

# Australia's Far-Right

Subjects: Social Issues

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Far-right extremism transpires in virtual and physical space. Far-right extremism, as with most contemporary political movements, transpires across virtual and physical spaces. While social media platforms have become an increasingly popular medium for communicating far-right ideology, facilitating recruitment, and mobilising action among the far right, offline activism and activities continue to play a significant role. Herein, an overview of the literature on how Australian far-right extremist groups coordinate their online activism with their offline behaviour was provided.

Keywords: Australia ; far right ; media

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## 1. Introduction

As [Campion and Poynting \(2021, p. 3\)](#) have warned, '[t]here are genuine implications for mis-conceptualizing the radicalization of the far right as either offline or online. In the digital information age, these two domains must be considered mutually complementary and reinforcing'. Over the last dozen years, social media companies gifted far-right extremists groups and terrorists with software capable of coordinating and traversing online and offline spaces, extending their logistical and strategical capabilities in targeted communication and attack preparation ([Cai & Landon 2019](#)). In the Australian context, the far-right also adopted sophisticated techniques and strategies for multimodal mobilisation ([Hutchinson 2019b](#); [Peucker & Smith, 2019](#)). It is provided with an overview of the literature on how Australian far-right extremist groups coordinate their online activism with their offline behaviour.

Australian far-right groups use various social media platforms, including Facebook, to disseminate information about offline events and encourage visiting users or followers to participate ([Hutchinson et al. 2021](#)). One of the most prominent of these groups, active during the period between late 2015 and early 2019, was the 'True Blue Crew' (TBC). TBC described itself as a '[p]ro-Australian group, against Islamisation, open border policies, refugees, asylum seekers and the left wing' ([Nilan 2019, p. 106](#)). It was a provocative group with committed followers who were temporarily allied with other far-right groups in the Australian State of Victoria, such as the 'United Patriots Front', participating in shared offline activities (e.g., [Engineer 2016](#); [Richards 2020](#)). TBC emerged out of the anti-Mosque protest movement, most prominently led by the group 'Reclaim Australia'. Similar to Reclaim Australia, TBC held a strong anti-Mosque stance but also promoted a more aggressive form of ethno-nationalism that privileged white, Anglo-Saxon men ([Nilan 2019](#)). [Campion \(2019, p. 12\)](#) has situated the schism from Reclaim Australia as the result of a more extreme set of adherents forming 'their own organisations, which appeared to be further committed to violence', and, as [Mcswiney \(2021, p. 36\)](#) describes, TBC became more of a 'violence-prone street-level organization'. The violent potential of TBC was further scrutinised in 2016 following the arrest of Phillip Galea, who was detained for extreme-right motivations to enact violence and charged with terrorism offences. Galea was associated with both TBC and Reclaim Australia, and was later convicted under Australian commonwealth counter-terrorism legislation for 'acts in preparation for, or planning a terrorist act' ([Australian Government 2020](#)). When sentencing Galea, Judge Hollingworth stated the following:

'Although you regard yourself as a patriot who holds mainstream views, it is clear that the jury found otherwise. The jury must have accepted that your particular cause was to reduce the influence of people or groups associated, or perceived to be associated, with left-wing ideology, and/or Muslims. It is not surprising that they did so, given the views you expressed (in numerous documents, and in many hours of intercepted telephone conversations), and the types of organisations to which you belonged (such as Reclaim Australia, and The True Blue Crew)'. (Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions v Phillip Michael Galea; [Australian Government 2020, p. 1](#))

Furthermore, following the Christchurch attack in New Zealand in 2019, it was learned that the Australian far-right terrorist, Brenton Tarrant, had made several online posts within the TBC Facebook group, among other forums ([New Zealand Royal Commission 2020](#)). While TBC did not openly advocate for initiating violence, it framed violence as permissible in

order to defend fellow 'patriots' ([Campion 2019](#)). In the wake of the Christchurch attack, TBC was banned from Facebook and eventually the group disbanded, with some supporters reappearing as members in other far-right groups ([Peucker & Smith 2019](#)).

Before proceeding, it is important to acknowledge the terminology used herein. The conceptual composition of far-right extremist groups is contested, case-dependent, and often changes over time, all the while presenting a varied collection of radical values and themes, often framed in the language of conservatism. The competition between characterisations in the literature has produced an expanding nomenclature of far-right definitions, values, and identities, used to distinguish segments of the broader movement (e.g., [Mudde 2000](#); [Dean et al. 2016](#); [Ravndal & Bjørge 2018](#)). However, despite the lack of a universal definition for far-right extremism, [Carter \(2018, p. 157\)](#) suggests that 'there is actually a high degree of consensus amongst the definitions put forward by different scholars'. Herein, far-right extremism was considered to be an exclusivist ideology motivated by various visions of social dominance and broadly outlined by anti-democratic and authoritarian sentiment (see [Pedahzur and Canetti-Nisim 2004](#); [Mudde 2016](#); [Carter 2018](#); [Campion 2019](#)).

## **2. Far-Right Extremism in Australia**

Far-right extremism in Australia has not historically reached the level of violence that has come to characterise other parts of the world ([James 2005](#)). Nevertheless, forms of far-right radicalism and violence were present in Australia following the country's federation, gaining notoriety among international strands of far-right thought throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century ([Lentini 2019](#); [Campion 2019](#)). While at times connecting ideas and tactics of international far-right movements, Australian far-right radicalism and extremism developed in ways that reflect the domestic context in which it operates ([Smith 2017](#)). Since the 1960s, the Australian far-right exhibited a strategic pivot to 'Australianise' the movement, and by the 1980s, prominent Australian groups—such as the revolutionary 'National Action'—promoted a form of 'wombat nationalism', encouraging the movement to look to 'Australian history to find its own ideals and symbols' ([Henderson 2002, p. 275](#); [Campion 2019](#)). This distinctly Australian character continues to shape the online movement and is represented to different degrees in divergent cultural and political preferences ([Hutchinson et al. 2021](#)). Rather, these groups are characterised by complexity, fluidity, and, at times, tension, across their goals, messaging, and attempts at mobilisation ([Peucker et al. 2019](#)). For example, various shifts to the Australian political and cultural landscape stimulated changes in the movement's operations in recent decades, such as being more action-orientated, ideologically adaptive, and technologically savvy (e.g., [Poynting and Perry 2007](#); [Rane et al. 2010](#); [Dean et al. 2016](#); [Poynting and Briskman 2018](#); [Hutchinson 2019a, 2019b](#)). This is not exclusive to Australia, however. [Aaron Winter \(2019\)](#) notes that far-right extremists in North America were not always proficient with internet technology but progressed in their capacity to adapt and support the movement online. Over the last dozen years, extensive societal adoption of social media gifted far-right groups, in Australia and internationally, the ability to grow their influence and coordinate their efforts across domains of activity.

Violent extremists now exercise an unprecedented aptitude in internet literacy. Due to social media's ubiquitous presence in society and persuasive design, violent extremists use social technologies to campaign their views, rally support for upcoming events, disseminate instructive materials, cultivate communities at a distance, and mobilise followers ([Peucker et al. 2018](#); [Winter 2019](#)). Furthermore, videos, manifestos, and attack methodologies left by previous far-right terrorists continue to circulate online, with proceeding far-right attackers having made reference to their international and Australian predecessors—arguably contributing to the increasing lethality of attacks ([Cai and Landon 2019](#)).

Contemporary Australian far-right extremism represents an important point of convergence between 'online' and 'offline' contexts. For example, in 2019, Australian far-right terrorist Brenton Tarrant targeted two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand during a terrorist attack designed to be celebrated online, killing 51 worshippers. Prior to the attack, Tarrant was exposed to, expressed his admiration for, and financially supported certain Australian and international far-right extremist groups using Facebook and group-owned websites ([Begley 2019](#); [Mann et al. 2019](#); [Anti-Defamation League 2019](#)). His affinity with an online anti-Islamic community, along with the anti-Islamic and white supremacist material found on his Facebook account, likely contributed to Tarrant's sense of self and moral disposition towards Muslims, who he later targeted during his attack ([Ganesh 2018](#)). The online community's subsequent and unprecedented surge in activity across social media was linked 'conclusively' to Tarrant's terrorist attack ([Davey et al. 2020](#)), which included anti-left conspiracies along with victim blaming and glorification of the perpetrator ([Hutchinson 2019a](#)). While Tarrant's acts drove some away from the far right, for others, the events of Christchurch were a watershed moment and reinforced their commitment.

Various attempts have been made to conceptualise the dynamic relationship between online and offline group members and activities. In exploring Roger Eatwell's concept of 'cumulative extremism', [Busher and Macklin \(2015\)](#) considered whether offline interactions with an opposing ideological group or event solidify or strengthen pre-existing motivations for extremist violence. In combination with [Randall Collins' \(2005\)](#) concept of 'emotional energy', the confrontation between opposing social groups presents an opportunity for both sides to escalate, sensitise cues for further engagement, and

become integral parts of their mythologies or collective action frames. Similarly, [Gallacher and Heerdink \(2021\)](#) explored the possibility of social media to incite mutual escalation between opposing groups, with acts of offline violence triggering online reactions from both the target and perpetrator groups. Other studies examined the point of convergence between online and offline contexts during a single act of mobilisation or ideological violence, such as acts of far-right extremist violence and terrorism. For example, [Criezis and Galloway \(2021\)](#) point to incidents such as the 6 January 2021 United States' Capitol riot as presenting a motley community of 'concerned citizens', violent extremist groups, and conspiracy theorists, who together traversed from an online space to execute acts of violence in an offline space.

To better understand how activity traverses between domains, researchers attempt to capture aspects of online and offline activity using various approaches. Most investigations correlate changes in offline conditions with fluctuations in far-right online activity in social networking forums (e.g., [Scrivens 2017](#); [Powell et al. 2018](#)). Research in this area has identified various conditions present within offline settings that are expressed in conversations and behaviour in online space. For example, [Koster and Houtman \(2008\)](#) found a positive relationship between an offline stimulus, such as social stigmatisation, and its impact on discussions within the far-right, white supremacist website *Stormfront*, such as greater reliance on the virtual community. [Wojcieszak \(2010\)](#) determined that if someone displayed like-mindedness with online participants and dissimilar offline social ties, their willingness to express extremist opinions tended to increase commensurate to their online participation. Similarly, focussing on the impact of offline events, [Scrivens \(2017\)](#) demonstrated that the emergence of the Lesbian–Gay–Bisexual–Transsexual–Queer (LGBTQ) movement in Canada from 2001 to 2016 had a corresponding impact on the online conversation and posting behaviours resident on *Stormfront*, and [Johnson et al. \(2019\)](#) showed that efforts to police extreme communities within a single platform (such as Facebook) result in self-organised, resilient networks that adapt in anticipation or in response to the company's decision to remove their account from the platform (also see [Ballsun-Stanton et al. 2020](#)). However, few studies have used both quantitative and ethnographic methods to systematically analyse how violent extremist groups traverse online and offline spaces to mobilise their communities. In rare cases, such as [Gill \(et al. 2017\)](#) or [Hutchinson \(et al., 2022\)](#), research has captured patterned correspondence between the online and offline settings by drawing on interviews and interactions with group members and supporters, to substantiate the flow of influence from online discussion to changes in perception and behaviour during offline demonstrations (e.g., [Gill et al. 2017](#)).

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