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19 June 2023

AI

By email: fyi-request-22480-e4ba0dfa@requests.fyi.org.nz
Ref: H2023024715

Tēnā koe AI

Response to your request for official information

Thank you for your request under the Official Information Act 1982 (the Act), received as a transfer from Te Whatu Ora – Health New Zealand on 4 May 2023 for information regarding the COVID-19 Disinformation Assessment and Response Team (DART). You requested:

*“I am making a request for the reporting that DART produced during the time the team existed from mid 2021 to 2022... I've found mention to 'landscape reports' which I am requesting any and all of please
Any regular or ad hoc reporting such as monthly or weekly reporting
Any formal memos or briefings DART members produced or contributed to on disinformation during their existence.”*

On 31 May 2023, the due date for responding to your request was extended under section 15A(1)(b) of the Act as consultation was necessary to make a decision on your request.

By way of context, DART acted as a clearinghouse for reporting on disinformation when it was in operation. DART received information about disinformation through a variety of forms, including leaflets, digital items, weblinks and social media. While most instances were brought to the attention of Manatū Hauora by members of the public or external parties, some were generated internally through monitoring by our Social Media team. For example, if the Social Media team noted disinformation on a post on our channels, this was provided to DART.

Documents identified within scope of your request are itemised in Appendix 1 of this letter. Please note that in relation to Document 2, while DART intended to provide these reports monthly, only the September 2022 report was completed. The DART team ceased to exist by November 2022.

Further to this, DART did not produce or contribute to the 'landscape reports' or any disinformation landscape format reporting referenced in your request. Landscape view reports were generated by The Disinformation Project¹ (formerly part of Te Pūnaha Matatini) under a research grant through the COVID-19 Response Fund administered by the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment. It may be that these are the reports to which you refer.

The Disinformation Project (the Project) is now an independent research programme and is not subject to the Official Information Act; however pursuant to section 13 of the Act, Manatū Hauora consulted with the Project and have been advised that there is currently no consideration for publishing all landscape reports.

For your information, I can advise that Manatū Hauora received disinformation landscape format reports from the Project on the following dates:

- 22 December 2021
- 23 December 2021
- 24 December 2021
- 25 December 2021
- 26 December 2021
- 27 December 2021
- 28 December 2021
- 29 December 2021
- 30 December 2021
- 31 December 2021
- 1 January 2022
- 2 January 2022
- 3 January 2022
- 5 January 2022
- 6 January 2022
- 7 January 2022
- 8 January 2022
- 9 January 2022
- 10 January 2022
- 11 January 2022.

Manatū Hauora, in consultation with relevant agencies and the Project, is willing to consider your request under the Act for any specific reports from the abovementioned list to further assist with your request.

If you wish to discuss any aspect of your request with us, including this decision, please feel free to contact the OIA Services Team on oiagr@health.govt.nz.

Under section 28(3) of the Act, you have the right to ask the Ombudsman to review any decisions made under this request. The Ombudsman may be contacted by email at: info@ombudsman.parliament.nz or by calling 0800 802 602.

Please note that this response, with your personal details removed, may be published on the Manatū Hauora website at: www.health.govt.nz/about-ministry/information-releases/responses-official-information-act-requests.

Nāku noa, nā



Sarah Turner
Deputy Director-General
Government and Executive Services | Te Pou Whakatere Kāwanatanga

¹ The Disinformation Project observes and analyses open-source publicly available data related to Covid-19 mis- and disinformation on social media, mainstream media, and in physical and other digital forms of information and knowledge dissemination. The Disinformation Project became an independent research programme in 2022.

Appendix 1: List of documents for release

#	Date	Document details	Decision on release
1	22 November 2021	COVID-19 Disinformation and harmful content (Draft)	Refused under 18(d) of the Act. Document is publicly available at the following link: www.dPMC.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2022-11/dPMC-roia-oia-2021-22-1068-mis-disinformation.pdf (refer to pages 16 to 30)
2	September 2022	DART Monthly Report (September 2022)	Released in full

DART Monthly Report

September 2022

Executive Summary

- All information has been collected via open source data.
- The report this month focuses on Voices for Freedom (VFF) as this group is a key driver of health disinformation in New Zealand.
- VFF is unique in that it is well funded, well branded, and more sophisticated than other disinformation groups. It is media-savvy, portrays itself in a less confrontational manner and its primary focus has been spreading COVID-19 disinformation.
- VFF has a record of anti-authority behaviours encouraging removal of masks and vaccine exemption, using domain spoofing to redirect user to the group's website, encouraging participation in the Parliamentary occupation and attempting to 'skirt' bans on platforms such as Meta/Facebook.
- The group's material has been the subject of over 100 complaints to the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA).
- Since most of the COVID-19 mandates lifted in September 2022, audience engagement with VFF's disinformation appears to be waning.
- VFF is pivoting away from anti-vaccine messaging to more political anti-authority messaging and clandestinely running members in local elections, however they could reignite their health disinformation when relevant such as around a new COVID-19 wave or during DPMC's upcoming COVID-19 antivirals campaign.

Key take home:

- **As the COVID-19 health response recedes from the national consciousness the ability of health disinformation by VFF to impact on daily operations will reduce but should a new outbreak, other health crisis, or new campaign emerge then VFF, or another group, could exploit it as before.**

Voices for Freedom by numbers



- We have scanned VFF’s open channels* with a focus on Telegram and their website as these are where they most activity takes place
- Their main method of communicating with people has been via flyer, with over 4.5 million distributed in the last year
- **VFF is responsible for over 70% of all public reports of disinformation made to the Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT) New Zealand for the 2021/2022 period.** These reports were of any item or activity seen by the public which they believed to be or have disinformation in it.

*Full methodology can be found in Appendix doc

Themes of mis/disinformation

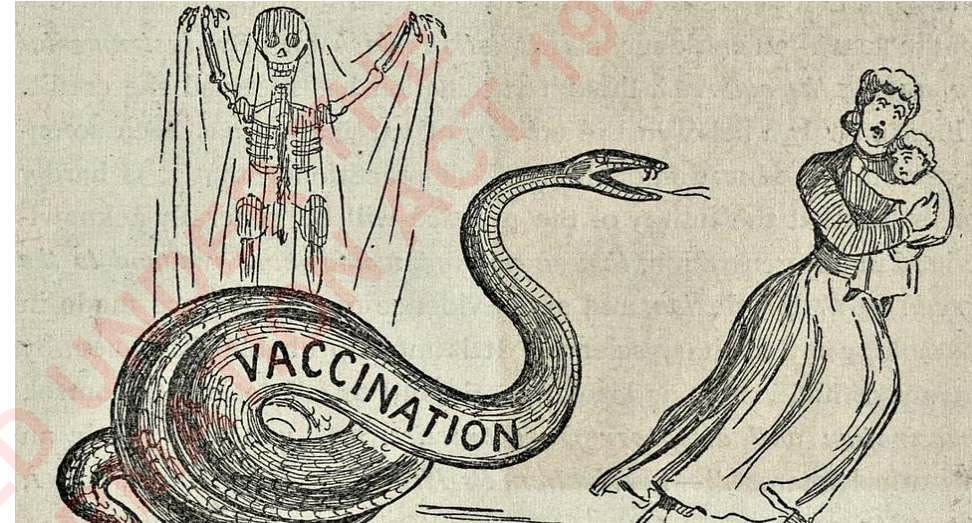


VFF's content from their blog and Telegram channel has been analysed to generate a word cloud with the most common themes being politics (39%), health (36%), miscellaneous (13%), and mistrust (12%) with examples of these themes being:

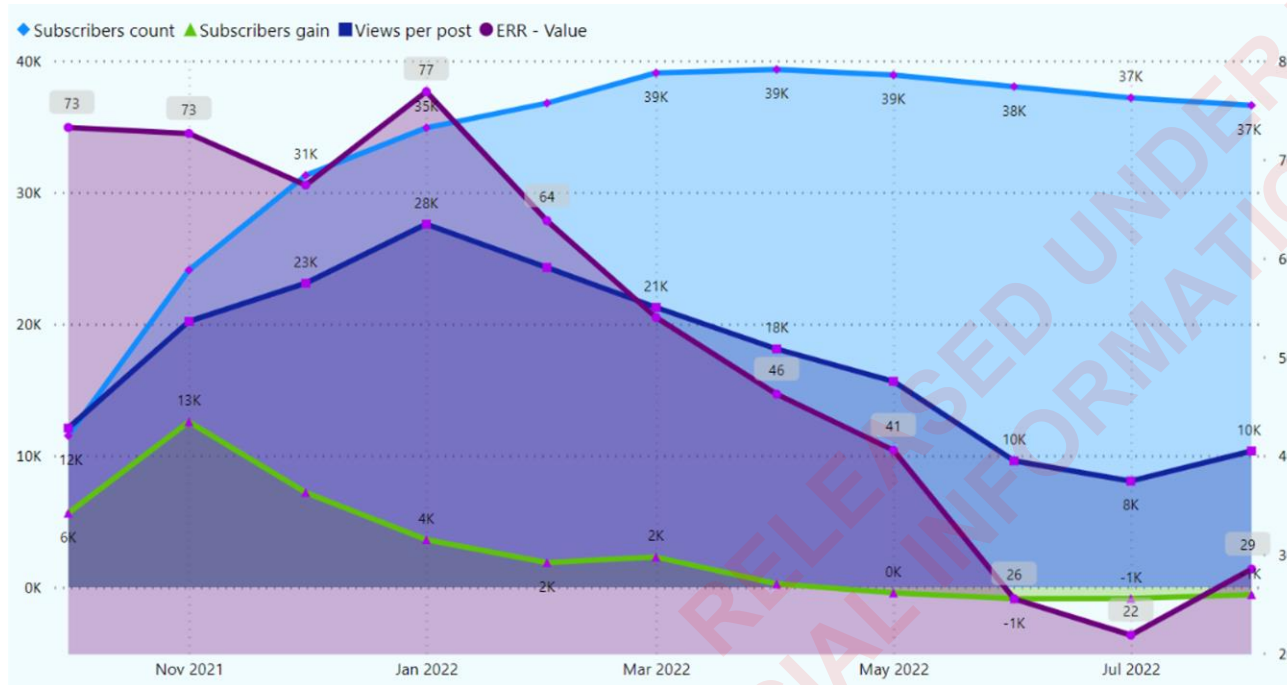
- **The government is hiding the data about vaccine deaths;**
- **COVID vaccines are experimental and harmful (particularly to children);**
- **Mainstream media is just government propaganda; and**
- **COVID vaccines and mask wearing are ineffective.**

How VFF influences

- Anti-vaccine groups and disinformation have existed since vaccinations began
- VFF have co-opted the positive language and imagery of the wellness industry and so called “momfluencers” to construct their brand
- The group has also copied the branding of the Unite Against COVID-19 campaign in some of its material
- The group use flyers and billboards to lead people to their digital content
- Digital platforms have enabled the group to increase visibility and gain a sufficient follower base to propagate their messaging
- The group has specifically targeted parents with fear based content arguing that vaccines harm children
- VFF members have protested outside of schools, vaccination centres and along roadsides



VFF's influence is waning



- **VFF's subscribers gain has dropped** and been low post its peak in Nov 2021 (green line)
- The group's total subscribers count (light blue line) has had a small but noticeable decline since March 2022
- There has been a significant drop in views per post (dark blue line)
- There has been a very significant drop in engagement per post (purple line) which tells us **their messages are no longer resonating as well with their audiences**

What is the importance of what we've learnt?

- The successful spread of VFF's message was directly tied to events such as the pandemic and the health mandates and through aggressive distribution of disinformation content both physically and digitally
- **COVID-19 dis and misinformation has reduced in recent weeks due to the removal of most COVID-19 public health mandates, but the benefits (financial or otherwise) of those like VFF who promoted mandate-based disinformation will not have gone away and are likely to be redirected elsewhere such as on topics such as antivaxx and antiviral myths.**
- VFF is still putting out some disinformation about the safety of vaccines and their **most recent flyers were specifically targeted at parents with disinformation messages likely to promote fear around children getting vaccinated.**
- They are also continuing to put out messaging saying that the government is hiding the data about vaccine deaths.



Comms planning to mitigate risks

- With an understanding of what VFF has been putting out in its messaging, the channels the group has been using, and analysing its reach, the Ministry is able to create messaging to pre-bunk and counter that of VFF and other disinformation groups.
- The COVID-19 comms team will **continue to track trending narratives to develop responsive communications and risk mitigations**. This will be even more important at specific times such as if we see another COVID-19 wave.
- We will **feedback to the National Immunisation Programme** communications team regarding the need for messaging to counter VFF's messaging about the dangers of children being vaccinated against COVID-19, with a particular need to focus messaging on more vulnerable communities such as Māori and Pasifika
- It might be worth proactively putting up someone from the Ministry such as Andrew Old to do a interview about the mortality analysis and vaccine related deaths to emphasise the safety of the COVID-19 vaccine and highlight how New Zealand's COVID-19 response has resulted in one of the lowest deaths per population in the world to counter VFF spin about COVID-19 mortality/vaccine safety.
- With further change to COVID-19 policy in October the DART function will be monitoring disinformation activity relating to these changes so that common themes/disinformation can be debunked by proactive messaging ahead of the announcements.
- We will support DPMC and Te Whatu Ora around the upcoming antivirals campaign to ensure that we have solid messaging and reactives around the safety and efficacy of COVID-19 antiviral drugs, as this is an ideal topic for VFF to reignite their disinformation campaign with.
- The key topics would be around:
 - Antivirals being safe
 - Why it's important that those most at risk have access to them as they can help to prevent serious illness for those most vulnerable
 - Antiviral eligibility and accessibility
 - The different types of antivirals
- As Stuff's Whole Truth campaign, which MOH fed in to on a monthly basis with story ideas, has now come to a close, MOH will develop it's own COVID-19 Myth Busting page on our website. This will cover specific topics around COVID-19 such as antivirals, and vaccines, the top ten myths about each topic, with accompanying information to dispel the myths. **DART will feed into this by pulling up the key themes of disinformation/misinformation that is being spread for each topic.**

Thank you

RELEASED UNDER THE
OFFICIAL INFORMATION ACT 1982