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28 November 2022

P Taylor

By email: fyi-request-20989-685ca7dd@requests.fyi.org.nz
Ref: H2022015932

Tēnā koe

Response to your request for official information

Thank you for your request under the Official Information Act 1982 (the Act) to Manatū Hauora (the Ministry of Health) on 31 October 2022. You requested:

“All communications between any member of the Disinformation Assessment and Response Team (DART) and Netsafe during the period of 01 August 2022 and 30 September 2022”

Manatū Hauora has conducted a search and identified four email chains and an attachment within scope of your request. The emails and relevant attachment are itemised in Appendix 1 of this letter and copies of the documents are enclosed. Please note, where information is withheld under section 9 of the Act, I have considered the countervailing public interest in releasing information and consider that it does not outweigh the need to withhold at this time.

The COVID-19 Disinformation Assessment and Response Team (DART) was initially established as part of the Manatū Hauora National Immunisation Programme. DART transferred into the Manatū Hauora Communications and Engagement Group on 1 June 2022. Following that transfer, the work was rescoped to fit with the communications focus. The team itself no longer exists: the two contractors and the Senior Advisor all finished work at the Ministry within the last two months.

When it was in operation, DART acted as a clearinghouse for reporting on disinformation. DART received reports of disinformation through a variety of forms, including leaflets, digital items, weblinks and reports from 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 the Social Media team. For example, if the Social Media team noted disinformation on a post on our channels, this was reported to DART.

DART did not collect personal information and used only open-source data to assess information and could not assess items that may be private. During its operation, the team made referrals to the Medical Council, the Department of Internal Affairs, Netsafe, Worksafe and the New Zealand Police. Referrals were made to other parts of Manatū Hauora, as well as to Te Whatu Ora Health New Zealand (formerly the district health boards). DART also worked with Netsafe to bring to its attention examples of sites and other social media sources where disinformation is reported to platforms like Facebook.

I trust this information fulfils your request. 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

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'S. Turner', is positioned below the text 'Nāku noa, nā'.

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

Appendix 1: List of documents for release

#	Date	Document details	Decision on release
1	23 August – 8 September 2022	Email: RE: Chantelle Baker back on Facebook with Operation People.	Some information withheld under section 9(2)(a) of the Act to protect the privacy of natural persons.
2	8 September 2022	Email: RE: Misinfo incident reports	
3	20 September 2022	Email: RE: Netsafe and DART monthly meeting	
4	21 September 2022	Email: DART Monthly Report – VFF DRAFT	
4A	21 September 2022	Email Attachment: DART Monthly Report- VFF DRAFT	Released in full.

From: Daniel Dominey
Sent: Thursday, 8 September 2022 9:37 am
To: Sean [REDACTED]
Subject: RE: Chantelle Baker on back on Facebook with Operation People.

Hi Sean

Thanks for that.

In regards to banned actors smurfing back on there are a few offenders we know of (VFF being one under their own names springs to mind) so this may be an opportunity to see if we can use the newly created code of practice to nudge them along (perhaps in the same way one uses a rolled up newspaper to nudge a wayward canine along).

Week of 19th works for me so I will send an invite through soon. I will make sure it's an ongoing one this time.

Happy for the CEO to touch base, we are always happy to help regarding disinformation.

Sincerely

Daniel

Daniel Dominey | Senior Advisor
Disinformation Assessment and Response Team (**DART**)
To contact us email: DART@health.govt.nz

From: Sean [REDACTED]
Sent: Thursday, 8 September 2022 9:27 am
To: Daniel Dominey <Daniel.Dominey@health.govt.nz>
Subject: Re: Chantelle Baker on back on Facebook with Operation People.

Hi Daniel,

I've had quite a bit of back and forth with the platform on this one. A little bit frustrating actually.

I'll let you know as soon as I have something more concrete.

Not sure how our regular catch-up fell off the schedule, But lets put it back in. How is the week of the 19th for you (I'm away next week)

Also, our CEO Brent Carey would like to touch base with you regarding some Misinfo reports we are concerned might have floated around the system somewhere, hope you are ok if I give him your contact details?

Speak soon,

Sean.



From: Daniel Dominey <Daniel.Dominey@health.govt.nz>
Sent: Tuesday, 6 September 2022 9:06 am
To: Sean s 9(2)(a)
Subject: FW: Chantelle Baker on back on Facebook with Operation People.

Hi Sean

Just following up on this.

Sincerely

Daniel

Daniel Dominey | Senior Advisor
 Disinformation Assessment and Response Team (**DART**)
 To contact us email: DART@health.govt.nz

From: Daniel Dominey
Sent: Monday, 29 August 2022 10:53 am
To: Sean s 9(2)(a)
Cc: Disinformation Assessment and Response Team <@mz>
Subject: RE: Chantelle Baker on back on Facebook with Operation People.

Hi Sean

Apologies for the delay here, was off sick the end of last week.

If possible we would like to know the outcome of this as the ability of an individual or group to “smurf” their way back into the system is probably a bigger issue than taking them off.

Also, its probably time for our monthly catchup, I checked my calendar as I thought we had a standing monthly but it appears not so how are you looking for this week?

Quite a lot to discuss.

Sincerely

Daniel

Daniel Dominey | Senior Advisor
Disinformation Assessment and Response Team (**DART**)
To contact us email: DART@health.govt.nz

From: Sean s 9(2)(a)
Sent: Wednesday, 24 August 2022 2:36 pm
To: Daniel Dominey <Daniel.Dominey@health.govt.nz>
Subject: Re: Chantelle Baker on back on Facebook with Operation People.

Cheers Daniel,

We have had reports around this little "ecosystem" and, as part of that, have made a report to Meta based on their subverting a ban from the platform criteria. I can let you know the outcome of that process if you'd like?

Sean

Sean s 9(2)(a) | Netsafe Online Safety Operations Centre | s 9(2)(a)
| Netsafe | www.netsafe.org.nz



We keep p

From: Daniel Dominey <Daniel.Dominey@health.govt.nz>
Sent: Tuesday, 23 August 2022 2:02 pm

To: Sean [REDACTED]
Cc: Disinformation Assessment and Response Team <@xnz >
Subject: Chantelle Baker on back on Facebook with Operation People.

Hi Sean

Just wondering if you (and Facebook) are aware of this.

After her Facebook account being suspended, it appears Chantelle Baker has moved to another Facebook page, Operation People.

<https://www.facebook.com/operationpeoplentz>

Sincerely

Daniel

Daniel Dominey | Senior Advisor
Disinformation Assessment and Response Team (DART)
To contact us email: DART@health.govt.nz

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Released under the Official Information Act 1982

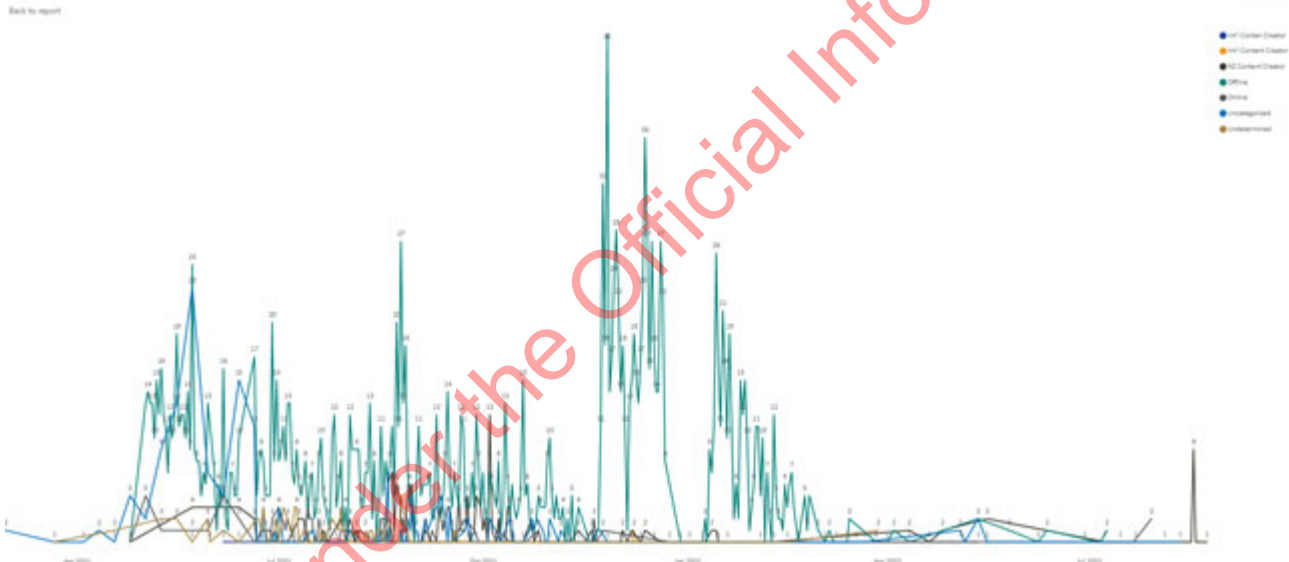
From: Daniel Dominey
Sent: Thursday, 8 September 2022 10:44 am
To: Brent Carey
Cc: Sean [redacted] Disinformation Assessment and Response Team; Priya Munro
Subject: RE: Misinfo incident reports

Hi Brent

Thanks for your email and congratulations on the new role, very exciting work.

Your question touches on an issue that I have been thinking about for a while now so I can probably provide some degree of answer as DART has been collecting and processing reports from CERT since the start of the year and we have been analysing all the data from CERT reports (which date back to around Jan 2021).

The short answer on this questions would be that the majority of reporting of disinformation over the last year or so was physical items such as flyers and leaflets (such as those put in letterboxes or handed out in public by the anti-vax group Vices for Freedom) who have accounted for approximately 70% of all reporting and that physical items get reported while digital do not (I will elaborate further below). I have attached a table from our data set to help illustrate this.



The green line that dominates that table is for reports of offline (or physical) disinformation content (like the aforementioned flyers) with digital content being that brown line down in the mix of data on the table.

Why the public reporting of physical disinformation is much higher is not exactly known but we are fairly certain that its due to the fact that while digital disinformation tends to only spread in the digital echo chambers (like minded groups and networks etc) so the majority of people who see (and consume it) are not going to see (or recognise) it as disinformation as they are accepting of its message/ideas so they would have little or no motivation to report it as disinformation as they would not see it as such.

However, physical information, such as VFF leaflets, breaks out of the echo chambers and into spaces well beyond so they prompt a greater response from members of the public (i.e. those who are not inside the echo chamber and recognise it as disinformation content).

So, if you look at the table you see a massive spike of reporting towards the end of 2021 which coincides with VFF running a major campaign of leaflets (VFF claimed to distribute over 4 million leaflets in 2021) and billboards in November, December and January 2021 (the period which immediately presaged the occupation and riots at parliament). Digital reporting for the same period was almost zero.

So if there are physical items of disinformation out there (and VFF are the only group who seem to have the high level of funds to pay for mass distribution of physical disinformation content) then reporting goes up, if not it drops back down and is almost all digital. And coincidentally, VFF have just started another round of flyers in letter boxes so we expect to see reporting go back up (as it has started to do through non CERT channels).

However, its important to note that digital spaces are where most of the disinformation we are seeing lives and that public reporting is only one part of our collections space, its an important one but we do our own scanning and collections to maintain awareness.

That is the immediate answer to your question but there are some other factors which need to be unpacked to fully account for the drop off.

The **first** is that the loop for public reporting is not closed as an important factor in what motivates people to report things to any organisation or authority etc is the want/need to know that their report has been received and often that something has been done.

In this case there is a disconnect here as while DART has received these reports and in cases responded to them we have not had the information (or the authority) to report back to the individual that made it and as far as I am aware CERT (who collects the reports) does not do this either (both in regards to acknowledging receipt of the report or in reporting back that any action has been taken).

And when the loop is not closed the person who made the report does not know if their report was received or if any action taken there is no motivation to make any further reports. I know this as with my work in compliance spaces for both INZ and DIA ensuring feedback to that those who provided info or reported things to us was vitally important as it ensured that the effort taken by the person was acknowledged and thanks given but also in some cases we would follow up and simply say that action had been taken (we would not disclose any further details but an indication that something had been done was usually enough). Thus the loop was closed and it often encouraged further reporting or at least helped people inform others of what to do if they had an issue they wanted to report.

The **next** issues is that there had been no real promotion that there even was a means (or agency) to report disinformation to so unless someone had an inkling that such a thing existed they would get disinformation in the letterbox but simply not know what to do about it. For example DIA handles reports of spam in NZ (<https://www.dia.govt.nz/Spam>), has a webpage on it and runs promotions to raise awareness of it. CERT had a section on one of their pages with info for reporting but it was never promoted except by other agencies (such as DPMC or MOH) in regards to specific situations. But, to be fair I do not blame CERT for this situation as they took the work on when no one else would and it was very much on the edge of their mandate so they may have been constrained in doing so.

So public awareness of what to do (such as reporting it) if they see disinformation is very low. Additionally there are no third parties organisations (such as CrimeStoppers) who currently act as a possible third party catch all for reporting of this kind (but DART has discussed this with CrimeStoppers in embryo but such has not progressed).

The **final** issue is that no government agency really has disinformation on its mandate (or they only deal with very specific aspects of it – such as the security services do look at the violent extremist aspects of disinformation but this is only a very small part of the larger disinformation ecosystem) and DART is the only team dealing with the full scope of the issue at an operational level and we are a small team (3 staff) who primarily deal with health disinfo (as it is one of the bigger aspects of the whole and due to MOH wanting us to focus on it). Current legislation is not really fit for purpose and as you would undoubtedly be aware there are issues of free speech etc which make entry into this space problematic without a firm mandate to do so.

These three factors/issue are part of the large issue in regards to reporting as DART had hoped to be able to take over the reporting from CERT (and we had scoped responses to the issues noted above) but Health decided not to progress this aspect.

So hopefully that helps explain things and apologies for the verbiage of my response.

If you have any further questions or thought please don't hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely

Daniel

Daniel Dominey | Senior Advisor
Disinformation Assessment and Response Team (**DART**)
To contact us email: DART@health.govt.nz

From: Brent Carey **s 9(2)(a)**
Sent: Thursday, 8 September 2022 9:46 am
To: Daniel Dominey <Daniel.Dominey@health.govt.nz>
Cc: Sean **s 9(2)(a)**
Subject: Misinfo incident reports

Hi Daniel,

Brent here, NetSafe's new CEO.

Sean kindly forwarded me your details.

I am reaching out to enquire as to what the reason might be for what looks to be a drop off in reporting to Netsafe around misinformation complaints - which gives rise to potential breaches of our false allegation principle under the HDCA.

My interest in the area was peaked after reading two OIA replies at: <https://fyi.org.nz/request/15411/response/58916/attach/2/DOIA%202021%202247%20Eurisko%20Bowden.pdf> and <https://fyi.org.nz/request/19579/response/76009/attach/4/H202208157%20Response%20Letter.pdf>

In the second fyi there is reference to roughly 1,200 reports which appear to have been 'dead ended' as in not referred to us for assessment.

I am keen being new in the role to understand the referral out to agencies process if there is one.

I've included an extract from an email below from Ben Cross over at CERTNZ as I asked him the same question and you will see from his reply he thought the answer might lie at MOH?

If it is easier to jump on a call with Sean would be keen to understand how better to coordinate on these matters.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Regards

Brent

Begin forwarded message:

From: Ben s 9(2)(a)
 Date: 6 September 2022 at 2:45:21 PM NZST
 To: Brent Carey s 9(2)(a) Leanne s 9(2)(a) Andrea s 9(2)(a)
 s 9(2)(a) Michael s 9(2)(a) Sean s 9(2)(a)
 s 9(2)(a)
 Cc: Sam Leggett <sam.leggett@cert.govt.nz>
 Subject: Follow-up on CERT NZ/Netsafe meeting [UNCLASSIFIED]

Kia ora koutou

Finally, I've been digging into the drop off in HDCA reports that CERT NZ sends through to Netsafe. It may be worth having a conversation with our IR team to address what the process was previously so that we can get this back up and running. I've CC'd Sam Leggett, who was the Senior Analyst working in this space and would be a good point of contact for getting some of the future reporting sorted. I will also chase up the Ministry of Health as they were meant to be forwarding on reports to the appropriate places once CERT had referred them through.

Ngā mihi
Ben

Benjamin s 9(2)(a) ([he/him](#))
 Senior Advisor, Engagement and Partnerships
 s 9(2)(a)

CERT NZ – Responding to cyber security threats in New Zealand
 Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment

For information on COVID-19 vaccine-related scams visit www.cert.govt.nz/covidscams
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 LinkedIn: [@certnz](#)
www.cert.govt.nz



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From: Daniel Dominey
Sent: Tuesday, 20 September 2022 7:25 am
To: Sean [redacted]
Subject: RE: Netsafe and DART monthly meeting

I can switch to 4.

From: Sean [redacted]
Sent: Tuesday, 20 September 2022 7:00 am
To: Daniel Dominey <Daniel.Dominey@health.govt.nz>
Cc: Disinformation Assessment and Response Team <dart@health.govt.nz>
Subject: Re: Netsafe and DART monthly meeting

Sorry to be a pain, but I have a round of job interviews at 3. Any chance we could do 2 or 4?

Sean

Sean [redacted] Netsafe Online Safety Operations Centre | [redacted]
[redacted] | Netsafe | www.netsafe.org.nz

From: Daniel Dominey <Daniel.Dominey@health.govt.nz>
Sent: Monday, September 19, 2022 3:20:31 PM
To: Sean [redacted]
Cc: Disinformation Assessment and Response Team <dart@health.govt.nz>
Subject: Netsafe and DART monthly meeting
When: Tuesday, 20 September 2022 3:00 pm-4:00 pm.
Where: ROOM WLG 1C.5 (4)

Forgot to add the teams link

Microsoft Teams meeting

Join on your computer, mobile app or room device

[Click here to join the meeting](#)

Meeting ID: [redacted]

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Video Conference ID: [redacted]

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From: Daniel Dominey
Sent: Wednesday, 21 September 2022 1:18 pm
To: Sean [REDACTED]
Subject: DART Monthly Report-VFF DRAFT September 2022
Attachments: DART Monthly Report-VFF DRAFT September 2022.docx

Hi Sean

Thanks for meeting yesterday.

As noted here is a draft copy of DARTs first monthly report and as you can see the first cab off the rank is Voices for Freedom (VFF).

We have gone for light and easy to read despite the heavier data that sits behind a lot of the analysis. Any feedback or comment is appreciated.

We are still developing the charts and tables so those are basically Version 1 and the final reports will probably have more developed ones but the words are pretty much what we will say.

Also I have added in below a quick summary that will be in the final report but is not in the version attached:

- *This group (VFF) is the most prolific spreader of disinformation in Aotearoa. Utilising a mix of disinformation false information created with the intent cause harm or for profit and malinformation true information which is manipulated or distorted to suit a particular narrative or agenda.*
- *VFF is unique in that it is well funded, well branded, and more sophisticated than other disinformation groups by portraying itself, and its content, in a less confrontational manner.*
- *Figures show that VFF's engagement appears to be waning:*
 - *website monthly traffic has significantly decreased from 114,000 visits in January 2022 (during the occupation at Parliament) to a low of 21,000 in June 2022.*
 - *VFFs posts on Telegram had high engagement (audience levels) from mid-2021 until in January 2022 (between 70% and 99%) before rapidly declining over the next few months to lows of only 22% and 29% per post in July to August 2022.*
- *DART assessed the group's content on their website and telegram for credibility and transparency finding that the website severely violates journalistic standards.*
- *VFF has a record of anti-authority behaviours encouraging mask and vaccine exemption, using shell website that redirect the user to the group's website, encouraging participation in the Parliamentary occupation and attempting to 'skirt' bans on platforms such as Meta/ Facebook.*
- *The groups material has been the subject of repeated (over 100) complaints to the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) and despite most rulings going against them VFF have repeatedly ignored findings against them.*
- *COVID-19 restrictions have now been lifted, VFF is pivoting to anti-authority sentiments and messaging to 'make New Zealand ungovernable' advising it's run members in local body elections.*

Finally, in regards to DART and its portability between agencies etc I would note the following:

- DART was built to be modular (which breaks down to mean that **a**) it's not system/software specific - its OS in nature and we are not dependant on stuff in any agency to do our work (we are off-the-shelf in almost everything we do and use); and **b**) DART is primarily based around its staff (as with point a) there is nothing that ties DART to any agency, we go where we can. I am a big believer in OS intel work but I don't limit that

to just OS data but also OS software and systems and staff etc. In essence we act and operate as a tech start-up would until we get to a certain size/level. It means we are nimble and flexible to pivot in the early to mid-phase when functions, products and practices are still being developed. After the mid phase we can embed properly and codify what we do more comprehensively (work out our Op Pol and such);

- This means that DART can set up anywhere and do what it does quickly (with some caveats); with basic systems and some extra software and access to some online APIs etc DART can pretty much be in business as quickly as we can plug those in'
- All DART staff are on contracts until 23 December only, but if the situation developed we are still able to give notice as per the norm and if the situation was right we may be able to discuss it with MOH to go earlier. At this time there is no indication of what happens after Dec 23 (however that is the same for a lot of the people where I work in MOH) so as noted we are beginning to look for new roles,
- My scoping for DART was a minimum of 6 people to make it viable (this is primarily as an intel function (including a data analyst) but with a dedicated Comms/engagement person as well; the next size up is approximately double that with an expanded comms/engagement function and a more educative aspect (ie we are not just providing analysis but we are also doing some of what we are doing now in MOH with training on things like pre-bunking/debunking and counter narrative stuff as well as critical thinking etc. The big difference between the 6 person and 12 person version is that the six is basically just raw intel while the 12 is intel and deeper analysis set into work streams and then allowing for a broader/bigger scanning function and the afore mentioned comms and engagement staff (who I think are what will really make a difference in the long run by teaching critical thinking and explaining the harms).

I would also note that while NZ is behind in its response overall, there is still the incredible opportunity to get in and make a real difference in this space as well as develop a comprehensive approach to the problem and harms of disinformation and while a lot of money has been thrown at this in some countries its not necessarily dollars that will make the difference but a keen focus on key issues and addressing those. Having a super big budget and being in a large org would help in some ways but really just as the nature of the space is fluid and flexible so does DART have to be, and I ensure that we embed that in our work so I think once we get ours down we can learn from others but also teach others what we have done, go the full DIY thing and show that its not about one agency fixing it as this is an all-of-society problem, it needs an all of society solution and we can work with others, bring people in and leverage those things into real solutions.

If you have any questions or comments please don't hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely

Daniel

Daniel Dominey | Senior Advisor
Disinformation Assessment and Response Team (**DART**)
To contact us email: DART@health.govt.nz

Sincerely

Daniel

Daniel Dominey | Senior Advisor
Disinformation Assessment and Response Team (**DART**)
To contact us email: DART@health.govt.nz

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Sep 2022

Voices For Freedom

Content Assessment

Released under the Official Information Act 1982

Disinformation Assessment & Response Team
[DART]

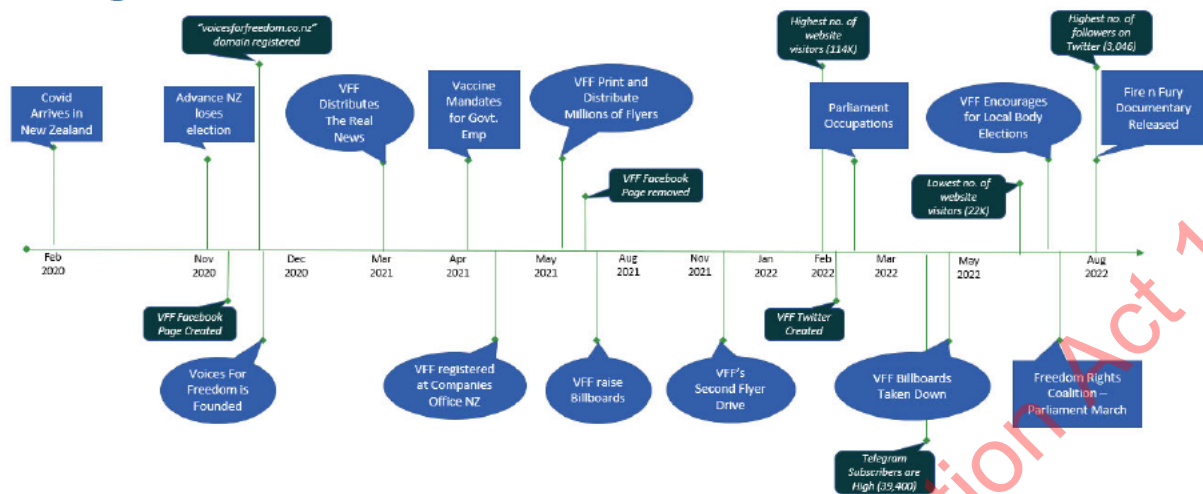
Disclaimer

All conclusions and interpretations in this report are made on the balance of probabilities and with the information available at the time of assessment.

Only open-source data and the content found on the website/s indicated are used in this assessment. No personal or private information is collected and no assessment of any individuals, or the organisation/s they belong to, are done but in some instances such details may be noted.

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Background



Voices For Freedom (VFF) is anti-vaccine group that was formed in late 2020 by Claire Deeks, Libby Johnson and Alia Bland. The group is the most prolific spreader of disinformation in Aotearoa and were prominent in supporting the occupation at Parliament.

Like many creators of disinformation, the group has been able to weaponize the discord, grievance, fears and upset created by COVID-19 and related health responses to increase consumption of its content and has often used highly emotive material, such as claiming vaccines cause harms to children, to promote a sense of urgency and action among members.

However, unlike other spreaders of disinformation in Aotearoa, VFF have the resources to fund multiple country wide mass media campaigns on multiple occasions, which by their own figures totalled 4.5 million flyers and billboards in all major centres during 2021, that has given it a reach no other disinformation group has.

The most common items of VFFs disinformation content are flyers which have been distributed across the country with the two most reported items being "You can't take it back" and "Are you fed up with COVID yet?". These items are specifically targeted at parents to promote fear around children getting vaccinated and to portray the COVID-19 health measures as being ineffective.

Much of this real-world material was the source of an unprecedented level of complaints to the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) and are responsible for over 70% of all public reports of disinformation made to CERT NZ.

Additionally, the groups self-image as non-violent and peaceful has differed markedly from its harassment of students, staff and parents outside of schools and vaccination centres and downplaying the role of the parliamentary rioters at the end of the 23-day occupation of parliament and instead blaming police and the media for the violence.

Recently, as COVID-19 measures have ended, VFFs anti-vaccine messages has waned in resonance and the group has sought to run members in local body elections without declaring their affiliations and with the intent of making New Zealand "ungovernable".

Website Assessment



The group is active online with a website and other social media such as Telegram (which is their main public channel) as well as physical media such as flyers and billboards.

False information content by the group was a mix of **disinformation** (false information created with the intent cause harm or for profit) and **malinformation** (true information which is manipulated or distorted to suit a particular narrative or agenda) and VFF actively created their own as well as used that of others.

The groups content failed assessment in three out of five areas for credibility due to the high levels of false information across all forms of media, information not presented responsibly and failures to clarify errors. The group did pass in differentiating between opinion other content (despite that content being false) and headlines were generally not misleading or deceptive (again despite the high levels of false content in the articles).

Additionally, the group failed two out of three criteria in transparency due to not disclosing their funding sources or conflicts of interest. This is significant as VFF have access the high levels of funds available for activities such as billboards and mass flyer drops. VFF usually disclosed the creators of content on their platforms, but occasionally unattributed material was used and so also passed on this criterion.

Behaviours

VFF have repeatedly shown a willingness to circumvent responses by authorities and social media platforms to remove disinformation content spread by them as well as subvert the media content of others (including New Zealand government) to cloak their own disinformation.

The groups Facebook page was closed in June 2021 for spreading COVID-19 disinformation, but VFF Then operated a smurf account to continue post disinformation content on the platform. Additionally, the groups Instagram account remains up despite near identical content and the parent company of Facebook and Instagram (Meta) being the same, which illustrates the limited effectiveness of social media account bans if not implemented fully.

VFF has also co-opted the web address for the [COVID-19 Vaccine Report and Adverse Reaction](#) page (www.carm.co.nz) which takes the user to groups website instead and was promoted on billboards across NZ. Additionally, the billboard and related advert also used branding from the Unite Against Covid (UAC) campaign to appear if it was government sponsored and did not include the VFF logo, which was prominent on all other billboards for the group.

Given the anti-vaccine stance of VFF this appears to have been an attempt to encourage people to make false reports of adverse reactions to the COVID-19 vaccine rather than promotion of public health.

The groups material has been the subject of repeated (over 100) complaints to the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) and despite most rulings going against them VFF have repeatedly ignored findings against them. Additionally, they submitted COVID-19 disinformation as evidence in one of their appeals which was not identified as such by the ASA and led to one decision going in their favour.

VFF have also produced material encouraging people to subvert health procedures and processes by falsely applying for exemptions to wearing a mask which (as the group is against mask wearing) appears to be a behaviour similar to people getting fake vaccine passes.

Thematic Analysis

Freedom



VFFs disinformation is thematically similar to other anti-vaccine content but the group portrays itself, and its content, in a less confrontational and more sophisticated manner than other disinformation groups and effects the appearance of a grassroots group of concerned parents “just asking questions”.

VFFs disinformation content has been analysed to generate a word cloud (above) with the most common themes being health (blue), mistrust (purple), politics (green) and miscellaneous (cyan) with examples of these themes being:

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

Common phrases used by the group and on its merchandise include:

- Freedom over Fear
- Born to Be Free
- Live Free
- Keep Hugging

VFF have created a brand by using a distinct set of neutral colours (light blue and green) on all material as well as having an easily identifiable logo which is found on items (apparel, flags and cups etc) sold in the groups online shop.

The group encourages having “courageous conversations” (using the logical fallacy of false equivalency) when promoting disinformation, refer to their supporters as “lions” (a reference with both conspiracy and Christian connotations) and themselves as “mumma bears” (a term used by conservative Christian mothers in the United States).

Further, VFFs ongoing references to protecting children, ostensibly from vaccine harms, is a softening of the same message used by the conspiracy group Qanon and others in the conspiracy space who believe that there are secret groups of paedophiles in governments that sexually abuse children in satanic rituals.

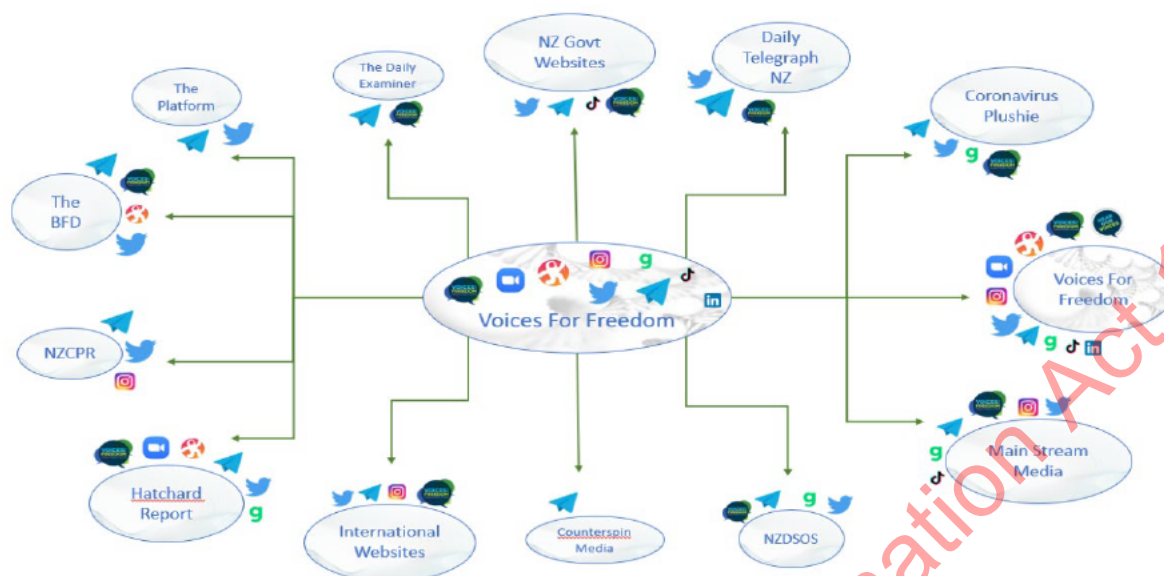
Additionally, many of the ideas and phrases which underpin the groups messages (including the use of the term “ungovernable”) have commonality with contemporary Libertarian and Anarchist ideas into which has been mixed imagery and beliefs from the alternate health and conspiracy spaces.

Like many other disinformation groups in New Zealand, VFF had used nationalist language and sentiment in their messages with constant references to “ordinary kiwis” which is used to help integrate their disinformation in local communities and mask its thematic origin (usually US styled conspiracy theories).

However, behind the positive branding are darker themes found in the conspiracy space such as the great reset, Agenda 30 and VFF have direct association with the Real News magazine and the political party Advance NZ which have both been responsible for aggressive promotion of conspiracy and anti-vaccine disinformation across Aotearoa.

Lastly, the groups social media channels reveal less-positive messages that include verbal attacks on politicians and senior health officials; repeated scaremongering through unsupported claims about vaccines causing widespread harms or death; use of the word “tyranny”; and allowance of violent messages in the groups chat spaces.

Network Analysis



VFF have extensive links to Aotearoa's and International disinformation networks which includes local disinformation content creators such as Guy Hatchard and international disinformation figures such as Robert F Kennedy Jr in the US (a major source of anti-vaccine disinformation).

Analysis of VFFs website and social media showed the most linked social media and online platforms were Telegram and Twitter (37 and 27 respectively) with video sharing channel Odysee third (6).

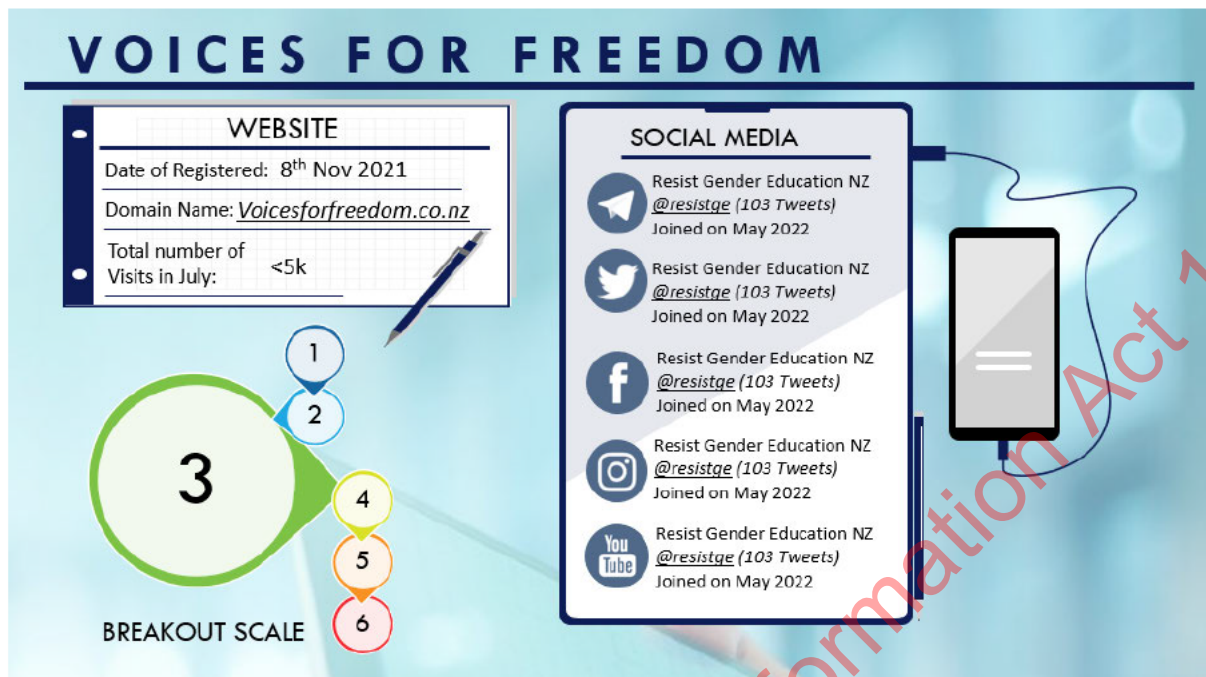
The most common New Zealand disinformation links VFF had were:

- Guy Hatchard, one of Aotearoa's most prolific spreaders of COVID-19 disinformation,
- The Daily telegraph, a New Zealand disinformation site with links to Russian propaganda source RT,
- Coronavirusplushie, an unidentified individual spreading COVID-19 disinformation in New Zealand),
- The BFD, a blog run by Cameron Slater,
- The Platform, an alternate media platform started by Sean Plunket,
- for Political Research (NZCPR) a NZ political fake-tank; and
- New Zealand Doctors Speaking Out With Science (NZDSOS) who are prominent medical disinformation spreaders.

Additionally, VFF has posted their videos on various hosting sites (Odysee) and link to a range of international websites known for anti-vaccine disinformation (the Children's Health Defence).

VFF also, had links to mainstream media and government websites when it fitted their narrative but notably rarely linked disinformation content from Brian Tamaki led group the Freedom and Rights Coalition in comparison to other groups.

Technical Profile

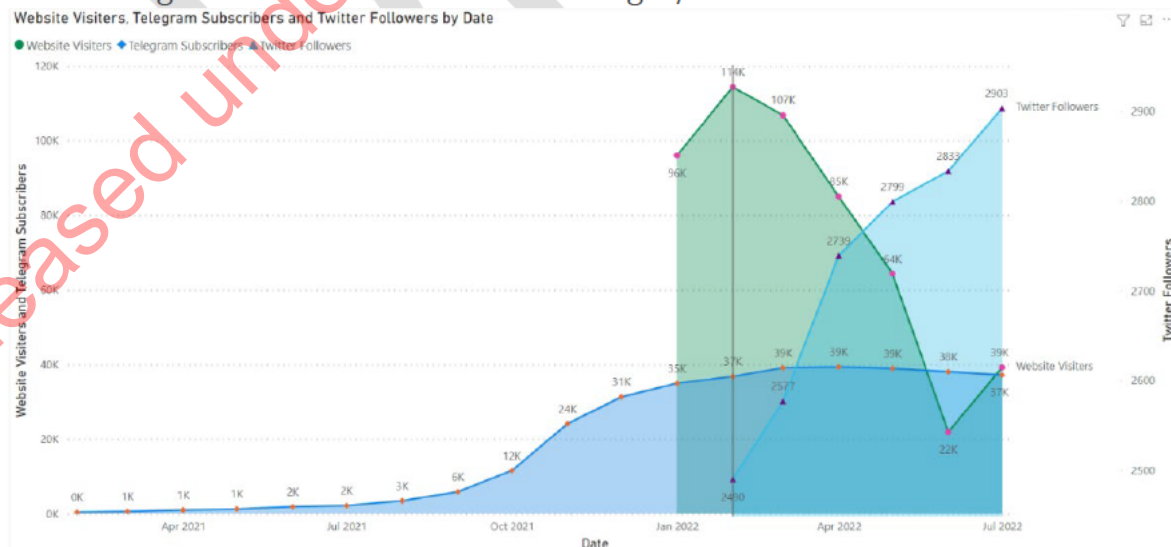


VFFs website has monthly traffic in the tens of thousands although those numbers have fluctuated significantly hitting a high of 114,000 visits in January 2022 (during the occupation at Parliament) and a low of 21,000 in June 2022.

Since then traffic has started rising again (to 69,000 in August 2022) but as these rises have coincided with a range of negative coverage in the media regarding VFF candidates running in local body elections and the Fire and Fury coverage by Stuff NZ it is likely that many of those visiting were not sympathetic to VFFs message but rather made curious by media coverage.

VFFs Facebook page was its main social media presence until June 2021 when its was taken down by Facebook, after which the group encouraged followers to move to their new channel on the messaging app Telegram and began to use the Facebook page set up by Claire Deeks.

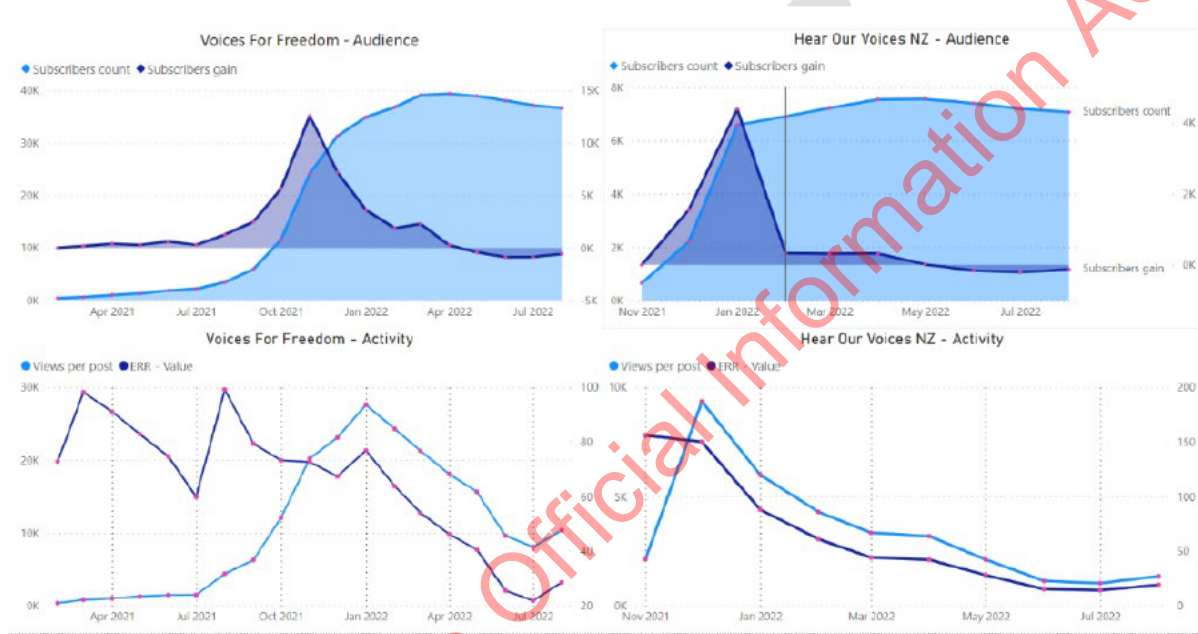
Decreasing resonance of the VFF’s messages/SOCIAL NETWORK



Digital data collected by DART of VFFs primary digital communication channel (Telegram) has shown decreasing audience and engagement to the posts made by the group (see below).

Based on analysis for data from February 2021 to August 2022, the number of subscribers (audience) spiked in November 2021 with over 12,000 (coinciding with a major leafleting campaign launched by the group this time) before began declining immediately after. Total subscribers peaked in April 2022 (immediately after the occupation and riot at parliament) at over 39,000 before beginning to decline in the next few months to a level of 36,000.

Engagement (audience) levels for VFFs posts on Telegram had high engagement from mid-2021 until in January 2022 (between 70% and 99%) before rapidly declining over the next few months to lows of only 22% and 29% per post in July to August 2022.



VFFs Twitter followers are low in comparison to its Telegram channel (over 3000 in August 2022) and its highest months for subscribers were February, April, and August 2022.

Both the declines in audience and engagement appear linked to the negative public reaction to the occupation/riot at parliament, recent media coverage of the general disinformation space in New Zealand (Stuffs Fire and Fury documentary) and VFFs attempts to secretly field members in local body elections.

Other factors which may have influenced this decline are the reduction of mandate requirements by the government in April 2022, which removed much of the main grievance that appeared to be driving the occupation, and the lack of innovation in the messaging by VFF over the last 12 months.

Additionally, at the time of writing, social media sentiment regarding VFF is mostly negative and includes negative comments in specific posts as well as well as a spoof account on Facebook (Voices for Freedom) which pokes fun at the group using satirical memes and factual content to counter VFFs claims made using pseudo-science.



VOICES FOR FREEDOM

voicesforfreedom.co.nz

-Group Webpage



Out With The Traffic Lights, In With The...
The Traffic Light System is over but what does that mean for us all?
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WHO PANDEMIC TREATY



Rank **3,088**

Website Registration Date: 9th Nov 2020

Total Number of Visits in August: **62,900**

Average Duration in August: **00:02:15**

- [@voices_nz](#)
3,065 Followers
2,405 Tweets
- [voicesforfreedom_nz](#)
18,900 Followers
1,413 Posts
- [@voiceforfreedom](#) and [@hearourvoicesnz](#)
42,394 Subscribers
2,124 Photos
655 Videos
2,330 Links
54 Files
- [@voicesforfreedom:6](#)
8,754 Followers
470 Videos
- [VoiceForFreedom](#)
1,600 Followers
1,300 Gabs
- [@voicesforfreedom.nz](#)
175 Followers
472 Likes
- [Voice For Freedom](#)
1 Members

Voices For Freedom (VFF) is a group critical of the New Zealand governments response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the safety / efficacy of the COVID-19 vaccine. They are likely the largest of the primarily vaccine-focussed groups in the disinformation landscape. Their site contains a blog, resources relating to COVID-19 and the government's response, information on the organisation and their activities, and a store.

Much of VFFs disinformation activity has been offline with mass leafleting and billboard campaigns across New Zealand in 2021.