

'It's a hellscape': The age of misinformation is here - can government close the rabbit hole?

Misinformation can kill, and almost two years since Covid-19 hit our shores it's a national security issue with no easy solution. How is it impacting how we treat each other, and society at large? Michelle Duff reports.

Remember laughing at the United States? Even a year ago, it seemed implausible that people in Aotearoa would seriously believe the world is controlled by a cabal of Satan-worshipping paedophiles running a global sex-trafficking ring.

Yet in government documents grappling with how to contain the infodemic, this outlandish theory from far-right [conspiracy group QAnon](#) was cited as among the misinformation that poses a significant threat to our way of life.

"Anti-mask and anti-lockdown narratives, often couched in broad human rights and basic freedoms terms (and often grounded in narratives linked to the US constitution) [have] found fertile ground amongst followers of a few influencers, political parties and some church congregations," a Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet briefing reads.

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It goes on to outline how so far, the country's relatively high level of trust in the state and the media has largely inoculated the public from widespread belief of false or misleading information. We aren't yet in the same post-truth environment as the United States, the United Kingdom or even Australia.

But that was pre-Auckland lockdown. Now, says Sanjana Hattotuwa, , of the University of Auckland Te Pūnaha Matatini's The Disinformation Project, we are there.

"I can't stress this enough. The social fabric of New Zealand is being tested and threatened daily, in ways that are historically unprecedented," Hattotuwa says.

"You have here, and for the first time with this voracity and increasing violence, an issue that has been brewing in other parts of the world. It is here, and it is a hellscape."

Covid-19 conspiracy theories and mis- and disinformation have increased exponentially since August 17, when Auckland went into [level 4 lockdown](#). The Government identified it as a national security threat before this, with

NZSIS Director-General Rebecca Kitteridge using a [speech in June](#) to raise the radicalising power of disinformation and its increasing potential for offline violence.

By now, everyone knows someone who has fallen down the rabbit hole. No-one seems immune. Journalist and former *Franklin County News* editor Rex Warwood was [spreading anti-Covid misinformation on his Facebook page](#) shortly before dying from the illness last week.

The vast majority of us are vaccinated, trust what Dr Ashley Bloomfield is telling us, and don't think Covid is a hoax or the vaccine is making us magnetic. Many of the vaccine-hesitant do not believe in vast conspiracy theories.

But, once ensconced in the disinformation ecosystem of closed Facebook groups or shadow social media apps like Telegram, where sense and fact-checking is almost non-existent, reality as we know it can cease to exist. Vaccine mandates, the traffic light system, and opening of the [vaccination to young children](#), have fuelled and accelerated anger.

The rage is often vitriolic, misogynistic, and racist. It's rooted in intolerance, but also distrust and fear and a sense of righteousness, which makes addressing it complex.

In [research by the Classification Office earlier this year](#), more than half of respondents said government was best placed to deal with this. But *Stuff* can reveal the main question it has been grappling with for the past several

months is: how?

Ella Bates Hermans/Stuff

Misinformation and disinformation in New Zealand have ramped up to such an extent they are considered a national security threat.

A serious threat to national security

Documents viewed by *Stuff* show the Government is treating the risks posed by the infodemic to both individuals and society as a "significant national security issue". That's in relation to the danger of radicalisation and extremism leading to terrorist attacks, but also the health and safety of people in general and the way we relate to each other and live our lives.

Yet in trying to address it, the Government is in a difficult place. It is aware any attempts to counter disinformation could feed into conspiracy narratives of state control. This is challenging. Unlike child sexual exploitation or terrorist extremist content, misinformation often existed in a grey area where it was legal (but could still cause untold harm.)

It is also worrying on a personal and societal level, it says.

"This confusion over what is true could not only lead individuals to make misinformed choices in their own lives, it can also have significant issues for national security," it states.

This includes the politicisation of scientific facts to

undermine the Covid-19 response, creating and amplifying social divisions, challenging national values, and inciting violence.

Racist, Treaty of Waitangi-based and gendered narratives were of real concern, it said. "Online spaces are being systemically weaponised against women leaders, with politically motivated gendered stereotypes and personal attacks posing a serious threat to women's equal political participation."

It has pulled together a group of 11 government agencies including the DPMC, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Justice, the Department of Internal Affairs, CERT NZ and the police to work on a strategic plan to address disinformation and its harms.

It will report to a group of ministers. But in the briefing documents, there's little detail on policies that might go towards stemming the infodemic. The Department of Internal Affairs [media content regulation review](#) is discussed. Long-term moves could include building resistance to disinformation and critical thinking teaching into the school curriculum, to prevent later radicalisation.

But any move had to be considered within the context of whether it would make matters worse. It was better to work with other independent groups more widely to tackle misinformation, rather than have it come from a single government entity, the documents state.

In a way, this is logical. As [Dylan Reeve wrote in *The Spinoff*](#), a comment by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, where she said the Government was the “single source of truth”, has since been used by various groups to allege mind control.

But The Workshop’s Jess Berentson-Shaw says the Government is being too risk-averse. “It’s great they are proposing a strategy and framework. Less great is the focus on civil society to do the work.

“That’s very much the job, I think, of people in government. They are there to create robust systems for our wellbeing, and one of them is building societies and communities that are resistant to false information.”

If the pandemic hadn’t revealed this, it would have been something else, she says. “It could be some other large-scale collective challenge, climate change for example, that pushed us into this really difficult space.

“There’s been a slow uptake in understanding how people in government develop and deliver information, and that’s a critical skill that’s missing. They need good public education that’s not just this neutral presentation of facts, and any shift from that approach is seen as risky now.”

Research shows trust in government increases when people see themselves as part of it. “They should be concerned about how we rebuild some trust, and don’t let any slip.”

In a statement, DPMC national security group deputy chief executive Tony Lynch said the strategy for mis- and disinformation would be developed next year. Teams within DPMC and the Ministry of Health were actively monitoring disinformation now, along with CERT NZ and Te Pūnaha Matatini, which was informing [Covid-19 messaging](#).

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Overlapping misinformation from a few sources

CERT NZ is the government agency responsible for receiving and collating reports of mis- and disinformation related to Covid-19. It has received more than 1500 reports this year, including pamphlets, posters, letters, videos, websites, emails and social media.

In an analysis produced in August of the 860 reports made in the first half of the year, obtained by *Stuff* under the Official Information Act, it found more than 80 per cent of the misinformation produced in New Zealand came from the same related sources.

Voices for Freedom, failed political party Advance NZ and an organisation called *The Real News* were identified as the main proponents of false information, and were linked through individuals associated with them and the content

and themes they pushed.

Thirteen themes were identified, which rose and subsided over time, often in alignment with what is being circulated internationally.

Suspicion of the Covid-19 vaccine remained the most prominent. The items with the most reports were flyers from Voices for Freedom, of which millions have been distributed around New Zealand, with titles like: "Covid Vaccine Facts Reference List; Are You Fed Up With Covid Yet?," and, "What's All The Fuss About Masks?"

Events like the beginning of Covid-19 vaccination, the Auckland lockdown, and the [travel bubble with Australia](#) brought with them new waves of misinformation.

This relatively small number of people responsible for spreading falsehoods is similar to patterns identified overseas. In [a recent report from the Center for Countering Digital Harm](#), 12 individuals in the United States were identified as responsible for 65 per cent of all online anti-vaccine content.

But trying to shut down these groups is like spraying weeds. Voices For Freedom, kicked off Facebook, encouraged followers to join them on Telegram. In this unregulated space, more than 158,000 New Zealanders are [soaking up what's served to them daily and nightly](#).

Hattotuwa says even if the number of Covid disinformation

consumers and spreaders is relatively small, it will infiltrate the way mainstream New Zealand thinks and acts.

“It is definitely going to impact the way of life here. How you treat each other, how you see each other, how we talk to each other online or how you treat someone with a divergent opinion or background.

“It will move, and it might have already moved, from a Covid-19 problem to striking at the heart of the democratic process, and impacting elections. The level of hostility and violence, of openly instigating harm against journalists, politicians, experts talking about the vaccine, this is all new.”

He says the Government has been slow to act, and needs to move to improve social cohesion and limit polarisation now. The proposals in the [Royal Commission of Inquiry into the mosque terror attacks](#) contain a blueprint for how to do this.

“The applicable laws, frameworks and processes of dealing with all-of-government problems are not fit for purpose, and in a way this is moving faster and with more veracity and complexity than the Government probably can handle,” he says.

“It’s a challenge that’s so complicated because in a country like Aotearoa, misinformation feeds off historical inequities, gendered discrimination, and communal grievances, and new things like Covid-19 threads into that like a garment.”

But anarchy is not destiny, he says. "What happens henceforth will be determined by how we deal with people who don't want to be vaccinated, how we deal with the planned protests, aggression, tension, and anxiety. It's already having an impact, and whether it expands and entrenches remains to be seen."

There are still some protective factors. Auckland University of Technology senior lecturer and co-director of its centre for Journalism, Media and Democracy (JMAD) Dr Merja Myllylahti says trust in the news media is generally higher in New Zealand than abroad. This is still relatively low, with less than half of New Zealanders (48 per cent) trusting the news media. The [most recent JMAD survey](#) found it had dropped by five percentage points since 2020, and is expected to erode further. This should be a concern for everyone, she says.

"It's verified information, it has proper sources which are normally named, it's professionally produced, it's been checked. Key news values are accuracy and transparency – we know where claims come from.

"How do people participate in processes if they're misinformed? If they have wrong information about party politics, if it's biased and not factual, of course it has a massive impact on democracy. It doesn't help them to act as citizens in a society."

People in the survey said they did want accurate

information. "They have enough opinions, they just want facts and data they can trust," Myllylahti said.

An opportunity for change

Society works because people accept rules and regulations, that those at the top know what they are doing and are generally telling the truth and acting in our best interests. This is part of the "social contract" that organises our lives.

Beijing Normal University conspiracy theory researcher, New Zealander M R X Dentith, says this is one of the things conspiracy theories threaten. Incidents like the [anti-lockdown traffic protests](#) are a group of people going out of their way to disrupt an agreed way of life because they believe it's inherently wrong or corrupt. "If you don't believe there are a trusted set of people doing the mahi at the top of society, and you start doubting the experts, then you start doubting other rules."

Dentith doesn't think tendencies to believe in these ideas are new, simply that we can now see it on a larger scale. And it's clear certain places, for example faith-based community Destiny Church, become hubs for bad ideas and information.

"It might be the case that this has always been a feature of our society, but it's curious we tolerated this before the pandemic. Maybe we need to look at how society is

structured to allow these communities to exist.”

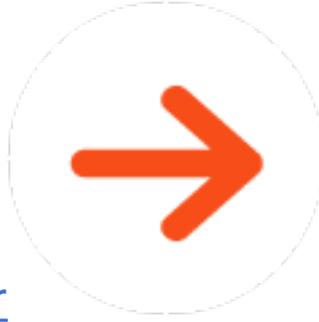
Dentith thinks that on the whole, New Zealand has done a much better job than other countries in maintaining trust, particularly in the pandemic’s early days. “It was the best health communication response anywhere in the Western world, and there was a much lesser chance for disinformation to enter the public discourse. That's the kind of thing we need.”

Please take a moment to show your support for the enormous amount of work by our journalists in these unprecedented past 12 months. In 2021 Stuff published nearly 5000 articles on Covid-19.

Many of us were also working from home, juggling life and uncertainty, while still delivering Aotearoa's fastest and most comprehensive Covid reporting.

You probably didn't read every one of the thousands of words we wrote, but even if you only read the odd hundred, we hope they left you better informed, less anxious and ready for the next step in our collective pandemic journey.

We also hope you'll consider contributing to Stuff, to support the journalists continuing to cover Covid in 2022.



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