Misinformation and disinformation narratives in the 2023 New Zealand General Election

[11th - 25th October 2023]

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Disclaimers

Background on report

The New Zealand Government is seeking to support a "whole-of-society" approach to build understanding and resilience against the harms of disinformation, that can be led primarily by those outside the government. This approach recognises the need to maintain an open internet and uphold the right to freedom of expression. The overall objective for this report and others produced by Logically as commissioned by DPMC is to promote best practice to provide a holistic, accurate, and trustworthy picture of the online environment in New Zealand, and how disinformation impacts that environment. The election integrity reporting produced by Logically covered the 2 weeks before and 2 weeks after the October General Election and monitored four specific categories of misinformation, disinformation and malinformation (MDM).

Misinformation and Disinformation Narratives in the 2023 New Zealand General Election
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Executive Summary

During the reporting period, **11 Oct - 25 Oct 23**, Logically monitored for narratives aligned to one of four categories of harm that could be identified as misinformation, disinformation or malinformation (MDM):

- MDM that could lead to voter suppression (through intimidation, coercion or persuasion);

- MDM that could pose a threat to public order;

- MDM that could pose a threat to public safety;

- MDM that could undermine confidence in the democratic process (for example through factually inaccurate information about the administration of an election, foreign information manipulation or interference, or coordinated inauthentic behaviour.)

During the reporting period, Logically analysed **76,970** unique mentions from **5,068** unique users connected to the New Zealand General Elections.

No foreign information, manipulation or interference (FIMI) or coordinated inauthentic behaviour (CIB) was identified during the collection period. The low amount of MDM targeting the General Election as a result of discussion of other major world events taking precedence in the New Zealand information space may demonstrate a lack of foreign interest in shaping the information environment. With the world's media and social media users focusing on events in the Middle East, foreign information operations are more likely to target these events in order to capitalise on international attention. Hostile State FIMI can be a highly resource intensive operation, and those states with an interest in interfering with the democratic processes of other nations are more likely to focus those efforts in their own sphere of influence, or where a tangible benefit to them has been identified. Additionally, foreign actors would not have an interest in conducting an influence operation on the concluded election as MDM narratives are primarily driven by a reactive news cycle. Hostile foreign actors would have laid out the groundwork for an influence operation in advance of an election in order to shape the information environment within New Zealand. Logically did not find any evidence of this in any of its research collection.

Logically identified two narratives connected to the 2023 New Zealand General Election which **could undermine confidence in the democratic process**, however these were highly limited in reach to only a small minority of the population:

1. Claims a mainstream political party "bribed" the "mainstream media" to influence the outcome of the election;

2. Conspiracy driven claims targeting the outcome of the election, COVID-19 and lockdown measures in New Zealand.

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Claims that the election was "rigged" and narratives questioning the integrity of the electoral process diminished in the wake of the preliminary election outcome.

However, other narratives regarding the election's preliminary results persisted with low engagement and were further amplified by users dissatisfied with the results.

Conspiracy theories related to COVID-19 will continue to be associated with the previous Government due to its policies surrounding the pandemic. These conspiracy theorists are likely to target the new Government as some users believe they will continue to carry out the same policies. This is the result of ongoing conspiracy theories such as those regarding the COVID-19 vaccination[1] and the Great Reset[2] that have been amplified in New Zealand. However, as a result of the low level of MDM targeting the elections prior to and after the preliminary election results, these narratives are unlikely to reach large audiences in New Zealand.

Fig. 1. Online mention volumes of each of the four MDM categories monitored within the research environment[3] (11 Oct - 25 Oct 23).

MDM that could undermine confidence in the democratic process had the most online mentions in comparison to the other categories of harm Logically monitored for, with a peak of **13,710** online mentions on 15 Oct 23. This spike in Fig. 1. was caused by a significant increase in the volume of posts targeting the preliminary election results as they were announced. One post by a European commentator, who often propagates popular conspiracy theorists, attracted over **9,093** reposts, over **39,500** likes and a global reach of **3,202,221**. Within New Zealand, the post was reposted by **26** users, with a domestic reach of **5,597**. The post propagated climate change narratives in the context of the post-election period and discussed the change of Government.

Fig. 2. shows the reach of all posts during the reporting period. Reach is calculated by the amount of engagement on a post, the followers of the original author, and an assessed number of viewers of a post.

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1 Anti-COVID vax communities believe that COVID-19 is a hoax or has been dramatically overstated in order to force an unnecessary vaccine on the population.

2 The Great Reset conspiracy emerged in early-mid 2020 following the World Economic Forum's introduction of its Great Reset Initiative. The international conspiracy theory community took this initiative as proof that "global elites" were attempting to use the coronavirus pandemic as a pretext for a reorganisation of the international political and economic order at the expense of ordinary people's liberty and wellbeing.

3 Definition of 'research environment' can be found in the Methodology on page 8.
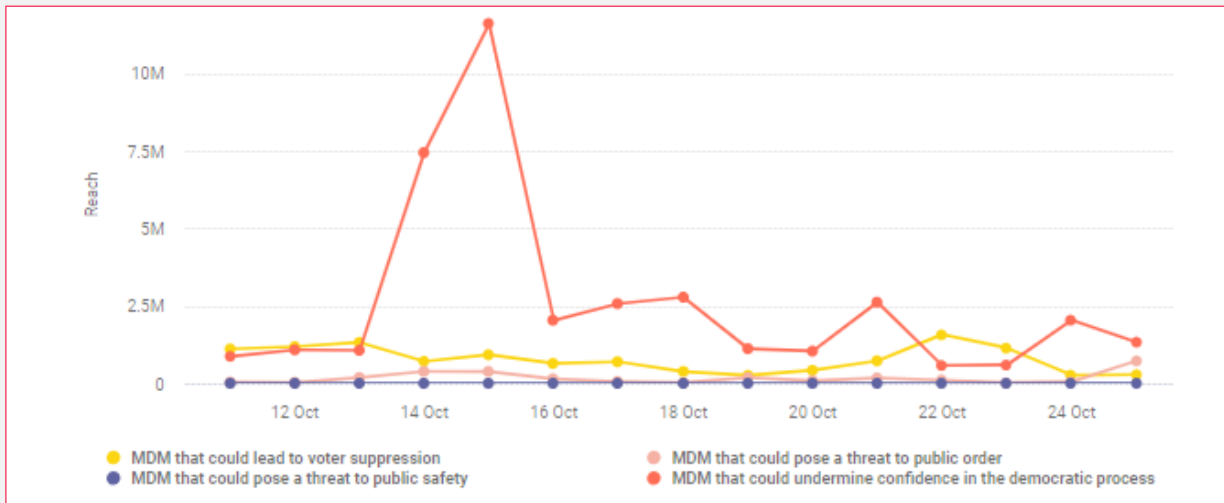
Fig. 2. Reach of online mentions related to the four MDM categories monitored within the research environment (11 Oct - 25 Oct 23).
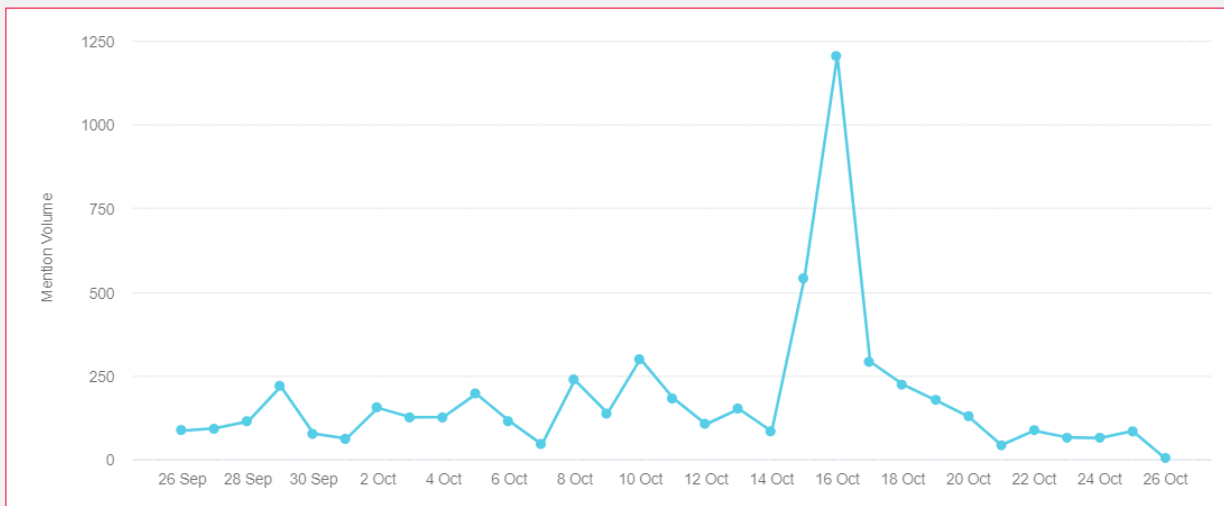

Fig. 3. Chart showing online mention volumes of "Treaty of Waitangi" OR "Te Tiriti o Waitangi".

The top ten trending topics in New Zealand on X were not about the General Election specifically, but instead focused on the Treaty of Waitangi, Māori, and the Rugby World Cup. Similar to how mentions of Israel and Hamas in the previous reporting period overtook mentions of the General Election, these trending topics overshadowed mentions of the election and resulted in MDM related to the election remaining consistently low throughout the reporting period. The chart above shows online mention volumes relating to the Treaty of Waitangi, which peaked on 16 Oct 23 following the announcement of the preliminary election results.

Logically observed limited continued engagement in this 2 week reporting period with the narratives identified in the previous report. This is almost certainly due to the fact that online discourse is reactive, and narratives are primarily driven by occurrences in the mainstream media and news cycle. This is evidenced in the lack of sustained engagement with the narratives that emerged prior to the closure of the election. It is likely that social media users stopped engaging with the narratives about voter suppression and the safety of votes following the announcement of the preliminary election results.

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Trending Topics

Fig. 4. Word cloud showing topics discussed within the research environment.

The word cloud in Fig. 3 shows the key topics discussed within the research environment, geofenced to New Zealand between 11 and 25 Oct 23. Names of individuals and political parties have been removed. One post, discussing the election results, claimed New Zealand politics and government would become dominated by Māori in the future, misrepresenting the percentage of the Māori population in New Zealand as significantly higher than is factually accurate. This post attracted **97** likes, **5** comments, **8** reposts, and a reach of **14,438**.

Fig. 5. Comparison between online mentions relating generally to the election over a 14 day period.

The chart above shows the trending topics relating generally to the election between 11 and 25 Oct 23. Names of individuals and political parties have been removed. Although a majority of the discourse was regarding the new Government and the preliminary election results, throughout the reporting period online mentions regarding the election and the results diminished and stopped trending. The trending topics during this reporting period instead related to the cancellation of plans to build a hospital in Whāngarei.

Methodology

This analysis used proprietary tools and analytical methodologies applied to publicly available information[4] to develop pattern and trend analyses of online behaviour, and misinformation and disinformation activities. Logically's methodology for the development and identification of patterns, trends, narratives, and coordinated inauthentic behaviour (CIB) analysis, including malicious online behaviour techniques, tactics, and procedures (TTPs) was developed in accordance with the DISARM Framework, Observatory for OSINT Guidelines, Phased-Based Tactical Analysis of Online Operations, the MITRE ATT&CK framework, and Logically's open-source intelligence (OSINT) tradecraft.

Logically does not monitor nor report on any expression by political parties on candidates where such expression may fall under election campaigning. Only MDM that meets one of the four criteria (MDM that could lead to voter suppression, MDM that could pose a threat to public order, MDM that poses a threat to public safety, and MDM that could undermine confidence in the democratic process) is collected and analysed for this report.

Logically use a bespoke analysis platform that ingests data from across the internet through crafted queries using Boolean logic and researched keyword combinations. Our analysts use this in conjunction with a suite of additional tools. This is referred to as the '**research environment**'. The research environment does not constitute all data on social media platforms or the internet, but is filtered to include the keywords that have been entered. Data sources may include, amongst others, *X, Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, TikTok, YouTube, Reddit, and 4chan*. The research environment was geofenced and limited to New Zealand.

Due to the manner in which information is collected, any data on social media platforms that has been deleted, or posted from accounts that have since been removed or suspended, will not populate in the research environment. As such, figures within this report are accurate as of Oct 2023, and may not reflect the information environment at specific points in time, due to accounts being suspended and posts being deleted.

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[4] *Publicly available information is any information which is contained in a publicly available publication. Publicly available publications include things like: Books, Magazines, Newspapers, Information posted publicly online, and Public registers. privacy.org.nz*

A mainstream political party "bribed" the "mainstream media" to influence the outcome of the election

Social media users on X and other online forums claimed the "mainstream media" or "MSM" was "bought" by a mainstream political party to spread propaganda about other political parties prior to the General Election to try and influence the election results. Users called into question the integrity of the media further, claiming a mainstream political party "bribed" the "mainstream media" to coerce biased reporting about the election and manipulate New Zealanders to vote for a specific political party. One post, which attracted **1.9k** views, **107** likes, and **20** reposts, claimed the "mainstream media" was surprised by the preliminary election results as it was too occupied with manipulating facts.
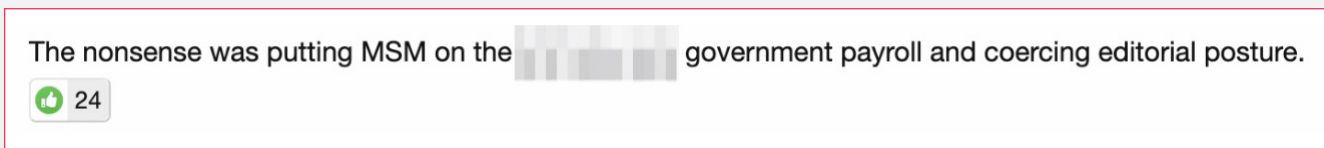

The nonsense was putting MSM on the ███████ government payroll and coercing editorial posture.

👍 24

Fig. 6. Claims a mainstream political party "coerced" the "mainstream media"

This narrative persisted with low engagement throughout the election period, amplified by users seeking to propagate narratives against a mainstream political party beyond the election. As this narrative was identified prior to the closure of voting as well, users continued to discuss this narrative in conjunction with discussion of the preliminary election results and speculation of the reason for the election outcome. Variations on this narrative have circulated through the information environment surrounding the General Election. These claims provide explanatory support to those seeking to question or undermine perception of the election's integrity.

Conspiracy driven claims targeting the outcome of the election, COVID-19 and lockdown measures in New Zealand

A conspiratorial, alt-media news outlet posted a video after the election claiming that the new Government will not investigate the previous Government's approach to COVID-19 and lockdown measures, because they are "in it, together." This circulated on X and Telegram. The video claimed that if the people of New Zealand don't "... stop it now, we won't be able to stop it ever... monitoring and tracking everything we do." The video also claimed links between the COVID-19 vaccine and cancer, and claimed that a New Zealand "media firewall" has been established by the Government, who funds restrictions on information getting to the general public. The speaker asked the freedom movement to come together, and called on individuals to help pay $90,000 NZD to review the election and question the special votes.

The video was shared across at least two Telegram channels, attracting over **11k** views and over **100** engagements
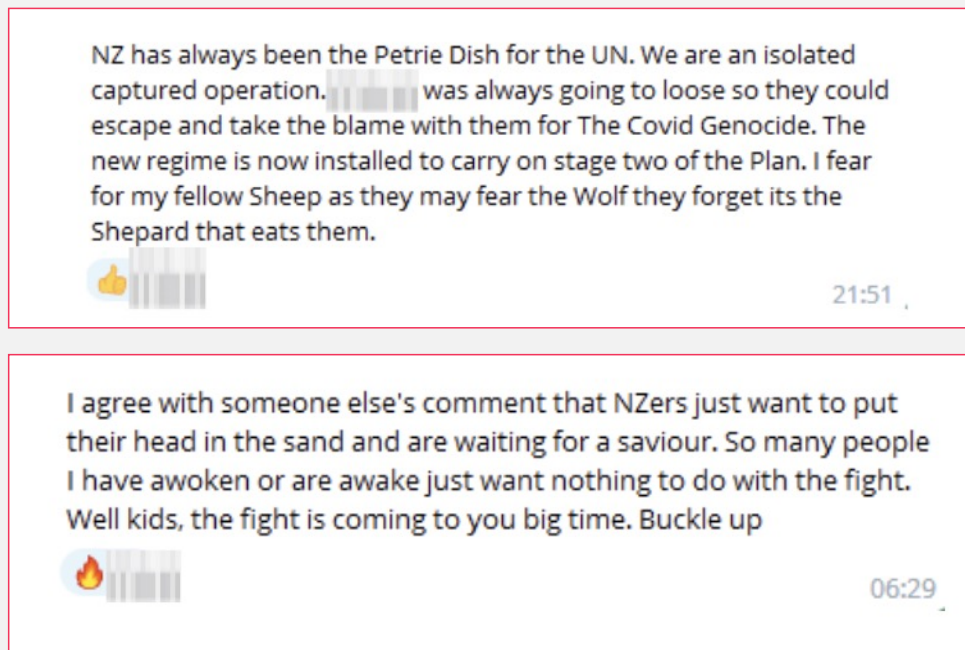

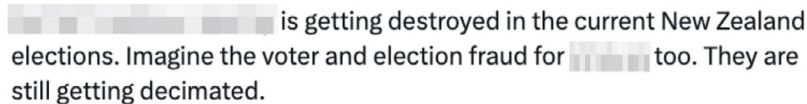*Fig. 7. and Fig. 8. Comments in support of conspiratorial views.*

This particular conspiratorial outlet propagates narratives originating in the British and American online information environment, expanding their reach internationally via domestic conspiracy influencers to whom the content appeals.

Post-election MDM narratives targeted the incoming Government, including that they are colluding in accordance with conspiratory theories, such as the Great Reset, to control the populace. As the Government continues to develop, communicate and roll out public health policies, MDM narratives related to lockdowns, censorship and control of citizens in line with conspiratorial thinking are likely to continue.

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Other identified narratives

An analysis of the online information environment has so far identified:

- Claims voters on the Māori electoral roll were purposely given incorrect voting forms; and

- Claims against a mainstream political party for committing electoral fraud; and

- Allegations against a religious group in New Zealand "secretly funding" a specific political party's election campaign
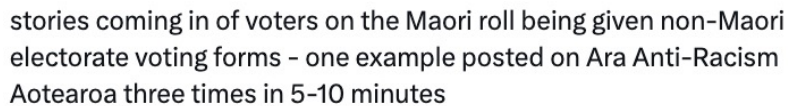

Fig. 9. Claims a mainstream political party committed electoral fraud.

Social media users claimed the democratic process was undermined as voters on the Māori electoral roll were purposely given non-Māori electorate voting forms to dissuade them from voting for the Māori electorates or stop them from voting altogether.

Users claimed the incorrect electorate voting forms were evidence of deliberate election fraud as it happened multiple times over many elections and was never addressed. Users called for an inquiry by the Electoral Commission to look into the "corruption" and "deliberate" suppression of votes by those on the Māori electoral roll. The post below garnered **11.4k** views, **153** likes, **28** resposts.

Fig. 10. Claims voters on the Māori electoral roll were purposely given non-Māori electorate voting forms.

Inauthentic Behaviour

No foreign information manipulation or interference (FIMI) was identified during the collection period. The low amount of MDM identified as a result of discussion of other major world events taking precedence in the New Zealand information space may demonstrate a lack of foreign interest in shaping the information environment.

Online activity connected with the New Zealand election did not indicate any coordinated inauthentic behaviour (CIB) targeting voters or the political process during the collection period. Observed activity fell within parameters expected of organic and authentic behaviour.

The indicators for CIB include: recent date of account creation; high frequency of shares/posts; shared user bases; shared topics, messaging, keywords, and phrases; co-ordinated deployment of links and URLs; a high ratio of posts or shares to interactions or replies; lack of conversational engagement with other platform users.

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About Logically

Logically combines advanced AI with human intelligence and expertise to tackle harmful and problematic online content at scale. The company's mission is to enhance civic discourse, protect democratic debate and process, and provide access to trustworthy information.

In 2021, Logically was named one of the world's most innovative artificial intelligence companies by Fast Company and won the Rising Star in Tech CogX Award. Logically has helped mitigate threats to elections in the United States, United Kingdom, and India since 2017.

Visit Logically.AI for more information, or contact us at info@logically.ai

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