

# New Zealand media to censor coverage of Christchurch terrorist's trial

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New Zealand's major media outlets—TVNZ, Stuff, Mediaworks, NZME and Radio NZ—signed an unprecedented agreement on May 1 to self-censor their coverage of the trial of Brenton Tarrant, who is accused of killing 51 people in terrorist attacks on two mosques in Christchurch on March 15.

Tarrant is due to reappear in court on June 14, when he is expected to enter a plea. This week police charged him with committing an act of terrorism, in addition to 51 previously laid charges of murder and 40 of attempted murder. The gunman wrote in his manifesto that he would plead not guilty and use his trial to espouse his fascist and white supremacist ideology, like his idol, Norwegian terrorist Anders Breivik.

The Christchurch attack was New Zealand's worst mass shooting and one of the most devastating acts of far-right terrorism anywhere in the world. The victims included New Zealanders and people from Malaysia, Turkey, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Tarrant's trial will be followed by millions of people internationally who were horrified by the atrocity and want to understand why and how it took place.

The new charge of terrorism requires that prosecutors prove Tarrant's political or ideological motivation. Discussion of this crucial evidence in court, however, is likely to be suppressed by the major media outlets on the pretext of denying the gunman "a platform."

The "editorial guidelines" adopted by the newspapers and broadcasters are politically-motivated and are a profoundly anti-democratic infringement on the public's right to information. The outlets, including the publicly-owned Radio NZ and TVNZ, are collaborating with the Labour Party-led government to prevent discussion of Tarrant's fascist views and their striking similarity to the racist and anti-immigrant politics

promoted by governments and political parties in New Zealand and other countries.

A joint statement by the five senior editors, on May 1, promised to "limit any coverage of statements, that actively champion white supremacist or terrorist ideology... [including references to] the accused's manifesto document 'The Great Replacement.'"

Absurdly, the media heads at the same time pledged to cover the trial "comprehensively and responsibly" in accordance with "the principles of open justice." They did not explain how these principles—and those of objective, truthful journalism—are compatible with suppressing the accused's views.

The *Guardian* noted "the speed and ease with which the agreement had been discussed and signed." Apparently, none of the senior editors felt any qualms about censoring their own coverage. Only a few local and foreign journalists criticised the decision, with *Politico*'s Jack Shafer describing it as "paternalistic opposition to free speech."

So far, international and smaller local media organisations have not announced any reporting restrictions, but it is unclear which outlets will be given accreditation to report from the courtroom.

The corporate media's self-censorship is directly inspired by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, who declared days after the massacre that she would not speak the gunman's name. On March 19, she told reporters: "I would hope there are ways that [the trial] could be covered without adding to the notoriety that this individual seeks."

Ardern's numerous statements exploiting the Christchurch massacre to push for censorship, including of social media, have been applauded by the media internationally.

A Radio NZ editorial on March 29 said the station

would still use Tarrant's name and it was "vitally important" for journalists to examine his background and motivations. The same article, however, said Radio NZ would not publish details about Tarrant's manifesto, the main source of information about his motivations.

This followed the chief censor's decision to ban possession and distribution of the manifesto, with lengthy prison sentences possible for anyone caught with it. The 74-page document has received only superficial media attention. A 22-year-old man, whose name is suppressed, was charged last month after the manifesto was found on his cellphone.

There has been little opposition to this draconian ban, apart from a few journalists and free speech campaigners. Disgracefully, the New Zealand Council for Civil Liberties' chairman Thomas Beagle told *Newshub* "there should be limits" to free speech and the ban was not "a serious impediment" to democratic rights.

Censorship of the manifesto and the trial has nothing to do with denying Tarrant "notoriety" or "a platform." In fact, these measures will increase his prestige in far-right circles. The real aim of the state and the media is to deprive the working class of information about the growing danger of fascism, which is being deliberately cultivated by the ruling elite internationally.

Tarrant was not an isolated individual; he had connections with the far-right Identitarians in Austria and France, and the United Patriots Front and Lads Society in Australia, which have all been promoted in the media and by sections of the political establishment.

His manifesto expressed admiration for US President Donald Trump, calling him a "symbol of white renewal." In 2016, Tarrant celebrated Trump's election victory as a win for nationalists and a defeat for "globalists" and "Marxists." The Ardern government, which has strengthened NZ's military ties with the US, is anxious to avoid any further exposure of Trump's encouragement of fascist and racist violence.

Tarrant's language resembles the anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant rhetoric used by Trump and other right-wing and nominally "left" bourgeois politicians, including One Nation in Australia and the New Zealand First Party. Ardern's Labour Party, which adopted NZ First's anti-immigrant policies in the 2017 election, gave the racist party considerable power in the coalition

government: NZ First leader Winston Peters, who has repeatedly demonised Muslim immigrants, was made deputy prime minister and foreign minister.

The gunman's hostility to socialism and Marxism likewise echoes statements made by Trump, who expresses the fears of the entire political establishment, including in New Zealand, of the growing class struggle and anti-capitalist sentiment.

Any discussion of the shooter's political views could raise uncomfortable questions about why the police and intelligence agencies turned a blind eye to the danger of white supremacist and neo-Nazi violence. Tarrant's manifesto expressed sympathy for the police and estimated that hundreds of thousands of European fascists are employed in the armed forces.

A Royal Commission ostensibly investigating whether Tarrant's attacks could have been prevented began on May 13, but is so far being held behind closed doors.

The cover-up of the real causes of the Christchurch terrorist attack is a serious warning. It is aimed at politically disarming the working class, while protecting the far-right and ensuring its continued growth internationally. As in the 1930s, the ruling class is cultivating fascist forces so they can be mobilised against workers and young people, who are moving to the left and coming into struggle against social inequality and war.



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