The Christchurch Attack Report: Key Takeaways on Tarrant’s Radicalization and Attack Planning

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On 8 December 2020, the Royal Commission of Inquiry in New Zealand released its report into the 15 March 2019 Christchurch mosque shooting during which 51 Muslim worshippers were killed.1 The nearly 800 page report concludes that despite shortcomings on the part of various security agencies, there was no clear signs the attack was imminent, and made 44 recommendations, ranging from improvements to counter-terrorism, firearms licencing, calls for new legislation to criminalize planning or preparing a terrorist attack, and strengthening existing laws around hate-speech.

After conducting more than 400 interviews, and combing through over 73,000 pages of evidence and submissions, the report took about 18 months to draft. The interviews included Muslim community leaders, governmental agency officials - including police, customs, immigration and intelligence services - along with experts and officials in England, Norway, and Australia. In a manner similar to the Gjørv Report commissioned after the 2011 Norway attacks,2 this report provides the public with an exhaustive and clear picture of the perpetrator, his process of radicalization, and his plan of attack. In what follows, we summarize and contextualize, based on the academic literature, these three important elements of the attack.

What do we know about the perpetrator’s radicalization process?

While the report is quite clear in detailing Tarrant’s process of radicalization, it is also the aspect of the report that, for radicalization researchers, feels a little incomplete. Just as pathways to terrorism are a personal process with divergent factors, this can also be said for the process of radicalization. Sageman and McCauley and Moskalenko note that there are two types of radicalization.3 The first is gaining extreme beliefs, or what is known as “cognitive radicalization,” while the second is a change in behavior which can lead to violence, known as “behavioral radicalization.” The report outlines Tarrant’s shift from cognitive to behavioral radicalization in a rather unexceptional way. Various factors including a broken home, unrestricted and unsupervised access to the Internet, the consumption of far-right literature, a lack of personal connections, a “loner” type personality, and behavioral worries. These resulted in two school interventions from anti-racism officers due to anti-semitic remarks, and point to a nonconformist personality, along with the development of more extreme views.

However, as Borum and Schuurman and Taylor note, having extreme beliefs does not mean that an individual will engage in violence.4 Many people with similar personality types, beliefs, or traits to Tarrant’s do not commit attacks. McCauley and Moskalenko state that “individuals with radical ideas are 100 times more common than individuals involved in radical action; targeting ideas rather than actions multiplies the enemy by a factor of a hundred.”5

This points to what scholars of radicalization and terrorism have labeled the “specificity problem”, which as Lorne Dawson notes, is “at the core of all analyses of the process of radicalization.”6 The specificity problem is defined simply as follows:

“whenever we encounter an explanation of why some person or group has engaged in terrorism, we need to ask if the causal factors identified are sufficiently specific to explain why that person or group engaged in violence, since, more often than not, the factors apply equally well to a wider set of individuals who did not become violent.”7

In other words, while the report places much emphasis on Tarrant’s time online, his travel experiences, and his struggles in early childhood, none of these are “sufficiently specific” to be explanatory in themselves.

What also remains wanting in the report is a deeper examination of why some of the early interventions did not prove effective. We know from the report that Tarrant was racist, spewing hate speech, and engaging with hateful online content since his teenage years. It is also clear from the report that this did not go unchallenged or unnoticed. As the report states, “He was twice dealt with by one of his high school teachers, who was also the Anti-Racism Contact Officer, in respect of anti-Semitism.”8 As the report acknowledges, some of this kind of racism and hate speech would not have raised the same kind of alarm bells as, by way of comparison, an individual spewing jihadist rhetoric. Even still, it would be important to know more about the kinds of interventions that were attempted with Tarrant, and whether there are any lessons that could be learned about why such early diversion strategies did not work.

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5 McCauley and Moskalenko, Friction, 274.
7 Ibid.
8 "Ko Tō Tātou Kāinga Tēnei, 168."
Did the internet have a particularly important role in his radicalization process?

Despite attempts to conceal some of his online activities - including purging his Facebook profile in 2018, using Virtual Private Networks (VPNs), Tor browsers, encrypting emails, deleting emails, and removing a hard drive from his computer prior to the attack - Tarrant still left a significant digital footprint. His online activities prior to the attack serve to highlight the complex and nuanced role the internet can play in the process of radicalization. Indeed, while a growing body of anecdotal evidence suggests that the consumption of extremist materials online plays a decisive role in radicalization processes, some scholars remain skeptical of such a relationship.\(^9\)

While a considerable body of scholarly work has recently emerged focused on analyzing extremist digital content\(^10\), its producers,\(^11\) and distribution mechanism,\(^12\) Conway argues that “insufficient substantive empirically grounded social science research has been undertaken to date in order to allow us to convincingly answer” whether the internet is influential.\(^13\)

While Tarrant’s manifesto suggests that the internet was responsible for the creation of his belief system, asserting that “you will not find the truth anywhere else,” the report provides us with a much more complete overview of his online activities prior to the attack. Throughout his childhood, Tarrant had nearly unrestricted and unsupervised access to the internet. The report described how he became interested in video games at the age of six or seven, with a particular affection for online multiplayer role-playing games and first-person shooters games.

The report establishes that he was by-large an avid consumer, rather than a creator/disseminator of hateful and harmful content. According to his mother, he claims to have started frequenting the imageboard website 4chan - a notorious hotbed of white supremacist and conspiratorial content\(^14\) - at the age of 14, around the time he started expressing racist ideas.

The influence of 4chan’s subculture is apparent in Tarrant’s manifesto. Robert Evans shows how Tarrant’s manifesto employs “shitposting,” a tactic used to distract a general audience away from an intended meaning, while grabbing the attention of its targeted audience.\(^15\) Notable far-right memes are also used in this way, providing a sense of solidarity and unification among those familiar with the memes in the manifesto and the internet culture surrounding them.\(^16\) Consequently, the manifesto can be seen as a coded document aimed at far-right audiences.\(^17\) Although it provides some clues into Tarrant’s reasoning for the attack, it is mainly directed at individuals with similar, extreme, views.

While recognizing that Tarrant frequented imageboards such as 4chan and 8chan, and regularly posted Islamophobic rhetoric on far-right Facebook groups such as the Lads Society Season Two, United Patriots Front, and True Blue Crew, the report identifies YouTube specifically as a significant source of information and inspiration. The report also found that Tarrant had donated money to the YouTube channel of Stefan Molyneux, a Canadian white nationalist and conspiracy theorist, now banned from the platform for violating their hate speech policies.\(^18\)

The notion that YouTube might serve as a digital ecosystem that can normalize or amplify extreme discourse - either due to corporate indifference or the nature of the platform itself - has gained considerable traction in recent years.\(^19\) In the aftermath of the Christchurch attacks, Caleb Cain - now a researcher at the Polarization and Extremism Research Innovation Lab at American University - came forward with a deeply personal tale of falling into a ‘alt-right rabbit hole’ on YouTube, in part due to charismatic YouTubers like Molyneux.\(^20\)

As it stands, the bulk of the discussion around the role


of the platform as a potentially 'radicalizing' force points to two reasons: corporate indifference, namely the lack of proper moderation and transparency; and the nature of the platform, particularly its algorithm and recommendation stream.\(^{21}\) Having analyzed 72 million YouTube comments on 330,925 different videos, a recent study suggests that a "significant amount of commenting users systematically migrate from commenting exclusively on milder content to commenting on more extreme content."\(^{22}\)

While the report acknowledges that YouTube has changed its hate speech policy after Christchurch, and banned Stefan Molyneux, David Duke, and Richard Spencer’s channels, amongst others, there is clearly still a lot of work to be done.\(^{23}\) Notably, commentators have lamented the fact that music associated with extreme viewpoints, notable white supremacism\(^{24}\) and violent dissident Irish republicanism,\(^{25}\) remains widely available on the platform. A version of the Chetnik song praising Radovan Karadzic, the Bosnian Serb leader convicted of grave war crimes, can be heard in the background of Tarrant’s livestream during the massacre that was broadcast on Facebook.\(^{26}\) As Facebook noted after an internal investigation, “the video was viewed fewer than 200 times during the live broadcast” and “was viewed about 4,000 times in total before being removed from Facebook.”\(^{27}\) Quite astonishingly, Facebook reported that in the first twenty-four hours, they “removed about 1.5 million videos of the attack globally” with more than 1.2 million of those blocked at upload.\(^{28}\)

What does the report say about how the attack was planned?

The report suggests that significant planning and resources were devoted to perpetrating the attack. In January 2017, while travelling in the Balkans, Tarrant emailed the rifle club in Dunedin, New Zealand, inquiring as to whether the club was still in operation and indicating his intention to move to Dunedin in August that year. According to the report, this indicates that seven months prior to his arrival in New Zealand Tarrant “had a terrorist attack in mind.”\(^{29}\) Furthermore, the report claims that upon his arrival in New Zealand on 17 August 2017, it was with “a fully-developed terrorist ideology based on his adoption of the Great Replacement theory and his associated beliefs that immigration, particularly by Muslim migrants, into Western countries is an existential threat to Western society and that the appropriate response (at least for him) was violence” and “from that time on, his primary focus in life was planning and preparing for his terrorist attack.”\(^{30}\)

The report goes on to detail the influence of the 22 July 2011 attacks in Oslo and Utoya, committed by Anders Behring Breivik, which left 69 people dead - 33 of whom were under 18. Several references to Breivik’s manifestations are present in Tarrant’s own manifesto. For example, Tarrant claims to have “taken true inspiration from Knight Justiciar [Breivik]” and to have received a “blessing” from him “after contacting his brother knights.”\(^{31}\) Despite Tarrant traveling to Poland to attend a ‘Knighthood Ceremony’ organized by Knights Templar Order International - an organization which shares a name but no links with the fictional underground paramilitary group to which Breivik claimed he belonged\(^{32}\) – Tarrant later admitted, according to the report, that these references and the trip were nothing more than an elaborate “red herring.”\(^{33}\) Nonetheless, several elements of the planning and execution of the attack show striking similarities with Breivik’s course of action.

On 1 September 2017, just fifteen days after arriving in New Zealand, Tarrant took the first steps in obtaining a firearms license. Similar to Breivik, joining a shooting club provided Tarrant with a necessary cover to acquire firearms without arousing suspicion.\(^{34}\) The report notes that by December 2017, Tarrant “had acquired a number of semi-automatic rifles and large capacity magazines” as well as body armour, and had engrossed himself in tutorials on YouTube detailing how to modify his own firearms.\(^{35}\)

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\(^{28}\) Ibid.

\(^{29}\) “Ko To Tatou Kāinga Tēnei, 167.

\(^{30}\) Ibid.

\(^{31}\) Ibid, 197.


\(^{33}\) “Ko To Tatou Kāinga Tēnei, 219.


\(^{35}\) “Ko To Tatou Kāinga Tēnei, 231."
In addition to obtaining weapons in a manner similar to Breivik, the report also illustrates several ways in which Tarrant appears to have followed a course of action similar, and potentially inspired by, Breivik. Like Breivik, Tarrant appears to have engaged in a strict exercise regimen and began using anabolic steroids and testosterone in preparation for the attack. While this might be a mere coincidence, it is worth noting that Breivik also detailed at length his physical exercise routine and his use of performance-enhancing substances. Investigators also found a copy of Breivik’s manifesto on one of Tarrant’s memory cards.

In their book on the 22 July attacks, Hemmingby and Bjørnjo lay out a target selection framework and note that Breivik’s attack was influenced by four factors: ideology; strategy; external factors (gun control laws, local environment, and the timing of other events); and internal factors (manpower, funding, skills). This framework helps us understand both why Tarrant chose to migrate to New Zealand to commit his attack, and the timing of the attack.

According to the report, firearm regulations in New Zealand, particularly with regards to semi-automatic weapons, allowed Tarrant to purchase a number of weapons and large capacity magazines, which he could neither lawfully obtain in Australia or transport there. The report also states that Tarrant believed planning and carrying out the attack in New Zealand would have several strategic advantages. Namely, as an Australian, “he was able to fit in” and the lack of close social contacts and the physical distance from his family made it less likely that someone would “raise an alarm about the way he was living and how he was acting.” Lastly, like Breivik, the timing of Tarrant’s attack was largely influenced by dwindling funds. Tarrant had originally planned to conduct his attack in mid-August 2019 to coincide with Eid al-Adha, the Muslim celebration commemorating Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son Ismail. However, the plan was revised as he started running out of money.

The report also lays out Tarrant’s extensive planning as evidenced by documents retrieved on a memory card associated with his drone and a series of emails he sent to himself and later attempted to delete. One document lays out a 550-day budget from early February 2018 until August 2019 (the original date for the attack) with a $380 (AUD) per budget line for ammo, while another is a detailed “to do” list. The “to do” list is particularly interesting as it gives us insight into how the plan evolved. By 18 July 2018, the authors of the report assess that “a plan was in place in general terms, but the reference to ‘other mosques’ suggests that he had not yet finalised the locations of his terrorist attacks.”

Investigators discovered that in early January, Tarrant began conducting reconnaissance exercises in Christchurch. As part of these reconnaissance exercises Tarrant flew a small commercial drone over the Masjid an-Nur, “recording an aerial view of the masjid grounds and buildings” focusing on “entry and exit doors, as well as the alleyway where he parked” on the day of the attack. Tarrant’s use of a drone to conduct aerial reconnaissance gives credence to a growing body of anecdotal evidence that terrorists are increasingly beginning to adopt commercial drone technology.

Finally, there is the important question of whether Tarrant was a lone actor terrorist. The authors of the report note that Tarrant was not recruited by anyone living in New Zealand or abroad, and did not recruit anyone to assist him in his attack. Schuurman, Bakker, Gill, and Bouhana found that most lone actor terrorists were deficient in operational security, were not exceedingly lethal attackers, and they had a habit of leaking their plans in advance. Thus, Tarrant provides an exception to these findings, highlighting the difficulty that some lone actors present to law enforcement and intelligence agencies.

Conclusion

Aside from the detailed information about Tarrant and the planning and preparation of the Christchurch mosque attacks, the report reveals and takes respon-
sibility for some significant oversights. Firstly, the report admits that the firearm licensing system did not meet standards, with a lack of attention given to vetting how well Tarrant’s referees actually knew him. The report suggests that there was “a lack of guidance and training for licensing staff and incomplete guidance for dealing with applications where nominated referees cannot be interviewed in person.”

Secondly, the report found that there was “an inappropriate concentration of counter-terrorism resources on the threat of Islamist extremist terrorism.” The report points out that this was due to limited counter-terrorism resources, a “lack of capacity until mid-2018 both to deal with that threat,” while New Zealand’s counter-terrorism focus was not based on a “comparative risk analysis,” or unanimous public sector agency agreement on terrorist threats outside of Islamic extremism. With that being said, the report states that this oversight was not the reason why Tarrant’s planning and preparation for the attack went undetected. Instead,

“given the operational security that the individual [Tarrant] maintained, the legislative authorising environment in which the counter-terrorism effort operates and the limited capability and capacity of the counter-terrorism agencies, there was no plausible way he could have been detected except by chance.”

As one Muslim interviewed by the inquiry told them, “they were watching us, not watching our backs.”

All in all, after over a year of research and interviews, the report is an exhaustive and much-needed look into all aspects of the attack: the broader culture for minorities in New Zealand; the radicalization process of Tarrant; the planning of the attack; as well as the fallout, and unrelenting trauma of the attack, for New Zealand’s Muslim community. As widely acknowledged, the way in which New Zealand and its Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern dealt with the attack, and a grieving nation, has, as Masha Gessen wrote, “rewritten the script for how a nation grieves after a terrorist attack.” Ardern focused on the victims, made it clear to them that they were part of New Zealand, and refused to even speak the attacker’s name. “He may have sought notoriety,” she said, “but we in New Zealand will give him nothing.”

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45 “Ko Tō Tātou Kainga Tēnei, 19.
46 Ibid, 10.
48 Ibid, 15.
49 Ibid, 140.
51 Ibid.
Bibliography


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