

Inaction on NZ 'Nuremberg' site sparks calls for overhaul of system 'not fit for purpose'

[By Toby Manhire](#) Editor-at-large



The organisation responsible for the .nz domain says it has not been instructed by police to remove a site ranking candidates for trial and execution over their role in the pandemic – and that it doesn't meet the 'very high threshold' for a provisional suspension.

This article includes examples of explicit, abusive and threatening language.

A “Nuremberg”-styled website that lists, ranks and depicts New Zealand politicians, academics, scientists and journalists and promises “judgement day is here” has gone offline for extended periods across the last fortnight and been targeted by hacktivists. Across the six months since it went live with a .nz address, however, the site has been left untroubled by New Zealand regulatory and enforcement agencies, a lack of action that, experts say, exposes shortcomings in the apparatus for responding to dangerous online activity.

The Domain Name Commission, which oversees regulation and registration for the .nz country code top level domain, told the Spinoff it has not moved to suspend the site, which also facilitates the mass dispatch of emails from “Nuremberg” addresses to schools and vaccination providers, because it has received no instruction from the police or other authoritative body to do so. The DNC has since the Christchurch terror attacks had the power to temporarily suspend a site, but has not done so in this case because it does not meet the “very high threshold”.

On the site, users are encouraged to add to the “accused list” individuals involved in the Covid response and the vaccination programme. They can then be up-voted and down-voted by other visitors. In its name, theme and imagery, the site is premised on the post-WWII Nuremberg trials of Nazi war criminals, which resulted in 10 executions by hanging. “Nuremberg” and “Nuremberg 2.0” have for many years been [stock tropes of the far-right](#). In the last

two years they have been adopted by more extreme parts of the conspiracy-laced anti-lockdown, anti-vaccine and “plandemic” rhetoric around the world. “Nuremberg” placards have been a [regular sight](#) at New Zealand anti-mandate protests, forming part of a wider [appropriation of Holocaust-linked images](#), together with [baseless](#) claims that the New Zealand vaccination programme breaches the Nuremberg code, a set of principles for medical research that emerged out of the trials.

A click-counter on the Nuremberg site, which first appeared in October last year, suggests it has clocked up more than 750,000 page views. The hundreds of comments on the site include repeated falsehoods, disinformation, conspiracy theories and demands for senior politicians to face death by hanging.

It is not the only example of a site using the .nz top-level domain that has come under the spotlight. Another .nz site, for example, promulgates countless conspiracy theories from faked moon landings to QAnon and names numerous current and former senior New Zealand politicians on a list of “traitors” who are declared guilty of “genocide”, illustrated with an image of a grim reaper holding a noose. The sites retain their .nz status despite a pledge by the DNC, posted on its [Covid-19 Information Hub](#) in September last year, that reads: “At the Domain Name Commission, we’re doing everything we can to keep .nz fair and safe for everyone during the global pandemic.”

'There is a very high threshold'

In February, Internet NZ – of which the Domain Name Commission is a part – confirmed it had referred the site to the police, adding: "The Domain Name Commissioner can suspend the domain name if instructed to do so by authorities." On Friday February 25, the site went offline, but the DNC told The Spinoff it had not suspended it, because it had received no instruction to do so. The site returned on Thursday. On Saturday, it disappeared again, but not because of any state-sanctioned intervention. The homepage had been replaced with the words: "website hacked by anonymous, do not come back". The site briefly returned but yesterday afternoon it was hacked again; for a couple of hours it rickrolled visitors, redirecting them to Rick Astley's 'Never Gonna Give You Up'.

The message on the Nuremberg themed .nz site on Saturday.

The domain name commissioner, Brent Carey, said that he was unable to comment on any investigations under way. Asked, however, whether any authoritative body – such as the police, courts or Internal Affairs – had instructed the DNC to suspend any .nz site in the last six months, Carey said they had not.

A spokesperson for the police confirmed it had received a "report relating to this website and concerns about its content that is publicly accessible". Police were "looking into this" and "working with a number of agencies in

relation to this website and similar matters". Last week police announced an [expansion](#) of its Open Source Intelligence team, which scans the internet for potential security threats.

Of the DNC's power to temporarily suspend a URL, Carey said: "There is a very high threshold for DNC to take action in 'emergency or exceptional circumstances (for example during a terrorist attack, cyber security attack, or force majeure event)', and the action itself is a temporary measure to be used in urgent circumstances. If this emergency or exceptional circumstance occurs, the DNC will also reasonably consider whether that use of the .nz domain name space is causing, or may cause, irreparable harm to any person or to the operation or reputation of the .nz domain space."

Later this year a new set of principles will kick in to guide the DNC's decision making. The third of five principles reads: ".nz should serve and benefit New Zealand and reflect and be responsive to our diverse social, cultural and ethnic environment." Carey said even if those principles were already in place, his decision would not have been different. Carey, who has been appointed CEO of NetSafe, a role he begins next month, stressed that the DNC encourages the reporting of material, especially that which includes "death threat content and direct calls to take specified violent action". Such content "should be reported to the police in the first instance", he said.

'I'm not the executioner'

The chief censor, David Shanks, told the Spinoff that the Classification Office had not received any complaints about this site. "We have been speaking with other agencies, who have been receiving complaints, and we are aware of the very serious concerns about it," he said. "The bar for an objectionable (banned) publication is necessarily very high, and our 1993 legislation is not well suited to responding to the kind of harms presented by websites of this kind. We are committed to working with other regulatory authorities to determine what we can do with the tools available."

The Nuremberg site is registered to a Christchurch database engineer and father of two who attended the occupation at parliament grounds in February after crossing Cook Strait in a fishing boat. In a podcast recorded during the occupation he said of his project: "I'm not the executioner, I'm not the judge, I see myself as more like the messenger." On another podcast he said: "It's not about 'let's go and hang someone'", adding: "I think the judicial system, we have that in New Zealand, and they have a role to play in this whole thing." His site was to enable people to "say who you think should be on the Nuremberg trials, who needs to stand to be accountable for these atrocities", he said.

Sean Lyons, chief technology officer for NetSafe, said

individuals who had been targeted on a forum such as the Nuremberg-themed site could make a complaint through Netsafe, but the remit of the Harmful Digital Communications Act expressly focused on “content”, rather than a website as a whole. “If somebody is seeing that content and feels it is aimed at them and they are experiencing emotional distress as a result of it, then there may well be actions within the legislation or a process of mediation and negotiation whereby that content can be removed. That’s a big part of what NetSafe does, broadly, across a range of platforms and content types,” he said.

If an affected individual were to report such content to Netsafe, said Lyons, “We can make an assessment and then assist people if they want to take action. There are civil sanctions through the District Court. We can put together our assessment in documentation form to take to the court and seek action. The District Court has powers for ordering removal, ordering a right of reply, putting an apology in place.”

On the broader question of online toxicity springing out of the Covid response, Lyons said: “Definitely there is a change. What we’re really seeing is a polarisation in conversations between individuals and a much faster rise to what would potentially be harmful conversations between individuals.”

Some of the signs, complete with noose imagery, brandished at NZ protests.

'Methods of harassment are more advanced, persistent and intentionally cruel'

The response to the Nuremberg-themed site and other similar examples with .nz addresses were a test of the regulatory and enforcement framework, said Kate Hannah, who leads the The Disinformation Project for Te Pūnaha Matatini. After the 2019 terrorist attack in Christchurch, "there were a number of regulatory updates and responses to think about how the system would respond to imminent threats or threats to individuals on a range of platforms and online spaces", she said. "What we've seen now with this and other websites with the .nz suffix is in a way a test case for the efficiency and efficacy of those changes that were made at speed in 2019 and 2020. Since then, the environment has significantly changed in terms of the tenor and the volume of information disorders in Aotearoa."

While the site might find a home on another high-level domain address were it to be booted off .nz, the authority conferred by that suffix mattered, she said. "To see it at a .nz level does give the content credence for some people."

Hannah commended signs that the various agencies are looking to coordinate in response to this and related challenges. "Everyone is showing up and being willing but there is a threat landscape that is just different to that for which these new provisions were designed ... There is not an unwillingness to act but a kind of paralysis, which

hopefully will shift," she said. "The threat is not absolutely immediate but it is a clear and present danger and sits alongside a broader information ecosystem wherein this language around death threats and execution, which is used as a weapon of fear and a weapon of control, is becoming normalised."

She urged organisations involved to speak up, and "communicate with the public, who are concerned about the proliferation of this material – to come out and say publicly: we've seen this, we're not sure how we can deal with this, but we are trying ... Waiting until there's a resolution leaves people who are feeling scared or victimised in the dark. It leaves them feeling nothing is being done."

Sanjana Hattotuwa, a Disinformation Project analyst, said the lack of action raised "concerns that Aotearoa's institutional responses aren't fit for purpose". It beggared belief that such a site was permitted to remain unbothered by authorities, he said. "What 'threshold' needs to be crossed, in light of explicit content that seeks to have public trials with a view to executing through public hanging the prime minister, senior policymakers in government and other individuals less protected from civil society, including those who have been central to the pandemic response?"

Rangi Kemara, an activist and cybersecurity expert who monitors New Zealand conspiracy theory circles online, said the episode revealed the need for a rethink of the

regulatory apparatus. "The online world is rapidly changing and the methods of harassment are now more advanced, persistent and intentionally cruel, in this instance threatening politicians, academics, Māori, journalists and others with execution," he said.

"These organisations that supervise aspects of the local internet like the Domain Name Commission and others need to figure out a way of providing real agency for victims of these modified methods of extreme harassment."

The last week has seen a flurry of stories that illustrate the growth in online abuse, hostility, harassment and intimidation – frequently misogynistic in nature and usually directed at women. A serial abuser of Christchurch councillor Sara Templeton and other women politicians was [revealed](#) to be a member of the Young Nats after she decided to go public. Subsequent [reporting](#) illustrated just how widespread and virulent such attacks are across the country. A damning ruling by the Human Rights Tribunal [identified](#) how NetSafe had failed a group of three women who were harassed and stalked online. On Tuesday, a man who has repeatedly posted online messages calling for the execution of senior politicians and others was [arrested](#) on charges of obstruction after police carried out a search warrant in Te Puke.

Update: See the response from Vocus, network host for the site, [here](#).

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