18 November 2021

To: Members, COVID-19 Chief Executives Board

COVID-19 Disinformation and harmful content

Purpose

1. This paper provides the COVID-19 Chief Executives Board (CCB) with an overview of the landscape of misinformation and disinformation currently circulating in Aotearoa New Zealand and sets out the approach agencies are taking to respond to these online harms.

Disinformation and harmful online content in Aotearoa New Zealand has been escalating in intensity and impact…

2. The circulation of COVID-19 and vaccine disinformation continues to escalate globally. With the Delta outbreak and the momentum of the vaccine programme there has been an increase in observed coordinated disinformation circulating in New Zealand.

3. Over the past six weeks there has also been a notable increase in the number of, and attendance at, COVID-19 related protest events. While these have seen a slight escalation in disruptive techniques (e.g. deliberate road-blocking, and action targeting the Prime Minister), activity has largely remained peaceful. Incidents of confrontation, violence and vandalism have been observed, however, these appear to be isolated incidents. There is a concerning surge in targeting schools for the distribution of misinformation, particularly in relation to the vaccine.

4. Growing frustrations with ongoing COVID-19 restrictions, income loss, the inability to travel and the perception that vaccine mandates are infringing on personal freedoms, appear to have mobilised a wide range of groups, individuals and causes (including both vaccinated and unvaccinated) to join in physical and online protest.

5. This has fuelled increasing and more hateful online and real-world harassment and threats towards elected officials, health professionals, journalists, academics, frontline workers and vulnerable communities (including women, Māori and ethnic communities).

… but widespread violence and unrest does not appear to be imminent.

6. This is largely "noise" generated in an unfiltered and anonymous online environment, however, verbal threats and intimidation have forced the closure of several COVID-19 vaccination centres and caused serious anxiety amongst affected groups, and we cannot discount it having an inciting effect on individuals holding extreme views.

7. New Zealand Police and the intelligence and security agencies have systems in place to identify and respond to credible threats of violence and mass mobilisation.

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8. The National Security System is activated at a low level to ensure agencies are coordinated in their information-sharing, assessment and dissemination, and will continue to monitor closely.

Deliberate confusion of the information environment can threaten public safety, fracture social cohesion and undermine public confidence.

9. The current narratives of COVID-19 misinformation[1] and disinformation[2] in Aotearoa New Zealand are mostly in relation to the vaccines, but there are continuing persistent themes within the content that is violently critical of the government's approach to COVID-19. Predominant themes include resentment of and opposition to health measures and authorities, conspiratorial beliefs, alternative medicines, and more general mistrust of government/suppression of truth, which highlight issues wider than the pandemic narratives within the content.

10. Beyond the immediate public health emergency, the deliberate confusion of the information environment has profound effects on social polarisation, governance, political discourse and the information landscape, threatening public safety, social cohesion and the acceptance of science-led health policy.

11. Globally we have seen links with disinformation and conspiracy theorists as a tool for recruitment and radicalisation to reduce health controls and to cause violence. Mis- and disinformation leading towards extremism is a trend that has been growing since before the start of the pandemic (e.g. the 2016 US Election). This is likely to be a permanent reality.

12. The broader threat is that the narratives surrounding COVID-19 and vaccination measures will normalise and entrench far-right ideologies, including, but not limited to, ideas about gun control, anti-Māori sentiment, anti-LGBTQIA+, conservative ideals around family structure, misogyny, and anti-immigration.

13. A recent discussion paper from 'The Disinformation Project' at Te Pūnaha Matatini describes the misinformation and disinformation landscape in New Zealand in more detail (Appendix A).

Further escalation of these activities is likely in the short term, particularly in response to COVID-19 mitigation measures.

14. There is evidence that continued restrictions of freedoms, including lockdowns, vaccine mandates, vaccine targets, mandatory scanning and mask wearing, as well as introducing policies that may drive emotional behaviours (e.g. vaccinations for 5-11 year olds), are all triggers for mobilising further disinformation and potential protest activity. We should consider the compounding effect of multiple measures, as well as each individual restriction.

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[1] Information that may unintentionally deceive.

[2] Information that may be deliberately intended to deceive.

15. Many international partners, including Australia, Canada and the UK, have mandated vaccines without popular revolt or extremist acts. However, there is a shared concern that mandates may provide the motivation for a very limited number of people with extremist views to conduct actions beyond lawful protest. This is likely to occur when vaccine mandates come into force, if lockdowns become necessary during the summer months or if vaccination is rolled out to 5-11 year olds.

Agencies are working together to determine the level and nature of the threat to the COVID-19 response from mis- and disinformation.

16. In the national security system, NZ Police and the intelligence and security agencies maintain several layers of security and intelligence that focus on the potential extremist threats to the COVID-19 response specifically, and public safety more generally. This system is effective at monitoring for credible/imminent national security threats and responding accordingly.

17. A National Security System Inter-Agency Working Group (IAWG) has been activated by DPMC to ensure that the processes and structures are in place, at this critical juncture of the COVID-19 Response, for the right information to go to the right places to inform the right responses. Officials are developing these processes and structures and identifying potential trigger/escalation points.

18. DPMC will convene Watch Groups and ODESC meetings if needed to escalate decision-making.

19. It is also important to ensure that how protest situations and the increasing amount of mis/disinformation and online harms are handled, is done deliberately and in the moment, to positively influence the trajectory of the situation and future sentiment.

Using insights reporting on broader mis/disinformation trends for COVID-19 mitigations

20. Since August 2021, in response to a request from DPMC (COVID-19 Group and the National Security Group) for insights into the mis/disinformation landscape and its effect on COVID-19 mitigation measures, Te Pūnaha Matatini[3] (TPM) has been providing regular analytical reports on the online COVID-19 mis/disinformation and extremist landscape. TPM researchers have been able to access a wide range of online platforms and networks, and use both data and narrative analysis to show how there has been an increase over time in extremist rhetoric within New Zealand.

21. This reporting, supplemented with other commissioned research and insights, has been an important source of information for the Ministry of Health and the COVID-19 Group, as they have developed the government's communications approach and the delivery of the vaccination programme. s9(2)(g)(i)

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[3] The Aotearoa New Zealand Centre of Research Excellence for Complex Systems, at Auckland University.

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Improving coordination, synthesis and assessment

22. While we are confident that information is being shared in a timely fashion with agencies to enable them to respond to specific, imminent and credible threats, we are looking to close gaps in effective, centralised reporting, triaging, synthesising and assessment of threat information (especially as the volume of information increases).

23. Various agencies have specific mandates or responsibilities that guide their responses to disinformation:
    a. NZ Police: ensuring public safety against illegal and/or violent acts;
    b. DIA: regulatory responsibility for objectionable publications;
    c. Classification Office: responsible for classifying films, videos, and publications including defining content that may need to be restricted or banned in New Zealand;
    d. Netsafe: responsible for harmful digital communication and can assist those who have been targeted for online abuse;
    e. CERT NZ: coordinates reports of cyber security issues from the public, supports businesses, organisations and individuals affected by cyber security incidents, and provides trusted and authoritative information and advice.

24. A stakeholder map of agencies' respective mandates to respond within the disinformation harm spectrum (provided their threshold/mandate for action is reached) is provided in Appendix B.

25. These statutory mandates can restrict the lens through which the material is considered or handled (e.g. law enforcement, objectionable material) and material trending towards but not meeting those statutory thresholds could fall through the gaps. Other agencies are receiving insights information without context, creating a sense of heightened alert if they are not equipped to assess it properly or if they are not aware of mitigations already in place.

26. An interagency working group (chaired by the DPMC COVID-19 Group) has been established to ensure that the right information is being sent to the right places to elicit the most appropriate responses to harmful online content. There are existing systems in place to detect and mitigate terrorist or violent extremist threats and efforts to escalate peaceful protest to violence. However, more work is required to properly receive, assess and triage the vast amount of grey zone information and to identify trigger points for escalation at an earlier stage. This work is currently underway.

27. The Ministry of Health is establishing a Disinformation Response and Assessment Team (DART) to monitor disinformation, triage and refer to responsible agencies any identified disinformation that meets their thresholds outside of harming the COVID-19 health response (eg, online harassment, criminality, objectionable content or national security situations). Establishing this function is urgent and requires further resourcing to scale up the capability of the function in order to have impact immediately.

28. The COVID-19 Group is building capacity to glean insights from landscape reports to inform strategic communications and sector coordination. DPMC are awaiting Budget decisions as part of the 'omnibus' out-of-cycle bid, which includes funding for resourcing, landscape monitoring and reporting.

29. The COVID-19 Group and the Ministry of Health also work jointly on providing guidance to the health sector, education sector, businesses, community leaders and the public on responding to COVID-19 mis- and disinformation.

30. Examples of the COVID-19 communications activity to respond to misinformation include:
    - Refresh of high-level disinformation messaging given the escalating environment
    - Inclusion of online safety content on the UAC website https://covid19.govt.nz/misinformation
    - Supporting projects like Stuff: The Whole Truth to ensure a wide range of information is available to audiences across New Zealand, and the media event on November 9 with the TPM "Disinformation Project".
    - Animation in development by Unite Against COVID-19 focussed on preventing people from sharing misinformation
    - A dedicated vaccine communications plan to ensure those hesitant to be vaccinated have access to reliable information (MoH lead).
    - Elevation of reliable sources of information and development of resources to respond to emerging narratives primarily at: https://covid19.govt.nz/covid-19-vaccination-your-questions-answered/
    - Marketing campaign to build awareness and resilience to misinformation

Recommendations

31. I recommend the COVID-19 Chief Executive Board members:

    a. **Note** that disinformation and harmful online content has been escalating in intensity and impact and coordination but widespread violence does not seem to be imminent.

    b. **Note** the Disinformation Project's landscape report provided in Appendix A.

    c. **Note** that agencies have specific responsibility for managing disinformation and online harm (as set out in Appendix B) but greater coordination is required to ensure that the right information is being properly received, assessed and triaged.

    d. **Note** that an interagency working group (chaired by the DPMC COVID-19 Group) has been established to manage this and establish and support the appropriate processes.

    e. **Note** that the Ministry of Health is standing up a tactical response unit (DART) to monitor disinformation, triage and refer to responsible agencies the vast amount of material that is being received.

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Appendix 2

Stakeholder map of agencies' mandates to respond within the disinformation harm spectrum

Assessment of the possible agencies and organisations that may be stake holders in Covid-19 mis/disinformation response has been broadly defined into five groups: defined threat, defined target, regulatory, industry standards and 'unclear harm' activity.
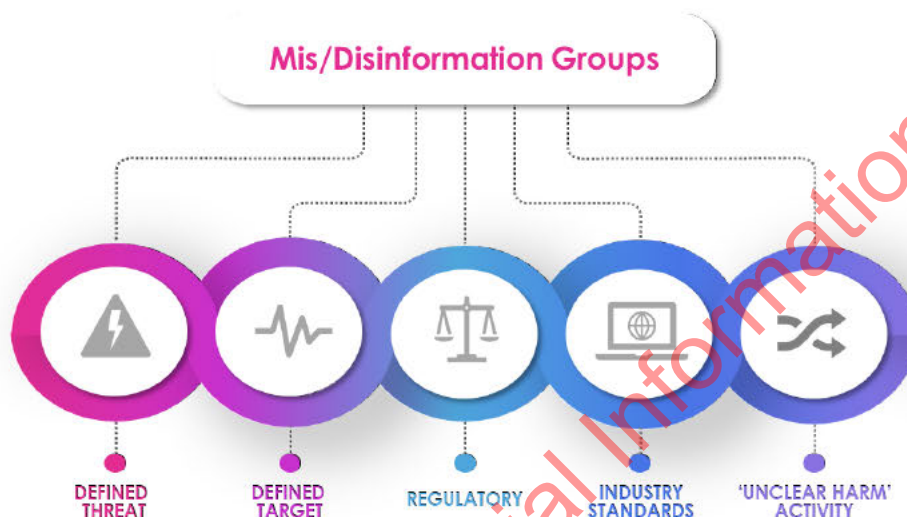
Triage for referrals to the wider multi-stakeholder groups fit within these five groups on a disinformation harm spectrum, which is weighted for escalation by urgency or virality and popularity (if online). Below is a stakeholder map of those agencies and organisations that should be equipped to respond within the five groups identified, where their threshold/mandate for action is reached.

IN CONFIDENCE