

Christchurch and the 'mass dissemination of hate' in the media



NAHELA NOWSHIN

I woke up to the news of the horrific attack in Christchurch, New Zealand on Friday, like millions around the world. I was scrolling through my Facebook newsfeed on Friday morning, and the first thing I read was a friend's status update sending her thoughts and prayers to the victims and their families. All I knew was that there had been an attack in New Zealand only a couple of hours earlier. I began to wonder, who were the targeted victims this time? Muslims? Christians? Or Jews?

At least 50 people had been killed in attacks in two mosques—in what is the deadliest shooting in modern New Zealand history—by an Australian national, Brenton Tarrant. His motivations behind the gruesome attacks became clearer and more chilling, as details began to emerge. From his grotesque 74-page manifesto to the guns scrawled with references to various figures from history (including Adolf Hitler) and mass shooters and the fact that he had apparently sent out a warning in the website called 8chan (described as "one of the darkest corners of the Internet"), it became obvious that this was a man filled with hate who had been indoctrinated into believing a twisted ideology—an ideology that sadly resonates with far too many today.

It also became clear that these attacks were thoroughly planned and were years in the making. Tarrant described his reasons for the attacks as to "show the invaders that our lands will never be their lands, our homelands are our own and that, as long as a white man still lives, they will NEVER conquer our lands and they will never replace our people."

These attacks hardly came as a shock at a time when xenophobic and anti-immigrant

sentiments are being ruthlessly peddled by the media and politicians in the West. The number of such kinds of attacks is rising in the western world in a large part because extremist views such as those of Tarrant are being legitimised by elected public officials. There's a thin line between toxic rhetoric and violence. And that is what's so tragic about attacks of the kind we witnessed in Christchurch—more innocent lives have been lost and families shattered largely because of the irresponsibility with which the media and some politicians have conducted themselves. Words have consequences.

I think of my family and friends scattered throughout the West who must be living in fear in the aftermath of yet another deadly attack targeting people who look like them and share their faith.

The current conversation is understandably highlighting many different aspects of the attacks—the role of the media, the manner in which immigrants are viewed and who have begun to feel that they can never truly "belong", the threat of white supremacy, the role of the community at large in standing up for Muslims in the West, etc.

But there's one other thing that made the Christchurch shootings stand out from terrorist attacks in the recent past—something that could set a dangerous trend in the future. The fact that the gunman livestreamed the attack on social media as he began shooting people at point blank range added a new dimension to the way terrorist acts are carried out and the way terrorists want to ensure mass dissemination of their carnage. The chilling footage, taken through a camera mounted on Tarrant's helmet, was shared by social media users en masse, with many urging people not to watch or share the video. Some of my Facebook friends had begun to share the video and by the time I logged onto Twitter, the video had spread like wildfire. When terrorist attacks take place, we usually read about them and get glimpses of the aftermath through various sources—but

how often do we witness real-time footage of the act itself, that too from the attacker's perspective?

This time, Tarrant made sure that everyone got to witness in real time the bloody rampage that he was about to embark upon. And the footage was evidently too hard to resist for many. Apart from the obvious moral implications of it—that watching and sharing the videos reflect an utter lack of respect for the dead—there is another side that is equally

scrambling to remove the graphic video from their sites which was available hours into the attack. Apart from the need for Silicon Valley tech companies to collectively find a strategy to filter and remove such content much more swiftly and effectively, the livestreaming of the Christchurch attack risks producing copycats who may adopt the same method to maximise their reach.

Given human beings' natural impulses to witness things of a "shocking", violent nature,

on its website and social media posts. Neither showed the actual shootings or any victims." In the UK, "tabloids have been criticised for publishing footage of the Christchurch mosque terror atrocity...on their websites." And on Friday, I switched on the TV to my disgust and horror to see Jamuna TV publicising the video, and later heard from a friend that another local channel had done the same. Apparently, none of these media channels stopped to think twice about the consequences of publishing a sordid video, however "heavily edited" as some spokespeople of news channels responded in defence, which will be etched into the memory of victims' families for the rest of their lives.

Also, there is no question that such real-time videos risk radicalisation on both sides of the aisle—white supremacists who may have been "inspired" by Tarrant on one hand, and those willing to exact revenge for the attacks, on the other. As social media users, the best we can do is denounce the attacks in the strongest possible terms, express solidarity with the victims and the targeted community, and refuse to watch and share the videos and indulge in our voyeuristic sentiments—essentially depriving the perpetrators of the audience they so badly crave.

The horrific Christchurch attacks are yet another cruel reminder of just how far we are from eliminating the spectre of terrorism given its very complex roots. But it shouldn't be lost upon us that the recent attacks have also brought to the fore a very dangerous dimension—a volatile concoction of technology, bigotry and violence—to terrorism in the 21st century, which, one can only hope, will not inspire similar violent attacks or lead to extremists into adopting a newfound "media strategy" by livestreaming the cold-blooded murder of innocent people.

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PHOTO: REUTERS

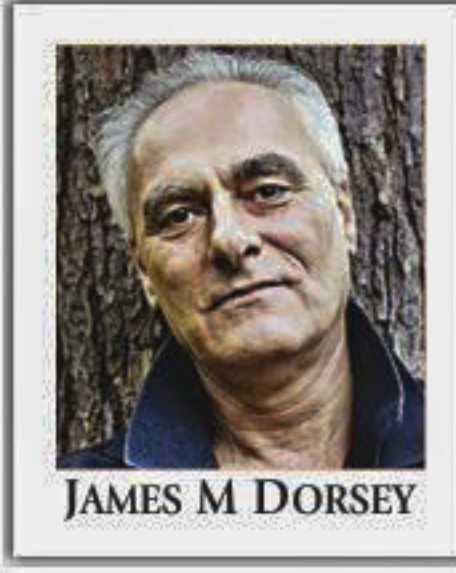
A woman whose husband was still missing after Friday's mosque attacks reacts outside a community centre near Masjid Al Noor in Christchurch, New Zealand, March 16, 2019.

disturbing: the exhibitionist nature of terrorist attacks that the opportunity of social media presents. When you combine all the factors—the fast-paced nature of social media, a terrorist attack in the West, and human curiosity—what you have is a recipe for disaster with implications for governments, ordinary citizens and tech companies. As we know, tech giants like Facebook, Twitter and Google were

it is understandable, though not justified, why social media users would watch and re-watch the Christchurch video when it's readily available at their fingertips. But what about those media outlets that utterly failed to uphold their moral responsibility during such a moment of crisis? The Guardian reports, "Sky News Australia repeatedly broadcast footage of the shooter at the mosque and Ten Daily embedded the footage

The emerging new world order's alarm bells

Men like Brandon Tarrant and Andreas Breivik, and the rise of 'civilisationalism'



JAMES M DORSEY

FRIDAY'S attack on two mosques in New Zealand reflects a paradigm shift: the erosion of liberal values and the rise of 'civilisationalism' at the expense of the nation state.

So do broader phenomena like widespread Islamophobia with the crackdown on Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang as its extreme, and growing anti-Semitism. These phenomena are fuelled by increasing intolerance and racism enabled by the far-right and world leaders as well as ultra-conservatives and jihadists.

These world leaders and far-right ideologues couch their policies and views in terms of defending a civilisation rather than exclusively a nation state defined by its citizenry and borders.

As a result, men like China's Xi Jinping, India's Narendra Modi, Hungary's Viktor Orban and US President Donald J Trump as well as ideologues such as Steve Bannon, Mr Trump's former strategy adviser, shape an environment that legitimises violence against the "other".

By further enabling abuse of human, minority and refugee rights, they facilitate the erosion of the norms of debate and mainstream hate speech.

Blunt and crude language employed by leaders, politicians, some media and some people of the cloth helps shape an environment in which concepts of civility and mutual respect are lost.

Consequently, the likes of Brenton Tarrant, the perpetrator of the attacks on the Christchurch mosques in which 50 people died, or Andreas Breivik, the Norwegian far-right militant who in 2011 killed 77 people in attacks on government buildings and a youth summer camp, are not simply products of prejudice.

Prejudice, often only latent, is a fact of life. It's inculcated in all cultures as well as education in schools and homes irrespective of political, religious, liberal, conservative and societal environment.

Men like Tarrant and Breivik emerge when prejudice is weaponised by a political and/or social environment that legitimises it. They are emboldened when prejudice fuses with politically and/or religiously manufactured fear, the undermining of principles of relativity, increased currency of absolutism, and the hollowing out of pluralism.

Their world is powered by the progressive abandonment of the notion of a world that is populated by a multitude of equally valid faiths, worldviews and belief systems.

The rise of civilisationalism allows men

like Tarrant and Breivik, white Christian supremacists, to justify their acts of violence in civilisational terms. They believe their civilisation is under attack as a result of pluralism, diversity and migration.

The same is true for jihadists who aim to brutally establish their vision of Islamic rule at the expense not only of non-Muslim minorities but also Muslims they deem no different than infidels.

Civilisationalism provides the justification for men like Hungary's Mr Orban to adopt militant anti-migration policies and launch attacks laced with anti-Semitism on liberals like financier and philanthropist George Soros.

It also fuels China's crackdown on Turkic Muslims in the north-western province of Xinjiang, an attempt to Sinicise Islam and the most frontal assault on the Islamic faith in recent memory.

Similarly, civilisationalism validates Mr

in civilisationalism as in terms of defence of national interest and security.

Their embrace of civilisationalism benefits from the fact that 21st-century autocracy and authoritarianism vest survival not only in repression of dissent and denial of freedom of expression but also by maintaining at least some of the trappings of pluralism.

Those trappings can include representational bodies with no or severely limited powers, toothless opposition groups, government-controlled non-governmental organisations, and some degree of accountability.

The rise of civilisationalism is further facilitated by a failure to realise that the crisis of democracy and the revival of authoritarianism did not emerge recently but date back to the first half of 1990s.

Political scientists Anna Lüthmann and Staffan I Lindberg concluded in a recently published study that some 75 countries

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PHOTO: AFP

Norwegian right-wing extremist Anders Behring Breivik killed 77 people on July 22, 2011, in a bomb attack in Oslo and a mass shooting at a summer camp for children.

Modi's notions of India as a Hindu civilisational state and Mr Trump's anti-Muslim and anti-migrant policies and his continued vacillation between lending racism and white supremacy legitimacy and condemning far-right exclusivism.

Civilisationalism poses a threat not only to the world we live in today but also to the outcome of the geopolitical struggle of what will be the new world order. The threat goes beyond the battle for spheres of influence or competition of political systems.

Civilisationalism creates the glue for like-minded thinking, if not a tacit understanding, between men like Xi Jinping, Viktor Orban, Narendra Modi and Donald Trump, on the values that should undergird a new world order.

These men couch their policies as much

humanitarianism and compassion towards refugees fleeing war and persecution.

These alarm bells coupled with the tacit civilisationalism-based understanding between some of the world's most powerful men brush aside the lessons of genocide in recent decades.

Ignoring the lessons of Nazi Germany, Hutu Rwanda, the Serbian siege of Srebrenica, or the Islamic State's Yazidis poses the foremost threat to a world that is based on principles of humanitarianism, compassion, live-and-let-live, and human and minority rights.

Framing the challenge, *Financial Times* columnist Gideon Rahman noted that Mr Trump's "predecessors confidently proclaimed that American values were 'universal' and were destined to triumph across the world. And it was the global power of western ideas that has made the nation-state the international norm for political organisation. The rise of Asian powers such as China and India may create new models: step forward, the 'civilisation state.'"

Mr Rahman argues that a civilisational state rejects human rights, propagates exclusivism and institutions that are rooted in a unique culture rather than principles of equality and universalism, and distrusts minorities and migrants because they are not part of a core civilisation.

In short, a breeding ground for strife and conflict that can only be kept in check by increasingly harsh repression and/or attempts at mass re-education and homogenisation of the "other"—ultimately a recipe for instability rather than stability and equitable progress.

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CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY

March 18, 1990
Helmut Kohl at a rally in 1990 for the first free elections in East Germany.

EAST GERMANY HOLDS ITS FIRST AND ONLY FREE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

The result of the election was overwhelming support for a quick road to reunification and an end to East Germany as a state.

PHOTO: REUTERS

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