

‘Curly-Haired Kid to Killer’: Australian newspaper coverage of the Christchurch terrorist attacks

Australian white supremacist Brenton Tarrant murdered 51 people and injured 49 when he attacked Muslim worshippers performing their Friday prayer in two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand on March 15, 2019.

A Facebook live broadcast set up by Tarrant was the very first “reporting” on the attacks. Social media platforms found it impossible to take every copy of the video offline given the significant number that circulated. Decisions in newsrooms across the world about coverage of the two mass shootings proved to be challenging.

This article examines the coverage of three major Australian newspapers—the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the *Australian* and the *Herald Sun*. My analysis shows that:

- The perpetrator was often labelled as a “terrorist” but there was a direct comparison of white supremacy with Islamic extremism that did not take into account the complexity of each phenomenon
- The personal stories of victims were told, but there was too much attention paid to the perpetrator’s personal hardships and problems
- Media did not generally reflect on, or take responsibility for, the structural causes of hate crimes against Muslims

A search for the word “Christchurch” in the three newspapers between March 16 and March 18, 2019 returned 131 results: 52 from the *Herald Sun*, 52 from the *Australian* and 27 from the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Fifty-four results were excluded from the dataset because of duplication and because some of the articles only referred to the attacks in passing. Letters from readers were not included. The text for the content analysis was gathered from both the Gale Academic OneFile and the ProQuest Central databases. This provided a dataset of 77 available articles: 16 opinion pieces, three editorials and 58 news articles. All the articles were then coded to explore the most recurring themes in the coverage.

I categorised all the pieces in my dataset by theme. The three most frequent themes were: the perpetrator’s backstory (14 percent); criticism of social media companies (11 percent); and victims’ stories (11 percent). Only two stories, an editorial and an

opinion piece in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, encouraged reflection and discussion of structural causes of hate crimes against Muslims. Further, three opinion pieces, two in the *Australian* and one in the *Herald Sun*, were a face-value comparison between white supremacy and Islamic extremism, which did not take into account the complexity of each phenomenon.

Attention to victims

Unlike the findings of a recent comparative study, the content analysis for this article shows that the three publications gave a considerable amount of attention to the victims and survivors of the attacks. This study looked at the Australian and New Zealand media coverage of the Christchurch attacks, concluding that Australian media did not apply a 'proximity filter' to its coverage, which resulted in less empathetic reportage. The *Herald Sun* and the *Australian* in particular were criticised for what was perceived as a graphic, "bloodthirsty" coverage.

The findings of this research show that nine out of 77 articles told the stories of the victims, reflecting an empathetic attitude towards them. For example, an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* titled "Victims from all walks of life and corners of globe" told the personal stories of many of the victims. Also, an article from the *Herald Sun* titled "I've lost my little boy, he's just turned 14" described the loss and grief experienced by some of the survivors. Several articles told stories of heroism relating to some of the worshippers and passers-by who attempted to stop the attacker. For instance, a story titled "You are our hero, you saved our lives" in the *Sydney Morning Herald* described how an Australian managed to chase Tarrant away.

Both the *Australian* and the *Herald Sun* removed the option for readers to comment to avoid hate speech. The *Herald Sun* described their decision as "what responsible organisations who serve their community do". The *Sydney Morning Herald* published letters from readers, which reflected solidarity and empathy. However, the Australian press coverage of the attacks was problematic on other levels.

Who is a terrorist?

Since the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States in 2001, Islamic extremism has been perceived as *the* threat to Western democracies, which has rendered it the focus of intelligence agencies and de-radicalisation programs.

Interviews with New Zealand's security practitioners revealed that militant jihadism was "a prevailing focus" of New Zealand's security agencies. In this context, terrorism legislation "allowed them the ability to improvise against jihadist threats, but less so against others". The interviewees blamed the media for influencing how security agencies assessed risks and despite being aware of that impact, security practitioners said they were incapable of reversing it. According to them, the media is capable of exercising "an unduly large influence over public opinion and government action".

In the Australian press coverage of the Christchurch attacks, the use of terms like "terrorism" and "terrorist" varied from one newspaper to another. An opinion piece in the *Herald Sun* titled "Fools aiding spread of hate", used strong words, such as "terrorism" and "terrorist" to describe the attacks and the attacker. However, in a news article titled "Disciples of hate inspired killer" in the *Australian*, the writer stated that "terrorism was not Bryant's motivation", and for no obvious reason the writer mentioned in the next paragraph a terrorist attack committed by Palestinian militants from the Black September group in the 1972 Olympics in Munich. In an opinion piece published by the *Sydney Morning Herald* titled "Australian police forces must track hate crimes", the writer recognised the growing threat of right-wing extremism, but described Islamic fundamentalism as "the larger threat". Such a perception can be misleading and dangerous because it might result in diverting valuable attention and resources away from monitoring right-wing extremism. The experiences of other countries as well as the rise of a number of neo-Nazi groups in Australia suggest a need for taking the threat of white supremacist violence more seriously. According to recent research, for instance, since 9/11, right-wing violence has claimed more victims on US soil than Islamic extremism.

Some of the stories examined seemed to foster fear of retaliation. The theme of preventing a retaliatory attack by Islamic extremists appeared in a news article and an opinion piece in the *Australian* with very similar wording. "The Christchurch murders will be a powerful recruitment tool for jihadists," read one article. "[T]he Christchurch murders will be a great recruitment tool for Islamist terrorists," read the other. Instead of encouraging society and policy makers to look for the root causes of hate crimes against Muslims, the article seemed to be encouraging tighter security measures and perpetuating the perception of the Muslim community as a potential source of threat.

A terrorist with a back-story

All the details of Tarrant's terrorist attacks were well planned: from choosing the location of his crime to livestreaming the attacks on Facebook. As outlined in his so-called manifesto named "The Great Replacement", Tarrant made the decision to kill Muslims two years before the actual attack. New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern stated Tarrant legally acquired the guns after being granted a standard gun licence. On the guns, he inscribed the names of other white supremacists and historical figures who fought against Muslims. Ideas such as taking revenge against Islam and treating mass immigration as a threat to white people were also expressed in the manifesto inspired by the writings of Anders Breivik, the terrorist behind the 2011 attacks in Norway. Tarrant also reportedly donated to non-violent white supremacist groups in Australia, Austria and France. Clearly, there was an ideology behind the atrocities he committed.

Despite all of the above, the Australian press coverage I examined failed to concentrate on the ideological causes of hate crimes against Muslims in favour of stories about Tarrant's family and other personal details, publishing 12 backgrounders on this type of subject matter. The *Australian* and the *Herald Sun* portrayed the attacker as an ordinary person who became a villain because of personal tragedies. This fits into a wider pattern of media coverage which humanises white extremists only. "The media describes their childhood and shows us their graduation photos, not their mug shots," wrote Professor of Law Caroline Mala Corbin about media portrayal of white terrorists.

A recent study suggests that the attention paid to Tarrant and his manifesto was equal to that paid to the victims, which resonates with the findings of this article. The undeserved attention given to the terrorist and his family tragedies should have been turned from him onto the victims and the growing threat of right-wing extremism. Three out of the 12 backgrounders on the attacker contained excerpts from his manifesto. Also, three news articles described graphic details of the livestreamed video of the attacks. Circulating either the manifesto or the video was banned in New Zealand. Australian newspapers should have followed suit by refraining from publishing material deemed objectionable elsewhere to limit the spread of Tarrant's messages of hate.

A news article in the *Herald Sun* was published under the headline "Attacks drove extremist killer", in which attacks by Islamic extremists were portrayed as Tarrant's

motivation. Another news article titled “Curly-haired kid to killer” provided detail of his background, including interviews with his schoolmates and neighbours. In one of the interviews, Tarrant’s family was described as a “good Catholic family”. In another news article titled “Extreme action”, Tarrant’s grandmother was quoted saying that he “had never been the same since finding his father dead from suicide in 2010”. She also mentioned how she had advised other family members to take him to counselling. Another news article about Tarrant was published in the *Australian* under the title “Bullied teen turned to extremism”, where attention was paid to Tarrant’s upbringing, his family, and his obsession with video games.

Despite its more balanced coverage, the *Sydney Morning Herald* also ran two backgrounders on Tarrant. A news article titled “Family of Tarrant apologises to victims” contained quotes of Tarrant’s grandmother describing him as “an ordinary chap” who totally changed from the boy she had known. Another news article in the same publication titled “Killer’s manifesto obsessed with white supremacy over Muslims” contained excerpts from the manifesto, suggesting that “there is little in the document to suggest an explanation for his evil actions lies in some direct experience of the country or its politics”. Such statements dismiss the importance of an overdue discussion on right-wing extremism in Australia.

Despite the extensive attention paid to the personal tragedies of the attacker in the same newspaper, an opinion piece in the *Herald Sun* titled “Fools aiding spread of hate” dismissed the arguments about prejudice and negative stereotypes as catalysts for hate crimes as “sob stories about marginalisation”. Those who raised the significance of alienating political rhetoric were described as “unscrupulous ghouls who want to use this massacre to settle personal scores and attack their ideological opponents.” Public figures who called for the root causes of Islamophobia to be addressed were harshly criticised. Well-known Australian media commentator, Waleed Aly, for example, was described as a “hypocrite” in an article in the *Australian*.

In an extended Twitter thread, Australian writer and former media presenter Yassmin Abdel-Magied said the attacks came as a result of othering, scapegoating and demonising Muslims in the West. Her arguments were dismissed as “blame games” in an article in the *Australian* titled “Be wary of blame and let’s not shut down debate”. In the same article, the writer claimed intolerance remained on the fringes rather than within the mainstream. The contextual reasons behind Islamophobic attacks were trivialised and dismissed again:

Home-grown extremists come in many forms today; local soil may or may not explain radicalisation. Rather, it is the ubiquity of ugly ideologies enabled by digital technology that has spawned the globalisation of extremism.

According to this line of reasoning, hate crimes can happen anywhere anytime and there are no issues specific to the Australian context that need to be addressed.

This idea of right-wing extremism being on the fringes of politics was challenged in an opinion piece in the *Sydney Morning Herald* titled “Broken white men and their terror fuelled by racist media”:

It was only a decade or two ago that anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant extremists such as [Candace] Owens existed only on the fringe of the media landscape or the corners of the dark web, but today, particularly in the age of Trump, Brexit and the return of ultra-nationalism, they have moved to the mainstream, enjoying platforms on major television networks.

This opinion piece and an editorial from the *Sydney Morning Herald* titled “Reject hatred and intolerance” are the only articles in my dataset which highlight the role of political discourse on issues like religion and immigration in fuelling intolerance and hate crimes. The *Sydney Morning Herald* editorial criticised “flagrant and irresponsible attempts to foster fear to win votes”.

Deflecting blame

Eleven percent of the articles analysed, mostly in the *Herald Sun* and *The Australian*, highlighted the responsibility of digital technology in spreading hate speech and extremist ideas. The *Sunday Herald Sun* editorial on March 17, 2019 harshly criticised companies, such as Google and Facebook:

They broadcast an act of evil, and aided and abetted that evil. There must be a day of reckoning for these faceless behemoths. Google and Facebook are parasites who build nothing of consequence and destroy that which matters.

Similarly, an opinion piece in the *Australian* titled “Challenge for centre-right to rise against this repellent ideology” made the argument that extremism across the political spectrum “flowers in abundance on the net.” Another opinion piece in the same publication titled “Shared hatred of fanatics” defined “the problem” as the existence of “various fanatical and bigoted ideological movements abroad in the

world using 21st-century technologies to propagate their beliefs and mobilise their brownshirts and assassins - of which radical white supremacism is one". Referring to extremists, another commentator wrote in the *Australian*: "These people will thrive in the dark woods of the internet, echo-chambers nurturing their hatred and bigotry away from logical argument."

Interestingly, there is no mention at all of the role of the mainstream media in manufacturing and reproducing prejudice and stereotypes. There is a lack of reflection on the role of anti-Muslim rhetoric generally in media, and from some political leaders, in inciting hate and violence. Apart from the two articles mentioned earlier, there seems to be a total denial of the role of what is sometimes called "everyday discrimination" as a "part of the structural causes of hate crime".

Comparing Islamic extremism with white supremacy

Two opinion pieces in the *Herald Sun* and one in the *Australian* directly compared Islamic extremism and white supremacy. In the *Herald Sun* story titled "Attack fans more hate", Tarrant's manifesto was compared to Bin Laden's "Letter to the American People". The two documents were described as "matching". The opinion piece in the *Australian* titled "Shared hatred of fanatics" read:

The psychological type is familiar enough and can be found in all countries and cultures at different times. Such individuals may become terrorists, or fascist thugs, jihadist maniacs, common criminals or secret policemen and torturers. James Fallon's book 'The Psychopath Inside' is worth reading in this regard.

In the same article, the writer argued that "Islam did expand by force of arms" and that "Muslim slave traders from the 7th century all the way to the 19th and they did enslave millions of Europeans". The author wrote that "Muslim imperialism...threatened the European world" and that "crusades were a sideshow and a largely unsuccessful pushback against the Muslim conquest", describing these controversial statements as "basic history".

Making the argument that all forms of extremism are similar is simplistic and can be misleading because it does not help contextualise each phenomenon and understand it thoroughly. It can also interfere with an adequate response to each. Also, the recurring references to Islamic extremism and the history of Islamic conquests in a

context where a crime against Muslims had recently been committed could easily be interpreted as an attempt to portray the events as a tit-for-tat situation.

No reflection, no change

Apart from an editorial and an opinion piece from the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the articles these three major Australian newspapers published in the two days following the Christchurch shootings reflected a failure to discuss the structural causes of hate crimes against Muslims.

Content analysis shows that reporting on the perpetrator's family problems, blame of digital media companies and comparing white supremacy to Islamic extremism were the main themes in the coverage in the two days following the shootings. Except for a limited number of articles, the coverage was characterised by a lack of discussion of structural causes of hate crimes against Muslims and an emphasis on the looming danger of retaliatory attacks by Islamic extremists.

The difference between the coverage of the Christchurch attacks in the *Australian* and the *Herald Sun* on the one hand and the *Sydney Morning Herald* on the other was obvious in the choice of headlines, the amount and nature of attention paid to the perpetrator and the discussion of structural causes of hate crimes. But despite its relatively unbiased reporting, the *Sydney Morning Herald's* coverage was too limited to balance that of other publications.

This is problematic because the absence of reflection minimises the prospects of change. By treating "everyday discrimination" as normal, we allow prejudice to be reinforced and perpetuated. This potential harm is aggravated by the fact that voices calling for dealing with the contextual factors leading to hate crimes against Muslims were condemned as "blame gamers". Also, the pretext of protecting "free speech" was used as a justification for allowing right-wing figures to voice their opinions.

Reflecting on the Australian media coverage of the Christchurch attacks, the then Melbourne editor of the *Guardian Australia*, Gay Alcorn, wrote four days after the shootings: "Those who need to reflect most of all, refuse. We'll go on, pointing fingers, but never at ourselves."

Image: Flowers near the Al Noor Mosque for the victims of the Christchurch shootings. Credit: Luis Alejandro Apiolaza/WikiCommons (image has been cropped).