

25 March 2019

Country: New Zealand

by: Verica Rupar



The terrorist attack in Christchurch has shaken New Zealand to its core. A white supremacist killed 50 people and injured dozens more in the attack on two mosques in a country where violence is rare, and racism unwelcome.

The grief is tangible. We feel it in the voice of the imam, the tears of Muslim men, women and children who lost their love ones, and the hugs of their friends, neighbours, colleagues, and fellow New Zealanders. It is felt by Christians, Jews, Hindu, people of all religions and of no religion. *Kia kaha*, stay strong New Zealanders, have been written on thousands of memory walls, pinned to flowers left in front of the places of worship, scribbled on the cards randomly put on park benches. The pain is tangible, but so is New Zealand's strength in the experience of pain.

Where is this strength coming from? Ten days after the terrorist attack it seems that the power

of New Zealand's response to the religious hatred-motivated mass killing comes from its deeply rooted, politically well-articulated and media-supported ethics of care.

Historically, the state has played an active role in providing for the well-being of the people. It is the first country to recognize women's right to vote, to introduce the welfare state, and to receive refugees with disabilities. From its history, it is clear that it is also one of the first countries whose prime ministers didn't shy from acknowledging the importance of striving for the common good, valuing relationships, and collective care.

"We were not chosen for this act of violence because we condone racism, because we're an enclave for extremism, we were chosen for the very fact that we are none of these things, because we represent diversity, kindness, compassion, a home for those that share our values, a refuge for those who need it," Prime Minister Jacinda Arden said immediately after the attack.

"And those values, I can assure you, will not and cannot be shaken by this attack. We are a proud nation of more than 200 ethnicities, 160 languages, and amongst that diversity we share common values."

It didn't take long to understand that the values of diversity, kindness, and compassion are signs of New Zealand's strength, not its weakness. These values underpinned both the swift and firm Government response to the attack, and [the media coverage of the terrorist attack](#) during days that followed.

A number of key moments have been instrumental in managing the tragedy. It is important to list them, for the record.

***Calling it terrorism:*** While the New Zealand media first reported that there was an "armed gunman," the language changed after Prime Minister Jacinda Arden's address—as did the narrative surrounding the attack.

Nevertheless, the global media did not follow suit. BBC continued to refer to the tragedy as a "mass shooting," and once the term terrorist attack was more widely adopted, they put it in

quotation marks, even though what happened in Christchurch fits the United Nations definition of terrorism as an anxiety-inspiring method of repeat violent action, motivated by political reasons.

**Focus on victims, not the attacker** – Rather than focusing on the attacker, Prime Minister Arden focused on the victims, and their relation to the community.

“Many of those who will have been directly affected by this shooting may be migrants to New Zealand; they may even be refugees here,” she said. “They have chosen to make New Zealand their home, and it is their home. They are us. The person who has perpetuated this violence against us is not. They have no place in New Zealand. There is no place in New Zealand for such acts of extreme and unprecedented violence.”

While the New Zealand media followed this example, the international media continued to obsess over the terrorist. *Sky News Australia* posted an edited video of the shooting (despite repeated calls not to spread the video) and *The West Australian* published screenshots from the livestream on its front page.

In Britain, the gunman was the center of the story. Newspapers published a link to his 89-page political manifesto (*Mail Online*) while the *Daily Mirror* ran a front page splash with the photo of the terrorist as a blond toddler describing him in a headline as an “angelic boy who grow into an evil far-right mass killer.” As if there is an angelic far-right alternative.

**No publicity for the killer, but right to fair trial:** In New Zealand, the terrorist’s obvious desire for notoriety was met with rejection. Ardern refused to say his name, and other politicians followed. A judge in charge with the case allowed photographers to take the photos of the killer but ordered that his face be pixelated to preserve his right to a fair trial.

**Change of gun laws:** The Government almost immediately announced a [change of gun laws](#) to ban military-style rifles and ammunition. To put this in perspective, only six percent of the New Zealand population have a firearm license, compared to one third of the United States population.

**Solidarity:** Solidarity with Muslim community that comprises only one per cent of the 4.8-million-strong population, has been [overwhelming](#)

. Prominent female reporters and politicians—including the Prime Minister—put on the hijab in solidarity. The Muslim call to prayer was broadcast on national radio television and radio at 1:30 PM to mark one week after the attack, and newspapers published Arabic greetings on their front-pages and stories explaining Muslim rituals surrounding funerals and prayers. At the top of news bulletins, reporters greeted their viewers with “Salam Alaykum,” Arabic for “peace be upon you.”

**Hate speech:** Two days after the attack, the police arrested a 22-year-old man for reposting the video footage of the massacre, reminding people that it is an offense to distribute or possess an objectionable publication. The Christchurch gunman’s manifesto has been classified as objectionable, and those with copies were told to destroy them.

**Responsibility of social media:** The terrorist’s livestream of the shooting went viral for hours after the attack. While Facebook removed 1.5 million videos of the attack, the video has since been published on other media platforms, showing the Internet’s potential to amplify hate speech

Numerous studies, including MDI’s [Get the Trolls Out](#) project demonstrate that social media amplifies hate speech—which, as seen in Christchurch, can have deadly consequences—but tech companies are noticeably ambivalent about taking responsibility to change their policies. Hopefully, the Christchurch tragedy is a turning point in the conversation.

**Journalism of care:** It is not only about the language used, or giving voice to the voiceless. The words that journalists chose to describe the massacre, and its effect on the community were carefully chosen to do justice to what witnesses, families of victims, friends, neighbors and ordinary citizens saw, felt and thought. In the days after the attack, journalists have been publishing articles that break down the anti-migrant rhetoric of certain MPs, the Islamophobia across the country, and the deep racism of New Zealand’s colonial past. It is this kind of careful, thoughtfully-constructed journalism that will open a public dialogue, and prevent similar events in the future.