Classification Office, 2021

TE MANA WHAKAATU
Classification Office

Watch carefully.
Think critically.

THE EDGE OF THE INFODEMIC

Challenging Misinformation in Aotearoa

The Edge of the Infodemic:
Challenging Misinformation in Aotearoa

Report and survey prepared by Henry Talbot, Nusiebah Alali and the research team at the Classification Office.

Fieldwork, data analysis and final survey design: Jocelyn Rout, Emma Appleton and Michael Chan at Colmar Brunton.

Report design: Mark Creative

Photos: Rebecca McMillan Photography, Pexels, Paul Andrews.

Acknowledgements

Engagement with a range of researchers, experts and government agencies was crucial in shaping this research. The Classification Office would like to thank all those who have given their time, energy, and support – with a special shout-out to those who engaged with us in some fascinating discussions both in person and, of course, via Zoom. This research would not have been possible without their insights, expertise and assistance.

Academic researchers from institutes throughout New Zealand and internationally made an invaluable contribution to the survey design. We would like to thank Professor Paul Spoonley, Sanjana Hattotuwa, Dr Sarah Bickerton, Dr Sereana Naepi, Dr Ana Stojanov, Professor Sonia Livingstone, Dr Martin Orr, and the team at Te Pūnaha Matatini: Dr M R.X. Dentith, Dr Ritu Parna Roy, Victoria Louise Smith, and Giulio Valentino Dalla Riva, with a special thank you to Kate Hannah for her support and advice throughout the research process. We would also like to thank Anna Muir at Transparency International New Zealand.

We're indebted to the excellent team at Colmar Brunton for their work on the survey design, fieldwork, and analysis – and delivering robust insights about these complex issues.

We thank the New Zealanders who participated so thoughtfully in this survey and shared such important insights. In particular, we are grateful to the hundreds of rangatahi whose involvement ensured that the voices of young people were front and centre in this work.

TE MANA WHAKAATU
Classification Office

Watch carefully.
Think critically.

COLMAR BRUNTON
A Kantar Company

Level 1, 88 The Terrace, Wellington 6011
PO Box 1999, Wellington 6140

Phone 04 471 6770
Email info@classificationoffice.govt.nz
Website www.classificationoffice.govt.nz

Colmar Brunton, a Kantar Company
Level 9, 101 Lambton Quay
Wellington 6011
Phone 04 913 3000

Crown Copyright ©

Cite as: Classification Office. (2021). *The Edge of the Infodemic: Challenging Misinformation in Aotearoa*. Wellington, NZ: Classification Office.

ISBN: 978-0-473-57710-0 (Print)
978-0-473-57711-7 (PDF)

June 2021

Contents

INTRODUCTION 4

KEY FINDINGS 6

BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES 9

RESEARCH METHOD 10

EXPOSURE TO MISINFORMATION IS COMMON, AND CONCERN IS WIDESPREAD 12
- How New Zealanders experience misinformation 14
- Perceived exposure to misinformation is common 14
- Examples of information people think is false or misleading 15
- New Zealanders' views about misinformation 17
- Concern about misinformation is widespread 17
- The influence of misinformation 18

MISINFORMATION IS UNDERMINING TRUST – AND THE INTERNET PLAYS A KEY ROLE 20
- The role of the internet 22
- Where people get news and information 22
- Misinformation and trust 23
- Trust in sources of information 23
- Who intentionally spreads misinformation? 25

EVERYONE IS AFFECTED BY THE SPREAD OF MISINFORMATION 26
- Key topics: New Zealanders' attitudes and beliefs 28
- Covid-19 28
- Vaccines 30
- 5G wireless communications 31
- The March 15 terrorist attacks 32
- Climate change 33
- 1080 34
- September 11, 2001 attacks 35
- QAnon 36
- Belief and misinformation 37
- How widespread are beliefs? 37
- Attitudes and behaviours associated with belief in misinformation 38
- Misinformation, violence, and real-world impacts 39
- Attitudes about violent and non-violent action 39
- How misinformation impacts individuals, communities, and society 40
- Insights: Age, gender, ethnicity and other demographics 42

NEW ZEALANDERS THINK SOMETHING SHOULD BE DONE 44
- Free expression and social media 46
- New Zealanders support limits to online speech when it is harmful, false or misleading 46
- Dealing with misinformation 47
- Personal responses 47
- New Zealanders support action 48

DEALING WITH THE INFODEMIC – WHAT CAN WE DO? 50
- Conclusions 55

Introduction

CHIEF CENSOR DAVID SHANKS, CLASSIFICATION OFFICE TE MANA WHAKAATU

We're living in the age of the infodemic, and New Zealand isn't immune. The Covid-19 pandemic has put the problem of misinformation high on the international agenda. In the early stages of the pandemic, the World Health Organization warned of the growth of an infodemic representing the overload of information about the outbreak in both the digital and physical environments – including false or misleading information. The WHO warned that in this digital age the widespread reliance on social media and the internet meant that information could be generated and spread more rapidly. While this could sometimes support the distribution of helpful information, it could just as easily amplify harmful messages, leading to mistrust in health authorities and undermining the public health response.

We have seen this play out around the world, and here in New Zealand. Many of us will have read articles online, seen posts, or had conversations that seem completely at odds with what we know about the virus. Claims that Covid-19 is no more dangerous than the common flu, or even that it is a hoax. Some of us will have seen these theories migrate from digital to physical forms, such as troubling flyers in our letterbox. Even more worrying, the spread of implausible theories linking Covid-19 with 5G telecommunications networks appear to have inspired a spate of destructive attacks on cell towers over the past year.

The linkage between conspiracy theories and real-world harm had been concerning us at the Classification Office for some time prior to the pandemic. The terrorist who carried out the horrific attacks on mosques in Christchurch in March 2019 went to great lengths to ensure that his white supremacist ideology would reach far and wide online. It was clear that he had been inspired by racist conspiracy theories, and that he sought to inspire others in turn. More recently, the influence of misinformation and conspiracy theories on the crowds that stormed the Capitol building in Washington on January 6th 2021 illustrated how quickly conspiracies can progress from being an online curiosity to becoming a threat to democracy.

In order to understand more about the challenges of misinformation in Aotearoa, we decided to undertake this research project. While we had a perspective on this issue, we were conscious that it was not necessarily a representative one. We wanted to know what New Zealanders thought of these issues.

What we found is that New Zealanders think misinformation is common – and are concerned about it. Many are highly concerned about its impact in important areas such as responding to the pandemic or the challenge of climate change. New Zealanders think the problem of misinformation is becoming worse.

The rise of digital platforms appears to play an important role in this. The internet has become the most popular source of news and information for New Zealanders, even though generally they are much less likely to trust online-only sources of information. And it seems that those who trust and use the internet the most for information can be more susceptible to it.

We found that just about everyone is affected in some way, no-one is immune from misinformation. You can't make assumptions about someone's vulnerability to misinformation based on things such as their age, gender, ethnicity or other characteristics. It is not unusual for New Zealanders to believe in at least a few ideas that are linked to misinformation, and that's okay. It is quite possible that one or more of the subjects we associated with misinformation in this research might yet turn out to be not so misinformed after all with the emergence of new evidence. History tells us that truth is not fixed and immutable, and it is healthy for diverse and inclusive societies to accommodate a broad range of views and beliefs.

However, at some stage belief in misinformation becomes a problem. That stage is very hard to define, but often it connects with the point at which people start relying on false or misleading information to make important decisions that can affect our own health and safety or the safety of our communities. This research shows how widespread the effects of this problem are on all of us.

Many of our participants told us about how they saw the spread of misinformation contributing to anxiety and sometimes anger, and how it can sow division and mistrust amongst friends and family members and in the community.

It is not surprising therefore that we found that most New Zealanders think that something should be done about the problem of misinformation. New Zealanders think that this is a real problem and it should be addressed. But there is much less of a consensus about who should be doing something, or what should be done. Again, that comes as no surprise. The problem of misinformation is a large and complex one. There does not appear to be any one agency or even sector that we can expect to fix this.

Criminalising misinformation certainly won't work. We at the Classification Office can play some role in assessing and restricting publications and posts at the far end of the misinformation spectrum, where some people may promote violence and criminal activity. But the vast majority of misinformation does not include these extreme elements. We cannot and do not restrict publications simply for being false or misleading. The effect of going down that pathway would likely be counterproductive.

But there are many other steps that can be taken. Good levels of confidence in the accuracy of broadcast and print news media in this country are at least partly due to the requirement that such news be accurate, balanced and fair. What therefore might be an analogous set of requirements for internet platforms, which might improve confidence in news and information in that space? And if social media algorithms are contributing to the acceleration of misinformation through the internet, what reasonable transparency requirements might be applied to those platforms to help mitigate this? What can we do in order to support and empower the sorts of community groups in this country who have done outstanding work throughout the pandemic to promote accurate information and reduce the impact and uptake of misinformation? How can we ensure that we are educating and equipping ourselves and our rangatahi to be both digitally literate and resilient in the face of propaganda and misinformation?

These and other steps could be combined in a way that stands up to the challenge of misinformation. Government, industry, communities and individuals could all play their part. Developing and coordinating such a broad strategy would not be easy – but it would be worth it. We should be able to look forward to a future where we have greater confidence in the news and information we rely on, where we are clear about the part we can play to keep others safe and we are confident that others are doing their part in turn to keep us safe. A rising tide of misinformation will corrode that confidence, and threaten our communities and social cohesion.

Let's not let that happen. Let's pay attention to this evidence, listen to what people have to say, and do what we need to do to turn the tide around.

David Shanks - Chief Censor

Key findings

Exposure to misinformation is common, and concern is widespread

It's common for New Zealanders to see news and information they think is false or misleading – and some people notice this often in their daily lives. People have very different views about what counts as misinformation, but the most common topics people identified were about Covid-19, followed by US politics.

Concern about the spread of misinformation is widespread and most think it's becoming more common over time. A majority of New Zealanders think misinformation is influencing people's views about things like politics, public health and environmental issues, and many see misinformation as an urgent and serious threat.

82%
are somewhat or very concerned about the spread of misinformation in New Zealand

Misinformation is undermining trust – and the internet plays a key role

New Zealanders tend to distrust online sources of information generally, and this is especially true of social media – most New Zealanders think social media users and corporations often spread false and misleading information intentionally. At the same time, the internet is the most popular source of news and information, while also being a reference point to verify, fact check or confirm this information.

Whether online or offline, most New Zealanders tend to trust information from more traditional sources like government officials, scientists and the New Zealand news media. However, our findings also show that people with higher trust in online-only sources of information – and who use these sources more often – are more likely to express belief in statements associated with misinformation.

79%
get news or information from social media

Everyone is affected by the spread of misinformation

Misinformation is widespread and affects everyone. This is true regardless of age, gender, ethnicity or other characteristics.

It's relatively common for New Zealanders to express belief in at least some ideas that are linked to misinformation – ideas which are not backed by the best available evidence we have.

When people rely on misinformation to make important decisions it can have a harmful impact on the health and safety of our communities. It can also affect us on a personal level, contributing to anxiety, anger, and mistrust.

75%

tend to think false information about Covid-19 is an urgent and serious threat to NZ society

New Zealanders think something should be done

People often take action themselves in response to misinformation – such as searching different sources to see if information is accurate, looking at more established news sources, or talking about it with people they trust.

New Zealanders also see this as a societal problem that requires more action. They have differing views on who should do this and how. Many think government, news media and experts have the biggest role in dealing with the spread of misinformation, but that individual internet users and social media corporations also have an important role.

84%

expressed support for specific groups or organisations to take action

Dealing with the infodemic – what can we do?

Emerging evidence indicates that we should be looking at solutions that work to increase access to good information; lower the volume of misinformation; improve resilience to misinformation; and build levels of trust and social cohesion that can serve as a counter to the more harmful effects.

Tackling misinformation in this way will involve a connected-up approach amongst a broad range of stakeholders. This could include government agencies, NGOs, educators, news media organisations, social media platforms, and community leaders. At the same time the public will need to be supported and engaged.

A broad strategy to address the issues will likely involve the following:

- Provide New Zealanders with the tools and information they need to be informed and empowered.
- Educate at all levels to improve critical thinking and resilience.
- Enhance industry transparency and responsibility.
- Update regulation where needed.
- Conduct further research and evaluation.

We explore this in more detail from page 50.

Background and objectives

Who we are

The Classification Office Te Mana Whakaatu is an independent Crown entity responsible for classifying material that may need to be restricted or banned. This can include films, books, video games and online content. We conduct research and produce evidence-based resources to promote media literacy and enable New Zealanders to make informed choices about what they watch.

The Classification Office cannot restrict or ban content on the basis of fairness, balance or accuracy. However we do have a mandate to restrict material that could encourage behaviour that poses a risk of self-harm or harm to others, and material that promotes criminal, terrorist or violent acts. Initial work undertaken by the Classification Office has highlighted the linkages between misinformation and extremist material and identified this as an area that needs to be better understood.

Why research misinformation?

Misinformation is nothing new, but there are increasing concerns worldwide about the prevalence of misinformation – especially online – and its potential to impact democracy, public health, violent extremism and other matters. We've seen how the spread of false and sometimes hostile misinformation and conspiracy theories continue to impact on our whānau and communities during the Covid-19 pandemic, and how extremist talking points and ideology can contribute to real-world violence such as the March 15 attacks in Christchurch. To date, there appears to be few nationally representative studies (in New Zealand or internationally) that cover the range of interconnecting issues relating to misinformation and how this may lead to real-world harms and a general loss of trust.

Given the potential impacts and implications of misinformation, we wanted to explore New Zealanders' experiences and views on the topic. We also felt that undertaking this research would be consistent with the recommendations made by the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the terrorist attack on Christchurch masjidain on 15 March 2019, where the importance of data analysis, monitoring and evaluation was highlighted.

What does this research add?

Misinformation presents a complex set of issues that we need to address as a society, and this requires robust, up-to-date evidence about the scope of misinformation in New Zealand and its impacts. By covering a range of interconnecting issues relating to misinformation and the link to real-world harms, we see this research as an important contribution towards our knowledge and evidence base.

This research aims to raise awareness about the issues, and create opportunities for open conversations about how to address them. It may inform the development of cross-government work on potential policy and regulatory responses, as well as information and resources for the public.

Research method

Research questions

Our research explores the following topics:

- How people experience misinformation, and how they respond.
- People's views about the potential harms of misinformation.
- Views about how misinformation should be dealt with, and who should take action.
- People's beliefs about topics associated with misinformation, and how common these beliefs are in New Zealand.

Our approach to research

This research deals with complex and interrelated topics. In order to effectively cover the scope of our research objectives, our research team looked at a variety of international studies, combining elements and adapting their approaches and methodologies to make this study relevant in the context of Aotearoa. We were helped by a range of New Zealand agencies, researchers and experts in the field of misinformation and related topics.

The survey covers a variety of topics that many New Zealanders feel strongly about, and explores people's personal beliefs about a range of issues that are sometimes controversial and sensitive. Through our consultation process we worked to ensure the survey was neutral in tone and respectful to all participants, acknowledging diverse perspectives in relation to gender, age, culture and background.

The final survey was designed in conjunction with Colmar Brunton, and tested with various demographic groups to ensure research participants found it clear and easy to follow.

A nationally representative survey

The issues in this research affect every New Zealander so we sought to conduct a survey that is representative of the people of Aotearoa.

We conducted a nationally representative survey of 2,301 people aged 16 years and over. This included 2,000 adults and a 'youth booster' of 301 young people, as the wellbeing of young people is central to the values and kaupapa of the Classification Office. This oversampling of the youth population allowed for a more in-depth analysis, and was accounted for when weighting different demographic groups in the full sample.

Adult survey respondents were recruited from two online panels (Colmar Brunton and Dynata). Youth respondents (16 to 17-year-olds) were recruited via their parents or adult caregivers who are members of these online panels.

Data was weighted to reflect 2018 Stats NZ Tatauranga Aotearoa census demographic data on age within gender, region, and ethnicity[1].

Participants completed the survey between 19 February and 18 March, 2021.

Privacy and confidentiality

The survey includes questions of a sometimes personal and potentially sensitive nature, and it was important that participants felt comfortable giving open and honest answers. Participants were informed that their privacy is guaranteed, and that their names will never be linked to their responses. We also asked participants not to talk about the questionnaire with others until it was completed, and to complete the survey in private.

1 See our website for a full demographic summary and the full questionnaire: classificationoffice.govt.nz/research21

Terminology

In this report the term 'misinformation' is used in a broad sense to refer to news or information that is false or misleading – regardless of whether there is an intention to deceive.

More specific terminology is sometimes used when discussing these topics. Some commonly used definitions include:

- **Misinformation:** false information that people didn't create with the intention to hurt others.
- **Disinformation:** false information created with the intention of harming a person, group, or organisation, or even a country.
- **Mal-information:** true information used with ill intent[2].

In practice, it is not always possible to make clear distinctions between these categories, and more than one definition may apply to an example of false or misleading information depending on context.

In the survey questionnaire itself we did not use terms such as 'misinformation', 'disinformation', or 'mal-information'. Rather, we asked participants about 'false or misleading' news and information. This ensured the meaning was simple and clear, and broadly applicable.

The challenge with any research in this area is that findings often rely on participants' subjective opinions about whether information is false or misleading, based on their own knowledge, attitudes or beliefs. People sometimes perceive accurate and factual information to be false or misleading, and vice versa. This must be kept in mind when reading findings about perceived exposure to, or views about, false or misleading information.

In addition to people's views about perceived misinformation, we asked participants about a series of topics that are known to be associated with misinformation (based on available evidence and scientific consensus).

Context and limitations

This quantitative survey took place between 19 February and 18 March, 2021, and responses to the survey must be considered within a wider context of local and world events over the previous year (February 2020 – March 2021). Principle among these is the ongoing Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic. By the time participants were completing this survey, the pandemic had become part of daily life. This resulted in continuous news coverage and public discussion about the pandemic and related issues such as misinformation.

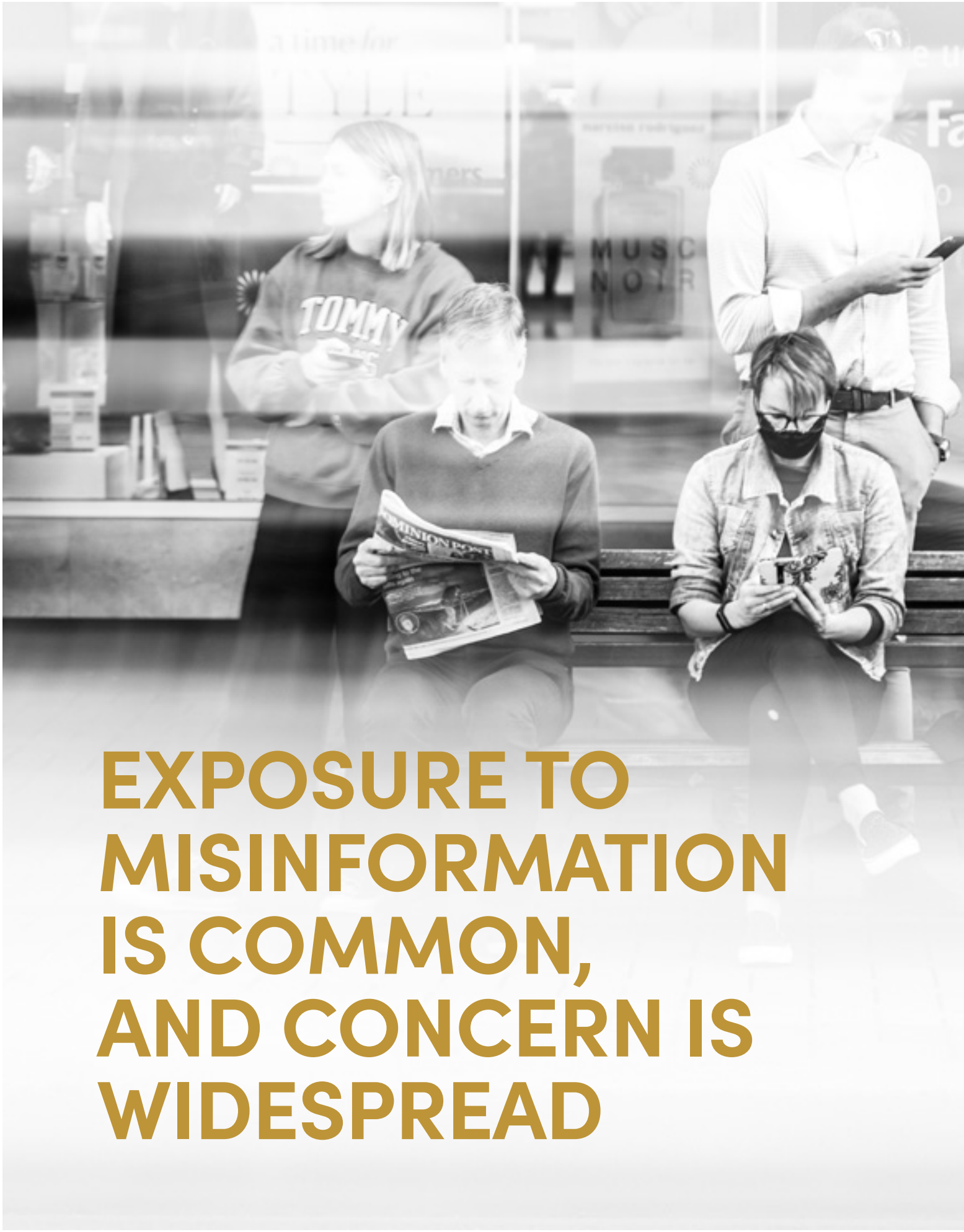
These events were fresh in participants' minds as the survey was conducted. Our findings represent a snapshot of beliefs and attitudes at a particular point in time, and results may have differed significantly if it had been carried out even a few weeks earlier or later.

Reading tables and charts

Percentages in the tables and graphs may not add to 100% due to rounding or because respondents were able to give more than one answer to some questions. The base sizes shown in the tables and graphs use unweighted data (as the statistical reliability of results is determined by unweighted base sizes). The percentages in the tables and graphs use weighted data to ensure the survey results are representative of the population of interest.

Percentage figures for 'prefer not to say' options that are 1% or under are not presented in the charts.

2 Berentson-Shaw, J., & Elliott, M. (2020). *Misinformation and COVID-19: A briefing for media.* https://www.theworkshop.org.nz/publications/misinformation-and-covid-19-a-briefing-for-media



EXPOSURE TO MISINFORMATION IS COMMON, AND CONCERN IS WIDESPREAD

"People are scared and don't know what to believe. Everyone is lying."

MALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 40-44

KEY FINDINGS

- **The majority (57%)** believed they had come across misinformation in the past six months, and 21% said they noticed this daily or weekly.
- **Most New Zealanders (82%)** are 'somewhat' or 'very' concerned about the spread of misinformation in New Zealand, while just 2% were 'not concerned at all'.
- **Most New Zealanders (81%)** think misinformation is becoming more common over time, while just 4% think it is becoming less common.
- **Most New Zealanders (90%)** think misinformation is influencing people's views about public health, and 75% tended to think false information about Covid-19 is an urgent and serious threat.

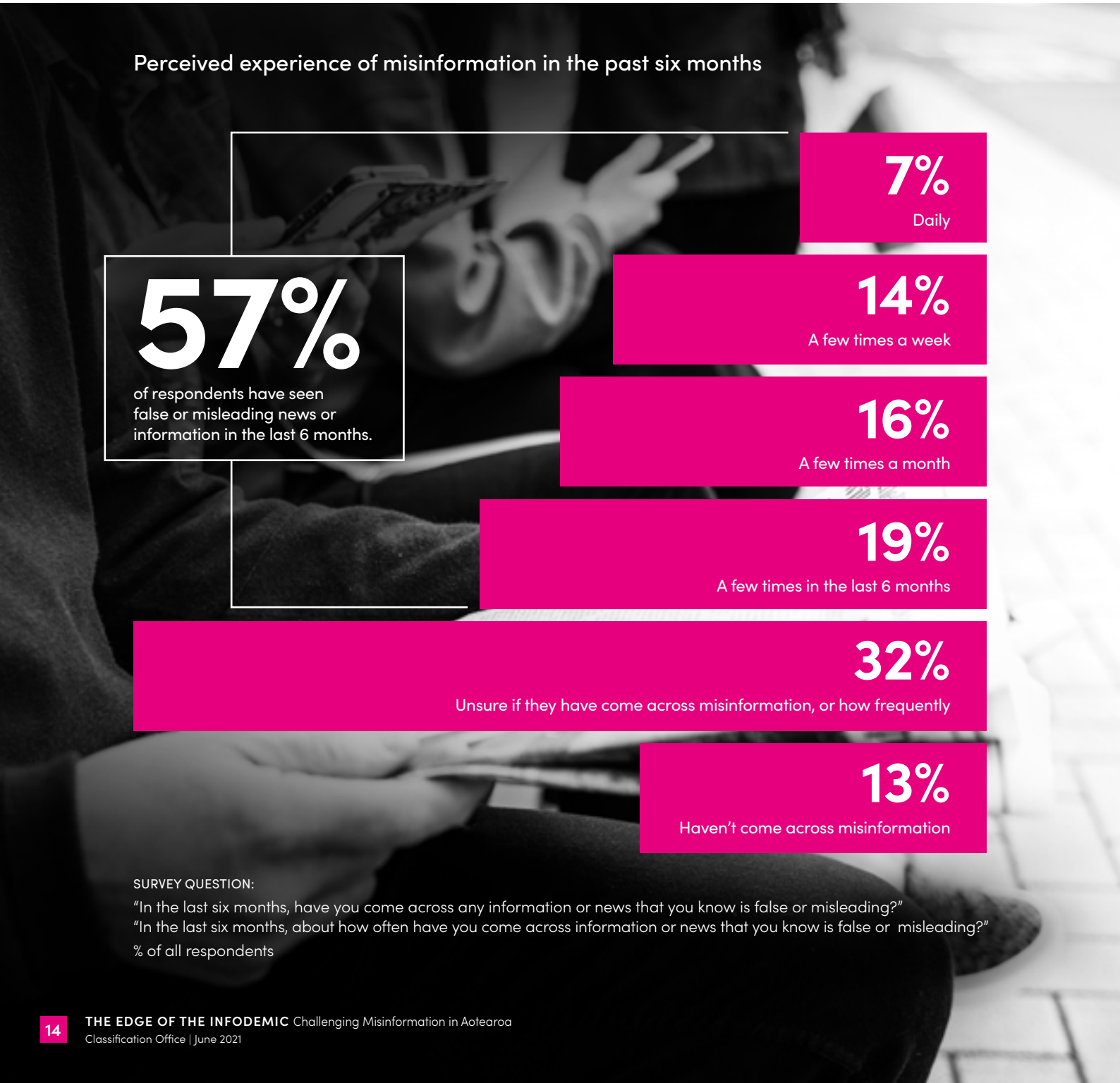
In this section we explore New Zealanders' experiences and views about misinformation. This includes people's views about whether they have come across misinformation and how often, examples of misinformation in their own words, and how they assess whether information is false or misleading. We also look at people's concerns about misinformation, whether they think it is becoming more common, and the influence it has on society.

How New Zealanders experience misinformation

Perceived exposure to misinformation is common

The majority of participants (57%) believed they had come across misinformation in the past six months and around a third were unsure. When asked how often they had come across misinformation, around one in five people said they noticed this daily or weekly. The following chart combines results from both questions.

As previously noted, people sometimes perceive accurate and factual information to be false or misleading, and vice versa. This must be kept in mind when reading findings about perceived exposure to, or views about, misinformation.



SURVEY QUESTION:
"In the last six months, have you come across any information or news that you know is false or misleading?"
"In the last six months, about how often have you come across information or news that you know is false or misleading?"
% of all respondents

Examples of information people think is false or misleading

Participants who believed they had seen misinformation were asked to provide some examples in their own words. The most common examples related to Covid-19, followed by politics in the United States.

When asked how they knew this information was false or misleading, some said they had researched or verified information themselves. Others believed information was false or misleading based on their own knowledge and experience, or because it came from a source they considered to be unreliable.

New Zealanders report seeing misinformation about...

SURVEY QUESTION:
"Please give us some examples of false or misleading information or news that you've come across."

Many people were aware of a variety of topics they associated with misinformation, and were able to list these in their own words.

> **"The Covid hoax; the gun grab and events preceding; the 'climate emergency'; 'peak oil' (circa 1980?); the misrepresentations about the motives and scale of protests in USA. Pretty much everything you've been told is a lie, researcher guy."**
>
> MALE, OTHER EUROPEAN, AGE 25-29

Quotes relating to Covid-19 provide a good example of the diversity of beliefs about the topic. Participants generally supported the advice given by government officials and experts, and provided examples of specific types of misinformation they'd come across that is not backed by the best available evidence. While much less common, some participants appeared to support some of these ideas, or were sceptical about information provided by scientists and officials.

> **"Conspiracy theories regarding Covid-19 and the drive behind lockdown. Theories that only plant seeds of fear and confusion."**
>
> MALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 16-17

> **"Bleach curing Covid, Covid created by 5G, Covid created by the Government, chips being put in vaccines."**
>
> FEMALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 30-34

Vaccinations were also a common theme, whether in relation to Covid-19 or more generally. Many expressed concerns about 'anti-vaxx' misinformation. Though much less common, some also expressed support for anti-vaxx ideas.

> **"Vaccines being tracking devices, global warming being a hoax, 5G towers being used to spread Covid-19."**
>
> MALE, PACIFIC, AGE 18-24

Misinformation relating to United States politics was top of mind for many people, following the extraordinary events of the 2020 US election and its aftermath, including the storming of the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021. While most comments were critical of Donald Trump and his supporters, some people appeared to support the view that the 2020 US election was 'rigged'. Some participants expressed concerns about misinformation surrounding the 2020 New Zealand election, though this was much less common.

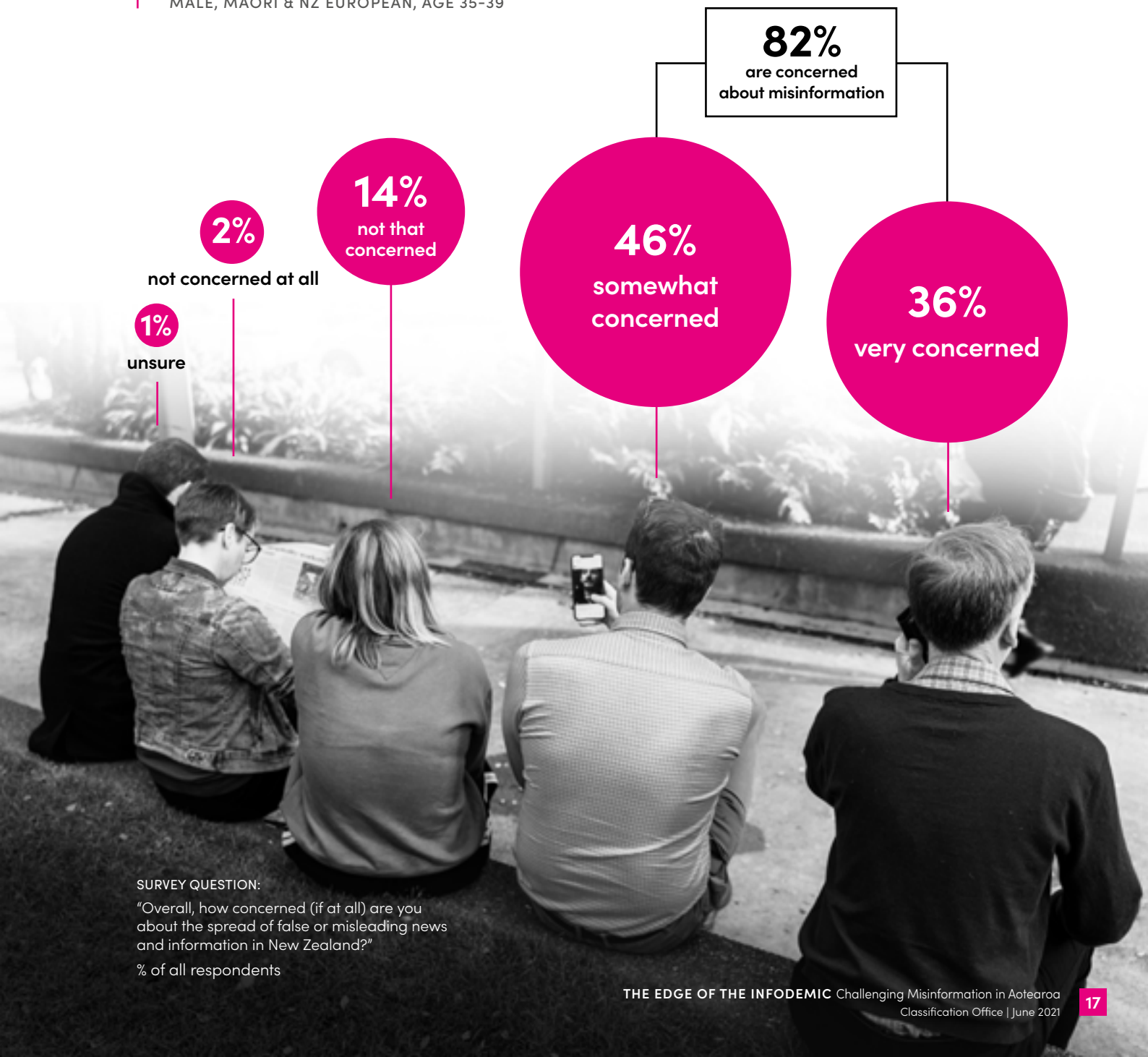
New Zealanders' views about misinformation

Concern about misinformation is widespread

The great majority of New Zealanders are concerned about the spread of misinformation. Most participants (eight in ten) were 'somewhat' or 'very' concerned about misinformation in New Zealand, while 14% were 'not that concerned', and 2% were 'not concerned at all'.

> **"I'm concerned about the misinformation around Covid and vaccination right now."**
>
> MALE, MĀORI & NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 35-39

> **"I am very concerned about those who are believing conspiracy theories about Covid vaccines and spreading this information. They are jeopardising our opportunity to get rid of Covid. "**
>
> FEMALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 35-39



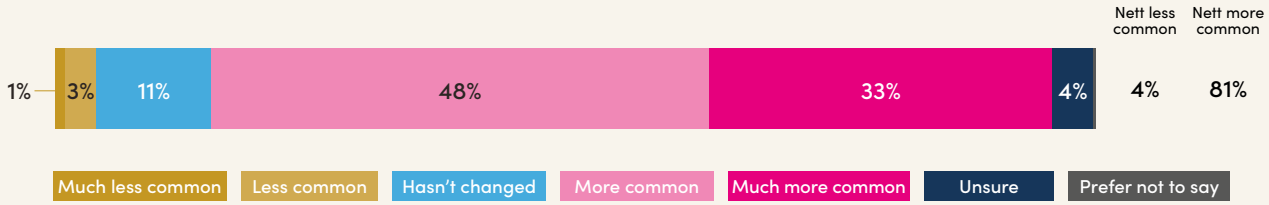
SURVEY QUESTION:

"Overall, how concerned (if at all) are you about the spread of false or misleading news and information in New Zealand?"

% of all respondents

We also asked New Zealanders whether they think misinformation is becoming more or less common over time, and there was broad agreement that this is a growing problem. The great majority (81%) think misinformation is increasing over time, while just 4% think it is becoming less common and about one in ten see no change.

Views on whether misinformation is becoming more or less common

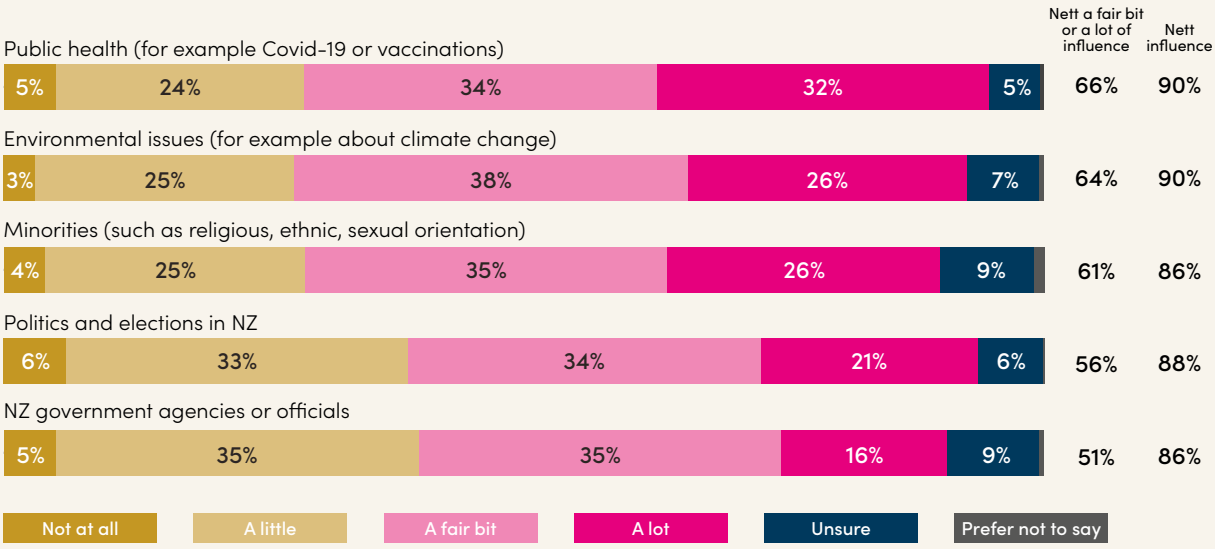


SURVEY QUESTION:
"Do you think false or misleading news and information is becoming more or less common over time?"
% of all respondents

The influence of misinformation

It is common for New Zealanders to see misinformation as an urgent and serious threat to society. Most think that misinformation has influenced people's views about things like politics, public health and environmental issues.

Perceived influence of misinformation on New Zealanders' views about key topics

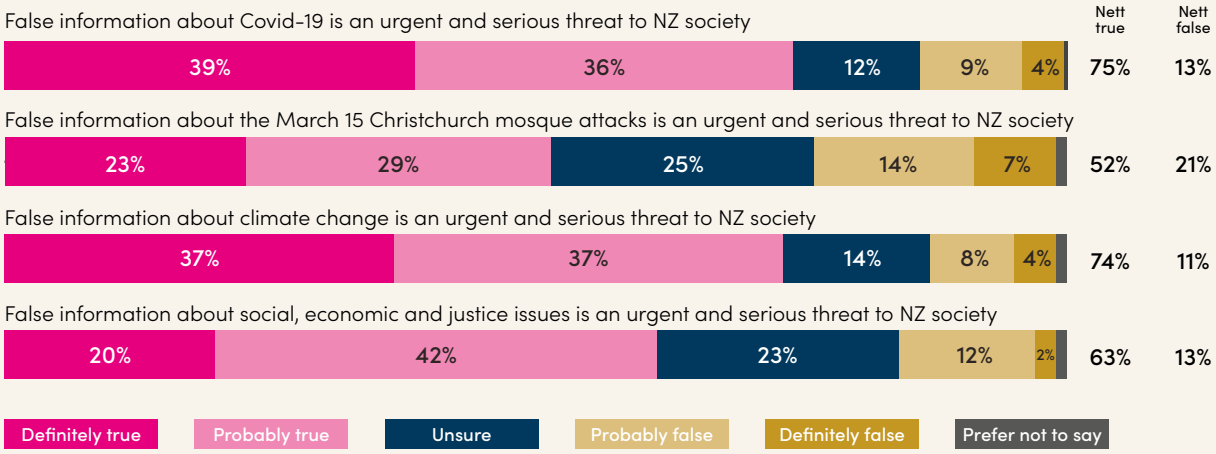


SURVEY QUESTION:
"In the past few years, do you think false or misleading information has influenced New Zealanders' views about...?"
% of all respondents

Most New Zealanders (nine in ten) think misinformation is influencing people's views about public health, for example Covid-19 and vaccinations. Around a third think there is 'a fair bit' of influence, and a similar number think there is 'a lot' of influence. New Zealanders have serious concerns about the harms of this misinformation, with three out of four people tending to think that false information about Covid-19 is an urgent and serious threat to New Zealand society.

There was also significant concern around the influence of misinformation on people's views about politics and elections in New Zealand. Around nine in ten think misinformation has at least some influence on people's views in this area, with a majority (56%) thinking that there is a 'fair bit' or 'a lot' of influence. The survey was carried out around four months after the 2020 General Election, which was dominated by discussion around Covid-19 and the official response to the public health crisis.

Views on whether misinformation is an urgent and serious threat



SURVEY QUESTION:
"Do you think this statement is true or false? We're just interested in what you personally think."
% of all respondents

We also found that three out of four New Zealanders tended to think that false information about climate change is an urgent and serious threat to New Zealand society. New Zealanders also think misinformation has a significant influence on views around a variety of other topics, from views about minorities to national security.

We asked participants whether groups or organisations are intentionally spreading misinformation "about important social, economic and justice issues". A majority tend to think this is true, and around one in seven think this is false. Serious concerns about this were common, with just under two-thirds tending to believe that false information about these topics is an urgent and serious threat to New Zealand society.

MISINFORMATION IS UNDERMINING TRUST – AND THE INTERNET PLAYS A KEY ROLE

KEY FINDINGS

- The great majority of New Zealanders (79%) get news and information from social media, and around half (51%) do this daily or weekly.
- Only 12% had high trust in news and information from internet and social media users, and 83% think this group frequently spreads misinformation on purpose.
- New Zealanders have a relatively high level of trust in traditional sources of news and information, including scientists, researchers or experts (78%), New Zealand government agencies and officials (64%), and the New Zealand news media (61%).

This section explores where New Zealanders get their news and information, their trust in different sources of information, and the extent to which they think different groups and organisations intentionally spread misinformation.

"False or misleading news makes you dislike and not trust what is being said, so you end up switching the off/power button."

FEMALE, MĀORI, PACIFIC & NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 50-54

The role of the internet

Findings from our research show associations between belief in misinformation, lack of trust in traditional sources of information, and reliance on online sources of information. This is concerning, because online environments are known to amplify voices that spread misinformation, and to create 'echo chambers' where misinformation can spread unchallenged – while also reinforcing these beliefs by fostering a sense of community for like-minded individuals[3].

> **"A close family member believes a lot of false and misleading news. It has changed his mind about vaccines to negative, he mistrusts government information and quite frankly believes a lot of outright rubbish that has been shared on social media."**
>
> FEMALE, OTHER ETHNICITY, AGE 70+

Where people get news and information

It's very common for people to get news and information from New Zealand-based news websites and apps – nine in ten had done so in the previous six months, and more than two-thirds use these sources daily or weekly. International news websites or apps are also popular, with around half using these as a source of information at least weekly.

Social media is another common source of information for New Zealanders. Just under eight in ten got news and information from social media in the previous six months, and around half did this daily or weekly. It's also common for people to get news and information from other online sources such as email newsletters, blogs, forums or podcasts.

Social media users were also asked which platforms they get news and information from. Unsurprisingly, the most common platform was Facebook (78% of social media users), followed by YouTube (45%), Facebook Messenger (36%) and Instagram (34%), which is also owned by Facebook. While these four platforms were the most popular, two-thirds of social media users had got news or information from a variety of other social media services.

The widespread use of online sources represents a key shift in the way New Zealanders seek, receive and share news and information. While the internet plays a key (and increasingly important) role, many New Zealanders continue to get news and information from more traditional sources. Most (nine in ten) got news and information from broadcast radio and TV in the previous six months, and two-thirds do so at least weekly.

Other common sources of information include print newspapers or magazines, in the workplace, and to a lesser extent in educational institutions, places of worship, or other community gathering places.

See our website for a chart showing full results: classificationoffice.govt.nz/research21.

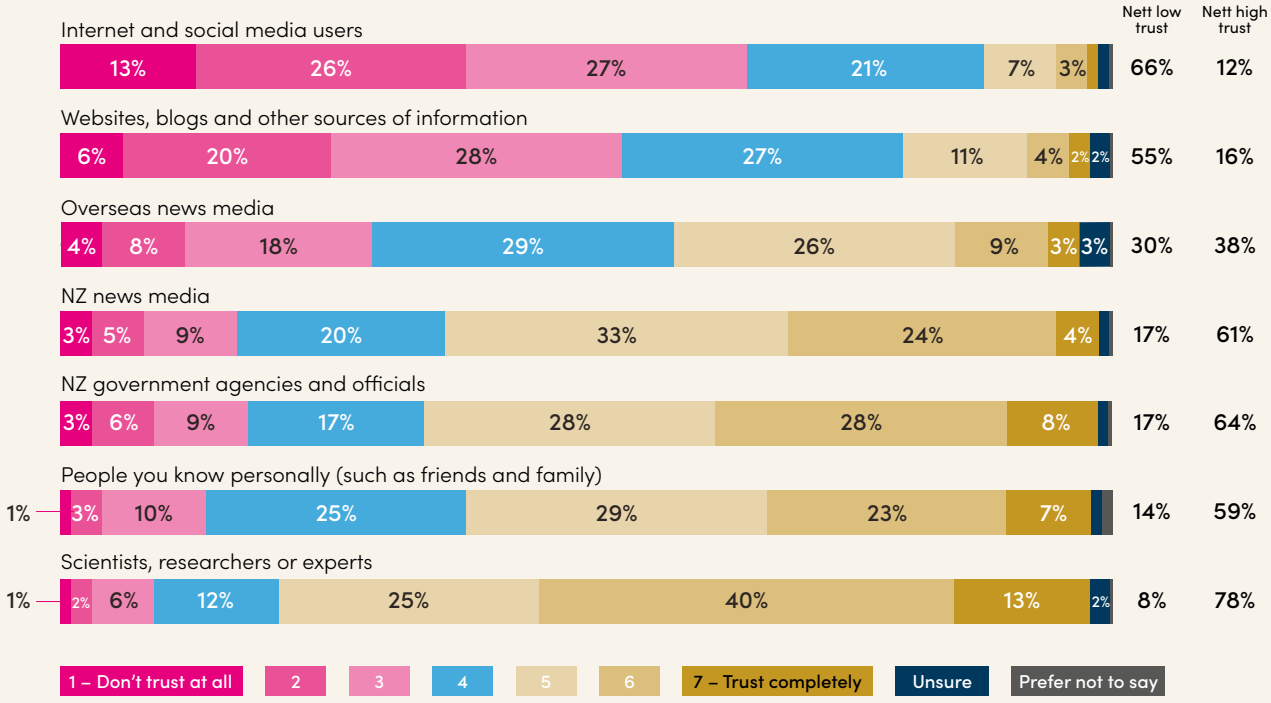
3 Menczer, F. (2016, Nov 28). Fake Online News Spreads Through Social Echo Chambers. *The Conversation*. https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/fake-online-news-spreads-through-social-echo-chambers/

Misinformation and trust

Trust is key to understanding the spread of misinformation and the harm it can cause. Overseas studies show that lack of trust in public health information reduced compliance with health protection measures[4]. Conversely, high levels of trust promote resilience. New Zealand remains a relatively high trust society[5], and this makes us more resilient to the negative impacts of misinformation. However some of the least trusted (often online) sources of information are also the most commonly used.

Trust in sources of information

Trust in sources of news and information



SURVEY QUESTION:
"Overall, how much do you trust the news or information from..."
% of all respondents

4 Duffy, B., & Allington, D. (2020). *Covid conspiracies and confusions: the impact on compliance with the UK's lockdown rules and the link with social media use.* London. UK: The Policy Institute, King's College. https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/covid-conspiracies-and-confusions.pdf

5 Chapple, S., & Prickett, K. (2019). *Who do we trust in New Zealand?: 2016 to 2019*. https://www.wgtn.ac.nz/__data/assets/pdf_file/0011/1762562/trust-publication-2019.pdf

We found that the majority of New Zealanders have a relatively high level of trust in traditional sources of news and information, including scientists, researchers or experts (78%), New Zealand government agencies and officials (64%), and the New Zealand news media (61%)[6]. In a separate question we asked whether New Zealand officials "are usually open and honest about the motives for their decisions" and got a similar result – with two-thirds thinking this was 'probably' or 'definitely' true.

By comparison, New Zealanders tend to have less trust in overseas news media (38%) and government agencies and officials in other countries (28%).

> **"Almost every single news article and much information that has a purpose of gaining my money/time is designed to provoke an emotional response."**
>
> FEMALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 18-24

> **"I believe a source like social is unlikely to be a safe place to find 'news', I have to take personal action to find alternate sources I can trust."**
>
> MALE, MĀORI, AGE 45-49

Aside from these sources, people also showed a relatively high level of trust in people they know personally, such as friends and family (59%).

New Zealanders are much less trusting of online-only sources of news or information. Just 12% indicated high trust in news and information from internet and social media users, and 16% in websites, blogs and other online sources of information. Further analysis (see page 38) showed that susceptibility to misinformation is associated with a higher level of trust in information from social media, websites, blogs or other online sources.

6 We asked participants to rate various sources of news or information on a scale of 1-7, where 1 means 'don't trust at all', and 7 means 'trust completely'. The results are outlined in the chart Trust in sources of news and information, where 'nett low trust' refers to scores of 1, 2 or 3, and 'nett high trust' refers to scores of 5, 6 or 7.

Who intentionally spreads misinformation?

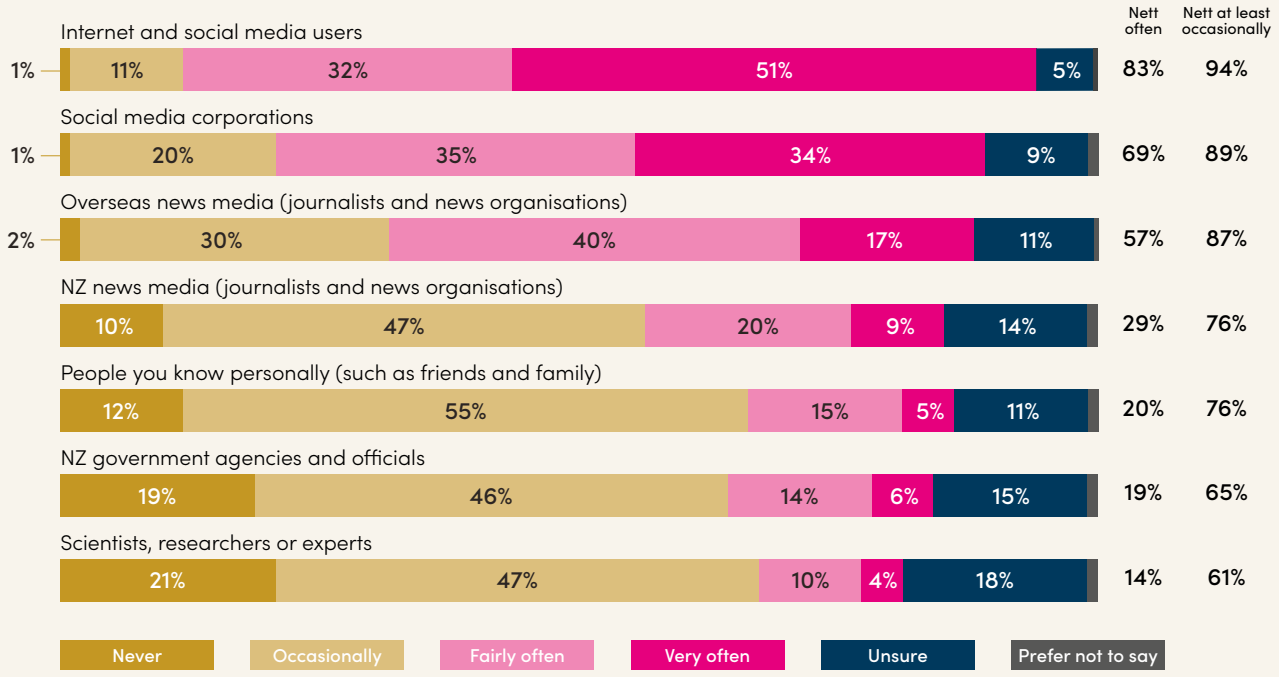
We asked participants who was responsible for spreading misinformation intentionally and how often. Their responses were consistent with views relating to trust in sources of news and information, with relatively few people thinking misinformation is very or fairly often spread by scientists, researchers or experts (14%) or New Zealand government agencies and officials (19%), although New Zealanders are somewhat more likely to think the New Zealand news media does so (29%).

Again, we found that there was a low level of trust in online-only sources, with eight in ten thinking internet and social media users often spread misinformation intentionally. More than two-thirds of participants also believed that social media corporations did this.

"It varies – there is no typical person. Some are people who tend to believe conspiracy theories, some are anti-government, some are anti-vaccine but if there is a typical person spreading false information I would be surprised."

MALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 55-59

Who spreads misinformation and how often?



SURVEY QUESTION:

"How often (if at all) do you think these organisations or groups spread false or misleading news and information on purpose?"

% of all respondents

EVERYONE IS AFFECTED BY THE SPREAD OF MISINFORMATION

KEY FINDINGS

- New Zealanders' beliefs about specific ideas (such as Covid-19, vaccines, and climate change) tend to be broadly similar irrespective of characteristics like age, gender, ethnicity, income, education, or religious belief.
- Most New Zealanders (91%) believe the Covid-19 virus is real. Three-quarters of New Zealanders (74%) believe that climate change is mainly caused by human activities. Most New Zealanders (85%) accept the official account of the March 15, 2019 terrorist attacks.
- The majority of New Zealanders believe that false information about these topics poses an urgent and serious threat to New Zealand society.
- Around half of New Zealanders (50%) have some level of belief in at least one statement associated with misinformation. Just under a third (31%) believe in two or more statements, and 19% believe three or more statements.
- Susceptibility to misinformation was associated with higher trust of social media and other online sources of information, and lower levels of trust in traditional news media and scientists or experts.

This section explores New Zealanders' beliefs about a variety of key topics, from Covid-19 to climate change. We discuss beliefs that are associated with misinformation, how widespread these beliefs are amongst New Zealanders, and attitudes and characteristics that are associated with these beliefs. We also look at attitudes towards violent action, and discuss the real-world impacts of harmful misinformation.

“It affects everyone and everything.”
FEMALE, OTHER ETHNICITY, AGE 60-64

Key topics: New Zealanders' attitudes and beliefs

We asked people about a range of topics that are commonly associated with misinformation in New Zealand, and participants provided responses on a scale from 'definitely true' to 'definitely false'[7].

Some New Zealanders indicated high levels of certainty about beliefs that are not backed by evidence, and which most people consider to be false. Mostly however, participants were less certain in their beliefs in these areas, potentially indicating that they lacked firm knowledge about a subject, or that they were still forming a view. This is important, as people who are uncertain about ideas may be more open to alternative points of view – whereas those who hold firm beliefs may be less likely to change their views even when provided with evidence that disproves them.

Covid-19

The vast majority of New Zealanders (91%) believe the Covid-19 virus is real, and that it is a serious threat to public health worldwide. Most also agree that measures like social distancing and hand washing reduce the likelihood of spreading the virus, with just 4% thinking this was false and 5% being unsure.

However, nearly one in four of us (23%) believe the dangers and severity of Covid-19 have been exaggerated by officials. Nearly one in five (18%) believe the New Zealand Covid-19 lockdowns were about "increasing government control".

The majority of participants (65%) believe groups or organisations are intentionally spreading false or misleading information about Covid-19. Three-quarters believe that false information about Covid-19 is an urgent and serious threat to New Zealand society.

Our findings suggest that Covid-19 misinformation is having an impact. A minority of people (5%) do not think that the Covid-19 virus exists – rather they believe that it is a myth created by individuals or organisations with a hidden agenda. This appears to reflect a level of belief in known conspiracy theories around the Covid-19 virus.

While the existence of the Covid-19 virus is an established fact, there is currently no definitive account of the origin of the virus. During the course of the pandemic there has been significant media coverage of the possibility that the Covid-19 virus was created in a lab in Wuhan, and was released either by accident or intentionally. We found that 26% of participants tended to believe the virus had been created in a lab, while 40% tended to think this was false. Around a third of participants (34%) were unsure[8].

> **"I had Covid about a year ago now and people who believe that Covid is a hoax spreading false info about it is truly hurtful. They don't know what it is like to live with the virus every day. I still struggle today, a year later."**
>
> FEMALE, MĀORI, AGE 16-17

7 A time limit was placed on responding to these statements to ensure responses were based on people's own knowledge and views about a topic. Some statements were asked to a smaller group of participants depending on previous responses – you can read more about why we took this approach on our website: classificationoffice.govt.nz/research21

8 We included this statement in the survey in order to get an indication of New Zealanders' views on the subject. Given that there is no authoritative account of the origin of Covid-19 (and evidence continues to emerge and be reported on), it was not included in our analysis of belief in statements associated with misinformation (see page 37).

Specific beliefs – Covid-19

SURVEY QUESTION:

"Next we have some statements about the Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic. Do you think this statement is true or false? We're just interested in what you personally think."

% of all respondents

SURVEY QUESTION:

"Do you think this statement is true or false?
We're just interested in what you personally think."

THE NZ COVID-19 LOCKDOWNS WERE ABOUT INCREASING GOVERNMENT CONTROL

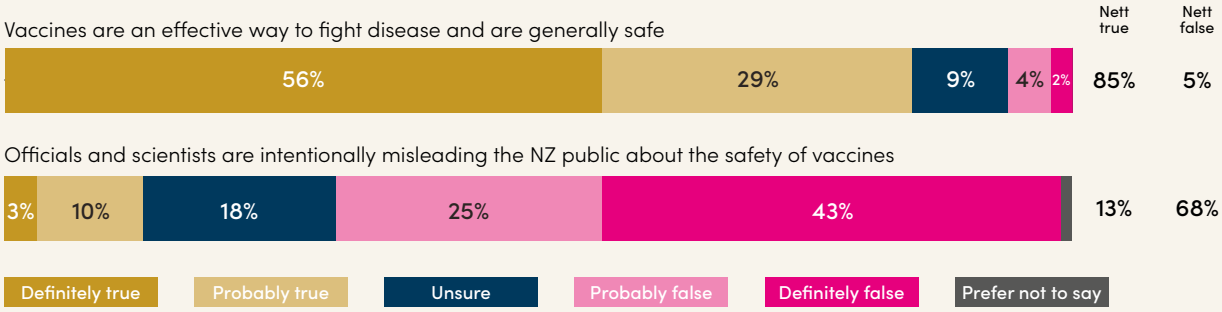
Nett believe true: **18%**

THE COVID-19 VIRUS DOES NOT REALLY EXIST, IT IS A MYTH CREATED BY INDIVIDUALS OR ORGANISATIONS WITH A HIDDEN AGENDA

Nett believe true: **5%**

Vaccines

Specific beliefs – Vaccines



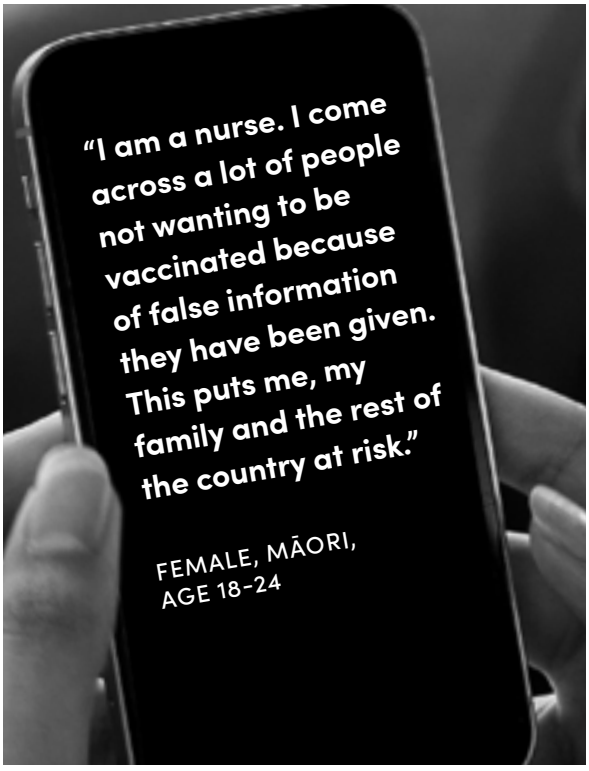
SURVEY QUESTION:
"Next we have some statements about vaccines. Do you think this statement is true or false? We're just interested in what you personally think."
% of all respondents

This survey did not explore New Zealanders' willingness to be vaccinated against Covid-19. We wanted to look at views and beliefs about vaccines generally. We found that the vast majority (85%) tend to believe that vaccines are an effective way to fight disease and are generally safe.

Conversely we found that there is some scepticism or uncertainty about whether officials and scientists are intentionally misleading the New Zealand public about the safety of vaccines. A minority (13%) tend to believe this is happening, and 18% are unsure. A minority of New Zealanders (4%) believe the widely discredited idea that vaccines cause autism.

Regarding Covid-19, we did ask people whether they believed that the pandemic is being used as an excuse to force people to get vaccinations, and we found that a small number (8%) tend to believe this is happening.

As we found with beliefs about Covid-19 in the section above, some New Zealanders' beliefs about vaccines appear to reflect the impact of misinformation on this topic.



5G wireless communications

Misinformation about 5G (the fifth generation technology standard for broadband cellular networks) has led to a range of unfounded conspiracies – including a link to Covid-19. One outcome of this has been attacks on cell towers.

> **"Had to convince a friend that 5G is not harmful and we should not try to burn down towers in NZ."**
>
> FEMALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 25-29

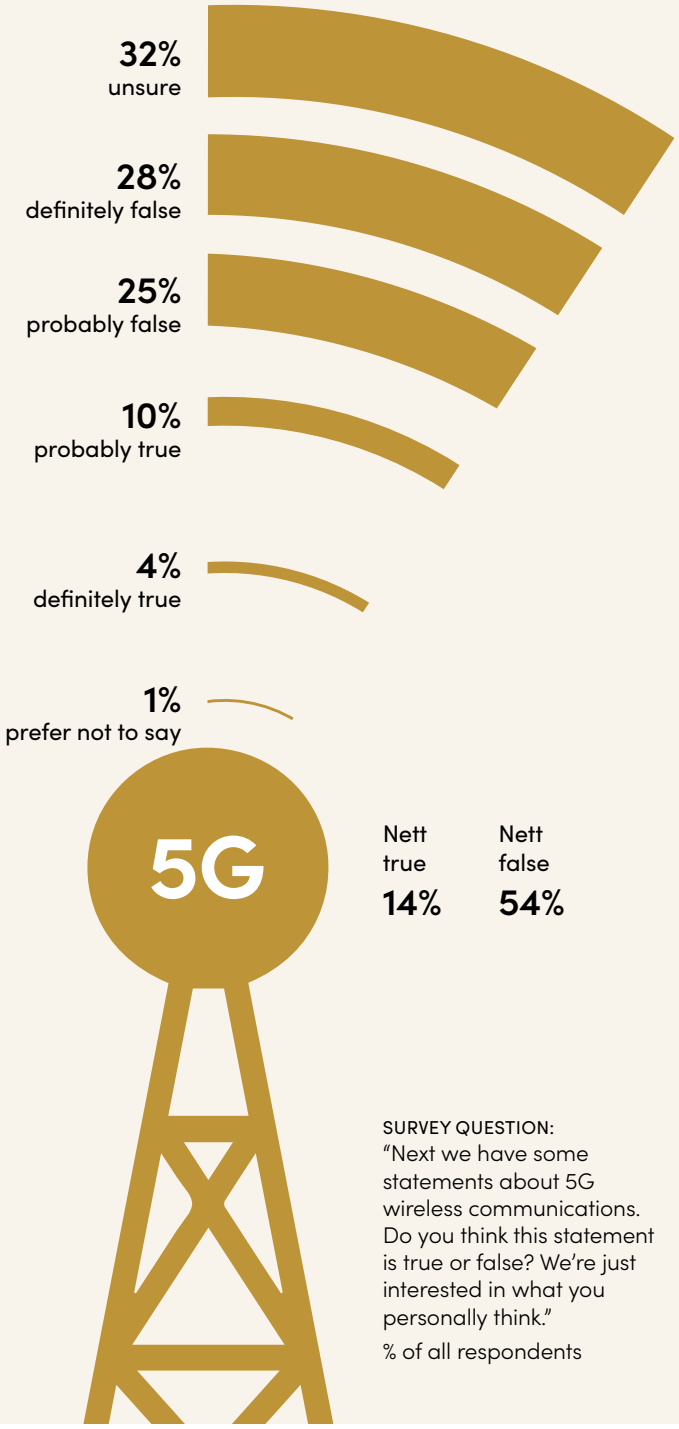
While just over half of New Zealanders (54%) do not believe that 5G is harmful to people's health, we found that nearly a third are not sure and that a significant minority (14%) tend to believe that it is harmful. A small number (3%) believe that Covid-19 is caused by 5G.

There is no strong scientific basis for a belief that 5G is harmful to health. There is certainly no evidence supporting a belief that Covid-19 is caused by 5G. However, misinformation and conspiracy theories linking 5G to Covid-19 became common at the onset of the pandemic and during 2020 there was a significant rise in attacks on cell towers in New Zealand.

> **"There are kids at my school that think 5G causes Covid."**
>
> FEMALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 16-17

Specific beliefs – 5G wireless communications

5G wireless communications are harmful to people's health



SURVEY QUESTION:
"Next we have some statements about 5G wireless communications. Do you think this statement is true or false? We're just interested in what you personally think."

% of all respondents

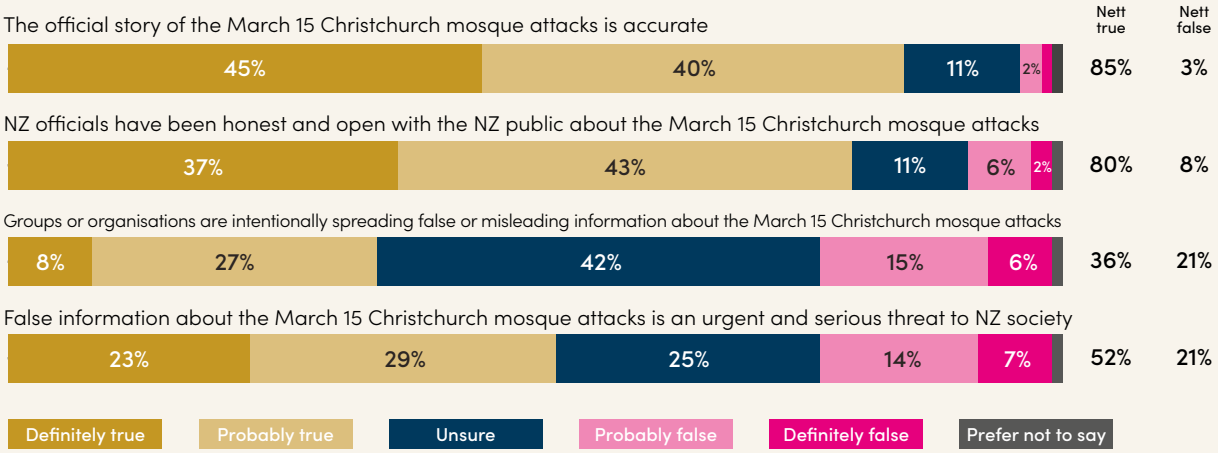
COVID-19 IS CAUSED BY 5G WIRELESS COMMUNICATIONS NETWORKS

Nett believe true: **3%**

The March 15 terrorist attacks

The ideologies underpinning the attacks on two Christchurch mosques in 2019 are linked to a variety of extremist misinformation, often circulated online. It was therefore an important topic to cover in this research. We found that most New Zealanders (85%) accept the official story of events, with only 3% thinking this is false. We also asked people's views about whether officials have been honest and open with the New Zealand public about the attacks, and found that people generally trusted in official communications (80%).

Specific beliefs – March 15, 2019 terrorist attacks



SURVEY QUESTION:
"Next we have some statements about the March 15, 2019 Christchurch mosque attacks. Remember that you can select 'prefer not to say' if you feel uncomfortable answering any of these questions. Do you think this statement is true or false? We're just interested in what you personally think."
% of all respondents

Following the attacks, the Classification Office became aware of a number of unfounded conspiracy theories about who was behind the attacks, with some questioning whether they took place at all. Our survey found that over a third of New Zealanders (36%) believed people were intentionally spreading misinformation about the events.

When asked if false information about the attacks is an urgent and serious threat to New Zealand society, just over half of New Zealanders believe it is a threat.

While relatively rare, some New Zealanders appear to believe in some form of conspiracy relating to March 15. The idea that the attacks were a hoax and never took place was believed by 2% of participants. A small number of participants (around 3%) did not believe the official story of the attacks, and some believed other people or organisations carried out the attacks.

THE MARCH 15 CHRISTCHURCH MOSQUE ATTACKS NEVER HAPPENED. IT WAS A HOAX INTENDED TO TRIGGER POLITICAL OR SOCIAL CHANGE

Nett believe true: 2%

"Most extremist activity is the result of false or misleading news. For example, the Christchurch attacks deeply affected my community and is the direct result of false or misleading information."

MALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 40-44

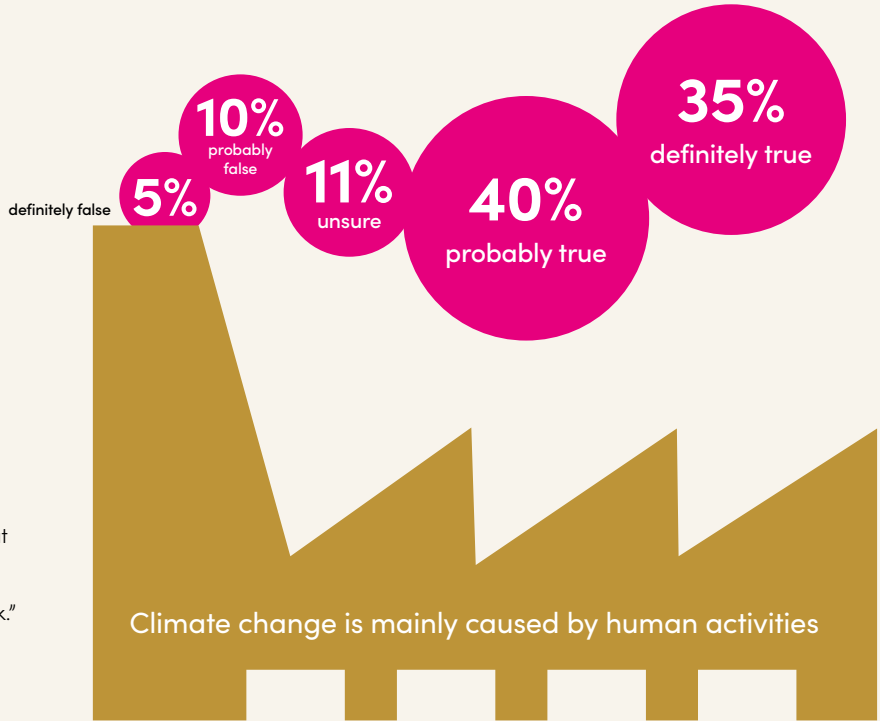
Climate change

Despite the overwhelming scientific consensus about the influence of human activities on global rises in temperature, climate change remains a topic of heated debate for many. This is, at least in part, a result of sophisticated disinformation campaigns – continuing over decades – that were often funded by the fossil fuel industry.

We found that three-quarters of New Zealanders believe that climate change is mainly caused by human activities. Nonetheless, it was quite common for participants to either disagree with this view (14%) or to be unsure (11%). A minority (one in ten) were inclined to believe the unfounded conspiracy theory that climate change is a 'hoax'.

Specific beliefs – Climate change

Nett true	Nett false
74%	**14%**



SURVEY QUESTION:

"Next we have some statements about climate change. Do you think this statement is true or false? We're just interested in what you personally think."

% of all respondents

There is widespread agreement among New Zealanders that groups or organisations are intentionally spreading misinformation about climate change – and that misinformation about this topic is a serious and urgent threat.

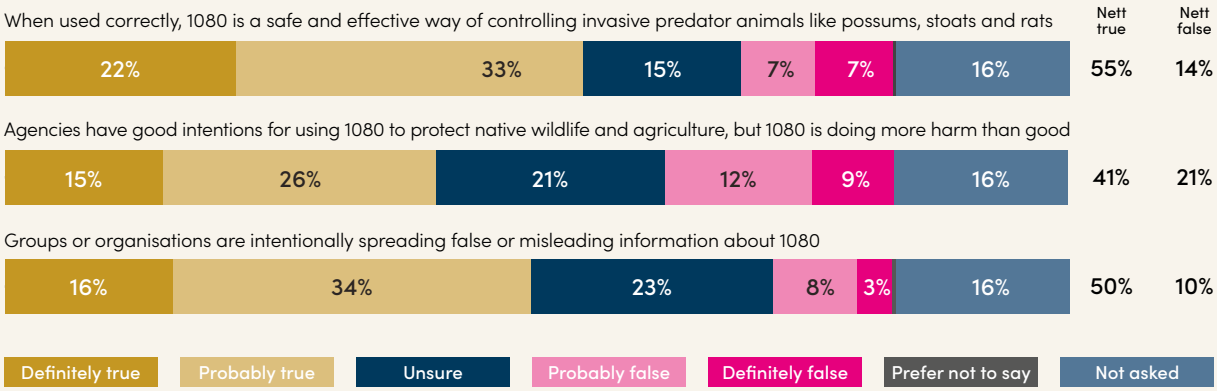
> **"I have seen lots of farmers suffering from the misinformation that cows are causing climate change. It is ruining people's livelihoods."**
>
> FEMALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 25-29

> **"I study science and am constantly challenged about climate change not being real, which undermines possible efforts to minimise it."**
>
> FEMALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 18-24

1080

1080 is a brand name given to a chemical used in New Zealand in efforts to control populations of invasive species such as possums, rats, stoats, and rabbits. Use of 1080 has been the subject of much controversy in New Zealand. Debate on this topic is often subject to misinformation and unfounded conspiracy theories.

Specific beliefs – 1080



SURVEY QUESTION:
"The next statements will be about 1080. 1080 is a name of a synthetic poison which has been used in New Zealand. Before we show you the statements, please tell us... before today, had you heard of 1080?"
"Do you think this statement is true or false? We're just interested in what you personally think."
% of all respondents

In our survey, most (84%) had heard of 1080 before, and we asked this group for their views on the topic. We found that a majority of New Zealanders tend to think 1080 is a safe and effective way of controlling invasive predator animals, while 14% tend to think this is false.

Some New Zealanders feel strongly about the perceived harms of 1080, with 12% tending to think it is an urgent and serious threat to New Zealand society. A small minority (3%) believed the idea that 1080 is part of a "global agenda to control the human population".

Around half of New Zealanders think that groups or organisations are intentionally spreading misinformation about 1080. This view was much more common amongst those who believed 1080 is safe and effective, although many of those who disagreed it is safe also expressed concern.

1080 IS PART OF A GLOBAL AGENDA TO CONTROL THE HUMAN POPULATION

Nett believe true: **3%**

1080 IS AN URGENT AND SERIOUS THREAT TO NZ SOCIETY

Nett believe true: **12%**

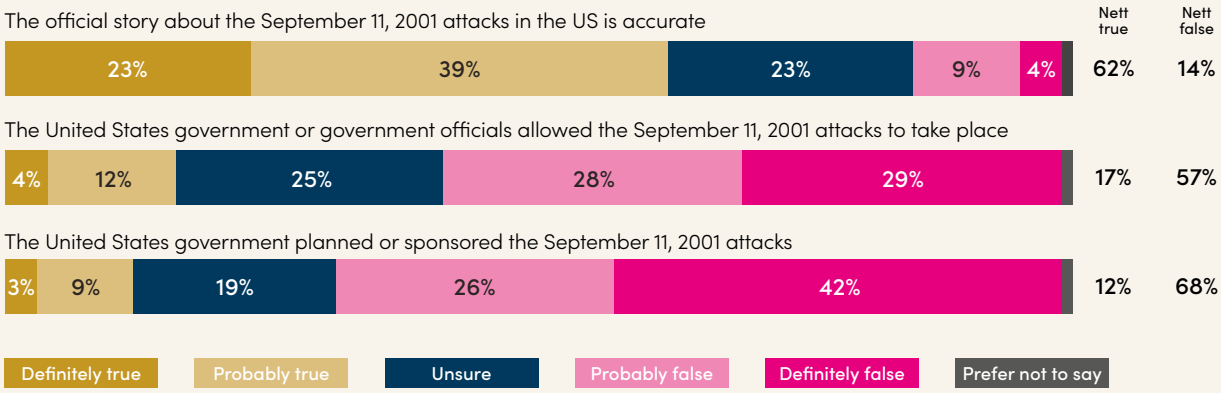
"I have argued with neighbours about 1080, which I support the use of based on facts. I get frustrated when people base their views on emotion, denying the science."

FEMALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 55-59

September 11, 2001 attacks

The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States resulted in a wide variety of conspiracy theories. In part, these were fuelled by the response of the United States government, which used the attacks as a justification for the invasion of Iraq in 2003. This response was also characterised by the spread of misinformation by officials, including claims that Iraq had 'weapons of mass destruction' that posed a threat to the United States. Nonetheless, there is no substantiated evidence to back claims that elements of the United States government were involved in the attacks, yet these beliefs are still widespread around the world today.

Specific beliefs – September 11, 2001 attacks



SURVEY QUESTION:
"Next we have some statements about the September 11, 2001 attacks in New York. Do you think this statement is true or false? We're just interested in what you personally think."
% of all respondents

The majority of New Zealanders, just under two-thirds, tend to believe the official story about the attacks. Around a quarter are unsure, and 14% believe this is false. When asked more specific questions about the role of the US government, 17% tended to think US officials allowed the attacks to take place, while a smaller group (12%) believed the US government directly planned or sponsored the attacks.

"The September 11 attacks negatively affected myself and my community by extreme right media, politicians, groups and organisations. We were, and still are targeted by these groups for their political gains."

MALE, ASIAN, AGE 35-39

QAnon

QAnon is the name given to a wide variety of baseless conspiracy theories which have become prominent in the United States, and increasingly in other countries. Describing these beliefs is complicated due to the many offshoots and contradictory claims. The essential elements allege that a powerful group of Satan-worshipping paedophiles run a global child sex-trafficking ring, and have plotted against former US president Donald Trump while he was in office. Believers in the QAnon conspiracy played a prominent role in spreading misinformation around the 2020 US election, and in the storming of the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021.

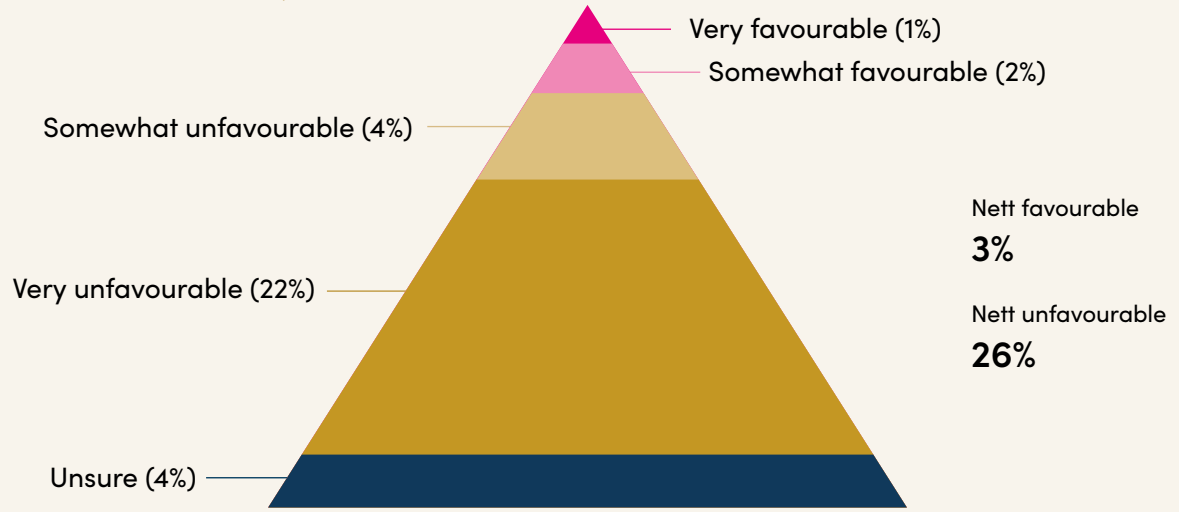
Unfortunately, variations on the QAnon conspiracy are spreading around the world – including New Zealand. QAnon has links to various other conspiracy theories around topics such as Covid-19.

In our survey we asked New Zealanders if they had ever heard or read about QAnon. Around two-thirds (62%) had not, and a third (33%) had heard at least something about it. We asked this group whether they have a favourable or unfavourable impression of QAnon, and the great majority of them had very unfavourable views. Just 3% of New Zealanders have a 'very' or 'somewhat' favourable impression of QAnon.

Wide-ranging conspiracy theories such as those associated with QAnon commonly have elements relating to a perceived global agenda being hidden from the public, often involving international organisations such as the United Nations (UN). Examples already covered in this report include Covid-19 being a myth and climate change being a 'hoax'. Another example supported by some New Zealanders (5%) is the idea that the UN's "Agenda 21/30 plan for sustainable development is intended to deprive nations of their sovereignty".

> **"QAnon conspiracies have led to vaccine/mask-wearing/lockdown hesitancy. QAnon conspiracies have the potential to incite insurrections and suicide."**
>
> FEMALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 55-59

Sentiment towards QAnon



62% had not heard or read about QAnon, and 5% were unsure

SURVEY QUESTION:
"Overall, do you have a favourable or unfavourable impression of QAnon?"
% of all respondents

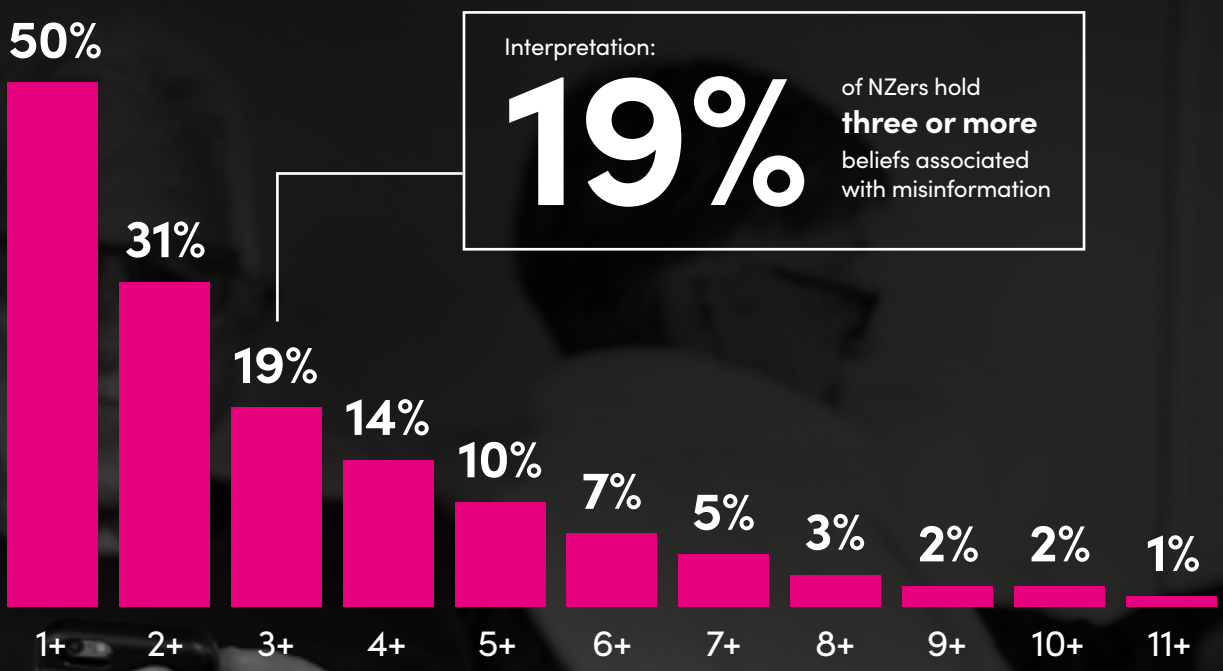
Belief and misinformation

How widespread are beliefs?

Findings in this section are based on beliefs that can fairly be characterised as being associated with misinformation, according to the best available evidence. Our analysis used 19 statements (for example, "vaccines cause autism") that are associated with misinformation[9].

We found that around half of New Zealanders expressed some level of belief in at least one statement associated with misinformation (50%). Just under a third believed in two or more statements, and 19% believed three or more statements. A belief in a number of statements associated with misinformation may be indicative of a higher level of susceptibility to belief in misinformation more generally.

Number of beliefs associated with misinformation (based on 19 statements)



Views about these topics are often not firmly held beliefs, and could be subject to change over time. Nonetheless our findings show that it's common for New Zealanders to hold at least some views that may have been influenced by the spread of misinformation.

9 See our website for the full list: classificationoffice.govt.nz/research21

Attitudes and behaviours associated with belief in misinformation

We carried out an in-depth analysis of different factors that were associated with susceptibility to misinformation – such as attitudes, behaviours or other characteristics.

We found that susceptibility to misinformation was associated with:
Higher levels of trust in news or information from people they know personally, and lower levels of trust in traditional news media and scientists or experts.
A relatively high level of concern about the spread of misinformation, and belief that misinformation has influenced New Zealanders' views about various topics.
A tendency to use social media more often, and to have somewhat more trust in social media as a source of news and information.
A higher tolerance for people or organisations saying what they choose to on social media, even if it might be false or misleading, offensive, or harmful.
Higher levels of trust in news or information from websites, blogs or other online sources of information.
Belief that New Zealand government officials, international organisations, and scientists or experts are responsible for spreading misinformation intentionally.

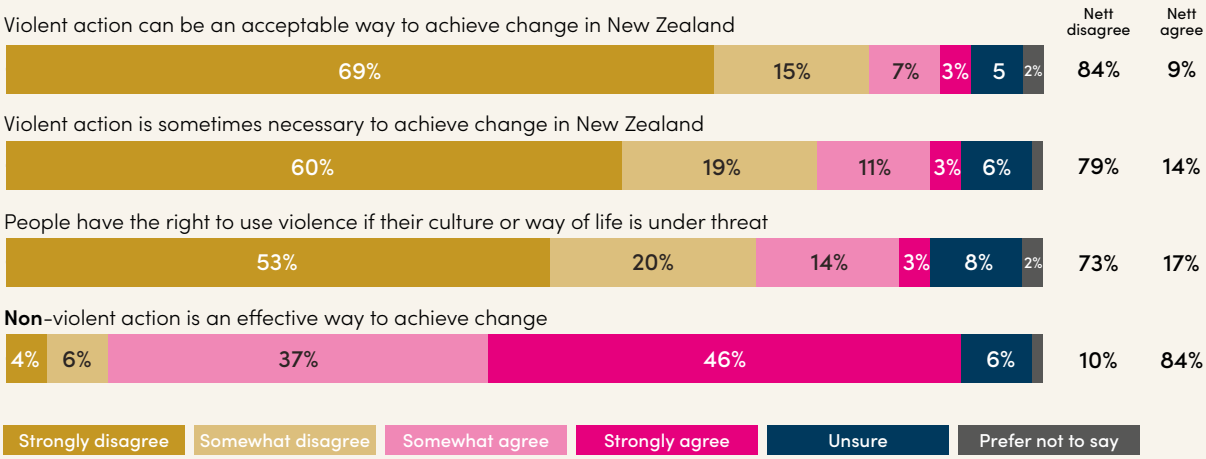
Misinformation, violence, and real-world impacts

Attitudes about violent and non-violent action

One of the reasons for the Classification Office undertaking research into misinformation was the apparent linkages between some varieties of misinformation and criminal or even terrorist action. For example, in Aotearoa, the rise of conspiracy theories linking 5G cellular networks with Covid-19 coincided with a spate of criminal attacks on cell towers. The relationship between misinformation and conspiracy theories and real-world crime and violence is an important one.

In order to explore this area, we asked New Zealanders about a series of statements relating to the use of violent or non-violent action. Regardless of how the question was framed, we found that large majorities (around eight in ten) opposed the use of violent action as a way to achieve change. On the other hand, most New Zealanders tend to agree that non-violent action is an effective way to achieve change.

Attitudes towards violent and non-violent action



SURVEY QUESTION:
"How much do you agree or disagree that..."
% of all respondents

While a majority of New Zealanders strongly disagreed with the use of violence or violent action, a small minority (9%) believed that violent action 'can be an acceptable way' to achieve change in New Zealand, with 14% thinking it is 'sometimes necessary' to achieve change. A slightly larger minority (17%) supported the proposition that "people have a right to use violence if their culture or way of life is under threat".

Particular care needs to be taken with the interpretation of these responses. Even the very small number (3%) of responses 'strongly supportive' of propositions that violent action can be acceptable or sometimes necessary to achieve change cannot be taken as implying that those participants are personally inclined towards violence. People will have their own interpretations and possible historic and future scenarios they have in mind that will influence their responses to these questions. However, these results do provide a potential baseline in order to measure trends of people's perspectives on violent action, as well as insights that may help inform further research in this area.

How misinformation impacts individuals, communities, and society

THE IMPACTS OF BELIEF IN MISINFORMATION

Misinformation has a wide variety of real-world impacts, both on a personal and societal level. These affect everyone, whether or not they personally believe in ideas linked to misinformation. This came through very strongly when we asked respondents if misinformation has affected them or anyone in their community. This question was optional but many New Zealanders expressed their views, with hundreds of participants (one in five) choosing to answer this question.

The backdrop of the pandemic obviously informed many people's concerns about the effects of misinformation, with many mentioning the potentially harmful effects of misinformation on New Zealand's public health response. However, serious concerns were also expressed around the impact of misinformation in areas such as the environment (including climate change and pest control) as well as racial intolerance and extremism.

People also raised concerns about how misinformation could create division and undermine trust in relationships with loved ones. People talked about how they felt that the spread of misinformation contributed to anxiety, stress, fear and sometimes anger.

OUR VOICES: NEW ZEALANDERS' VIEWS ABOUT THE IMPACTS OF MISINFORMATION

The following quotes provide a snapshot of how New Zealanders feel about misinformation in their own words.

"The propagation of false and misleading news and information is extremely dangerous. Unfortunately, too many are not prepared to investigate an issue thoroughly or are susceptible to manipulation."

FEMALE, PACIFIC, AGE 60-64

"It takes a mental toll never knowing what is true and real anymore."

MALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 35–39

"People in my community were sharing misleading information about the Covid-19 vaccines, which is a direct barrier to NZ achieving a Covid-free country and an attack on our public health response."

FEMALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 18-24

"It is eroding our culture and way of life."

MALE, MĀORI & NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 65-69

"It's just made people panic and do things that are unnecessary. It's also highlighted a darker side to humanity."

MALE, MĀORI, AGE 40-49

"I would like to see a far less dramatic slant to news items. Yes I know it sells but there has to be an alternative way so people can become calmer and less wound up about issues ... People need to have the skills to be able to change their mind and accept another person's viewpoint. Or at least be able to meet half way."

FEMALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 60-64

"It has made me believe things that weren't true."

FEMALE, ASIAN & NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 16-17

"It causes division and hatred."

MALE, MĀORI & NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 16-17

"We no longer engage with some siblings because of their beliefs in conspiracy theories."

FEMALE, MĀORI, AGE 45-49

"Makes people lose trust in each other."

MALE, ASIAN, AGE 16-17

"Everyone is a lot more sensitive to information so I think it is extremely important that people, organisations, etc are more considerate with their views, claims and what they are saying."

FEMALE, PACIFIC & NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 18-24

"It has affected relationships within my close family. It has caused arguments. Caused a person to be isolated and for friends to start disengaging. It's caused many heated debates and has even led some family members to avoid discussing some of the topics at all."

FEMALE, OTHER ETHNICITY, AGE 35-39

"It makes people do stupid things."

MALE, MĀORI & PACIFIC, AGE 18-24

"I have lost friendships over false information."

MALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 55-59

Insights: Age, gender, ethnicity and other demographics

Misinformation affects everyone. We found that people's experiences of misinformation and their views about the issue were broadly similar irrespective of characteristics like age, gender, ethnicity, income, education, or religious belief. Likewise, beliefs about specific ideas (such as Covid-19, vaccines, and climate change) tend to be broadly similar across different groups.

In general, similarities in how people think about the issues covered in this report are much greater than the differences. Nonetheless some significant differences and broad trends across groups do exist.

Age

There was widespread concern about misinformation across all age groups although concern tended to rise with age, being somewhat less common amongst young people and most common in the 70+ age group.

Younger people are more likely to express some level of belief in statements associated with misinformation (see page 37). Of those in the 16-29 age group, 42% indicated belief in two or more statements, compared with 33% of those aged 30-49, and 24% of those aged 50+. This difference was driven by the responses of younger males aged 16-29 who were significantly more likely to believe a number of statements associated with misinformation.

It was common for people across all age groups to get news and information from social media, however this tended to be more popular with younger age groups. Over two-thirds of young people aged 16-17 used social media in this way at least weekly, compared with just over a third of those aged 70+. Use of online blogs, forums or podcasts was also more common for younger age groups, especially for young people aged 16-17.

Trust in internet and social media users was low regardless of age, although higher trust was somewhat more common amongst young people, particularly males aged 16-17. There was a similar pattern with respect to trust in websites, blogs or other online sources of information.

Younger age groups were also more likely to get news or information from a local community gathering place, and both the youngest (16-17) and oldest (70+) participants tended to trust more in people they know personally such as family and friends.

Gender

Overall, males were somewhat more likely to believe statements associated with misinformation, with 34% indicating belief in at least two statements compared with 28% of females. These differences were more apparent when looking at younger age groups, with 48% of younger males aged 16-29 more likely to believe such statements compared with 35% of younger females aged 16-29.

Ethnicity

Belief in at least some statements associated with misinformation was quite common, but somewhat less so amongst NZ Europeans. For example NZ Europeans (28%) were less likely to indicate belief in two or more statements associated with misinformation compared with Māori (42%), Pacific (46%), and Asian New Zealanders (37%). Belief in six or more statements was uncommon for all groups, ranging from 6% (NZ Europeans) to 14% (Pacific).

Sources of news and information, and trust in those sources, tended to be similar across ethnic groups. We did find that use of online blogs, forums or podcasts was more common for Pacific and Asian participants than for NZ Europeans and Māori. Pacific and Asian participants were also more likely to get news or information from a local community gathering place compared with NZ Europeans and Māori.

Religious belief

We asked participants "How much of a role does religion or faith play in your life?" on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 being 'none at all' and 7 being 'a great deal'. For analysis, we grouped these into 'no role' (1), 'small role' (2-3), 'moderate role' (4-5) and 'large role' (6-7).

Note that 'no role' is not the same as 'no religion'. Some of those who said religion or faith plays no role in their lives also identified with a religious group (i.e. Christian, Jewish or Muslim), and some of those who did not identify with a religious group indicated that religion or faith plays some role in their lives.

Concern about misinformation was high regardless of religious belief, although this was somewhat more common amongst those for whom religion plays a large role.

There was some association between religious belief and belief in statements linked to misinformation. Those for whom religion played a large or moderate role in their lives were more likely to indicate belief in two or more statements (39% compared with 26% for whom religion plays a small role or no role). More religious people were also twice as likely to believe four or more statements (20% compared with 10% respectively).

Moderately or highly religious people were significantly more likely to get news or information from a local community gathering place. They also tended to have higher levels of trust in friends and family as a source of news and information.

Use of online blogs, forums or podcasts tended to be more popular with highly religious participants, and trust in internet and social media users was somewhat higher amongst this group, while still very low overall. There was a similar pattern with trust in websites, blogs or other online sources of information. At the same time, they were more likely to have a high level of trust in New Zealand news media, and were somewhat more likely to have higher levels of trust in New Zealand government agencies and officials.

Income and education

Concern about misinformation was high regardless of household income or educational qualification, although perceived exposure to misinformation tended to be more common in higher income groups and those with a higher level of education.

There was some association between income and education, and belief in statements linked to misinformation. Those with higher household incomes were somewhat less likely to indicate belief in two or more statements (26% of those in the highest income bracket compared with 36% of those in the lowest bracket), as were those with a tertiary qualification (27%) compared with those with no qualification (41%).

NEW ZEALANDERS THINK SOMETHING SHOULD BE DONE

KEY FINDINGS

- It's common for people to take action themselves in response to misinformation – such as searching different sources to see if information is accurate, looking at more established news sources, or talking about it with people they trust.
- New Zealanders think more should be done about misinformation. The great majority (84%) expressed support for specific groups or organisations to take action.
- More than half (55%) of New Zealanders think government agencies and officials are best placed to take action, followed by the news media, and scientists or experts. Around a quarter see an important role for social media and tech corporations.

This section explores the actions New Zealanders already take in response to misinformation, their views about whether there are limits to what's acceptable online, and who they think should be responsible for dealing with misinformation.

“It is so easy for misinformation to spread and we need to do better.”
MALE, MĀORI & NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 35-39

Free expression and social media

> **"People have mistaken freedom of speech to mean being allowed to say whatever they want. Whereas freedom of speech should mean the right to say something, not to incite misinformation."**
>
> MALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 45-49

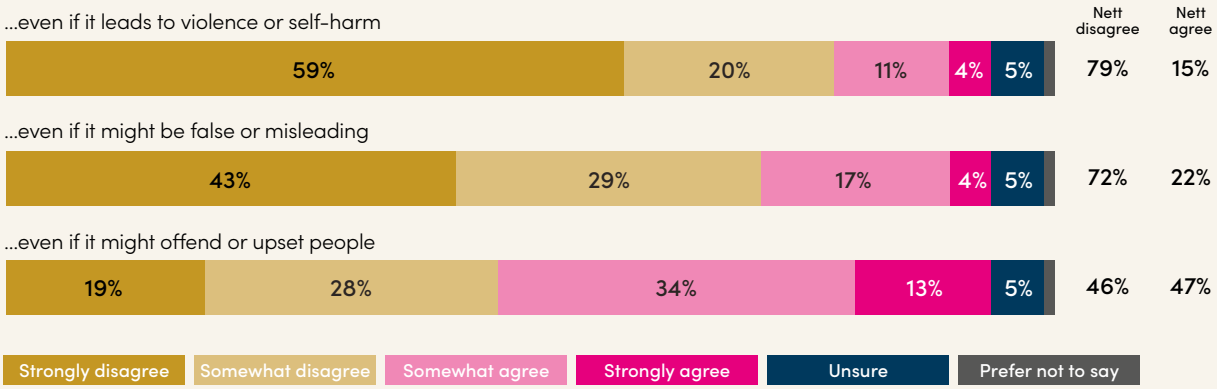
> **"Freedom of speech vs the impact that speech can have is a tricky balance."**
>
> FEMALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 18-24

New Zealanders support limits to online speech when it is harmful, false or misleading

We asked New Zealanders about whether people or organisations should be able to say what they want on social media even if it is false or misleading, or if it might offend or upset people, or lead to violence or self-harm.

Views about freedom of expression on social media

People and organisations should be able to say what they want on social media...



SURVEY QUESTION:
"How much do you agree or disagree that..."
% of all respondents

We found that the great majority of New Zealanders (72%) tend to disagree that people should be able to say what they want on social media if might be false or misleading. A minority (22%) tend to think there shouldn't be any limits on what people say, although just 4% strongly agree with this.

People with higher trust in social media, websites and other online sources are more likely to agree that people and organisations should be able to say what they want on social media, even if it false or misleading.

New Zealanders had mixed views about offensive or upsetting content. Around half tended to agree people should be able to say what they want, and around half tended to disagree. New Zealanders had the strongest views about content that directly leads to violence. The great majority (79%) disagreed that people should be able to say things on social media that lead to violence or self-harm, with 59% strongly disagreeing.

Dealing with misinformation

Personal responses

We asked those who believed they had come across misinformation whether they had taken some kind of action in response, and provided a list of options. Most in this group said they had done something in the previous six months, the most common actions being to search different sources to see whether information was accurate, looking at more established or well-known news sources, and talking about it with people they trust.

Most common actions taken in response to misinformation

1. I searched a number of different sources to see whether information was accurate
2. I talked about it with people I trust
3. I started looking at more established or well-known news sources
4. I started looking at alternative or specialised news sources, websites, blogs or internet forums
5. I made a complaint to the information provider/relevant authority/digital platform

SURVEY QUESTION:
"You said you've come across news and information you know is false or misleading. Have you done any of these things in the past 6 months because of this?"

Results show whether respondents took some kind of action in response to misinformation in the last six months, but do not show how often or regularly these actions were taken.

"By talking to family, teachers and listening to experts."

MALE, ASIAN, AGE 16-17

"Social media warning that this information is false or misleading."

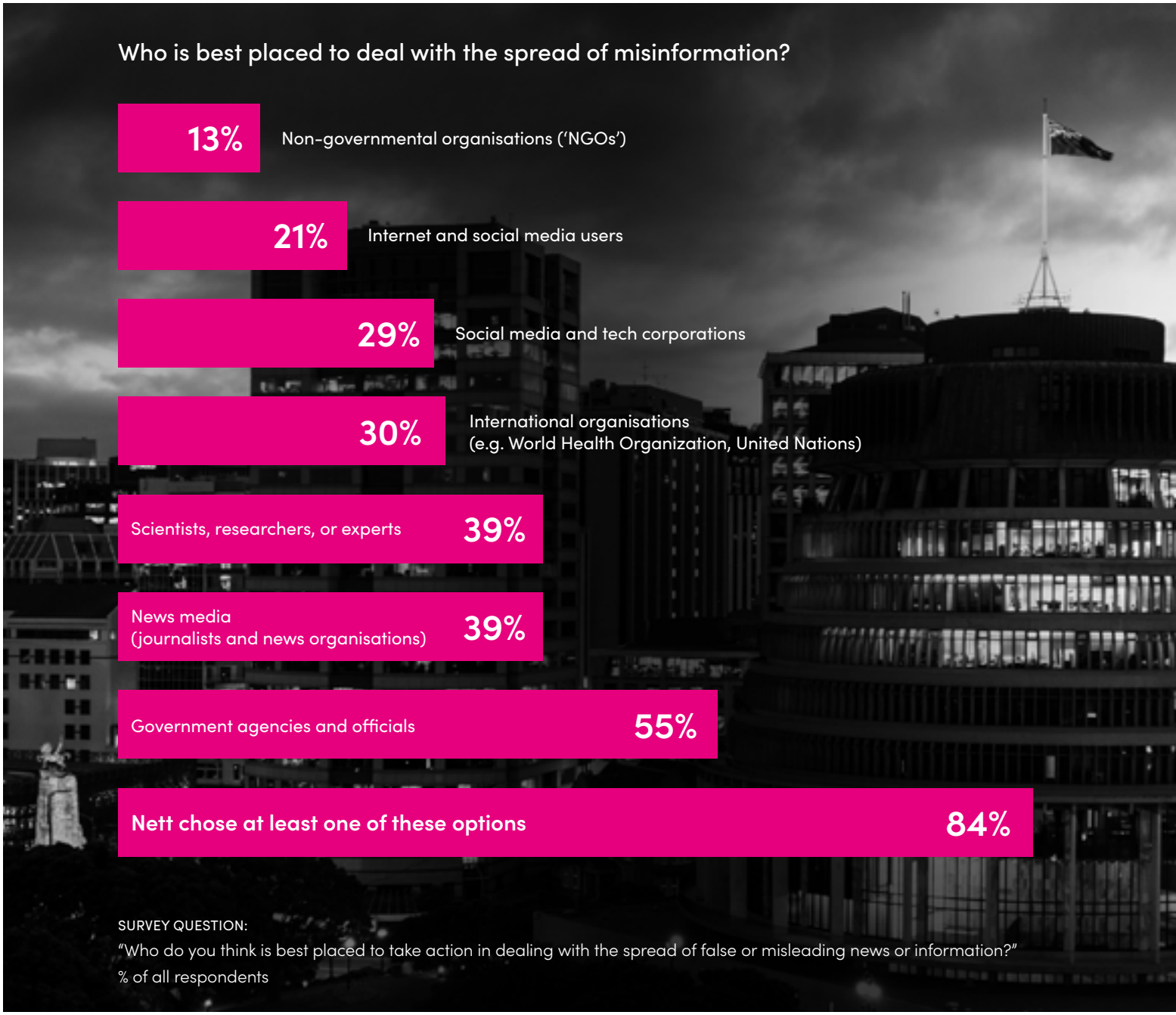
FEMALE, OTHER ETHNICITY, AGE 30-34

"My sister shared a video on her Facebook page, supposedly showing a woman of Asian ethnicity spitting on fruit at an Australian supermarket and being arrested. I did a quick fact check search and easily discovered the video (which combined vids of two separate incidents) had been put together by a white supremacist group and pushed onto Facebook. The fact that so many people like my sister were willing to share the link without question was disturbing."

FEMALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 70+

New Zealanders support action

We asked people about who is best placed to take action in dealing with misinformation, providing a list of options. These results suggest widespread support for some kind of action. The great majority of New Zealanders (84%) chose at least one of these options, while 12% were unsure. Just 3% did not select any options, which may indicate they do not think any intervention is necessary.



SURVEY QUESTION:
"Who do you think is best placed to take action in dealing with the spread of false or misleading news or information?"
% of all respondents

Over half of New Zealanders (55%) think government agencies and officials are best placed to take action, followed by the news media, and scientists or experts. Around a quarter see an important role in this space for social media and tech corporations as well as internet users generally.

Participants could choose more than one option, and a majority did so. The most common options chosen together tended to include government agencies and officials together with another group, including scientists and experts, the news media, international organisations, and social media and tech corporations. Other common pairings included scientists and experts along with the news media, or with international organisations.

"I was going to say government but the reality is everyone has their own agenda. I am concerned that major corporations become the ones that decide what is right or wrong nowadays, especially on social media. Who made them the moral compass of society? I have a mistrust of many of these organisations and so I think people have to be discerning themselves."

MALE, PACIFIC, AGE 40-44

"May be useful to have a 'watchdog' group set up to monitor the spread of false information but I feel we are all responsible, especially as false info can lead to high risk to specific groups and individuals, e.g. risk of suicide, and we are all at risk individually or as a nation."

FEMALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 70+

DEALING WITH THE INFODEMIC – WHAT CAN WE DO?

"It concerns me that my grandchildren are living in a world where they can no longer trust adults to do the right thing, to behave honestly and legally."

MALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 70+

This section summarises our key findings in the context of the wider infodemic, and explores options for effectively dealing with issues around misinformation in New Zealand.

Addressing misinformation – we all have a role to play

Our research has highlighted that we are living in the age of the infodemic – and we are not immune in New Zealand. There are real, widespread concerns about the prevalence of misinformation, and the harmful impacts it can have. Unsurprisingly, we think something should be done about this.

This is a global problem and there are no simple solutions. However, emerging thinking suggests that we can counter the more harmful effects by increasing access to accurate information; reducing the spread of misinformation; and improving resilience.

This would require a connected-up approach amongst a broad range of stakeholders. This could include government agencies, NGOs, educators, news media organisations, social media platforms, and community leaders. At the same time the public will need to be supported and engaged.

Dealing with misinformation cannot be delegated to one agency or even one sector – an effective response would mean that all of us would have a role to play.

> **"I think everyone has a part to fact check each other on what people say, not just one particular organisation or individual."**
>
> MALE, ASIAN, AGE 40-44

Informing and empowering New Zealanders

> **"Providing resources from reliable/trusted sources could help."**
>
> FEMALE, MĀORI & NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 25-29

> **"Every individual should take care to know the facts before spreading possible false information."**
>
> FEMALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 55-59

The global response to the pandemic has shown us that countries do best when people are given clear, accurate, accessible and consistent information. In New Zealand, the Unite against Covid-19 website is an example of an accurate and trusted information resource, supported by public information campaigns.

Our research shows that more can be done. It also suggests that misinformation may influence people's beliefs and actions in a way that could threaten the effectiveness of our public health response. This is particularly true for those who have become reliant on sources of information which promote distrust of official sources.

Of course, this is a wider issue than just misinformation and conspiracy theories about the pandemic. Many New Zealanders are concerned about the impact of misinformation across a broad range of topics, including the environment and racial tolerance.

Reaching people who distrust accurate sources of information can be challenging for everyone, including friends and family. Engaging with loved ones about misinformation can cause frustration, anxiety and even anger. The New Zealand news media has been providing good information about engaging people in an empathetic and non-confrontational way. Further steps can be taken to provide people with the skills and confidence to have these difficult conversations to help others who are being affected by misinformation and conspiracy theories.

Education

> **"I think there needs to be more safety measures in place to protect young people from false/misleading information. This includes educating them early about using trusted sites/research and the difference between that and fake news/opinions."**
>
> FEMALE, MĀORI, AGE 25-29

> **"Teach our population how to discern and critique the information they are receiving."**
>
> FEMALE, MĀORI & OTHER EUROPEAN, AGE 45-49

The huge variety of new platforms and sources of information (many digital) mean that many of us are finding it challenging to understand the origin of information, to interpret it, and to establish how trustworthy it is. New modes of distribution of information, such as social media, make it easier than ever for misinformation to spread. We could all benefit from improved tools and knowledge to help us navigate a new world of digital information.

Media literacy and critical thinking skills can help us sort fact from fiction and interpret information. These skills can also help build resilience in the community against misinformation. Toolkits and information could be supported by public information campaigns.

However, there is no 'one-size-fits-all' solution. A central government campaign could reach many people, but is unlikely to influence people and communities who already have lower trust in government. A range of strategies and approaches will be needed, and diverse communities will need to play a key role in developing tools and engaging their members.

Education in schools is also needed to empower and equip our rangatahi to recognise and challenge misinformation. Our education system already aims to provide children and young people with the critical thinking skills necessary to navigate a complex world – but the challenges appear to be deepening. We have an opportunity now to learn from international experience and adapt that in a way that works for young people and children in Aotearoa.

Moderation and industry responsibility

> **"I'd be interested in how tech and news media can be held accountable for the spread of misinformation and what enforcement can be taken to prevent their doing it."**
>
> FEMALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 55–59

Recent research suggests that misinformation travels through the internet much more rapidly than accurate information[10]. The algorithms that select and promote posts and information on many social media and digital platforms often select information that is 'high engagement' – that is, information that attracts more comments, shares and likes. Misinformation can often be high engagement, as it can easily be more sensational, or generate stronger emotions.

Online platforms are not generally subject to the same standards around accuracy, fairness and balance that newspapers, broadcast or other news media are – instead they apply their own 'terms of use' standards to content. While some significant steps have been taken recently by large online platforms, the approach taken to the challenge of misinformation is highly variable, often confusing, and subject to rapid change.

New Zealanders can help improve this by calling out and reporting misinformation when they come across it. In turn, digital platforms could operate in a transparent way, reporting on the state of misinformation on their sites, and the steps that they are taking to deal with it in New Zealand. Industry agreements or Codes of Practice can also play a part in creating a more consistent set of expectations and approaches in Aotearoa.

Misinformation can impact a range of government agencies and services, and can potentially hamper or derail health or safety initiatives. There is a real opportunity to look at these issues and engage with digital platforms in a coordinated way.

10 Vosoughi, S., Roy, D., & Aral, S. (2018). The spread of true and false news online. *Science, 359(6380)*, 1146-1151. https://science.sciencemag.org/content/359/6380/1146

Regulation and policy

> **"I think this is something that should be addressed more in public."**
>
> FEMALE, OTHER ETHNICITY, AGE 35-39

Misinformation is not in and of itself illegal – and it would be impractical and counterproductive to make it so. It should not be unlawful to express a view or belief that is wrong, or that is contrary to prevailing evidence and opinion.

There are of course some certain extreme categories of misinformation that can become unlawful; whether because it is misinformation that promotes criminal or terrorist activity (and may therefore be subject to prosecution under the Films, Videos, and Publications Classification Act, or Crimes Act); or if it amounts to racial harassment (and therefore may be subject to the Human Rights Act); or if it is posted online with the intention of causing someone serious emotional distress (and is thus potentially in breach of the Harmful Digital Communications Act).

While most misinformation is not illegal, much of it would be in breach of industry standards concerning accuracy. Such standards apply to broadcast services (under the Broadcasting Act), print media (under the standards administered by the New Zealand Media Council) and advertising (under the Advertising Standards Authority). Most of the broadcast and industry self-regulatory models were not set up to address the challenges presented by the digital age such as misinformation shared on platforms like Facebook or YouTube.

A consistent regulatory approach across non-digital and digital misinformation alike is needed. The Government has announced that it is considering a broad review of media regulation, in the face of new types of harm that have emerged online, requiring new thinking and approaches. There could be scope to look at what a better coordinated, modern approach to misinformation may look like as part of that broad review.

Research and evaluation

Evidence-led policy is essential in this area. The understanding of what needs to be researched and evaluated is becoming clearer, and this should be an ongoing process. The information environment will continue to rapidly evolve – often in ways no-one can predict. As new evidence emerges, interventions will change as well.

Some excellent work has already been carried out in New Zealand looking at misinformation; for example, by the research group Te Pūnaha Matatini. There is an opportunity for further research to continue to explore the ways diverse individuals and communities engage with, understand and respond to the challenges of misinformation.

It's crucial to an ongoing, effective response that this work continues, that work is coordinated, and that insights and expertise is shared.

Conclusions

> **"I liked the questions asked in this survey. It was very much needed to cover these topics. I believe such a survey will let people like me share some views that will go in the right hands who decide the future of New Zealand and the happiness of its people."**
>
> MALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 30-34

Misinformation matters. It's not a minor issue for New Zealanders, and it's not seen as something that only affects people overseas. It affects everyone – from individual families and whānau, to communities, to society as a whole.

It's one thing to acknowledge the widespread concern about misinformation in a general sense, and another to learn about people's personal experiences of misinformation and the damage it's causing. Beyond the charts and statistics, participants in our research expressed their concerns about a variety of impacts in their own words. These personal responses revealed a depth of concern that's unlikely to diminish unless steps are taken to address the issues.

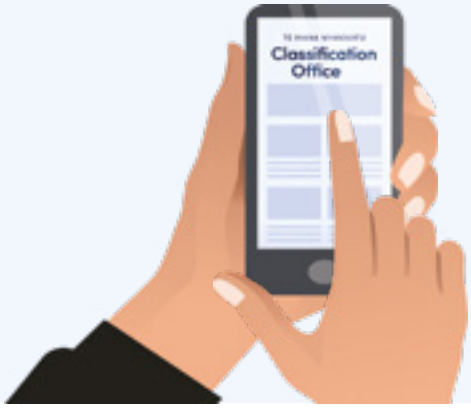
The pandemic was often top of mind for participants when thinking about misinformation, and it's arguably the most pressing example of the challenges we face. Our beliefs about Covid-19 drive how we respond to the crisis in our daily lives. Ideas and beliefs have a life of their own, and that's generally a good thing. But like anything, there can be a darker side to the human drive to share, and to understand the world. This is especially true in moments of crisis, where a need to make sense of disaster can be overwhelming – and this is fertile ground for misinformation to spread.

Misinformation isn't new, but the online environment means we're in uncharted territory. The internet – and social media in particular – is coming to dominate the way we come across ideas, and how we share them with others. It's not just bad actors – misinformation is often spread by ordinary people around the world who have genuine concerns about what they've seen, heard, or read. If we're to effectively deal with the spread of misinformation and the harms it causes, it's crucial that we make this distinction, and try to understand the perspectives of people sharing this information.

We're living in the age of the infodemic, but it doesn't have to be this way – and we can do better. Better means empathy for those we disagree with – whether it's family members, friends, or total strangers. Better means listening to what others have to say and trying to understand where they're coming from. And yes, better means taking action – as individuals and as a society. Let's get started.

For further information about this research please visit our website:

www.classificationoffice.govt.nz



TE MANA WHAKAATU

Classification Office

Watch carefully.
Think critically.