

The Front Page: Parliament protest - Dangerous conspiracy theories motivating protesters

[Damien Venuto](#) 22 Aug 01:08 PM

As protesters again converge at Parliament grounds, a researcher warns disinformation will continue to spill from online into the real world.

Disinformation Project director Kate Hannah tells [the Front Page podcast](#) that even though most restrictions have now subsided, the outrage we continue to see is no longer strictly about the pandemic.

"The thing that's unifying people who are joining the convoy or planning to go to the protest is the idea of New Zealand and what they think New Zealand should be like," Hannah says.

Asked why the protesters are taking to the streets at a time when the Covid-19 restrictions have largely been relaxed, the researcher says it's important to understand that people drawn to these kinds of protests were never entirely motivated by the pandemic.

"For the people benefitting from and leading these

movements, it was never really about Covid-19," says Hannah.

"For those who joined the movements, it often was because it was about their personal experiences of being concerned about the vaccine or their personal experience of mandates and impacted upon them and their families.

"But the leaders [of these protest movements] have always been interested in ideas around families, around the roles of men and women, ideas around power, control and politics, and ideas about who gets to be a New Zealander... Covid-19 was a bit of Trojan horse for pulling people into these ideas actually."

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The rhetoric around the latest protest includes military symbolism and language, as well as plans for mock trials for politicians, officials and journalists, who they falsely accuse of crimes against humanity.

This thinking is all peppered with conspiracy theories, regularly shared online across New Zealand.

"The motivation for the rhetoric around trials is a misinterpretation of the Nuremberg trials and the Nuremberg declaration, which came about at the end of World War II as a response to the Holocaust.

"The rhetoric that has been expressed by leaders of the protest is that politicians, officials, journalists, academics and members of the healthcare system are responsible for what they describe as mass genocide or democide, which means the killing of a population by its government.

"These claims are patently false, but the rhetoric around the requirement that people are held responsible is very widely expressed within these communities."

While some of these theories are outlandish, we have already seen conspiratorial thinking propagated online lead to real-world violence.

The storming of Capitol Hill on January 6 and the local protest at Parliament in February are just two recent examples of the danger that lies in allowing these ideas to seep into society.

"We should be really cautious and concerned," says Hannah.

"The level of military or weapons-related rhetoric and symbolism has increased since the parliamentary occupation in February and March. The level of expressed tension has also increased. When I say 'expressed tension', I mean perhaps that the tension doesn't really exist, but it has been expressed on social media in a way that encourages people to believe that violence might be necessary."

But this isn't only about the threat of violence. Major proponents of disinformation are now also encouraging their supporters to disrupt New Zealand in other ways.

The best example of this would be Voices for Freedom, which has started encouraging its members to stand for councils and school boards.

Worryingly, these people have also been told to scrub their social media profiles [and hide their affiliations to any conspiracy adjacent groups](#) - which in turn means that voters could be casting their votes for these candidates without realising it.

"To have a situation where people with a very fixed agenda... are placing themselves into councils and school boards could have long-term effects on what we call the ability of diverse and marginalised candidates to feel included in these really critical parts of our social fabric and democracy," says Hannah.

She says that voters will this year have to pay far closer attention to their local candidates and ensure that they aren't casting their votes to people intent on doing more harm than good.

While the protest might roar and rage for a day (or maybe more) before again subsiding, this doesn't mean these issues will disappear.

The real battle, it seems, will play inside the institution

these individuals are railing against so furiously.



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