Document 1

DRAFT Communications approach
for managing COVID-19 disinformation, online harms and scams

V1.2   10 Dec 2021

Te Kāwanatanga o Aotearoa
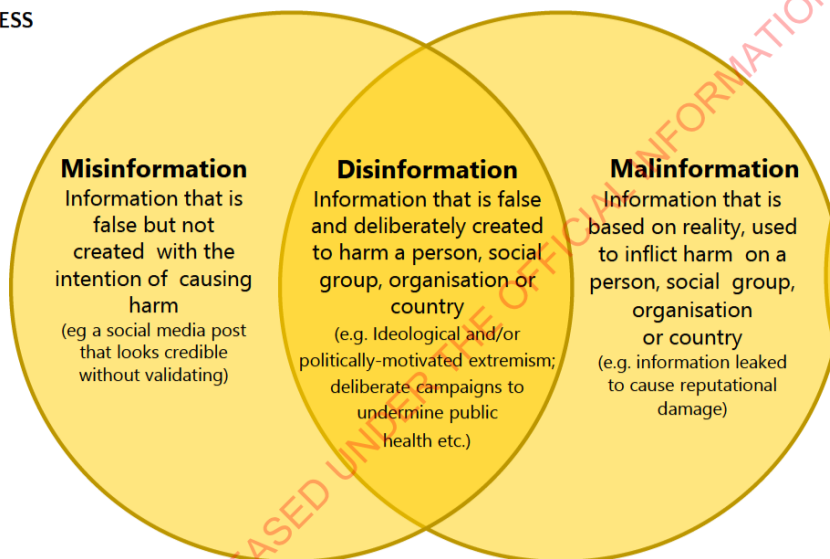New Zealand Government

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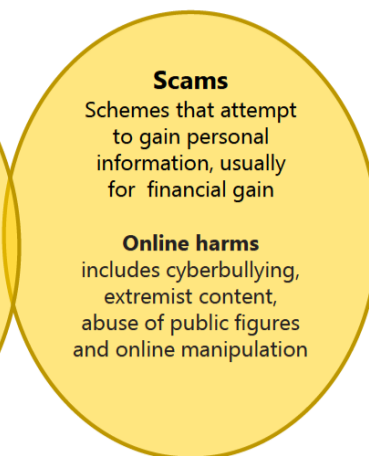MINISTRY OF HEALTH
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Context

Aotearoa New Zealand's response to COVID-19 has been one of the most successful in the world in preventing the spread of COVID-19. A significant factor in our success to date has been strong public trust and confidence in the response and effective use of communications.

At the same time, there has been a marked increase in sharing false and misleading information since the onset of the virus. The technology that we have used to keep people safe is being used in an increasingly coordinated way to enable disinformation to be spread. The issue is not unique to New Zealand but requires an approach that both draws on international best practice and suits our unique context.

FALSENESS   INTENT TO HARM

Misinformation
Information that is false but not created with the intention of causing harm
(eg a social media post that looks credible without validating)

Disinformation
Information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organisation or country
(e.g. Ideological and/or politically-motivated extremism; deliberate campaigns to undermine public health etc.)

Malinformation
Information that is based on reality, used to inflict harm on a person, social group, organisation or country
(e.g. information leaked to cause reputational damage)

Scams
Schemes that attempt to gain personal information, usually for financial gain

Online harms
includes cyberbullying, extremist content, abuse of public figures and online manipulation

· Use of terminology: misinformation is commonly used to cover the spectrum of false information though disinformation is the primary focus due to the quantity and intent to cause harm
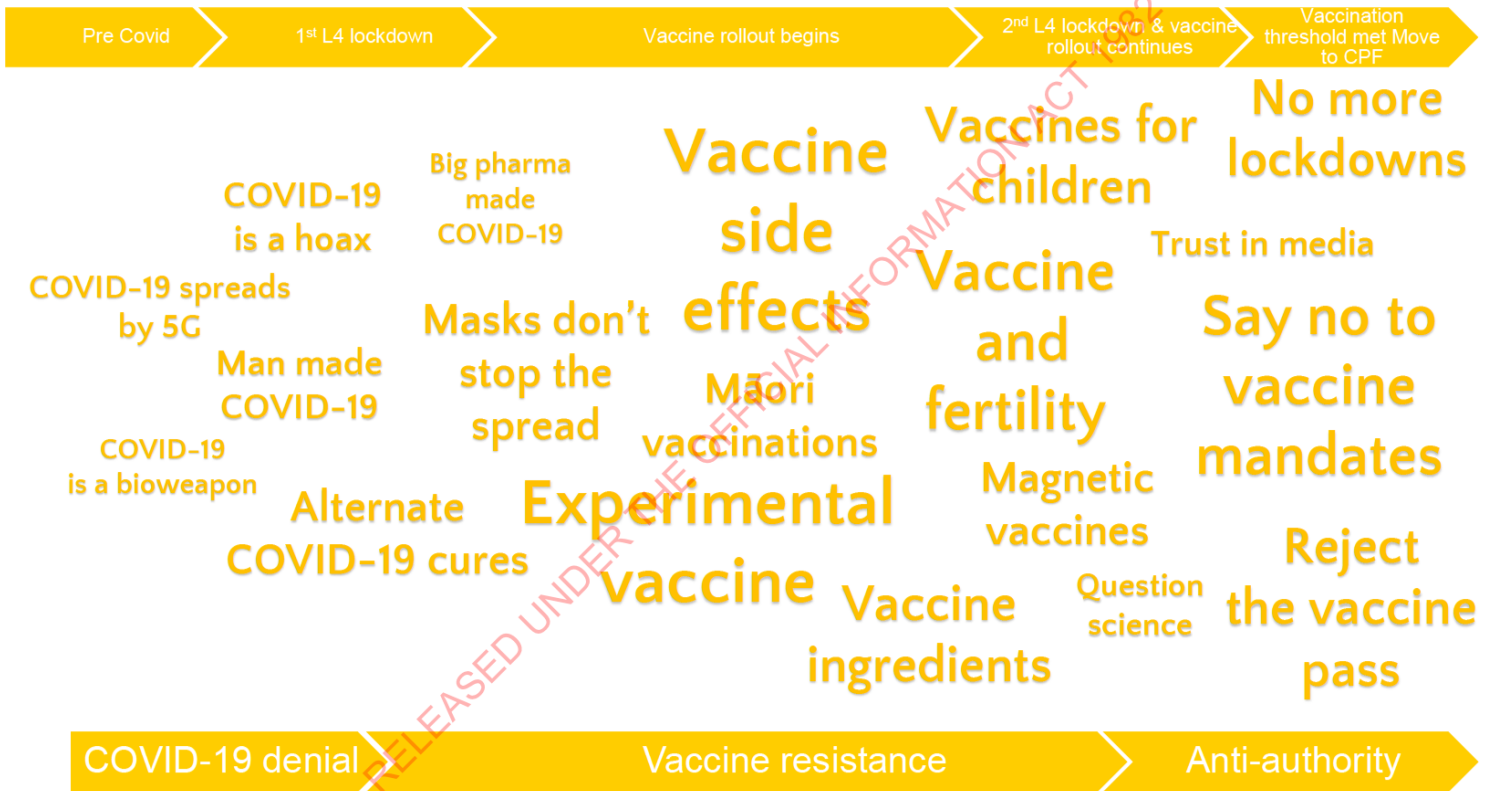
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Disinformation landscape in Aotearoa New Zealand

- The current COVID-19 narratives are **mostly related to vaccines** though there are emerging activities relating to the **COVID-19 Protection Framework (CPF)** including **My Vaccine Pass (MVP)** and **vaccine mandates.**

- Many of these narratives are woven into larger themes centred around mistrust of authorities and international businesses and relate to **concerns about side effects, safety and long-term effects of the vaccine** and **perceptions of COVID-19 restrictions.** Most themes originate from outside New Zealand but are tailored to New Zealand audiences.

- While most misinformation is not spread intentionally, there are a small group of people and organisations within New Zealand and overseas who **actively share disinformation** and seek to cause harm by **threatening public safety, fracturing community cohesion** and **reduce trust in democracy**.

- False information can be spread through **a range of different channels**, including social media, traditional media (television, radio and print), pamphlets, letterbox drops and word of mouth.

- Mainstream **social media platforms** (e.g. Facebook and YouTube) are the most common means of disseminating COVID-19 disinformation in Aotearoa though there is increasing use of alternate platforms to coordinate activity.

- There are increasing reports of spokespeople, government employees and frontline workers **targeted online and offline**.

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Conceptual landscape of COVID-19 disinformation narratives in Aotearoa

| Pre Covid | 1st L4 lockdown | Vaccine rollout begins | 2nd L4 lockdown & vaccine rollout continues | Vaccination threshold met Move to CPF |

COVID-19 is a hoax

Big pharma made COVID-19

Vaccine side effects

Vaccines for children

No more lockdowns

COVID-19 spreads by 5G

Masks don't stop the spread

Trust in media

Man made COVID-19

Māori vaccinations

Vaccine and fertility

Say no to vaccine mandates

COVID-19 is a bioweapon

Experimental vaccine

Magnetic vaccines

Alternate COVID-19 cures

Vaccine ingredients

Question science

Reject the vaccine pass

| COVID-19 denial | Vaccine resistance | Anti-authority |

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Insights and research

Our communication planning considers insights and research from the following sources to determine existing and emerging false information narratives:

- Research commissioned to understand public awareness and perceptions of vaccine to include misinformation specific questions

- Regular monitoring of our Unite Against COVID-19 and Ministry of Health social media channels

- Working with engagement leads within government agencies and the health sector to ensure feedback is provided from communities and groups on areas of concern

- Regular updates from international partners on their initiatives and emerging narratives

- Updates from research commissioned by government agencies that may be of significance to the COVID-19 response

- Research and landscape updates provided by academic organisations such as Te Pūnaha Matatini

- Public reporting of potential false or misleading information via CERT NZ

- Media reporting in New Zealand and overseas

- Overseas government updates

- **This is fed into combined agency reporting [from Dec 21] on disinformation and related risks which is used for policy development and communications planning**

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Freedom of expression and association

- Most mis/disinformation is legal.
- When addressing false information we must (and do) take into account New Zealanders' rights to freedom of expression and association.

Key considerations

- False information has emerged as a complex national security issue across the world.
- There are a number of potentially harmful effects from the spread of false or misleading information.
- These harms include a threat to public safety, incitement of criminal or violent extremist activity, breakdown of social cohesion, and reduction of democracy.
- We need a whole of society approach to build awareness and strengthen resilience.
- Everyone has a responsibility to prevent mis/disinformation.
- It's shouldn't be just a government voice involved in the discussion
- A whole of society approach means government, civil society, tech companies, media, academia, business and the public all have a role to play, from education, to communication, to public safety.

What is being done

- Ensure a whole of society approach
  - Coordinated approach across government and into communities
  - Collective planning, collaboration and delivery through multi sector approach that is innovative and inclusive for all

- Increase the public's resilience to disinformation and online harms
  - Promote digital literacy and critical thinking
  - Provide fact checking resources

- Promote credible information through effective communication

- Prevent the propagation of false and damaging content
  - Ensure a robust reporting mechanism
  - Understand the risks, indicators and levers
  - Encourage social media platforms to keep their community spaces safe through the management of content

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All of society role in responding and building resilience

Role of technology providers

- Government agencies engage regularly with major technology providers and platforms on issues of public safety and will continue to do so.
- Independent online safety organisations such as Netsafe also provide practical tools, support and advice for managing a range of online challenges.
- We need to ensure New Zealanders can safely make the most of the opportunities technology offers.

Role of media

- The media has a vital role in helping to combat false information
- They play an active role in determining what issues are important to the public.
- It is important that New Zealand's media is independent, trusted and robust.
- Information must be accessible across the cultural, religious and linguistic diversity of our communities.

Role of communities and the New Zealand public

- Elevate and promote credible voices within communities to respond and build resilience
- Learn about reliable sources of information and how disinformation is designed to undermine beliefs and values.
- Report information about COVID-19 or the vaccine that doesn't seem right. If it's on social media report it to the platform – anything else such as a pamphlet report it to CERT NZ or call 0800 2378 69.
- Possible crimes should be reported to the Police

Role of academia

- A strong voice on the effects of false information.
- Research on why false information is spread and how is can be countered
- Recommendations and evaluations on interventions
- Academic view on the disinformation landscape
- Unravelling the complex effects of false information on civil society

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Role of government

- A range of government agencies are working to mitigate the consequences of false information.
- Our strategic communications approach focuses on providing readily available reliable information while building and strengthening resilience to false information.
- DPMC's National Security Group has a coordination role across government agencies working on strategic resilience to disinformation (beyond COVID-19).
- DPMC's COVID-19 Group has a leadership and coordination role working with government agencies in understanding the landscape and responding to COVID-19 disinformation.
- COVID-19 Group and MoH are working jointly on providing guidance and resources to the health sector, businesses and community leaders and the public on responding to COVID-19 disinformation.
- Government cyber security agency CERT NZ is the central coordination point for any COVID-19 cyber security incidents and a public reporting point for disinformation.
- The Ministry of Health has established an operational focussed Disinformation Assessment and Response Team to respond to vaccine and health disinformation.
- Response agencies are working to ensure that risks are understood and measures are in place should they be needed.

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Guiding communication and engagement principles

Insights and research led communications planning that is agile to respond to changing false information narratives

Rapid intervention to fill an information gap/provide an alternative to a dominant mis/disinformed narrative where appropriate.

Work in partnership with Māori during planning and delivery of communications and engagement

Direct engagement that is respectful and culturally appropriate, encourages participation, and empowers through dialogue.

Build on existing trust foundations. A government or reliable health voice may not work for all communities. Channel reliable information through voices they trust.

Inclusive approach that recognises audience diversity including language and accessibility needs and at each stage honours the Treaty of Waitangi

Localised, tailored and **community focussed** communications while managing central integrity of messaging.

Media/social media engagement to slow/stop the spread of false information

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An approach informed by manaakitanga with iwi/Māori

Kotahitanga is a key part of our resilience strategy.
If you give us access to good science and
evidence, we will make better decisions.
– Tina Ngata

Mis/Disinformation is widespread among whānau - especially rangatahi – who have been particularly targeted and exposed to a wide range of damaging narratives that are mainly taking advantage of trust in media, science and or Government.

We recognise and acknowledge the historical and political landscape that Māori exist within, and the associated triggers that the COVID-19 pandemic may exacerbate.

We draw upon our connections and common ground, an approach informed by manaakitanga allows us to respectfully establish boundaries with whānau engaged in conspiracy theories while remaining digitally connected to one another.

Where we can and when safe, Kanohi ki te kanohi – face to face. This form of Māori led engagement promotes an open and authentic opportunity where people can directly address concerns in a local, safe environment with access to appropriate experts.

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Communications response to COVID-19 disinformation

	Requirement	Channels	Tools	
Short-term reactive	The misinformation requires an immediate response. Rapid communications are required to rebut, correct or counter disinformation with the established facts. Pre-bunk emerging risks by exposing disinformation strategy. Led by agency affected	Prioritise media relations and face-to-face contact with trusted allies, journalists and researchers Activate network and stakeholders.	• Press statement • Minister statement • Direct communications • Community leaders • Brief journalists • Q&A • Paid advertisement/SEO (geo targeted)	• Weigh up resources and immediate threats to determine balance between counter-message, counter-narrative and crisis handling. Focus reactive efforts on public safety and assurance
Medium-term proactive	The misinformation requires a considered response. Use a combination of communications to assert own values/ brands. Tie proactive measures with normal everyday communications and work with stakeholders/influencers to create consensus around the position. Led by COVID-19 Group and Ministry of Health	• Mainstream media • Official COVID-19 channels • Stakeholders and influencers • Social media platforms • Wide audiences	• Standalone campaign • Community outreach, dialogue and engagement • Updated facts pages on web content • Key message availability	• Facilitate network, stakeholders and influencers • Work with technology providers (i.e. social media platforms)
Long-term strategic	The misinformation requires a coherent, sustained response to create long-term change. Develop and assert strategic narratives in relation to an issue by shaping the information space to promote position and deter others (raising the threshold). Led by National Security Group and COVID-19 Group	• Multiple channels across society • International channels • Stakeholders and influencers • Social media platforms • Wider disinformation stakeholder network	• Database of narratives • Publish regulatory responses • Multi stakeholder forum • Campaign, narrative and brand engagement • Programme funding e.g. for participatory content	• Influencer and community leader support • Facilitate network, stakeholders and influencers • Workshops/training

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Social media guidance to ensure reliable information is readily available

- Publish accurate, timely, reliable content consistently to ensure the community knows official channels to go to for credible information
- Regularly advise on how to look out for accurate information, with reminders in content
- Don't name or repeat known misinformation but instead provide the correct information
- Robust community guidelines in place and made publicly available
- Provide support to government agencies supporting COVID-19 response to facilitate training and best practise
- If disinformation or emerging themes are identified they are escalated for further review and action

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Ministry of Health COVID-19 Disinformation Assessment and Response Team

The Ministry of Health has established a team to carry out the following tasks:

- Receive reporting, monitor and develop insights on evolving COVID-19 disinformation incidents and narratives

- Build a database and dashboard for reporting misinformation in Aotearoa and track emerging narratives that may mislead New Zealanders

- Carry out risk and impact analysis of the disinformation

- Support the delivery of tactical communications to counter or respond to disinformation and ensure that reliable information is widely available to all New Zealanders – this might include geolocated communications campaigns (to town level) responding to misinformation hotspots, utilisation of digital marketing techniques to push appropriate information to identifiably vaccine hesitant areas, publicly calling out prominent items of misinformation.

- Act on disinformation through levers of government such as reporting illegal activity to Police, DIA online harms, regulatory bodies etc

- Track outcomes

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COVID-19 disinformation – public communication messages

Disinformation and online harms

- With the Delta outbreak and the vaccination rollout there has been a significant increase in coordinated disinformation circulating in Aotearoa New Zealand.

- Disinformation is a global problem and New Zealanders are not immune from this sort of activity and the potential for it to lead to harm.

- This includes coordinated activity from people seeking to prevent New Zealanders from being vaccinated and undermining the response by sharing and promoting misleading and false information - often targeting New Zealand's most vulnerable communities.

- The most important thing we can do for our friends and whānau who might be targeted by disinformation, is to encourage access to credible information, and to promote where people can safely and reliably get this – whether online or in person.

- All New Zealanders have the right to freedom of expression, but this must be lawful and not impinge on the rights of others.

- Disinformation may risk people's safety, by undermining the importance of health measures, particularly for vulnerable people and those on the frontline working night and day to protect New Zealanders from COVID-19.

- New Zealanders are asked to consider carefully what they read and what they share. Something that may look genuine could be a few clicks from individuals or organisations whose intent could be harmful.

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COVID-19 online harms and threatening behaviour – public communication messages

Online harm content includes abusive and hurtful message, images or videos; repeated unwanted messages, spreading of gossip and lies; fake accounts used to humiliate or harass others.

Friends and whānau who might be subjected to online harms - including bullying, abuse and harassment - are encouraged to report it the platform hosting it or to Netsafe.

Harmful online content targeted at individuals, businesses and organisations, including media outlets, who promote the vaccine.

If anyone is immediate danger, **call Police on 111 straight away.**

Threatening behaviour towards anyone related to COVID-19 will not be tolerated. Acts of violence and attempts to be unlawful with an aim to disrupt or cause fear should be reported to the Police.

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COVID 19 scams – public communication messages

Scammers look for ways to trick people into sharing their personal or financial details, especially via phone and email. Here's what you should know about the COVID-19 vaccine:

- You will never be asked to pay for the vaccine or pay to secure your place in the queue.
- Official information about the vaccine will come from a trusted provider of health content, such as the Ministry of Health, Unite Against COVID-19 or your District Health Board or health provider.
- A health worker will never come to your home to give you the vaccine, unless arranged with you beforehand.
- You will never be asked for personal information via text or email. If you see, it report it to CERT NZ and don't reply to the message.
- If you receive an email, phone call or SMS asking for financial details in regards to the vaccine pass, it will be a scam. Report it to CERT NZ immediately.
- If you see something about the vaccine pass that doesn't seem right, report it to CERT NZ at https://www.cert.govt.nz/covid-19-vaccine-scams/ or call 0800 2378 69.

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Guidance for government officials talking about Disinformation

- Ensure transparency and freedom of expression are at the forefront of communications regarding our response to disinformation.

- When talking about disinformation, where possible the organisation/person who has initiated the information should not be promoted and the false information not reinforced.

- Scientific facts won't counter value-laden false information. Instead, bring common good values, necessary to collective public health action, to counter misinformation.

- Acknowledge the challenge of countering disinformation and the impact it has. Highlight the complexity of the disinformation landscape but connect this to concepts that the general public can relate to.

- Prepare the public that false information will be widely circulated as the COVID-19 response continues but we can all help to reduce the impact.

- Acknowledge that while many of us will have shared false information at some stage without realising, sharing incorrect information may put the health response at risk.

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Resources toolkit to respond to disinformation and online harms

About misinformation and online safety

covid19.govt.nz/misinformation and online harms

A Brief History of Misinformation animation

Guidance for health professionals and community leaders

covid19.govt.nz/postersandvideos

keepitrealonline.govt.nz/

netsafe.org.nz/

Vaccine Facts (addresses key disinformation themes)

covid19.govt.nz/get-the-facts-about-covid-19-vaccination/

covid19.govt.nz/your-vaccine-questions-answered

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Memo

Resilience to Mis/disinformation

Date:	19 March 2021
To:	COVID-19 Vaccine and Immunisation Programme Steering Group
From:	Geoff Gwyn, Privacy and Security Lead
For your:	Feedback

Purpose

The purpose of this report is to note the current Ministry response to mis/disinformation related to the COVID-19 vaccination and immunisation programme (CVIP) and to decide if a more consistent approach and identified business owner is required.

Also, to note how this approach will link in with the whole of society approach to mis/disinformation being developed by the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC).

Recommendations

It is recommended that you:

1	**Note**	the current Ministry response to mis/disinformation related to the COVID-19 vaccination and immunisation programme.	Yes/No
2	**Agree**	for the CVIP to be the Ministry business owner for mis/disinformation in the short term.	Yes/No
3	**Agree**	that a more consistent business process to mis/disinformation (register, review, assess, decide and record) is required as a priority.	Yes/No
4	**Agree**	that two additional staff (team leader level) are required to support this business process.	Yes/No
5	**Note**	that a longer-term approach will be developed for mis/disinformation in parallel with the immediate business process.	Yes/No
6	**Note**	how the Ministry approach to mis/disinformation links in with the whole of society approach that is being developed by DPMC.	Yes/No
6	**Agree**	the next steps	Yes/No

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Key points

The Ministry is receiving several reports per week of mis/disinformation regarding the COVID-19 vaccine on websites, blogs, social media and print distribution to households. These reports come from a variety of sources including CERT NZ[1], Department of Internal Affairs (DIA) and DPMC.

While mis/disinformation is one of many factors that may contribute 'vaccination hesitancy", it could significantly. influence individual decisions not to immunise. This could reduce overall uptake and undermine the programme objective of vaccinating as many people as possible.

The Ministry has identified a need to establish a consistent position on how it will deal with reported mis/disinformation.

Background

While mis/disinformation is not a new phenomenon, its reach has increased exponentially in recent years via social media channels. Its impact through the potential erosion of trust in democratic institutions and the undermining of public health campaigns became dramatically apparent in the United States throughout 2020.

New Zealand still has high levels of public trust in media and state institutions. This was positively demonstrated last year, as media outlets and civil society organisations successfully countered several COVID-19 and elections related disinformation campaigns before these could take hold.

However, this situation cannot be taken for granted and strengthening New Zealand's resilience to mis/disinformation is an acknowledged national security priority.

The importance of countering mis/disinformation is recognised by media outlets. For example, Stuff receives funding from a global fund to fight misinformation (Dominion Post Wednesday 17 March 2021).

Responding to mis/disinformation is a complex issue. For example, there is a risk that if you try to counter disinformation, this could reinforce conspiracy narratives and give legitimacy to those claiming the erosion of free speech.

Definitions

Misinformation is information that is false or misleading but is not produced in pursuit of an underlying ideological or commercial purpose e.g. anti-fluoride information.

Disinformation is false and misleading content (or omission of content) designed to achieve a strategic purpose. Whether for ideological or commercial goals, the effort is designed to influence audiences' perceptions, opinions and/or behaviour (e.g. QAnon conspiracy theories).

Malinformation that is based on reality, taken out of context and used to inflict harm on a person, organisation or country.

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[1] Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT NZ) is a government agency established as a part of Budget 2016 to improve New Zealand's access to international networks and information on cyber-attacks.

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Status Quo

There are several approaches to scanning, distributing and coordinating responses to mis/disinformation reports.

The CVIP agreed in February 2021 that CERT NZ is the agreed central coordination point for COVID-19 vaccine related scams and misinformation. This includes limited reactive scanning and a dedicated web page and mailbox to receive reports of mis/disinformation.

CERT NZ will triage the reports and assign the issue to the relevant agency e.g., scams to NZ Police, mis/disinformation to the Ministry of Health, while phishing is dealt by CERT NZ.

The entry point to the Ministry for these recorded instances from CERT NZ is the IT Security and Communications teams. They are currently receiving two to three reports per week of misinformation regarding the COVID-19 vaccine on websites, blogs and social media.

These reports, and other new reports are also entering the Ministry through a variety of points, largely influenced by personal or agency relationships.

CERT NZ provides a weekly summary report "CERT NZ COVID-19 Vaccine Scam Interagency Report" to several core agencies[2]. These core agencies are part of a roundtable established by the Ministry of Health that meet monthly and provide a coordination forum for COVID-19 cyber threats.

This group does not action the individual scams and mis/disinformation incidents which are the responsibility of the relevant agencies.

As part of this group Netsafe has offered to contact, at Ministry direction, platform owners to remove content based that does not meet the terms and conditions of the platform.

These reports are often coupled with wider criticisms of the NZ government's overall response. It is anticipated that this number will increase as the programme is rolled out.

Additional sentiment scanning is conducted by DPMC and this reporting is shared with the Ministry's communications team to inform strategy and content.

The Ministry communications team actively remove misinformation on the Ministry's social channels and reports breaches of community guidelines. The team also has direct contact with some platforms namely Facebook and Google and reports to them any mis/disinformation actors who share content on Ministry platforms.

The current system primarily relies on some scanning of the social media domain and public complaints to inform the Ministry of instances of mis/disinformation. These reports are managed by several workgroups and responses are driven by individuals within those workgroups.

DPMC project

The Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC) is working with an Interagency Coordination Group[3] to develop a strategic framework for a whole of society approach to building resilience to mis/disinformation.

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[2] NZ Police, Netsafe, Serious Fraud Office, Domain Name Commission, Department of Internal Affairs and CERT NZ.
[3] That group will comprise: DIA, DPMC, MBIE, MFAT, MCH, MOE, MOH, MOJ, NZ Police, NZSIS and GCSB.

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DPMC is invited to report back to the Prime Minister by the end of March 2021. The draft strategic framework (including high level process) is scheduled for Cabinet approval by April 2021 prior to wider consultation.

This process will include close consultation with academia, civil society organisations, the media council, and other key public stakeholders to ensure transparency and buy in. The framework will involve:

- guiding principles that include upholding freedom of expression, privacy and human rights commitments
- the establishment of a broad civil society and academia led multi-stakeholder approach to monitoring, building public awareness, critical thinking skills and online media literacy
- a strategy for public communications, detailing best practice in counter narratives
- S9(2)(g)(i)

S9(2)(g)(i)

The importance of the DPMC work is to ensure that agencies, academia and civil society organisations can align their efforts to combat mis/disinformation under a common and agreed framework. It presents an opportunity for the CVIP to be part of the development of this whole of society approach as a pilot with the benefits of mitigating the potential impacts of mis/disinformation on vaccine uptake.

Limitation of Current Approach

The Ministry is receiving reported instances of mis/disinformation to selected individuals and workgroups through multiple channels, including personal and workgroup relationships. The current approach is a mixture of proactive identification (DPMC scanning) and reactive complaints (to CERT NZ or selected Ministry individuals) of mis/disinformation.

The communications team's current approach is to collate and record rather than respond. This is used to guide the content approach e.g., recent Get the Facts social post. An intended interim solution is to collate the instances of mis/disinformation, identify the intended audience, and forward to other agencies.

The IT security team are part of a wider government agencies coordination mechanism to counter cyber threats, which is informed of instances of mis/disinformation by CERT NZ. The team does not act on individual reported instances of mis/disinformation.

These differing approaches create the impression that the Ministry has a inconsistent approach to how these reports are managed and actioned. The current largely reactive monitoring approach also limits the ability to understand and forecast trends and impacts.

Overall, the overall Ministry approach is somewhat disjointed, and reported instances are evaluated subjectively by multiple individuals and workgroups. There is an opportunity to have greater confidence that reported instances are recorded, tracked and assessed to a consistent standard by an appropriate decision maker. This may have the added benefit of enhancing trend and impact analysis over time.

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There is a current opportunity to leverage off examples of clear, concise, deliberate decision-making processes used by other agencies e.g., DIA and the Office of Film and Literature (OFLIC). Although these agencies deal with different types of harmful information their approaches can provide useful guidance insights into the types of evaluative frameworks that can be used to assess mis/disinformation.

Opportunities to improve the current approach

- Any actions taken to manage instances of mis/disinformation in the CVIP could provide the opportunity to create a precedent for immunisation programmes and/or wider Ministry programmes.
- Ensuring a centralised reporting point for instances of mis/disinformation to ensure consistent recording and distribution to Ministry audiences.
- Clear, concise and deliberate decision-making processes including notification and escalation.
- Assigning clear business ownership for the overall coordination of responses to instances of mis/disinformation.
- Ensuring any Ministry action in relation to mis/disinformation aligns with the under-development whole of society approach (DPMC).
- Ministry's approach can be aligned to other government agencies approaches e.g. DIA.
- DPMC has offered the opportunity to use the COVID-19 vaccine programme as a case study or pilot for the whole of society approach
- Consider increasing proactive monitoring of the social media domain utilising other agencies activities e.g. DIA to gain greater insights of potential trends and impacts of mis/disinformation themes.

Next Steps

1. To support the DPMC led approach to strengthening New Zealand's resilience to mis/disinformation by membership and contribution to the Interagency Coordination Group.

2. To clarify the roles and responsibilities for reporting, assessing, actioning and recording reports of mis/disinformation.

3. To develop a consistent approach to the management of reported instances of mis/disinformation.

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COVID-19 Vaccine and Immunisation Programme

PROPOSAL TO PROVIDE A TACTICAL RESPONSE TO COVID-19 VACCINE DISINFORMATION

Date:	31 May 2021
To:	COVID-19 Vaccine Implementation Programme – Steering Group
From:	Ministry of Health COVID-19 Vaccine and Immunisation Programme - Head of Communications
Subject:	Proposal to provide a tactical response to COVID-19 vaccine disinformation

Purpose

1. The outcome sought from this brief is approval to initiate a capability within the COVID-19 Vaccine and Immunisation Programme to better understand the disinformation landscape and develop an agile response to emerging narratives which are assessed to be misleading or false and risk impacting the success of the programme.

Context

2. When the information environment is deliberately confused this can threaten public safety, fracture community cohesion and undermine the public acceptance of science's role in informing health policy such as the vaccine programme. Our primary objective in countering disinformation is to give the public confidence in information available to them so that they are equipped to make fully informed decisions.

3. Current research[1] indicates that 38 percent had encountered what they believed to be misinformation. The main sources were social media (65 percent) followed by friends or family (32 percent) then mainstream media (25 percent). 61 percent who had seen misinformation indicated they would look for official information to verify it. Nine percent of those who had seen something they thought was misinformation would not get a vaccine if the misinformation they saw actually alarmed them; this increases to 15 percent for people who identify as disabled.

4. There is an existing communications approach to counter COVID-19 mis- and disinformation which is delivered through our current communications and engagement channels. However, more robust insights and an agile response will enable a more tailored and timely approach.

Current Approach

5. Since the vaccination programme was initiated, CERT NZ has broadened its scope from scams and cyber security incident reporting to be the point for public reporting of false information. This

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[1] https://www.health.govt.nz /covid-19-vaccine-research-insights

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reporting is then passed to the Ministry of Health. The vaccine public information campaign includes an information layer that can provide facts where there is an identified gap or prevalent misinformation; this is enhanced by a range of other content available through the Ministry, DHB, Ministry of Pacific Peoples, Te Puni Kokiri, Unite Against Covid-19 and other channels. The development of new forms of information (essentially addressing key points of safety, efficacy and operational rollout) will be a consistent work in progress throughout the vaccination campaign .

6. In addition to ensuring we have a strong information layer in our public information programme, we have taken ad-hoc tactical responses. For example, we currently have a strong information layer push underway in the Nelson region, to counter particularly heavy misinformation there and, with Group 3 underway, we are upweighting our information layer targeted to people aged 65 and over.

7. There is currently a toolkit in development to support the health sector and community leaders in addressing public concerns of misinformation as well as an engagement events in areas of prevalent misinformation (and vaccine hesitancy).

8. However the approach could be strengthened with more clear procedure and dedicated resourcing, as well as clearer accountability within CVIP for addressing misinformation. Accountability is currently split between operations and communications.

9. Principles
    a. We must respect New Zealanders' rights to freedom of expression and association.
    b. Timeliness. Agility and speed are crucial in countering disinformation.
    c. Primary focus on disinformation though misinformation will also be in scope.
    d. Our communications must be truthful, transparent, fair and accurate, enabling trust to be maintained with the New Zealand public.
    e. Communications will be managed and signed off through existing processes.
    f. The communications approach is based on an all of society response to mis- and disinformation which is enabled through engagement with key stakeholders such as education, media, technology and academia including Te Pūnaha Matatini

Recommendations

10. It is recommended that the steering group agree to stand up a dedicated disinformation response team reporting to the CVIP Head of Communications that can carry out the follow tasks:
    a. Receive reporting, monitor and develop insights on evolving disinformation incidents and narratives.
    b. Build a database for reporting misinformation in Aotearoa and track emerging global narratives that may mislead New Zealanders.
    c. Carry out risk and impact analysis of the disinformation.
    d. Support the delivery of tactical communications to counter or respond to disinformation and ensure that reliable information is prevalent to all New Zealanders – this might include geolocated communications campaigns (to town level) responding to misinformation hotspots, utilisation of digital marketing techniques to push appropriate information to identifiably vaccine hesitant people, publicly calling out prominent items of misinformation.
    Note – standard operating procedures will be developed for steering group approval to guide this activity.

    e. Act on disinformation through levers of government such as reporting illegal activity to Police, Media Council complaints.

    f. Track outcomes.

11. It is recommended that the team is based on the following capabilities with the following required for minimal viable product, resource will come from the Ministry of Health.

    a. Team Leaders. Develop procedures and policy, manage reporting, complaints and coordinate activity across government agencies. Two team leader roles are currently being recruited.

    b. Insights and analysis function. Expert analyst who can manage proactive and responsive analysis with connection into the Ministry's Data and Insights and Behavioural Insights teams. Not currently resourced.

    c. Strategic Communications planner linking into resources into the wider team. This is currently provided by a Principal Advisor seconded from the COVID-19 Group.

    d. Access to Health subject matter expertise to enable verification of emerging narratives and responses. Not currently resourced.

    e. Access to social sciences expertise to input to analysis and corresponding response. Not currently resourced.

Additional considerations

12. The development of a standalone communications campaign to help build New Zealander's resilience to mis- and disinformation.

13. Role of COVID-19 Group leadership and cross system coordination including a focus on wider COVID-19 disinformation risks.

14. This model is evaluated as an enduring option in support of the wider government framework to build resilience to disinformation in Aotearoa and sits on the cross-government disinformation working group led by DPMC NSG.

15. Business process mapping began on 27th May to map existing processes and develop the processes required to fulfil the tasks at para 10.

16. In order to carry out robust insights, investment in technology solutions may be required.

17. This team may require scaling up should the impact of disinformation increase.

Recommendations

It is recommended that you:

1.	Note the content of the report	Including that standard operating procedures will be brought to Steering Group for approval to guide counter-disinformation activity.	Yes/No

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2.	Agree	That a new disinformation team is established in the Communications and Engagement team utilising existing resources.	Yes/No

Signature _____   Date:

[Name]

[Title]

Signature _____   Date:

[Name]

[Title]