

1 Introduction

One autumn Friday in 2019 shortly after lunchtime, an Australian man Brenton Tarrant strapped a camera to his helmet, linked the feed to Facebook Live, and went on to carry out New Zealand's worst-ever terrorist attack. Inspired by far-right Islamophobia and white supremacism, the livestreamed attack eventually claimed the lives of fifty-one adults and children attending two mosques in the city of Christchurch, while leaving a further forty injured. Friday, March 15 became, in the words of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, "one of New Zealand's darkest days" and the perpetrator became New Zealand's first convicted terrorist. That day made history in another sense. The Christchurch attack, as it came to be known, was not the first terrorist attack to be livestreamed across social media to a global audience, but it was the first to go viral.

All terrorist attacks are to some degree performative, but the twenty-eight-year-old gunman went to extraordinary lengths to appeal to and engage an online global audience to spread his message of hatred and violence. Minutes before the Facebook livestream commenced, copies of his self-penned manifesto were linked to posts he made on social media platforms Twitter and 8chan. A URL to the livestream and words of encouragement to online followers were included so that others would access, share, and spread the attack in real time. The helmet camera resulted in nearly seventeen minutes of high-definition, point-of-view violence that purposefully replicated a first-person video game. A "backing track" made up of anti-Islamic songs, popular among the denizens of online far-right chat forums such as 4chan and 8chan, was played through a speaker strapped to a weapon. This was interspersed with instructional commentary as the attacker discussed the effectiveness of his weapons and attempted to glorify his violence through direct appeals to the audience. The weapons themselves were graffitied with symbols and phrases, such as "kebab killer," referring to popular online racist memes. Perhaps most revealingly, just before the attack the terrorist made a direct comment to the camera saying, "Remember lads, subscribe to PewDiePie," referencing Swedish YouTuber Felix Kjellberg. Kjellberg, who had been accused of using far-right material in his clips, was at the time the world's top-subscribed YouTuber and in a race with Bollywood music channel T-Series to be the first to reach 100 million subscribers (Dickson 2019).

As the attack took place, only a limited number of online followers encouraged and cheered on the attacker in real time (Lowe 2019). However, copies of the footage soon began to spread across digital media. In the first twenty-four hours after the attack, Facebook moderators removed 1.5 million uploads. At over two billion users, Facebook represents by far the biggest audience in

history. During the same period, YouTube removed tens of thousands of versions of the clip (it has not released exact numbers), many of them altered by users in an attempt to evade automated censor software. At one point, the number of new clips of the attack being uploaded to YouTube reached one per second, while hundreds of new accounts were created solely to share versions of the livestream. Some mainstream media also posted clips of the attack online, with six minutes of raw video footage being posted by Australian news.com.au showing the gunman driving on his way to the attack (Murrell 2019). Days after the attack, Facebook's former chief information security officer Alex Stamos posted on Twitter that searches surged as "millions of people are being told online and on TV that there is a video and a document that are too dangerous for them to see" (Bogle 2019).

In the wake of the Christchurch attack, governments and social media companies scrambled to address the danger that terrorism and violent extremism on the Internet supposedly pose to vulnerable audiences online. Internet service providers in New Zealand blocked access to lesser-regulated platforms such as 4chan, 8chan, and LiveLeak (Ilascu 2019), while Reddit banned the subreddits WatchPeopleDie and Gore due to their glorifying of the attacks. Australia introduced legislation fining platforms and potentially imprisoning their executives if they did not remove terrorist content; its Prime Minister stated that social media companies must "take every possible action to ensure their technology products are not exploited by murderous terrorists" (Fingas 2019). On the international stage, New Zealand and France led the Christchurch Call, a global effort to hold social media companies to account for promoting terrorism by eliminating terrorist and violent extremist content online. This was because "such content online has adverse impacts on the human rights of the victims, on our collective security and on people all over the world" (Christchurch Call n.d.). The New Zealand Classification Office (n.d.), in banning the livestream, was blunt about the dangers it believed were posed by online violent extremist material, stating that those "who are susceptible to radicalisation may well be encouraged or emboldened."

One year after the Christchurch attack, we, as academics at Macquarie University in New South Wales, the Australian state from which the attacker hailed, conducted focus groups with young people about their emotions and experiences when accessing terrorism and violent extremism online. Almost without exception these young people had accessed the Christchurch attack, either the full livestream or partial clips. What we saw was surprising. Instead of evidence for radicalisation, the young people we talked to revealed complex emotional responses and behaviours. For one participant, the attack was an affront to their online culture. They were shocked that their humour had been

Feeling Terrified?

3

appropriated by a terrorist, but this did not result in them abandoning their online culture:

Yeah, that [references the Christchurch attack] – and it ruined the humour behind the subscribe to PewDiePie. After that moment, I was just – or that humour about his subscribe to PewDiePie, let’s take over the world. Then I – it just – those jokes just weren’t really funny at all. I remember seeing that and that just completely really broke something for me and I was just like oh, this guy is gross. This guy has the same sort of humour as me. He has a similar culture, meme culture and stuff – humour, as me and he’s doing all those terrible things that moved me away from that meme culture, I guess. But obviously, I’m still into it, so, yeah, I was like woah.

This Element is about young people, online terrorism, and emotion. In it, we explore the issues of how young people consume violent extremist material in the digital era: how it makes them feel, what they do with this content and these feelings afterwards, and how they talk about it with friends and family. If the Christchurch attack was “engineered for maximum virality” (Warzel 2019), a design principle that has since been emulated by far-right extremists in El Paso (Zekulin 2019) and Singapore (Walden 2021), then this Element is about the generation who have been targeted as the online audience. Yet despite almost universal concern from a number of quarters, including parents, the media, government, and tech companies, there have been surprisingly few attempts to initiate conversations with young people themselves about their emotions and the effects on them of exposure to online terrorism and violent extremism. This is surprising given that so few of these young people actually become terrorists. There is a lot of concern in this space, but not a lot of conversation.

Emotions, Terrorism and the Audience

The incorporation of the word “terror” in terrorism, defined here as “the state of being terrified or extremely frightened; an instance or feeling of this” (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.), creates an inescapable relationship between the phenomenon of terrorism and emotion. Yet any study of emotions within the discipline of terrorism studies has been largely absent. In part this reflects a perspective of emotions as unconscious and beyond the control of an individual, and therefore problematising the presentation of terrorism as the product of rational decision-making (Crawford 2000, 124). Notable exceptions include studies by Neta Crawford and by David Wright-Neville and Debra Smith (Crawford 2000; Wright-Neville and Smith 2009). The distinction between positive and negative emotions has been shown by scholars within the history of emotions to be a function of history, with simple dichotomies restricting more

complex analysis (Solomon 2008). However, the binary demarcation of positive and negative emotions remains in use among scholars examining emotions in the context of violent extremism. This is reflected in the tendency of terrorism scholarship to focus on negative emotions both among victims (terror, hurt, fear) and among perpetrators (humiliation, anger, hate). The focus on these types of emotions, as will be discussed here, is certainly valid. However there remains the possibility that other emotions arise, including positive emotions such as love, happiness, relief, and compassion (Cottee and Hayward 2011, 975). Examining the intersection between emotion, social structures, political processes, and individual perceptions and/or behaviours can provide insights into the complex dynamics involved in processes of radicalisation to violent extremism (Wright-Neville and Smith 2009).

Although writing prior to the global dissemination of digital media, Neta Crawford's comments remain acutely relevant:

Just as emotions are labile, emotional relationships may be altered. So, the categorization of a group's emotional relationship to another group, and therefore the behaviours a group deems normatively obliged to enact, may change if empathy or antipathy are elicited through contact (Crawford 2000, 135).

Her statement reflects the critical requirement for systematic examination of the relationships between emotions, violent extremism, and digital media to understand how, why, and when online content may (or may not) contribute to processes of radicalisation to violence. By marginalising the role emotions play in violent extremism, we risk returning to a one-dimensional model of radicalisation that pitches the all-powerful violent extremist against the vulnerable and passive individual.

Examining the spectrum of emotions also provides insight into the emergence of the moral panic that has arisen in response to the presence of violent extremist content on digital media and the framing of youth audiences as particularly vulnerable. It helps to problematise the notion that "technical things have political qualities . . . and the claim that the machines . . . can embody specific forms of power and authority" (Winner 1996; Nahon 2015, 19). Prioritising emotions in this way demands a reconceptualisation of the complexity of this "vulnerable" audience while identifying opportunities to strengthen and develop resilience to violent extremism at an individual, group, and societal level.

Understanding the audience is key to any appreciation of how or why terrorists engage in violence the way that they do, and why, since the advent of digital media, terrorists themselves have been so dedicated to posting

Feeling Terrified?

5

violence online. According to most definitions, terrorism can usefully be thought of as an audience-focused performance of violence. The violent act is intended to create strong negative emotions (i.e., terror and fear) among those who are impacted by the violence, or who hear about it or view it through media reporting. Strategically, terrorism is a remarkably successful form of political violence due to this ability to cultivate widespread fear among an audience, particularly when this popular fear is then translated into demands for political elites to respond to the provocation in some way (Freedman 1983). Responses can include accommodating the terrorist's demands, that is, for political concessions such as the autonomy or emancipation of a group, or forms of unintended state overreaction that put further pressure on the society that is under attack (Altheide 2006). In this way, it is no exaggeration to say that terrorism is in essence a strategy of political violence that relies on the manipulation of negative emotions, particularly anxiety, fear, and terror, among an audience usually made up of the general public.

It is surprising therefore that, given the central role audience emotion plays in the success of terrorist strategy, there has been relatively little attention placed by terrorism researchers on the range of emotional responses felt by audiences who view media reporting of terrorist acts. As we will see, those studies that have been conducted have mostly been in relation to traditional media, particularly newspapers and television, and not the new media landscape characterised by the Internet, digital platforms, and social media (Aly 2017). The majority of academic considerations of the audiences of terrorist attacks have focused their analysis on various classifications of the audiences into types. These include the uncommitted versus the sympathetic (Wright 1991), immediate victims versus neutral groups (Schmid 2005), or government versus media (Matusitz 2012). Although useful for thinking about how terrorists perform their violence and frame their media so as to impact various groups, this research does not reveal the variety of emotional responses, perceptions, and responses held by audiences themselves to the terrorist content they consume.

What we do know is that emotions such as fear, anxiety, and even trauma are not uncommon audience reactions to terrorist violence, even when that exposure is purely through media reporting (Sinclair and Antonius 2012; Kiper and Sosis 2015). For years after the September 11, 2001, attacks by al-Qaeda, for example, polls showed terrorism remained the highest-ranking fear among American youth (Lyons 2005). Research on human subjects has demonstrated that media exposure to terrorist events can create audience fear and sympathy (Iyer and Oldmeadow 2006), depression, and anxiety (Norris, Kern, and Just 2003), as well as lingering posttraumatic stress (in this case among children) (Pfefferbaum et al. 2003). This is despite the fact that the high levels of fear

engendered by terrorism are usually disproportionate to the actual risks terrorism poses in Western countries, certainly when compared with other less sensationalised dangers such as homicides, domestic violence, or traffic accidents (Matusitz 2012).

Indeed, research on audiences who have been exposed to terrorist violence through traditional media show that media saturation following a terrorist attack can result in “mean world” syndrome whereby audiences overestimate the risk of becoming the victim of terrorism and demonstrate an irrational desire for overprotection (Matusitz 2012). This overreaction to negative emotions has been shown to manifest as a form of catastrophising in which audience members feel either increased aggression towards out-groups, particularly when they share the same religion or ethnicity as the terrorists (Kiper and Sosis 2015), or an opposite fear that encourages capitulation to terrorist demands (Iyer et al. 2015). This ability of media exposure to terrorism to create fear, anxiety, anger, aggression, and prejudice towards an out-group has been shown to be more pronounced than in media about other forms of crime (Shoshani and Slone 2008; Nellis and Savage 2012).

The type of media through which terrorism is experienced also plays a role in how audiences respond. Sensationalised and tabloid news coverage has been shown, for example, to lead to the adoption of more negative emotions and hawkish foreign policy positions among American subjects (Gadarian 2010). These effects have also found to increase when exposure is through a visual medium such as television, and especially when graphic and evocative imagery is used (Gadarian 2014). Vergani (2018) found that terrorism is perceived as more threatening by audiences living in countries dominated by market-oriented commercial and tabloid media. He suggests this is due to commercial media’s focus on entertainment and on arousing the emotions and passions of viewers, in part through sensationalising terrorist events. This contrasts with public-oriented media that emphasises factual non-emotive reporting, which correspondingly results in an audience that feel less terrified and threatened by anxieties about terrorism.

The research that we refer to above has tended to focus on traditional, rather than digital, media. It assumes viewers that are relatively passive and view news through traditional mediums such as print and broadcast media. However, in the digital environment there is a fundamental shift in the nature of audience responses and in how people expect to and do interact with media on different platforms and in differing contexts. Using these platforms, it is well-established that audiences become both consumers and producers of content. They are, in other words, part of the process of interacting with and disseminating content (variously termed “prosumers” or “producers”), as a form of entertainment and

social engagement (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010; Bruns 2007). Indeed, research on how audiences receive terrorism content online, on how it makes them feel and act, is conspicuously missing (Aly 2017). Hence, most commentary about how online audiences experience terrorist content, or even become radicalised to violence, only speculates on the nature and extent of their impressions and how they are influenced. As noted by Aly (2017) this sort of commentary is “often based on an assumption that the violent extremist narrative works like a magic bullet to radicalise audiences already vulnerable and predisposed to becoming violent.”

In part, this assumption about the dangers of exposure to online terrorist content and the vulnerability of audiences reflects the application of a media-effects theory framework in understanding how exposure to digital media may lead to radicalisation to violence. A foundational theorist of the media-effects school of thought was Albert Bandura, a Canadian-American psychologist who used social science experiments to demonstrate that, by observing behaviours, people – and particularly children – learn to model behaviours and emotions. This model was then cross-applied to the theory that, by watching and absorbing media of various forms, vulnerable groups would be stimulated to mimic the behaviour and would be effectively desensitized. The best-known critic of this framework for understanding how people, and particularly young people, respond to media stimuli, including violent video games, is David Gauntlett, a British sociologist and media studies theorist. In his influential essay, *Ten Things Wrong with the Media “Effects” Model*, he argues that reputable criminologists consistently rank media engagement as one of the least influential factors among the causes of real-world violence (Gauntlett 1998). He notes that media effects studies are consistently conducted in artificial laboratory type settings which ignore the multiple factors that influence how and why media consumers view material and the role that their pre-existing values and cultural and socio-economic backgrounds and experiences play in those interactions. Indeed, in their systematic review of protective and risk factors for radicalisation, Wolfowicz et al. (2020) noted the limited effect of direct and passive exposure to violent media in generating risks associated with radicalisation (Wolfowicz et al. 2020).

Overall, despite the shocking nature of terrorist violence going viral online, and the very clear strategy used by groups and individuals such as the so-called Islamic State and the Christchurch attacker in hijacking the Internet and social media to spread their propaganda, we still know very little about how this material affects young people. Assumptions taken from the field of terrorism research and traditional media-effects theory suggest that the primary emotional response to this material must be terror, or something like it, and that the result

must be trauma or even radicalisation to violence. However, we do not know if these assumptions are valid, particularly in the context of the blended online environments through which young people increasingly inhabit and mediate their social relationships. This Element, and the research that informs it, explore this new environment through the voices and experiences of young people themselves.

The Research Project

The genesis of this research came about in early 2015. That year saw a rapid rise in concern among the government, the media, and the general public about the dangers the Internet posed to young people who were being increasingly exposed to violent extremism online, particularly through digital media. The succeeding twenty-four months became something of a watershed for fears about the confluence of terrorism, the Internet, and “vulnerable” youth. The so-called Islamic State (IS) had commenced a global online media campaign that was tech-savvy, aimed at youth, and beginning to result in large numbers of people – often young people – leaving their homes to join IS’s self-styled caliphate (Bergin et al. 2015). Others, once connected to the extensive and well-funded online IS networks, were remaining home and supporting the group in other ways: as financiers, recruiters, propagandists, or even as violent actors. Around this core of terrorists and their supporters a larger, grayer area was coalescing; this was made up of IS “fanboys” and “fangirls” using the Internet and social media to create and spread violent and extreme pro-Islamic State memes, songs and video games (Winter 2015). At the same time, schools began to report an emergent phenomenon of “Jihadi cool” among students, a transgressive subculture adopted by rebellious youth, sometimes as young as primary school age (Cottee 2015). It is not surprising that increasingly frantic questions began to be asked by concerned parents, teachers, politicians, and national security practitioners about the vulnerability of youth on the Internet. Was a whole generation being radicalised overnight via their mobile phones and social media accounts? In this climate of uncertainty and fear, there was no shortage of terrorism commentators and instant experts warning that online violent extremism presented a new and sinister threat that adults and established security agencies were completely unequipped to counter (Burke 2015).

As academic researchers working in the fields of terrorism studies and media studies, we began to ask questions about this phenomenon. Just what is the role of the Internet in creating terrorists? In particular, how exactly was online violent extremist content received, interpreted, and processed by young people themselves? Why, given the volume and frequency of engagement with this type of

Feeling Terrified?

9

content, were so many young people *not* becoming radicalised to violent extremism? It was clear that there were major gaps in our understanding of terrorism and the Internet regarding the role and influence of online violent extremist messaging on the phenomenon of radicalisation. While literature in the field acknowledged that the Internet played some part in radicalisation processes for some people and in some circumstances, there was little actual evidence to support assumptions of causality between young people accessing online violent extremist content and becoming radicalised to violent extremism (Von Behr et al. 2013).

As concern about online youth radicalisation grew, and as Islamic State’s propaganda was joined – and then superseded – by online far-right violence and extremism, one thing became increasingly apparent: for all the attention given by the media and government to this problem nobody was asking young people (Frissen 2021). Their experiences navigating these difficult online spaces, and their own ideas about what constituted “violent” and “extreme” content, were not being recorded or considered. Nor were their emotional responses and strategies of coping. Here we present our research with young people reflecting and talking about how they navigate violent extremist material online, how it makes them feel, what they do with these emotions afterwards, how they talk about them with friends and adults, and their experiences of the contested process of radicalisation. Through this, we hope to reinsert the voices and experiences of young people into a debate that has not gone away but that has only intensified over the succeeding years.

The young people who generously gave us their time and trust to discuss their experiences, during what became an increasingly anxious time as Covid-19 made its mark on Australian campuses, are referred to as “participants” throughout. Quotations from participants are in general verbatim, although some minor modifications were made at times and when necessary for purposes of anonymity. Numeric references are used to indicate a discussion between different participants within a single focus group, while all other quotes reflect comments from a single participant.

Definitions

The arguments presented below rely on two key terms – “violent extremism” and “digital media.” Our definitions for these complex and contested phenomena are set out here.

Violent Extremism

There is little consensus in the literature as to the definition of violent extremism. Its popularity in academic and policy circles arose in part to address the

intrinsic relationship between terrorism and the politics of power. The term has found itself intertwined with political narratives of power, exclusion, and control, and as such is drowning in definitional complexity (Elzain 2008, 10). We use the definition of extremism by J. M. Berger who in turn draws on social psychological theories of social identity (Berger 2018). Reflecting the findings of the work presented here, this definition is centred on the primacy of social relationships and the tendency of these to generate distinctions between in-groups and out-groups based on perceived social connections. These differences are not necessarily problematic and, as Berger notes, are often celebrated within pluralistic societies. Violent extremism occurs when an out-group is systematically demonised and positioned as an acute crisis for the survival of the in-group, necessitating decisive and hostile action against the out-group (Berger 2018, 121–122).

The work of Manus Midlarsky (2011) provides a theoretical model for why an out-group may be framed as a threat to the survival of an in-group, and how this can lead to the creation of extremist social movements willing to perpetrate violence and murder. Midlarsky argues that a loss of political and social authority by an in-group can lead to deeply felt perceptions of injustice and mass emotions of anger, shame, and humiliation. This shared perception by the in-group opens a cognitive window allowing dehumanisation, violence, and even the extermination of those considered to be the problem. Although Midlarsky's framework relies on a consideration of the shared emotions of masses, rather than the emotions of individuals and their contribution to collective social movements, it remains useful in keeping us alert to the foundational emotional drivers of violent extremism and terrorism.

Online violent extremist content may be expressed in multiple ways, drawing on humour, satire, glorification, and deniability to attract and speak to different audiences. However, underpinning all these variations is a commitment to a polarised way of viewing the world that is intolerant to dissent. It is a view of the world whereby the survival of the in-group requires the destruction of the out-group.

Digital Media

In the focus groups we conducted, the environment under examination was usually referred to as “social media” with the unspoken assumption this covered social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok as well as tools such as Google and Wikipedia. However, it became increasingly clear that participants engaged with traditional legacy media sources such as newspapers and television through online mediums. These mediums in turn were far more