



# Communications approach for managing COVID-19 false and misleading information and scams

## Context

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

At the same time, we have observed a marked increase in sharing false and misleading information since the onset of the virus. As well as an increase in frequency, narratives have shifted to broad scepticism challenging the vaccination programme and current border strategies. 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

#### Misinformation

Information that is false but not created with the intention of causing harm  
(e.g. conspiracy theories about chemtrails, fluoride etc.)

#### 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; foreign state-backed campaigns to undermine public health etc.)

#### Malinformation

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

### INTENT TO HARM

#### Scams

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

- Use of terminology: the correct terminology is 'false or misleading information' however 'misinformation' is generally understood and relatable by the public and more commonly used

## False information landscape in Aotearoa New Zealand

The current narratives of COVID-19 misinformation and disinformation in Aotearoa New Zealand are mostly related to vaccines though there is continued activity questioning the government response to COVID-19.

Many of these narratives are woven into larger themes centred around mistrust of government, elites, or international businesses, (often referred to as conspiracy theories); or concerns about side effects, medical safety, and long-term effects of the vaccine.

False information can be spread through a range of different channels, including social media, traditional media (television, radio and print), pamphlets, posters and letterbox drops as well as through word of mouth. Social media platforms (e.g. Facebook and YouTube) are the most common means of disseminating vaccine misinformation and disinformation in Aotearoa New Zealand. However, a platform with the most message numbers may not be the most trusted, believed or influential with a targeted audience.

False information is a direct threat to a successful public health response – particularly in context of the vaccine rollout – this is being addressed proactively to ensure that everyone has access to reliable information and is able to discern between reliable and unreliable information.



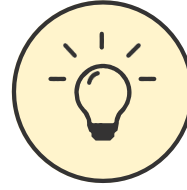
## Key communication considerations

- 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 about false information and strengthen resilience to it. Everyone has a responsibility to prevent mis/disinformation.
- It's shouldn't be just a government voice involved in the discussion but also up to media/academia to encourage people to get information from reliable sources.
- 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.



## 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.



## What is being done

- A range of government agencies are working to mitigate the consequences of false information.
- Our strategic 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 false information.
- DPMC's COVID-19 Group has a leadership and coordination role in understanding the landscape and responding to COVID-19 false information.
- COVID-19 Group and MoH are working jointly on providing guidance to the health sector, businesses and community leaders on responding to COVID-19 vaccine false information
- The Ministry of Health is establishing a tactical response team to respond to vaccine false information.
- Government cyber security agency CERT NZ is already working closely with other government departments to try to stop scams in their tracks and is the central coordination point for any COVID-19 cyber security incidents and a public reporting point for false information.

## Insights and research

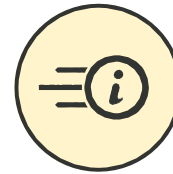
Our communication planning considers insights and research from the following sources to determine existing and emerging false information narratives:

- 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
- Behavioural insights research
- 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 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

## Guiding communication and engagement principles



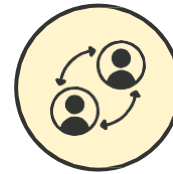
**Insights and research** led communications planning that is agile to respond to changing false information narratives



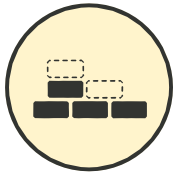
**Rapid intervention** to fill an information gap/provide an alternative to a dominant mis/disinformed narrative where appropriate.



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



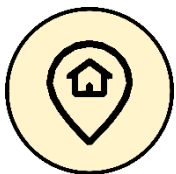
**Direct engagement** that is respectful and culturally appropriate, encourages participation, and empowers through dialogue.



**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

# Approaches to respond to disinformation

|                       | ACTION   | TARGET GROUPS  | TOOLS  |
|-----------------------|--|--|--|
| Short-term reactive   | The misinformation requires an immediate response. Use rapid communications to ensure the accurate narrative is widely provided.   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Traditional media (journalists/editors)</li> <li>Stakeholders and influencers</li> <li>Social media platforms</li> <li>Key audiences</li> </ul>                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Press statement</li> <li>Minister statement</li> <li>Direct communications</li> <li>Community leaders</li> <li>Brief journalists</li> <li>Q&amp;A</li> <li>Paid advertisement</li> <li>Search engine optimisation (SEO)</li> <li>Report to agency, i.e. Media Council/Police/Employer</li> </ul>  |
| Medium-term proactive | The misinformation requires a considered response. Use a combination of communications to assert own values/ brands. Tie together proactive measures with normal everyday communications and work with stakeholders/influencers to create consensus around the position. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Traditional media (journalists/editors)</li> <li>Stakeholders and influencers</li> <li>Social media platforms</li> <li>Wide audiences</li> </ul>                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Campaign, narrative and brand development</li> <li>Community outreach, dialogue and engagement</li> <li>Facilitate network, stakeholders and influencers</li> <li>Workshops/training</li> <li>Work with technology providers (i.e. social media platforms)</li> </ul>   |
| 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).                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Traditional media (journalists/editors)</li> <li>Young up-and-comers</li> <li>Stakeholders and influencers</li> <li>Social media platforms</li> <li>Wide audiences</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Regulatory responses</li> <li>Creation of multi stakeholder forum</li> <li>Campaign, narrative and brand engagement</li> <li>Programme funding e.g. for participatory content</li> <li>Talent spotting and influencer support/creation</li> <li>Facilitate network, stakeholders and influencers</li> <li>Workshops/training</li> <li>Contingency planning</li> </ul> |

## Social media approach to ensure reliable information is readily available



- We publish accurate, timely, reliable content consistently to ensure our community knows that we are a place to go for correct information.
- We regularly advise on how to look out for accurate information, with reminders in our content.
- We don't name or repeat known misinformation but instead provide the correct information.
- Robust community guidelines in place and made available
- Provide support to government agencies supporting COVID-19 response to facilitate training and best practise
- When we identify emerging false information themes we escalate them for further review

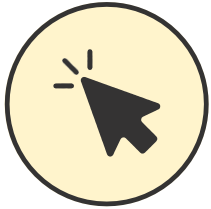


# Ministry of Health COVID-19 Vaccine and Immunisations Disinformation Response Team

The Ministry of Health will lead in the establishment of a team to carry out the following tasks:

- Receive reporting, monitor and develop insights on evolving disinformation incidents and narratives
- Build a database for reporting misinformation in Aotearoa and track emerging global 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 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 to guide this activity
- Act on disinformation through levers of government such as reporting illegal activity to Police, regulatory bodies, DIA etc
- Track outcomes

# All of society role in building resilience to false information



## Role of technology

- 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.



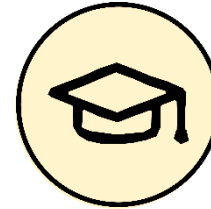
## Role of media

- 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 the New Zealand public

- Learn about reliable sources of information and how disinformation is designed to undermine beliefs and values.
- Minimise the spread of mis/disinformation by reporting fake accounts, or pages and domains repeatedly sharing misinformation using the Help Centre on the social media platform being used.
- 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 the Academia

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

## Guidance for government officials talking about false information

- Ensure transparency and freedom of expression are at the forefront of communications regarding our response to false information.
- When talking about false information, 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, into a story designed to counter misinformation.
- Acknowledge the challenge of countering false information and in particular 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 puts the health response at risk.

## COVID-19 false and misleading information– public communication messages

- People should only go to reliable sources for their information.
- Everyone has a responsibility to prevent false and misleading information.
- There are a number of potentially harmful effects from the spread of misleading or inaccurate information.
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- We need a whole of society approach to build awareness about false information and strengthen resilience to it and to encourage people to get information from reliable sources.
- 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.
- The best sources of accurate and reliable COVID-19 information are The Ministry of Health, Unite Against COVID-19 and trusted sources like your DHB or health provider.
- If you see something about COVID-19 or the vaccine that doesn't seem right, if it's on social media report it to the platform – anything else [report it to CERT NZ](#) or call 0800 2378 69.

## 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 it will be a scam. Report it to CERT NZ immediately.
- If you see something about the vaccine that doesn't seem right, report it to CERT NZ at <https://www.cert.govt.nz/individuals/common-threats/covid-19-vaccine-scams/> or call 0800 2378 69.