

Fire and Fury documentary shows journalism at the peak of its powers

Jenny Nicholls is a Waiheke-based writer, specialising in science commentary.

OPINION: [Fire and Fury](#), released barely two weeks ago, is already one of Stuff Circuit's most-viewed documentaries. [Stuff Circuit](#), if you are unfamiliar with the name, is a wonderful thing – a series of long-form investigations by a group of senior journalists who specialise in video reports.

The documentary looks at the forces behind what narrator Paula Penfold calls “a new, violent, misinformed New Zealand” – figures who featured large in the chaotic protests in Wellington six months ago.

Misinformation merchants, they target government officials, politicians, healthcare workers, journalists, academics, and attack our system of democracy, creating an alternate reality in which no-one else can be trusted except them.



STUFF CIRCUIT

Stuff Circuit's Fire and Fury investigation looks at the forces behind what narrator Paula Penfold calls "a new, violent, misinformed New Zealand".

It might seem laughable, ridiculous even – [until we consider January 6, 2021](#), a day when hate moved from online chatrooms to the sanctums of the US Capitol; the growing audience in New Zealand for online conspiracists; the threats of extreme violence that swirl around their depressing "reports"; or the fact that two subjects of Fire and Fury never made it past the cutting room floor, thanks to pending criminal charges.

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Since it went to air, Penfold and experts she interviewed have been subject to ferocious online harassment, including threatening emails and phone calls.

The documentary has been widely acclaimed for its investigation of anti-vaccine "influencers" such as Voices

for Freedom. It introduces many of us to extremist livestreamer Chantelle Baker, whose Facebook page boasted 97,000 followers; former AUT academic Amy Benjamin; Carlene Hereora, leader of the “Sovereign Hīkoi of Truth”; Damien de Ment, a man who threatens healthcare workers on a video livestream while driving; and Kelvyn Alp, who set up extremist media outlet Counterspin.



Counterspin

Hannah Spierer and Kelvyn Alp are co-hosts on Counterspin Media.

Alp and his co-host Hannah Spierer have [reportedly been arrested and charged](#) with distributing an “objectionable publication”. Earlier this year, Counterspin posted footage of an atrocity – excerpts from the Christchurch terrorist’s GoPro camera video, banned in New Zealand.

These people are, in Penfold’s words, “strategically intertwined, united in their uprising against authority”, even if they seem to have little in common except a desire to

replace mainstream media with their own faces.

The pandemic gave them their opportunity: Voices for Freedom became the sole news source for many of its followers.

(As an aside, although VFF strives to appear environmentally aware, a page on its website urges followers to stand as independents in local body elections, to enable them to “push back and stop some of the unworkable regulations being forced upon New Zealanders. For example, [environmental protections such as] SNAs [Significant Natural Areas] and ‘managed retreat’ [identifying areas at high risk due to climate change].” What would a group of anti-vaxxers know about climate ch.... Oh. Right.)



LAWRENCE SMITH/Stuff

Stuff Circuit's Paula Penfold, who made Fire and Fury with colleague Louisa Cleave.

Science is the enemy. Media is the enemy. The state is the enemy. Public health is the enemy. Several of the "influencers" in *Fire and Fury* even disapprove of feminism.

Grisly voice clips add to the documentary's chilling effect. "You gotta love that sound of execution. It's gonna happen," says one fan. "The media in this country need burning. They really seriously need burning," says another.

Fire and Fury, in fact, shows Aotearoa journalism at the peak of its powers. Instead of clickbait interviews with Alp, Benjamin, Baker, Hereora, Claire Deeks and De Ment, Penfold and her team are guided by academic research into the far right, aware of the dangers of amplifying toxic messages.

Analysis by experts like Kate Hannah, director of research group The Disinformation Project, helps viewers to understand the historical context and strategies of extremists.



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Jenny Nicholls: "Fire and Fury was made with respect for counterintuitive evidence and expertise, and it interviewed the right people."

"The fundamental questions became these," explained Penfold and Louisa Cleave on *Stuff*. "How dangerous are these people? (Very.) Does the benefit of exposing what they're saying outweigh the risk of platforming them? (Yes, but it's a qualified yes.) What's the tipping-point here; is this issue of enough significance to our country to warrant our attention? (The answer, in this case, is a resounding yes. The fact that two of the people we investigated are now facing criminal charges is hint enough.)"

It is interesting to think about the latest Wellington protest in light of the documentary, which was certainly watched by those who featured in it. VFF was conspicuous by its absence, although its decision was probably made before *Fire and Fury's* release on August 14.

Nonetheless, the date of a VFF press release, August 19, is suggestive of a desire for damage control. "We will not be involved in these events and no VFF signs are authorised to be used. The recent media attention VFF has received validates our approach thus far."

On August 21, Chantelle Baker's Facebook page was deactivated by Meta. The next day Counterspin Media was kicked off Instagram, after a ranty programme filled with violent threats; three hours devoted to Fire and Fury.



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James Hollings is an associate professor in Massey University's School of Communication, Journalism and Marketing.

In his book *A Moral Truth: 150 years of investigative journalism in New Zealand* (2017), Massey University journalism lecturer James Hollings suggested that, if there was one upside to the takeover of small independent newspapers in New Zealand by corporates, it was the ability to mount difficult investigations.

"It is highly unlikely that [an important investigative piece] could have been pulled off by the Rotorua Daily Post or Bay of Plenty Times."

The same might be said about *Fire and Fury*, which required senior journalists to spend months soaking in "the most violent misogyny, racism, religious bigotry, transphobia, homophobia, online stalking and harassment", as Penfold

and Cleave have explained, in their piece [Pushing Back Against the Monsters](#).

Fire and Fury was made with respect for counterintuitive evidence and expertise, and it interviewed the right people. It was packaged for maximum impact, and, despite its complexity, spoke to a vast audience. To quote Hollings on the impact of good journalism in Aotearoa, Fire and Fury told us “what lies behind the cloud”.

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