

Anti-media sentiment among protesters cause for concern - experts

[Tim Brown](#)

The anti-mandate protests in Wellington and around the country have also contained a strong anti-media sentiment with reporters abused and threatened.



The scene in the grounds of Parliament early on in the anti-vaccine mandates protest. Photo: RNZ

But one far-right activist has gone a step further and as part of a targeted attack on the media has published a graphic image of public executions of Nazi war criminals.

The disturbing image shows a dozen Nazi war criminals

being hanged following World War II.

It has become a popular meme with the online far-right ecosphere, where it is often accompanied by a caption: "Photograph of Hangings at Nuremberg, Germany. Members of the Media, who lied and misled the German People were executed, right along with Medical Doctors and Nurses who participated in medical experiments using living people as guinea pigs".

Disinformation Project lead Kate Hannah said the poster's intention was clear.

"It's incredibly unsubtle. Even if all they do is march outside... it is still incredibly disturbing, it is still incredibly upsetting to have their work [media and health workers] targeted in such a manner."

But in a twist of irony - considering the fake news such far-right groups claimed to despise - only one member of the media was actually executed following the war; high-ranking Nazi politician Julius Streicher, publisher of the far-right *Der Stürmer* tabloid.

And the photo in question was not even taken in Nuremberg - instead it shows executions in Kiev.

But, errors aside, Hannah said the far-right's seizing of ill-feeling against the media was cause for concern.

"There has been a concerted effort in these spaces over

the last 18 months to frame mainstream media as agents of the state, as the 'lying press' which is obviously from lügenpresse which is Nazi terminology for left-wing press. There's been some hideous language used around journalists - the use of the [word] 'presstitute' to describe female journalists.

"So this is very much an attempt to shift the place where people get their information from, from being say the mainstream media to fringe media outlets."

The ultimate goal of far-right activists was destabilising democracy, Hannah said.

Media commentator Gavin Ellis said there had been a concerted effort to target the foundations of democracy - including freedom of the press.



Gavin Ellis Photo: RNZ/Dru Faulkner

It was an orchestrated rather than an organised movement, Ellis said, with some of those pulling the strings doing so from a distance.

"Some of these people won't even be at the protest - their orchestration is behind the scenes. But they are intent on undermining the institutions of democratic government," he said.

Most protesters were not violent and were simply frustrated with the ongoing effects of the pandemic on their lives.

But they were being harnessed by far more nefarious actors, and their anger at the media was a case of shooting the messenger, he said.

"That's a large part of it - that reality flies in the face of what they stand for. So they forge their own alternate reality and anything that doesn't match that worldview that they might have is seen as not only wrong, but inherently malevolent - that the truth is something that must not be tolerated," Ellis said.

While the anger directed at the media was unprecedented in New Zealand, he did not believe it was based on any genuine criticism of the current health or quality of the industry.

However, he feared such tactics could have a chilling effect on the media and journalists, and reporters must continue to do their work in the face of such intimidation.



Parliament Protest Photo: RNZ / Angus Dreaver

The other aspect of utilising such imagery was how offensive it was to victims of Nazi persecution.

Holocaust Centre of New Zealand chair Deborah Hart said she was disgusted by the poster.

There was no comparison of the rollout of a potentially life-saving vaccine by the New Zealand government to the industrial murder of six millions Jews and millions of others by the Nazis, Hart said.

"The Nuremberg trials where military tribunals after World War II for senior Nazis who participated in the Holocaust. To compare that to the vaccine mandates is ridiculous. The intention of these two things was different; the scale was different; the policies were different; and the outcomes were profoundly different."

It is also worth noting that where possible, Hitler withheld vaccines from populations the Nazis persecuted.

Political extremism researcher outlines concerns

Auckland University senior lecturer Doctor Chris Wilson - who researches political extremism - told *Morning Report* it was important not to exaggerate how involved far right groups were.

"I think they would like to be involved and they're trying to be involved online, but to my mind, certainly in terms of the protesters who seem to be on the ground in Wellington, they are not taking much of a leadership role.

"I've certainly seen a few anti-Semitic references, and certainly there's a lot of threats of violence which is very concerning, but that's not confined to the far right.

"Of course, threats of violence against politicians and media have been rising, particularly within this conservative movement for several years, driven partly ... by [Donald] Trump using intimidation against political opponents in the media.

"So that's been rising for about five years. But to my mind, it's indicative of deeper trends in society and because of the rhetoric of social media, online rhetoric, and the ability to say things to shock, the incentive to use more extreme language, we've seen quite a bit of a spillover of that online

rhetoric into the real world.

"To go even deeper, I think it's been rising for about 10 years and there is a growing distrust of the elite, rising populism and what we refer to as democratic backsliding, a decline of faith in democratic institutions and politicians and democracy as a political system.

"So it represents deeper trends rather than just short term [views] against politicians and media."

Wilson was concerned for several reasons.

"In terms of the threats, it's worrying because threats are performative - their threats are performative, so they're showing off, if you like.

"They represent the norms of a social movement, so they represent the sum of parts of what the movement is about.

"But they're also strategic in a sense. They are intended to intimidate an opponent into taking a certain action.

"The problem, of course, is that if that opponent doesn't take that action i.e. remove mandates, then they can escalate to something more active, if you like - assaults and other violent actions.

"I would suggest that the people who are making these threats are probably not the greatest threat. It's people who are being provoked by them, people who are potentially isolated, maybe not even members of the movement, who

are watching it online."

The spread of protesters' content online was also of concern, Wilson said - particularly the violent language used.

"The longer this goes on, the more chance there is also more of a political level of populism coming involved - politicians starting to manipulate and use these sentiments and then you start to get a social movement [with] grassroots online actors plus the political level.

"Then you've got a quite a serious problem."

While some elements had been imported - including populism - there were also local aspects, Wilson said.

"One of the findings of social movement researchers is that many people will support a movement regardless of whether they have had material impact - so whether they've lost their jobs and so on, but the people who act are generally the people who have actually had material impacts.

"That's why you seem to see in a lot of the interviews, that people have actually lost their jobs or know people that have lost their jobs.

"So the longer this goes on ... there is the danger that this movement does sustain, perhaps grow."

He did not see any naiveté among the police or others

dealing with the situation.

"When it comes to the police I think they've got a very tricky job because they've got a few decisions. One of them is how do they use arrests? Do they use repression? If they use some element of repression, then potentially it can disperse the protesters ... but more likely I would suggest is that it would escalate it.

"So they do have a very difficult job and they've got very few people who they can actually negotiate with and then know that any agreement they reach with that individual is actually going to be followed by all the other factions within the protest.

"It's not so much naiveté, but more of an incredibly difficult job, I think."