Cyclical Violence: Brenton Tarrant's Christchurch Mosque Attacks and the Role of Social Media

in Radicalization and Encouraging Extremism

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"I am just a regular White man, from a regular family. Who decided to take a stand to ensure a future for my people."[1] This is how Brenton Tarrant describes himself in the introduction of his 74 page white nationalist manifesto, "The Great Replacement." Taken out of the necessary context used when discussing Tarrant, his claim of normalcy might seem convincing. He was born in New South Wales, Australia, where he lived until graduating from high school with a barely passing grade. Having no interest in furthering his education, Tarrant worked as a physical trainer in his hometown until about 2012 when he began visiting Europe and Asia, paying for his travels with money he had gained from cryptocurrency investments. Tarrant then moved to Andersons Bay, New Zealand, where neighbors described him as reclusive but friendly, saying that he had offered them assistance in maintaining the property.

But this was all a facade. Beneath the surface of mediocrity was a violent, hateful, xenophobic extremist. On his trips to Europe, Tarrant had become infatuated with visiting the sites where the Christian empires of Europe had once battled with the Muslim empires. His infatuation soon developed into an obsession. In 2016, Tarrant began researching terror attacks perpetrated by Muslims against Europeans, comparing the ancient holy wars between empires to what he saw as a contemporary clash of civilizations between Muslims and Christians.

Around the same time, Tarrant became active in alt-right and white nationalist forums on social media platforms where he could remain anonymous, such as 8chan, Reddit, 4chan, and even publicly accessible websites like Facebook and Twitter. It was in these digital communities that Tarrant expressed his Islamophobic sentiments, arguing that Muslims were invaders occupying European land, that the two races/religions could not peacefully coexist, and that all

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[1] Tarrant, Brenton, "The Great Replacement," accessed April 20, 2020, 7.

of this amounted to evidence of white genocide. His resentment was echoed by other participants in the forums.

Days before what would come to be one of the darkest periods in New Zealand's history, Tarrant released his 74-page manifesto on Twitter and 8chan and made ambiguous remarks about an impending attack, encouraging his online communities to tune into his Facebook livestream on March 15th, 2019. On that horrific day, during the Friday prayer at two Christchurch mosques, Tarrant stormed in with five guns, including an AR-15 style weapon and two shotguns, killing 51 worshippers and injuring 49. All 26 minutes of the video were captured on Tarrant's GoPro which was simultaneously live streaming the attack on his Facebook.[2] Tarrant's online communities disseminated the video accompanied by messages legitimizing and honoring his attack. The video was recorded and reuploaded onto Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Reddit, 8chan, and other social media platforms where 1.5 million copies circulated for weeks before content moderators could remove them.[3]

In the time that the recorded video of the attack was online, millions upon millions of people viewed it. The news cycle was dominated by details of the attacks for weeks and terms such as "white supremacy," "white extremism," and "Muslim immigration" became buzzwords for media outlets. News organizations, politicians, and law enforcement alike were quick to point to the lack of adequate censorship and online community monitoring as responsible for the dispersion of the video on social media platforms. But what is to be said about social media's role in the actual attack? Tarrant was a member of a plethora of alt-right and white supremacist groups on these platforms, but critics of the use of social media seem to focus on the platforms'

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[2] Fagnoni, Filipo, "Terrorism in the Digital Era: The Dark Side of Livestreaming, Online Content and Internet Subcultures," *Masters of Media*, University of Amsterdam, September 22, 2019.
[3] Fagnoni, "Terrorism in the Digital Era."

reactionary policies, not the lack of proactive effort to monitor these communities and eliminate hateful and threatening speech. Tarrant had been posting and interacting with extremist messages on these forums years before the events of March 15th, 2019, but as explained above, no red flags appeared at any point and Tarrant was perceived as normal. Did these online communities encourage, radicalize, or even enable the Christchurch attacks?

The streaming and publicization of the Christchurch mosque shootings serve as an example of the inadequacy of censorship tools on social media platforms, which has provided breathing spaces for radical communities to disseminate propaganda and garner support for their ideologies. Violence portrayed in videos and photos of instances like Christchurch's normalize brutality, desensitize the throngs of spectators to real disasters, and ultimately serve to amplify the fringe ideologies of extremists. But groups that publicize videos like Tarrant's need an audience if they are to promote their viewpoints. This is where we, the observant bystanders, come in. Terrorists utilize our culture's insatiable craving for media relating to violence, hijacking the news cycle to propagate their views.

Digital media and the advent of social media has given a voice and a community for violent extremists to express their grievances openly, however irrational, which ensures broad viewing of the perpetrators' message. While public discourse concerning issues of "Muslim invaders" or "white genocide" would meet fierce opposition and even repression, digital communities lack this check because of anonymity. Without the ability to attach ideas to their owners, opposition, when it does exist, can be dismissed and mocked because there is no mechanism for accountability. Once a community united by a central ideology is created, the lack of accountability and opposition allows hate speech and extremism to fester. Filipo Fagnoni, in his piece "Terrorism in the Digital Era: The Dark Side of Livestreaming, Online Content and

Internet Subcultures," notes that "These forums that encourage violent content and their distribution within internet subcultures not only conserve the very foundation of extremist ideas, but they constantly harbor their development."[4]

These digital communities empower individuals to perpetrate violence as lone actors to draw attention to their political agendas. In the face of international counterterrorism measures, extremists have had to adapt to maintain support and deliver their messages. In his article, "The Age of Selfie Jihad: How Evolving Media Technology is Changing Terrorism," Jason Burke claims "Lone actors now have much greater capability to create and broadcast material than they did a decade ago, while extremist groups can contact and interact with potential recruits with much greater ease."[5] The transition to online communications and dissemination, although forced, might have actually bolstered extremist groups' ability to captivate an audience by removing the prerequisite of appealing to news organizations and the media. Fillipo Fagnoni observes that the creation of online communities has permitted extremist groups to "amplify any personal message with the general public at large, instantly, without restrictions."[6] The question then becomes how to effectively transmit a message that will circulate to all corners of the internet and the media.

To achieve broad viewership, extremist groups use methods called 'attention hacking,' described by Fagnoni as "calculated use of social media, memes, and bots."[7] Utilizing social media platforms' content algorithms, extremists can avoid censorship and even manipulate the algorithms to "put a spotlight on this type of content."[8] Provocative or downright fabricated ideas

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[4] Fagnoni, "Terrorism in the Digital Era."
[5] Burke, Jason, "The Age of Selfie Jihad: How Evolving Media Technology is Changing Terrorism," Combatting Terrorism Center, *CTCSentinel*, West Point University, December, 2016.
[6] Fagnoni, "Terrorism in the Digital Era."
[7] Fagnoni, "Terrorism in the Digital Era."
[8] Fagnoni, "Terrorism in the Digital Era."

and (fake) news thus permeate through the platforms, luring viewers to further investigate extremist ideologies disguised as substantiated. When it comes to attention hacking, nothing quite entrances viewers like visual media.

As Graham Macklin points out in "The Christchurch Attacks: Livestream Terror in the Viral Video Age," Tarrant's choice to livestream and record the attacks was an integral part of spreading his message.[9] Macklin says, "It is already apparent that although Tarrant acted alone, he was sustained by, and interacted with, a broader sub-cultural online environment that was electrified by his atrocity, as he knew it would be."[10] Blogs or other text posts in these niche communities might not explode beyond the confines of its original page, but, as Macklin notes, photos and videos are different; "In filming his rampage and posting it online, Tarrant grasped intuitively that digital technology could and would amplify his murderous message, ensuring its projection far beyond the cloistered confines of the 8chan sub-thread on which it originated."[11] Tarrant used a GoPro to film his attacks, giving it a first-person shooter video game feel. Tarrant didn't just want to kill worshiping Muslims, he wanted to produce a video of someone killing worshiping Muslims, thus igniting the internet and providing a platform for his ideologies. Macklin deduces that "In filming his rampage and posting it online, Tarrant grasped intuitively that digital technology could and would amplify his murderous message, ensuring its projection far beyond the cloistered confines of the 8chan sub-thread on which it originated."[12]

Visual media is so effective for attention hacking because people are naturally attracted to videos and images depicting tragedy and our media's culture incentivizes displaying dramatic

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[9] Macklin, Graham, "The Christchurch Attacks: Livestream Terror in the Viral Video Age," Combatting Terrorism Center, *CTCSentinel*, West Point University, July, 2019.
[10] Macklin, Graham, "The Christchurch Attacks."
[11] Macklin, Graham, "The Christchurch Attacks."
[12] Macklin, Graham, "The Christchurch Attacks."

visuals. Extremists take advantage of people's incessant craving for dramatic imagery to bolster their own platforms. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag examines how people's appetite for dramatic and devastating images drives the media and how images shape our understanding of the world.[13] Sontag argues that "The hunt for more dramatic images drives the photographic enterprise, and is part of the normality of a culture in which shock has become a leading stimulus of consumption and source of value."[14] The shock value referenced by Sontag has dangerous repercussions considering that "Something becomes real - to those who are elsewhere, following it as 'news' - by being photographed."[15] This means that if someone is trying to spread a message, the best way to do it is to provide dramatic imagery as it solidifies and becomes ingrained in the viewer's memory. As explained by Sontag, "The very notion of atrocity, of war crime, is associated with the expectation of photographic evidence."[16] Sontag also contends that "It seems that the appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain is as keen, almost, as the desire for ones that show bodies naked,"[17] further incentivizing both the media and extremists to produce graphic imagery. Sontag goes as far as to say that our desire to see human suffering is borderline voyeuristic. In essence, our culture's innate and complex attraction to images of dramatic brutality encourages the media to search for visual media that shocks and entrances the viewers. Unfortunately, this system is susceptible to hijacking by extremists who can make their cause seem 'real' and draw attention to their ideologies by producing imagery with shock value, as Tarrant did in filming his attacks. The news cycle revolved around his attacks and their ideological inspiration for weeks.

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[13] Sontag, Susan, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, New York: Picador.
[14] Sontag, 23.
[15] Sontag, 21.
[16] Sontag, 83.
[17] Sontag, 41.

Exposure to such graphic imagery is dangerous though, as it can desensitize viewers or normalize violence for political gain, both of which make violent behavior more likely among spectators. For the fanatics and those especially enthralled with violent imagery, exposure to videos like Tarrant's can also radicalize spectators. In reference to desensitization, Sontag says "Imagery that would have had an audience cringing and recoiling in disgust forty years ago is watched without so much as a blink by every teenager in the multiplex."[18] Rowell Huesmann, in his amalgamation of psychological studies pertaining to viewing violence titled "The Impact of Electronic Media Violence: Scientific Theory and Research," adds that "Repeated exposures to emotionally activating media or video games can lead to habituation of certain natural emotional reactions… Negative emotions experienced automatically by viewers in response to a particular violent or gory scene decline in intensity after many exposures."[19]

Desensitization diminishes our understanding and sympathy to victims of violence and reduces our emotional disgust to acts of violence, ultimately undermining the suffering of others. The lack of emotional response to horrendous instances of brutality thus diverts our attention to the practical and political aspects of attacks, putting a spotlight on the ideological stance of the perpetrators. Observing violence also makes aggression more likely and can make people accommodate violence as if it was legitimate. Huesmann reflects that "Those who watch the violent clips tend to behave more aggressively than those who view non-violent clips, and they adopt beliefs that are more 'accepting' of violence."[20] The relationship between viewing violence and becoming prone to committing violent acts is described by Huesmann as observational learning, which he describes as "children encode in memory social scripts to guide behavior

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[18] Sontag, 101.
[19] Huesmann, Rowell, "The Impact of Electronic Media Violence: Scientific Theory and Research," US National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health, June 30, 2009.
[20] Huesmann, "The Impact of Electronic Media Violence."

through observation of family, peers, community, and mass media. Consequently, observed behaviors are imitated long after they are observed."[21] Viewing violence can also translate to perpetrating violence through a process called mimicry, which Huesmann explains as "Observation of specific social behaviors around them increases the likelihood of children behaving exactly that way."[22] Huesmann also stipulates that if viewers identify with the perpetrator or if the violence displayed is rewarded, or at least doesn't show punishment, the likelihood that observational learning will occur is higher.[23]

Lack of responsible, effective censorship and community monitoring combined with our culture's demand for stimulating, dramatic imagery has created the perfect set of circumstances for extremists to project their twisted ideologies across the webosphere. Unregulated anonymous social media pages act as an incubation chamber for extremist ideologies to solidify and indoctrinate others through attention hacking and promote the use of violence to achieve political recognition. The publicization of violence in these communities and beyond desensitizes viewers and propagates the use of violence as a tool. In this way, social media extremism is self-referential as it encourages violence by honoring past acts of extremist political violence, thus encouraging others to follow the path of the deceased or imprisoned political 'martyrs.' And when the media reports on such instances, attention turns to the social media communities that instigated the violence which offers them yet another opportunity to broaden their support base. The summation of all of these factors is a cycle of increasingly violent extremist action and political radicalization, fueled by our culture's insatiable appetite for viewing tragedy.

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[21] Huesmann, "The Impact of Electronic Media Violence."
[22] Huesmann, "The Impact of Electronic Media Violence."
[23] Huesmann, "The Impact of Electronic Media Violence."

Brenton Tarrant's rampage and the ensuing media coverage, publicization of his livestream, and the republishing of his manifesto are testimonies to the aforementioned vicious cycle of political violence. But there is hope. If social media platforms constrain anonymity and install mechanisms of accountability to producers of content, then extremism is cut off at the roots. This is not to say that legitimate freedom of expression should be censored, but if ideas are attached to their owners, the range of preposterous political expressions will severely decrease as public shaming and opposition to extremism discourage radicalism. If somebody isn't willing to express their opinion openly from fear of repercussions, why should we give them a community in which there are no repercussions? Social media accountability would shine light into the darkest crevices of the internet and force those individuals who would rather their opinions remain unattributed face reality, opposition, and most importantly, the victims of violence that they have promoted.

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