

# Covid-19: Disinformation in Aotearoa has escalated since Delta outbreak

Conspiracy theories about Covid-19 have dramatically escalated since Delta arrived in New Zealand in late August, researchers have found.

The Disinformation Project, a collaboration between Te Pūnaha Matatini, the department of physics at the University of Auckland and the Centre for Science in Society, Te Herenga Waka, has been monitoring misinformation and disinformation about Covid-19 and the vaccine since February 2020.

This has included "the seed and spread of 'dangerous speech', hateful expression, and criminal behaviour".

Its latest report, monitoring the period from August 17 to November 5, shows "a trajectory of growth and spread that is increasing, widening, and deepening every week".

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## council

### \* Churches with links to the US being blamed for spreading Covid-19 misinformation

The volume, range of platforms and speed at which content was produced was significant and unprecedented, the researchers found.

"We note that it is by order of magnitude more than the content speed and spread over 2020, and even in the first half of 2021."

Researchers Kate Hannah, Sanjana Hattotuwa and Kayli Taylor analysed large volumes of data on a range of platforms from Telegram to Facebook and Instagram.

They concluded the disinformation "landscape" was "sophisticated, motivated, adaptive, resilient, increasingly violent and significantly volatile".

During the study period they saw a shift from vaccine hesitancy to vaccine resistance among the core groups monitored on Telegram.

They found the recent Covid-19 outbreak and the roll-out of the Pfizer vaccine were used as symbols to "push various far-Right and conservative views" from gun control, rural land rights and 1080, Māori sovereignty land rights, "free speech", abortion, euthanasia and cannabis law reform.

Mememes were used extensively, offering “strong in-group identity markers” and providing the “opportunity to make fun of out-group members – either the vaccinated or the state”.

“This separation into in-group and out-group cements difference and encourages division.

“This content ranges from humorous re-purposing of known memes to explicit sexist and racist content, imagery of death and execution, and historic imagery from the Holocaust, the Cold War, and other violent or extremist events.”

The researchers observed those most active in spreading mis- and disinformation, “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”.

Much of the content which framed the Covid-19 response as a fight between the individual and state had been repackaged from US and Australia sources.

In these, the state is described as tyrannical, treacherous, and forsaking international and/or national law.

Language used had become increasingly violent in the past 12 weeks.

A large group of anti-vaccination protestors gathered at Claudelands with signs to share their point of view on the vaccine on Saturday.

“Language specifically targeting individuals and minority groups has become more violent and graphic.”

Women associated with the Covid-19 response such as politicians, healthcare professionals or experts “are being targeted individually for harassment, including non-consensual video recordings”.

But they are also framed as “representative of transgressive women who are then targeted with highly misogynistic framing, including death and rape threats”.

Researchers observed the targeting of Māori by cis-male (those whose gender identity and sex assigned at birth is male) and Pākehā mis- and dis-information proponents.

An example of this was a “hīkoi” – a communal walk or march, typically for publicity or as a form of protest – by anti-vaccine conspiracy theorists on October 26 to 27, which used Māori motifs and symbols, such as the language of “hīkoi” and the United Tribes flag.

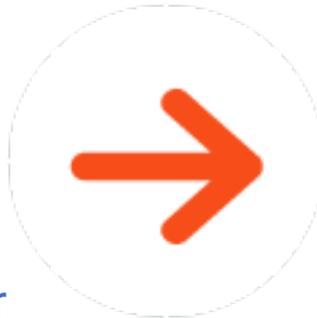
“This aligns with an increasing use of Māori voices, narratives, and imagery for agendas of white supremacist individuals and groups who make up one cluster we study.”

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