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

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Te Kāwanatanga o Aotearoa
New Zealand Government

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Context

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

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

FALSENESS   **INTENT TO HARM**

Misinformation
Information that is false but not created with the intention of causing harm
(eg a social media post that has been shared as it looks credible)

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

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

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

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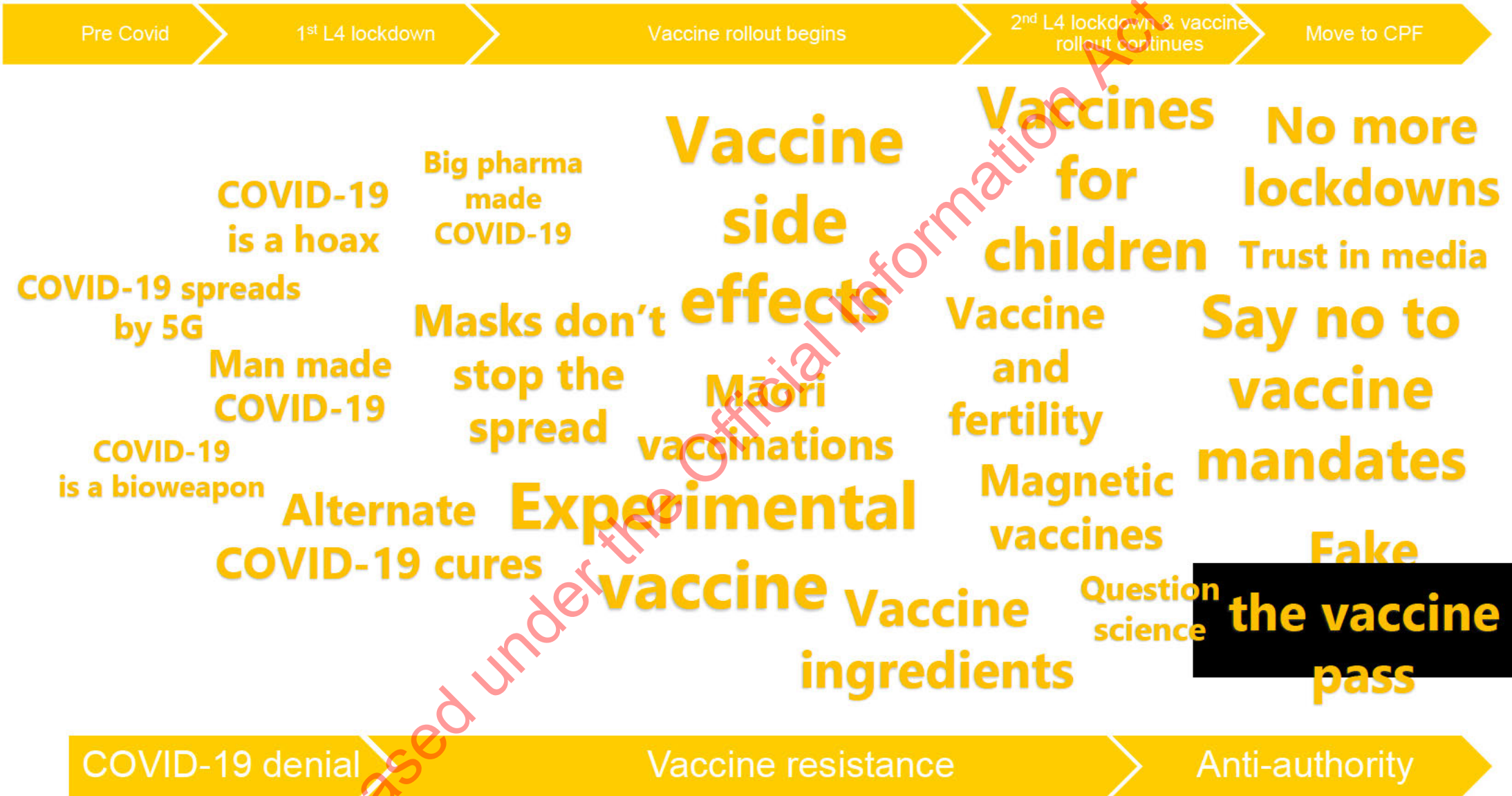includes cyberbullying, extremist content, abuse of public figures and online manipulation

Use of terminology: misinformation is commonly used to cover the spectrum of false information (Misinformation, Disinformation, Malinformation) though disinformation is the primary focus due to the quantity and intent to cause harm.

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Disinformation landscape in Aotearoa New Zealand

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Conceptual landscape of COVID-19 disinformation narratives in Aotearoa

Pre Covid → 1st L4 lockdown → Vaccine rollout begins → 2nd L4 lockdown & vaccine rollout continues → Move to CPF

COVID-19 is a hoax

Big pharma made COVID-19

Vaccine side effects

Vaccines for children

No more lockdowns

COVID-19 spreads by 5G

Trust in media

Man made COVID-19

Masks don't stop the spread

Vaccine and fertility

Say no to vaccine mandates

COVID-19 is a bioweapon

Māori vaccinations

Alternate COVID-19 cures

Experimental vaccine

Magnetic vaccines

Vaccine ingredients

Question science

Fake the vaccine pass

COVID-19 denial → Vaccine resistance → Anti-authority

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Insights and research

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

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

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

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

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

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

- Research and landscape updates provided by academia

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

- Media reporting in New Zealand and overseas

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What is being done

- Support a whole of society approach

- Increase the public's resilience to disinformation and online harms

- Promote credible information through effective communication

- Prevent the propagation of false and damaging content

Freedom of expression and association

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

Key considerations

- False information has emerged as a complex national security issue across the world.

- There are a number of potentially harmful effects from the spread of false or misleading information.

- These harms include a threat to public safety, incitement of criminal or violent extremist activity, breakdown of social cohesion, and reduction of democracy.

- We need a whole of society approach to build awareness and strengthen resilience.

- Everyone has a responsibility to prevent mis/disinformation.

- It's shouldn't be just a government voice involved in the discussion

- A whole of society approach means government, civil society, tech companies, media, academia, business and the public all have a role to play, from education, to communication, to public safety.

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All of society role in responding and building resilience

Role of technology providers

- Government agencies engage regularly with major technology providers and platforms on issues of public safety and will continue to do so.

- Independent online safety organisations such as Netsafe also provide practical tools, support and advice for managing a range of online challenges.

- We need to ensure New Zealanders can safely make the most of the opportunities technology offers.

Role of media

- The media has a vital role in helping to combat false information

- They play an active role in determining what issues are important to the public.

- It is important that New Zealand's media is independent, trusted and robust.

- Information must be accessible across the cultural, religious and linguistic diversity of our communities.

Role of communities and the New Zealand public

- Elevate and promote credible voices within communities to respond and build resilience

- Learn about reliable sources of information and how disinformation is designed to undermine beliefs and values.

- Report information about COVID-19 or the vaccine that doesn't seem right. If it's on social media report it to the platform – anything else such as a pamphlet report it to CERT NZ or call 0800 2378 69.

- Possible crimes should be reported to the Police

Role of academia

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

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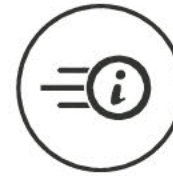MANATŪ HAUORA

Role of government

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

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Guiding communication and engagement principles

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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A Māori approach informed by manaakitanga

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

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

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

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

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Communications response to COVID-19 disinformation

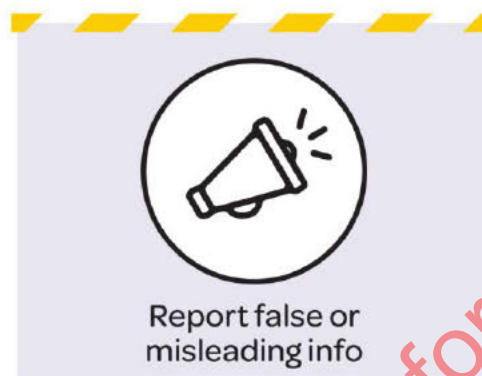|	Requirement	Channels	Tools
Short-term reactive	The misinformation requires an immediate response. Rapid communications are required to rebut, correct or counter disinformation with the established facts. Pre-bunk emerging risks by exposing disinformation strategy. Led by agency affected	Prioritise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

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Social media guidance to ensure reliable information is readily available

Get the facts
Covid19.govt.nz
New Zealand Government
Te Kāwanatanga o Aotearoa

Report false or misleading info
Covid19.govt.nz
New Zealand Government
Te Kāwanatanga o Aotearoa

Take care what you share
Covid19.govt.nz
New Zealand Government
Te Kāwanatanga o Aotearoa

- Publish accurate, timely, reliable content consistently to ensure the community knows official channels to go to for credible information

- Regularly advise on how to look out for credible information, with reminders in content

- Don't name or repeat known misinformation but instead provide the correct information

- Robust community guidelines in place and made publicly available

- Provide support to government agencies supporting COVID-19 response to facilitate training and best practise

- If disinformation, harmful content or emerging themes are identified they are escalated for further review

Ministry of Health COVID-19 Disinformation Assessment and Response Team

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

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

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

- Carry out risk and impact analysis of the disinformation

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

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

- Track outcomes

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COVID-19 disinformation – public communication messages

- Disinformation is a global problem and New Zealanders are not immune from this sort of activity and the potential for it to lead to harm. Since the start of the pandemic there has been a significant increase in coordinated disinformation circulating in Aotearoa New Zealand.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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COVID 19 scams – public communication messages

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

- You will never be asked to pay for the vaccine or pay to secure your place in the queue.

- Official information about the vaccine will come from a trusted provider of health content, such as the Ministry of Health, Unite Against COVID-19 or your District Health Board or health provider.

- A health worker will never come to your home to give you the vaccine, unless arranged with you beforehand.

- You will never be asked for personal information via text or email. If you see, it report it to CERT NZ and don't reply to the message.

- If you receive an email, phone call or SMS asking for financial details in regards to the vaccine pass, it will be a scam. Report it to CERT NZ immediately.

- If you see something about COVID-19 and the vaccine that doesn't seem right, report it to CERT NZ at https://www.cert.govt.nz/covid-19-vaccine-scams/ or call 0800 2378 69.

Guidance for government officials talking about Disinformation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Resources toolkit to respond to disinformation and online harms

About misinformation and online safety

covid19.govt.nz/misinformation and online harms

A Brief History of Misinformation animation

Guidance for health professionals and community leaders

covid19.govt.nz/postersandvideos

keepitrealonline.govt.nz/

netsafe.org.nz/

Vaccine Facts (addresses key vaccine disinformation themes)

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

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