

Christchurch and social media

Sanjana Hattotuwa
Special Advisor, ICT4Peace Foundation

sanjanahattotuwa@ict4peace.org
www.ict4peace.org



Table of contents

Sri Lankan social media expert: 'We must confront what we fear'	3
A historic opportunity	5
Principles over promises: Responding to terrorism	8
Pulse Points	11
Terrorists know they have the upper hand on social media	14
NZ's response can lead the way	17
Other content & output on Christchurch	20

Sri Lankan social media expert: 'We must confront what we fear'

23 September 2019, [Asia Media Centre](#)

At a time when social media is under scrutiny for its role in tragedies like the Christchurch mosque shootings, governments must avoid knee-jerk reactions, writes Sanjana Hattotuwa.

The markets — or "pola" as we call them in Sri Lanka — my father took me to when I was a child were chaotic. Vendors shouting over each other. Buyers animatedly haggling. The sights, sounds and smells of produce and livestock were overpowering to the senses, especially when at waist-height to everyone else.

Social media today reminds me of the markets of my childhood. Those who shout the loudest often get the most attention. It's easy to get lost in the madness. The more outrageous an idea or item held up for public display, the more crowds throng around it. Like different sections for vegetables, fruits, fish and meat in a "pola", social media platforms or accounts are branded by what their authors say, stand up for, are opposed to, or want to see more of.

In less than a decade, the same platforms that were attributed with enabling popular uprisings and revolutions overturning dictatorships are now flagged as tools of authoritarians or the megaphones of populists. Social media has become a reservoir of toxicity. For the most part, Silicon Valley companies are responsible for this mess. I should know. Documenting what was then a rising tide of violence against Muslims, I published evidence of inciting hate, racism and violence on Facebook as far back as 2013. The company said and did nothing.

Sri Lanka's social media shutdown

For years in Sri Lanka and elsewhere, just as much as it has contributed to violence, social media has become entwined with activism against authoritarianism. However, with every tragic act of violence or terrorism, media and governments are drawn to framing social media as something defined by emotion over evidence and fears over facts. This is dangerous. In the guise of public safety and security, governments in countries with a democratic deficit, like mine back home in Sri Lanka, are primarily interested in social media regulation only to censor and stifle democratic dissent.

For example, following the Easter Sunday terror attacks, the government blocked social media in an attempt to curb the flow of rumours and misinformation. It was the longest block in history, lasting close to two weeks. At the time, I recorded a rapid escalation in frustration that soon gave way to seething anger. Cut off from victims and loved ones, social media users around the country used VPNs to bypass the blocks and began to suspect the government was more interested in stifling criticism and public knowledge of intelligence failures that led to the attack. Ultimately, the block stymied the spread of content that sought to heal, and resulted in an angrier public more susceptible to rumours and the weaponisation of grief.

Lessons from Christchurch

How can evidence around the complexity of social media help fight against extremism, and celebrate its potential to be used for positive change? This question inspired my study of close

Christchurch and social media

to 100,000 tweets in the week after the Christchurch massacre in March. Domestic and international media at the time were aghast at how an awful livestream and hate-filled document had rapidly spread online. Yet, I found a different story on Twitter, anchored to content and commentary markedly different from what a terrorist wanted to inspire. I found a large number of tweets were in Urdu and Hindi, from Pakistan and India, respectively. Why? Because when prominent news anchors broke the story of Indian and Pakistani lives lost in Christchurch, tens of thousands of others from both countries, in their own language, joined in expressing dismay, distress, care and concern for Kiwis. There was a near-total absence of hate or violence and an abundance of love.

Rising above knee-jerk reactions

The theatre of terrorism thrives on stoking emotions that generate reactions. Politicians are driven to do something — anything. However, rarely does anything useful or enduring result. Rising above knee-jerk reactions, Prime Minister Ardern’s ‘Christchurch Call’ recognises the “internet’s ability to act as a force for good”, “fostering inclusive societies”. It also calls for the closer study of online content, over time. These are helpful frames to gather evidence required for progressive policymaking. Violence and hate are easy stories for media, if only because there’s a lot of it around and easily found. Yet, it also can blind us to content that binds and heals, somewhat hidden but often, just as abundant.

Just like global warming has no easy solution pegged to a single source, effort or location, governments, private corporations and civil society will need to work together to address the harms of social media. This is why I argue for a more dispassionate study of data, framed by values entrenched in New Zealand’s constitution, country, culture and communities. This is hard work, with no easy wins. But robust evidence and data on social media should inform official responses, reforms and regulations. I believe that confronting what we fear can help us identify the worst of what social media is, which is the first step towards making it a more civil environment. We must rise to the challenge.

A historic opportunity

16 April 2019, [Otago Daily Times](#)

New Zealand must get it right when it comes to legislating social media, writes Sanjana Hattotuwa

Wonderful news, said all the Sri Lankans. But why Queensland, all the Australians asked. Fifteen years ago, a Rotary World Peace Fellowship award offered seven universities around the world to undertake a Masters in Peace and Conflict Studies.

I chose the University of Bradford. I was awarded a place at the University of Queensland, in Brisbane. I didn't complain. The scholarship was a chance to get out of Sri Lanka and rigorously study what I had till then done on the ground, at a time when violent conflict dynamics were, after some years of relative calm, rising rapidly.

My Australian friends, however, were concerned that I would face in Queensland a degree of discrimination and intolerance they said I would never encounter in Sydney or Melbourne. I didn't know enough to argue and expected the worst.

After two years of extensive travel within the state and country, I returned to Sri Lanka experiencing very little along the lines I was warned about. Others though, at the same time, had a different experience - never physically violent, but far more verbally abusive. For them and I, this othering was at the margins of society. Well over a decade ago and without social media, violent extremism and ideology had to be actively sought after to be engaged with. Racism wasn't digitally dispersed.

It is with an enduring affection of Australia that I am deeply concerned about disturbing new legislation, passed hurriedly last week, which uses the terrorism in Christchurch to justify overbroad controls of social media.

The central focus of my doctoral research at Otago University is technology as both a driver of violence and a deterrent. How, today, social media promotes hate or harm is well known and widely reported.

As with any generalisation, though elements of truth exist, the simplification of a complex problem results in illegitimate targets of fear or anger. Social media companies, for their part, are irascibly unmoved by what for years those like me have warned them about, around the abuse of platforms by those who seek to profit from violence.

Coherence and consistency in policies that respond to the seed and spread of violence are lacking and resisted. However, significant changes in stance, response and policies are coming.

The terrorism in Christchurch is responsible for accelerating globally what was sporadically mentioned or implemented with regards to safeguards around the production and promotion of content inciting violence, hate and discrimination. However, we must resist what appear to be simple answers to complex challenges, whether it comes from governments or big technology companies.

Christchurch and social media

Violent extremism has many drivers, both visible and hidden. It doesn't bloom overnight. Social media, inextricably entwined in New Zealand's socio-political, economic and cultural fabric as it is back home in Sri Lanka, cannot be blamed, blocked or banned in the expectation that everything will be all right thereafter.

Driven by understandable concern around the dynamics of how the terrorism in Christchurch spread virally on social media, the Australian legislation - rushed through in just two days without any meaningful public debate, independent scrutiny or critical input - doesn't address root causes of terrorism, extremism or discrimination.

Among other concerns and though it sounds very good, holding social media companies and content providers criminally liable for content is a very disturbing template and precedent. American corporate entities are now required to oversee to a degree technically infeasible and humanly impossible, information produced on or spread through their services. This risks the imposition of draconian controls over what's produced, judged by hidden indicators, with little independent oversight and limited avenues for appeal. As a global precedent, the law is even more harmful, allowing comparatively illiberal governments to project or portray as the protection of citizens, parochial laws, essentially, that stifle democratic dissent.

David Kaye, the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the freedom of expression, is also deeply concerned. In an official letter to the Australian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Kaye stresses, among other more technical, procedural and legal points, the need for public review and proportionality, international legal obligations on the freedom of expression and imprecise wording in the law, which is entirely removed from how digital content is generated in society today, and by whom.

And herein lies the danger for New Zealand too. Politicians, under pressure to respond meaningfully, need to assuage the fears of a grieving country through demonstrable measures. The tendency is to pick an easy target and push through solutions that look and sound strong.

The underlying drivers of violence and conflict, however, simmer and fester. Measures taken to control and curtail gun ownership are welcome, and arguably, long overdue. Policymaking around social media, however, is a different problem set that cannot be as easily, or concretely, addressed.

This is not a submission to do nothing. Rather, it cautions against the understandable appeal of following the Australian response and law. Steps around the non-recurrence of domestic terrorism must certainly embrace aspects of social media regulation and related legislation.

The public must be involved in this. We know already that social media reflects and refracts - mirroring values of consumers as well as, through ways academics are struggling to grasp fully, changing attitudes and perceptions of users over time. This requires governments to iteratively work with social media companies on checks and balances that systemically decrease violence in all forms.

Elsewhere in the world, politicians who know the least about social media seek to control it, and those who know more or better, often abuse it.

Christchurch and social media

Kiwis, led by PM Ardern's Government, have a historic opportunity to forge a response to terrorism - relevant and resonant globally - that incorporates how best government can work with technology companies to protect citizens from harm. Australia, with the best of intent, gets it very wrong.

New Zealand, with a greater calling, must get it right.

Principles over promises: Responding to terrorism

2 April 2019, [Scoop](#)

Almost exactly a year ago, Facebook was in the news in New Zealand over [a row with Privacy Commissioner John Edwards](#). The heated public exchange between Edwards and the company took place in the context of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, in which the private information of millions of Facebook users was harvested, illicitly, for deeply divisive, partisan and political ends. Edwards accused the company of breaching New Zealand's Privacy Act. The company responded that it hadn't and that the Privacy Commissioner had made an overbroad request which could not be serviced. Edwards proceeded to [delete his account](#) and warned others in New Zealand that continued use of Facebook could impact their right to privacy under domestic law. [Just a few months prior](#), the COO of Facebook, Sheryl Sandberg, was pictured on Facebook's official country page with New Zealand PM Jacinda Ardern. The caption of the photo, which captured the two women in an embrace after a formal meeting, flagged efforts the company was making to keep children safe. It is not surprising that Sandberg also [wrote the paean to Ardern](#) in last year's Time 100 list of the most influential people.

The violence on the 15th of March in Christchurch dramatically changed this relationship. In response to the act of terrorism, Facebook announced, and for the first time, [a ban](#) on "peace, support and representation of white nationalism and separatism on Facebook and Instagram". Two weeks after the killings in Christchurch, a message by Sandberg was featured [on top of Instagram feeds](#) in the country and featured in local media. The message noted that Facebook was "exploring restrictions on who can go Live depending on factors such as prior Community Standard violations" and that the company was "also investing in research to build better technology to quickly identify edited versions of violent videos and images and prevent people from re-sharing these versions." Additionally, the company was removing content from, and all praise or support of several hate groups in the country, as well as Australia. Sandberg's message called the terrorism in Christchurch "an act of pure evil", echoing verbatim David Coleman, Australia's immigration minister, in a statement he made after [denying entry to far-right commentator Milo Yiannopoulos](#), who after the attack referred to Muslims as "barbaric" and Islam as an "alien religious culture". Last week, New Zealand's Chief Censor David Shanks, [declared the document](#) released by the killer as 'objectionable', which now makes it an offence to share or even possess it. Following up, authorities also made the possession and distribution of the killer's live stream [video](#) an offence. Facebook, Twitter and Microsoft have all been to New Zealand in the past fortnight, issuing statements, making promises and expressing solidarity. Silicon Valley-based technology companies are in the spotlight, but I wonder, why now? What's changed?

Since its debut in 2015, a report by BuzzFeed News [published in June 2017](#) flagged that at least 45 instances of grisly violence including shootings, rape, murders, child abuse and attempted suicides were broadcast on Facebook Live. That number would be higher now, not including Christchurch. The Founder and CEO of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, [in May 2017](#), promised that 3,000 more moderators, in addition to 4,500 already working, would be added to over live and native video content. Promises to do more or better are what Zuckerberg and Sandberg

Christchurch and social media

are very good at making, in the aftermath of increasingly frequent and major privacy, ethics, violence or governance related scandals Facebook is in the middle of. Less apparent and forthcoming, over time, is what really the company does, invests in and builds.

There are also inconsistencies in the company's responses to platform abuses. In 2017, [the live video on Facebook](#) of a man bound, gagged and repeatedly cut with a knife, lasting half an hour, was viewed by 16,000 users. By the time it was taken down, it had spread on YouTube. A company spokesperson at the time was quoted as saying that "in many instances... when people share this type of content, they are doing so to condemn violence or raise awareness about it. In that case, the video would be allowed." Revealingly, the same claim wasn't made with the Christchurch killer's production.

The flipside to this is the use of Facebook's tools to bear witness to human rights abuse. In 2016, the killing of [a young black American Philando Castile](#) by the Police in Minnesota was live-streamed on Facebook by his girlfriend, Diamond Reynolds, who was present with him in the car. The video went viral and helped document police brutality. There is also clear documented evidence of how violence captured from [a Palestinian perspective](#), as well as content [on potential war crimes](#), is at greater risk of removal on social media platforms. In fact, [more than 70 civil rights groups](#) wrote to Facebook in 2016, flagging this problem of unilateral removals based on orders generated by repressive regimes, giving perpetrators greater impunity and murderers stronger immunity.

It is axiomatic that deleting videos, banning pages, blocking groups, algorithmic tagging and faster human moderation do not erase root causes of violent extremism. The use of WhatsApp in India to seed and spread violence is a cautionary tale in how the deletion of content on Facebook's public platforms may only drive it further underground. The answer is not to weaken or ban encryption. As New Zealand shows us, it is to investigate ways through which democratic values address, concretely and meaningfully, existential concerns of citizens and communities. This is hard work and beyond the lifespan of any one government. It also cannot be replaced by greater regulation of technology companies and social media. The two go hand in hand, and one is not a substitute for the other. It is here that governments, as well as technology companies, stumble, by responding to violent incidents in ways that don't fully consider how disparate social media platforms and ideologues corrosively influence and inform each other. Content produced in one region or country, can over time, inspire action and reflection in a very different country or community.

Take an Australian Senator's response, on Twitter, to the Christchurch terrorism. Though condemned by the Australian PM, the very act of referring to the Senator and what he noted on Twitter promoted the content to different audiences, both nationally and globally. The Twitter account, as well as the Facebook page of the Senator in question, produce and promote an essential ideology indistinguishable from the Christchurch killer's avowed motivations. It is the normalisation of extremism through the guise of outrage and selective condemnation. What should the response be?

In Myanmar, [an independent human rights impact assessment on Facebook](#), conducted last year, resulted in the company updating policies to "remove misinformation that has the potential to contribute to imminent violence or physical harm". And yet, it is unclear how what may now be operational in Myanmar is also applied in other contexts, including in First World countries at risk of right-wing extremism.

Christchurch and social media

I wonder, does it take grief and violence on the scale of Christchurch to jolt politicians and technology companies to take action around what was evident, for much longer? And in seeking to capitalise on the international media exposure and attention around an incident in a First World country, are decisions made in or because of New Zealand risking norms around content production, access and archival globally, on social media platforms that are now part of the socio-political, economic and cultural DNA of entire regions? Precisely at a time when any opposition to or critical questioning of decisions taken on behalf of victims and those at risk of violence can generate hostility or pushback, we need to safeguard against good-faith measures that inadvertently risk the very fibre of liberal democracy politicians in New Zealand and technology companies seek to secure. An emphasis on nuance, context, culture and intent must endure.

So is meaningful investment, beyond vacuous promises. In 2016, [Zuckerberg called live video](#) “personal and emotional and raw and visceral”. After the Christchurch video’s visceral virality, it is unclear if Sandberg pushed this same line with PM Ardern. In fact, Facebook astonishingly allowed an Islamophobic ad featuring PM Ardern wearing a hijab, which was only taken down after [a domestic website’s intervention](#). Clearly, challenges persist. Social media companies can and must do more, including changing the very business models that have allowed major platforms to grow to a point where they are, essentially, ungovernable.

Grieving, we seek out easy answers. Banning weapons and blocking extremist content helps contain and address immediate concerns. Ideas though are incredibly resilient, and always find a way to new audiences. The longer-term will of the government to address hate groups, violent extremism in all forms and the normalisation of othering, from Maori to Muslim, requires sober reflection and more careful policymaking. What happens in New Zealand is already a template for the world. We must help PM Ardern and technology companies live up to this great responsibility.

Pulse Points

21 March 2019, [Scoop](#)

Whether bound by country, city or community, the pulse of or, on Friday, the pain from a place like Christchurch can often be determined by the careful collection of social media updates published in the public domain. It is an interest in precisely this that brought me to New Zealand, where I study how Twitter and Facebook are integral to political communications and cycles of violence in Sri Lanka, my home. In South Asia, social media engagement drive attention towards or away from around key events, issues, individuals and institutions. Sport, religion, politics, elections and entertainment dominate content creation. The resulting conversations, to varying degrees, contest or cement opinions. Emotions drive engagement more than reasoned presentation or critical inquiry. Interestingly, though geographically distant and culturally distinct, a shared pattern of access and resulting behaviour on social media makes a younger demographic back home almost indistinguishable from their counterparts in New Zealand. This includes the heightened production of content on social media after an unexpected event.

Based on all this, I wasn't surprised to discover that the violence in Christchurch last Friday generated a tsunami of content just over Twitter. In the hours and days after the killings, specific hashtags on Twitter captured a community grappling with trying to make sense of, and recover from, a scale and scope of violence unprecedented in its history. The study of this content – much of it extremely painful to read - offers a glimpse into how the violence in Christchurch resonated across the country, and far beyond.

Almost immediately after the first news reports of the killings, #christchurchmosqueshooting, #christchurchshooting, #christchurchterroristattack, #newzealandterroristattack and #christchurch started to trend on Twitter domestically. This means that content using one or more of these hashtags showed a dramatic increase over a short period. In just a day, around 85,000 tweets featured one or more of these hashtags. By the 16th, two other hashtags started to trend - #49lives and #theyareus. In just a day, these two hashtags generated close to 37,000 tweets. With a single tweet capturing 280 characters, I was curious as to what just over 34 million characters, in the first 24 hours after the killings in Christchurch, said about the event. This is not just of academic interest. Policymakers and others interested in or tasked with immediate response after a natural or man-made catastrophe can look at social media as a digital weathervane of public sentiment, crafting measures based on need, mood, reception or pushback.

When studied at scale, publicly shared content on social media is almost pathological. Key ideas, communities that assemble around specific individuals and content that goes viral can be gleaned through network science, which those like myself employ to understand key drivers and motivations behind content generation. This is easier to grasp by way of an example. Adil Shahzeb is in Islamabad, Pakistan and a television news presenter and host. And yet, on the 15th itself, he appears quite prominently in the content shared around the violence in Christchurch. This is, prima facie, utterly confusing. How can someone all the way in Pakistan become rapidly popular on Twitter around an event that happened in New Zealand? The answer is in a single tweet by Shahzeb, currently pinned to his Twitter profile, which identifies a man who tried to stop the killer as Naeem Rashid, with Pakistani origins. Rashid and his son Talha, the tweet noted, were tragically lost to the killer. This single tweet generated a

Christchurch and social media

considerable number of retweets and likes amongst those on Twitter, in both Pakistan and New Zealand. It is a similar story with Sunetra Choudhury, a Political Editor and journalist at NDTV, a popular Indian TV station. One of her tweets, featuring a clip of PM Ardern speaking to the affected community in Christchurch on Saturday, was viewed close to half a million times. The responses to the tweet, almost all from India, feature an overwhelming appreciation of the New Zealand PM's political leadership. These are two great examples of how empathy, shock and solidarity – here expressed in Urdu, Hindi and English – were able to cross vast geographies in a very short span of time.

Another way to get a sense of what's being discussed is to analyse the substance of the tweet. Through what's called a word cloud, words used more frequently can be rendered to appear larger than other words used less frequently. This process ends up with a visual map of the conversational terrain that affords the closer study of specific terms. Different hashtags feature different word clusters, but across all of them, Muslim, condemns, reject, Muslims, victims, terrorist, mentally, deranged, mosque, name, remembering, grotesque, white, supremacist and love feature prominently. The thrust, timbre and tone of tweets that feature these words are overwhelmingly empathetic and ranges from the profoundly sad to the outraged. By way of a loose comparison, when awful violence directed against the Muslim community broke out in Sri Lanka almost exactly a year ago, public sentiment I studied on Twitter at the time didn't feature anything remotely akin to the levels of solidarity and support channelled towards the Muslim community in New Zealand, since last Friday.

What academics call a 'platform affordance' is more simply known to all Twitter users as a mention. Prefacing an account with the @ symbol ensures that on Twitter, a specific account is notified of a tweet. This is also used to direct a tweet towards a specific recipient or group. Unsurprisingly, PM Ardern, the Australian PM, the American President and controversial Australian Senator Fraser Anning are amongst those referenced the most over the first 24 hours. #49lives started trending on the 6th, generating nearly 17,000 tweets in a single day. The instigator of the hashtag is American. Khaled Beydoun is a Professor of Law based in Detroit, Michigan and a published author on Islamophobia. It is perhaps this academic interest that drove him to create #49lives, reflecting the number that at the time was the official toll of those killed in Christchurch. Beydoun's tweet, pinned to his profile, has generated an astonishing level of engagement – from New Zealand as well as globally. Liked nearly 146,000 times, retweeted just over 89,000 times and generated around 1,700 responses to date, the tweet prefigures PM Ardern's assertion in New Zealand's Parliament that she will not ever speak the killer's name. "I don't know the terrorist's name. Nor do I care to know it." avers Beydoun's tweet, which also asks to remember stories around and celebrate the lives of the victims. #theyareus generated just over 20,000 tweets by the 16th, but the sentiment or phrase is anchored to a tweet by PM Ardern made on the 15th. In a tweet liked 132,000 times and retweeted 40,000 times to date, she noted that "many of those affected will be members of our migrant communities – New Zealand is their home – they are us." However, it was two heartfelt tweets by Sam Neill, a businessman from Central Otago, that kick-started the hashtag trend. Speaking out against white supremacism and in solidarity with the Muslim community in New Zealand, Neill's two tweets, published consecutively on the 15th and 16th, have cumulatively generated nearly 27,000 likes, 4,200 retweets and 300 responses to date.

In sum, a cursory top-level study of the nearly 85,000 tweets generated in the 24 hours after the violence on Friday shows a global community outraged or dismayed at terrorism, an outpouring of love, empathy and solidarity, engagement that spans many continents and languages, addressing prominent politicians and journalists, featuring hundreds of smaller

Christchurch and social media

communities anchored to individuals based in New Zealand and beyond tweeting in a manner overwhelmingly supportive of the Muslim community.

The Twitter data underscores the value of studying public sentiment on social media in the aftermath of a tragedy. Social media provides pulse points. Framed by moments in time and driven by an understanding of, amongst other things, context, technology, access and language, the study of content in the public domain often helps in ascertaining how violence migrates from digital domains to physical, kinetic expression. Christchurch offers the world another lesson, a glimpse of which I wanted to capture here. Just as social media helps extremist ideology take seed and grow, it also helps in healing, empathy, gestures of solidarity, expressions of unity, the design of conciliatory measures and the articulation of grief and sympathy. The admiration, bordering on adulation, PM Ardern has received since Friday for her political leadership on just Twitter alone indicates that New Zealand is already seen as a template for how a country can and should respond to terrorism. These are more than just ephemeral in nature. Long after the world has moved on to the next news cycle, domestic conversations around what happened in Christchurch will endure on social media. Understanding how these ideas, anxieties and aspirations grow and spread lie at the heart of measures, over the long-term, that address extremism, racism, terrorism and prejudice, in all forms.

Terrorists know they have the upper hand on social media

20 March 2019, [Stuff.co.nz](https://www.stuff.co.nz)

Coming out of a long meeting, the first I heard of the violence in Christchurch was from those in Sri Lanka who had got breaking news alerts. I was both very disturbed and extremely intrigued. Terrorism as popular theatre or spectacle is not new, and some academics would argue is a central aim of terrorists, who want their acts recorded and relayed, not redacted or restrained. The use of social media to promote and incite hate, violence and prejudice is also not new. From ISIS to politicians elected into office through populist, prejudiced campaigns, social media is foundational in contemporary terrorist recruitment and political propaganda. What events in Christchurch last Friday brought to light was something entirely different, new and very unlikely to be resolved easily or quickly. The killer's intentional use of the internet will have far longer reaching implications, requiring significant, urgent reform around the governance of large social media platforms as well as oversight mechanisms, including regulations, on parent companies.

Though Facebook New Zealand, Google and Twitter all issued statements hours after the attack that they were working with the New Zealand Police to take down content associated with the attack, the content had by then spread far and wide across the web. The video moved from platform to platform, edited, freeze-framed, downloaded off public streams which risked being taken down and then re-uploaded to private servers, which in turn served up the video to thousands more. As Washington Post journalist Drew Harwell noted, "The New Zealand massacre was live-streamed on Facebook, announced on 8chan, reposted on YouTube, commentated about on Reddit, and mirrored around the world before the tech companies could even react". The challenge is significant because of the scale of the platforms, with billions of users each creating or consuming vast amounts of content every second. Managing the platforms is now largely algorithmic, meaning that only machines can cope with the scale and scope of content produced every second. There are serious limitations to this approach. Terrorists know and now increasingly exploit it, weaponising the unending global popularity of social media to seed and spread their ideology in ways that no existing form of curtailment, containment or control can remotely compete with. And that's partly because of the way algorithms tasked with oversight of content are trained, which is entirely opaque. It is entirely probable that algorithms trained to detect signs of radical Islamic terrorism are incapable of flagging a similar violent ideology or intent promoted in English, anchored to the language and symbolism of white supremacy or fascism.

In March 2018, Facebook's Chief Technology Officer (CTO) Mike Schroepfer noted that the company was using artificial intelligence (AI) to police its platform, and that it was "fairly effective" in distinguishing and removing "gore and graphic violence". Last Friday's killings highlight the risible falsity of this claim. Hours after the killings, dozens of videos featuring the same grisly violence as the original live stream were on Facebook. One had generated 23,000 views an hour, with nearly 240,000 seeing it. Though Facebook notes it blocked 1.5 million videos in the days after the killings from being uploaded, it has tellingly withheld statistics on how many the original live stream reached or why 300,000 related videos were not identified soon after upload, which means they too were viewed – even for a short time – by hundreds of thousands. And this isn't the first time graphic, wanton violence has resided on the platform for

Christchurch and social media

hours before it was taken down, by which time, the strategic aim and intention of producers have been met. The problem doesn't end there. Neal Mohan, YouTube's Chief Product Officer, is on record saying how Christchurch brought the company's moderation and oversight to its knees. Unable to deal with tens of thousands of videos spawned across its platform that showed the grisly killings – one every second at its peak. In two unprecedented moves for the company based on the severity of the challenge, his team decided to block search functionality that allows users to search recent uploads and also completely bypass human moderation, trusting even with the possibility of false positives, content possibly linked to the violence in Christchurch flagged by its algorithmic agents. Mohan has no final fix. The company just has no better way – even in the foreseeable future - to deal with another incident of this nature. Terrorists simply have the upper hand.

The Christchurch killer knew this and used it to his advantage. He won't be the last. The appeal to internet subcultures, famous personalities, memes, the very choice of music, expressions, gestures and popular references are a new argot of communications intentionally designed to use online cultures as means to amplify and promote violent ideology (called red-pilling). At the same time, malevolent producers can almost entirely bypass existing controls and checks on the distribution of such material. The scale of social media is the hook, with the inability to oversee and inadequacies around governance, weaponised. Academics call this a wicked problem – a challenge that is so hard that even partial responses to any single aspect or facet increase the levels of complexity, often exponentially.

Generating greater friction around the production, promotion and spread of content is not in the interests of social media companies, who will continue to maintain – not without some merit - that billions of users producing vast amounts of mundane yet popular content daily is what primarily drives research and development. Read profits. Not without some irony, Facebook's Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg wrote in 2018 a glowing tribute to New Zealand's Prime Minister in Time magazine's list of 100 'Most Influential People'. After PM Ardern noted that the live streaming of the grisly killings would be an issue she takes up with the company and perhaps mortified that this incident will strengthen calls around more robust regulation in the US, Sandberg had reached out after the violence, though it is unclear with what intent or assurances.

This rough sketch of the context I locate my doctoral studies in masks far greater complexity, anchored to community, culture, context and country. What is true of social media Sri Lanka, my home and the central focus of my research, doesn't always hold sway in New Zealand. There are however strange parallels. Repeated warnings around the weaponisation of Facebook to incite hate and violence, since 2014, went entirely unacknowledged by the company until severe communal riots almost exactly a year ago. In Myanmar, the company's platforms were flagged by the United Nations as those that helped produce, normalise and spread violence against Muslims. Till 2018, the company did little to nothing to address this, despite warnings and ample evidence from local organisations. YouTube's recommendation engine – the crucial algorithm that presents content that may interest you – has long since and openly been flagged as extremely problematic, beguilingly guiding users towards far-right radicalisation. The Christchurch killer's release of a 74-page document before his rampage shows an acute understanding of how all this works, by transforming tired conspiracy into highly desirable material through strategic distribution just before an act that serves as the accelerant to infamy.

Christchurch and social media

Alex Stamos, the former Chief Security Officer at Facebook, posted in the aftermath of Christchurch a sobering reminder of just why this violence goes viral. He notes that the language used, links provided and even excerpts of the violent video broadcast by news media only served to pique interest in the killer's original document and full video. This is a disturbing information ecology where content produced by terrorists cannot be taken down easily or quickly because the surge of interest generated around discovery and sharing will overwhelm attempts to delete and contain. If this is the world we now inhabit and by using social media, contribute to cementing, the questions directed at companies and governments may be better directed at ourselves. How many of us searched for the video, and shared it? How many of us, without having any reason to, searched for, read and shared the killer's document? If we cannot control our baser instinct, then we become part of the problem. The terrorists are counting on this, and us, to succeed. We should not let them win.

NZ's response can lead the way

20 March 2019, [Otago Daily Times](#)

Should New Zealand's response to the Christchurch terror attacks be primarily anchored to national security? asks Sanjana Hattotuwa.

Do you love New Zealand? asked the extremely inebriated young white man and his companion as they suddenly blocked my path at the Octagon, a few weeks after I arrived in Dunedin.

Of all the people on the footpath at the time, I noticed they only followed me for a while. Not knowing quite how to respond, I said affably that I liked what I had seen so far. Entirely uninterested in my answer, coming closer and with their bodies and fingers arching towards me, they said that they were willing to die for New Zealand and that I needed to know this.

Recalling a poet from Sri Lanka who in verse noted that it was far better to live for one's country, I decided just to smile somewhat incredulously. Satisfied that whatever point they had wanted to make had got through to me, they left and lunged into a wine and beer shop.

Claims of New Zealand's innocence lost after Friday's attack in Christchurch need to be tempered with stories that abound around how those who are perceived to be different from or somehow not Kiwi are subject to, every day, the language and looks of condescension, incomprehension and suspicion.

New Zealand is isolated by geography but despite popular belief isn't as exceptional to be immune from ingrained prejudice and latent racism. Some may argue it is an insensitive or inopportune moment to raise more deep-rooted issues, when the more urgent need is to respond to an episode of wanton violence.

An argument can be made to pursue both, recognising that longer-term policymaking requires the unearthing of deep-seated anxieties.

Fascism thrives on societal insecurities. A document uploaded to the internet by the killer - a self-proclaimed fascist - is instructive reading on this score. First, the language is simple and clear, even if and indeed, particularly because, the logic is so twisted.

The entirely subjective and strategically selective are presented as indubitable fact and authoritative history. Though the document is anchored to right-wing extremism, what's remarkable is how much of it resonates with the anti-Muslim rhetoric spewed by extreme Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist monks in Sri Lanka, and their equivalent in Myanmar. The targets of hate are the same.

Likewise, in the absence of meaningful interaction between diverse groups, faiths, genders or identities, clusters of the like-minded form online, almost immediately putting up high-barriers to inflows of opinion, information and perspectives that contest or question widely held

Christchurch and social media

assumptions. Over time, the illusion of diversity based on only the smallest of divergence supplants a more open discussion that embraces radically different ideas.

Author Eli Pariser warned us about this many years ago, noting how algorithmically, our social media accounts feed us what we want to see, instead of what we need to engage with. It is online and by careful design that Friday's fascist found his most receptive audience. As Washington Post journalist Drew Harwell noted: "The New Zealand massacre was live-streamed on Facebook, announced on 8chan, reposted on YouTube, commented about on Reddit, and mirrored around the world before the tech companies could even react".

Policymakers who may not even recognise some of the platforms here have a steep learning curve ahead. New Zealand authorities must now pivot an existing intelligence apparatus geared to hone in on the projected threat of Islamic radicalisation, to more adroitly pick up signals around the very real presence and rapid spread of white supremacist ideology.

Which begs the question: should the response to Friday be primarily one that is anchored to national security?

Coming from Sri Lanka, I sincerely hope not. In my country, legislation purportedly drafted to prevent counter-terrorism has resulted in a convenient framework for successive governments that condones extrajudicial torture and the rampant abuse of human rights, for decades.

The slow erosion of civic rights begins, invisibly, with the emotional appeals to protect all citizens or certain groups from violence. The necessary balance between proportional responses to new and increasing threats and the protection of civil liberties has escaped Sri Lanka, where more parochial and communal interests have held sway. New Zealand's story, in the months and years to come, must not be this.

Flagged and framed in my social media accounts since Friday is the contrast between a moral and political leadership so visibly present here, yet markedly absent in other countries after a cataclysmic event of this nature, including my own.

What is remarkable since Friday, and reassuring, is the language employed by, and actions of, this country's political leadership. Faced with an unprecedented loss of life, all official responses - without exception - were anchored to denouncing extremism and fringe lunacy, not communities and faiths present in, or part of, New Zealand.

Ironically, it may not even be recognised as exceptional by those living here, but it is precisely that for those of us who are more used to, tired of and frustrated with politicians who are in effect as racist as the terrorists and terrorism they seek to denounce.

Though profoundly distressed by the events of Friday, I am hopeful that the tragedy will result in local and national conversations which lead to, through policy and practice, social, political and cultural templates for other countries to emulate in responding to, and preventing, terrorism.

The encounter at the Octagon fresh into my sojourn in Dunedin was not the only time I have been subject to wary looks and violent language. It is worse for others, identified as belonging to a faith or community that is feared more.

Christchurch and social media

The pain of acknowledging this is - more than or at least alongside revisions to legislation around gun ownership - a necessary step towards a country that may never be able to prevent terrorism, but always sees it as entirely alien to its core values, beliefs and principles rooted in decency, dignity, diversity and democracy.

Other content & output on Christchurch

Presentations

1. Full video & slidedeck of lecture: From Christchurch to Sri Lanka – The curious case of social media, <https://ict4peace.org/activities/full-video-slidedeck-of-lecture-from-christchurch-to-sri-lanka-the-curious-case-of-social-media/>
2. National Dialogue limits in the age of digital media: ‘New dialogic processes’, <https://ict4peace.org/activities/big-data/national-dialogue-limits-in-the-age-of-digital-media-new-dialogic-processes/>

Input to 'Christchurch Call'

1. ICT4Peace was invited by RT Hon Jacinda Ardern to discuss “Christchurch Call to Action to Eliminate Terrorist and Violent Extremist Content Online“, <https://ict4peace.org/activities/ict4peace-was-invited-by-rt-hon-jacinda-ardern-to-discuss-christchurch-call-to-action-to-eliminate-terrorist-and-violent-extremist-content-online/>
2. PDF of submission to the 'Christchurch Call', <https://ict4peace.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/ICT4Peace-2019-ChristchurchCall-PolicyPaper.pdf>
3. ICT4Peace input to Christchurch Call meeting in Paris, <https://ict4peace.org/activities/ict4peace-input-to-christchurch-call-meeting-in-paris/>

Podcast

1. Radio interview with Daniel Stauffacher on the Christchurch Tragedy, <https://ict4peace.org/activities/responding-to-preventing-violent-extremism-using-icts-and-the-internet/radio-interview-with-daniel-stauffacher-on-the-christchurch-tragedy/>



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