



27 February 2023



Ref: OIA-2022/23-0516

Dear 

Official Information Act request for The Disinformation Project contracts

Thank you for your Official Information Act 1982 (the Act) request received on 30 January 2023. You requested:

“Under the provisions of the OIA please provide me with the contract and procurement documents related to the government purchase of work by Te Punaha Matatini/University of Auckland, possibly under the name of The Disinformation Project, related to “disinformation” and related concepts including misinformation.

My request includes the cost (including projected costs and the contracted value) of this work.

Please also provide me with all work, including reports, supplied to the government under such contract(s).

Please cover the period of Jan 1, 2021 to today. [30 January 2023].”

Please find attached:

- Document 01 Contract between the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet and The Disinformation Project for three reports.
- Document 02 Report (11/07/2022) “Reporting of online harms and threats against the Covid-19 Response: Fortnightly Update for the period 27 June to 7 July 2022.”
- Document 03 Report (25/07/2022) “Reporting of online harms and threats against the Covid-19 Response: Fortnightly Update for the period 8 July to 22 July 2022.”

Some information in these documents has been withheld under the following sections of the Act, as marked in the documents:

- section 6(d) to protect the safety of any person.
- section 9(2)(a), to protect the privacy of individuals.
- section 9(2)(ba), to protect the supply of similar information in the future and/or to prevent damage to the public interest, where information was provided in confidence.
- section 9(2)(c), to protect the health or safety of members of the public.
- section 9(2)(g)(i), to maintain the effective conduct of public affairs through the free and frank expression of opinion.
- section 9(2)(g)(ii), to prevent improper pressure or harassment.

One report has been withheld in full, under sections 6(d) and 9(2)(g)(i) of the Act.

Where information has been withheld under section 9 of the Act, no public interest in releasing the withheld information has been identified that would be sufficient to override the reasons for withholding it.

You have the right to ask the Ombudsman to investigate and review my decision under section 28(3) of the Act.

This response may be published on the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet's website during our regular publication cycle. Typically, information is released monthly, or as otherwise determined. Your personal information including name and contact details will be removed for publication.

Yours sincerely



Tony Lynch
Deputy Chief Executive
National Security Group

Enc: contract and two reports in scope of the request



Contract for Services

Contract Details

Reporting of online harms and threats against the COVID-19 Response

The Parties

The Buyer:

Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

NZBN 9429041904923

TSB Building, 174 Lambton Quay Wellington 6011

and

The Supplier:

s9(2)(g)(ii)

The Disinformation Project

The Contract

Agreement

The Buyer appoints the Supplier to deliver the Services described in this Contract and the Supplier accepts that appointment. This Contract sets out the Parties' rights and obligations.

Parts of this Contract

The documents forming this Contract are:

- Contract Details:** This section
- Schedule 1:** Description of Services
- Schedule 2:** Standard Terms and Conditions GMC Form 1 SERVICES | Schedule 2 (3rd Edition) available at: www.procurement.govt.nz
- Any other attachments described at Schedule 1.

How to read this Contract

- Together the above documents form the whole Contract
- Any Supplier terms and conditions do not apply

- Clause numbers refer to clauses in Schedule 2
- Words starting with capital letters have a special meaning. The special meaning is stated in the Definitions section at clause 17 (Schedule 2).

Acceptance

In signing this Contract each Party acknowledges that it has read and agrees to be bound by it.

Signed for and on behalf of the Buyer:

Signed for and on behalf of the Supplier:

(signature)

Name: Ruth Fairhall

Position: DCE, COVID-19 Group

Date: 6/05/2022

s9(2)(a)

(signature)

Name:

Position: Director

Date: ~~6/07/2022~~ 30/06/2022

Schedule 1 Description of Services

Contract Management and Personnel

Start Date	Date of execution	Reference Schedule 2 clause 1
End Date	29/07/2022	Reference Schedule 2 clause 1
Renewal	not applicable.	Reference Schedule 2 clause 1

Contract Managers

Reference Schedule 2 clause 4

	Buyer's Contract Manager	Supplier's Contract Manager
Name:	s9(2)(g)(ii)	s9(2)(g)(ii)
Title / position:	Senior Advisor	
Address:	147 Lambton Quay Wellington	
Phone:	s9(2)(a)	
Email:	s9(2)(g)(ii)	

Addresses for Notices

Reference Schedule 2 clause 14

	Buyer's address	Supplier's address
For the attention of:	s9(2)(g)(ii)	s9(2)(a)
Email:	s9(2)(g)(ii)	
c.c. Contract Manager	s9(2)(g)(ii)	
Delivery address:	Level 9 TSB 147 Lambton Quay Wellington	s9(2)(g)(ii)
Postal address:	Level 9 TSB 147 Lambton Quay Wellington	

Supplier's Approved Personnel

Reference Schedule 2 clause 2.4

	Approved Personnel
Name:	s9(2)(a)
Position:	Senior Research Fellow
Specialisation:	Social network analysis

	Approved Personnel
Name:	s9(2)(a)
Position:	Researcher
Specialisation:	Plain language reporting

Description of Services

Context

The current narratives of COVID-19 misinformation and disinformation in New Zealand have mostly related to vaccines, and COVID-19 Protection Framework (CPF) related health measures such as mask wearing. Many of these narratives are woven into larger themes centred on mistrust of government, international businesses; or concerns about side effects, medical safety, and long-term effects of the vaccine and perceptions of COVID-19 restrictions.

While misinformation related to COVID-19 is still being circulated, and the general themes remain consistent, the volume of disinformation relating to the COVID-19 health measures has reduced significantly in line with changes to mandatory public health measures.

It is anticipated that while COVID-19 public health measures remain in place, disinformation will continue to be circulated to undermine the public's trust in the COVID-19 response.

Understanding the shifts in the COVID-19 disinformation narratives posted on social media informs our work on building public resilience and ensuring that people are aware of the misleading narratives and have access to accurate public health information about COVID-19.

DPMC require snapshots of trends and changes in the Aotearoa New Zealand information environment related to the Covid-19 protection framework and the broader Covid-19 response, and in particular, mis/disinformation, in order to have access to actionable insights to inform decision-making and strategic comms.

DPMC also seek a deep-dive report on issues widening anti-vaccination rhetoric and potential impacts, particularly for Māori communities that impact specifically on Māori

The reporting needs to draw objective evidence-based conclusions, and provide insights from that evidence base.

Description of Services

The Supplier will provide:

1. Fortnightly evidence-driven qualitative and quantitative analysis of the trends and signals in the Aotearoa New Zealand open-source online landscape that indicate changes in the context and nature of online content relating to COVID-19, particularly regarding mis/disinformation. The parameters of this work includes the assessment of global trends and narratives, where they intersect with observations made within the Aotearoa New Zealand landscape.
2. 1 x monthly Out of Cycle Report “deep dive” is an opportunity for the Supplier to deliver a report on a misinformation/disinformation topic of choice or critical emergent issues (agreed with DPMC) related to Covid-19, health or public safety

Additional requirements:

The Supplier will ensure:

3. Methods for collecting data do not breach the Conditions of Use of the platforms from which you draw observations, and that the collection of any data complies with the obligations in the Privacy Act. In particular, this means that information that may identify an individual should not be collected, or collected only if:
 - a. It is for a lawful purpose connected to our (DPMC) functions and activities
 - b. The information is necessary for that purpose.
4. To ensure the reporting does not appear biased, a list of key terms and definitions along with references clarifying where these terms are defined by other protocols must be included in every report.
5. Outside of the scope are any suggestions for government action, proposals for policy or legislative measures. Any content that is cause for urgent or emergency action must be referred to the appropriate agency i.e Netsafe or New Zealand Police.
6. Where possible, the reporting must be succinct and concise when capturing emerging and continuing narratives.
7. Reporting cannot contain self-referenced accounts of self-harm or harassment from groups or individuals.
8. The work conducted for DPMC (and any reports or analysis etc. that arise) is prepared only and solely for DPMC. In practical terms this means that the work completed for the DPMC is not shared with any other party in any other way. This includes on and offline public comment and dissemination to other agencies.

How should the Services be delivered?

Services should be delivered in the form of succinct written reports.

Deliverables and Milestones

What are the key Deliverables or outputs?

Fortnightly Reports (2 reports total)

1X Out of Cycle Report (topic of choice)

*An index of key terms and their definitions must be attached to each report

The Supplier must email the reports to the covid-19.systemassurance@dpmc.govt.nz

	Deliverable/Milestone	Due date	Amount due (exc GST)
Month 1	1. Report 1	15/06/22	9(2)(ba)
	2. Report 2	06/07/22	
	3. Out of Cycle Report (disinformation issues facing Māori)	20/07/22	
Total (exc GST)			\$27,187.50

Specific code of conduct / policies / health & safety / protective security / legislative requirement

Privacy

The Supplier acknowledges its obligations under the Privacy Act, in particular the information privacy principles, in providing the services to the Buyer. The Supplier will ensure that at all times during the delivery of services to the Buyer that it is complying with [clause 14 of Schedule 2](#) Standard Terms and Conditions - Services.

Conflicts of interest

This clause is to be read together with [clause 9 of Schedule 2](#).

The Supplier will make enquiries with all staff, including nominated personal, who are providing Services pursuant to this contract, to determine whether they have any conflicts of interest related to the Services being provided (this includes actual, potential or perceived conflicts of interests).

All persons must do his or her best to avoid a situation that may lead to a conflict of interest arising.

If a conflict of interest arises in relation to the Services, the personal must tell DPMC immediately (and in writing). If a conflict of interest does arise the Parties must discuss, agree and record in writing whether it can be managed and, if so, how it will be managed. Each party must pay its/his/her own costs in relation to managing a conflict of interest.

Health & Safety

The Supplier will:

- consult, cooperate and coordinate with the Buyer to the extent required by the Buyer to ensure that the Buyer and the Supplier will each comply with their respective obligations under the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015 as they relate to the Contract;
- perform its, and ensure that its Personnel perform their, obligations under the Contract in compliance with its and their obligations under the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015;
- comply with all reasonable directions of the Buyer relating to health, safety and security; and

- d. report any health and safety incident, injury or near miss, or any notice issued under the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015, to the Buyer to the extent that it relates to, or affects, the Contract.
- e. The Supplier has agreed to put additional Health, Safety and Security measures in place relevant to the Services provided, and its staff as set out in Attachment 2.

Supplier's Reporting Requirements

Reference Schedule 2 clause 5.2

Report to:	Description of report	Quality measure	Due date
Contract Manager	Fortnightly analysis of the trends and signals in the Aotearoa New Zealand open-source online landscape that indicate changes in the context and nature of online content relating to COVID-19	On time To the satisfaction of the contract manager.	Fortnightly
	Out of Cycle Report "deep dive" on a specific topic of choice or critical emergent issues (agreed with DPMC) related to Covid-19, health or public safety.	On time To the satisfaction of the contract manager	13 th of July

Charges

The following section sets out the Charges. Charges are the total maximum amount payable by the Buyer to the Supplier for delivery of the Services. Charges include Fees, and where agreed, Expenses and Daily Allowances. The Charges for this Contract are set out below.

Fees

Reference Schedule 2 clause 3

The Supplier's Fees will be calculated as follows:

Fixed Fee

A fixed Fee of \$27,187.50 excluding GST.

Expenses

Reference Schedule 2 clause 3

Actual and reasonable — travel Expenses

If the Buyer expressly requires the Supplier to travel for any Services in writing, then the Buyer will pay the Supplier's actual and reasonable travel Expenses incurred in delivering the Services up to a total maximum amount of \$2000 excluding GST provided that:

- the Buyer has given prior written consent to the Supplier incurring the Expense
- the Expense is charged at actual and reasonable cost, and
- the claim for Expenses is supported by GST receipts.

Daily Allowance

Reference Schedule 2 clause 3

No Daily Allowances are payable.

Invoices

Reference Schedule 2 Subject to clauses 3 and 11.7

The Supplier must send the Buyer an invoice for the Charges at the following times:

By the 20th of the month, for Services delivered during that month.

Address for invoices

Reference Schedule 2 clause 3

	Buyer's address
For the attention of:	s9(2)(g)(ii)
Address:	dpmcinvoices@cass.govt.nz cc: s9(2)(g)(ii)

Other instructions about invoices

The Supplier must include cost code [169-110] on each invoice, and the invoice must be in pdf format.

Insurance

Reference Schedule 2 Clause 8.1

The Buyer does not require any specific insurance under this Contract other than the requirements under clause 8.1 of Schedule 2.

Changes to Schedule 2 and attachments

Attachments

Reference 'Contract documents' described at Page 1

- The contracted personnel will complete Attachment 1: Declaration relating to a Contract for Services with the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet
- Attachment 2: Supplier's additional Health, Safety and Security measures

Attachment 1: Declaration relating to a Contract for Services with the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

The Supplier must sign this declaration prior to commencing any work for the Buyer.

Name of Contract	Contract for Service relating to Reporting of online harms and threats against the COVID-19 Response						
Supplier	The Disinformation Project						
Relationship with Contract	Capitalised terms in this declaration have the meaning given to those terms in the Contract. Nothing in this declaration overrides or affects the terms of clauses 9 and 13 of Schedule 2 of the Contract and the Supplier must ensure it is familiar with those clauses.						
Confidentiality Reference Schedule 2 clause 13	The Supplier undertakes: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> to be discreet in all matters relating to the Buyer and the New Zealand Government; not to read, copy, remove or access any information held on any Buyer premises other than to perform its obligations under the Contract; not to use such information to gain personal material advantage or for financial benefit for any other person or organisation; to comply with clause 13 of Schedule 2 of the Contract; and to honour this declaration after the end of this Contract. 						
Code of Conduct	The Supplier undertakes during the period of this Contract to comply with the following documents: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet’s (DPMC) Code of Conduct and the Code of Conduct for the State Services (as updated from time to time by the State Services Commission) relevant to the Services being provided; All DPMC Policies relevant to Services being provided, including the Social Media Policy. 						
Conflicts of Interests	Circle the statement below that applies, after due enquiry by the Supplier:						
	Yes	The Party and its Personnel have no actual, potential or perceived Conflict of Interest in relation to this Contract. OR					
	Yes	The Party or Personnel have an actual, potential or perceived: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> financial interest, arrangement or affiliation; and/or personal or fiduciary relationship; and/or personal knowledge; and/or other Conflict of Interest, Relating to this Contract, details of which are below. <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <thead> <tr> <th style="width: 50%;">Name of Supplier or Personnel</th> <th style="width: 50%;">Nature of conflict and how it will be managed</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td> </td> <td> </td> </tr> <tr> <td> </td> <td> </td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Name of Supplier or Personnel	Nature of conflict and how it will be managed			
Name of Supplier or Personnel	Nature of conflict and how it will be managed						
Signature	The Supplier makes this declaration after due enquiry and agrees to be bound by it. For and behalf of the Supplier s9(2)(a) [Redacted] (signature) Name: s9(2)(a) [Redacted] Title _____ Date: 30/06/2022						

Attachment 2: Supplier's additional Health, Safety and Security measures

s9(2)(a), s9(2)(c)

Released under the Official Information Act 1982

**Reporting of online harms and threats against the Covid-19 Response:
Fortnightly Update**

SENSITIVE
11 July 2022

For the period 27 June to 7 July 2022

Kate Hannah, Sanjana Hattotuwa, Kayli Taylor
The Disinformation Project (TDP)

For further inquiries or should this report fall within the scope of an Official information Act request, contact the Disinformation project Director, Kate Hannah

s9(2)(a) [REDACTED]

Released under the Official Information Act 1982

SENSITIVE

Executive Summary

- The ever-changing mis- and disinformation landscape continues to evolve and shift, with impacts on democracy, stable governance, and human lives.
- Social media groups and channels studied have subscriber numbers in the hundreds of thousands: 380,000 subscribers across 161 channels on Telegram; 956,685 followers across 95 Facebook pages; 220,442 followers over 47 Instagram accounts.
- The Ministry of Health's communications are providing another tool for mis- and disinformation producers to use to stir up fear and mistrust in public health institutions and responses.
- The overturning of Roe v Wade and unveiling of anti-abortion sentiment could have an effect on the safety of abortion providers (both individuals and infrastructure), and to those seeking abortion services in Aotearoa New Zealand.
- QAnon rhetoric, further propelled by the recent re-emergence of Q, is present, embedded, and growing in the ecologies we study.
- s9(2)(c)
- Mis- and disinformation subscribers rely on racism to blame and ostracize. This has implications for social cohesion and contributes to a muddying of conversations about 'free speech'.
- Frames and themes of misogyny dominate ecologies we study – with effects on norm-shifting and changing what is 'acceptable' in Aotearoa New Zealand.
- Queerphobia and harms against the LGBTQ+ community are commonplace, with religious and nationalist frames being used to scapegoat.
- Sov-Cit rhetoric and the use of 'paper terrorism' are increasing in Aotearoa New Zealand – which will have effects on frontline Police, and the way Justice and other agencies operate.
- The genuine cost of living crisis and fuel increases are having an impact on the way New Zealanders feel and live – something that is being weaponised by mis- and disinformation producers.
- The belief that the Christchurch Terror Attack was a 'false flag' continue to grow in prominence in the ecologies we study, with effects on whānau of victims, the Muslim community, mistrust in government, and de-sensitisation to violence.

Introduction

Disinformation is a threat to democracy,¹ stable governance,² and human life.³ Since the start of the Covid19 pandemic and its associated infodemic,⁴ disinformation and its impact on people and society in Aotearoa New Zealand has grown. The Disinformation Project (TDP) has analysed this since February 2020, paying particular attention to the volume, velocity, and vector of information. We use daily data collection and analysis (which form the basis of this summary report), use computational and manual tools to scan open-source social media post and commentary across a wide range of social media platforms, websites, and media/alternative media organisations. The information landscape studied is developed using 'snowball' techniques, which means that we have expanded the inclusion of pages, groups, and channels only when they are signalled by existing locations of study.

Within the social media ecologies studied, key individuals and groups producing mis- and disinformation capitalise on growing uncertainty and anxiety amongst communities, related to Covid-19 public health interventions, including vaccination and lockdowns, to build fear, disenfranchisement, and division. Mis- and disinformation is also particularly targeting and scapegoating already marginalised or vulnerable communities – for whom distrust of the state is the result of intergenerational trauma and lived experience of discrimination or harm, which can increase engagement with conspiratorial explanations and disinformation. Over the past two and a half years of research, TDP has developed a thorough and balanced understanding of the harms that mis- and disinformation and 'dangerous speech' present to social cohesion, freedom of expression, inclusion, and safety. (See Appendix One for our definitions of these terms).

The landscape studied – Covid-19

The landscape studied originated as locations engaged in mis- and disinformation related to Covid-19 and the Covid-19 response, and our study, the type of content produced and shared within this landscape has shifted over time, so other narratives and themes within this landscape now form part of our analysis.

For example, on September 26, 2021, the Telegram channels we studied totalled 44,267 subscribers; as of July 1, 2022, we analyse daily 161 Telegram channels with 380,000 subscribers. While there is no feasible ethical method for de-duplication, the growth – and similar growth of both locations (pages, groups, accounts) and followers on Facebook and Instagram – signals increasing interest in these ideas, and continued engagement with content despite the shifts in narrative and theme we note above.

For the purposes of this reporting, we focus on online harms and threats against the Covid-19 response, including people and places associated with the Covid-19 response. This includes covid denialism, covid minimisation, anti-vaccination messaging (which is increasingly spilling

¹ [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/653635/EXPO_STU\(2021\)653635_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/653635/EXPO_STU(2021)653635_EN.pdf)

² Ibid.

³ <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/covid-misinformation-is-killing-people1/>;
<https://www.axios.com/2022/04/21/barack-obama-disinformation-social-media>

⁴ <https://www.who.int/health-topics/infodemic>

from vaccination against Covid-19 into other types of vaccination, including vaccination for tamariki), and anti-mandate/anti-public health measures messaging. These are the four dominant types of messaging that TDP observes in its study of the mis- and disinformation ecologies within Aotearoa New Zealand.

The landscape studied – shifts and developments

As the pandemic has, and continues to, shift and adapt; so too do the focuses of mis- and disinformation producers and their subscribers. We outline these more thoroughly in our two most recent public reports.⁵ A short summary below.

- In our paper published November 2021, we warned about the way Covid-19 related mis- and disinformation were being used as a kind of Trojan Horse to push followers and subscribers towards far-right and extremist ideologies.
- The Parliament Protest saw a large and ideologically diverse group of people brought together to advocate for highly divergent causes. Protestors had highly divergent understandings of the protest, its intentions, and its reception within non-protestors. There is also a high chance that protestors were radicalised during the protest. For example, they may have gone to protest one issue e.g. vaccine mandates; and instead find themselves exposed to a wide array of extremist ideology.
- The causes advocated for and against by mis- and disinformation producers is constantly shifting. Current concerns include Three Waters reform, abortion law (in the wake of the overturning of Roe v Wade in the US), the rise of Sovereign Citizen rhetoric, support for the invasion of Ukraine, and the rights of LGBTQ+ people in Aotearoa New Zealand. As the media and social landscape of Aotearoa New Zealand continues to pivot and highlight diverse issues, so too do mis- and disinformation producers and their subscribers adopt new concerns.
- The end of the Parliament Protest does not symbolise a neat ending to conspiratorial thought in Aotearoa New Zealand. Such ideologies continue, adapting and growing at pace. The responsibility falls to renewing our efforts for social cohesion, honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and reflecting critically on our past, shared present, and collective hopes for the future.

⁵ Hannah, Kate, Sanjana Hattotuwa, and Kayli Taylor. "Mis- and Disinformation in Aotearoa New Zealand from 17 August to 5 November 2021." 2021.: <https://thedisinfoproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/2021-11-09-FINAL-working-paper-disinformation..pdf>; Hannah, Kate, Sanjana Hattotuwa, and Kayli Taylor. "The Murmuration of Information Disorders: Aotearoa New Zealand's Mis- and Disinformation Ecologies and the Parliament Protest." 2022.: <https://thedisinfoproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/The-murmuration-of-information-disorders-May-2022-Report-FULL-VERSION.pdf>

Health disinformation

Health disinformation, and the responses to Covid-19 and other disease, form the bulk of the focus on mis- and disinformation producers within Aotearoa New Zealand – and thus TDP’s research focus.

One narrative that proliferates within the ecologies studied by TDP is that Covid-19 isn’t as bad as the media, public health officials, and Governments say. This narrative emerged in 2020 and grew over 2021. In Aotearoa New Zealand, the Delta outbreak from August 2021 and onset of Omicron have fueled this narrative. This leads to the undermining of public health messaging from MoH and UAC in attempts to get (1) children vaccinated against Covid-19 (2) getting people, especially children, vaccinated against the flu, (3) getting adults boosted, and (4) getting eligible adults boosted again.⁶

Public health commentary is consistently misinterpreted. For example, an interview from Professor Michael Baker on increased mortality is repackaged by alternative media organization Counterspin Media blaming harm related to the vaccine. This conceptualization is normative in the landscape studied.

Against the backdrop of rising case numbers and the increase of deaths across the country, Counterspin Media’s decontextualization is dangerous and completely at odds with the thrust of the interview. This is sophisticated disinformation – using professional media productions in service of Counterspin Media’s conspiratorial and disinformation narrative production. Such disinformation production has consequences for how people interact with, and trust, mainstream media, and public health messaging.

s9(2)(g)(i)

⁷ The wilful misinterpretation of this messaging is promoted by the most influential producers, such as Voices for Freedom, with widespread social media and direct marketing reach to over 200,000 New Zealanders, and likely impact on further vaccination campaigns for childhood vaccines.

Newshub Journalist Michael Morrar’s piece on the poor estimation on testing capacity in the early Omicron peak,⁸ and the claims of one union representative that the Ministry’s stance amounted to ‘misinformation’ was flagged in the ecologies we study. This labelling is now instrumentalised in a number of ways: (1) to deem the term meaningless, (2) that the government was promoting misinformation (with negative effects on public trust), (3) and that

⁶ For an example of this, see the section on harassment of Dr Jin Russell.

⁷ <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/470282/significant-second-wave-of-omicron-may-already-be-here>

⁸ <https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/new-zealand/2022/06/omicron-testing-backlog-review-finds-ministry-of-health-failed-to-accurately-estimate-nz-s-lab-capacity.html>

research on mis- and disinformation (such as TDP) doesn't look at such 'misinformation' because of hidden agendas to silence mis- and disinformation producers and/or to silence truth.

Trust in institutions is important, particularly during a pandemic. We are observing across the ecologies we study *and* from groups with previously high trust, that trust in Government, public health institutions, and the Ministry of Health is waning. Continuation of the current erosion of trust will have dangerous implications for the way the Ministry of Health and other public-health related government organisations in Aotearoa New Zealand interact with its peoples.

International contexts

Roe vs Wade

Following the overturning of Roe vs Wade and the removal of constitutional right to abortion for people with uteruses in the United States, mis- and disinformation ecologies studied by TDP celebrated the decision, and pivoted attention to abortion laws in Aotearoa. This attitude is widespread and consistent across the diverse groups and individuals represented in our location of study. For example, a video posted to YouTube, critiquing the PM's response⁹ to SCOTUS's decision by a prominent Christchurch disinformation producer has been viewed, at time of writing, over 1700 times with 240 likes and over 100 comments. The video uses graphic and inaccurate frames designed to antagonize and incite.

s9(2)(c)



⁹ PM Jacinda Ardern slams US abortion ruling, but Chris Luxon avoids reaction, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/129080107/pm-jacinda-ardern-slams-us-abortion-ruling-but-chris-luxon-avoids-reaction>

s9(2)(c)



QAnon

QAnon is a wide-ranging and baseless internet conspiracy with origins in the United States and global influence.¹¹ Broadly, adherents to the conspiracy theory believe that a collection of Satan-worshipping political leaders, celebrities and billionaires rule the world – including engaging in paedophilia, human trafficking, and the harvesting of blood from children. Supporters of QAnon were involved in the attempting coup at the US Capitol building on 6 January 2021.¹²

QAnon ideas are common in the mis- and disinformation ecologies studied. The return of anonymous poster 'Q', instigator of the QAnon conspiracy theory the same weekend as the overturning of *Roe v Wade* saw an increase in the discussion of QAnon discourses here. One local disinformation producer posted celebrated the overturning of *Roe v Wade*, claiming that abortion is one way the organ trade operated in the US.

The presence of QAnon ideas is of concern in Aotearoa New Zealand for several reasons:

- QAnon, and the sentiment it encourages represents a militant and anti-establishment ideology and is associated with declining trust in institutions in the United States.
- Radicalisation, the erosion of trust in social and democratic institutions, and reductions in social cohesion are some of the effects we may see as a result of the spread of QAnon related ideologies and ideals across Aotearoa New Zealand.
- QAnon frames align closely with Russian disinformation, queerphobia, misogyny; as well as content that goes against democracy. Such content is aimed at public institutions in the United States, but is toxic to domestic cultures, communities, and contexts.

QAnon is not just limited to social media (Telegram, but present across Meta and Twitter), but takes place in offline settings, such as public meetings across the country called 'Save the Children', which bring the QAnon conspiracy here and place it into a local context for the audience –framed around abuse in state care, and specifically targeting Oranga Tamariki, Police, and other agencies as perpetrators of the harms that the conspiracy focuses on.

QAnon social media content and frames, shared into and on NZ-based accounts, groups, and channels is consistently the *most violent content* we discover in our research.

s9(2)(c)

¹¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/aug/25/qanon-conspiracy-theory-explained-trump-what-is>

¹² <https://www.bbc.com/news/53498434>

National impacts

TDP is observing the effects of an *information void* as Covid-19 and its impacts are less focused on by institutions, including government agencies. In the absence of narrative frames, an information void develops, one that mis- and disinformation producers are now filling with alternative narrative frames which rely on racism, misogyny, queerphobia, and pseudo-law. In an environment with less counter-messaging, these are growing at pace.

Racism

Disinformation producers rely on frames that articulate, amplify, and normalise racism – and establish the right to offend and be offensive as a *pillar of free speech*. Hate speech and harmful speech are framed as free speech – allowing the generation of logic that any criticism is an attempt to ‘cancel’ or censor them.

This is further emphasised by requests from disinformation producers to ‘chat’, ‘discuss ideas’, or ‘debate’ ideas with public figures. When their requests are denied or ignored it can be framed as a refusal to engage in ‘free debate’ or an attempt at cancelling.

One example of the anti-Māori racism that saturates mis- and disinformation ecosystems is the response to Matariki. 24 June 2022, Aotearoa New Zealand’s first public holiday to acknowledge Matariki, the Māori New Year, generated criticism and anti-Māori racism within the ecologies studied by TDP. The public holiday saw common and widespread themes re-articulated, including He Puapua, Three Waters, Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta, Te Tiriti o Waitangi, co-governance, and denial of Māori indigeneity. These themes target Māori (both collectively and individually, such as Foreign Minister Nanaia Matuha) with harassment and violence. The widespread rejection of the premise of the new holiday has impacts for social cohesion.

Misogyny

Themes and frames of toxic masculinity and misogyny are commonly and normatively expressed mis- and disinformation ecologies studied by TDP. Critically, these frames are used to recruit further subscribers and to target women’s participation in public life. Effects of these widespread frames are already being felt by women and gender minorities, and resulting in norm-shifting, where the use of misogyny and language of threats and violence is accepted in Aotearoa New Zealand. Misogynistic framing – particularly around the roles of men and women in families and public life – is the most common unifying frame we observe in the ecosystems studied. Examples during the period of analysis focus on abortion rights, motherhood, and the role of men, and continue to provide both tools for recruitment and for targeted harassment of women and gender minorities.

Queerphobia¹³

The publicity around Bethlehem College in Tauranga¹⁴ and burning of Rainbow Youth¹⁵ continue to provide narrative frames about LGBTQ+ people in Aotearoa New Zealand.

In the last fortnight, an Auckland-based misinformation producer whose main platform is Facebook attacked the visibility of LGBTQ+ people in public life, saying:

“I am so glad that New Zealand has not stooped as low as the United States when it comes to children and sexual ideology. This seems crazy to me that people are okay with children being around hyper sexualised environments. I would love to have some LGBTQ members on the podcast with me to talk about the difference between celebrating ourselves and where the lines should be when it comes to children. If you would like to join me and chat then let’s sit down for an open and honest conversation.”

Another Auckland-based producer, mainly present on Telegram, was motivated by Spark’s new campaign aiming to create inclusion for non-binary people¹⁶ has attacked non-binary people. He claims Spark’s campaign is “using [minorities’] stories to create falsehoods and distort social realities” which will damage the “great nation”. His original post is shared into over 25 Telegram channels.

A Christchurch-based disinformation producer active on Facebook and YouTube strategically and intentionally misappropriates a Biblical passage (Pride goes before destruction, Proverbs 16:18), thus targeting Pride and LGBTQ+ communities as ‘sin’. The PM’s attendance at a Pride festival from years ago is highlighted, drawing her into the ‘sin of Pride’.

In June, ‘online’ harms and discrimination against the Queer community¹⁷ became a real display of violence with the burning of Rainbow Youth offices in Tauranga.¹⁸ Safety, and feelings of safety, for the LGBTQ+ community are placed at risk every time dangerous, hateful, and harmful rhetoric is posited against them.¹⁹

Anti-establishment / sov-cit

Since 2021, TDP has analyzed the domestic growth of Sovereign Citizen (Sov-Cit) ideologies. The Sov-Cit movement emerged in the United States in the mid-1970s. Adherents view governments as illegitimate and corrupt and view themselves and living outside of the required confines of the law.²⁰ Since the Covid-19 pandemic, Sov-Cits in the US have pivoted into sharing Covid-19 related mis- and disinformation – including attending anti-vaccination and anti-mask events.²¹ One tool of Sov-Cit rhetoric is ‘paper terrorism’, meaning when they get frustrated with the authorities or public institutions they retaliate with bogus legal claims that waste time and resources.²² Sov-Cits have also been known to use violence and threats of harm. TDP is observing Sov-Cit rhetoric in Aotearoa New Zealand’s mis- and disinformation ecologies – which will have negative effects on public safety, including that of frontline Police officers.

¹³ TDP is using ‘queerphobia’ as an umbrella term to describe harms against members of the LGBTQ+ community.

¹⁴ <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/bay-of-plenty-times/news/taurangas-bethlehem-college-criticised-for-discriminatory-marriage-belief/ACKCSXMNTDGO5CRCLF7AMTWZXY/>

¹⁵ <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/469221/rainbow-youth-tauranga-drop-in-centre-destroyed-in-suspicious-fire>

¹⁶ <https://www.spark.co.nz/online/beyondbinarycode/about/>

¹⁷ <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/bay-of-plenty-times/news/taurangas-bethlehem-college-criticised-for-discriminatory-marriage-belief/ACKCSXMNTDGO5CRCLF7AMTWZXY/>

¹⁸ <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/469221/rainbow-youth-tauranga-drop-in-centre-destroyed-in-suspicious-fire>

¹⁹ For more, read TDP researcher Kayli Taylor’s short piece on hate speech: <https://thedisinfoproject.org/2022/06/18/hate-speech-in-aotearoa-new-zealand-reflecting-and-resisting/>

²⁰ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-53654318>

²¹ <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/sovereign-citizens-movement>

²² <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/sovereign-citizens-movement>

In the last fortnight TDP has observed repeated posting on Telegram by an individual regarding their interactions with Police, and other content espoused by this person. In one visit, the individual records an interaction with Police, who advise him to take down two videos which feature graphic violence that were posted to his Telegram channel in April. The video shows two entirely separate worldviews: one connected to domestic laws and policing, and one that is inextricably entwined with and based on Sov-Cit vocabularies and beliefs.

A faux 'sheriff' van, inspired by the local 'sheriff' movement (which itself is inspired by Sov-Cit rhetoric) is celebrated on Telegram. The van says 'Stop 3 Waters', and has pictures of Chris Hipkins, James Shaw, Nanaia Mahuta, Trevor Mallard, Ashley Bloomfield, Chris Luxon, Andrew Little, Jacinda Ardern, and Grant Robertson.



TDP also analysed a letter sent to a Judge of the Supreme Court²³, and featured in the Nuremburg NZ Telegram channel, featuring a range of pseudo-science links and urging them to support their efforts to bring people in NZ who have been involved with the Covid-19 response to justice. This is the perfect example of paper terrorism. Not only is the letter, in its harassing nature and with its ridiculous demands a form of paper terrorism; but it makes reference to other behaviours that could be interpreted as the same: repeated emails to government and public health officials.

Sov-Cit rhetoric and its dismissal of Police jurisdiction could have serious effects on social cohesion, and the safety of individuals across police, government, elections, and public health. The rise in 'paper terrorism', and bombardment of law and other agencies with pseudo-legal claims will have impacts on the way these agencies operate and function.

Christchurch Terror Attack

Content warning: Discussions of the Christchurch Terror Attack

The harmful and disturbing lie that the Christchurch Terror Attack was a 'False Flag'²⁴ is present within the mis- and disinformation ecologies studied by TDP. *The Three Faced Killer*, a 'documentary' in three parts by Michael O'Bernicia trivialises the attacks and includes video footage from the attack – which is classified in Aotearoa New Zealand as objectionable material.²⁵ The second part has been released and features extended cuts from the Christchurch killer's livestream - just like Part One, which was also deemed objectionable by the Classification Office.²⁶ Like Part One, Part Two of the

²³ The letter is addressed to Chief Justice William Young, who left the Supreme Court in April 2022. The email address however, is for Chief Justice Helen Winkelmann, who is now the Chief Justice. For the purposes of this analysis, we shall label as 'a justice of the Supreme Court'.

²⁴ <https://www.poynter.org/fact-checking/2022/what-is-a-false-flag/>

²⁵ <https://www.classificationoffice.govt.nz/news/news-items/christchurch-mosque-attack-livestream-classification-decision/>

²⁶ Chief Censor Bans The Three Faced Terrorist, a 'documentary' about the March 15 Mosque attacks, <https://www.classificationoffice.govt.nz/news/news-items/chief-censor-bans-the-three-faced-terrorist-a-documentary-about-the-march-15-mosque-attacks/>

'documentary' has been banned.²⁷ While Part Two has been banned, like Part One and the original video footage of the attack s9(2)(c) [REDACTED]

While TDP and Te Mana Whakaatu – Classification Office brace for Part Three, we note that subscribers to mis- and disinformation ecologies who posted the video will likely have observed it – deeply disturbing material that displays, at least in part, the attack of 15 March. The impacts on mental health, on perceptions of violence, and desensitisation²⁸ are myriad.

The lie that the terrorist attack was a false flag is harmful to the communities and whānau most affected by the violence, further generating harm against the Muslim community for an event that has already caused significant harm. The continued accusation that the terrorist attack was orchestrated by the Government serves only to cement distrust of the state and institutions. This will have long-tail effects on the way subscribers to mis- and disinformation ecologies interact with public institutions.

²⁷ <https://www.classificationoffice.govt.nz/news/news-items/acting-chief-censor-bans-video-featuring-the-march-15-mosque-attacks/>

²⁸ <https://www.apa.org/topics/video-games/violence-harmful-effects>

Appendix One: Definitions

Misinformation: “false information that people didn’t create with the intent to hurt others”

Disinformation: “false information created with the intention of harming a person, group, or organization, or even a company”

Malinformation: “true information used with ill intent”²⁹

Conspiracy theory: purported explanations which cite a conspiracy at the salient cause of some event or phenomenon.³⁰

Dangerous speech: “dangerous speech is any form of expression (e.g., speech, text, or images) that can increase the chances that its audience will condone or participate in violence against members of another group.”³¹

Hallmarks of dangerous speech:

- Dehumanisation
- Coded language
- Accusation in a mirror
- Threat to group integrity or purity
- Assertion of attack against women and girls
- Questioning in-group loyalty

²⁹ Berentson-Shaw J and Elliot M. *Misinformation and Covid-19: a briefing for media*. Wellington: The Workshop; (2020).

³⁰ Dentith MRX. Conspiracy theories and philosophy: bringing the epistemology of a freighted term into the social sciences. In JE Uscinki (ed.) *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; (2018).

³¹ The Dangerous Speech Project, *Dangerous Speech: A Practical Guide*: 19 April 2021 <https://dangerousspeech.org/guide/>

Appendix Two: TDP's work to report and flag content to minimise harm to New Zealanders

9(2)(ba)



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**Reporting of online harms and threats against the Covid-19 Response:
Fortnightly Update**

SENSITIVE

25 July 2022

For the period 8 July to 22 July 2022

Kate Hannah, Sanjana Hattotuwa, Kayli Taylor
The Disinformation Project (TDP)

For further inquiries or should this report fall within the scope of an Official information Act request, contact the Disinformation project Director, Kate Hannah

s9(2)(a) [REDACTED]

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SENSITIVE

Executive Summary

- Aotearoa New Zealand's disinformation ecologies are a complex and shifting phenomena that is having and will continue to have impacts on human and national security.
- Social media groups and channels studied have subscriber numbers in the hundreds of thousands: 380,000 subscribers across 161 channels on Telegram; 956,685 followers across 95 Facebook pages; 220,442 followers over 47 Instagram accounts.
- Disinformation producers continue to target vaccinations as harmful, masks as ineffective, and all public health measures as ridiculous.
- Monkeypox has been imbricated into conspiratorial thinking and denialism.
- The image of the PM, other senior government officials, and youth MPs unmasked is a gift to disinformation ecologies and is an accelerant for worsening information disorders in Aotearoa New Zealand.
- Identity-based harassment, including racism and misogyny, continue to rise in the ecologies studied by TDP.
- TDP witnessed more Sov-Cit rhetoric this fortnight, including threats to bring the PM to trial.
- TDP is increasingly concerned about the threat of stochastic terrorism in NZ.
- The white supremacist 'Great Replacement Theory' is referenced without critique in domestic Telegram channels by NZ-based producers.
- TDP notes how easy it is to move from domestic anti-vaccination and anti-mandate Telegram channels to channels promoting violent extremism and other harms.
- Sri Lanka's unrest has captured the attention of mis- and disinformation ecologies studied by TDP. The protest activity is held up as an example of how to revolt against government – including in Aotearoa New Zealand.
- Former Japanese President Abe's assassination was reported on Telegram faster than many mainstream media outlets picked it up, and later framed conspiratorially.
- Mis- and disinformation producers oppose Three Waters reform, muddy the issue, and protest visibly.
- Russian disinformation continues to be shared amongst ecologies studied by TDP, including domestically produced content in Russian.
- Mainstream media has promoted misinformation, and thus bolstered its producers.
- Schools are, as we have described over the past year, increasingly contested sites where efforts to increase social cohesion such as the new history curriculum are poised to become embattled.

Health disinformation

TDP observes in studied ecologies health disinformation related to Covid-19 denialism and minimisation, anti-public health rhetoric, and anti-vaccination messaging. The emergence of Monkeypox has also drawn the attention of mis- and disinformation ecologies.

A large and popular disinformation group which focuses on women and families' features another disinformation narrator claiming "You can statistically show that the vaccines have been increasing the deaths" and represents the Covid-19 vaccine as a "device that changes the way our immune system works." These represent explicit claims that what is being named as Covid-19 related deaths are instead vaccine-related. Another high profile and popular woman disinformation producer posts videos alleging that Covid-19 vaccines cause myocarditis, heart issues, heart attacks and essentially, kill people. This denial of the effects of Covid-19 is highly palatable as it offers a neat explanation for excess death.

s9(2)(g)(i)

Anti-mask discourses and the promotion of the misuse of mask exemptions are widespread. Multiple disinformation producers appear to be building up to a crescendo that will be unleashed in its full force if/when stronger mask mandates are announced by Government. Any capitulation is also packaged as evidence of their power and influence – ie the strong advice to schools that falls short of an actual mask mandate is understood within the location of study as evidence of the fear of their growing movement.

Media reporting on Monkeypox cases in Aotearoa New Zealand¹ has been recognised within the ecosystems studied by TDP. Monkeypox has been immediately drawn into anti-public health measures across mis- and disinformation ecologies studied by TDP. A poll on Telegram from an alternative 'news' organisation which produces and promotes disinformation highlights resistance to a lockdown, as well as the belief that the New Zealand government will introduce a lockdown as a system for control (of both people, and virus). Broadly, Telegram's reception to Monkeypox is discourse is exclusively ridicule and rejection. The thrust of comment responses to this poll includes anti-vaccination, anti-mandate, anti-government, Covid-19 denialism, and Monkeypox denialism. Monkeypox has been drawn into the same operation of conspiratorial thought in which Covid-19 is viewed.

This graph compares interactions of the Unite Against Covid-19 Facebook page against that of the high-profile woman disinformation producer whose livestream content was the most popular during the Parliamentary occupation.

¹ New Zealand's first case of monkeypox detected in Auckland, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/health/300633595/new-zealands-first-case-of-monkeypox-detected-in-auckland>

As the graph shows, since January 2022 the misinformation producer has received nearly *four times* the number of engagements than the Unite Against Covid-19 page. While the majority of this was over February-March 2022, this individual remains slightly higher interactions in May and June 2022.



A maskless Prime Minister

Against a backdrop of worsening information disorders, rising Covid-19 infections and re-infections, and a health system on the verge of collapse,² an image of a mask-less Prime Minister, Governor General, other MPs, and youth MPs is a *gift* to mis- disinformation ecosystems and an accelerant for worsening information disorders in Aotearoa New Zealand.

TDP has written over 30 pages, summarising the response from both mis- and disinformation ecologies and those not subscribed, including politicians – current and former – and academics. In the interest of brevity, we will summarise a few points below.

Mis- and disinformation ecologies latched on immediately, and significantly, with a variety of responses. Some labelled the Prime Minister hypocritical, others used it as an opportunity to allege that masking is not effective, some highlighted other posts from Youth MPs in which individuals are seen mask-less, and some labelled the PM’s rhetoric as “Do as I say, not do as I do”. No mis- and disinformation producer has achieved the level of undermining of public health measures as this image has. Within mis- and disinformation ecologies, it has further undermined the government’s own public health guidelines, policies, and communications in ways that TDP expects to have longtail effects.

Discourse on Twitter shows 221 tweets on the subject, reaching a potential 46,920 followers. These tweets generated 2662 retweets (including quote tweets). TDP noted last week that trust in government and public health organisations from those *with previously high trust* in these groups is being eroded. This image further erodes this trust – with implications on how future public health responses are likely to be received.

Disinformation ecologies already had anti-public health measure views, which manifested into anti-masking rhetoric. TDP stresses that all future expressions of anti-mask sentiment will be appreciated by the PM’s maskless photo on social media. Thus, pushback against mask use is *strengthened* by the PM’s own actions.

² Covid-19 NZ: Why the rising tide of cases doesn't tell the whole story, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/explained/129256918/covid19-nz-why-the-rising-tide-of-cases-doesnt-tell-the-whole-story>

In sum, the image presents a serious and unprecedented issue in domestic information disorders – the magnitude of which is yet to fully be seen. This image, alongside decreasing public and official communication creates a new foundation for mis- and disinformation to thrive.

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Beyond health disinformation – other trends of the ecosystem

Identity-based targeting and harassment

TDP has repeatedly pointed to the ways in which Covid-19 mis- and disinformation ecosystems are drawing people towards conservative ideologies, far-right views, and racism.

This fortnight, disinformation producers across Telegram and Facebook promoted an online petition against calling this country Aotearoa, which was hosted on the anti-Māori Hobsons Pledge website. Racism is deeply intertwined with the disinformation ecologies studied by TDP – with impacts on all of Aotearoa New Zealand and its efforts for social cohesion. There has been a notable increase in both antisemitic and Islamophobic content in commentary in the period of study.

Additionally, themes and frames of toxic masculinity and the operations of misogyny are present and highly volatile across the mis- and disinformation ecologies studied by TDP. For example, the Freedom and Rights Coalition promotes “real men” joining a “Million-Man March” in Auckland, Wellington, and Christchurch with language such as “Men of this nation will gather up their wives, sons and daughters and say, “Let’s make history and stand for our freedoms, our rights and let’s get our nation back.” The language is heteronormative, erases gender diverse identities, and frames a highly misogynistic expectation that men need to “fight” to save the nation from its current “collapse”. Disinformation producers who are women are also involved in the production and promotion of material with harms to gender equality and the lives and safety of women and gender minorities.

Sovereign Citizen

Since 2021, TDP has borne witness to the domestic growth of Sovereign Citizen (Sov-Cit). The Sov-Cit movement emerged in the United States in the mid-1970s. Adherents view governments as illegitimate and corrupt and view themselves and living outside of the required confines of the law.³ Since the Covid-19 pandemic, Sov-Cits in the US have pivoted into sharing Covid-19 related mis- and disinformation – including attending anti-vaccination and anti-mask events.⁴ One tool of Sov-Cit rhetoric is ‘paper terrorism’, meaning when they get frustrated with the authorities or public institutions they retaliate with bogus legal claims that waste time and resources.⁵ Sov-Cits have also been known to use violence and threats of harm. TDP is observing Sov-Cit rhetoric in Aotearoa New Zealand’s mis- and disinformation ecologies – which will have negative effects on public safety, including that of frontline Police officers. TDP notes that Sov-Cit rhetoric is now strong enough offline to make mainstream media news.⁶

s9(2)(a)

Other disinformation producers continue to travel the country promoting Sov-Cit ideas and spreading conspiratorial thought.

³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-53654318>

⁴ <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/sovereign-citizens-movement>

⁵ <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/sovereign-citizens-movement>

⁶ <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/crime/129313220/trials-and-tribulations-during-mans-troubled-court-appearance>

A high profile former mainstream journalist disinformation producer interviews another a fringe disinformation producer who has been promoting Sov-Cit rhetoric and his encounters with Police on his Telegram channel. This narrator and second speaker 'interview' technique provides and powerful form of dangerous speech that validates fringe ideas through the medium of a 'news' style interview conducted by someone with status within that space.

In the post accompanying the video, the interviewer says "we must create change at a local level... Take out your cameras, and make a lot of noise! Demand Change!" The video itself amplifies Russian disinformation, vaccine related disinformation, and re-features previous content from the interviewer alleging children are dying from the Covid-19 vaccine. Towards the end of the video, the interviewee questions the Police, vaccine clinics, and anyone associated with power. When asked to say something to PM Ardern, the interviewee says, "Resign and get ready for trial."

Methods of engagement and protest

TDP observes a variety of methods of engagement and protest within the disinformation ecologies we study. Some of these are tools currently being implemented, like public protest and use of the mainstream media. Some are hinted at – realities that TDP is increasingly concerned we will witness in Aotearoa New Zealand. One example of this is stochastic terrorism.

On 8 July, following the release of a publication called 'The Hard Reset', the Counterterrorism Group (CTG) in the United States released a flash alert warning that the publication would "almost certainly" increase extremist violent attacks across the country.⁷ They noted that the motive behind the publication was to encourage white supremacists and anti-government individuals to take violent action.

s9(2)(c) TDP has read the document and agrees with CTG regarding the tone and thrust of the content. We cannot make an assessment about potential offline consequences of the availability of the document in a domestic context. However, given the content of the document and the irrigated path dependencies established by prior TVEC content, s9(2)(c)

We are observing the very real threat of stochastic violence and terrorism. The ease of access to 'The Hard Reset' and other materials across s9(2)(c) highlight that Aotearoa New Zealand is reaching a point where kinetic harms including, but not limited to, stochastic terrorism are inevitable.

The Great Replacement Theory in Aotearoa New Zealand

One disinformation producer, s9(2)(c) signals The Great Replacement Theory's central thesis: that the white population, suffering from declining birth rates, is being 'replaced'

⁷ <https://www.counterterrorismgroup.com/post/flash-alert-high-risk-of-violence-with-the-publication-of-the-hard-reset-a-terrorgram-publication>

by immigrants. He names it in the context of the Dutch farmers protests, alleging he heard about dropping birth rates amongst white people in the Netherlands, and high immigration flows. The Great Replacement Theory (GRT) inspired the Christchurch terrorist and the Buffalo mass-shooter. This disinformation producer's rhetoric and framing is the same ideological framework, and vocabulary, as the aforementioned terrorists.

Domestic Telegram ecologies are one step from violent extremist promotion

TDP's study focuses on s9(2)(c) who cluster around anti-vaccination and anti-mandate messaging. These channels regularly link to, share, or direct people towards terrorist and violent extremist content, violent extremist, child sexual abuse material, and The Great Replacement Theory repositories. There is no guard, friction, oversight, or control over the production and propagation of this material – and no geographical containment. What is produced in the United States is instantly discoverable by those in Aotearoa New Zealand who are imbricated within mis- and disinformation ecologies.

Sri Lanka

The socio-political developments in Sri Lanka have caught the attention of disinformation ecologies studied by TDP. The events are held up as an example of how people could revolt against the government in Aotearoa New Zealand, how food shortages in Sri Lanka preface the same here, and how civil unrest in Sri Lanka will also be experienced in Aotearoa New Zealand. Sri Lanka's conundrums and issues are instrumentalised without context or historic framing to suggest civil and political unrest could be achieved in Aotearoa New Zealand in the same way.

President Abe's assassination, represented on Telegram

Former Japanese President Abe's deadly shooting was captured quickly by ecologies studied by TDP. The first post on Telegram was posted several minutes prior to any wire report seen by TDP on Twitter, or before reporting from the *New York Times*. Consequently, TDP views Telegram as a real time news network reporting entirely independently from wire news reporting and mainstream media. Later framing of the assassination is dominated by tropes that he was close to Putin and opposed vaccine mandates, the World Economic Forum, globalists, and the World Health Organisation, and that his assassination is therefore the work of pro-vaccine conspirators.

Opposition to Three Waters

Multiple content producers within disinformation ecologies studied by TDP have strong opposition to Three Waters reform. This includes organising physical protest outside the Local Government New Zealand (LGNZ) meeting in Palmerston North – which was shared across multiple clusters within our ecologies. Three Waters reform is almost exclusively framed as concerns of Māori control or ownership over water – a sign of the racism present within ecologies, as well as the way the *debate* about Three Waters has overshadowed the actual issue.⁸

⁸ <https://thespinoff.co.nz/live-updates/21-07-2022/commentary-around-three-waters-has-overshadowed-need-for-change-ardern>

The spread of Russian disinformation

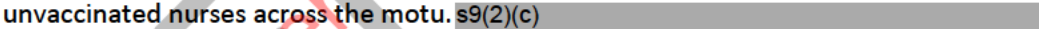
TDP has noted the spread of Russian disinformation and propaganda throughout Aotearoa New Zealand's information ecosystems, particularly since the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. In a paper released in May, we described how, by the end of March 2022, every domestic Telegram channel studied by TDP had pivoted to a nearly exclusive framing of the Ukraine war through pro-Putin and pro-Kremlin frames. This reflects trends observed by Microsoft who reported in June that after December 2021, Russian propaganda consumption in New Zealand increased by over 30% relative to consumption in Australia and New Zealand. Critically, pro-Kremlin and pro-Putin content in the Russian language is being produced in New Zealand, via open channels and closed groups such as <https://www.facebook.com/groups/VladimirPutinFanClubNZ/discussion/preview>. This includes content which seeks to fundraise for Russian causes, potentially in violation of sanctions and terrorism laws.

s9(2)(c)



Mainstream media promoting misinformation

This fortnight, the mainstream media promoted a puff piece for a group of unvaccinated nurses begging to return to work amidst the collapsing health system.⁹ The piece failed to recognise the cluster was organised by a prominent disinformation group, which has conspiratorial ideas about the New World Order, believes the vaccine will cull the population, and advocates for Nuremberg trials for doctors, academics, and politicians. The group of nurses and its parent network, following the success of the piece have scaled up rapidly, organising action plans for unvaccinated nurses across the motu. s9(2)(c)

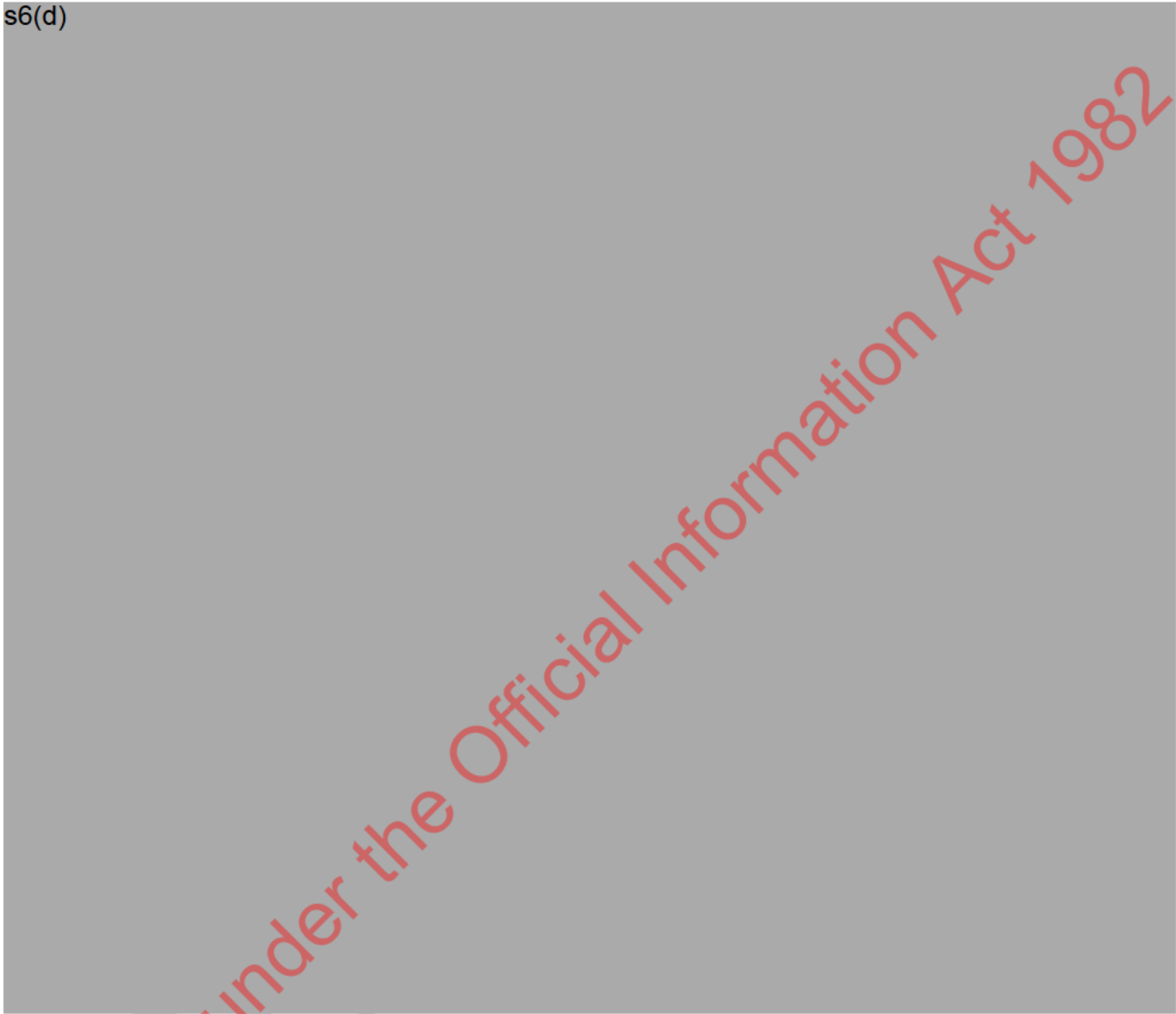


s6(d)



⁹ <https://www.stuff.co.nz/southland-times/news/129197272/plea-by-unvaccinated-nurses-to-return-to-work>

s6(d)



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Appendix One: The Disinformation Project and our field of study

Disinformation is a threat to democracy,¹⁰ stable governance,¹¹ and human life.¹² Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic and its associated infodemic,¹³ disinformation and its impact on people and society in Aotearoa New Zealand has grown. The Disinformation Project (TDP) has been analysing this since February 2020, paying particular attention to the volume, velocity, and vector of information. We use daily data collection and analysis (which form the basis of this summary report), use computational and manual tools to scan open-source social media post and commentary across a wide range of social media platforms, websites, and media/alternative media organisations. The information landscape studied is developed using 'snowball' techniques, which means that we have expanded the inclusion of pages, groups, and channels only when they are signalled by existing locations of study.

Within the social media ecologies studied, key individuals and groups producing mis- and disinformation capitalise on growing uncertainty and anxiety amongst communities, related to Covid-19 public health interventions, including vaccination and lockdowns, to build fear, disenfranchisement, and division. Mis- and disinformation is also particularly targeting and scapegoating already marginalised or vulnerable communities – for whom distrust of the state is the result of intergenerational trauma and lived experience of discrimination or harm, which can increase engagement with conspiratorial explanations and disinformation. Over the past two and a half years of research, TDP has developed a thorough and balanced understanding of the harms that mis- and disinformation and 'dangerous speech' present to social cohesion, freedom of expression, inclusion, and safety. (See Appendix One for our definitions of these terms).

The landscape studied – Covid-19

The landscape studied originated as locations engaged in mis- and disinformation related to Covid-19 and the Covid-19 response, and our study, the type of content produced and shared within this landscape has shifted over time, so other narratives and themes within this landscape now form part of our analysis. For the purposes of this reporting, we focus on online harms and threats against the Covid-19 response, including people and places associated with the Covid-19 response. This includes covid denialism, covid minimisation, anti-vaccination messaging (which is increasingly spilling from vaccination against Covid-19 into other types of vaccination, including vaccination for tamariki), and anti-mandate/anti-public health measures messaging. These are the four dominant types of messaging that TDP observes in its study of the mis- and disinformation ecologies within Aotearoa New Zealand.

¹⁰ [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/653635/EXPO_STU\(2021\)653635_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/653635/EXPO_STU(2021)653635_EN.pdf)

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/covid-misinformation-is-killing-people1/>;
<https://www.axios.com/2022/04/21/barack-obama-disinformation-social-media>

¹³ <https://www.who.int/health-topics/infodemic>

Appendix Two: Definitions

Misinformation: “false information that people didn’t create with the intent to hurt others”

Disinformation: “false information created with the intention of harming a person, group, or organization, or even a company”

Malinformation: “true information used with ill intent”¹⁴

Conspiracy theory: purported explanations which cite a conspiracy at the salient cause of some event or phenomenon.¹⁵

Dangerous speech: “dangerous speech is any form of expression (e.g., speech, text, or images) that can increase the chances that its audience will condone or participate in violence against members of another group.”¹⁶

Hallmarks of dangerous speech:¹⁷

- Dehumanisation
- Coded language
- Accusation in a mirror
- Threat to group integrity or purity
- Assertion of attack against women and girls
- Questioning in-group loyalty

¹⁴ Berentson-Shaw J and Elliot M. *Misinformation and Covid-19: a briefing for media*. Wellington: The Workshop; (2020).

¹⁵ Dentith MRX. Conspiracy theories and philosophy: bringing the epistemology of a freighted term into the social sciences. In JE Uscinki (ed.) *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; (2018).

¹⁶ The Dangerous Speech Project, *Dangerous Speech: A Practical Guide*: 19 April 2021 <https://dangerousspeech.org/guide/>

¹⁷ Ibid.

Appendix Three: TDP's work to report and flag content to minimise harm to New Zealanders

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