



TITLE	COVID-19 Related Reports of False Information to CERT NZ
Date and time	11 August
Produced by/location	Insights and Reporting Team, COVID-19 Group, DPMC

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Introduction

1. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic there have been reports of false information related to COVID-19 circulating in New Zealand and internationally.¹ Since early 2021, CERT NZ has offered to collect reports of COVID-19 false information or vaccine scams through its website.² CERT NZ is an agency that receives reports of cyber security problems. It is acknowledged that the reporting to CERT NZ is a limited picture as it only includes items reported by the public and does not include all false information relating to COVID-19.
2. The Insights and Reporting Team in DPMC's COVID-19 Group have analysed the reports to CERT NZ to establish an understanding of the false information relating to COVID-19 in New Zealand. An earlier short summary of this report has been provided as an 'Insight of Note' titled 'COVID-19 False Information Reports to CERT NZ' on 29 July. This report is the larger version, of that insight.
3. For the period of 22 February 2021 to 9 July 2021 there were 859 reports related to COVID-19 made to CERT NZ. The submission form on the CERT NZ website asked submitters to include who published the information, the URL or an image of the material, and from 25 June, the location the information was distributed in.
4. Of the 859 reports, 156 unique items were identified.³ These included items such as a pamphlets, flyers, posters, letters, or an individual's statements or behaviour, videos, websites, emails or social media. These items were assessed to determine if they included false information, and if so, what themes were present.

Themes

5. In the material reported, thirteen different themes were identified. These themes are broad enough to capture the general narrative of each unique item but have enough specificity to differentiate between different, but related themes (for example those which were centred around different medical aspects of COVID-19). Each of these themes are explored below.

Anti-Mask

6. The anti-mask theme relates to masks not having any effectiveness in stopping the spread of COVID-19. The reports to CERT NZ linked to these themes are attributable to **Voices for Freedom**, **The Real News** and **Covid Plan B**. The anti-mask theme was reported in the weeks of 22 February, 19 April, 24 May and 21 June. In addition, **Voices for Freedom** released a flyer in this period called '*what's all the fuss about masks?*'.⁴ The anti-mask theme first occurred in reports to CERT NZ in February 2021 but had been seen internationally prior.⁵ This theme often misrepresents information found in medical reports and data.

¹ Radio New Zealand, COVID-19: Wellington commuters face anti-mask propaganda on train, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/440904/covid-19-wellington-commuters-face-anti-mask-propaganda-on-train>, accessed 16 July 2021.

² CERT NZ, Report COVID-19 vaccine scams or information, <https://www.cert.govt.nz/individuals/common-threats/covid-19-vaccine-scams/report-covid-19-vaccine-scams-or-misinformation/>, accessed 21 July 2021.

³ Some reports identified material attributed to one group or organisation, but which had been linked or distributed by another. In the cases where an identifiable source was available the material was classified as such.

⁴ Voices for Freedom, What's all the fuss about masks?, <https://voicesforfreedom.co.nz/mask-facts/>, accessed 19 July 2021.

⁵ Vox, Anti-maskers explain themselves, <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2020/8/7/21357400/anti-mask-protest-rallies-donald-trump-covid-19>, accessed 21 July 2021.



Mistrust of Tests

7. The mistrust of tests theme relates to PCR tests being inaccurate and sits within the larger narrative that COVID-19 is not as dangerous as it is being portrayed. This theme was reported in the weeks of 22 February, 19 April and 21 June. The reports to CERT NZ linked to these themes are attributable to **The Real News** magazine and website.⁶

Suspicion of COVID-19 Vaccines

8. This theme regarding suspicion of COVID-19 vaccines ranges from assertions that COVID-19 vaccines cause death and negative side effects, through to the claims that vaccines do not meet all the regulatory requirements. This theme was dominant over the entire period analysed. The reports to CERT NZ about this theme are attributable to **The Real News**, **Voices for Freedom**, **Covid Plan B**, **Truth Unmuted** and **NZ Doctors Speaking out with Science**.⁷

Alternative Medicines

9. This theme relates to various medical drugs and treatments which are asserted to be effective at treating COVID-19, despite this not being supported by mainstream medical research.^{8 9 10 11} This theme generated reports at four times across the period and was part of clusters of other themes in the weeks of 22 February, 19 April, 31 May, 21 June and 5 July. The reports to CERT NZ linked to these themes are attributed to **Covid Plan B**, **The Real News** and **Voices for Freedom**.
10. This theme includes claims that alternative medicines for treating COVID-19 are being withheld. There are also arguments that governments are ignoring proven treatments. This theme includes advertisements for alternative medicines or health cures. This is similar to trends identified overseas with prominent anti-vaxxers operating, or being linked to, businesses that profit from alternative medicines or the anti-vaxx industry.¹²

Mistrust of Government

11. Mistrust of government was a theme in much of the material reported to CERT NZ and the content that was reported usually related to questions and criticisms of government messages (mostly New Zealand's government but also other governments), government responses to the virus, its origins, effects, and treatments. This theme was reported on 22 February, 19 April and 21 June. This theme is attributable to the political party **Advance New Zealand**, **The Real News**, **Voices for Freedom**, **Covid Plan B** and **Concerned Citizens Initiative**. Leaving aside the political positions advocated in the material, there is a high degree of mixing fact and fiction in narratives which raise doubts about politicians and political parties (other than **Advance New Zealand**), and the current political system.

Political Party Promotional Material

12. This theme includes instances where a political party has been directly referenced in either an article or advertisement in material reported to CERT NZ. It was reported in the week of 5 April, 19 April and 28 June. There is only one political party in this theme, which is **Advance New Zealand**.

⁶ NewsHub, Coronavirus: Every claim about COVID-19 made by anti-lockdown group Voices for Freedom debunked by scientists, <https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/new-zealand/2021/04/coronavirus-every-claim-about-covid-19-made-by-anti-lockdown-group-voices-for-freedom-debunked-by-scientists.html>, accessed 22 July 2021.

⁷ NewsHub, Coronavirus: Every claim about COVID-19 made by anti-lockdown group Voices for Freedom debunked by scientists, <https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/new-zealand/2021/04/coronavirus-every-claim-about-covid-19-made-by-anti-lockdown-group-voices-for-freedom-debunked-by-scientists.html>, accessed 22 July 2021.

⁸ Policy Options, Misinformation, alternate medicine and the coronavirus, <https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/march-2020/misinformation-alternative-medicine-and-the-coronavirus/>, accessed 22 July 2021.

⁹ Huffpost, How to debunk coronavirus 'natural Remedies' with your family, https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/coronavirus-natural-cures-debunk-family_ca_5e6fb273c5b6eab77939fc79, accessed 22 July 2021.

¹⁰ Associated Press News, No Evidence ivermectin is a miracle drug against COVID-19, <https://apnews.com/article/fact-checking-afs:Content:9768999400>, accessed 22 July 2021.

¹¹ National Institutes of Health, Hydroxychloroquine does not benefit adults hospitalized with COVID-19, <https://www.nih.gov/news-events/news-releases/hydroxychloroquine-does-not-benefit-adults-hospitalized-covid-19>, accessed 22 July 2021.

¹² Center for Countering Digital Hate, Pandemic Profiteers – The business of anti-vaxx, <https://www.counterhate.com/pandemicprofiteers>, accessed 19 July 2021.



Suppression of Truth

13. This theme includes claims that governments and global corporations are suppressing the truth about COVID-19 to increase control over citizens and increase profits. This occurred only minimally throughout the period, and was reported in the weeks of 22 February and 21 June. The reports to CERT NZ linked to this theme are predominantly attributable to **Voices for Freedom**. There was also some coverage by **The Real News**, **Advance NZ**, and the **Concerned Citizens Initiative**.

Suspicion of Mainstream Media

14. This theme is related to the suppression of truth theme, but includes claims that mainstream media is manipulating the narrative around COVID-19 by not telling the truth about the virus and suppressing any information which is not part of this narrative. This was reported in small numbers in the weeks of 22 February, 31 May, and 28 June. Reporting to CERT NZ on this theme is attributed to **Advance NZ**, **Voices for Freedom**, **Covid Plan B** and **The Real News**.

Suspicion of Pharmaceutical Companies

15. This theme includes the claim that large pharmaceutical companies producing the vaccine are part of the larger conspiracy around COVID-19. This includes that the vaccine was developed prior to the virus as part of a scheme to increase profits, or that these companies are wielding undue influence over governments and releasing products that are untested and dangerous.

16. These were reported only briefly in the weeks of 22 February, 19 April, and 21 June. Most of the reporting to CERT NZ relates to a pamphlet released by **Voices for Freedom** titled '*Covid Vaccine Facts Reference List*' but has also been echoed by **The Real News**, **Concerned Citizens Initiative** and **Advance NZ**.

Focus on Prominent Individuals as Leading the Conspiracy or in Opposition to it

17. This theme includes a focus on prominent individuals and depicts them as either part of the conspiracy around COVID-19 or in opposition to it. Most of these reports are negative regarding prominent individuals such as Jacinda Ardern or Bill Gates. Material about Bill Gates frequently occurred, and placed him at the centre of larger conspiracies. This material was reported in the weeks of 19 April and 31 May and is attributable to **Voices for Freedom**, **Covid Plan B** and **The Real News**. There was positive coverage of New Zealand Lawyer Sue Grey (Co-Leader of the NZ Outdoors Party). The positive reports were linked to the **Concerned Citizens Initiative**. Much of the material analysed was a mix of facts about an individual that were then misrepresented or placed out of context.

General Conspiracy Theories

18. Conspiracy theories generally posit that events are being secretly manipulated by groups of the elite for their benefit. Material identified as the theme 'general conspiracy theories' was diverse and mixed facts with a particular view or agenda. A common theory in the material reported was the use of COVID-19 to facilitate the rise of a global police state, with the material exhorting people to resist. Such material has a rich and extensive mythos which forms the basis for the alternative views or 'truths' that underpin all of the other themes identified here to one degree or another. This theme had a small but ongoing presence in the reporting to CERT NZ with noted peaks in the weeks of 22 February, 19 April, 3 May, 17 May, 31 May, 28 June, and 5 July. These themes are attributable to the **Concerned Citizens Initiative**, **Advance New Zealand**, **The Real News** and the **WhiteRose**.

Not False Information

19. Some of the items reported to CERT NZ were classified as 'not being false information'. These were reported in the weeks of 5 April, 10 May, and 7 June. One of the items identified as not being false information was the '*Open Letter to the New Zealand Prime Minister about Pfizer Vaccine Breaches*' by Sue Grey. The tone and substance of this letter was factual and only report about this item was received. The



other item was the *'Informed Consent Kit'* by **Voices for Freedom** that focused on the legal rights of employees (mostly border workers) to be forcibly vaccinated and what to do if they were.

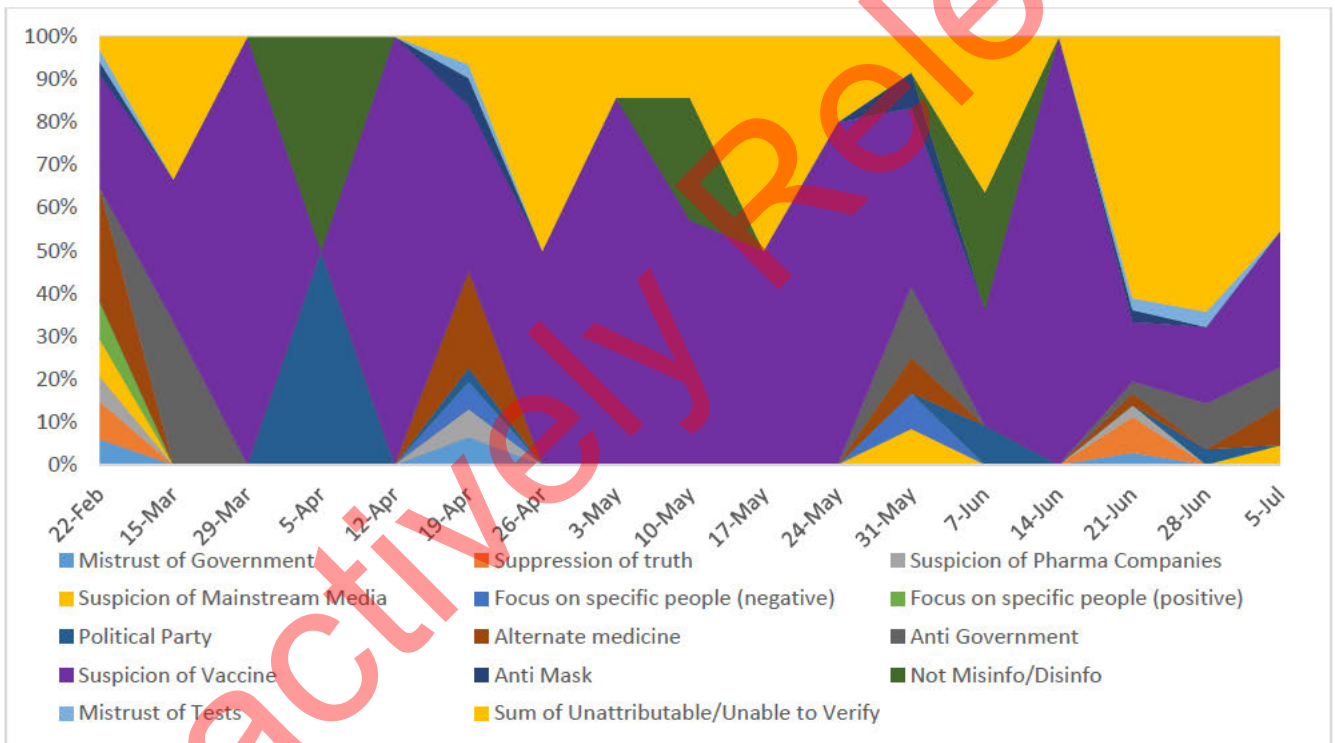
Unable to Be Classified

20. Some items viewed were 'not able to be classified' due to insufficient information in the report itself or where the information provided, such as video links, did not work. These were significant and consistent across the time period and constituted 70% of reported material in the weeks of 21 and 28 June.

Themes Over Time

21. The chart below shows the prevalence of false information themes (but not individual items of material) by week in the reports to CERT NZ for the period analysed. Not all themes were reported in a particular week and in some weeks clusters of themes appeared which was often due to items of material reported having multiple themes.

Figure 1: Proportion of Reported Items by Theme by Week



22. The prevalence of themes has varied over time. Suspicion of COVID-19 vaccines has remained a constant theme. Some of the other themes appeared in clusters around 22 February, 19 April, 31 May and 21 June, which may indicate a particular item of false information (such as a flyer or leaflet) being distributed.

23. Some reports could not have a theme attributed or were unable to be verified due to the limited information in the report. This unattributable material was a significant portion of all reporting.

24. For the week of 22 February there was a cluster of themes and an increased number of reporting which coincides with the beginning of the vaccinations for COVID-19 and the second Auckland Lockdown.

25. On 19 May, when QFT travel with Australia began there was a noted rise in reports to CERT NZ and a cluster of material reported with various themes, such as alternative medicine, political party publications, a focus on prominent people, suspicion of pharmaceutical companies and mistrust of government.



26. In May 2021, when group three vaccinations began there was a spike in material reported with an anti-vaccination theme, and a rise in reports to CERT NZ.
27. Finally, for the week of June 21 there was an increase in reporting to CERT NZ which coincides with media reporting around disinformation and misinformation in the days prior.

One Source/Many Faces: Voices For Freedom, The Real News, and Advance New Zealand

28. **Voices for Freedom, Advance NZ and The Real News** are linked via the individuals associated with them and the content and themes in their material which overlap.¹³ Reports made to CERT NZ that are attributed to these three organisations total over 73% of all reports. There are also reports which appear likely to have come from one of these organisations but there is insufficient information in each report to definitively identify the source or the content. If these unattributed reports were added to the total for these three groups, then they would be responsible for over 80% of the material which was reported to CERT NZ related to COVID-19 false information.
29. The items with the most reports associated with these groups are the flyers and pamphlets from **Voices for Freedom** of which 1.7¹⁴ million were distributed across New Zealand between late April and mid-June 2021. There were several flyers titled '*Covid Vaccine Facts Reference List; Are You Fed Up With Covid Yet?*' and '*What's All The Fuss About Masks?*'.¹⁵ Despite a ruling by the Advertising Standards Authority that one flyer was in breach of principles including social responsibility, truthful presentation and rules governing advocacy organisation communications **Voices for Freedom** have indicated that they will continue to distribute such material and information.¹⁶
30. This relatively small number of individuals responsible for spreading a large amount of misinformation and disinformation is similar to patterns identified overseas, for example, a recent report by the Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH) identified twelve individuals in the United States which were responsible for 65% of all anti-vaccine content identified online.¹⁷

Location of the Material Reported to CERT NZ

31. Of the total reports made to CERT NZ, 21% (179 reports) had a location included. The regions with the highest amount of false information related to COVID-19 reported to CERT NZ were:
- Wellington region – 5% (42 reports)
 - Auckland region – 3% (29 reports)
 - Canterbury – 3% (26 reports)
 - Marlborough/Nelson region – 3% (25 reports)
 - West Coast region – 2% (14 reports)
32. The remaining 43 reports with a location included were spread across other regions in New Zealand. From 25 June, the CERT NZ website was update to ask for the location the information was distributed in, which should increase the amount of location information that is reported to CERT NZ in the future.

¹³ New Zealand Herald, The Real News: Who is really behind the COVID-19 conspiracy magazine being dropped into 60,000 letterboxes, <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/the-real-news-who-is-really-behind-the-covid-19-conspiracy-magazine-being-dropped-into-60000-letterboxes/V3CSQAQNUD4RCEUXXB7YPHZDNO/>, accessed 16 July 2021.

¹⁴ Stuff, Complaint against anti-vax leaflet largely upheld by Advertising Standards Authority, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/health/coronavirus/300329450/complaints-against-antivax-leaflet-largely-upheld-by-advertising-standards-authority>, accessed 16 July 2021.

¹⁵ Voices for Freedom, <https://voicesforfreedom.co.nz/>, accessed 16 July 2021.

¹⁶ Stuff, Complaint against anti-vax leaflet largely upheld by Advertising Standards Authority, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/health/coronavirus/300329450/complaints-against-antivax-leaflet-largely-upheld-by-advertising-standards-authority>, accessed 16 July 2021.

¹⁷ Center for Countering Digital Hate, Disinformation Dozen: Why platforms must act on 12 leading online anti-vaxxers, <https://www.counterhate.com/disinformationdozen>, accessed 19 July 2021.



Responses to the Material

33. An inter-agency response¹⁸ has been developed which seeks to raise public awareness and reporting of COVID-19 related false information to CERT NZ. CERT NZ passes the reports onto the relevant agencies. For example, material which appears criminal in nature is reported to the New Zealand Police, whereas items which breach advertising or reporting standards are reported to the Advertising Standards Authority, Broadcasting Standards Authority, Classifications Office, or the New Zealand Media Council. Work is ongoing in this space.
34. Recent examples of responses to the distribution of COVID-19 false information include:
- The Advertising Standards Authority ruling against **Voices for Freedom**;
 - Facebook taking down the **Voices for Freedom** Facebook page;¹⁹ and
 - The Pharmacy Council issuing a warning to its members not to stock literature that promotes false COVID-19 information.²⁰
35. However, **Voices for Freedom** has since urged its followers to move to another online social network popular with far right groups and conspiracy theory believers.²¹ Since then, material was reported to CERT NZ by the public, that **Voices for Freedom** were encouraging its supporters to support a “covert counter-attack on censorship” which they indicated would occur on ‘Monday – Wednesday’ in the first week of August. This was stated to be contingent on fundraising \$50,000 by the preceding Sunday. Since then, there has been a paid promotion online, indications of a roadshow having been planned, and also some prominent billboards displaying their material. There was also a march through central Wellington culminating at Parliament grounds.

¹⁸ Comprised of Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC), CERT NZ, Ministry of Health (MOH), Nation Cyber Security Centre (NCSC), The Department of Internal Affairs (DIA), NZ Police, Netsafe, Domain Name Commission, Serious Fraud Office (SFO), and The Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE).

¹⁹ Newshub, Anti-vaccination group **Voices for Freedom** booted off Facebook for spreading COVID-19 misinformation, <https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/new-zealand/2021/07/anti-vaccination-group-voices-for-freedom-booted-off-facebook-for-spreading-covid-19-misinformation.html>, accessed 30 July 2021.

²⁰ Stuff NZ, Pharmacy Council issues warning after Auckland chemist displays COVID-19 misinformation, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/health/coronavirus/300304129/pharmacy-council-issues-warning-after-auckland-chemist-displays-covid19-misinformation>, accessed 30 July 2021.

²¹ Vox, Why Right-wing extremists favourite new platform is so dangerous, <https://www.vox.com/recode/22238755/telegram-messaging-social-media-extremists>, accessed 30 July 2021.