

Coronavirus: '100-fold increase' in Kiwis following disinformation groups online - study

[Dan Satherley](#)

Watch: COVID-19 disinformation has dramatically increased since Delta arrived in New Zealand in August.

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There has been a terrifying rise in the amount of disinformation about COVID-19 and vaccines being spread online in New Zealand social media channels, according to a new report.

And much of it is being used to funnel victims towards extreme ideologies such as white supremacy and QAnon.

"What we found from the 17th of August, from the beginning of level 4... has been quite amazing," lead author Kate Hannah, leader of Te Pūnaha Matatini's Disinformation Project, said on Tuesday.

"The level has just gone up and up and up. We've had 100-fold increase in followers on various Facebook pages and groups we've been looking at over a year."

Her report, *Mis- and disinformation in Aotearoa New*

Zealand from 17 August to 5 November 2021, comes the same day anti-lockdown activists and conspiracy theorists said they'd be descending on Parliament - some with violent intent, going by posts made on Telegram, [prompting police to lock down the surrounding area](#).

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Telegram is an app that's become the go-to for homegrown extremists in the last few months thanks to its lack of oversight and rules. In the past 12 weeks there's been an "immense flood" of extreme content, the report found, overflowing from Telegram onto mainstream channels like Facebook and Instagram, including "absolutely repellent levels of misogyny" targeted at female politicians, researchers and journalists, as well as Nazi imagery and shocking content like photographs of hangings.

Dr Hannah said researchers at the Disinformation Project started noticing a "closer link between COVID-19 disinformation and wider sets of fringe beliefs" during last year's August outbreak of COVID-19, which forced the election to be delayed.

There was a "sharp increase in the popularity and intensity of COVID-19-specific disinformation and other forms of 'dangerous speech' and disinformation, related to far-right ideologies" however, when the Delta outbreak began. 'Dangerous speech' is defined as speech which can "increase the risk that its audience will condone or

participate in violence against members of another group".



Kate Hannah. Photo credit: Victoria University of Wellington

Between August 2020 and this outbreak, the vaccines arrived - which spreaders of false information and supporters of extremist ideologies have used as a "Trojan horse" to turn vaccine "hesitancy and uncertainty" into "active resistance and refusal", the report says, with a goal of "entrenchment of far-right ideologies in Aotearoa New Zealand".

"The most recent COVID-19 outbreak and the vaccination are highly visible, potent symbols used to push various far-right and conservative ideologies around issues such as gun control, rural land rights and 1080, Māori sovereignty and water/land rights, 'free speech', faith (Christian evangelical or Pentecostal), abortion, euthanasia, cannabis law reform, families and family structure, LGBTQIA+ rights, including conversion therapy, immigration, race, and gender.

"The growing polarisation, engineered by leading mis- and disinformation producers within Aotearoa New Zealand, between those who are vaccinated and those who are not, seeks to normalise the increasingly intense negotiation of difference."

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Psychologist Sarb Johal, commenting on the research, said extreme content can appeal to people bored with the monotony of life under lockdown restrictions, particularly those prone to "sensation-seeking" behaviour. He said people are also vulnerable if they can't see any link between their personal sacrifices and the success New Zealand has had, as a country, at preventing the spread of the virus.

"That combination of monotony and vulnerability and uncertainty about what's going to happen next... we can see that this is something that is ripe for exploitation."

Conspiracy theories are entertaining - even people who don't believe them can see that - but for some people, that emotional response makes them easier to believe than the "mundane" reality. There's also the thrill of being in on a secret, Dr Johal said, particularly if they're somewhat narcissistic.

"People find conspiracy narratives entertaining... it's unusual, it's somehow perverse, but it's attention-grabbing."

These entertainment perceptions cause people to linger on them, perhaps share them."

The report noted the recent anti-lockdown protests have heavily featured Māori symbols - such as the United Tribes flag - and had a large number of Māori involved, though most of the planning and promotion on Telegram had involved Pākehā males.

"This aligns with an increasing use of Māori voices, narratives, and imagery for agendas of white supremacist individuals and groups," the study noted - the goal being to make Māori as a population appear to be anti-vaccination, which results in "the intensification of anti-Māori racism" and makes them more susceptible to future disinformation campaigns.



Protesters in Wellington on Tuesday. Photo credit: Newshub.

Researcher Tina Ngata said the staged vaccine rollout,

which favoured people by their age or occupation, has fuelled this perception. Māori on the whole are younger than other ethnic groups, meaning they had to wait longer to be eligible for the vaccine - despite health experts noting early on they were, thanks to poor housing, incomes and institutional racism, [at far more risk from COVID-19 than others.](#)

Ngata said warnings about this, and the likelihood Māori would be targeted by the far-right, were ignored by the Government.

The rhetoric on Telegram is only getting worse, Dr Hannah said - in the past few weeks threats against the Prime Minister, for example, including specific to times and locations.

"People are allowed to be anti-state, but the way it's expressed is in terms of violence."

Combatting the mis- and disinformation can be difficult, Dr Hannah said, with media struggling to debunk nonsense without also repeating it in the first place. Many people also don't respond to straightforward presentation of facts, since people aren't just vessels you can "pour good information into", she said - they need to hear it from people they trust, which in the case of many Māori for example, might not be the state or mainstream media.

"If we let the stories and the context and the history be all part of it, led by the people who know their own people, it

does work. It takes high quality, deep reporting."

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