

Rise in hostility since conspiracy theory arrests triggers call for stronger response



Counterspin

Hannah Spierer and Kelvyn Alp were arrested on Thursday night.

The arrest of a couple involved in the anti-mandate movement is fuelling hostility among supporters to include threats of killing and rape – a level that experts think the Government is not taking seriously enough.

Kelvyn Alp and Hannah Spierer, the founders and hosts of far-right media outlet Counterspin, were arrested in Christchurch on Thursday evening and [charged with distributing an "objectionable publication"](#). They will appear

in court next week.

Counterspin has since publicised their arrest and called for donations to help fund legal fees, a move which volunteer group Fighting Against Conspiracy Theories Aotearoa (FACT) says they are doing to ratchet up their campaign.

A FACT spokesperson said using an arrest as a platform builder is a common tactic among disinformation groups and will often unite them to swarm on an issue.

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"And the facts don't matter – to the movement, this is just repression," the spokesperson said.

Disinformation project researcher Dr Sanjana Hattotuwa said he had never seen the types of discourse he had studied in the hours since the couple's arrest and said it was worse than the Parliament occupation.

Sanjana Hattotuwa/Supplied

Disinformation project researcher Dr Sanjana Hattotuwa said he had never seen the types of discourse he had studied in the hours since the couple's arrest.

He described social media groups on messaging and group

chat app Telegram as being a chilling platform for rape culture.

"Just over the past 72 hours I've had to deal with [threats of MPs] Chloe Swarbrick and Golriz Ghahraman being raped. [Online] the prime minister is being raped every day ... I can't even begin to tell you."

After studying the vitriol Hattotuwa described New Zealand as the 51st state of America.

"Because of the hate and hurt of dangerous speech, the violent nature, vulgarity, venom, viciousness, misogyny, hyper and toxic masculinity, rape culture, anti-semitic and trans/queer phobia."

He described the day-to-day threats espoused on social media were being conducted by a larger number of Kiwis than we think.

"It's just a frothy bile – a verbal diarrhoea of hate."

Since the arrests Hattotuwa said there was alarming widespread conversation about taking up arms against authorities, and believes there should be an urgency around dealing with misinformation and hate speech.

"If I was to remotely tell you about how bad it is I couldn't because of the broadcasting standards ... people want to kill."

However, Hattotuwa said it was not a police or government

problem alone, and it also required a social response.

“It takes more than a national security lens to understand information disorders.”

Wrapping support around communities and funding initiatives to combat misinformation at local levels was needed – especially for vulnerable people who have suffered because of Covid-19.

Hattotuwa described the platforms allowing the hate messaging as a church.

“It gives meaning to an individual at a time when particular issues or existential concerns give them cause for anxiety and anger.”

Dominico Zapata/Stuff

Anjum Rahman is frustrated the Government hasn't been taking the misinformation threat seriously.

Anjum Rahman, from the Aotearoa Inclusive Collective Tāhono, agrees that we need to resource communities and need help from academics as to what might be effective against the current situation.

“It can't just be government.”

Rahman is a frustrated activist against hate messaging, having helped highlight the urgent need to act since 2015.

“We could see the impacts of all these things ... and have

been trying to get the government to take us seriously.”

Where it was minority communities like Muslims that were affected before, it has now shifted to a wider community, she said.

Rahman was also concerned at how quickly people were being taken down a “rabbit hole” of disinformation, but believes blaming the instigators will not create change.

“How can we improve the situation?”

Some community groups were trying to stem the problem, she said, but they needed to be supported.

The [attacks and riots at the Capitol Building in the United States in January 2021](#), when far-right insurgents invaded the home of American democracy, showed how close that democracy came to falling in the country, she said.

“Our democracy is equally fragile. People just assume it will survive.”

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