



POLICY APPROACHES TO ONLINE HATE

SUMMARY REPORT

MARCH 2019





ABOUT PPF

Good Policy. Better Canada. The Public Policy Forum builds bridges among diverse participants in the policy-making process. It gives them a platform to examine issues, offer new perspectives and feed fresh ideas into critical policy discussions. We believe good policy is critical to making a better Canada—a country that's cohesive, prosperous and secure. We contribute by:

- Conducting research on critical issues
- Convening candid dialogues on research subjects
- Recognizing exceptional leaders

Our approach—called Inclusion to Conclusion—brings emerging and established voices to policy conversations, which informs conclusions that identify obstacles to success and pathways forward. PPF is an independent, non-partisan charity whose members are a diverse group of private, public and non-profit organizations.

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SUMMARY REPORT

POLICY APPROACHES TO ONLINE HATE

Hate that festers without intervention is not only a threat to public safety, but its tragic outcomes have implications for the fundamental human rights of all people in Canada. The horrific attack in Christchurch, New Zealand on March 15, 2019 served as a chilling reminder that online hate and real-life violence are inextricably linked. The violence is worryingly similar to other hateful acts motivated by racism, religious intolerance, sexism and xenophobia. We should all be deeply troubled by the rise in hateful incidents here in our country and around the world, and the role that online hate plays in facilitating them.

The Public Policy Forum (PPF), joined forces with the Canada Centre for Community Engagement and Prevention of Violence at Public Safety Canada (PSC), and the Canadian Human Rights Commission (CHRC), with support from the United Kingdom High Commission and the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. On March 26, 2019, it convened an evening session featuring two panels on the topic of hate. The first panel presented perspectives of Canadians who have directly experienced acts of hate. The second panel served as an exploratory forum to identify potential solutions to the unique challenges presented by online hate.

LIVED EXPERIENCES IN CANADA

Panelists in both sessions agreed that online platforms have not fundamentally changed the nature of hate. However, they have provided unprecedented opportunities for individuals and groups to broadcast harmful content and recruit adherents to hateful ideologies. The internet has become a new ‘town square’ where people can gather, build communities and share ideas. Unfortunately, the anonymity associated with virtual spaces emboldens individuals to broadcast their ideas with little oversight or accountability. Although the internet has occasionally amplified positive messaging (e.g. #MeToo), it has also enabled the rise of populism and harmful ideologies. A common thread throughout the session was how organizations that are actively involved in combating violence and hateful content often lack the resources and capacity to address the unique challenges related to hate facilitated by online technology. For example, one panelist discussed this challenge through the lens of sexual violence and how community counselors lack the resources to respond to emerging technological facilitators of hate such as doxing, dating abuse, artificial intelligence and deep fakes.

Underreported instances of hate

Hate is not always overt. While subtle acts of hate result in similar outcomes, they are more difficult to remedy because they lack the same degree of publicity and condemnation. Several examples were

raised by a panelist who explained how the colonial impacts of this phenomenon apply to Indigenous peoples, including in the form of forced assimilation. One panelist spoke extensively about how hate directed at Canada's Jewish communities is often underreported, which contributes to a false assumption that antisemitism is no longer a significant issue in Canada. Because state-sponsored antisemitism no longer exists and government officials regularly express broad support for the Jewish community, even members of the Jewish community question the prevalence of antisemitism in Canadian society, the panelist explained. At the same time, however, antisemitic acts of violence have increased over the past several years.¹ In some cases, members of the Jewish community do not realize the devastating impact of ongoing antisemitic hate until it is directed towards them. The same can be said for all Canadians. For people to have a full understanding of the consequences of hate they must first, unfortunately, know that it exists. This requires responsible media coverage of lived experiences.

Burden placed on victims

Although it is everyone's responsibility to combat hate wherever it manifests, there is often an undue burden placed on victims of violence to be their own advocates. A panelist used the example of Islamophobia to describe this phenomenon. Islamophobia is the by-product of ignorance, but Muslims are often unfairly burdened with educating the public and defending their faith or the way they express it. This constant pressure to defend a fundamental component of one's identity can have extremely negative consequences, including the manifestation of self-hatred. It also creates a barrier to dialogue. Victims are presented with the excruciating question of whether and how to engage with people who believe they should not exist.

POLICY PERSPECTIVES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The policy perspectives emerging from the two panels fell under four main themes: safety, resources, education and laws.

Creating Safe Environments

- 1. Increasing collaboration and cooperation.** An overarching theme throughout both panels was the need to extend safe spaces beyond physical environments to virtual platforms. The technology to combat online hate and create safer online spaces already exists. However, panelists agreed, any successful strategy will require extensive collaboration between individuals, governments, civil society, like-minded nations and private technology companies.
- 2. Increasing accountability for technology companies.** Any solution to online hate will require cooperation and collaboration with the technology companies administering the online platforms where hate is published. In Canada, it remains largely voluntary for technology companies to

¹ The Canadian Press. (2017). [Anti-Semitism in Canada is on the Rise. Audit Shows.](#)

remove harmful content from their platforms. This lack of accountability is driven by the argument that technology companies are passive actors and not responsible for the content posted on their platforms. Panelists found this argument inaccurate due to technology companies' extensive use of algorithms to control the content viewed online. Evidence suggests that algorithms have an enormous capacity to lead individuals down a path of radicalization² based on the information they present to individuals. Because online platforms curate the content users see online by using algorithms, these companies should be regarded as content publishers and not just delivery services. Governments and civil society should take steps to [make companies legally accountable](#) for the content posted on their platforms.

- 3. Using existing and new technology.** The technology required to combat online hate already exists, and new innovative techniques are constantly under development. One panelist described a program currently under development called [Redirect](#). This program aims to “provide alternative, positive content to vulnerable individuals searching for violent extremist material online”.³ When a person searches for hate-driven material online, the top search results will contain alternative narratives challenging hate. Since the remaining search results are unaffected, there is no risk of infringement on freedom of expression. The technology used to distribute hate can also be used to challenge it.
- 4. Developing a community of active allies.** When one panelist's synagogue was vandalized in 2016, its first response was to cultivate an environment where members of the community felt safe. Beyond providing reassurance that the act was perpetrated by a lone actor, the synagogue called on passive allies of the Jewish community to become active in their support through gestures of solidarity. At a peace rally organized days after the attack, clergy from a range of different faiths marched and prayed together.

A similar experience was articulated by another panelist regarding their involvement with the [Idle No More](#) movement on university campuses. The movement began in order to protest Bill C-45 but grew to encompass broader considerations of Indigenous rights and sovereignty. They explained that during the first ‘teach-in’ and subsequent rally organized by the Indigenous Law Society, Indigenous students were joined by hundreds of their non-Indigenous peers in a resounding gesture of solidarity.

These acts of solidarity and community collaboration are significant. All panelists agreed that community is often where victims first turn to grieve, receive support and access justice. A panelist explained how hate-fueled tragedies should be turned into opportunities for communities to come together and support each other, demonstrating how grief can translate into action. In

² Adnan R. Khan. (2018). [How the internet may be turning us all into radicals](#). Maclean's.

³ Public Safety Canada. (2018). [Funding Project Descriptions](#).

addition, panelists emphasized that communities are also responsible for holding themselves to account when it comes to confronting 'othering' that leads to violent acts.

Improving Resource Allocation

- 1. Insufficient funding and complicated processes.** Several panelists were extremely vocal about the lack of funding and resources provided to organizations actively involved in combatting hate and violent extremism. Government institutions need to show support for vulnerable communities by providing adequate resources and funding to combat online hate and violent extremism. Similarly, current grant application processes to access funding are complex and lengthy, and many organizations do not have the capacity to complete them. Too often, the organizations that would benefit the most from government funding are the least equipped to navigate these complex processes. Streamlining funding processes would significantly improve the ability of organizations to combat and respond to important issues such as online hate.
- 2. Financial burden of security.** Unfortunately, a necessary component of ensuring the safety of vulnerable communities is implementing security measures. One panelist addressed the heavy financial burden security can place on vulnerable community organizations and centres. Increasing funding for security measures is another area in which governments can show their support for communities at significant risk of being targeted by violent extremism.
- 3. Community-owned media.** One panelist discussed the importance of community-based media as a platform with enormous capacity to combat hate and radicalization. This is mainly because media companies are held accountable for their content when they are owned and operated in the communities they serve. In order to operate effectively, community-based media must receive adequate funding and resources.

Educating and Improving Collaboration

- 1. Mandatory sensitivity training.** A panelist identified sensitivity training as a fundamental component of addressing hate. Hate and violent extremism are almost always by-products of ignorance, which manifest in harmful acts against 'the other.' Sensitivity training can help to improve understanding and kinship between communities. Individuals would also be less vulnerable to online radicalization if mandatory sensitivity training were widely implemented. Another panelist mentioned how the RCMP is in the process of implementing mandatory cultural awareness training, set to take place over the next two years.
- 2. Interventions at an early age.** A panelist explained how hate and radicalization often begin at an early age. Belonging and validation are fundamental human motivators that can cause vulnerable youth to seek community in harmful online spaces. If younger individuals can be educated to find validation in more positive spaces, in turn they will be less vulnerable to online radicalization.

- 3. Collaboration and sharing knowledge.** Online hate is a global problem requiring a global solution. Any successful strategy will involve collaboration between like-minded individuals, governments, organizations and countries. Far too often, actors involved in combating violent extremism operate in silos. Several panelists were vocal about the need to create an international forum to share knowledge and best practices on combating online hate. This would involve collaboration between like-minded countries and domestic knowledge-sharing between individuals and organizations with varying areas of expertise.

Reforming Laws and Legislation

- 1. Understanding free speech versus hate speech.** An issue often brought up as a stumbling block to combatting online hate is perceived tension between freedom of expression and the right to live free of discrimination and hate. In 2013, the Supreme Court of Canada unanimously ruled in a landmark judgment that laws against hate speech are a reasonable limit on freedom of expression. Approaches for curbing hate speech, online or in the physical world, seem to be within the legal boundaries in Canada. It was pointed out that this can be very different in other jurisdictions such as the United States.
- 2. Addressing gaps in legislation.** There are also gaps in legislation to address instances of online hate. One panelist spoke specifically of the repeal of Section 13 of the Canadian Human Rights Act. Although Section 13 allowed the Canadian Human Rights Commission to receive complaints regarding online hate messages, it was not enough to respond to the realities of the online environment. Currently, online hate is dealt with almost exclusively using the Criminal Code.
- 3. Addressing gaps in the Criminal Code.** When asked about the relevance of laws in the struggle against online hate, one panelist stated: “laws cannot make someone love me, but they can stop people from killing me”. The creation and enforcement of laws will certainly play a role in combatting online hate. However, for laws to be effective, they may need to be reformed to reflect the unique challenges of hate that occurs in virtual spaces. Another panelist discussed how there are some misperceptions around how the Criminal Code applies to hate. The Criminal Code’s definition of terrorism means many hate crimes fall outside its purview, as it can be difficult to conclusively prove that acts of hate have political motivations. This can create a perception of inequality when some acts are clearly classified as terrorism while many acts of hate are not. These issues need to be addressed, perhaps by applying the blanket term of ‘violent extremism’ to violent crimes motivated by hate.
- 4. Reforming the criminal justice system.** One panelist asked the audience to seriously consider how Canada as a society deals with people who hurt others. They argued that the current criminal justice system is doing little to engage and educate people who perpetrate acts of hate.

Acknowledging that not everyone can be rehabilitated, this panelist argued that completely casting people out of society contributes to further marginalization, which can lead to further acts of violence. Criminal justice reform, with a focus on education and rehabilitation, should be considered in any solution to online hate.

CONCLUSION

The battle against hate will be constant and unending. Ignorance and 'othering' will always exist. But, just as violent extremists use the internet to spread harmful content, individuals and organizations working to combat hate can use the internet as a force for good. Panelists agreed that society has the resources to operate more effectively than violent extremists. And we can do so at scale.

Canadians should be proud to live in a society that is largely forward-looking and often leading international efforts to combat hate in all its forms. Yet the experiences shared during these panel discussions should remind us that hate exists in Canada and we cannot be complacent.

APPENDIX: PANELISTS

The first panel included:

- **Dahabo Ahmed Omer**, Head of Steering Committee, Federation of Black Canadians; Justice for Abdirahman Coalition;
- **Jocelyn Formsma**, Executive Director, National Association of Friendship Centres;
- **Rabbi Idan Scher**, Congregation Machzikei Hadas; and
- **Dillon Black**, Member, Canada's National Expert Committee on Countering Radicalization to Violence.

The second panel included:

- **Monette Maillet**, Deputy Executive Director and Senior General Counsel, Canadian Human Rights Commission;
- **Dr. Tracy Vaillancourt**, Professor and Research Chair, Children's Mental Health and Violence Prevention Counselling, PrevNet;
- **Ross Frenett**, Co-founder, Moonshot CVE; and
- **Sam Jaroudi**, Civilian Member, RCMP

Both panels were moderated by Satyamoorthy Kabilan, Vice President, Policy, Public Policy Forum.