

Intersections of influence

Radical conspiracist ‘alt-media’ narratives and the climate crisis in Aotearoa

Abstract: This article explores a neglected, but important aspect of the misinformation challenge posed by some alternative media platforms in Aotearoa: namely, the spread of denialist or denialist-adjacent discourse on climate change, featuring messaging which aligns with the broad themes of medical misinformation and anti-vaccination propaganda seen during the COVID-19 pandemic. As we will demonstrate through a case study of Aotearoa New Zealand’s 2021 ‘Groundswell’ protests, locally-based influencers and ‘alt-media’ platforms have disseminated conspiracist, unscientific narratives on both COVID and global warming to audiences likely to be receptive to these associations. The authors identify some of the tropes and narratives circulated by influencers during the demonstrations as bearing the fingerprints of radical right-wing discourse originating in the United States. The case is made that there is a high degree of cross-pollination of ideas at play within the phenomenon of anti-authority, conspiracist protest movements in Aotearoa, of which ‘Groundswell’ was an instructive example (uniting rural protesters with anti-vaccine demagogues); the discourse is infused with emotionally potent falsehoods and American-style ‘culture wars’ language. While these narratives remain relatively fringe, their toxic messaging may become more influential as more people turn to ‘alt-media’ sources for news. Indeed, the extent to which some of the influencers and language from this movement are edging closer to the outer boundaries of mainstream media and politics may represent an early warning sign for the future trajectory of this phenomenon. Finally, the authors tentatively pose some recommendations for professional media engagement with the growth of ‘viral’ content that misrepresents critical social challenges.

Keywords: alternative media, case study, climate change, climate emergency, climate refugees, conspiracy theory, culture wars, disinformation, fake news, Groundswell, New Zealand, protests, social media, toxic politics

BYRON CLARK

Videographer and Independent Researcher, Christchurch

EMANUEL STOAKES

University of Canterbury, Christchurch

Introduction

THE CLIMATE crisis in 2023 is evident everywhere. From the disastrous Cyclone Gabrielle in the northeast of Aotearoa New Zealand in January to the impact of severe weather events in Vanuatu, its effects are being felt with a vengeance in the Pacific region. Indeed, Pacific Island Nations (PINs) have been described as being on the ‘front lines’ of the battle against climate change (Parsons, 2022). Yet even at this late stage, there are voices inside Aotearoa New Zealand, some of whom enjoy a growing political profile, that are at variance with the overwhelming majority of scientific opinion on climate.

The trends of climate decline suggest that, over coming years and decades, the South Pacific will be faced with cascading social and political challenges as a result of a permanent emergency of environmental destruction. These may, for some Pacific states, rise to the level of an existential challenge, producing outflows of refugees, many of whom may seek to find a new home in Aotearoa.

A sustained flow of asylum-seekers to New Zealand’s shores could elicit a radical nativist politics that seizes, in part, on the ‘alt-right’ style foundations of an increasingly influential, albeit fringe, political discourse currently purveyed by some of the groups that will appear in this research. The seeds that are being sown in the public sphere at present by these actors, their polemics and ersatz networks, could function as communicative preconditioners for a future toxic politics that could move more deeply into the mainstream.

A major ingredient for this kind of embryonic resentment politics would be the instrumentalisation of the injustice of climate destruction, especially as it begins to dramatically affect the lives of privileged New Zealanders. The reality that modest-sized Pacific countries, including Aotearoa New Zealand, are set to face a turbulent and difficult future due to the failure of the international community to reduce their emissions, is a frustrating state of affairs. Like much of the world, New Zealanders are set to bear the burden of a crisis chiefly not of their own making.

An anti-science politics that looks for scapegoats rather than solutions could capitalise on storytelling around ‘globalists’ engaged in sinister plots, tying this to immigration and asylum-seeking, as has been the case in parts of the far-right for decades (for example, the idea of a Jewish conspiracy to flood Europe with Muslim migrants in a bid to weaken the hegemony of the ‘white’ race, see Winston, 2021). In Europe, relatively mainstream conservative political parties, such as the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and ex-UKIP leader Nigel Farage’s successor project, the Brexit Party, have come close to laundering some of the tropes of this narrative (Walker, 2019b), while engaging in various degrees of climate denial. Farage, who has denied being a conspiracy theorist, has nonetheless appeared on far-right talk shows such as Alex Jones’ *Infowars*, (Walker, 2019a) a programme that has links to the New Zealand-based conspiracist platform, *Counterspin* (Clark, 2022).

While it is not possible to predict whether or not Aotearoa's politicians will succumb to the temptations of populist expediency in precisely this manner, it can be reasonably expected that the accompanying social, economic and mental health stresses of a worsening climate crisis will provoke a search for answers and some form of a politics of blame. We contend that the likelihood of a future toxic political response to the social and economic shocks wrought by protracted climate disruption is increased by the presence of ready-made stories about elite conspiracies that are themselves highly derivative of long-standing paranoid themes that have been amplified across swathes of social media, particularly during the COVID pandemic.

For this reason, we argue that more critical attention should be directed at this phenomenon, especially the messaging alignment and network intersection that our case study reveals; further research is needed on this topic and in related fields. The authors of this article believe that sunlight will be the best disinfectant: dangerous conspiracist lies need to be addressed robustly in the here and now, their networks (and funding streams) investigated; any overseas links need to be exposed, with their claims debunked rationally and comprehensively in open access forums—long before a movement based on anti-science demagoguery establishes itself further.

Background

The roots of climate denialism on the radical right run both deep and shallow. Shallow, because they are based on polemics that lack any serious intellectual foundation; and deep, because the ideas that, as we shall see, have become the staples of the movement, have some historical legacy. Our research suggests that much Anglophone right-wing opposition to action to minimise climate damage can be traced to paranoid right-wing campaigns against the United Nations by groups such as the John Birch Society in the 1960s. Much contemporary discourse on 'globalism' in anti-vaxx and climate-rejecting communities appears to echo many of the themes developed during that period (Dickinson, 2021). An ideological 'chain of custody' can also be traced from the Birchers to the Trumpists in contemporary American political life (Mann, 2022). The lines of continuity between the past and present suggest that conspiracist thought of this kind is largely a socially constructed phenomenon, in which key ideas recur across periods of time, not because of their veracity, but due to their emotive appeal to marginalised individuals and groups that share a common distrust of authority, turning certain tropes and terms into shibboleths that are loaded with social meaning. The algorithmically-enabled echo chambers of social media likely play a role in making these ideas more visible to people who might otherwise not have accessed such content in the analogue era of mass communication.

The John Birch Society (JBS) appeared on the American political scene in

the late 1950s (Mulloy, 2014). The emergence coincided with a period of intense cold war anti-communism among parts of the US political right, which had found expression in events such as the Army-McCarthy trials earlier in the decade. JBS's opposition to the United Nations (UN), which included a campaign to get the US to leave the organisation, was based on the belief that the world body was part of a covert Communist plot to establish a one world government that would culminate in a tyrannical international police state (Mulloy, 2014, p. 142). Among the claims used to bolster this narrative was the suggestion that accused Soviet spy Alger Hiss's involvement in the setting up of the United Nations was somehow evidence that the organisation was deeply infiltrated, or even controlled, by the Communists (Mulloy, 2014). More generally, the JBS expressed opposition to the United States joining supranational organisations—not just the UN, but also security structures such as NATO—dubbing these actions as America willingly limiting its ability to pursue its own national interests on the global stage. (Mulloy, 2014).

The John Birch Society outlasted the Cold War, yet continued to promote the conspiracy theory of a covert campaign by the UN to establish a one world government that would administer tyranny over the sovereign peoples of the earth. In so doing, the group seized on relatively obscure agreements, such as 'UN Agenda 21', a highly aspirational, non-binding blueprint for international cooperation on future environmental security, which emerged out of the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, as evidence of such grand conspiracies (John Birch Society: Agenda 21 is stealth plot, 2011).

The group persisted in their promotion of this claim for decades, while seeing other far-right movements borrow their narrative on the subject, for example, campaigner Tom DeWeese, who would host annual conferences on the issue which brought together influencers on the American radical conservative side (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2014). 'There is nothing on, in, over, or under the Earth that doesn't fall within the purview of some part of Agenda 21,' read a 2011 article in the JBS magazine, *The New American* (Hahn, 2022). In the early 2010s the right-wing populist Tea Party movement echoed these polemics, with spokespeople describing Agenda 21 as an 'an all-encompassing prescription for regulating every aspect of human activity' that will 'cause fuel prices to rise, businesses to leave the United States, remove you from your land, take your property, manipulate our economy, take away our Constitutional Rights and depopulate our planet' (Berrey, 2020). The influence of the Tea Party movement within the Republican Party led to anti-Agenda 21 legislation being introduced in 26 states (passed in five) and the party adding an anti-Agenda 21 position to its presidential platform. In 2012, the Republican National Committee (RNC) produced a resolution that attacked the putative dangers of the initiative, decrying its 'insidious' nature, aimed at a 'socialist/communist redistribution of wealth' (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2014).

Berrey (2020) describes this mainstreaming of the Tea Party movement as ‘indicative of both the taking of American conservatism to the extreme right and the burgeoning transnational far-right backlash against multilateralism and multiculturalism’, which would find amplified expression in the Trump campaign and Presidency of later years. (The former President was himself a vocal climate sceptic during his time in office). But Trump was apparently merely building on, or exploiting, the shifting ground of increasingly mainstream ‘alt right’ currents.

Agenda 2021 has been superseded by Agenda 2030, a new UN initiative that was adopted at the UN Sustainable Development Summit in 2015. Agenda 2030 outlines 17 ‘sustainable development goals’. Like its predecessor, the project is aspirational; these goals are not legally binding and there are no consequences for nations that fail to meet them. All UN member states, including New Zealand, have ratified these goals (World Bank, 2019).

In Aotearoa, conspiracy theorist and aspiring politician Billy Te Kahika built a sizable following on social media in 2020 with live streamed videos promoting narratives that incorporated Agenda 2021 and Agenda 2030 into his public messaging on coronavirus, a prominent example of the importation of paranoid US political rhetoric into this country (Te Kahika, 2020). Some early media coverage of Te Kahika portrayed these concerns as legitimate, with the possible effect of laundering the information through these portals. In June 2020 *Te Ao Māori News* (Nathan, 2020) published an article headlined: ‘Calls for independent overview as concerns mount over legislation fast tracking’ that quoted Te Kahika extensively, describing Agenda 2030 as a foreign programme being implemented without proper consultation. Te Kahika called it

a complete challenge to our Kiwiana. It’s a complete challenge to the Treaty of Waitangi, it’s a complete challenge to Māori as tāngata whenua with inherent cultural practices and cultural rights to exercise those cultural practices. (Nathan, 2020)

This interpretation posits the implementation of Agenda 2030’s sustainable development goals in opposition to Tino Rangatiratanga; in the process, appropriating the language of indigenous resistance to globalisation through the filter of American far right discourse.

Te Kahika’s view was challenged by other Māori media. In July 2020, *Waatea News* (UN 2030 agenda fears based on nonsense, 2020) spoke with Tahu Kukutai from the University of Waikato’s National Institute for Demographic and Economic Analysis, who criticised ‘people in positions of power who willingly and knowingly feed mistruths into our community’, such as Te Kahika. Kukutai noted that if there is criticism of Agenda 2030 from Indigenous peoples ‘it is that it does not give them space to advocate solutions based on their own knowledge and world views’. The article represented an example of media

discourse engaging critically with the narratives propagated by Te Kahika in a manner that is arguably antidotal to the previous case; nonetheless, the existence of such conversation in Māori media represented a problematic encroachment of conspiracist discourse into mainstream media.

After the political party co-led by Te Kahika, Advance New Zealand, failed to enter Parliament in the 2020 election, two new organisations were formed by former Advance candidates. Voices for Freedom initially focused primarily on spreading misinformation related to the COVID-19 vaccine (Clark, 2023), but has expanded to other conspiracy theory discourse, including on the topic of climate change; a practice which has found a dedicated platform with the launch of the online media outlet, Reality Check Radio (The climate agenda, rural crime, truancy & ballooning govt departments, n.d.). During the same post-election period, Agriculture Action Group (AAG) (which has since disbanded) produced conspiracist content, aimed at rural New Zealanders, with an agenda explicitly denying climate change and opposing environmental regulations (Clark, 2023). AAG were founded on election night 2020 by a group of rural South Island residents who had all been involved in Advance New Zealand.

While it is difficult to estimate with precision the following that each of these movements attracted, it is reported (Davison, 2021) that meetings of the now defunct AAG drew hundreds of attendees at some of its events across locations in various parts of the country, suggesting a not insignificant constituency for the views that they were disseminating. This research has been unable to access data on the size of Reality Check Radio's audience. However, as we shall see, phenomena such as the 'Groundswell' movement indicate a degree of disparate political alignment, or even cooperation, between political sympathisers and fellow-travellers from either group.

Groundswell as a case study of denialist narrative intersection

The Groundswell event was one of the largest political protests in recent memory by New Zealand's agricultural community, which occurred at a period of time in which the Labour government, led by then Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, was beginning to see poor poll performance, as its initially popular public health response to the COVID pandemic was drawing a growing backlash. For this reason, it occurred at an advantageous time for conspiracist agitators to appeal to growing public frustration and seek common cause with other groups.

The measure of relative success in achieving an alignment between these causes marks Groundswell out as a significant example, and thus a good case study, of the ways in which a convergence of interests led to apparent cooperation between disparate protest groups, some of whom employed the language of US-style 'culture wars' and anti-government rhetoric when promulgating their views. Groundswell also contained elements of a 'red-brown-green' (far-left/far-right

/'hippie') alliance that was reportedly on display in the parliamentary occupation that followed in early 2022, and the gathering of protesters in support of visiting British anti-trans activist Posie Parker in March 2023, with accompanying partisan media debate following each of these events, which magnified social media furore. In this respect, Groundswell was, arguably, a harbinger of things to come. It may prove to be a predictor of yet further developments.

It should be noted, however, that these relationships did not form spontaneously. Prior to Groundswell, there was evidence of message alignment and cooperation between the aforementioned Agriculture Action Group (AAG) and alternative media, which continued during the event. For example, AAG co-founder Heather Meri Pennycook appeared on ANZAC Day, April 2021, on the first episode of *Counterspin Media*, a New Zealand based talk show originally streaming on GTV, a network known for disseminating disinformation (Clark, 2022). Pennycook made the claim that climate change was 'theoretical' and alleged a sinister motive behind environmental regulations. 'What's the hidden agenda to decimate the agricultural industry?', she asked. 'Stalin did it, look at your history. You want to bring in communism; you take out farmers first,' she added.

In so doing, she echoed the catastrophising, sensationalist language of her hosts, while stressing, in contradiction to the overwhelming majority of qualified climate experts, that there was no proof of global warming, adding that AAG would be putting out 'evidence' to support this on their website. No evidence that disproves the scientific consensus on climate is yet to emerge (Clark, 2023). She augmented this misinformation by claiming that the government was imposing (non-existent) emergency provisions targeting the agriculture sector (Clark, 2023) in an attempt to tackle climate change. From there, she pivoted to make the assertion that such actions were typical of governments that wanted to impose communism, with farmers being thus on the implicit frontline against the threat she was evoking. Adding to the misinformation, during the interview, host Kelvyn Alp made the claim that New Zealand's 2020 election was 'rigged', as there was supposedly no way 'South Island farmers' would vote for a government doing the things that Pennycook claimed. This incident represented an acute example of the intersection of misinformation and denialism on several related themes; at least one of which echoed Trumpian rhetoric (on rigged elections) seen in the United States.

As already noted, when active, AAG hosted meetings throughout the provinces, at times attracting attendance of up to 200 people (Davison, 2021). Mainstream media coverage of the group correctly portrayed them as an outfit promoting disinformation. For example, *The Otago Daily Times* (Davison, 2021) quoted Otago Federated Farmers president Mark Patterson, who attended an AAG meeting, as saying: 'Pretty early on there were some wild conspiracy theories being peddled, regarding the United Nations' Agenda 21, and that organisation's

leading of a shadowy global cabal dictating to our government.’ Patterson noted that the group was playing on rural residents’ concerns and grievances while pushing their own agenda (Davison, 2021). The *ODT* also quoted Pennycook as saying: ‘Some of the facts we present can cause a cognitive dissonance because they sound so insane. That makes it easy for people, like Mr Patterson, to twist what we’re saying and label it as “conspiracy theory”.’ These quotes represent further evidence of not only the appearance of AAG discourse in parts of the media landscape (albeit with a more critical framing), but the way in which the AAG were appearing to link conspiracy themes to more specific domestic popular concerns among the rural community.

In commentary published in *The Southland Times*, Clutha mayor Bryan Cadogan, who had also attended an AAG meeting, commented on what he described as the ‘careful manipulation’ of the audience by AAG, in which the speakers sought to connect ‘legitimate issues to extreme political agendas, and spicing things up along the way with calls that undermined the very fabric of our society, deriding virtually every institution that upholds law and order’. A damning assessment.

Andy Thompson, host of *The Muster*, a rural news programme broadcast on Hokonui Radio, dedicated airtime to criticising the group for the disinformation that they were promoting after ‘going through their Facebook page and chasing up some of the nonsense they’re spouting’, which included ‘anti-climate change nonsense, COVID conspiracy nonsense, anti-vax nonsense...talking about the fact that meat is going to be banned and Bill Gates is buying up as much farmland as he can so he can stop the production of meat, y’know, this is just nonsense.’ (Clark 2023). These examples, cited by Thompson, suggest the infusion of narratives popular in the US conspiracy scene imported into discourse about the New Zealand rural experience.

The AAG’s inciteful activity went beyond mere talk. They threw their support behind the ‘Howl of a Protest’ event organised by Groundswell in July 2021. The organisation had been formed to oppose government regulation around freshwater and biodiversity, as well as winter grazing rules, and, in particular, the government’s vehicle emissions ‘feebate’ scheme, a plan for discounts on low emission vehicles that would be offset by levies on those with high emissions (branded a ‘ute tax’ by opponents, (Clark, 2023)).

In the lead up to the protest event *The Spinoff* questioned Groundswell co-founder Bryce McKenzie about AAG, and quoted him as saying:

They’re involved in spreading the message about [the protest], we certainly know who they are, but we’re not aligned with them. They say a lot of good things, it’s just some of the things [they say] that we probably stand a wee bit distant from. (Braae, 2021)

While McKenzie made an obvious effort to project distance from the group, he also acknowledged their influence within the movement. On a similar (and less conciliatory) note, *The New Zealand Herald* (Ryder, 2021) reported Federated Farmers national president Andrew Hoggard as saying there was a real risk of the agricultural sector being made out to look like ‘a bunch of fringe nutters’, observing that a big concern was offensive signage being brought to the protests, which would do more harm than good. (That concern turned out to be well-founded, as protesters turned up with signs reading ‘Free NZ from bitch rule’, ‘Cindy→Stalin’, ‘Black utes matter’, and ‘Jacinda Kiwis do not want Communism!’ Members of Voices for Freedom also turned up at the Auckland demonstration with signs advertising their website.) The extent to which the group was apparently influencing demonstrators embedded within a wider protest movement, suggests that Hoggard had a solid basis for his concerns.

During the nationwide event, Chris Miles, organiser of the Hastings protest (who has no known close ties to AAG), made a speech with rhetoric comparable to some of the more controversial placards, telling the crowd that New Zealand is on the brink of ‘being taken down a socialist plug hole’. His speech, which claimed that New Zealand may ‘end up like Zimbabwe or Venezuela’ if the country was not on its guard, was quoted by Stuff (Sharpe, 2021). While it is unclear what prompted these comments, the overlap with AAG narratives could be indicative of the disinhibiting force of extreme language on relatively mundane local issues.

While mainstream media provided the organisers of Groundswell with the opportunity to distance themselves from AAG, disinformation channels provided coverage of the ‘Howl of a Protest’ in a way that suggested common goals and beliefs between the disparate groups involved, a suggestion that will have furthered the impression of a common cause. *Counterspin*, in a broadcast covering the event, interviewed Rural Advocacy Network chairman Jamie McFadden, who was also one of Groundswell’s national coordinators, and Grey District mayor Tania Gibson. In the conversation, McFadden appeared at times to be unsure what he had gotten himself into by agreeing to the discussion, yet ended up reinforcing the *Counterspin* narrative with some of his answers. When host Kelvyn Alp asserted: ‘You are the industry most at risk of being completely obliterated’, McFadden hesitated before saying: ‘it is being obliterated’ and, stating that that ‘traditional farming families’ are being pushed off the land in favour of corporate farms, overseas owners and carbon forestry (Clark, 2023). ‘It’s almost as though they want to get the traditional farming families off the land, and they want to, I don’t know, do they want to turn the whole country into a conservation park or something?’ With this statement, by a sleight of rhetoric, the speaker may have inadvertently advanced the appearance of a sinister conspiracy.

In a pre-recorded interview at the Whangarei demonstration, played after an

interview with mayor Gibson, a farmer (introduced only as Linda), who the host identified as a fan of the show, stated that she was not there because of the ‘ute tax’ but because of the ‘the loss of freedoms’, adding that ‘the sooner that the whole of New Zealand wakes up to find out what’s really going on [the better]’. The hidden agenda was not vouchsafed by the speaker. Statements such as this were interwoven with claims by *Counterspin* presenter Kelvin Alp asserting that the 2020 election result was fraudulent, with AAG co-founder Rob Wilson then reinforcing this. Wilson argued, without substantiating his claims:

There’s no doubt in my mind that the election here was rigged, as it was in the US and we’re starting to see come out over there- y’know, AAG’s always been at the forefront of the information battle that’s going on in the rural sector, just as you guys are in the overall media sector, we’ve said from the start that this election was rigged.

The saddest thing is most people don’t even realise they’re slaves, they have yet to wake up to that degree, it’s coming and it’s happening, and we’re seeing it first hand with what we’re doing, but there’s a long way to go yet. (*Counterspin Media*, 2021)

He provided another example of denialism that ties together overseas misinformation with inflammatory language about local events.

The next guest was Sue Grey, leader of the Outdoors and Freedom Party; a lawyer known for her legal work opposing vaccine mandates and promoting numerous conspiracy theories. Grey added to the misinformation by suggesting, without providing evidence, that the government was set to borrow money from Chinese banks, using water as collateral, before moving on to the topic of the COVID-19 vaccine, which Alp claimed was being used to commit ‘genocide’ (*Counterspin Media*, 2021). The existential threat narrative here, communicated to what would likely have been a larger-than-average audience for *Counterspin* due to the coinciding protest event, marked a pitch of irresponsibility. Through their explicit support for Groundswell and tacit support of the Groundswell-affiliated guests, *Counterspin* provided a means for these conspiracy theories, and the extreme narratives associated with them, to reach a wider audience.

The wider significance of the Groundswell event lies not only in the alarming discourse on display, including the wholly fabulistic claims of AAG spokespersons or Grey and Alp on *Counterspin*, but the fact that the movement also received mainstream political support, which may have had the inadvertent effect of legitimising, by association, some of the more extreme language used by protesters and alt-media commentators. The risk of such slippage in the nexus between mainstream politics and radical protesters was again apparent in events such as the parliamentary occupation, the ‘baby blood dispute’¹ and the visit by British anti-Trans provocateur Posie Parker. In each of these cases, the far-right

and conspiracist narrative was present on several alternative media and social media channels, concurrent with expressions of support for protesters from some mainstream politicians (for example, former deputy Prime Minister Winston Peters visited the parliamentary protest (Coughlan, 2022), spoke in support of the rights of the family of the child needing urgent medical care (Stoakes, 2022) and fans of Parker (Newshub, 2023).

In April 2023, Peters went further, sitting for a filmed interview with conspiracist Liz Gunn for her alternative media outlet *Free NZ Media* (Gunn, 2023), which was shared on the video streaming platform, *Rumble*. While he stopped short of directly endorsing her views, the former deputy Prime Minister, intentionally or not, lent his mana to this media event. As yet, no major New Zealand politician, including Peters, has explicitly backed the claims of the movement with which Gunn is linked, but the risk of reputation laundering-by-association is a matter of concern because of the ways in which it enhances the visibility of the conspiracist politics associated with the platform Peters appeared on; supporters of the politician who watched the broadcast may have found themselves exposed to new ideas that could influence them. It is not impossible to foresee that, as more of the same occurs, the line between fringe ideas and politically admissible narratives may grow thin in the future. The movement of ‘Agenda 21’ conspiracism from the American far-right to the Tea Party movement and into RNC resolutions, as noted above, serves as an instructive example of the ways in which misinformation can be effectively recycled among disparate groups to the point where it is smuggled into the political mainstream.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Our case study demonstrates that explicit references to US narratives about stolen elections, communist plots and existential dangers to society—many of which bear the hallmarks of American far-right narratives, such as those of the John Birch Society, their co-thinkers and ideological heirs—are present in aspects of discourse on climate here in Aotearoa. Tellingly, these were often linked in with wider sets of issues into which the climate challenge was crudely bundled and about which similar stories were being told, such as the COVID-19 vaccine.

This demonstrates the extent to which complex matters of national importance, such as climate change or public health emergencies, can be seized upon by alternative media and conspiracist influencers and incorporated into emotionally potent, reductive stories that are apparently designed to elicit outrage and protest. Examples from our Pacific neighbours demonstrate the ways in which vaccine disinformation can play a role in prompting public disorder, for example in Papua New Guinea, where ambulance crews were assaulted by anti-vaxxers who believed falsely that the staff were administering inoculations, to which they were opposed (Robie, 2022, p. 32). This example demonstrates the potentially

life-and-death consequences of this phenomenon.

As already noted, the authors of this article suspect that a danger exists that, over coming years and decades, the appetite for this kind of story-telling could increase in tandem with growing social disruption caused by the climate crisis, including a large-scale refugee influx on our shores. As has been discussed in previous editions of this journal (Cass, 2018), such a scenario would need to be covered with a high degree of journalistic ethics and professionalism to avoid amplifying hateful, dehumanising narratives. The authors anticipate that, during a crisis of this kind, conspiracist tropes may occupy meaningful space in public discourse in a manner that echoes the COVID-19 experience, building on established story-telling concerning putative elite plots. The risk exists that the persistence of such fabulist speech, as mediated through social media nodes and alternative news ecosystems, may have grown in its appeal with the cumulative effect of increasing the receptivity of a wider audience, seeking to make sense of sudden hardships.

In circumstances of prolonged, severe social distress, sophisticated communicative actors could further exploit public feeling to move opinion in a radically disorderly political trajectory; in these future scenarios, shifting public sentiment could catalyse the emergence of new voting blocs which could be moved toward a yet more destructive direction. As Robie and Krishnamurthi (2020) have touched on, the potential for conspiracist disinformation to become even more of a force on social media during future elections remains an acknowledged issue.

Indeed, it is possible, perhaps even likely, that hostile foreign actors might seek to take advantage of such a situation. (As noted by New Zealand's intelligence community, the risk of foreign state manipulation of parts of New Zealand's media landscape is already a live issue (Kitteridge, 2019).) In other words, the snowball effect of viral misinformation could be accelerated by both overt and covert manipulators and leveraged for political effect; today's fringe narratives could become tomorrow's populist political discourse.

While these are worst-case scenarios that seem far off, complacency is no answer to the trends we have identified in their inchoate form in this article. Policymakers and stakeholders in the community should be mindful of these embryonic threats and adopt a proactive response to prevent future scenarios in which social media and other informational channels become a vector for yet more politicised misinformation that could be used to foment societal division. The authors believe that civil society groups and communities, ranging from those working in the agricultural sector, Iwi organisations and activists on the right and left of the political spectrum (though these are, of course, not mutually exclusive groups), are well-placed to offer their own solutions to these problems through self-organisation in accordance with the principles of autonomy and rangatiratanga.

In addition, the media can play an important supporting role in meeting this challenge, whether independently or through collaboration, by conducting investigations into the phenomenon; dedicating resources to debunking its falsehoods; exploring any foreign connections (including financial ties) to conspiracist influencers; and demonstrating the origins of their narratives and their lack of basis in factuality, and so on. Sunlight is the best disinfectant. Above all, we recommend that media outlets provide representation to critical voices in locations where conspiracist misinformation has taken hold and seek to visualise social effects of online harms through the stories of individuals, whānau and communities, so as to provide real-world, relatable moral clarity about the nature and consequences of the issues at play.

It is also worth re-emphasising that, while the case study focuses on a relatively limited pocket of the media scene, the cross-pollination to which we have already referred—namely, the spread of ideas and narratives across parts of the alternative media ecosystem, between disparate fringe groups, permeating elements of popular protest movements—may continue in ways that eventually create the space for a rupture into the mainstream. This is an abiding concern for the authors.

Indeed, there are hints of this, arguably, in the recognition afforded by some high profile politicians to certain alt-media *cause célèbres*, as in the case of the former deputy Prime Minister Winston Peters. (As we have already made clear, we do not mean to imply that politicians such as Peters endorse the ideas, groups or movements that function as proponents of dangerous misinformation, only that the risk of perceived legitimisation, or inadvertent message laundering, exists.)

Finally, readers of this article with far more expertise in relevant fields than the authors will have their own suggestions about the issues raised; we welcome that *kōrero*. Our argument is chiefly that the national conversation on climate change, conspiracy theories and misinformation needs to be upscaled, and to fall within easier reach of those who might otherwise fall prey to the spread of toxic falsehoods.

Note

1. A controversial case in which the parents of a critically ill child were refusing to use vaccinated blood in his surgery; Sue Grey was again directly involved. For more information see, for example, Crimp.L. (2022, December 7). Parents refusing vaccinated donor blood case: What you need to know. Radio New Zealand (RNZ) <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/480213/parents-refusing-vaccinated-donor-blood-case-what-you-need-to-know>

References

- Berrey, E. (2020). *When liberal states bite back*. Cambridge University Press EBooks. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108754613.008>
- Braae, A. (2021, July 16). ‘Just bloody over it’: Rural New Zealand makes itself heard. *The Spinoff*. <https://thespinoff.co.nz/society/16-07-2021/just-bloody-over-it-rural->

new-zealand-makes-itself-heard

- Cass, P. (2018). A plan nobody hopes they will need: New Zealand and climate change migration. *Pacific Journalism Review : Te Koako*, 24(1), 138-153. <https://doi.org/10.24135/pjr.v24i1.426>
- Clark, B. (2022). Frontline 3: The NZ media and the occupation of Parliament. *Pacific Journalism Review*, 28(1 & 2), 123–137. <https://doi.org/10.24135/pjr.v28i1and2.1248>
- Clark, B. (2023). *Fear: New Zealand's hostile underworld of extremists*. HarperCollins Australia.
- Counterspin Media. (2021, July 16). Counterspin Ep. 16–‘Howl of a protest’ breakdown. *Rumble*. <https://rumble.com/vk06vu-counterspin-ep.-16-howl-of-a-protest-breakdown.html>
- Coughlan, T. (2022, February 10). Parliament protesters buoyed by support from Winston Peters. *The New Zealand Herald*. <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/politics/parliament-protesters-buoyed-by-support-from-winston-peters/4K75M7DBMSTN3PV3JEKAPKM734/>
- Davison, R. (2021, July 7). Rural group’s ‘wild conspiracy theories’ criticised. *Otago Daily Times*. <https://www.odt.co.nz/rural-life/rural-people/rural-group%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%98wild-conspiracy-theories%E2%80%99-criticised>
- Dickinson, T. (2021, August 5). How the anti-vaxxers got red-pilled. *Rolling Stone*. <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/qanon-anti-vax-covid-vaccine-conspiracy-theory-1125197/>
- Gunn, L. (2023, April 2). Liz Gunn interview with Winston Peters. *Free NZ Media*. Hosted on *Rumble*. [Video] <https://rumble.com/v2fpz9g-liz-gunn-interview-with-winston-peters.html?mref=s9inf&mrefc=2>
- Hahn, B. (2022, October 14). Fighting the great reset begins locally. *The New American*. <https://thenewamerican.com/fighting-the-great-reset-begins-locally/>
- John Birch Society: ‘Agenda 21’ is stealth plot to steal freedom. (2011, December 5). Southern Poverty Law Center. <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2011/12/05/john-birch-society-%E2%80%98agenda-21%E2%80%99-stealth-plot-steal-freedom>
- Kitteridge, R. (2019, April 11) *Director-General remarks: Justice Select Committee Inquiry into 2017 general election and 2016 local elections*. Remarks to Select Committee in Parliament. <http://web.archive.org/web/20200116092557/https://www.nzsis.govt.nz/news/opening-remarks-justice-select-committee-inquiry-into-2017-general-election-and-2016-local-elections/>
- Mann, J. (2022, June 1). The Birchers & the Trumppers. *The New York Review of Books*. <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2022/06/23/the-birchers-the-trumppers-john-birch-society-james-mann/>
- Mulloy, D. J. (2014). *The world of the John Birch Society: Conspiracy, conservatism, and the cold war*. Vanderbilt University Press.
- Nathan, D. (2020, June 1). Calls for independent overview as concerns mount over legislation fast tracking. *Te Ao Māori News*. <https://www.teaomaori.news/calls-independent-overview-concerns-mount-over-legislation-fast-tracking>
- NewsHub (2023, March 26) Gender activist Posie Parker hits out at her treatment in New Zealand as Twitter row erupts. *NewsHub*. <https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/new-zealand/2023/03/gender-activist-posie-parker-hits-out-at-her-treatment-in-new-zealand-as-twitter-row-erupts.html>
- Parsons, C. (2022, May 23) The Pacific Islands: The front line in the battle against climate change. National Science Foundation (USA). <https://beta.nsf.gov/science-matters/pacific-islands-front-line-battle-against-climate>

- Robie, D. (2022). Journalism education ‘truth’ challenges: An age of growing hate, intolerance and disinformation. *Pacific Journalism Review : Te Koako*, 28(1 & 2), 29-46. <https://doi.org/10.24135/pjr.v28i1and2.1240> <https://ojs.aut.ac.nz/pacific-journalism-review/article/view/1240>
- Ryder, W. (2021, July 15). Farmers to descend on towns in nationwide protest. *The New Zealand Herald*. <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/farmers-to-descend-on-towns-in-nationwide-protest/TIN5QTLH2OWNX4USYY2P2IAGM/>
- Sharpe, M. (2021, July 16). Howl of a protest: NZ being ‘taken down a socialist plughole’ organiser tells Hastings crowd. *Stuff*. <https://www.stuff.co.nz/business/farming/300359263/howl-of-a-protest-nz-being-taken-down-a-socialist-plughole-organiser-tells-hastings-crowd>
- Southern Poverty Law Center. Agenda 21: The UN, sustainability and right-wing conspiracy theory. (2014, April 1). Southern Poverty Law Center. <https://www.splcenter.org/20140331/agenda-21-un-sustainability-and-right-wing-conspiracy-theory>
- Stoakes, E. (2022, December 6). Her baby needs heart surgery. But she is demanding ‘unvaccinated’ blood. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/05/world/australia/new-zealand-baby-vaccine.html>
- Te Kahika, B. (2020, June 12). Billy Te Kahika explain UN agenda 21-30 New Zealand Public Party, Aotearoa Freedom Movement [Video]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-O9d72tfFbI>
- The climate agenda, rural crime, truancy & ballooning govt departments. (n.d.). Reality Check Radio. <https://realitycheck.radio/the-climate-agenda-rural-crime-truancy-ballooning-govt-departments/>
- UN 2030 Agenda fears based on nonsense. (2020, July 9). *Waatea News*: <https://waateanews.com/2020/07/10/un-2030-agenda-fears-based-on-nonsense/>
- Walker, P. (2019a, May 6). How Farage adapted his voice to Infowars’ toxic worldview. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/may/06/how-nigel-farage-adapted-his-message-infowars-toxic-worldview-alex-jones>
- Walker, P. (2019b, November 21). Farage under fire for conspiracy claims linked to Antisemitism. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/nov/21/farage-under-fire-for-conspiracy-claims-linked-to-antisemitism>
- Winston, A.S. (2021). ‘Jews will not replace us!’: Antisemitism, interbreeding and immigration in historical context. *American Jewish History* 105(1), 1-24. <https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/804146>.
- World Bank Group and the 2030 Agenda. (2019). World Bank website. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/sdgs-2030-agenda>

Byron C. Clark is a video essayist whose work focuses on New Zealand's far-right and conspiracy theory scene. He has been making video documentaries on related topics since New Zealand's mosque massacre in Christchurch 2019. He has also been involved in various forms of activism since his teens.
byronclark@gmail.com

Emanuel Stokes is a postgraduate student doing his Masters in media and communication at the University of Canterbury.
emanuel.stoakes@pg.canterbury.ac.nz