



Auckland Unitarian Church

Love beyond belief

## The Rise — and Rise — of Hate Speech in an Online World

Distinguished Professor Emeritus Paul Spoonley © 20th November 2022

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai>

Kia ora tatou katoa. Nga mihi nga mihi nui. Nga mihi ki a koe, Ted. Thanks for the introduction. And te whare e tu nei. Tena koe. I acknowledged the house in which we are standing or sitting. Ted has kindly mentioned the book, Histories of Hate. And so I have had a long connection in studying the far right. And so earlier this year, as Ted has indicated, the Prime Minister and Cabinet appointed me as a co-director of [He Whenua Taurikura](#). He Whenua, land, Taurikura, peace, so land of peace. And what we're tasked with doing is bringing together the best research and knowledge that we can to avoid ever having to encounter an event like the March 2019 again. We're just getting underway. We had a hui here in Auckland two weeks ago, in which we brought together communities, government departments and experts and we looked at the research that is available, but also the gaps that exist. Coincidentally, this book, Histories of Hate, was written before this appointment. But Paul Morris, who some of you might know who's involved with religious diversity initiatives in New Zealand and is a member of the Jewish community, he and I wrote the chapter on what's happening in countries like New Zealand at the moment. And so I just want to share some thoughts of what we're seeing.

What's interesting is that there's a moment, a tipping point, around 2015-16, which is associated with Trump in various ways, although I want to be careful about drawing a straight line connection between what I'm going to be talking about and Trump. But what he did was mandate some forms of expression and speech. And what we've seen prior to that period in 2015 16, is the decline of the mass political parties around the world and the rise and rise of various forms of political tribalism.

And, in 2010, I was a senior Fulbright Fellow at the University of California, Berkeley, and in that year, the Tea Party were being established in the United States. I took some interest in this development. And we had a meeting at UC Berkeley that year, and many thought that with better education and better communication, the Tea Party's message of an America First, which centered on an exclusionary nationalism, would be undermined. And there was an author who wrote a very good book, which appeared in 2016, called Arlie Hochschild. And Arlie said, well, no, you're misunderstanding what is happening. There is a change beginning to occur in societies like the United States. And of course, the year in which the book, her book, came out, 2016, was the year in which we began to see this growth and terms of hate online.

I wrote the cabinet paper on social cohesion in 2006. It wasn't accepted by cabinet in this country. But one of the things that I talked about was the way in which we acknowledged diversity and the way in which we would incorporate and recognize diversity in various ways. And that involves not only those who are perhaps new to this country, like immigrants, but it involved communities that are here as host communities. But at the time, I didn't understand the significance of what was happening online. And so you begin to see that enabling of hate online, particularly in the last five to seven years. And what I think the online world has done is make it possible to say things that are deeply hurtful, that are deeply vitriolic, and which target various individuals and communities. And I want to talk about antisemitism in a moment. But it was a possibility of doing one to many form of communication, that it was anonymous, and that it was a form of communication that had no accountability. If you haven't seen the Graham Norton response to a question at a book event, in which he is charged with being on the side of wokeness, I can't remember the exact words. But he said, well, what we're really seeing is speech without accountability. And that I think is one of the challenges that we face. We see this new online world providing new political possibilities.

But prior to that, there have been some other things that have been happening. One of those was that identitarian movements have been growing and there was a French author, Camus, who wrote a book in 2012, about what he called the "great replacement", the idea that the white Christian west was being replaced, particularly by Islam and Muslims. And from that you get phrases like white ethnocide or white genocide beginning to emerge. So that was one component of these new politics. The other was the alternative right, which we now know as the alt-right, which began to be come into being really around the end of the first decade of the 21st century, very much online, very much involving communities that had felt marginalized. And this is what [Arlie Hochschild](#) talks about. She talks about the queue that is lining up for the great American dream, but gets very annoyed that women are given special consideration – or blacks or Latinos or the rainbow community, and is feeling further marginalized by the way in which these communities are being recognized, and being given access to that great American dream. And so the alt-right began to articulate some of these views in various ways.

Now we have the alt-right here in New Zealand. Action Zealandia is a group that is here in Auckland and other parts of New Zealand. You can look at their website, and their punch line is about preserving the interests of white New Zealand. And then, of course, in 2019, we had the Christchurch events, which really have challenged many of us because one of the things that I had experienced during my research and writing was that many, many New Zealanders felt that we were somehow exceptional, that the events that we'd seen overseas, let's say the killings in Norway, was not something that would happen here. And the events of Christchurch in 2019 really did challenge that. And since then, we've seen the escalation of online misinformation and disinformation. Misinformation is material that is incorrect but is circulated. Disinformation is deliberately misleading material. And both have grown.

And I want to come back to the antisemitism here, because one of the things that I did, when I first began to look at these groups in the 1980s, in New Zealand was to look at antisemitism. And I've written about it and been a correspondent for various international organizations, talking about the nature of antisemitism in New Zealand. But I've also been part of surveys of the Jewish community beginning in 1983. I've been involved in four, and there's a fifth that occurred earlier this year. And one of the things about those surveys of the Jewish community was that the level of antisemitism they experienced in New Zealand was relatively low, much lower than, for example, in Australia, and certainly much lower than in Europe. But by the time that we completed the last one, which was just a couple of years

ago, and then the one that was completed this year, in both cases, the level of antisemitism experienced by the Jewish community in New Zealand is now on par with other parts of the world. And so we've got this new wave of antisemitism that's been occurring. And if you go to particularly some of the American organizations like the Anti-Defamation League, or the Southern Poverty Law Center, you'll see the year-on-year escalation of antisemitism. And so the European Union has a taskforce that's been looking at this growth. And they estimate that on a daily basis, there are about 5 million politicized antisemitic tweets in the world. And so you can just see the level of this growth. And certainly that's true for New Zealand.

Now, I think the moment in which some of these developments accelerated was COVID. COVID gave the far right and these groups that were anti-diversity that were buying into some of these arguments about the great replacement and the identitarian movement in Europe that COVID and what governments did in response to COVID, was the moment in which both the anxiety of communities was increased but also suspicion and trust of governments. Well, suspicion has increased; trust has dropped. And along with Sir Peter Gluckman and a few others, we looked at trust here in New Zealand in the early stages of COVID. And the trust in our health professionals and our government and our institutions was incredibly high. And when we look at what happened around the world, then we could say that New Zealand was one of the few countries in which that trust was as high as it was.

Ted has mentioned demography and me. One of the things that's really interesting is that COVID has reduced life expectancy in all OECD countries, so that is 38 countries, except for three, and those three are Norway, Taiwan and New Zealand. And here in New Zealand, the response to COVID, and what we did by way of public health measures, actually saved about 3,500 people from dying in that period, particularly from things like influenza and pneumonia.

But there's a very different stage that had emerged in the latter stages of our COVID management system. And you saw that at Parliament earlier this year. And the thing that was very concerning was the rise and rise of conspiracy theories, particularly concerning the United Nations or other international bodies like the WHO, but it was also the Islamophobia, the antisemitism and the misogyny that was present. And there's been some research, which is just coming out in the last few weeks in which misogyny, which is particularly directed at the Prime Minister, is a character of what's happened in New Zealand as part of these conspiratorial politics. But of all of the conspiratorial views, [Chris Wilson](#), who's the researcher who's done this research, shows that the misogyny is the most toxic of those conspiratorial views.

Now, going back to the antisemitism, what you then saw were arguments beginning to play out, that behind COVID, behind the government responses, behind international organizations, there was a cabal of Jews. And when you look at the QAnon arguments coming out of the United States, they very quickly descend into conspiratorial views, but particularly into antisemitism. So unfortunately, we've got to the point now, where New Zealand is not exempt. It never was. But there's very good evidence that we are part of an international ecosystem in which this online hate is beginning to impact upon our community relations, but also on our politics. There are going to be various tests of this rise of online hate. It looks as though in terms of local government, the attempt by some of these conspiratorial groups to undermine local government in New Zealand during the elections were not successful. But we're going to have a general election next year. It's going to be interesting to see what role these views play out in that.

Can I just finish by talking about our responsibility and some of the impacts of what we are seeing. I think the nature and impacts of hate online is not understood by most of us. You might have seen “Fire and Fury” and one or two recent documentaries, which try and explain the nature of this online world. But we should reach out to the communities that have been targeted — the Muslim community, the Jewish community, the rainbow communities – and understand what it is that they’re experiencing. And as somebody who was involved with this prior to the events of 2019, and Christchurch, I was certainly very concerned at what I was seeing. But my concern was particularly for younger New Zealanders. When we heard evidence from the communities who were targeted, I was appalled at the level of hostility that some of these communities face, but the community that I think was most impacted were our teenagers, that what happens online is really problematic at the moment for younger New Zealanders.

So what are we going to do? We have got hate speech legislation. The Minister has announced that it’s coming before Parliament. You might have heard the news in the last 48 hours that there will be an extension of the human rights provisions. From nationality, race, ethnicity, it will now include religion. But unfortunately, it does not include gender identity, which is puzzling given the evidence I know the government have received.

One of the things that is going to be an issue for all of us is what do we do about hate online? And for me, legislation is important, but it’s not as important as education. As something that Ted and I share is making sure that people have got digital literacy, that they know how to assess material online, how to understand it, and how to respond to it. And I’ve given Ted a [pamphlet which, interestingly, has been produced by the New Zealand Security Intelligence Service](#), which is what is it you should be looking for in terms of radicalization? And then how do you respond to that? One of our challenges is that in our communities, in our whanau, in our peer groups, we’re going to see people are being radicalized by what they encounter online. And what is it that we should be looking for and what it is that we should do? It’s really difficult. I mean, by the time it comes to the attention of [He Whenua Taurikura](#), it is probably too late. But we need to do things in the community and in our more intimate settings to address these issues.

We certainly have a challenge about what happens internationally. A lot of what we encounter online does not originate in New Zealand, it might originate from QAnon in the United States, or a troll factory in Russia. We’re at the end of a system of production. And it’s very difficult to manage what happens in that system, because a lot of it is generated from overseas. What I’d like us to do is to say, well, if you’re posting something online, we need to know who you are. And the platform should be treated as a publisher. If they publish material which is hateful, then they are held responsible for that. I’m not holding my breath on either of those, I think the horse has probably bolted in terms of that. But the Christchurch call is beginning to have an impact. And some of the major platforms are beginning to respond to community and national concerns. But that doesn’t deal with what happens in the dark web. What happens in that dark web is still deeply problematic. And it’s very difficult to control.

I think the final thing returns back to that paper on social cohesion. You might be aware that the [Ministry of Social Development produced a series of papers on social cohesion](#) a few weeks ago. I’ve got some issues with what is being suggested, but at least it identifies some of the things that matter in terms of contributing positively to community fabric. And for me, one of the things – as you’ve heard today – is that we really do need to understand the impact of what’s happening online, and the possibility that what happens might be recruiting and radicalizing people in a way that is deeply challenging and unsettling for social cohesion.

If I can leave you with a plea, it is to listen to those who are targeted. If we're not personally targeted, it is often difficult to understand what people are experiencing. If you talk to members of the Muslim or Jewish community or the Rainbow communities in New Zealand, you would be horrified by the sort of hate that they experience. The second plea is to take the conversation out into the public. I've been slightly appalled at the referencing of what happens in the United States, as being a reference point for us here in New Zealand. We don't have a constitution, we don't have sheriffs. I don't know whether you've taken any notice of the Sovereign Citizens movement. But the rather bizarre idea that what happened with sheriffs in the United States in the 1870s is something that should apply here. And when you look at the at the events of the parliamentary protest, why so many American flags? Why so many pro-Trump flags? Why so many pro-Trump slogans there? And then of course, you have the very challenging conspiratorial views which largely come from QAnon. Let's be aware of these dynamics in our community, and let's try and work out how we respond to them because they are deeply challenging.

I don't have the answers, [He Whenua Taurikura](#) will provide some of those answers. The challenge is to get community leaders, religious leaders, politicians to take note of the evidence. And then to do something about it, because at the end of the day, we are facing some enormously serious challenges in terms of the online attacks of some communities. So can I leave you with an invitation and to thank you. And thank you, Ted, for inviting me along. There will be a book next year which not only explains the history of these ideologies and politics in New Zealand, but will also – hopefully – provide some insight into what's happening at the moment. Kia ora tatou.

## Meditation / Discussion Questions

What do you do when you encounter what you believe is hate speech?

What can we do about hate speech, both individually and collectively?