

**COLLABORATE  
TO COMBAT  
MISINFORMATION  
AND THE THREAT OF  
DOMESTIC EXTREMISM**

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## Context and background

**Australia and the United States should support the establishment of a regular track 1.5 dialogue between government, business, and civil society leaders on the spread of violent extremism and its drivers.**

The links between flawed information ecosystems and domestic extremism are now explicit and well-acknowledged following the failed Capitol insurrection on 6 January 2021. American security and intelligence agencies will be dealing with an emboldened extreme right-wing domestic terror threat for years to come as a result of the belief among many that the presidential election was rigged.<sup>6.1</sup> But both the explosion of violence and erosion of fact were a long time in the making and long foretold.<sup>6.2</sup> Australia is in a position to avoid the full fate of the United States in this regard. Working with American counterparts will be essential given that many of the solutions strike through American jurisdictions, like Silicon Valley.<sup>6.3</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic was an accelerant – but not the root cause – for the linked information and extremism crisis facing the world today. Traditional news sources have been financially squeezed for years while the internet giants applying the bulk of the pressure have shirked any real responsibility for the content they host and promote, even in many cases when it was clearly extremist or outright conspiracy theorist content.<sup>6.4</sup>

The Trump administration quickened truth decay. The leader of the world's oldest and most renowned democracy was disinterested in upholding the institutions that underpinned it. The COVID-19 pandemic then caused immense, health and financial hardship and contributed severe damage to social cohesion. Meanwhile, internet use soared in concert with prolonged lockdowns.<sup>6.5</sup>

With the above factors in place, the world was primed for the rapid scaling of misinformation within individuals' information ecosystems and far-right groups and conspiratorial grifters were ready to exploit it.<sup>6.6</sup>

## The Biden administration

The scale of this challenge does not pale in comparison to those like economic recovery, climate change or the rise of an authoritarian China. In fact, solving the United States' domestic security and information crises is critical to each.

But like the other problems facing the Biden administration, these are intractable. The Republican Party is deeply divided. So long as conspiracy theories are flourishing within its ranks and giving those views legitimacy, the Biden administration will struggle to truly amend the problem.<sup>6.7</sup>

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Australia and the United States are in the process of rewriting the online regulatory landscape. While Australia is at the vanguard of some issues like media bargaining, the US Congress now has the resolve to regulate the tech giants headquartered in its jurisdictions. The Biden administration is likely to increase the scope of anti-trust suits already filed against Google and Facebook, embark on data privacy and algorithmic transparency pushes and look closely at Amazon's market position, including through the lens of its labour practices.

**RIGHT-WING EXTREMISM NOW ACCOUNTS FOR AS MUCH AS 40 PER CENT OF THE AUSTRALIAN SECURITY INTELLIGENCE ORGANISATION'S CASELOAD IN AUSTRALIA, A DRAMATIC INCREASE FROM 2016 WHERE IT WAS ESTIMATED TO BE 10-15 PER CENT. EXTREME RIGHT GROUPS, INCLUDING NEO-NAZIS, ARE INCREASINGLY EMBRACING ENCRYPTED MESSAGING PLATFORMS TO ORGANISE IN SECRECY BUT HAVE ALSO HELD VERY PUBLIC GATHERINGS INDICATING THAT THEY ARE EMBOLDENED.**



There is bipartisan consensus that Section 230 of the US Communications Decency Act (1996)<sup>6.8</sup> – which does not consider internet platforms like Twitter and Facebook to be publishers – needs to be made fit for purpose. Democrats broadly seek to impose more responsibility on the bigger platforms, while Republicans accuse them of excessive censorship.<sup>6.9</sup> This bipolarity will belie efforts to truly reform the media landscape in a way that reflects the realities of the 21st century.<sup>6.10</sup>

While any regulatory measures will take time, the threat of violence partly born of broken information ecosystems remains pressing. The Biden administration is taking steps to seriously address the threat of far-right extremism from a national security perspective, including a comprehensive threat assessment of domestic extremism being undertaken by the Director of National Intelligence in cooperation with the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security.<sup>6.11</sup> This marks a definitive step into the post-9/11 paradigm of domestic security. Australia is also in the process of exploring the scope of these problems in the form of the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security's Inquiry into extremist movements and radicalism in Australia.<sup>6.12</sup>

## Australian interests

Damaged information systems and right-wing extremism represent clear and present dangers for Australia. Right-wing extremism now accounts for as much as 40 per cent of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO)'s caseload in Australia, a dramatic increase from 2016 where it was estimated to be 10-15 per cent.<sup>6.13</sup> Extreme right groups, including neo-Nazis, are increasingly embracing encrypted messaging platforms to organise in secrecy but have also held very public gatherings indicating that they are emboldened.<sup>6.14</sup> In statements to parliamentary joint committees, both the Australian Federal Police and the New South Wales Crime Commission have testified that COVID-19 has driven a rise in right-wing extremism online.<sup>6.15</sup> And, of course, it was an Australian man in Christchurch who conducted the deadliest explicitly extreme right-wing terrorist attack in recent decades.<sup>6.16</sup>

With a high-profile vaccine roll out, the threat of social unrest, violence and terrorism at associated crowded places is real and demands vigilance. Attacks on 5G towers rolled out in the United Kingdom and even New Zealand demonstrate the short leap from conspiracy-fuelled extremism to violence and terrorism.<sup>6.17</sup>

## Policy recommendations

- › **Australia should support the establishment of a regular track 1.5 dialogue with the United States on countering violent extremism and its drivers.** Australia and the United States have sound and long-standing intelligence-sharing arrangements through the Five Eyes collective and have also participated in sustained multilateral initiatives since 2001 through the United Nations and bodies like the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) on the matter of counterterrorism.<sup>6.18</sup> There is also a strong history of official agreements between their respective counter-intelligence coordination centres.<sup>6.19</sup> But following multiple intelligence failures in the United States,<sup>6.20</sup> and a rising threat in Australia,<sup>6.21</sup> new foundations are needed. Both governments recognise this and are undertaking independent internal reviews into the changing domestic security landscape. These efforts would be complemented by convening government leaders in coordination with business leaders at the coalface, and civil society leaders and researchers who built an intimate knowledge of this emerging landscape before it presented itself fully as a threat to national security.
- › Such a forum would help to sharpen both Australia and the United States' existing participation in multilateral fora and would give necessary context allowing collegial and pragmatic discussions given Australia and the United States' many shared values.
- › Australia already participates in a similar dialogue on counterterrorism with the European Union<sup>6.22</sup> and has previously participated in track 1.5 dialogues with the United States on critical issues like defence and cybersecurity.
- › The dialogue's scope should include the role of big tech. Both the United States and Australia are beginning a once-in-a-generation regulatory effort in this area and the new foundation must address the conditions that have let misinformation and conspiracy theories fester to the advantage of extremist recruiters.