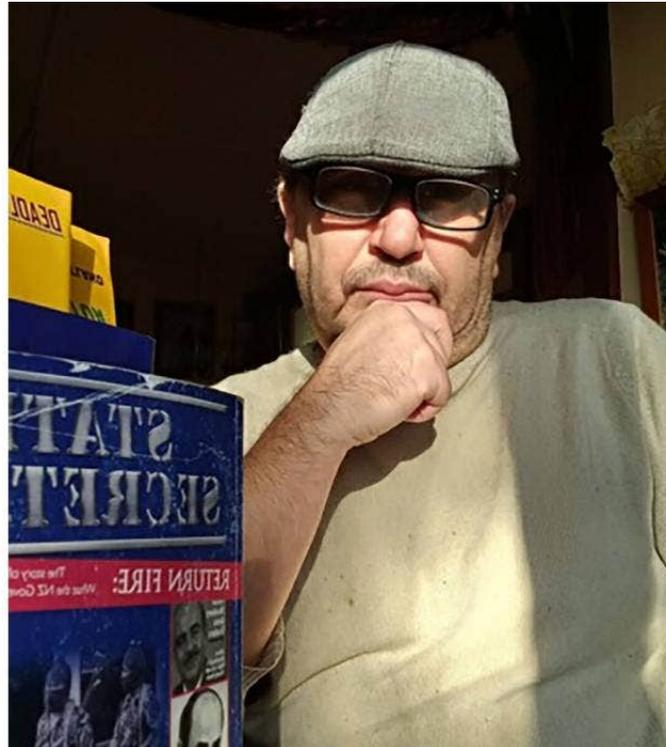


# Battle on fringes as alternative media operator calls out far right influences



Ben Vidgen says he's been in the alternative media realm for decades, and recently people who were feeling alienated were being taken advantage of by people pushing a far-right agenda.

An alternative media operator is raising alarm about other alternative media outlets who he says have connections to neo-Nazi and far right groups.

Nelson man Ben Vidgen doesn't label himself, but acknowledges he is what many would call a conspiracy theorist.

He has self-acknowledged fringe views, and has spent a decade researching and publishing what he calls "alternative media" news looking into what he believes is

undue corporate influence over Governments, the influence of Nazis in global politics, and the international trade of nuclear warheads.

He said he now felt compelled to warn people against the dangers of some alternative media sources, peddling dangerous messages, thinly veiled by legitimate concerns.

"There's room for mainstream and alternative media to critique the system ... but these guys are coming in with an agenda."

## **Spin meets Counterspin**

Vidgen said he was prompted to speak out about the far-right elements he saw in the alternative media platform Counterspin, which is currently touring the South Island and is due to speak in Nelson on Sunday.

He said Counterspin met Government "spin" with its own. His concern was that people with genuine concerns were being co-opted into a movement that was looking to lead them down the wrong rabbit-hole – into far right, violent ideology.



KATE FULTON/Supplied

Vidgen said people were being led into dangerous territory, where violence was presented as a viable and simple solution to complex issues. He also said their actions damaged any chance of actually revealing any conspiracy.

Vidgen said he had distanced himself from people he used to work with whom he said now had connections to Counterspin and the far right.

"I will never stand up in a room with someone who says 'I'll fight for my rights, but not for yours'. You can't be talking about people's rights when you're [standing next to photos of people hanging](#), or people who are [homophobic](#), [misogynistic](#), or [hateful](#)."

He said people who felt like they had legitimate concerns that weren't being addressed by mainstream media should tread carefully when exploring the alternatives, and especially be wary of people that seemed to provide a simple solution to complex and diverse problems,

especially if that solution was violent.

## Violence 'not illogical' with Counterspin view

Counterspin hosts Kelvyn Alp and Hannah Spierer have been taking their Let's Not Forget tour around the country, receiving a less than warm welcome in some places. In Dunedin they were forced to switch venues after residents hounded them out of one.

One place where they were able to hold their talk was [Christchurch, at the Lotus Heart restaurant](#), where Byron Clark, activist and commentator on the far-right movement in New Zealand, tuned in to their livestream to "keep an eye on things".

Clark also follows accounts associated with far-right activity on Telegram and social media, and he said outlets like Counterspin "certainly don't make any attempts to distance themselves" from the far-right fringe.

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*WARWICK SMITH/Stuff*

Byron Clark says violence is not an illogical end-point from the views expressed by Counterspin, and that should be cause for concern given the platform has 18,000 followers on Telegram, "even if only half of those are real people".

Philip Arps, who used to run a [white-supremacy themed company](#) and has a raft of [convictions including sharing video of the Christchurch mosque shootings](#) was specifically mentioned as an attendee by one of the

speakers at the Christchurch event.

"The rhetoric is ramping up a bit," Clark said. "There's talk of holding 'common law' trials, after which politicians and journalists will be executed."

Clark has a YouTube channel where he has several videos exposing far right elements in New Zealand's online sphere, which has led to him being targeted with threats and harassment, including death threats.

"What the protest at Parliament showed and this tour showed, is when you have this online misinformation – it's real people behind it."

"We can say that the existence of things like Counterspin is making violence more likely. It's not illogical within the logic of what these people believe."

Clark said it was akin to climate change, where extreme weather events were more likely, but no single event could be directly attributed to it.

"Something I talk about a bit is this idea of stochastic terrorism, where you have people who are spreading propaganda in a way where it's not directly inciting violence, but its making violence more probable ... "They're not necessarily going so far as calling for violence, but they're saying the Government is tyrannical and trampling your rights, and Jacinda Ardern is a dictator.

“It lends people to believe that violence is justified. I think we need to be concerned about that.”

## From reason to fear

Disinformation Project director Kate Hannah said for safety reasons she would not speak about individual groups or people, but there was an overarching issue where people were getting information from “malign” sources which were “trying to push people into an emotional view”.

This was often achieved with stories or warnings about harm, especially to children. Once people were in that emotional space, malign information sources moved beyond the realm of reasonable concerns, for example worries about a new vaccine, into the realm of fringe or extremist beliefs.

She said it was common for people to start sliding into conspiracy from a position that was rooted in reality – for example [abuse in state care](#), or the [gender-gap disadvantaging women in the medical system](#).

Disinformation Project director Kate Hannah said

*RYAN ANDERSON/Stuff*

Disinformation Project director Kate Hannah said

“A lot of women have a bad experience in the medical system, especially in their experience as women – that’s true, that’s actually real.”

Hannah said many ended up looking for information from social media groups where they felt listened to and respected, and “that’s incredibly trust-building”. But some people in those groups did not necessarily have people’s best interest in heart, or might be influenced by some other malignant source of disinformation.

She said people were pushed into taking small steps further and further away from real concerns, and further into extremist views.

“They’re talking about issues to do with social structure, the Government, and who gets to be a New Zealander ... these are not innocent ideas.”

However, Hannah had “the deepest empathy and aroha” for people who got hoodwinked into extremist beliefs.

“Many of them genuinely believe that some sort of genocide is being conducted by the Government of New Zealand or by world governments – if they truly believe that, their action are the only logical thing to do.”

Hannah said the social isolation of Covid lockdowns had made people lose touch with their wider community and seek comfort in online spaces, and while there were still valid health concerns to perhaps avoid public gatherings, the most effective way to bring people back from the edge was to increase participation in social life again.

“We all crave social contact and community. We’ve all been

stuck home ... People are allowed to have their own risk assessments, but we should really be getting out and socialising again.

“That third space is critical. If people don’t have that community, they don’t have a sense-check for their ideas.”

Counterspin has been contacted for comment.

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