COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

The March 15 Mosque attacks in 2019 and online proliferation of the terrorist's livestream video and 'manifesto' was a horrific wake-up call that served to demonstrate the increasing weaponisation of digital technology by violent extremists.

With violent extremism on the rise in Aotearoa and around the world, our specialist Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) team was established to identify ways to reduce the harms of the violent extremist content. The team focusses on research, education and outreach to provide subject matter expertise to the Chief Censor and the broader sector (including DPMC, Police, DIA and Netsafe). It proactively engages with New Zealand and overseas government agencies, experts, civil society and the digital sector.

CLASSIFYING OBJECTIONABLE MATERIAL

The CVE team advises the Chief Censor and Classification Unit on responding to crisis situations and classifying Terrorist and Violent Extremist Content (TVEC). The Digital Violent Extremism team at DIA submit most of the publications dealing with this content, and the number of submissions to the Office is increasing steadily.

In February 2022, a new law empowered the Chief Censor to make time-limited interim classification assessments. The legislation updated the Classification Act to enable urgent prevention and mitigation of the harms caused by objectionable content. The decisions make it illegal to possess or distribute the publications. Moving rapidly to put an interim ban in place allows enforcement agencies and other organisations to respond with confidence when limiting the spread of objectionable content.

WORKING WITH PARTNERS

The CVE team promotes a "pick up the phone" approach to stakeholder relationship management and interagency collaboration. It participates in consultation and provides feedback on proposed policy and strategy documents and legislative changes.

The team represents the Office on a number of interagency and international working groups, including DPMC's P/CVE Strategic Framework Working Group, DIA's CVE Working Group and the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism's Legal Frameworks Working Group.

The Office hosts a speaker series to bring together and upskill the sector. Speakers have included Tara Kirk Sell, Paul Spoonley and Andrew Geddis. The series provides an opportunity to gain a wider perspective on the various dimensions of the threat.

RESEARCH AND MONITORING

The threat posed by violent extremist content is constantly evolving, so it's important that we keep pace with developments. The team assesses the latest research and best practice from the wider sector by conducting landscape monitoring of studies, unfolding events and media coverage. Classification decisions are informed by case studies on significant incidents in the TVEC ecosystem.

The internet provides violent extremists with a global audience, so the spread of harmful content is not constrained by borders. We engage international expertise to inform our practice. Experts such as Anne Aly, Susan Benesche and Bjorn Ilher all contribute to our understanding of the threat and our options for responding.

TE MANA WHAKAATU

Classification Office

CASE STUDY: BUFFALO SUPERMARKET SHOOTING

On May 15 2022 (NZT), a white supremacist killed 10 people at a supermarket in Buffalo in the United States. He livestreamed the racially motivated mass shooting and uploaded a 'manifesto' to the internet. Within hours of the massacre, the Acting Chief Censor banned both publications on an interim basis. They were then formally classified as objectionable within the 20 working day statutory timeframe.

Within 48 hours of the interim ban the Terrorist Content Analytics Platform (TCAP) began alerting tech companies to the decision, and the number of sites hosting the content dropped significantly. The TCAP was developed by Tech Against Terrorism, an initiative launched by the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate, which works with the global tech industry to tackle terrorist use of the internet and uphold human rights.
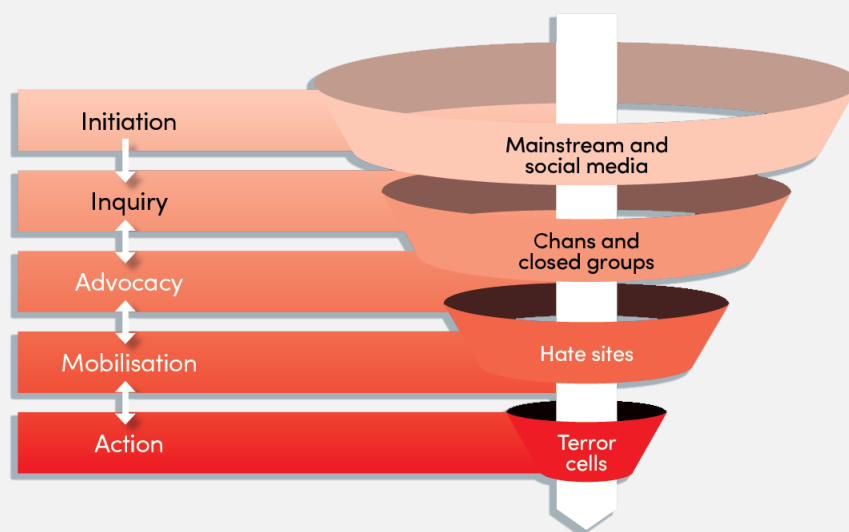
> *"We applaud the government of New Zealand for their proactive and transparent reaction to the concerning spread of this material online. We also commend the Classification Office for taking strategic leadership in criminalising this material, ensuring that tech companies have the clarity and legal grounding to remove such content from their platforms."*
>
> – Terrorist Content Analytics Platform (TCAP)

THE RABBIT HOLE

It has become a trend for terrorists, in particular white supremacist killers, to issue these kinds of publications to encourage others to follow their lead. The shooter intended to provide encouragement and instruction to others, and contribute to the ongoing proliferation of these types of copycat attacks.

The striking similarity between the publications and those relating to the March 15 Mosque attacks was no coincidence: the Buffalo gunman cited the Christchurch 'manifesto' as a direct influence on his actions. The references serve as evidence of the radicalising impact of these publications on vulnerable people and the tangible harms they cause.