

# The Disinformation Project

## MEDIA PACK

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New findings: *“Transgressive transitions; Transphobia, community building, and community bridging within Aotearoa New Zealand’s disinformation ecologies March-April 2023”*

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### MEDIA RELEASE

*Friday 5 May*

Independent research group The Disinformation Project has today released evidence that hatred towards transgender people in Aotearoa New Zealand has increased significantly this year.

A new report titled ‘Transgressive transitions; Transphobia, community building, and community bridging within Aotearoa New Zealand’s disinformation ecologies March-April 2023’ outlines a measurable rise in both volume and tone of transphobia, as well as evidence of foreign interference in New Zealand online communities.

“The type of language and imagery we’re seeing is significantly more violent, including repeated use of language that denies that trans people exist, or that they should be allowed to exist,” said Dr Sanjana Hattotuwa, Research Fellow at The Disinformation Project.

The researchers saw specific tactics which suggested foreign influence and interference were being used to help this increase in violence. Utilising disinformation narrative techniques including, but not limited to rage-baiting, performative outrage, emotional contagions, inflammatory presentations, aggrieved frames, and dangerous speech, the

rapid, continuous, and repetitive content production we observe in Aotearoa New Zealand's disinformation ecologies mimics or is modelled on Russian propaganda techniques.

From 22 March 2023 onwards, Australian, and international far right and explicitly neo-Nazi content was shared and promoted on Aotearoa New Zealand Telegram channels at levels The Disinformation Project had never previously observed. However, this also took place on Telegram channels where the influence of a small but prolific number of New Zealand's neo-Nazi and far-right community members has become significant.

The scope of the research included the social media landscape of disinformation producers, narrators, and audiences in Aotearoa New Zealand, starting from those spaces which were expressing Covid 19 minimisation or denial in 2020.

They discovered that anti-trans content quickly became the key talking point in these networks due to a tactic called '*community bridging*', where one set of ideas is bridged into a community that doesn't yet hold those ideas.

"This is bridging between extremist ideas is really concerning, as it makes the spread of further harmful ideologies possible. For example, explicitly Neo-Nazi content has been shared in New Zealand-based social media spaces, and these groups and individuals were more active in social media during our research period", said Kate Hannah, Founder, and Director of The Disinformation Project.

Download the working paper from <https://thedisinfoproject.org/2023/05/05/working-paper-transgressive-transitions>

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## SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

### Harm to trans people has increased:

- Harm and hate towards transgender and non-binary people in Aotearoa measurably increased in both volume and tone during the period 18 March – mid-April 2023. This corresponded with the tour of UK-based anti-transgender activist Kellie-Jay Keen-Minshull.
- The type of language and imagery used is significantly more violent, including repeated use of language that denies that trans people exist, or that they should be allowed to exist.
- Denying a group's existence and their right to exist are both signs of the language of genocide.

### Foreign influence is evident:

- Over the same time period, we saw specific tactics suggesting foreign influence and interference being used to help this increase in violence.
- Neo-Nazi and far-right content and narrators rapidly emerged as the dominant narrative signature across domestic Telegram discourse – with content imported from foreign neo-Nazi channels at a pace never before studied, which we can state, with a high level of confidence, did not previously exist to this extent within our location of study.

### **Far-right activity has been bolstered:**

- Explicitly neo-Nazi and far-right content, individuals, and groups have been shared in New Zealand-based social media spaces.
- White nationalist groups and individuals were more active in social media during this time period.

### **Existing disinformation groups are taking up trans hate:**

- Key proponents of disinformation kept the story going longer and used connecting existing audiences to anti-trans narratives to grow engagement and followers.
- Anti-trans content quickly became the key talking point due to a tactic called '*community bridging*', where one set of ideas is bridged into a community that doesn't yet hold those ideas.
- This is achieved through stories which connect the new idea to shared ideas within the community being bridged into. Our research showed topics relating to children were the bridging mechanisms.
- This has created a bonding effect around the idea of threats to women and children.

### **Disinformation networks are extremist, and may be getting worse:**

- New Zealand's far-right and Neo-Nazi groups and individuals have been using Covid-19 disinformation to broaden their community of followers. Now they are able to overtly communicate extremist ideas within the New Zealand disinformation community.
- These patterns are still emerging, but the tactical sophistication, including successful efforts from foreign influence, makes the bridging of further (more extreme) ideologies possible.

## **ABOUT THIS STUDY**

Our location of study comprises the open-source social media landscape of disinformation producers, narrators, and audiences in Aotearoa New Zealand, starting from those spaces which were expressing Covid 19 minimization or denial in 2020.

Now in 2023, the ideas, narratives, and identities presented and represented in this landscape have shifted, with norm-setting and community building founded on shared conspiratorialism, features of international far-right talking points - immigration, reproductive rights, LGBTQIA+ (and particularly trans rights), globalisation, nativism, loss of hegemony<sup>1</sup> – and local conspiratorial frames such as 1080 drops to co-governance.

Our project charts these shifts, and significantly, does so within an existing online and offline community which has demonstrated in near real-time features of networked manoeuvres, the impact of key influencers, and the re-setting of social, cultural, and political norms.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Ezra Klein Show, "Transcript: Ezra Klein Interviews Pippa Norris," <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/01/podcasts/transcript-ezra-klein-interviews-pippa-norris.html>, Accessed 18 April 2023.

<sup>2</sup> *The impact of disinformation on democratic processes and human rights in the world*, Policy Department for External Relations, European Parliament, April 2021. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/653635/EXPO\\_STU\(2021\)653635\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/653635/EXPO_STU(2021)653635_EN.pdf) Accessed 18 April 2023.

## ABOUT THE DISINFORMATION PROJECT

The Disinformation Project is an independent research group studying misinformation and disinformation in Aotearoa New Zealand. Since February 2020, we have used mixed methods approaches to analyse and review the seed and spread of information disorders – and their impact on the lives of New Zealanders.

Our grounded research makes use of mixed methods, combining open-source and quantitative data from a range of social media platforms, cross-pollination patterns, super-spreader signatures, semantic study, and the qualitative analysis data, including discourse shifts over time. Our approach to information disorders provides unique perspectives into misinformation and disinformation's establishment, entrenchment and expansion in Aotearoa New Zealand.

We produce [publicly available research](#), sensitive reporting, [media commentary](#), and resourcing for civil society seeking to respond to information disorders, and growing offline consequences, in their communities.

Aotearoa New Zealand is experiencing an [infodemic](#), where the Covid-19 pandemic furthered the spread of misinformation and disinformation, impacting social cohesion and over the longer term, the country's democratic fabric and electoral integrity. We help social media companies, journalists, academia, policymakers, and civil society to identify, understand, unpack and meaningfully respond to information disorders.