



26 May 2023



Ref: OIA-2022/23-0915

Dear

**Official Information Act request for the release of report related to disinformation issues facing Māori**

Thank you for your Official Information Act 1982 (the Act) request received on 15 May 2023. You requested:

*This OIA:*

*<https://fyi.org.nz/request/21371/response/82258/attach/5/Release%20document.pdf>*

*Asked for 2 landscape reports and a deep dive report that were provided to DPMC under a contract with the Disinformation Project.*

*The response gives a variety of contractual information and the 2 landscape reports.*

*Several elements were withheld, including it looks like the deep dive/out of cycle report which is referenced in the released contract as "Disinformation Issues facing Maori" along with covering emails that accompanied it.*

*Request:*

*1.*

*Now that more time has passed - can that report please be released that was withheld in that OIA?*

*2.*

*Could you please confirm if any further reports not included in those above 3 references have been commissioned (delivered or undelivered) from the Disinformation Project.*

Regarding part one of your request, I can advise that a re-assessment of this document has been undertaken and I am able to release the report titled 'Differential experiences of the pandemic, the infodemic, and information disorders – disinformation impacts for Māori' in part with some information withheld under the following section of the Act:

- section 9(2)(g)(ii), to prevent improper pressure or harassment

Regarding part two of your request, I can confirm that beyond the above report and the two reports titled 'Reporting of Online Harms and Threats against the COVID-19 Response' the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet has not commissioned any further reports from The Disinformation Project.

I can, however, advise that The Disinformation Project has voluntarily, and not at DPMC's request, provided copies of additional reports. These voluntary reports have not influenced or contributed to any workstream within DPMC.

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



pp  
Tony Lynch  
**Deputy Chief Executive**  
National Security Group

## Differential experiences of the pandemic, the infodemic, and information disorders – disinformation impacts for Māori

The Disinformation Project (TDP)

s9(2)(g)(ii)

### Introduction

This deep dive analysis explores the experiences of Māori during the Covid-19 pandemic and its resulting infodemic. It provides historic context and offers suggestions for future Crown responses to both pandemic and infodemic. Understanding such contexts is essential as we look to navigate future relationships with Māori, inspired by the relationship enabled and enforced by Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

This deep dive is based on The Disinformation Project's (TDP) daily analysis of mis- and disinformation ecologies in Aotearoa New Zealand, critical insights from its researchers' study of Aotearoa New Zealand's history, and conversations with communities and leaders. The unique combination of these uniquely equips us to provide both overview and insight into the way mis- and disinformation ecologies impact Māori.

### The importance of health and social cohesion

In the middle of the pandemic's first year, and reflecting on more than twenty years' work establishing the critical importance of the social determinants of health, renowned British public health expert Sir Michael Marmot, of the eponymous Marmot Reviews, wrote that "a socially cohesive society with concern for the common good is likely to be a healthier society."<sup>1</sup>

But what is social cohesion? It is increasingly well understood that relationships are important for physical and psychosocial wellbeing, and in social determinants of health, these relationships are conceptualised through ideas such as social cohesion, social capital, social networks and social support. Social capital refers to shared community or group resources which individuals access through their social networks, which we might best understand as the *ecosystem*, or web, of human relationships. Underpinning social cohesion within this complex relationship-based construction is the idea of collective efficacy – that is, a community's ability to create change and exercise informal social control by influencing behaviour through shared social norms. Whānau, hapū, community, faith and other organised or non-organised groupings are spaces within which people experience social networks, can access social capital, and experience social control.

In Tā Mason Durie's critical conceptualisation 1984 of health and wellbeing within a Kaupapa Māori framework, Te Whare Tapa Whā, health and wellbeing is a whareniui with four walls: taha

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.health.org.uk/publications/reports/the-marmot-review-10-years-on>

wairua, or spiritual wellbeing; taha hinengaro, mental and emotional wellbeing; taha tinana, physical wellbeing; and taha whānau, family and social wellbeing.

The wharenuī has strong foundations within the whenua on which it sits. These models, conceived to describe the complex interrelationships between individual health outcomes, social issues, community wellbeing, and social inclusion, provide enormous insight for our understanding of information ecosystems, disinformation, and information disorders. People who are grounded, situated, enabled to flourish and contribute, and connected to others are far less likely to experience negative health outcomes – and, far less likely to experience other negative outcomes: disconnection, information disorders, social exclusion, and participation in fragmented realities.

The Report of the Royal Commission into the Ōtautahi Christchurch mosque attacks provides a series of recommendations related to social cohesion. Released at the end of 2020, the report specifies the role we all have in making Aotearoa New Zealand safe and inclusive:

*Public conversations about embracing diversity and encouraging social cohesion should be led by political leaders and the government. There should be transparent conversations where information is available to everyone. These conversations need to include all communities – across the length and breadth of the country, both rural and urban. Enduring change will take time and investment, so these conversations will need to be ongoing.<sup>2</sup>*

In this deep dive report, which focuses on the experiences of the infodemic and information disorders for Māori, these contexts are critical. The last two and a half years of the pandemic have further impacted social cohesion, further eroded information and knowledge flows, and further entrenched social networks based within information disorders. The pandemic, and tipping points predicated by external influences such as the 2020 election's shift to more closely align with the US election cycle, and internal influences such as vaccine mandates and the long Delta lockdown of 2021 have had significant detrimental impact. Unable to access spaces and places within which to proceed with those needed ongoing and enduring conversations about diversity and social cohesion, communities have formed social networks centred within narratives of exclusion, division, polarisation, and in some cases, hate. These social networks are based within social contagion, but the social support people experience as members of these communities is real, and unpacking the complex networked effects of social contagion will take very real effort, time, investment and replacement of contagion with cohesion.

## **Colonial Context**

*Colonisation is in fact the history that has never left us... acts of subtle (and not so subtle) discrimination, the frequently coded demeaning of our people*

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<sup>2</sup> <https://christchurchattack.royalcommission.nz/>

*in many media outlets, and the nagging public hectoring which questions the Treaty or the worth of being Māori are an unarticulated, ever-present burden...<sup>3</sup>*

Aotearoa New Zealand's colonial past, and the operations of colonisation in the present, are important backdrops through which to assess and understand Māori experiences in Aotearoa New Zealand in 2022. The cultural, social, and economic impacts of colonisation are varied and substantial. While it is outside the scope of this deep dive to assess each of these in detail, we will highlight the impact of land confiscation on Māori lives and health outcomes.

The nineteenth century saw mass confiscation of Māori land by the Crown as punishment for actions which were deemed rebellious. Historian Vincent O'Malley has argued that the invasion of the Waikato by the colonial government on 12 July 1893 is the definitive origin of the colonial state of New Zealand, far more so than any twentieth century conflict.<sup>4</sup> The raupatu (land confiscation and alienation) that followed saw land ownership shift from Māori to settlers and the colonial state.

Land confiscation must be viewed within the context of Tā Mason Durie's conceptualisation of Te Whare Tapa Whā. As established above, in the model whenua (land) is the foundation of the wharenuī of health and wellbeing. Land confiscation and continued alienation from land must be seen as a contributor to poor Māori health outcomes – and are essential context through which to understand Māori experiences of the pandemic, the infodemic, and information disorders.

Entwined with land confiscations was the labelling of Māori as 'rebels' against the Crown – applying labels to scapegoat and cement Māori as 'other'.<sup>5</sup> The labelling of Māori extends beyond the context of the 1863 Settlements Act, extending to frames of 'subversives', 'traitors', 'savage inferiors', 'filthy primitives', and 'terrorists'.<sup>6</sup> The operations of labelling and consequences of scapegoating, entwined with land confiscations, are essential contexts for understanding Māori experiences of the pandemic, the infodemic, and information disorders.

Intergenerational distrust and lived experiences of systemic neglect, fuelled by two centuries of being ignored and abused by those in power<sup>7</sup> has generated mistrust in state authority – mistrust which is grounded in experience and lived reality, but which can be manipulated by conspiratorial thinking. The preconditions for propensity to entertain and then believe in conspiratorial thought include a sense of lack of control over one's own circumstances, a sense of isolation, and a sense of disconnection from others. The complex and interconnected forces of colonisation, land dispossession, labelling of Māori, and mistrust by Māori of state authority are key factors influencing the way Māori have responded to both the Covid-19 pandemic and

<sup>3</sup> Moana Jackson, "Preface - the Constancy of Terror," in *Terror in Our Midst?: Searching for Terror in Aotearoa New Zealand*, ed. Danny Keenan (Wellington: Huia, 2008), 3.

<sup>4</sup> Vincent O'Malley, *The New Zealand Wars: Ngā Pakanga O Aotearoa* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Māmari Stephens, "Beware the Hollow 'Calabash': Narrative, Analogy, and the Acts of Suppression," in *Terror in Our Midst?: Searching for Terror in Aotearoa New Zealand*, ed. Danny Keenan (Wellington: Huia, 2008), 191.

<sup>6</sup> Jackson, "Preface - the Constancy of Terror," 2.

<sup>7</sup> Te Rina Triponele, "Protesters Are Ignoring Tikanga – and That's Dangerous," NZ Herald, <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/te-rina-triponele-protesters-are-ignoring-tikanga-and-thats-dangerous/NVOEIXLQILQXAUPYIE2RH2I2Y/>, Accessed 10/8/22.

its associated infodemic. These historic and contemporary contexts then intermingle with the lived experience of the pandemic and infodemic to further erode information ecosystems, enabling the experience of information disorders which are now present in Aotearoa New Zealand.

### The pandemic

The arrival of Covid-19 in Aotearoa New Zealand caused significant unknowns for New Zealanders.<sup>8</sup> Official Covid-19 communications in early 2020 were celebrated domestically and internally, for their clarity and for contributing to Aotearoa New Zealand's successful elimination strategy.<sup>9</sup>

Researchers Alex Beattie and Rebecca Priestley have described how Covid-19 communications did not reach all communities in Aotearoa New Zealand in the same way, saying that te ao Māori – such as use of te reo Māori and referencing of the East Coast wave – was used tokenistically.<sup>10</sup> Public health expert Dr Rhys Jones called the 1pm daily briefings “an exercise in whiteness”, critiquing the way Māori were not included in them as partners.<sup>11</sup> This reflects the way that Māori did not experience the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic in the same ways as non-Māori, highlighting the pandemic generated different experiences for New Zealanders.

In September 2020, Te Pūnaha Matatini researchers prepared modelling for ethnicity-based inequities in Covid-19 effects estimated inequalities in fatality resulting from Covid-19 infection by ethnicity.<sup>12</sup> They concluded that Māori and Pacific communities were at greater risk of fatality than non-Māori and non-Pacific, and that these factors needed to be included in future disease incidence and impact modelling.<sup>13</sup> The paper concluded that if there was rapid community transmission in future, it would create unprecedented stress on the health system - which would “almost certainly amplify existing racism in the healthcare system.”<sup>14</sup> Te Pūnaha Matatini's report warned that pre-existing inequalities in the health system would *exacerbate* poor experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Just as Māori have been labelled and used as scapegoats throughout Aotearoa New Zealand's history, so too did this happen during the pandemic. Writing on the spread of mis- and disinformation during August 2021-November 2021, TDP noted:

*For example, mainstream media's reporting on the uptake of vaccination by Māori has increased a perception of Māori as vaccine hesitant and anti-*

<sup>8</sup> Luke Fitzmaurice and Maria Bargh, *Stepping Up: Covid-19 Checkpoints and Rangatiratanga* (Wellington: Huia, 2021), 1.

<sup>9</sup> Alex Beattie and Rebecca Priestley, "Fighting Covid-19 with the Team of 5 Million: Aotearoa New Zealand Government Communication During the 2020 Lockdown," *Social Sciences & Humanities Open* 4 (2021): 1.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, 7.

<sup>11</sup> Rhys Jones, "Covid-19 and Māori Health: 'The Daily 1pm Briefings Have Been an Exercise in Whiteness'," *The Spinoff*, <https://thespinoff.co.nz/atea/13-05-2020/covid-19-and-maori-health-the-daily-1pm-briefings-have-been-an-exercise-in-whiteness>, Accessed 9/8/2022.

<sup>12</sup> Nicholas Steyn, Rachelle N Binny et al., "Estimated Inequities in Covid-19 Infection Fatality Rates by Ethnicity for Aotearoa New Zealand," *New Zealand Medical Association* 133, no. 1521 (2020).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

*vaccination, which has been picked up within circles of disinformation in way that capitalises on racism and further targets disinformation towards those groups. This allows for the targeting of Māori, and the intensification of anti-Māori racism within mis- and disinformation circles.*<sup>15</sup>

The same period also saw blame of Māori centred around the spread of Covid-19 from Auckland to Waikato, and references to gangs as rule-breakers and spreaders of Covid-19. This implicit messaging relies on old tropes – blame, labelling and scapegoating of Māori for the behaviour of others. Just as Māori were scapegoated in the early colonial period of Aotearoa New Zealand's history, so too were they scapegoated during the pandemic.

### **The infodemic**

Alongside the Covid-19 pandemic emerged an infodemic: the “overabundance of information – some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it.”<sup>16</sup> In TDP's preliminary evaluation of the impact of disinformation in Aotearoa New Zealand we noted:

*Aotearoa New Zealand's communities have differential experiences of past pandemics, different measures of health and wellbeing, and different experiences of state services and state intervention. The pandemic and infodemic are also taking place within different nation-states, with different political systems, worldviews, and approaches to healthcare and the role of government. These contexts necessarily inform community and individual responses to the overabundance of information experienced. Understanding how the infodemic has presented in Aotearoa New Zealand enables us to better evaluate ways in which unreliable and untrustworthy information differentially impacts our communities.*<sup>17</sup>

As early as 2020, we highlighted that different communities in Aotearoa New Zealand are experiencing and responding to rising infodemics in different ways. Within the mis- and disinformation ecologies studied by TDP, Māori are targets and scapegoats, producers, and subscribers. The complex interrelationship between these phenomena must be viewed within the context of the infodemic's unique impact on Māori and historic experiences of colonisation.

### **Racism – Māori as targets of mis- and disinformation**

Anti-Māori racism is a key feature in the anti-vaccination, anti-mandate ecologies studied by TDP. A defining feature of this is the ways in which the worst producers and promoters of racism frequently align themselves with Māori, drawing a distinction between “real Maori” and “Maori

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<sup>15</sup> Kate Hannah, Sanjana Hattotuwa, and Kayli Taylor, "Mis- and Disinformation in Aotearoa New Zealand from 17 August to 5 November 2021," (2021), 8.

<sup>16</sup> World Health Organisation, "Infodemic," <https://www.who.int/health-topics/infodemic>, Accessed 10/8/2022.

<sup>17</sup> Max Soar, Victoria Louise Smith et al., "Evaluating the Infodemic: Assessing the Prevalence and Nature of Covid-19 Unreliable and Untrustworthy Information in Aotearoa New Zealand's Social Media, January-August 2020," *Te Pūnaha Matatini* (2020): 2.

elites". Such discourses align with both good Muslim/bad Muslim rhetoric that emerged post 9/11,<sup>18</sup> and to the ways Māori were divided during the colonial project.<sup>19</sup>

This generation and amplification of division by non-Māori subscribed to mis- and disinformation ecologies in Aotearoa New Zealand results in violent targeting of Māori with high profiles, such as Members of Parliament. One disinformation producer says of a Māori Member of Parliament: "She is literally above the law and rules that apply to the rest of us. I believe she's a self loathing one part in 512 Maori if that, with dyed hair, spray on tan and a moko to exaggerate her Maori credentials purely for greed and riches beyond anything she could accumulate in a million years of life. A truly horrendous human being and a quintessential definition of a psychopath." The racist targeting of this MP is common, as are attacks against Māori colleagues in Parliament, public health, academia, and Māori leadership.

In the context of Three Waters reform, racism against both Nanaia Mahuta (as Minister for Local Government, and spokesperson on the issue) and Māori as a whole is common. In one comment, a disinformation producer based in Ōtautahi Christchurch divides Māori by signalling a Māori elite, and targets Nanaia Mahuta: "Councils including Christchurch will capitulate to whatever Nanaia Mahuta dreams up, and be backed by extremist elite Maori in the Maori party, who stand to become very very wealthy while non Maori cowards in government say nothing." Anti-Māori racism, and specifically targeting of wāhine Māori is the norm within the anti-vaccination, anti-mandate location of our study. This is expressed via language, imagery, and meme, and is violent and hateful in expression. There is little to no pushback to this dangerous speech targeting Māori, even from subscribers and producers who are Māori. This lack of pushback is enabled by the establishment of two groups of Māori, as above. In recent days, the proliferation of the specific racist term 'house n\*gger' has been updated to 'house hori', used to describe the group of Māori who are members of the so-called 'elite.' In operating this tool of divisiveness between members of a historically marginalised group, disinformation producers build both an audience for their messaging, and develop a group to be blamed and scapegoated.

### Information Disorders

Two critical disinformation discourses studied over the last two and a half years target Māori in ways that capitalise on genuine lived experiences of the state, systemic racism, and the slow violence<sup>20</sup> of colonisation. In these discourses, Māori are both promoted as producers of disinformation and sought after as subscribers to disinformation. Neither of these roles are safe – in that, much like the end of the Parliament protest, however Māori are enticed into conspiratorial thought, the historic scapegoating of Māori as 'traitors' or 'terrorists'<sup>21</sup> will leave Māori blamed for events, actions, and narratives that others have also participated in.

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<sup>18</sup> Mahmood Mamdani, "Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: A Political Perspective on Culture and Terrorism," *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (2002).

<sup>19</sup> Sue Abel, "Tūhoe and 'Terrorism' on Television News," in *Terror in Our Midst?: Searching for Terror in Aotearoa New Zealand*, ed. Danny Keenan (Wellington: Huia, 2008).; Alison McCulloch, "'Maori Terror Threat': The Dangers of the Post-9/11 Narrative," *Pacific Journalism Review* 14, no. 2 (2008): 212.

<sup>20</sup> Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Harvard University Press, 2011).

<sup>21</sup> Jackson, "Preface - the Constancy of Terror," 2.



### **Lived experiences of sexual violence – Māori as producers of mis- and disinformation**

In a particularly distressing and complex set of disinformation narratives, the lived experiences of people, particularly wahine Māori, related to family and sexual violence are cynically used to promote conspiratorial narratives related to QAnon. QAnon is a wide-ranging and baseless internet conspiracy with origins in the United States and global influence. QAnon subscribers believe that a collection of Satan-worshipping political leaders, celebrities, and billionaires rule the world – engaging in paedophilia, human trafficking, and the harvesting of blood from children.<sup>22</sup> This particular conspiratorial narrative links older narratives around satanic ritual abuse, antisemitic narratives of ‘blood libel’, and antisemitic dog-whistles based on a global conspiracy of elites. How this narrative is promoted to and by Māori has deep ties to lived experiences of abuse, including abuse in state care, as highlighted by the ongoing work of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in State and Church Care. International contexts for Indigenous peoples, including the policies of removal of children from their families in Canada and Australia, and subsequent neglect, abuse, and murder feed into the veracity of this set of narratives: for Indigenous peoples, the mass kidnapping of children and systemic sexual abuse are both lived realities.

A wahine Māori mis- or disinformation<sup>23</sup> producer had a successful tour of the country over late autumn/early winter 2022, holding meetings at which QAnon rhetoric and imagery was posted alongside specific Aotearoa New Zealand references to Oranga Tamariki, current legislation to remove the Office of the Children’s Commissioner, and practises of the removal of tamariki Māori by Oranga Tamariki which were investigated by a number of agencies. This narrative is powerful for those who have experienced the surveillance state and its agencies – from Oranga Tamariki to the Ministry of Social Development (and their earlier iterations), as well as the Ministry of Education and myriad healthcare providers. Whānau Māori are far more likely to have these experiences than non-Māori.

A recent example reveals the utility of promoting Māori as producers of disinformation by those mis- and disinformation ecologies who largely espouse anti-Māori and racist ideologies. A widely reported case in which a defence lawyer argued that a 12 year old child ‘consented’ to sexual intercourse (which is a legal defence in Aotearoa New Zealand as we do not have statutory rape provisions within our legal framework<sup>24</sup>), is widely picked up within the mis- and disinformation ecosystems studied. It is framed as evidence of widespread state-supported corruption and involvement in the global conspiracy described above. In this frame, the judge is a sexual predator in cahoots with others. The genuine and distressing sexual abuse of a child, currently before the courts, is cynically used to further distress and sensitise communities with lived experience of sexual harm not to target perpetrators but to incite action towards overthrowing the state. For the wider ‘freedom movement’ which is grounded in ideas which discriminate

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/aug/25/qanon-conspiracy-theory-explained-trump-what-is>

<sup>23</sup> The individual’s own belief in the veracity of what she promotes makes the categorisation of this as mis- or disinformation difficult, since it is clear that she has lived experience of abuse, including abuse within the state system.

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/aug/05/calls-for-changes-to-new-zealand-law-after-rape-claims-sex-with-12-year-old-consensual>

against Māori, involving Māori enables a convenient and culturally familiar scapegoat when or if violence takes place.

### **Vaccines, whakapapa, and dispossession – Māori as subscribers to mis- and disinformation**

Māori are also subscribers to mis- and disinformation ecologies. Such subscription must be viewed within the context of Māori experiences of colonisation and abuse by state power.<sup>25</sup> A key disinformation narrative we have observed and analysed for the last two and a half years, that of vaccine hesitancy or vaccine resistance/refusal, provides a clear example for the ways in which experiences of social and physical dispossession, systemic racism, and the surveillance state enable Māori participation in disinformation narratives.

These experiences, coupled with facile disinformation producers' manipulation of international narratives about corrupt elites into an Aotearoa New Zealand, and specifically Māori context, see preventative healthcare such as vaccination framed as tools of colonisation and dispossession. A wahine Māori disinformation producer associated with a large 'alternative news' cluster describes, at odds with widespread historical and contemporary understandings by Māori scholars of Mātauranga Māori, how in the past "there was no hapū or iwi, there was just Māori." This false construction (it is widely accepted that precolonial identity was whānau, hapū and iwi based, and that Māori as an identity marker is postcolonial) works in a number of ways. Firstly, it feeds a narrative frame that there are 'Māori elites', usually iwi based, who are, in this construction, 'bad' Māori, and that ordinary Māori, disconnected from hapū and iwi, are 'good' Māori. This trope has already been identified above. Secondly, this operates to further disconnect iwi Māori from their whānau, hapū and iwi which are critically, locations within which information is assessed, knowledge is exchanged, and decisions are made based on that information and knowledge. In this manner, a construction of divided Māori works for the wider anti-establishment 'freedom movement' to perpetuate conspiratorial thought and alienate Māori as subscribers to disinformation from accessing their traditional means of information evaluation, furthering information disorders.

Vaccine-related disinformation has and continues to target Māori as Māori, in that vaccine disinformation has focused on harm to whakapapa – with pregnancy, childbirth, pēpi and tamariki as key visual and emotive frames. Whānau Māori experience healthcare system racism,<sup>26</sup> and that racism is especially experienced by pregnant people and their loved ones. The leading cause of death for pregnant Māori in Aotearoa New Zealand is suicide. When vaccination is presented, as the Covid-19 vaccination has been within mis- and disinformation ecologies studied by TDP, as harmful for pregnant people, babies and young children, this works powerfully within communities who experience more detrimental health outcomes within our

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<sup>25</sup> Triponel, "Protesters Are Ignoring Tikanga – and That's Dangerous".

<sup>26</sup> Rebekah Graham and Bridgette Masters-Awatere, "Experiences of Māori of Aotearoa New Zealand's Public Health System: A Systematic Review of Two Decades of Published Qualitative Research," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health* 44, no. 3 (2020).

healthcare system. Vaccine hesitancy has increased, and more tamariki Māori are now behind on other childhood vaccinations than before.<sup>27</sup>

The intentional manipulation of whānau Māori decision-making about vaccination has pulled some Māori into a worldview that sees vaccination as part of a widespread global conspiracy which some call 'the great reset', which claims that once again global elites are seeking to drastically reduce the global population. For communities worldwide who have experience of eugenics, from forced sterilisation to forced abortion, which Māori are one of, this narrative resonates. The sad reality that those who are promoting this worldview are in fact themselves white supremacist or eugenicist is hidden from sight by the promotion of Māori voices for cynical ends. The Covid-19 vaccination roll-out, which focused on age-based bands, saw Māori, a younger population than other ethnic groups, exposed to disinformation about the specific vaccine and wider vaccine disinformation for longer, and at a time, the Delta lockdown, when Aotearoa New Zealand's disinformation communities grew at pace.<sup>28</sup> The impact of exposure to vaccine disinformation framed to describe threats to the wellbeing of particularly women and girls, a hallmark of dangerous speech<sup>29</sup> has entrenched vaccine resistance and refusal within communities that previously were vaccine neutral or hesitant. The potential for outbreaks of preventable childhood diseases alongside new threats such as Covid-19 and monkeypox are likely to have differential impacts for Māori, particularly tamariki Māori.

### **Māori responses to pandemic and infodemic**

For Māori, Covid-19 prompted action across various health, education, and social services to protect their communities.<sup>30</sup> These actions can be seen as exertions of rangatiratanga and of the continued work of Māori to protect people and communities from the worst effects of the pandemic and infodemic.

One example of the action taken by Māori to protect their people is the checkpoints set up during the Covid-19 lockdown in early 2020. As Luke Fitzmaurice and Maria Bargh explore, the checkpoints are examples of rangatiratanga.<sup>31</sup> As they point out, the success of the checkpoints highlight that Crown-Māori partnerships, such as those at the checkpoints can be Māori-led; that rangatiratanga has never stopped being expressed by Māori; that rangatiratanga is not vested solely in iwi but can be expressed by a variety of Māori political structures; and that Māori can draw on a wealth of skill and knowledge when needed.<sup>32</sup> The checkpoints show a way in which Māori responded in tikanga-led ways, collaborated with Crown agencies, and acted in ways that benefited both Māori and non-Māori.

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<sup>27</sup> Anna Howe, Emma Best, and Matthew Hobbs, "Nz Children Face a 'Perfect Storm' of Dangerous Diseases as Immunisation Rates Fall," *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/nz-children-face-a-perfect-storm-of-dangerous-diseases-as-immunisation-rates-fall-188157>, Accessed 11/8/22.

<sup>28</sup> Hannah, Hattotuwa, and Taylor, "Mis- and Disinformation in Aotearoa New Zealand from 17 August to 5 November 2021."

<sup>29</sup> The Dangerous Speech Project, "Dangerous Speech: A Practical Guide," (2021).

<sup>30</sup> Fitzmaurice and Bargh, 2.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

## Conclusion

The colonial context and its impact on the economic, cultural, and social lives of Māori is directly intertwined with differential experiences of both the Covid-19 pandemic and its resulting infodemic. Such experiences of both pandemic and infodemic are complex. Government communications did not reach Māori in the same way they did non-Māori, with one public health expert calling the daily 1pm briefings “an exercise in whiteness”. During various Covid-19 outbreaks, Māori were scapegoated, blamed, and mis-represented as vaccine hesitant. The practice of labelling and scapegoating slots into a long history of labelling Māori.

Anti-Māori sentiment proliferates throughout the mis- and disinformation ecologies studied by TDP, directed at Māori collectively as well as at high-profile Māori. Māori subscription to QAnon rhetoric must be appreciated within the context of lived experiences of abuse, including abuse in state care. Recognising intergenerational trauma and deep mistrust in the state is essential context for understanding such experiences of Māori during the infodemic. Similarly, vaccine hesitancy is also context-based and historically informed. It must be understood within histories of eugenics and state control of non-white bodies.

Despite these complex, historically grounded, and real experiences for Māori; iwi and hapū Māori have responded in a number of ways to protect the safety and wellbeing of their people. These efforts have not just protected Māori – checkpoints established by Māori kept non-Māori safe too.<sup>33</sup>

For decades, advocates and academics have recommended ways that the Crown can adequately work alongside Māori. Fitzmaurice and Bargh argue that the checkpoints show how the Crown can adapt itself to work alongside tikanga-based practices, and thus generate successful partnerships.<sup>34</sup> The case study of checkpoints set up by Māori early in the Covid-19 pandemic offer an opportunity to critically assess the way the Crown and Māori collaborate on issues of national significance. Public health expert Dr Rhys Jones, when critiquing the lack of partnership present in the Covid-19 briefings called on the Crown to include Māori at the decision-making table. He argued this would have positive effects on all of Aotearoa New Zealand – reducing inequalities.<sup>35</sup> Our analysis, which is informed by daily and grounded research, draws us to recommend the same. Bringing Māori leaders and communities to the table to lead, inform, and assist with both pandemic and infodemic responses in is the best way to ensure equity; and to mitigate against the effects of the colonial past and present.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>35</sup> Jones, "Covid-19 and Māori Health: 'The Daily 1pm Briefings Have Been an Exercise in Whiteness'".

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