



Terrorism and Social Media Conference 2024

Insights Report from Inclusive Aotearoa Collective Tāhono

July 2024

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Foreword



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This report shares findings and information from the Terrorism and Social Media Conference held at Swansea University from 17 – 20 June 2024. Anjum Rahman was invited to participate and speak at the event, as well as supplementary workshops outside of the conference.

[From the website:](#) The TASM conference will bring together a range of researchers, policy-makers and practitioners, from a number of different countries and disciplinary backgrounds. It will be hosted at the Great Hall on Swansea University's Bay Campus on 18-19 June 2024. As well as keynote presentations from leading experts, attendees will also have the opportunity to choose from a wide variety of breakout sessions.

Tāhono's involvement came about through the work done with the Christchurch Call Advisory Network. One of the co-chairs of CCAN, Katy Vaughan, works at CYTREC, Swansea University, and was one of the key conference organisers. She had asked for a letter of support to funders last year, to secure funding for members of CCAN to attend.

The work is important to Tāhono, both in terms of improving belonging online, having an international presence, spreading our knowledge of belonging and inclusion and improving our connections in the international space. At some point in the future, we may seek funding from international funders. Connections with researchers and academics in the field will better inform our work, both in terms of our constellation but also our training modules.

The team discussed the possibility of asking some of the conference speakers to run webinars for our Coalition for Better Digital Policy, or open them up for anyone to attend. This is something that we will be looking at later in the year.

Once funding was confirmed, Katy was in touch with a formal invitation to Anjum to attend and speak at the conference. All travel costs were funded. We would also like to acknowledge that CYTREC also obtained funding to support participation from global majority countries. Anjum had the opportunity to meet with participants from Nigeria, Pakistan, and other countries.

Pre-Conference Workshops

Arrival

Anjum arrived in Swansea on Friday, 14 June, and met with Katy Vaughan that night at dinner, where they discussed the logistics of the conference and the sessions Anjum would be contributing to. On Sunday afternoon (16 June), Anjum and Katy spent time together and discussed the work of the Christchurch Call and the new foundation, and general issues around a multi-stakeholder approach (one that involved different sectors of society, such as government, civil society and private sector companies).

On Sunday night, other conference participants arrived. Katy and Anjum met with Farzaneh Badeii (another co-chair of CCAN) and Dia Kayyali (a former co-chair and recently working for Meta's Oversight Board). The three discussed various issues around terrorist and violent extremist content online, the effectiveness of global efforts with the Christchurch Call and the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism, and, in particular, the role of CCAN under the new structure.

On Monday, 17 June, CCAN members attending the conference were gathered for two workshops. Those attending were Anjum, Farzaneh, Dia, Tonei Glavinic of the Dangerous Speech Project and a former co-chair of CCAN, and Niklas Brinkmoeller of the Violence Prevention Network (Germany) and a CCAN member.

The workshops were facilitated discussions led by Dr Katy Vaughan and Dr Ashley Mattheis of Dublin City University. Two law students took notes during the discussions.

The first workshop focused on the effectiveness and importance of multi-stakeholder approaches, both to complex problems and to research. Participants talked about the inherent power imbalance of civil society organisations, as compared to governments (who have legislative and regulatory powers) and private corporations (who have a strong resource base, and many of which are large multinationals).

There was discussion around the origins of the multistakeholder approach with the Christchurch Call, which was originally intended to be a set of agreements between governments and companies. When some civil society members found out, they pushed for inclusion. Civil society's role is both to bring a community voice to decision-making and to uphold a range of human rights. To have governments and companies making major decisions without the check of a civil society voice was considered alarming.

This led to the establishment of the Christchurch Call Advisory Network, which grew to develop a strong voice within the Call. CCAN members bring a range of expertise and lived experience to the discussions.

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Anjum also spoke about her experiences with the Independent Advisory Committee of the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism, but these were off record, and mainly to inform the rest of the group.

The group also discussed the importance of a multistakeholder approach in research. Companies had the data, government often also held important information around convictions and investigations, while researchers bring an academic analysis of the issues. Communities and civil society are equally important, to ensure that research does not harm communities.

The second workshop focused on researchers' engagement with communities. Anjum spoke about the inherently exploitative nature of research, which took the knowledge and experiences of communities while often not providing anything in return. The structural and institutional racism historically embedded in academia has often harmed communities, and research has been weaponised against them.

There was discussion on how best to engage with community, and what a true partnership approach looked like. Also, there was discussion about the inaccessibility of research findings and how these could be made more practical for communities to use to ensure policy and resourcing benefited those who need it.

The workshops wrapped up with a discussion on how the panel discussion would run the next day, with Anjum, Farzaneh, Tonei, Dia and Niklas being the speakers.

The day ended with a formal conference dinner, with a few additional attendees. Further discussions around terrorist and violent extremist content were held, including researchers sharing their areas of focus.

Conference Day 1

Details of the conference programme can be found [here](#), with details of breakout sessions [here](#) and [here](#). A PDF of the programme is also included. Anjum attended the following sessions, with more detailed notes and photos of slides available on request.

Panel 1C: Bringing Old and New Together: Understanding The Evolution of Violent Extremist Strategic Communication Online

The focus of this panel was showing that while major companies have said that terrorist content is not appearing on their platforms, there are a number of ways that extremist groups are circumventing platform protection measures and ensuring their material is being effectively shared through proxies. They showed the number of posts coming up, the types of posts, and the growth over time.

Panel 2B: A Civil (Society) Discussion: How to Better Integrate Civil Society into Multistakeholder Projects

Anjum spoke at this workshop - see speech notes on next page.

Panel 3D: Telegram

This session covered Terrorgram, the extreme right part of Telegram, and how extreme right groups are using the platform, including the use of well-known MMA fighters who act as influencers, proxies then spreading material, the ways mercenaries are spreading videos from the battlefield. There was discussion of militant accelerationism, in which extremists want to hasten the collapse of society. The use of stylised imagery, promotion of previous mass murderers, use of imagery on headers to indicate a shared worldview and targeting of youth are key features. The aim of the Terrorgram network

is to produce lone actor shooters. Particularly insidious was the use of children and families in propaganda material. The final presentation looked at the spread of disinformation through Telegram and WhatsApp and how this influenced the Brazilian elections. 99% of phones had WhatsApp and were using it every day, as opposed to 65% for Telegram.

Panel 4B: Pathways

This session looked at how people were going down the pathway to extremism, and the first session compared the approach of the UK to Nigeria. The UK had better technology and infrastructure to combat this, but there was a lack of transparency and discrimination against Muslims. In Nigeria, the drivers were poverty, remote/rural upbringing, lack of employment, mistrust of government and the way security agencies operated. The speaker also discussed the impact of content moderation and bulk surveillance. The second speaker looked at terrorism and violence committed by people over 60 years old. The focus has been on youth, but this group has some unique characteristics that are different to the way youth go down the pathway to violence. The final speaker focused on right-wing extremism in Germany, the different groups and the overlap across the Telegram channels of major influencers.

Panel 2B was successful, with at least 40 attendees from academia, government, and private companies. The panel reviewed the discussion points from the previous day's workshops. Due to the number of speakers, there was not much time for questions, but feedback was positive.



The speech notes are based on two key questions, and are as follows:

<p>What doesn't work so well in terms of being a civil society actor working in other sectors?</p>	<p>What works well in terms of being a civil society actor working in other sectors?</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exploitative nature of research: lack of recognition of what they are taking from our communities • Lack of reciprocity: build your careers, get funding based on our knowledge and experience, but we don't see resources coming back into our community • Racism in research: in deciding the research question, design of the research project, choice of methodology, collation and interpretation of results, conclusions and recommendations. Eg Shama proposal • Research is weaponised against our communities • Institutional and structural racism eg matauranga Māori and different understandings of how to seek knowledge • Lack of access – publishing • Time frames eg the literature review for Media as Allies, and how much work we were able to get done prior to receiving it 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building relationships with communities. Exhaustion of communities. • How can your work support the community: access to power, leadership, resourcing • Accessibility of findings • Meaningful partnerships eg CARE activist in residence • Including those communities in your institutions, senior leadership levels, and boards/councils. Making space. • Letting go of defensiveness; learning to be uncomfortable • Make recs more accessible • Put findings in places community will look, which isn't Google scholar. Disinformation is free, reliable information costs (MSM is doing this too), so what are people in communities most informed by?

Conference Day 2

On Day 2, Anjum attended the following sessions:

Panel 5C: Ecosystems

This session looked at ecosystems in Ireland and online extremist spaces. In Ireland, it was found that X and Telegram had a greater impact than YouTube and 4chan. The most mentioned influencers were Irish, British and American figures. Popular themes: great reset (using a video from World Economic Forum), Anti-Left (cultural Marxism, scheme to destroy traditional western culture), Alt-Right (Q-Anon, Trumpism), Anti-Black (racism fearmongering, local crime, gangs, immigration), Anti-Government (disapproval of current government, specific political figures, alleging the government was complicit in conspiracy theories). Another presentation looked at the adversarial shift in online spaces, isolating a unique piece of propaganda and tracing how it spread. Outlinking was the way most posts were shared. The final paper examined where content was being hosted (terrorist-operated websites, Telegram, file-sharing platforms, terrorist-operated apps). They also looked at the main dissemination platforms, although attendees had some concerns around the categorisations here.

Panel 6D: Understanding violent extremism, non-violent extremism and non-radicalisation

There was a connection between online and offline activity, eg influencers being on-site to record material and their own commentary. The sale of alternative products was used to fund extremist activity. Recruitment strategies were divided into hard and soft, the former used protest activity, civil disobedience, and boycotts;

the latter used art, films, social events and more. The language was different for the different strategies, and Telegram was used during external events (e.g. going into Covid lockdown, the EU referendum) for peak recruitment. Two of the presentations looked at the online behaviour of those who desist from violence in extremist groups compared to those who committed violence. The second presentation looked at the Gulen group from Turkey, who had been subjected to torture and exclusion but had not turned to violence, and concluded that their belief systems and personality traits protected them. There were some concerns around the latter studies, particularly around seeking justice and the notion that perpetrators of violence must be responded to with non-violence.

Panel 7B: Psychological and psychiatric drivers

These sessions addressed people with ADHD, some of whom may be vulnerable to recruitment, and discussed the factors that made them vulnerable. There was considerable concern expressed around the framing that might lead people to believe that those with ADHD are more likely to commit violence. One of the studies looked at the January 6, 2020, attack on the US Capitol, and the online mobilisation, motivation, and organisation of the event. The study looked at the role of Minecraft, TheDonald.win, as well as the imagery used from popular films. One presentation provided a tool which could be used by psychiatrists, psychologists, nurses, and others to support people who are presenting/referred to them. Another study →

looked at identity fusion, whereby people moved from individual to group identity as part of the group. There was some disagreement about the methodology and the texts the author chose to compare in the research, and particularly the way these texts were classified.

Panel 8A: Regulation

The first speaker covered the outsourcing of regulation, through the UK's Online Safety Act, to platforms and Internet Service Providers. These organisations are set up to make profits and are not careful judges of illegal content. They use matching-based or machine-learning-based approaches, which lead to incorrect and inconsistent outcomes. States have both

negative and positive obligations to secure basic human rights principles. Another speaker focused on an analysis of the published decisions of Meta's Oversight Board. There are significant concerns around the lack of transparency where States, instead of using a formal legal request, instead made informal referrals of content suggesting they violate Meta's standards. The only reporting is on legal requests; there is no public record of these informal referrals, how compliant Meta was, and whose content was taken down. A person wouldn't know if a referral was made by the UK Met, for example, or any other state agency when their content was taken down.

Plenary session

The final session was a panel focused on how academics and researchers could collaborate better with communities. The speakers were Anjum Rahman, Dia Kayyali and Anne Craanen. Practical examples were given for each point, but were removed in the following speech notes for confidentiality.

Speech notes:

Geopolitical context: often, the research is done without this. What are the legitimate pathways to address the awfulness perpetrated by your countries. Eg illegal war on terror, invaded Iraq on lies about weapons of mass destruction, fuelling the belief (in the US) that it was in response to World Trade Centre/Pentagon attacks. And there has been no accountability for that, Blair and Bush have had no effective accountability, and no public servants have faced jail time. Plus, the damage of that illegal invasion and what has been done in Syria led to the rise of IS and so many other extremist groups. If you want people to not be radicalised, there need to be legitimate pathways to justice: justice needs to be done and seen to be done, restoration needs to happen, eg profits from those wars need to be given back to those countries, plus what was destroyed to be rebuilt. Without that context, the data models and findings will not address the problem, but they are much simpler to do than challenging your own governments and an established and very profitable war machine.

Going back to the opening address, we heard the word audacity. We need to have audacity to challenge the fundamentals. It's great to cite previous research, but when your institutions are part of a historically racist, colonising tradition, what are you doing to challenge the assumptions of those previous researchers and the institutions they work in? How are you fundamentally reframing things? →

All of this is risky; we know it, we live with the risk. We're under surveillance, we're attacked on the streets, we are recipients of online threats and harassment, we know all about risk! That's where partnerships and collaboration, but also collective organising, are so critical. Communities of solidarity are critical, and that's why we're here.

Definitions are being used to suppress people. Legal definitions are inherently political and there to serve the interests of the country that is legislating. Use expertise and skills to take the edge off the bluntness of definitions. Protecting vulnerable communities.

Also, impacts: are we requiring severely oppressed to be non-violent. The Research Excellence Framework requires publishing, but what harm is being caused by what you publish? Sometimes, your work furthers marginalisation and increases the problem. What responsibility do you have for the impacts, similar to what responsibilities do platforms have for the harm they cause?

You're here to speak truth to power. As academics and academic institutions, you're the critic and conscience of society. Therefore, you can't uphold the same power structures that you're supposed to be the critic and conscience of. I know what I'm asking. There are professions which require people to put their bodies on the line, and yours is one of them if you are ready to take the challenge. But as with those professions, the institutions they are part of are responsible for their health and safety, as is society and the state.

Lived experience of harm, victims' voices. Multistakeholder forums are not accessible to so many impacted communities (Rohingya, Tigray, Syria). These people need to be at the heart. Gaza and shadow-banning. NZ experience – Safer Online Services and Media Platforms consultation has been shelved. There is a lack of hate speech protection.



Conference Day 3 Sandpit Proposals

Some of the conference participants returned to Swansea University for a day of working in groups to develop research proposals. We were taken through a co-design process that asked us to define a problem, combine similar problems, then pick a problem set to work on developing a proposal.

Our group developed a proposal titled “Reaching the Resistant: Identification of best practices in the delivery of critical thinking and digital literacy education”. The proposal document can be found [here](#).

Ultimately we were not successful in gaining the £5,000 award for the proposal, but the process was very helpful in showing us how to work through a problem set and bring it down to concrete steps in terms of a research project.

Conclusion

The conference offered insights around online content moderation, abuse of platforms, the way different actors were using platforms and the impacts of such content. There was as much information in what wasn't said: often the lack of geopolitical analysis, sometimes not understanding how definitions and categorisations can cause harm. Finally, there was much emphasis on description of what was happening, but very little focus on effective solutions. The description in itself was very helpful in building understanding, but from a community perspective, we are looking for what we can implement to solve the issues presented.

Certainly it was a privilege to share thoughts on working in multistakeholder forums, the impact of research on communities (particularly marginalised communities) and why meaningful partnerships with communities are critically important in seeking knowledge. It is also important to critically examine our own assumptions and biases, and be aware of how this impacts research.





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