

Name of presenter: Kevin Nguyen

Organisation: ABC News, Background Briefing

Contact information: nguyen.kevin@abc.net.au

Introduction

Story: [The Base Tapes](#)

Earlier this year, the ABC's Background Briefing gained access to something that had never been heard before: hours and hours of covert recordings from the inner sanctum of a US-based neo-Nazi paramilitary group called The Base.

The group had been infiltrated — and the five Australian applicants had no idea they were being recorded, as they were vetted for membership. Their responses gave an unprecedented insight into the motivations of Australia's most hardcore white supremacists, and the recruitment strategies of a global terrorist organisation.

Story info

- **Investigation team:** Alex Mann and Kevin Nguyen
- The first story was published March 26, 2021
- The story was covered over a two-part radio investigation, two digital features and broadcast television
- Nominated for several awards including Radio/Audio Feature for the Walkleys, Outstanding Radio Journalism for the Kennedy Awards, the NSW Council of Civil Liberties shortlist and the WA Media Awards

Techniques

- The unmasking of these Australian potential recruits was done through a combination of well-placed sources, shoe-leather journalism and open-source intelligence (OSINT) research

Starting point

- Australians were identified as part of a covert recording operation by Jason Wilson for the Southern Poverty Law Centre in August 2020. In this story, he identified Western Australian man Dean Smith as one of the prospective candidates who interviewed to join The Base.
- The recordings of the Australians were provided to Alex Mann at the beginning of 2021 by a confidential source and we set out to unmask the remaining four Australians in those recordings
- Alongside the tapes we were provided the written applications each candidate had submitted prior to their formal interviews.

How did we get the recordings?

- Both Alex and I have been reporting on far-right wing extremism for some time and we were both well known within the ideological extremism circles, both by anti-fascist researchers and

white supremacist groups themselves. Researchers and people connected to the infiltrator trusted Alex due to his prior reporting and I was vetted and provided access to the materials shortly after

- Anti-fascist groups usually have experienced OSINT researchers among their ranks. They can be well-resourced in terms of manpower and have a meticulous method of archiving their work. They, however, tend to overshoot and will often collect and keep records of materials and profiles which may not have much editorial value (at least not immediately). Also, unless they've scrapped databases directly from the source, they're usually difficult to search through. I would recommend asking for "everything" because you're likely to be overwhelmed with what they provide.
 - **TIP:** They know their database well and when requesting materials, it's best to ask for usernames and monikers — specifically, you'll want to ask for the platform's followers or friends list (more on this).
- Security was a significant consideration. The researchers will have their preferred method of hosting sensitive material, but we used [CryptPad](#) and Mega links to share and work on materials. CryptPad is effective because it has the same features as Google Docs, but is end-to-end encrypted, meaning not even the service administrator can see what is being produced.

Establishing the targets

There are elements of the story both Alex and I are still working on and so we are unable to provide specific detail in writing about our investigation. However, this tip sheet can give you the general principles we employ when trying to unmask someone.

As background, none of the five men we were searching for in those recordings had provided their real names. They did as part of their vetting process, however, provide their age and which city they were residing in. Throughout the calls they revealed fragments of information about their hobbies and interests, which were ultimately the details we used to find them.

For example, one candidate said he trained in a specific kind of martial arts in Queensland. It turned out there weren't many dojos which offered this and so Alex called around and a person was able to provide us with the first name of someone who matched the description of the candidate. I searched the dojo's Facebook and found tournament photos where he was originally tagged. He had scrubbed his profile, but by searching through the old photos of other people involved with the dojo, I found a new one under a different name.

Another candidate from Canberra said he had gotten in trouble with classmates over anti-Muslim posts he shared shortly after the Christchurch Shooting in 2019. This detail would eventually help us identify the school he attended.

Before we move onto the OSINT section, the shoe-leather journalism and classic reporting skills cannot be undervalued. One of the more elusive targets, whom we later identified as James Grieg, was discovered because Alex staked out the apartment building where he supposedly lived. In one of the recordings he mentioned living across a local watering hole. The actual name of it was difficult to hear in the audio, but after we allowed some local reporters listen to that snippet of audio they recognised it immediately.

What can you tell me about a person?

From an OSINT framework, every aspect of our lives is one piece of a puzzle which can be used to find us or unravel our identities. A single point of data tells us very little about a person. However, hundreds of

points of data gives us predictability. A typical reporter approach might ask “who are you and what do you do?”

When I’m investigating a persons, some of the questions (a small fraction) I’m interested in are:

- **Where were you born and where do you currently live?**
 - This may give us two options for searching electoral roles. If we can’t find them, we can search their family names, which gives us new vectors of search
- **Where did you go to school?**
- **How old are you and what year did you graduate?**
 - Since 2008, many schools have newsletters and Facebook posts dedicated to specific graduating classes. Many groups also set up their own private groups.
 - Many local libraries will have a copy of the school’s yearbook. Sometimes when those digital options are exhausted, you can head there to try and get a positive ID on someone. It’s also helpful if there is one library which may cater to several schools — this is often the case when you know a target went to school in a specific area, but not which one.
 - Yearbooks are great to trying to determine their hobbies as well. Local sports groups are great ways to find them in group photos — they tend to be facing the camera directly, which gives us a clear look at their features.
- **Are they technologically competent?**
 - A question which may provide a surprising amount of insight. Technologically illiterate people tend to keep the same email and usernames across all platforms, meaning if you’re able to ascertain one email/username you can find most of them.
 - If they’re gamers, this is often a solid thread to pursue (see more below)
- **What’s their usernames and monikers?**
 - Assuming from the above, you can plug those details into an incredibly useful tool called namechk.com to uncover their presence on other platforms.
 - In my experience, the platforms which ultimately betray a person’s real identity or will lead to the rest of their profile are the ones starting with S — Steam, SoundCloud and Spotify.
 - SoundCloud tends to host their real photos and Spotify may have viewable “followers”. Unless they’re an internet personality of some sort, those followers will tend to be people they know personally
- **When do they sleep?**
 - Mapping out their online activity, for example through foller.me, will give you an idea of when they’re most active and an approximation of their timezone. I usually note whenever there is highly irregular or erratic activity, because it can suggest when more than one person has access to the account.
- **Who are their friends?**
 - This was arguably the most crucial question of our investigation. More details provided below

Flipping

The funny thing about young neo-Nazis is that they generally aren’t very popular and many of the friends they do have tend to cut ties with them if they don’t share the same worldview. Every single person we identified had former friends who recognised their problematic worldviews at a young age and drifted away from them.

Former friends were crucial in virtually every instance of this story in getting 100 per cent verification of these people's identities. The problem was finding these people in the first place. I'll go through two of them here.

The Martial Artist

Once we found the individual's new profile we needed to get a sense of his social circle.

- You don't want people who are too close, because they will tip the subject off. You can usually identify these people if:
 - They've appeared in many photos together recently
 - They comment regularly or use the "love" reaction on their profiles
 - They have a lot of mutual friends. If you can't see their friends list, you can use [this handy tool](#). Just find someone on their profile who has a visible friend's list and [extract their Facebook ID](#). Use the original target's FB ID and the second profile into the URL and you'll see mutual connections.

In this instance, we needed someone who may have had some connection with him but wasn't really close. We also needed someone who very clearly didn't share his world view.

- The irony of this is that we stereotyped heavily. Through his connections to find someone who matched his profile. In the end we found a woman who appeared to be a liberal progressive.
 - Messaging on Facebook sucks, as they tend not to see it. In this instance I searched through her profile and found out where she worked. I couldn't find her email, but found the correct format for it — it was [surname.firstname@company.com.au](#).
 - The initial messaging is really important. You need to establish bona fides without giving away too much about what you're looking into, in case they reach out to your subject. I find **appealing to curiosity and sense of helpfulness** will get me over the line. You also **need to acknowledge how peculiar the outreach is**.

My initial emails tend to read:

- Dear <name>, I hope you're well. I'm sorry for contacting you from out of the blue, but I am an investigative reporter with ABC News. I believe you're acquainted with a person I am looking into and I think you'll be able help me learn a bit more about them. If you had a few minutes, could we please speak?

The Gamer

One of the targets had a unique username. Which, through Namechk, led me to a Steam account. Amazingly, there were no details to that username anywhere which gave away his real identity or any other social profile (although it did help confirm the city he was in). So, following the same logic as above we searched his Steam profile using <https://steamid.uk/>

- Steam is an extremely popular gaming platform which records a lot of data about user activity. We might be happy to burn our Twitter and Facebook accounts but people very rarely change their Steam accounts. All their games, achievements and purchasing history is tied to it and can't be transferred over to another account without risking losing it.
- Your friends on Steam are visible and using the site above (you'll need your own log-in), you can sort their friends by when they first connected. The site also handily tells you the date this happened. We specifically chose to target people he would've started playing with when he was 13 years of age.
- For high schoolers, our first friends on Steam tend to be our classmates.

- Gamers tend to use the same or similar usernames for much of their formative years.
- I was able to locate two of his former friends, one which used the same name on Twitch and another which had the same name on Reddit. Both confirmed the identity of the target.

Ethics

As with all reporting on white supremacy, there needs to be editorial justification for it. Alex and I followed this ABC guidelines on identification, platforming and glorification to inform our final story:

<https://edpols.abc.net.au/guidance/hate-speech-terrorism-mass-killings/>