Social cohesion, Twitter and far-right politics in Australia: Diversity in the democratic mediasphere

Jeffrey Lewis, Philip Pond and Robin Cameron
RMIT University, Australia

Belinda Lewis
Monash University, Australia

Abstract
The concept of ‘social cohesion’ has become an orthodoxy in governmental and academic discourse, augmenting the complex of progressive and liberal politics that have formed around the modern, multicultural and globally engaged nation-state. The reinvigoration of far-right politics is challenging this orthodoxy, at least inasmuch as these politics appear to be gaining traction through the strategic manipulation of increasing insecurity within these democratic states. This article examines these challenges conceptually and through an empirical case study. The case study examines the appearance in 2016 of Senator Elect Pauline Hanson on the ABC’s Q&A television programme. The article examines Twitter discourses that were generated around the far-right senator’s appearance on the broadcast programme. The article concludes that ‘social cohesion’ and its role in electoral, participative and deliberative democratic processes is a largely inadequate discursive buttress to the complex of language wars within which the concept is besieged.

Keywords
Media democracy, multiculturalism, right-wing extremism, social cohesion, transculturalism, Twitter

Corresponding author:
Philip Pond, RMIT University, La Trobe Street, Melbourne, VIC 3001, Australia.
Email: philip.pond@rmit.edu.au
Introduction

The concept of ‘social cohesion’ has emerged as a critical component of Australian governments’ social, economic and cultural policy framework (Markus, 2015). Despite assurances that Australia is a highly cohesive society (Hassan, 2017; Markus, 2015; Turnbull, 2017), both the concept and its social efficacy have become increasingly ensnared in a broad range of antagonisms. Many of these antagonisms have been exercised through broadcast and online media systems and discourses (Lewis, 2005, 2011; Grossman et al., 2016; Lewis et al., 2017). These ‘language wars’ (Lewis, 2005) have been perpetuated around the primary trope of ‘social cohesion’, as well as its constituent triad – diversity, community resilience and multiculturalism (Australian Human Rights Commission Report (AHRC), 2015).

This article examines the antagonisms as a challenge to ‘social cohesion’ in Australia. The article focuses specifically on the language wars and ‘violent’ discourses that are being generated around Islam and the Muslim ‘diaspora’. The article is especially interested in anti-diversity, ‘far-right’ groups and the ways in which they propagate a violent extremism that is predicated on monadic and exclusionist conceptions of nation and national cohesion (Barker, 2016).

Inevitably, the article also reflects upon the far-right’s engagement with its nemesis, the ‘progressive’, pro-diversity far-left. However, the main focus of the article is on the far-right groups themselves and their deployment of online and broadcast media systems in pursuit of their cultural and political objectives. The concept of ‘violence’ is used in a broad sense to include physical violence, as well as a politically grounded ‘psycho-cultural’ violence which involves threat, exclusionism and various forms of systematic and interpersonal oppression (see Zizek, 2008; Lewis, 2016). According to the Australian government, the aggregate of these forms of politically motivated violence constitutes the type of ‘violent extremism’ which poses a direct threat to national cohesion and democracy (AG, 2019).

The article, therefore, connects its analysis of far-right challenges to social cohesion to more encompassing questions about electoral and participative democracy. In order to address these questions, the analysis draws on primary research examining the appearance of (then) Senator Elect Pauling Hanson on the ABC’s forum television programme, Q&A, 18 July 2016. The research focuses on the interaction between Hanson’s appearance on Q&A and audience members’ ‘participation’ through Twitter. This primary research provides us with a clear lens for analysing a ‘mediated’ democracy and its role in the functioning of social cohesion. The analysis is especially apposite for an examination of a ‘deliberative’ model of participative democracy, at least inasmuch as it interrogates the ways in which online systems like Twitter may contribute to rational and informed public debate within the ‘mediasphere’ (Hartley, 1996; Lewis, 2005, 2011; Pond, 2016; Pond et al., 2013; Roy, 2013).

Context

The concept of ‘social cohesion’ has a significant scholarly and political genealogy (Barker, 2016; Mann, 2015). In Australia, specifically, the concept of social cohesion has been adopted as a supplement to ‘multiculturalism’ (Markus, 2015). The concept and
policy framework of multiculturalism itself emerged through Australia’s social history as an ideological antithesis to earlier conceptions of nation as a monadic and unitary cultural and political entity (Migrant Council, 2016).

This refurbishment of nation emerged through two overlapping historical imperatives: one economic and the other ideological. Most economists in the period following the Second World War argued that economic growth depended crucially on population growth (Sheffield Political Economy Research Institute (SPERI), 2014).

Over the past 40 years, Australia’s high economic and population growth targets could only be achieved through the broadening of migrant sources beyond Britain (Cully, 2012; Migrant Council, 2016). Concomitantly, Australia became signatory to a range of international treaties regarding human rights and non-discriminatory migration policies (AHRC, 2015; Mann, 2016; Richard, 2008). This increased diversity has been presented as both an economic and cultural-ideological advantage for Australia’s national development (Cully, 2012; Hassan, 2017; Legrain, 2015). Multiculturalism, in this sense, represents a confluence of the restless expansionist drives of capitalism augmented and dignified as democratic and humanist progressivism.

This drive to economic growth through population growth has evolved, therefore, through a complex cultural branding, a set of discursive tropes, which elevate material pragmatisms and economics as a progressive, humane and inclusive framework. Extending the foundational compound of ‘liberal democracy’ into a more inclusive, global ideology, the proponents of multiculturalism insisted that ‘difference’ should not simply be tolerated or respected – it should be embraced and celebrated (Koopmans et al., 2014; Legrain, 2015; Markus, 2015; Migrant Council, 2016). The adherence of ‘social cohesion’ to multiculturalism evolved out of a need to transcend ‘assimilation’ models of cultural diversity which offended the dignity of migrants and their home cultures. Social cohesion, therefore, created an imaginary of ‘unity in difference’ or ‘many in one’ without surrendering the celebratory tones of cultural distinction and the maintenance of traditions among immigrant diaspora. Social cohesion enabled the maintenance of ‘nation’, that is, within a difference-similarity aporia (Levey, 2012; Souphemmasane, 2012).

There remain, however, at least two enduring problems for this cultural and conceptual aporia. The more obvious is that this form of non-assimilative multiculturalism and imaginary of cohesion has not been universally embraced, articulated or even understood by all Australian citizens. Indeed, a number of surveys have suggested that attitudes towards immigration and multiculturalism in Australia are complex, sometimes contradictory and often incomplete. Survey respondents frequently insist, for example, that a notional and somewhat vaguely imagined conception of Australian ‘way of life’ (culture) needs to be protected from dilution or ‘contamination’ by new arrivals (Essential, 2016; VicHealth, 2014). Even where diversity and immigration is ‘generally’ welcomed, this anxiety about the cohesion of Australian culture, cultural values and language adoption is significant for many survey respondents (Hassan, 2017; Pew Research Centre, 2017; VicHealth, 2014). Concerns over Muslim migration, in particular, have become increasingly voluble in recent attitudinal surveys (Essential, 2016; Newspoll, 2017; Pew Research Centre, 2017).

These uncertainties inevitably challenge continued claims by numerous migration advocacy organisations, academics and government officials, including the Prime
Minister (Turnbull, 2017), that Australia is the ‘most successful’ multicultural nation in the world with high levels of social cohesion (Markus, 2015, 2016).

The inconsistency of various surveys centres on the ways in which questions are posed and the assumptions are ascribed to ‘multiculturalism’ and ‘cohesion’ by respondents and researchers. Moreover, the conclusions that are drawn from the data often reflect the perspectives of the researcher. The Essential (2016) and the Newspoll (2017) survey data which suggest high levels of Islamophobia in Australia are dismissed by multiculturalism advocates, Andrew Markus (2016) and Riaz Hassan (2017), who argue that there are very low levels of Islamophobia in Australia.

Such debates and uncertainties have become especially exigent in the current context of global insecurity and violence associated with the Middle East and the rise of militant groups like Islamic State (Aisch, 2017; Lewis, 2016). Far-right groups in Australia have mobilised this insecurity and sense of public threat in order to validate their own political and cultural objectives – particularly their hostility to Islam and Muslim migration (Akbarzadeh, 2016; Dean et al., 2016; Grossman et al., 2016; Hassan and Martin, 2015; Lewis et al., 2017). For many commentators, this amplitudo of anxiety and Islamophobia is due in large part to media systems which provide a ‘disproportionate’ public space for far-right rhetoric (Dean et al., 2016; Grossman et al., 2016). According to these arguments, media reporting of the far-right groups, including electoral parties like One Nation, stimulate concerns over Islam, security and national cohesion that is putatively disproportionate to the threat posed by an extremely small number of criminals who invoke religion and ideology to justify their egregious views and violence (Grossman et al., 2016; Lewis et al., 2017).

All of this points to the second issue for social cohesion—diversity aporia. Ideals of difference, as Stuart Hall (1996) pointed out some time ago, are formed through the complex association of identity and the politics of exclusion—inclusion. Hall argued that the preexisting residents of a social entity usually prefer a form of assimilation which celebrates palatable and enjoyable difference – something he called the ‘international cuisine’. Substantial (ontological) Difference is not acceptable where it disrupts the normative values and practices of the longer term residents. During the course of Australia’s adjustments to multiculturalist policies, certain diasporic cultural distinctions – such as infibulation, marriage of minors, consumption of dogs and the burqa – have often been identified in terms of this code of Difference, inciting moral outrage, if not criminal sanction, from the majority citizenry.

By and large, though, both government and citizenry rely precisely on the vagueness and relativity of multiculturalism (and cohesion) in order to manage the difference–similarity aporia (Hasmath, 2010; Joppke, 2017; Meer et al., 2016). The complex attitudes of the citizenry, in fact, have been mobilised by governments in order to impose high levels of immigration and its unceasing demands for public compliance, accommodation and adjustment (Birrell, 2010). As demographer Bob Birrell (2010) has for decades argued, these high levels of immigration have created social and environmental pressure points which seem not to be acknowledged by mainstream political parties in Australia. Even Australia’s green and progressive parties no longer question the high population growth, largely because of the adhesion of these growth policies to liberal democracy, globalist ideologies, human rights principles and the pleasures of the ‘international
cuisine’ (Dusche, 2004; Hasmath, 2010). This abdication has disposed publics who are negatively affected by high levels of immigration to the arguments of far-right groups whose conception of social cohesion is often brutally nationalistic and exclusionist (Lewis, 2013).

**Delineating the political ‘extremes’ in Australia**

From the perspective of this research article, ‘extremism’ exceeds ‘radicalism’ in that it seeks some form of political change that may necessitate violent actions (A-G, 2015; Abbas, 2012; Midlarsky, 2011). Over recent years, governments and researchers have become increasingly aware that the antagonisms which derive from religious extremism in Australia are clearly exacerbated by the activities, violence and aspirations of far-right groups. What appears to confound much of the recent analysis of these groups, however, are their various modes of self-presentation and use of media systems. Indeed, these groups and their policies are themselves quite varied, with a range of positions on issues such as democracy, ethnicity, Christianity, trade protectionism, labour, migration, sexuality and gender (Lewis, 2013; Charalambous, 2015; Dean et al., 2016; Kottig et al., 2016; Lazaridis et al., 2016; Polakow-Suransky, 2017).

In this context, it has proven difficult to define precisely the contemporary far-right. Even so, there are a set of characteristics and perspectives which the majority of Australia’s far-right groups share (Dean et al., 2016; Lewis et al., 2017). These include the following:

- A nostalgic ultra-nationalism in which Australia is imagined as heroic, virtuous and unified. ‘True Australians’ are characterised by shared values, deep history, especially military history, and cultural characteristics which form the fabric of social cohesion. This cohesion is threatened by dangerous, uncommitted and culturally ‘deviant’ outsiders.
- A stereotyping and deep antipathy towards Islam, Muslims and Muslim cultures.
- A belief that all migrant groups, if they are to be admitted at all, should shed their old cultural practices and beliefs, and become assimilated into a unitary Australian culture.
- A strong sense of ‘heroic masculinity’ which subscribes to traditional (especially heterosexual) models of gender distinction (Kottig et al., 2016; Lewis et al., 2017). This heroic masculinity conceives of women (and ‘femininity’) as capable but vulnerable, needing protection from the insidious, immoral and repressive violence of alien cultures, especially Islam.
- A support for strong statehood, government and leadership, particularly in terms of national security and defence.
- A willingness to actively support or condone violence and militant activities in defence of nation and national culture.
- A willingness to defend the state against poor government, including democratically elected governments whose policies and actions threaten the integrity of nation.
• A sense of representing the ‘common person’, especially the working person who has been the victim of government policies which threaten livelihoods.
• A deep suspicion of internationalism, especially global governance systems and treaties that support human rights, environmental protection, refugees and free trade.
• A general disdain for progressive people and ideas, including those who support multiculturalism, Islam, environmentalism, public broadcasting, human rights and animal rights.

The Far-left, pro-diversity groups, which identify themselves as antithetical to the far-right, are less easily identified, partly because their ambit of interests is so broad. These interests range from labour markets, environmental protection, corporate hegemony, the state and migration, particularly refugee issues.

Paradoxically, in fact, the far-right and far-left share a certain vagueness in relation to economics, labour and trade, with both sides claiming to represent the interests of the everyday worker. Both groups are also ambiguous about democratic processes and both sides lionise violence in pursuit of their interests, particularly around the respective conceptions of ‘social cohesion’ and nation. Indeed, the far-left and far-right define themselves and their political project around the primary issue of diversity, Islam and the Muslim diaspora. It is reasonable to suggest that this political and cultural posturing around diversity enables each of the antagonists to be more precise about their own identity and political project which is shaped and defined in terms of their respective antagonists (Lewis et al., 2017). As was evidenced in the 2016 Coburg Riots, the far-left and far-right readily engaged in violence against one another in disregard of democratic process or rule-of-law. As Lewis et al. (2017) explain, the Muslim communities, over whom the street clashes were fought, were themselves largely absent from the belligerence and physical violence.

Table 1 lists the major groups on the far-left and far-right in Australia by web presence (Lewis et al., 2017; see also Dean et al., 2016).

**Pauline Hanson, Q&A and social media democracy**

The empirical research which informs this article focused on the interaction between online and broadcast media systems. While the research focus extends beyond the immediate interests of this article, findings provided significant insights into the ways in which Pauline Hanson’s appearance on Q&A stimulated antagonisms which are directly relevant to Australia’s social cohesion and democratic processes (Dwyer, 2016; Lewis et al., 2017).

For many commentators, the election of Pauline Hanson and other anti-diversity politicians into the Australian Parliament exposes both the populist demeanour of the far-right and its insidious capacity to stimulate racist activism (Dwyer, 2016). In a broader context, this form of far-right electoral success exposes the fallibilities of a representative democracy that is itself contingent upon the pernicious power of mass media and political calumny (Grossman et al., 2016; Herman, 1990; Keane, 2013; Murray, 2016).
Table 1. Far-right and far-left membership numbers (as of 8 January 2017).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Far-right/anti-diversity (membership-subscriber numbers)</th>
<th>Far-left/pro-diversity (membership-subscriber numbers)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United Patriots Front (97,014)</td>
<td>Melbourne Antifascist Info (3143)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reclaim Australia (57,427)</td>
<td>Antifa Australia (4069)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>True Blue Crew (3339)</td>
<td>Campaign against Racism and Fascism (7452)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One Nation Party (36,240)</td>
<td>No Room for Racism (18,320)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Liberty Alliance (34,740)</td>
<td>Slackbastard (12,242)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rise Up Australia Party (15,485)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q Society (15,539)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Settler Rebellion (35,820)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Lewis et al. (2017).

In order to overcome these fallibilities, innumerable political scholars and commentators have commended a model of democratic participation by which the citizenry engages in political processes beyond parliamentary elections. This mode of participation includes various forms of lobbying, activism, community politics, public discussion and other forms of lawful opinion-influencing practices (Roy, 2013). From the emergence of the World Wide Web in the 1990s, it has been frequently claimed that the online media systems would greatly augment this form of participative democracy, overcoming the limits of political representation and the delegation of power to elected éites (Lewis, 1998; Keane, 2013; Roy, 2013).

The notion of a ‘deliberative democracy’ is a form of political participation based more directly on what Jürgen Habermas calls ‘communicative action’ and the public sphere. Deliberation returns democratic politics to an informed citizenry, wrenching it from the populism, mendacity and intuitive-sensate opinion fostered by broadcast mass media.

This digital utopianism (digitopianism) has encouraged forum TV programmes like Q&A to augment their broadcast model of democratic participation through the utility of the online microblogging system, Twitter. The programme announces itself as a contributor to mediated democracy, claiming that it

... is driven by interaction: Q&A provides a rare opportunity for Australian citizens to directly question and hold to account politicians and key opinion leaders in a national public forum and Q&A is broadcast live so that not the studio audience but also the wider audience can get involved.

Panellists, therefore, usually represent the professional political élite as elected politicians, journalists or other commentators. Nevertheless, the show also aims to be accessible, facilitating the participation of all viewers through studio commentary and the platform of Twitter.

For tweets to appear on-screen or to be posed as questions to guests during the programme, they have to be vetted by moderators and producers. The online discussions are very open, which in itself may pose difficulties for a mediasphere that is
designed to promulgate effective deliberative discussion since such openness also permits threats, bullying and online abuse (Henry and Powell, 2015). In spite of the abusive political practices, which may inhibit effective deliberative discussions, Twitter might be seen as conducive to some form of participative democratic engagement. This ‘engagement’ may or may not be categorised as ‘deliberative’, dispassionate, logical and respectful (Pond et al., 2013; Procter et al., 2016). In the framework of authorised social cohesion, this form of democratic participation seems to augment the ideals of community resilience and participation (Lewis, 2016).

Because of her capacity to mobilise sensate, intuitive and often deeply held beliefs, Pauline Hanson provides a useful focus for this analysis of Twitter and its role within a democratic mediasphere. Like most media personae, Hanson is a representative figure who is amplified and emblemised in cultural consciousness. She is a celebrity politician who marshalls particular characteristics and perspectives into a simplified Media-Self or ‘subjectivity’ which is somehow stripped of complexity to become a consumable political media product. As with all media celebrities, Hanson is conjured as both ‘one of us’ and familiar, while being projected as ‘exceptional’ (Lewis, 2008; Wheeler, 2013).

In many respects, celebrity politicians like Pauline Hanson provide a catalyst for media activation, which in the contemporary context occurs through the interaction of broadcast and online media systems. The interaction between broadcast and online systems intensifies the compound of familiar-exceptional, giving users and audiences a sense of authentic participation and contribution to debate and decision-making, even as the celebrity politician remains fundamentally conjured and representative as a media and political figure (Wheeler, 2013).

Method and findings of Twitter research

This research deployed two conventional methods – content and textual analysis – which were adapted for particular kinds of Twitter discourse analysis (Pond, 2016; Pond et al., 2013; Lewis et al., 2017). Tweets were downloaded from publicly available Application Programming Interface (API) data. These tweets were gathered from the beginning of the Hanson Q&A appearance and concluded 30 hours later.

Content analysis. In order to explore the relationship between far-right politics, Q&A and social media discourse, tweets were captured before, during and after Pauline Hanson’s 18 July 2016 appearance on the show using the commercial tool Texifter. Specifying that tweets had to contain the sanctioned #QandA hashtag returned a dataset of 82,248 records, with the first tweet sent at 09:02 AEST on 17 July and the last at 08:58 AEST on 19 July (during July, Australia is 9 hours ahead of UTC). These tweets were sent from 18,565 unique user accounts – an average of 4.43 tweets per account – though, as ever the distribution of tweets per user was highly skewed. The busiest account sent 290 tweets during the period whereas half the accounts (n=9145) sent only one tweet.

Within this baseline sample, we were particularly interested in accounts that self-identified as ‘extreme’ – either far-left or far-right – in their political views, because our
primary aim is to explore the influence of these users on #QandA discourse. Clearly, it is no easy task to divine the political sensibilities of several thousand Twitter accounts based on limited self-reporting across a few metadata fields. Our chosen method involved filtering accounts using information in the ‘bio summary’ field—a text field that users are asked to complete to describe themselves on Twitter. We reasoned that there are certain signifiers that are frequently politicised, and that to include these signifiers in a short biographical statement is a political statement of some sort that, while not in itself extreme, is indicative of an ongoing intent to act politically. The following keywords were determined through an inductive process of examining samples of the Twitter dataset to find what words were associated with the research focus of diversity, political extremism and social cohesion. Keywords included


In total, 741 user accounts contained at least one keyword from the above list, and these accounts were responsible for a total of 5211 tweets, an average of 7.05 tweets per user—notably higher than the baseline average. Our interest in these accounts is twofold. First, we are seeking to characterise the linguistic markers of ‘extreme’ social media political actors and to characterise those actors using available metadata; second we are interested in the relationship between these markers, the language of #QandA – it being an emergent space for public-political discussion – and the way that this discourse engages with mainstream broadcast media.

There is limited heuristic value in trying to summarise the political leanings of 741 different accounts and, of course, there can be no supposition that all 741 accounts belong to genuine political actors: some may be duplicates and many may be bots. Nevertheless, it is interesting to observe the frequency with which certain keyword signifiers arise in the biographies of these accounts. We compute the frequency of these signifiers by parsing biographies into individual parts of speech using python’s natural language toolkit (NLTK) and then recording frequencies across all biographies combined. As a very crude indicator, these frequencies can be displayed in a word cloud (Figure 1).

A closer reading of these biographies supports the summary observation that accounts are highly polarised: there are ‘proud’, ‘conservative’ nationalists – both Christians and atheists – defined frequently in opposition to ‘Islam’. The language of the left is equally distinct and the signifiers are rarely shared. It is notable, too, that a somewhat paradoxical globalist-nationalist tension is evident in the far-right ‘extreme’ discourses. Nationalist imaginaries are set against global ideologies such as neoliberalism but also, and more forcefully, Islam. At the same time, many of these accounts are engaged in transnational political discussion with like-minded ideologues: US patriots comment on the role of Islam in Australia; Trump supporters align themselves with Pauline Hanson.

As such, there is sense in trying to explore the geography of these extreme accounts, even acknowledging the many challenges involved in mapping Twitter, not least the limited availability of specific geographical data. A very low percentage of tweets tend to be geo-located, for instance, and in the ‘extreme’ sample only 82 accounts specify a
precise user location. Given the relatively low number of accounts in our samples, we chose to explore spatiality by analysing the user-specified location fields, which include the precise bounding boxes already mentioned and a free-form text field. The geography discussed here, then, is not a grid-bound mapping of accurate tweet or user locations, but rather a ‘representational geography’ – a snapshot of the places, nationalities and spatial imaginaries with which users choose to identify. Some users choose to use the location fields to describe an action or a spurious location (i.e. one that cannot be located physically: ‘Right here when you’re ready’ or ‘Locating terrorists on a scope’). These types of description were treated as non-entries for this analysis (Pond et al., 2013; Procter et al., 2016).

Given the size of the ‘extreme’ sample, it was possible to analyse locations manually; 53% of these users said that they were based in Australia, 18% were international, predominantly from the United States and the remaining 29% did not specify a usable location. Within Australia, New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria were the most common locations, and there were very few users away from the Eastern states. This distribution tends to align with the population distribution within Australia.

On their own, these summary figures are hardly meaningful; we require baseline data and a mechanism for comparison. Given the much larger number of unique users, manual analysis of the complete baseline dataset was not possible. Instead, a random sample of 500 accounts was extracted from the baseline data and these accounts were analysed using the same manual reading process. Table 2 displays a comparison of the two data samples.

It is interesting that the extreme sample group contains a far higher percentage of international accounts than the baseline group, especially in light of media speculation following the election of Donald Trump and the possible growing influence of a
Table 2. A comparison of account locations between the baseline and extreme samples.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Extreme</th>
<th>Baseline</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No entry</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

coordinated, globalised surge of disruptive nationalism, possibly associated with Russia and particularly prominent in social media channels. It is possible, of course, that the terms used to identify political extremism were biased towards internationalism, but there is no particularly obvious reason for this. It seems more likely that particular discourses attract a particular type of user, regardless of local framings. In many of the account biographies, there is a sense of a global, uniting opposition to ‘Islam’ – that is, Islam is often bundled with other vaguely defined ‘ideologies’ to be opposed by default, in what appears to be an ongoing, far broader language war between left and right. Within these wars, there recurs a ‘basket’ of predictable key signifiers. The relationship between these signifiers is not always coherent:


Atheist. Anti #RegressiveLeft, #SJWs, political correctness and #Islamism. For #Brexit. Interested in science, politics and animal welfare.

An Aussie patriot. We are at war with Islam. Oz will prevail. Be aware of leftists, greens and bleeding hearts. They are cowards and traitors.

Anti-Globalist. Individualist. Atheist. Tight leash on Govt. Totalitarian ideologies – ProgMarxism & ISLAM must be destroyed. Trump ONLY one who’ll wipe them out.

False Evidence Appearing Real – FEAR. Anti-extremist, Anti-Islam, Detest Racism (Islam is not a race, its a politicised religion) in all its forms! Ex-Military.

with a mission to reclaim planet earth as habitable again, I’m against islam. If I hurt ur sentiments, you need to ponder. if its against islam, RT==endorsement

Muslims are also well represented in this sample, not least because many self-describe as Muslim (and, often, ‘proud’) or state their membership of a Muslim council or organisation. The language of these biographies, though, is markedly different from that of the ‘global nationalists’.

#ILoveAllah #ILoveMuhammad #ILoveIslam #ILoveQuran #ILoveHadith #ILoveSahaba #ILoveMuslims #ILoveChristians #ILoveJews #ILoveNonMusLims #LoveForAll #HateForNone
A proud Canadian Ahmadi Muslim. ‘Love for all hatred for none’. All opinions are personal and RTs are not endorsements.


Official handle of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, USA Outreach Department. Got questions? Ask us at #-####-##### Love for All, Hatred for None!

Having established that there is some evidence that there are distinct differences between the baseline contributors to #QandA and the more polarised political contributors, we wanted to explore the discourses associated with these groups. In order to do this, we conducted two phases of analysis: an automated keyword and sentiment reading to establish domains or genres of discourse, and a closer textual reading to explore the dynamics of linguistic struggle within these domains.

**Automated reading.** The first step in an automated reading is to parse tweet text into individual parts of speech using a Python natural language processing library. This enables the easy identification of recurring signifiers (keywords – nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs), distinct from the frequent but non-signifying components of URLs, prepositions and tweet-specific syntax (e.g. the @ symbol). The relative frequency of these signifiers can be visualised using a word cloud, in the same way as the account biographies (see Einspänner et al., 2014) (Figure 2).

Within the word cloud, the prominence of ‘Pauline’, ‘Hanson’, ‘Muslim’ and ‘Islam’ reflects the frequent occurrence of these words. Ms Hanson is mentioned in 1236 tweets, Islam in 702 tweets and Muslim in 806 tweets. Ms Hanson appears alongside either Muslim or Islam in 260 tweets. The polarisation of these inter-sectoring tweets is revealed by sentiment analysis. Approximately one-third of the tweets are decisively not neutral in their sentiment (sentiment scores are greater than ±0.25), which suggests that the intersection of these signifiers produces discourse that is frequently non-deliberative and regularly oppositional. Indeed, a closer reading of these 260 tweets suggests that the sentiment scores probably underestimate the polemical nature of the discussion – as does the visibility of ‘hate’ in the word cloud.

#auspol The insane Larissa Waters is on #qanda tonight up against our @PaulineHansonOz #risofotheright NO MUSLIMS! https://t.c

RT @un_diverted: #qanda #auspol More strong women @SoniaKruger @KirralieS @ PaulineHansonOz speaking out about muslim violence

RT @Kon_K: What a contrast:Peaceful, inclusive, dignified #Muslim woman VsHateful bigot named Pauline #Hanson. I’ll st

RT @nakkiahlui: Pauline Hanson is a White Supremacist. First it was Aboriginals and then Asians and now Muslims. She preys on

RT @Welsh58: Only winner tonight on #QandA is Pauline Hanson, all ALP, Greens & LNP APPEASED ISLAM & vilified an elect
Figure 2. A word cloud depicting the most frequent keywords occurring in 5211 tweets sent by ‘extreme’ users under #QandA.

Sentiment analysis. Attempting to compare the sentiment of the extreme and baseline groups is difficult. Sentiment analysis was conducted on the text of tweets, and positive and negative sentiment tweets were separated to avoid masking; tweets that scored 0 for sentiment polarity were discarded as were tweets where the sentiment score was highly subjective (>0.75). In the baseline sample, those tweets that mention Pauline Hanson and score positive sentiment average +0.29; those that are negative score −0.23: a difference of 0.52. Within the extreme group, values are almost exactly the same: positive tweets score +0.29 also and negative sentiment averages −0.22. If this suggests anything, it is that discussion around Pauline Hanson is neither more polarised nor more positive (or negative) in either group. This is a little surprising given the conflicting discourse surrounding Hanson in the ‘extreme’ group – the closer reading suggests a far higher degree of polarisation. There are similar spreads for ‘Islam’ too. It may well be that the relative extremity of political positioning among users has little or no influence on the subsequent discourse associated with those users, but it is equally possible that sentiment analysis is simply too crude a tool to explore any relationship. For this reason, it is important to subject both groups to close textual reading.

Closer reading textual analysis. While the quantitative methods of analysis revealed broad themes across the dataset, a more detailed analysis of individual tweets allows for greater specificity. This is particularly helpful in identifying the ways in which various tweeters and their tweets engage with the cultural and democratic politics which are generated around social cohesion.

It is important to emphasise that this form of analysis is not treating the tweets as ‘representative’ in a quantitative sense. Rather, tweets were selected using a purposive sampling method. That is, they were selected for what they might illustrate about the issue of social cohesion and the polemics of far-right and far-left extremism in Australia. These insights, we would argue, provide useful discussion points about cohesion and participative-deliberative democracy in Australia. They also indicate something of the
ways in which ‘violent extremism’ is functioning through the broadcast and online mediasphere.

What is immediately obvious, and as our quantitative analysis intimates, is that the far-right are highly active in both the broadcast and online media systems. Whether as electoral representatives or ‘grass-roots’ politics, the far-right are focused and organised, taking as many opportunities as possible to promote their cultural and political objectives.

One key theme that emerged is a contestation or language war over what it means to be a cohesive society. In particular, social cohesion is addressed directly through the debate over the expectation that Muslims ‘integrate’ into Australian life.

Consider, for example, tweets suggesting there is an inherent barrier to social cohesion associated with the Muslim faith that makes it incompatible with Western democracy:

#qanda Islam is NOT inclusive.

One reason that some Islamists don’t feel included in society is that it’s not a sharia society. #qanda

According to Islam, rape is a human right #RespectDiversity #IslamIsTheProblem #qanda

Tweets such as these epitomise a worldview that sees Islam as a monadic belief system determined to adopt a militant dissident approach to community, regardless of the social context with which it interacts. This discussion, however, was not always one way; there were some instances where this issue was debated when counterarguments to this pessimistic view of the likelihood of effective cohesion were made:

@MariamVeizadeh @QandA Social Harmony. What planet are you living on. Non existent. World under seige from Islam variants.

Largest muslim nation in the region – Malaysia – has an ongoing problem with Islamic terrorism. Remember Bali ? #qanda

True integration is to love the country in which you live & to be completely loyal to it. #QandA #KhalifaOfIslam http

Name ONE country where Islam has assimilated into Western culture #qanda

The ideal of effective deliberative discussion, however, is not evident in these tweets as these arguments seem to be playing out preexisting positions, rather than engaging with the alternative perspectives being offered.

A similar line of argument was presented by pro-diversity left-wing perspectives. Rather than put forward an ad hominem attack on her intelligence, it invokes a consequentialist account of the impact on society:

Pauline Hanson FEEDS Radicalism ON BOTH SIDES. #QANDA'
Pauline Hanson is a threat, now we know who is scaring who. #QandA

People like Pauline Hanson and Sonia Kruger are putting Muslims lives in danger. #QandA

Here also emerging in these tweets is the invocation of a kind of counterpoint ‘extremism’ against the pro-nationalist position. Pauline Hanson’s Islamophobia is invoked as harmful to broader society because of the fear it creates and the damage it does to trust. While there was a greater number that invoked Islam as a threat to integration and national identity, pro-diversity left views likewise positioned Pauline Hanson as a threat to social cohesion.

The characterisation of Pauline Hanson within this engaged group tended to break down into two clearly demarcated positions: first was the more negative argument that she was stupid:

Sam Dastyari wanted a battle of wits with Pauline Hanson, but she came unarmed #qanda

Who else loved Pauline’s face when she heard Indonesia the biggest Islamic country in the world is successful &amp; enforces democracy

Wow, Pauline Hanson cannot stand up to being fact checked to her face. Tony Jones just destroyed her. #qanda

Clear here is that the focus of these posts is not about countering her argument. On one level, tweets such as these seek to describe her failure effectively to propose a convincing argument against her political opponent, but the clear sub-text is that this is due to some kind of intellectual deficiency on her part:

I remember seeing Hanson as a young child &amp; thinking she was an insignificant woman &amp; a dying breed. I wish I had been right. #qanda

‘I’m really looking forward to Hanson making a goose of herself – she’s such a fucking bird brain #QandA

Pauline Hanson is glimmering with evil connivance as @samdastyari speaks #qanda #auspol

What is evident here is that far-left proponents are engaging in their own form of ‘abusive exclusivism’, precisely the sin which they attribute to the far-right. In the case of Hanson and her disciples on the right, the imperative for exclusion and abuse is not race, religion or ethnicity – but social class and education levels.

Here, negative gendered themes become more explicit. Hanson is positioned as being beyond her station, attempting to do something she has no right to do. She is not the right person for the job – an ensign of the deficiency of a democratic system that admits electoral stupidity and ignorance.

What is also noteworthy is that this view of her intelligence was not limited to those who demonstrated negative sentiment towards her. This view was evident even among some who agreed with her views on Islam:
@MAK1985_AU @PaulineHansonOz may be awkward but she is only one saying anything real, #qanda panel can only say it’s racist

Pauline Hanson might not be the most eloquent speaker but at least she isn’t afraid to talk about Islam. #qanda

Here, however, Hanson as incompetent outsider and lower class politician accord with a grudging respect for her brave willingness to say what more conventionally educated, often male conservative politicians do not. She is granted a counterpoint heroic and salvational status.

Hanson’s supporters among the engaged user group tend nevertheless to lionise her status as an Australian, which is continually defined as antithetical to Islam. Abjuring class or class distinction, the far-right voice is often shrill with nationalism and the primacy of national belonging and identity, holding in contempt those Muslims who place their religion before Australia, Australian values and the ideals of modern nationhood. Hanson represents these values and ‘nation’ which are both heroic and victim. As the national matriarch, Hanson is both tenacious and righteous:

@mirandadevine @QandA @PaulineHansonOz she will become Prime minister of Australia. A true patriot. And she is no racist’

Her we go an Islamic putting Pauline down. Get into her Pauline #qanda’

Hanson’s views on Islam dominate #QandA https://t.co/oDR39r2stQ Better title: ‘PC tag team bullies Hanson’.

Sorry Muslims &amp; #qanda but I agree with @KirralieS. @SoniaKruger @PaulineHansonOz &amp; Hungary Halt Islamic immigration’

Hypocrite @MariatamVeiszadeh would praise #QandA if #AnneAzzaAly was on panel Complains about Elected @PaulineHansonOz https://t’

@pruemacsween did you expect anything less Prue? She has more guts than most to walk into that pit! @QandA @PaulineHansonOz’

Much of the online discussion revolved around these cultural and political tropes of heroic victimhood and the violence of exclusion. Hanson’s status as a celebrity politician was central to the ways in which the discussions were exercised through the online system. While the actual broadcast maintained a respectful etiquette and attempted to construct a deliberative framework, the online discussions were sometimes abusive, and often impassioned and personal. As the familiar-exceptional, celebrity politician, Pauline Hanson, facilitated the release of these personal politics. Of course, Twitter itself may not be the ideal forum for a deliberative democratic participation (Pond, 2016; Pond et al., 2013), but there is strong evidence to suggest that the far-right, and less so the far-left, are taking the opportunities provided by the online systems to propagate and promote their political and cultural objectives.
Conclusion

At its most obvious, we can see that the whole concept of social cohesion is besieged by antagonistic groups with differing conceptions of nation, community, diversity and unity. Governments seek perpetually to resolve these antagonisms through the assertion of law and Australian values. Other than invocations of modernity, liberal democracy and secular humanism, these values remain only vaguely defined. The diversity–similarity aporia, in fact, seems more comfortably eschewed within a relativist framework of *Difference, difference* and cohesion. The ‘great success’ of Australian multiculturalism becomes a governmental discourse of national apologia – nothing more needs to be prescribed or defined.

For the far-right, however, the aporia opens new possibilities within the language wars of culture and politics. Innumerable scholars and commentators have sought to dismiss the resurgence of far-right politics in all Western states as simply racism that is vitalised by the West’s economic contraction, globalisation and distending economic inequalities (Polakow-Suransky, 2017). Others suggest that the rise of the far-right is also symptomatic of the failings of progressive politics and the left (Lewis et al., 2017).

Either way, it is clear that the far-right have been energised by these issues, even though they are bereft of feasible solutions. Indeed, rather than focusing on the complexity of global systems and inadequate models of governance, the far-right contents itself with scapegoating – a tried and true strategy that has marked ultra-conservatism through the modern political era.

Our study has exposed how this strategy is being exercised through contemporary media systems. The far-right – and their antagonists on the far-left – use the democratic framings of modernity to pursue their violent and anti-democratic cultural and political objectives. Paradoxically, too, the far-right use global media systems to promote an ultranationalism which assaults the premise of diversity that tolerates their own political peculiarities in free speech and other legislated rights.

Against all of these complex language wars, the concept of ‘social cohesion’ seems astonishingly inadequate. Governments and diversity enthusiasts seem at times to be entirely oblivious to these complexities. Too often the advocates of cohesion in multiculturalism seek to promote an ontology of difference which overrides the more threatening dimensions of immanence and their provocation of violence – a violence which emerged through the contingencies of territorialism, agriculture, social hierarchies and cultural distinction (Lewis, 2016; Malesevic, 2017).

Lewis (2002, 2008, 2016) has offered an alternative conception of *transculturalism* which distinguishes ‘culture’ as perpetually embryonic, evolving, mutable and dynamic. Rather than invest its political and governmental aspirations in a fundamental aporia – multiculturalism – Lewis argues that the dynamics which define culture should be conceptually emancipated. All forms of political and cultural essentialism would be overthrown in order for human social groups to mix, hybridise, innovate and develop progressive and productive social relations. The political challenge is to ensure that this dynamism is effected through the deconstruction of extreme hierarchies, and thus all barriers to engagement and transcultural mixing are dissolved.
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ORCID iD
Jeffrey Lewis https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5806-415X

References


Biographical notes

Jeffrey Lewis is co-director of the Human Security and Disasters Research. He is a former Fellow of the Centre for Civil Society, London School of Economics, and has published over forty book chapters, reviews and articles. He has also published numerous stories and articles for magazines and newspapers.
Philip Pond is a researcher in digital communication and software studies at RMIT University in Melbourne. He runs the Digital-Social Systems Lab, which designs research and builds software to study the impact of technology on society.

Robin Cameron’s current research focuses on Digital Criminology with a focus masculinity and extremist violence in urban and online spaces, and the effects on community resilience. He has also conducted research into 9/11, the war on terror and security responses to other crises such as disasters and protests.