



Submission to the Victorian Parliament Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues
Committee

INQUIRY INTO EXTREMISM IN VICTORIA

20 May 2021

Introduction

The AVERT (Addressing Violent Extremism and Radicalisation to Terrorism) Research Network is a multidisciplinary, multi-institutional research network based in Melbourne, Australia supported by Deakin University's Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation (ADI). AVERT members conduct research into a wide array of topics related to terrorism, radicalisation, and violent extremism. Our Network is comprised of highly engaged and critically informed social science, humanities and multidisciplinary research academics from a variety of universities and research institutions who believe in conducting meaningful evidence-based research for the public good.

A critical aim of AVERT is to foster evidence-based understanding and reduction of the social harms created by violent extremism. Through its members, AVERT has significant expertise and research outputs and achievements focusing on various points along the continuum of understanding, preventing and intervening in radicalisation to all forms of ideological violence, and the implications and impacts of this for social and community wellbeing. We are committed to engaging in research that delivers social benefits and informs effective policy and practice as well as constructive critique and dialogue.

Engaging with stakeholders is an important part of the AVERT Research Network's mission to understand, address and reduce the social harms caused by radicalisation to violent extremism and terrorism. AVERT welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the Victorian Parliament's effort to understand and address the evolving nature and threat of extremism in Victoria and is grateful for the opportunity to make a submission to the Victorian Parliamentary Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee inquiry into extremism in Victoria.

This inquiry is timely, given the current environment in which extremism is motivated and mobilised by a wide range of actors and movements, particularly within the diverse, contested space of the extreme right. We also observe that a striking characteristic of contemporary extremist movements and beliefs across the ideological spectrum is the

extent to which grievance-fuelled resentment and violence, and the claiming of 'victim' status, are being used to underpin both the narratives and the actions of extremists in Australia and around the world. The COVID-19 pandemic has engendered many of these grievances and has provided opportunities for extremism actors and movements to exploit, radicalise and recruit. In addition to grievance-based extremism, there is a great deal of ideological ambiguity emerging within and among extremist movements, strategic ambiguity regarding the use and promotion of violence and a more diffuse organisational structure of extremist movements. These dynamics pose new challenges that the current inquiry is well-placed to consider and address.

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Addressing the Terms of Reference

This submission will focus on the following terms of reference:

- b. Methods of recruitment and communication;
- c. How the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the growth of far-right extremism in the Victorian context;
- e. The violent potential of these movements, including the potential for targeted violence against politicians and public figures;
- f. The links between far-right extremist groups, other forms of extremism, and populist radical right and anti-vaccine misinformation groups;
- g. What steps need to be taken in Victoria to counter far-right extremist groups and their influence.

This submission also includes the following Addendum documents from which segments of this submission to the Victorian Parliament have been extracted:

1. AVERT Submission to the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security Inquiry into extremist movements and radicalism in Australia, February 12, 2021
2. Professor Kristina Murphy submission to the Victorian Parliament Legislative Council, Legal and Social Issues Committee Inquiry on Extremism in Victoria, May 10, 2022
3. Macquarie University submission to the Victorian Parliament Legislative Council, Legal and Social Issues Committee Inquiry on Extremism in Victoria, undated
4. CRIS Submission to the Parliament Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security Inquiry into extremist movements and radicalism in Australia, 12 February 2021
5. CRIS Submission to the Victorian Parliament Legislative Council, Legal and Social Issues Committee Inquiry on Extremism in Victoria, 13 May 2022

b. Methods of recruitment and communications

As current research¹ on extremist and terrorist recruitment now being undertaken by AVERT members through the Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies (www.crisconsortium.org) has shown ('Contact Zones: Understanding Recruitment Processes to Violent Extremism in Comparative Domains'), recruitment to right-wing extremism, as for other forms of extremist recruitment, can manifest simultaneously as a 'top-down', 'bottom-up' and 'horizontal' process (Grossman et al., 2021). Recruitment to right-wing extremism constitutes a complex process of 'co-production' (Peucker, 2021b) that meets the psychosocial, political and sometimes economic needs of both recruiter and recruited.

In the Victorian context, evidence indicates that far-right recruitment activities 'sit along a continuum that range from active and deliberate top-down strategies to attract and incorporate new members by a radical-right group, on the one hand, to passive forms of recruitment that rely much more on self-recruitment' (Peucker, 2021b).

This complexity of recruitment processes has implications for the way in which prevention and intervention measures are developed and implemented, taking into account different recruitment pathways and the agency of all actors. This is similar to right-wing recruitment processes and strategies both elsewhere in Australia and internationally.

While only limited research to date specifically on the Victorian context exists in relation to violent extremist recruitment, below are three dimensions, derived primarily from international research, of far-right recruitment explored in more detail: (1) targeted recruitment, (2) recruitment through social networks and social influence, and (3) online recruitment.

1. Targeted recruitment

Recruitment to far-right extremism can be centrally conceived and organisationally driven from the top down. For example, the US-based Anti-Defamation League (ADL) (2020) has documented how the neo-Nazi organisation 'The Base', which has targeted Australian individuals for recruitment, organisationally manages recruitment through an active and deliberate process of using both offline and online methodologies to attract new members with a specific profile or skill set, followed by an internal application process. A BBC investigation (De Simone and Winston, 2020) into the 'The Base' found senior members

¹ This section on recruitment to far-right extremism also appears in slightly modified form in the Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies (CRIS) submission.

undertaking online interviewing (via conference call on an encrypted App) of prospective 'young applicants' who divulged that they had been radicalised by 'online videos and propaganda'. The article details how interviewers asked about applicants' personal history, their 'radicalisation journey' (including what books they had read whilst also being encouraged to familiarise themselves with the group's white supremacist ideology) their experience with weapons, and their ethnicity. Interviews were conducted by the group leader as well as a panel of senior Base members. After applicants left the call, senior members discuss their potential for membership prior to arranging to vet them in person at a later date.

An ABC investigative report into The Base's efforts to recruit in Australia found that a similar combination of online and offline methods was being used to attract new recruits into the movement. This included flyers targeting new recruits being circulated both online via social media, but also posters being distributed around Perth's Hyde Park offering potential recruits the opportunity to 'train' and 'fight' with the group by accessing a QR code that took them to propaganda produced in the USA (Mann & Nguyen, 2021). Other efforts to recruit by The Base in Australia included strategies for reaching 'a younger audience', including minors, and the kinds of branding and messaging required to attract people from this target group into the organisation (Mann & Nguyen, 2021), which follows a similar pattern of email exchanges, written applications, screening questionnaires around identity, ideology and experience/skills. This organisationally led recruitment model resembles recruitment strategies used by violent extremist organisations from other ideological paradigms (Sageman, 2008).

Other Victorian far-right groups, including white nationalist networks, also use a similar targeted top-down approach to recruit new members, and undertake similar specific vetting procedures (for example, a dedicated vetting channel on Telegram, followed by a personal conversation/ interview either online or offline with the potential recruit). In some instances, such vetting processes can be redundant as the ideological commitment of the person to a white nationalist agenda has been otherwise demonstrated. A Victorian-based extreme far-right group, for example, reached out to Brenton Tarrant (who would later commit terrorist attacks killing 51 Muslims in Christchurch) and invited him to join their group (Peucker, 2021b). This was an invitation Tarrant declined because of his plans to move from Australia (Royal Commission Inquiry, 2019).

Extremist groups also encourage interested individuals to reach out to *them* and/or engage with their online content and also to join their network as a new member. They do so via their online presence in channels, websites and pages but also through offline mechanisms such as public flyer drops, graffiti and stickering/postering blitzes, a common tactic of Victorian far-right groups to attract attention among potential recruits. These flyers and stickers direct individuals to online destinations.

International research from Germany and the USA has found that some far-right extremist groups target young people through recruitment within educational institutions and/or members of law enforcement agencies and armed forces (Braunthal, 2010; Counter Extremism Project, 2020; Flade, 2021; Simi et al., 2016; ADL, 2020; McGowan, 2014). A particularly common operational recruitment tactic is through leafletting and posterage in schools, music concerts and other public areas (Berger et al., 2020; Simi et al., 2016). This has also been common in the Victorian context, where numerous public sites, including universities, have been targeted by white nationalist groups' stickering or posterage blitzes. The public stunts are then often filmed or photographed.

Various types of subcultural contexts such as music venues/concerts and private house parties have also been found to be important environments which facilitate social bonds and introduce right-wing movement ideologies in order to recruit sympathisers (especially among younger people) towards more substantial involvement (Kruglanski, et al., 2020; Scrivens and Perry, 2017). Exposure to far-right propaganda in youth clubs, soccer teams, or even simply through casual encounters with vocal neo-Nazis is also prevalent. Other radicalising spaces such as larger scale public rallies and protest events also serve as a potential entry point for new recruits, as was observed during the influence of far-right extremist actors during the Melbourne anti-lockdown protests in 2021. (Patton, 2021)

Some far-right groups also target individuals with particular *vulnerabilities* (Brown, R. A. et al., 2021: 86). There are different ways in which far-right groups seek to identify or determine vulnerabilities and, accordingly, adjust their recruitment strategies. Some specifically target alienated, disenchanted young people who are seen as having psychological and social grievances, while a study on recruitment to far-right extremism in the US identifies three groups of individuals who are targeted: '(1) frustrated and angry youth looking for solutions to their problems; (2) individuals looking for intimate relationships outside of their families and (3) younger adolescents who typically lacked maturity and may have been unable to fully comprehend the ramifications of a group's radical ideology' (Simi et al., 2016: 60). There have been UK studies that demonstrate that extremists of high school age target fellow students who already hold racist or antisemitic views and 'who find little support in the school and at home' (Braunthal, 2010).

Other studies argue that recruitment also takes into account individuals' socioeconomic grievances and hardship; this is reflected in how some groups use spatially based tactics to explicitly target certain geographical areas where such grievances are expected to be more prevalent (Blazak, 2001). Grievances are not the only vulnerability factor, however. Some research indicates that pre-existing ideological mindsets play a role in the decision of far-right groups to target certain individuals. A study on recruitment to right-wing organisations in a German study, for example, found that right-wing groups have sought to recruit new members through conservative right-wing students (McGowan, 2014).

Some extreme far-right (white nationalist) groups in Australia, and in particular in Victoria, pursue an ideologically unambiguous agenda. They make no secret of their ideological worldviews and they target people who they understand to be ideologically predisposed or at least open to their white supremacist worldviews. A prominent far-right leader in Victoria 'used his Telegram channel to call on "White men with Blood and Honour" in Australia, committed to the "racial struggle" for the survival of the "our race", to send an email to his organisation' (Peucker, 2021b).

Right wing extremist movements have become skilled at utilising masculinities as a recruitment mechanism. Narratives developed by extremists are usually multi-layered, particularly when they are seeking to recruit men to the cause.

Extremist narratives are highly calibrated in both tone and content to appeal to men, valorising hegemonic masculinities and emphasising the urgency of a return to patriarchal societies. These messages attempt to appeal to men but promoting men back to the role of breadwinners and the heads of households, whilst castigating western women and feminists as licentious, immoral, and requiring forceful correction. Extremist narratives reposition men as protectors of the tribe, as warriors engaged in an existential war against a defined enemy, whether liberal elites and the political left, the 'west' and even specifically, women. (Roose et al, 2022) These narratives are at times linked to medievalist figures and culture, such as Norse Vikings and (neo)-paganism, as in the case of the National Socialist Network discussed in detailed below.

Narrative messaging of right-wing extremism used in the targeted recruitment of men is very often highly emotively charged, and, angry in tone. This mirrors the anger of those experiencing stagnating and downward social trajectories on the one hand, though also widens the potential appeal of narrative messaging to a wider body of men in western contexts, for whom anger is commonly experienced. Despite the increasing body of research exploring the role of masculinities in violent extremism much work remains to be done to adequately understand how masculinities are utilised in the recruitment of men to violent extremism (Roose et al., 2022). Any attempt to empower men to critically engage or be resilient to such narratives must recognise that the majority of men may be able to identify with at least one theme in their narratives (Roose and Flood, 2020).

2. Recruitment through social networks and social influence

Recruitment does not only unfold in a 'top-down' fashion between individuals who are unknown to each other; it also occurs within existing social networks where individuals trust each other and share similar experiences and connections. International research has found evidence that existing social networks often play a central role in individuals' pathways into far-right extremism. Sometimes that is in the form of existing networks like friend groups, peer groups (e.g., at schools), and sometimes families (Kruglanski et al., 2020; Blazak, 2001)

Other times activists create these social networks through their politicisation and involvement in extremist activity where they create a new social 'home' in which they can be immersed. (Parker and Veugelers, 2021: 3)

Forming social ties and entering supportive networks provides a 'structural pull' towards extremist networks. A wide range of organisational practices, like public events (book presentations, sporting events and training sessions; cultural events, organisational meetings and briefings, 'social' get togethers, political events including but not limited to protests) are used to drive mobilisation and recruitment, emphasising the importance of face-to-face interaction in the service of recruitment efforts.

Empirical research (Busher, 2016) reveals the importance of social ties. In a study of far-right group in the UK, the English Defence League (EDL), new recruits were often already part of the social circles and existing social ties of existing members. These prior social ties before involvement in extremism facilitated 'bonds of solidarity' and intra group trust' (Busher, 2016: 43). They were quickly made to feel part of a fraternity. Similarly, The Base has deliberately tried to attract new members that already had right-wing ideological beliefs or specific skill sets (ADL, 2020).

Recruitment can also occur through a process of cultivating potential joiners through social influence and the dissemination of extremist propaganda in online and offline contexts. An analysis of the lead up to the El Paso terrorist attack in the US documented the way in which online users radicalise and 'recruit' each other in a 'self-referential continuum of extreme right terrorism.' Anonymous users on online message boards collectively venerate 'saints' and 'martyrs' responsible for previous atrocities and exhort others to join the 'pantheon of heroes' by perpetuating acts of violence 'in exchange for celebrity and respect' (Macklin, 2019). In the Australian context, an analysis of online extremism in New South Wales explores a similar process of social influence through 'red pilling' 'the preaching, recruitment and mobilisation among the wider public' by those promoting extreme right-wing narratives (Ballsun-Stanton et al., 2020).

Social media has played an important role in organising, mobilising and recruitment at the network level. With a focus on the Victorian context, Peucker (2021) found that many radical-right actors in Australia hardly need to go beyond posting extremist content online as the 'recommender' algorithms of social media platforms do their job for them by channelling people towards their accounts. This can create fairly ideologically homogenous online communities where members share a sense of in-group identity and social connections. Victorian research has further demonstrated how certain 'social media-based groups have built a loyal online community over time by posting primarily on one particular single issue, such as opposition to gender diversity or Islam' (Peucker, 2021b). Some of these online communities subsequently expand the thematic scope of their posting and move into 'politically and ideologically charged space where far-right narratives circulate' (Peucker et

al., 2020: 35). Such shifts are often driven by conspiratorial framing of these themes, creating an internally seemingly coherent meta-narrative. As Peucker notes, 'These ideological shifts may be a reflection of the account administrators' changing ideological mindset, but they can also be part of a recruitment strategy to gradually pull individuals into radical-right ideological spaces' (Peucker, 2021b).

3. Online recruitment

The online environment allows for a more distributive organisational structure which has implications for our understanding of online recruitment, one in which a lack or loosening of formal networks, hierarchies and roles online (Sageman, 2008) can muddy the distinction between recruiters and recruits, particularly when anonymity is a feature of these interactions (Crosset et al., 2019). Australian research has shown the shift towards online forms of recruitment and training has resulted in a corresponding shift towards a more 'leaderless' structure of terrorist recruitment (Torok, 2013).

Yet the interactive, communal spaces of the violent extremist digital age are, like their spatial counterparts (Neumann and Rogers, 2007), also 'places of congregation' and 'places of vulnerability' with their own virtual geographies, ranging across platforms, chat forums and channels in which recruitment is not necessarily facilitated by one person, but by multiple voices and influences. For example, there is the online phenomenon in which potential recruits are 'swarmed' by many group members who respond, provoke, ask and answer questions and share their movement's version of 'truth' (Torok, 2013).

Ponder and Matusitz's (2017) study of online extremist recruitment supports this, explaining that online recruitment achieves its goals through 'initiating, experimenting, intensifying, integrating, and bonding' through interactive online dialogue. Research has also revealed the ways in which the internet can facilitate trust building between individuals, leading to an increase in reciprocation and intimate disclosures (Windsor, 2018).

Extremist online spaces are not merely used to disseminate propaganda, but also play a critical social and community building function that draws in recruits seeking belonging, approval and identity stabilisation.

Aside from playing a role in immersing potential recruits within narratives, ideas and psychosocial support networks, online platforms and the interactive formats enable recruiters to identify receptive participants in these virtual forums and then both target and recruit them by drawing on various logistical online capacities relevant to recruitment efforts, such as online registry protocols, directories, FAQ sections and interactive services (Bowman-Grieve, 2013).

The online environment and its affordances have neither replaced nor even displaced the importance of offline, face-to-face contact and interactions in recruitment. A recent analysis

of various recruitment strategies in the Australian far-right (Peucker, 2021b) also points to interplay between online and offline environments in relation to disseminating ideological messages (propaganda) and recruitment. Several far-right groups in Victoria and other parts of the country seek to raise their public profile through offline action, such as stickering or leafletting (leaflets often include contact details), holding rallies or other public stunts (see targeted recruitment section above). This is seen as vehicle to make more people aware of their group and encourage them to follow them online or get in contact with the group directly. Closely related to this recruitment approach is the attempt of attracting mainstream media attention through public provocations; such a deliberate strategy of 'media baiting' is regarded as a central recruitment tool because media reporting about the group – even if reported critically – significantly helps increase the group's public profile (Peucker, 2021b).

Leafletting and flyer drop activities are readily observable in Victoria and point to the ubiquitous uptake of these strategies to pursue multiple, interacting channels of influence and propaganda for the purpose of recruitment and mobilisation.

Role of medievalism in extremist communication and recruitment

Right wing extremist ideology often uses references to the European Middle Ages (medievalism), such as historical narratives of white supremacy, and medieval signs and symbols. Medievalist historical narratives lend credence to very contemporary identities and political positions, such as the violent white masculinity and white nationalism espoused by the National Socialist Network, by misappropriating history. Medievalist symbols, such as the Black Sun and othala rune, are racialised symbols that advertise the political positions of those who display them while also giving plausible deniability because they are not *exclusively* used by right wing extremists (Young, 2021). The significant medievalisms in mainstream Australian political culture, and popular culture are channels that can enable spread of right wing extremist ideologies and beliefs.

Medievalist historical narratives, and associated symbols, have proven to offer potent motivation for racialized terrorism, for example:

- In 2011, Anders Breivik murdered 77 people in Norway, claiming his act was to save Europe from a Muslim takeover. His manifesto invoked medievalism through significant references to the Christian Crusades.
- In 2019, Brenton Tarrant murdered 51 Muslim worshippers in New Zealand, claiming to be following medieval and early-modern historical practices. His manifesto invoked medievalism through references to the Crusades, Norse (Viking) religion, and use of the 'Black Sun' pseudo-runic symbol. The Black Sun was also worn by the alleged killer of ten Black people in a supermarket in Buffalo, NY, in May 2022.

Examples of medievalisms used by far-Right organizations in Victoria include:

- Use of Norse culture and symbols, as swearing of oaths to the Norse god Odin by members of the Melbourne chapter of the international 'Soldiers of Odin' vigilante group.
- A recent National Socialist Network vigil and commemoration on social media (Telegram channel) of Australian Odinist Alexander Rud Mills.

Medievalisms are rife in right wing extremist meme culture, and on social media platforms such as YouTube and Telegram. Interest in and discussion of European medieval history and culture online is highly likely to bring everyday people into contact with right wing extremist perspectives and ideologies. It is crucial to take seriously the use and abuse of history by extremists because they are used to making and lending credence to arguments that directly impact contemporary politics, including around immigration, and the role of government.

Right wing extremist medievalisms in Victoria

Medievalisms, because they are widely understood to represent white Western Civilisation by both extremists and non-extremists, function across borders. As a result, they act to tie together local, regional, and national right wing extremist networks. They are used by far-Right movements including Identitarians and neo-Nazis (Castle and Parsons, 2019; Miyashiro, 2020; Kao, 2020), and organisations such as the 'Soldiers of Odin', including in Victoria (Castle and Parsons, 2020; Nilan, 2019). Although the chapter of the Soldiers of Odin based in Melbourne has not been visibly active very recently, the Norse mythology they embraced has been taken up by the National Socialist Network (NSN), including espousing a "warrior" masculine identity. This includes through actions in Victoria.

The NSN recently held a vigil at the grave of Australian Odinist and Nazi sympathizer Alexander Rud Mills. They also read from passages of his pseudo-Norse religious book *The Call of our Ancient Nordic Religion*. These acts were reported on the NSN Telegram channel where Rud was named as a "National Socialist and Odinist" and a passage supporting racist eugenics beliefs was quoted. The same post tied Mills' internment during World War II to highly charged contemporary discourse about government censorship and suppression of right wing extremist ideas and positions: 'pray that you have the same strength [as Mills'], in this period where White Australians are hated and attacked by the government'.

The episode encapsulates contemporary right-wing extremist medievalisms. NSN brought together race, religion and anti-government sentiment in a social media post linked to offline activities. Their Odinism, presented as a genuine religious practice in the post, connects to an international community of Odinist/Heathen religion. That community includes both extremist and non-extremist organisations and members (Lentini, 2021).

Recent research into right wing extremist activity in Victoria has not specifically investigated medievalisms but highlights the significant circulation of positions that are very frequently associated with and expressed through it. These include, for example, the idea that there is major conspiracy to “replace” white populations in Western countries (including Australia) through immigration; a notion directly linked to the Great Replacement theory espoused by Tarrant and by the alleged Buffalo terrorist who used medievalisms to express it.

c. How the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the growth of far-right extremism in the Victorian context

During the COVID -19 pandemic, isolated in our homes, unmoored from normal routines and rituals, people spent copious amounts of time online. While the pandemic shut us off from real world activities terrorism and real-world violence included engagement with online conspiracies, online disinformation and online hate speech all increased. So too did engagement in right-wing extremist forums and online spaces. Right-wing extremists’ online engagement increased significantly during the pandemic, but interestingly other extremist tendencies did not (Davies, et. Al, 2021).

The COVID pandemic highlighted how times of crisis are ripe for conspiracists and extremists (Barkun, 1974, Murphy et al., 2022) and helped highlight how crisis can be instrumentalised by extremist actors (Grossman, 2021). Even when the government and emergency management response has been robust, current research has demonstrated that extremist actors are adept at interpreting natural disasters and reframing emergencies (1) to contest government legitimacy, (2) to identify groups to blame, and (3) to encourage mobilisation and in so doing tacitly incite violence against outsider groups as a response (Khalil, et al/, 2021).

The COVID pandemic was no exception. Right-wing extremists attempted to capitalise on this climate of fear and deftly exploited pandemic conditions to spread their extremist ideologies and radicalise others into their movements.

Living under a government-imposed state of emergency that gave authorities broad powers, the pandemic was the first time that many people living in democracies, particularly within the white majority, truly felt the heavy hand of state. While many accepted the social distancing requirements and restrictions on freedom of assembly as a necessary hardship to preserve public health, others bristled against these restrictions and thought they were government overreach (empirical evidence from an Australian study showed this to be the case; see Williamson et al., 2022). Extremists framed necessary extensions of government authority and curtailing of individual liberties during an emergency as tools of social control

and evidence of authoritarian tendencies, playing into the concern that temporary restrictions will become a permanent feature of life and governance.

Government restrictions also contributed to social and economic ills. People lost livelihoods and loved ones without being able to properly mourn them. Many people blamed the state for these tragedies, and this increased their susceptibility to the disinformation and conspiracy theories being spread by right-wing extremist actors that these public health measures were part of a broader nefarious plot by governments to control and manipulate us.

The pandemic, and particularly the government-imposed restrictions in their public health response, reinforced many right-wing narratives about the corrupt and oppressive nature of government. Vaccine mandates and restrictions on freedom of movement to curb the spread of the virus fed into right-wing extremist narratives about government imposing authoritarian controls over citizens. (Khalil, forthcoming) Such narratives are particularly likely to take root among those feeling disempowered and those with a conspiratorial mindset, whether it be socio-economically, socially or politically - particularly after a prolonged state of emergency and restrictions.

In Australia there was a sharp uptick in sovereign citizen and anti-government sentiment and an anti-lockdown protest movement spurred by those chafing against COVID restrictions and lockdowns. During the pandemic in Australia, the sovereign citizen movement also intersected with the anti-lockdown and anti vax movement, a phenomenon which was turbo charged when vaccine mandates were introduced. The anti-lockdown and sovereign citizen movements also attracted and interacted with a number of far right and extremist elements who also sought to find common cause and/or recruit among the sovereign citizen, anti-vax, anti-lockdown cohort (Khalil, 2020, Khalil, 2021).

During the period of pandemic restrictions, Australian sovereign citizens and anti-lockdown protesters have organised a number of protests, encouraged violation of emergency regulations like mandating mask wearing and traveling outside of restricted zones- all activities in defiance of state emergency regulations. Many of anti-lockdown protests led to violence against police (BBC, 2020).

Sovereign citizens and anti-lockdown protesters would often film themselves defying lockdown restrictions and confronting authorities while doing so, later posted their videos on their individual and group social media pages. Also on social media they spread conspiracy theories and disinformation about the pandemic, vaccinations and government regulations and their intentions. Much of this disinformation was also, QAnon or Q-adjacent content (Thomas, 2021).

As restrictions eased, the anti-lockdown movement transitioned away from organising protests and rallies to coalesce into a political movement, the Reignite Democracy Australia Party that contested seats in the 2022 election and found common cause with other far right Australian parties like the United Australia Party and One Nation (Baker, 2021).

Conspiracy theories and disinformation connected to the COVID pandemic have also inspired plots and attacks. In Australia, during the various states of emergencies, government figures were targeted, there was increased harassment of public health and elected officials and disruptions at vaccine centres. Pandemic legislation being considered in 2021 in Victoria drew large protests where right-wing extremists intermingled with the anti-government and anti-lockdown movement, displaying nooses in front of the Victorian parliament and menacing state parliamentarians.

The global pandemic has played into anti-globalisation and nativist attitudes among various extremists. Data extracted from Australian far right and extremist social media has shown persistent narratives about how globalisation has contributed to the spread of COVID, that multiculturalism is a failure and that the pandemic restrictions are an opportunity to press for more permanent limitations on immigration and extolling white supremacy (Khalil 2022).

Right-wing extremists also adeptly highjacked legitimate grievances and frustrations that arose from the pandemic. For example, most notably in September 2021, when the Victorian Government imposed an industry wide shut down and mandatory vaccine mandate for the construction industry. The head office of a well-known construction union the CFMEU - was mobbed and attacked, and protesters descended and desecrated the Shrine of Remembrance. However, it was not only disgruntled union members angry at the government shut down that participated in these protests, there was also coordinated action by far-right actors and anti-government, anti-vax and anti-lockdown protesters to engage and livestream these protests as well. (Khalil 2022; Roose, 2022)

Extremist or anti-government actors are not just reacting to effects of natural disasters or government response to them but are **pre-emptively** undermining government responses and see disasters and emergencies as an **opportunity** to challenge government legitimacy and spread disinformation and conspiracy theories about a crisis in order to sow distrust and foment polarisation. (Khalil, 2021)

Right-wing extremists in particular have latched on to emergencies as catalysts for "accelerationism", promoted by groups like Atomwaffen Division, The Base, and Sonnenkreig Division (Garstenstein-Ross, et. al, 2020). The Boogaloo movement in the US has also been a proponent of the same theory their name itself a reference what its adherents believe to be a future civil war. Some elements of US based Proud Boys chapters have also integrated into accelerationist movements (Kriner and Lewis, 2021). Preliminary

observations in Australia show that far-right movements including the National Socialist Network have promoted accelerationism during the COVID pandemic.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, conspiracy theories such as those propagated by QAnon have taken hold with small, but highly dedicated segments of society. This includes some fringe politicians merging with a variety of anti-lockdown and anti-state actors including militant wellness movements, anti vax, sovereign citizens and far-right actors (Khalil, 2020). Drawing from a libertarian political vocabulary emphasising the 'tyranny' of the state, these movements, primarily located in the United States, are exporting their radical and violent language and political outlook on a global scale through social media. This has been demonstrated in the vocabulary and symbology of the protesters including Trump flags, the use of gallows (as seen at the both the January 06 Insurrection and the Victorian anti pandemic legislation protests) and threats to politicians and media figures (Roose, 2022).

This broad coalition, and the far right in particular, must be understood as part of a transnational movement. Even a cursory analysis of protest message boards indicates the protesters have been heavily influenced by groups and events overseas. They share a common vocabulary and symbology. It is clear the 6 January 2021 storming of the Capitol Building in the United States, and the more recent Ottawa 'freedom convoy', described by Ottawa police as a 'threat to democracy', (Coletta, 2022) have inspired some protesters in Australia as elsewhere, as the Canberra Convoy in February 2022 (Britton, 2022) has demonstrated.

These movements are also associated with the global right-wing populist surge that has resulted in the election of authoritarian governments, led by "strong men", in countries ranging from the United States, Hungary and Poland to the Philippines, India and Brazil. These leaders claim to speak for the "people", framing themselves as outsiders to a corrupt and broken political system. They promise to deliver radical change, though merely aim to replace the current powers. We saw this most famously with Donald Trump's promise to 'drain the swamp' (Roose, 2021).

There is also a widening polarisation between progressive, democratic and conservative, authoritarian leaders and states. This can helpfully be understood as an ongoing clash between cosmopolitans and anti-cosmopolitan (Beck 2006; Halafoff, 2013). Others have described this as a tension between "past preserving" and "future forming" narratives (Beaman 2020: 24).

Briefly, cosmopolitanism is a social and political theory centred on respect for rights and diversity. Cosmopolitan rights and policies were institutionalised in many societies, focused on respect for cultural, gender, sexuality and multispecies diversity in the mid-late twentieth century. These progressive changes have, however, been strongly resisted by anti-cosmopolitans with a nationalist agenda and an often-conservative religious orientation who

are threatened by these changes and wish to retain their power and privileges. Anti-cosmopolitans began to gain significant public support at the turn of the twentieth century, after the events of September 11, 2001. This has increased with the emergence of right-wing populism and been intensified by the 'culture wars' and the spread of dis/misinformation through social media over the past two decades. Religion, particularly Christianity, plays a prominent role in all of these anti-cosmopolitan regimes and propaganda campaigns, where minorities, and notably LGBTIQ people, are routinely persecuted and have their rights threatened.

Halafoff (2006, 2014, 2022) has studied anti cosmopolitanism as it relates to values debates and 'anti-cosmopolitan terror.' Putin's authoritarian regime, its relationship with the Moscow Patriarch, its horrific war in Ukraine, its anti-LGBTIQ stance, and its disinformation campaigns exemplify this phenomenon. 'Anti-cosmopolitan terror' is also connected to the Australian context with Anders Breivik and the references he included in his manifesto to anti-Muslim statements made by former Prime Minister Howard, former Treasurer Peter Costello, and the Australian Cardinal George Pell (Halafoff, 2014). This example demonstrates that rhetoric by political leaders and others in the media that seeks to strengthen the myth of Australia as a white, Christian, nation can embolden anti-cosmopolitan terror and right-wing extremism.

d. The violent potential of these movements, including the potential for targeting against politicians and public figures

Many actors within right wing extremist movements have track records of violent rhetoric and extremist sentiment, and the threat of future violence cannot be discounted. Indeed, it must be considered likely. In recent years, Australia's security agencies have highlighted that the threat posed by extremist movements and radicalisation in Australia are evolving. On 17 March 2021, for example, ASIO's Director-General stated:

In addition to the enduring threat from religiously motivated violent extremists is a growing assortment of individuals with ideological grievances. So-called right-wing extremism has been in ASIO's sights for many years. Since then, ideological extremism investigations have grown from around one third of our priority counter-terrorism caseload, to around 40 per cent. This reflects a growing international trend, as well as our decision to dedicate more resources to the emerging domestic threat (ASIO, 2021).

Far-right groups show many strong signals of being prepared for collective violent action. A Linguistic Inquiry and Word count (LIWC) analysis of progenitor groups in Victoria including the Lad's Society (predecessor to the National Socialist Network) and terrorist manifestos

indicated that of all groups, The Lad's Society had the most in common with Brenton Tarrant's manifesto, including a predisposition to violent collective action (Roose and Flood, 2020).

It is also important to consider the potential for targeted violence against politicians. This has been amply demonstrated by attacks in electorate offices and threats made to political figures in Victoria, including Premier Dan Andrews. More broadly we have seen the assassinations and attempted assassinations of politicians in the United Kingdom including Jo Cox MP in the street by a far-right extremist prior to the Brexit Vote in 2016 and Sir David Amess by an Islamist extremist whilst meeting constituents at a church in 2021 (Roose and Flood, 2020).

e. The links between far-right extremist groups, other forms of extremism, and populist radical right and anti-vaccine misinformation groups

In 2022, ASIO's Director-General reflected on the growth of extremism in Australia. He stated that Australia is seeing a significant rise in a new form of extremism brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. He noted this emerging form of extremism was motivated by various 'social grievances' and 'conspiracies'. He noted this 'upswing' in grievance and conspiracy-fuelled extremism is concerning because 'many of the radicalised actors involved are newcomers', having never been involved in extremism before (ASIO, 2022). Complicating this, these individuals seem to constitute a highly diverse group, with libertarians, anti-vaxxers, sovereign citizen groups, right-wing groups, and QAnon believers among the mix (Roose, 2022).

In 2020, Murphy and colleagues at Griffith University conducted two surveys of the Australian population (in April 2020 and again six months after Australia's international borders were closed in October 2020) (Murphy et al., 2020). The surveys aimed to explore trust in Australian authorities during the pandemic and how this impacted their willingness to comply with social distancing restrictions. The findings of the survey presented in this submission suggests that distrust in governments and politicians may be associated with an increase in far-right extremist movements in Victoria, and that this distrust in governments and politicians has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (see Addendum for Professor Murphy's individual submission to the Inquiry for further details). The findings of the survey research also point to there being a possible link between individuals who hold far-right extremist political beliefs and beliefs in other forms of extremism, such as radical right views (including sovereign-citizen beliefs), conspiracy theory beliefs, and anti-vaccine sentiment.

The link between extreme far-right beliefs and belief in conspiracy theories

Conspiracy theories attempt to explain significant events and circumstances. They can be distinguished from other accounts of events in two important ways. First, they explain events by referencing the malevolent acts of powerful groups who manage to conceal their role. Second, conspiracy theories tend to be sceptical of any 'official' accounts of events, no matter what the evidence suggests. The literature on conspiracy theories suggests that people are drawn to conspiracy theories when important psychological needs are not being met (Douglas, et al, 2017, Douglas, 2021). Political and situational factors are also important for understanding who might be drawn to conspiracy theories. Political conservatives are consistently more likely to believe in conspiracies than political liberals (Miller et al, 2016, Uscinski, et al., 2020)

Research also suggests that individuals differ in their susceptibility to believe in conspiracy theories. This susceptibility is known as a conspiracy mentality (Moscovici, 1987, Bruder, et al., 2013), which is highly correlated with specific conspiracy theory beliefs. Murphy et al.'s (2020) research explored how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced beliefs in conspiracy theories, distrust in authorities, and extremist views in Australia. The research confirmed that a significant number of Australians believed in COVID-19 conspiracy theories. The research also showed that trust in authorities (government, health authorities and police) was damaged during the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic. It also confirmed that extreme far-right Victorians were more likely than other Victorians to believe in COVID-19 specific conspiracy theories. This suggests again that far-right extremism is linked to other forms of extremist beliefs. There is also evidence that extreme far-right Victorians are also more likely to score higher on the general conspiracy mentality scale.

The link between extreme far-right beliefs and anti-social attitudes and behaviour

Radicalisation is the process of growing willingness to pursue and/or support radical changes in society (sometimes in undemocratic ways) that could pose a threat to the democratic legal order. When we talk about *attitudinal extremism* we refer to individuals who hold or express counter-normative thoughts and views (e.g. support for violence; disengaged or defiant posturing toward authorities and their decisions or laws; counter-normative views about one's right to disregard laws (e.g. sovereign citizen beliefs)). However, we know there is not always a strong relationship between extremist beliefs and behaviours. (McCauley and Moskaleiko, 2008) For some, extremist attitudes will be the end point in their path to radicalisation. Others will transition to behavioural extremism. When we talk about *behavioural extremism*, we refer to those who deliberately overstep the bounds of law by engaging in anti-social, illegal or violent behaviour in pursuit of their cause (e.g. vandalism; violence; inciting violence; planning violent protests; spreading misinformation/conspiracy theories; non-compliance with authority decisions, rules or laws). Predicting who in Australia

is most likely to transition from attitudinal extremism to behavioural extremism is difficult and requires much more research. The development of risk-assessment methodologies that seek to identify those individuals most at-risk of engaging in violent extremism is needed.

The survey by Griffith University measured a variety of extremist attitudes and beliefs (e.g., sovereign citizen beliefs; conspiracy beliefs; expressed defiance toward police authorities; anti-vaccine sentiment). But it also asked survey respondents about whether they had complied with all COVID-lockdown restrictions during the pandemic. As such, the survey was able to assess the link between far-right extremist beliefs and participation in illegal behaviour; that is, self-reported non-compliance with COVID-19 restrictions. The results showed that extreme far-right Victorians were significantly more likely to express resistance toward police, were more likely to disregard/disengage from police authority, were less likely to feel obligated to obey authorities, and were significantly less likely to abide fully with COVID-19 restrictions. As such, there appears to be a link between extreme far-right beliefs and anti-social attitudes and behaviours in the extreme far-right Victorian sample. (Murphy, et al, 2022)

The link between extreme far-right beliefs and vaccine intention

There also appears to be some evidence from the survey that those Victorians who held extreme far-right beliefs were also generally less willing to take the COVID-19 vaccine voluntarily. They were even less likely to take the vaccine if the government mandated it (note that the survey was conducted before a COVID-19 vaccine had been developed or administered in Australia). It can also be demonstrated from survey results that extreme far-right Victorians were significantly more likely to believe the COVID-19 vaccine would be used by authorities to control or harm the population (a prevalent conspiracy theory that has surrounded COVID vaccines). As such, extreme far-right Victorians held more extreme views about vaccination than other Victorians.

'Conspiritoriality', 'militant wellness' and alternative wellness and spiritual communities

There have been concerns about the production and spread of COVID dis/misinformation among wellness and holistic spiritual influencers and communities, and their links to QAnon and Far Right discourses, in and beyond Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic (Cahil, 2020; Halafoff, 2020; Gerrand, 2020, Khalil, 2020). This is particularly troubling given the large amounts of Australians who identify as spiritual but not religious, and religious and spiritual, including 38% of Australian teenagers (Singleton et al., 2021).

Charlotte Ward and David Voas (2011: 104) were the first scholars to study 'conspiritoriality', which they described as the nexus of right-wing conspiracy theory and New Age spirituality with two conspiritorial convictions that '1) a secret group covertly controls, or is trying to control, the political and social order, and 2) humanity is undergoing a "paradigm shift" in consciousness'. However, the role and prevalence of conspiritoriality among wellness

communities, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, remains contested. Because this remains an emerging research space, it is vital to continue research to better understand the differences between sub-cultures that have been spreading d/misinformation during COVID-pandemic, including among alternative wellness and spiritual communities and the far right, and the overlaps between them.

Qualitative and quantitative research conducted in a pilot study on conspирuality and COVID pandemic in Australia by members of CRIS/AVERT and colleagues, revealed a 'spiritual complexity' and internal diversity regarding vaccine uptake within these spiritual and alternative wellness communities. The project team concluded that only a minority of those who identify as spiritual or engage in spiritual practices strongly adhere to conspирuality and are vaccine resistant, and that only a minority of those adherents may pose a significant risk to society, similarly to other extremist movements within broader religious and cultural groups (Halafoff et al. *forthcoming a, b*; Aechtner and Farr *forthcoming*).

Other assessments and researcher projects, however, have explored and conceptualised the emergence of 'militant wellness' (Gerrand, 2020) or 'woo Anon' (Nelson, 2021) with an explicit focus on the intersection of wellness, conspiracy and far-right extremist narratives and belief frameworks. These research efforts examine links between holistic spirituality, conspiracy theories and far-right extremism among alternative wellness communities.

The conspирuality and COVID-19 pandemic project's findings revealed that while anti-vax and conspирitual ideas in wellness and holistic communities were less widespread and had a different lexicon and aesthetic to disinformation spread within far right movements, there were some disturbing similarities within them. Both share a growing distrust in state and medical authority, and the prominence of men and hypermasculine narratives of spiritual warriors in contemporary conspирuality, and their association with violence, are serious issues that require further investigation (Griera et al. *forthcoming*; Halafoff et al. *forthcoming a*). LeClerc and Hussein (2022) have also documented a rise in what they call 'Paleo Purity' within the broader 'Freedom Movement.' These men adhere to Paleo diets, regularly attend gyms, and seem to have strong links with the Far Right, including in their lexicons and aesthetics.

f. **What steps need to be taken in Victoria to counter these far-right extremist groups and their influence**

- **The need to address masculinities in CVE/PVE efforts**

As argued in a 2020 report on masculinities and recruitment to violent extremism (Roose and Flood, 2020), right-wing extremist representations of masculinity and normative frameworks intersect more than expected. This is particularly the case in relation to negative attitudes to women, minorities, key institutions and elected officials, support for the use of violence as a defensive mechanism and the expression of anger. These groups seek to mobilise a particular conception of manhood that stands opposed to many societal values and threatens to undermine social cohesion. Many hide behind a veil of anonymity in online environments. Key interventions are needed and are identified below (Roose and Flood, 2020):

- **Legislative measures**, including the understanding of male supremacism as a form of ideologically motivated violent extremism, would recognise the seriousness of the potential threat and place Victoria ahead of other jurisdictions nationally and internationally in responding to the threat. Making Victorian men more accountable for both anonymous hate speech and ideologically motivated violent extremism in online forums would likely have a significant impact.
- **Those closest to men exercise the greatest influence on their conception of manhood.** Parents, siblings and friends emerged as the individuals most able to shape how men think of themselves and their place in society. Parents and peers are a particularly important potential entry point. Fixed institutions don't have the power to shape men as they once did. Policy makers may need to consider innovative cross-departmental approaches to implement interventions aimed at Victorian men. It may be possible to provide resources or training to parents on raising healthy or respectful men, during their transition to parenting or at key milestones such as children starting school or high school. Key sites of socialisation with peers including sporting clubs and online chat forums may also provide direct access.
- **Attitudes towards women.** Initial interventions may focus on the attitudes of younger men to women, older men to minorities, framing of when violence is permissible and under what circumstance, regaining trust in institutions (specifically the legal system) and elected officials, and anger management strategies. Online literacy is also increasingly urgent.
- **Online environments play an increasing role in shaping masculinities.** Men may also look online and form their sense of manhood in relation to what they are reading

or watching. Social media, YouTube, online gaming and website forums are key avenues where men may interact with others they may never otherwise meet. The plethora of information available requires innovative strategies to reach young Victorian men on their phones, laptops and gaming computers. Intensive and holistic online literacy training focusing on critical engagement with sources should be prioritised.

- **Schools and workplaces offer important, yet largely untapped, locations to develop healthy masculinities that reject violence.** As Roose and Flood (2020) found in their research, what was unexpected was the extent to which traditional institutions where boys become 'men' including schools and workplaces played a significantly smaller role. To some extent this means that governments are relinquishing the task of developing healthy masculinities to families and social media and popular culture. School curricula, sporting programs and peer education opportunities offer important sites of intervention in reaching young men and importantly, the women who will shape them as friends, partners and eventually, mothers. Some of this work is already taking place through the Victorian Government's Respectful Relationships program and elsewhere (see, for example, the research of Deakin University's Professor Amanda Keddie on 'Changing the story of gendered violence: New educative approaches', Fulbright Senior Scholarship program, <https://disruptr.deakin.edu.au/society/changing-the-story-of-gendered-violence-through-schools/>), but further work still needs to be undertaken. Programs delving into violence, masculinities and online literacy might be devised as core components of a larger syllabi on citizenship. Workplace education (including via Centrelink courses, TAFE and universities) for potential mentors of young men might also be considered
- **More research is needed to examine the role of masculinities.** Much more work is required to understand the form and function of male supremacist groups and associated individuals in the Victorian and Australian context. Bearing in mind the notion that anti-women attitudes are considered a 'gateway to violent extremism', more work is required to understand why younger men who adopt largely tolerant perspectives on minorities, might show significant levels of soft prejudice against the notion of women's rights. More work is also required to understand how fixed sites and institutions including schools and workplaces can increase their impact on the formation of healthy masculinities. Research on precisely how men engage with and interpret violent extremist material targeting their sense of manhood will provide significant insights into the development of counter narratives.

- **Combatting far-right extremist medievalisms**

Interdisciplinary research innovations to improve understanding. There is a need for interdisciplinary research in preventing/countering violent extremism to address the complex challenges that it poses (Conway, 2017). The activity of Odinist right wing extremists in Victoria, noted above, is one example of a specific area in which collaborative research from medievalists and P/CVE specialists would offer perspectives and new understandings, with the capacity to improve historical literacy and develop counternarratives to support interventions. The need for innovative interdisciplinary research into right wing extremist medievalisms speaks to a more general need for interdisciplinary work, particularly with the Humanities.

Improving subcultural literacy. To understand further the processes of radicalisation to violent extremism, insights are required into the relationships between technological platform-specific affordances (such as algorithms) and the creation/consumption of persuasive content, including that which draws from European histories, especially medieval histories. These insights in turn are likely to assist in the generation of more effective moderation and counter-narrative strategies.

Developing literacy into the use of ideological histories by right-wing extremists will increase understandings amongst analysts and front-line workers as to the role such narratives play in processes of radicalisation and recruitment into violent extremism. Front-line workers' lack of literacy in in the sub-cultures, such as trolling and video-gaming, in which far-right extremists often operate has been identified as a significant danger (Phillips, 2018; Verdegaal and Wouters, 2020); medievalism is rife in these sub-cultures. Online communications that may seem innocuous or technical, such as a discussion of the medieval Battle of Tours or demographic changes in Europe, may in fact be red flags that may be used to track growing far-right consciousness and agitation.

Improving historical literacy. There is a need to highlight the risk of white Christian narratives emanating from the far right. It must also be counter with education about the long history and current multicultural and multifaith reality of Australia and de-bunking the myth of Australia as an exclusively or historically white, Christian, nation which does not reflect the historical and contemporary multicultural nature of Australia. This myth needs to be dismantled and the reality of Australia's cultural and religious diversity needs to be better reflected in policy, practices and curricula (Halafoff et al. 2019, 2021; Weng et al. 2021).

Collaboration with digital platforms and content providers. Working with platforms such as YouTube to track, and manage, how algorithms move viewers from mainstream to extremist historical materials would help intervene in the spread and use of right wing

extremist medievalisms. Working with content-providers and educators to provide counter programming to extremist historical narratives, both on online platforms and in educational environments, would enable interventions and propagation of medievalist counternarratives developed through innovative interdisciplinary research.

- **Inoculation to address disinformation**

Strategies and programs that integrate 'inoculation theory' are a promising means to counter disinformation and conspiracy and mitigate the adoption of beliefs and attitudes consistent with violent extremism ideologies (Braddock, 2019). Inoculation theory, which is a replicable evidence-based social communications theory that claims that you can "inoculate" individuals from credulity and persuasion to information or influence by pre-exposure to arguments that refute a given narrative or idea (MacGuire, 1961), is one potential way to combat disinformation and harmful conspiracies that Government should consider.

A number of recent studies have provided evidence that 'pre-bunking' or inoculating against conspiracies and disinformation can be effective (Roozenbeek et al., 2020). However, it is most effective when the inoculation message is able to reach audiences before conspiracists do (Banas and Miller, 2013: 204). This is a challenge of agility in prevention for Government and will require an awareness and intelligence-led analysis of what conspiratorial messages are emerging. Government cannot rely solely on intervention methods but must also integrate media literacy programs and education in early prevention efforts.

- **Integrating CVE/PVE within emergency management responses**

According to the UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction and the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED), more natural disasters are forecast in our future given increases in global surface temperatures (CRED, 2020). Alongside evidence that natural disasters are increasing, there has been an equally unprecedented spread of misinformation and disinformation and contestation of the cause and origins of these crises (Cinelli et al., 2020). Concurrent crises since 2020 - including bushfires, COVID-19 and other natural disasters caused by climate change in Australia and elsewhere - demonstrated that natural disasters have multi-layered political and societal effects that can act as potential drivers to political violence and increase the risk of engagement in violent extremism. Multiple emergencies and crises in a post-truth age will not only challenge government's disaster response and recovery efforts, but disinformation can be used by extremist groups to mobilise to violence, undermine trust in government, and undermine social cohesion.

Previous research findings have also demonstrated that natural disasters like bushfires, hurricanes, earthquakes and pandemics have the potential to increase the risk of violent extremism by heightening grievances and provide openings for groups with pre-established grievances to act violently against the state and identified out groups. But in dealing with natural disasters, government has primarily focused on traditional categories of disaster and emergency management (DEM) such as emergency response, public-health measures,

disaster planning, border security, and economic stimulus. However, consolidated democratic governments, like Australia, have not yet fully accounted for the acceleration of violent extremism and the spread of disinformation by extremist actors as part of their disaster management and response.

Additionally, a key element in disaster response and recovery is maintaining not only the functioning of government and society post-disaster but maintaining trust in the government and systems in order to prevent societal fraying and to maintain order. If the acceleration of disinformation and violent extremism is not addressed during these times of crisis, it will allow extremism and distrust of government to incubate and spread. This makes maintaining and recovering government legitimacy and social cohesion in the long term more difficult and will have ongoing implications for countering violent extremism efforts.

Government's disaster and emergency management responses must include a recognition that these crises can play into the hands of individuals who want to stoke division and extremist actors who exploit these conditions to promote social conflict and undermine social cohesion. A recent stocktake of Australian government CVE/PVE/Disaster and Emergency Management policies from 2001-2021 conducted as part of the Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies' (CRIS) Crisis Points research project (Khalil and Duckworth, 2021) found the following:

- Australian policies had scant acknowledgement of the information environment, particularly the risks, harms or role of disinformation and the need to address them.
- There was an assumed level of trust between citizens and government and that strategic policies did not adequately address trust deficit gaps among the general population. There was also a delayed understanding, now made more apparent by the COVID-19 pandemic, that extended state of emergency declarations will exacerbate these conditions, making the disaster ripe for extremist exploitation.
- The policies recognised the key role communities play in both countering violent extremism and recovery, an approach that already incorporated in Australian strategies that can help address these complex challenges .

Government policies therefore need to reflect an updated understanding of the role of disinformation and trust deficits have on policy development and execution in CVE and disaster management and resilience and how they are interlinked.

Governments need to better acknowledge and understand the interplay between crisis, disinformation and violent extremism to more effectively design and direct CVE programming and better integrate it with disaster and emergency management planning and communication. It will support both government and community actors working to

counter extremist appeals and disinformation during times of disaster and crisis. It will also support efforts to more effectively activate and leverage community networks during a crisis or natural disaster.

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