

Into the Fog of Digital Delusion: The Lighthouse Paradox and the Rise of Far-right Extremism in Australia

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Declaration

I certify that this thesis is my own original work and has not been submitted for a degree at any other institution. To the best of my knowledge, all sources used and contributions from others have been appropriately acknowledged.

This research was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the University of Sydney. Any necessary ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate university ethics committee [see: [2024/HE001074](#) for details].

This thesis was professionally proofread by John Mahoney, with assistance limited to language, grammar, and punctuation. Prior to this, Grammarly was used strictly for initial proofreading. While graphs were rendered using ChatGPT, no other generative AI tools were used during the research, development, analysis, or writing of this thesis. All proofreading and visual assistance were carried out in accordance with the University of Sydney's academic integrity and ethical research guidelines.

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to explore how extremist far-right recruiters speak to people online, to assist with Australia’s countering violent extremism (CVE) early detection measures. I argue that such strategies—while occasionally successful—have been hampered by not engaging thoroughly with online environments, often dismissing them as *secondary sites* for recruitment. Furthermore, I suggest that these strategies often focus on detecting the *radicalised* rather than the processes of recruitment, relying on a root-causes approach that is problematic due to its tendency to oversimplify. Additionally, I contend that early detection measures, whether via digital countermeasures or regulatory frameworks, have been limited by representational biases that portray the far-right in a particular way: namely, as *non-terrorist* and *unified*. These factors have resulted in outcomes that appear to target only certain groups within the extreme far-right spectrum, leaving many to spread hate and incite violence online.

I use an interdisciplinary approach to survey far-right recruitment materials. Namely, I apply media logic to Critical Terrorism and Security Studies as a means to combine complementing knowledge spheres to better address online extremism. Focusing on websites—as a group’s primary source of self-representation—I develop a typology that refreshes and extends the work of Schwartz, Dunkel, and Waterman (2009). Specifically, *the Extremism Typology*—my original contribution—combines Social Identity Theory and Identity Theory to explore how a group’s social, cultural, and collective identities shape the content they produce online. I then apply this typology to a multimodal discourse analysis (*MDA*) to examine how such identities influence the text produced by groups and, in turn, present their uniqueness.

By progressing beyond the parameters of what is known about extreme far-right groups, I further conceptualise far-right recruiters as *text*, and this text as *lighthouses* with the ability to direct audiences to simplified narratives and extreme worldviews developed by groups who capitalise on digital affordances. I argue that such text permeates an environment shaped by a culmination of misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories—a condition I describe as a *fog*. Within the fog, conspiracy theories—as foundational bedrocks for extreme far-right beliefs—develop *latches*, or opportunities for lighthouses to enter spheres of interest previously unobtainable to them. I conclude that the far-right is not unified, and that improving early detection measures requires addressing such groups as

individual entities. Furthermore, online environments are not secondary spheres for recruitment but should be considered a primary vehicle for the proliferation of far-right extremism.

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1 Introduction

The lighthouse analogy has long been a metaphor for various positive emotions, aspirations, and conditions. Virginia Woolf, in her novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927/2000), employs this metaphor to illustrate the oscillation between distant and near gazes, akin to the trajectory of a lighthouse beam, which serves to ‘illuminate’ transcendent or universal laws beyond human experience (Luttrell, 2013). This symbolism also echoes throughout Christianity, where the lighthouse epitomises guidance and salvation, mirroring the teachings of Jesus Christ. As articulated in the Gospel of John, “I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life” (John 8:12). In the context of rehabilitation from alcohol and opioid addiction, the lighthouse metaphor represents the supportive role of family and friends who guide individuals through their struggles. A poignant quote often cited on rehabilitation clinic websites is from novelist Anne Lamott (1994, p. 218): “Lighthouses don’t go running all over an island looking for boats to save; they just stand there shining.” In complete contrast, I revitalise the lighthouse analogy to conceptualise a chaotic landscape where a world experiencing enduring crises is drawn to far-right recruiters, who offer an illuminated path into conspiratorial *multiverses*, ideological warfare, the potential for dismantling democratic regimes, and violence. The lighthouse paradox articulates how far-right recruiters exploit the digital space to disseminate their message amid a sea of white noise—characterised by misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories—developing a digitised fog for individuals to get lost in, eventually becoming ensnared in its depths. Lighthouses are traditionally seen to guide vessels to safety rather than peril, hence the paradox inherent in this thesis’s title.

The *lighthouse paradox* is particularly pronounced during times of crises, when audiences seek simplified explanations for complex situations (Shermer, 2012, p. 162). Over time, previously implausible and fringe narratives become more coherent and justifiable to some individuals, leading to a specific audience that is vetted for the lighthouse. Such audiences are conditioned to engage with messages that are oversimplified, enemy-driven, and often carry detrimental implications aimed at inciting ideological warfare. I develop the lighthouse paradox at a time when governments, policymakers, and intelligence operatives are increasingly focused on early detection of online radicalisation—a challenge that remains significant despite some successful interventions (Yunus, 2022, p. 9; Birdwell, 2020, p. 198).

I argue that recognising and understanding such a paradox is imperative to safeguarding the core values of democracy and liberalist societies against the encroaching shadows of ideological extremism.

1.1 Background Research: Crises and a Nudge to the Right

Crises have a way of courting extremes. They are an important element to address when discussing the rise of online recruitment to extremist far-right groups, as they tend to provide a gateway for such narratives to find prevalence in mainstream political discourse. A crisis can be defined as a “triggering event causing significant change or [has] the potential to cause significant change”, often coupled with “the perceived inability to cope with this change, and a threat to ... existence” (Keown-McMullan, 1997, p. 4). While the term is quite commonplace, it is difficult to provide an objective definition of a crisis, as subjectivity often provides the lens through which one defines it (Roitman, 2011). Nonetheless, crises, whether on a global, local, or individual scale, are not uncommon. In fact, according to van Prooijen and Douglas (2017, p. 323), “people continuously experience substantial uncertainty and fear due to societal crisis situations”. Furthermore, crises do not tend to end after the event is over. Rather, experts allude to a “crisis after the crisis” (Hart & Boin, 2001, p. 28), indicating a sustained circumstance.

Crises acting as a gateway for the far-right into mainstream political discourse is not a new phenomenon, and prevalent examples of far-right successes via crisis pathways can be found throughout history. Specifically, these are moments when “government majorities shrink, parliamentary fractionalisation rises, the number of parties in parliament increases, and the far-right parties see strong political gains” (Funke et al., 2016, p. 227). For example, Peydró et al. (2019) equate the successes of the Nazi Party in post-WWI Germany to a banking crisis in 1931, when Danatbank and Dresdner, two prominent national banks, collapsed, ushering in an era of hyperinflation in the fledgling republic that remains the fourth worst instance after post-WWII Hungary, Mugabe’s Zimbabwe, and the former Yugoslavia’s inflation crisis of 1994 (Toscano, 2011).

During the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) in 2008, a similar shift was experienced in both developed liberal States and indebted developing economies (Saull, 2015). In Hungary, as an answer to foreign debt and a free-falling economy, far-right party Jobbik (The Movement for a Better Hungary) benefitted significantly at the polls by presenting a nationalist, relief-from-foreign-debt platform (Dizikes, 2022). While the party has since

declined, their platform proved to be of great inspiration to the incumbent Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, whose party FIDESZ (Hungarian Civic Alliance) infiltrated Jobbik's loyalists by appropriating modified versions of the party's manifesto (Petsinis, 2020). Orbán, who was once described as “the most dangerous man in the European Union”, continues to present a platform fuelled by nativism, ethno-nationalism, and far-right populism (Lendvai, 2018).

In Greece—a State with a long-standing history of nurturing democratic values at a structural level—the amplification of the far-right developed under stringent economic austerity measures aimed at alleviating the State's sovereign debt; a result of the GFC (Angouri & Wodak, 2014, p. 541). Lasting for seven years between 2010 and 2017, measures included the freezing of salaries for government employees, a decrease in commercial sector wages and pensions, and a substantial reduction in the number of municipalities and publicly owned companies (Manojlović, 2011, p. 338). The austerity measures and subsequent recession created a pathway for Golden Dawn, an extreme far-right group that managed to parlay the disillusionment of a society in crisis into political gains for their particular strand of national socialism (Vasilopoulou & Halikiopoulou, 2015). Golden Dawn procured 7 per cent of the vote during the 2009 general election, or 18 parliamentary seats (Smith, 2015). According to Trilling (2020), “No outright fascist party in Europe had made such gains in a general election for years”.

In Australia, the principal geographical focus of this thesis, there has been a steady increase in support for minor parties—including independents and more extreme candidates—since 1945 (Wood et al., 2018). This trend was particularly pronounced in the 2016, 2019, and 2022 federal elections, which saw right-leaning parties such as Pauline Hanson's One Nation and the United Australia Party capitalise on voter disaffection with the major parties, especially in regional areas (Green, 2022; Australian Electoral Commission [AEC], 2022). However, the 2025 federal election marked a sharp decline in their support, as younger and more progressive voters played a decisive role in shifting the political centre leftward (The Conversation, 2025; AEC, 2025).

Despite this electoral setback, the influence of right-wing narratives remains embedded in national politics, particularly in the wake of ongoing crises such as inflation, housing affordability, and geopolitical instability. In response, both Labor and Coalition parties have adopted more conservative rhetoric and policy positions—for example, Labor's retreat from a renewed push for the Indigenous Voice to Parliament (McIlroy, 2025), alongside a broader reassertion of national security priorities (Dzeidzic, 2025). These developments demonstrate how crises can push political discourse rightward, even when

electoral outcomes appear to favour the centre-left. Furthermore, these shifts suggest that electoral results alone do not fully capture the momentum of rightward political shifts. Crises—whether economic, social, or existential—can trigger deeper transformations in public sentiment and policy direction, even in the absence of formal gains for the far-right. Nonetheless, electoral success remains an important measure of how effectively political forces can convert these shifts into institutional power. Historical research underscores this dynamic: for example, a study by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York found a correlation between higher mortality from the 1918 influenza pandemic and increased support for extremist parties in interwar Germany, including the Nazi Party (Blickle, 2020). More recently, during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, an increase in support for the far-right, extreme right, and populist parties was detected globally (Magnus, 2022). In particular, those parties, through ‘exceptionality discourse’—or the speech acts of a charismatic leader who presents themselves as one with the people and different to ‘others’, à la Brazil’s former President Jair Bolsonaro (Burni & Tamaki, 2021, p. 115)—promoted distrust of establishments (notably, the World Health Organization) and discouraged vaccination (p. 113). Nonetheless, the examples mentioned above are generated from mainstream political spheres. As will be discussed in this thesis, other factions of the far-right—the more extreme, white supremacist and neo-Nazi groups—also receive a boost of support during times of crisis.

Currently, the world is experiencing an array of crises—from armed conflicts, environmental disasters, economic turmoil, and changes to the status quo both culturally and socially—each having the potential to fuel nationalist, ethno-statist, populist, and extremist sentiment. However, shifts to the extreme factions of the ideological spectrum are not exclusively directed by political institutions and their representatives. Furthermore, the success of these nudges to the right during crises is not measured strictly by voter turnout, nor is right-speak propagated solely by the populist politician through classic modes of politicking, grandstanding, media appearances, or campaign trails. With increased levels of digitisation, the shift is also in the hands of the audience. Within this far-reaching motley crew of participants, once described as the mass (see Neuman, 1991; Dohle, 2008), there are a few whose main objective is to amplify the extremities of the right. More specifically, in an enduring state of crisis, opportune times are presented to accelerate online recruitment into far-right groups (Avis, 2020, p. 8; Norlen, 2020, p. 12; Khalil, 2021, p. 109). Thus, in an era of increased digital affordances, yesterday’s far-right politician is any number of today’s far-right loyalists—whether influencers, groups, individuals, or automated programs. With the

click of a keyboard, they develop manifestos, produce counter-narratives to the mainstream worldview, and recruit others to their cause—in chatrooms, through memes, and throughout various *shitpost* sessions. Crises shape societies, and societies shape the digitalised realms in which individuals interact, thus shaping new environments, audiences, and opportunities for far-right extremists.

1.1.1 The Digitisation of Recruitment

Digitisation, the “integration of multiple technologies into all aspects of daily life” (Gray & Rump, 2015, p. 1319), has long reshaped elements of human interaction. Digitisation has rewritten the tacit rules of engagement, from ‘swiping right’ instead of meeting someone in a bar (Hobbs et al., 2017), offering a ‘thumbs up’ emoji instead of applause, to arguing with strangers online about previously taboo topics, such as faith and politics, without experiencing the discomfort of confrontation. Digitisation, the harbinger of mediatisation—or, as articulated by Deuze (2014), an existence lived *through* and not *with* media—has reshaped language itself and developed ways to express emotion or intent via computer-mediated communication (CMC). For example, paralanguage cues, such as character repetitions, multiple punctuation, emojis and emoticons, have all become effective means to convey emotion (Rodríguez-Hidalgo et al., 2017, p. 638), and have proven to be more effective in conveying meaning in certain instances, such as when learning a second language (Loewen & Wolff, 2016, p. 163).

From an idealistic standpoint, digitisation has liberated the previously elite-controlled exchange of information and broken through the barriers of top-down communication by permitting transmission from a variety of sources, and on a potentially global scale (Poster, 2013, p. 11). Furthermore, the production of this exchange is no longer solely in the hands of mass media, speaking one to many via a set of highly expensive broadcasting technologies (Holmes, 2005, p. 17; Livingstone, 1999, p. 60; Winseck, 2019). Nor are the recipients of this mass-mediated communication passive, as once thought. Or, as described by Lasswell’s (1929) hypodermic needle theory, a homogenous and acquiescent audience unable to question media transmissions that are injected directly into the brain of the mass conscience. On the contrary, in today’s digitised reality, the audience is very much active and actively engages in the processes of communication, with a relative degree of sovereignty over their own perception of media transmission (Hall, 2019). The audience is equally an active producer of content, of narratives, and counter-narratives, developing

spheres of interest and, through this exchange, new communities (Castells, 2010). In the era of digitisation, the audience is a complicit producer of their own lifeworld, without the constraints of so-called homogeneity, and is afforded a degree of influence in the realities of others (Silverstone, 2002). I acknowledge these positive advancements made possible through such seismic technological shifts. However, I will be exploring the negative impacts of digitisation; namely, how these affordances permit far-right recruiters to indoctrinate individuals into their worldview.

1.1.2 Countering Violent Extremism: A Local and International Perspective

In today's quick-moving digital transformation environment, the internet has increasingly been employed as a space for radicalisation, indoctrination, training, and the recruiting of future violent extremists (Almohammad, 2018; Aly et al., 2017; Borum, 2011; Rudner, 2016). While counterterrorism measures have previously focused predominantly on recruitment to Salafi-jihadist movements, far-right extremism is garnering focus as a threat on par with jihadism, with far-right groups more likely to engage in violent acts (Jasko et al., 2022, p. 1). According to experts, early detection is the most effective defence against online extremism (see Iqbal et al., 2021; Najjar & Al-Augby, 2021). As part of the broader set of programs and policies known as preventing/countering violent extremism (CVE), early detection refers to a set of preventative and non-coercive measures to reduce involvement in terrorism by focusing on collecting information about “potentially threatening individuals” (van de Weert & Eijkman, 2020, p. 492). Since the inception of CVE approaches—that were put into place following the 9/11 attacks and subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq when countermeasures were exclusively punitive—early detection has aimed to progress “hard security approaches” such as surveillance and policing towards “soft security approaches”, aiming to understand the various social, cultural and political drivers of radicalisation (Ambrozik, 2019, p. 102; Subedi, 2017, p. 136). Among States that have embraced CVE measures is Australia, whose ongoing experiences with far-right extremism are the focal point of this thesis.

Australia's approach to CVE remains in step with the United Nations (UN) principles pertaining to countering violent extremism. These principles are important to survey, as international governance often provides a framework for member States to formally shape their regulatory measures. In 2014, in a bid to curb further radicalisation among host States with the return of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs), the Security Council

issued Resolution 2178 (S/RES/2178), with the impetus placed on CVE approaches as “an ‘essential element’ in addressing the threat to international peace and security posed by FTFs”. Further, the Security Council recognised that acts of terrorism cannot be prevented through repressive measures alone. “It is also essential to take account of grievances that may be exploited by terrorists and their supporters and to develop constructive solutions” (United Nations, n.d.-a). These solutions were suggested to have “an emphasis on dialogue, inclusion, and the promoting of understanding, including in the fields of education and religion” (United Nations, n.d.-a). Furthermore, that the focus should be on non-coercive measures, and that an even greater focus should be placed on protecting vulnerable individuals from the processes of radicalisation (United Nations, n.d.-a). Those susceptible to radicalisation, according to the UN’s *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism* (United Nations, n.d.-b), include lack of socio-economic opportunities, marginalisation and discrimination, unresolved conflict and collective grievances and victimisation. The *Plan of Action* also offers recommendations for Member States on how to shape and implement CVE measures on a global, local and regional level. However, despite these efforts, there are currently no universally agreed-upon definitions or approaches to CVE, which has not been unproblematic (UNODC, n.d.). Namely, in addition to concerns that approaches on a national/local level may not adhere to universal principles of human rights and fundamental freedoms (see Saul, 2024), there is the threat that the term *CVE* could become a catchcry for a plethora of initiatives that result in counterproductive measures (McCants & Watts, 2012, p. 1). This lack of cohesion is critical to highlight for two reasons. The first is that such localised approaches could result in a lack of cohesion and cooperation when attempting to combat the rise of violent extremism, an inherently global problem, with extremist actors employing the affordances of digital technologies to recruit locals from international locations. Second, a domestic approach to developing CVE initiatives (UNODC, n.d.) could result in domestic, localised outcomes. Australia’s approach to regulatory measures acknowledges the globalised nature of online recruitment into extremist groups. In *Preventing and Countering Terrorism 2022–26: Australia’s International Engagement Update and Way Ahead* (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2022, p. 4), the State’s desire to engage strategically on an international level is mentioned:

While we are primarily focused on the Indo-Pacific region, we recognise the enduring character of terrorist and violent extremism threats and their capacity to traverse borders. We acknowledge the expansion of extremist groups and their influence

globally ... we will prioritise understanding the nexus between geographical areas, violent extremist groups and across borders. (p. 20)

However, as highlighted, an enduring localised approach has resulted in localised outcomes. As expressed by the *Preventing and Countering Terrorism* initiative, “Our priority is firmly centred on threats to Australia and Australians, and in countering terrorism and violent extremism” (p. 20).

States focusing on the well-being of their citizens is in step with the universal principles of human rights and good governance, as laid out in the various conventions issued by the UN that outline the operational aspects of the post-WWII order. However, as articulated by the Australian government, extremism is a global problem. Thus, understanding the nature of extremism as globalised and not localised highlights the importance of understanding these groups and the individuals who join them as being influenced by global directions, contexts, and perspectives. More specifically, a localised approach may not consider the various international contexts and motivations that are palatable to an Australian audience. I argue that to protect locally is to understand extremism globally—via digitisation’s reach—and internationally, via the foundational contexts and belief systems that translate to a local audience.

Over the past few years, Australia has increased its commitment to expanding the State’s approach to CVE. While such measures will be detailed further in chapter three of this thesis, they will briefly be mentioned here as a means to highlight the discord between such approaches and the realities of online recruitment. Australia’s approach to CVE aims to address four key pillars. As outlined by the Department of Home Affairs (n.d.), these include activities that aim to “build strength in diversity and social participation, early intervention, disengagement and reintegration, targeted work with vulnerable communities and institutions addressing terrorist propaganda online”. As an example, the *Living Safe Together Initiative* was launched by the Australian Government in 2015 and focused on safeguarding local communities from violent extremism by prioritising early detection (Office of the Attorney-General, 2015, p. 23). The initiative highlights the significance of families, friends, and the broader community in identifying vulnerable individuals susceptible to radicalisation, with the government and other services extending support as required (see Australian Government, 2020). The initiative also defines radicalisation as a deviation from the views of society and community regarding social issues and political involvement:

As a person radicalises, they may begin to seek to change significantly the nature of society and government. However, if someone decides that using fear, terror or violence is justified to achieve ideological, political or social change—this is violent extremism. (Office of the Attorney-General, 2015, p. 5).

According to the initiative, the categories of vulnerable individuals who may be at risk of radicalisation are similar to the characteristics outlined by the UN. Namely, Australia’s list includes those who have experienced unfavourable changes in lifestyle, livelihood, and relationships; those who are grappling with mental health concerns such as depression, anxiety, or suicidal tendencies; those experiencing discrimination; and those who have been exposed to hateful attitudes and actions, either as victims or perpetrators, and “overseas events that may harm their community” (Office of the Attorney-General, 2015, p. 9). Thus, in the context of Australia’s CVE measures, the onus is placed on individuals, families and communities to assess whether or not an individual is radicalised. As I discuss, detecting motivations for radicalisation or developing a set of root causes as motivating factors for joining extremist groups has long been considered by experts within the field of terrorism studies as a difficult, if not impossible, task (see Lankford, 2014; Weatherston & Moran, 2003). To bolster early detection measures, a shift in focus is necessary—from the recruited to the recruiter—with a deeper understanding of such online interactions beyond assuming the causes for people joining such groups.

Following the Christchurch mosque shooting in 2019 in New Zealand, orchestrated by Australian Brenton Harrison Tarrant, the Australian Government also refreshed its punitive measures to include elements addressing the proliferation of online extremism. However, these measures were focused on addressing acts of terrorism. Namely, the government made amendments to the *Criminal Code Act 1995 (C157)*, or the *Amendment (Sharing of Abhorrent Violent Material) Act 2019* (see Commonwealth of Australia, 2023). Part 5 of the Criminal Code Act outlines the definition of terrorism, and the punitive measures aimed at eradicating terrorist acts. The amendment introduced penalties for social media platforms that permitted or failed to remove the live streaming of violent crimes. The amendment also provided the *eSafety Commissioner*—a local body with the authority to intervene in cases of harmful online content—the power to issue notices when platforms violate the amendment’s terms. Another recent amendment to the *Criminal Code Act 1995 (C157)*—the Counter-Terrorism Legislation Amendment (Prohibited Hate Symbols and Other Measures) Bill 2023 (see Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2023)—criminalised the display and

proliferation of hate symbols and speech both on- and offline. The amendment also criminalised online recruitment and provided a brief outline of what is meant by such materials. Specifically, Article 10 articulates extremist materials as “recruitment materials, which are aimed at disseminating extremist views and promoting violence”. However, there appear to be no definitive parameters in terms of what is meant by recruitment materials or extremist views. Thus, despite such amendments further acknowledging the role of online content in proliferating violence, there appears to be a dichotomy between the treatment of terrorists and those labelled extremists. Furthermore, with such amendments aiming to address the proliferation of violence online via punitive measures, they appear to both devalue and contradict the approaches outlined in the State’s CVE and early detection measures.

1.1.3 Digital Countermeasures: A Bastion for Learned Biases

Regulation is but one part of today’s countermeasures. As digital technologies diversify and increase in capability, so too have the techniques employed by known extremist groups to radicalise online (Davis, 2021, p. 64). As claimed by experts, in the war against cyberterrorism, “technology is a strong ally” (Ionescu et al., 2020, p. 56). States worldwide have implemented a plethora of technological arsenals to detect extremist activity online (Lara-Cabrera et al., 2017, p. 10892; Aldera et al., 2021, p. 42384). Measures have included, among others, text analysis (Choi, 2014) and the more rudimentary keyword search (Tinnes, 2013), the more advanced (yet highly politicised) employment of takedown campaigns (Fitzgerald & Lokmanoglu, 2023), counter-narrative campaigns (Schmid, 2022), fact-checking/debunking strategies (Arcos et al., 2022), and artificial intelligence (Ionescu et al., 2020; Davis, 2021; McKendrick, 2019).

These cyber tools have become central to the prevention of violence from non-State actor groups as they permit higher volumes of data to be analysed and patterns in extremist content to be unearthed, and can often be disseminated at increasing speeds that human intervention simply cannot match (McKendrick, 2019). Algorithmic predictors and other cyber-tools have, in the past, displayed the capacity to track anti-Western sentiment among members of jihadist groups, last-minute ticket purchases to conflict hotspots, or affiliations to known violent actors (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019, p. 4). Artificial intelligence, a relatively novel approach, has displayed the capacity to analyse behaviour, detect physiological signals indicating a change in emotional state, and profile individuals through the analysis of various media such as video, text and audio (Ionescu, 2020).

Nonetheless, while an increasing stockpile of technological weaponry has focused on countering online radicalisation and cyber terrorism, the rate of online radicalisation continues to increase. To provide scope, a survey conducted in 2016 of 473 radicalised individuals in the United States revealed that social media played a role in the radicalisation processes nearly 90 per cent of the time (Jensen et al., 2018). Another report, which conducted a seven-year survey between 2014 and 2021 of completed and thwarted attacks across eight Western countries, found that, while offline radicalisation proved to be a greater precursor to violence, online radicalisation exceeded offline approaches threefold (Hamid & Ariza, 2022, p. 1).

In Australia, an eSafety Commissioner report (2020) revealed that approximately 33 per cent of young people reported being exposed to online content promoting terrorism. In addition, the Australian Federal Police (2022) has seen far-right terrorism-related investigations increase from 2 per cent prior to 2020 to about 15 per cent in 2022. Currently, the Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) has focused 40 per cent of its capacity towards the investigation of *ideologically motivated extremism*, a banner term under which *far-right extremism* resides (Grant, 2023). Furthermore, the number of cases of online radicalisation into far-right groups has increased substantially during a recent health crisis—the COVID-19 pandemic (Grant, 2023). Thus, while online radicalisation into extremist groups is an evolving quagmire, there appears to be a dichotomy between the application of cyber technologies and their success rate. Moreover, cyber technologies, much like their regulatory counterparts, present a more punitive nature—a direction that appears to be in conflict with the *soft security* principles of CVE.

The limitations of technological approaches have been acknowledged by scholars and programmers (see Crawford, 2021; McKendrick, 2019). Among the criticisms is that technologies, such as AI, not only lack the capacity to judge the content they analyse constructively—potentially resulting in *pre-crime* punishment, and privacy and human rights issues (such as violations of freedom of expression, association, and access to information)—but have also been known to exhibit inherent or learned biases (O'Connor & Liu, 2024; Alvarez et al., 2024; Osoba & Wesler, 2017). Scholars (Grilli & Pedota, 2024; McKendrick, 2019) argue that the accuracy of these systems is dependent on the knowledge fed to them from the institutions that employ them. These critiques suggest that there is a gap between the concept of online radicalisation that programmers adhere to and the actual patterns, signals or cues that are prevalent in a particular example of online recruitment. Furthermore,

programmers may be overlooking the nuances that differentiate certain groups in terms of recruitment strategy.

I contend that learned biases stem from enduring stereotypes and the amplification of events involving the extreme fringes of the political spectrum. As articulated by Gaufman (2017), this form of representation results in the simplification and personification of an enemy—referred to as *enemy building*—that often excludes important nuances. I argue that such representations have resulted in a particular perception of the far right that has developed a blind side in early detection measures. These learned biases stem from an institutional level whose regulatory measures and speech acts present a demarcation between the terms *terrorism* and *extremism*, a dichotomy discussed at length in chapter three. Furthermore, news media narratives often present simplified and sensationalised versions of groups and events, further influencing programmers and regulators through amplified and emblematic stereotypes—a quagmire discussed in chapter four. As such, there is room to refresh our understanding of the far right, their recruiters, and the extremists among them in a bid to assist with early detection measures.

1.2 Thesis Approach: Research Questions

In this thesis, I explore how far-right recruiters communicate with potential recruits online. As such, this study is guided by the following research question: **RQ1: *How do far-right recruiters speak to people online?***

Specifically, I survey the recruitment materials of two far-right groups, known in the body of this work (for ethical and safety reasons) as *Case A* and *Case B*. Both are known to authorities and have been flagged as neo-Nazi hate groups, yet remain visible to Australian audiences, despite attempts to eradicate recruitment materials and extremist views online. *Case A* is a self-styled religious organisation that promotes racial superiority and espouses extremist ideologies. Although the group originated in the United States, it has established chapters in Australia and, as this study will demonstrate, calls for violent action in pursuit of its ideological goals. The group has been linked to a range of hate crimes, including acts of violence such as murder, bombings, and arson. *Case B* is a religious/neo-Nazi organisation, also with origins in the United States, which has expanded globally, including a visible online presence accessible in Australia. While their influence is international, most of their documented violent activities have occurred within the United States. Senior members of this group have previously faced legal repercussions for their involvement in activities considered a threat to national security.

I argue that such groups remain visible because regulatory and technological countermeasures to tackle violent extremism online have developed a blind side to particular groups on the far-right spectrum due to representational biases. Specifically, I contend that early detection measures are often skewed by representational biases that present the far right in a particular way. As such, the following research question is posed: **RQ2: *How do representational biases impact early detection measures?***

I further propose that recruitment discourse is shaped by a group's cultural, social, and collective identities, and that recruiters speak to particular audiences in particular ways and at specific times—elements amplified during crises. This relationship—between the social, cultural, and collective—results in the development of unique stylistic cues specific to each group and context. Thus, the far right cannot be considered a single entity, a finding of utmost importance to early detection measures.

This thesis focuses on Australia as a country with a history steeped in white nationalism, from its colonial origins to forming its federation and beyond (Moran, 2005; Hearn, 2007; Smith, 2020). It concentrates on a single State to highlight the various discourses palatable to a local audience. Therefore, I aim to explore the following research question: **RQ3: *What elements make the messages of far-right groups palatable to Australian audiences?***

To address this question, I explore the prevalent themes within far-right online discourse to further understand what makes nation-specific discourse—for example, the Americanised variants of the far right popularised in Australia today—relevant and palatable to Australian audiences, thus enriching an understanding of what is meant by *recruitment materials* and the *proliferation of extremist views*.

1.2.1 The Matter of Subjectivity

This thesis is a culmination of investigations into far-right groups and presents empirical evidence on the nuanced differences among them that develop blind spots in Australia's early detection methods. However, it does not shy away from the subjectivities of my lived experiences as sources for an enhanced understanding of the subject of research (Le Gallais, 2008, p. 151)—elements that are addressed in the reflexive elements of the methodological chapter.

As an Australian who experienced first-hand the violence of the Bosnian and Kosovo wars as the daughter of politicians opposed to strongman Slobodan Milosevic, then President of the former Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, I am sensitive to the transmission of

language that incites violence or stokes nationalistic, racial or tribalistic narratives, and the outcomes of proliferating such language. This language, whether disseminated in public, on State-run media channels, or other forms of media, draws from past (and, often, unaddressed) grievances and amplifies assumptions of exceptionalism among national identities to justify violence against the *other*. Often, these narratives spread conspiracy theories regarding the other, or the so-called malevolent forces active in a region (in the above mentioned case, the international community and NATO forces who aimed to stop the violence among warring parties). These are lived experiences that equip me to address the language of far-right, ultranationalist and white supremacist movements of today.

Furthermore, as an active member of the resistance movement *Otpor!*—a student-derived anti-government group who sought the resignation of Milosevic in 2000, culminating in the revolution known as October 5th—I have a deeper understanding of labelling, or the repercussions of being labelled a *terrorist* by such regimes. While presenting empirical evidence and exploring such phenomena through the lens of conceptual frameworks, taking note of the epistemic responsibilities of a researcher (Code, 2017, p. 89) to present an element of trustworthiness through unbiased modes of research, I bring these lived experiences to derive a deeper understanding of how violence is made palatable through word of mouth, or the proliferation of the language of violence, such as is the case in online recruitment.

1.2.2 Interdisciplinary Approaches

To explore the recruitment tactics of far-right extremists, the analysis takes an interdisciplinary approach to surveying online recruitment. As will be outlined in the methodological chapter, it applies digital media logics to Terrorism and Security Studies to develop its conceptual lenses and its methodological approaches. Specifically, the research is influenced by the argument that Digital Media Studies ignores terrorism scholarship at its peril. Alternatively, Terrorism and Security Studies scholarship that does not consider the shapeshifting nature of media and the impacts of digitisation risks developing a blindness to both knowledge and approaches to countering extremism.

From Terrorism Studies, the study draws from Critical Terrorism Scholarship (CTS) to understand groups labelled extremist and far right. CTS aims to emancipate away from realist and militarised approaches towards non-State actor groups to explore the politicised nature of such labels and the mechanisms of labelling (Shanahan, 2016; Greene, 2017; Harré, 2004). Furthermore, drawing from the work of Matusitz (2013) and Decker and

Rainey (1980), it argues that terrorism/extremism is communication. Therefore, recruitment discourse can be analysed for meaning and remains a prevalent factor in disseminating violence.

The analysis employs Social Identity Theory (SIT), a psycho-social approach to human categorisation (see Schwartz, 2005; Schwartz et al., 2009; Strindberg, 2020; Klandermans, 2014) to provide a framework to analyse the recruitment discourse extremist groups produce. Schwartz, Dunkel and Waterman (2009) explore extremist identities based on social, cultural, and personal contexts. By refreshing Schwartz et al.'s (2009) approach to SIT, the project replaces an exploration of the personal with the collective due to the impacts digital affordances have on identity formation.

Through an exploration of their social, cultural and collective contexts, the group identities of the selected case studies are deconstructed and compared, developing a basis for multi-modal discourse analysis (MDA) of online recruitment material. Specifically, by analysing the text produced by groups in their various iterations—written, audiovisual, spatial and subliminal—the work presents a dichotomy between the two case studies, asserting that, while groups may have certain similarities in ways of speaking, no two groups communicate in the same way, potentially assisting in the development of tools and regulatory measures aimed at early detection. While not prescribing particular countermeasures for the detection of online recruitment, the analysis suggests that future countermeasures should take into account the various factions of the far right and integrate this knowledge into their counterterrorism operations. In particular, it highlights that groups within the far-right spectrum vary and, as such, could be treated as separate rather than a singular entity.

1.3 Thesis Structure

In this thesis, I examine the complexities of the digitised communication landscape that complicate the detection of far-right recruitment efforts and render these ideologies more appealing to target audiences. In that vein, chapter two specifically analyses the online environment and its affordances to articulate the challenges programmers, policymakers, and intelligence agencies face as they navigate this intricate terrain. A central focus of this chapter is the conceptualisation of the *digital fog*—a mixture of misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories that can blur the line between fact and pseudo-information. With particular emphasis on conspiracy theories as a foundational aspect of far-right ideology (Lewandowsky & Van Der Linden, 2021, p. 15; Byington, 2019; Douglas et al., 2019, p. 11), the chapter outlines the current landscape in which counterterrorism measures, including their

regulatory frameworks and technological tools, seek to identify and mitigate online recruitment initiatives. Moreover, the chapter investigates the psychological mechanisms that render individuals more vulnerable to manipulative messaging within this digital fog—referred to here as *delusion*. While not engaging in root-causes theorising, I explore concepts such as the *Conspiratorial Mindset* (Shermer, 2012) and the *Line of Demarcation* (West, 2018) as a means to reflect on the tension between the expansion of belief systems and evolving criteria for what is considered credible. Finally, the chapter introduces the concept of *metapolitics* (Griffin, 2000; Tebaldi, 2023) to explore the fluidity of far-right messaging, illustrating how it serves as a unifying force for audiences and groups seeking to recruit them.

Chapter three explores the origins of representational bias that impedes technological countermeasures and regulatory frameworks. It establishes a demarcation between the terms *terrorism* and *extremism* to highlight the learned biases that subsequently impact the treatment of actors labelled one or the other. Further, it asserts that both terms are malleable and prone to political influence, shaping their meaning during specific times and circumstances. Through the lens of *securitisation*—a Security Studies framework that aims to understand what moves events from the realm of everyday politics into national security (Wæver, 1995; Gaufman, 2017)—the chapter explores how and why such representations are forged and their impacts on developing both regulatory and P/CVE measures. Specifically, it examines how the predominant “whitewashing” of the term *extremist* (Dixit, 2022; Corbin, 2017) derives from a *soft security* approach—encouraging debate, or *de-securitisation* (Wæver, 1995)—to far-right violence. Conversely, the representations associated with *terrorists* derive from punitive and militarised measures, leaving both regulators and programmers in a quagmire in terms of how to address acts labelled *extremist*.

Chapter four further investigates these learned representational biases by examining the use of the term *far-right* in scholarship and identifying ambiguity in its definitional parameters. Drawing from Miller-Idriss (2020), I argue that the far-right can be categorised as a ‘spontaneous coalition’ due to the variation of beliefs among such groups. Therefore, the far-right should not be considered unified. To further explore the extreme variants of the far-right, this chapter analyses how the term *far-right extremism* is defined in scholarship and how such definitions derive meaning from digitalised settings. In doing so, it highlights definitional misdirection that often results in the dismissal of online environments as secondary sources for recruitment. Focusing on local contexts, I examine how the far-right is represented in scholarly works pertaining to Australia’s socio-political conditions. To highlight the sources of influence on such definitions, the chapter considers media

representations. Revisiting Gaufman's (2017) cycle of securitisation, I position news media as instrumental in developing simplified enemy images that impact the scope of CVE. To illustrate this role, I present the events of January 6th, 2021, the Capitol riot, as an example that impacted data collection for this research. Lastly, the chapter surveys recruitment scholarship to explore how the term is defined and understood, as well as the ramifications of digitisation on these concepts. Here, by acknowledging the impacts of digital affordances, I categorise recruitment as *text* developed by groups.

Chapter five presents the methodological framework, including ontological and epistemological positions, as well as the disciplinary approaches and data collection techniques used. I work under constructivist and interpretivist assumptions, positing that far-right identities are shaped by discourse and can be interpreted differently depending on the circumstances in which they arise (Hülse & Spencer, 2008, p. 572). Additionally, these identities derive meaning through interactions between social groups and society (Tulga, 2022, p. 6; Wendt, 1992, p. 397). Using these perspectives to analyse online text, I examine the distinct meanings that evolve within a group's recruitment strategies, considering collective identity, out-group interactions, and context-specific variations. The methodological approach draws from psychological theories within Terrorism Studies—the field's leading epistemological direction post-9/11 (Phillips, 2021, p. 410). Building upon these concepts, I formulate a classification system, or typology, for analysing the online identities of two far-right groups based on the content they produce. Specifically, I draw from Social Identity Theory and Identity Theory as psychological and sociological frameworks that examine how socialisation, role conflict, and intergroup dynamics shape individual and collective identities (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 20). Expanding on the work of Schwartz, Dunkel, and Waterman (2009), who investigate terrorist identities through personal, social, and cultural dimensions, I shift the focus to *collective* influences on identity formation—particularly the effects of digital affordances such as anonymity and pseudo-anonymity (Boyd, 2014). I then apply this typology to construct an analytical framework for textual analysis, investigating the subtleties, commonalities, and differences in online recruitment discourse. The analysis employs multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) as a qualitative method to explore the complexity of online communication (Pérez-González, 2019; Adami, 2016; Hull & Nelson, 2005). Through a mixed-methods approach, this framework enables me to explore how group identities are expressed and interpreted online.

Chapters six and seven present how Case A and Case B communicate their unique identities online. Categorising their modes of communication by social, cultural, and

collective identities, I outline the elements that differentiate how each group speaks. These chapters also include a Table of Slurs, showcasing similarities and differences in how each group refers to perceived enemies. Beginning with the groups' histories, the chapters examine how each case is represented—by watchdog organisations, news media, and through their own self-representations. They then explore the immediate multimodal forms of self-representation encountered upon visiting each group's website. The chapters continue by analysing *cultural identities*, as defined by Schwartz, Dunkel, and Waterman (2009, p. 541), which include values such as collectivism, religious absolutism (or intense belief in conspiracy theories), and *familism* (group loyalty and protectionist ideologies). The *social identities* of each group are also explored, focusing on in-group/out-group dynamics: perceived threats, indoctrination elements, relational features, and moral superiority. Finally, the chapters investigate *collective identities*, such as group membership levels and internal hierarchies—presenting the most prominent markers of uniqueness in each group's discourse.

Chapter eight offers a critical discussion of the findings in chapters six and seven, in light of the conceptual frameworks introduced in chapters two to four. It addresses the core research question—how recruiters speak to people online—by conceptualising their strategies as *lighthouses* projecting *latches* into the digital fog. These latches, often rooted in conspiracy theories, offer topical and emotionally resonant hooks for recruitment during crises. In this context, I argue that conspiracy theories should not be considered linear pathways (e.g., rabbit holes) but rather a *multiverse*, with overlapping entry points and flexible narratives. The discussion also analyses multimodal affordances—visual, audio, spatial, and symbolic—exploited by recruiters. These elements amplify the reach and emotional impact of far-right identity discourse. I argue that such groups speak through the language of their collective identities, using various modes that allow their messaging to remain undetected by conventional countermeasures. The chapter returns to the representational biases addressed in earlier chapters and critiques the dichotomy between *terrorism* and *extremism* as strategic calls to action or inaction. It also introduces the concept of *Maga Cap Syndrome* to describe the overemphasis on certain far-right subtypes, which blinds detection systems to others. I call for a deeper, more nuanced understanding of far-right recruitment strategies in order to inform more effective early detection tools.

The final chapter concludes the study and synthesises its findings. It provides recommendations for future research into far-right recruitment strategies in digital spaces. It also outlines the study's limitations and proposes the development of typologies that can improve the literacy of academics, policymakers, and developers working in CVE. The

exploration of far-right extremism may begin by identifying unique rhetorical strategies, but it must continue by addressing the systems, structures, and platforms that allow these messages to spread. In today's digitised landscape, extremist content ranges from overt to deeply obscured—in chatrooms, coded language, and manifestos—waiting to be discovered by the next person caught in the 'fog'.

2 The Fog of Digital Delusion

As articulated in the introduction of this thesis, a crisis can be defined as a “triggering event causing significant change or [having] the potential to cause significant change”, often accompanied by a sense of “perceived inability to cope with this change, and a threat to ... existence” (Keown-McMullan, 1997, p. 4). Whether on a global, local, or individual scale, crises are not uncommon (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017, p. 323) and tend to persist even after the immediate event concludes (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017, p. 323; Hart & Boin, 2001, p. 28). The enduring effects of such events are critical to consider in the context of far-right online recruitment. Beyond their capacity to shift the political landscape to the right, crises can also catalyse the proliferation of extremist content by reshaping political boundaries and instigating change (Davies, 2021, p. 157). Notably, periods of crisis are known to expedite online recruitment efforts, particularly within far-right groups (Norlen, 2020, p. 12; Khalil, 2021, p. 109). Thus, in contemplating the broader inquiry of how recruiters engage with individuals online, it is imperative to investigate the environment and context in which these interactions take place. This thesis conceptualises the contextual landscape of these interactions as the *fog of digital delusion*, a term I coin to describe a culmination of misinformation, disinformation, conspiracy theories, and other forms of pseudo-information, and the outcomes of their proliferation. This chapter explores these various elements to develop a deeper understanding of the environment in which today’s far-right recruitment occurs and in which early detection methods are employed with some, but often limited, success.

First, this chapter addresses the digital affordances that shape computer-mediated communication (CMC), thereby influencing the operational strategies of far-right recruiters. It then explores the various components of the fog through the lenses of misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories. This thesis positions conspiracy theories as the ideological bedrock for many far-right groups (Lewandowsky & Van Der Linden, 2021, p. 15; Byington, 2019; Douglas et al., 2019, p. 11), serving to render their messages more palatable to audiences with seemingly opposing views. To further explore the mechanisms through which far-right messaging appears more palatable, this chapter engages with Shermer’s (2012) concept of the Conspiratorial Mindset, which explores the dynamics of engagement with conspiracy theories and their consequential outcomes. Additionally, it observes West’s (2018) Line of Demarcation as a concept that illuminates how the gradual adoption of far-fetched, fringe, or extreme narratives can occur. Lastly, this chapter engages

with the concept of metapolitics (Griffin, 2000; Tebaldi, 2023) to examine the fluidity of far-right messaging as a unifier between groups with aims to enact cultural and political dominance. Together, these concepts articulate the new playing field for far-right recruiters, the increasing plausibility of their campaigns to audiences interacting within the fog, and the weaponised affordances that countermeasures aim to address.

2.1 Digital Affordances

This chapter begins with a critical survey of the diverse communicative affordances that inform the techniques employed by far-right recruiters in online environments. Digital affordances present distinct and evolving modalities for engaging with audiences and present diverse applications across various platforms. In classical terms, as articulated by Gibson (1979), the concept of affordances refers to specific material properties that manifest particular actions, or the potential actions arising from the interaction between an agent and their environment. Contemporary perspectives recognise the impacts of an ever-evolving digital landscape and the unique affordances that reshape how individuals engage with such contexts. Therefore, instead of viewing the relationship between agents and technology as linear, these scholars assert that digital affordances provide a multitude of outcomes, each shaped by the agent's perception of them (Fayard & Weeks, 2014). For instance, instant gratification affordances—such as ‘like’ buttons and upticks—can convey multifaceted meanings that are contingent upon context (or the platforms they appear in) and are utilised in various ways depending on the agent's objectives (Volkoff & Strong, 2013). While a positivist understanding of affordances provides a lens for addressing the fluid nature of online interactions and their mechanics, the term has also been subjected to critical scrutiny. For example, Oliver (2005) posits that the concept of affordance has deviated significantly from its original conceptualisation, rendering it too ambiguous to be analytically valuable. Butler (2024, p. 7) advocates for a reframing of affordances that accounts for a form of dis-agency, in which users are compelled to engage in imposed and repetitive behaviours. This chapter acknowledges the contested nature of the term affordance and recognises the necessity to explore its conceptual boundaries. Nonetheless, despite these complexities, it maintains that affordances provide a valuable lens through which to investigate the impacts of digitisation on both one-to-one and one-to-many communication. Furthermore, it provides a lens to explore how recruiters articulate their message to audiences online, as well as the diverse strategies available to them in this context.

Digital affordances have been the subject of studies into the realms of far-right radicalisation. For example, Schulze et al. (2024) highlight the interplay between 17 different digital affordances, explicit to the communication styles of far-right groups. Their focus narrows to three recurring affordances employed by groups across platforms—namely, anonymity, visibility, and collectivity—as the hallmarks for creating an ideal environment for radicalisation. Zhang and Davis (2024) further employ the lens of affordances to elaborate on the concept of *e-extremism*. This concept encompasses a wide range of online activities associated with the far right, including their use of digital affordances. However, as will be illustrated by the two case studies presented in this thesis, the acceptance of such affordances varies among groups. Furthermore, while such research presents useful concepts for surveying the outcomes of computer-mediated extremism, this thesis positions groups as singular entities with unique ways of engaging with particular digital affordances. Therefore, while articulating some affordances that are relevant to far-right recruitment, such conclusions may be true for some groups and not for others.

In step with Marwick et al. (2022), this thesis considers digital affordances as vehicles for the dissemination of far-right/extremist beliefs, as tools that allow individuals who are drawn to these ideas to connect and build communities, and as a means to help normalise conspiracy theories and scepticism towards various institutions. Thus, while there are many approaches to affordances relevant to the scope of online recruitment, only some will be relevant to each group's unique dynamic. However, as a means to consider how far-right groups employ affordances to disseminate their message, three affordance arenas will be considered here to broadly address how they impact how the far-right speak, whom far-right recruiters speak to, and the means in which they speak to them: specifically, spatial/cross-border affordances, paralinguistic modifications of computer-mediated communication, and multimodal affordances as lynchpins for far-right engagement online.

2.1.1 Spatial/Cross-border Affordances

The concept of spatial media, initially articulated by Crampton in 2009 (p. 92), pertains to a suite of technological tools—including hardware, software, and programming methods—that underscore spatial dimensions. This term also encapsulates forms of geographic information content generated through various practices linked to these technologies. However, spatial affordances can also be conceptualised as a constellation of attributes that transcend geographic, national, and cultural borders, along with their respective time zones. For example, Ponzanesi (2020) and Calhoun (2017) introduce the

concept of *digital cosmopolitanism*. While classic cosmopolitanism propagates the notion of a global community with shared values and rights, irrespective of cultural backgrounds or locations (Derrida, 2003), digital cosmopolitanism represents “a way of thinking, feeling, and acting beyond the nation”, fostered through digital exchange. Ponzanesi (2020, p. 1) illustrates this concept through the lived experiences of digitally interconnected migrants. In this context, the connectivity forged among migrants is characterised by exchanges involving “a new citizen of the world, who is both rooted and routed, and whose global interactions are marked by the use of social networks” (Ponzanesi, 2020, p. 1). Similarly, Calhoun (2017, p. 198) refers to migrants as “agents of interconnection in a global world”, who embrace digital affordances that transcend conventional borders. While the pervasiveness of nationalism, racism, and xenophobia among extreme far-right groups ostensibly negates the tenets of classic cosmopolitanism, the notion of *digital cosmopolitanism* reframes affordances as the connective tissue linking a diversity of groups (Ponzanesi, 2020, p. 3). As such, this framework is particularly salient in the context of digitised recruitment strategies of the far right. By harnessing the spatial dynamics of digital communication, far-right groups gain entry into the cultural and social realities of others, extending well beyond their own national perimeters. Moreover, they are afforded the opportunity to disseminate their values, objectives, and ideologies into domains that were previously inaccessible to them, including mainstream society and countercultural subgroups with intrinsic ideological divergences. By leveraging spatial affordances, the far right possesses the capability to transition their narrative from a localised context to a global one, effectively recontextualising their presence in an interconnected world.

2.1.2 Paralanguage Affordances

Paralanguage affordances in computer-mediated communication are characterised as a transformation in communicative modalities that extends beyond mere speech and text (Hampel, 2014, p. 5). These modalities encompass the integration of multiple forms of communication, or multimodal communication, which serves to enhance interactions beyond the limitations of written language, facilitated by the mechanics and architecture of digital environments (Hampel, 2014, p. 5). In essence, an examination of paralanguage affordances seeks to explore how individuals adapt their communicative practices in contexts lacking traditional verbal cues (Walther, 2012, p. 397). For instance, Li and Storch (2017) investigate the challenges and opportunities presented by CMC in second-language learning contexts, highlighting paralanguage affordances as a means to facilitate communication that transcends

the confines of a producer or agent's primary language. According to Hafner (2013, p. 830), such opportunities are actualised through multimodal affordances—or “other semiotic resources for communication”—that resonate with diverse audiences. By recognising the unifying characteristics of paralinguistic affordances, such concepts can be applied to the realms of far-right recruitment, considering them as a vehicle for the construction of a second language utilised by far-right recruiters.

The notion of a second language emerging from the paralinguistic affordances of computer-mediated communication is not a novel concept, especially within the realm of scholarship addressing online radicalisation. Numerous scholars (e.g., Deem, 2019; McSwiney et al., 2021; Kor-Sins, 2023; Åkerlund, 2022) have examined the affordances of CMC as facilitators that empower the far right to articulate a codified language—one that is identifiable as both in-group specific and transnational, thereby making it accessible to a broader audience. As such, this codified language can be considered as a second language of far-right recruitment. Furthermore, by developing a codified language, far-right groups develop a mechanism for fostering communication within their in-groups and with chosen out-groups. Thus, in this context, paralinguistic affordances can be construed as enablers of specific actions within digitalised environments, facilitating the cultivation of a codified or second language that enhances inter-group communication and disseminates their message beyond the bounds of first-language limitations.

2.1.3 Multimodal Affordances

As will be presented in the methodological section, this thesis employs multimodal discourse analysis to investigate the communication styles prevalent in far-right groups, positing that multimodal affordances play a pivotal role in shaping both self-representation and recruitment messaging. While modes can be conceptualised as affordances extending beyond traditional written and spoken forms of exchange (Li & Storch, 2017), the methodological framework of this thesis positions these modes as resources for semiotic exchange (Kress & Bezemer, 2023, p. 141). Furthermore, this thesis also considers how one mode derives meaning through its interplay with other modes, including textual elements, audio components, spatial arrangements, and movement (Eisenlauer & Karatza, 2020, p. 125). In this chapter, the purely mechanical dimensions of multimodal exchange will be explored as tools that contribute to the development of a codified second language, informed by the diverse modes accessible to producers within a digital context. More specifically, this

chapter posits that multimodal affordances serve to enhance the establishment of a new, codified language.

It draws from several studies to reach this conclusion. For instance, in their examination of textual and visual strategies employed during the European refugee crisis from 2015 to 2017, Laaksonen et al. (2022) highlight the integral role of multimodal affordances in amplifying the far right's anti-immigration discourse. Similarly, Prakasam and Huxtable-Thomas (2021) elucidate how multimodal affordances foster a shared language of commonality among users on Reddit, thereby rendering far-right messaging more palatable through a discourse that resonates with both the far right and the far left. Moreover, Hakoköngäs et al. (2020) explore the utilisation of multimodal memes within far-right circles as a mechanism for crystallising belief systems. In this light, multimodal affordances can indeed be perceived as the vehicle for the enhancement of a codified second language for the far right, facilitating meaning construction through both in-group solidarity and out-group interpretation.

As will be argued in chapter eight, the convergence of spatial, paralanguage, and multimodal affordances, resulting from the proliferation of digitised communication modes, cultivates a diverse array of opportunities for the far right to disseminate, refine, and construct a codified lexicon that resonates with varied audiences. By harnessing spatial affordances, far-right movements connect with realms and subcultures beyond their immediate reach, thereby facilitating engagement with individuals and groups previously inaccessible to them. Paralanguage affordances empower the far right to forge a second language that appears translatable to both in-groups and out-groups, adhering to the implicit conventions of computer-mediated communication. Furthermore, by integrating modalities that extend beyond mere text, the far right is positioned to enhance its codified language, establish common ground among disparate groups, and strategically utilise these communicative forms to entrench existing belief systems, introduce novel ideologies, and amplify its overarching message in the digital sphere. Digital affordances, then, function as instrumental vehicles for the far right in their efforts to disseminate messages and recruit adherents. Rather, as will be argued, these tools operate within a complex interplay of factual information, misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories—collectively referred to here as the *fog of digital delusion*—which further amplifies far-right discourse and renders it more acceptable to broader audiences.

2.2 Articulating the Fog

The rise of the far right is but one manifestation of an enduring crisis—one that, as will be discussed in chapter eight, has a profound impact on political processes and the foundational bedrocks of well-functioning democracies. The second consequence, which serves as one focal point within this thesis, is the emergence of what I term the *fog of digital delusion*. In this context, the fog encapsulates a phenomenon wherein a culmination of pseudo-information, misinformation, and conspiracy theories increasingly undermines mainstream narratives. This saturation of pseudo-information culminates in what may be described as a truth disorder, often referred to as post-truth, where “‘alternative facts’ replace actual facts, and feelings have more weight than evidence” (McIntyre, 2018, p. 13). Some scholars, policymakers, and institutions interpret this phenomenon as indicative of a broader strategy of information warfare (see Libicki, 1995; Ventre, 2016; Taddeo, 2012). This viewpoint holds merit. Deliberate campaigns, termed “mass psychological campaigns”, aimed at destabilising societal structures and governance have been distinctly identified (Wilson, 2022). These campaigns endeavour to secure an “information advantage” over so-called enemies (NATO, 2005). However, the entire spectrum of alternative facts cannot be classed as deliberate, nor can they all be perceived as strategic campaigns.

The COVID-19 pandemic illuminated a significant proliferation of both accurate and misleading information, prompting scholars and policymakers to characterise this phenomenon as an *infodemic*. This term encapsulates the duality of truthful and deceptive narratives that accompany a dynamic health crisis (World Health Organization, 2021, p. iv; Eysenbach, 2009; Cinelli et al., 2020). Mirroring the tactics seen in information warfare, the concept underscores the capacity of pseudo-information campaigns to disseminate widely and exert varying degrees of influence on individuals. Both pandemics and infodemics necessitate containment strategies to mitigate their spread; however, unlike pandemics, which generally affect large populations with traceable patterns of transmission (Moren et al., 2009, p. 1019), the ramifications of pseudo-information are largely indeterminate with respect to their scale (de Saint Laurent et al., 2022, p. 1) and their intricate entry points (Nemr & Gangware, 2019, p. 3). While pandemics may erupt with ferocity and subsequently wane (Moren et al., 2009, p. 1019), pseudo-information campaigns are persistent. For instance, anti-vaccine narratives that emerged during the 1918 pandemic have not only persisted but were revitalised during the COVID-19 crisis and continue to circulate (see Neto et al., 2021). Furthermore, the contextual dimensions of a pandemic—along with surrounding

environmental and social factors—are frequently neglected in analytical diagnoses (Moren et al., 2009, p. 1019).

Nonetheless, while *information warfare* and *infodemic* contribute to particular understandings of online environments, I contend that the concept of *fog* is more appropriate, as it encompasses the dynamic interplay between intentional disinformation campaigns and unintentional errors, rumours, and subjective opinions that do not necessarily share common strategic aims. Thus, the term *fog* will be used to describe the contemporary online environment, wherein facts and pseudo-information coexist and often intermingle. This fog can impede an individual’s capacity for critical thinking, thereby complicating the differentiation between fact and falsehood (Ecker et al., 2022, p. 13). In this context, the cognitive tools required for navigating the overwhelming cacophony of information overload may be significantly diminished (Roets, 2017), ultimately hindering individuals’ efforts to regain clarity.

Articulating the nuances between different types of pseudo-information can, at times, be a formidable task, as these typologies are frequently employed interchangeably. Moreover, the delineation between the definitions of these terms is often obscured, with various phrases overlapping in their meaning (Jerit & Zhao, 2020, p. 79). However, establishing clear distinctions between these typologies is crucial. Although diverse forms of pseudo-information may yield similar outcomes—such as belief in half-truths or fallacies and the aggravation of a truth disorder or post-truth—some forms are more harmful than others (see Tucker et al., 2018, p. 15). That is to say, certain types of pseudo-information are propagated with explicit intent—such as profit-making, political destabilisation, skewing electoral results, or inciting violence—while others may lack such intent or have limited effects, potentially allowing individuals to be simply misled or to develop a disregard for truth (Chadwick & Vaccari, 2019, p. 6).

In essence, although the outcomes of false or misleading narratives may converge, one type of pseudo-information does not equate to another. Nonetheless, there is currently an absence of definitive demarcation between these categories, resulting in challenges in addressing both intentional and unintentional producers within regulatory frameworks. The lack of clear definitions can significantly obstruct the development of policies to mitigate misinformation and disinformation. For example, Australia’s proposed Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation Bill 2024 did not pass through the Senate, with one primary criticism centring on the bill’s definitional vagueness. Specifically, the Parliament of Australia (2024) cited “concerns” over “the unclear and uncertain definitions of

misinformation and disinformation in the proposed bill”. Consequently, it can be argued that without precise definitions, regulators, policymakers, and programmers encounter difficulties in curtailing pseudo-information or tracing its effects. Additionally, the absence of delineation complicates efforts to determine whether content constitutes pseudo-information, an error in judgement, or a deliberate recruitment initiative—each requiring different responses. Put simply, differentiating among various types of pseudo-information is imperative for effectively tracking far-right recruitment within an environment where the lines between intentional and unintentional information are blurred. Otherwise, this ambiguity may result in pre-emptive punitive actions against some individuals while allowing the deliberate efforts of others—such as far-right recruiters—to go unaddressed.

2.2.1 *Misinformation*

An examination of both intentional and unintentional elements of pseudo-information that contribute to the fog begins with *misinformation*. As articulated by Kuklinski et al. (2000, p. 790), to be misinformed is to embrace the acceptance of incorrect information as truth. However, while misleading, propagating such content is often an unintentional act (Baines & Elliott, 2020, p. 3). Hence, misinformation may be characterised as unintentionally misleading content (Howard et al., 2021, p. 6; Chadwick & Vaccari, 2019, p. 14).

An example of an unintended proliferation of misinformation can be found in the inaccurate reporting by CBC News reporter Natasha Fatah during her coverage of the 2018 Toronto van attack. The perpetrator, an individual associated with the incel movement—defined by the Anti-Defamation League (2020) as a racist and misogynistic online community that perceives itself as involuntarily celibate—used a van to fatally strike pedestrians, resulting in 11 deaths. Fatah’s initial tweet, based on eyewitness accounts, described the attacker as “wide-eyed, angry and Middle Eastern” (in Meserole, 2018). She subsequently issued a correction stating that the driver was “white” (Fatah, 2018). However, by that point, the damage had already been done. As reported by *The Toronto Star* (see Nanji, 2018), the original tweet—now deleted—garnered over 1,500 retweets and more than 2,000 likes, while the corrective tweet received only 134 shares (Fatah, 2018). This stark contrast illustrates the rapidity with which misconceptions and fallacies can spread compared to corrections (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018).

Importantly, in the case of Fatah’s tweet, there was no discernible intention to mislead or exploit the attacker’s perceived racial identity to incite xenophobia. Thus, misinformation

can be understood as the transmission of unintentionally misleading content—an arena that may largely exclude the deliberately motivated narratives produced by far-right recruiters.

2.2.2 Disinformation

In contrast to misinformation, disinformation entails the intentional dissemination of false or misleading information (Fallis, 2015, p. 402), orchestrated by actors whose objective is to deceive (Fetzer, 2004). Illustrative examples of disinformation can include deceptive advertising, propaganda, manipulated images and videos (e.g., deepfakes), fake news masquerading as legitimate sources, counterfeit maps, and forged documents (Fallis, 2015, p. 402).

In the context of the Fatah tweet, while the initial post cannot be classified as disinformation, it nonetheless spurred the production of other forms of misleading content. Specifically, an employee from *Infowars* leveraged the tweet to establish a false correlation between the Middle East and terrorism. *Infowars* is a far-right conspiracy website founded by the controversial talk-show host Alex Jones, who is notorious for losing a US\$965 million lawsuit for asserting that the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in 2012 was a hoax (Yang, 2022). The tweet, composed by *Infowars* Editor-at-large Paul Joseph Watson, proclaimed: “9 dead in Toronto, authorities confirm it was a terrorist attack. Terrorists were described as ‘Middle Eastern,’ ‘Motive unknown’” (in Wilson, 2018). *The Toronto Sun* (see Nanji, 2018) reported that the tweet garnered over 1,500 shares within hours.

Watson (in Wilson, 2018) further entrenched the Islamic terror narrative by tweeting, “A jihadist just killed 9 people, and the mayor is already out virtue signalling.” He was not alone in this framing. A now-deleted article by Alex Jones was titled “Identity released of Islamic man who used truck to kill 10 in Toronto” (Castaldo, 2018), and was accompanied by a podcast in which the host claimed mainstream media were concealing the perpetrator’s identity.

Through these examples, one can discern not only the intent to propagate falsehoods but also a key distinction between misinformation and disinformation. As I will further articulate, it is within the domain of disinformation that far-right recruiters craft compelling narratives designed to ensnare audiences and further their agendas—frequently through the dissemination of conspiracy theory narratives.

2.2.3 Conspiracy Theories

Conspiracy theories—defined as “explanations for important events that involve secret plots by powerful and malevolent groups” (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 4; Goertzel, 1994; Zonis & Joseph, 1994)—frequently emerge as a consequence of intentional disinformation campaigns designed to vilify the opposition (Knight, 2008, p. 173). Common adversaries in such narratives typically include political elites, institutions, pharmaceutical conglomerates, and intelligence agencies (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 3). A persistent stream of conspiracy theories has also historically served to demonise racial, cultural, and religious minorities—most notably through theories such as ‘white genocide’ (see Wilson, 2020).

Conspiracy theories are often regarded as contemporary phenomena, particularly in an era characterised by digital affordances that facilitate their rapid dissemination (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017). Nonetheless, conspiracy narratives are not new. Examples date as far back as the Roman Empire, such as the spurious claim that Emperor Nero orchestrated the Great Fire of Rome (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017, p. 326).

Uscinski and Parent (2014) argue that the overall volume of conspiracy theories has not increased significantly over time. However, there is evidence that such theories are amplified during periods of crisis (Berrebi & Ostwald, 2011). This amplification is attributed to individuals’ psychological need for simplified explanations during complex events (Knight, 2008, p. 184; Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999, p. 638). Conspiracy theories cater to this need by presenting familiar, binary narratives (Dyrendal & Jolley, 2020, p. 5), often grounded in dichotomies such as good versus evil (Chirume & Kaseke, 2020), humanity versus ambiguous threat (Tyagi & Carley, 2021), or the elite versus the oppressed (Fenster, 1999).

Due to their intrinsic simplicity and relatability, conspiracy theories can act as gateways to more extreme ideologies—particularly those espoused by the far right (Imhoff et al., 2022). They often establish ideological foundations for extremism (van Prooijen, Krouwel, & Pollet, 2015). A relevant example is the belief held by the jihadi group ISIS in the imminent return of the Mahdi—a messianic figure who will appear before the final judgment, leading an army with black flags in an ultimate confrontation between good and evil (McCants, 2015, p. 22). Similarly, extreme-right factions propagate the theory of *the Great Replacement*, an in-group narrative positing that “we”, or white Europeans, are being systematically supplanted by “the other”, or non-white immigrants (Ekman, 2022, p. 4). This phrase gained traction through the writings of the French identitarian philosopher Renaud Camus and has been appropriated to incite moral panics over the perceived erosion of white

culture (Ekman, 2022, p. 5). In contemporary discourse—from far-right extremists to populist political entities—the Great Replacement is invoked for purposes ranging from bolstering anti-immigration policies to inciting violence (Obaidi et al., 2021, p. 3).

Thus, conspiracy theories can be positioned as foundational underpinnings of far-right ideology and serve as key mechanisms for message dissemination through accessible and recurring themes. Beyond these narratives, it is crucial to understand conspiracy theories within the broader context of social upheaval. Embracing such theories can act as a gateway to recruitment, increasing individuals' receptiveness to more radical content. Specifically, belief in one conspiracy theory often predisposes individuals to accept others (see Goertzel, 1994). In this context, the boundary between the plausible and the absurd becomes fluid (West, 2018, p. 24). This ambiguity, I argue, allows far-right recruiters to introduce increasingly extreme ideas under the guise of plausibility. A nuanced understanding of conspiratorial thinking is thus vital for comprehending how radical far-right ideologies gain traction, especially within the disorienting conditions of the fog.

2.3 The Conspiratorial Mindset

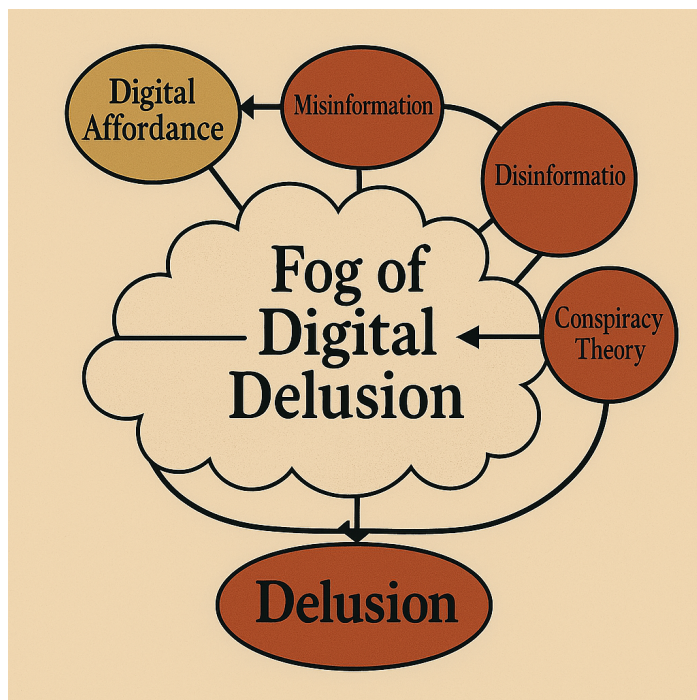


Figure 2.1: The Fog of Digital Delusion
Rendered using OpenAI's ChatGPT (2025).

This section addresses the *delusion* elements of the fog. It by no means asserts that individuals lost in the realm of conspiracy theories are delusional. Rather, as presented in Figure 2.1, it suggests a state of being that is often capitalised on by the far right. This section

considers this condition via the concept of the *Conspiratorial Mindset*, characterised by an enduring state of “hyper-vigilance towards the potential malevolent intent of others” (van Prooijen & Jostman, 2017, p. 110). Such conditions are often situated within broader sense-making processes humans engage in that seek to delineate and comprehend the complexities of the world (Schöpfer et al., 2023, p. 2).

As articulated by Shermer (2012), the Conspiratorial Mindset emerges as a by-product of cognitive phenomena such as patternicity, agenticity, hindsight bias, and various cognitive biases. Patternicity refers to the “tendency to find meaningful patterns in both meaningful and meaningless data” (Shermer, 2012, p. 162). The identification of these patterns—often conceptualised as “connecting the dots”—subsequently engenders beliefs that shape an individual's interpretation of reality (Shermer, 2012, p. 165).

Although a relatively novel term, the features of patternicity bear resemblance to the psychological construct of apophenia, defined as the “tendency to perceive meaning in unrelated events” (Fyfe et al., 2008). However, whereas apophenia is frequently associated with psychoticism (Blain et al., 2020), patternicity is framed by Shermer (2012) as a function of evolutionary survival mechanisms. In a similar vein, Friedman (2021, p. 3) posits that an intrinsic quest for meaning, inherited from humanity’s ancestral cave-dwelling origins, seeks to mitigate perceived dangers, resulting in judgement calls based on drawing conclusions through perceived patterns. Nonetheless, this pursuit of meaning, albeit foundational, can inadvertently lead to detrimental consequences for individuals, specifically when it culminates in the attribution of significance to increasingly disparate and ludicrous patterns over time (Shermer, 2012, p. 166; van Prooijen & Van Vugt, 2018, p. 772).

Patternicity is frequently coupled with agenticity, which describes the “tendency to infuse patterns with meaning, intention, and agency” (Shermer, 2012, p. 155). More precisely, it encapsulates “the tendency to perceive humanlike, goal-directed agency where there is none” (Shermer, 2012, pp. 153–4). Hindsight bias involves the construction of post hoc rationalisations for previously known outcomes, while confirmation bias denotes the inclination to interpret information in a manner consistent with one's pre-existing beliefs (Shermer, 2012, p. 392).

While I contend that the Conspiratorial Mindset provides a valuable framework for understanding the susceptibility of individuals to far-right messaging, it is paramount to recognise that conspiracy theories are not linear in their development. Rather, they present a multitude of conclusions from which one might select. Furthermore, as will be explored in this thesis’s discussion section, conspiracy theories often exhibit interconnectivity—what I

will refer to as *latches*—affording far-right groups opportunities to appropriate particular belief systems and redirect adherents toward their own.

2.4 The Line of Demarcation

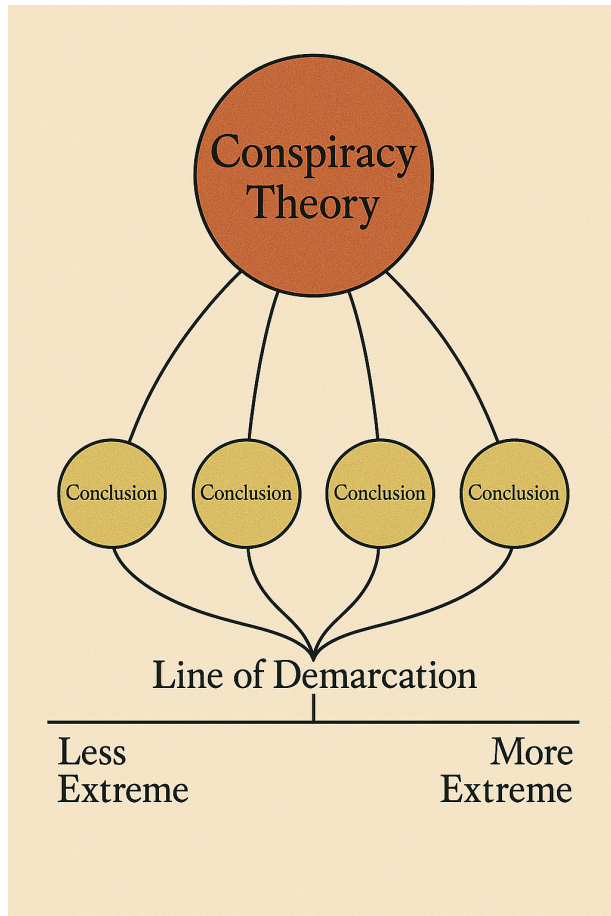


Figure 2.2: Line of Demarcation in Conspiracy Theory
Rendered using OpenAI's ChatGPT (2025).

As Goertzel (1994, p. 738) posits, “The single best predictor of belief in one conspiracy theory is belief in a different conspiracy theory.” This assertion highlights the propensity of individuals to become increasingly susceptible to more radical ideas, fostering a chain of conspiratorial assumptions regarding the malevolent entities behind various plots. West (2018), in the context of a broader conspiracy scope, characterises this intensification of belief as the *Line of Demarcation*. I will later assert that the intensification of belief in specific conspiracies renders individuals more vulnerable to the objectives of far-right groups, which are increasingly articulated through progressively extreme conspiratorial narratives. However, prior to advancing this discussion, it is crucial to acknowledge that while I contend that the deepening and broadening of conspiratorial beliefs increase susceptibility to far-right messaging, engagement with said content or even the internalisation

of beliefs that correspond with those harboured by the far right does not inherently guarantee recruitment, allegiance to extremist factions, or the motivation to act on their behalf. Youngblood (2020) emphasises that recruitment into far-right groups necessitates the convergence of several environmental factors, alongside exposure to online recruitment materials and participation in group dynamics that reinforce such beliefs. McSwiney et al. (2021, p. 23), in their examination of far-right recruiters' online practices in Australia, notes that effective recruitment hinges on direct communication, connectivity, and visibility—elements made feasible through digital technologies. Nonetheless, it is important to recognise that an awareness of conspiracies and conspiracy theories, or the harbouring of one or multiple conspiratorial beliefs, essentially designates an individual as a “believer” (West, 2018, p. 44). As believers, an immeasurable number of individuals may be inclined to broaden their belief systems, which is a significant aspect in the context of online recruitment. Thus, while discussing West's (2018) Line of Demarcation, the objective is not to elucidate the root causes behind individuals' susceptibility to recruitment efforts or the factors that ensure successful recruitment. Rather, appropriating this concept to examine far-right recruitment illustrates how the expansion and deepening of belief systems can render individuals susceptible to far-right messaging.

The Line of Demarcation has also been integrated into conspiracy theory scholarship in multiple ways. Notably, the phrase has been utilised to draw distinctions between individuals' adherence to science-based theories and non-scientific beliefs (Dentith, 2014, p. 10), as well as between legitimate and illegitimate knowledge, or knowledge that is epistemologically sound versus that which is nonsensical (Thalman, 2014, p. 5; Bjerg & Presskorn-Thygesen, 2017, p. 2). Boudry (2022) develops the concept to assert that a demarcation in the realm of conspiracy theories can be drawn between assertions that aim to explain causes and effects of the natural world, versus a black hole of fact-resistant beliefs from which one cannot escape. Harambam and Aupers (2017) explore self-identification as a means of demarcation, examining the propensity of believers to label themselves as critical free-thinkers in order to evade the stigma often associated with the title of conspiracy theorist. West (2018, p. 52) argues that the Line of Demarcation should encompass not only the distinction between fact-based hypotheses and nonsensical conclusions but, as illustrated in Figure 2.2, the entire spectrum of beliefs that a conspiracy theorist may adhere to, ranked according to their degree of extremity and the depth of acceptance of each theory. This spectrum, which I shall later describe as a *multiverse*, allows for the conceptualisation of conspiracy theory realms as interconnected planets within a galaxy of belief systems, thereby

challenging the notion that conspiracy beliefs simply represent a descent, or a venture “down the rabbit hole”. This interconnectivity subsequently facilitates the formation of what I will later refer to as a *vetting ground*, among individuals with a propensity to believe. Moreover, West (2018, p. 53) advances the concept of the Line of Demarcation by articulating the moment at which it is drawn—specifically, when individuals choose to subscribe to one conspiracy theory while rejecting another. For instance, a person may engage with any number of theories related to the assassination of JFK, such as the portrayal of Lee Harvey Oswald as a pawn in CIA machinations, while simultaneously rejecting beliefs in chemtrails or the notion of governmental efforts to poison the populace and manipulate weather patterns through contrails emitted by jet engines. A contemporary illustration of this phenomenon can be found among supporters of QAnon, who, while endorsing a conspiracy centred on a global cabal of Satanic paedophiles, delineate their beliefs by mocking flat-Earth theorists (Ebner, 2021, p. 155). In this context, the Line of Demarcation serves as a boundary that separates those regarded as sane from those labelled as crazy. Additionally, West (2018, p. 53) enriches the concept of the Line of Demarcation by considering the broadening of belief or the depth of acceptance, which accounts for the array of beliefs subsumed within a single conspiracy spectrum.

More specifically, each conspiracy theory possesses a range of divergent conclusions that can be situated on a continuum from mild to extreme (West, 2018, p. 53). The believer ‘buys into’ various conclusions contingent upon their personal Line of Demarcation. For instance, within the domain of conspiracies often referred to as *Big Pharma*, there exists a plethora of contemporary conspiracy theories regarding COVID-19. The spectrum of conclusions ranges from the assertion that the virus constitutes “only the flu” (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2020, p. 1111) to the more radical claim that it is a lab-engineered *plandemic* (see Neuman, 2020). Further along this continuum of extremity lies the belief that COVID-19 was engineered as a bioweapon, allegedly produced either in China or the United States (Nie, 2020, p. 2). The theories concerning the origins of COVID-19 are complemented by various speculations pertaining to vaccines—a sub-realm known as *anti-vax*. Within this sub-realm, some individuals have posited that vaccines serve as mechanisms for 5G implantation (Bruns et al., 2020, p. 13). Others, more deeply entrenched in such beliefs, purport that vaccines function as a form of sterilisation—a purported Zionist scheme aimed at exerting control over the global population (Muraru, 2020).

West (2018, p. 52) contends that such delineations can be perceived as a threshold of belief, perceiving any notion situated beyond this threshold as “false information”. This

conceptual framework, termed the Line of Demarcation, articulates the extensive and nuanced belief systems, including those affiliated with far-right ideologies, which exhibit both breadth and depth. Moreover, as posited in this thesis’s discussion section, this construct underscores the scope of beliefs that recruiters navigate while engaging in recruitment efforts amid the pervasive fog of digital delusion—an environment with a diverse array of pseudo-information, conspiracy theories, and extremist beliefs.

2.5 Metapolitics

The Conspiratorial Mindset and the Line of Demarcation provide valuable insights into how people deepen and broaden their beliefs in conspiracy-laden misinformation. However, they do not address how individuals with seemingly opposing beliefs come to adopt views they previously did not hold. Scholars have sought to enhance an understanding of this phenomenon by employing the concept of the *Overton Window*—an analytical framework elucidating how shifts in societal perceptions transform within and beyond the boundaries of acceptable ideas (Dustin et al., 2019, p. 1). This concept, originally articulated by Joseph G. Lehman, President of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, honours the late political policy scholar and free market libertarian Joseph Overton (Astor, 2019). Once relegated to somewhat obscure discussions regarding the acquiring of donor support through advocacy, the Overton Window has recently gained traction as a versatile lens for examining various political phenomena, particularly regarding the ascent of ideas that were previously considered radical or fringe into the mainstream (Robertson, 2018). The term effectively delineates a “window of political possibility” that encapsulates the spectrum of ideas the public is willing to endorse, shaped significantly by prevailing societal values. This, in turn, influences the discourse of political candidates and the policies they seek to promote (Szałek, 2013, pp. 237–9).

Conceptually, the window is fluid; it may expand, shift along the political spectrum, undergo subtle nudging, or even be irrevocably smashed through in favour of a particular cause or agenda (Hallam, 2019, p. 60). In the context of far-right ideologies, the Overton Window has been utilised to scrutinise the phenomenon of a diminishing centrist consensus (Wright, 2019). Furthermore, the concept serves as a critical lens through which to analyse the ramifications of propaganda, social media algorithms, and labelling tactics that serve to challenge or reinforce dominant narratives associated with mainstream ideas (Youvan, 2024). However, the Overton Window fails to adequately address the mechanisms through which acceptance of more extreme ideas permeates mainstream or opposing ideological camps.

Thus, there exists a compelling avenue for investigating the processes of acceptance pertinent to far-right recruitment, not only as a means to engage with far-right content but also as a pathway to gradually internalising their beliefs. Drawing upon Griffin's (2000) scholarship, the lens of metapolitics can be adopted to explore the convergence of ostensibly disparate ends of the political spectrum, united through cultural discourse, with the overarching objective of challenging and ultimately transforming the status quo.

Metapolitics can be broadly described as the philosophy of talking politics (Badiou, 2005). The concept offers a nuanced framework for understanding the interplay between politics and culture. The term has increasingly been appropriated to explorations that aim to investigate how individuals from opposing belief systems may find themselves vulnerable to the right (Marwick et al., 2022; Lucassen & Lubbers, 2012; Peucker, 2024). Furthermore, the term often aims to articulate the right's strategic co-option of Marxist methodologies, particularly those influenced by Gramsci, in the pursuit of activism aimed at establishing cultural hegemony as a precursor to political power (Maly, 2019). As articulated by Griffin (2000, p. 1), the right employs metapolitical strategies to secure dominance by cultivating a cultural hegemony that ensures minds are imbued with a "conception of the world which consolidates and justifies it". In examining the ramifications of digitisation on cultural and intellectual activism, Maly (2019) elucidates how metapolitics serves as a catalyst for enhancing the far right's online presence while concurrently bolstering their mobilisation capabilities in the offline sphere. Addressing the confluence of seemingly disparate ideological camps, de Boise (2024) investigates the metapolitics of strategic ambiguity, positing it as a mechanism to render more extreme ideas palatable to broader audiences. These inquiries have been adeptly integrated into contemporary studies that scrutinise the mechanics of digital propagation, or the strategies employed by the far right to disseminate their message. For instance, Darius and Stephany (2019) explore the far right's strategic appropriation of *hash-jacking*, a play on the term *hijacking*, which refers to the practice of utilising another's hashtag to advance one's own social media agenda. In a related vein, Darius and Stephany (2022) also examine hash-jacking within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, revealing its role in disseminating disinformation and exacerbating political polarisation. Fitzgerald and Graham (2024) introduce the notion of *co-option* to trace the pathways of QAnon's dissemination tactics. Their analysis highlights the manner in which QAnon has co-opted the hashtag *#SaveTheChildren*, originally associated with the charitable organisation, to propagate disinformation regarding an alleged cabal of Satanists involved in

child sex trafficking. Thus, metapolitics emerges as a crucial tool for the far right to embed themselves into the left by co-opting the lexicon of its culture.

The metapolitical endeavours undertaken by various groups and activists are described in the literature as *projects*. Griffin (2000) characterises the term as an ideological initiative designed to achieve cultural hegemony. Maly (2019, p. 7) identifies the online zine *Breitbart* as a cultural project intended to disseminate specific political ideologies via metapolitics. Other scholarship employs a variation on similar themes. Examining the online phenomenon of *tradwives*, Tebaldi (2024) employs the concept of *seduction* to analyse how influencers within this space utilise feminine allure to propagate masculinist narratives rooted in white nationalism. The scholarship of Frojo and Ganesh (2018) is particularly salient in its thematic analysis of how metapolitical transnationalism facilitates the palatability of extreme right ideas to a wider audience. Each of these works provides critical insights into the mechanisms of palatability, whether manifested through cultural narratives, seduction, or relatability. I seek to build upon the existing body of literature by conceptualising metapolitical activities as *exchanges* that delineate the relationship between two opposing ideological camps. By engaging with foundational concepts such as metapolitical projects, seduction, and transnationalism, I posit that these exchanges are pivotal moments where opportunities arise for the far right to transcend ideological divides through the transmission of cultural discourse. Crucially, as will be demonstrated, this analysis positions conspiracy theories as cultural artefacts—serving as the primary vehicles for metapolitical exchanges that potentially foster recruitment through strategic cultural interactions.

2.6 Conclusion

The intricate environment fostering far-right recruitment has been critically examined, with attention to how digitised spaces derive their complexity from technological affordances and information-sharing capabilities. A nuanced analysis of these dynamics, framed through the concept of digital affordances, elaborated on the convergence of mis/disinformation and conspiracy theories that together form a fog of digital delusion. Digital affordances are positioned as pivotal vehicles for the far right's recruitment strategies. Spatial affordances, in particular, enable a form of digital cosmopolitanism (Ponzanesi, 2020), allowing far-right groups to transcend geographic and cultural boundaries and infiltrate varied communicative spaces. Paralanguage affordances facilitate the development of a second language that

enables communication across diverse audiences, while multimodal affordances enhance this second language by leveraging shared conventions of computer-mediated communication.

Significant challenges within existing regulatory frameworks were also highlighted. In particular, definitional ambiguity between misinformation and disinformation risks overlooking deliberate disinformation campaigns while potentially penalising unintentional misinformation. These complications hinder efforts to curtail far-right recruitment, understood here as deliberate and systematic campaigns. Within this environment, conspiracy theories emerge as foundational to far-right belief systems, laying the groundwork for what will later be identified as *vetting grounds* for recruitment.

Elements of delusion were explored through a multidimensional engagement with Shermer's (2012) *Conspiratorial Mindset*, West's (2018) *Line of Demarcation*, and the strategic function of metapolitics. The interplay between delusion and the *Conspiratorial Mindset* highlights how individuals—particularly during crises—may seek meaning in disconnected patterns, leaving them vulnerable to the far right's reductive narratives that claim to explain complex societal conditions. Conspiracy theories, in this context, represent key opportunities for exploitation by the far right, taking root in the psychological vulnerabilities cultivated by the fog of misinformation and disinformation. West's *Line of Demarcation* conceptualises the non-linear structure of conspiracy theory engagement, illustrating how varying depths and breadths of belief provide multiple avenues for recruitment.

The concept of metapolitics was considered as a means of understanding how far-right narratives gain receptivity across diverse political landscapes. Conspiracy theories, when viewed as cultural artefacts, serve as vehicles for metapolitical exchange, uniting disparate audiences around shared narratives of discontent and social transformation. Taken together, these mechanisms create fertile conditions for far-right recruitment to flourish. Persisting definitional ambiguities around misinformation and disinformation, alongside other regulatory challenges, continue to complicate the detection of such recruitment strategies. These issues will be explored in greater detail in the following chapters, particularly through the examination of how distinctions between terrorism and extremism shape early detection efforts and influence regulatory and technological responses.

3 Fighting Words

In 2017, 18-year-old Devon Arthurs, previously identified by law enforcement as a prominent member of the neo-Nazi youth organisation Atomwaffen Division, entered the Green Planet Smoke Shop in Tampa, Florida, armed with an assault rifle. He took an employee and several patrons hostage, before confessing to the murder of his two roommates, Jeremy Himmelman and Andrew Oneschuk, both of whom were also former members of Atomwaffen Division (Sullivan, 2020). In his police affidavit, Arthurs claimed that his roommates had disrespected his “new religion”, Salafi Islam, to which he had recently converted (Kutner, 2020). Although Arthurs’s newfound ideological identity may have been unexpected for law enforcement, it was well-known within the online communities he frequented. During the year of his conversion, he changed his online pseudonym from *Weissewolfe*, translating to “white wolf” in German, to *Kekman Al-Amriki*, a name reflecting both his former white nationalist beliefs and his newly adopted jihadist aspirations. The term Al-Amriki, meaning “the American” in Arabic, is often assigned to US *Gharib* or *Ghuraba*, terms designating individuals viewed as strangers or foreigners who participate in conflicts beyond their homeland (McCants, 2015, p. 100). The name *Kekman* has genealogical ties to alt-right online culture. Kek originated as a Korean onomatopoeia for laughter (e.g., “haha” or “kekeke”) and became widely recognised through the online video game *World of Warcraft*. Subsequently, members of forums such as 4Chan began using it to signify “lol” (Neiwert, 2017). Furthermore, Kek references a frog-headed Egyptian deity associated with darkness, which later inspired the character Pepe the Frog, a figure adopted by a nascent satirical alt-right belief system. Ultimately, Pepe was designated as a hate symbol by the Anti-Defamation League (Mele, 2016).

Under this new pseudonym, much to the dismay of the alt-right and far-right participants in the chatrooms he frequented, Arthurs promoted the notion of “white jihad”, advocating for the formation of hooligan factions within far-right organisations willing to engage in unlawful and violent activities (Haanstra & Keijzer, 2018, p. 2). He expressed a desire to support violent Islamist groups, such as ISIS, and frequently remarked to fellow chatroom member James that he perceived the American far-right as “soft” for failing to engage in violent actions against various groups, including LGBT individuals; in contrast, he noted that groups like ISIS actively perpetrated such violence (Reeve, 2017). While it does not appear that Arthurs had joined or affiliated with any known Islamist groups, the incident, complete with a self-proclamatory ideological conversion, is a rare example of unification

between two seemingly diverse signifiers: *terrorist* and *extremist*—at least in their representation. For example, news coverage of the incident and subsequent trial refers to Arthurs as both a “fundamentalist” and “extremist” (Peñaloza, 2017). Another opinion piece (see Mahdawi, 2017) also describes Arthurs as a “neo-Nazi turned Islamist [who] flipped terror narratives upside down”. While two examples cannot provide the entire scope, “turning narratives” may not be the case. I argue that the demarcation between terrorism and extremism is at the core of biases and stereotypes embedded into our counterterrorism measures and impedes efforts to detect online recruitment. Furthermore, this separation impacts how the two entities are treated, with the *extremist* label often bestowed on ultra-right-wing, white supremacist, white nationalist or neo-Nazi groups (Dixit & Miller, 2022; Corbin, 2017). However, while separated, both terms are defined by discourse that shapes them and by events that both amplify and personify acts of violence.

In that vein, this chapter has three aims. The first is to explore the differences between the labels terrorism and extremism by genealogically tracing their meaning over time. This chapter also considers the political, social and cultural contexts in which the definition is embedded. Second, by introducing Gaufman’s (2017) approach to securitisation—or a Critical Security Studies framework that addresses the act of moving everyday politics to the realms of national security via the dissemination of threat narratives and enemy images (Wæver, 1995)—this chapter considers how these prevalent representations are developed and why they endure, potentially influencing counterterrorism measures. The third is to survey the impacts of demarcating terrorism and extremism. In this chapter, the demarcation will be explored through a survey of regulatory measures aimed at curbing *terrorism* and contrast them to countering violent *extremism* (CVE) measures aimed at curbing *extremists*—a label often bestowed on ultra-right-wing, white supremacist, white nationalist or neo-Nazi groups (Dixit & Miller, 2022; Corbin, 2017).

This chapter concludes by asserting that early detection measures can be seen as hampered by long-standing representations that define terrorists and extremists. I will elaborate on the impacts of this demarcation in the discussion section of this thesis where I aim to argue that these representations position the terms terrorism and extremism as distinct labels that separate one form of violence from another, conveying a message about action or inaction.

3.1 The Meaning of Terrorism

Before embarking on an examination of interchangeable definitions of terrorism and extremism, it is crucial to consider the factors contributing to the existing dichotomisation. A significant issue is the racial delineation that is observable in the categorisation of terrorism, which is often associated predominantly with Islamist groups (Hase, 2021; Kundnani, 2014; Mulinari & Neergaard, 2012). This representation is supported by the narrative that conflates Islam with terrorism, steeped in Orientalism, portraying Arabs as the “uncivilised, dangerous other” (Corbin, 2017, p. 458). Conversely, extremism is frequently linked to far-right groups (Dixit & Miller, 2022; Corbin, 2017), with white perpetrators represented by terms such as ‘mass shooters’ and ‘individuals with mental illness’ (D’Orazio & Salehyan, 2018; Betus et al., 2021, p. 1134). Both terms have also been used interchangeably to create descriptors like radical or jihadist extremism (Schmid, 2013; Joffé, 2013), and extremism has equally been viewed as a precursor to terrorism (Striegher, 2015, p. 76).

The quest for a precise definition of terrorism has sparked contentious debate among scholars, legal analysts, and policymakers (Lowe, 2018, p. 38; Bryan, 2018, p. 23; Jackson, 2011; Richards, 2015). Some scholars argue that the term is irredeemably pejorative and should be abandoned (Gearty, 1991; Bryan, 2018), while others contend that the multitude of definitions renders a singular interpretation unviable. Schmid and Jongman (1998) and Simon (1994) indicate that up to 200 definitions exist, leading scholars to question alternatives to the term (Richards, 2018, p. 14). This debate dates to the mid-20th-century emergence of Terrorism Studies and continues to influence the evolution of scholarship and counterterrorism policies (Lowe, 2018, p. 38; Bruce, 2013, p. 26). Many scholars suggest that an ambiguous definition may facilitate manipulation by political regimes (Chiha, 2013, p. 90) and that the act of labelling individuals and groups as *terrorists* has been used to suppress dissent and infringe upon fundamental rights (Chiha, 2013). Additionally, the absence of a workable definition leaves lawmakers in a difficult position in terms of addressing what violence qualifies as terrorism and what crimes should be policed (Saul, 2006). This chapter acknowledges this definitional quagmire and further asserts that the lack of definition has rendered the concept of terrorism malleable, allowing its meaning to shift over time.

Examples of the shapeshifting nature of terrorism can be found throughout history in its practical policymaking applications and conceptual representation. However, before we begin genealogically tracing the malleability of ‘terrorism’, it is important to note that this

chapter focuses predominantly on examples of violence shaped by Western narratives. Specifically, it focuses on definitions emerging predominantly from the United States (US). As the global hegemon, the US is positioned to influence the military, economic, and cultural aspects of Western parts of the globe (Agnew, 2005, p. 1). This influence includes Australia, whose political terrain and susceptibility to right-wing extremism is the main focal point of this thesis. As such, the US and its experiences with terrorism can be considered both a harbinger of future trends and a mirror that guides counterterrorism measures echoed in Australian policy.

The first record in the modern history of the term ‘terrorism’ describing particular violence stems from the French Revolution (Richards, 2015, p. 52). In 1793, after the first French Republic was forged, Maximilian Robespierre, leader of the Jacobins and fighting militant spearhead of the French Revolution, executed a series of arrests, mass purges, incarcerations, and executions by guillotine to attempt to eradicate his opposition (Moore, 1998, p. 18). In 1794, in a bid to justify his actions—violence, Robespierre claimed, was necessary to hinder attempts of foreign invasion—he uttered the following words in front of the National Convention, or France’s first legislator body: “If the basis of popular government in peacetime is virtue, the basis of popular government during a revolution is both virtue and terror; virtue, without which terror is baneful; terror, without which virtue is powerless” (in DeArme, 2020, p. 265). Thus, through both speech and action, the first workable definition of modern terrorism was State terrorism executed against one’s citizens living within one’s borders.

Almost two centuries later, the term would be used in policymaking circles and defined within the acts and clauses of international law. Leading up to and between the two World Wars, a spate of assassinations targeting political elites developed into grave instability (Trapp, 2016). The eventual catalyst for placing the label ‘terrorism’ into the realm of policymaking was the assassination of King Alexander I of Yugoslavia and Louis Barthou, Foreign Minister of the French Republic, in Marseilles in 1934 at the hands of Yugoslav expatriates (Trapp, 2016). Despite the growing allegations that the act was State-sponsored and orchestrated by Yugoslav émigrés operating from Hungary (Trapp, 2016), the clauses drafted by the now-defunct League of Nations in the *Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of Terrorism* of 1937 left out any mention State-sponsorship. Instead, the Convention defined terrorism as “criminal acts directed against a State or intended to create a state of terror in the minds of particular persons, a group of persons, or the general public” (Galicki, 2005, p. 744). A victim of poor ratification—the Convention never entered into

force (Galicki, 2005, p. 744)—the first attempt at defining terrorism in international law was as a criminal act against the State, or particular people or groups within the State, an evolution in stark contrast to terrorism’s State-orchestrated roots.

By the 1950s, Eastern and Western superpowers—namely the United States and the Soviet Union—were locked into an escalating period of tension. Driven by a complex interplay of ideological, political, and economic factors, the Cold War pitted the communist States of the East, who were focused on expanding Bolshevik revolutionary ideals throughout the globe, against the democratic, capitalist and liberalist States of the West (Library of Congress, n.d.). The change in political dynamic—turning former WWII allies into foes—saw the United States not only enter an era of both McCarthyist moral panic against the “red scare” at home (Cowley, 2009) but also a period of increased intervention abroad (Sloan, 1986, p. 7). As part of the policy of ‘containment’, a strategy aimed at curbing “Soviet pressure against the free institutions of the Western world” (Kennan in the Office of the Historian, n.d.), the US engaged in a wide range of economic activities, known as President Truman’s Marshall Plan, in a bid to stave off the spread of communism (Office of the Historian, n.d.). Containment also employed psychological warfare (Osgood, 2002), proxy wars, and the arming and supporting of right-wing militias in developing States that had become fertile ground for communism (Westad, 2005, p. 1). Much effort was made to install Western-backed leadership in the Middle East (Samaan, 1972, pp. 48–50).

Furthermore, a moment of great consequence saw the US allying with France to regain colonial control over Vietnam by supporting the democratic revolution in the South, pitted against the communists of the North, resulting in the outbreak of war in 1955 (Thayer, 1989, p. xiv). These actions, complemented by a shaky relationship with the often-oppressed civil rights and anti-war movements at home (FBI, n.d.-a), set the scene for the formation of both domestic and foreign anti-American, anti-capitalist, Marxist-Leninist groups to counter what was referred to as “western puppet mastery” (Crenshaw, 1981, p. 382). The era also saw the rise of other violent players who did not have a Marxist-revolutionary agenda; for example, the formation of nationalist-secessionist groups, along with the iconisation of the long-standing Irish Republican Army (IRA), who sought autonomy from colonial rule (Patterson, 2008, p. 492). Thus, another shift in the conceptual parameters of terrorism occurs, albeit not away from notions of the State as the primary victim of violence. Instead, the focus moves toward a concept representing terrorism as “urban guerrilla warfare” (Crenshaw, 1981, p. 382) with agents engaged in “distinctive revolutionary

strategy” with sustained campaigns of violence directed against “highly visible targets” (Gurr, 1979, p. 1).

In the 1970s, terrorism studies experienced a “first wave” of academic output, driven by the rise of international terrorism (Sánchez-Cuenca, 2014). This influx of scholarship influenced, in part, the definitional elements of terrorism. The shift in academic trajectory was coupled with the militarisation of counterterrorism measures (Al-Kassimi, 2019; Jackson, 2016). The result was a sustained (non-State)-actor-based concept of terrorism, with the State remaining as the principal target for violence (see Wardlaw, 1989). However, it was not just the work produced by classicist theorists that defined terrorism in the 1970s and beyond. Answers can also be found in the complex political and economic situation the West found itself in during the later years of the Cold War. This new dynamic forged a conceptual definition of terrorism as not only politically motivated but also a threat stemming from the Middle East. Namely, while threats to the US global hegemony were multifaceted, a defining threat developed from the anti-colonial sentiment that grew among soon-to-be liberated States (Zoller, 2021). While oppositional forces grew at home, anti-Western and anti-capitalist sentiment also grew in parts of the non-Western world (Hellema, 2018, p. 11). This complex situation ushered in the era of international terrorism (Blumenau, 2014, p. 65)—or what was referred to as transnational terrorism—from groups originating in one country but orchestrating attacks in another (Chermak & Freilich, 2016, p. xii). Moving beyond rudimentary urban warfare, new international players had perfected their repertoire of violence. They were armed and trained during the Cold War in proxy wars orchestrated by superpowers of both East and West and employed more sophisticated tactics, including “assassination, bombing, kidnapping, airline hijacking, barricaded hostage situations and armed assaults” (Jenkins, 2015). They travelled regularly, and their targets pivoted from institutional symbols to civilians who, with little to do with the political grievances of terrorists, perished in highly televised events (Hoffman, 2017, p. 64). Throughout the Middle East, tensions and conflicts—predominantly sparked by the Arab–Israeli war in 1949 and the mass expulsion of Palestinians from the territory—led to an escalation of revolutionary violence (Hoffman, 2017, p. 66). The Iranian Revolution of 1979 severed ties between Iran and the United States—a State that had previously supported the deposed Shah’s regime (Moore, n.d.). The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (and subsequent anti-Soviet war) also stimulated the rise and expansion of terrorist groups (Moore, n.d.). Nonetheless, while many smaller groups fought for a similar cause—the liberation of the Middle East from

colonial rule and the dismantling of Israel—it was the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) that “replaced the Viet Kong as the heroic model” (Chermak & Freilich, 2016, p. 56).

The PLO, ideologically grounded in Palestinian nationalism, anti-Zionism, and Marxism, was established in 1964 in response to rising Arab nationalism during decolonisation (Baracskey, 2011), or—in accordance with the United Nations General Assembly—the decolonisation period in which former colonies became sovereign States (see UN General Assembly Resolution 1514, 1960). Initially viewed as a legitimate political entity, the PLO encompassed factions that engaged in violent acts while maintaining a distance from the central organisation. For instance, Black September, linked to Yasser Arafat’s Fatah, executed high-profile attacks, including the Munich Olympics massacre in 1972, while the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) was involved in the 1968 hijacking of an El Al flight (Silke & Filippidou, 2020). Consequently, the PLO was designated a terrorist organisation by the United States under the Anti-Terrorism Act of 1987, although a presidential waiver later allowed for engagement with the group (Mark & Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Trade Division, 2003). Despite achieving permanent observer status at the United Nations (Kapeliouk, 1986), the PLO’s association with terrorism influenced the perception of Palestinians as supporters of terrorism. More specifically, through the labelling of the PLO as a terrorist organisation, a conclusion was forged that if “the PLO were terrorists, so must be the people who support them” (Kapeliouk, 1986, p. 187). This conflation was reflected in the clauses of the Anti-Terrorism Act. Specifically, the Act asserts that “Middle East terrorism” represented a significant portion of international terrorism, and linked the PLO to violent incidents, such as the murder of an American on the Achille Lauro cruise liner. This connection contributed to the conceptualisation of terrorism as an ‘Arab threat’ in liberal societies (Thussu, 1997). Thus, the PLO’s designation as both a terrorist entity and a representative of Palestine reinforced the notion of sophisticated, non-State-actor warfare emerging from the Middle East—a representation that persists in contemporary discussions of terrorism, including the events of 9/11.

At this juncture, a chronological examination of the term ‘terrorism’ will conclude. The image of the PLO in the 1970s has transferred onto significant historical events, such as the attacks of September 11, 2001, and continues to resonate today as the landscape of violence appears to be shifting towards incidents perpetrated by white Western individuals. As such, the understanding of terrorism has been shaped by temporal and contextual factors, directly influencing who is designated as a *terrorist* and the contexts in which these labels are applied. However, while tracing the genealogical evolution of the term provides valuable

insights into its shifting meanings, this approach alone fails to capture the full scope of the repercussions associated with the application of a non-definitive label to specific situations, events, groups, or individuals. As will be explored further, the act of labelling an individual or group as a terrorist carries profound implications, many of which may not be directly experienced by those who are branded as extremists.

3.2 Defining Extremism

I began researching the use of the term ‘extremism’ in May 2022. Then, West Australian Premier Mark McGowan referred to Peter Dutton (the newly appointed leader of the conservative Liberal Party) as an *extremist* (White, 2022). Just a day before McGowan’s claim, an American not-for-profit news site, *The Intercept* (Lowenstein, 2022), targeted Rupert Murdoch, claiming that the antidote to the media mogul’s power and influence was to “consistently highlight the extremism” published on his platforms. In the United States, former President Joe Biden referred to white supremacy as “poison” after a spate of mass shootings, some of which were described as “racially motivated violent extremism” (Mason, 2022). At the cusp of the US Supreme Court overturning *Roe v Wade*, a landmark ruling on abortion rights, *The Washington Post* (Rubin, 2022) implored the Republican Party to “defend its abortion *extremism*”. A counter-piece, published under the same masthead only a few weeks earlier, asserted that it was the Democrats who were proving to be “the real *extremists* on abortion” (Olsen, 2022). In Europe, Europol teamed up with music-sharing platform SoundCloud to remove ‘extremist’ audio clips, which included “jihadist chants in several languages as well as audio fragments promoting violent and right-wing *extremist* groups” (Euronews, 2022). There were also grave fears over a small and unknown faction of volunteer fighters in Ukraine, believed to be espousing “far-right or far-left *extremist* views”, which could potentially present a risk when they return to their home State (Seldon, 2022). In Russia, authorities treat Jehovah’s Witnesses as extremists following an outlawing of the group in 2017 (Reevell, 2022). The decision resulted in the imprisonment of Danish Jehovah’s Witness Dennis Christensen, who was released in 2022 (Radio Free Europe, 2022). In Asia, news headlines speak of the quest to reduce “religious extremism”, an issue with increased salience after the deportation of Abdul Somad Batubara from Singapore (Singh, 2022). This overuse is still prevalent today, with countless examples of violence and violent groups being labelled with the term. Extremism, in the realm of violence, has been used to describe jihadist groups, fundamentalist religions, white supremacists and neo-Nazi groups, along with a procession of communities from the

fractured and far-reaching domains of the alt-right. Due to this overuse, and much like its highly politicised counterpart ‘terrorism’, ‘extremism’ is prone to malleability and misuse. However, it differs from ‘terrorism’ in two distinct ways. First, as will soon be discussed, extremism and its misuse are not only a product of time and place, subject to influences of political interest, but also appear to harbour unique multi-contextual usages simultaneously, such as the labelling of jihadist groups, and conservative politicians in the same breath and with the same term. The multi-contextual elements of extremism further diminish the development of a core concept, leading to misapplication and, in turn, misuse; specifically, when the term is appropriated to racially demarcate violence.

Scholars from a variety of schools and disciplines have sought to define the term beyond a conventional understanding (Sotlar, 2004, p. 1). Of relevance to this thesis are definitions drawn from the Political Sciences, including both Terrorism and Security Studies, which have produced a variety of concepts. For example, Coleman and Bartoli (2003, p. 1) consider extremism to be a complex phenomenon, incorporating a variety of activities (such as attitudes, beliefs, feelings, and strategies), with the act of labelling groups and people ‘extremists’ as both subjective and political. Davies (2008, p. 1) considers extremism through a physical lens, characterising it as “violence and death”. Hogg et al. (2013, p. 407), while highlighting the contested nature of the term, consider extremism as “the source of enormous human suffering”, representing “a significant social problem”. Others explore extremism through an ideological lens, veering towards the religious (Ghosh et al., 2017; Liebman, 1983; Miller, 2012), political (Breton et al., 2002; De Figueiredo & Weingast, 2000; Fernbach et al., 2013), and philosophical (Cassam, 2021). Some assert that extremism involves “either the implicit or overt acceptance of violence as legitimate” (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2010, p. 9). Berger (2018, p. 24) takes a broader approach to defining extremism as a diverse spectrum of groups with notable similarities in identity formation. Interestingly, the author genealogically traces the definition of extremism by use of historical examples, such as the Black Hand nationalists who assassinated Archduke Ferdinand at the cusp of WWI, the Third Reich and the Mujahideen offshoot al-Qaeda, some of which are examples previously employed to illustrate the definition of terrorism throughout time. Ebner (2017), a counterterrorism expert who spent time embedded in violent groups, also develops this concept of similarity among diverse groups in a bid to define extremism. In her book, *The Rage: The Vicious Circle of Islamist and Far-right Extremism* (Ebner, 2017), the author likens the ideological underpinnings of what she refers to as jihadists and far-right extremists to that of a horseshoe, where the far-right and the far-

left sit on opposing ends, therefore being closer to each other than the centre. More specifically, when it comes to far right and jihadist extremists, Ebner (2017) finds striking similarities in their narratives that tend to propagate binary worldviews and anti-establishmentarianisms.

On the other hand, Striegher (2015) considers extremism as anything but formal groups with similar ideological underpinnings. Rather, the author (Striegher, 2015, p. 76) considers extremism to be a process, one through which an individual becomes a *terrorist*. Importantly, a few (e.g., Coleman & Bartoli, 2003, p. 2; Borum, 2011, p. 9) are alert to the lack of consensus in defining extremism and who extremists are. Specifically, Lowe (2024), while discussing the implementation of the term ‘extremism’ into the United Kingdom’s counterterrorism lexicon, alerts us to a lack of a law-based definition, thus rendering the term extremist not fit for purpose. Peels (2024), while surveying scholarship’s current stance on the term extremism, addresses similar contextual parameters that were previously employed to define terrorism. However, a review of the literature reveals a clear tendency to define extremism in ways that deliberately distinguish it from terrorism. While the minimisation of employing such a loaded and politicised term (terrorism) may be of benefit to curtail misuse and misapplication, the delineation between both terms influences legal and policy frameworks, along with the development of technological countermeasures, potentially creating an unbalanced response to certain acts of violence. This imbalance includes domestic terrorism, or a term that has been often appropriated to describe violence orchestrated by a white perpetrator (Dixit & Miller, 2022; Corbin, 2017), referred to as ‘extremists’. Furthermore, a review of the literature indicates a contextual struggle to define extremism, akin to the complexities surrounding the term terrorism. This ambiguity, I argue, leads to the problematisation and politicisation of extremism. Yet, while a survey of literature illustrates this terminological quagmire, it inadequately explores how representations of extremism influence the formulation of countermeasures intended to mitigate the spread of violence. This chapter explores these processes through securitisation frameworks that predominantly focus on the dynamics of personification, the construction of enemies, and the role of discourse in identifying violent actors.

3.3 The Cycle of Securitisation

The process of constructing definitions—whether they are politicised and racialised, as seen with the term terrorism, or ambiguous and misappropriated, as with the term extremism—is complex and deserves further analysis. However, simply examining the

development of specific terms and definitions does not capture the broader implications of such categorisation. A clearer understanding comes from analysing the mechanisms that define perceived threats, as well as the underlying objectives that drive these characterisations. I argue that these processes engender biases that shape counterterrorism strategies, significantly influencing the treatment of individuals categorised as either *terrorists* or *extremists*. While this chapter concentrates on the concept of *securitisation*, it also recognises the contributions of other disciplines that engage with similar processes and their intended goals. A pertinent example from cultural studies is Cohen's (2002) deviancy amplification cycle. Outlined in his seminal work, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, Cohen's (2002) deviancy amplification cycle exemplifies how moral panics develop within society. He defines moral panics as social phenomena wherein a condition, individual, or group is depicted as a significant threat to societal values (Cohen, 2002, p. 1). Those identified as folk devils often reflect underlying societal anxieties, marked by stylised and stereotypical traits. Cohen posits that while the genesis of moral panics may originate from deviant behaviours, they are significantly exacerbated by sensationalist media coverage, which amplifies fears and shapes public narratives. This amplification can lead to notable changes in social policy and law enforcement practices as public demand for stringent regulations increases. Cohen's (2002) framework effectively illustrates the ways in which media coverage amplifies public fear and delineates the relationship between policy changes and public demand. However, its applicability diminishes in contexts where perceived threats are internationalised or when deviant behaviours escalate to a level of national security, resulting in outcomes that may be equally or more violent than the deviance itself. Given the heightened stakes associated with such scenarios, it becomes imperative to adopt a complementary lens to assess such phenomena.

One such approach can be found in securitisation frameworks. The concept of securitisation, which initially emerged within the banking sector, was transposed into the field of International Relations by Critical Security scholars (Balzacq, 2011, p. xiv). The term first gained prominence through the scholarship of Ole Wæver (1995, p. 51), who aimed to address the longstanding security dilemma of 'What constitutes a security problem?'. Wæver's (1995, p. 51) enquiry was grounded in linguistic theory, positing that security is best understood as a speech act. In this view, the employment of the term *security* constitutes the act itself, distinct from any ensuing actions. Wæver, aligned with the Copenhagen School—a collective of scholars responding to the post-Cold War imperative to broaden the scope of security beyond traditional military considerations—was notably influenced by Barry

Buzan's (1983) seminal work *People, States and Fear: The National Security Problem in International Relations*. Within the work, Buzan (1983, p. 9) articulates security as a concept that is both undefined and “intensely political”. While he does not explicitly address securitisation in this foundational text, Buzan explores the notion of a ‘state of nature’ wherein States and governments arise as mechanisms to counter “unacceptable chaos” and as a rationale for the “sacrifice of certain freedoms” in pursuit of heightened security (Buzan, 1983, p. 20). This compromise, or sacrifice, serves as a pivotal characteristic of the securitisation process.

Within the frameworks of securitisation, a particular threat, identified as jeopardising a specific sector of society, is identified by a *securitising actor* (Kurylo, 2022, p. 130). In this context, the term *actor* typically refers to the State and its authoritative representatives, as well as any entity possessing the capacity to articulate threats (Eroukhmanoff, 2017). Once a threat is identified, it undergoes a transformation into a security issue through discursive practices, or what can be termed *speech acts* (Wæver, 1995, p. 52). This transition shifts the issue from the sphere of everyday politics into the domain of national security (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998, p. 20; Buzan & Wæver, 2003, p. 491). This transformation is facilitated through the propagation of a *threat narrative* that explicates a *referent subject* (the threat) alongside a *referent object* (the threatened) (Kurylo, 2022). Similarly to deviancy amplification cycles (Cohen, 2002, p. 1), these threat narratives gain momentum and are further reinforced by news media (Buonfino, 2006, p. 23) in an effort to evoke a sense of urgency (Eroukhmanoff, 2017, p. 106). This process of elevating a threat from a marginal concern to a security priority is strategically designed to cultivate public consensus and to rationalise often disproportionate responses to these perceived threats (Williams, 2008, p. 72; Buzan & Wæver, 2003, p. 491).

Understanding securitisation is essential to comprehending the inherently political nature of constructing threats. However, the theory is not without its criticisms. For example, Balzacq (2011) discusses the lack of audience perception, or the importance of public consensus, in earlier securitisation works as a miscalculation. Heinrich and Szulecki (2018) further assert that, without modification, securitisation frameworks do not provide a clear, empirical direction for research. Barthwal-Datta (2009) discusses the enduring Eurocentric nature of securitisation frameworks, which position political actors as the *securitising agents* instead of non-State actors, such as NGOs, in developmental socio-political contexts. Nonetheless, securitisation theory aids in widening the security agenda by highlighting the process in which “something becomes a security problem through discursive politics” (see

Balzacq, 2011, p. 1). As such, it is a valuable lens to explore the creation of a *threat narrative* and to what extent that impacts terrorism as a label and its usage.

The advancement of threat narratives is significantly informed by Gaufman's (2017) framework of securitisation. By integrating insights from enemy image research, the embedding of collective memory, and the deployment of governmental speech acts, Gaufman articulates the construction of threat narratives as a complex process that invokes generalisations, facilitates othering, and resurrects entrenched stereotypes and negative biases to personify a notion of evil (Gaufman, 2017, p. 20). This detrimental portrayal of society's perceived violent other is conceptualised by Gaufman (2017, p. 14) as *enmification*, signifying the process through which an 'other' is rendered an enemy. Conversely, Gaufman (2017, p. 14) posits that it is equally crucial to highlight the positive attributes of the in-group, thereby reinforcing a dichotomy between 'us' and 'them'. This binary narrative, persistently disseminated to the public, contributes to what Gaufman identifies as a *collective memory*, which is deemed essential for the effective execution of successful securitisation (Gaufman, 2017, p. 64). Similar to the evocation of biases, *collective memory* is preserved and resonates with pre-existing threat narratives (Gaufman, 2017, p. 4). Such memories are triggered within specific cultural contexts and articulated through various *referent objects* (Gaufman, 2017, p. 64). To establish a successful spiral of securitisation, Gaufman (2017, p. 52) further contends that the incorporation of elements of personification and enemy image construction is paramount. In delving into the components of enemy image-building within threat narratives, Gaufman (2017, pp. 14–15) asserts that "it is not the threat that is needed; it is the threat discourse that brings an enemy image alive". She further elaborates that the formation of an enemy image constitutes a culmination of pre-existing negative preconceptions, including prejudice, generalisation (framed as 'us' versus 'them'), differentiation (achieved through the presentation of distinct qualities that the in-group possesses compared to the out-group), and the propagation of negative attributes and visuals, described as "for instance, having several faces or looking evil" (Gaufman, 2017, p. 14). For example, in the case of 9/11, when a series of four coordinated, piloted attacks, orchestrated by al-Qaeda operatives, occurred on US soil, 'evil' was a word that featured heavily in the appropriation of the Muslim *other*, which "conflated the Islamic faith with terrorism and constructed all Muslims as dangerous anti-American outsiders" (Kwan, 2008, p. 653). The term has been widely recognised as integral to the event's construction (Ibrahim, 2010; Khalid, 2011; Jamil, 2014). In this instance, the Muslim other, presented as evil, was employed as a powerful tool to justify extraordinary acts

against the threat of Islamic terrorism, reaching levels of militarised invasion in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other places around the globe (Mavelli, 2012; Cesari, 2008; Awan, 2010, p. 522). Thus, through securitisation frameworks, we can identify the processes through which violent events—specifically, terrorism—are placed into realms of national security, the importance of threat narratives, and the conjuring of collective memory embeddedness to justify often disproportionate acts against perceived threats. Nonetheless, what remains unaddressed are the factors that obstruct the transformation of such events to the realms of national security, such as in the case of white supremacist violence orchestrated by groups often referred to as extremists.

3.3.1 De-Securitisation

De-securitisation, also coined by Wæver (1995), addresses the processes that attempt to minimise securitisation, a state of play in which all necessary means would be employed to neutralise a threat. Put plainly, de-securitisation can be seen as a process that aims to keep issues out of the realm of national security. These processes are considered by Wæver (1995, p. 52) as preferred and far more effective than securitisation’s militarised trigger, as they hinge on the implication of “less security, more politics!”. More specifically, they maintain the threat within the realm of politics and political debate as opposed to placing it in the realm of national security, which often leads to a militarised response (Balzacq, 2010, p. 136). For this reason, de-securitisation has been hailed as a peace process (see Oelsner, 2005) and an ‘unmaking’ of a security issue (Hirschauer, 2020, p. 220).

Nonetheless, as in the case of securitisation, de-securitisation has also been critiqued. Aradau (2004, p. 393) acknowledges the concept as “an ethical–political choice which refuses to let democratic politics slip into exceptional politics”. Furthermore, the author (Aradau, 2004) considers de-securitisation as under-specified and lacking a concept of politics or a clear definition of politicisation. Huysmans (2006, p. 152) argues that the politicisation of issues puts a political community “to the test”. In the context of de-securitisation, this could be considered a challenge to the democratic values of politicising issues. Balzacq (2010, p. 136) further explores the minimising or marginalising of urgent issues through de-securitisation, such as in the case of environmental issues, even when the desired result is action.

I further argue that, while de-securitisation can be understood as democratising, as it provides a political platform to discuss matters of security and steers away from militarised responses, the process can equally be considered as undemocratising during times or in

events when de-securitisation minimises threats for the sake of political interest; for example, when an event is labelled an act of extremism, as opposed to terrorism. As Borum (2011, p. 9) argues, the use of extremism alone “is not a sufficient basis for defining a security threat ... how we define the threat has profound implications for how we understand and address it”. Placed into the context of *terrorism* versus *extremism*, de-securitisation processes, or the evoking of politics over policy, can highlight the way in which certain phenomena—namely, violent acts labelled extremism—remain out of the context of national security and avoid the repercussions of counterterrorism measures.

3.4 Dichotomy and Its Regulatory Impacts

This chapter positions regulation as one of the outcomes of successful securitisation. Second, it considers regulation as both a lens and an anchor by which other elements of counterterrorism measures are developed. Increasingly, the digital realm is governed by an overlap between formal regulatory frameworks and tech companies' self-defined operational standards. In the context of national security, however, it is regulation that determines what constitutes a violation of counterterrorism law (Fishman, 2019, p. 8). As such, while it may be outdated to assume that governments are solely responsible for counterterrorism measures online, the regulation they produce still shapes actions within digital spaces. Furthermore, in the case of *terrorism* versus *extremism*, it is the speech acts of governments that define who is a terrorist or extremist and what is to be done with them, impacting how regulation is developed. As will now be discussed, it is in the example of regulatory frameworks where the dichotomous relationship between terrorism and extremism, and its repercussions, is quite prominent.

3.4.1 *The Example of Terrorism and 9/11*

As an example, this chapter will draw from the exceptional regulatory measures produced after 9/11. Resulting in the death of just under 3,000 civilians, rescuers, firefighters, police, and medical personnel, along with emergency volunteers (Goldberg et al., 2007, p. iii), the violent event has been noted as the “deadliest attack in [U.S.] history” (FBI, n.d.-b), one that “shattered the nation’s sense of security” (Goldberg et al., 2007, p. i), resulting in widespread repercussions felt beyond US soil. As such, 9/11’s exceptionality may render the example as incomparable. However, it is the single incident that defines most directional approaches to counterterrorism measures in the West, including Australia. Specifically, to

counter the threat of terrorism, the US, and their allies across the globe, implemented draconian counterterrorism measures (Jackson, 2005, p. 166).

Defined as an immediate threat through a variety of speech acts, including former US President George W. Bush's address to the public on the evening of September 11, and complemented by a 24-hour news cycle that amplified the threat of Islamic terrorism (see Lewis, 2002), a string of policies was swiftly approved. Namely, just weeks after the attacks, US Congress passed *The Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act 2001* (18 USC, United States Congress, 2001), also known as the USA Patriot Act. The Act almost passed unanimously in the Senate (see Department of Justice, n.d.) and introduced sweeping counterterrorism measures. These included the introduction of enhanced security and surveillance, border protection, and a slew of new crimes related to terrorism, including the prohibiting of harbouring terrorists (see United States Congress, Sec. 101–508). The Act was seen to be in direct violation of the First and Fourth Amendments of the US Constitution that protect privacy and freedom of speech respectively (American Civil Liberties Union, n.d.-a). For example, the inclusion of a 'sneak and peek' search provision allowed law enforcement to conduct searches without informing the subject (Rubel, 2007, p. 119). The Act also impaired free speech as gag rules suppressed news media and the public from entering or reporting on immigration court hearings of those detained after September 11 (American Civil Liberties Union, n.d.-b). However, the Patriot Act is not the only piece of legislation that was swiftly passed through the Senate and dramatically expanded the government's executive power, increased citizen surveillance, and remodelled the immigration system, targeting Muslim, Arab, and South Asian communities (Carlisle, 2021). In fact, 130 pieces of 9/11-related legislation were introduced in the first year after the attacks, with 48 bills approved or signed into law (Villemez, 2011).

Anti-terrorism countermeasures that were 9/11-related did not contain themselves solely to the realms of public policy, nor could they be classed as mere legislative events. Under the guise of a global 'War on Terror', the US launched a military campaign "against all those who seek to export terror, and ... those governments that support or shelter them" (Bush in US National Archives, 2012). Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), the official name for the global 'War on Terror', saw the US enter the longest war in the country's history in Afghanistan, the State perceived as the primary abettor of al-Qaeda, with the Taliban regime seen as having a long history of harbouring and supporting the Islamist group, their training camps, and their expansion throughout the Middle East and other parts of the globe (Tellis, 2008, p. 1). OEF later expanded its reach to counterterrorism campaigns in other

States and regions, such as the Philippines, Somalia, and the Horn of Africa, in a bid to curtail the operation of various jihadist groups (Møller, 2009, p. 91). Later, in 2003, the ‘Coalition of the Willing’, a small contingent of US-led allied States, invaded and occupied Iraq, with the objective of destroying weapons of mass destruction and ‘nation building’ after President Saddam Hussein’s ousting (Jennings, 2003, p. 1). The enduring War on Terror resulted in countless deaths of civilians and military personnel, destruction, and a besmirching of the reputation of the United States through the administration of torture committed at Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib prisons (Centre for Constitutional Rights, n.d.). As such, the War on Terror is noted as 9/11’s most “visible and controversial dimension” (Jackson et al., 2011, p. 251). While public polls reveal the War on Terror currently experiences far-reaching criticisms, the campaign was initially conducted with the support of a wider, accepting audience (see Hartig & Doherty, 2021). As per securitisation frameworks, such extraordinary measures were made possible and were legitimised through a relationship between political elites, discourse, and the public—with a public willingly sacrificing personal freedoms to curb threats (Jackson et al., 2011, p. 250).

3.4.2 Australia’s Counterterrorism Measures

Australia’s counterterrorism measures have undergone significant tightening since 9/11, reflecting trends seen in the United States. Notably, the US definition of terrorism resonates within Australia’s counterterrorism framework. The parameters of Australia’s approach to terrorism, as well as its legal responses to acts designated as terrorism, are delineated in Part 5.3 of the *Criminal Code Act 1995*. Specifically, Division 100 within this Part articulates offences pertaining to international terrorism and defines *terrorism* as “an act, or a threat to commit an act, that is undertaken with the intention to coerce or influence the public or any government by intimidation, thereby advancing a political, religious, or ideological cause.” In parallel, the United States codifies terrorism in Section D, Chapter 38 (§ 2656f) of the United States Code, Title 22 – Foreign Relations and Intercourse, characterising it as “premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents”. The similarities between the two nations’ legislative frameworks extend beyond definitional parameters.

The *Criminal Code Act 1995* further delineates an organisational structure for the implementation of punitive measures in response to acts classified as terrorism. The Act prescribes severe penalties, including life imprisonment for individuals who commit acts of terrorism, 25 years for those who provide or receive terrorist training, and up to 15 years

for possession of materials linked to terrorist activities (*Criminal Code Act 1995*, s 101.1–101.4). Equally significant are the statutes that confer powers upon law enforcement agencies (as outlined in the *Crimes Act 1914*), intelligence services (as specified in the *Australian Security Intelligence Organisation Act 1979*), and the defence forces (as established by the *Defence Act 1903*) to effectively address terrorism. Collectively, these legal frameworks constitute a comprehensive enforcement and militarised approach to countering terrorism in Australia. As such, terrorism is categorised, in Western States, as a threat that needs to be addressed through punitive, militarised measures. As will now be discussed, this is in contrast to the regulatory frameworks that dictate the treatment of extremists.

3.4.3 Extremism in Regulatory Frameworks

This section analyses Australia’s strategic framework for countering violent extremism (CVE). Emerging over the past decade, the term CVE encapsulates a broad spectrum of non-coercive, policy-oriented approaches designed to dissuade individuals from engaging in violent acts (Harris-Hogan et al., 2016, p. 1). These strategies are perceived as pivotal in the post–War on Terror context (Koehler, 2016; Millett & Ahmad, 2021, p. 52), with CVE initiatives substantially expanding the regulatory toolkit available to governments for combating extremism. This shift has redirected focus from conventional terrorist organisations to the underlying religious ideologies and identities that may fuel radicalisation (Kundnani & Hayes, 2018, p. 3).

Under the expansive umbrella of CVE, policymakers—both domestically and internationally—have implemented a variety of measures, including outreach programmes, targeted counselling for vulnerable individuals, developmental assistance, educational initiatives, and public relations campaigns (Kundnani & Hayes, 2018, pp. 2–3). These interventions have been extended into correctional facilities, which are often regarded as “hotbeds for radicalization” (Silke & Veldhuis, 2017, p. 2), and have specifically addressed the challenges posed by returning foreign fighters (Speckhard & Shajkovski, 2018).

As discussed in the Introduction of this thesis, Australia adheres to international guidelines in the realm of CVE. The State’s comprehensive strategy has emphasised early detection through the enhancement of community and youth outreach initiatives, alongside the publication of educational resources, such as the now-defunct *Point* magazine (Lauland et al., 2019). A significant component of this strategy is encapsulated in the *Living Safe Together* initiative. As previously discussed in the introduction of this thesis, this initiative incorporates mentoring, counselling, and efforts to reconnect these individuals with their

families (Australian Government, n.d.). Moreover, rehabilitation programmes have been developed for individuals charged with terrorism-related offences, focusing on their successful reintegration into society (Australian Government, n.d.).

Another critical aspect of the government's efforts pertains to online content regulation, as evidenced by the Criminal Code Amendment (Sharing of Abhorrent Violent Material) Bill 2019. This legislation mandates internet service providers, hosts, and content services to report 'abhorrent violent material' in a timely manner (Parliament of Australia, 2019). In addition to these national efforts, various state-based initiatives have been implemented. For instance, in 2016, Multicultural NSW launched a robust programme with a budget of AU\$8 million, designed to enhance social cohesion through 12 locally focused projects that targeted 20,000 youths across 130 schools (Wise et al., 2018, p. ii). The state has also taken proactive measures to combat online extremist content and provide support for community leaders dealing with radicalised individuals (Lauland et al., 2019). In response to the increasing digitisation that has disrupted traditional recruitment methods, Australia has integrated artificial intelligence and other advanced cyber technologies to identify extremist activity within digital spaces (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019).

Furthermore, the establishment of Taskforce Pearl in 2025 (see NSW Police) exemplifies Australia's commitment to addressing the rise of antisemitism, aiming to enhance both the safety and security of the Jewish community. Formed in response to escalating incidents of antisemitic behaviour and threats, this task force collaborates with law enforcement, community organisations, and educational institutions. Its key initiatives include the implementation of preventative measures, outreach programmes to foster awareness, and support services for victims of antisemitic acts. The overarching objective is to cultivate a safer environment for Jewish Australians while promoting understanding among diverse communities to counteract discrimination and hatred fostered by extremist ideologies.

However, as will be explored in the discussion section of this thesis, while such measures may impede the activities of certain groups designated as extremists, they may inadvertently leave room for extreme far-right factions to disseminate their ideologies and recruit online relatively unimpeded.

While the demarcation between terrorism and extremism in the Australian context is noted, it is the interplay between the two terms that is significant, as these terms are frequently used interchangeably or, in some cases, redefined through specific subsets that lack precise definitions. For instance, a non-dated report on the Parliament of Australia's website (Barker, n.d.) emphasises the necessity for Australia to maintain vigilance

domestically while fostering international partnerships to address terrorism and violent extremism. The report conflates the concepts of “terrorist and extremist groups” and utilises the terms “terrorist/terrorism” and “extremist/extremism” interchangeably. Additionally, it merges Australia’s counterterrorism initiatives with its countering violent extremism (CVE) measures, despite acknowledging that the majority of funding is directed toward counterterrorism efforts.

This conflation echoes statements made by Mike Burgess, Director-General of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), who, in early 2020, signalled a shift away from language explicitly tied to Islam when describing terrorism. The move aimed to adopt more neutral terminology in response to the growing threat of far-right extremism (in Bergin, 2021). Instead, ASIO adopted the terminology “religiously motivated violent extremism” and “ideologically motivated violent extremism” (Bergin, 2021). Nevertheless, Australia’s *Counter-Terrorism Strategy* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2025, pp. 1–6) continues to employ both ‘terrorism’ and ‘violent extremism’, defining terrorism in accordance with the *Criminal Code Act 1995*, and violent extremism as “acts of or support for violence to achieve social, political or legal outcomes or in response to specific political or social grievances”.

Although the exact posting dates are ambiguous, ASIO seemingly maintains a conventional distinction between extremism and terrorism. Yet, despite initiatives aimed at diminishing the use of the term ‘terrorism’, the distinction between these two concepts remains unresolved. Two salient observations emerge from an examination of Australia’s approach to CVE. Firstly, the term ‘extremism’ lacks clarity, with Australia’s definition of extremism presenting the same ambiguities observed globally. This variability underscores important differences between terrorism and extremism, particularly concerning their respective labels—one being securitised while the other is de-securitised. Secondly, despite attempts to eliminate the term ‘terrorism’ from official discourse, it continues to be employed in State policy and legislative measures. Consequently, a distinction between terrorism and extremism persists, rendering both terms politicised, which in turn informs politicised responses to violence.

3.5 Conclusion

The cries of “Allah Muhammed”, a misarticulated *takbir*—a common Arabic exclamation of faith in Islam, meaning “God is greatest”—uttered by the impressionable Devon Arthurs during his arrest immediately following his assault on the Green Planet

Smoke Shop, may superficially suggest a connection between terrorism and extremism. However, by surveying the definition of such labels, this chapter positions terrorism as a politicised label that has evolved throughout history and across various political and cultural landscapes. In contrast, the term extremism is characterised by its vagueness and lack of clarity, rendering it adaptable to the cultural and political contexts in which it is situated.

Employing the framework of securitisation to examine the implications of such labelling, we can delineate two divergent outcomes. Firstly, the designation of individuals and groups as terrorists can lead to framing these phenomena within the discourse of national security, often resulting in punitive responses to perceived threats. Conversely, a more conciliatory outreach approach has been identified as a potential means to dissuade individuals from engaging in *extremist* activities. In the realm of far-right recruitment—where actions are frequently classified as extremism—this distinction carries significant implications for the treatment of such groups. Namely, this categorisation often leads to a comparatively less punitive response, thereby undermining efforts to counteract the recruitment of individuals into far-right groups.

Nonetheless, such definitional challenges extend beyond the boundaries of terrorism and far-right extremism. As will be discussed in chapter four, there exists considerable ambiguity regarding what constitutes the far-right, what actions are recognised as recruitment practices, and how these actors are represented. These complexities further obstruct Australia's capacity for early detection of potential threats.

4 The Far-right, Extremists and Recruiters

The previous chapter examined the regulatory ramifications associated with the delineation of the highly politicised terms *terrorism* and *extremism*. It underscored that the term terrorism—whose use can be traced through history and various contexts—is predominantly applied to jihadist groups and the violent acts they perpetrate. In contrast, extremism is characterised as an overused term, resulting in a lack of concrete definition. Importantly, extremism encompasses a diverse range of contexts and actors, including violent groups and individuals from the far right. The demarcation between the two had implications for developing regulatory measures to address such groups and their violent acts. Namely, regulatory measures aimed at eradicating terrorism centred on punitive measures, while extremism evoked CVE initiatives focused on community outreach and counselling, with the onus placed on communities to detect radicalised individuals. The result was a difference in treatment and the potential to impede action aimed at addressing far-right extremism. Furthermore, such demarcation was noted to impact early detection by focusing on the radicalised as opposed to the radicalisers or the groups who aim to recruit. Nonetheless, while the demarcation between terrorism and extremism reveals some of the representational biases that affect countermeasures, it is but one influence among the various forces that skew directional pathways in countering violent extremism and early detection efforts.

Another significant influence in the development of representational biases is the term *far-right*. As will be discussed, the term is susceptible not only to overuse but also to amplified and simplified representations of such actors. As outlined in the discussion portion of the broader thesis, these generalisations shape understandings of who or what is deemed far-right, what actions are seen as requiring intervention, and who is targeted by the array of CVE responses. This logic extends to how ‘recruitment’ is conceptualised and what actions are seen as indicative of attempts to draw individuals into far-right groups. To investigate how the far-right is represented, the present chapter first surveys the term’s use in scholarly discourse and the various contexts in which it is employed. It also outlines the definitional parameters adopted in the broader thesis—namely, a “spontaneous coalition” (Miller-Idriss, 2020, p. xiv) consisting of actors with varying beliefs and distinct identities. Given the focus here on more extreme variants—white supremacist and white separatist movements—the review further considers the effects of combining the terms *far-right* and *extremism* in scholarly representation.

To advance an understanding of the impact of digitisation on these conceptualisations, the chapter examines how the meaning of *far-right extremism* is shaped within digital contexts. It further includes a brief overview of how far-right extremism is defined and represented in Australian policy and discourse.

To explore how public understandings are influenced, the present review examines the news media's role in shaping perceptions of far-right actors. Drawing on Gaufman's (2017) cycle of securitisation, this section highlights the mechanisms through which the media are instrumentalised in enemy-image construction and how reductive portrayals of violent actors emerge. In particular, the review scrutinises news media representations of the events of January 6, 2021—commonly referred to as the Riot at the Capitol—due to their significant impact on the themes explored throughout the broader thesis.

The discussion then turns to the literature on far-right recruitment to explore how this process is defined, understood, and influenced by digital environments. By acknowledging the affordances of digital platforms, the chapter proposes a reading of recruitment not merely as a behavioural process, but as one manifest in text—or, put differently, as *recruitment as text*.

This chapter concludes that there is considerable ambiguity in defining the far-right. Such groups may be understood as a 'spontaneous coalition', lacking internal homogeneity and comprising a spectrum of sub-groups with distinct identities and communication practices. Additionally, in light of the transformative effects of digital technologies, recruitment can be understood as the text these groups produce, rather than focusing solely on the individuals generating that content.

4.1 Defining the Far Right

A review of academic literature pertaining to the far-right reveals a significant absence of consensus concerning the concept's definition, as well as the diverse array of individuals and groups that the term describes (Mudde, 2019, p. 4). Specifically, scholarly work presents a definition of the far right that appears to be multi-purposed and, therefore, applicable to many contexts. Works pertaining to the far-right include the exploration of political radicals (Weinberg & Assoudeh, 2018; Bornschier, 2018), populist movements (Sengul, 2022; Wodak, 2019), nationalists (Camus & Lebourg, 2017), neo-Nazis (Potter, 2022, p. 4), and fascist ideologists (Davies & Lynch, 2005; Traverso, 2019), as well as more fringe elements such as doomsday preppers (Mills, 2021). The far right may also encompass groups that advocate for chauvinistic and hyper-masculinist ideologies, which they perceive

as a countermeasure to feminism (Travis, 2023). Additionally, these groups can adopt pro- or anti-LGBTQI+ stances, depending on whether LGBTQI+ individuals are viewed as symbols of Western freedoms or the decline of conservative values (Russell, 2019). In terms of organisational structure, the far right has been conceptualised as institutionalised and organised. For instance, Lucassen and Lubbers (2012) augment the term ‘far right’ with ‘party’, framing these actors as inherently political and, therefore, organised entities. In contrast, Ghosh (2020, p. 58) regards populist variants of the far right as disorganised and leaderless adhocracies. Griffin (2003) argues that it is not institutional strength (like 19th-century parties) but the ability of “the groupuscular right” to operate despite their minuscule size. Far-right groups may manifest as an almost exclusively physical presence, exemplified by organised prison gangs such as the Aryan Brotherhood (Anti-Defamation League, 2022). Alternatively, as demonstrated by the alt-right, the far right can emerge from and predominantly function within entirely online environments (Cullings, 2020, p. 1; Nagle, 2017, p. 9). These examples illustrate the complex nature of today’s far-right and our understanding of them—a term that incorporates many beliefs and organisational systems. Nonetheless, there is a tendency to generalise the concept of the far-right, leading to its overuse as a descriptor for a broad spectrum of ideologies, groups, and functions. I argue that such generalisations hinder a nuanced understanding of far-right dynamics, which in turn affects the efficacy of countermeasures employed against these movements.

Some scholars consider the variations among the far-right as a spectrum. For example, author Naomi Klein (2023, p. 102) discusses this spectrum in terms of a rejection of ‘left’ and ‘right’ monikers, a diagonalism that often veers to the far right. Miller-Idriss (2020, p. xiv) acknowledges the broad spectrum of beliefs, referring to the far-right as a “spontaneous coalition” that unites unlawful militias, white supremacist extremists, QAnon conspiracists and everyone in between. Miller-Idriss (2020, pp. 3–12) further assigns groups into four prevalent categories. The first category includes anti-democratic and anti-government groups. The second are groups who adhere to hierarchal, exclusionary, and dehumanising ideologies. The third category pertains to groups who focus on existential demographic threats or dystopian conspiracies. The last are the accelerationists, destabilisationists and those who adhere to apocalyptic fantasies. Miller-Idriss (2020) further breaks down each category. Namely, the first category is reserved for groups that are motivated by the desire to undermine democratic practice (Miller-Idriss, 2020, pp. 3–12). The second category is reserved for groups who adhere to a system of beliefs that are racist or white supremacist, sexist and homophobic (Miller-Idriss, 2020, pp. 5–6). Last is the league of

accelerationists, destabilisationists and those who adhere to apocalyptic fantasies (Miller-Idriss, 2020, p. 12). While accelerationism is not a political mechanism exclusive to far-right circles (see Mackay & Avanesian, 2014), Miller-Idriss (2020, p. 3) progresses our understanding of far-right accelerationists/destabilisationists as groups motivated to stop the perceived diminishing of the Western status quo or the white race. Miller-Idriss's (2020) approach to categorisation is useful to illustrate the varying belief systems that exist under the far-right moniker. However, while categorisation is useful, any attempt to unify several groups into one ideological basket can also be problematic as it can conceal the nuances and differences that separate groups have within the same category. While Healy (2017) argues against the inclusion of nuance in conceptual deliberation as an inhibitor of developing good theory, I argue that a lack of nuance equates to a lack of deeper engagement with such phenomena. In the case of online far-right extremism, disregarding nuance has impacted the detection of such groups, how they operate, and how they speak to people online in a bid to recruit. As such, Miller-Idriss's (2020) initial premise, or the far-right as a "spontaneous coalition" of groups, is far more useful as it asserts a fluidity between belief systems.

Understanding the fluidity of belief systems within the far-right spectrum is crucial for not only presenting a workable definition of the far-right, but a means to explore the diverse groups that comprise this political domain. These groups often adhere to multiple ideologies or may focus on singular motivations. For instance, the Proud Boys exemplify a collective identity centred on the preservation of Western values, US constitutional rights, and hyper-masculinity (Kutner, 2020, pp. 13–18). In contrast, certain factions within Europe's anti-immigration and anti-multicultural movements prioritise specific identitarian issues, such as opposing immigration within nation-specific contexts or promoting national pride. A notable example is the 'ultras' within Serbia's football culture, who aim to uphold and promote the notion of a Serbian identity as Orthodox Christian (Serbian Orthodox), loyal to the notion of Kosovo as inherently Serbian, and harbouring a strong sense of national pride—often in opposition to neighbouring cultures with which they have a historical rivalry (Djordjevic, 2013). The broader thesis underscores the necessity of recognising that the term far-right encompasses a wide array of motivations and beliefs, some of which are multifaceted while others are singular in nature.

Accordingly, the present work adheres to a definition of the far-right that acknowledges the entire spectrum of such groups. From white supremacists and ultra-nationalists, organised groups and militias, disorganised communities, and conspiracy adherents, to those with a single purpose—whether it be to stamp out immigration or to

create the white ethnostate. These groups are treated as separate yet very much part of a ‘spontaneous coalition’. However, instead of presenting an all-encompassing description that is far too broad and thus redundant, this thesis draws the Line of Demarcation between far-right and centre-right at the point of a group’s adherence to conspiratorial narratives that provide extreme far-right actors with their foundational underpinnings and motivations. Specifically, in this thesis, the far-right are defined as groups who harbour an aim to destabilise societies and, potentially, engage in violence against such structures and the individuals who reside within them, as opposed to more populist and conservative variants who are part of institutionalised governance frameworks. The definition of far-right adhered to by this thesis incorporates anti-government beliefs that include anti-institutionalism, pertaining to a rejection of international governance bodies. This understanding of the far-right includes groups who harbour exclusionary and demonising beliefs, including antisemitic narratives that place Jewish communities and prominent individuals among them into the role of powerful and malevolent actors. This definition includes conspiracies that fear or protest against the supposed eradication of the white race, such as White Genocide, and the Great Replacement. It extends its definition of the far-right to beliefs and narratives that espouse any form of supremacy of the white race and loyalists who adhere to them.

4.1.1 Extreme Far-right Variations

The previous section addressed the definitional quagmire of the employment of the ‘far-right’ term. However, the broader thesis focuses on the more extreme variants of the far-right. Thus, an important element to consider when addressing groups beyond the pale of populist and institutionalised scopes is how groups referred to as far-right extremists are perceived in scholarly works. As mentioned in the preceding chapter, there appears to be a unification between the two overused terms *far right* and *extremism*. Therefore, it is important to survey how scholarship conceptualises these terms. This section briefly considers the definitional elements when the two terms are combined—namely, *far-right extremism*.

Scholarship pertaining to far-right extremism articulates the phenomenon as inherently Americanised (Müller, 2010; Chommeloux, 2017; Chan & Ventura, 2024), increasingly digitised (Liang, 2020; Törnberg & Törnberg, 2024; Wallace & Romaniuk, 2024) and evolving beyond traditionalist assumptions of a leaderless revolution (Stabile, 2024). For example, in relation to Americanisation, Jones (2022) defines the threat of far-right extremism as predominantly emerging from the United States. By defining America as a

culmination of systems of whiteness, Chan and Ventura (2024, p. 82) position far-right extremism—in the orbit of white supremacy—as a default setting to the State’s cultural and social contexts. Mudde’s (2019) seminal work, *The Far-right Today*, features a red MAGA cap (a piece of merchandise referring to the catchphrase “Make America Great Again” coined by US President Donald Trump) on the front cover. The present work acknowledges the Americanisation of today’s far-right representation. However, it also argues that the inherent manifestation of an Americanised far right extends beyond the State’s borders and finds palatability with other audiences through threads of commonality.

Digitisation, as an important phenomenon influencing directional trends among the extreme far-right, has been acknowledged in recent scholarship. For example, the work of Liang (2020), Törnberg and Törnberg (2024), and Wallace and Romaniuk (2024) explores the impacts of digitisation on far-right extremism. Of relevance to the broader thesis is the work of Yoder et al. (2024), who map the symbiotic relationship between two prominent far-right movements, namely, the alt-right and the extreme far-right. Specifically, Yoder et al. (2024) assert that the alt-right acts as a gateway to the extreme far-right via digitisation. By focusing on exchanges made on the sharing platform 4Chan, the authors position digitisation (and the platforms it affords) as a conduit between the two entities, thus mainstreaming and normalising extremism. The thesis refreshes an understanding of digital logics and their impact on the crossover to more extreme beliefs beyond technological affordances. Namely, moving beyond affordances, it considers the social and cultural contexts in which these crossovers are made possible.

The introduction of this thesis positioned crises as the catalyst for nudging the political needle to the right. In chapter Two, digital affordances were explored as vehicles for far-right recruitment. Furthermore, as discussed in chapter Two, the culmination of a crisis encourages audiences to seek answers and discover far more relatable narratives within the confines of conspiracy theories. As will be discussed in subsequent chapters, it is a culmination of crises, digitisation, conspiracies, and the social and cultural contexts of the extreme far-right that work to create the perfect storm in which their messages become translatable to other contexts and, therefore, more palatable. The latter, developing forms of palatability that transcend borders, is an important element to address when considering how such Americanised narratives are palatable to other parts of the world—in particular, Australia.

4.1.2 *Far-right Extremism in Local Contexts*

The final consideration in this discussion is the definitional context of *far-right extremism* in more localised Australian settings. This is a more challenging exercise given the fragmentation of such scholarship (Moore, 2005). For example, Pantucci and Singam (2024) define far-right extremism in the Australian context—in the wake of recent regulatory measures such as the banning of swastikas—to be almost non-existent. However, they highlight the potential threat of emerging violence stemming from individuals affiliated with far-right groups who joined the fight in Ukraine or who have received violent materials from known extremist groups overseas (Pantucci & Singam, 2024, p. 109). The latter—contact with violent materials from overseas—indicates Australia’s vulnerability to the transplanting of international ideas into local settings via digitisation. Mondon (2012) asserts that Australia experiences an immunisation from the extreme far-right due to the politics and policies of mainstream political parties, thus denying the potential for a significant threat to emerge. In a similar trend, Harris-Hogan (2023) asserts that while there has been an evolution in the type and targets of violence in Australia over time, “no clear increase in serious right-wing violence has occurred in recent years”. I acknowledge that the scale of violence currently experienced on Australian shores is not equal to the high-casualty events experienced by its Western counterparts. By comparison, the State appears to be, as articulated by Mondon (2012), immune to such high-scale attacks. Yet, as will be presented, there exist extremist far-right groups in Australia who have a known, violent history. Furthermore, as Griffin (2003) argues, the extreme far-right’s capabilities are not necessarily conducive to numbers but to impact. Thus, defining the extreme far right and assessing its capabilities in Australia cannot merely be an exercise in casualty counts or frequencies. I move beyond such predictions and assessments based on scale and draw on the work of Sengul and McSwiney (2004, p. 2) to, first, position the term ‘far-right extremism’ in the Australian context as an ‘umbrella term’ that incorporates a variety of parties, movements, and activists that ‘are broadly united in their authoritarianism, exclusionary radical nationalism, and racism’. Sengul and McSwiney (2024, p. 2) further differentiate the extreme elements of the far-right as an entity that “outright rejects democracy in principle, liberal or otherwise, and is commonly associated with fascist ideologies such as neo-Nazism”. In that vein, I progress the notion of a broadly united far-right within the Australian context and separate entities among the extremist, white supremacist movements to gauge a better sense of their unique qualities. I explicitly argue that, due to a variety of elements that shape group identities, each group can be perceived as

individualistic and therefore unique. Thus, as will be argued, their language outputs also present an element of uniqueness that cannot be described with a single moniker. To explore this uniqueness is, therefore, beneficial to progressing early-detection measures aimed at eradicating online recruitment.

4.2 Media Representations of Far-right Extremism

Beyond scholarship is the representation presented by news media as an important communicative arm of society (Castells, 2008, p. 80), as a developer and enhancer of narratives (Ryan et al., 2004), and as an entity associated with the term *weaponised* (Franz, 2016) in such contexts. News media and its portrayal of certain agents and actors can be seen as having an influential role to play in defining the far-right. To consider the media's representation of the far-right, this section returns to Gaufman's (2017) cycle of securitisation.

While there are many lenses through which one can consider the impacts of news media and influence, it is through securitisation that one derives a sense of how such phenomena transcend to levels of national security. The role of news media in Gaufman's (2017) cycle of securitisation is multifaceted and significant. According to Gaufman (2017, p. 2), news media act as the adjudicator of successful securitisation. Elements important to the role of news media in securitisation (or de-securitisation) include framing, agenda setting, the public's response, and the generation of biases (Gaufman, 2017, p. 18).

Framing can be understood as the "process of culling a few elements of perceived reality and assembling a narrative that highlights connections among them to promote a particular interpretation" (Entman, 2007, p. 164). Agenda setting can be seen as a process "of the mass media presenting certain issues frequently and prominently with the result that large segments of the public come to perceive those issues as more important than others" (Coleman et al., 2009, p. 147). The two have been classed as necessary elements for the conceptual generation of biases (Entman, 2007, p. 164). While the term *bias* has long been problematised (see Hammersley & Gomm, 1997), I draw from Johnson's work (2020), who defines representational bias as a culmination of explicit inputs that forge a stereotype (p. 1194).

Lastly, public perception—or levels of audience acceptance (Gaufman, 2017, p. 167)—as a result of agenda setting (Waeber, 1984, p. 687) has been considered a crucial element of securitisation. Specifically, successful securitisation cycles depend on the audience's acceptance of narratives presented by elites and amplified or embellished by the

news media (Wæver, 1993, p. 17). Within Gaufman's securitisation cycle (2017, p. 18), news media is also the mechanism through which audiences learn of the threat and generate responses to proposed action. Audiences learn of such threats via their personification and simplification through news media narratives, a process referred to as the development of an enemy image (Gaufman, 2017, p. 21).

The simplification and personification of perceived enemies, as part of a broader enemy-building framework, are elements that, I argue, further entrench certain understandings of threats that impact the development of countermeasures to tackle far-right extremism. To articulate the potential impacts of news media representation on developing such representations, the present chapter briefly surveys the events of January 6, 2021, at the Capitol in Washington, to highlight particular characteristics of far-right representation that can be considered influential in developing approaches to early detection. The event is surveyed here due to the considerable impact such representations had on the data collection for the broader thesis.

While I do not assert that the events of January 6 were solely responsible for the development of far-right representation, I argue that such narratives impact who is targeted in terms of detecting the far-right online, as will be discussed in chapter eight. Specific to this research are the representational narratives surrounding January 6th that impacted who and what was found online, what was removed, and what groups remained below the surface of such stringent takedown measures.

4.2.1 The Events of January 6

The violence that transpired on January 6, 2021 at the Capitol in Washington has been widely characterised in media discourse as a "riot" (see, for example, BBC, 2023), an "attack" (*Washington Post*, 2021), and, on rare occasions, a "seizure" (see Smith, 2021). Occurring two months after the 2020 presidential election, in which Republican incumbent Donald Trump lost to Democratic candidate Joe Biden, the incident emerged from Trump's refusal to concede, culminating in numerous unsuccessful legal challenges and a disinformation campaign alleging electoral fraud (Trump in Naylor, 2021). On the day congress met to certify the Electoral College vote confirming Joe Biden's victory, Trump incited his supporters to attend a rally, asserting that the events would be "wild" and urging them to "fight like hell", suggesting that their efforts were vital for preserving the nation (Trump in Barry & Frenkel, 2021).

As his speech concluded, supporters were already marching toward the Capitol in anticipation of disrupting the electoral vote (BBC, 2023). They ultimately breached police barricades and forcefully entered the Capitol, aiming to “stop the steal” (CBS, 2021). Notable individuals were also targeted—namely, former Speaker Nancy Pelosi and then–Vice President Mike Pence—with rioters expressing a desire for retribution (Trautman, 2021, pp. 1158–1169). Pelosi—who had previously been labelled “Crazy Nancy” by Trump—had initiated impeachment proceedings against him in 2019 for purportedly undermining national security for personal political gain (Pelosi in Fandos, 2019). Trump publicly condemned Pence for allegedly failing to leverage his vice-presidential authority to overturn the election results (Trump in Naylor, 2021). This climate of violence was further exemplified by rioters constructing makeshift gallows and chanting threats against Pence (Trautman, 2021, p. 1170).

While the violence of January 6 was physical, it was also symbolically charged, manifested and amplified through signs, symbols, and imagery. For example, some demonstrators showcased Confederate flags, embodying a complex legacy rooted in racial strife and the Civil War (Wright & Esses, 2017, p. 224). Others exhibited the QAnon flag, a representation of conspiracy beliefs that portray the Democratic Party, among other elites, as a cabal of Satan-worshipping paedophiles (Smith, 2021). Jacob Chansley, known as the “QAnon Shaman”, became an emblematic figure of the riot with his horned headdress and face paint, employing a bullhorn to incite the crowd (Lenthang, 2021). Amid this, red MAGA caps emerged as potent symbols of anti-democratic sentiment (O'Sullivan, 2020).

The crowd also included individuals dressed as American superheroes, and some wore militarised attire, carrying various weapons including firearms, stun guns, and alleged explosives (Dreisbach & Mak, 2021). While the rioters were predominantly Trump supporters, the group also encompassed far-right elements such as the Three Percenters, a paramilitary faction advocating for limited governmental authority (Hosenball & Wolfe, 2021); the Oath Keepers, an anti-government militia asserting constitutional defence (McQueen, 2021); and the Proud Boys, a self-described group of “Western chauvinists” (Kutner, 2020, p. 5). Collectively, these factions underscored the multifaceted nature of the insurrection, blending extreme ideological beliefs with open manifestations of political violence.

Nonetheless, what emerged from the event was a homogenised representation of the far-right. This representation embodies what I later refer to as *the MAGA cap syndrome*—a portrayal of the far-right as American or Americanised, Trump-supporting, with specific conspiratorial leanings, and belonging to particular groups. As will later be discussed in

subsequent sections, these representations arguably exert significant influence on both programmers and regulators. This thesis contends that these influences critically shape the digital landscape, determining what type of far-right remains online and what is effectively purged from it—such as the case studies explored in this thesis, remain easily accessible, leaving such groups free to espouse hate and plan violent acts undetected.

4.3 Defining Recruitment

The last important element in the construction of this thesis's scope is defining and understanding what is known about recruitment. Recruitment scholarship, whether pertaining to jihadist or far-right extremist variants, cannot be addressed without acknowledging the use of the term *radicalisation*. Since 2004, radicalisation has become central to Terrorism Studies and counterterrorism policymaking (Marwick et al., 2022). In fact, a significant area of focus in research literature is the overall process of radicalisation, while less emphasis has been placed on recruitment mechanisms or developing strategies to prevent online recruitment (Prezelj & Zalokar, 2024, p. 2). In certain instances, the two terms are assumed to be inextricably linked. For example, the recruitment of individuals into terrorist groups has been viewed as part of a larger process of radicalisation (Prezelj & Zalokar, 2024, p. 2). Furthermore, radicalisation has been defined as a process, and recruitment as the method to this process (Kardaş & Özdemir, 2018). Lastly, recruitment has often been defined as a by-product of a more extensive radicalisation process (Prezelj & Zalokar, 2024, p. 2).

Perceptions of radicalisation have also been highly racialised. As argued by Marwick et al. (2022), the term has been employed to understand elements of jihadi terrorism, thus separated from the context of far-right extremism. Kundnani (2012, p. 3) underscores the complexities surrounding the use of the term 'radicalisation' and highlights how such interpretations contribute to the perception of Muslim populations as 'suspect communities', which in turn leads to violations of civil rights. The term radicalisation has also skewed the trajectory of research into the realm of recruitment. Specifically, explorations into radicalisation have often considered the root causes of why certain individuals are prone to it while others are not (for examples, see the work of Veldhuis & Staun, 2009; Botha, 2014; Thompson, 2016), leading to what I argue is a generalised pursuit of certain indicators that obscure the nuances of recruitment processes.

However, there have been concerted efforts to separate the two terms. Jones (2017, p. 5) posits that while radicalisation can be an aspect of recruitment, it is essential to distinguish between these two phenomena. Neumann and Rogers (2007) define recruitment as the

actionable processes involved in becoming part of a group, whereas radicalisation pertains to the transformation of beliefs, values, and behaviours. Peucker (2024, p. 73) contends that recruitment encompasses a variety of actions associated with political mobilisation, many of which involve the dissemination of specific narratives, ideas, and agendas; however, not all recruitment activities are necessarily focused on radicalisation. Zhang and Davies (2024) delineate the concept of recruitment as distinct from the processes of mobilisation, radicalisation, and propaganda, situating it within a broader framework of *e-extremism*. The broadness of Zhang and Davies' (2024) concept is useful in progressing our understanding of far-right recruitment as more than—but not equal to—radicalisation, propaganda, and mobilisation. Nonetheless, I seek to reframe the concept of recruitment by encompassing all modalities of communication aimed at engaging individuals in a cause. Thus, drawing from Jones (2017, p. 5), I conceptualise recruitment as a dynamic process through which individuals, whether predisposed or resistant, are either incentivised or deterred from joining a particular group. In addition, I draw from Yayla (2020) to define recruitment as the entire process by which such groups reach out to potential new audiences in a bid to persuade them to join their cause. Lastly, by avoiding the term radicalisation—in order to evade the inherently racial connotations associated with it—I focus the discussion on recruitment strategies. The aim is to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms employed by groups to entice individuals to join particular causes and movements, while remaining sensitive to the complexities of individual motivations and societal influences. Thus, by differentiating recruitment from the concept of radicalisation, attention can be placed on what is often overlooked—and, by doing so, enhance early detection strategies crucial for thwarting the rise of online extremism.

4.3.1 The Digitisation of Recruitment

In examining the phenomenon of online recruitment within the context of far-right extremism, it is imperative to evaluate the transformative impact of digitisation on this dynamic process. The digitisation of terrorism—or, in this case, far-right extremism—has received considerable empirical attention (Peucker, 2024, p. 77). Nevertheless, perspectives on the effects of digitisation are notably dualistic and, at times, downplayed. For example, Peucker (2024, p. 76) posits that the influence of digitisation is largely benign, viewing online recruitment techniques as a passive counterpart to more traditional forms of physical mobilisation. Archetti (2015, p. 50) supports this perspective, arguing that the notion of the internet inherently shaping recruitment practices is overly simplistic and reflects a form of

technological determinism. Archetti (2015, p. 50) further contends that the assumption that technology inherently brings about specific outcomes ignores the reality that it is ultimately people—whether government officials, citizens, or extremists—who wield technology to further their own objectives. Additionally, audiences do not passively accept messages; they actively choose and engage with content that interests them.

In this thesis, I have acknowledged that audiences are not passive recipients but, as argued by Crawford (2009), are active participants in selectively engaging with messages that resonate with their preferences. As previously discussed in the introduction, the scholarship surrounding media effects, even in the context of traditional mass-communication channels such as television and radio, underscores that the influence of media is not uniformly experienced and that audiences play an active role in constructing their interpretations (Hall, 2019). While it may be overly simplistic to assert that online communication universally influences all individuals, it is equally reductive to dismiss the significance of online recruitment entirely, as this denies the permeating influence of such media. As articulated by Deuze (2010, p. 143), our existence is in media rather than merely coexisting with it. In this context, online communication can be considered as significant as physical interactions—whether friendly exchanges or the recruitment strategies of far-right groups.

Others acknowledge digitisation and its impact on the process of recruiting individuals into violent groups. Ebner (2017) asserts that a substantial proportion of recruitment into violent groups now occurs in online spaces, with the internet emerging as the primary vehicle for propaganda dissemination, radicalisation, and the mobilisation of individuals into violent factions. Furthermore, the digitisation of recruitment has been discussed not only in terms of scale, but also in terms of the means through which technological affordances alter its orchestration. For example, Wallace and Romaniuk (2024) emphasise that advances in technology have enabled the reach of extremist influence to extend beyond geographical confines, creating an environment in which such influences are pervasive. Phadke and Mitra (2021) explore how the digital landscape fosters the emergence of novel recruitment paradigms. Specifically, they develop three distinct archetypes of online recruiters: the *educators*, the *flamers*, and the *motivators*. Educators are accounts that disseminate intellectual content regarding extremism while actively engaging with and amplifying extremist materials (Phadke & Mitra, 2021, p. 3). Flamers provoke and inflame discussions through the dissemination of inflammatory content (Phadke & Mitra, 2021, p. 3). Motivators embody an achievement-oriented approach, promoting a favourable portrayal of their extremist agenda (Phadke & Mitra, 2021, p. 3). While this typology is useful for

categorising the various textual outputs produced by recruiters, I refresh an understanding of recruiters. Specifically, as will now be discussed, I define recruiters as the text that humans produce—not the humans themselves. Furthermore, I acknowledge that engagement with online recruitment materials has surged exponentially over the past few years, despite the implementation of various countermeasures aimed at eradicating extremist content (Montasari, 2024; Williams & Tzani, 2024). As such, online communication has become both a permeating and pervasive means of recruitment. While I posit that digitisation is not the sole catalyst for recruitment into violent groups, I identify digitisation and its distinctive affordances as pivotal in orchestrating a multifaceted and transnational recruitment strategy that reaches various audiences on an unprecedented scale.

4.3.2 The Recruiter as Text

The final element addressed in this chapter pertaining to defining recruitment in digitalised settings is the consideration of recruitment and the recruiter as *text*, as opposed to humans that produce it. This approach is not unprecedented, particularly when considering the various assertions put forth by scholars within the field of Terrorism Studies. For example, by considering the transformative impacts digitisation has had on the communicative practices of groups labelled terrorists, Peucker (2024, p. 75) asserts that recruitment can be perceived as an action and not the person behind it. Kadivar (2021), in surveying ISIS's recruitment strategies, positions the role of digital media as the driver for the group's increased power during its height in 2014. Namely, the author (Kadivar, 2021, p. 2) considers digital media as a permeating force capable of “enter[ing] into all homes and rooms through satellite dishes”. In a study of information proliferation during the COVID-19 pandemic, Tsoy et al. (2021, p. 35) assert that “the most significant portion of COVID-19's fame is due to the particular attention of media, especially social media”. As such, the medium facilitating the dissemination of recruitment messages can be viewed both as an extension of the individuals responsible for producing them and as a primary actor in their widespread proliferation.

However, to delve further into the impacts of technological advancements on human interaction, this thesis draws from Communication Studies, a subject that has long considered the impacts of evolving technologies on human interaction. By surveying Communications Studies scholarship, one gains a sense of technologies working with, or, often, influencing the directions of human agency in this exchange. For example, McLuhan (1994, p. 7) presents the often touted “the medium is the message”. He argues that the individual and societal

impacts of any medium, or any extension of ourselves, stem from the new dimensions that each extension or new technology brings to our lives. When applied to the realm of far-right online recruitment, this perspective necessitates the consideration of technology as an extension of the individuals who produce content. More specifically, the medium—comprising various digital affordances—shapes the recruitment message.

In more contemporary contexts, Wahlström (2012, p. 55) considers digital technologies as inherently essential in today's sense-making practices. The author asserts that “as digital communication technologies make sense-making more efficient, it seems plausible that the evolution of ideas would be quicker—that is, it would take less time for a new abstract and alien idea to be decisively anchored to people's existing values and concepts and perhaps to be perceived as concrete or real”. The element of expedited sense-making and the introduction of new ideas within the lifeworlds of individuals is relevant to understanding the dynamics of online interaction, as it outlines the expansive scope of ideas and the ease with which individuals can consume them due to the advancement of such technologies.

By combining the two outlooks, one can derive a sense that the producer of such texts may not be as prevalent as the text itself in the sense-making practices of individuals in online spaces. Placed into the context of online recruitment, it could be argued that the text itself can be perceived as the recruiter, or, at least, as the element that necessitates focus when aiming to understand how far-right groups recruit people online. Here, the work of Ebner et al. (2023) is relevant. Ebner et al. (2023) conducted a text analysis of various far-right extremist online groups, alongside ideologically moderate control groups, to assess the risk of these communities resorting to violence. Their study particularly examines language cues that signal identity fusion—the psychological merging of an individual's identity with that of the group—which may serve as a catalyst for real-world violence. By introducing a fusion-plus-threat model, they demonstrate how analysing textual content in relation to violent tendencies adds a valuable layer to risk assessment and enhances the potential of predictive policing methods.

Throughout this thesis, root-causes approaches—whether framed as preludes to violence or as motivators for joining violent groups—are and continue to be rejected, as I perceive such motivators to be highly personalised and unique. However, it draws from such approaches to consider language and its assessment an important factor in addressing far-right recruitment. I later argue that it is through language that far-right groups define and disseminate their identities and present elements of uniqueness. Thus, to detect such groups, one must consider them unique entities with unique motivations and language.

In that vein, this thesis defines recruitment in the context of digitisation as *text*, characterising it as encompassing all forms of communication afforded to far-right actors within digitised environments. It acknowledges the transformative impacts of digitisation on communication as extending beyond mere verbal and textual exchanges to encompass the symbolic, auditory, and subliminal. While digitisation does not remove human agency from the act of recruitment, it does place focus on the tools and affordances that shape such messaging. New media technologies have provided far-right extremists with unprecedented opportunities to craft and disseminate their messages, facilitating innovative avenues for online recruitment. Hence, although various frameworks can be employed to analyse the effects of digitisation on online recruitment, this thesis contends that recruitment fundamentally represents a form of communication, or text, which is both enabled and enriched by the digital affordances of the internet.

4.4 Conclusion

As explored in this chapter, the term *far-right* is often the subject of definitional challenges and lacks a universally accepted concept. Scholarly works often characterise the far-right as a populist, organised movement and emphasise numerical strength. However, as Griffin (2003) articulates, our understanding of far-right groups should not be contingent solely upon their size; instead, such definitions should consider the operational capabilities and influence of such groups, even with smaller memberships. Moreover, it is imperative to acknowledge the inherent diversity among far-right groups. Miller-Idriss (2020) introduces the concept of a “spontaneous coalition” to encapsulate the complex spectrum of beliefs that typify the far-right. This thesis advances the notion of the spontaneous coalition to include a deeper understanding of the fluidity among far-right groups and their foundational beliefs. It also highlights the overlapping of such foundational beliefs that contribute to the formation of far-right identities.

When examining the intersection of *far right* and *extremist*, a generalised definition surfaces, reflecting an Americanised and digitised perspective of such groups. I recognise these characteristics as pivotal in shaping contemporary far-right identities and their representations. However, I seek to consider these phenomena within the Australian socio-political landscape to explore how such Americanised variants are palatable to local audiences. While local interpretations often trivialise such groups as non-threatening, I argue that Australia indeed hosts far-right factions with histories of violence, which have adequately tailored their message to resonate with local audiences. In doing so, I highlight the

significance of context and adaptability when exploring far-right recruitment in Australia, and the representational biases that hamper early detection.

The news media play a crucial role in shaping representational biases in their portrayal of notorious groups. Through Gaufman's framework of securitisation (2017), the media emerge as key adjudicators in the practice of enemy construction, significantly influencing the public's understanding of violent actors, particularly those on the far-right. The events of 6 January exemplify a specific representation of the far-right as profoundly Americanised, Trump-supporting individuals, affiliated with pre-existing violent organisations, and prepared to act upon perceived threats—factors that have undeniably skewed the data collection methodologies employed in this thesis.

Furthermore, this chapter delves into the concept of the *recruiter*. The exploration equally unearthed a generalised understanding intertwined with the politically charged and racially loaded term *radicalised*. The term radicalised not only impacts how recruitment is viewed but also how it is studied—with an enduring focus on root causes—as opposed to surveying the mechanisms of recruitment itself. The application of digital logics to the study of recruitment revealed mixed assumptions. Some scholars dismiss the impact of digitisation on recruitment, arguing that technological advancements alone cannot transform the underlying mechanisms of these practices. In contrast, others assert that digitisation fundamentally alters both the execution of recruitment and the content produced by violent actors. By placing affordances at the fore, I revitalise the work of Ebner et al. (2023) by conceptualising recruitment as a form of *text* generated by violent groups online. This perspective offers a unique lens through which to examine recruitment as an embodiment of the group's unique identity. While acknowledging the role of individual recruiters in crafting these messages, it is essential to recognise that such agents serve as extensions of the collective identity of their groups, which, in turn, shapes the content of the recruitment narratives. Therefore, recruitment can be reconceptualised as text produced within digital environments, forged under the influence of group identities and designed to persuade others to adopt hateful (or fearful) beliefs, anti-democratic sentiments, and, ultimately, to engage in acts of violence. In this light, recruitment transcends mere transmission of information and, as text, becomes a deliberate act of persuasion to foster a culture of extremism.

5 Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological approach of this thesis, its ontological, epistemological and disciplinary positions, and data collection methods. With an aim to explore how far-right recruiters speak to people online, this thesis observes the recruitment strategies of two white supremacist and white separatist groups via content published on their websites. Considered spaces where the far right can forge a collective identity (Caiani & Parenti, 2010, p. 274) and have direct control over their message (Conway, 2006, p. 288), these websites remain visible to Australian audiences. This thesis posits that these groups, among others, remain undetected due to a (mis)representation of the far right as unified and, therefore, homogenous in its style of address and self-presentation. On the contrary, while far-right groups can be considered part of a spontaneous coalition (Miller-Idriss, 2020, p. 3), this thesis argues that their approach to recruitment is influenced by elements of a group's identity, their relationship to out-groups, and the context in which both identities manifest. More specifically, elements of group identity and the socio-political contexts of their lived realities develop unique stylistic features and ways of self-presentation—referred to here as *texts*—with which these groups communicate. Constructivist and interpretivist in assumption, this thesis is first guided by the premise that far-right identities are socially constructed via discourse and subject to interpretation dependent on the context in which they manifest (Phillips, 2007, p. 63; Hülse & Spencer, 2008, p. 572; Huysmans, 2002, p. 43). Furthermore, I contend that identities derive meaning from group and societal interactions (Tulga, 2022, p. 6; Wendt, 1992, p. 397). Employing these elements as filters through which to analyse discourse, this thesis observes the unique meanings that develop within a group's recruitment strategy based on their collective identity, their relationship to out-groups, and how these elements shift within certain socio-political contexts.

This thesis applies an interdisciplinary lens to develop its methodological approach as it perceives the digitisation of far-right recruitment to be a phenomenon that cannot be addressed solely through the lens of a single discipline (Klein, 2007; Newell, 2007, p. 248; Robinson et al., 2016). For this purpose, this thesis draws from Terrorism Studies—a field that has long problematised the act of labelling violent groups (Azinovic, 2013, p. 206; Chenoweth, 2013, p. 373; Post, 2013)—and applies these logics to an exploration of online communication. In particular, it draws from Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS)—which, among other concepts, considers terrorism as communication (Matusitz, 2013; Decker & Rainey, 1982)—and perceives terrorism, or in this case far-right extremism, to be a

communicative act whose meaning can be derived from the discourse it produces.

Furthermore, it adopts frameworks from psychological approaches to Terrorism Studies as the leading epistemological direction in the field since 9/11 (Phillips, 2023, p. 410). Drawing from these concepts, this thesis develops a typology for deconstructing the online identities of two far-right groups via the *text* they produce.

To develop a typology, this thesis draws from Terrorism Studies approaches to Social Identity Theory and Identity Theory, two psycho-sociological theories that focus on the role of socialisation, role conflict, and intergroup relations in developing both perceptions of self and collective identities (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 20). Specifically, it refreshes the work of Schwartz, Dunkel and Waterman (2009), who explore the construction of the terrorist identity through a collection of social, cultural and personal identities. However, due to specific digital affordances—in particular, anonymity and pseudo-anonymity, which have a direct impact on identity formation online (Boyd, 2014)—this thesis replaces an exploration of the personal with the collective as a more prevalent influence on identity formation and the text it produces. This thesis applies this typology to provide an analytical framework for a textual analysis that explores the nuances, similarities and variations evident in a group’s online recruitment. Specifically, it applies multimodal discourse analysis frameworks—as a qualitative method that complements the various modes of online communication (Pérez-González, 2019; Adami, 2016; Hull & Nelson, 2005)—to understand how group identities manifest online and shape the meaning of the text they produce.

5.1 Ontological and Epistemological Directions

This thesis develops qualitative research methods through interpretivism and constructivism’s ontological and epistemological assumptions. Ontology is a branch of philosophy that considers the very nature of existence and the ‘state of being’ (Al-Saadi, 2014, p. 1; Smith, 2012, p. 47; Killam, 2013, p. 7). A researcher’s ontological position is crucial in directing the appropriate research methods depending on how they perceive a social reality (Grix, 2002, p. 177; Hall, 2003, p. 374). In this context, ontology guides the researcher’s position in relation to the research itself (Ormston et al., 2014, p. 58; Grix, 2002, p. 176). This thesis adheres to interpretivism and subjective positioning to enrich the findings of this thesis contextually. Specifically, it does so to explore how the recruitment text of far-right groups online could be interpreted from a local (Australian) perspective.

5.1.1 Interpretivism

Interpretivism posits that there are ways of understanding the world beyond direct observation and that individual or collective perceptions interpret the world around us (Potrac et al., 2014; Hammersley, 2012; Creswell, 2007). In this context, knowledge is not discovered objectively, as positivism argues (Yanow, 2015). Instead, truth and knowledge are subjective, culturally and historically situated, based on lived experiences and an individual's understanding of them (Ryan, 2018, p. 48; Berryman, 2019, p. 273). Interpretivist positions recognise that objectivity in social research is not always applicable, as the researcher inevitably becomes personally engaged with their findings and interprets them from their subjective standpoint (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022, p. 425). As such, an interpretive position complements an exploration of online recruitment derived from a researcher's subjective knowledge of local contexts.

The subjective positioning of interpretivism has been critiqued as an element that can "taint" or "contaminate" data (Code, 1996, p. 18). However, in realities where facts can be seen as derived from "social construction, language, shared consciousness, and other social interactions" (Berryman, 2019, p. 273), it could be argued that subjectivity can provide a lens to produce a deeper, contextual, understanding of these phenomena (Day, 2012, p. 74). For example, as discussed in chapter three, the processes of labelling individuals and groups as terrorists or extremists—referred to as speech acts (Wæver, 1995, p. 52)—are arguably prone to collective and individual interpretation (Appleyby, 2010; Barrinha, 2011). As such, it is important to understand these processes from complementing, subjective, standpoints. This thesis adopts interpretive assumptions of truth as context-dependent and emerging from subjective experiences. It applies these assumptions to explore how the far right presents itself online and the ways in which these speech acts, or *texts*, are interpreted and represented.

5.1.2 Constructivism

While ontological assumptions concern themselves with the nature of the world, epistemology is the theory of knowledge driven by two main questions: "What is knowledge?" and "What can we know?" (Greco, 2017, p. 1). This philosophical direction attempts to make sense of "possibility, nature, and limits of human intellectual achievement" (Cruz, 2006, p. 1). Like ontology, epistemology is crucial to research methodology as it "can be thought of as justification of knowledge" or a means to justify one's methodological design, providing a lens through which to gather, research and interpret data (Carter & Little, 2007, p. 1316). This thesis adopts constructivism to develop suitable methodological

frameworks for exploring far-right identities and their social construction, along with the relational elements of identity construction from which meaning is derived.

Constructivism posits that the world is socially constructed and that “people make society, and society makes people” (Onuf, 2012, p. 60). Specifically, “meaning is a social product, not an objective truth” (Heath-Kelly, 2016, p. 61). Drawn from the realm of International Relations—while currently applied to all fields of social inquiry, including Terrorism Studies—constructivism initially developed a lens through which to perceive interactions between States beyond rationalist and positivist assumptions (Heath-Kelly, 2016, p. 60). Specifically, rationalism defined the world as anarchical and assumed that State-based relations were influenced by this observation (Heath-Kelly, 2016, p. 60). However, as articulated by constructivist Alexander Wendt (1992), State-based relations are identity-centred. Wendt (1992, p. 397) further states, “A fundamental principle of constructivist social theory is that people act towards objects, including other actors, based on the meanings that the objects have for them. States act differently towards enemies than they do towards friends because enemies are threatening and friends are not”. Thus, if the world was perceived as anarchical by States, it is, essentially, what States have made of it (Wendt, 1992). In this context, it could be argued that the far right can be observed as a constructed identity, one that derives meaning from the subjective interpretations of collectives and individuals among them.

Moving beyond the parameters of State-based relations, constructivists argue that identities are produced in discourse (Phillips, 2007, p. 63; Hülse & Spencer, 2008, p. 572; Huysmans, 2002, p. 43). As Tulga articulates (2022, p. 6), “Discourse has an essential effect on identity, and it also is crucial in the formation and shaping of collective identity.” Similarly, scholars within the realm of Terrorism Studies have adopted constructivism to define terrorism as a social fact produced in discourse (Hülse & Spencer, 2008, p. 571) and, moreover, that labels such as terrorism and terrorists do not constitute factual or neutral phenomena (Tulga, 2022, p. 3). Instead, individuals and societies establish what terrorism is to them via discursive practices (Tulga, 2022, p. 2). As articulated by Spencer (2010), “Constructivist research on extremism and terrorism is not so much concerned with who the terrorist is but with how he is spoken or written to be.” Furthermore, as stated by Hülse and Spencer (2008, p. 576), “The terrorist is a consequence of discourse ... Hence, the primary source of terrorism research must be the discourse in which the social construction of terrorism takes place.” These deliberations indicate that identities—whether terrorist or extremist—are not only produced in discourse but via relational exchanges with other entities

and groups in society. Thus, it could be argued that terrorists and extremists can be considered social constructs with whom society interacts, and, from this interaction, terrorism and extremism derive meaning. As such, constructivism's theoretical underpinnings provide a directional lens through which to observe far-right groups, how their identities are shaped via discourse, and how this discourse derives meaning via relationships with other groups.

5.2 Qualitative Research Frameworks

According to Edmonds and Kennedy (2016, p. 3), the overarching goal of research is to “reach valid outcomes based upon the appropriate application of the scientific method”. A means to consider an appropriate method for obtaining a research goal is to consider a design that “reflects decisions about the priority being given to a range of dimensions of the research process” (Bryman, 2012, p. 17). Maintaining its ontological and epistemological position, this thesis surveys discourse, or *text*, produced by the far right and considers the contextual elements that create similarities and differences in how each group communicates. More specifically, priority is placed on exploring the conceptual underpinnings that shape far-right communication. In that regard, I consider a qualitative research design the most suitable.

While the definition of qualitative research is varied, Hammersley (2012, p. 12) articulates the design approach as follows:

a form of social inquiry that tends to adopt a flexible and data-driven research design, to use relatively unstructured data, to emphasize the essential role of subjectivity in the research process, to study a small number of naturally occurring cases in detail, and to use verbal rather than statistical forms of analysis.

Put simply, such frameworks aim to “address questions concerned with developing an understanding of the meaning and experience dimensions of humans' lives and social worlds” (Fossey et al., 2002, p. 717). Furthermore, qualitative research within social and behavioural sciences is “usually holistic, uncontrolled, exploratory” (Newman & Ridenour, 2008, p. 1). As such, applying qualitative research methods can be beneficial when context could run the risk of being lost through quantification or the assessment of numerical data (Hammersley, 2012, p. 11). More specifically, adopting qualitative frameworks to study discourse-led identity formation provides a lens through which to interpret and explore identities for their contextual and socially derived meaning.

Similar to interpretivist approaches, qualitative research frameworks have frequently been criticised for their inherent subjectivity, which some argue may compromise the reliability of the findings (see Giorgi, 2002, p. 5; Armstrong et al., 2011, p. 153). As articulated by Phillips (1993, p. 58), there is often the misconception that the term *objective* is “commendatory” while *subjective* “carries negative connotations”. Such critiques are often derived from the assumption that reality can only be discovered by analysing data obtained through objective forms of measurement (Horsburgh, 2003). In addition, critiques of this nature are often based on the conclusion that reality is constructed of truths that can be seen through an objective lens (Fossey et al., 2007, p. 718). However, as argued, identities—such as the far right—can be seen as both constructed and socially interpreted. Without interpretation, acquired through the subjective lens of the researcher, the contextual elements and nuances that develop specific meaning would be lost (Hammersley, 2012, p. 11). Therefore, explorations into far-right recruitment discourse require a contextual understanding of how these discourses derive meaning—something that cannot be discovered without the subjective lens of qualitative research.

5.3 Reflexivity

As discussed, this thesis adopts a subjective lens to analyse and explore far-right recruitment discourse online. However, as mentioned, subjectivity can pose significant challenges to the researcher as the way they view the world and various phenomena—in this case, as both transient and constructed—can impact the conclusions they draw from their subjects (Giorgi, 2002, p. 5; Armstrong et al., 2011, p. 153). Specifically, subjective analysis can, among other things, be conditioned, developing researcher bias, particularly when analysing contradictory data to one’s perceptions (Code, 1996). Thus, it is an obligation of the researcher to adhere to what philosophers term *epistemic responsibility*, or an obligation to be responsible in one’s approach to research (Code, 2017, p. 89), to develop a loop of trustworthiness between subject, researcher, and approach (Lehrer, 2000). One approach to responsible research is engaging in reflexivity. Reflexivity can be seen as self-reflection or examining one’s own assumptions, beliefs, and judgement systems and thinking carefully and critically about how these influence the research process (Jamieson et al., 2023; Barrett et al., 2020, p. 11). The processes of self-reflection often include but are not limited to personal reflection on the influence of one’s own identity on research, the philosophical assumptions and position of inquiry, interrelations between the researcher and the subject, and a reflection

on the limitations of knowledge within one's discipline (Chan, 2017; Bourke, 2014, p. 2; England, 1994, p. 2).

5.3.1 *Unlearning and Relearning*

Throughout the research process, to counter or reflect on the various limitations and influences of constructed knowledge, personal experiences, world views, and the influence of scholarly inputs, I have adopted a mode of reflexivity I refer to as *unlearning and relearning*. I consider unlearning to be a process that involves acknowledging and removing—to one's best ability—influences and elements of preconditioning that could impact research, elements referred to by Schwartz (2014, p. 69) as “patterns of thinking”. Relearning involves reintroducing materials of influence but in a way that acknowledges them as a source of knowledge that contains both learned biases and limitations. To engage in this process, I considered two prevalent modes of conditioning or influence. The first mode recognises past experiences as influences that could compromise data. The second acknowledges current and ongoing influences that can impact the direction of research. For example, past experiences that could skew interpretation include my own experiences with war in the Balkans and witnessing, first-hand, violence fuelled by nationalism and the exceptionality discourse of nations. These experiences also include being labelled a terrorist by former Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic and the government of the former Federal Republic of Yugoslavia for identifying with and engaging in revolutionary action with the resistance movement *Otpor!*.

Through reflection, I acknowledge that the former—experiencing ultra-nationalism as a cause of war—can be a powerful trigger for observing far-right groups pejoratively, a potential limitation to research that could skew the value of produced text towards meanings that were not intended by the producer. As outlined by Technau (2016, p. 191), negative emotions can encourage response tendencies which, in turn, could overlook or mask intended meaning. However, the exclusivity of experience can also provide insight that few have. Namely, being labelled a terrorist makes one privy to understanding the fluidity of the word *terrorism*, the problematic nature of labelling, and how the terrorist identity is constructed through various institutional, societal, and cultural discourses. To experience war and violence first-hand is to understand the mechanisms of threat amplification, the impact of dehumanising the enemy, and the outcomes of in-group versus out-group interaction at times of heightened conflict—elements articulated in chapters three and four. Furthermore, as argued by Greene and others (2018, p. 1), lived experiences offer a pre-understanding that

cannot be set aside and “could be utilised as a productive tool for analysis”. Le Gallais (2008, p. 151) refers to the position of employing lived experiences as the *insider–outsider continuum*, where a researcher has the benefits of enhanced understanding through being familiar with in-groups and certain environments, with a bird’s eye view acquired through distance from other aspects of the subject. Nonetheless, the insider elements fall into the danger of pre-familiarity and bias (Le Gallais, 2008, p. 151). This thesis acknowledges the benefits and perils of the insider–outsider continuum and addresses these elements through the process of ‘unlearning and relearning’. In the context of lived experiences, to unlearn and relearn means acknowledging the influence of the past and drawing insight from it, while also maintaining enough distance to avoid letting past experiences distort outcomes or impose judgments on phenomena shaped by different contexts.

The second element in addressing preconditioning through unlearning and relearning involved disengaging from immediate influences that might depict subjects in a particular way, thereby impacting research outcomes. In this context, the process of unlearning included intentionally avoiding stimuli—such as news coverage, podcasts, documentaries, or images—directly related to far-right groups, conspiracy theories, and their associated movements for a period of time. This approach was partly inspired by Cunliffe’s (2016, p. 741) definition of reflexivity as “Questioning what we, and others, might be taking for granted—what is being said and not said—and examining the impact this has or might have.” Disengagement, therefore, provided a means to critically reassess perceived truths taken for granted, as well as to examine cultural and scholarly biases and gain distance from the subject. However, complete removal is neither possible nor realistic. As previously noted, Deuze (2014) describes a mediatised existence in which individuals live *in media* rather than *with* it. Therefore, although disengaging from scholarly work on extremism, the far right, and the digitisation of terrorism was part of removing certain stimuli, this withdrawal could only ever be partial. Nonetheless, unlearning did involve reading broadly and seeking knowledge from other sources that potentially complemented the main scope of this thesis. For example, various case studies that fell outside of the far-right domain were surveyed, such as late 1960s cult leader Charles Manson, who presented me with an opportunity to consider recruitment into violent groups as a relationship between the palatability of the message and the translatability of the message within particular contexts. Case studies also included a deep reading of the experiences of several religious and ideological cults, each presenting their own unique means of recruitment. To explore the mechanisms of belief and why some individuals believe in conspiracy theories, I widened the lens beyond

psychological approaches to Terrorism Studies by considering concepts from parapsychology, such as *magical thinking*—the belief that one’s thoughts by themselves can bring about effects in the world (Williams & Irvin, 1991, p. 1339)—and *apophenia*, the tendency to perceive meaningful connections between unrelated things (Fyfe et al., 2008; Blain et al., 2020), referred to as *patternicity* (Shermer, 2011, p. 162) in this thesis. The period of reading broadly was followed by relearning, or reintroducing material directly concerning the far right. Through this process, I was able to reposition reintroduced materials as assumed knowledge, but also to find new ways of addressing research subjects. Thus, unlearning and relearning is not only a process to address influence but applies scepticism to processes of reflexivity, guided by the desire to engage with research subjects in new and deeper ways.

5.4 Disciplinary Approaches

This thesis is interdisciplinary in that it seeks to integrate the knowledge systems of two humanities disciplines at a time when new phenomena have emerged that cannot be addressed via a single disciplinary perspective (Klein, 2007; Newell, 2007, p. 248; Robinson et al., 2016). Namely, this thesis seeks to apply the concepts of Terrorism Studies to communications logics to explore the impact of new, digitised landscapes on the recruitment tactics of far-right and extremist groups. Specifically, it aims to explore the emergence of the internet as a vehicle for extremist activity as a phenomenon that cannot be addressed solely by the perspectives of Terrorism Studies. Nor can terrorist or extremist activity—as identity-derived and socially constructed—be surveyed singularly through its media dimensions. This thesis leverages two knowledge spheres to generate a more complex understanding of the digitised far-right phenomenon. In this instance, concepts from Terrorism Studies become the lens through which to explore digitised manifestations.

5.4.1 Critical Terrorism Studies

In previous chapters, labels such as ‘terrorism’ and ‘extremism’ have been explored to highlight how these labels can impact on how certain groups are represented and subsequently treated. Furthermore, it has been argued that by unifying these labels, research into far-right extremist groups has the opportunity to draw from Terrorism Studies scholarship to consider extremism—and the recruitment of individuals who join violent groups or commit acts in their name—beyond the scope of politicisation and enemy building. Drawing from Terrorism Studies scholarship can provide conceptual frameworks to develop

research methods. In particular, this thesis draws from Critical Terrorism Studies to consider terrorism and extremism as communication. As such, its meaning can be analysed from the discourse or, in this case, the text it produces.

The field of Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS) has existed since the emergence of Terrorism Studies itself (Jackson et al., 2011, p. 31). However, the discipline gained more prominence post-9/11 and served as a critique of normative or orthodox approaches (Phillips, 2021, p. 1). Terrorism Studies as a distinct subject began in the late 1960s and early 1970s as part of counter-insurgency scholarship (Jackson et al., 2011, p. 10). It sought to move beyond understanding violence solely in the context of Western interests against communist insurgency as leftist, anti-colonial, and revolutionary groups emerged (Jackson et al., 2011, p. 10). However, while fracturing away from counterinsurgency, traditional approaches to understanding violence labelled as terrorism continued to develop as a normative exercise in State-based securitisation against threats (Jackson et al., 2011, p. 10). Specifically, former counter-insurgency experts entering the field of Terrorism Studies brought realist notions—or State-centricity and the protection of a State’s borders against a perceived anarchical world (Persaud, 2022)—to understanding the phenomenon of terrorism. The result was an actor-based understanding of terrorism as a threat against the State evoked by illegitimate non-State actors, with research methods focusing heavily on problem-solving (Jackson, 2009).

Unlike mainstream approaches, CTS seeks to move beyond a narrow understanding of terrorism and considers it a social phenomenon influenced by various factors such as judgments, circumstances, and intent (Schmid & Jongman, 1998, p. 101). Critical scholars in this field investigate, through various lenses and methods, the social, political, and historical contexts that drive violence, and scrutinise the political nature of labelling certain groups as terrorists (Azinovic, 2013, p. 206; Chenoweth, 2013, p. 373; Post, 2013). Among other explorations, CTS research has expanded to include an exploration of terrorism discourse. For example, how groups labelled terrorists communicate to their intended audiences—or, specifically, terrorism as communication (Matusitz, 2013; Decker & Rainey, 1982). This concept provides an opportunity for researchers to explore terrorism as a communicative act, one that can be explored for meaning via the discourse it produces.

5.4.2 Terrorism as Communication

Terrorism as communication has been considered through several lenses in CTS scholarship. Initially, it considered the symbiotic relationship between mass media and groups labelled terrorists (Wardlaw, 1981; Farnen, 1990; Weimann & Winn, 1994;

Wilkinson, 1997)—whether news coverage motivated acts of terror (Matusitz, 2013) and whether news media played a role in shaping public understanding of terrorism (Archetti, 2015; Huff & Kertzer, 2018). The communication employed by terrorists, or the propagandistic elements of terror production, has also been explored. More specifically, terrorism is propaganda “insofar as they both seek to influence a mass audience in a way that is intended to benefit the sponsor” (Tugwell, 2006, p. 5). These are essential directions to note as they provide a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms of labelling and how groups labelled terrorists speak to audiences. This thesis progresses the scholarship of Matusitz (2013) and others such as Decker and Rainey (1982) to assert that terrorism—and, I argue, extremism—is communication and can be considered as such from the inception of groups, the development of their ideological underpinnings, the recruitment of loyalists, to the violent act itself. It can be considered as such because “communication is crucial to terrorism” (Archetti, 2013, pp. 1–2). Further, by considering terrorism as communication, violent acts are not meaningless or senseless. Instead, they can be “understood as having meaning and making a type of sense ... as rational attempts at communication” (Archetti, 2013, pp. 1–2).

Considering terrorism as communication is essential in today’s predominantly digitised communications sphere where the internet and its platforms have been seen as spaces “where terrorists can craft and disseminate propaganda ... tailoring their pitch to target thousands of potential recruits to join their organization and further their cause” (Lieberman, 2017, p. 1). For example, the internet is said to have played a prolific role in Al-Qaeda’s quest for ‘electronic jihad’, to mobilise jihadist empathy among Muslims worldwide (Rudner, 2016, p. 8). During its peak in 2014, ISIS had become a prolific propagandistic juggernaut and highly successful in using the internet for terrorist activity (UNODC, 2012; Berger & Morgan, 2015, p. 3). Similar trends can be seen among the far-right movements. Among the “spontaneous coalition” (Miller-Idriss, 2020, p. 3) is the leaderless and solely online movement known as the alt-right (Nagel, 2017, p. 10), intersecting with the more extreme white separatist and supremacist movements. In 2022, the Anti-Defamation League’s Center on Extremism (2022) tracked a 38 per cent increase of white supremacist propaganda online from the previous year. In 2023, the Center detected an additional increase of 12 per cent (Anti-Defamation League, 2023). Furthermore, the far right and white supremacist movements have displayed an ability to integrate social media into their direct operations, from live-streaming terror attacks—such as in the case of Brenton Tarrant live-streaming his attack on a Christchurch mosque in 2019—to the publication and proliferation of Anders Behring

Breivik's manifesto (Byman, 2022). Through these examples, we see how groups labelled terrorists and extremists utilise online spaces. More so, how through various mediums, groups communicate and craft each message, with specific motivation, to reach a particular audience (Schmid, 2022; Combs, 2022). As such, both terrorism and extremism can be considered communicative acts that can be understood via the text they produce—a critical element that can be adapted to research delving into extreme-right groups, and one that shapes the methodological direction of this thesis.

5.4.3 Psychological Approaches

This thesis considers terrorism as communication to direct its theoretical underpinnings and provide a particular unit of data to study—namely, the discourse it produces. However, an approach to how discourse could be studied via Terrorism Studies logic is provided via psychological approaches. As the leading epistemological direction in Terrorism Studies in the post-9/11 era (Phillips, 2023, p. 410), psychological approaches emerged with an aim to explore how violence manifests through a range of psychoanalytical and psychosocial approaches (Borum, 2004, p. 31). Applying the lens of psychology to violence appeared a logical direction, given that terrorism wields tremendous psychological impact (Shortland, 2020, p. 14; Gearson, 2002, p. 15). Stripped of its complexities, terrorism appears to be “atypical human behaviour” (Victoroff, 2005, p. 4).

Nonetheless, psychology's incursion into Terrorism Studies was not unproblematic. An assumption within the discipline positioned terrorism as “unusual” and running so contrary to the accepted standards of society “that it [seemed] to suggest psychological anomaly”, a product of “disturbed childhoods, faulty genes and serious personality disorders” (Silke, 1998, p. 52). These assumptions placed a significant focus on discovering the “root causes” of violence (Horgan, 2014, p. 27; Kruglanski & Fishman, 2006, p. 193; Wilson, 2000; Bandura, 2006), often conducted through the lens of psychoanalysis at a time when most terrorists were considered insane or mentally disturbed (Silke, 2003, p. 30). These directions were complemented by research aimed at discovering a prevalent terrorist ‘personality’, which often prescribed personality disorders to violent actors, ranging from narcissism and antisocial behaviour to paranoia (Abrahamson, 2014, p. 41; McCauley, 2006, p. 15; Gupta, 2005, p. 16). While novel and in step with the wider assumptions of what causes violence, both directions led psychology down inconclusive paths (Horgan, 2014; 2019; Bandura, 2006, p. 262; Schuurman, 2020, p. 14). As articulated by critics, there are no known root

causes of terrorism, and the most prevalent “pathology” experienced by terrorists is ‘normalcy’ (Lankford, 2014; Weatherston & Moran, 2003).

A substantial pivot occurred within the discipline from the millennium onwards. Psychologists overtook political scientists as the most prolific terrorism researchers between 2002 and 2011 (Phillips, 2021, p. 410). At this time, some psychologists moved away from asking why someone becomes a terrorist and, instead, aimed to address how someone becomes a terrorist (Horgan & Taylor, 2011). Spurred by the cataclysmic impacts of 9/11, researchers also addressed a need for highly trained psychologists to tackle the issues of dealing with the impacts of terrorism on victims, rescuers, and their families (Cable & Martin, 2003). However, despite these new avenues, the quest to define root causes, articulate a terrorist personality, or assert that mental illness was a critical driver of violence continued within the discipline (Horgan, 2019, p. 215; Weatherston & Moran, 2003). Thus, in the post-9/11 reality, while more doors were opening for psychological exploration, certain factions of the discipline continued with more traditional modes and methods, impeding progression in psychological approaches to understanding terrorism.

According to Horgan (2019, p. 218), there is an opportunity to refresh directions within the discipline. Namely, to focus on what terrorists *do* instead of who they *are* (Horgan, 2019, p. 218) in contemporary settings. As previously mentioned, Critical Terrorism Studies provides a scope to consider the labelling of terrorists and extremists as socially constructed (Jackson, 2018). Among other approaches to understanding terrorism, critical scholars view it as a form of communication or a communicative act (Matusitz, 2013; Decker & Rainey, 1982). In contemporary settings, these communicative acts have been digitalised and at increasing speeds, offering groups labelled terrorists or extremists new ways to communicate terror, along with offering scholars new ways to analyse what they do. As articulated by LaFree (2017, p. 93), “It is revealing to consider how much the communication of terrorist ideologies, as well as the planning and execution of terrorist attacks, have been transformed by the internet.” Thus, what terrorists do is communicate terror. This communication produces *text* which can be surveyed for meaning via behavioural, psychological approaches. First, this approach considers identity as a construct, one that informs the text produced by terrorists. These exchanges produce text in an online setting, a unit of study that can be surveyed for meaning derived from a group’s digital identity and the constructs in which that identity is embedded (Meier & Reinecke, 2021, p. 28). As such, this thesis surveys far-right extremism in contemporary settings by considering group identities, the constructed

environments in which they are embedded, and the contemporary—or digitised—settings in which they communicate.

5.5 Methods and Methodology

This thesis employs a qualitative approach to surveying far-right recruitment discourse online. First, by drawing from Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Identity Theory, it develops a conceptual typology to explore in-group identities that, in turn, influence a group's recruitment discourse. Furthermore, it seeks to explore inter-group relations and how these relationships further cement the identity of far-right groups. To develop a typology for far-right groups, this thesis draws from the work of Schwartz, Dunkel and Waterman (2009), who consider the identities of terrorists as a combination of many cultural, social and personal identities. However, due to the impact of digitisation on identity formation, this thesis replaces an exploration of the personal with the collective, or a group's ideological underpinnings, their hierarchical structures and ways of seeking membership. This thesis then conducts a textual analysis of far-right recruitment text, employing McKee's (2003, p. 57) concept of an 'educated guess'—or articulating “the most likely interpretations that might be made of a text”—to highlight how these constructed identities embellish and, therefore, alter the meaning of recruitment text, dependent on a group's social, cultural and collective identities.

5.5.1 *Identity and Social Identity Theory*

As its primary conceptual approach, this thesis applies Social Identity Theory (SIT) to comprehending far-right extremist recruitment online. SIT examines the importance of group identity, not only as a source of meaning and value for one's own group (referred to as the “in-group” in social psychology) but also in terms of how it could be devalued and derogated by other groups (usually referred to as “out-groups”) (Spears, 2011, p. 202). Through social comparison, individuals acquire a knowledge of self by identifying or belonging to particular social categories or groups (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 225). The theory provides a lens through which to consider the development of a collective identity, the perceptions of self and others, and their behavioural outcomes (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 20). In the context of this thesis, SIT serves as the foundational concept for exploring what drives and shapes the recruitment discourse of far-right groups online. Specifically, adopting SIT as a methodological framework provides researchers with the opportunity to examine group identities and their intra-group relations—or, in this case, the recruiting group and the potentially recruited,

along with in-group and out-group relations that define friends and foes of the far right—through a “named and classified” world (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 225).

SIT is compatible with the interdisciplinary approach of this thesis. With origins in social psychology, SIT has gained traction in both the Political Sciences and Communications Studies (Spears, 2011, p. 202), including Terrorism Studies and those pursuing a deeper understanding of violent groups and why people join them (see Richards, 2017; Meyer et al., 2007). Through the lens of psychological approaches to Terrorism Studies, identities provide a source through which to observe the dynamic of interactions between violent groups and out-groups, the politics of identity in conflicts, and a precursor to behaviours among violent groups (Victoroff, 2005; Borum, 2004; Crenshaw, 2004). As articulated by Post (2005, p. 196), “It is not individual psychology, but group, organizational and social psychology, with a particular emphasis on ‘collective identity’, that provides the most powerful lens to understand terrorist psychology and behaviour”.

While SIT highlights the importance of surveying in-group and out-group dynamics, this thesis develops its parameters from the field of Identity Theory to explore “named and classified” worlds—or, put simply, to develop boundaries through which to differentiate the various elements of a group’s identity. Identity Theory considers identity formation as a process of categorisation of the self (or self-categorisation) “as an occupant of a role, and the incorporation into the self, of the meanings and expectations associated with that role and its performance” (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 225). Identity Theory equally explores the elements of self that take on meaning and produce various behavioural outcomes (Stryker, 2001). Drawing from both SIT and Identity Theory is not uncommon in research practice. For example, Hogg, Terry and White (1995, p. 255) argue that both theories “occupy parallel but separate universes” and conclude that the main difference is scope. Namely, Identity Theory sets out to explain an individual’s role-related behaviours, while SIT sets out to explain group processes and inter-group relations (Hogg et al., 1995, p. 255). Schwartz, Dunkel and Waterman (2009, p. 543)—from whose work this methodology develops its theoretical underpinnings—employ SIT within the framework of Identity Theory to develop a working definition of social within the parameters of identity formation. Thus, while this thesis grounds its theoretical elements in SIT, it draws from an application of Identity Theory to define its conceptual definitions. Schwartz, Dunkel and Waterman (2009, p. 537) apply Identity Theory to explore the concept of terrorism as a “cultural identity strongly based in collectivism and in fundamentalist adherence to religious or cultural principles”. In essence, their research is an exploration of what elements of identity-making, identification, and inter-

group relations form the basis for groups who turn to terrorism. According to the authors (Schwartz et al., 2009, p. 540), the sum of a terrorist identity is a collection of various cultural, social and personal identities. This thesis refreshes the work of Schwartz, Dunkel and Waterman (2009) in that it does not aim to explore the various identities that form terror groups. Rather, it explores how these various identities shape the recruitment strategies of the far right and the elements that produce stylistic cues or variations in meaning. Furthermore, Schwartz, Dunkel and Waterman define the cultural and social parameters that this thesis adopts. However, this thesis posits that one cannot ascertain, or evidence, the personal processes of self-identification by examining online text. Furthermore, due to certain digital affordances—such as anonymity and pseudo-anonymity—collective identities override the processes of self-identification and are secondary to the strong textual cues of the collective.

5.5.2 Cultural Identity

The first parameter to explore the elements that develop extremist identities and, thus, influence their online communication is *culture*. Culture, due to the term's many usages (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2012, p. 1), has been the focus of many disciplines and schools, with varying conclusions about what culture is and how to define it (Eagleton, 2016, p. viii; Ingold, 2002, p. 329; Keesing, 1974, p. 74). In this thesis, the term 'culture' has been used in chapter four to describe a space from which the far right develops a latch to mainstream their message or derive a platform. In this thesis, the term *culture* is also used to describe a tool employed by the far right—specifically, the culture of metapolitics as a soft-power strategy. This non-violent approach allows far-right actors to appropriate elements of leftist politics (Stern, 2019) in order to craft a more socially acceptable narrative for promoting societal change (Byrd, 2023; Norocel, 2023; Griffin, 2016, p. 19). As such, while the term culture is difficult to define, it could be argued that, within the context of the far right, culture can be seen as both a space and a tool for change, whether behavioural or social. In their work, Schwartz, Dunkel and Waterman (2009, p. 541) define *cultural* as the cultural values an individual incorporates throughout life as guiding principles for their behaviour. These values, within the context of the terrorist identity, embody collectivism, absolutism in belief, and familism (Schwartz et al., 2009, p. 541). Thus, within the context of identity, culture as a space and tool for change could position these elements of identity as parts that both deepen and shift with the needs of the collective or group.

Within *collectivism*, the authors highlight the prioritisation of the group over the individual, and an 'us' versus 'them' thinking (Schwartz et al., 2009, p. 541). Specifically,

according to the authors, “Terrorism requires having divided people into two categories: those whose interests are to be advanced through terrorist activities (‘us’) and those against whom the terrorist activities are to be directed (‘them’). This cognitive dichotomization may be based on religious, ethnic, racial, or other cultural criteria” (Schwartz et al., 2009, p. 541). Within this thesis, elements of collectivism will consider the narratives forged by the in-group to shore up their identity against the perceived ‘other’; or, put simply, the reflective elements of the group’s identity and how they are constructed in contrast to the ‘other’.

A prevalent driver of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ dichotomies within group dynamics is *religious absolutism*. While some position absolutism—and, in particular, religious absolutism—as ‘culturally dangerous’ (Wallace, 2016), a pejorative term akin to ‘radicalisation’ (Galland, 2020), within the context of Schwartz, Dunkel and Waterman’s (2009, p. 541) research, religious absolutism is constructed as the precursor to black-and-white thinking. Specifically, religious absolutism is defined as unwavering loyalty in religiously oriented belief, characterised by “concepts contrasting believers and unbelievers, such as ‘infidels,’ ‘sinners,’ and ‘heretics’”, that can often motivate attacks against the out-group (Schwartz et al., 2009, p. 541). The authors (Schwartz et al., 2009, p. 541) also define religious absolutism beyond spirituality, incorporating nationality and ethnic grievances. This thesis problematises the association between religion and terrorism in chapter three. Instead, it builds on the discussion of conspiratorial thinking in chapter two and positions religious absolutism as a manifestation of conspiratorial thinking, marked by a deep commitment to such narratives. More specifically, this thesis will explore a group’s adherence to conspiratorial thinking that develops their ideological direction and provides a latch for recruiters to address individuals outside the scope of far-right belief systems.

Familism is the final element incorporated into Schwartz, Dunkel and Waterman’s (2009) approach to understanding the cultural elements imbued in violent group identities. Familism describes a familial loyalty that places the family over personal interests (Kim & Wilcox, 2013, p. 32; Stein et al., 2014, p.224). Familism is a term that is often not researched solely in relation to the exploration of family life, but can incorporate national, religious and ethnic communities (see, for example, Stein et al., 2014; Mahoney & Krumrei, 2012; Jeung, 2012; Lacar, 1995). Here, in the work of Schwartz, Dunkel and Waterman (2009, p. 542), it is described as “a hierarchy of loyalties running, in inverse order, from the nation-State, to the tribe, to the clan, and to the extended family. Such cultural arrangements typically place obligations on individuals for upholding family honor and avenging wrongs done to the family.” In this thesis, familism is examined as a way to understand group loyalty,

particularly in relation to what is perceived as needing protection—be it the nation, race, or religion. This dynamic plays a key role in accelerating conspiratorial thinking, often centred around the question: *Who has wronged us?*—a framing that identifies targets for potential acts against perceived threats.

5.5.3 Social Identity

Throughout various forms of scholarship, the question of what is *social* has often been problematised, but has generally been defined as “basic social values, social institutions, modes of living and social relations” (Blumer, 2006, p. 84). Within the context of collective/group identities, some scholars perceive identity as inextricably linked to society (Stets & Burke, 2003, p. 1). Others consider identity as the very foundation upon which society is built (Burke, 2004). As Berger (1966, p. 107) once proclaimed, the self only exists by virtue of society. More specifically, social identities are not only the by-product of what Miller (1962) refers to as social relations, but the defining principle of social organisation (Castells, 2011, p. 7; Buckingham, 2008, p. 5; White, 2008, p. 60). Thus, while there are many ways to consider the concepts of *identity* and *social*, their intertwining can be perceived as foundational to the construction of a social order, defined by an individual’s relationship with that order.

Social identities are also often linked to culture (Bou Malham & Saucier, 2016; Ridgeway, 2006; Maton, 1993). Some perceive culture as an influence in shaping social identities (Smaldino, 2019, p. 111; Brewer & Yuki, 2007, p. 307). Others argue that the two concepts cannot definitively be separated (Alexander & Seidman, 1990, p. 4; Griswold, 2012, p. 12). Similarly, this interrelatedness is featured in the work of Schwartz, Dunkel and Waterman (2009). The authors propose interconnectivity between the social and cultural to explore dichotomous thinking (us versus them). By applying the concept of SIT, the authors assert that “it is at the level of social identity that such dichotomization will directly impact the daily living of individuals in societies where there are few opportunities for direct interactions with members of the outgroup”. Furthermore, direct threat action will occur when “outgroups are perceived to be encroaching on the ingroup’s physical or psychological territory” (Schwartz et al., 2009, p. 542). Thus, in the context of terrorists, or extremists, social identities can be considered intertwined with the cultural, with collectivist elements of cultural identity developing dichotomous us-versus-them relationships to other identities within societies.

According to the authors (Schwartz et al., 2009, p. 546), the elements that construct the social identity of groups include *inculcation*, relational elements with institutional structures, and feelings of moral superiority over the out-group. Inculcation refers to how one learns about the enemy from broader societal influences such as school curricula and religion in the media, including newspapers, radio, TV, cinema, art, and music (Schwartz et al., 2009, p. 546). Relational elements consider feelings of alienation within the in-group against social institutions. Specifically, in-groups are likely to feel alienated from wider societal institutions, perhaps perceiving that these institutions alienate them via exclusionary practices or that the powerful out-group controls these institutions. As argued by the authors (Schwartz et al., 2009), “members of the minority group lack control and direction of cultural institutions, [and] there is a natural tendency to distrust the motives of outgroup representatives of those institutions”.

Social identities equally manifest elements of moral superiority among the in-group during the processes of dehumanising the out-group. That is, “in addition to the anger associated with the grievance, members of the smaller or lower-status group may likely develop feelings of moral superiority to their oppressors” (Schwartz et al., 2009, p. 543). This moral element reinforces grievances and attributes superiority over the out-group (Schwartz et al., 2009, p. 543). Drawing from these definitional parameters, this thesis considers the social elements of a group’s identity as inextricably linked to the cultural, as relational to other groups and institutions that form societies, and as a driving force for the development of threat construction. This thesis also posits that social identities are evidenced through their relationship with societal structures and institutions and their ability or inability to engage with them. It perceives inculcation as both an influence in threat construction and the element that provides in-groups with an essence of moral superiority over out-groups. With these elements in mind, this thesis explores the manifestation of social identities in group texts via their representation of out-groups, how they construct threats, along with their relationship to wider societal institutions and levels of trust in them.

5.5.4 Collective Identities

In the work of Schwartz, Dunkel and Waterman (2009, p. 544), the authors stipulate that a prominent element in producing a terrorist identity is the personal, or an “individuals’ self-definition”. The authors also develop a definition of the personal within the group through a commitment to addressing the group grievances. More specifically, group grievances are becoming “more important than other aspects of identity including work or career, family

responsibilities, or personal interests” (Schwartz et al., 2009, p. 546). This thesis acknowledges these grievances and their influence on individuals within a group setting. However, I argue that the personal elements of identity formation, or *self-identification* (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006, p. 4; Oyserman, 2011), are internal processes that cannot be surveyed via qualitative research methods, with reasons for one’s self-identification being highly personal and, arguably, immeasurable through the subjective lens of a researcher. Furthermore, attempting to assess the processes of self-identification in spaces of increased digitisation excludes the consideration of how these technologies alter human behaviour. As argued by Abrahamson (2006, p. 44), the way in which “people function psychologically in cyberspace is not quite the same as in direct face-to-face social relationships”.

In today’s increasingly digitalised realities, self-identification takes on new dimensions, with digital technologies providing individuals with opportunities to further assert their own individualistic approach to constructing their identity (Boyd, 2014, p. 38; Papacharissi, 2002; Marwick, 2013). The decrease in boundary and divide between individual and audience amplifies what some scholars have long touted: that individuals perform in specific ways in front of particular audiences and shape, like a repertoire of outfits, a variety of identities to showcase (Formilan & Stark, 2023; Wang, 2020, pp. 43, 59). However, others consider the impact of digitisation on a decrease in particular behaviours between people and groups that has, in many ways, supplanted how some individuals connect (Helsper, 2021; Baym, 2015; Trittin-Ulbrich et al., 2021). Specifically, certain technological affordances constrain and enable different types of self-presentation (Marwick, 2013, p. 358). For example, anonymity and pseudo-anonymity are considered just one of the important affordances that impact how people construct identity online (Boyd, 2014). As articulated by van der Nagel and Frith (2015), anonymity and pseudo-anonymity are not binary concepts that differentiate between being completely identifiable or completely anonymous. However, the terms can include the development of a pseudonym (Chen et al., 2008), the creation of a fully-fledged alter ego (Arnold, 2016) or only sharing parts of oneself with particular audiences at particular times (Boyd, 2014). Some argue that removing the physical attributes of communication—such as identification—increases the adoption of group norms and displays group loyalty within specific individuals (Spears, 2021, p. 382; Barreto & Ellemers, 2002; Rosander & Eriksson, 2012). No longer face-to-face, group influence over the individual is increased—a process known as *deindividuation* (Klein et al., 2007; Lea et al., 2001). While others argue that anonymity in online communities weakens group identification, they agree that conformity to group norms can be a significant mediator (Kim et al., 2019). The supplanting of self-

identification, according to scholars, is further fuelled by membership in a terrorist group. In the words of Atran (2004, p. 20), “different groups have different values”, and, in the case of terror groups, these group values have superseded the power of other groups, “dropping or reducing every other connection” (Atran, 2004, p. 20). Crenshaw (2000, p. 408) adds, “Once in the group, socialization and learning experiences further shape the behavior of terrorists”. As such, while self-identification remains an essential factor in identity-making, it can also be considered an element that can be surpassed by the collective in extremist realms of the internet. Thus, this thesis adds precedence to the manifestation of the group identity over the personal in the online context and considers how these elements present themselves in recruitment discourse. Specifically, it explores how group identities present themselves and their values through the use of digital technologies—whether through the production of manifestos or the dissemination of rules of living. Furthermore, it seeks to understand group structures (in particular group hierarchies), and how these elements shape their online identity, along with how the group seeks membership, as a means to further impact on deindividuation.

5.5.5 Extremism Typology

The aforementioned parameters develop an extremism typology to explore recruitment text:

Category	Element	Definition
Cultural Identity	Collectivism	Group identity defined in contrast to the out-group; in-group positioning.
	Religious Absolutism	Belief in conspiracy and depth of belief; Line of Demarcation (West, 2018).
	Familism	Inter-group loyalty; belief in a cause; protection of what is perceived as in need of saving.
Social Identity	Threat Level	Threat construction, including whether threats are perceived as direct or indirect.
	Inculcation	Influences in threat construction (e.g. historical,

		religious, political, educational, media).
	Relational	Relationship between the in-group and social or institutional structures.
	Morality	Perceived moral superiority over the out-group.
Collective Identity	Constructed	Expressed through in-group discourse such as manifestos, rules, or guiding principles.
	Hierarchical	Structural organisation of the group (e.g. military, religious, adhocracy).
	Exclusive	Use of specific language, restricted access, or defined membership status.

5.5.6 Textual Analysis

This thesis conducts a textual analysis of far-right recruitment online. As previously discussed in chapter four, this thesis positions recruitment discourse as speech acts (Wæver, 1995), influenced by group identities (Tulga, 2022), that manifest as text online. Utilising a typology based on the work of Schwartz, Dunkel and Waterman (2009), it qualitatively analyses how the social, cultural and collective identities of two case studies from the far right shape recruitment text. Specifically, it applies this typology to a multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) of digital phenomena—or to a group’s website—to identify how these group identities influence text beyond the parameters of what is said or written. The following section outlines the aims of textual analysis, how this thesis defines *text* and *discourse*, and how it structures its methodological approach as a filter through which the researcher can gauge a sense of both meaning and variations in meaning depending on group context.

Textual analysis is a qualitative research method that utilises text as empirical data to explore the sense-making practices of cultures by observing the ways in which people interpret text (Bernard & Ryan, 1998, p. 596; McKee, 2003, p. 32). Specifically, textual analysis aims to interpret texts “in order to try and obtain a sense of the ways in which... particular cultures at particular times ... make sense of the world around them” (McKee,

2003, p. 32). Textual analysis can be viewed as an umbrella term that incorporates an array of methodologies aimed at analysing meaning-making within a textual format (McKee, 2003, p. 32). Nonetheless, while varied, these approaches require the researcher to engage in a deeper reading of the text and to possess a deep understanding of the context from which the text is derived (McNamara et al., 1996). Or as Belsey (2013, p. 163) articulates, “interpretation always involves extra-textual knowledge”. From these elements, the researcher aims to interpret the meaning of text via what McKee (2003, p. 57) refers to as an “educated guess” or, as previously mentioned, articulating “the most likely interpretations that might be made of a text”. This thesis applies the term *textual analysis* to describe its methodological approach. Specifically, it applies a typological framework to multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) with an aim to interpret far-right text through the lens of group identity construction. The following section outlines what is meant by *text* and *discourse* within this thesis.

5.5.7 Defining Discourse and Text

This chapter has observed the constructivist assumption of identities as social facts developed through discourse and has referred to digitised far-right discourse as *text*. It does so to not only draw from the methodological directions of textual analysis, but to assert an understanding of text as a physical product (Levenston, 1992; McGann, 1991, p. 42) and *discourse* as containing meaning dependent on social context (De Saussure, 2007, p. 188). The intertwining of the two concepts is highly relevant in the digital context, with websites manifesting as a physical representation of group identities, deriving meaning from the context in which they exist.

Defining discourse, as with many conceptual terms, opens a myriad of different perspectives and debates from the realm of critical theory, sociology, linguistics, philosophy, social psychology, and other fields (Mills, 2004, p. 1). Discourse and its analysis has been approached through applying the lens of analysing linguistic behaviour—or what is written and spoken—to the conceptual elements of language in use incorporating elements of psychology, semiotics, communication, etc. (Bhatia et al., 2008, p. 11). This thesis defines discourse as in use and in accordance with constructivist assumptions. As mentioned, discourse remains central to a constructivist exploration of phenomena (Phillips, 2007, p. 63; Hülse & Spencer, 2008, p. 572; Huysmans, 2002, p. 43). According to constructivist theorists, the world and the system we live in is constructed through discourse (Jung, 2019, p. 3). Furthermore, constructivism considers discourses as socially and culturally derived speech acts (Gordon, 2009, p. 39) that are interpreted through relational contexts (Carta,

2019, p. 92; Pouliot, 2004, p. 329). Specifically, according to Neubert and Reich (2002, p. 25), discourse is interpreted, or derives meaning, through its construction, deconstruction and reconstruction by distant and self-observers depending on their aims, interests and possibilities to act. As such, this thesis defines discourse as socio-politically derived, a phenomenon that shapes the world and the reality we live in. Furthermore, complementing an exploration of in-group/out-group interplay, it considers discourse as defined by relations between entities and identities, with meaning derived through this exchange.

While this thesis draws from the anti-positivist/anti-realist assumptions of constructivism to define discourse, it equally draws from other critical schools to articulate what discourse can be constituted as and, therefore, what can be observed. When defining discourse, this thesis also draws from the conceptual foundations of poststructuralism. Combining two critical schools—constructivism and poststructuralism—is, in the context of this thesis, not either/or, but an exercise that further enriches an exploration of constructed meaning and clarifies the parameters that define discourse. Namely, poststructuralists consider discourse as a process constituting knowledge derived from social practices, subjectivity and power relations (Foucault, 1982, p. 108; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 272; Ramos, 1992; Van Dijk, 1994). Often focusing on the dynamics of discrimination, power abuse, racism, hegemony, and marginalisation (Jan, 2022), these approaches consider how power relations operate in and through discourse (Krzyżanowski & Forchtner, 2016, p. 254). Furthermore, akin to constructivism’s reality-making concepts, poststructuralists, such as Hall (1997, p. 5), describe discourse as a permeating force derived from various symbols, shaping a “representational system”. Thus, this thesis also considers discourse as a socially and culturally defined phenomenon, that is envisaged relationally. In this context, discourse is the primary driver of knowledge construction, with meaning derived from a relational exchange in and through societies.

What constitutes text, or the physical manifestations of discourse, is further derived from poststructuralist concepts. McKee (2003, p. 36) refers to *text*, or what can be broached in the various methodological outputs of textual analysis, as multidimensional, incorporating “films, television programmes, magazines, advertisements, clothes, graffiti and so on”. Hebdidge (1988, p. 78) further defines text as style, incorporating clothing and accessories, among other elements, as in-group signifiers—a means to represent what one is in relation to what one is not. Important to an understanding of *text* in contrast to *discourse* is Fairclough’s (1995, p. 188) contextualisation. The author notes differences in the way text is treated in analysis as not just a study of the symbolic and linguistic, but the *intertextual* elements—or

the compositional elements of text in relation to other textual elements—that are derived from the time and place of text production (p. 189). This concept is what Kress and Bezemer (2023, p. 140) refer to as the “material site of emergence of immaterial discourse(s)”. Drawing from these concepts, this thesis defines text as multidimensional and multimodal to incorporate elements beyond what is written and spoken. In its definition it includes other forms of meaning making such as video, images, audio, colour, and spatial positioning as enhancers of meaning/text. Last, it considers text as transient, a product of time and place, represented through the compositional elements within text and surrounding text. These definitions of both discourse and text are appropriated to a multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) of digitised far-right recruitment.

5.5.8 Multimodal Discourse Analysis

This thesis conducts multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) to observe far-right recruitment discourse published on group websites. MDA is an evolving methodology that aims to focus on how communication is constructed through various modes, how their meaning is enhanced through this interplay, what role context plays in meaning-making and the transience of meaning as contextual phenomena shift (Jaipal, 2010; Kress & Bezemer, 2023, p. 141). Derived from the school of functional linguistics (see Halliday & Hasan, 1985; van Leeuwen, 2008; Kress & Bezemer, 2023; Jewitt, 2015), MDA extends the study of language to incorporate other modalities—or forms of communication such as audio, visual, colour, and spatial positioning—and how these modes interact to derive semiotic meaning (Kress & Bezemer, 2023, p. 141). Halliday (1978, p. 123) refers to semiotics as “system[s] of meanings that constitute the reality of the culture”. In the context of this thesis, this definition would position far-right recruitment strategy as an interplay between the various modes of communication that construct the far-right culture. While a simple, and thus beneficial, means to present the semiotic elements of multimodality, this thesis further progresses an understanding of semiotics as defined by its founding theorist, Ferdinand de Saussure (2006, p. xxvi), as an analysis of symbolic communication from which one derives meaning as both understood and interpreted. In this context, de Saussure (2006) explains that language consists of signifiers (communication through symbols and signs) that are understood through the conventional knowledge of the signified. More specifically, it is through a relationship between the signifier and the signified that this symbolic communication is interpreted and, thus, derives meaning (de Saussure, 2006, p. xxvi). In this thesis, the concepts of semiotic expression as understood and interpreted are viewed in two ways. The first is the semiotic

exchange of tacit signifiers or communication that is commonplace and unquestioned (Arquilla, 1992). For example, commonplace is the universal understanding of facial expressions within a given culture or the meaning behind red, amber and green lights on a stop sign. Within the context of the far right, these elements would include the use of everyday language, universally known symbols, or compliance with the rules/affordances of social interactions by way of digital exchange. The interpreted element of semiotics includes the meaning derived from context. The interpreted can be defined as the in-language learned within group contexts or understood by out-groups through subjective interpretations. For example, Weimann and Am (2020, p. 13) discuss the adaption of coded and racialised language among far-right social media users, such as nicknames for particular minorities or the employment of Nordic runes and obscure fonts from which the far right derives meaning. Some refer to coded humour appropriated in amplifying far-right ideas online (Åkerlund, 2022, p. 1808; Kearney, 2019, p. 4; Woods & Ruscher, 2021). Others consider visual symbols as signals for white supremacy, such as the hijacking of the ‘OK’ symbol (Drainville & Saul, 2020, p. 15) and triple parentheses ((())), or “echoes” around a person’s name to symbolise their Jewishness (Moshin, 2018, p. 32). Thus, with a focus on observing recruitment strategies present on far-right websites—a space in which specific affordances permit messages to be crafted beyond what is spoken or written—MDA is a complementing methodological approach to observe the impact of digitisation on far-right recruitment and the meaning behind this multimodal, symbolic, exchange.

While this thesis concerns itself with the interplay between digitisation, its affordances, and how this shapes recruitment discourse in ways beyond simple linguistics, it also aims to observe how far-right recruitment is shaped by a group’s collective identity and how its influence crafts unique modes of collective expression and representation. As argued, it is at this level of influence—group identity and the content it produces—where text differences, nuances and similarities among groups are observed. Furthermore, within the context of collective identity and its influence, it is at the formation and presentation of group identities and their relationship to out-groups where recruitment text derives meaning. Approaches to MDA have addressed the need for multi-levelled observation (see O’Halloran, 2011, p. 1). Nonetheless, not having a framework to do so has been articulated as the approach’s main limitation (Halliday, 2011, p. 3). Lacking in theory or frameworks for analysis, MDA relies on interdisciplinary approaches to provide a benchmark from which to interpret text (O’Halloran, 2011, p. 3). Hence, while MDA allows for an observation of communication beyond what is written and spoken and further considers the interplay between various modes

of communication, this thesis develops a multi-level approach to textual analysis by applying a typology derived from SIT to present the following elements within the text:

- What is discovered? (*Text*)
- How is the text presented? (*Modes*)
- Which elements of a group's identity provide context? (*Interpretation*)
- In what settings is this text derived? (*Context*)

For example, far-right groups often employ the term *patriot* (text). However, this term has different meanings in different contexts and in relation to different institutions, collectives and groups. As observed by Nightingale and Muldoon (2021), 'patriot', on a global level, is a term often employed as a prompt for international solidarity among actors of the far right (context). However, the meaning of patriot differs on a macro (State) level. Namely, Neiwert (2017, p. 38) observes that the term, when used in an American context, is often employed in a bid to mainstream the idea of a patriotic militia movement (an idea often derailed by the violent acts of right-wing extremists) (context). The term patriot further diverges in meaning on a more micro in-group to in-group and in-group to out-group level. At this level, it is observed that divergences are influenced by group identity, complemented by social and cultural contexts, along with the medium in which the message is produced and disseminated. In the context of the January 6th riots, the use of the term patriot by users of Parler signified that the individual would "have every conviction they will fight for their Republic and president" (Ng, Cruickshank & Carley, 2023, p. 7) (interpretation). Within QAnon, Q-drops (modes) on 8Chan containing *patriot*—or posts from a so-called Q-level operative—symbolised a unification among those who would strike to "save the nation" (Chandler, 2020, p. 24) (text/interpretation); specifically, a militarised call to arms against the satanic cabal of paedophiles that represented the "establishment" (Chandler, 2020, p. 24). In Australia, Chair of the defunct United Patriots Front (UPF), Shermion Burgess, once began his since-removed social media videos (modes) with the term 'patriots'. For example, a Facebook video began with the words "get ready, Patriots. It's gonna be big" (in Safran, 2018, p. 9) (text/modes/interpretation/context). His use of the term patriots was a call to witness a series of anti-Islamic acts (see Dickson, 2015), attend anti-immigration rallies (see Safi, 2015), watch the burning of a Muslim newspaper (Safran, 2018, p. 18), or consume a pork sausage at a 10th-anniversary celebration of the Cronulla riots (Safran, 2018, p. 125), a violent incident that saw White Australia engage in a mass attack on 'Muslim looking' individuals at

Cronulla in a bid to ‘reclaim’ the beach in 2005 (Poynting, 2006, p. 85) (context). Here, while rudimentary in observation of text and context, the nuances and differences observed in the meaning of patriot indicate a need to consider online recruitment text beyond the parameters of physical manifestation. Equally, it is important to observe the interplay between various modes and levels of interpretation, developing unique meaning. Thus, to make an educated guess about the meaning of the text (McKee, 2003), it is essential to employ a multilayered analysis that offers different perspectives to understand how text conveys meaning. Thus, MDA and its ability to draw from interdisciplinary perspectives provide an important analytical tool through which to observe far-right recruitment, its interplay with group identity, context, and the various modes of communication afforded to them in digitised spaces. This thesis applies MDA first to observe the various modalities that the far right employ to speak. It then considers how various modes impact how groups present themselves and the style in which they present their message. To derive a deeper understanding of the elements from which text derives its meaning, this thesis applies an identity-derived typology to explore how elements of a group’s identity manifest in particular moments within their recruitment strategy, how these elements relate to out-groups, the sociopolitical context in which they manifest, and how these elements interplay to shape recruitment discourse.

5.6 Data Collection Methods

This thesis observes recruitment discourses and texts on far-right websites to understand how these actors speak to people online. This thesis used what I term a breadcrumb approach to trace the online presence of far-right groups—a process of following digital trails that lead users toward content strategically positioned to attract attention. Typing familiar white supremacist tropes into Google and Gab searches uncovered several far-right groups, two of which are observed here. The following section outlines this thesis’s data collection methods, ethical considerations, sampling methods, and inclusions and exclusions.

5.6.1 *Follow the Breadcrumbs*

A term commonly associated with the realm of web design, the ‘breadcrumb approach’ is appropriated here to describe simple search engine techniques to find groups online. More specifically, like Hansel and Gretel in the Hans Christian Andersen fairytale, the researcher follows the breadcrumbs to see what is revealed to them. A trail of breadcrumbs, or, in this context, the words used in word searches, was collated during the relearning stages of research—a period in which materials pertaining to the far right were reintroduced—to gauge

commonly used tropes to describe the far right, along with any words associated with far-right and extremist. For example, White Power, White Genocide, the Great Replacement and 1488 (the numerical nod to white supremacist David Lane's 14-word slogan "We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children", coupled with the number 88, or alphabetically HH, which stands for "Heil Hitler"). While examples are mentioned here, the actual terms used to find far-right groups online have been omitted from this thesis due to ethical considerations that will be discussed in the following section.

5.6.2 Ethical Considerations

According to Sanders-McDonagh (2014, p. 242), research that engages with far-right and extreme-right groups can be considered an "occupation" undertaken in "dirty workspaces". These spaces can be perceived as physically dangerous, morally tainted and "compromised by society, perhaps having a criminal element" (Sanders-McDonagh, 2014, p. 242). Conway (2021, p. 268) further positions the internet and the digitisation of terrorist and extremist groups as the new battleground. Specifically, the author asserts, "For online extremism and terrorism researchers, the Internet is the 'field'." As such, emphasis should be placed on "researcher welfare, especially researchers' mental and emotional wellbeing". By considering the internet as both a dirty workspace and a battleground, this thesis looked to protect the source (the far-right groups and its members), the researcher and the research from insecurity—namely, from identification. Specifically, while this thesis and respective research methods align with ethical considerations of protecting research subjects from harm, it also considers the potential harm to researchers who embark on surveying terrorist/extremist groups online. In that vein, this thesis maintains its responsibilities towards adopting methods to reduce the risk of identification during collection, analysis and storage of data and information (NHMRC, 2023, p. 34). However, it also considers how reducing the risk of identification could benefit the researcher, their wellbeing, and the benefits of this thesis's research findings. To reduce these risks, the names of the far-right groups, or case studies, have been anonymised in the main body of work. Thus, the two case studies will be referred to as Case A and Case B. However, the Case Study chapters will present their names in full and will be redacted from the final, printed copy. On occasion, certain characteristics within group communication will be described or paraphrased. Group members, while mentioned by name in the (redacted) case study section, do not appear throughout the main body of this thesis.

5.6.3 Corpus, Inclusions and Exclusions

By following breadcrumbs, this thesis aimed to emulate pathways for discovering groups online. For this purpose, sampling limitations—in the way of inclusions and exclusions—were kept to a minimum. Instead, by focusing on early detection, sampling focused on including groups and pathways that were easy to find; for example, groups found on the first page of a Google search, as in the example of Case A. Other word searches would involve a two-step process. For example, a trope would reveal a thread on Gab—the self-proclaimed Home of Free Speech and the Parallel Economy—for further results. Tropes were then typed into the Gab search bar. One trope produced a thread with links to Case B’s website.

This thesis considers recruitment text as any content produced by a group on their website with an aim to disseminate their main message or to motivate action. All text included within the dataset is, therefore, within the public domain. The dataset excludes any activity requiring individuals/the researcher to join private chats or use hidden codes or URLs. This element was imperative to maintain levels of early detection, or what this thesis perceives individuals to first encounter when searching for far-right content online. Materials from Case A were collated directly from their website. In the example of Case B, whose website was removed/taken down while the dataset was collated, some of the content was retrieved from reposts on the group’s forum, and other elements were collated from the ‘WayBack Machine’, as directed by the group who provided such links to their website on public platforms. The dataset was collated on random dates in the latter half of 2024 and includes screenshots of website pages, books, and pamphlets downloaded from websites, embedded videos, along with posters, memes, and group logos.

The total dataset includes (for each group):

Case A: Over 40 screenshots, ten posters and pamphlets for dissemination, 20 memes and posters, 13 ‘holy books’, three fan books, two anthems (audio files), and four speeches (audio files) from their late founder.

Case B: 16 books (ranging from 250–500 pages each), pamphlets, and how-tos (staging attacks, executing lone-wolf attacks); over 100 screenshots (derived from their administration reposting on their forum), including over 20 doctored images.

5.7 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined this thesis's methodological design, including its philosophical assumptions, interdisciplinary approaches, and data collection methods. To assist Australia's early detection measures, it focuses on articulating the various textual nuances between far-right groups and their recruitment strategies in online settings—elements that, I argue, make it challenging to detect online recruitment. Interdisciplinary in approach, it considers directions from Terrorism Studies scholarship and applies them to communications logics to construct methodological frameworks for textual analysis. Specifically, this thesis applies a typology derived from Terrorism Studies approaches to SIT to determine how group identities shape unique stylistic cues in self-presentation. It observes these elements through MDA to acknowledge the various modes of communication afforded in digital settings. By defining text as multidimensional, this thesis considers the representational aspects of a group's self-presentation beyond what is spoken and written. Furthermore, by defining discourse as both the contextual and relational—elements from which recruitment text derives meaning—it develops a holistic sense of the various contexts that shape online recruitment. Combined, these elements—the interdisciplinary approaches, multimodal observation and identity formation—provide insight into how far-right identities are constructed online and the unique ways in which these identities shape a group's recruitment strategy.

6 Deconstructing Far-right Identities

[REDACTED]

7 Seditious and Violence for ‘The Cause’

[REDACTED]

8 Conceptualising Findings within the Digital Terrain of the Far Right

In this chapter, I conceptualise the findings presented in this thesis by situating them within the complex dynamics of digital environments that the far right strategically exploits. As will be explored, these environments serve as essential conduits for recruitment, creating an ideal storm to attract new adherents through a blend of pseudo-information, particularly in the form of conspiratorial narratives. In this digital landscape, individuals are exposed to increasingly extreme ideas expressed through distinctive language cues influenced by the collective identity of far-right groups. By highlighting the relationship between digital technology and the communication strategies employed by the far right, I emphasise not only the significance of these findings within existing scholarly literature but also their potential to enhance early detection measures in Australia.

Divided into two key focus areas, I begin with an exploration of the central research question: “How do far-right recruiters speak to people online?” This section will provide context for their communication by examining the impacts of crises, the deepening of *digital fogs*, and the emergence of what I refer to as *Vetting Grounds*—spaces in which individuals become particularly susceptible to far-right messaging. In doing so, I challenge the common assumption that crises have solely political consequences, and instead, play a role in catalysing the narratives of the far-right, while priming audiences to be open to such messages.

This section will further delve into the core elements of far-right belief systems, placing a particular emphasis on conspiracy theories. By reconceptualising conspiracy theories as an interconnected network—akin to a *multiverse*, a term appropriated from *Marvel Comics*—this analysis will reveal how the far right adeptly engages diverse audiences through metapolitics. This perspective casts the far right as *lighthouses*, guiding their message through the pervasive *fog of digital delusion*. As a result, I not only redefine the nature of conspiracy theories but also underscore their strategic significance within the communication tactics employed by far-right groups.

This section will also draw from this thesis’s findings to articulate the characteristics of how the far right speak within the context of the fog; namely, in a language crafted by their identities, providing both a similarity and uniqueness in the way they speak. Furthermore, they speak in a *second language*, developed through the various digital affordances a group

adopts—be they paralanguage, or multimodal affordances. Thus, this second language is not conveyed through direct speech or text, but through coded language, colour schemes, music choices, and visuals that derive meaning via the parameters of a group’s identity. In addition, these recruiters—or the text produced by the far right—communicate by *latching* into the fog and the conspiratorial multiverse, attributing elements of palatability and translatability to a variety of contexts. The latter elements—translatability and palatability—address the third question of this thesis. Specifically, “What elements make the messages of far-right groups palatable to Australian audiences?”

In the second part of this chapter, I address the supplementary question that this thesis has aimed to explore. Specifically, how do representational biases influence early detection measures? Returning to the dichotomy between *terrorism* and *extremism*, this section reverts to securitisation frameworks as a lens through which to examine the implications of these labels beyond their delineation. I posit that terrorism—taking into account the militarised countermeasures addressed in chapter three—can be interpreted as a label that signifies *action*. Conversely, extremism, often associated with the softer approaches of countering violent extremism (CVE), is construed as a label indicative of *inaction*. Such dichotomies may further hinder the development of effective measures targeting those labelled extremists. Specifically, extremism—an overused and malleable term often employed to describe far-right violence—is addressed with softer CVE approaches, or the *inaction* of de-securitisation. However, while this section underscores these arguments, it also recognises that the tension between terrorism and extremism constitutes only one source of potential bias affecting the formulation of regulatory and technical countermeasures. As will be discussed, the data collection and corpus inclusions were not merely a methodological consideration for this thesis. These elements are intrinsically linked to the findings themselves. Specifically, the corpus’s composition has been influenced by a secondary representational factor, which I term *The MAGA Cap Syndrome*—or the representation of the far right as predominantly American, Trump-supporting, and intrinsically linked to the events of January 6th—that often overshadows other violent factions within this spectrum and evokes political ramifications, such as increased polarisation.

In sum, chapter eight addresses the multifaceted tactics employed by far-right recruiters in digital spaces, illuminating the intersections of conspiracy theories, identity, and communication strategies that facilitate their outreach. By critically assessing the implications of these findings and their resonance within existing literature, I contribute to the discourse surrounding far-right extremism and its detection in Australia. Ultimately, the

insights drawn from this exploration not only challenge traditional narratives surrounding crises and recruitment but also advocate for a more nuanced approach in the formulation of CVE strategies. Namely, effective intervention must address the underlying representational biases that shape our understanding of *extremism* and its manifestations in the digital age.

8.1 The Three Phases of Crisis

As outlined in the Introduction of this thesis, the scholarly discourse surrounding crises often argues that such events catalyse a significant shift toward the political right (Funke et al., 2016, p. 227). Additionally, crises tend to have a persistent nature, leading to what can be conceptualised as a “crisis after a crisis” (Hart & Boin, 2001, p. 28). This condition sustains the nudge towards the right and, as will be discussed, impacts political processes and outcomes. Further implications are revealed when such phenomena are placed into context of the far right and their recruitment tactics. Namely, due to these implications, I posit that a crisis typically unfolds in *three distinct phases*, a perspective that integrates existing scholarship with contemporary digital dynamics and their impacts, such as aforementioned affordances. Thus, while the initial phase of a crisis may be characterised by a shift toward the political right—a nudge often exploited by populist actors—the rise of digitisation presents opportunities for new actors to capitalise on evolving political climates, who actively seek to exploit moments of crisis to promote their narratives. As such, this shift necessitates a re-evaluation of how we understand crises and their multifaceted impacts on political landscapes.

The second phase, as I have previously articulated, is conceptualised as the formation of the *fog*. As chapter two outlines, the fog represents a situation in which mainstream narratives are increasingly undermined by a digitised melting pot of pseudo-information and conspiracy theories, leading to a State often referred to as *post-truth* (McIntyre, 2018, p. 13). Understanding the formation of the fog is crucial for comprehending crises and their impacts in the digital age. Specifically, while crises serve as opportunistic moments for such groups to challenge mainstream narratives, the *fog* provides a conduit for such groups to communicate their more extreme ideas to new audiences. Thus, far-right groups and the extremists among them not only exploit times of crisis but the formation of the digitised fog, as evidenced by heightened recruitment efforts during these opportune times (Khalil, 2021, p. 109; Avis, 2020, p. 3).

Consequently, as evidenced in the rejection of Australia’s Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation Bill 2024, campaigns designed to combat pseudo-information and online

extremism face the daunting task of navigating the complexities of the fog, while attempting to distinguish between intentional and unintentional mis- or disinformation. More specifically, within this setting, discerning fact from unintentional error or the deliberate dissemination of disinformation aimed at destabilising political structures becomes profoundly challenging. This environment is further complicated by the growing acceptance of conspiratorial narratives and the broadening of belief systems among audiences explored in this thesis through the lens of the *Conspiratorial Mindset* (Shermer, 2011) and *The Line of Demarcation* (West, 2018). Thus, in this digitised context, or fog, a crisis emerges not merely as a disruptive event but as a catalyst for developing what I refer to as a *Vetting Ground* for far-right recruiters—one whose formation is difficult to deter due to the very nature of digitised fogs.

The *Vetting Ground*, or phase three of a crisis, is a set of social, cultural, cognitive, and technological elements, resulting in an environment where a particular audience is more open towards the words of extremists. In the title of this thesis, the *Vetting Ground* constitutes part of the term *Delusion*. In this instance, *Delusion* describes the moment in which an individual's ability to decipher fact from fiction is overridden by these social, cultural, and cognitive factors, widening their acceptance of more and more extreme ideas. Furthermore, *Delusion* aims to articulate certain factors that often arise during a crisis when heightened anxiety (Grzesiak-Feldman, 2013), a quest for meaning (Shermer, 2011, p. 162), a fear of not knowing or helplessness (Hofstadter, 2012, p. 80) can motivate audiences towards accepting half-truths, irrational conclusions, and enemy-driven world views. In particular, this manifestation is evidenced through engagement with conspiracy theories that, as mentioned, often lay the foundation of extremist belief systems. Thus, as part of the concept of *delusion*, the *Vetting Ground* can be viewed as a conceptual space that far-right groups exploit to promote their narratives. Amid the confusion and anxiety created by a crisis, these actors strategically capitalise on the susceptibility of the audience, effectively disseminating their message to individuals who are more willing to embrace extremist perspectives.

The intricate relationship between crises and the increased proliferation of far-right recruitment underscores the need to shift beyond the parameters of what is understood to solely be political ramifications of a crisis. As crises unfold, they catalyse shifts that not only nudge the political landscape to the right but also create fertile ground for far-right narratives to flourish. The phases of this evolution—the initial push towards the right, the formation of the disorienting fog, and the establishment of the *Vetting Ground*—reveal how social, cultural, and cognitive factors intersect to render individuals more susceptible to extremist

ideologies. Recognising these patterns enables us to not only understand how crises are exploited but provide opportunities to develop more effective strategies for countering extremist recruitment. Furthermore, advancing our comprehension of crises presents opportunities to articulate how far-right recruitment operates within these contexts, presented here through the lens of conspiracy theories as an interconnected multiverse, and a form of *metapolitical exchange*.

8.2 Conspiracy Theories as a Multiverse

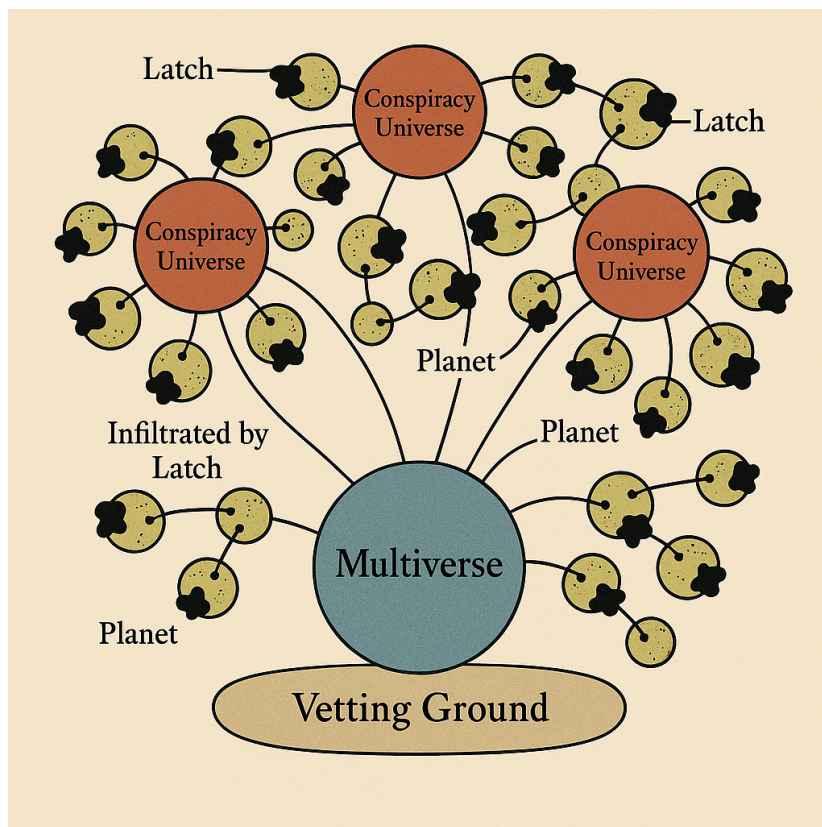


Figure 8.1: The conspiracy Multiverse and Vetting Ground.

Rendered by ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2025).

Scholars (Imhoff et al., 2022; Van Prooijen, Krouwel & Pollet, 2015) have often acknowledged conspiracy theories as the bedrock of far-right ideology, and countless examples throughout history present the far-right's adherence to such narratives. For example, the Third Reich's foundational beliefs were rooted in the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (Webman, 2012, p. 4), coupled with the 'stab in the back' theory—the latter both wildly antisemitic and anti-Communist in nature. In its Nazi iteration, the 'stab in the back' claims that Germany did not lose WWI (Evans, 2015, p. 126). On the contrary, the theory asserts that the German army was, instead, infiltrated by Jewish/Marxist enemies who purposefully

laid down their arms, only later to sign the armistice, leading to policies that were seen to bankrupt Germany—specifically, reparations as outlined in the Treaty of Versailles (Evans, 2015, p. 134).

Much like the origins of Third Reich belief foundations, most threat narratives adhered to by contemporary far-right groups can still be attributed to conspiratorial belief, be it a devotion to the Great Replacement, Eurabianism (a conspiracy theory that claims European elites have deliberately enabled the Islamisation of Europe [Carr, 2006]), White Supremacy, or White exceptionalism. The case studies presented here have further illustrated the connective elements between conspiracy theories and the foundational elements of far-right belief systems. Namely, as seen in Case A, far right and white supremacist movements can be forged on the archaic backs of pseudo-science theories that propagate white exceptionalism. In Case B, a divergent narrative that stems from misappropriated scripture asserts that the white race is one with God. However, after exploring the interplay between far-right messaging and conspiracy theories, I demonstrate conspiracy theories are not only a bedrock of far-right ideology, but a tool employed by the far-right as a means to recruit. To do so, I challenge our understanding of conspiracy theories as dormant narratives from which the far-right merely develop the foundational elements of their collective identities. On the contrary, I position them as tools that provide the far-right with access to groups and individuals formerly out of reach. Furthermore, I assert an *interrelatedness* between various conspiratorial narratives, further challenging the notion of conspiracies as isolated phenomena. To illustrate this, I will now refresh the analogy that often depicts engagement with conspiracy theories as falling down a rabbit hole to one that likens the experience to traversing through a multiverse.

The metaphor of falling down a rabbit hole originates from Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and encapsulates the experience of entering a perplexing, convoluted, or surreal situation, often without intent, and subsequently encountering challenges in extricating oneself from it (Arnavas, 2018, p. 81). This metaphor has often been applied to the context of engaging with conspiracy theories, highlighting the intricate and often disorienting nature of such encounters (Neiwert, 2020, p. 91). For example, when attempting to describe what others perceive to be the experience of engaging with conspiracies, Basu (2024) writes, "They're so far down the rabbit hole ... that they're lost for good." Others (see Williams et al., 2024), exploring the processes of disengaging with conspiracy theories, liken the experience to digging oneself "out of a rabbit hole". Williams

et al. (2024) further progress the nature of conspiracies as a rabbit “burrow” that one can eventually escape from.

However, as mentioned, there appears to be an interrelatedness between conspiracy theories that motivates the far-right to engage in many different narratives in a bid to direct audiences to more extreme ideas. Thus, such dynamics render the very isolated nature of a rabbit hole redundant in describing such phenomena. Furthermore, while burrows may indicate a relatedness, they equally insinuate that individuals meandering through such networks often land at particular destinations, go back to others, or camp for an amount of time in a single conspiratorial thread. Such is not the experience of engaging with conspiracy theories in digitised spaces where one can maintain particular positions—or hold beliefs about one particular conspiracy theory—while progressing to others simultaneously, connecting one conspiracy to others, and in varying degrees. As West (2018) asserts, conspiracy theories evolve simultaneously, and on different plains. Thus, the concept of the *multiverse* will be appropriated here to address this interrelatedness.

The concept of a multiverse also contextualises conspiracy theory realms as post-truth ecosystems in which individuals can believe in a variety of conclusions within a single conspiratorial universe, have a closed or open mind to others and, as evidenced in the case studies presented in this thesis, forsake one belief for another. Furthermore, the concept of the multiverse allows for an exploration of the various entry points into new and established audiences engaged within various conspiracy realms, presenting far right actors with a plethora of opportunities to exploit them.

The multiverse was introduced to Marvel Comics in 1983 by writer David Thorpe (Frevele, 2020). Its origins coincided with the company’s efforts to relaunch the *Captain Britain* franchise. Originally, according to Thorpe (in Frevele, 2020) *Captain Britain* drew significant inspiration from Arthurian legends and the chivalric tales of the Knights of the Round Table—elements that, by the early 1980s, were perceived as antiquated and disconnected from the contemporary experience. To facilitate this reinvention, Thorpe conceptualised the multiverse in which Earth 616 was “our world” and wherein the original iteration of *Captain Britain* existed. However, Earth 616 represented merely one fragment of this larger universe, encompassing a multitude of solar systems, with each housing distinctive iterations of Marvel characters, including variations of Captain Britain.

The multiverse permitted these characters to navigate divergent trajectories, exhibit varied physical attributes and possess the capacity to interact across parallel universes. The introduction of the multiverse not only allowed Marvel Comics to modernise a previously

dormant character but also to foster continuum narratives, permitting several arcs to develop at once. The multiverse concept, placed into the context of far-right recruitment, permits a deeper understanding of how extremist groups present evolving conspiratorial narratives, how they shape-shift throughout various conspiracy planets and universes, evolve to suit particular contexts, or how these groups can harbour two contradictory beliefs at once.

Both Case A and Case B evolve their conspiracy-verse from prominent racial theories—whether that be misappropriated scripture attempting to assert white exceptionalism or waging a holy war based on an enduring, antisemitic, threat narrative (e.g., The Jewish lie). Both case studies equally present anti-immigration stances beyond the lens of Eurabianism and the Great Replacement, situating their beliefs on immigration as a Jewish ruse to poison the bloodlines of the white race. However, in the conspiracy multiverse, these groups can adapt their narratives to suit topical discourses. Namely, both Case A and Case B presented support for the Palestinian cause during the initial phases of the Israel–Hammas war, thus forsaking their racial stance towards People of Colour, to promote antisemitism. This example illustrates how both groups present an ability to contradict their core belief values and adapt narratives to suit particular contexts. A second example is derived from the *Big Pharma* universe and illustrates how such groups can hold several conclusions at once, and how they shape-shift to suit the various *Lines of Demarcation* (West, 2018) present among particular anti-Pharma audiences. Namely, Case A held beliefs that COVID-19 was both a Chinese bioweapon and a Jewish plot to sterilise the white race. Case B situated their COVID-19 narratives within the wider *Holohoax* universe while spiking these narratives with anti-establishmentarianism—or COVID-19 as a byproduct of governments subjecting to the will of the *Jew World Order*.

Presenting conspiratorial realms as a multiverse permits for a deeper understanding of how conspiracies are weaponised by far-right groups who meander into various audiences via an appropriation and adoption of these narratives, offering an element of translatability in terms of how they speak. Thus, to describe conspiracies as rabbit holes—or burrowing into isolated narratives—ignores the fundamental flexibilities and interrelatedness apparent in conspiratorial discourse. Furthermore, the multiverse concept also illustrates the opportunities presented to the far right to parlay their extreme ideas into various conspiratorial realms. Coupled with the concepts of the Conspiratorial Mindset, The Line of Demarcation, and the various affordances that increased levels of digitisation provide, the multiverse can be positioned as an important component of the Vetting Ground. More specifically, the multiverse becomes a conceptual space that the far-right traverses, speaking to vetted

audiences at particular junctures of an enduring crisis through language that is translatable to them. However, while multiverses and the far-right's capitalisation of them describe a particular translatability of such narratives, they do not address important elements of *palatability* that assures a certain resonance of far-right messaging among audiences. These elements are now illustrated through what I refer to as *latching via metapolitical exchange*.

8.3 The Metapolitics of Latching

As presented in Figure 8.1, an important element of how the far right speaks is what I refer to as latching. The concept of latching—or the ability to interject and hold space within particular conspiratorial realms or in popular mainstream topics—is a crucial element in understanding how the far right is able to engage with diverse and often opposing audiences during crises. Here, latching is characterised as a metapolitical exchange, or the process of traversing the realm of politics via culture. As such, the concept of latching can offer insights into how the far right mobilises audiences that might otherwise reject its core tenets.

As discussed in chapter four, metapolitics is defined as the philosophy of “talking politics” (Badiou, 2005). The concept serves as a lens for analysing how culture can be weaponised for the sake of political gain. Specifically, metapolitics explores how individuals with divergent ideologies may become susceptible to right-wing influences (Marwick et al., 2022; Lucassen & Lubbers, 2012; Peucker, 2024) and is often appropriated to address how the right advances political activism to establish cultural hegemony as a precursor to political control (Maly, 2019; Griffin, 2000). The term is employed here to illustrate how such strategies motivate a cultural exchange, shaping public perception and discourse beyond traditional political arenas. In this context, metapolitics is the lens through which to explore the narrative shifts that the far right employs to resonate with diverse audiences, effectively latching onto prevailing sentiments, concerns, or crises to further their agenda.

The metapolitical endeavours undertaken by various groups and far-right activists are frequently conceptualised in academic literature as *projects* (Griffin, 2000; Maly, 2019; Tebaldi, 2024). However, to enhance our understanding of the mechanisms by which these groups engage with diverse audiences, I propose the term ‘metapolitical exchanges’ to describe these interactions, wherein conspiracies and topical discourse become cultural artefacts that are exchanged within a dynamic relationship between two ostensibly polarised factions. Furthermore, the term *exchange* is more appropriate in the context of far-right recruitment, as it emphasises the reciprocal nature of these engagements. Namely, audiences furnish the context within which the far right seeks to insert itself. The far right then

addresses these contexts through nuance, adapting the language through which they speak. Consequently, a symbiotic relationship materialises in which the audience provides a platform for the far right to *latch* onto via a cultural exchange.

Examples of the far right employing conspiratorial narratives palatable to various factions of the political spectrum were evidenced in both case studies presented here, particularly COVID-19 conspiracies and their statements pertaining to the various lockdown measures. However, more nuanced latching elements can be found in other topical arenas that were prevalent in public discourse. For instance, in discussing Brenton Tarrant—the perpetrator of the New Zealand mosque attack—Case A reframed Tarrant's identity as a far-right phoney and race traitor, instead of a hero. To promote this stance, the group utilised in-group language to incite members against those who expressed admiration for Tarrant's violent act—positioning them as watchdogs against an influx of “newbies” and Tarrant “fanboys”. Furthermore, this rebranding was conveyed to out-groups via universal paralanguage cues, presented as strikethroughs on the original text that acclaimed Tarrant as a race hero. The strikethrough was accompanied by language that demonised his violent actions and promoted the protection of white exceptionality as the true cause. Thus, by rebranding Tarrant as a race traitor, Case A engages in a metapolitical exchange wherein the group adopts positional norms to such violence to latch into new audiences while promoting their beliefs on white supremacy.

Another example is found in the attempts of Case B who engaged in metapolitical exchange during the reinstatement of President Donald Trump in 2025. The group employed an AI-generated image portraying Trump embracing the Israeli flag. This image not only circulates on their website and forums but also permeates various social media platforms. While such platforms have not been explored in this thesis, they are briefly mentioned here to illustrate how the far-right endeavours to anchor themselves within diverse social and political spheres, taking on both anti-Trump and anti-Israel positions that remain palatable to certain constituents across the political spectrum. Thus, these metapolitical exchanges are instrumental in shaping how the far right speaks and to whom within a convoluted ideological landscape. More specifically, latching through metapolitical exchanges facilitates the far right's infiltration into broader discursive arenas.

8.4 The Multimodalities of Right Speak

As illustrated above, the way in which the far-right speaks is fundamentally shaped by the contexts and environments in which it operates, influencing not only the style and content

of their text but also the avenues they utilise and the audiences they target. Specifically, they engage with a vetted audience that is already receptive to certain conspiratorial narratives, thereby fostering a *multiverse* of opportunities that enables deeper engagement and exploration of extreme ideas. However, as important as context is, so too are the specific characteristics of how they speak. Exploring these elements highlights the distinctions and commonalities within their approaches—or the very elements not addressed in current early-detection measures. The following section provides an overview of these characteristics—or the differences and similarities between Case A and B—to better understand the nuances of far-right communication.

Both groups speak by exploiting both triggered and enduring crises, and their various phases. Specifically, as seen in both Case A and Case B, the normalisation of the right allows such groups to enter mainstream discourse. Case A achieves this by addressing current events and topics—whether local (Australian) in nature or more international—often providing forum threads for discussion. This creates a space for members to air their grievances and for new audiences to engage. Case B also discusses current events, but it does so through a nationalist/Americanised lens, which is then juxtaposed with thematic, biblical tones. Thus, the far-right speaks *into* a crisis, capitalising on current topics, relevant conspiracies, and using a nudge to the right to its advantage.

Conspiracy theories play a significant role in how far-right groups communicate, not only as a latch but also as a means of speaking through the language of such theories, which are appropriated to the group's discourse. Case A's conspiratorial approach is broad and multifaceted, traversing a variety of conspiratorial universes. It appropriates a wide range of narratives, spanning topics such as health and Big Pharma, distrust in government, and ultimately culminating in the historical victimisation of the white race, which leads to the call for a so-called holy war. In contrast, Case B adopts a more focused approach, anchoring its conspiratorial framework in New World Order theories. This anchor enables the group to latch onto topical conspiracies, consistently tracing them back to the so-called "Jew World Order". Importantly, both groups find fertile recruitment ground in a space where truth is fluid and populated by individuals whose ability to distinguish fact from pseudo-fiction is increasingly diminished. These individuals are thus primed for deeper immersion into the conspiratorial multiverse, making them more open to far-right voices.

Far-right groups also capitalise on digital affordances in varying degrees and ways to communicate their message. The types of affordances employed reveal both similarities and differences in their respective approaches. Specifically, such affordances become vehicles for

a multidimensional approach to identity formation and its presentation in digitised spaces. They also serve as a means of recruitment through multimodal strategies. For example, sound plays a pivotal role in how each group recruits. Case A leans heavily into sound as a call to arms for the white race and as a way to appeal to two desired in-groups via the adoption of thrash-metal music. Case B presents sound through sermons, capitalising on the auditory elements of multimodal affordances to motivate and train recruits into violent acts. Thus, through multimodal forms of self-representation, the far-right speak through what is afforded to them in digitised spaces and employ such affordances to tailor their recruitment campaigns.

Far-right groups utilise multimodal affordances to promote their beliefs and engage their intended audiences. For instance, both Case A and Case B aim to immerse followers through the density of their content made possible through the spatial elements of multimodal affordances—whether as labyrinthine textual narratives or intricate scrollytelling (an interactive storytelling technique where content unfolds dynamically as the user scrolls)—designed to legitimise their claim as the true voice of white supremacy. These multimodal strategies are also used to communicate historical elements of far-right culture in their representations. Case A, for example, draws heavily from the aesthetics of the Third Reich and the Roman Empire, employing visual affordances to portray these references as aspirational markers of a desired ethnostate. Case B similarly uses colour schemes to signal allegiance to the Third Reich and to reinforce Holocaust denialism. However, the narration of their group identity begins with a posture of threat and counter-threat—portraying historical violence committed by their out-groups and prophesying doom for the white race, conveyed through a mix of graphics, animation, and visual symbolism. These historical references serve a dual purpose: firstly, they create a sense of familiarity through recognisable iconography; and secondly, they introduce a coded paralinguage developed through the group's unique identity, accessible only to those fully immersed in their ideology.

As illustrated by the two case studies, the far-right also exploits paralinguage affordances to speak in a *second language*. This coded language extends beyond the use of slurs directed at their enemies and further defines their unique identities. For example, Case A's second language is shaped by a more universal, hybrid identity that attempts to embrace various cultures—particularly through a blend of American and Australian influences. Thus, Case A presents a form of *digital cosmopolitanism* (Ponzanesi, 2020), embracing both American and Australian colloquialisms to convey its ideology. Case B, by contrast, speaks through a tighter, more rigid framework steeped in religious symbolism that offers its own

form of universality. As such, Case B aims to speak from a space that defends all that is white, American, patriotic, and Christian.

This second language also incorporates elements of a verbal sleight of hand, or the language of double entendres and hypocrisies, which permits such groups to traverse the conspiratorial multiverse and tap into different audience spheres. Specifically, Case A speaks the language of two varying beliefs, employed at opportune times—whether in relation to their stance on women, or their position on Palestinians versus their disdain for Israel. Case B hypocritically embraces—or turns a blind eye to—anti-Christian behaviours (murder, theft, etc.) in a bid to recruit for the cause of white supremacy. The addition of a coded second language indicates that the far-right employ a plethora of affordances to present elements of their unique identities. However, provided with additional flexibility, they also speak in opportune ways, at particular times, forsaking their beliefs in a bid to latch onto audiences and attempt to recruit individuals towards violence.

While there are similarities between the two case studies—such as their exploitation of digital tools, crises, and conspiracy theory-laden narratives—their unique group identities ultimately shape the language they employ in distinct ways, beyond their ideological and conspiratorial differences. For example, through their cultural identities, both groups identify and describe their enemies, thus spiking their language in unique ways depending on how such relationships are framed. Specifically, Case A articulates these grievances via the historical resentments of its leader, with current members carrying forward this narrative. Case B uses their leader’s experiences and teachings as foundational doctrine but progress their articulation of out-groups to more universal *cause* narratives. Thus, how such groups position themselves in relation to their perceived enemies, and their desired outcomes, influences the language through which they speak.

Each group speaks from distinct positions within the conceptual geography of the far-right, relative to mainstream society and other far-right factions. These elements are prevalent in the characteristics defined as their social identities. Case A speaks from what might be termed an ‘unwelcome member’ status, rooted in their leader’s political highs and subsequent marginalisation by the American conservative elite. Case B—buoyed by a notorious membership—positions itself outside the mainstream but at the forefront of the far-right as “King of the Outsiders”, speaking a revolutionary language from the margins. Their language, then, is not just a product of belief, but of deeply embedded group identity, one shaped by the socio-political and cultural ecosystems from which it emerges.

While the social and cultural elements of groupspeak derive from a sense of conceptual positioning, the role of out-groups, and influences shaping how they speak, the most prevalent differentiating elements are found within their collective identities. Here, the constructed, hierarchical, and exclusive elements of their identities emerge to create unique stylistic cues that establish differences among them. Whether through the language of strict group norms on socialisation, personal hygiene, and high levels of group involvement, or through grooming members into potential perpetrators of violence via the language of divine prophecy and militarised manuals and codes, each group asserts its main objectives through a unique language, for unique purposes, and in ways that are inherently different.

Lastly, both groups take advantage of the fact that they remain undetected because they do not conform to dominant paradigms of what is conventionally recognised as *terrorism* and, by extension, what is popularly understood to constitute far-right *extremism*. By not conforming to the ways in which regulatory and digital countermeasures define violence and violent groups, these groups—and many like them—remain on the clear web, in spaces that nurture opportunities to promote violence undetected. This strategic evasion, combined with the convoluted nature of online environments exacerbated by crises, positions far-right recruitment—and the multimodal texts they produce—as *lighthouses* in the *digital fog*. These lighthouses guide their audiences through the chaos, providing direction and clarity amidst the disorienting swirl of conspiracies, confusion/delusion, and ideological messaging. Thus, the way far-right groups speak is designed to steer individuals toward beliefs that assert white supremacy, framing it not as an isolated ideology but as a necessary and empowering response to perceived societal shifts. In doing so, they draw people deeper into a network of influence, where the fog of digital delusion becomes the very tool of recruitment, allowing these movements to remain undetected and grow.

This section outlined the intricacies of the digital environments in which far-right actors operate and the strategies they use to communicate online. However, significant challenges remain in detecting or removing some of the more extreme variants of the far-right, particularly those examined in this thesis. Although regulatory frameworks and digital countermeasures have succeeded in removing certain content and deplatforming prominent figures—some of whom will be discussed in the next section—others remain largely undetected on the clear web, just a few clicks away. I argue that this blind spot is the result of representational biases embedded within current counter-extremism frameworks. Two such biases are particularly salient: the conceptual divide between terrorism and extremism, and the disproportionate focus on amplified far-right actors, referred to here as the MAGA Cap

Syndrome, which inadvertently obscures less visible groups among them. This section addresses the first of these.

8.5 Terrorism as Action

The distinction between terrorism and extremism has not only shaped the treatment of actors labelled under each term but has also influenced the meaning and implications of the labels themselves. Broadly, terrorism can be considered a label denoting *action*, while extremism is often associated with *inaction*. This framing has direct consequences for how threats are perceived and responded to in policy and practice. As discussed in chapter three, the term ‘terrorism’ is inherently malleable and has historically been subject to manipulation by State actors (Chiha, 2013, p. 90). Furthermore, terrorism is often reserved for jihadist actors (Hase, 2021; Kundnani, 2014; Mulinari & Neergaard, 2012) and has been wielded to justify extraordinary interventions against perceived enemies. To illustrate this, I examined the expansive and often arbitrary counterterrorism frameworks that emerged in the post-9/11 context. These measures, while addressing an extraordinary event, extended well beyond the domain of public policy, manifesting in militarised campaigns such as the War on Terror.

Securitisation helps explain how justification for the War was achieved via the processes that shift events from everyday politics to national security (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998, p. 20; Buzan and Wæver, 2003, p. 491). Namely, by aligning political authority, discourse, and knowledge, the US government was able to redefine 9/11 as a global threat requiring a military response. However, it is within the enemy image-building (Gaufman, 2017, p. 20) stages of securitisation that the positioning of terrorism as a threat requiring extraordinary action is evidenced. For example, then-US President George W. Bush, repetitively positioned terrorism as the enemy and the war against it as a moral crusade—between good and evil—thus reinforcing a binary worldview conducive to collective mobilisation (Boyd, 2014, p. 13). In his address on the evening of 9/11, Bush repeatedly invoked the terms *terrorists* and *evil*, reinforcing a moral binary that mobilised collective support (Singer, 2004). These good-versus-evil narratives, grounded in cultural and theological traditions, simplify complex geopolitical events into morally absolute terms (Proud, 1998; Heerspink, 2012). Furthermore, such narratives serve as powerful instruments of social conditioning, particularly during times of military crisis, enabling the public to interpret global violence through familiar binaries (Gaufman, 2017, p. 64). More importantly, they serve as a call to arms, a familiar narrative, one in which the “latter [evil] is always attacking the former [good] and ... the former always prevails” (Bratta, 2009: 240).

In the case of 9/11, such simplified representations helped solidify the enemy image of the terrorist as an existential threat and validated extraordinary responses through a widely accepted moral framework. Thus, terrorism, in this and other contexts, transcends description; it functions as a *performative label* that mobilises action. Accordingly, terrorism can be understood not merely as a legal or political designation but as a *communicative act* to facilitate an extraordinary response. It operates as a discursive tool, often unevenly applied, that addresses certain forms of violence over others. Importantly, this asymmetry has profound implications for how countermeasures are developed and deployed against far-right extremism online.

8.6 Extremism as Inaction

While terrorism frequently acts as a red button prompting immediate, extraordinary measures, extremism—as surveyed in chapter three of this thesis—is considered anything but terrorism. Specifically, the use of the term extremism has been evidenced to de-escalate or de-securitise an issue, such as in the case of Australia’s CVE measures. By invoking the extremism label, securitising agents reposition certain acts within the realm of public debate and criminal justice, rather than national security (Wæver, 1995). This framing diminishes the likelihood of extraordinary responses typically justified under the terrorism label.

A pertinent example of de-escalating extremism—and one that occurred at the time of exploring the variations of both labels for this thesis—is the mass shooting that occurred in Buffalo, New York, in May 2022. Eighteen-year-old Payton Gendron entered Tops Friendly Markets at approximately 2:30 p.m., armed with an AR-15 rifle and wearing tactical gear, including body armour and a helmet-mounted camera for live streaming the attack via Twitch (Browning, 2022). Gendron was an active participant in online communities that endorsed white supremacist ideologies and the Great Replacement conspiracy theory, which prominently featured in his 180-page manifesto alongside overtly antisemitic content (Meyer, 2022). The attack resulted in 10 fatalities and three injuries (Helmore, 2022). Two months later, Gendron was indicted on 27 federal charges, including hate crimes and firearms violations, with *domestic terrorism* among them (Halpert, 2022). This delineation is important as the US judicial system—lacking in domestic terrorism statutes on both state and federal levels—relies on hate-crime statutes that treat domestic terrorism as murder or assault and battery and not a matter of national security (Collins, 2020, pp. 9–10). Furthermore, initial responses to the incident refrained from immediately categorising the violence as

terrorism. For example, authorities and news media instead employed terms such as “racially motivated hate crime” and “racially motivated violent extremism” (Zucker, Gorman & Warburton, 2022; Thompson et al., 2022). This linguistic framing was prevalent across early media reports and official statements; however, the dominant narrative was that the Tops Friendly Markets shooting was a case of *violent extremism* (Healy, Closson & Medina, 2022). The choice of terminology is significant and impacted public perception and policy response. Namely, FBI Special Agent Stephen Belongia described the shooter as “a racially motivated, violent extremist” and confirmed the incident would be investigated as a *federal hate crime* (Levenson et al., 2022).

Important to this context is the articulation of extremism being often, but not exclusively, reserved for acts orchestrated by ultra-right-wing, white supremacist, white nationalist or neo-Nazi groups (Dixitt & Miller, 2022; Corbin, 2017). The avoidance of the terrorism label in cases involving white perpetrators contributes to a politicised and racialised securitisation discourse. The de-securitisation of such incidents—achieved through the extremism label—sustains the issue within the bounds of routine political debate and domestic legal frameworks, ultimately downplaying the threat. In this case—as in many cases pertaining to the far-right—the prevailing discourse de-emphasised the need for extraordinary security measures. Simultaneously, the incident reignited debates on gun control, which further ensured the issue remained in the domain of everyday politics (Stern & McBride, 2022). Thus, extremism can be seen as not terrorism and, simultaneously, as a label signalling inaction.

This discrepancy in labelling carries significant implications for the development and implementation of early detection measures aimed at identifying the online recruitment strategies of the far-right. The reluctance to categorise white supremacist or separatist violence as terrorism—instead, often labelling such acts as extremism—contributes to a diminished perception of the threat. As a result, such actors are not consistently treated as imminent risks to national security, nor are they met with the punitive strategies typically deployed against those labelled as terrorists. Thus, the term extremism, although occasionally used interchangeably with terrorism, remains a concept marked by semantic fluidity and politicised application. Importantly, it can be considered a label that signifies inaction. Specifically, when applied to far-right violence, it functions as a discursive mechanism that obscures the severity of the threat and defers urgent action. As such, the online presence of far-right, white supremacist, and white separatist groups is inadequately addressed, leaving critical blind-spots in both national and international countermeasures. Thus, the selective

application of security labels not only reflects existing representational biases but also undermines the capacity of counter-extremism measures to respond effectively to the recruitment tactics of the far-right.

8.7 The MAGA Cap Syndrome

In *Everything You Love Will Burn: Inside the Rebirth of White Nationalism in America*, journalist Vegas Tenold (2018) recounts his experiences of embedding himself within various far-right, white supremacist, and white separatist groups in the United States. During a Ku Klux Klan rally, Tenold (2018, p. 88) observed that contemporary Klansmen framed their mission as defending what they considered white, Christian, patriotic, and American values. Drawing on Tenold's observations as representational pillars, I introduce the term *MAGA Cap Syndrome* to describe a contemporary bias, or one of the elements that arguably shape digital and regulatory countermeasures against far-right speech online. Furthermore, the MAGA cap can be considered emblematic of the impacts of such representations, ones that impede political processes—sustain crises—through the silencing of those associated with such groups. This term encapsulates the archetypal image of the far-right as white, American, male, pro-Trump, and aligned or, importantly, *unified* throughout established extremist networks—a stereotype intensified in the aftermath of the January 6 Capitol riot. I argue that this archetype became a symbolic reference point for regulators and developers seeking to eliminate far-right content online. I do so as the case studies that this thesis aimed to explore were successfully removed online after the violence of January 6.

Originally, this thesis aimed to analyse the discourse of groups such as the Proud Boys, a self-described “Western chauvinist” men’s club (Al Jazeera, 2018), and QAnon, a conspiracy theory that motivated a leaderless adhocacy among its adherents (Holoyda, 2022). Both groups had a notable presence in Australia, were established online and were primary examples of international entities among the far-right translating their cause to local audiences. However, both were also involved in the Capitol riot and their presence, alongside their flags and insignia, not only became visually synonymous with January 6 but with the red MAGA cap itself. News media coverage around January 6 consistently reinforced this unification. Reports from the BBC (2023), *The Guardian* (2021), and others conflated pro-Trump supporters, right-wing militias, QAnon conspiracy theorists and the gold and black insignia of a militarised Proud Boy contingent. Figures like Jacob Chansley, the so-called QAnon Shaman, and Ashli Babbitt, another QAnon adherent who was shot attempting to enter the Speaker’s Lobby, were also extensively covered. Headlines further framed the riot

as both a culmination of Trump's assault on democratic institutions and as a freak occurrence fuelled by extremist factions (McManus, 2021) accompanied by images often featuring the Proud Boys and Chansley. Thus, groups such as QAnon and the Proud Boys became emblematic in the visual and narrative framing of the event, their presence spiking a sea of pro-Trump red MAGA caps.

By the time data collection for this thesis began, both groups had largely been deplatformed from mainstream internet spaces. Their disappearance coincided with legal actions—most notably, the sedition charges against several Proud Boys members, including leader Enrique Tarrio. To date, many individuals who engaged in the violence of January 6, such as Chansley, have since resurfaced in public life (e.g., running for office after serving 41 months in prison). Thousands of others have also re-emerged, including Proud Boys leader Enrique Tarrio, who was pardoned by Trump, had his X account re-established, and was granted a platform on Australia's *60 Minutes* (see Adams & McNab, 2025) to publicly express his desire for a vendetta against those he believes have wronged him. However, despite these resurfacing efforts, such actors remain largely deplatformed from mainstream digital spaces. For example, QAnon, though leaderless and decentralised, and therefore operational beyond classic modes of self-promotion such as a website, remains systematically purged from mainstream platforms. Previous posts, including documentary-style videos and 8Chan threads, have been replaced with counter-narratives, or strategic messages designed to challenge and undermine disinformation by offering accurate, alternative perspectives (European Commission, 2015). However, while figures like Tarrio rekindled his mainstream presence, others who were banished found their way to deregulated and closed spaces, or created their own pay-walled platform, Truth Social, where the far-right now flourish (Carlson, 2021). However, QAnon and Proud Boys were not the only groups targeted. Specifically, counter-extremism efforts expanded to encompass a broader network of alleged associates symbolically aligned with the red MAGA cap, including Republican Party figures, Senators, and social media platforms—either as perceived enablers of far-right activity or as entities that failed to act pre-emptively (Zakrzewski et al., 2023).

The inclusion of the Republican Party in this associative web was not incidental. Actions by key Republican figures reinforced perceptions of alignment with the riot at the Capitol. For instance, a then Republican Senate minority initially blocked the formation of a commission to investigate January 6 (PBS, 2021), raising suspicions of complicity. Others, such as advisor for Trump's 2016 presidential campaign Roger Stone, helped disseminate the 'Stop the Steal' narrative—a claim insinuating that the results of the 2020 election were

rigged. However, none of the Senators or spokespeople mentioned were present at the Capitol on January 6, nor are they affiliated with extreme far-right factions. Nonetheless, their rhetorical and symbolic alignment with these groups contributed to their absorption into the broader far-right narrative and further motivated a misdirection in terms of articulating what is perceived as far-right extremism online and what should be removed.

During this time, several conservative, populist and far-right Republican Party senators experienced the digital era's equivalent of excommunication—namely, *cancelling*. Most notably, Donald Trump, Republican Senator Marjorie Taylor Greene and Senator Barry Moore all had their accounts locked on X, then Twitter and Facebook for promoting the 'Big Steal' conspiracy (Singh, 2021; Curtis, 2021). Highlighting their digital banishments in this context does not negate the decision to do so. The repercussions of amplifying disinformation have been addressed in chapter two of this thesis. However, the cancelling of associates, particularly those engaged in mainstream politics, highlights two important elements pertaining to the misdirection of far-right countermeasures. Namely, the first is that the amplification of particular representational biases motivates a unification between perpetrators and their perceived associates resulting in political consequences. This misdirection—or the cancelling of associates from the arena of mainstream politics—can trigger an additional crisis, or increased levels of political polarisation (Kleinfeild, 2023; Danoff, 2020). Framed here as a crisis due to its ability to create an environment in which “intolerance will grow, democratic norms will be undermined, and winners will be reluctant to let the losers ever regain power” (Axelrod et al., 2021, p. 1), political polarisation has the potential to undermine democracy “by making compromise impossible and transforming politics into a zero-sum game” (Axelrod et al., 2021, p. 1). Trust in governments falls and this distrust can transform political attitudes (Pew Research Centre, 2015), further spiking a nudge to the right. Thus, the casting of a wider web of associates creates a situation in which political polarisation—a variant of political crisis—provides opportunities for more extreme ideas to enter mainstream political discourse, with little margin for discussion or debate, heightening the palatability of far-right messaging.

The second important element evidenced in misdirecting countermeasures is the impact on detecting far-right extremism online. While those associated with the proverbial MAGA cap were largely censored, others—as shown by the examples that appear in this thesis—remain. While certain elements of the far-right were effectively deplatformed, along with associates who may not align ideologically or structurally with known extremist groups, others within the “spontaneous coalition” (Miller-Idriss, 2020) of the far-right continue to

espouse antisemitic, anti-democratic, racist, xenophobic and misogynistic content. As such, the representation of January 6 can be seen as one of the elements that skew digital and regulatory countermeasures by way of addressing a particular contingent of the far-right, while passing over those remaining. These representational biases—discussed here through the events of January 6 and the emblematic nature of the groups and individuals involved—can be seen to hamper early detection measures, the censoring of far-right extremist content, and the spread of online recruitment due to the powerful portrayals of all that is white, American, Christian and patriotic; or, in this instance, those among them emblematically sporting a red MAGA cap.

8.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined how the far right speak to people online in a way that illustrated not only the *how*, but *where* they speak as a strategic and communicative tool. Namely, far-right recruitment is shaped by a second language: one built from unique identities, codes, multimodalities, and other various digital affordances that collectively propel their message to some audiences while, importantly, obscuring it from others. Thus, far-right recruiters do not just speak to people—they create opportunities and employ weaponised elements of digital affordances to segue into new groups and cultures throughout a digitised realm. These are spaces where their messages can move subtly, slipping through cracks in counterterrorism and CVE measures aimed at early detection.

At the centre of this strategy is the conspiratorial multiverse as part of a wider digitised fog that forms a Vetting Ground. It is a narrative web that offers different outcomes and conclusions amid an enduring crisis, simultaneously offering various entry points into the Vetting Ground. These various approaches to conspiracy narratives, made possible in the multiverse, present the far right with an ability to latch onto societal panics and redirect audiences to a far-right worldview—offering meaning and direction in moments of uncertainty. In this way, the far right operate less like broadcasters and more like lighthouses: guiding people through the digital fog. This communicative approach makes their message palatable, allowing it to shift shape across local, international and cultural contexts. It is through this palatability that far-right ideas, often of Americanised variants, become translatable to Australian audiences. That is, not as something imported, but as something already familiar.

The question of why they can't be caught lies partly in this strategic ambiguity. Far-right content often operates just beneath the thresholds of mainstream detection, falling

outside conventional definitions of terrorism. It is also a question of how extremism is framed. As I have argued, representational biases—particularly the dominance of American far-right imagery and the symbolic weight of January 6—limit the field of vision. What results is a regulatory and technological quagmire shaped around recognisable symbols and spectacular events, rather than the everyday, embedded forms of extremism. The binary between terrorism and extremism reinforces this gap: where terrorism prompts hard securitisation, extremism is more often met with soft, sometimes ineffective CVE responses. These conceptual and operational divides not only weaken early detection, including within the Australian context, but perpetuate a political crisis which, cyclically, increases polarisation and further provides the far right with opportunities to embed themselves into mainstream discourse.

In bringing together these findings, I have argued that the far right communicate not through a single channel, but through an ecology—one shaped by identity, crisis, digital tools, and the strategic use of the fog. Their speech is not always loud or direct; instead, it's ambient and often hiding in plain sight. To respond effectively, detection efforts could arguably move beyond representationally based approaches that tend to disengage with the spontaneous coalition known as the far right and the fog in which they operate, allowing their speech to circulate; specifically, approaches that recognise that the far right speak in a unique language based on their specific identities, that they speak in particular contexts, and that their messages resonate beyond the borders of their own local geographies.

9 Conclusion: Signals from the Right—Illuminating the Path of Extremism

Recruiters of violence as *lighthouses* may be a novel concept to some, but it is not unfamiliar to me. Specifically, these lighthouses are voices I often heard on State-run media channels during the height of the Balkan wars. The language of nationalist exceptionalism, justifying extraordinary levels of violence against perceived *others*, permeated newspapers, echoed in the streets, and reverberated across the front lines of several wars waged among former members of a fractured unity of States.

These voices are familiar not only to those who are acquainted with the outcomes of the dissolution of Yugoslavia but also in a broader, more global context, and across various historical epochs. From the ideological battles fought during the two World Wars, to the cultural struggles of the Cold War, and the role of Rwandan radio in sparking genocide, the presence of these lighthouses illuminating a path to violence is a recurring theme. However, in today's digitised world, where our lives are saturated by media, these platforms now provide new avenues for actors not always tied to the State. This new breed of lighthouses has found a language that resonates with a global, diverse audience, spreading violence more widely and effectively. The way these actors mobilise for their causes and the language they use to disseminate violence are at the core of what this thesis has aimed to address.

This chapter concludes the thesis by first restating the study's main research questions and approaches. It then outlines key findings that are both conceptual and practical in nature. Specifically, while some findings offer a conceptual lens through which to explore the phenomena observed in the study of far-right groups, others provide practical tools—such as an extremist typology—to assist with early detection measures. The findings are also categorised into two areas: those related to far-right recruitment and those concerned with the representational biases that impact countering violent extremism (CVE) measures. The chapter will then present the main original contributions to the fields of scholarship and CVE, followed by a discussion of limitations, future research directions, and concluding remarks.

9.1 Research Questions and Approaches – A Recap

This thesis set out to explore how far-right recruiters speak to people online. Specifically, it aimed to address how far-right recruitment leverages digital spaces in ways that incorporate the mechanisms of these environments and the opportunities they present to

far-right groups—elements which are often assumed as given, or oftentimes overlooked, in scholarly and practical approaches. This thesis also sought to examine the factors that hinder the success of Australia’s early detection measures, as part of the State’s CVE approaches. In particular, it explored the representational biases that impede our understanding of the far right, extremism, and how such actors mobilise individuals to their cause. Lastly, it considered the elements that made such messages particularly palatable and translatable to local, Australian audiences—a country currently experiencing rising levels of online radicalisation into far-right groups.

Through eight chapters—including three literature review chapters, methodology, two case studies, and a final discussion—this thesis built toward a more nuanced understanding of how far-right recruitment operates in digital contexts. Each chapter contributed to a broader interdisciplinary examination; one that considered how digital affordances and identity-making practices intersect to shape recruitment strategies in digital environments. By taking an interdisciplinary approach—one that appropriates Critical Terrorism and Security Studies to the study of digital cultures—this thesis reframed recruitment as the *text* produced online. In doing so, it shifted the focus from the individuals who create such content to the content itself, as a means of engaging with the initial moments of interaction between groups and audiences—interactions that reflect the digitised experience of contemporary recruitment. In addition, this analysis revealed that far-right groups do not simply talk to audiences online. Rather, they capitalise on multimodal affordances—visual, spatial, and auditory—to construct their messaging as cultural artefacts, forming what I term a *metapolitical exchange* between groups and their intended publics.

Drawing on psychological approaches to Terrorism Studies—the discipline’s dominant epistemological framework since 9/11—this thesis diverged from root-cause approaches that often pathologise violence. Instead, it focused on the observable strategies and discursive practices of extremist groups, shifting attention towards what Horgan (2019, p. 218) articulates as “what terrorists do” rather than who they are. This allowed for an exploratory study of group identity and how such identity formations shape the style and substance of far-right recruitment. Specifically, the thesis proposed a refreshed typology of extremism, grounded in the work of Schwartz, Dunkel and Waterman (2009), to examine how cultural, social, and collective identities inform these communicative practices. This approach not only produced a more nuanced understanding of how these identities influence group discourse but also challenged homogenised representations of the far right by highlighting their uniqueness.

Through the examination of digital cultures and the evolving communicative dynamics of today's online environments, this thesis explored the increasing prevalence of misinformation, conspiracy theories, and the role of crises in exacerbating such phenomena—elements that facilitate and accelerate online recruitment. Specifically, this thesis explored how crises develop both environments and opportunities for far-right groups to engage with audiences online and, equally, challenge mainstream narratives, thus accelerating their efforts. These insights contribute a conceptual and methodological shift in how far-right communication is studied—via the context, identity making practices, and the multimodality of their discourse, rather than focusing solely on individual psychology. In that vein, the next section outlines the central findings that emerged from this interdisciplinary study, addressing how recruitment manifests online and why current detection measures continue to fall short.

9.2 Key Findings: The Conceptual and Practical

This thesis presents several key findings that deepen our understanding of the far right, the digital spaces in which they operate and recruit, and the representational influences that obscure their detection online. These findings emerge through critical engagement with far-right discourse and digital environments, offering original insights into how recruitment unfolds and how such activity can be more effectively identified and addressed. These findings can be grouped into two broad directional outputs: the conceptual and the practical. The first centres on conceptual insights: how the digitised arena is constructed and navigated, the characteristics that define far-right recruitment practices, and the identities that shape such discourse. These conceptual findings also include innovative insights that challenge the dominant definitions of *terrorism* and *extremism*, as well as the representational elements of the far right that appear amplified and misdirect our understanding of such groups. The second addresses the more practical elements of this research and offers directions for improving early detection measures such as the extremism typology combined with multimodal case study analysis. These findings also offer a deeper understanding of how conspiracy theories function as tools for recruitment, or *latches*. These practical elements offer considerations for regulators and those who develop digital countermeasures, particularly in relation to avoiding biases when developing tools for monitoring or detecting far-right recruitment online.

The key findings presented here are not only a by-product of extensive research into far-right online spaces but are also shaped by the process of *unlearning* and *relearning*—a reflexive mechanism outlined in the methodology and woven throughout the research. As

discussed in the methodological section, this involved intentionally redirecting focus toward themes and topics adjacent to, but not always directly within, the primary realms of the far right, digital spaces, or recruitment, in order to establish a research position from which these phenomena could be revisited and reimagined with fresh insights and novel approaches. For example, reading the work of parapsychologists to explore elements of *magical thinking* and *apophenia* in conspiracy beliefs, exploring cults as extreme variants of intergroup loyalty, and Manson-like figures to consider how certain ‘recruiters’—similar to Manson and the women among his family—spoke to particular people, in specific ways and times.

The conceptual and practical contributions can be separated. However, they are intentionally presented here as intertwined as one; essentially unable to exist meaningfully without the other. For example, the conceptualisation of digitised spaces and the ways we currently understand extremist actors are inseparable from the consequences of existing CVE measures—which often pursue narrow and, at times, counterproductive directions. Nor can concepts that illustrate representational elements or the environments in which the far right operate in be separated from the texts the far right produce as part of their recruitment strategies. Nonetheless, while intertwined, the findings will be presented across three broad clusters: (1) conceptual and practical innovations in addressing the online environments where far-right recruitment takes place; (2) the communicative strategies—the ways in which the far right speak; and (3) the broader implications of representational bias within countermeasures and the political processes they have an effect on.

9.2.1 Recruitment in Digitised Environments

The first set of innovative elements presented in this thesis begins with the original conceptualisation of crises beyond their immediate political ramifications. By examining when the far right speak, how they speak, and in what context, it becomes evident that crises not only serve to shift the political needle to the right, but—in periods of heightened digitisation—also create optimal conditions for far-right recruitment to flourish. This argument has been presented through the original framework I term the *Three Stages of a Crisis*.

The first stage acknowledges existing scholarship that tracks the drift toward right-wing politics. The second stage, which I conceptualise and term the *digitised fog*, describes a space in which various forms of pseudo-information—including mis- and disinformation, and, most notably, conspiracy theories—challenge mainstream narratives, impact political processes and, importantly, open up opportunities for far-right groups to recruit. This concept

was developed through an analysis of the communicative strategies observed in the two case studies explored in this thesis. By observing their outreach approaches and when they chose to execute them, I conceptualise the digitised fog as more than a descriptive term; but one that names a chaotic and layered information environment where factual consensus is blurred, and extremist messaging is given space to spread. Analogically, I present the digitised fog as a conceptual vehicle—a space that enables and accelerates far-right recruitment. The third stage, which I frame as the Vetting Ground, builds on existing understandings of conspiratorial belief—particularly Shermer’s (2011) *Conspiratorial Mindset* and West’s (2018) *Line of Demarcation*—and adapts them to a study of recruitment processes. The Vetting Ground is introduced as an original conceptual space in which individuals, already receptive to conspiracy thinking, become increasingly vulnerable to far-right messaging. Through this framing, I present crises as a proverbial trifecta: they entail political shifts, the convergence of fact and pseudo-information, and the formation of an ideal environment for recruitment into far-right extremism.

The second innovation presents new approaches to considering and articulating the dynamics of conspiracy theories. While conspiracy theories are positioned—in line with existing scholarship—as foundational to far-right beliefs, this thesis extends that understanding by reimagining conspiracies not as passive ideological bedrocks, but as dynamic recruitment mechanisms. Through close analysis of narrative shifts within the case studies, I demonstrate how conspiracy theories interrelate—not as isolated ‘rabbit holes’, but as planets within wider solar systems, or, more expansively, as a multiverse. This original metaphor captures the ways in which conspiracies provide multiple and shifting entry points for far-right actors to engage with audiences already primed through conspiratorial narratives. In conceptualising conspiracies as multiverses, I contribute a novel perspective on their functionality, their fluidity, and the opportunities they create for far-right recruitment. Together, the Three Stages of a Crisis and the Conspiratorial Multiverse provide a fresh and integrative approach to understanding the evolving and complex dynamics of far-right recruitment online, opening new avenues for both theoretical exploration and practical intervention.

9.2.2 Novel Approaches to Understanding How the Far-right Speaks

The second cluster of innovations presented in this thesis focuses on the specifics of how the far right speak. These are important for understanding who the far right is—a cluster of singular identities rather than a unified mass—and for identifying the particular

characteristics of their language, which is shaped by their cultural, social, and collective identities. Furthermore, this cluster also addresses the mechanics of how they speak, via latching and metapolitical exchanges, and as lighthouses, illuminating their message through the digitised fog.

Central to the innovations of this thesis is the concept of ‘latching’, which I developed to articulate how the far right inserts itself into cultural and political discourse. Through detailed analysis, I identified metapolitical exchanges as the mechanism by which this latching occurs—wherein conspiracies and topical content become the cultural artefacts for engaging disparate, and often oppositional, audiences. These exchanges are not merely symbolic; they reflect a tactical responsiveness in how the far right speaks—modulating discourse, rebranding narratives, and strategically adapting language to speak through the noise of crisis. This innovation emerged through close engagement with case material, where patterns of re-contextualisation, coded speech, and cultural signalling revealed a far-right strategy that is less about unifying belief systems and more about flexible, often contradictory, positioning. By naming and framing these processes, I contribute to a new way of understanding how the far-right attempts to recruit—not through overt persuasion alone, but through a discursive agility that allows them to latch onto the sentiments and anxieties of wider publics; including local audiences whose reach is obtained through the palatability and translatability of such discourse.

Further to the aforementioned discursive flexibility are the specifics of how the far right speaks. Namely, through their group’s identity. These key findings are both conceptual and practical. They conceptualise the far right’s unique stylistic cues as a *second language*—one that is both coded and multimodal, as revealed through the analysis of two case studies. They are practical in that they contribute to developing a typology of extremism that incorporates the cultural, social, and collective identities of groups. This typology can be applied in various contexts to study the far right and their recruitment strategies—whether in academic research or as practical parameters for assessing and addressing far-right recruitment online. By exploring the cultural, social, and collective identities of two far-right groups, I have identified significant similarities and differences in their identity-making approaches. This is a key finding, as it challenges preconceived notions of the far right being unified under the impacts of labelling.

Last, drawing from all the original concepts and findings that this thesis presents, I conceptualise far right text, or recruitment, as *lighthouses*. I do so not for the sake of merely re-labelling, but as a means of illustrating how—combined with the environments in which

they operate, the permeating nature of conspiracies that they employ, and the unique styles they adopt to signal and exchange with new audiences—the extreme beliefs of the far right are illuminated as a simple answer to complex situations such as crises. These lighthouses guide the audience to such conclusions by “standing there and shining”, as Lamott (1994, p. 218) aptly put. Understanding the nature of recruitment and how such messages become palatable are important steps to addressing how the far-right speak, and how to stop the pervasive influence of their recruitment tactics online.

9.2.3 Representational Biases and Challenging Known Knowns

In examining the inherently violent and abhorrent groups surveyed in this thesis, it became necessary to investigate why such actors remain active and visible online. This inquiry led to a broader exploration of the representational biases embedded within CVE measures—particularly those concerned with early detection—and how these biases have contributed to the ongoing visibility of far-right groups in digital spaces. By analysing regulatory approaches, softer CVE strategies, and various digital applications designed to curb extremist content, this thesis identifies key limitations that hinder the development of effective countermeasures.

The first key finding, both conceptual and practical in approach, explored the definitional quagmire formed by a clear delineation between *terrorism* and *extremism*. Namely, by surveying key regulatory measures evident in the aftermath of 9/11, it articulated the definition of terrorism as the by-product of enduring representations forged on the actions of post-colonial revolutionary groups—comprising Arab nationalists and the more hardliner jihadists among them—such as the PLO and their sophisticated and weaponised tactics that garnered global shock and attention. These representations were further cemented during the events of 9/11 and beyond into the post-9/11 era. Exploring this representation through the lens of securitisation, I position terrorism as a term that signifies *action*—often punitive, extraordinary, and militarised—in response to acts of violence labelled as such.

In contrast, extremism, a malleable term that has developed a problematic fluidity through overuse, has often prompted responses that are of softer CVE approaches. The prevalent representation of extremism—notwithstanding its application to violence of a jihadist nature, or to populist ultra-conservative and hardliner political actors—is reserved for violence perpetrated by white men. By surveying the discourse surrounding the Tops Friendly Markets shooting in Buffalo, this thesis presented the ways in which the term ‘extremism’ is deployed to de-securitise an issue, creating a platform for public debate as opposed to

engaging in militarised, punitive measures against such threats. These elements position extremism as a term signifying *inaction*.

This definitional distinction has practical consequences. Representational biases allow far-right actors to remain visible on the internet, benefiting from an oversight that fails to categorise their behaviour as terrorism. As a result, they evade detection and deplatforming. The framing of extremism as not terrorism impacts the deliverance of CVE measures and fails to address the looming threat of online far-right recruitment. This dichotomy affects who gets deplatformed, shapes the design and focus of counter-extremism initiatives, and distorts how far-right extremists are perceived by regulators, platforms, and the public alike. Thus, the delineation and re-evaluation of such terms present findings that address the biases that impede countermeasures towards far-right extremism.

Another key conceptual finding within the orbit of representational bias is the term I refer to as the MAGA Cap Syndrome, which encapsulates the dominant representation of the far-right as white, American, Christian, male, and emblematic of Trump's red cap. This stereotype, particularly reinforced after the January 6 Capitol riot, oversimplifies the far-right by focusing on a highly visible, recognisable image. Drawing from Tenold's (2018) analysis of white nationalism, I argue that the MAGA cap has become a symbol that directs counter-extremism measures towards easily identifiable groups, while obscuring the broader, more complex reality of far-right extremism.

This simplification was detected to have two major impacts. First, it created a situation in which platforms and regulators directed counter-extremism measures toward what was visible, symbolic, and already in the spotlight. Furthermore, it developed a misdirection in countermeasures to include the banishment of those associated with the red MAGA cap. Deplatforming efforts zeroed in on the most emblematic groups and their perceived associates, including Republican senators and pro-Trump figures, reinforcing an already polarised political landscape and pushing mainstream actors into the margins.

Second, and most crucially, this representational misdirection allowed others to slip through. The groups explored in this thesis—known for orchestrating extremely violent acts—benefited from this oversight. They remained online, operational, and largely visible within contexts preoccupied with the MAGA archetype. MAGA Cap Syndrome, then, names the problem of representational bias and its misdirection: the kind of visual and rhetorical oversight that shapes not just public perception, but the policies, tools, and digital architectures built to respond. In doing so, it reaffirms the central argument of this thesis: that

far-right recruitment is not simply about who is most visible, but about who gets overlooked when we assert emblematic assumptions about extremism.

9.3 Original Contributions

This thesis offers several original contributions to the study of far-right extremism and online recruitment. First, it refreshes the call from Horgan (2019) to focus on what terrorists (or, in this case, extremists) do by expanding this focus to include *where they operate*—positioning digital environments not simply as tools, but as spaces that actively shape recruitment. In doing so, this thesis underscores the significance of online environments as ecosystems that facilitate and sustain far-right recruitment beyond the assumptions of secondary sites.

Throughout, I also present several analogical descriptors—such as the metaphor of *lighthouses, the Three Stages of Crises, Fogs, Vetting Grounds, multiverses, metapolitical exchanges* and *latches*—to articulate how far-right groups operate, communicate, and recruit within digital ecologies, offering accessible yet critically grounded ways to discuss their evolving strategies. By way of such conceptual exploration, I directly challenge the dominant assumptions that view online extremism as an extension of offline behaviour. As such, this thesis foregrounds the digital realm and its unique affordances as a critical context in its own right—one that enables the far right to innovate, adapt, and speak in uniquely coded ways.

The research integrates both theoretical and practical dimensions, developing a typology that draws on and updates Schwartz, Dunkel, and Waterman's (2009) framework. The extremism typology enables a more refined analysis of groups and the way they speak by examining the interplay of their cultural, social, and collective identities and their influence. As a practical tool, it provides a template for assessing groups based not only on their belief systems, but on the stylistic, environmental, and affective characteristics that distinguish them. In advancing these insights, the thesis contributes to the interdisciplinary study of online extremism by bringing together Critical Terrorism and Security Studies and digital cultures. It reconceptualises key elements essential to understanding online recruitment—namely, the environments in which it occurs, the operational aspects of the far-right, and the distinct ways they speak.

Finally, by illustrating the unique elements within far-right groups, this thesis challenges long-held assumptions of a unified far-right identity. It shows that recruitment is not simply a matter of belief, but of stylistic adaptation, contextual nuance, opportunity, and

strategic communication—features that demand more sophisticated models of analysis and response in CVE measures.

9.4 Limitations

While this thesis offered an elaborate and nuanced approach to surveying how far-right groups recruit in dynamic online spaces, there are limitations in the approach to the study. Namely, the study focused on two case studies, thus limiting its scope. Furthermore, while it was beneficial to focus on two groups with similar identities, it further limited the scope to pseudo-theological entities within the far-right spectrum, narrowing the understanding of the far right to these parameters. These limitations extended to sites in which recruitment was observed. Namely, it focused on websites as deliberate and controlled self-representations of identity while not analysing a group's presence on social media platforms and other forms of digital media, leaving room for an expansion into these realms.

While this thesis conceptualised the mechanisms of digital spaces and the various characteristics that aid and abet far-right recruitment, these assertions are theoretical and analogical in nature, cemented through exploration as opposed to direct observation of such phenomena. Furthermore, while the study also explored how the far-right attempt to parlay their beliefs into various audiences online, it did not have the space to consider how these metapolitical exchanges were received by such audiences, and the level of embeddedness they achieved, opening up opportunities to further explore both ends of a spectrum and the true impacts of online recruitment.

9.5 Future Research

While the limitations discussed above may be considered constraints, they also present opportunities for future exploration. The contexts in which far-right groups were explored in this thesis continue to evolve. Therefore, future studies should view the findings presented here as a benchmark for an ongoing exploration into these phenomena, which will undoubtedly continue to develop.

Future research would benefit from surveying a broader range of groups, expanding the number of case studies considered. This would provide a wider scope for the approaches presented here. I have identified and detected several of these groups online, and I plan to survey them in future work. Additionally, while this thesis offers a valuable and under-examined perspective, future studies should incorporate social media and platform-specific dynamics to gain a fuller picture of how far-right groups speak, adapt, and reach audiences.

Additionally, research would benefit from a means to empirically assess the conceptual elements introduced in this thesis. For example, I have posited that conspiracies can be perceived as *multiverses*. Empirical evidence of the shapeshifting nature of conspiracies could be gained through thematically mapping conspiracies and their evolution over time, and across various cultural subgroups and platforms online.

Representational biases were approached in this thesis by observing the language embedded in regulatory measures and their impacts on the corpus during the data collection period. While these elements illustrate the impacts of such biases on misdirected countering violent extremism (CVE) approaches, the study would benefit from further engagement with developers and regulators. Gaining clarification on these representational biases, understanding their justification, and learning how they are applied could further inform the development of more effective countermeasures.

Lastly, as articulated by Ebner (2017)—whose premise is included in this thesis in chapters three and four—the extremes on both sides have more in common with each other than with the political centre. The far right represents only one element of a broad political spectrum. Thus, exploring the identities of groups labelled *jihadist* or *terrorist* may provide valuable insight into the similarities and differences between ideological extremes at opposing ends of the political spectrum. This could lead to a deeper understanding of the manifestations of violence in online spaces, with implications for both practical and conceptual solutions that address such violence as it moves into physical realms.

9.6 Conclusion

This thesis set out to explore how far-right groups speak to people online. By centring on the communicative strategies and identity-making of the far right, it underscored the urgent need to rethink what we know about these groups, the digital environments in which they operate, and the tools and contexts accessible to them beyond the parameters of digital affordances. Through this, it is clear that our current approaches to countering the far right are insufficient. Only by acknowledging these spaces as ecosystems that enable and sustain harmful beliefs can we hope to develop meaningful countermeasures. Furthermore, only by understanding far-right recruitment as a product of digital culture—as much as it is a product of group identity and motives—can we begin to develop more responsive, nuanced countermeasures.

In exploring far-right recruitment and the digital cultures these groups operate in and exploit, far more was revealed than the uniqueness of far-right identities online. It brought

into view questions about how we understand extremism itself, especially when juxtaposed against entrenched definitions of terrorism or amplified and emblematic variants of the far-right. In doing so, this thesis revealed certain representational biases that impede the detection of violence online. These findings culminate in what can only be described as a paradox—one that presents the complexities of violence against the simplicities of what is known about it, how it operates, and for what purpose—echoing the very paradox named in this thesis’s title.

Paradoxes can be seen as loops that evolve over time and across various narratives. They contradict existing truths and, in doing so, reveal the complexities and tensions of what is understood and known about certain phenomena. This thesis may be an initial attempt to challenge the discourse around far-right extremism, the infrastructures that allow such beliefs to grow and thrive, and the ways they are rendered palatable to wider audiences. However, it merely scratches the surface of the wider societal impacts resulting from the proliferation of the language of far-right violence—one part of a broader spectrum of violent voices seeking to reach and mobilise.

This thesis contributes a novel typology, an interdisciplinary methodology, and a reorientation of how we understand far-right communication in digital ecosystems. It offers one element of considering the far right—but, like the loop of a paradox, it is an element that demands constant re-addressing and re-evaluation, as tools become sharper and such actors become smarter. This thesis ends not with answers, but with signals—toward the many lighthouses in the fog—each asking not where we are, but what we’ve missed in trying to find them.

10 Bibliography

CHAPTER ONE

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CHAPTER TWO

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CHAPTER THREE

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CHAPTER FOUR

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CHAPTER FIVE

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CHAPTER SIX

For references, please refer to Appendix A.

CHAPTER SEVEN

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Appendix A

REFERENCES CHAPTER SIX

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Appendix B

Visual Supplement to Case Study A (Chapter 6)

[REDACTED]

Appendix C

REFERENCES CHAPTER SEVEN

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Appendix D

Visual Supplement to Case Study B (Chapter 7)

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