

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into Extremism in Victoria

Melbourne—Tuesday, 14 June 2022

#### SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS

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Ms Nina Taylor—Deputy Chair	Mr Mark Gepp
Dr Matthew Bach <sup>2</sup>	Ms Sheena Watt <sup>3</sup>

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Ms Fiona Patten—Chair	Ms Tania Maxwell
Dr Tien Kieu—Deputy Chair	Mr Craig Ondarchie
Ms Cathrine Burnett-Wake	Ms Nina Taylor
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**WITNESSES** (*via videoconference*)

Dr Andre Oboler, Chief Executive Officer and Managing Director, and

Dr Nasya Bahfen, Director, Online Hate Prevention Institute;

Mr Daniel Aghion SC, President, and

Ms Naomi Levin, Chief Operating Officer, Jewish Community Council of Victoria; and

Ms Julie Nathan, Research Director, Executive Council of Australian Jewry.

**The CHAIR:** Good afternoon, everyone. I declare open the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee's public hearing for the Inquiry into Extremism in Victoria. All mobile phones should now be turned to silent.

I would like to begin by respectfully acknowledging the traditional custodians of the Wurundjeri land from which I am joining you here today and the various First Nations lands that we all join from virtually on this Zoom today and pay my respect to their ancestors, elders and families past and present and Aboriginal elders of other communities who may be here today.

By way of introduction, I am Samantha Ratnam, and I will be chairing the session this afternoon. I am joined by the Deputy Chair of the committee, Ms Nina Taylor; Dr Matthew Bach—and little baby; and Ms Cathrine Burnett-Wake. We have another committee member, Ms Tania Maxwell, who has had to come in and out of hearings, so she may join us at some point during this hearing. So you might see her appear.

By way of explanation of parliamentary privilege and the Hansard transcript, all evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during this hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and published on the committee's website.

For the Hansard record, can I please ask the various members of the panel this afternoon—and welcome to the Online Hate Prevention Institute, the Jewish Community Council of Australia and the Executive Council of Australian Jewry—to state your name and any organisation you are appearing on behalf of, after which I will invite you to make an opening statement. Who would like to go first? Dr Oboler.

**Dr OBOLER:** Andre Oboler. I am the CEO of the Online Hate Prevention Institute.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome.

**Dr BAHFEN:** I may as well go next, as a colleague of Dr Oboler. My name is Dr Nasya Bahfen, and I am a Director of the Online Hate Prevention Institute.

**Mr AGHION:** I will go next. Daniel Aghion SC, President of the Jewish Community Council of Victoria.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome.

**Ms LEVIN:** And I am Naomi Levin. I am the Chief Operating Officer of the Jewish Community Council of Victoria.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome.

**Ms NATHAN:** I am Julie Nathan, the Research Director at the Executive Council of Australian Jewry.

**The CHAIR:** Fantastic. Welcome, all, and thank you so much for your submissions and for agreeing to appear before this parliamentary inquiry today. On that note, I welcome you to make an opening statement on behalf of the organisations represented here today of up to 10 minutes altogether, after which time we will open

up for questions and discussion with the committee members. Who would like to make the opening statement, or are there a few of you that will be making the opening statement together? Dr Oboler, over to you.

### Visual presentation.

**Dr OBOLER:** Nasya and I will both begin speaking. These slides present the view of the Online Hate Prevention Institute. The other organisations will follow us with their own opening remarks. Nasya.

**Dr BAHFEN:** Thank you very much, Andre. Thank you to you all for allowing us to appear at this inquiry. As Andre stated, our specific remit is in the spread of extremism in the digital space, but what we have found is that harmful forms of extremism often have their roots in digital hate, so extremism has its antecedence in things like antisemitism, Holocaust denial, Islamophobia and anti-Asian racism. What that does, as my colleagues will explain, is that that digital extremism often has consequences in the real world, and these consequences affect Victorians. What we found through our research is that there are leaders of far-right groups whose messages are amplified in the digital space to a far greater extent than would be the case if that online communication and that online lobbying did not actually exist. So we found a definite link between the dissemination of extremist messages in the digital space and what happens offline through a process of dehumanisation of these targeted communities—Jewish communities, Asian communities and Muslim communities, just some of the targets of this hate.

Andre, if we could move to the next slide, please. What we have done through our work over many, many years is we have exposed how a lot of the movement and the lobbying affects people within Victoria, but a lot of that stuff takes place from overseas extremist movements. These overseas extremist movements are joined together in their common hatred of a particular targeted group, and that is how a lot of these extremist groups mobilise, using the internet. So we are dealing with a very specific problem here, which is that extremism is exacerbated in the online space by people and organisations that are often overseas, but they are able to mobilise these extremist groups within Australia and within Victoria. That particular mobilisation, our research has shown, causes demonstrable and recordable harm to communities within Victoria. What we have done over the years is build up tools and recording mechanisms to strengthen the resilience of the communities affected by this extremism, and Andre will go into further detail about some of the methods and the research that we have conducted.

**Dr OBOLER:** Thank you, Nasya. Bringing it directly to extremism, we deal with all forms of hate as well as extremism and obviously the links, as Nasya mentioned. In 2019 we documented four terrorist attacks—Christchurch, Poway, El Paso and then Halle—all of which resulted from self-radicalisation by members of a particular online community. A few weeks ago, a month ago now, we saw another one of those attacks radicalised by the same community, an attack that killed 10 people in Buffalo, New York. So the community sees violent extremism, this online community. They see the live streaming of attacks in other places, and that inspires further action. So the more those videos of the attacks and the manifestos that the attackers create spread, the greater the risk of further attacks. This community includes Australians and most certainly Victorians. Attacks can occur anywhere, which means there is a risk here as well. The danger with this self-radicalisation is that it is coming from people that may not be on the radar of police and intelligence services, so this is a different problem from some of the well-known extremists that we will otherwise talk about in this hearing.

We have documented the attacks. The work we have done highlighting that has been shared by governments around the world. Our last major report, which looked at the first four attacks, had a foreword from the European Commission. The Buffalo attack we have just mentioned. We have worked to get those videos and manifestos removed, and that is a major part of what we do. We do that with connections with the technology companies behind the platforms, we do that by online analysis—manual work—as well as working with communities and experts. I just want to briefly highlight this graph, which is in one of our submissions. This shows a video from a month ago, and you can see how when we first found it it had about 100 000 views, and that was within a few hours. It took us around 13 hours to get it removed, and in that time it got to 3.2 million, and we do not know how many of those people will have downloaded that video, spread it both online and via USBs et cetera. That is a real risk. One of our problems is that we need more capacity to be able to do this more quickly, and if we can do that, it will actually lead to greater safety.

This is from our submission as well. These are stats on antisemitic incidents in Victoria. This data is from ECAJ, so Julie, who is with us, will be able to talk more about this and some other matters. This is just here for reference. I will pass back to Nasya quickly.

**Dr BAHFEN:** Thank you, Andre. At the last anti-vilification inquiry held by the state government, one of the recommendations called for the relevant agencies to work together with OHPI. Our work benefits Victorians, but we cannot do it ourselves—the budget is shoestring. There is a lot more work to be done in this space. We understand that the Victorian government actually adopted this recommendation, but we are not clear about future support. We believe that Victoria urgently needs a strategy to tackle online hate because it leads to real-world extremism and real-world violence, and we basically need the support of the Victorian government to continue our work.

These are the recommendations from our submissions. It is in our submissions, so I will not go through each of those, but basically it is in a lot of detail within the paperwork. I am just really conscious of the time. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much. That was really insightful. Ms Levin, Ms Nathan, did you want to add anything further to the opening statement? Mr Aghion?

**Mr AGHION:** I will introduce Naomi Levin, who is going to speak on behalf of the Jewish Community Council of Victoria. Before she does, can I just indicate that we are the roof body for the Jewish community in Victoria, and we are therefore constitutionally authorised to speak on its behalf to government, in particular in situations such as this. Thank you, Madam Chair. I will pass over to Naomi Levin.

**Ms LEVIN:** Thanks, Daniel, and thank you to the committee for the invitation to appear today. We really appreciate it. We are focused, I suppose, more on the impact of extremism rather than analysis of extremism, as others have been this morning. Antisemitism or a hatred of Jews is a foundational ideology of Neo-Nazi and white supremacy extremist groups. This committee was established as a direct result of heightened extremist activity in Victoria in 2021, led by the growth of the so-called freedom movement. Now, antisemitism was evident throughout this movement. It was visible in messages left in online chat channels associated with the movement, on banners that appeared at demonstrations and in vandalism along demonstration routes; however, antisemitism did not appear to be a core or binding value of the freedom movement. Nevertheless, there was a rise in antisemitic incidents in Australia in 2021, as my colleague Julie Nathan will explain, and this has both physical and psychological effects on the Victorian Jewish community.

The Jewish community continues to dedicate a disproportionate amount of community resources towards security protection. These resources include security measures such as CCTV, perimeter security and other external protection for Jewish sites, such as synagogues and Jewish schools, as well as the employment of trained security guards. There are also, understandably, significant human resources that must be committed to protecting Jewish people and Jewish facilities, and the effect of this on the community is that a lot of our community leaders, most of whom are volunteers, spend a significant amount of their time addressing security issues rather than focusing on positive community-building measures.

In terms of the psychological effect on the Jewish community, no-one has scientifically quantified the effects of rising antisemitism in Victoria, but Jewish Victorians have cause to feel less safe and more anxious as a result, and it is not just the victims or the witnesses of these antisemitic incidents who are affected. Knowledge of these incidents understandably spreads through our community via media reports or community networks and contributes to a wider sense of unease. This is then exacerbated by the heightened awareness of antisemitism due to the recent history of the Holocaust and the lingering effects of that traumatic and devastating time on the Victorian Jewish community. The JCCV's submission makes a series of recommendations that seek to protect the Jewish community from the impact of rising extremism. I am sure the committee has had a look at those, so I will not go through them. I will finish there and invite any questions the panel may have. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Great. Thank you very much. Ms Nathan.

**Ms NATHAN:** The Executive Council of Australian Jewry is the peak national body representing the Jewish community in Australia, and JCCV is the body for the Victorian Jewry and as such is a constituent organisation of the ECAJ. I am the author of the annual ECAJ *Report on Antisemitism in Australia*, and this is it here. It is 200-odd pages, which I do every year. It covers both antisemitic incidents over a 12-month period and also antisemitic discourse, whether in the mainstream media, amongst politicians or amongst other groups,

and also a large section of that is online antisemitism, particularly on extremist sites such as Gab and Telegram. I would spend on average between 10 and 12 hours a week on these extremist sites monitoring what they are saying, so I am very happy to answer any questions on antisemitic incidents or on extremists online. Unfortunately a high proportion of them tend to be in Victoria. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. Thank you all for those really insightful opening remarks and keeping within the time frame as well, which is challenging amongst three organisations. But we have plenty of time for questions and expanding on some of the points that you have raised both today and in your submissions, and thank you for the work you have done to contribute those submissions to the inquiry. They are very, very useful. If I may begin the questioning, there are a couple of things I want to ask. We will go around and have a couple of rounds of questions.

But just to begin, particularly, Ms Levin, with some of the work that you have just documented, and Ms Nathan as well, in terms of understanding the impact the rise of far-right extremism has on the community, we have heard evidence through the course of receiving submissions to the inquiry about the threat of violent extremism of course, which we need to be very cognisant of and do everything we can to mitigate. Sometimes, however, a discussion might focus solely there, but we also know from the academic literature and some of the work that groups like yours have been doing that the effects of the rise of these extreme movements are felt by society in a range of ways, not just in the outcome of violent extremism and, as you have documented, the rise of racism and the feelings of safety and security within the community. I wonder if you could please expand for the benefit of the committee on those experiences of the communities that you are working with in terms of: if communities feel like there is racism rising or they feel physically less safe or socially less safe and more excluded in society, what kinds of accounts are you receiving from the community? Are you seeing that increase, or how has that changed over the last few years as we have seen the rise of these movements continue?

**Ms LEVIN:** Julie, do you want to go first?

**Ms NATHAN:** I think the question was about the impact on the community, but in Victoria, being one of the two major states that have a Jewish community, even though statistically Victoria has far less antisemitic incidents than New South Wales, that is more an issue of underreporting by Victorians. They will report to other organisations, and unless those reports come through to the JCCV, to CSG or to me at ECAJ, those incidents are not recorded. So even though you can look at the number of incidents in Victoria, it is grossly underreported. The impact, as JCCV would know, is that Jewish communal buildings, synagogues and Jewish schools require a whole lot of security measures such as armed guards, CCTV cameras, high fences and a whole lot of other measures to protect Jews while they are at prayer, in school or at communal events. We have actually had a whole generation of Jews grow up under these kinds of conditions, and having these security measures in place has, I would suggest, lessened the number of attacks against Jews. Naomi, you have something else to add?

**Ms LEVIN:** Thanks, Julie. Yes. I would just point out that Julie referenced an acronym there, CSG, which stands for Community Security Group. It is an incredibly important organisation within our community that seeks to educate, inform and then also protect our community on security issues that they are facing. I do not want to go into too much more detail about them, but the fact that the Jewish community has an organisation within it that fundraises and is dedicated and recruits volunteers just for the purpose of security I think is emblematic of the feeling and the sentiment within the community. A lot of people volunteer to assist on those issues. People are quite happy to donate funds towards those matters because it is something that impacts them daily—walking to synagogue, dropping their children off at school, shopping in strongly Jewish areas of Melbourne. It is always top of mind, and it is something that people going about everyday activities are very cognisant of.

So in terms of a personal impact, it is felt daily. It is felt when you walk into a Jewish school and there is a guard there. It is felt when you go into a synagogue, and unless you are a member of that synagogue and they know who you are, you are potentially not granted access. It is not the same in other houses of worship or other schools of other religious denominations in Victoria. That is probably the easiest way of illustrating it to the committee, but I know Daniel would like to add something.

**The CHAIR:** Please do.

**Mr AGHION:** Thank you, and thank you for the indulgence, noting that you were only going to have two speakers per question.

**The CHAIR:** That is okay.

**Mr AGHION:** I want to give you two examples, if I may. I am Melbourne born and bred, and the presentation of synagogues to the street now is not what it was when I grew up. They have high walls. Distinguishing features to identify them as a place of worship—a Star of David, for example, Hebrew writing—a lot of those things are not shown. They present essentially as an office block or some non-descript building for fear of identification and therefore for fear of becoming a target. Now, of course, this answers your question, Chair, because it is not only the risk of the kind of attack that we have seen on religious institutions overseas—synagogues, mosques, as we know in New Zealand—and so forth, but it is the fear that we may be the subject of an attack.

The second example I will give from recently was the banning of the Nazi swastika, which was announced by the Attorney-General and is, we are pleased to see, bipartisan policy. Within 24 hours there was stickering throughout Caulfield, up and down Hawthorn Road, of Nazi swastikas. At one level you could simply say, ‘Well, those are just stickers. That is graffiti’, but it was done by a pair of Neo-Nazi thugs who have been arrested and as I understand it charged with de minimis charges. But ultimately when the legislation is implemented they would be able to be more severe. But their intent was very clear. Their intent was to intimidate, and intimidate they did. It was not just stickering of the type that would be conceived to be, if you like, a public nuisance but no more. I give those two examples, the latter being something designed to intimidate, and it does intimidate, and the former being the outward presentation of our synagogues and also our cultural institutions, as being a response to that kind of intimidation. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. I really appreciate that. It highlights the tragedy of when those kinds of security measures and fear have to become normalised in people’s lives, and that is kind of the impact of the rise of these movements. Hence the inquiry. Thank you very much. I will hand over to Ms Taylor.

**Ms TAYLOR:** Thank you to everyone for being here today, and already you have answered many questions that I had, so thank you in advance. The first question I had was further to the legislation that passed the lower house last week with regard to banning the Nazi symbol, and we expect to debate and pass it in the upper house next week. On that note, how important is it to remove those symbols of hate from public display and what has been the community’s reaction to the legislation proper?

**Mr AGHION:** I wonder if perhaps I can speak about that first. The community’s reaction has been very positive, because we see it as almost, for want of a better word, a no-brainer. And I know there was a lot of work done behind the scenes and we are grateful for that, but we mean that it is a no-brainer in the sense that if one is going to talk about the Nazi swastika—that is to say, the impermissible and perverted use of the traditional swastika, which is valuable in a number of religions such as the Buddhist and Jain communities—there is really no institution or organisation we can think of that would validly want to support its public display. So in that sense our community is very strongly in favour and the response that we have had is very positive. What we would like to see is the extent to which the legislation can then be expanded out to other symbols. Our understanding is that the door is not closed to that—that this is, if you like, a starting point. But certainly in terms of your question, it has been very positively received and we are grateful.

**The CHAIR:** Dr Oboler?

**Dr OBOLER:** Thank you. We put in a submission in relation to the legislation and we have highlighted just a couple of concerns. We are very strongly supportive of the legislation, but we are concerned that the protest exemption may be too broad. It may be able to be manipulated in ways that completely undermine what it is trying to do, so we would urge that actually the exemption be restricted to protesting against Nazi and Neo-Nazi groups rather than some vague wording of ‘similar organisations’ et cetera, because anyone could try and make out that anyone they disliked was something similar, and that can fall into a problem of Holocaust distortion, which is itself a problem.

The other thing is that we think it is very important to deal with the online use of these symbols, and we documented multiple examples of both the use of the symbols but also outright Holocaust denial, which is spread through various platforms and which then again leads into recruitment to extremist groups. So we have done what we can to start removing this, but it needs a major project and that is going to need government

support to take it forward. So I will just leave it there, other than to again support what Daniel just said about other symbols coming to the forefront once we have this legislation in place and the need to then expand it. The black sun, for example, is a common Neo-Nazi symbol, and there are others. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Ms Nathan, do you want to add to that?

**Ms NATHAN:** Yes, just very quickly. It is commendable to be banning such hate symbols, and other states are also following suit—New South Wales, Queensland, Tasmania. The other thing is just to note that while this is an important part in fighting hate crime and extremism, it is just one small beginning and there are a lot more other measures that need to be enacted. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. Dr Bach, would you be in a position to ask a question now?

**Dr BACH:** I sure am. Thank you very much, Chair. Just quickly still on this topic—and maybe I will ask you, Ms Levin—I agree with what Daniel was saying before that surely the banning of the swastika, the Nazi swastika, is a no-brainer. Nazis are bad. Jew-hating is an appalling thing. Surely everybody understands that, and if you do not understand that, well, there is a problem. There is going to be a year now before the legislation comes into force, for a so-called education campaign. Perhaps there is some education to be done around the appropriate use of other swastikas for other religious groups. I am not sure if a year is necessary to do that. What do you think, Ms Levin?

**Ms LEVIN:** Thank you, Dr Bach, for the question. I note that it was amended, before being voted on, for that period to change to six months. Certainly the JCCV advocated for the introduction of this law to be immediately. As Daniel just explained, the day after the Attorney-General made the announcement there was a stickering attack through Caulfield, and I would add to that it actually happened on the building we were in at the time, Daniel and me. The incident happened while we were inside a building, and those swastikas were stuck on the outside of our building. Certainly that was something that we advocated for: an immediate introduction. The government chose to amend it to six months. I mean, obviously from our point of view we understand the necessity of an education campaign. To make sure, for those communities who do use the symbol for their own peaceful and positive means, that education needs to happen, but ultimately we would like to see this very positive change come in as soon as it possibly can.

**Dr BACH:** Thank you. Can I ask another question, Chair, or do other members of the panel want to make a contribution on that?

**The CHAIR:** Certainly. I think Dr Oboler had his hand up.

**Dr OBOLER:** Thank you, Chair. Just a very brief comment. As part of that education campaign, I think it is important to highlight existing laws that may be breached if similar incidents, like the stickering Daniel mentioned, occur, because the gap before the implementation of the law creates a period which people may try and take advantage of. So it needs to be highlighted that this is not a period for a free-for-all.

**Dr BACH:** No, no. Quite right, thank you. And I mean, still on that and referencing the Chair's excellent question to start off our session with you, of course we are very, very mindful that violent extremism is an appalling thing and we need to do everything we can to combat it, but thinking about some of the psychological impacts of antisemitism—the sorts of things we have already been talking about, this appalling stickering of people's rubbish bins with the Nazi swastika the other day. I used to be a schoolteacher, and in my previous roles in secondary schools—oftentimes religiously affiliated schools—it really struck me that when I employed teachers who had worked at Jewish schools they were struck by how porous our campuses were. I most recently was the deputy principal of a girls school that must have had 15 entry and exit points—no fences, no gates. The students came and went, and whenever anything happened in the community that impacted their ability to move around it really impacted my students.

So again, potentially initially to you, Ms Levin, given that we are so mindful, we are hearing a lot about violent extremism—that is so important—but to also make sure that we are mindful enough of the sorts of impacts of extremism that are not necessarily violent in nature, perhaps for young children, would you mind talking a little bit more about the psychological impact of the sort of appalling antisemitism that we have seen recently and that you argue, very credibly in my view, is on the rise?

**Ms LEVIN:** Thank you. Look, I wish I could point to some data on this on the psychological impact. As far as I know, certainly in Australia, we do not have data that can sort of really illustrate this problem. So what we have is anecdotes, and I think it is a poor man's substitute for data, so it would be good to see data in this area. I think what you say is right, and I think for us in the Jewish community perhaps we are sort of blinkered, I suppose, to the restrictions that we have on our lives in terms of things like access to our community buildings, the necessity to walk through metal detectors before you go into them and those sorts of things. It is part of our day-to-day lived experience, so perhaps we do not even think about it until somebody calls it out, but you are 100 per cent right; that is the lived experience of the Jewish community.

I would just like to caution that it is not just right-wing extremism that is causing that threat. There are other sources of antisemitism, as Julie outlines in her report. I mean, we are not commenting on that today because it is beyond sort of the terms of reference of this committee, but I think it needs to be acknowledged that it is not just coming from those right-wing extremists—those threats and that feeling of insecurity.

**The CHAIR:** Dr Oboler, and Ms Nathan as well.

**Dr OBOLER:** Thank you. I wish to speak, if I may, in another capacity. I also served on behalf of the education committee as the cultural liaison to the inquiry into antisemitism at Brighton Secondary, so I am aware that matter is before the court. I understand the government has acknowledged the antisemitism the students faced. It is a question of responsibility that the court is dealing with, but the actual fact that antisemitism occurred is accepted by all parties, and the evidence in that inquiry was very clear on the impact on those students—and there are a number of students there. I do not know how much access you have to that report, but it is a very detailed and good report that does go into that in some detail. So there is evidence I would refer to you there. It led to students leaving the school entirely—a number of them—and it highlights in the details how antisemitism in the school environment makes life unlivable. I think that is very clear there and something to acknowledge, and it does not take many perpetrators of antisemitism to create such environments.

One of the things the report did highlight was that there is a difference between bullying and racist bullying, whether it is antisemitism or another form. One of those differences is that bullying of one student against another does not build in the same way that the same sort of racist remarks from five students, 10 students, 20 students can all build upon each other in the impact on an individual. So I think that is something about the impact of antisemitism that we can learn from.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Nathan.

**Ms NATHAN:** On the impact of antisemitism on the Jewish community, I think, as Naomi said, it is normalised, so we do not even really think about a lot of these things until, let us say, we might enter a church or a mosque or an Islamic school and see how it is very much different for our community—the security measures that we live under. So that is just something that appears normal, perhaps something we have grown up with. Antisemitism has been around for 2500 years. The Australian Jewish Community has the highest proportion of Holocaust survivors per capita outside Israel, so antisemitism and violence against Jews is something that is just part of the normal cultural make-up, I think, of how we see things. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. I will hand over to Ms Burnett-Wake.

**Ms BURNETT-WAKE:** Thank you very much. Dr Bahfen, I think was you—and not Dr Oboler—who stated that digital hate is amplified on social media and there is a link to its dissemination online that then leads to offline grooming and then people going out and activating violence and so forth. So I am actually interested in your assessment of what the major tech platforms are doing to take these issues seriously—spreading hate speech, conspiracy theories and misinformation—and how they are addressing them proactively. And to what extent do you think they need to do more?

**Dr BAHFEN:** Thank you for the question. For a very long time people have seen the tech giants, such as Facebook, as being incredibly arbitrary in their responses to online hate, and often we have seen them playing a bit of a catch-up game. So every time something like, for example, Christchurch happens—I obviously cannot speak for the Jewish community, but it seems to me they have been warning about far-right extremism for a very long time, as have people from other communities as well, and those warnings have sort of gone unheeded. What we saw the tech companies try to do was appear to scramble after something like that happened, and then it is almost a reactive thing instead of being proactive. That is something that Dr Oboler and I have tried to address through our engagement with them. It has taken a lot of—I would not put it as wheeling

and dealing—lobbying, a lot of relationship building, to try and get to the point where Facebook will sit down and have a meeting with us. I think it has gone from playing catch-up to an understanding that—I am going to be cynical here—if they are not seen to be acting on this, they are just going to lose users and they are going to lose clicks and relevance. It has moved from proactive to reactive, and you are seeing things like Twitter clamping down on online hate and incitements of violence, resulting in a lot of these groups moving to the sorts of organisations that other people on the panel have referred to—to Parler, to Gab. While you are seeing this sort of proactive stand, I think it is because in the past it has been seen to take a hit to their reputation and to their brand, and I think there is a long way to go.

I think that there is always some sort of pushback. As soon as the Victorian government takes a step like this, the pushback is immediate from members of these groups. If you take a look at the JCCV's submission, they outline how the pandemic saw a lot of fringe groups and extremist groups take advantage of public health regulations to prey on the disenfranchised, to prey on people who were affected by that and to try and exacerbate their message. As somebody with no skin in the game with regard to the swastika, as soon as that decision was taken and announced—it was the day after—in the heart of the Jewish community again we saw that pushback. It is kind of like, 'How can we intimidate these people as much as possible?', because legislation [Zoom dropout] expression. That is something that I think the Victorian government really needs to work on—that notion that these overseas actors have taken a lot of the movement in this space and turned it into a 'My rights, my freedom—yee-haw!' type of narrative. I think that is something that all these groups need to work on.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Nathan. Dr Oboler after that.

**Ms NATHAN:** Thank you. On the one hand we have the mainstream online sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, which are much more able to be influenced or encouraged to deal with the hate content. There are other sites, such as Gab and Telegram, where a lot of the hate content occurs, and people who have been thrown off Facebook and Twitter go onto these other sites. These are sites that believe in free speech and are run by antisemites themselves, in the case of Gab, which is Andrew Torba. And he will gladly admit to being an antisemite.

Because these sites cannot be influenced, it comes down to: can, let us say, the Victorian police charge people for vilification? For example, there was a case where police arrested a Victorian man in November 2020 for his antisemitic posts online. He would post images of Jews being shot, Jews being hanged and being stabbed and continually call for the killing of Jews. Victoria Police investigated for 18 months, and then in May this year they dropped all charges against him. He was charged originally under the 'serious religious vilification and incitement' Victorian law and under 'use telecommunications device to menace'. So this person is still out there and still putting out. For example, from the 2021 antisemitism report I will just give four citations. He wrote:

... the #Jew is the enemy of the entire #gentile world.

... #Jews are a verminous race unworthy of life!

It's okay to ... exterminate #Jews worldwide!

Jews have to be exterminated.

Now, this is a man who police have looked at and have decided has not breached any laws, so that is why they have done that. So this is another area for Victoria to look at. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Dr Oboler.

**Dr OBOLER:** Thank you. Just going back to that Buffalo attack, the attacker used a service called Twitch, which is usually used for streaming gaming, to live stream the attack. Twitch managed to respond within 2 minutes. The video was pulled down while he was still shooting people, while the attack was still occurring. The same service was used in an attack in Germany, in Halle, at the end of 2019, on Yom Kippur in fact, targeting a synagogue. In that case the person finished their attack, and the Twitch service automatically saves the video and uploads it to make it easier—again, if it was a gaming video—for people to share et cetera, but in the case of an extremist video it has the same effect. So that video was able to go viral because of that mechanism. Twitch's 2-minute response here I thought was very good, but what we saw is it actually made no difference. Our report, which we had up within 24 hours of the attack, dissected exactly how the attacker had in a technical sense got around this. The details are in the report, but basically they were using Discord, another

one of the encrypted platforms. They were streaming through to Discord from their Twitch stream, which basically disempowered the platform that was trying to do the right thing. It undermined that action.

After that the video was uploaded to two smaller file-sharing services. We contacted one of them pretty much immediately, and 13 hours later they still had not actually responded to our report, which did not just report the video—we ticked a box saying ‘This is terrorist content’, and even that did not make a difference. We eventually got it down by going through and contacting the company and working our way through to the managing director of their parent company. That is how we managed to take it down. But it shows again the divide between platforms that are trying to do the right thing and platforms that are either too small to have the infrastructure to do the right thing or just do not care.

We have done work looking at Gab. It is not just that there is antisemitic content on it, it is that we have a list of fully blown Neo-Nazi groups that are active on the platform. We have documentation of white supremacist content posted by the founder of the platform. So this is not just unpoliced, this is actually hostile, and the question is what can we do to stop Victorians falling into that, because it is happening and we do see it.

Again in this attack we saw people, including from Australia, providing technical help and support to try and get others to recover copies of the video to spread different versions of it—the US, Australia, Canada, other countries where we would expect strong action on this content. So the only thing we can really do is invest in responses. I do not know why the FBI could not deal with it given it was an American attack. I do not know why in five incidents so far it has fallen to us, a small charity in Victoria, to respond and try and take the steps to make things safer around the world, but we are doing that work. We just cannot do it quickly enough on the resources we have. I did try to reach out to some of the tech platforms and to some other larger NGOs that deal with removing terrorist content. The responses we got were they do not deal with X platform; therefore it is not their problem. So we really need to have the public investment in organisations that will deal with it wherever it is—that there are no strings attached—and that is what is really lacking in the global scene right now. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Dr Oboler. I am just mindful of the time, so we will open it up to the last round of questions. Fellow committee members, please raise your hands if you have got some further questions. If I may start that second round off, Dr Oboler and Dr Bahfen, I was particularly interested in some of the aspects of your submission and, as you have highlighted there, the vigilance, the monitoring and just the depth of this that you have to traverse. Thank you for doing that work. Your submission really highlights just how layered and complex this kind of work is, but somebody has to do it to understand what is happening and how you mitigate it. I was interested in the section in your submission, and I wonder if you could please explain briefly, on the threat from what you call the /pol/ group and the 4chan group, using that as a case study in some way to study and highlight the tactics that are used. We have heard in other evidence presented to the inquiry that some of the tactics that are being used to recruit people are to create these spaces which are engaging, for want of a better word, fun in this kind of really perverse way. And then you talked about using irony as well. I wonder if you can expand a little bit more on what the traits of that kind of activity you saw were and why they were particularly concerning and what has happened as a result of that.

**Dr OBOLER:** Nasya, do you want to maybe start, and then I can jump in afterward?

**Dr BAHFEN:** Yes. Thank you. Thank you for the question, Samantha. Basically, the context of this is that we earlier spoke about the psychological effects on these targeted communities of the activities of extremism. One psychological effect that we have seen is that people feel less of a connection to the Victorian community, and they feel like they are not welcome in that particular space, and so that is where extremists will then come in and take advantage of that. Speaking again anecdotally, I do not have any hard evidence of this, but just looking at people from within, for example, the Muslim community online, the feeling is that, ‘Look, this country hates you, this society has no space for you, this state doesn’t like you’. That particular sort of alienation then leaves these people open to, I guess, find the rhetoric of extremism really quite appealing, and we saw that with the pandemic—you know, people taking advantage of those feelings of isolation and not being accepted by the Victorian community. And so that leaves them open to this sort of thing. I will hand over to Andre now to talk about that process.

**The CHAIR:** Over to you.

**Dr OBOLER:** Thank you, Nasya. We have coined a term called Hate 2.0, which we have used in a number of our reports going back to 2012 looking at attacks against Indigenous Australians, and it is the use of irony,

the use of jokes, the use of memes, all designed to create an online space where the hate is acceptable, it is deemed to be safe. And if someone was to challenge you, someone would say, 'Well, I'm just joking, it's just fun'. And we see a lot of it with misogyny as well. Again, from back in 2012 we have got screenshots of content saying—I showed one at a talk just last week—'It's not rape if you yell surprise'. Now, what is horrible about that is not just the content but the fact that—this was the name of a group—our screenshot is of a message from Facebook saying, 'Thank you for reporting this, but the content is not in breach of our community service'. Now that is no longer the case—that policy has changed—but that is the sort of use of, 'Oh, it's just a joke, it's just irony'. We had to fight with Facebook on what is called Aboriginal memes, where originally Facebook's response was, 'Oh, these are a meme, it's a joke, therefore it's not racism'. Facebook at least has changed its position and accepted the fact that something being presented as a joke does not make it not racist. A racist joke is still racist. But we have had to work through that over the last 10 years.

In terms of /pol/ specifically, it started with this sort of irony in the community, and a lot of it was tongue in cheek. And then Neo-Nazis from a forum called Stormfront came in. We have got, again, screenshots documenting their internal discussions, saying, 'This is a community that is at the edge of Neo-Nazism. Perhaps we can tip them over', and in a very short period they did. After that what we see is when there is an attack it is people in this community who are congratulating the attackers, who are encouraging if someone is about to carry out an attack and saying things like we saw on one of the past attacks, 'Get a high score', as if it is a game—and they are talking about killing people. So this is where they have created a space where the environment is toxic and it shifts from online to offline—that is the important part. Once people feel that this is acceptable in the online community they engage in, the hate can move to the water cooler, it can move to other social circles, but it can also move into, 'Okay, it's okay to move from verbal attacks to physical attacks', and that is the real threat we face from this online content.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. It is such an important point for us to remember throughout this inquiry. Committee members, are there any further questions? I welcome Ms Maxwell to the hearing as well. Ms Taylor—probably the final question I think we have time for.

**Ms TAYLOR:** I guess hearing the evidence so far it seems to me like there is a balance between what is said to be a really chronic issue with what you are talking about, online very disturbing material and platforms like Telegram—I honestly have never been on there, so I am not very familiar with it, I will be honest—but on the other hand I know our Victorian government is implementing Holocaust education with the goal of preventing racism in the first place and seeing people as humans rather than using other identifiers as such. So I am just wondering about some feedback on those. I am sure there are many levers in this space—many.

**Ms LEVIN:** If I could start and respond, if that is all right.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, please do.

**Ms LEVIN:** Thank you for that question. It really goes to the first recommendation in the JCCV submission, which is for the government to continue their excellent work—and it is excellent—in anti-racism and antisemitism education. The JCCV is very lucky. We represent 52 affiliate organisations, and many of those affiliates are engaged in providing racism and antisemitism education into the broader community, so organisations like the Melbourne Holocaust Museum, which has extensive education programs for both teachers and students, and I think it is important that they do run them for teachers as well; the Jewish Museum of Australia, which does similar education on the Jewish community more broadly, not just focusing on antisemitism, because it is important that people understand and know that Jews are just like anybody else and we do not deserve the sort of othering status that we get; and then also Courage to Care, which sits under the banner of B'nai B'rith, another one of our affiliates, who have just received some incredible support from the Victorian government to continue their upstander community education. So there is a lot of work being undertaken by the Jewish community in this space, and we would urge that external support to continue, because again it comes back to a burden on the Jewish community to fund and resource this education to try and prevent racism in the community from within, which is a huge burden on our community. So the support that we get from government is incredibly important.

**The CHAIR:** Dr Oboler, would you like to comment?

**Dr OBOLER:** Thank you. I am actually speaking to you from Scotland. I am on my way to a meeting of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, where I serve as one of Australia's delegates. The education work is very important. Our membership of IHRA, as it is known, is very important. But we need to connect the dots a bit more. We are part of this international network. We have access to amazing experts from around the world and working at the diplomatic level. We are sometimes facing difficulties translating things to the local level. I am going to have to appear in their antisemitism committee next week, and they want to know what we are doing about promoting their campaign to protect the facts of the Holocaust, and this is a campaign that a lot of resources have been invested in. The short answer that I have shared with the chair is: we are not doing very much on this in Australia at all, because we just do not. We attend the meetings, we represent Australia there, but there is not a body in Australia. Other than our volunteer experts, there is not the sort of infrastructure to take it forward at a sort of government level, and it really is a government-led organisation.

So we are working with DFAT, but we run into problems with schools. Education is obviously a state matter, so we can only get so far with the federal government before we suddenly need to engage with the states. And if there is an opportunity to better connect the education departments with each other around the country and with our IHRA experts, that would make a big difference. The last comment I would make, though, is that education will only help those who are open to it. I have made this point a number of times in other forums. There are people who are not interested, who are intentionally engaging in the hate, all the way through to people who are just psychopaths. The education is not going to help those people. So we need the education, but we also need to have the monitoring and the other responses, and we also need to recognise that a lot of what we are seeing, whether it is stickering or whether it is terrorist attacks, is not coming from students in schools. And some of the education has been going on for a long time. We need to deal with people of all ages and we need to deal with people who education is not going to work for, so we need multiple approaches.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much, Dr Oboler. Thank you very much, everyone. Unfortunately we have run out of time for this session, so we have to draw it to a close. Thank you so much for your contribution, both your written submission and your evidence today. It has been really useful insight for the work of this committee.

**Witnesses withdrew.**