

## HERMENEUTIC MANIPULATION OF RELIGIOUS TEXTS IN DIGITAL SPACES: EXAMINING ONLINE RADICALISATION AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO OFFLINE VIOLENCE THROUGH A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE 2025 BONDI TRAGEDY

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### Abstract

Easy accessibility to internet and free social media applications with worldwide reach have transformed our digital age. With such universal access to social media, violent ideologies and thought processes can also travel rapidly. The use of social media warrants a sense of responsibility and tolerance for opposing view. However, that is often not the case and misuse of social media platforms like X, YouTube, Facebook as means of online radicalization is becoming a troubling trend. The Bondi Beach tragedy of 2025, when two gunmen opened fire at a Jewish celebration at Bondi Beach Australia happens to be one such outcome of online interreligious hate and extremism. Using Fairclough's selective Critical Discourse Analysis, this paper argues that the hermeneutic manipulation of certain religious scriptures in online spaces in Australia is the primary driver behind the extremism that led to the Bondi Beach tragedy. Policy makers need to identify the loopholes that allow usage of social media applications as breeding grounds for interreligious hate, so that such tragedies be prevented in future.

### Introduction

In the contemporary world of digitalization, modes of radicalization have taken a shift from physical spaces to online spaces. Various social media platforms like Facebook, TikTok, YouTube which were once considered as mediums of communication and leisure are now becoming spaces polluted with religious extremism and radicalization. These online spaces have become thought experiment labs where historical religious texts are extracted from their traditional context, reinterpreted and repurposed for a contemporary era, to galvanize followers for a cause, legitimize hostility, rationalize hate, and demonize the religious "other."

For the past few years, the Salafi-Jihadists have been actively celebrating and encouraging the attacks on the Jewish communities and exploiting

the situation in Gaza (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2025).

Saleem et al. (2017) defines hateful speech as "speech which contains an expression of hatred on the part of the speaker/author, against a person or people, based on their group identity." This paper investigates the afore-mentioned reinterpretation of religious scripture in the context of the Bondi beach tragedy of 2025. Using the Critical Discourse Analysis, this paper examines how historical scriptures are used to selectively reinterpret contemporary grievances—both real and imagined—and then amplified through social media networks powered by algorithms.

The Bondi tragedy is a pertinent case to examine the intertwining and convergence of online radicalization and offline violence in a multicultural society grappling with challenges of religious-cultural diversity and assimilation. While

some scholarly attention has been paid to online hate speech, radicalization, and politically motivate violence, the specific role of hermeneutic manipulation and scriptural reinterpretation remains under-examined. There is a need to bridge the said gap, and to understand how such narratives and hermeneutic manipulations are imported to the digital spaces.

The aim should not be to frame any religious text as inherently violent but to focus on how decontextualization, selective interpretation, and online radicalization converge to drive individuals to carry out violent acts of extremism against the very society that hosts them, and why such individuals see these acts as legitimate acts of defiance. An Islamic State (IS) supporter was observed openly admiring the culprits of the said incident in a Facebook post while at the same time hating on Ahmad Al-Ahmad who tried to stop the attack (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2025). This demonstrate how fluid and accessible online platforms are for hate-posting.

The five major social media applications including Facebook, X, Instagram, TikTok and YouTube collectively had 87 posts and 77 comments that fell into the category of antisemitic from December 14, 2025 to the day of the tragedy (CyberWell, 2024). Online hate speech comes with anonymity and is easy to access and profess with a lack of accountability (Awan, 2014).

Some terrorist groups especially the ISIS militants justify their acts of terror and hate propaganda by misinterpretations of the verses of the Quran (Mahasneh, 2021). There has been spread of hate targeting Jews through antisemitic memes (Zannettou et al., 2020). De Smedt has deduced by analyzing various social media platforms that the IS fueled its antisemitic hate narrative rapidly and targeted audience was Muslim immigrants after 2015.

Cinelli et al. (2021) linked misinformation ecosystems and hate narrative online through the formation of digital echo chambers. There is nothing as religious violence but presenting religion as a scapegoat to violence (Rowley & Wild-Wood, 2017). This stance actually affirms the notion that the scriptures or religious texts are

violated and misinterpreted to spread the agency of hate and violence.

### **Research Problem**

Online radicalization is catching on alarmingly and attracting attention. Yet, little attention is paid to understand the phenomenon of online interreligious hate that is spreading through religious textual tempering in online spaces. The Bondi Beach tragedy of 2025 is a pertinent example wherein in the lead-up to the terror event, extremist discourse was created through deliberate and conscious manipulation and distortion of ancient scriptures— especially through the misrepresentation of certain verses without their due context. There have been enough document-based sources that have unraveled the seizing of religious marked verses by the culprits behind this terrorist attack. Yet, there remains a gap as to how particular annotated verses from the scriptures are manipulated into hate ideology that becomes the motive for such tragedies.

### **Research Objectives**

1. To investigate how religious scriptures are repurposed and reinterpreted within online extremist discourse.
2. To understand the intertwining of online hate discourse and offline violence through the case study of Bondi Beach tragedy (2025).

### **Research Questions**

1. How are specific religious scriptures reinterpreted and reframed within online extremist discourse?
2. How did online radicalization set the stage for Bondi beach tragedy of 2025?

### **Methodology**

This paper is qualitative in nature and utilizes Norman Fairclough's framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which has been selectively applied. It has been further supplemented by elements of digital ethnography and comparative textual analysis of the verses of Quran. The digital footprints of the Bondi Beach attackers on platforms such as the X, TikTok or Telegram etc are examined to trace their online

radicalization journey. Furthermore, a comparative textual analysis of extremist reinterpretation is carried out against recognized scholarly and theological interpretation of scriptures. The Fairclough's framework of CDA is employed to observe how extremist narrative is formed by distorting original verses which circulate and disseminate across social media platform, ultimately leading to acts of extreme violence.

### Significance of the Research

This research paper aims to add to the existing scholarship on online radicalization, hate speech, and extremism within multicultural societies endeavoring to assimilate religious-cultural diversity. It will expand the current understanding of how theological reinterpretation of religious scripture takes places in a contemporary digital context. The present paper may prove helpful in understanding and highlighting the piping of radicalization in the digital platforms.

### Analysis and Findings

Authorities in Australia, after a forensic investigation of the social media accounts of the perpetrators of the Bondi Beach tragedy, concluded that their social media accounts history showed an inspiration and influence from the extremist ISIS and as such a homemade ISIS flag was also found from their vehicle (Elkin, 2026). An article published in Al-Naba praising the attackers as "heroes" and "lions" also mentioned the importance of social media platforms for such radicalization and preparation of violent attacks. It hailed such attacks as low cost as well as approachable option for the ISIS to continue its objectives (Elkin, 2026).

Furthermore, the authorities did find a copy of the Quran where certain verses were marked and annotated to prepare for the Bondi Beach shootings (The Guardian, 2025). ABC News (2025) has also confirmed that the Quran recovered from the residence of the attackers had annotated verses which explicitly indicate how religious texts are taken out of their original contexts to brainwash and misguide the people

into believing that antisemitism and violence are religious obligations.

There were certain videos compiled by the IS using the verses from the scriptures to brainwash the perpetrators to carry out the violence acts against another religious group. This paper has employed the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework of Norman Fairclough to highlight how the following verses from the Quran are distorted by the terrorist groups to spread their online propaganda of hate and violence that later appear in real life in the form of tragedies like the Bondi Beach attack.

1. **Surah At-Taubah (Chapter 9:5)** – from which the attackers drew their Universalized Mandate for Antisemitism as Manipulated by the Terror Groups:

*"And when the sacred months have passed, then kill the polytheists whenever you find them and capture them and besiege them..."*

The above verse is always presented as a universal license to kill and besiege people of other faiths, stripping it off its historical and conditional contexts of the seventh century treaty bound clause as it originally is (Fairclough, 2025). This is further manipulated and spread with background music and chants and is piped into the YouTube shorts and TikTok's clips to normalize hate and desensitize the youth to extremism and violence (Sipra and Rashid, 2013). The social media history of the attackers of Bondi Beach was traced and found evidence of such shorts and TikTok clips which motivated their online exposure to extremism into acts of real-life violence.

2. **Surah Al-Mai'dah (Chapter 5:5)** – from which the interreligious hate doctrine is extracted: *"O, you who have believed, do not take the Jews and the Christians as allies..."*

The perpetrators of hate and antisemitic propaganda turn the aforementioned verse into a license to animosity against Jews and Christians omitting all the real and contextual meaning to the verse. Thereby convincing the individuals that peaceful coexistence or everyday interaction with Jews is a betrayal to one's faith. In the Arabic Version of the above verse, the term 'Awliya' has been used to indicate that military guardians or allies and not the everyday interaction of

friendships with people of other faiths. The perpetrators of this tragedy were brainwashed and made to believe that attacking and killing the innocent Jews is an act of religious obligation.

### Conclusion

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) throws light upon the manipulation of religious texts to justify and spread the online hate into real life extremist acts of violence. It further exposes the online hate narrative formed by the tempering and misinterpretation of verses of Surah At-Tauba and Surah Al-Mai'dah tracing how extremist groups channels hate and antisemitism into online spaces. In order to prevent such acts of terror in the future, social media platforms regulators must review and revise their policies as mere certain words blocking has not substantially curbed the spread of online radicalism. Furthermore, policy makers must take into account the fuelling of online hate through hermeneutical manipulation of ancient scriptures to prevent terror attacks.

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