
THE DISINFORMATION PROJECT



**DISINFORMATION
AND THE 2023
NEW ZEALAND
GENERAL ELECTION**

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THE PROBLEM

Over the last three years, Aotearoa New Zealand has experienced growth of false, misleading or harmful information being deliberately spread. This is called disinformation, and it's having serious impacts on our society.

The upcoming 2023 General Election means more people are trying to understand how disinformation takes root and what can be done about it, as well as talking about the beliefs held by groups formed around disinformation.



Disinformation undermines our shared social values by creating fear and distrust, breaking down people's faith in democracy. Groups in New Zealand and overseas seek to undermine elections by questioning the integrity of people's votes and falsely claiming interference in things like vote counting.

These groups sometimes create their own political parties and put forward candidates to further the spread of disinformation. Candidates from more mainstream political parties are also taking up these ideas in an effort to appeal to communities who believe them.

The ideas spread through disinformation go beyond a healthy distrust of power and have resulted in large groups in New Zealand that now exist in a different reality to the rest of society. Understandably, many people find this worrying and hard to grasp.

FALLING DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE

Most New Zealanders will have some understanding that over the last three years, a large number of people have come to believe false and upsetting things. Sometimes, this is called **falling down the rabbit hole**.

You may know people affected by this, and some of the themes we'll outline might sound familiar to you, even if you're confused about how people can come to believe these things.

In this resource, we won't give you a full history of how and why people have come to believe extreme ideas, but we can tell you about the themes that often appear in our research on disinformation. These include some ideas you may see supported by political parties and candidates.



USING THIS RESOURCE

We believe that disinformation should be of concern to everyone, regardless of their political leanings. **We hope this resource will help everyone to:**



Better understand disinformation as a phenomenon, how it's growing in New Zealand and the risks it poses to electoral democracy.

Be able to recognise some themes that disinformation groups and candidates are seeking to promote during the lead-up to the election.



Feel more confident talking to your friends and family about why disinformation should concern them this election, as well as asking candidates about their beliefs and policies on disinformation and its themes.

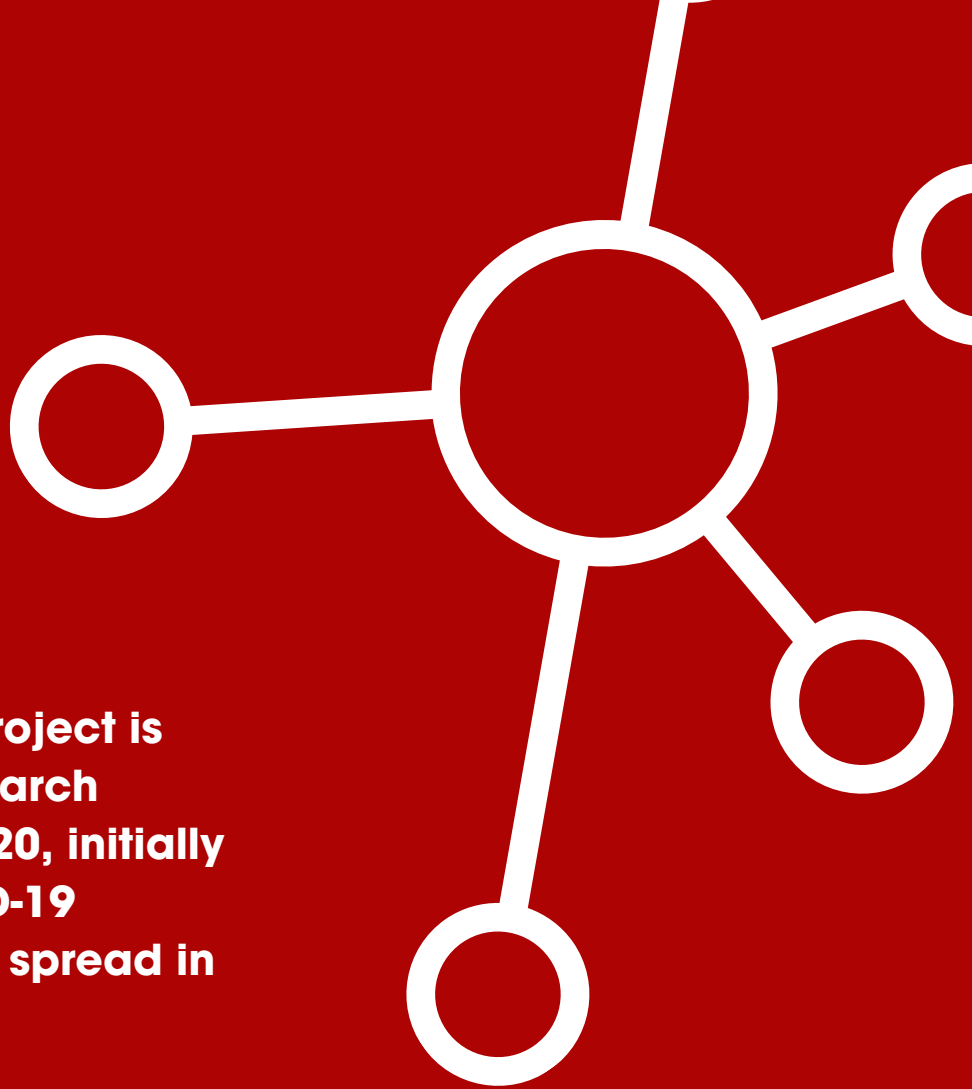
OUR WORK

The Disinformation Project is an independent research group founded in 2020, initially to understand COVID-19 disinformation being spread in the early days of the pandemic.

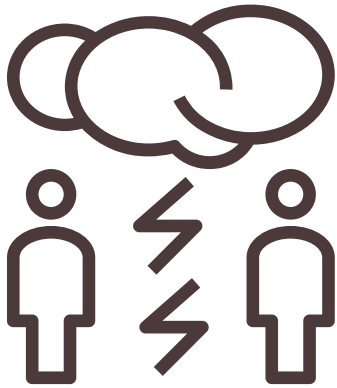
As more people turned to technology for information, support and a sense of community, we saw groups that initially formed around false COVID-19 beliefs were growing to include increasingly extreme ideas based on disinformation.

Our team has been using open-source methods to understand disinformation in New Zealand for over three years, and we work across all sectors with a range of clients to help them combat disinformation.

As this issue has grown, we have seen it have increasingly harmful impacts on families, communities and Aotearoa as a whole. In order to help people grasp this, we also provide free publicly available research on our findings, media commentary, and free resources like this one.



WHAT DOES DISINFORMATION DO?



Disinformation often promotes a distrust of people in power, like the government or 'in groups' who are believed to have influence. Holding leaders to account is a healthy and normal part of society, and many groups in Aotearoa have historically been mistreated and have very understandable reasons to distrust the government.

However, disinformation spreaders exploit this distrust by encouraging people to believe increasingly extreme ideas about the world. These ideas promote a constant sense of fear and anger in people, which creates a harmful disconnect between them, their families, communities and eventually wider society.

MIS OR DIS?

You might sometimes hear the term '**misinformation**'. Misinformation is false information that is spread because a person believes it to be true, usually without intent to harm.

Disinformation is the term used most often because the impacts of spreading false information on a large scale are harmful regardless of whether it started from a genuine belief.

DEFINING DISINFORMATION

Disinformation is false or misleading information created or shared with the intent to cause harm, or which could reasonably be expected to harm an individual, group or community. Disinformation is also:

- ✓ **A local and global issue that is having a growing impact on society.**
- ✓ **Spread by individuals and online communities that have shared conspiratorial beliefs.**
- ✓ **Often centred around existing fears, stereotypes and harmful beliefs about groups, as well as a belief that the government seeks to harm people.**
- ✓ **Aided by technology like the internet, targeted online advertising and the use of unmoderated social media platforms.**
- ✓ **Amplified by well-funded foreign groups who seek to benefit from creating disharmony across different countries.**
- ✓ **Ultimately fuelled by a global backlash to progressive issues like public health measures, sharing decision-making with indigenous communities, and marginalised groups winning small gains towards their rights and wellbeing.**

THEMES OF DISINFORMATION

The most common theme in disinformation is the idea that the government, backed by powerful 'in groups', are engaging in mass-scale deception of the public.

An example of this is the false belief that the COVID-19 pandemic was fake and

involved a genocide that has been covered up by groups ranging from healthcare providers through to the United Nations.

Other themes seek to exploit people's existing biases and target groups who are already marginalised by spreading false ideas like:

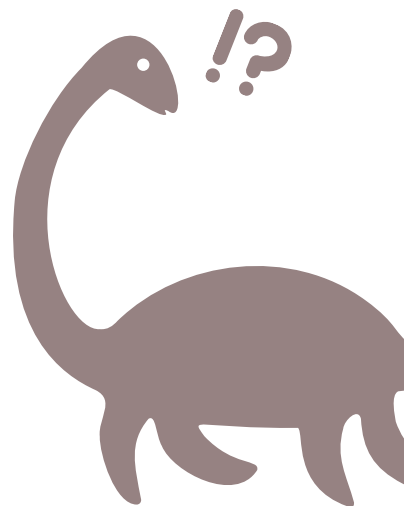
FALSEHOODS

- Honouring the Treaty of Waitangi will take away the rights of non-Māori as part of a conspiracy between the government and a perceived group of 'elites'.
- Transgender and non-binary people are a danger to children.
- The growth of immigration into New Zealand and other countries will result in the 'replacement' of white people.
- Women's rights have gone too far, and women are failing in their traditional roles as mothers and caretakers.
- Moves to be more environmentally friendly, especially in infrastructure and transport, are secretly a way to take away people's private property.

You might have noticed that disinformation themes overlap with conspiracy theories.

While there are a lot of shared ideas between the two phenomena, they are separate.

An example of a conspiracy theory is a belief in the Loch Ness Monster. However, no well-funded groups seek to spread a belief in the Loch Ness Monster to sow distrust locally and internationally through the idea that the Scottish government is covering up its existence.



DISINFORMATION IS HARMFUL

As online communities centred around disinformation continue to grow, so do their real-world impacts. Members of disinformation communities frequently express a desire for violence towards politicians, judges, public servants, academics and marginalised communities who they believe will cause them harm or take away their freedoms.

In the lead-up to the election, more people are being exposed to disinformation and encouraged to distrust the electoral process. This ranges from being told their vote won't count, to the normalisation and encouragement of extreme actions to protect against perceived threats.

CALLING IT OUT

Now that you know some of the frequent themes of disinformation, we hope that you will feel confident to call it out when you see it.

It's important to do this when you see people spreading disinformation, especially candidates and parties asking for your vote this election.

This is important to do in places like social media, in your communities, and at events like candidate meetings. We encourage you to emphasise the shared value of good information and being able to trust the people who seek to represent us.

Calling out disinformation when we see it might not win over people who have already gone down the rabbit hole, but it helps by showing others that disinformation will not go without challenge.

Even if you are shouted down, raising your concerns is still important.

A common tactic for disinformation spreaders is to be evasive and accuse other people of the bigotry they themselves clearly hold through their words and actions. Again, raising your concerns still helps, even if you're given an unsatisfactory response.

Unfortunately, disinformation isn't going away. As technology evolves, so does the spread of disinformation, and the platforms which host disinformation are often motivated by financial gain, rather than social good.

However, good information from trustworthy sources are critical to a healthy democracy, especially during an election period.

Combating disinformation often starts at a personal level by understanding the issue and calling it out.



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