Dangerous speech, misogyny, and democracy

A review of the impacts of dangerous speech since the end of the Parliament Protest

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Content warning: Explicit language, threats, misogyny, racism, violence.

Introduction

The Disinformation Project studies misinformation and disinformation in Aotearoa New Zealand. Since February 2020, we have used a range of mixed methods approaches to collate, analyse, review, and contextualise the seed and spread of these phenomena – and their impact on the lives of New Zealanders.

Our research combines open-source quantitative reporting from social media, media platforms or sources with rich text with artefact-based narrative analysis of longform qualitative data. This approach, grounded and situated here in Aotearoa New Zealand enables us to map the disinformation landscape in the context of international trends but focused on the experiences and values of New Zealanders.

Mis- and disinformation is transmitted within and across social media platforms, mainstream media outlets, and in other online (i.e. email, messaging) and offline (i.e. watercooler) spaces and places, rapidly reaching audiences in the hundreds of thousands.

The Disinformation Project describes these complex phenomena as 'ecologies' – systems and networks that mirror and migrate content, discourses, language, and values across different spaces and places to audiences, with significant online impact and growing offline consequences. For the purposes of our work we use the following definitions:

- Misinformation: "false information that people didn't create with the intent to hurt others"
- Disinformation: "false information created with the intention of harming a person, group, or organization, or even a company"
- Malinformation: "true information used with ill intent"[1]

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[1] Berentson-Shaw J and Elliot M. Misinformation and Covid-19: a briefing for media. Wellington: The Workshop; (2020).

When we describe conspiratorial thought, we draw from M.R.X. Dentith's work for a simple definition of conspiracy theory, defining them as *purported explanations which cite a conspiracy as the salient cause of some event or phenomenon.*[2]

The Disinformation Project uses the category 'dangerous speech' to categorise material observed and analysed with these ecologies. Susan Benesch's Dangerous Speech Project asserts that: "dangerous speech is any form of expression (e.g. speech, text or images) that can increase the risk that its audience will condone or participate in violence against members of another group."[3] The hallmarks of dangerous speech are useful analytical tools for our work also. These include: dehumanisation, accusation in a mirror, threat to group identity or purity, assertion of attack against women and girls, and questioning in-group loyalty. Dangerous speech takes place in a **context**, is expressed to different **audiences** in different ways, involves a **speaker** or **narrator**, can include the role of a **second speaker**, and is transmitted via a **medium** or **genre**, including the normative generic traits of a social media **platform**.

Context

In mid-April 2022, The Disinformation Project team, reviewing comparative data generated from mis- and disinformation ecosystems across months of collation and analysis, became increasingly concerned by the ongoing targeted harassment, abuse, stalking, and threats being made to women and gender minorities in public life.

As researchers focused on online and offline harms arising from disinformation's establishment, expansion, and entrenchment; we have grave and growing concerns around chilling effects the normalisation of threats and harassment we study in information ecosystems shaping our public sphere, political and social discourse, and the participation of women and gender minorities in public life.

We know that these threats are significantly more violent towards, and sustained around women with intersectional identities, particularly Indigenous women, women of colour, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, and visible religious and ethnic minorities, particularly Muslim women.

There are issues with regulatory frameworks and legal or civil remedies presently available, which show features of what many call Aotearoa New Zealand's transparent, high trust model – and what we within the Disinformation Project refer to as our 'hackable society'[4] – combined with rhetoric and a real sense of grievance can and have led to personal security risks and impacts which asymmetrically effect those targeted who have less or no access to security support, advice, and technologies.

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[2] Dentith MRX. Conspiracy theories and philosophy: bringing the epistemology of a freighted term into the social sciences. In JE Uscinki (ed.) Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them. Oxford: Oxford University Press; (2018).
[3] The Dangerous Speech Project, Dangerous Speech: A Practical Guide: 19 April 2021 https://dangerousspeech.org/guide/
[4] Schneier on Hacking Society, https://www.darkreading.com/application-security/schneier-on-hacking-society

Hosted on Telegram,[5] and on the .nz domain, with no Aotearoa New Zealand agency providing appropriate recourse for reporting or content moderation, lists of people – running into hundreds – are curated by those who call for the state and other aspects of the Covid-19 response to be 'held responsible' with trials. These 'trials' are based upon Sovereign Citizen[6] and Common Law Assembly[7] ideologies. These lists are developed and presented within the context of what is widely described as 'Nuremberg 2.0', a reference to both the Nuremberg Code for medical practitioners, which was developed in response to war crimes including the participation in genocide perpetrated by doctors within the Nazi regime, and is also a reference to the Nuremberg trials, which resulted in the execution of a number of those Nazis found guilty of crimes against humanity and war crimes. This reference, which is frequently accompanied by a written or visual death threat, is now normalised within the ecosystems we study. The naming of people creates long-tail risks for a wide range of New Zealanders, many of whom are private citizens. In the context of identification of 'basic attack' vectors and risks in the November 2021 and February 2022 Combined Threat Assessment Group (CTAG) reports, we highlight the asymmetrical personal security risk profiles of individuals identified and doxed, who, unlike the Prime Minister, senior government officials, Members of Parliament, or high net worth individuals, do not have security measures to protect them from offline consequences of online harms, but continue to experience sustained and personalised harassment, stalking, and brigading.

Aotearoa New Zealand has Local Body Elections in 2022, and a General Election in 2023. While recent announcements have confirmed the removal of the requirement for publication of candidate home addresses prior to local body elections, a range of other regulatory requirements pose risk for individuals.

Prior to the Parliament Protest, we observed the repeated misuse of the Companies Register to target and doxx individuals from relatives of politicians to academics and public servants. Other potential vectors for this kind of misuse use proliferate across government or regulatory norms for publication of addresses, many of which the public are unaware that there are remedies for. *These risks are little known outside the security sector*, and the proliferation of mass targeting via 'Nuremberg 2.0' lists has exposed more New Zealanders than at any other time to the unknown risk of having their address published at a time that groups are meeting across the country to discuss 'Common Law' actions to, in their perception of reality, take justice in their own hands. The risk here is, as always, higher for women and gender minorities, other visible minorities, and as indicated earlier, those who are private citizens without access to security advice and related support. From teachers to health care workers and retail staff, we are concerned that these cumulative factors could lead to exponential growth of exposed targets, and the risk of further offline consequences. The long-tail consequences of being in one or more 'Nuremberg 2.0' registries include heighted online risks including but not limited to malevolent intrusion attempts, targeted scams, spear-phishing, credit card and identity theft, or ransomware, spyware and malware payloads through personal account and communications vectors, as well as offline harms

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[5] Telegram "exercises virtually no content moderation" https://www.wired.com/story/how-telegram-became-anti-facebook/
[6] https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/sovereign-citizens-movement
[7] https://www.stuff.co.nz/dominion-post/wellington-top-stories/128459085/common-law-sheriff-explains-groups-attendance-at-anzac-day-service

including harassment, kinetic violence, stalking, arson, theft, and acts of vandalism. Risks to family and colleagues also need to be considered.

Beyond the hackability of our current regulations and legislation, the legal remedies for those who find themselves targeted are limited – to civil proceedings such as the taking out of a restraining order or making an application to the District Court under the Harmful Digital Communications Act (HDCA). Both these approaches make a systemic and social problem personal – a 'he said, she said, they said' based on intimate relationship violence or harm. The response often encountered in these processes of making a complaint or seeking protection is that what goes on online doesn't or hardly ever moves into offline action; the Parliament Protest and subsequent violence, including brigading and doxing, has at last put that misplaced belief to rest. *The sustained and violently misogynistic hate, harms, haranguing, and harassment of women in public life needs an urgent, meaningful national response, and an enduring national conversation.*

Since the end of the Parliament Protest,[8] key narrators and content creators, having established semantic and epistemic authority through their participation in Covid-19, anti-vaccine, and anti-mandate disinformation have pivoted to influence public discourse on other matters, particularly those related to women's roles in public life, co-governance, and the place of Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Influential producers are now evolving, participating in constant campaigning as candidates, strategists, or hyper-partisan network organisers.

Content produced, and commentary engineered, is designed to create, and sustain conspiratorial disinformation-founded hostility towards, suspicion of and pushback against the state and institutions. The published lists and targeted harassment of people who are perceived as having participated in the Covid-19 response sees individuals as *representative* of the state or institutions. In the manipulation of public mood, response, and perception, through sophisticated production and propagation of narrative frames, creators position themselves as sources of courage, comfort, solidarity, acceptance, and support. Since February 2022, the increasing development of offline social networks and events have furthered enabled a sense of connection with others within disinformation ecosystems, and disconnection from those who disagree. Fear, anger, uncertainty, and a sense of division are instrumentalised to encourage confusion, in-group loyalties, and out-group distrust. These and related dynamics studied by TDP are eroding social cooperation, and cohesion at pace.

Two considerations stand out, explored in significant detail in our analysis conducted daily over 2022. Firstly, the growing harms against women in public life and public office, with associated chilling effects increasingly sharply, eroding social cohesion by disincentivising political diversity, participation, and public voice. Secondly, the algorithmic amplification of a toxic masculinity that underwrites our socio-political culture and discourse, which targets and harms all women and gender minorities, and especially those who present visibly 'different', deemed to be transgressive, or espouse progressive ideas.

Telegram, studied as a platform, presents novel challenges. Prior to the pandemic, Telegram was not a key domestic vector of misogynist, mis- and disinformation, and gendered harms.

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[8] Hannah, Kate, Sanjana Hattotuwa, and Kayli Taylor. "The Murmuration of Information Disorders: Aotearoa New Zealand's Mis- and Disinformation Ecologies and the Parliament Protest." 2022.

In April 2022, mis- and disinformation ecologies and constituent enclaves of misogyny, along with public choreographies of harms directed against woman, are key features in Aotearoa New Zealand's information disorders, propelled by the unregulated nature of Telegram. What is happening now, and at increasing pace, is a migration from the frictionless cross-pollination across ecologies on Telegram, which isn't based on algorithmic amplification, to the recommendation engines and algorithmic expansion of reach powering Meta product and platform surfaces, like Facebook Pages, Facebook Groups, and Instagram, as well as Twitter, TikTok and YouTube.

Aotearoa New Zealand moves towards upcoming electoral moments in the face of 'constant campaigns', with dark patterns or engagement signatures aiding the rapid spread of disinformation which are invisible to public institutions, private citizens, and often even social media companies. These challenges are compounded by how even leading social media platform's lack of situated knowledge, disallowing timely, meaningful insights into how, and why, the underlying socio-political culture of the country is shifting, and changing.

TDP studies Aotearoa New Zealand's socio-political discourses as inextricably entwined with the nature and nurture of harms in global disinformation landscapes; requiring critical analysis and responses that locate today's **harms** as those evident and for longer elsewhere, allowing us to determine deleterious path-dependencies if unchecked, resulting in more denigration of women and gender minorities, destruction of civic norms, and hollowing out of democratic institutions.

Dehumanisation

"Where they burn books, they will, in the end, burn people too."
Heinrich Heine, 1822

Given our unique data collection, analysis, and interpretation, grounded within a year of qualitative and quantitative data, The Disinformation Project now studies a rise in dehumanising discourse on Telegram that recalls the words used before the Rwandan genocide, by Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM).[9] Named 'the soundtrack to genocide', RTLM is known by genocide scholars and journalists for the repetitive description of Tutsis as 'cockroaches', drawing upon historic prejudices within the Hutu community.

Starting late September 2021, The Disinformation Project now studies more than 165 public Telegram channels daily, searching for the usage of keywords and phrases in posts or commentary. This process cannot be automated, is time-consuming, and can be distressing, given the volume of and violence contained in the content studied, including but not limited to memetic, GIF, video and audio material framed by, or featuring these keywords. Data collation was conducted daily from October 2021- 2 March 2022; reverting to every week day since, with offline context driven analysis conducted over weekends since the end of the parliamentary protest.

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[9] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Radio_T%C3%A9l%C3%A9vision_Libre_des_Mille_Collines

Here is a non-definitive list of instances of the word 'cockroach' from November 2021 to April 2022 appearing in the domestic Telegram ecologies studied.

- He ain't a man of faith, he's a criminal and is responsible for every death in NZ that results from the experimental jabb! May he be tried for treason and executed for crimes against humanity!! Fukn cockroach!
- The only way to get rid of the fucking Cockroaches who squat at the expense of the good Kiwis is to grab the cunts by the scruff of the devil necks and fucking knife them- they won't go peacefully! They are killing Kiwis!! Rise up and get rid of those cunts, starting with the fuck-ugly bloke Jacinda Ardern! Take back your country before they kill you all off!
- How is it that the police even got hold of them at all, some one on the inside I'm picking. This protest has to start getting serious, no more festive vibes, no more peace and love, we can do that once we have won, just get bloody serious and storm parliament, get rid of all those cockroaches.
- Great work! Fuk these cockroaches!!
- I've told her that in my opinion damage is done and we need to see the underacted Pfizer contract as a starter, this process she's got going gives too much wriggle room for these cockroaches to scurry away and come back with new destruction.
- Spin it however you want you sick twisted evil spineless cockroaches. The light will be permanently shined onto you. To expose you and send you scuttling back to the dark from whence you emerged you cess ridden harridan.
- 100% all cockroaches - they all need to go!! all traitors to the people.
- Plastic, lying arrogant, cockroach!! Worst PM in history...Michael Joseph Savage and Kate Sheppard would be turning in their graves, you communist bitch!
- how many politicians (Cockroaches) does it take to change a lightbulb none they all hide from the light
- Any one have a flame throwing to disperse the blue cockroaches
- Comparing her to a pig is an insult to all pigs. She's a repulsive cockroach.
- Wonder what dirt they have on this cockroach?
- She is a mindless puppet being controlled by her WEF handlers..Her entire political career has been scripted and she has no idea how to deal with our off-script reaction.. it's the same with Trudeau! When the shit hits the fan these human cockroaches scurry for the nearest dark recess of filth to hide in!
- Fuckn cockroach!!!
- An insult to cockroaches.
- Ardern reminded me of a cockroach in this screenshot.
- Repugnant cockroach!
- Yea right, if they didn't come out to meet you, their the same as the rest of those yellow bellied treacherous cockroaches.
- So now you know, the ones that are still employed are complicit in the poisoning and depopulation agenda! They are willing to hide the sid3 effects from you! How do you feel about that? What sort of cockroach does that to their fellow humans who trust them to give accurate advice? How many people have they knowingly contributed to their eventual deaths? What should be done to them???

- This slimy little maggot cockroach hemorrhoid cocksucking piece of dogshit should have been aborted at 5 months.

Dangerous speech discourses, safely hosted and significantly growing within the safe harbours on Telegram, have enabled those with semantic and epistemic authority to affix dehumanising frames to individuals and groups who represent, to the target audience, a dangerous out-group who are considered responsible for genocide or democide. Through the repeated use of dehumanising language – cockroaches, traitors, terrorists, witches, spawns of Satan, pure evil founded in Biblical semantic authority, and associating people with pests, rodents, animals, or insects that are easy to kill – we are studying the strategic shift of social perceptions, values, and attitudes, which is a dangerous speech hallmark. The violative language engenders and normalises the notion that targets *must be killed, and often, urgently.*

Targets framed in the data collation above include the Prime Minister, leading academics, specific journalists, media personnel, doctors, and senior public officials, like Dr. Bloomfield (against who the first comment above is made). As *In Rwanda, We Know All About Dehumanizing Language[10]* notes,

> The radio station RTLM, allied with leaders of the government, had been inciting Hutus against the Tutsi minority, repeatedly describing the latter as inyenzi, or "cockroaches," and as inzoka, or "snakes." The station, unfortunately, had many listeners.

> The promoters of genocide used other metaphors to turn people against their neighbours. Hutus, by reputation, are shorter than Tutsis; radio broadcasters also urged Hutus to "cut down the tall trees."

> In urban centers, government soldiers and well-armed members of the Interahamwe militia affiliated with the ruling party set up roadblocks filtering out Tutsis and killing them by the roadside. It was an easy task to pick them out. Ever since independence from Belgium in 1962, national identification cards specified ethnicity.

> Within 100 days, an estimated one million people, the overwhelming majority of whom were Tutsis, lay dead. The worst kind of hatred had been unleashed. **What began with dehumanizing words ended in bloodshed.**

Meta's Hate Speech Community standard defines Hate Speech as the targeting of people based on "protected characteristics." Tier 1 ("do not post") content includes:

Content targeting a person or group of people… on the basis of their aforementioned protected characteristic(s) with… dehumanising speech or imagery in the form of comparisons, generalisations, or unqualified behavioural statements (in written or visual form) to or about:
- Insects

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[10] https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/04/rwanda-shows-how-hateful-speech-leads-violence/587041/

- Animals that are culturally perceived as intellectually or physically inferior
- Filth, bacteria, disease, and faeces
- Sexual predator
- Sub humanity
- Violent and sexual criminals
- Other criminals
- Statements denying existence

Content proliferating on New Zealand-based Telegram channels without administrative pushback, community mediation, or platform regulation regularly meets and exceeds Meta's 'Do not post' criteria for Hate Speech. Notably, discursive norms seeded on Telegram are now spreading throughout Aotearoa New Zealand's information ecosystems, with new norm-setting for the regular and unchallenged use of vocabularies disallowed by community guidelines and other policies on leading social media platforms like Meta, Twitter, and YouTube.

The Disinformation Project's non-exhaustive keyword list, which in daily use for the study of information disorders, involves derivatives, proximate terms, synonyms, other slang, and more common expletives, is its own significant signal around the toxicity, violence, misogynistic normative discourse within disinformation ecologies. Every word or phrase brings with it, almost every day, new search results. Other content, such as voice notes, which are regularly used by some prolific commentators, must be listened to in their entirety for analysis, since keyword searching *will not* surface images, memes, photos, videos, app-based stickers, or audio. Accordingly, keyword analysis significantly and consistently *under-represents* the actual presence and propagation of dangerous speech, on just domestic anti-vaccine Telegram ecologies.

1. arrest
2. bullet
3. cockroach
4. cunt
5. execute
6. extreme prejudice
7. fuck Ardern
8. fuckers
9. gallows
10. guillotine
11. hang
12. horse
13. horseface
14. kill
15. kill them
16. military
17. necks snap
18. Neve
19. noose
20. occupy

    21. public execution
    22. rope
    23. shoot
    24. shot
    25. slug
    26. Tarrant
    27. terrorist
    28. traitor
    29. whore

Meta specifically notes the use of the word "cunt" in the guidelines related to Tier 2 "do not post". Recent media coverage of the misogynistic targeting experienced by women in public life in Aotearoa included the decision by Dominion Post editor, Anna Fifield, to publish the word unredacted (in the print edition) in an article so that readers would feel the violence and violation of the way in which this word is levelled at women.[11] It is one of the most frequently found terms in the Telegram ecologies we study and is normatively used by content creators and commentators to describe women who are perceived to be involved in the Covid-19 response, from the Prime Minister to academics, journalists, and health care workers.

14 of 29 terms regularly studied above are words related to murder or execution; this text-based analysis does not account for the proliferation of visual content (videos, gifs, stickers, memes, photos) which *also* reference murder and execution. Visual content related to murder and execution is *the most predominant* visual content posted in the Telegram channels studied. As violence and death threats have become commonplace on Telegram (examples follow):

- "Can someone slap that red haired pedo-looking chunker upside her face? She is a taint upon the populace"
- "Go on Jacinda, put this piece of rope around your neck and stand on this trapdoor. For the common good. Nobody's died from it in New Zealand ever. It's quite safe. #science")

TDP now studies the migration of dangerous speech from Telegram to more mainstream social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.

Misogyny

Misogyny – which is not merely the hatred of women but the punishment of and attempt to control women who challenge male dominance[12] – is a profoundly powerful tool which is being used here in Aotearoa New Zealand, manifesting in a range of features of dangerous speech.

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[11] https://www.stuff.co.nz/dominion-post/wellington/300556540/disgusting-abuse-targeted-at-women-in-wellington-local-government

[12] Kate Manne, *Down Girl: the Logic of Misogyny*, 2018

Dehumanisation of transgressive women (women who need to be punished and controlled as above) is commonplace – using animal references, imagery of animals, imagery of insects and disease, ideas from classical misogyny around women as the cause of humanity's 'fall' in the Garden of Eden, the binary construction of women as Madonna/whore, imagery and language of witchcraft, Satanism, possession, succubae, and other forms of sorcery.[13]

These dehumanising tropes (a trope is a significant or recurring theme) act not just to target and diminish the women to whom they are directed. Through using language and images which are highly culturally charged with meaning, present-day targets of misogyny are at once connected to a long-standing history of misogyny and sexism, and, in addition, reminded constantly of the historic punishments meted out to transgressive women. The accusation of witchcraft *contains within it* the notion of the *necessity* for punishment of witches – by trial, by dunking, by execution. Many of these historic or 'classical misogyny' tropes either objectify or sexualise women; again, this language and imagery serves to both speak to an historic cultural charged set of ideas, but to also remind women of their (lack of) value as human.

More than merely upsetting or distressing, misogynistic targeting of women in public life is *in and of itself a form of hate speech which leads to violence* – both so-called domestic violence and so-called terror are innately formed within language and images which reinforce binary ideas of gender, objectify women, and link women now to historic forms of violently expressed misogyny. "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live" (Exodus 22:18, KJV) and the *Malleus Maleficarum* (1487), which is usually translated as 'The Hammer of Witches' form deep culturally signalled and signposted narratives within which the description of the Prime Minister as a witch, sorceress, or succubus takes place. When the Prime Minister is targeted in this manner, the speech is not political, it is 'dangerous', i.e. a form of expression (e.g. speech, text or images) that increases the risk that its audience will condone or participate in violence against members of another group, *that group being women and girls, non-binary people, and those who are perceived as outside binary gender*.

We have observed the seed and spread of new-to-Aotearoa New Zealand culturally charged terms and images targeting women. "Presstitutes", is a derogatory term describing women journalists which is prevalent in the Philippines and South Asia and widely used to attempt to discredit journalists, such as the 2021 Nobel Peace Laureate, Maria Ressa.[14] Familiar with the terminology from international research, we note that there has been a significant rise in its usage in 2022.[15]

This language of extreme misogyny is migrating from Telegram to other social and/or media platforms: a post on Telegram resolves to a meme on a website, which is highly racist and misogynistic in tone. What is pitched as 'satire' is a strategic play, enabling plausible deniability around any online or offline consequences resulting from individuals targeted. The tonal shift of speech frames in anti-vaccine/anti-mandate ecologies from August 2021

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[13] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Succubus

[14] #Presstitute: The Online War Against Women With An Opinion, https://www.thecitizen.in/index.php/en/NewsDetail/index/7/10942/Presstitute-The-Online-War-Against-Women-With-An-Opinion

[15] Summary data available on request.

to April 2022 embrace the normalisation of woman journalists as 'presstitutes', other women in public life as witches or whores, and all subject to arrest, public trial, and summary execution.

The normalisation of the language of dangerous speech does not require offline, kinetic harm to occur to be taken seriously as dangerous to intended targets and women in general. *We stress that misogyny is not merely a gateway harm:*

> Even in attacks where misogyny isn't the primary motive, it is often nonetheless present as a contributing factor. Anders Breivik, who killed 77 people in an attack in Norway in 2011, wrote a manifesto which was riddled with misogyny and opposition to feminism. Christchurch gunman Brenton Tarrant and John T. Earnest, who killed one person at a synagogue near San Diego, both referenced feminism in their manifestos (Jewish people, Earnest said, deserved to be killed, among other things, for their role in creating 'feminism, which has enslaved women in sin').

> All of these terrorist attackers were active in online communities linked to the 'manosphere', a loose collection of online communities ranging from more or less mainstream activism for men's rights through to pick-up artists and reactionary anti-feminist movements like 'incels' and 'men going their own way'.[16]

Extreme misogyny is a significant problem in and of itself, one which is providing disinformation narrators and their communities with avenues for recruitment, and which is enabled by transformation at pace to political campaigns, networks, platforms, and parties. The misogyny present in these communities has become a calling card for their socio-political interactions, a means of shared identity creation, and, chillingly, is in *plain sight* a description of their underlying endgames – restricted participation of women in public life, binary gender roles, control of bodies and choices, anti-feminist, and anti-LGBTQ+ policies and polis.

With ongoing concerns related to misogyny within Parliament and existing political parties, and the regular targeting of women politicians, including local body politicians, the creeping norm-entrenchment of the visual and linguistic targeting of women in public life *as women* becomes a critical feature of our political and social discourse. Such discourses have significant chilling effects. This violent misogyny and its burgeoning impacts on human security and safety are well-accounted for, both in our ongoing research, media coverage, and the acknowledgement in a statement to the press April 11 by SIS Director Rebecca Kitteridge:

> I can say is we are seeing an increase in violent language, and we are seeing the cherry-picking of a range of misogynist, racist, and xenophobic views being combined in a whole range of ways.[17]

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[16] https://www.voxpol.eu/the-national-security-implications-of-extreme-misogyny/
[17] https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/300562276/violent-misogynistic-language-unthinkable-a-few-years-ago-nz-spy-boss-says

A salient example is content produced in the first week of May 2022 targeting a Māori woman politician. A white supremacist content creator posts a video targeting her with accompanying text on Telegram:

> I'll stick by my words of ugly on the outside and even uglier on the inside. A woman full of ill intent and pure malice for anyone she takes a fancy to destroy. A woman free from negative media attention or rule of law. She is literally above the law and rules that apply to the rest of us. I believe she's a self loathing one part in 512 Maori if that, with dyed hair, spray on tan and a moko to exaggerate her Maori credentials purely for greed and riches beyond anything she could accumulate in a million years of life. A truly horrendous human being and a quintessential definition of a psychopath.[18]

The specific stresses, tone, and delivery of the video and the hallmarks of dangerous speech in use mark this content as a critical example of racism, misogyny and toxic masculinity directed against an individual. The speaker and his strategic, intentional targeting are key to our understanding of the layered ways in which content that is inspired by, rooted in and promoting of toxic, hyper-masculinity and misogyny, and related harms including violence against woman (VAW) is promulgated across the ecosystems we observe and study. We note that pushback, be it administrative or community-based, is not visible, and that this kind of content is shared, signalled, and positively engaged with.

VAW as defined by the World Health Organisation is limited to intimate partner violence and sexual violence.[19] As we have previously described, The Disinformation Project notes that VAW is a national security problem,[20] and as is clear in this case, has a negative and chilling-effect on women, particularly Indigenous women and women of colour in public office,[21] or seeking elected office.[22] Internationally, this kind of targeting is notably experienced by women who come from minority communities in Global North constituencies,[23] *and is now considered an inescapable harm for any woman in politics,[24] including in Aotearoa New Zealand.[25]* Our analysis and data collation has captured how mainstream socio-political discourse in Aotearoa New Zealand normalises harms against women MPs, academics, public servants, and business leaders. Norm entrenchment of toxic

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[18] Reference available on request.

[19] Violence against women, https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women

[20] Gendered disinformation is a national security problem, https://www.brookings.edu/techstream/gendered-disinformation-is-a-national-security-problem/

[21] Tackling Online Abuse and Disinformation Targeting Women in Politics, https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/11/30/tackling-online-abuse-and-disinformation-targeting-women-in-politics-pub-83331

[22] Women in politics face 'daily' abuse on social media, https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-politics-52785157

[23] Black and Asian women MPs abused more online, https://www.amnesty.org.uk/online-violence-women-mps and How much more abuse do female politicians face? A lot., https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/10/06/1009406/twitter-facebook-online-harassment-politicians/

[24] Politicians in the line of fire: Incivility and the treatment of women on social media, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2053168018816228

[25] Female politicians face sexist abuse online, https://www.rnz.co.nz/national/programmes/lately/audio/2018836535/female-politicians-face-sexist-abuse-online and Here be trolls: New Zealand's female politicians battle rising tide of misogyny, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/09/here-be-trolls-new-zealands-female-politicians-battle-rising-tide-of-misogyny

masculinity in Aotearoa NZ's socio-political culture was established prior to the pandemic, but is worsened on account of it, and sees clear expansion.

This is a real, present, and growing danger to social cohesion. Researchers have described how:

> Women continue to experience high levels of gender-based abuse and harassment in carrying out their everyday roles as public representatives. This misogynistic and regularly also racist abuse, particularly online, is becoming an increasing barrier to women's political participation. This is a clear threat to our democracy...[26]

The Disinformation Project, where we focus on information disorders within ecosystems, notes that outside the analytical lenses of national security, a focus on human security and social cohesion reveals the threat this normalised misogyny and misogynoir represent. We are mindful, in the contexts described in this paper, of the escalation to violent extremism which led to the murder of British MP Jo Cox;[27] we also emphasise that stochastic violence *should not be required* for online misogyny to be regarded as, and responded to, as a *serious and significant harm* that erodes Aotearoa NZ's democratic firmament, public institutions, political culture, social interactions and diversity. Cox's murderer, profiled in a BBC article, is described:[28]

> Those in Birstall who believed Mair to have been odd but harmless say he was devoted to his mother, who lived nearby, and many commented on the way he tended elderly neighbours' gardens. Neighbours, who knew nothing of his links with white supremacists, said they had no reason to believe he was racist. His half-brother, Duane, whose late father, Reginald, was originally from Grenada, said he had never heard him express racist sentiments.
>
> Others in the town tell a different story. A number of Asian taxi drivers say Mair would utter insulting comments to them. "He'd been reported by a few taxi drivers for making racist remarks," said Zein Ali, a controller at Oakwell and Rex taxis. "When they dropped him off and he was paying them, he'd say racist things. We always thought he was a racist."
>
> The books and magazines that police recovered from his home and the examination of library computers on which he had browsed the internet left no room for doubt.

When those charged with assessing risk to individuals and communities are dominated by those least likely to be targeted or harmed by the ideologies at play, these in-group perspectives as in the Cox murder above were in opposition to the lived perspectives and experiences of brown, Asian and other non-white community members. Threats towards and online harms targeting Māori, minority communities, and women online – and now, increasingly in offline activity too – *cannot* be fully understood without *situated knowledges*,

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[26] Social media abuse threatens to silence women as political actors, https://www.nwci.ie/learn/article/social_media_abuse_threatens_to_silence_women_as_political_actors

[27] Jo Cox: Man jailed for 'terrorist' murder of MP, https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-38079594

gendered, grounded experience and the embrace of *input, insight, and initiatives* of those *who have been harmed or targeted*, in identifying the nurture and nature of harm.

The dangerous speech ideation and normative vocabularies present within the ecosystems we study is markedly similar to content produced, signalled, and consumed prior to the enaction of offline violence internationally, such as the murder of MP Jo Cox, as well as other Far-Right and Incel-based violence enacted since, including the 2019 Christchurch Mosque terrorist attack. Material studied by The Disinformation Project daily contains all the hallmarks of dangerous speech, a growing and accepting audience, a context within which racism and misogyny are now normalised and entrenched, and a multi-platform ecosystem which, through the safe harbour of Telegram, provides refuge for hyper-toxic masculinities within which misogyny is mixed with anti-Māori racism, Islamophobia, and anti-Semitism.

Gendered harms and toxic masculinities dominate the landscape we study and are the key linking feature of many disparate groups and individuals. We note as always concerns for women and gender minorities, Indigenous peoples, and people of colour involved in these movements. Misogynistic use of purported threat to women and girls is another dangerous speech hallmark we see repeated across these ecologies, from hyper-masculine posting around ANZAC Day to the construction of 'good' women as anti-feminist, traditional, content with binary gender roles, and in their place in the occupation kitchen. The fixated obsession with women in public life expressed across the ecosystems studied is grounded within binarized categories for women's participation in work and the domestic sphere. Women are evaluated as sexual objects, and men who are targeted are 'emasculated' though feminisation, slurs, and homophobic/transphobic commentary and 'humour'. From 'Cindy' to 'cunt' this set of violent and distressing language and imagery is everywhere across the ecologies studied, and increasingly prevalent in mainstream and offline spaces and places also.

Critical to understanding the impact of this rampant and widespread violent misogyny is understanding its intent: the creation of a socio-political context that is toxic for women and gender minorities, particularly those who have intersectional identities, in any position of public visibility, authority and elected office, including industry, media, and academia. Additionally, the risks that our high-trust model of public life provide, with very few civil or legal remedies for the prevention of targeted harassment or the protection of those targeted, signal both *potential harm* and the ongoing *slow violence* of living with the impact that this normative, violent discourse has for those targeted, their families, and those who share their personal characteristics, or value tolerance and inclusion.

Recommendations

1. Immediate review of the electoral legislation candidate disclosure requirements ahead of the 2023 General Election.

2. Expedited review of the regulations for the Companies Register to address discoverability of disclosure requirements and redaction criteria for individuals at risk.

3. Establishment of collective work programme across Privacy Commission and Human Rights Commission on related published registers such as vehicle registration and the Electoral Roll to ensure balance of access to voting rights and protection of privacy.

4. A full review of the existing legal and civil remedies, particularly the Harmful Digital Communications Act, Netsafe, and the absence of advocacy as a core deliverable. This review should look at civil and criminal harassment within the context of online, stranger-led hate and harassment.

5. Systems-wide approach to the Content Regulatory Review, including the regulatory frameworks for Netsafe as lead agency for the HDCA and the Domain Name Commission's regulatory framework for .nz CCLD.

6. The establishment of a transparent, outside government entity to provide research, analysis and advice for communities, civil society organisations, agencies and independent crown authorities on information disorders and their impacts in Aotearoa New Zealand.