

The subjects of Stuff's Fire and Fury are furious



A week ago Stuff released an hour-long documentary about the disinformation and threats of violence infecting a swathe of the New Zealand internet. Stewart Sowman-Lund speaks to journalist Paula Penfold about the response to [Fire and Fury](#).

It's been six months since thousands of people camped on parliament's lawn as part of an anti-mandate occupation that descended into chaos. Now, a new Stuff documentary traces how anger at Covid-19 vaccinations and the government translated into one of New Zealand's darkest days.

Produced by the Stuff Circuit investigation team, Fire and

Fury, released on August 15, centres on those [widely held responsible for inciting the violence](#) on the final day of the protest – the fringe online influencers and far right figures that, in the Covid era, have seen their following grow significantly.

That includes Voices for Freedom, [an anti-vaccination group](#) and super-spreaders of misinformation; Chantelle Baker, a conspiracy theorist livestreamer and daughter of ex-New Conservative leader Leighton Baker; Carlene Hereora, who led the so-called [sovereign hīkoi of truth](#) through locked-down Auckland; and Kelvyn Alp, who launched ultra right-wing media outlet Counterspin.

Others referenced in less depth include QAnon conspiracy theorist Damien de Ment and Amy Benjamin, the former AUT law professor who, [as The Spinoff first reported](#), left her academic post at around the same time she labelled the Christchurch mosque attack a “false flag”.

While all of these characters – and more – appear in Fire and Fury, they were not interviewed specifically for the film. Instead, the documentary makers relentlessly trawled through social media posts, videos and news archives to provide an accurate portrait of the disinformation milieu over the course of 60 minutes. Those who do appear on camera as talking heads, providing both analysis and commentary, include the likes of Kate Hannah from the Disinformation Project and Khylee Quince, dean of law at AUT.

In short, it all makes for a compelling watch. And while *Fire and Fury* holds few revelations for those who have been keeping an eye on the darker sides of the internet across the pandemic, it solidly traces the way that various, disparate communities converged in February this year, outside parliament.

Veteran journalist Paula Penfold is one of the Stuff Circuit team who produced *Fire and Fury*. As the documentary's face, she's been the recipient of most of the profuse praise and, in the case of the film's subjects, violent criticism. "The response has been really interesting because, if anything, it has proven what we said and warned about because the response has been violent, and threatening and pretty hideous really. We were anticipating that there would be a pretty intense backlash and sadly we were proven right," she says. Penfold spoke to *The Spinoff* last week, just a few days after the documentary was released.

"There have been some very threatening responses, messages, emails, direct messages and we've been made aware of some information that's quite concerning. But this is our job as journalists and we thought it was important to be in the public domain."

This response is hardly surprising. During the week [I spent at the parliamentary protest](#) I was subject to threats on several occasions and almost escorted out of the occupation at one point, as Penfold was while filming the documentary. While it's unfair to label the entire protest a

violent mob, the fringe elements Fire and Fury is most concerned with could easily be found among the tents and placards on parliament's lawn.

It's for this reason that Penfold says her team did not seek to provide a direct right of reply to Fire and Fury's subjects. "We didn't approach them. That's a really unusual editorial decision and I don't know that we've ever taken that decision before, I think it is unprecedented for us. But it was obviously a very considered decision because in this instance we wanted our documentary to be the right of reply to what they've already said in the public domain," she explains.

"They had the right of reply self-contained in the story because we were using their own words, it's not like we were criticising them on the basis of a lack of information. We were using their own words and then giving context to that through experts who gave analysis."

She adds that this is the recommended approach for publishing on a subject matter like this. "When you're reporting on far right dangerous speech you do not give them a right of reply because that elevates them."

Most of those featured in the documentary have used their own platforms, through the likes of Telegram, to respond. Damien de Ment said the "DNA of deception" ran through the entire film, although he also claimed the documentary was beneficial to his cause, writing: "Thanks Stuff for

helping the freedom movements.”. Counterspin Media [hosted a three-hour reaction](#) livestream (about three times as long as the documentary itself). That included additional threats of violence against the media and the government.

Some, like Voices for Freedom, have claimed the film bolstered their support and led to a rise in subscribers (though, according to Penfold, the group’s Telegram followers have actually fallen over the past week).

The risk of bolstering support for these fringe groups was also considered, says Penfold. “We did have conversations about whether it was going to give them free publicity, but I don’t think the saying ‘any publicity is good publicity’ is true in this instance because we wanted to expose them for what they truly believe – and wanted their audience to understand that what they thought they subscribed to isn’t actually what they subscribed to.”

Some of the film’s more prominent subjects did, however, manage to achieve an almost-mainstream vehicle to respond via Sean Plunket’s online radio station The Platform. In the last week alone, the network’s welcomed the likes of Chantelle Baker (twice), Kelvyn Alp and Voices for Freedom to share “their side” regarding the way they were portrayed in Fire and Fury. Rodney Hide, who spoke at the Wellington protest and has sympathised with fringe views, is a regular contributor to The Platform and has appeared as a host. Rachel Stewart, who suggested “antifa” operatives may have been responsible for lighting

fires outside parliament, was brought in as a commentator last week too.

Those interviews have been viewed thousands of times across multiple platforms – and the comments are almost unanimously in support. “Well done [The Platform] on providing right of reply to the persons wilfully defamed in the Stuff hit piece,” one commenter wrote. “Thank you for the interview... I have searched out [Counterspin Media] and will follow you with interest,” another said.

Penfold said Plunket was at risk of becoming our version of US right wing broadcaster and conspiracy theorist Alex Jones. “I think he’s trying to build an audience, I think he’s trying to be provocative and get people to talk about him. If he wants his platform to have any ounce of journalistic credibility, well, he’s lost that this week,” she said. “I started to watch a bit of something that he said about our piece and I found it quite personally disgusting some of what he was alleging about us. He’s becoming guilty, himself, of inciting hatred against journalists and that makes me annoyed.”

While Fire and Fury was the title ultimately settled on, Penfold says that for a long while the documentary was going to be called The Inciters. In short, that’s because the film sets out to look at those pulling the strings, rather than the freedom movement as a whole. “We wanted people to understand that this wasn’t a documentary that was aimed at the protesters themselves,” Penfold explains. “The story

was about the people who were inciting people to believe what they believed." Nevertheless, when the title was revealed, some online commentators, and many of the film's subjects, suspiciously pointed out that it was the same title as [an exposé written about the Donald Trump presidency](#).

That became a bizarre online theory of its own. "It's hilarious," says Penfold. "I think I actually laughed out loud at that little conspiracy." At the risk of making it too obvious, Penfold says the title was chosen because "there was a fire and people were furious".

And if the response to the documentary proves anything, it's that those featured in it remain more furious – and more fiery – than ever.

Read more on Fire and Fury, and watch the full documentary, [here](#).

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