouts on Reddit or under the comment section of a YouTube video (such as a Jordan Peterson-type creator) often reek of desperation for social acceptance. And whilst some commenters attempt to help. Others send them further down the path of extremism, onto sites with stronger tendencies towards extremism, such as 4chan or some subreddits.

One of the things often discussed on these sites, and also made into memes is 'looks-maxing'. This is the idea that certain facial features will lead to more success in dating. These ideas

5

favour certain specific facial features and ethnicities too. These ideas can become very ingrained in an incel's mind and shape every aspect of how they view the world. In Elliot Roger's (the shooter at the 2014 University of California Santa Barbara shooting) manifesto, he discusses extreme rage when seeing Black Americans talking to beautiful girls, as they have features which he believes should place them below him in his attractiveness hierarchy. This breeds resentment and a sense of injustice which pushes him into more extreme groups and eventually violence. It is easy to see how the same sort of isolation he experienced coupled with his bizarre hierarchy could translate into a form of right wing extremist violence, this time racially motivated.

3. Online algorithms and the way in which they promote far-right extremism

What are social media algorithms?

Social media algorithms are the formulas that determine what content is shown to users. They collect a vast array of data, such as your interactions with earlier content, the engagement with such content of those you follow, and the behaviour of other users online. The algorithms then use this information to generate a personalised feed of content that is designed to most effectively capture the attention of the viewer.

However, particularly in relation to political content, the quantity and type of material recommended to the user is of significant consequence.

By what mechanisms do algorithms generally favour far-right extremist content?

Algorithms are designed to prioritise content that has high engagement rates, such as likes, comments, shares, and views.

However, to use 'engagement rates' as the basis for what content should be recommended is problematic. Not all political stances receive the same 'engagement rates'. Content that is more emotive, shocking, and salient is favoured.

What political content is the most eye-catching, the most sensationalist? Extremist material. Radical political views are inherently more shocking, and thus receive more attention and engagement. Extremist content garners more comments, more shares, more likes, and thus more views.

Whether *right-wing* extremist material, in particular, is favoured by algorithms has been subject to much debate. The most comprehensive audit of algorithmic recommender systems and its effect on political content was carried out by a Stanford University study in 2021. In this

investigation, the researchers concluded that the "political right enjoys higher amplification compared to the political left".[5]

The way in which algorithms recommend far-right content is twofold, however. Once a user interacts with the far-right content that has been disproportionately presented to them, recommendation algorithms intensify their promotion of far-right material. Users thus become trapped in a self-reinforcing network of far-right content – a phenomenon called 'filter bubbles'. As a result, users become separated from information that contradicts their viewpoint, isolating them in their own far-right ideological bubbles. In such a way, algorithms "favour the formation of groups of like-minded users, framing and reinforcing a shared narrative", found a study from the University of Oslo in 2021.[6] Led down a rabbit hole of far-right content by algorithms, a user is then ensnared by a swirling web of far-right extremism.

What is the effect of such far-right content promotion?

Online content exposure impacts a user's beliefs and behaviour. Although it can be difficult to determine the extent to which social media usage affects one's real-world behaviour, there is a clear correlation between the rise of social media and an increase in far-right activity.The Global Terrorism Index outlines a stark increase in far-right extremist incidents from 2011 to 2017 – a growth that parallels the rise of social media in that same time period.

Furthermore, as a young person, I think it is worth particularly exploring the effect of online political content consumption on the attitudes of Australia's youth. This is because teenagers are particularly susceptible to the extremist viewpoints presented on social media.

Why? Firstly, for many young people, social media is the first place that they are exposed to political content. As such, when presented with online political material, young people do not have the same wealth of experience and knowledge that adults do to contextualise and critically assess what they are seeing. Without having been exposed to a diversity of perspectives, teenagers are particularly impressionable. As such, young people are especially susceptible to being led astray by the sensationalist far-right content on social media.

> **Recommendation 2: that the Committee recommend that the Parliament commission an independent investigation to examine the exact role that social media algorithms**

---

[5] Huszár, F., Ktena, S.I., O'Brien, C., Belli, L., Schlaikjer, A. and Hardt, M. (2021). Algorithmic amplification of politics on Twitter. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 119(1). doi:https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2025334119.

[6] Cinelli, M., Morales, G.D.F., Galeazzi, A., Quattrociocchi, W. and Starnini, M. (2021). The Echo Chamber Effect on Social Media. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 118(9). doi:https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2023301118.

> **play in recommending far-right content to users, and the consequent effects this has on a user's beliefs and behaviour.**

Currently we have a limited understanding of algorithmic recommendation given that intellectual property objections protect companies from being required to publicise their specific algorithms. There is limited transparency. The issue regarding intellectual property could be avoided by commissioning an *independent regulatory body* to exclusively access and research the algorithms of major social media platforms.

> **Recommendation 3: that the Committee commend the Parliament to expand regulation of social media recommendation algorithms.**

In doing so, governments can protect citizens, especially teenagers, from being exposed disproportionately to far-right content online.For example, social media algorithms could ensure that all users are presented with political content which contradicts the user's typical content consumption, in order to provide users with a diversity of perspectives.

4. Consideration of the Counter-Terrorism Legislation Amendment (Prohibited Hate Symbols and Other Measures) Bill 2023

For this section of the submission, I will focus on the following terms of reference:

> (iv) how individuals progress to committing acts of violence, and

> (c) measures to counter violent extremism in Australia, with a particular focus on young people;

These matters will be addressed with reference primarily to the likely effectiveness of measures that will be introduced by the bill, in particular, those criminalising the public display of, and trading goods in the bearing of prohibited Nazi symbols, the Nazi salute, and other symbols associated with a terrorist organisation. It is undeniable that hate symbols such as the Nazi Hakenkreuz convey harmful messages, spread intolerance, and incite hatred. These sorts of symbols have no place in Australia as they undermine social cohesion and are particularly detrimental to certain communities.

Thus, whilst the amendments may be a step in the right direction, the effectiveness of these measures remains unclear, particularly regarding deterring young Australians from taking part in the proliferation of hate symbols.

On this basis, several issues warrant further consideration:

> a)   *Is banning an effective deterrence or does it further insight acts of violence?*

Amongst other countries, Germany has longstanding laws that ban 'symbols of anti-constitutional organisations'.[7] Despite this, Germany continues to grapple with significant problems regarding right wing extremism. Shockingly, recent statistics from the Freidrich Ebert Foundation suggests that as many as one in every 12 Germans now subscribe to extreme right-wing ideology,[8] with a troubling rise in young people harbouring these views.[9] This serves as just one example of many, underscoring that whilst strict regulations on expressions of right-wing extremism exist, they fail to address the root of the problem effectively.

Similar concerns may arise in Australia where prohibiting measures may offer a superficial solution to a complex issue. Particularly concerning to us, is the impact these laws could have on disenfranchised young people who, already socially isolated, may have little hesitation in breaching the law. We fear that rather than mitigating their negative effects, banning symbols could place greater significance on these actions in the media, generating attention around these actions and potential interest on the parts of young people in their fringe views and messages

We do however acknowledge that regulations will also likely assist in public displays of hate symbols, and thus whilst they may not entirely eliminate acts of right-wing extremism that take part privately or online, they may garner less traction among youth.

As such, it is unclear whether the impact of these laws will be positive. What is clear, is the urgent need for education as a measure to counter violent extremism and the portrayal of hate symbols amongst the youth.

Recommendation 4: that the Committee recommend the Parliament invest in revising national curricula for secondary schools to enhance educational strategies regarding the damaging effects of hate symbols.

Education is recognised as crucial for preventing the development of radicalisation.[10][4] Thus, it is critical to educate individuals about the harmful effects, and origins of hate symbols whilst also ensuring a sense of inclusion and community amongst schools. UNESCO's guide for policymakers on 'Preventing violent extremism through education' suggests that education

---

[7] Regulation (EU) 2021/784 of the European Parliament and of the Council [2021].
[8] Ibid.
[9] Behnam T. Said, Countering Islamist Radicalisation in Germany - A Guide to Germany's Growing Prevention, ICCT Policy Brief, (26/09/2018).

[10] Ibid.

policies must, directly and indirectly, address the specific drivers of violent extremism.[11] One proposal that we deem necessary is to enhance media and information literacy programs. These programs equip young people with the skills to critically evaluate online information, making it easier for them to limit interactions with online sources that promote hate symbols and right-wing extremism.

With the passing of generations that lived through events such as the Holocaust[6], we recognise the renewed importance of education to be centred around historical events such as World War II within schools. Without sufficient knowledge of the historical significance of certain hate symbols, children are more susceptible to manipulation from far-right ideologies. Thus, we recommend implementing programs into curricula which empower students to critically analyse 'sensitive issues relating to local and global conflicts'.[7]

Additionally, we recommend a greater focus on social inclusion. Children who appear socially isolated must be reintegrated into the social fabric of their communities to mitigate the likelihood of them turning toward right-wing extremist groups. Prioritising integration programs and encouraging children to join sporting groups, clubs, and group activities are essential, as emphasised earlier in this submission.Tackling a rise in expressions of hate symbols and right-wing extremism requires a grassroots approach. It must be tackled from the ground up.

5. Preventative Measures being taken globally

This section will focus on the counter terrorism and de-radicalisation measures being taken by the European Union, the United States and Germany. All three regions and states combine prevention of violent extremism (PVE) and countering of violent extremism (CVE) measures.

The European Union has the most stringent online regulatory schemes, that require active intervention from online platforms to take down any identified terrorist content within an hour,[12] placing the onus of removing online hate content on the platform, rather than the user. This approach, in comparison to the proposed amendments to the Counter Terrorism Bill, obligates the platform in ensuring content is removed, rather than the user from posting content (although many European states also have legislation restricting what users can post). The EU's approach recognises the difficulties of prosecuting individuals, and the possible ramifications on freedom of speech and political communication.[13] The EU's approach to moderating platforms rather than users indicates that Australia's proposed changes to the Counter Terrorism bill may not be the most effective.

---

[11] Milena Uhlmann, Evaluation of the Advice Centre on Radicalisation, Research Centre, Research Report 31, (2017).

[12] Section 86a of the German Criminal Code.

[13] "German Far-Right Extremism on the Rise as Holocaust Sites Defaced." euronews. Accessed April 1, 2024.
https://www.euronews.com/2023/09/25/german-far-right-extremism-on-the-rise-as-holocaust-memorial-sites-defaced.

Germany, as well as being affected by EU legislation, places an emphasis on preventative measures that include building 'a strong social work and family support strategy'.[14] There are a number of different projects that aim to prevent radicalisation, with most being local approaches - deemed by the Federal Criminal Police Office to be most effective.[15] Much of the focus of these projects has been on schools, helping young people to build resilience against radicalisation. Germany has also seen considerable success in their 2012 establishment of counselling centres for radicalised persons, with the number of cases they handle steadily growing each year.[16]

The United States has also seen a pivot towards strategies aimed at prevention of radicalisation. In fact, a study by START (Study of Terrorism And Responses to Terrorism)found that approaches that are aimed at restricting freedom of speech - such as the proposed Counter Terrorism Bill amendments are actually the least effective, and instead awareness, education and civic challenges to extremism make the most difference.[17] A large part of the United States current PVE and CVE programs aim to engage local government in strategies that can be used to raise awareness and foster digital literacy.[18]

These strategies demonstrate a number of different approaches being taken globally, which all have a significant focus on preventative measures through community and social work.

---

[14] Ibid.
[15]

Abbasi, M.A. Towards the de-radicalization of Pakistani society: The need for a balanced and progressive education system. Dialogue 2014, 9, 255–270.
[16] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization: Preventing violent extremism through education: A guide for policy-makers. UNESCO 2017.
[17] Neumann, Peter, *Options and Strategies for Countering Online Radicalization in the United States,* Studies in Conflict & Terrorism (January, 2013) 431-459. Khalil, Lydia, "Banning the Nazi Salute Opens a Pandora's Box." Lowy Institute, March 29, 2023.
https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/banning-nazi-salute-opens-pandora-s-box.
[18] The White House, National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism (Fact Sheet, June 15 2021)
 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Preventing violent extremism through education: A guide for policy-makers, UNESCO 2017.