

Reading Manifestos: Restricting Brenton Tarrant's "The Great Replacement"

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Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

A censorious and censoring attitude has engulfed responses to the mental airings of the Christchurch shooter. Material in connection with Brenton Tarrant, the alleged gunman behind the killing of 50 individuals at two mosques in New Zealand, is drying up; his manifesto, for one, is being disaggregated and spread through multiple forms, removed from their various parts with blunt razors. Doing so does a disservice to any arguments that might be mounted against him, but having a debate is not what this is generally about.

Arguments on banning the incendiary and dangerous are easily mounted against a range of publications. The smutty supposedly corrupt public morals; the revolutionary supposedly give citizens strange and cocksure ideas about overthrowing the order of things. Then there are just the downright bizarre and adventurous, incapable of classification, but deemed dangerous for not falling into any clear category. Certitude is fundamentally important for the rule-directed censor and paper shuffling bureaucrat.

One example stands out, a testament to the failure of such efforts and the misunderstandings and distortions that follow. Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, as a stellar case, was banned in Germany after the Second World War. In January 2016, it was republished on the expiry of copyright held by the Bavarian government. As Steven Luckert [remarked](#) in *The Atlantic* at the time, "the history of the book, and of Hitler's words more generally, demonstrates that there's no clear-cut relationship between banning speech and halting the spread of ideas." The Nazi party did not disappear in the aftermath of the ban; nor could it be said that his ideas had captivated whole states and their governments, despite being accessible.

The book, deemed to be an insight into the darkened corridors of Hitler's racial and biologically charged mind, was not initially seen as off limits in the war of ideas; even as the United States was doing battle against Nazi Germany, advocates for understanding the mental baggage of Hitler was sought rather than dismissed. Houghton Mifflin [made it](#) a patriotic duty for Americans to familiarise themselves with the tenets of the text.

British Prime Minister Winston Churchill was also keen that those battling Germany have a sense of what they were up against. As he [noted](#) in his history of the Second World War, "There was no book which deserved more careful study from the rulers, political and military, of the Allied Powers." All the elements were there, from "the programme of German insurrection" to establishing "the rightful position of Germany at the summit of the world."

With Tarrant, the push to restrict discussion and siphon off any serious mention is well underway. [The Great Replacement](#) has become scarcer on the internet, having been

removed from numerous sites and scoured off digital domains. White House counselor Kellyanne Conway insists that the document be studied and read “in its entirety.” Her reasons, explained in a Monday [morning interview](#) with *Fox & Friends*, are valid enough; she wants to argue that Tarrant is not merely a white nationalist warrior, but as much a radical in other contexts. Yes, he mentions President Donald Trump “and there it is, one time. But he also said he aligns closely with the ideology of China. He said he’s not a conservative, he’s not a Nazi, I think he referred to himself as an eco-naturalist or an eco-fascist.” Such are the muddying details of completeness.

The suggestion prompted scorn and outrage from the media cognoscenti. Aaron Rupa [called](#) it “highly irresponsible.” Joan Donovan of Harvard’s Technology and Social Change Research Project, demonstrating the enlightened disposition one has come to expect from boxed squirrel scholars, [demanded](#) a curb to its reach. “It is loaded with keywords that lead down far-right rabbit holes. Do not repost.” Tech writer for *The New York Times* Kevin Roose was [decidedly](#) paternalistic, issuing a hazard warning to any would-be reader: “be careful with the NZ shooter’s apparent manifesto. It’s thick with irony and meta-text and very easy to misinterpret if you’re not steeped in this stuff all the time (and even if you are).” Like the Catholic Church of old, it has been left to a priestly cast of read, steeped-in-the-stuff interpreters to give the highlights, carefully chosen, for public consumption. No rabbit holes, meta-text, or irony for the unfortunate plebeian readership.

The mechanism by which this censorship is being engineered is questionable from ethical, evidentiary and epistemological contexts. The copy-cat syndrome has roared to the fore as real and influencing, and to that end, justifying. Be wary of social contagion in the aftermath of a mass killing, we are told.

In 2015, a [multi-authored study](#) in *PloS ONE* claimed to find “significant evidence that mass killings involving firearms are incited by similar events in the immediate past.” There was “significant evidence of contagion in school shootings.” The authors suggested that an increased risk of mass killings and school shootings in a 13-day period following previous incidents. Such perspectives on contagion have been echoed in a range of [publications](#) which insist on not publishing names or photographs of mass shooters.

Adam Lankford and Sara Tomek [revisited](#) the theme in studying mass killings in the United States between 2006 and 2013 in the journal *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behaviour*. They noted the absence of relevant empirical studies on the subject, and previous contradictory findings. The authors suggested that contagion requires transmission. “The social contagion thesis requires that the imitative mass killer be at least indirectly exposed to the model killer’s behaviour.”

On examining their gathered data, Lankford and Tomek confidently asserted that their study raised “significant questions about previous findings implying a short-term social contagion effect from mass killings.” No “statistically significant evidence of contagion” was detectable within the 14-day time period. Ever careful to cover their tracks with heavy padding, they also issue a cautionary note; “that longer term contagion or copycat effects may pose a significant threat to society.”

The banning complex is hard to resist. After catastrophe, material can find itself onto forbidden lists. Authorities, fearing mayhem, are the first to identify such dangers in slipshod fashion. Uncertain and unverifiable contagion measures are considered. But keeping such material off the radar will not advance the discussion of nationalism of a

certain pedigree and the source of its inspiration. If white nationalism be the problem, then call it out. Examine it. Consider remedies. Tarrant's *The Great Replacement*, like Hitler's *Mein Kampf* before it, should be studied for its implications and understandings rather than avoided as a viral inducement for further violence. The censor, in attitude, practice and assumption, remains as great a danger to society as any dangerous text ever could be.

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