



HOW TO AVOID MEDIA MANIPULATION ATTEMPTS

Responsible Reporting
on False Information



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Written and compiled by FACT Aotearoa (Fight Against Conspiracy Theories) August 2023.

FACT Aotearoa is a grassroots group of activists fighting harmful conspiracy theories and disinformation in New Zealand.

Our members include citizen researchers who have a solid grasp on the disinformation landscape. Get in touch if you have a story that could use our knowledge.



The issue of how to report on false and misleading information is not new, especially not to journalists. But it is more important now, given the rapidly changing landscape of news distribution and digital media. We've all heard the adage often falsely attributed to Mark Twain – that “a lie will go round the world while truth is pulling its boots on”, and social media has made that truer than the unknown author could ever have imagined.

Media can create feedback loops within our communities, amplifying the important issues of the day, which feed into the news stories of tomorrow. And there are people out there looking to exploit this loop, to shift the Overton window toward their political ideology, to make their falsehoods appear as truth. This has made journalism much harder in today's time-poor environment. Accidental amplification of harmful rhetoric is common, both in general reporting and in manipulation attempts by those looking to spread their false information.

Here are some tips for how media professionals can minimise narrative hijacking by conspiracy theorists and extremists, and maximise their ability to report on important events. But first, let's look at some of the ways Aotearoa New Zealand's so-called “Freedom Movement” are trying to get their messaging to a broader audience.

Regards,
FACT Aotearoa.

MEDIA MANIPULATION TACTICS

Many of the so-called freedom groups in New Zealand are strategic about their communications, hiding the full extent of their beliefs. It's a recruitment tactic used to "redpill the normies," meaning to convince someone to take on their beliefs. It is done in various ways, often through "just asking questions," creating and hijacking memes, selectively editing video footage, simplifying complex topics, and twisting facts to suit their agenda. Voices for Freedom famously target "the wobbly middle" and use "just asking questions" to open the door to unsuspecting marks. Members are told that they cannot be open about their beliefs at first, as it could frighten new people away before they are ready to hear more.

Sometimes the movement attempts to share their messaging through astroturfing groups and a plethora of "concerned citizens" groups. As the names of these groups are not recognised by those unfamiliar with the disinformation scene in New Zealand, they can slip into print and online articles with ease. Voices for Freedom (VFF) have encouraged their members to form small groups with innocuous sounding names to gain attention from local and national government, and media. These groups have been successful in gaining a small amount of press through hiding their affiliations and true beliefs.

Nurses For Freedom NZ, lead by VFF coordinator Deborah Cunliffe, gained press through appearing as nurses "who just wanted their jobs back" when many members were not currently registered, or didn't want their jobs back. The coverage provided them with video that they could share online to make people believe that they were a legitimate group, when many were talking privately about holding their colleagues to account through "Nuremberg codes."

Operation Good Oil and Dig In at Marsden have both received positive coverage in the media. While it is legitimate to be against the closure of Marsden Point refinery, this was a stance adopted by conspiracy theorists immediately after the occupation at parliament as their anti-mandate support fell. It was their new cause to attach to and gain a foothold in the mainstream media. Most of the positive articles were amended after being alerted that the organisers of these groups were major players in the organisation of the parliament occupation, but the message had already been spread.

Arguments from extremists and conspiracy theorists are often framed as "just jokes," that the subjects of harassment "can't take a joke" or that it is "free speech." These tactics add plausible deniability to pushback received to hateful and harmful conduct, and risk normalising the behaviour. PM Jacinda Ardern was a lightning rod for this kind of behaviour, since women receive more violent and sexual abusive comments than men. Women of colour receive even more. This tactic can create a chilling effect, stopping people from taking public roles amidst fears of being the target of harassment.

Conspiracy theorists often use private groups to organise dog-piling comment sections with praise or scorn, creating a false sense of popularity or unpopularity. These campaigns are commonly known as brigading. Brigading, the online practice of banding together to perform a coordinated action, is also common on website polls. These polls are then taken by the spreaders of misinformation as proof that they are the (not-so) “silent majority.” To the casual observer this can seem organic, a change in public opinion, like something worth adding into a story for context. That is exactly what this tactic is meant to achieve.

And of course, there is source-hacking, planting a story and then using it to prove popular support.

All of these manipulative tactics are not new, and newsrooms have systems in place to combat the efforts. But sometimes it’s the basics that get missed in everyday operations.



TIPPING POINT

One of the reasons false and misleading information spreads so quickly is because it is often interesting, disturbing, or entertaining. That means eminently clickable stories. And while that is good for egos and the bottom line, accidentally amplifying conspiracy narratives can be damaging to our society, causing distrust in media, institutions, and democracy.

The most important question to ask before writing a story is one of the most basic in journalism.

IS IT NEWSWORTHY?

Here are some ways media can assess whether a story reaches the tipping point, becoming worthy of reporting or debunking.

Ask yourself:

- How far has the false information spread?
- Is it likely that our audience has seen it already?
- What are the consequences of bringing this content to their attention?
- Is there a social benefit in covering this story?
- If we didn't cover this, would it just go away?

If a story has extended beyond its originating community, it may be worthy of reporting. If it has not reached that tipping point, you may be giving it oxygen to grow.

ARE YOU BEING MANIPULATED?

Before pen hits paper, one must ask who a story might benefit. Many skilled communicators weaponise events to benefit their ideology or will use the resulting story to seed their narrative into the public sphere.

Ask yourself

- Who are the people bringing me this story?
- How might the story be weaponised to spread false information?

If you are being manipulated, there could still be a story. Reporting on the tactics of groups has a social benefit: helping the public to understand the rhetoric and techniques employed in manipulation campaigns, and recognise them in future.

The manipulators need the media so they can become part of the narrative, to amplify their latest attacks against people in our communities, enabling their dehumanisation.

Remember that the group spreading the misinformation may still celebrate or leverage off the resulting journalism – that's inevitable – but that same piece could act to inoculate a larger audience against their tactics in future.

TIPPING POINT REACHED, MANIPULATION MITIGATED, NOW WHAT?

Determine what the public should take away from your piece.

Ask yourself:

- Why do we report on attempts at manufactured amplification?
- Are we educating the public about disinformation campaigns so that they can be more vigilant?
- Are we trying to encourage technology companies and governments to act?
- Should we focus on debunking the content, or on the actors behind the content, or on the platforms that allow the content to spread?
- How can we write about the content without perpetuating the messages that they are boosting?

When in doubt about whether a story has reached the tipping point, ask a few colleagues. Get a sense check, and work with them to pre-empt pushback from actors in the final story.

Remember, there is an infinite loop, public to media, media to public. This can be hijacked.

The final check will ensure you're working to the best of your ability, and in the interest of the public good.



TIPS FOR REPORTING ON MIS/DIS/MALINFORMATION

TALK TO THE EXPERTS

- Understanding the landscape you are reporting on is of utmost importance. The articles that we've seen in New Zealand journalism that have been manipulated or that have reported falsehoods unknowingly have been from people who may not know the landscape of disinformation in Aotearoa New Zealand. Names of people, publications, and groups will be known to dedicated reporters, or experts in the field.
- Foreground experts, community organisations and activists that have been affected by the disinformation in your story, to ensure the history of the offending is well explained, and harmful framing is called out.
- Reporters shouldn't just quote experts, but should consult about labelling, framing, contextualising behaviours, and how to identify and pre-empt manipulation tactics.

REDUCE HARM AND INFORM

- Journalists must take a clear position during reporting of untruths to minimise the risk of amplifying falsehoods. Talk to experts wherever possible to write or consult on editorial pushback to ensure the clearest, most informed refutations possible.
- Focus on the harm caused by the misinformation and its victims and avoid framing that falls back on both-sides-ism when there is a clear victim of the abuse or misinformation, especially when the attacks are based on racial or gender intolerance. Frame the conversation within broader trends: the impact of online and offline attacks to at risk communities, and the public health implications.
- To avoid the contagion effect, stories should not create a blueprint that helps disinformation spread. Instead, talk about how manipulators are gaming the system to get their messages across.
- Avoid speculating on mental health or psychology. This narrows down people's perception of who can become an extremist to individual or personal traits, rather than an ideology or movement. And you really can never know what motivates disinformation actors. Stick with words, actions, and effects.
- Don't make fun of those that believe in the conspiracy theory or false information. Studies have shown that at least 81% of New Zealanders hold at least one false belief and will have many different reasons for holding them. Disparaging comments risk trivialising real issues, and further entrenching beliefs. Epistemological frameworks are notoriously hard to shift. Making someone feel belittled raises their defensiveness, making a shift even harder.

BE SPECIFIC

- When reporting on a false claim, use a truth sandwich. The aim is to ensure the truth is said twice as much as the lie, to avoid mistaken amplification of the latter. Here's how the concept's inventor George Lakoff describes it:
 1. Start with the truth. The first frame gets the advantage.
 2. Indicate the lie. Avoid amplifying the specific language, if possible.
 3. Return to the truth. Always repeat truths more than lies.

“When correcting a falsehood, state the fact *first and last*.
Repeated information stays in the mind.”

— *News Literary Project*

- Don't shy away from accurate descriptors of perpetrators. Often anti-vaccine activists in Aotearoa New Zealand will call themselves pro-choice, right as they are campaigning to take the right of vaccination away from others. This frame allows them plausible deniability of their intentions. Accuracy matters here.
- Specify numbers where possible. New Zealand's conspiracy theorist communities try hard to exaggerate their numbers.
- Be aware that online discourse is not always a representation of “the person on the street.” Comment sections and polls may have been shared in private groups so participants can flood them with conspiracist ideologies, creating a false sense of their popularity. Therefore, do not treat these results as a pull quote or use poll results in a story. If you do, your reporting may cause the very thing the false information purveyors want.
- While adding banal details about disinformation spreaders' lives provides a rich frame for readers, it can also be weaponised to make the individual seem less extreme. Family or an innocuous hobby like yoga is often thrust to the forefront to make a manipulator seem likeable.

Voices for Freedom brand themselves as three Auckland mums. Some media have run with this framing, obfuscating their influence in the dissemination of mis/dis/mal information behind a façade of normalcy and comfort.

When this happens, VFF celebrate on their channels – the same channels that have been used to promote harmful conspiracy theories and extremist views from NZ and international far-right activists.

INTERVIEWS AND LIVE REPORTING

While journalistic practices often require comments from the subject, giving a microphone to known disseminators of false information may not be in the public's interest. It gives them the opportunity to spin their positions and make them more palatable for the everyday audience.

The decision was tested with the Media Council, where two of the six complainants included the “right of reply,” the council replied that most of the subjects had their own platforms, and that there are circumstances where seeking the other side's views just gives a platform to inflammatory and harmful material.

“[W]e would not expect holocaust deniers to be contacted for their views in an article about the holocaust. For the same reason, we would not expect 9/11 and Christchurch massacre false flag theorists, and those who say there is no Covid pandemic, or that vaccines cannot work, to be contacted about articles wherein their views are criticised. We accept Stuff’s point that to do so would be irresponsible.

— *New Zealand Media Council*

The complaints were not upheld. If there is a good reason to interview the subject, make it clear what they believe, their actions, and their history around spreading false information. And when the inevitable dog-whistles to their ideology appear, explain their history, providing context to the reader.

The makers of the award-winning Stuff Circuit documentary [Fire and Fury](#) about the parliament occupation made the decision not to interview the main protagonists of the film for two reasons: “One, they’ve had their say in their endless online videos, chatrooms, and posts, so in this instance, we are providing the balance and context to what they have already said. And two, it would elevate their hateful and dangerous behaviours to a platform equal to the harm being done, in what after all is an infodemic driven by adept manipulators.”

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AVOID LIVE INTERVIEWS WITH MEDIA MANIPULATORS WHERE POSSIBLE

Many disinformation spreaders use a rhetorical technique called Gish gallop, trying to overwhelm an opponent with a torrent of arguments to make it near impossible to fact check them in real time. The technique is aptly named after anti-science evolution denier Duane Gish. And as Brandolini's law states, the amount of energy needed to refute bullshit is an order of magnitude bigger than that needed to produce it.

But if you have decided that the story has passed the tipping point and has met the threshold for a live interview with a known spreader of misinformation, experts have a few recommendations:

BE PREPARED

Do as much research on the participant as you can, understanding their talking points, the good, bad, and ugly. Keep your notes handy for the interview. You will need them.

DON'T WAIT

As soon as a falsehood is uttered, try to correct it in real time. If on television, it would be ideal to add lower thirds with corrections, although that may be unrealistic. Corrections can be made after the interview in articles and on social media. If the subject is Gish-galloping, slow your interviewee down, focus on one point, and hammer that home.

MAKE CLEAR CORRECTIONS

After the interview, ensure that all falsehoods are corrected so that the false information has no time to linger.

REPORTING USING IMAGERY AND VIDEOS FROM MANIPULATORS

Be extremely cautious when including online or print material, memes, symbology, photos, videos, and propaganda from known manipulators and false information spreaders in your publication. Much of this is crafted to bypass intended audiences' manipulation defences.

The purpose of the imagery, videos and other propaganda serves to normalise far-right ideas ([Fielitz and Thurston, 2019](#)). Printing it helps their cause.

Extremists wash their beliefs in visuals and rhetoric that allows plausible deniability. A great example is the adoption of the [OK symbol by the far-right](#). This can be used to signal to ideological peers, while at the same time making those pointing to the symbol as a white supremacist sign look overwrought.

There are ways to illustrate your article using the more innocuous images, ensuring you inoculate against the content to better inform the general population.

- Explain context around the image's inclusion in the article and provide context to help people understand the dog-whistles and false information. This can come as an image description, or in the body of your work.
- Think about the use of an overlay clearly stating that the content is false, manipulated, or harmful. [First Draft has a great guide for overlay techniques](#).
- Obscure identifiers that can help the public find the harmful information online or in public. Don't do the dirty work for those trying to recruit from unsuspecting audiences. This includes hiding social media profile pictures and handles, group names, and websites, where they do not reach the tipping point or if they provide a pathway for discovery and radicalisation.

Early in New Zealand's pandemic, an article printed a full leaflet from Voices for Freedom. VFF boasted that the article increased sign-ups significantly. They have said that this coverage was better than money could buy. It was responsible to cover the flier, but a quick redaction of the website address would have added a barrier to recruitment.

In March 2023 Marama Davidson was confronted by Counterspin Media, a far-right outlet that has called for violence against ministers of parliament on multiple occasions. That video was shared by mainstream news outlets, lending their credibility to the outlet, and providing a pathway for recruitment as people sought out the video. [The Disinformation Project](#) said "the targeting of Davidson spiked to unprecedented levels. No other individual has been the focus of so much content, and content of this nature except for former Prime Minister Right Honourable Jacinda Ardern."

SAFETY

Research from Massey University in 2022 says two thirds of Stuff's journalists have faced violence or threats related to their job. Those who cover extremist elements of New Zealand can tell you it is almost guaranteed if you cover the false information beat. There are steps you can take to help secure yourself from harassment and protect your mental and physical health.

- Search for your email address and phone numbers online and request they be removed.
- Lock down social media profiles for less access to those engaging in threatening behaviour.
- Record all interactions with false information spreaders. They may be recording them to use against you, to either discredit you or send followers to harass you.
- If a harassment campaign is engaged, ask your editor and police about how they can protect you.
- Request to be transferred to the unpublished electoral roll.
- Keep a record of all threats and report them to 105. If urgent, call 111.

Reporters on this beat are exposed to a lot of harmful and hateful material. It is important to take breaks, to be kind to yourself. There is a constant flow of misinformation online, and in real life. It will wait for you to take that break. Wading through hateful content and not being affected is not a badge of honour, it is desensitisation. If you get to this point, it maybe good to take a break.

Talk to friends and colleagues about what you are experiencing. Shared information can relieve the burden. Help is also available from mental health professionals. You may have access through your workplace. Talk to your editor.

For more in depth tips, read [13 security tips for journalists covering hate online](#).



There is no edge to the news. What happens in the media loops back to the media. Responsible reporting can help contain the spread of misinformation. And most have been doing a great job. Keep it up. We need your help to defend against narrative hijacking, targeted antagonism, and media manipulation.

DEFINITIONS

Astroturf: the practice of hiding the sponsors of a message or organization (e.g., political, advertising, religious, or public relations) to make it appear as though it originates from, and is supported by, grassroots participants.

Brigading: a slang term for an online practice in which people band together to perform a coordinated action, especially a negative one, such as manipulating a vote or poll or harassing a specific person or members of an online community.

Disinformation: information that is false, and the person who is disseminating it knows it is false. “It is a deliberate, intentional lie, and points to people being actively disinforming by malicious actors”.

Misinformation: information that is false, but the person who is disseminating it believes that it is true.

Mal-information: information that is based on reality but is used to inflict harm on a person, organisation, or country.

Overton window: the range of policies politically acceptable to the mainstream population at a given time.

WORKS CITED, RESOURCES AND FURTHER READING

When public officials spread health misinformation, be quick to point it out: A tip sheet – Naseem S. Miller, The Journalist’s Resource: <https://journalistsresource.org/home/covering-misinformation-tips/>

Essential Guide to Responsible Reporting in an Age of Information Disorder – Victoria Kwan, First Draft: https://firstdraftnews.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Responsible_Reporting_Digital_AW-1.pdf?x21167

The Oxygen of Amplification – Whitney Phillips, Data & Society: <https://datasociety.net/library/oxygen-of-amplification/>

13 security tips for journalists covering hate online – April Glaser: <https://mediamanipulation.org/research/13-security-tips-journalists-covering-hate-online>

Abuse of journalists shows how ugly our civil discourse has become – Paula Penfold, Stuff: <https://www.stuff.co.nz/opinion/300776395/abuse-of-journalists-shows-how-ugly-our-civil-discourse-has-become>

Post-Digital Cultures of the Far Right: Online Actions and Offline Consequences in Europe and the US. Bielefeld: transcript 2019 (Political Science 71). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/3657> – Fielitz, Maik; Thurston, Nick (Hg.): https://mediarep.org/bitstream/handle/doc/4409/Fielitz_Thurston_2019_Post_Digital_Cultures_.pdf?sequence=6&isAllowed=y

Transgressive transitions Transphobia, community building, bridging, and bonding within Aotearoa New Zealand’s disinformation ecologies March–April 2023 – Dr Sanjana Hattotuwa, Kate Hannah, Kayli Taylor, The Disinformation Project: <https://thedisinfoproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Transgressive-Transitions.pdf>

“Just asking questions”: How healthy skepticism morphed into toxic denialism – Warren Berger, Big Think: <https://bigthink.com/thinking/just-asking-questions/>

Schrödinger’s Joke: The Weaponisation of Irony and Humour in the Alt-Right – Erin Schroder, Global Network on Extremism and Technology: <https://gnet-research.org/2023/07/28/schrodingers-joke-the-weaponisation-of-irony-and-humour-in-the-alt-right/>

Overlays: How journalists can avoid amplifying misinformation in their stories – First Draft: <https://firstdraftnews.org/articles/overlays-how-journalists-can-avoid-amplifying-misinformation-in-their-stories/#>



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