

Followed, threatened and abused — being a Māori advocate in the pandemic

As tensions, anger and misinformation rose during the Covid-19 pandemic, so too did the hate directed at Māori speaking up for their communities. In this story, three leaders share their experiences of the abuse, threats, and vitriol sent their way, despite knowing it could expose them to further abuse. Katie Doyle reports.

In December last year, Dr Rawiri Taonui was followed home.

He had just finished some Christmas shopping and was turning into his no-exit street when a four-wheel-drive sped up behind him.

As he stopped to check his letterbox, the pursuing car pulled a U-turn.

Then came a voice.

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"It's good to know where you live, you black b.....d."

After a brief exchange he noted down part of the car's licence plate and later tracked the person down, "just to let them know that we know who they are".

It's just one of the many forms of abuse and threats he has received throughout the pandemic.

CHRIS SKELTON/Stuff

Dr Rawiri Taonui tracked Māori vaccinations rates, cases and deaths across the course of the pandemic

Covid, Māori and hate

Early in the Covid-19 outbreak, Taonui realised official figures weren't telling the whole story, particularly when it came to Māori.

He started publishing figures on Māori media outlets and writing pieces for mainstream media companies.

Along the way, Taonui picked up work advising the [Iwi Chairs Forum](#), the Kīngitanga, and community groups.

After spending 25 years writing for newspapers, Taonui was no stranger to abusive and racist mail.

"With Covid, it has changed in nature ... it's a little bit more organised."

One of the more sinister threats Taonui had to deal with came in the form of a list naming people set to be tried and potentially executed in Nuremberg-style proceedings.

He found himself at number 13 and used humour to respond.

"So I responded by saying that it was my goal to break into the top 10, and about two weeks later I was dropped down to 20, so I followed that with a comment of disappointment, but you know, with the added context that at least I was off the dreaded 13."

Taonui wasn't as shocked by the talk of Nuremberg compared with other people he knew, viewing it as an extension of the racism he had experienced throughout his life and career.

"There are surprises in terms of how organised it is ... like the hate is more intense, it's more personalised, it's more directly threatening ..."

He now follows good social media protocols and has monitoring agreements with some sites he writes for.

But last year, online threats were made against members of Taonui's family. He contacted the authorities and the threats were later removed.

Taonui has arrangements with sites producing Covid-19 information in case there is a campaign of hate, and he reports serious threats.

His family now have a security and escape plan in place in case someone threatening knocks on the door.

Protecting the north

Guarding the border of Te Tai Tokerau, Rueben Taipari (Ngāpuhi-nui-tonu) found much of the anger directed at him came from the people he was trying to protect.

Trauma and government mistrust had become mixed with vaccination fear and conspiracy theories.

As someone who would usually lead protests and hīkoi, Taipari said people were devastated he didn't join their ranks to fight against the Covid measures because they were a government initiative.

"This is where I think the difference was. We made our decision based on research, not on politics," he said.

Rueben Taipari was the regional co-ordinator of Tai Tokerau Border Control during the pandemic.

Supplied

Rueben Taipari was the regional co-ordinator of Tai Tokerau Border Control during the pandemic.

Years of activism around kaupapa like food sovereignty had seen Taipari build relationships with people from all over the world in the medical field.

He said their unanimous view was that indigenous people needed to take Covid seriously and vaccinate to protect themselves.

Despite his belief that protecting the north was the right thing to do, the abuse still hurt.

"A lot of these people who were directing their hate were great friends of mine, people that I admire, people that I have done occupations with and activism with in the past," he said.

"So there was that personal element ... yeah it hurt, personally."

He also had white supremacist hate to deal with.

Labelling them "chumps", he said they spread harmful messages using politically charged rhetoric from places like the United States.

Tikanga helped get him through.

"The definition of tikanga is to do the right thing, at the right time, for the right reason. So we felt that we were doing the right thing, for the right reason and the time to do it was now, not to wait until we were proven right or wait until it was easy to do, but to do it when it needed to be done."

Losing the art of conversation

Dr Huhana Hickey (Ngāti Tāhinga, Whakatōhea) is accustomed to receiving abusive mail.

During the Covid-19 pandemic she worked tirelessly to ensure the voices of the Aotearoa disabled community were heard, and before that she was a prominent voice in the euthanasia debate.

The hate directed at Hickey has ranged massively in that time.

Some people have resorted to calling her names like "idiot" and "moron".

Others have simply encouraged her to die.

"It's funny, because the euthanasia debate was right at the beginning of Covid when we did the referendum, but we'd been fighting for a couple of

years before that to prepare people," she said.

"And then we also had the Trumpism that was going on and suddenly there was this big explosion of 'the media are evil, nobody tells the truth, academics should be hung' and all of a sudden this anti-intellectualism, this anti-news thing came in, and it changed the whole way people debated."

Dr Huhana Hickey was labelled an idiot and told she should die.

RYAN ANDERSON/Stuff

Dr Huhana Hickey was labelled an idiot and told she should die.

Radicalisation and poverty

It is the impact of this breakdown on everyday people which worries Hickey.

"Covid has had a huge impact, particularly on the poorest and the most marginalised," she said.

"To me, those are the ones we should be capturing because radicalisation comes with poverty. Radicalisation comes with excluding people."

But conversation alone won't fix this. Poverty has to be addressed at its core, she believes.

"We must look after our poorest and most marginalised people in order to bring everyone up. We don't bring them up by leaving them to languish when everyone is getting support and everything else," said Hickey.

Sustainable employment opportunities could be one way to do that.

"When I left school at 15, I could be told at that time I would have a job until I was retiring. That changed 20 years later and has never come back," she said.

"So people are now doing two jobs, five jobs, low wages, non wages, contracts, and our system can't keep up."

The spread of hate

Kate Hannah, who is the project leader for the [Disinformation Project](#), said racist hate directed at Māori started to rise in April/May 2021.

She said a number of high-profile content creators aligned with the disinformation space began to promote quite violent anti-Māori racism, targeted at those working to ensure Māori had access to good information about Covid-19 and the vaccine.

Kate Hannah has been tracking disinformation throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.

RYAN ANDERSON/Stuff

Kate Hannah has been tracking disinformation throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.

At the same time, Hannah said discourse in the mainstream space was starting to focus on inequities in the vaccine rollout, and the battle between public health measures and people wanting to live their lives as normal.

“Through the really conscious effort of academics and experts to really highlight that this was going to have an unequal impact on Māori and Pacific people in Aotearoa, there started to be like a backlash,” she said.

“Conversations about colonisation or the structural racism got turned into conversations about people’s own individual choices as if they don’t happen in a context.”

Sadness

For Taonui, the hate directed at him comes with a tinge of sadness.

“Their sense of insecurity and their fear about Covid, it’s quite sad that it reduces them to such poor behaviour,” he said.

“Because at the end of the day it undermines their own dignity, and it’s like they’re lost and overwhelmed with misinformation and so frustrated and don’t understand what’s going on.

“The only reaction they have is to lash out at you, or swear at you, or abuse you, or threaten, and things like that.”

It's why he often combats the abuse with humour, rather than responding in the same way.

"Because the person on the other side, they're actually suffering as victims of their own hate. It's really important to rise above that."

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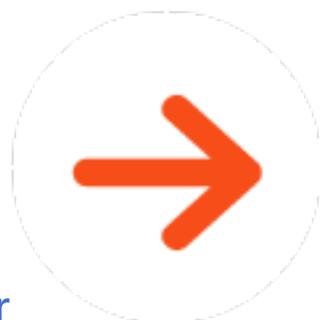
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