

Christchurch terrorist foreshadowed mosque attacks online over a year before

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According to a report from the *Conversation*, republished in the *Guardian* on February 20, Christchurch fascist gunman Brenton Tarrant posted about his intentions on the website 4chan at least a year before his 2019 deadly attacks on two mosques in the city.

New research by a group of academics working at the University of Auckland—Chris Wilson, Ethan Renner, Jack Smylie and Michal Dziwulski—raises serious questions about why authorities did not detect the posts before the horrific shootings. The researchers uncovered racist and violent online postings by Tarrant as far back as 2015—that is, four years earlier.

On March 15, 2019 Tarrant carried out well-planned mass shootings at the mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, in which 51 people were killed and 40 injured. The victims included men, women and children; the youngest killed was a three-year-old boy. Tarrant made clear in his manifesto that the atrocity was motivated by white supremacist, anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim beliefs.

To this day there remain many unanswered questions about how Tarrant, an Australian citizen, was able to plan and carry out his attacks without being stopped by police or the intelligence agencies on both sides of the Tasman Sea. Tarrant had links with the Australian neo-Nazi groups, the Lads Society and United Patriots Front (UPF), whose leading members had at one point tried to recruit him.

New Zealand's then Labour Party-led government took steps to suppress public discussion about the terror attack. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern declared that she would not refer to Tarrant by name and instructed the media to avoid reporting on his beliefs.

The state censor outlawed possession of Tarrant's manifesto—an anti-democratic decision taken in order to hide the similarity between his politics and those of US President Donald Trump, as well as far-right forces in Europe, Australia and New Zealand. These included the Labour government's coalition partner NZ First, a viciously anti-immigrant party.

The research points to systemic failings by the state

agencies, given the human and technical resources at their disposal, to seriously track and investigate on-line activities of the extreme right, both before and after the attack. The authorities consistently turned a blind eye to the danger of far-right violence while the focus of their intelligence activity was directed towards the Muslim community and left-wing groups.

A royal commission of inquiry was held in 2020, but its hearings took place in secret and the vast majority of the evidence that it examined has been sealed. A separate coronial inquiry, which is limited in scope and focused on the day of the attack, began two years ago and is yet to conclude.

The royal commission's report, published in 2020, covered up the role of the state agencies, declaring that nothing could have been done to prevent the attack. This is despite the fact that Tarrant was active in far-right online forums and had been reported to police in Australia for sending death threats via Facebook to an opponent of the fascist UPF.

The *Conversation* article is a damning indictment of the royal commission's report, which accepted Tarrant's claims that he was not a frequent commenter on extreme right-wing sites. The commissioners flatly declared: "Although [Tarrant] did frequent extreme right-wing discussion boards such as those on 4chan and 8chan, the evidence we have seen is indicative of more substantial use of YouTube and is therefore consistent with what he told us."

The Auckland University researchers questioned this assertion and went on to investigate whether right-wing websites were significant in Tarrant's radicalisation. They declared their findings overturned "a great deal of what we thought we knew about him." They also raised disturbing questions "not only about why this posting was not detected before the attack, but also why it has not been discovered in the five years since the 15 March attacks."

The research team asserts that there were numerous opportunities for New Zealand and Australian security services to observe Tarrant making extremely threatening

online statements. Tarrant had been calling for attacks against civilians at least as early as 2015. “The violent racism and Islamophobia in his posting sets him apart, even in the darkest corners of 4chan,” they noted.

The team reviewed thousands of anonymous posts and hundreds of threads. Because 4chan posts are anonymous, they used a combination of indicators to identify Tarrant. 4chan’s “politically incorrect” board—referred to as /pol/—provides the time, date and location of each post, allowing them to match this against Tarrant’s travel to numerous countries over five years.

Tarrant provided personal information in his posts, openly stating his Australian identity and always using the same distinctive language, and in some cases repeating specific points. Tarrant often made certain grammatical errors which made his posting stand out. These features can be seen in online writing samples as early as 2011, in his 2019 manifesto and in a great deal of online posting. The researchers concluded that, taken together, these indicators identify Tarrant at a “very high evidence threshold.”

Posts showed that by 2015, Tarrant was calling for mass violence against people of colour. Inspired by US gunman Dylann Roof’s massacre of nine black worshippers in a South Carolina church, Tarrant declared: “violence is the last resort of a cornered animal” and “it was always going to come to this.” He said white nationalist extremists should target innocent victims in locations of “significance,” such as places of worship.

For at least four years Tarrant planned on killing people in such locations. He glorified public shootings and advocated the sadistic killing of innocent civilians, hoping white violence might trigger a race war. Travelling internationally between 2014 and 2018, Tarrant became increasingly focused on Muslims. In one thread, he claimed he would form and fund an armed band of 4chan users to conduct ethnic cleansing in the Balkans.

The intelligence agencies appear to have consistently ignored warning signs that would have enabled them to identify and track Tarrant and intervene. He posted regularly on 4chan and 8chan, which are freely and publicly accessible. His postings were visible to numerous others whose identities he could not know.

Two threads in March and August of 2018 showed plans to attack the Muslim community in New Zealand. Revealing he was in Dunedin, Tarrant expressed his anger at the mosques in that city, and in neighbouring Christchurch and Ashburton. When other users called on him to act, he wrote: “I have a plan to stop it. Just hold on.”

The researchers note: “Far from maintaining tight operational security as he planned his attack, Tarrant openly (albeit anonymously) discussed violence against mosques in

the South Island while in New Zealand.” They note that the royal commission’s report stated that Tarrant made only “limited lapses” in operational security during his time in New Zealand between late 2017 and March 2019. “This is not the case,” the researchers say.

The research team will be posting more information about their study in due course. However, what has been presented so far is sufficient to challenge the key finding of the royal commission: that the police and security services could not possibly have known about Tarrant’s plans in advance or taken action to prevent the atrocity.

The study completely vindicates the position taken by the *World Socialist Web Site* at the time of the 2019 massacre and since. The commission’s predetermined purpose was to whitewash the New Zealand and Australian intelligence agencies and police, and to cover up the role of governments in both countries in whipping up racism and Islamophobia, including through participation in US imperialist wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The commission’s final report was vetted and approved by the intelligence agencies themselves prior to being released.

In a perspective published three days after the attack, the WSWS opposed the attempts that were already being made to portray Tarrant as a “lone wolf,” unconnected to any political tendencies, whose actions and beliefs were completely alien to New Zealand politics and society. The massacre was, we insisted, “the product of the deliberate cultivation, at the highest levels of the capitalist state in country after country, of the most extreme right-wing nationalism.”

With the fifth anniversary of the country’s worst terror attack approaching, the ongoing silence from the political establishment is aimed at obscuring the roots of the Christchurch shootings and downplaying the danger posed by fascism and the extreme right, internationally and in New Zealand.



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