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| TITLE | The Evolving Picture of Online/Offline Activism Linked to the COVID-19 Pandemic |
| Date | 29 October 2021 |
| Produced by/location | Insights and Reporting Team, COVID-19 Group, DPMC |

Thank you to the following teams that assisted with this report: New Zealand Police, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and the Ministry of Health.

Introduction

1. The Insights and Reporting Team in DPMC’s COVID-19 Group have analysed some of the information regarding online narratives related to COVID-19. The narrative amongst those who disagree with the government’s approach to the COVID-19 pandemic has evolved recently, with more individuals moving from online activism to acting offline.
2. This report details the current anti-vaccine/anti-lockdown/anti-government landscape in New Zealand both online and offline and how these two spheres interact, as well as examples from overseas, and initiatives and efforts aimed at preventing such activity.

Online Versus Offline Activism

3. The path that leads an individual or group to act, whether that be legal protest or illegal and violent action has many factors. Much ‘real world’ action, has some form of online component. In many cases this online component has a symbiotic relationship with real world action, feeding off existing grievances, whilst at the same time reinforcing grievances and encouraging further action. A soon to be released New Zealand Police report on the activism landscape in New Zealand details how use of physical and digital platforms by activists continue to change and are increasingly inter-related.¹ In the case of COVID-19, grievances around the various impact lockdowns can have on people’s welfare, as well fears over the vaccines, are often motives for offline action. Those encouraging the action may have motives other than anti-vaccine or anti-lockdown sentiment but may nevertheless use these grievances as a vehicle to drive unrest.²

The New Zealand COVID-19 Activism Landscape

4. Online and offline activism in New Zealand takes a number of forms. Some of these forms of activism have been observed to be on the rise in New Zealand during the COVID-19 pandemic, ranging from legal and peaceful activism to illegal and violent activism, posing more of a threat to civil society. This includes dangerous speech, property damage, protest, and disruption to the COVID-19 vaccination roll out as detailed below.

Dangerous Speech

5. Dangerous speech is defined as any form of expression that can increase the risk that its’ audience will condone or participate in violence.³ s9(2)(ba)(i)

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

Hate Speech

6. s9(2)(ba)(i)

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]



vandalism of a cell phone tower in Northland in 2020 related to an online conspiracy theory linking 5G phone networks and the coronavirus.¹⁸

COVID-19, Anti-lockdown, and Anti-Vaccine Protests

12. COVID-19 related protest activity has become more common over recent weeks. On 16 October the group 'The Freedoms and Rights Coalition' hosted a series of protest demonstrations promoted as family picnic styled events, where people could stand for "freedom". This came after an earlier event held in Auckland gained an attendance of around 2,000 people. Events were held at 13 locations around the country with many attracting over 200 people. It should be noted however, that unlike many instances abroad, recent COVID-19 related protest activity in New Zealand has not led to any major security concerns. New Zealand Police also point out in their reporting their recognition that protest is a lawful activity, which they look to support within the bounds of current health restrictions.¹⁹

Disruption to the COVID-19 Vaccine Roll-Out and Response

13. There have been some reports of disruption to the COVID-19 vaccine roll-out by suspected anti-vaccination groups or individuals. One example was of a medical centre that was reportedly barraged with fake bookings through the 'bookmyvaccine' website. The names used to make the bookings contained offensive and racist terms. This mimics behaviour observed in Australia, where anti-vaccination activists in Byron Bay booked fake vaccination appointments.²⁰ During the 16 October 'Super Saturday' vaccination event in New Zealand a number of small anti-vaccination demonstrations occurred outside vaccination sites around the country. Although no significant issues were reported, a number of protesters were reportedly abusive towards members of the public.²¹ s9(2)(ba)(i)

[Redacted]
[Redacted]
[Redacted].²² In New Zealand, 'cease and desist' documents have been 'served' on medical staff, by those who oppose the COVID-19 vaccine roll-out.

Targeting of Schools and Teachers

14. There have been a number of reports of anti-COVID-19 vaccination activists targeting schools in recent months. In September, two activists were found to be handing out flyers to students in Wellington, claiming that young people who contract COVID-19 will not die and that the vaccination will cause long-term side effects.²³ s9(2)(ba)(i)

[Redacted]
[Redacted]
[Redacted]²⁴

Doxxing

15. s9(2)(ba)(i)
[Redacted]
[Redacted]
[Redacted]

[Redacted].²⁵ This tactic has been observed with the details of government staff being shared and it is feared could lead to further online harassment. Examples observed abroad and mentioned below, have included the perpetrators of doxxing releasing home addresses and contact details of victims who have subsequently received abuse.

Examples of COVID-19 Activism Overseas

16. As mentioned above, despite the growth of dangerous speech online in New Zealand, this has translated into only a few isolated pockets of civil unrest and violent behaviour offline thus far. The majority of the protest activity occurred without major incident. There have however, been a number of examples



abroad of online rhetoric being linked to acts of violence or civil unrest, which may inspire action here and give an indication of how future action may escalate.

The United States

17. In February 2021, access to a mass vaccination centre in Los Angeles was temporarily disrupted as anti-vaccine protesters became abusive towards people waiting in line for a vaccine, as well as health workers administering the vaccine. The protest was organised on Facebook, through a group that also promoted anti-mask material and contained links to a website dedicated to the so called 'Plandemic' conspiracy theory. The Plandemic theory espouses the idea of a global elite engineering the pandemic to enrich themselves.^{26 27}
18. Anti-vaccine activity in the United States has been an issue for a number of years, however online activity has exacerbated the issue. For example, in 2019, California state senator Dr. Richard Pan was assaulted by anti-vaccine protestors after he introduced a bill requiring medical exemptions from some vaccinations to be approved by the California department of public health. The attack was live streamed on Facebook and garnered praise online from members of the anti-vaccine community.²⁸
19. Another example of protest activity in the United States from October 2021, saw anti-mask and anti-lockdown protestors, follow parents and children to school. The protestors used abusive language towards parents, referring to them as child abusers and referring to vaccination of children as forced and illegal. This mirrors some of the language noted online from individuals based in New Zealand.²⁹

Australia

20. There has been a significant level of civil unrest in Melbourne from anti-vaccine and anti-lockdown protestors. On 16 October, protests in the city led to the arrest of more than 50 individuals. This was despite attempts by the protestors to avoid the police by organising changes in location through encrypted messaging services. Police organised roadblocks across the city to help disperse the moving protest groups quickly. This recent protest comes after events over the previous month had led to more than 600 people arrested for violent protests.³⁰
21. It is believed that some of the protest activity in Australia has links to extremist groups. A report earlier in 2021 by Victoria police warned a parliamentary inquiry into extremism that online commentary on COVID-19 was being used as a recruiting tool for right-wing extremists. It noted that some of this commentary was linking people interested in wellness and anti-vaccine/anti-government conspiracy theories with white supremacy.³¹

The United Kingdom

22. In the United Kingdom there are a number of groups with a significant online presence, circulating conspiracy theories related to the COVID-19 pandemic, with some of these groups also involved in offline activities. One example is the group 'Stop New Normal', which is led by prominent conspiracy theorist Piers Corbyn. The group's online activities include publishing anti-vaccine videos and raising money through donations. Offline, Piers Corbyn has been arrested on suspicion of malicious communications and public nuisance following the distribution of a leaflet with his name on it, comparing COVID-19 vaccination programs with the holocaust.³² Piers Corbyn was also present as anti-vaccine protesters stormed former BBC headquarters in August 2021. Protesters at the event reportedly referred to the media as "the virus" and criticised the BBC's coverage of the pandemic.³³
23. The storming of the former BBC headquarters came after previous incidents of journalists in the United Kingdom being threatened both online and in person by anti-lockdown and antivaccine groups. The BBC reported that it has had to upgrade security protocols after offline incidents of abuse, as well as online trolling directed at its reporters. The BBC also noted that it has set up specific support for women and ethnic minority journalists as they are more likely to be targeted. There have also been reports indicating



that members of anti-lockdown groups on the social network Telegram have been issuing death threats and sharing the personal details of journalists, including their addresses.³⁴

24. The United Kingdom has also had anti-vaccine protests outside schools. A recent survey carried out by The Association of School and College Leaders found that 79% of schools surveyed have been targeted by anti-vaccine groups. The majority of this action had been via emails threatening legal action, however there were also a number of cases of staff being threatened with physical violence, and some protesters gaining access to school sites. The Centre for Countering Digital Hate noted that the increase in offline action towards schools was linked to online networks which are encouraging people to act with false information and conspiracy theories. The Centre for Countering Digital Hate also warned of the problem of social media group's in which extreme comments were being amplified and rewarded.³⁵

Interventions and Readiness Planning in New Zealand

25. In August 2020 the New Zealand Police provided an update to the Security and Intelligence Board (SIB) Civil Unrest Risk Profile. Amongst the factors considered in the update were the expansion and increased use of social media and the risk of economic downturn and unemployment as a result of COVID-19 which led to an increase in the risk rating.³⁶
26. The COVID-19 Group and Ministry of Health have recently updated their approach to countering COVID-19 false information online. As part of this update it was recognised that false information is a threat to a successful public health response and that social media platforms are the most common means of spreading false information in New Zealand. To combat this, the approach recognises the requirement to work in partnership with Māori during planning and delivery of communications and the need to use a generally inclusive approach that recognises language and accessibility needs and honours the Treaty of Waitangi. This is important given the targeting of false information at vulnerable and ethnic communities noted above. It is also recognised that the solution requires a whole of society approach including media, academia, government, tech and business.³⁷

Short-term Action

27. As part of the COVID-19 Group and Ministry of Health strategy to combat false information, short term action includes the use of rapid communications to ensure an accurate narrative is widely provided. This can take the form of press statements, direct communications, community leaders, media, paid advertisement and search engine optimisation.³⁸
28. The Unite Against COVID-19 website also contains information on how to recognise false information and scams, and supporting FAQs are shared with education and other targeted sectors.
29. The process of initiating civil court orders in relation to objectionable posts or material that target public figures is also under active consideration. This relates to cases where a criminal threshold is not met and would form part of a graduated and proportional response to harmful online activity.

Long-term Strategy to Combat Civil Unrest - Communication

30. As part of the SIB update, it was noted that in order to achieve long term prevention of civil unrest, a socially inclusive and cohesive society in which vulnerable people are protected is required. The report noted that the implementation of this strategy would require across government funding. It also noted that strategies such as public engagement prior to protests occurring had worked previously and helped to deescalate tensions before and during protests.³⁹ In the New Zealand Police's Activism Landscape report, they also noted that Police interactions with activists shape outcomes and a higher degree of cultural competency would also be a benefit.⁴⁰
31. Long-term communication strategies being used by the COVID-19 Group and Ministry of Health include a coherent sustained response to create long-term change through the development of strategic narratives in relation to related issues. This will be done through traditional media, social media and



through stakeholders and influencers, and will employ changes to regulation, funding for programs, brand engagement and through training and workshops given to stakeholders and influencers.⁴¹

Example of Overseas Intervention

32. Similar strategies for combating false information exist abroad. A prominent example is Finland's 2014 anti-fake news initiative aimed at teaching residents, students, journalists and politicians how to counter false information in response to fake news and propaganda targeted at it from another country.^{42 43 44} Finland also used social media influences to widen the reach of their communications, beyond traditional media at the start of the pandemic, designating them as key workers alongside doctors, public transport operators and supermarket workers.⁴⁵
33. The Cabinet Office of the United Kingdom government launched a Rapid Response Unit (RRU) in April 2018 in a bid to support what it termed, "the reclaiming of fact-based public debate." The RRU was aimed specifically at monitoring news and information shared online in order to identify any emerging false information issues quickly, and to assess the effectiveness of government public information. The group was made up of analysts, data scientists, and media and digital experts.⁴⁶
34. In the European Union, countering false information is part of its European Democracy Action Plan. This plan will be implemented and reviewed before 2023 ahead of the next European elections. The plan is aimed at building more resilient democracies across Europe. The countering false information part of this plan includes strengthening tools to counter foreign interference in the European Union's information space including imposing cost on perpetrators and introducing an updated Code of Practice.⁴⁷



¹ New Zealand Report. New Zealand's Activism Landscape. 12 October 2021 – IN CONFIDENCE

² New Zealand Police. 26 October 2.56 PM

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⁴ s9(2)(ba)(i)

⁷ Stuff. Covid-19: Thousands gather at Waitangi to support anti-lockdown hiko <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/300439026/covid19-thousands-gather-at-waitangi-to-support-antilockdown-hiko> - Accessed 29 October 2021

⁸ s9(2)(ba)(i)

⁹ s9(2)(ba)(i)

¹⁰ New Zealand Police. OSINT Collection Summary. 8 October 2021 – IN CONFIDENCE

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¹² s9(2)(ba)(i)

¹⁴ RNZ. Battle to spread truth about Covid-19 vaccine in Pacific communities. <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/438769/battle-to-spread-truth-about-covid-19-vaccine-in-pacific-communities> – Accessed 29 October 2021

¹⁵ Stuff. Covid-19: Conspiracy graffiti removal given the same priority as racism. <https://www.stuff.co.nz/dominion-post/news/wellington/126178287/covid19-conspiracy-graffiti-removal-given-the-same-priority-as-racism> - Accessed 27 October 2021

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¹⁹ New Zealand Police. NIC-SR-211021 Protests and Activism. 21 October 2021

²⁰ NZ Herald. Covid-19: Coronavirus: Byron Bay anti-vaxxers' sick act as fears region will be 'awash' with Covid cases by Christmas. <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/world/covid-19-coronavirus-byron-bay-anti-vaxxers-sick-act-as-fears-region-will-be-awash-with-covid-cases-by-christmas/GB3D5CYTJABQNRORPKXK2TAKY/> - Accessed 27 October 2021

²¹ New Zealand Police. NIC-SR-211021 Protests and Activism. 21 October 2021 - RESTRICTED

²² s9(2)(ba)(i)

²³ Stuff. Covid-19: 'Not acceptable' teens were targeted in anti-vax campaign, deputy principal says. <https://www.stuff.co.nz/dominion-post/news/wellington/126398267/covid19-not-acceptable-teens-were-targeted-in-antivax-campaign-deputy-principal-says> - Accessed 29 October 2021

²⁴ s9(2)(ba)(i)

²⁶ The Guardian. Lawmaker who faced anti-vax attack: 'The movement is growing more violent'. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/03/anti-vaxxers-coronavirus-vaccines-california-richard-pan> - Accessed 27 October 2021

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²⁹ Daily Mail. Anti-maskers target American parents taking while they walk their kids to school in wealthy Beverly Hills and accuse them of 'child abuse' for covering their faces <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10074621/This-rape-Anti-vaxxers-accost-parents-taking-masked-kids-school-Beverly-Hills.html> - Accessed 27 October 2021

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³⁷ Ministry of Health and COVID-19 Group. Communications approach for managing COVID19 false and misleading information and scams – 21 June 2021

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