

Annual Conference 2025



RESPONDING TO EXTREMISM IN THE CLASSROOM: ONLINE LIES AND REAL WORLD HARM

A PAPER FROM THE TĀMAKI MAKURAU AUCKLAND AND WELLINGTON
REGIONS



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RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That the report be received.
2. That the President and General Secretary assign an existing Taskforce and/or Committee to be tasked with developing specific advice and guidelines for the membership on dealing with the issues outlined in this paper, including considering the recommendation of a member survey.
3. That PPTA Te Wehengarua acknowledge and endorse the findings of the *He Uru Kahikatea: Building young people's resilience through media and information literacy and digital citizenship skills* report and support its recommendations for building youth resilience to harmful online content.
4. That PPTA Te Wehengarua call on the Ministry of Education to implement the recommendations from the *He Uru Kahikatea* report.
5. That PPTA Te Wehengarua call on the Ministry of Education to provide PLD and resourcing for teachers, ensuring that every teacher has access to quality PLD on:
 - a. Recognising and responding to harmful online content and resilience against extremist ideologies
 - b. The embedding of critical media literacy into a range of curricula
 - c. Empowering teachers to help students make links between historical forms of fascism and contemporary forms of fascism (i.e. Educating for Peace from AEU¹)
 - d. Managing classroom discussions with sensitivity and confidence
 - e. The risks of social media use, particularly among young people
6. That PPTA Te Wehengarua reasserts members' right to hold and express political views, and their right to freedom of political association, in the context of this paper.
7. That PPTA Te Wehengarua call on the Ministry of Education to develop a National Strategy on Digital and Media Literacy, centrally funding and mandating a cross-curricular approach to Digital Citizenship and Critical Media Literacy, co-designed with teachers, iwi, digital experts and youth workers.
8. That PPTA Te Wehengarua take to members a possible future STCA claim for a dedicated Digital Citizenship and Wellbeing Lead in every secondary school, responsible for staff training, curriculum integration and student support, who can work alongside classroom teachers and pastoral teams.
9. That PPTA Te Wehengarua call on the Ministry to co-design a youth-led, culturally grounded programme with rangatahi Māori, iwi, Pacific youth, and community leaders, focusing on building digital resilience and belonging in the face of growing division online and in communities.

¹ Australian Education Union - Victorian Branch, 'Resolution: Educating for Peace', AEU Vic, 2024.

<https://www.aeuvic.asn.au/resolution-educating-peace-0>

The Conversation, 'Education for Peace: the effort to teach children how to rebuild societies after WWII', [theconversation.com](https://theconversation.com/education-for-peace-the-effort-to-teach-children-how-to-rebuild-societies-after-wwii-246087), 2025. <https://theconversation.com/education-for-peace-the-effort-to-teach-children-how-to-rebuild-societies-after-wwii-246087>

10. That PPTA Te Wehengarua call on the Ministry of Education to create Safe Reporting Pathways and Student Support Services, establishing confidential, student-friendly pathways for reporting exposure to harmful online content or extremist grooming, supported by trained pastoral staff and culturally competent counsellors.
11. That PPTA Te Wehengarua call on the Ministry of Education to collaborate with platforms and community partners, advocating for stronger regulation of harmful content and support school-community partnerships to build resilience and counter online hate.

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The rise of misinformation, disinformation, and xenophobia, including through a toxic online culture of ‘masculinity’, poses an escalating threat to society, and in particular to our members, the learning, safety, and wellbeing of students in Aotearoa. As educators, we are witnessing firsthand the disruptive impact of these harms on classroom dynamics, students’ ability to think critically, student mental health, and teacher workload. Social media platforms and online influencers - in what is often termed the ‘attention economy’ - are now arguably more influential than formal education, and many students are engaging with harmful ideologies that undermine respectful relationships, inclusive values, and their learning and development.
- 1.2 For many people, the recent Netflix limited series, *Adolescence*, was their first exposure to how this is playing out with teenagers and in schools, but for the teachers of Aotearoa, the writing has been on the (white)board for some time.
- 1.3 One focus of this paper is to call on the Ministry of Education to support urgent action. Teachers and schools should not be left to face these challenges alone. Instead, we must insist on the tools, training, and resources necessary to equip both educators and students to navigate digital culture as safely and critically as possible.

2. EXTREMISM(S)

- 2.1 While ‘toxic masculinity’ is a particularly insidious form of extremism we are seeing in our classrooms, it is important to note the myriad webs of xenophobia luring our young people. The use of the word ‘webs’ here is both to indicate the power of *online* platforms and communities for radicalising young people, but also the subtle ways that even seemingly innocuous ‘content’ can capture and lead young people down dangerous ways of thinking (YouTube is particularly effective at this, more on this later), and that this online behaviour has real world consequences. These ‘extremisms’ can include:
 - The ‘mansphere’: A term designating a varied collection of websites, blogs, and online forums which promote ‘toxic masculinity’, misogyny, and oppositions to feminism. This includes ‘incel’ communities which explicitly demonise women, and ‘hustle culture’ which justifies toxic ‘dating’ behaviour and sexual violence.
 - ‘Trad-wife’ culture: Increasingly young women (including anecdotally in the classroom) are expressing regressive views on the role of women.
 - ‘Pro-ana’ and ‘pro-mia’: While not a new phenomenon, pro-anorexia and pro-bulimia views have found new voices on TikTok and other platforms, often using coded terms to engage (primarily) young women in dangerous ways of thinking about their bodies, with sometimes tragic consequences. Beyond this, broader issues of body dysmorphia impact young men too, which often leads them into online communities promoting harmful ‘wellness’ regimes and even unnecessary medical procedures.
 - Homophobia and transphobia: Whether linked to religion, ‘gender ideology’, or ‘gender critical’ thinking, extreme views on people in rainbow communities is a significant cause of division, and results in real world violence and self-harm.
 - Islamophobia: What could be seen as almost a contemporary ‘Crusades’-mindset translates imperialist justifications for genocide into individual justifications for mass killing.

- Antisemitism: While used too often as a cudgel against legitimate criticism of the Israeli state and military, negative tropes from leaders and an ongoing resurgence of explicitly Neo-Nazi fascism keep antisemitism alive.
- Anti-Māori racism: Conversations about Aotearoa's history and honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi are often hijacked to justify extreme views and disinformation, including on co-governance, fueling racist ideologies increasingly prevalent in our classrooms.

2.2 When we don't allow for nuanced conversations on complex issues as a society - a crucial role for schools in developing critical thinking - we can make extremists seem reasonable. Unfortunately the design and underlying framework of online spaces, particularly with many platforms rolling back on comprehensive content moderation and other guardrails, has been shown to entrench and feed division.

3. ONLINE EXTREMISM

- 3.1 A 2021 report by Hedayah and the Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right examined 12 far-right groups active in Aotearoa New Zealand and identified 25 core narratives driving their discourse.² These narratives reflected global trends - including white supremacism, ethno-nationalism, antisemitism, Islamophobia, misogyny, chauvinism, homophobia and transphobia, fascism, and anti-social sentiments - but also revealed two themes particularly distinctive to the New Zealand context: anti-Māori rhetoric and the co-opting of environmental concerns, often reframed through racist anxieties about resource scarcity and non-white population growth. Crucially, most of these 25 narratives included strong threads of transphobia, anti-immigration sentiment, sexism, misogyny, and a distrust of democratic institutions.
- 3.2 Anecdotally, many members have spoken about the impact of disinformation on their classrooms, particularly since the COVID 19 pandemic where students are increasingly distrustful of 'traditional' institutions. Similarly, teachers - particularly women, are facing increasing misogynistic pushback from students who have been radicalised by 'manosphere' content.
- 3.3 For educators, the challenge lies in the subtle and often obscure ways these narratives show up in the classroom. Far-right messaging today is rarely explicit. Instead, it circulates through digital spaces using memes, coded language, and insider humour - forms of communication steeped in online subcultures that many teachers may not be familiar with. This means harmful ideologies can be echoed in classroom discussions, online group chats, or student content without teachers recognising the red flags.
- 3.4 Algorithm-driven platforms like YouTube can act as pipelines to extreme content by prioritising engagement over accuracy or safety. The recommendation systems are designed to keep users watching for as long as possible, often by suggesting increasingly extreme videos. This can lead 'users' - particularly young people - down a 'rabbit hole' of content that gradually shifts from mainstream to fringe, potentially exposing them to conspiracy theories, misogyny, racism, or other forms of harmful extremism. Because these shifts can happen subtly over time, starting with 'meme-culture' and coded language before leading to more radical 'content', people would often not recognise how their views are being shaped by the platform's algorithm. The recent increase in AI-generated content only

² William Allchorn, "From Gangs to Groupuscules and Solo-Actor Terrorism: New Zealand Radical Right Narratives and Counter-Narratives in the Context of the Christchurch Attack," *Hedayah.com* (Hedayah, 2021), https://hedayah.com/resources/new_zealand_radical_right_cve_narratives/.

exacerbates this spread.

- 3.5 One minute a young woman is engaging with TikToks about ‘wellness’ and nutrition, the next she is finding her feed presenting posts covertly encouraging anorexia.
- 3.6 One minute a young man is watching YouTube videos about Stoicism, and with only a few clicks on ‘recommended’ videos, he is watching Andrew Tate justifying his hatred for women.
- 3.7 Historically, schools have taken a protectionist approach to these issues, attempting to censor content or ban access to them. The limitations of this approach have been made clear by the access to online environments outside of school hours, as well as many strategies students use and share to get around school IT systems. Adding to this a woeful lack of regulation, this leads to young people being exposed to harmful content at an increasingly young age - including pornographic content, extreme or otherwise, which can lead to a warped understanding of human sexuality. In the current context students need to be equipped with the knowledge and skills to safely and critically navigate the online landscape.
- 3.8 The Ministry of Education’s recent move to make Financial Literacy a compulsory part of the curriculum is a welcome and pragmatic step towards equipping young people with tools for the so-called ‘real world’. But in the same spirit, it’s vital we treat Media Literacy with equal urgency. Young people are growing up in an algorithm-driven media landscape where disinformation, extreme content, and manipulative narratives are only ever a click or two away. A refreshed curriculum that fails to embed Media Literacy as a core competency risks leaving both students and teachers unprepared for the complexities and risks of contemporary digital life.
- 3.9 Simon Wilson chaired a panel about the COVID 19 response at the recent Auckland Writers Festival. One of the panellists was Shaun Hendy, author of *The Covid Response*, his account of our science-driven strategy for confronting the global pandemic. His message about the next pandemic was that it wasn’t a matter of if, but when. “... and that scares me” he said, “*the public mood has changed. The informational landscape is even worse than it was. This year the White House took down its Covid website and put up a conspiracy theory. So I shudder to think what will happen. I am very nervous*”.³
- 3.10 We should all be nervous.

4. ‘REAL WORLD’ EXTREMISM

- 4.1 It is always important to remember how linked our digital and our ‘real’ worlds are.
- 4.2 The Christchurch Mosque Shootings of 2019 were a tragic wakeup call that being radicalised online can have horrifying and very real impacts, felt across the globe, including with footage shared on social media. The ‘Christchurch Call’ following this is at least a sign some leaders are taking these issues seriously (if only the social media giants who hold the real power here felt the same way).

³ Steve Braunias, “Record-Equal Numbers and Bland Ham at Auckland Writers Festival,” Newsroom, May 18, 2025, https://newsroom.co.nz/2025/05/19/record-equal-numbers-and-bland-ham-at-auckland-writers-festival/?fbclid=IwY2xjawKXnaFleHRuA2FlbQlxMQABHuDLTqEL6Bp7wr9TrTGsnej6pErkSmo5W85uEY5taTvV9cw2mVPf3ID9Gwdg_aem_GHzqPde8974ckMlu-s5mvQ

- 4.3 During the COVID 19 pandemic foreign influences had a significant impact on the growth of domestic groups fed by toxic misinformation and disinformation campaigns, leading to violent protests, and threats against science communicators, and health and political leaders.
- 4.4 The ‘Roast Busters scandal’, first reported on in 2013, was an early example of how much impact issues of extremist misogyny can have in a school context.⁴
- 4.5 Brian Tamaki’s recent violent protest of a library reading group highlights the real threat to children and families when caught up in toxic reactionary movements fueled by hateful rhetoric against rainbow people.
- 4.6 Broadly, the manipulation of disenfranchised people (and those who *feel* they have been ‘left out’) is a tried and true tool of fascism. Today we see this in ‘Trump’s America’ and beyond, and increasingly we are seeing this impact in our classrooms: online extremism having very tangible ‘real world’ impacts.
- 4.7 While Aotearoa-based research is limited when it comes to the radicalisation of young people, there are worrying statistics coming out of the UK and the US for example.
- 4.8 In data collected by the UK Government, through the Prevent Programme, a key counter-radicalisation effort in England and Wales, out of 6,884 referrals where age was known, individuals aged 11-15 accounted for the largest group, 40% or 2,729 referrals. Those aged 16-17 accounted for another 13% or 892 referrals meaning that minors aged 11-17 made up 53%. Where gender was specified, 89% of referrals were for males (all data for year ending March 2024).⁵
- 4.9 In the US a 2023 Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) report analysing extremists active between 2000-2019 found that 639 out of 1,028 individuals were under 30 years old (including 24 aged 18 or under), highlighting youth susceptibility. The same report noted a 311% increase in the number of radicalised young people without formal ties to recognised extremist groups over the past 10 years compared to the previous 5 decades, suggesting a rise in diffuse, often online-driven radicalisation.⁶

5. KEY ISSUES FOR SCHOOLS IN AOTEAROA

- 5.1 Anecdotally, teachers in Aotearoa too are seeing more and more young men being drawn into the toxic world of the ‘manosphere’. In a profession that’s predominantly made up of women, this is showing up in the classroom, not just as typical teenage rebellion, but as blatant disrespect or outright dismissal of teachers simply because of their gender. and the reality is, there’s little to no support for schools or teachers on how to respond to this kind of behaviour.

⁴Huffpost, “Roast Busters, New Zealand ‘Teen Rape Club,’ Allegedly Preyed On Drunk, Underage Girls,” Nov 6, 2013, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/roast-busters-new-zealand-teen-rape-club_n_4221597

⁵ GOV.UK, “User guide to: Individuals referred to and supported through the Prevent Programme, England and Wales”, Dec 5, 2024, [https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/user-guide-to-individuals-referred-to-and-supported-through-the-prevent-programme-england-and-wales](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/user-guide-to-individuals-referred-to-and-supported-through-the-prevent-programme-england-and-wales/user-guide-to-individuals-referred-to-and-supported-through-the-prevent-programme-england-and-wales)

⁶ Jones, I., Guhl, J., Davey, J., & Ayad, M. (ISD: Institute for Strategic Dialogue). “Young guns: Understanding a new generation of extremist radicalization in the United States”, 2023, https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Young-guns_Understandings-a-new-generation-of-extremist-radicalization-in-the-United-States.pdf

5.2 Things teachers are seeing regularly in the classroom now include the following:

5.2.1 **The Normalisation of Misogyny and Violence Online**

- Influencers promoting toxic masculinity are being glorified by students, particularly young men.
- Classrooms are seeing increased instances of sexist language and attitudes that challenge the respectful relationships kaupapa central to our curriculum.

5.2.2 **The Spread of Misinformation and Disinformation**

- Students are increasingly drawing on conspiracy theories, pseudoscience and online ‘alternative facts’ which directly conflict with evidence-based teaching.
- Teachers face pushback when correcting misinformation, increasing stress and classroom tension.

5.2.3 **The Addictive Nature of Technology Fueling Extremism**

- Social media and other online platforms use design and algorithms based on increasingly advanced psychologically/geared technology as used by gambling machines to keep users hooked, prioritising ‘engagement’ above all else. The more eye balls the more ad dollars, and increasingly large Silicon Valley corporations demonstrate that they put shareholders interests above societal health and the wellbeing of young people.
- It is an understatement to say that keeping students off distracting apps and websites in the classroom so they can learn is a tough part of the job being a teacher in the 21st century. Students have always had distractions but not to the degree or the access that we have today.
- Many jurisdictions are considering or have implemented social media bans for young people, partly due to the realisation that companies like Facebook and TikTok are not capable of ‘self-regulation’. Certainly, bans cannot be seen as a simple fix, and the tension is perhaps in how bans like this are implemented and enforced, but this is a conversation that we need to keep having in Aotearoa and in our Association.
- The toxic combination of extreme content and addictive platforms exacerbates the risks for young people. Only time will tell the true impact of this ‘global experiment’ on our young people.

5.2.4 **Teacher Workload and Responsibility Creep**

- Teachers are expected to respond to complex issues of digital culture, media literacy and student radicalisation with little or no specialist training.
- An increasing amount of bullying and concerning behaviour is now happening outside of school in online spaces, many of which teachers have limited understanding of or access to. This places additional strain on our already stretched staff and resources.
- We are already anecdotally seeing significant and recently growing pressure in this area, particularly on pastoral roles. Some teachers have been reporting for example a particular prevalence of exposure to extremist content in new Year 9 students, indicating that these pressures are likely to get worse.

5.2 There is a lot of work to be done here. However, there has already been a lot of investigative work done in this space, and sound recommendations made, exemplified by the *He Uru Kahikatea: Building young people’s resilience through media and information literacy and digital citizenship skills* (2023) report.

- 5.4 This report was authored by Professor Dame Juliet Gerrard, Professor Stuart McNaughton, Professor Melinda Webber, Colson Verdonk and Susie Meade. The report was commissioned by then-Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and produced by the Office of the Prime Minister's Chief Science Advisor (OPMCSA) as part of a governmental initiative to address the challenges posed by misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation—collectively termed "polluted information" in the report.⁷
- 5.5 The primary aim of *He Uru Kahikatea* was to explore how young people in Aotearoa New Zealand can be supported to develop resilience against polluted information through enhanced Media and Information Literacy (MIL) and Digital Citizenship (DC) skills. The report emphasises an holistic, system-wide approach that involves educators, schools, whānau, communities and government agencies. It underscores the importance of culturally responsive education that upholds the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi and addresses equity by ensuring all young people, regardless of background, have access to the necessary tools and support to navigate the complex information landscape.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS FROM *HE URU KAHIKATEA: BUILDING YOUNG PEOPLE'S RESILIENCE THROUGH MEDIA AND INFORMATION LITERACY AND DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP SKILLS*

- 6.1 The *He Uru Kahikatea* (2023) report provides a set of detailed recommendations aimed at increasing Media and Information Literacy and Digital Citizenship in Aotearoa New Zealand schools in order to counter misinformation and build youth resilience.
- 6.2 The core recommendations related to education are summarised below:
- 6.2.1 **Integrate Media and Information Literacy and Digital Citizenship Across the Curriculum**
- Media literacy should not be confined to Media Studies; it must be woven throughout all subject areas and year levels.
 - Learning should focus on critical thinking, information evaluation, and ethical engagement online.
- 6.2.2 **Strengthen Teacher Education and Professional Development**
- Initial teacher education (ITE) programmes should explicitly include Media and Information Literacy and Digital Citizenship competencies.
 - Ongoing professional learning and development (PLD) must be accessible to all teachers, enabling them to teach these skills confidently and effectively.
- 6.2.3 **Develop and Share Adaptable, Culturally Grounded Teaching Resources**
- Resources should be context-specific, adaptable for different communities, and inclusive of Māori and Pacific worldviews.
 - There should be co-design with kaiako, iwi, and local communities to ensure cultural relevance and responsiveness.

⁷ Juliet Gerrard et al., "He Uru Kahikatea Building Young People's Resilience through Media and Information Literacy and Digital Citizenship Skills" (Office of the Prime Minister's Chief Science Advisor, October 2023), i. <https://www.pmcса.ac.nz/topics/building-young-peoples-resilience-through-media-and-information-literacy-and-digital-citizenship/>

6.2.4 **Ensure Equity of Access**

- Efforts must address the digital divide and disparities in access to quality Media and Information Literacy education, particularly for:
 - Māori and Pacific students
 - Disabled and neurodiverse learners
 - Students in rural and low-income communities
 - Immigrant and rainbow young people

6.2.5 **Engage Parents, Whānau, and Communities**

- Home and community partnerships are essential. Parents and caregivers should be supported to reinforce Media and Information Literacy and Digital Citizenship learning outside the classroom.
- Community-based education initiatives, including libraries and NGOs, should be recognised and supported.

6.2.6 **Embed Te Tiriti o Waitangi Principles**

- Media and Information Literacy and Digital Citizenship initiatives must honour Te Tiriti o Waitangi and be underpinned by Māori approaches to knowledge, identity, and digital engagement.
- Te Ao Māori expertise should be involved in design and delivery.

6.2.7 **Establish a Coordinated National Approach**

- A system-wide strategy is required, including cross-agency leadership (e.g. Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, Department of Internal Affairs).
- This should be supported by localised implementation reflecting community needs.

6.2.8 **Invest in Libraries as Community Media and Information Literacy Hubs**

- Libraries and librarians are under-utilised resources. Their roles in promoting critical information skills should be expanded and funded accordingly.

6.2.9 **Create Meaningful Ways to Measure Progress**

- Develop assessment tools that measure Media and Information Literacy and Digital Citizenship capabilities in a way that is valid for the Aotearoa New Zealand context.
- Data collection should inform ongoing improvement, with research into what works best.

6.3 These recommendations advocate for a **collective, equity-focused, and culturally grounded approach** to media literacy in education, acknowledging that misinformation is a systemic issue requiring systemic solutions.

6.4 Much of the mahi in developing a framework has already been done here, and given the current landscape, it is imperative that the Ministry of Education actively engages with this important work.

7. CONCLUSION

- 7.1 We have been told that online platforms are designed to ‘build connections’ between people. Certainly we can recognise the positive along with the toxic: young people connecting with (positive) niche groups online, connecting families and communities with geographic separation for example. But increasingly it seems clear that the design of these tools - prioritising engagement and profit at the expense of ‘user’ and societal wellbeing - really fuels disconnection, a divided society, threats to democracy, and, too often, a lure for fascist ideologies.
- 7.2 It should be noted that many of our young people are already aware of these issues and willing to lead and speak up when they see the harm that results. Including them and empowering them is the best place to start.
- 7.3 It is important to note too that these issues in no way only affect young people. Addiction to technology more broadly could be seen as a cultural pathology. Avoiding these issues, hoping they go away, hasn’t worked. Too many of our young people feel isolated and increasingly they realise themselves that the internet is a cause of this. They deserve for us to lead on these issues, particularly *because* the conversation and the answers aren’t easy.
- 7.4 This is a matter of urgency and the solution will be found in a full spectrum of approaches. If we do not act decisively, we risk allowing online extremism, misogyny, and false information to erode the inclusive and respectful values we strive to nurture in our schools.
- 7.5 The Ministry must respond with a coordinated, well-funded approach that supports both students and the educators tasked with guiding them. Our classrooms are not ideological battlegrounds - they are spaces for learning, empathy, and growth. Our young people deserve protection and support.

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