

Mis- and disinformation in Aotearoa New Zealand

Who are we?

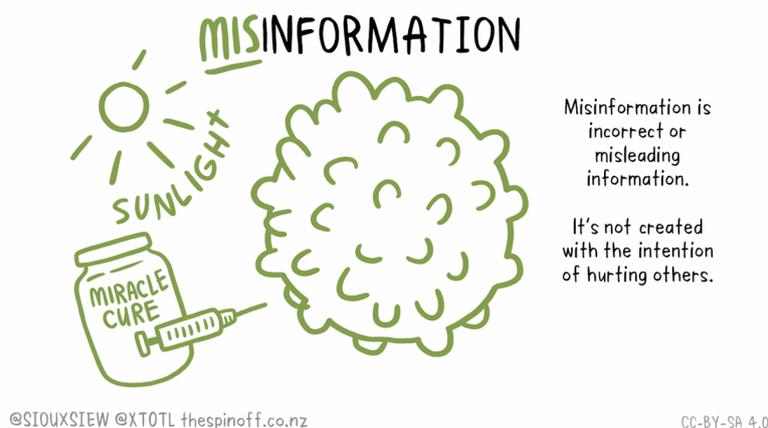
The Disinformation Project is an independent research group studying misinformation and disinformation in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Since February 2020, we have used mixed methods approaches to analyse and review the seed and spread of information disorders – and their impact on the lives of New Zealanders.

What are misinformation and disinformation?

- Misinformation is false information that **was not** created with the intent to harm people.
- Disinformation is false information that **was** created with the intent to harm a person, community, or organisation.

Science communicator Siouxsie Wiles has written more about the red flags of misinformation and disinformation here: <https://thespinoff.co.nz/society/21-08-2021/siouxsie-wiles-toby-morris-the-red-flags-of-covid-misinformation/>.



How do you study this?

We look at a number of public facing pages and groups across a number of platforms on the internet – including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Telegram. Every day we look at posts and comments. This helps us to understand what is being said and the language used.

What have you found?

Increase from August 2021

There has been a sharp increase in the amount of posts and people liking, sharing, and commenting on them since 17 August 2021, when Aotearoa New Zealand first returned into Alert Level 4 lockdown.

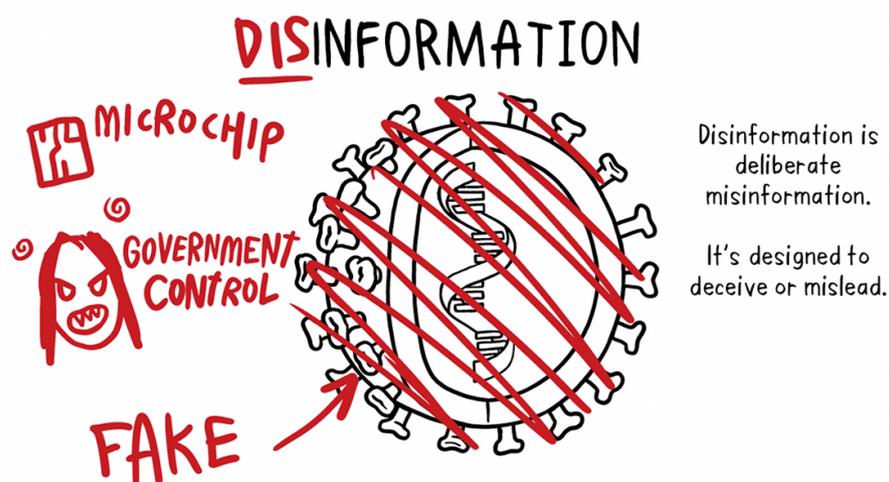
Links to far right

The most recent Covid-19 outbreak and the vaccine are strong symbols that are being used to push various far-right and conservative views. These include opinions and beliefs that are against gun control, against women's rights, anti-gay, anti-transgender, anti-takatāpui, anti-immigration, anti-1080, anti LGBTQ+, conservative Christian/Christian supremacist, anti-Muslim, anti-Jewish, and anti-Māori sentiment.

Anti-Māori sentiment

Online spaces that promote and share misinformation and disinformation also promote a lot of anti-Māori sentiment, including opposition to Māori land rights, Māori sovereignty, and te Tiriti o Waitangi/the Treaty of Waitangi.

It has become common for local pākehā and overseas white supremacists to use Māori symbols and culture to promote these ideas. Misused symbols include the Tino Rangatiratanga flag, the United Tribes flag, language of 'hīkoi', and te reo Māori. It is concerning to see anti-Māori people taking symbols from Māori culture — we worry that they are trying to erase the Māori meanings of these symbols and replace them with their own anti-Māori meanings.



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Imported themes from overseas

Some of the misinformation and disinformation we are seeing in Aotearoa New Zealand's online spaces is imported from overseas, especially from Australia and the United States. This content often talks about the state being tyrannical, lecherous, and something that should not be trusted. This kind of messaging can appeal to communities who have been treated badly or feel ignored by governments.

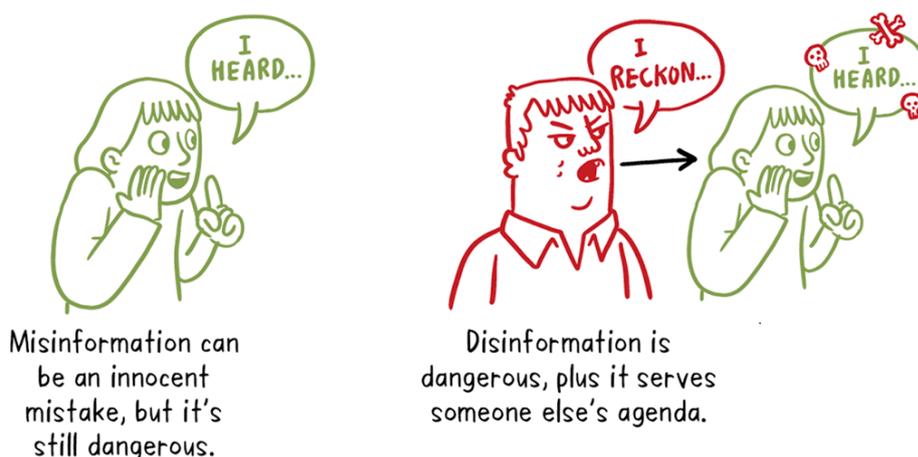
However, these anti-government messages are often being imported alongside white supremacist ideologies — the creators do not care about Māori being harmed by the government, and are very anti-Māori themselves. We think this overseas messaging is aiming to destabilise our public health measures and vaccination efforts, and we are therefore concerned this will have the worst effects on our most marginalised communities. This overseas imported content is often the most violent in language.

Tools used

Online misinformation and disinformation uses memes, humour, and trolling to make people respond and increase the amount of people that see it.

- A meme is a video, picture, or phrase that a lot of people send to each other on the internet.
- Trolling is when someone makes a provocative comment on the internet with the intention of making people respond.

On social media, posts that people respond to spread further and reach more people. Also, people are more likely to choose to share memes on their own personal pages, which helps normalise and spread disinformation. Memes, humour and trolling material is also divisive, and seeks to offer a strong sense of community for in-group members, while also mocking out-group members.



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OK, what does this mean?

The types of content we study have increased since the most recent Covid-19 outbreak and vaccination rollout began. But the content isn't just about Covid-19 anymore.

Based on what we are seeing, we are worried that people engaging with Covid-19 misinformation and disinformation are being pushed towards right-wing and conservative opinions and beliefs. These opinions and beliefs include, but are not limited to, opposition to gun control, anti-Māori sentiment, anti-gay, anti-trans, anti-takatāpui, conservative ideals around family and family structure (e.g. opposing larger whānau groups and favouring small families that live apart), misogyny, and anti-immigration.

Therefore, increasing misinformation and disinformation pose risks to those who are already marginalised and targeted. We think that this increasing misinformation and disinformation poses significant threats to social cohesion, freedom of expression, inclusion, and safety.