

# Information You Don't Want to Mis-

"Thinking that you're educated, that you've got a degree and you're around all this knowledge, can make people think that whatever they consume is true, because—you know—I wouldn't possibly fall for misinformation—I have a degree."

Having superstitions is fun and all, but Kayli Taylor from the Disinformation Project knows believing in unsubstantiated claims can be a dangerous game that anyone can enter.

First, let's clear up some definitions. Sorry if you're smarter than a fifth-grader and already know the difference between dis- and misinformation, but I didn't before working on this article. Both dis- and misinformation are types of false information or information without "rational" evidence supporting it. However, while misinformation tends to be incorrect unintentionally, disinformation is often created purposefully and maliciously.<sup>1</sup> In our interview, Kayli said people make disinformation for all sorts of reasons, but usually, it's for some kind of gain, whether that be power or simply to incite "fear and hysteria."

We know from the long protests at the start of the year that whole groups of people can be swept up in believing what might appear to outsiders as nonsense. I'm sure many of us were surprised to realise that family members or friends,

who seem to trust experts in other areas of their lives, were anti-vaxxers or thought the pandemic was a hoax. Kayli explained that:

“Falling for conspiracy theories and blaming things on external sources means that we don’t have to deal with the reality of the world. Shit’s hard. It’s so much easier to think that someone created the virus and someone’s doing it on purpose, or the virus is fake, because it’s scary. It’s terrifying that I could catch something and then not function for a long period of time. It’s easier to externalise and let someone else take the blame for that than to reflect on human nature and how we got here and our rights and responsibilities under that.”

Expecting people to critically reflect on who they are and the sources they read in the middle of a pandemic is not exactly fair. Not only is it a difficult task that even the most cynical of us find draining, but certain

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communities have accurately placed distrust in government and big institutions that cannot easily, or perhaps ever, be overcome. We can’t ask people to simply believe information because it’s come from an expert without

making genuine efforts to include people in society first.

That being said, even the seemingly most privileged New Zealanders were acting like they knew more than my queen, Dr. Siouxsie Wiles. Such people often belong to the extreme right. They capitalise on opportunities to spread conspiratorial discourse to bolster their ultra-conservative agenda that is anti-anything not white and cis-male. For these people, disinformation isn't necessarily something they need to believe as long as they can use it to make marginalised groups fearful.

Unfortunately, Kayli said that this issue is here to stay. The Disinformation Project's recent research suggests that COVID-19 denialism and disinformation is a "Trojan horse". That it has "opened the floodgates to allow more people to be drawn into a more conservative agenda." They are noticing a spillover from the US regarding beliefs around Joe Biden stealing the election. As New Zealand's local body and general elections get closer, an increasing number of people believe that NZ's 2020 election was rigged.

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Since dis- and misinformation aren't things that are only "sitting in some horrible dark corner of the internet", it's pretty helpful to

## ***public-health information about COVID-19.***

know how to avoid them. Kayli told me that getting news from outlets like *Stuff* are good

places to start. These platforms have responsibilities under the Broadcasting Standards Authority to produce accurate information. Other sources, like *The Spinoff*, are good as well. This is because even though *The Spinoff* is sometimes paid to create content by institutions and organisations like the University of Otago, Kiwibank, and Z Energy, the writers are always very transparent about when a piece is a paid partnership. Put simply, it's a red flag when a source/writer is not clear about their biases or where they got their information from. Kayli also said that it's good practice to engage with multiple sources regarding big-ticket items like public-health information about COVID-19. When trying to help people in your life from falling prey to disinformation, the simplest thing you can do is check in with them. You should ask them questions such as "why don't you want to get the vaccine? And where does that information come from?"

While the government, police, and organisations like InternetNZ and Netsafe have a responsibility to make sure the internet is as safe as possible, if people want to say or spread something, they're going to find ways to do it. Even though it can be exhausting, erring on the side of caution when consuming news is a good thing. At the end of the

day, being more aware of dis- and misinformation can help protect ourselves, those we care about, and our communities.

## References

- Hannah, K., Hattotuwa, S., & Taylor, K. Working Paper: Mis- and disinformation in Aotearoa New Zealand from 17 August to 5 November 2021.

<https://thedisinfoproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/2021-11-09-FINAL-working-paper-disinformation..pdf>