

**Counterspin Media and COVID-19 in Aotearoa New Zealand: Far-Right
Extremism and the Undermining of Public Sphere and Public Health Principles**

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed:

Date: 30 November 2023

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Abstract

As the COVID-19 pandemic was used by far-right extremists organized within an online ecosystem to normalise their ideology, public sphere and public health principles were undermined. This thesis applies critical discourse analysis, keyword analysis and ideology critique to a sample of texts from Counterspin Media, who have been labelled as one of the largest platforms for conspiracy theories and far-right ideology in Aotearoa New Zealand. The aim is to determine the extent to which far-right extremist ideology has pervaded Counterspin's language, such that public sphere and public health principles in Aotearoa New Zealand were treated during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research finds that Counterspin's language is pervaded by far-right extremist ideology. However, there was an effort to conceal this and there were several occasions in the analysed samples in which the influence was denied. Thus, Counterspin had the potential to spread far-right extremist discourse and exploit people's feelings of anxiety about the pandemic, without appearing to do so. Deployment of certain keywords – 'freedom', 'tyranny', 'reclaim', 'democide', 'media', 'Jacinda Ardern' reveals that. One can conclude that Counterspin are indeed a far-right extremist entity who used the COVID-19 pandemic, and the accompanying infodemic, to spread their ideology, in ways which undermined public sphere and public health principles.

Chapter 1: Introduction

On 2 March 2022 a three-week occupation of Parliament grounds in central Wellington came to a violent end, with protestors clashing with riot police, and the onsite kids' playground ending up on fire. It was the introduction of vaccine mandates towards the end of 2021 that would be the trigger for this occupation, which would mobilize and draw together vaccine sceptics, a fundamentalist church, far-right groups and non-aligned individuals. But the occupiers' claims would go far beyond vaccination to echo international far-right extremism including calls to prosecute certain politicians for crimes against humanity (O'Brien & Huntington, 2022). Following police removal of the protestors, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern spoke about the occupation and remarked that 'one day it will be our job to try and understand how a group of people could succumb to such wild and dangerous mis- and disinformation' (The Disinformation Project, 2022, p.1). Scholars have researched just that, with many pointing to key players within Aotearoa New Zealand who not only had a hand in the Parliamentary protests, but who had spread far-right extremist ideology over previous years.

1.1 Why Counterspin?

Clark (2022) and Manhire (2022) named the key people involved, with Counterspin Media (hereafter Counterspin), the focus of this research, at the top of their lists, alongside other groups such as Convoy NZ, The Freedom and Rights Coalition and Voices for Freedom. As Clark (2022) points out, Counterspin is one of the largest platforms for conspiracy theories and far-right ideology in Aotearoa-New Zealand. Spearheaded by couple Kelvyn Alp and Hannah Spierer, Counterspin increased their operation dramatically during the Parliament ground protests, with Spierer running hours-long coverage from the studio and Alp reporting from the grounds (Manhire, 2022). Acting as an unofficial mouthpiece for the occupation, Counterspin would livestream daily what was going on without interruption. Viewers had an unedited look into 'Camp Freedom', a name that was given to the occupation by protestors. These livestreams reached tens of thousands; on the first day, just under one hundred thousand views were recorded.

Other than the daily livestreams, Counterspin were very active on their Telegram channel, which now has just under twelve thousand subscribers. Among the thousands of posts riddled with extreme claims made during the protests, were some relating to the coordination of people on the grounds. Posts called for first aid responders and nurses to report to the first aid tent to 'help those injured & pepper sprayed'. Despite the posts and talk by Counterspin about the occupation being non-violent and a 'peaceful protest', far-right extremist language being spouted by Alp and Spierer during this period cannot be ignored. During one of the many livestreams, Alp delivered a lengthy monologue in

which he claimed the government was practicing genocide in its ‘transhumanist agenda and the great reset’ before stating that he wouldn’t mind seeing ‘a few heads chopped off’ at parliament. Toby Manhire has summarized the significance of Counterspin.

It is tempting to dismiss Counterspin as a fringe of a fringe, eye-popping but irrelevant. That would be a mistake. Their audience’s online number in the tens of thousands, and the energy and volume of their online supporters’ comments are profoundly troubling. (Manhire, 2022)

Counterspin claims to be a facts and evidence-based platform that covers stories and events that mainstream outlets will not. They claim to be an alternative to the mainstream, and while that is true, they are definitely not a facts and evidence-based platform. Counterspin’s influence grew during the COVID-19 pandemic. One only has to look at the Parliament protest, and the thousands still actively watching and participating in their content on an array of platforms, including Facebook. Riding the wave of their increased popularity, Counterspin went on a nationwide tour called the ‘Let’s Not Forget’ tour shortly after the Parliamentary protest came to an end. They visited cities in the North and South Islands and packed out most venues with supporters. In the first stop in Auckland, over 200 people attended, with known far-right extremist Damien De Ment on MC duty alongside other similar figures such as conspiracy theorist and former law lecturer Amy Benjamin and Elliot Ikilei. The latter hosted the now cancelled *Talanoa Sa’o* which was described as the Fox News of the Pasifika community (Clark, 2023). Counterspin were just continuing what they had already been doing, spreading far-right extremist language, anti-vax sentiment, conspiracy theories, anti-government beliefs, among other unsupported claims. Now they had even more people listening intently to them.

While it was the rabid anti-vax messages of Counterspin that brought them to attention, it was their far-right extremist views, interwoven into their rhetoric, which sparked my research interest. It was easy to see the global influences of QAnon in the claims made by Counterspin in regard to the COVID-19 pandemic. QAnon keywords such as transhumanism and Great Reset were regularly spouted on Counterspin episodes, by both hosts and guests. Both terms have been frequently used by conspiracy theorists and far-right extremists. The overarching idea of transhumanism is that there are Satanist elites out there using technology to make white people infertile, and that the LGBTQIA+ community allegedly has a significant role to play (Balzer, 2021). The *Great Reset* conspiracy theory is very similar. It follows the idea that the World Economic Forum (WEF) and its Great Reset initiative, an effort to reduce global inequality and advance environmental initiatives in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, is actually a tool being used by the elites to reorganise society and institute a global, totalitarian regime (The Great Reset Conspiracy Flourishes Amid Continued Pandemic, 2020). Both terms demonise the other, transhumanism does that to the LGBTQIA+ community, and the Great Reset does that to anyone fighting to reduce inequality, especially minority groups, which in turn demonises such groups in the

eyes of conspiracy theorists and far-right extremists. It is concerning that this rhetoric is being spread locally in Aotearoa New Zealand, as it may not be easy to spot the QAnon references if you don't know what to look for. This is ultimately what concerns me, a Samoan, the most, especially in regard to the rise of conspiracy beliefs in the Pasifika community. Their backing by people of Pacific Island heritage such as Elliot Ikilei, gives them some legitimacy in Pasifika communities. As Byron Clark has remarked 'the relatively high production values also make these new media projects less distinguishable from real news – and more influential' (Clark, 2023, p.189).

Despite claims by Kelvyn Alp that he cannot be a white supremacist because 'half of his family are jiggaboos' because his sister is married to a Samoan, Counterspin is detrimental to the Pasifika community, and other minorities (Counterspin Media, 2022i). While the uptick in anti-vax sentiment among Pacific Islanders cannot be solely attributed to Counterspin, they certainly bear some of the blame. During the measles outbreak of 2019 in Samoa, a large volume of misinformation was spread online following the death of two infants after being administered the MMR vaccine (Craig & Worth, 2020). Although this was, in fact, the result of human error, anti-vaxxers used the tragedy to claim that vaccines endanger children (Craig & Worth, 2020). By the end of 2019, 70 people had died, most of them children, and in many cases the medical staff discovered the anti-vaccination conspiracy theories spreading on the Internet had resulted in decisions not to vaccinate (Cass, 2023). This goes to show that the Pacific community is susceptible to the effects of disinformation, misinformation, and conspiracy theories. The constant appearance of Niuean Elliot Ikilei, and Samoan Leao Tildsley, co-host of *Talanoa Sa'ó*, brought some legitimacy to Counterspin within the Pacific community. Pacific people tend to gravitate towards each other, so will listen to what each has to say. Thus, a Pacific audience will be more willing to circulate extreme claims, such as anti-vaccination or far-right extremist ones, even if there is no back up evidence, then those who may not have a cultural connection. Both figures appeared in Counterspin's second episode titled *Racism – is it real or manufactured?* which aired 29 April 2022, on a predominantly non-white panel. Ikilei claimed that the overrepresentation of Māori and Pasifika in socio-economic disparity indicators, resulted from the breakdown of the traditional family, rather than systemic racism (Clark, 2023). Counterspin amplifies Pasifika voices who then go on to promote white supremacist, far-right extremist narratives to their Pasifika audience. *Talanoa Sa'ó* has a few thousand following them on Facebook, so there is a very good chance that Counterspin would have been recommended to that audience.

Because Counterspin operates solely online, no official media authority can reprimand them. In undertaking this research, I wanted to complement the critique of Counterspin undertaken by Byron Clark and The Disinformation Project (hereafter TDP) at the University of Auckland. There are two overlapping tendencies that I find disturbing about Counterspin, and these will be the focus of analysis.

First is their undermining of public sphere principles by being a purveyor and promoter of far-right extremism. Cas Mudde's describes the latter (as cited in Rydgren, 2018) as an ideology that is openly racist, neo-fascist and anti-democratic that largely exists on the fringes. The second is their tendency to undermine public health principles by perpetrating disinformation and contributing to an infodemic regarding COVID-19, its causes, government responses, and the efficacy of vaccines.

1.2 Public Sphere and Public Health Principles

Habermas et al. (1974) describes the public sphere as a space within our social life where the right to advance ideas and arguments is guaranteed to all citizens. Public sphere principles are critical to maintaining a democracy, whereby people can come together, exchange different views regarding issues, deliberate, and form public opinion. Seeliger and Sevignani (2022) point out that 'For the purpose of general transparency, the public sphere should be open for all social groups, topics, and opinions that hold collective relevance. To ensure collective validation, actors who participate in the public sphere should (have to) deal with topics and opinions of other participants, in order to (possibly) change their own standpoints. Finally, for the cause of general orientation, the public sphere brings about public opinions (which, in practice, however, become diversely effective)' (p.8). On this reading Counterspin can be seen as anti-ethical to public sphere principles. They have a tendency to demonise opponents rather than engage with them, as seen in their opposition to the Government or mainstream media. Nothing can change their belief that both institutions are enemies of the people. Their complete disagreement with anything that is said by people they categorise as liberal lefties is another sign that they are anti-ethical in relation to public sphere principles.

The introduction of the Internet has resulted in a growing number of echo chambers. This concept is not specific to the Internet but is mostly used to describe online communities where like-minded people choose to connect with each other and echo each other's opinions and beliefs (Bruns, 2019). Bright et al. (2022) argue that although echo chambers can be formed throughout the left to right spectrum, it is of particular note that far-right echo chambers have become catalysts for extremist radicalisation. The scholars offer Stormfront, a neo-Nazi Internet forum created by former Alabama Klan boss and long-time white supremacist Don Black, as an example of how these online far-right extremist echo chambers insulate individuals from outside perspectives. Such environments distort their perception of reality through confirmation bias and facilitate the spread of disinformation, which in turn breeds extremism (Bright et al., 2022). The Stormfront site has been linked to a number of terrorist attacks, including the 2011 Norway attacks and the 2015 Charleston church shootings (Beirich, 2015). These echo chambers reject any opposing opinions, and in fact 'far-right online echo chambers

seem to thrive on the marginalization and ridicule of their opponents (Bright et al., 2022, p.130). This goes against the fundamental principle of the public sphere.

Misinformation is information that is false, but not created with the intention of causing harm; disinformation is false information that was deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organisation or country. The two terms have overlapping meanings (Jayakumar et al., 2021). The spreading of misinformation and disinformation within online spaces and beyond, directly undermines public sphere principles. 'Disinformation is endemic in the digital age, seriously harming public interest in democracy, health care, and national security' (Sun, 2023, p.367). Democratic processes, such as elections, and democratic decision making by politicians depends upon refutable information. We have recently seen the influence of disinformation, with the lie that the 2020 US presidential election had been stolen. Republicans in many states were prompted to pass hundreds of voter suppression laws to combat non-existent voter fraud (Henricksen, 2022). This directly undermined the public sphere principle that all citizens could participate by right. As Lipari (2022) puts it, the possibility of people coming together to rigorously debate is almost untenable due to disinformation, misinformation, lies, and deception. One can see therefore how far-right extremist ideology goes against every principle of the public sphere. Chapter 2 will discuss this further.

There are seven key principles, which were agreed on by the Public Health Clinical Network, that inform and shape public health service delivery in Aotearoa New Zealand (Community & Public Health: Te Mana Ora). These are summarized below.

- a. There must be a focus put on the health of the community, rather than individuals, which can be done by strengthening communities' capacities to address health issues of importance to them.
- b. Health determinants must be monitored, analysed and reported on to find out what the threats are to health and what can be done about it.
- c. Improvements in Māori health must be prioritized by putting a specific focus on the health disparities of Māori.
- d. Health disparities must be reduced since they adversely affect groups of people who have systematically experienced social or economic obstacles to health provision (due to their ethnicity, gender, age, socioeconomic status etc.)
- e. Professional practice must be based on the best available evidence, which includes research, economic analysis to support public health innovation and to evaluate the effectiveness of public health policies and programmes.

- f. Effective partnerships must be built across the health sector and other sectors, to help in developing, implementing, and managing primary and secondary prevention programmes for the whole population.
- g. Health authorities must remain responsive to new and emerging health threats.

The extent to which these principles have been or are being adhered to is beyond the scope of this research. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the public health system was applauded for how it dealt with pandemic. Grout et al. (2023), concluded in their study that Aotearoa New Zealand's successful response to the pandemic warranted further investigation to identify what went right so that this could help prepare for future pandemics. The scholars also remarked that the prioritisation of professional practice based on scientific evidence, was one of the reasons for this success. However, the health system was also criticized for the way it dealt with Māori, as well as Pasifika health issues. There was criticism from some, such as those behind TDP (2022), that the government and public health sector should have worked with leaders within these communities from the outset of the pandemic. Pakilau Manase Lua, the chair of the Pacific Response Coordination Team (PRCT) in an interview with RNZ, indicated that public health had forgotten their first principle, 'It just feels like the government, DHBs and the officials are forgetting the community, and forgetting to communicate with us. Come and talk to us. The biggest problem is they are not willing to listen to Pacific voices' (Rovoi, 2021).

At times public sphere and public health principles can interact and overlap, especially in regard to critiquing the spread of disinformation, misinformation, and conspiracy theories, on medical matters. Thus, the public health principle that practice should be based on verifiable, scientific evidence from medical research provides reliable information for citizens. When certain communities are not given a voice within local, regional or national public spheres, this can affect the quality of public health services available to them. The interconnections between the public sphere and public health played out during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the World Health Organization (WHO) states, COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Most people who are infected experience mild to moderate respiratory illness, but anyone can become seriously ill or die at any age from the virus. These are scientifically verifiable facts which underlay public health assistance. However, as Infodemic (2023) pointed out, the pandemic was accompanied by another phenomenon, an infodemic, which put pressure on public health systems around the world. They found themselves combatting not only a deadly infectious disease but also a human made informational one, which had the potential to undermine the public sphere. According to the World Health Organization (World Health Organization, 2023), an infodemic is too much

information including false or misleading information in digital and physical environments during a disease. Chapter 3 will detail the pandemic and infodemic within Aotearoa New Zealand.

So where does Counterspin fit into this? I began this introduction with some introductory comments about their convictions, and why I decided to focus this research on them. Chapters 4 and 5 will provide a comprehensive profile. The relation between Counterspin and the undermining of the public sphere and public health principles, during the COVID-19 pandemic will be highlighted. While Counterspin can claim that they contribute to the public sphere by giving a platform to different opinions that can then be discussed, it can be argued that the disinformational content and purpose of these opinions damage public sphere domains. With regard to the internet, Davis (2021) defines the anti-public sphere as a space of 'online socio-political interaction where discourse routinely and radically flouts the ethical and rational norms of democratic discourse' (p.143). These spaces include discursive spaces and forms such as White supremacist websites, anti-climate science forums, militant 'men's rights' sites, anti-immigrant Facebook pages, gay hate memes, misogynist trolling, anti-Semitic websites, alt-right websites, and conspiracy websites, where discussion is often fractious and divisive, with aggression and vitriol (Davis, 2021). Anti-public sphere spaces can also, potentially, undermine public health principles.

1.3 Sample and Methodology

The aim is to determine the extent to which far-right extremist ideology has pervaded Counterspin's language, such that public sphere and public health principles in Aotearoa New Zealand were undermined during the COVID-19 pandemic. To this end I will analyse the following Counterspin texts that were produced during the Parliament protests:

1. Counterspin Livestream on February 6th, 2022 (Day 1 of the convoy)
2. Counterspin's 'OPERATION: RECLAIM' Telegram post on January 29th, 2022.
3. 270 comments on the seven most viewed Counterspin videos on Rumble ¹

Those timeframes were chosen because they highlight the overlapping viewpoints, not only of Counterspin, but the occupation as a whole. The Parliament Protest is significant, with TDP (2022) labelling it a tipping point in the embedding of information disorders which might take years to fully

¹ These are the seven most watched Counterspin videos on their Rumble channel, including the title and the number of views and comments on each.

1. REPLAY (Unedited) LIVE: CONVOY 2022 NZ DAY 1 – Sunday 6th February 2022 (84k views, 53 comments)
2. REPLAY (Unedited) LIVE: CONVOY 2022 NZ DAY 3 - Tuesday 8th February 2022 (70.1k views, 56 comments)
3. Replay: Kiwi Citizens have now served documents to the New Zealand Police for the Arrest of Health Minister Andrew Little (50.8k views, 31 comments)
4. REPLAY (Unedited) LIVE: CONVOY 2022 NZ DAY 4 - Wednesday 9th February 2022 (51.2k views, 61 comments)
5. REPLAY (Unedited) LIVE: CONVOY 2022 NZ DAY 2 - Monday 7th February 2022 (37.5k views, 33 comments)
6. REPLAY (Unedited) LIVE: CONVOY 2022 NZ DAY 17 Tuesday 22nd February 2022 (34.5k views, 23 comments)
7. Special Report: Kiwi Citizens Initiate Arrest of Health Minister Andrew Little (2nd February 2022) (25.8k views, 36 comments)

examine. The first text was chosen because it includes a cross section of all the different claims made by Counterspin hosts, Alp and Spierer, as well as those made by their guests. Because it is a livestream, the discourse within it is less filtered and best encapsulates Counterspin's core nature. The second text, which details their strategic plan, 'OPERATION: RECLAIM', outlines what would be needed to oppose the 'demonic forces of democidal intent'. This reveals, to a certain extent, what Counterspin truly wanted before the protests began. The final text was chosen to explore and measure the effects of exposure to Counterspin and their rhetoric. Together these three texts reveal the type of messages Counterspin spread. It will be helpful to analyse them and to determine whether Counterspin's far-right extremist messages are being repeated by the public, such that the public sphere and public health principles are undermined.

Analysing language used by Counterspin is central to this research. Doing so will form the answer to my research question. Language can do many things; in the case of this research, it can normalise a certain ideology and freely undermine public sphere and public health principles. To go about analysing language is not a simple task and requires a theoretical framework from which to draw. For this research, that theoretical framework will be Fairclough's (1995) critical discourse analysis (CDA), Raymond Williams' keyword analysis (Williams, 1976), and John Thompson's overview of ideological modes (Thompson, 1990).

1.4 Ideology and discourse analysis

Critical discourse analysis has been chosen as it can illuminate representations, identities and relations (Fairclough, 1995). Norman Fairclough provides a broad definition of discourse as the use 'of language as a particular form of social practice'. In a narrower sense, discourse represents 'the language used in representing a given social practice from a particular point of view' (Fairclough, 1995, p.54-56). This understanding helps to uncover far-right extremism in Counterspin's language. It helps to answer the following kinds of questions: How is the world (events, relationships, etc.) represented? What identities are set up for those involved (hosts, audiences, third parties referred to or interviewed)? What relationships are set up between those involved (e.g., host audience)? (Fairclough 1995, p.5). CDA is concerned with how power is exercised through language and consists of three dimensions. The first is text which is analysed at word level, the second is called discursive practise which involves production or constitution of texts, and the third and last dimension is called social practice, which is the analysis of the norm level (Fairclough, 1995). Fairclough's analytical approach assumes that language helps to create or resist changes in behaviour within relations of power.

This research also draws upon Raymond Williams keyword analysis which he first developed in *Keywords: a Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976). Keywords are important in the analysis of

language, as they reflect vocabulary choice. This research will specifically reveal how keywords such as 'freedom' and 'tyranny' have been co-opted by far-right extremists to become key signifiers of their ideology. Durant (2008) outlined five criteria that make a keyword; (1) it is now being used to communicate and work out meaning while also invoking authority from the discipline it comes from; (2) in different times of use, it is understood differently; (3) it gives an identity to social practices, beliefs, value systems, and preferences; (4) in social debates and arguments it is actively contested; (5) it forms together the terminology for a particular topic when it is part of a cluster of interrelated words (Durant, 2008). The third criterion is of particular importance for this research. Keywords can give a recognised identity to the social practices, beliefs, value systems, and preferences of those using them. To aid with identifying and explaining how far-right extremism reveals itself in Counterspin's language through selected keywords and phrases, this research will also refer to John B. Thompson's work. He stated that to study ideology is to identify the ways in which meaning serves to establish and sustain relations of domination. He proposed five general modes through which ideology can operate using a range of strategies, as summarised below:

- Legitimation: Relations of domination are established and sustained by being represented as legitimate;
- Dissimulation: ideology is established and sustained by being concealed, denied, or obscured, or represented in a way which deflects attention from existing relations or processes;
- Unification: constructs a form of unity which embraces individuals in a collective identity, no matter the differences and divisions that may separate them, in order to establish and sustain an ideology;
- Fragmentation: the opposite of the previous mode in that instead of unifying individuals, it fragments them. A strategy that is common in this mode is the expurgation of the other which involves the construction of an enemy that is portrayed as evil, harmful, or threatening, such that individuals are called upon to expurgate or resist its presence;
- Reification: dominant discourse's language and words are represented as how things are and have been throughout history.

(Thompson, 1990, p.60).

My discourse analysis draws from four of the modes above to critique Counterspin in determining and exploring in which way they are peddling far-right extremist ideology. The four modes I will discuss are dissimulation, unification, fragmentation, and legitimation.

1.5 The organisation of the thesis

This thesis is organised in the following way. This chapter, which has provided a brief overview of what this research will be about has detailed why Counterspin was chosen for analysis. It has also briefly discussed how I will analyse and critique Counterspin.

Chapter 2 examines far-right extremism; and its political and ideological strands and what role it played during the COVID-19 pandemic. This provides an important context in regard to my rationale for critiquing Counterspin. Here it is important to include Donald Trump and his influence on far-right extremism around the world, including Aotearoa New Zealand. This chapter will end with what far-right extremists did during the pandemic to undermine public sphere and public health principles. It will detail the lies and conspiracy theories that they spread in regard to; the supposed causes of the virus, and reaction to government responses such as vaccine mandates and lockdowns.

Chapter 3 outlines the COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanying infodemic in Aotearoa New Zealand. It will detail and provide a timeline of the initial arrival of both, and the exponential spread of disinformation. An important aspect comes at the end where there will be a discussion of the Parliamentary occupation (with a timeline on what happened before, during and shortly after). This will provide more context for understanding the role Counterspin played during this period.

Chapter 4 is a profile on Counterspin and key leaders. It will discuss ideological strands and international influences. Emphasis will be given to their early development and emerging role in the internet and social media ecosystem. A list of other far-right figures and groups that exist in the same space as Counterspin will also be provided.

Chapter 5 will outline the role and influence of Counterspin during the pandemic and infodemic in Aotearoa New Zealand. It will detail their reaction to government COVID-19 precautions, including lockdowns, vaccine mandates and other rules. It will provide a more comprehensive examination of Counterspin's role in the convoy, national anti-lockdown, anti-vaccine, and anti-government protests, as well as Parliamentary occupation.

Chapter 6 presents my analysis of three Counterspin texts, drawing upon critical discourse analysis generally, with ideology and keyword analysis used for more in depth empirical work. Counterspin's language will be seen as revealing far-right extremism within the organization (with the capacity to undermine public sphere and public health principles).

The concluding chapter contains my final remarks on Counterspin as a far-right extremist entity, which had a growing influence within the far-right digital ecosystem, such that it could use the pandemic to infiltrate people's feelings of anxiety and alienation. It summarises discourse analysis findings, in relation to the research questions and methodological approach. A wider reflection on how

Counterspin threatens public sphere and public health principles will follow. This includes Counterspin activities since the Parliamentary occupation that are causes of concern. This chapter, and thesis, will end with suggestions for future research.

Chapter 2: Far Right Extremism and COVID-19

2.1 Introduction

Debate concerning the appropriate terminology to use when describing far-right extremism or the extreme far-right, has increased in recent years. Cunningham et al. (2022) opted to use 'radical right' as a general description, as it simply describes views that are more radical than those held by mainstream groups and parties. It is Cas Mudde's description of far-right extremism (as cited in Rydgren 2018) that this research will centre itself around. He distinguishes far-right extremists as being openly racist, neo-fascist and anti-democratic and on the fringes of mainstream politics. With this in mind, this research employs far-right extremism as an umbrella term with space given to explore ideological subcultures over time. Particular emphasis will be given to the formulation of the 'alt-right'. What follows overviews far-right extremism, its political and ideological strands, and its history in Aotearoa New Zealand. The alt-right phenomenon will be considered in this context. After reflection upon the internet and social media ecosystem of the far-right extremism, I will discuss the links between Donald Trump and far-right extremism, especially during his US presidential campaign in 2016. The international linkages and influence of far-right extremism within Aotearoa New Zealand will then be considered.

2.2 Populism and fascism

I begin with Sakurai's observation that far-right politics is a mix of fascism, populism and their overlap (Sakurai, 2022). The term populism first emerged at the end of the nineteenth century, to describe political movements which appealed to 'the people' against an elite who had supposedly monopolized political power for their own ends (Cunningham et al., 2022). Populism cannot stand alone, it is always combined with more substantive ideologies, such as liberalism, conservatism, and nationalism (Cunningham et al., 2022). A common feature of populism is the struggle between a virtuous and homogenous 'people' against the corrupt 'elite' that no longer represents its constituents, and the desire to exclude an 'other' that is believed to be seeking to usurp the status of the 'people' (Cunningham et al., 2022). As this thesis continues, it will become evident that far-right extremism has a populist component. It is also fascist. Defining fascism is contentious, however, Payne's set of characteristics (as cited in Cunningham et al., 2022), reproduced in Table 1, provides a useful summary of common ideas, goals, styles, and negations. As will be discussed later, all far-right extremist groups mentioned will have some if not all of the features set out by Payne.

Table 1: Payne's definition of fascism

PAYNE'S DEFINITION OF FASCISM	
A.	IDEOLOGY AND GOALS
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Espousal of an idealist, vitalist and voluntaristic philosophy, normally involving the attempt to realise a new modern, self-determined and secular culture• Creation of new nationalist authoritarian state not based on traditional principles or models.• Organisation of a new highly regulated, multi-class, integrated national economic structure, whether called national corporatist, national socialist, or national syndicalist• Positive evaluation and use of, or willingness to use, violence and war• The goal of empire, expansion, or a radical change in the nation's relationship with other powers
B.	THE FASCIST NEGATIONS
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Anti-liberalism• Anti-communism• Anti-conservatism (though with the understanding that fascist groups were willing to undertake temporary alliances with other sectors, most commonly with the right)
C.	STYLE AND ORGANISATION
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Attempted mass mobilization with militarization of political relationships and style and with the goal of a mass party militia• Emphasis on aesthetic structure of meetings, symbols and political liturgy, stressing emotional and mystical aspects• Extreme stress on the masculine principle and male dominance, while espousing a strongly organic view of society• Exaltation of youth above other phases of life, emphasising the conflict of generations, at least in effecting the initial political transformation• Specific tendency toward authoritarian, charismatic, personal style of command, whether or not the command is to some degree initially elective.

2.3 European New Right & Identitarian Movement

In the late 1960s a rise of New Right Movements throughout Europe in response to the New Left, involved a hatred of liberal internationalism and multiculturalism, a thorough critique of global capitalism, and, in one way or another, an identitarian form of race-based politics (Steinmetz-Jenkins, 2018). This movement was, and is still, devoted to striking down the hegemonic Western liberal-capitalist paradigm through cultural combat (Zúquete, 2018). Here, José Pedro Zúquete provides an apt description.

Taking their cue from Marxist Italian Antonio Gramsci-especially his insistence on the power of ideas and the need for an organic intellectual vanguard to change mentalities-adherents to this movement saw a metapolitical drive for the conquest of minds and spirits as a priority in order for a regenerated and yet again powerful Europe to emerge from the ashes of a decadent West. (Zúquete, 2018, p.7-8)

The original founders of the European New Right and Identitarian Movements tended to define their new position as something beyond traditional political divisions. Thus, Alain de Benoist founded the French New Right, as a reaction to the student and workers protests of 1968. The French New Right, labelled by French media as 'Nouvelle Droite' (New Right, ND), with Benoist as its major intellectual reference, produced an array of writings with the intent of establishing cultural counterpower for European societies (Zúquete, 2018). Although its status diminished during the 1980s, key ideas promoted by the movement and its leader influenced other movements, namely the American alt-right (Steinmetz-Jenkins, 2018).

2.4 American Alternative Right (alt-right)

Far-right extremism has a fairly storied history in the United States of America, which I will briefly mention here. As Nick Estes points out, the history of America is a history of settler colonialism, in which for the majority of its history, only white people could own and sell property, run for elections, and vote (Estes, 2019). Bickford and Clabough (2019) remark that far-right groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and the John Birch Society would emerge as racial, religious and ethnic minority groups made social, cultural, economic and political gains in US society. The KKK has historically advocated for white supremacy through violence, terror and intimidation to oppose immigration, integration and non-Protestant faiths, since its first wave that started in the American South soon after the US Civil War (Bickford & Clabough, 2019). At its height, The John Birch Society was the most prominent extreme far-right group in America, boasting a membership of around 100,000 in the mid-1960s, as they looked to combat the infiltration of communism into American life (Mittelstadt, 2022). These kinds of groups, along with other movements, would influence the emergence of the alt-right as Patrik Hermansson et al., note in their book titled *The International Alt-Right: Fascism for the 21st Century*.

While the Alternative Right is a distinct far-right movement, it is not an aberration conjured into existence in the last decade, nor is it born of fundamentally novel far-right ideas. Rather its distinctiveness is derived from the fact that it is a conglomeration of existing political and social movements that when fused together, created something new and different. It is, at its core, a convergence of three broad groups: the European New Right and Identitarian movement, the American Alternative Right and Online Antagonistic Communities. (Hermansson et al., 2020, p.2)

Gilbert and Elley (2020) claimed that the alt-right movement began on the internet and grew to prominence through its support of Donald Trump's 2016 US presidential election campaign. Williams (2017) argued that scholars and journalists, in search for the intellectual origins of Trumpism, Bannonomism, the so-called dark web, and more generally the alt-right, only later turned their attention to the influence of the French New Right. American Richard Spencer, a white nationalist who coined the term alt-right, has acknowledged the significant influence the French New Right movement has

played in his thinking about collective identities and cultural hegemony. Steve Bannon has also acknowledged the influence of Alain de Benoist. The American alt-right is focused on changing the ideological outlook of white Americans, pushing them to reject basic American values such as democracy and equality (Hawley, 2018). Hawley (2018) also states that despite there being no shortage of racism in white America, the number of people who support the alt-right's radical agenda remains small, which is why the alt-right looks to the internet for help. The alt-right is presently just as concerned with the viral spread of its ideology on the internet as with federal policy change. With the help of Online Antagonistic Communities, the alt-right's promotion of racist internet memes and slogans may lead to their ideas being more politically acceptable, allowing an eventual breakthrough of open and explicit white identity politics (Hawley, 2018).

According to Hermansson et al. (2020), the blend of European New Right ideas with the American far right can only be considered the alt-right when it is also merged with what they call Online Antagonistic Communities. They were built around various reactionary interests, and engaged in exclusionary, antagonistic behaviour 'through trolling, creating offensive symbolism or just espousing and voicing hatred and contempt' (Hermansson et al., 2020, p.4). These kinds of communities can be found on all parts of the political spectrum and can be non-political. However, when this behaviour was adopted by the alt-right their antagonism became directed at left/liberal politics (Hermansson et al., 2020). We only need to look at the communities that have been created on sites such as Reddit, Twitter or Facebook to see the antagonistic stances of the alt-right. During 2016 US presidential election, then-candidate Donald Trump and his campaign chief executive Steve Bannon, would energize the alt-right groups and help the movement reach a new audience, with the help of Online Antagonistic Communities. Trump's election revealed the success of this campaign. Many on the alt-right claimed that they played a pivotal role in Trump's victory, declaring that they 'memed him into office' (Hawley, 2018).

2.5 Far-Right Extremism in Aotearoa New Zealand: A Brief History

Far-right extremism is certainly not a new phenomenon for Aotearoa New Zealand. Historians have traced this multi-faceted phenomenon back to the late nineteenth century with the colonization of Māori and the ruling ideology's scientific racism. Also important was anti-Chinese discrimination, socially and institutionally, antisemitism during the interwar years, and skinhead racism from the 1980s.

In their book titled *Histories of Hate: The Radical Right in Aotearoa New Zealand* Cunningham et al. (2022), various authors discuss the history of far-right extremism, under the radical right rubric. Māori scholars Leonie Pihama and Cheryl Smith explore how scientific racism and the application of

biological concepts of natural selection to cultural interactions were used to reinforce British superiority. Māori were portrayed as savage, inferior and unfit. These perceptions justified the taking of Māori land and other resources (as cited in Cunningham et al., 2022). According to Cunningham et al. (2022), there were two aspects of the pre-World War II period, in the Aotearoa New Zealand context, that became crucial to understanding the postwar far-right.

One of these ideas was eugenics as a rationalization for racial hierarchy. Truby King was a key campaigner and founder of the infant health-focused Plunket society which grew out of concern with declining Pākehā fertility and a desire to preserve the quality of the Pākehā 'racial stock' (Cunningham et al., 2022). Anti-Chinese prejudice reflected moralistic as well as economic and racial anxieties. Organisations such as the Returned Soldiers' Association, Chambers of Commerce and trade unions opposed Asian immigration on the basis that it would undercut white wages and businesses (Cunningham et al., 2022). Brian Moloughney and John Stenhouse (as cited in Cunningham et al., 2022), suggest that there are links between these various threads of intolerance and that they can all be linked to 'colonial nationalism', or the desire to build a better Britain in the South Pacific. Thus 'Chinese gold miners and vegetable growers, Dalmatian gumdiggers, Assyrian and Hindu (Indian) hawkers, Māori prophets, and the mentally and physically "unfit"' were perceived as threats or impediments to idealistic nation building (Cunningham et al., 2022, p.20).

The second aspect crucial to understanding the postwar far-right is the emergence of ideologically extreme groups during the interwar years. A series of events including the Great War, the Bolshevik revolution and the Great Depression generated a sense of crisis which triggered this development (Cunningham et al., 2022). Anti-communist groups – The Loyal Citizens League, the Protestant Political Association and the Welfare League, all emerged towards the end of World War I or shortly after. Their central belief was that labour unrest in Aotearoa New Zealand was part of a wider conspiracy to bring down the British Empire. They had occasional influence on mainstream views, in both social and political realms (Cunningham et al., 2022). Antisemitic conspiracy grew during the Great Depression, and thus gave way to the radical monetary reform movement during the 1930s, which the Douglas Social Credit movement is best known for. Described as essentially a middle-class movement that represented the hopes and fears of small property owners who wished to rise economically, without jeopardizing their existing social position, the movement claimed to have 60,000 members in May 1933 with support spread especially strong in rural areas (La Rooij, 2002).

As in other countries, World War II represents an important breakpoint for the far-right extremists in Aotearoa New Zealand. Being openly antisemitic became much less tenable due to collective memory of the Holocaust. Accordingly, after the halfway point of the 20th century circumstances favoring

prejudice changed. Restrictions against Asian and South European immigration were removed bit by bit, to meet the increased workforce demands of a booming economy, and in some instances, as part of a more sympathetic response to ethnic diversity (Cunningham et al., 2022). Extreme ideas that were relatively mainstream before the war were becoming less acceptable; the centre was shifting, and the far-right extremism that eventually emerged was partially a response to this (Cunningham et al., 2022). In Aotearoa New Zealand from the 1980s, there were major social, political and demographic changes. The growing Māori population were moving to urban areas, women had entered the workforce, and the welfare state was receiving bipartisan consensus (Cunningham et al., 2022). Spoonley (1987b) explains that far-right extremism during the postwar period in Aotearoa New Zealand was a product of these changes. Some people felt like they no longer had the status or the power that they once had. Consequently far-right extremists sought to push back on these changes, and to somehow return to earlier times. There were dozens of far-right extremists' groups that were formed during this time, with many splintering or dissolving in the 1970s and 1980s. However, three groups in particular would go on to have ongoing significance, despite also being short lived (Cunningham et al., 2022).

The National Socialist Party of New Zealand, led by Colin King-Ansell, was the country's longest standing far-right torchbearer. They ran in several unsuccessful election campaigns in the 1970s (Cunningham et al., 2022). Their manifesto, which drew heavily from German-style Nazism, emphasized the maintenance of a homogeneous nation moulded from European stock, the repatriation of 'coloured people' and legislative moves to make inter-marriage illegal (Spoonley, 1987b). The party maintained a high public profile throughout the 1970s. Election material and publications were explicit. Pamphlets asked the white voter 'Have You Had Enough?' of what was described as 'overburdened and slum ridden areas' filled with 'coloured immigrants'. Their publication, *The Observer*, would regularly include articles about the arrival of lepers from the Pacific, alongside other racist writings from around the world (Spoonley, 1987b). The party disbanded in 1980.

The National Front which appeared in Aotearoa New Zealand in 1967, as an offshoot of the British group of the same name, has since housed many of New Zealand's most infamous far-right extremist figures, including Colin King-Ansell, Kerry Bolton, Kyle Chapman and Anton Foljambe (Cunningham et al., 2022). Those involved have also been key members of various like-minded organisations. Chapman for example set up the Right-Wing Resistance as the street arm of the National Alliance, another far-right extremist political party comprising a coalition of the National Front and other smaller groups (Ford, 2021). Taking after its British counterpart, the National Front shared the same objective, which was to preserve the 'British race' (Spoonley, 1987b). The National Front in Aotearoa New Zealand, dissolved and recreated several times since it came onto the scene, is currently being led by King-Ansell but has since been fairly quiet following the Christchurch Mosque shootings of March 2019.

The League of Rights, a branch of the Australian movement of the same name was founded by Eric Butler who was a follower of the Douglas Credit movement (Cunningham et al., 2022). Cunningham et al. succinctly outline its trajectory.

The League was officially launched in New Zealand in 1970 and combined fervent British patriotism and racism with the 'purist' Douglas Credit tradition it inherited after the split in the movement. It produced considerable amount of propaganda – including a steady stream of anonymous letters to major newspapers – and founded or worked with dozens of other radical-right groups before it folded in the early 2000s. (Cunningham et al., 2022, p.26)

A common thread amongst all of the groups that emerged during this period is the interconnection of ideologues and personnel.

From English skinhead subcultures of the late 1960s in the late 1960s, similar groups emerged in various locations around New Zealand during the late 1970s, most prominently in Christchurch (Gilbert & Elley, 2020). The skinhead gangs were a product of neoliberal economic policy changes which had triggered a recession during 1991. New Zealand experienced its most significant rise in unemployment since the Great Depression. The consequence of this sharp economic recession was the creation of social conditions that were critical to gang formation (Gilbert & Elley, 2020). There was a rise of Pākehā street gangs in the 1990s, often with neo-fascist and white power tendencies. In Christchurch, skinheads became a central expression due to the high Pākehā population and its reputation for conservatism (Cunningham et al., 2022). Alongside the economic woes that would produce these skinhead gangs, was an influx of migrants which created tension among those who saw them as unwanted outsiders. Anti-immigrant sentiment was a rallying cry, especially in regard to Asian immigrants (Gilbert & Elley, 2020).

Spoonley (1987a), conducted Aotearoa New Zealand's first investigation of non-patched gangs, identifying the rise of skinheads reflecting music and National Front influences from Britain. Local groups were frequently involved in racially motivated activity. Spoonley warned of their potential dangers and was proven correct when skinheads burst into national consciousness in the 1990s. It was at a time when the internet had emerged and white supremacist literature from overseas was easily spread. Groups in Aotearoa New Zealand were being impacted by skinhead movements, in either Britain, America, or Australia. According to Gilbert and Elley (2020), the most significant pop-culture influence came when an Australian film depicting the struggles of Melbourne skinheads, *Romper Stomper*, was released in 1992. The film, starring Russell Crowe, became a cult classic and had many youths seeking to mimic the lifestyle and beliefs shown in the film (Gilbert & Elley, 2020).

The most feared of all skinhead gangs was the Fourth Reich. Founded in a Christchurch prison in the early 1990s, it was a small but hardcore gang that developed a presence in Christchurch, Nelson,

Greymouth, Timaru, and Dunedin (Cunningham et al., 2022). Members were involved in four murders, three of which appear to have been motivated by skinhead ideology (Cunningham et al., 2022). Hemi Hutley, who was Māori, was murdered in 1997; James Bambrough, who was gay, was murdered in 1999; and Jae Hyeon Kim, who was a Korean tourist, was picked up and killed while hitchhiking in 2003 (Cunningham et al., 2022). By the 2000s, the skinhead scene had almost disappeared and the overt racism of the street had changed into something else entirely (Cunningham et al., 2022). Cunningham et al. remarked that 'This more recent 'alternative right' (alt-right) movement avoided many aspects of skinhead culture, such as the emphasis on violence and gang activity, tending to be much more focused on ideology and politics' (Cunningham et al., 2022, p.232).

2.6 Alt-right in Aotearoa New Zealand

The alt-right is something recent for Aotearoa New Zealand and presents a whole set of new challenges. From groups such as Action Zealandia to media platforms such as Counterspin, far-right extremist ideology is being promoted, with scholars pointing to international influence of the alt-right as a primary reason.

Gilbert and Elley (2020) have claimed that the alt-right share many of the ideas and conspiracy beliefs as former far-right and white supremacy movements. However, their demographics and mode of engagement are significantly different. The alt-right movement is mainly comprised of middle class young white males who use the internet to engage. According to Spoonley and Morris (2022), such groups with a strong identitarian focus began to appear in Aotearoa New Zealand during and after the publicity gained by alt-right organisations in 2016 during the US presidential election. Formed in 2018, the Dominion Movement described itself as a 'youth-oriented brotherhood of nationalists committed to the revitalization of European culture and identity in New Zealand' (Clark, 2023). They faded from view after the Christchurch Mosque shootings of March 2019, especially once the media and security agencies outed members as extremists with connections to international neo-Nazi groups. But it was soon replaced by Action Zealandia which was formed in July 2019. A leaked manual from the new organization revealed a significant membership overlap with the Dominion Movement (Spoonley & Morris, 2022).

Gilbert and Elley (2020) observed that after the Christchurch Mosque shootings of March 2019 many pointed to the Australian nationality of the attacker, and the lack of a local white supremacist involvement. But this did not mean that there was no significant concentration of white supremacists in Aotearoa New Zealand. In fact, the attack was the expression of an international far-right movement that had taken root in Aotearoa New Zealand long before but had gone largely unnoticed up until that point. As Byron Clark remarked 'The terror in Christchurch wasn't the arrival of the alt-right on these

shores; it had been growing here for years. White nationalists groups had emerged in 2017 and 2018, far-right activists who in the past would have struggled to find a platform', had built sizeable audiences online, radicalizing many in the process, including the Christchurch terrorist (Clark, 2023, p.5).

Fifty-one Muslim worshipers were murdered in terrorist attacks on the Al Noor Mosque and Linwood Islamic Centre in Christchurch on 15 March 2019, with many more injured. This was livestreamed online and highlighted the need to combat violent extremism and terrorism in Aotearoa New Zealand (Comerford et al., 2021). Many, if not all researchers, have pointed to the terrorist's ideology to explain the atrocity. A self-proclaimed eco-fascist (a trend in environmentalism which regards people as a blight on the earth) had stated that his hatred of migrants was because they come from groups that were overpopulating and besieging the white population. His manifesto, posted online before the attacks, declared that we must 'kill the overpopulation and by doing so save the environment' (Durie, 2019). The terrorist made clear in 'The Great Replacement' manifesto, that he was executing this atrocity all in the name of saving Western civilisation (Clark, 2023). He took the title from the French, *le grand remplacement*, a phrase which linked the fear about the demographic future of France with a looming 'white genocide' (Durie, 2019). The terrorist also made it clear he had primary connections to white supremacist groups appearing online, through websites like 8chan (imageboard website similar to 4chan). His manifesto was littered with familiar far-right extremist ideology, including popular QAnon conspiracy theories (Gilbert & Elley, 2020). This demonstrates the influence that the alt-right and far-right, especially the American alt-right, can have, if someone in a relatively remote location can be ideologically influenced to commit an atrocity all because of the movement's ideology. It is also evidence of the extensive internet and social media ecosystem that the alt-right and far-right extremists have created and maintained over the years.

Researchers from Aotearoa New Zealand have looked into how much of the disinformation and misinformation that circled around Aotearoa New Zealand during the COVID-19 pandemic was imported from the US. Marques et al. (2022) argued that the far-right extremist movement in Aotearoa New Zealand was heavily influenced, if not a direct copy, of the movement in the USA with similar ideas, modes of communication and conspiracy theories. They argued further, with a study to support their argument, that there was a link between someone's political ideology and their heightened or reduced belief in conspiracy theories. 'Research has found that belief in conspiracy theories is strongest for those on the political right' (Marques et al., 2022, p.3). This may explain why the far-right use conspiracy theories to spread disinformation. Researchers Byron Clark and Dylan Reeves have argued that the type of mis and disinformation that people are engaging with is pushing them towards more right-wing and conservative opinions and beliefs. In terms of more direct links to the US Alt-

Right, outfits such as Counterspin or Action Zealandia are evidence of this, as is the spreading of conspiracy theories, such as QAnon.

Counterspin is an online media platform and has been described as one of the largest platforms for conspiracy theories and far-right ideology in Aotearoa New Zealand (Clark, 2023). It was launched in 2021 on GTV, a platform started by dissident Chinese billionaire Guo Wengui, and former Trump advisor and the driving force behind right-wing Breitbart News, Steve Bannon. A Graphica Research report in 2021 stated that the GTV acts as a prolific producer and amplifier of mis- and disinformation, including claims of voter fraud in the US, false information about COVID-19, and QAnon narratives (Graphica, 2021). For Clark (2022) Counterspin has knowingly acted as a producer and spreader of misinformation and disinformation, most notably during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even after the demise of GTV in March 2022, due to Guo's legal troubles, Counterspin has not missed a beat and has since moved to Canadian video sharing website Rumble, which has far fewer rules than YouTube, as well as banned.video, which is part of the network of websites operated by American far-right radio show host and prominent conspiracy theorist Alex Jones (Clark, 2023). Counterspin imports most of its talking points from overseas, especially America, and repackages it to include New Zealand. Most rhetoric is from the alt-right in America, such as anti-government, anti-LGBT or antivax. Because Counterspin operates solely online, and there being no equivalent of the New Zealand Broadcasting Standards Authority for online content, anything can be promoted with no consequence (Clark, 2023). I will return to Counterspin in Chapters 4 and 5.

Action Zealandia emerged in August of 2019, and described themselves as a community for European New Zealanders and a movement of young nationalists. Action Zealandia draw inspiration and ideas from the French Nouvelle Droite (New Right), contemporary extreme far-right movements such as the European Identitarians as well as the American Alt-Right, specifically the Rise Above Movement (R.A.M), a white supremacist group based in Southern California (Comerford et al. 2021). Independent researcher Byron Clark has a chapter dedicated to Action Zealandia in his book titled *Fear*, which looks into Aotearoa New Zealand's hostile underworld of extremists. In an anonymous post on imageboard website, 4chan, Action Zealandia was announced on 2 August 2019, as a new youth based nationalist movement with Self-Improvement, European Identity, Community Building, Nationalism and Sustainability listed as its core ideals (Clark, 2023). In the same post we see more influence from America, when towards the end it says, 'the Overton Window continues to shrink'. The Overton window is named after American policy analyst Joseph Overton and is the idea that there is a window of political ideas that are acceptable in mainstream discussion at any given time, a well-used phrase among the alt-right (Clark, 2023). Much like Counterspin, Action Zealandia peddle the same views as other American alt-right groups, and like them have become openly racist, anti-Semitic and

Islamophobic in their communications. Further, much like all outfits of the same ilk, they have become spreaders of QAnon narratives.

Since the 2020s, QAnon has been described as a 'big tent' conspiracy theory with existing conspiracy theories incorporated into their worldview. The narrative reads like a modern take on the millennia-old 'blood libel' conspiracy, which alleged that Jewish people would kidnap and kill Christian children and use their blood in matzo bread. It first came to be in a number of posts on a 4chan message board, by a person claiming to be a US government insider, outlining a sprawling conspiracy that detailed how Donald Trump is the hero who will stop the blood libel. QAnon has become arguably the main recruiter, in recent times, for the alt-right. It acts as an easy entry point for people to fall down the rabbit hole and begin believing in more far-right ideologies. A report from the Institute for Strategic Dialogue found that during the period in which researchers monitored social media, New Zealanders sent the second highest number of QAnon-related tweets per capita, 1500 tweets per 100,000 internet users, behind only the US at 3000 (Clark, 2023). This trend worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.7 The Far-Right Extremist Internet Ecosystem

Far-right extremist online presence is not new. Baele et al. (2020) cites the establishment of Stormfront in 1995 as one of the earliest examples of the far-right extremist movement using digital technologies to communicate and spread their content. Since then, the movement has only grown in scale online. Gaudette et al. (2020) states that there is a growing body of evidence suggesting that the Internet is a key facilitator of violent far-right extremism. Other researchers such as Holt et al (2020) have argued similarly that the Internet, specifically social media, has played a key role in the rise of far-right extremism, offline as well as online. It's this online to offline dimension that is worrying for researchers, as well as policymakers and publics. Increasing levels of regular Internet access and the production and easy availability of large amounts of far-right extremist content may have violent radicalizing effects (Conway, 2016). In the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, the Christchurch terrorist attacks justify this concern. It is evident that he was known and radicalized within online far-right extremist communities on message board websites 4chan and 8chan. Baele et al. (2020) have described the far-right extremist online ecosystem as vast, dynamic, multidimensional, and heterogenous. They characterized the far-right extremist online ecosystem as having four key elements: entities, communities, biotopes, and whole network. These can be summarized as follows.

Entities are individual domains which could for example be a Facebook group page, a forum, or a blog (Baele et al., 2020). As Holt et al. (2020) states, these entities are a vital resource among the far-right extremism movement as they allow individuals to spread propaganda that supports their ideology to individuals who may have otherwise been out of reach physically. Facebook group pages have been

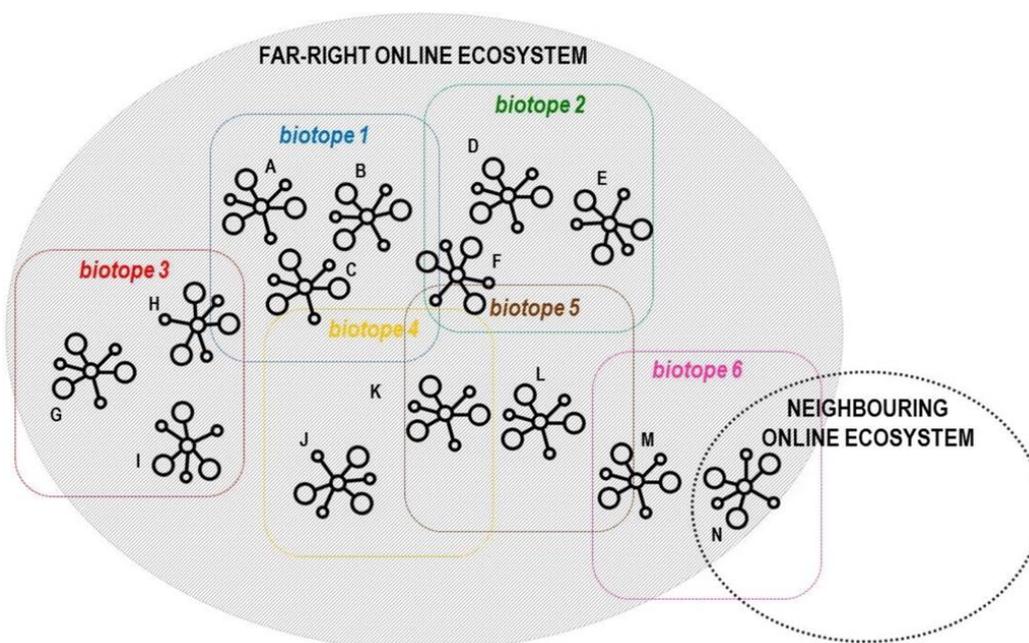
used as a tool to recruit and spread propaganda, despite the recent crackdown by the platform on hate speech and far-right extremism. Research into the use of Facebook group pages in Britain revealed that there were vast entities in play, with one of the more popular pages called Britain First having nearly 700,000 likes (Klein & Muis, 2019).

Within the far-right ecosystem a multitude of entities are linked together as communities (Baele et al., 2020). In some instances, these communities can be location specific, such as the far-right extremists in Aotearoa New Zealand. In other instances, they can correspond to a particular niche or take on a particular identity within far-right ideological subcultures, such as specific white supremacist groups (Baele et al., 2020). Communities are dynamic. Their niche may change, their location may change, and they may become transnational. The entities that they were once linked to may no longer be linked.

Simply put, biotopes are groupings of communities that share an ideological, thematic, or cultural sub-identity within the umbrella of the far-right ecosystem (Baele et al., 2020). Much like communities, biotopes are dynamic and often overlap with each other. The alt-right can be considered a biotope within the far-right ecosystem, simultaneously consisting of white supremacist and ethno-nationalist, amongst other communities.

The whole network can be termed the far-right online ecosystem. It is the entities, communities, and biotopes that make this network. It is dynamic and as figure 1 suggests boundaries with other neighbouring ecosystems are blurred.

Figure 1: a generic model of the far-right online ecosystem (Baele et al., 2020).



While there are other online sites that have garnered a reputation for being a hub and breeding ground for far-right extremists, such as Reddit, 4chan or 8chan, this research also considers a more recent phenomenon, the online instant messaging platform, Telegram. Launched in 2013 by two Russian brothers, Nikolai and Pavel Durov (Bovet & Grindrod, 2022), it is a free and open-source instant messaging platform that boasts an estimated 700 million global monthly users as of December 2022 (Telegram Statistics, 2023). Because it offers end-to-end encryption of messages, voice and video calls, it is popular for far-right extremists and other fringe groups looking to conduct illegal activities.

A major factor in the initial and ongoing popularity of Telegram is the deplatforming of some accounts on mainstream social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram and YouTube, due to the breaking of their rules. Affected individuals and groups included, according to one account, white nationalists, anti-semites, alt-right adherents and neo-nazis (Rogers, 2020). Most of those who have been deplatformed are far-right extremists (Rogers, 2020). Although this was treated as the antidote to the toxicity of online communities and the mainstreaming of extreme speech (Pohjonen & Udupa, 2017), it also triggered the migration of many to alternative sites, such as Telegram. Unlike mainstream social media, Telegram promotes less restrictive free speech policies and does not enforce extensive content removal guidelines (Walther & McCoy, 2021). The lack of regulations has made Telegram a desirable platform for far-right extremists.

There has been a recent growth in research concerning the far-right on alternative social media sites such as Telegram. Bovet and Grindrod (2022) researched the organisation and evolution of the UK far-right extremist network on Telegram. Gilbert (2023) investigated how Telegram was breeding far-right extremists in the US. Zehring and Domahidi (2023) analysed how the far-right in Germany used Telegram to support dissemination of their views. All these researchers would agree that the far-right extremist network on Telegram is decentralised and divided mostly along ideological and national lines. According to Urman and Katz (2022), the most influential communities on Telegram within the far-right extremist network, are those related to the 4chan imageboard and those who are supporters of former US President, Donald Trump. His influence on the far-right extremist movement, and the alt-right specifically, cannot be ignored.

2.8 Donald Trump

Donald Trump is a right-wing populist, whose rhetoric has appealed to xenophobic elements among American voters. There is no compelling evidence that he is a white nationalist who seeks a pure white ethnostate (Hawley, 2018). Nevertheless, the alt-right and far-right extremists became excited and threw their support behind Donald Trump (Hawley, 2018).

Throughout his long career as a public figure, Trump has not maintained consistent ideological position; at times he was to the left of the Republican Party, and at other times far to its right (Hawley, 2018). However, there are some consistent themes, such as his long record of criticizing China and his generally positive stance toward Russia, or his generally anti-immigration stance, all positions that please the alt-right. Trump campaigned on a message of 'draining the swamp' in an attempt to paint himself as an outsider to what is Washington politics. This gained him support among the far-right and the alt-right.

Trump echoed many far-right talking points about immigrants in the speech that launched his campaign. He referred to Mexican immigrants as rapists and criminals and made race and racism major topics in American media (Hawley, 2018). The alt-right was thus able to use this to inject itself into the national conversation, becoming a jubilant cheerleader for Trump (Mondon & Vaughan, 2021). So, when Trump regularly criticized the media for spreading fake news, the alt-right and far-right extremists applauded these attacks, as they had frequently claimed that mainstream media were biased against them. These attacks on the media also influenced the migration of the far-right to alternative sites, such as Telegram.

Bringing in Steve Bannon, who served as Trump's campaign chief executive before serving as Chief White House Strategist during Trump's first year in office, would have also enthused the alt-right. Much like Trump, Bannon had no experience in politics. As Green (2017) points out, 'He was a bomb thrower and an outsider with no experience operating the levers of government, a man with a gift for making enemies, and someone whose habit it was to feud bitterly with those whom he disagreed' (p.1). His presence on Trump's campaign team was controversial, providing further evidence that Trump was friendly with the alt-right. Bannon encouraged Trump to maintain his right-wing populist platform and his attacks on Hillary Clinton (Hawley, 2018).

Bannon had a successful career in the military, serving as a naval officer before earning his MBA from Harvard and working for Goldman Sachs, as well as having a short stint as an executive producer in Hollywood. Part of his wealth came from his stake in the television program *Seinfeld*, before he eventually joined Breitbart News as executive chair in 2012 when the founder, Andrew Breitbart, passed away (Hawley, 2018). Breitbart News was already one of the most popular online media outlets for conservative news and opinion, with a strong populist and confrontational style, and a willingness to engage in racial 'dog-whistling'. Under Bannon it became even more explicitly right-nationalist, and by 2015 it had become a Trump propaganda machine (Hawley, 2018). Bannon has openly admitted that Breitbart is a platform for the alt-right, which is evident in the promotion of racist, anti-Semitic, conspiracy stories on the media site (Feltus et al., 2018).

2.9 Alt-right, far-right extremism and COVID-19

Ciaran O'Connor (as cited in Klepper & Hinnant, 2021), an analyst at the London-based Institute for Strategic Dialogue, observed that the pandemic was a catalyst for radicalization. It allowed far-right extremists, alt-right groups, and conspiracy theorists to create simple narratives of us versus them, good versus evil. These narratives designated the far-right extremists or the alt-right as heroes in the impending crisis, whether it be a societal collapse, biblical rapture, or a race war. Such narratives have long been key in drawing in followers for these movements (Wilson, 2020) Graham Macklin, a researcher who focuses on extremism at the University of Oslo, offered a short summary on the broad response the far-right had to COVID-19 in the US.

The far-right response to COVID-19 has, more broadly, ranged from denial to apocalypticism. For some, like prominent US conspiracy theorist Alex Jones, it was an opportunity to push quack "cures" which led the Food and Drug Administration to order him to stop making bogus claims about products marketed on his show. For others the pandemic afforded an opportunity to advance longstanding anti-vaccine agendas, now incorporating a concerted effort to sow distrust about any future inoculation efforts to combat COVID-19 whilst those who "categorically reject" vaccination clearly pose an ongoing threat to public health. There are some indications of a growing convergence between the far right and anti-vaccination protestors who represent a voluble component of US anti-lockdown protests. (Macklin, 2020)

Some myths about the origin of COVID-19 included that, the virus was created in a Chinese laboratory, the virus was a Chinese bio-weapon, the pandemic was created as a plot for Jewish to control the world, and 5G was the cause of the pandemic. These myths about the origin of COVID-19 were disseminated by alt-right and far-right extremists online. All advanced the narrative that there were bad people out to get you. Only the alt-right and far-right knew about it and could do something to stop it. These origin narratives all have specific appeal to racist and xenophobic discourses (The Disinformation Project, 2021). Far-right groups stated that the government was lying about the severity of the virus, or that it was a hoax to enact its 'draconian' laws. Those in Aotearoa New Zealand pointed to the COVID-19 contact tracing system and claimed it was a form of mass surveillance (Clark, 2023). The vaccine mandates were seen as more attempts by the government to control people. Conspiratorial discourses on the lack of trust in the government, within the far-right and alt-right ecologies, are all too common. In summary these discourses claimed that the government would lead society into a dystopian future, where we would live in a dictatorship, being forced to comply or be killed (Clark, 2023).

Macklin (2020) also pointed to the growing convergence between the far-right and anti-vaccination protestors in the US. In Aotearoa New Zealand, the Parliamentary occupation and protest was evidence of the convergence, as far-right extremist ideology pervaded the occupation. One of the more outlandish myths about vaccination that the far-right and alt-right disseminated, claimed that Bill

Gates had put microchips in the vaccine, to keep track of those who took it (Macklin, 2020). Bill Gates is a longstanding enemy of the far-right (Treichler, 2022). All these myths, conspiracy theories and disinformation disseminated by far-right extremists and the alt-right undermined trust in government responses to the pandemic, public health responses, verifiable expert guidance, and scientific facts. Together, these tendencies undermined the public sphere and public health principles.

Chapter 3: Pandemic, Infodemic in Aotearoa New Zealand

3.1 The Initial Arrival of COVID-19 and Pandemic Response

According to Rothan and Byrareddy (2020), COVID-19 is caused by SARS-COV2 and represents the agent of a potentially fatal disease, based on the large number of infected people that were exposed to it in Wuhan City, China, and beyond. On January 30th in 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the epidemic a global health emergency (Rothan & Byrareddy, 2020). On February 28th, Aotearoa New Zealand reported its first known case of COVID-19. A person in their 60s had travelled to Auckland from Iran, resulting in the government placing restrictions on people travelling from that country (Strongman, 2020). By March 5th the first case of local transmission involved a man from Auckland who was infected by a family member who had recently returned from Iran. A fortnight later, on March 18th, the government implemented strict border measures, including a 14-day self-isolation for anyone entering the country. Aotearoa New Zealand closed its borders to all but citizens and permanent residents as more and more cases were caught at the border (Strongman, 2020). These restrictions would set the tone for what was to come in terms of the government's policy response. Aotearoa New Zealand adopted a virus elimination strategy very early on in the pandemic.

On March 21st, a few days after the borders closed, the government introduced a four-level alert system, in an effort to help combat COVID-19. Level one meant the disease was contained, level two meant there are risks of community transmission growing, level three meant there was a heightened risk that the disease was not contained, and level four meant that the disease was not contained (Strongman, 2020). At the time it was announced, Aotearoa New Zealand was at level two. Only two days later, on March 23rd, the country would move to level three due to a couple of cases being treated as community transmission unlinked to overseas travel (New Zealand Doctor, 2021). The Prime Minister also announced that people were to stay at home for 48 hours, with schools and other educational facilities to be closed, alongside all non-essential businesses, before the country was to move to alert level four. At that point only essential businesses such as supermarkets, pharmacies and medical clinics were to remain open. People were instructed to stay at home with strict social distancing measures, managed border quarantine, rationed supplies, and limited domestic travel. There was also a major reprioritization of healthcare services (Varghese & Wu, 2020). On March 25th, the government declared a state of emergency, as the country prepared to go into level four lockdown at midnight for a minimum of four weeks (Strongman, 2020). Peeni Henare, the Minister of Civil Defence, explained that under these conditions the government had the powers to slow the spread of COVID-19 and reduce its impact, whether it be by closing roads, prohibiting traffic, excluding people from certain places, or bringing in further legislative changes (Small, 2020). Aotearoa New Zealand

would report its first COVID-19 related death only a few days into lockdown on March 29th; a woman in her 70s from the West Coast region (New Zealand Doctor, 2021).

By mid-April 2020, the death toll was at 12, with the total number of active cases sitting at 555. On April 20th the Prime Minister announced that alert level four lockdown would last until April 27th, before the country moved to alert level three for two weeks (Strongman, 2020). Level three also meant a change to what businesses could be open. This allowed for food outlets such as McDonalds to operate as long as they did so with strict physical distancing practices in place (Strongman, 2020). By June 8th, the Ministry of Health would report that there were no active cases of COVID-19 in Aotearoa New Zealand, allowing for the country to move to alert level one, with border controls to continue. Aotearoa New Zealand would experience 102 days of being free of any new cases in the community until the beginning of August when four new cases were discovered, putting Auckland back into level three (with the rest of the country moving to level two) (New Zealand Doctor, 2021). For the next year or so, Aotearoa New Zealand would still be employing an elimination strategy, going through periods with less restrictions, to periods with more restrictions.

Vaccination began in February 2021, with vaccinators being the first recipients before border and Managed Isolation Quarantine (MIQ) workers, and the people they lived with (New Zealand Government, 2021). Frontline workers and people living in high-risk settings were the next group to receive the vaccine along with priority populations (meaning those who were at a higher risk of catching COVID-19 such as immunocompromised older citizens). The rest of the population started receiving vaccinations from July 2021. They were free of charge and could be administered through pop-up vaccination centers, pharmacies, health care facilities, and hospitals, as part of the New Zealand Government's COVID-19 strategy, which included equitable access to vaccines (Hunt & Bradwell-Pollak, 2022). As mentioned earlier, it wasn't a perfect operation. There were criticisms during the vaccination rollout, ones that have rightly continued throughout, such as not prioritizing Māori and Pasifika health (which will hopefully be taken into consideration when a counter-strategy to the next pandemic is created). The Waitangi Tribunal found that the decision, from Cabinet, to not take advice from officials to adjust the age brackets for Māori in the rollout breached the treaty principles of active protection and equity (Waitangi Tribunal, 2021). There were also criticisms from leaders within the Pacific community about the lack of engagement with their communities during the vaccine rollout, especially given that there were high numbers of COVID-19 infections among Pasifika (Rovoi, 2021). These valid criticisms notwithstanding, vaccination rollout in Aotearoa New Zealand was generally successful.

According to Hunt and Bradwell-Pollak (2022), the data shows that by November 2022, 84% of the eligible Māori population and 90.3% of the eligible Pacific population had received both doses of the COVID-19 vaccine. This compared to 90.7% of the New Zealand European population and 92.7% of the New Zealand Asian population. Despite a very vocal minority of people speaking against the vaccinations, statistics suggest that the rollout was a success. Despite misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy theories about the effects of the vaccine, or what was in them, most of the eligible population went and got vaccinated.

3.2 Delta and Omicron Variants

In June 2021, the first confirmed case of the Delta variant of COVID-19 was caught at the border, before making its way into the community by 17th August 2021 (New Zealand Doctor, 2021). COVID-19 is prone to mutations, with some causing the virus to weaken or become less contagious. However, the Delta variant has multiple mutations, which is thought to have made it more transmissible and more likely to bypass the human immune system (Altez & Hamdy, 2021). Nationwide vaccination rollout was in its early stages when the Delta variant was detected in the community. Over the following four months, around 9000 cases were detected, mainly in Auckland, which was moved to Alert level four not long after the first Delta case was detected. At this point 94% of the eligible population had received at least one dose of the vaccine (Vattiato et al., 2023). Aotearoa New Zealand was still aiming for elimination, but as another variant called Omicron was discovered around the world towards the end of 2021, the Government announced the COVID-19 Protection Framework (Traffic Lights). This signaled a formal move away from elimination to mitigation (Trnka, 2022). It was during the outbreak of the Omicron variant, between the end of 2021 and beginning of 2022, that the volume of misinformation and disinformation steadily increased in Aotearoa New Zealand (The Disinformation Project, 2022). The convoy and Parliament protest coincided with these developments.

3.3 Vaccination Mandates

In October 2021, six months after the initial COVID-19 lockdown in Aotearoa New Zealand, COVID-19 vaccinations were mandated for most police, firefighters, healthcare workers, and teachers (Trnka, 2022). It required these workers to be double vaccinated by specific deadlines, or they would lose their job if another arrangement for a non-public role could not be found. The second mandate required anyone that would be entering public premises such as restaurants or retail shops to show proof of double vaccination. These were called vaccine certificates or passes, and only access to essential services, such as grocery stores and pharmacies were exempt. On October 13th, the 'My Covid Record' site was launched, which allowed individuals to access COVID-19 vaccine records for their vaccination pass certificates needed for travel or other vaccine mandated activities (The University of Auckland,

2023). There were three official records that individuals could use as proof of vaccination status, My Vaccine Record, My Vaccine Pass, and an International Travel Vaccination Certificate, all of which could be obtained via the 'My Covid Record' website (He Puna Waiora, 2023). Mandates were rescinded in early April 2022 (Trnka, 2022).

While initial vaccination uptake was positive, once these mandates were announced and implemented, dissent grew. Anti-vaccination protests sprouted up in the streets and parks of the big cities, and were fueled by losses of jobs because of mandates, the concerns over freedom and bodily rights, and the rising cost of living (Trnka, 2022). The protests attracted a mix of attendees. There were some teachers and nurses, plus other mandated professions, who had most likely lost their jobs due to mandates. There were members of religious communities, such as Brian Tamaki and Destiny Church, and their supporters. All protestors claimed the government had created two tiers of citizenship based on vaccination status (Trnka, 2022). As with all the other factors that came into play during the COVID-19 pandemic, mandates, and the conversation around them, energized anti-vaccination demonstrations and protests. Despite what seemed to be a somewhat successful pandemic response, Aotearoa New Zealand was still not immune to what accompanied the pandemic, namely the infodemic.

3.4 COVID-19 and Infodemic Spread

Echoing what happened all around the world, the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in Aotearoa New Zealand was accompanied by an infodemic. Aotearoa New Zealand's experienced an infodemic of misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy theories, similar to international patterns but with significant local themes and impacts (Soar et al. 2020). A few scholars in Aotearoa New Zealand have looked into the infodemic of disinformation that came about during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since February 2020, TDP researchers have been studying the spread of misinformation and disinformation within Aotearoa New Zealand. Infodemic effects seen elsewhere in the world were also occurring domestically, a worrying trend that needed urgent attention (The Disinformation Project, 2021). They found that increasing amounts of 'US-style content' had been filtering into the country's information ecosystem since the American elections of 2020. In 2021, they argued that COVID-19 specific disinformation involved 'a number of key trends and observations: an increase of both posts and engagement across an ecology of platforms; a shift in reception to the COVID-19 vaccine from vaccine hesitancy to vaccine resistance' (The Disinformation Project, 2021, p.9).

According to WHO (2023), the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, affects your lungs, airways and other organs. Millions of deaths occurred around the world and there were lasting health problems for many who have survived the illness. On these facts most agree, but not

everyone. TDP researchers (2021) studied the misinformation and disinformation surrounding COVID-19 in Aotearoa New Zealand during the first lockdown from March to May 2020, and identified several narratives circulating on social media and in mainstream media discourse. They reflected ‘distrust in governmental, inter-governmental and intra-governmental official health information regarding the virus and its effects’. Also evident was skepticism about ‘the origin of the virus, including denial of its existence; and health and wellbeing narratives grounded in rejection of mainstream medical advice’ (The Disinformation Project, 2021, p.7).

3.4.1 Distrust in government

Narratives concerning the distrust some had in the government regarding COVID-19 included conspiratorial discourses criticizing political leaders for allegedly over-reporting or misrepresenting the severity of the virus to justify the encroachment on personal freedoms. There was a conspiracy theory that the pandemic was part of a global agenda to enact restrictions of freedom, led by evil elites, who had been dictating to our government (Clark & Stoakes, 2023). Another one suggested that the restrictions employed to slow the spread of the virus, such as lockdowns, were a part of a plan to make the population docile subjects dependent on the government (Reeve, 2022a). It must also be noted though that lack of trust in the government may also be attributed to the contexts of colonization, systemic racism, government policy failures and underfunding and under-resourcing of public health. The latter is particularly true for Māori, Pasifika and other groups who experience inequitable access to healthcare (The Disinformation Project, 2021). We will focus on the conspiratorial discourses, but it is also important to note the other sources of distrust.

‘Rights and freedoms’ is a phrase that was thrown around a lot over the course of the pandemic in Aotearoa New Zealand, with some believing that the government’s response to mitigate the effects of the virus was oppression. Others went further by stating that the government was lying about the severity of the virus, or that it was a hoax, to enact ‘draconian’ laws. It was also suggested that the COVID-19 contact tracing system was a form of mass surveillance (Clark, 2023). Conspiratorial discourses on the lack of trust in the government often included the claim that the government was leading society into a dystopian future, in which a dictatorship would force people to comply (Clark, 2023). The conspiratorial discourses in Aotearoa New Zealand that featured a distrust in the government narrative echoed international ones. However, most local discourses focused specifically on Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern. Some believed that she was destroying society and turning Aotearoa New Zealand into a communist country (Miller, 2023). Jacinda was the ‘dictator’ or ‘tyrannical leader’ in these discourses, one hellbent on gaining power and taking away people’s freedoms.

3.4.2 The origin of the virus

Narratives about where COVID-19 originated include a variety of discourses surrounding the supposed power grab by China (The Disinformation Project, 2021). Terms such as ‘China virus’ and ‘Wuhan flu’ were used, and blame for the pandemic was put on China, the Chinese government, and subsequently Chinese residents around the world (Chen, 2021). These narratives were emboldened by US President Donald Trump, who repeatedly referred to COVID-19 as the ‘Chinese virus’ and described the pandemic as the worst attack in US history, more so than Pearl Harbor and 9/11 (Peters, 2020). These narratives, which all have appeal to racist and xenophobic discourses, engaged with long-held fears from people and governments about the role of China in a changing global structure (The Disinformation Project, 2021).

Some views were explicitly xenophobic, such as one that claimed that the virus came about due to the lack of hygiene of Chinese, or because of their culture and diet (The Disinformation Project, 2021). Others claimed that something nefarious was going on, in that the virus escaped from a lab in Wuhan, and the Chinese government had covered it up (despite there being not a single piece of data suggesting this) (Holmes, 2022). One popular claim among conspiracy theorists, was the idea that the virus was bioengineered into a bioweapon by China to cripple the West and take over the world. Another was that the virus came from 5G, and that China was weaponizing it (this resulted in some 5G sites around Aotearoa New Zealand being vandalized) (Reeve, 2022a). During the course of the infodemic, Aotearoa New Zealand saw an increase in racist behaviour towards Asian New Zealanders (Foon, 2020).

3.4.3 Health & Wellbeing

Narratives that were related to health and wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic would interchange with the bodily rights and freedom discourses (The Disinformation Project 2021). These narratives built on the mistrust of Western medicine and medical science, demonizes medical interventions such as vaccination, and embraces alternative health. These viewpoints were not new but found increasing support during the COVID-19 pandemic (Demuru, 2022). Observed during the pandemic was the symbiosis of health and wellness narratives with conspiracy theories, such as anti-vax claims that the virus was created in a lab to control people’s bodies, minds, and behaviors (Demuru, 2022). Claims that hydroxychloroquine, an antimalarial medication, was highly effective at combating the virus was boosted by Elon Musk and Donald Trump (Ensor, 2020). The Disinformation Project (2021) observed that this was one of the indications that health and wellbeing narratives had moved from misinformation to dangerous disinformation.

Reeve's (2022a) argued that the health and wellbeing movements ideas could be categorized as conspiracy theory, since almost all alternative health ideas typically involved some secret knowledge that had been hidden to most. He continued that during the COVID-19 pandemic, some high-profile wellness influencers began spreading conspiratorial narratives. Australian chef Pete Evans, for example began selling a device which he claimed could cure COVID-19. Baker (2022) observed that health and wellbeing narratives were weaponized to promote misinformation, disinformation and conspiratorial thinking, that would undermine public health.

3.4.4 Sources of Misleading Claims

Early on in the pandemic, those who were keeping a close eye on the infodemic were seeing misinformation and disinformation being spread by those on the far-right, especially when it came to the origins of the virus. The congealing of alt-right, religious right, and the conspiracist right, was seen at anti-lockdown marches in 2020 when key narrators came together to protest, such as Brian Tamaki, former New Conservative leader Leighton Baker and his daughter Chantelle Baker, and Billy Te Kahika of the Outdoors Party. These three were some of the most prolific spreaders of disinformation in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Leader of the Pentecostal Destiny Church, Brian Tamaki is not new to conspiratorial discourses. In 2016 he blamed the LGBTQIA+ community for earthquakes, and other natural disasters (Shrimpton, 2016). During the pandemic, he claimed to have been responsible for organizing more than 100 anti-mandate and government protests (Hurley, 2022). At one of these protests, he likened the director general of health, Ashley Bloomfield, to Hitler (Macdonald, 2021). Leighton Baker was a vocal anti-vaccination and anti-mandate protestor, who claimed that Omicron was similar to a cold (Armstrong, 2022). Chantelle was much of the same, only she had amassed a substantial online following due to her spreading of conspiratorial narratives. They gave a voice to claims that the vaccine made people magnetic (McConnell, 2022). Billy Te Kahika gained followers that supported his opposition to COVID lockdowns, and his conspiracies ranged from 5G causing cancer to coronavirus being no worse than the flu (Penfold, 2020).

Meanwhile media personality Mike Hosking, in an effort to create distrust in the government's health response, knowingly spread disinformation claiming that deaths were being overestimated or miscounted (The Disinformation Project, 2021). On April 6th, 2020, Hosking, on his Newstalk ZB morning radio show, claimed that the people dying in Italy at the height of the pandemic, were dying with the virus, not of it (Peacock, 2020). He also claimed that mass testing in Iceland showed that half of their population were unwitting carriers of COVID-19, which he reckoned cast doubt on the government's elimination strategy here (Peacock, 2020). Complaints were made to the Broadcasting

Standards Authority (BSA) regarding his claim about Italy, which were upheld, with the BSA noting that Hosking did not make reasonable efforts to make sure his information was accurate (Peacock, 2020).

All these people TDP (2021) made the same key observation throughout their research. The spread of mis- and disinformation pointed to a broader threat, that COVID-19 and vaccination are being used as a kind of Trojan Horse for norm-setting and norm-entrenchment of far-right extremist ideologies in Aotearoa New Zealand.

3.5 Disinformation Concerning Official Responses to COVID-19 in Aotearoa New Zealand (2020-2022)

The arrival of COVID-19, and with it the infodemic, resulted not only in fatalities and a besieged health system, it also triggered a surge of disinformation concerning official responses to COVID-19 in Aotearoa New Zealand, such as the vaccination roll-out. In February 2021, Aotearoa New Zealand had its first vaccination against COVID-19. The Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine was used with vaccinators being the first recipients. By March 2021, forty thousand people in Aotearoa New Zealand had received at least one dose. As of September 2023, just under ninety percent of eligible people in Aotearoa New Zealand had completed their COVID-19 vaccinations (Ministry of Health, 2023). However, that didn't stop the minority of antivaxxers from being vocalizing their concerns. When vaccines were being introduced at the beginning of 2021, there was some hesitancy with genuine concerns about the side effects of the vaccine. TDP (2021) found that as the pandemic unfolded, a critical shift from vaccine hesitancy to vaccine resistance and refusal occurred. This was attributed to the disinformation that spread concerning the side effects of the vaccine, what was in the vaccine, and the effectiveness of it.

Anti-vaccination sentiments are not a new phenomenon, with the first documented case targeting the smallpox vaccine in the early 1800s (Wolfe & Sharp, 2002). However, during the COVID-19 pandemic a rapid rise in anti-vaccination views occurred with the availability of social media technologies (Chaney & Lee, 2021). There were claims from offshore that the government had placed a microchip in the vaccine to keep track of individuals, and this accusation was spread throughout antivax networks in Aotearoa New Zealand. Associated disinformation and conspiracy theories were spread by individuals who became minor celebrities among the misinformed. The most vocal and popular of the anti-vaccination groups was Voices for Freedom (VFF), a group that was founded by Claire Deeks, Libby Johnson and Alia Bland, all mothers. They claimed to have around forty thousand members in Aotearoa New Zealand and have been described as the most significant part of the so-called freedom movement (Clark, 2023). Very early on in the vaccine rollout VFF quickly became the most prominent oppositional group. As Clark (2023) observes 'It was mainly women-led, it was well resourced... VFF produced online videos, organized pop-up protests and spearheaded a legal challenge to the vaccine

roll-out for children’ (p.150). VFF emphasized three key messages: COVID-19 is not dangerous at all, the vaccine is dangerous, and you cannot trust vaccine advocates (Clark, 2023). They followed this playbook when opposing the vaccine mandates as well and were a key player in protests across Aotearoa New Zealand, including the Parliament grounds occupation in early 2022.

3.6 Parliament Protest and Occupation

From February 2022 to March 2022, a significant online and offline event occurred when anti-vaccination and anti-mandate protestors occupied Parliamentary grounds for 23 days. Unprecedented, the occupation brought chaos to Wellington CBD and captured the attention of the nation, with some wondering how such an event could have happened. While online, misinformation, disinformation, conspiratorial and far-right extremist sentiment soared to never before seen levels (The Disinformation Project, 2022). In the months leading up to the protest, TDP researchers (2022), noticed an increase in the volume of disinformation in Aotearoa New Zealand, with growing numbers of people subscribed to or engaging with protest-related sites and forums on Facebook Pages, Groups, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Telegram and TikTok. On Facebook during this period, 73% of disinformation was created by only 12 people/groups, labeled the ‘disinformation dozen’. They included Counterspin, Brian Tamaki, VFF, the Bakers, and Billy Te Kahika (Manhire, 2022). On Telegram, there was a rapid growth in subscribers to protest-related channels, with one account growing by almost 100,000 subscribers between January 2022 and the end of the protests in March (Manch, 2022). Inspired by what they were seeing online in regard to the Canadian trucker convoy protesting vaccine mandates, some people in Aotearoa New Zealand sought to recreate their own convoys here.

On February 6th, 2022, Waitangi Day, convoys began from different locations around Aotearoa New Zealand, in order to converge outside Parliament over following days. They eventually began convening on Parliament grounds on February 8th. According to a review done by The Independent Police Conduct Authority (2023) only about 100 protesters were in attendance during the early days, but this quickly grew to about 3,000 over the following weeks. This growth in numbers can be attributed to key players and groups on multiple platforms, spreading disinformation concerning COVID-19 and about what was happening on the ground. During the occupation of parliamentary grounds, VFF claimed they represented half of the people there, becoming in effect, one of the voices for the protest (Clark, 2023). During the Parliament Protest, TDP researchers (2022) found that livestreams from the protests were getting greater nationwide engagement than most of mainstream media’s coverage. That disinformation accounts were receiving increasing engagement across different platforms was extremely concerning as they were constructing an alternate reality to what was happening on Parliament grounds. While mainstream media were showing violent rhetoric from the protesters, such

as the call for the murder of then Primer Minister Jacinda Ardern, groups such as VFF were instead showing the communal side of it all. Kate Hannah of TDP states that this created a splintered reality, where people felt connected to a community moving towards a common goal, while the rest of us, observing from the outside, saw the death threats and the violence (RNZ, 2022). The Parliament Protest showed in real time how far-right extremist messaging took over as the days passed. More and more conspiracy theories were being promoted onsite such as QAnon theories such as the Great Reset. Eventually the occupation ended when police marched in to remove protesters early in the morning on March 2nd. As shown in Stuff Circuit's documentary, *Fire and Fury*, the day turned violent as protesters began to retaliate, sometimes by throwing projectiles at police and even lighting the playground on fire (Stuff Circuit, 2022). The documentary investigated disinformation in Aotearoa New Zealand, particularly the lead up to the Parliament protest and occupation. Journalist Paula Penfold, who was part of the team that produced the documentary, and who spent a week at the Parliament occupation filming it, revealed that the team were subjected to threats on several occasions (Sowman-Lund, 2022). In an interview with RNZ, Penfold observed that the COVID-19 mandates weren't the true agenda of some key figures that feature in the documentary (some of whom were part of the 'disinformation dozen') (RNZ, 2022).

As mentioned, the infodemic related to COVID-19 pushed followers towards more violently exclusive, supremacist, xenophobic, racist, far-right and extremist ideologies. This played out in real time at the Parliament grounds occupation. *Fire and Fury* observed that despite a popular narrative that tried to paint the occupation as peaceful, with the ending of mandates as their main goal, there was an entirely different and dangerous agenda (Stuff Circuit, 2022). The documentary makes note of two main things that happened during the occupation. One was the amount of talk on social media that threatened democracy, by calling to make the country ungovernable. The second, as TDP (2022) observed as well, was that extreme violent language had been normalised, with people talking publicly about killing politicians (Stuff Circuit, 2022). Other journalists onsite were also victims of violent language and physical violence. RNZ video journalist, Angus Dreaver, was hit with a camping chair and told to leave when he was there on the last day (Sapkota, 2022). This type of action, and narrative, is very commonly associated with the far-right, and of course the US alt-right (in regard to the storming of the US Capitol in January 2021).

Just as the Parliament protest was appropriated by extremist Alt-right narratives made popular in the US, so to was the anti-vaccination movement (as was evident with the growing influence of VFF). To an average citizen VFF were, it seemed, concerned mothers worried about the effects of the vaccine. But to researchers such as Byron Clark, the influence of far-right extremism on VFF was clear. As New Zealand lifted vaccine mandates, they began to expand their scope by promoting conspiracy theories

about the Great Reset and mobilizing people around a conspiracist anti-globalist ideology (Clark, 2023). The Great Reset is a popular conspiracy theory among the US Alt-right claiming that the elites had created a fake pandemic to bring in a New World Order.

Table 2: COVID-19 timeline of key events in Aotearoa New Zealand (New Zealand Doctor, 2023).

COVID TIMELINE OF KEY EVENTS IN AOTEAROA (2019-2022)	
DATES	Brief description of events
2019	
December 29	Chinese authorities advise the WHO of cases of pneumonia of unknown cause
2020	
January 30	WHO declares epidemic a global health emergency
February 28	First COVID-19 case reported in Aotearoa
March 11	WHO declares it a pandemic
March 14	All those entering NZ must self-isolate for 14 days
March 19	Indoor events with more than 100 people are banned. Borders closed to everyone but citizens and permanent residents
March 21	4-tiered Alert Level system introduced. NZ at Level 2
March 23	NZ moved to Level 3
March 25	NZ moved to Level 4. State of National Emergency declared
March 29	First COVID-19 related death in NZ
April 27	NZ moves to Alert Level 3
May 13	NZ moves to Alert Level 2, after no new cases for two days. Death toll: 20
August 12	Auckland moved to Alert Level 3 after 4 new cases were detected in community. Rest of country moved to Level 2
August 30	Auckland moves to Alert Level 2
October 7	All of NZ now at Alert Level 1
2021	
February 14	Auckland moves to Level 3 after cases detected in community. Rest of NZ to Level 2
February 15	First vaccination. Vaccinators are first recipients
February 20	Vaccination of border workers begin
February 22	All of NZ back at Level 1
February 28	Auckland back to Level 3. Rest of NZ to Level 2
March 26	Around 10,000 people had received two doses of vaccine
June 17	Govt announces timing for vaccination priority group 4 – over-60s
June 26	Delta variant confirmed in NZ
August 6	Vaccination bookings open for people aged 55-59
August 17	All of NZ moved to Alert Level 4
August 31	Auckland & Northland remain in Level 4. Rest of NZ to Level 3
September 7	Auckland is still in Level 4. Rest of NZ in Level 2
September 21	Auckland and Upper Hauraki to Level 3. Rest of NZ still in Level 2
October 5	Level 3 restrictions eased in Auckland. Marked the end of the elimination strategy
October 11	Vaccination mandated for workers in health sector plus all teachers and early childhood workers
October 13	My COVID Record website launched. Access to vaccine records for passes that ensured access to vaccine mandated activities
October 16	'Super Saturday' Vaccination event
October 22	Govt announces move to COVID-19 Protection Framework (traffic light) system
October 26	Vaccine mandate extended to include hospitality workers
November 22	Auckland in red traffic light system
November 26	Vaccine mandate extended to NZ Police and Defence Force. Omicron named a variant of concern by WHO

COVID TIMELINE OF KEY EVENTS IN AOTEAROA (2019-2022)	
December 13	The government announced that Auckland will move to orange. Northland will remain in red. Rest of country in orange
December 16	First case of Omicron detected in managed isolation
2022	
January 17	Vaccine available for children aged 5-11
January 18	First case of Omicron community transmission
January 23	All of NZ moves to red
February 15	NZ moves to phase 2 of Govts Omicron plan
February 24	Phase 3 of the Government's Omicron plan comes into effect at 11.59pm. Main features include that only household contacts will be counted as contacts
March 18	Unvaccinated NZ citizens do not need to enter MIQ or self-isolate
April 4	Vaccine pass no longer required. Mandates for number of occupations removed. Still in effect for health & disability, aged care, corrections and border workforces
May 1	Vaccinated travellers from visa-waiver countries can travel to NZ isolation-free
May 24	NZ still in orange
September 12	The COVID-19 Protection Framework ended.

Chapter 4: Counterspin's Emergence and Profile

4.1 Introduction

Counterspin's Alp and Spierer were key players during the Parliament occupation, labelled by researchers as one of the 'disinformation dozen', who had a hand in spreading disinformation and extremist language during that period. It's important to understand Counterspin's history and emergence within disinformation and far-right extremism spaces to reveal how they came to be labelled as one of the twelve. This chapter will profile the key leaders and discuss the ideological strands, as well as the international influences. It will focus on Counterspin's history, its early development and emerging role in the internet and social media ecosystem. Finally, this chapter will end with a list of other far-right figures and groups that exist within the same extremist space as Counterspin.

4.2 Counterspin Origins

I begin with Himalaya New Zealand, the local chapter of the Himalaya Farms Network, which acts as a network of embassies for the New Federal State of China, a dissident political group opposed to the Chinese Communist Party regime. It was founded by dissident Chinese billionaire Guo Wengui, and former Trump advisor Steve Bannon (Clark, 2022). Its representative Tex Hill, where the idea of Counterspin airing frequent episodic content is birthed. Before then, Counterspin had only made a few posts in 2020 on their Facebook page. One, on April 29th, 2020, that shared what they were all about; they would 'Fearlessly go where the mainstream media fear to tread' (Counterspin Media, 2020a). Their Facebook page would go quiet for about a year, before really picking up at the same time as their first episode aired on Guo TV (GTV) in April 2021. Hill approached the then hosts and producers of Counterspin, Kelvyn Alp and Hannah Spierer, about starting a show on GTV and organized a studio for them to use (Clark, 2023). This was a media network also started by Guo Wengui and Steve Bannon. A report conducted by Graphika Research in May 2021 stated that GTV is a 'prolific producer and amplifier of mis- and disinformation, including claims of voter fraud in the US, false information about COVID-19, and QAnon narratives' (Graphika, 2021). Symbiosis between not only the parties mentioned above, but also between white supremacist, far-right extremist groups generally, would lead to the first episode of Counterspin going live on ANZAC day, April 25th, 2021. Flanked by the New Zealand and the New Federal State of China flags, Kelvyn Alp hosted the inaugural episode with first guest Tex Hill. Although the initial push comes from Hill, it cannot be understated just how much of Counterspin is Kelvyn Alp.

4.3 Kelvyn Alp

Born Kelvyn Glen Alp in March 1971, he has a long and colourful history on the margins of New Zealand politics (Spoonley & Morris, 2022). Not much is known about his early years as a child, teenager, or young adult other than that he served in the New Zealand Army. Alp came to attention in his mid-twenties when he formed an anti-government militia in 1996 (Gardiner, 2002). Called the New Zealand Armed Intervention Force (NZAIF), it was styled as the paramilitary wing of a separatist Māori government, and was described as a mix of white supremacists and Māori radicals, that aimed to overthrow the government (Hume, 2010). Not long after the militia was formed, an advertisement appeared in the New Zealand Herald, calling for former military personnel to join (Gardiner, 2002). In July 2000, a member of the group appeared in court on firearm charges, and a month later, Alp told *Investigate* magazine that the militia had bought MP5 sub-Machineguns, grenade launchers, rocket launchers and more than 100 military assault rifles, and that it had about 120 members at the time (Gardiner, 2002). In the same interview conducted in August 2000, Alp remarked how he and the militia were passionate about ‘saving’ New Zealand from ‘Big Government’ who wanted to coerce the population into submission. The NZAIF would bring back ‘the old New Zealand’ (Investigate Magazine, 2007).

Probably the most notable action taken by Alp’s militia was in 2001 when they turned up, in military uniform, to the home of BNZ’s managing director Peter Thodey, claiming to be acting on behalf of a customer, Christchurch accountant Phillip Verry. He was described by the National Business Review at the time as a conspiracy theorist blaming the BNZ for many of New Zealand’s problems, who had engaged Alp as his negotiator (Clark, 2023). The NZAIF was covered in a 2002 episode of the TV3 current affairs show 20/20. No longer available online, a synopsis describes the segment as being about ‘a disaffected former soldier who claims he has his own army and is prepared to go into battle with the government’ (Clark, 2023). In March 2004, Alp experienced a police raid on his Auckland home after he bought a police pistol holster from Trade Me (Dinsdale, 2011). No charges were laid, and at the time he said that he found it funny because at every election people are trying to overthrow the government by going against it, yet he had been the only one investigated (Dinsdale, 2011). The NZAIF would fade away from the public eye almost completely after this. The same was true for Alp, until 2005.

The Direct Democracy Party (DDP) of New Zealand was formed in 2005 and led by Alp until it became defunct in 2009. It challenged the monetary system, and with inspiration from similar systems that are used in parts of Switzerland, it aimed to establish a series of binding referendums for all major public decisions (Direct Democracy Party, 2007). The party would register for the 2005 election with several

candidates being members of the National Front. The latter originated in 1967 with a group of activists who supported the British National Front's advocacy for traditional fascist ideas, opposition to non-white immigration, and preservation of the 'British race' (Dunick, 2022). Revived again in 2004 by known white supremacist Kyle Chapman it would close down shortly after the 15 March Christchurch Mosque attacks. The aftermath of this atrocity made open white supremacist organizing almost impossible due to public backlash (Dunick, 2022). The DDP won 782 votes (0.03% of the total vote) and failed to get anyone into parliament (*'Elections'*, 2005). A few years after the failed attempt at entering parliament, in 2007, Alp stood in the Mangere councilor by-election, finishing fourth out of eight candidates, with 956 votes (Stuff Limited, 2009). In 2008, still as the leader of the DDP, Alp unsuccessfully stood for the Manukau mayoralty (Dinsdale, 2011). Registration for DDP was cancelled in 2009, at the request of the party.

During 2009, Alp would gain media scrutiny, this time due to his business dealings. From 1996 to 2014, there would be a total of eight companies registered with the New Zealand Companies Office, which all featured Alp as either the director or shareholder, sometimes both (New Zealand Companies Office, 2023). All have since been removed from the register. Alp is currently only co-director and shareholder of Counterspin Media Limited, which was registered in 2021. He was director and shareholder of Pheonix International Limited, who gained media attention in 2009 when their dealings in the Solomon Islands were criticized, both by island locals, and international media (Hume, 2010). Alp claimed to be setting up one of the world's largest gold mines, but the decision to issue a mining license to his company was questioned by The Solomon Islands National Union of Workers (SINUW), who expressed concern over Alp's past involvement with the NZAIF (Gridneff, 2009). The venture was stalled in 2010 after tax exemption for the import of heavy machinery was not secured (Hume, 2010). It was later the subject of a police investigation into fraud, but no charges were brought after a Serious Fraud Office investigation (Farrier, 2022).

Alp would enter politics again in 2011 with the OurNZ (Ownership, Unity, Responsibility) Party, which had many of the same key messages as the DDP (Dinsdale, 2011). He stood in a 2011 by-election in the Te Tai Tokerau electorate under the OurNZ Party, despite the fact that he didn't live there. He claimed no alignment with any iwi or hapu such that he could serve all equally (Dinsdale, 2011). He only gained 72 votes, coming last. In a Facebook post on the OurNZ account, Alp announced that he was leaving his role as OurNZ leader in September 2011 (OurNZ, 2011). In his statement he revealed that it was due to the party wanting to remove him for bringing unwanted attention. He began the post with 'some of us stand against tyranny while others either do not believe that tyranny exists or simply do not want to know' (OurNZ, 2011). This goes to show that Alp's language has been consistent over the years, as this research has observed. From 2011 Alp would be relatively quiet in the world of

politics for about a decade (Clark, 2023). In 2020, Alp and other 'sovereign citizen' believers hatched a plan to take over the Abel Tasman National Park, and create their own utopia called New Freeland (Mitchell, 2023). Counterspin would soon gain popularity, and Alp would gain more notoriety. While Alp had a strong early connection to the far-right, the same can't be said for his partner and Counterspin producer and co-host, Hannah Spierer.

4.4 Hannah Spierer

Nadine Porter of Stuff NZ has asked 'She was once Auckland University's campus co-convenor of the Green Party who spoke out about Islamophobia – so what happened to Counterspin co-founder Hannah Spierer?' (Porter, 2022). Born in the mid-1980s, not much is known of Spierer's earlier years, but the Counterspin co-founder and co-host, was a completely different version from her present self. She was pictured at an end of year celebration in 2000, hosted by the Green Party, alongside her politics lecturer Paul Buchanan, who described her as an excited and bright student, and media commentator Martyn Bradbury (Porter, 2022). Bradbury stated he had known Spierer since the 2000s but hadn't spoken to her since 2007 and described her as a passionate and respected environmentalist and social justice advocate, who 'went bush many, many moons ago and never came back' (Bradbury, 2022). In 2006, Spierer was still at Auckland University as the International Affairs Officer for the student association, and in 2007, she was the student association's environmental affairs officer and the Green party co-convenor on campus (Porter, 2022). That same year she co-signed a letter to *Investigate* magazine that criticized the 18-page article 'Helen Hoodwinked by Preachers of Hate' written by Ian Wishart in the March 2007 edition, for the negative stereotyping of Muslims (Investigate Magazine, 2007). The only other mention of Spierer's involvement with environmental activism that could be found online was a mention of her in a comment underneath an article titled 'Conservatives Are Scaredy Cats' by David Farrier for his website *Webworm*. The comment mentioned that Spierer was a team leader at Greenpeace in 2008 and was described as cool and passionate about environmentalism and anti-racism (Farrier, 2023).

Not much else is known of the years between 2008 and when she reemerged as a totally different person. Another comment, by Pablo underneath his blog *Kiwipolitico*, offered a plausible theory as to what may have happened to Spierer during the unknown years. In the late 2000s, he mentioned that Spierer stayed at a place he described as a grifter's paradise posing as a spiritual retreat for hippies. Despite her claiming that all was good when she visited Pablo who lived near the retreat, he stated that he would not be surprised if it was there where Spierer began down the slippery slope to where she is now (Pablo, 2022). According to a tweet by Pete Huggins (2022), Spierer asked to be removed from the Green Party's mailing list in 2010. One other thing that is known about these years is that

Spierer worked as an assistant at a Rudolf Steiner kindergarten which practices a spiritual science in the education of children (Porter, 2022). One cannot know for sure if this was what set her on the current path she is on. Presently though, Spierer is opposed to Islam, feminism, vaccination and the state in general.

Porter (2022) points to QAnon, an umbrella for all conspiracy theorists, as the likely cause of Spierer's transformation when she reemerged as Sarah Smith in 2019 (a pseudonym Spierer used before she began using her real name again publicly in 2021). Under Sarah Smith, she started accounts on both YouTube and Twitter called 'Sarah Speaks' which were riddled with far-right extremist language and QAnon conspiracy theories (Porter, 2022). In January 2021, her Twitter account was suspended after a crackdown by the platform on far-right and QAnon-related activity (Daalder, 2021). The YouTube account is no longer active as well. Her views were evident in one of her and Alp's court appearances for the distribution of objectionable publication related to the 15 March terrorist attack. She told her supporters then that the Great Awakening was coming. The initial QAnon conspiracy had incorrectly predicted the arrest of Joe Biden and other politicians and the reinstatement of Trump as US President. The Mothers Who Stand For Freedom (MWSFF), the early iteration of Voice for Freedom (VFF), was a short-lived group that was created by the same women in 2020. Only Spierer, still using Smith, was directly involved in the former (Porter, 2022). Much like VFF, MWSFF relied on their supposed compassionate communication to promote themselves without completely identifying what they really were; a QAnon conspiracy theory group (Adams, 2020). Very early on, if one bothered to look deeper, as did those behind Rabbit Hole Resistance, an anti-conspiracist group, one would find evidence that they were in fact connected to the far-right extremist space (Adams, 2020). For example, a known far-right extremist, Damien De Ment, was in attendance at some of their events (Adams, 2020). Spierer, still going by Smith, gained prominence within the far-right extremist space due to her involvement with MWSFF and her support for VFF (Porter, 2022).

It is unclear whether Spierer had met Alp before 2020. It is most likely that they did, or that they met early 2020. It was her involvement with the Mothers Who Stand For Freedom (MWSFF) group, and subsequently her support of Voices for Freedom (VFF) that would lead to the creation of Counterspin. Hannah Spierer is as much Counterspin as Kelvyn Alp. The role of women on the far-right is often overlooked, they are integral to these movements yet are not talked about (Clark, 2023). It was Spierer (using Smith) who was approached by Tex Hill, after she interviewed him at an anti-lockdown protest in Auckland, and he offered a platform for Counterspin (Clark, 2023). Women are often used as fronts because of perceptions that they are motherly and trustworthy. So, when Spierer began using her real name and began appearing in front of the camera as co-host (moving away from her role as just a

producer under Sarah Smith) she added more credibility to Counterspin for those within the far-right extremist space.

4.5 What is Counterspin?

The individuals behind Counterspin try to call themselves just an ‘alternative’ type of media news. However, it is unequivocally a far-right extremist entity. It exists purely online with no foothold on terrestrial television, at least for now. Even after the demise of GTV in March 2022, due to Guo’s legal troubles, Counterspin continued. It subsequently moved to Canadian video sharing website Rumble (with less content restrictions than YouTube) and banned.video, which is part of the network of websites operated by American far-right extremist radio show host and prominent conspiracy theorist Alex Jones (Clark, 2023). Jones’ influence, in terms of talking points and language, can be seen throughout Counterspin episodes. Influence and inspiration from American counterparts is common among the far-right extremists and conspiracy theorists worldwide, and Aotearoa is not immune to this. It didn’t matter that the issues that affect the US are far from Aotearoa New Zealand, large-scale online far-right extremist communities meant that the American influence was bound to happen. What mattered to the conspiracy theorists there, mattered to similar people worldwide (Reeve, 2022a).

Counterspin imports most of its talking points from overseas, especially US, and repackages relevant content. Take the discussion around critical race theory (CRT) which has become a hot topic among American far-right extremists in recent years. This ‘is an academic concept that is more than 40 years old. The core idea is that race is a social construct, and that racism is not merely the product of individual bias or prejudice, but also something embedded in legal systems and policies’ (Sawchuk, 2021). On numerous occasions, Counterspin would use CRT as a talking topic to reject it as nonsense. According to them Māori get special privileges because of Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Every other far-right hot topic from around the world, whether it be QAnon, antivax, sovereign citizenship, or anti-LGBTQIA+, has been at least mentioned by Counterspin. It is undeniably a clearing house for overseas far-right material and because operations are solely online, no equivalent of the Broadcasting Standards Authority can regulate their content; anything can be promoted with little to no consequence (Clark, 2023). Below is a list of Counterspin episodes, from their launch, till the end of 2021. Included are the number of views it has amassed.

Table 3: list of Counterspin episodes, from their launch, till the end of 2021

Counterspin Episodes from launch till end of 2021 – Titles & view count included (CounterspinMedia, 2023)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ANZAC DAY LAUNCH (April 23rd, 2021) – 4.25K views • ANZAC DAY LAUNCH EP 01 (April 25th, 2021) – 8.61K views • Counterspin Ep. 02 – RACISM (April 29th, 2021) – 2.49K views • Counterspin Ep. 03 - LAND TO FREEDOM (May 3rd, 2021) – 8.88K views 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counterspin Ep. 32 - AUSSIE UPDATE (October 4th, 2021) – 2.38K views • Counterspin Ep. 33 - Covid Casualties (October 7th, 2021) – 5.66K views • United for Freedom: NZ Medical Symposium Live Stream Replay (October 10th, 2021) – 3.38K views

Counterspin Episodes from launch till end of 2021 – Titles & view count included (CounterspinMedia, 2023)

- Counterspin Ep. 04 - FIGHT FOR JUSTICE (May 10th, 2021) – 756 views
- Counterspin Ep. 05 - PEDOPHILES AND PREDATORS (May 10th, 2021) – 1.13K views
- Counterspin Ep. 06 - STARVE THE BEAST! (May 13th, 2021) – 3.58K views
- Counterspin Ep. 07 - COUNTERING COLLECTIVISM! (May 16th, 2021) – 1K views
- Counterspin Ep. 08 - THE REAL PANDEMIC: Part 1 (May 20th, 2021) – 1.56K views
- Episode 08 PART 2 THE REAL PANDEMIC (May 23rd, 2021) – 1.45K views
- Counterspin Ep. 09 - THE STATE OF THE NATION! (May 26th, 2021) – 6.46K views
- Counterspin Ep. 09 - STATE OF THE NATION! [PG edit] (May 28th, 2021) – 2.61K views.
- Counterspin Ep. 10 DIGITAL BATTLEFIELD (June 7th, 2021) – 507 views
- Counterspin Ep. 11 - A NATION BETRAYED (June 10th, 2021) – 1.68K views
- Counterspin Ep. 12 - NZ'S COVID CON (June 16th, 2021) – 4.31K views
- Counterspin Ep. 13 - FAKE ENVIRONMENTALISM (June 20th, 2021) – 1.98K views
- Counterspin Ep. 11 - A NATION BETRAYED PART 2 (June 23rd, 2021) – 1.62K views
- Counterspin Ep. 14 - 4th OF JULY ELECTION RIGGING SPECIAL: PART 2 (July 4th, 2021) – 1.1K views
- Counterspin Ep. 14 - 4th of July Election Rigging Special (July 4th, 2021) – 9.14K views.
- Counterspin Ep. 15 - FALSE FLAGS & AGENDAS (July 15th, 2021) – 2.3K views
- MP Questioned on Covid Cure (July 16th, 2021) – 2K views.
- Counterspin Ep. 16 - 'HOWL OF A PROTEST' BREAKDOWN (July 18th, 2021) – 3.54K views
- NZ PM's Response to Farmers - Truth Translation (July 19th, 2021) – 1.72K views
- NZ Farmers 'Howl of a Protest' montage (July 19th, 2021) – 796 views
- RISE, AUSTRALIA, RISE! (July 20th, 2021) – 3.77K views
- Counterspin Ep 17 - "COVID-19 VACCINE" WARNING (July 21st, 2021) – 8.37K views
- Counterspin Ep. 18 - COUNTERING THE COVID SPIN (July 26th, 2021) – 1.49K views
- Episode 19 Part 1 - The True Meaning of the Treaty of Waitangi (July 28th, 2021) – 2.56K views
- Counterspin 19 Part 2 - The True Meaning of the Treaty of Waitangi (August 2nd, 2021) – 989 views
- Episode 20 - Practical Solutions with Liz Lambert (August 4th, 2021) – 4.4K views
- NZ FARMERS CARE (August 5th, 2021) – 353 views
- Counterspin Ep. 21 - ABUSE IN STATE CARE UPDATE (August 9th, 2021) – Views not counted.
- Counterspin Special: Mike Lindell's Cyber Symposium (August 10th, 2021) – 8.01K views
- Counterspin Special - Mike Lindell Cyber Symposium - Day 2 (August 11th, 2021) – 3.9K views
- NZ MAN PULLS OVER COP FOR SPEEDING - watch what happens (August 13th, 2021) – 2.55K views.
- Cyber Symposium Special - David Vincent Bobb (August 16th, 2021) – Views not counted.
- Counterspin Ep. 22 - LOCKDOWN SPECIAL #1 (August 18th, 2021) – 6.98K views
- Counterspin Ep. 23 - LOCKDOWN SPECIAL #2 (August 19th, 2021) – 3.68K views
- HIGHLIGHTS: Aussie Patriots (August 20th, 2021) – 895 views
- Counterspin Ep. 34 - PCR Pressure & Liberty Doctor (October 11th, 2021) – 1.58K views
- Counterspin Ep. 35 - MORE HEALTH EXPERTS SPEAK OUT (October 14th, 2021) – 2.44K views
- News Hub Fact Checked (October 16th, 2021) – 1.43K views
- Counterspin Ep. 36 - Covid KO (October 18th, 2021) – 20.7K views
- COVID1984 Alert 2 - No mandatory Vaccine (October 19th, 2021) – 2.09K views
- COVID 1984 Announcement & New Zealand Government Hypocrisy Alert (October 19th, 2021) – 1.21K views
- BRIAN TAMAKI RELEASED (October 20th, 2021) – 1.41K views.
- Counterspin Ep. 37 - Jabathon Maxout - Injuries Mount - Sue Grey Battles Government - Plus More (October 21st, 2021) – 6.31K views
- COUNTERSPIN HOST ARRESTED & RELEASED (October 21st, 2021) – 4.32K views
- COVID 1984 Alert 3 - Risk/Benefit Analysis (October 22nd, 2021) – 2.05K views
- Counterspin Host Arrested. NZ Police Swamped with Calls Like This (October 21st, 2021) – 4.12K views
- SUE GREY END OF CASE DEBRIEF (October 22nd, 2021) – 8.26K views
- Sue Grey Good News Update - VAX EXEMPTIONS AVAILABLE (October 24th, 2021) – 15.4K views
- Counterspin Ep. 38 - A Question of Jurisdiction? (October 26th, 2021) – 8.42K views
- SHOT • SOVEREIGN HIKOI OF TRUTH (October 26th, 2021) – 1.38K views
- SHOT • MOVING SPEECH & HAKA AT THE AUCKLAND BORDER, NZ (October 26th, 2021) – 1.49K views
- SHOT • COPS FAIL TO STOP CONVOY (October 26th, 2021) – 1.54K views
- SHOT • THIS IS OUR MOMENT KIWIS! (October 26th, 2021) – 1.39K views
- SHOT • NORTHERN CHECKPOINT UPDATE (October 26th, 2021) – 1.93K views
- SHOT - People Serve Notice on Police to Let Them Pass to Waitangi (October 26th, 2021) – 3.38K views
- SHOT - FOX NEWS REACHES OUT TO WAITANGI (October 27th, 2021) – 348 views
- SHOT - NZ SOVEREIGN HIKOI OF TRUTH - MSM PROPAGANDA (October 27th, 2021) – 615 views
- Independence Day Speeches at Waitangi Day 1 (October 29th, 2021) – 294 views
- Freedom Day, Whangarei (October 30th, 2021) – 337 views
- Independence Day Speeches at Waitangi Day 2 (October 30th, 2021) – 338 views
- Counterspin 39 - PM's Question Time with Shane Chafin (November 5th, 2021) – 17.9K views
- Kaeo Border Korero is Ka Pai (November 8th, 2021) – 660 views
- REPLAY: No More Control March on Parliament (November 9th, 2021) – 8.65K views
- Counterspin Media Stumps New Zealand Prime Minister (November 10th, 2021) – 754 views
- THE KAWAKAWA "HECKLERS" RE-UNITE AGAINST TYRANNY (November 11th, 2021) – 505 views
- Counterspin Ep. 40 - NZ Media Scores Own Goal with First Gunshot Covid Death & Doctors Send Unvaxxed to Basement (November 12th, 2021) – 3.2K views
- EPIC FAIL: New Zealand Media Attack on Counterspin Fizzles (November 14th, 2021) – 2.59K views
- CSM VS. MSM (November 14th, 2021) – 2.4K views
- Peek into the Matrix: Part 1 - Introduction to Panterra D'Oro with Kenneth Scott (November 17th, 2021) – 3.81K views

Counterspin Episodes from launch till end of 2021 – Titles & view count included (CounterspinMedia, 2023)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Counterspin Ep. 24 - LOCKDOWN SPECIAL #3 (August 21st, 2021) – 7.83K views Lockdown Special - Napoleon Busch (August 23rd, 2021) – 838 views Counterspin Ep. 25 - LOCKDOWN SPECIAL #4 (August 26th, 2021) – 2.07K views Kelvyn on 'The Fringe' (August 28th, 2021) – 862 views Kelvyn talks to Carl Bromley (August 30th, 2021) – 1.16K views. Counterspin Ep. 26 - IV WITH TREVOR LOUDON (September 6th, 2021) – 11.3K views Counterspin: EP. 27 - THE AUSSIE COSSACK (September 9th, 2021) – 2.7K views Counterspin Ep. 28 - ALLODIAL CLAIM WITH KERRE BROGDEN (September 13th, 2021) – 3.21K views. Counterspin Ep. 29 - NZ UPDATE (September 16th, 2021) – 19.2K views HIGHLIGHTS: Sue Grey (September 19th, 2021) – 14.6K views Counterspin Ep. 30 - COVID-19 - THE OTHER SIDE (September 24th, 2021) – 6.8K views UNITED FOR FREEDOM (September 24th, 2021) – 2.13K views UNITED FOR FREEDOM (September 25th, 2021) – 2.28K views Counterspin Ep. 31- COP & COUNCILLOR (September 30th, 2021) – 2.04K views 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A Peek into the Matrix: Part 2 – Introduction to Panterra D’Oro with Kenneth Scott (November 19th, 2021) – 2.13K views REPLAY: Mother of all Protests (November 21st, 2021) – 2.04K views ALEX JONES IS RIGHT: New Zealand PM Ardern Follows Davos Narrative (December 2nd, 2021) – 2.32K views. NEW ZEALAND: Apartheid Has Begun (December 3rd, 2021) 1.2K views. The Mass Exodus - Protest Day (December 4th, 2021) 817 views New Zealand Apartheid Day 4: We Can Beat Them! (December 6th, 2021) – 1.08K views Alex Jones Reveals the Real Jacinda Ardern (December 7th, 2021) – 3.46K views. Ep 45 - New Zealand Businesses Bounce Back off the Ropes (December 9th, 2021) – 1.29K views. A Peek into the Matrix with Kenneth Scott: Ep 3 Solutions to the Matrix (December 11th, 2021) – 1.18K views New Zealand Businesses Bounce Back off the Ropes - Steve Oliver (December 11th, 2021) – 2.34K views. Ep 46: Vaxx Injured & Coercion of Children (December 13th, 2021) – 1.14K views. New Zealand Jab Victim Speaking Out (December 16th, 2021) – 1.67K views. Ep 47: Pfizer Carnage Continues in NZ (December 17th, 2021) – 2.6K views. Gutless NZ Politicians Avoid Protesters (December 25th, 2021) – 767 views. Episode 48: Virus? What Virus? - Dr Mark Bailey's Slam Dunk (December 29th, 2021) – 4.64K views.
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Regular episodes on a range of topics bring in a steady audience, with an average view count of around two thousand views on Rumble (Counterspin Media, 2023). The engagement with their audience is also very steady on their social media profiles. From the beginning of 2023 to October 2023, Counterspin’s followers on Facebook grew by two thousand (Counterspin Media, 2023). On Facebook, Counterspin promote their different episodes, with meme like content and outright misinformation and disinformation scattered throughout. Their reach grew between 2020-2021. On Facebook, for example, on July 2nd, 2020, they promoted a video featuring Barry Smith, a Christian preacher and author from Aotearoa New Zealand (Counterspin Media. 2020b). The post originally had no comments or shares in 2020 but by the second half of 2021, it had received a lot more engagement. The increase in engagement coincides with the August 2021 lockdown.

Their mainstream social media presence took a hit, due to many violations of guidelines around false information. They were banned from Instagram in August 2022, after a long rant filled with violent threats mostly devoted to Stuff Circuit’s documentary, *Fire and Fury* (Nicholls, 2022). Alp doubled down on his previous comments and called for violence against the Government and politicians, threatening that they should all be hanged (Newshub, 2022). However, their presence on alternative sites continued to grow, especially on Telegram. As mentioned in the first chapter, Telegram has been described as one of the darker corners of the internet. It is an instant messaging app that allows the building of a following. Like YouTube, one can broadcast to subscribers (Rogers, 2020). It is one of the

platforms that those who are banned from mainstream social media flock to. Before being ‘locked out’ of their original Telegram page, with ‘New Zealand’s Media Revolution!’ as its heading, Counterspin were sitting at just under nineteen thousand subscribers. They have not posted on this page since the end of February 2023. However, their old posts are still available to see. Unlike their Facebook page, their Telegram page contains outright mis- and disinformation, and conspiracy theories throughout. Counterspin’s new Telegram page, created at the beginning of 2023, has just under eleven thousand subscribers.

4.6 International influences

In the previous chapter there was a short section that discussed the international linkages and influence on far-right extremism in Aotearoa New Zealand, whether it be from Alex Jones, Donald Trump or Steve Bannon from the US, or from European far-right extremists. These linkages and influences have had a major effect on far-right extremists in Aotearoa New Zealand, and of course Counterspin. International influences can not only be seen in the kind of topics, rhetoric and the language that Counterspin uses, but also in the positioning and functionality of their central website. There we see hyperlinks to multiple international far-right extremist websites, most notably the Infowars website. Infowars is owned and operated by Alex Jones, who also owns and operates a network of websites, which include banned.video. While it is unclear whether Counterspin receives funding from Alex Jones, the inclusion of the Infowars hyperlink, and the use of banned.video shows that there are complementarities between Jones and Counterspin.

Described by some as the most paranoid man in America, Alex Jones started out as a relatively unknown radio show host before he began incorporating the Internet and social media platforms into his strategy to sell conspiracy and far-right extremist messages to a wider audience (Van den Bulck & Hyzen, 2019). Warzel succinctly describes his disposition, operations and signature.

wildly successful libertarian- and conspiracy-news juggernaut: Take a kernel of truth, warp it and its context in a funhouse mirror, and set it against a heavy backdrop of conspiracy, while raising the stakes with a generous dose of fear. The strategy has made Jones — a stocky central Texan with a penchant for clamorous outbursts, fanciful digressions, and meandering stream-of-consciousness monologues — a celebrity. It’s also made Infowars — his broad kingdom of media properties, including a website, webstore, and four-hour daily broadcast — a required part of the far-right’s media diet. (Warzel, 2017)

Much like Kervyn Alp, Alex Jones harbored early political ambitions. His initial interest was False Flags (Van den Bulck & Hyzen, 2019). This is a political or military action carried out with the intention of blaming an opponent (BBC, 2022). Much like Alp, these ambitions would lead to nothing, however his support for Deep State and Truther conspiracies would result in a far-right following. During 2017-2018, at the height of his popularity, Alex Jones and his rhetoric would attract two million weekly

listeners, while the Infowars website had 20 million monthly visits (Van den Bulck & Hyzen, 2019). His popularity waned, subsequently, and he was ordered to pay just over a billion dollars as a punishment for spreading false conspiracy theories about the Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre on December 14th, 2012, where twenty children and six adults died in a shooting (Associated Press, 2022). His lasting influence can be seen in the way Counterspin operates. Counterspin takes a leaf out of the Alex Jones book and uses conspiracy theories, disinformation, distorted truths, and a generous amount of fear, in order to build their far-right extremist community. The arrival of COVID-19 gave them a perfect opportunity to expand their operations.

As mentioned, Counterspin undoubtedly emerged as a far-right extremist entity. This underlies my concern about their influence on people in Aotearoa New Zealand. We have seen first-hand the violence this ideology can promote, especially in regard to the Christchurch Mosque shootings of March 2019. Although Counterspin was established in 2021, almost two years after, it has repeated much of the same ideology. Counterspin even published online excerpts from the terrorist's livestream in early 2022, in which the hosts, Kelvyn Alp and Hannah Spierer, were arrested and charged with distributing an objectionable publication (Gill, 2022). The two were arrested August 25th, 2022, charged with sharing a so-called documentary which featured the full livestream of the attacks (Gill, 2022). The pair are due in court for a pre-trial on February 14th, 2024 (RNZ, 2023).

In the first episode of Counterspin, Alp remarked that 'If you believe the mainstream media, I'm a white supremacist with white privilege' (Counterspin Media, 2021b). He employs a common tactic among far-right extremists, shifting blame toward a common enemy namely, mainstream media. Ultimately, Counterspin is a platform that spreads far-right extremist ideology. But what makes them dangerous is that they do so in ways that aren't explicit. Aspects of white supremacy have underpinned most of their episodes. On their social media, they use coded language, which can be described as dog whistles. Åkerlund (2021) defined far-right dog whistles as speech that might 'appear inaudible to general public, while conveying hidden meaning to fellow far-right sympathisers'. Something else that Åkerlund discusses, particularly meaningful for this research, is that dog whistling is used with the aim to deceive parts of the audience. The rhetoric can be used unintentionally by those not in the know, just as it is repeated by those with specific shared knowledge within the far-right community. So, some unsuspecting audience members who have tuned into Counterspin perhaps for their coverage on other issues, such as vaccinations, will unknowingly be subjected to far-right extremist ideology. These messages will then be repeated to other people.

4.7 The internet social media ecosystem

As discussed in chapter 2, the far-right extremist Internet ecosystem can be described as one that is vast, dynamic, multidimensional, and heterogenous, with four key elements according to Baele et al. (2020): entities, communities, biotopes, and whole network. Counterspin can be positioned as a strategic community within the far-right extremist Internet ecosystem. Strategic communities are ones that have been created with hyperlinks placed strategically to structure the community, and content/user flows are started and steered (Baele et al., 2020).

The far-right extremist Internet ecosystem was well established when Counterspin began creating its online community in 2020-2021. Kelvyn Alp was already involved offline in far-right extremist groups. It is unclear how much of a presence he had online before Counterspin. Spierer, as mentioned earlier, was most likely radicalised online through QAnon conspiracies, so she would have had experience within the far-right extremist Internet ecosystem. Alp's storied history with far-right extremism alongside Spierer's involvement with the online far-right extremist movement, has allowed them to create their own Counterspin community within the far-right extremist online ecosystem. This strategic community includes a central website with hyperlinks to a banned.video channel, a podcast, blog posts, a Rumble channel, a gettr channel, a gab account, a Telegram channel, an online shop, a donation link, a hyperlink to an Infowars livestream, and hyperlinks to 'Other Trusted Media & Recommended Links'. The latter includes the websites of some key figures within the far-right extremist Internet ecosystem such as Damien De Ment and Liz Gunn. The central website is quite basic compared to others within the far-right Internet ecosystem, such as Breitbart. It is a little difficult to navigate and is quite a clunky setup. However, the setup is strategic, with hyperlinks to Counterspin's other accounts, and to other far-right extremist websites, accounts, and communities. As Baele et al. (2020) observed these hyperlinks have been strategically connected to various components in ways that provide large propaganda nets with multiple entry points.

The central website does not link to Counterspin's mainstream social media accounts on Facebook and Twitter, however both accounts have a hyperlink that directs people to the website. Counterspin did have an Instagram account, as mentioned earlier, that was removed in August of 2022, due to violating the platform's policies repeatedly (Newshub, 2022). Despite being deplatformed, Counterspin's reach on alternative social media sites, such as Telegram, continues to grow.

Here are Counterspin's followers/subscribers count on their different platforms as of October 2023:

Telegram – 11.1K (Old Telegram account had 18.8k, new account was only started beginning of 2023)

Rumble – 5.43K (Last checked in April 2023 and had 4.92K)

Gettr – 12.4K (Last checked in April 2023 and had 12.2K)

Gab – 630 (Last checked in April 2023 and had 610)

Twitter – 1,291 (Last checked in April 2023 and had 905)

Facebook 15K (Last checked in April 2023 and had 13K)

The increase in the number of followers/subscribers in all of the platforms listed above is evidence that Counterspin’s audience continues to grow. On Facebook, Counterspin’s content has the potential to reach a more mainstream audience. Far-right extremist rhetoric thus has the potential to perhaps influence an unsuspecting viewer. Chapter 5 will discuss how Counterspin used their online presence during the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequently their role during the infodemic.

4.8 Far-right figures, groups surrounding Counterspin.

The far-right extremist movement in Aotearoa New Zealand, as well as internationally, works symbiotically. Whether knowingly or not, they are all connected. Ignoring them all, even the smaller outfits, such as Counterspin, may be to our detriment. This chapter will end with a brief list of groups, organisations and individuals, besides Counterspin, that populate the far-right extremist movement in Aotearoa New Zealand. They were central to the pandemic and infodemic in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Table 4: List of far-right figures and groups

List of far-right figures and groups	
Phil Arps	A notorious Christchurch-based white supremacist, who gained notoriety in 2016 when he delivered a box containing a pig’s head to the Al-Noor Mosque in Christchurch, one of the two mosques attacked in 2019 (Ford, 2020). He was videoed delivering the package, doing a Nazi salute and shouting, “White Power!” (Ford, 2020). He was also the first person arrested for sharing the livestream of the 2019 Christchurch Mosque shooting (Clark, 2022). Clark (2022) also named him as one of the key figures behind the Parliament protests.
Damien De Ment	A frequent guest on Counterspin, who used to be a moderately successful YouTube personality before his channel was removed for spreading misinformation. A white supremacist who is one of the most vocal when it comes to calling for trials and executions of politicians, journalists and others involved with the COVID-19 public health response (Clark, 2022).
Brad Fluety	Occasionally a guest host on Counterspin, and a prominent conspiracy theorist from Northland. Was arrested during the Parliament protest for encouraging protestors to commit acts of violence.
Sue Grey	Frequent guest on Counterspin and a vocal opposer of vaccine and vaccine mandates. Usually appears on Counterspin as a lawyer to share her legal knowledge and has often spouted sovereign citizen rhetoric and QAnon conspiracy theories. She has become the ‘go to’ lawyer for conspiracy theorists and far-right extremism in Aotearoa (FACT Aotearoa, 2022). She ran in the 2023 New Zealand election under the NZ Outdoors & Freedom Party, a coalition party with Brian Tamaki.
Liz Gunn	A former news reader for One News who has since made a transition to fake news. A frequent guest on Counterspin as well. Leader of the NZ Loyal Party which ran in

List of far-right figures and groups	
	the 2023 New Zealand elections. She failed to win any seats in Parliament, much like the other minor far-right extremist parties. Also, an avid antivaxxer.
Shane Chafin	A former pharmacist and current Counterspin 'medical correspondent' who gained media attention for his persistent questioning of Jacinda Ardern about alleged vaccine related deaths which caused her to move a press conference inside (Clark, 2022).
Elliot Ikilei	The co-host and creator of 'Talanoa Sa'o' which has been described as the Fox News of the Pacific (Clark, 2023). Former deputy leader of the New Conservative Party, he was for a brief period also the leader. His media platform 'The Daily Examiner' is similar to Counterspin and also pushes false and misleading information about the COVID-19 pandemic and other conspiracy theories (Vance, 2022). Frequently appeared on Counterspin, as the 'Pasifika voice'.
Brett Power	A Sovereign Citizen from Taranaki who was one of the first to be arrested at the Parliament protests as he tried to conduct a citizen's arrest of the Minister of Health (Clark, 2022). His arrest and actions before and during the Parliament occupation have been the focus for a couple of Counterspin episodes.
Brian Tamaki	Someone who has a long history in Aotearoa as a self-ordained bishop of the evangelical Destiny Church, which is behind the Freedom and Rights Coalition. It merged to form the Outdoors & Freedom Party for the 2023 election. Has long been spreading conspiracy theories, such as ones that put the blame on the LGBTQIA+ community for extreme weather conditions in Aotearoa. Has a complicated relationship with Counterspin. In June 2023, it was announced that he was looking to sue Counterspin for false allegations made about him (Roberts, 2023).
Billy Te Kahika	One of the most popular conspiracy theorists during the COVID-19 pandemic, who organised and attended numerous protests against COVID-19 related restrictions throughout 2020 and 2021 (Clark, 2022). Much like most of the others on the list, Billy also has a failed political career (with his New Zealand Public Party). His base grew considerably as he spread messaging that included conspiracies ranging from Satanic teachings inspiring the United Nations, to 5G as a cause of cancer (Penfold, 2020).
Leighton Baker	Former leader of the New Conservative Party and vocal anti-COVID vaccine and anti-mandate protestor, who in the 2023 New Zealand election, announced that he was forming the Leighton Baker party after he was named in the top five preferred prime ministers in a Newshub poll (Roberts, 2023).
Chantelle Baker	Daughter of Leighton, who has quickly amassed a greater following with her use of social media and the spreading of conspiracy theories. Her livestreams of the parliament protest gained more engagement, at times, than mainstream media and became significant vectors for the spread of misinformation and disinformation (Clark, 2022). Features frequently on Counterspin.
Kerry Bolton	Has a longstanding involvement with far-right extremism and its political activism, and regularly writes for the Action Zealandia website. Cunningham et al. (2022) described him as one of the most prominent propagandists of the far right, who had involvement in neo-Nazi and similar movements in his teenage years, such as the New Zealand National Front (and other similar groups later on).

List of far-right figures and groups	
Kyle Chapman	Chapman has a long history with far-right extremism, and in the early 2000s revived the New Zealand National Front. He also joined the Direct Democracy Party that was led by Kelvyn Alp, who would go on to create the Right-Wing Resistance, the 'street arm' of the Nationalist Alliance (Cunningham et al., 2022). He remains active in Christchurch based far-right extremism and conspiracy campaigns and was distributing anti-vaccination flyers in 2021. Obviously, an old friend of Alp, Chapman has made regular appearances on Counterspin.
Lee Williams	A former prison guard born in the UK and residing in Christchurch, who became a prominent figure of the far-right extremist online ecosystem. Since first doing an interview with Spierer in June 2020, he has appeared on Counterspin numerous times.
Colin King-Ansell	Described as New Zealand's longest-standing far-right extremist torchbearer. Who has been involved in the National Front, as well as many other far-right groups.
Voices for Freedom	An anti-vaccination group founded by Claire Deeks, a former candidate for the Advance New Zealand Party, with Alia Bland and Libby Johnson. The group very quickly found itself peddling far-right extremist rhetoric and conspiracy theories, especially during the Parliament protests, but can still be seen as one of the more moderate groups (Clark, 2022). Spierer has been a supporter of VFF since the beginning, and subsequently VFF have been frequent guests on Counterspin.
Action Zealandia	They describe themselves as a community for European New Zealanders and a movement of young nationalists. They keep the identities of their members hidden.

Chapter 5: Role and influence of Counterspin in the pandemic-infodemic in Aotearoa New Zealand

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter discussed the origins and emergence of Counterspin, and the key leaders. We now examine their role in the COVID-19 pandemic and infodemic in Aotearoa New Zealand. Under consideration will be the vaccination rollout and mandates, the anti-lockdown protests, the convoy, and the Parliamentary occupation. The immediate aftermath of Parliamentary occupation, and Counterspin's influence, will then be discussed.

COVID-19 first arrived on Aotearoa New Zealand's shores in February of 2020. By ANZAC day of 2021, the day Counterspin launched its first episode on April 25th, there had been around 2300 confirmed cases and 26 deaths. Vaccination efforts had already begun with around 10,000 people having already received both doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine (New Zealand Doctor, 2021). While Counterspin wasn't around in the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in Aotearoa New Zealand, it certainly compensated for this later. Alp made the following remarks in the first episode on April 25th, 2021.

rights and freedoms, where? When you have companies getting cancelled because they won't cower and just accept their loss of life and be talking heads and just regurgitate the same things told by the government. When you have racial division manufactured to cause division and distraction while they implement draconian legislation. (Counterspin Media, 2021b)

This observation came in the first minute of the first episode and it sets the tone for what was to follow in not only in that episode but for others to come. By episode eight, titled 'The Real Pandemic', which aired May 20th, 2021, mis- and disinformation were rife, alongside conspiracy theories, surrounding the severeness, or lack thereof, of the virus, and the effects of the vaccine. Alp had apparently heard on his way to the studio that morning, that some healthcare workers were refusing to get the vaccine because they had seen its effects on colleagues who were quitting their jobs (Counterspin Media, 2021b). This sentiment pervaded their rhetoric against all of the public health protection measures taken by the government in Aotearoa New Zealand.

5.2 Lockdowns

On March 23rd, 2020, then Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced that Aotearoa New Zealand had moved to alert level three. In 48 hours, it would move to alert level four of the Government's four-level alert system to help combat COVID-19 (Strongman, 2020). Being in level four meant that the disease was not contained and that there are widespread outbreaks. People were instructed to stay at home with all businesses closed except for essential services such as supermarkets and pharmacies (Strongman, 2020). By June 8, the country had been moved to alert level one due to no more active

cases of COVID-19. However, by August 13, Auckland was moved to alert level three, with the rest of the country moving to alert level two due to 22 active cases. On October 8, Auckland joined the rest of the country at alert level one (Strongman, 2020). Different cities, but especially Auckland, would move in and out of different alert levels during the first half of 2021 (The University of Auckland, 2023). Although Counterspin was not active during the first few lockdowns in 2020 and 2021, by the beginning of the Delta variant outbreak in August 2021, they were well and truly peddling their anti-lockdown message.

The level four lockdown mentioned above lasted till April 27th, 2020. Fortunately, during this period there had been no reported incidents of lockdown protests in Aotearoa New Zealand. Counterspin had a very small presence online during this time. Alp and Spierer's online presence existed only on their own personal accounts, which unfortunately cannot now be viewed, so conceivably they may no longer exist. When Alp's name is searched in posts made in the first half 2020 on Facebook, not much is returned. There is one post made on the Spiritual Renaissance New Zealand (SRNZ) Facebook group on June 19th, that welcomed new members, which included Alp, to their group. The final sentence on the post summarizes what the group was about. It stated to 'start running before the commie government screws your freedoms down so hard you can only travel 30km/hr, you are under martial law and lining up for a mandatory tracking device!' (SRNZ, 2020). Counterspin's first post on their Facebook page on April 29th, 2020, came only two days after level four lockdown ended on April 27th, 2020. Their only other post on Facebook in 2020, on July 2nd, reposted a YouTube video with Barry Smith who claimed that there were elites who had been controlling New Zealand since the 1960s (Counterspin Media 2020b).

The first reported anti-lockdown protest was on August 13th, 2020, in Whangarei. It was attended by Billy Te Kahika, who denied organizing it but voiced support for the view that the government's alert level system violated their rights (Pearse, 2020). This occurred only one day after Auckland had moved to alert level 3 due to four new cases detected in the community (they would remain there until the end of August) (New Zealand Doctor, 2023). There would be around five more anti-lockdown protests between August and October 2020 (Molyneux & Satherly, 2020), (Williams, 2020), (Bayer, 2020). There is no concrete evidence that Counterspin attended any of these protests, but one could most certainly assume that either Alp or Spierer were at one or more of them. Plausibly at one of these protests Tex Hill met Spierer, and later contacted her to suggest getting Counterspin onto GTV. There had been another anti-lockdown protest on January 14th, 2021, titled the 'freedom rally', which was organized by Te Kahika outside Parliament, and attended by about 150 people (Walls, 2021). But yet again, there was no concrete evidence that either Alp or Spierer attended this or contributed anything to it.

On August 17th, 2021, Auckland was put into alert level four lockdown, with the rest of the country subsequently joining them a few days later due to the Delta outbreak. Since their launch, up until this lockdown, Counterspin had released thirty-six episodes, including those titled 'LAND TO FREEDOM', 'THE REAL PANDEMIC', and 'NZ's COVID CON' (Counterspin Media, 2023). On August 18th there was an anti-lockdown protest outside the TVNZ buildings, led by Te Kahika, who was arrested by police in front of around 100 supporters (RNZ, 2021b). In a video about the protest, posted on RNZ's website, both Alp and Spierer are pictured on the steps of TVNZ, both maskless. On the same day, in an episode titled 'LOCKDOWN SPECIAL #1', (one of four lockdown specials during the first two weeks in the August lockdown) Alp would refer to draconian measures taken by the government to encroach on people's rights and freedoms. In the same episode, Alp provided more details about the protest in front of the TVNZ building in Auckland. He went on to say that it was awesome to see so many people fighting back against the attack on rights and freedoms (Counterspin Media, 2021d). For the rest of the two-hour long episode, much of the same was reiterated, including the Great Reset conspiracy theory, and sovereign citizen ideas.

Reeve had provided an apt description on what sovereign citizens believe: 'generally speaking, the idea relies on some vague understanding of 'common law' and a complex set of legalistic fairy tales which tend to conclude with the idea that each of us, as individuals, has been lied to about the very nature of our existence within society as we typically understand it' (Reeve, 2022a, p. 145). Most New Zealander's will not be familiar with the idea of a sovereign citizen, with some only becoming aware of it during the COVID-19 pandemic. It became especially prominent during the lockdown when the protests began happening in Aotearoa New Zealand. While not all those who see themselves as sovereign citizens are also considered far-right or alt-right, more often than not, adherents of these ideologies are followers of the sovereign citizen movement. Its ideological roots can be traced back to the Posse Comitatus, and anti-tax movements, of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s in the US. Researchers have argued that they were akin to far-right extremist's groups (Hodge, 2019). Counterspin did its part in promoting these ideas during lockdowns, by openly presenting such ideas through the episodes, or providing the platform for others to promote them.

Episode three on May 3rd, 2021, featured an interview with Liz Lambert, a former lawyer for the Service and Food Workers Union, and follower of the sovereign movement. She was involved with the attempted occupation of the Abel Tasman National Park with Alp in 2020. Lambert recounted how Alp contacted her to put a case together against the government for COVID-19 public health restrictions being a breach of human rights. In doing so, ideas and phrases familiar to those who follow the sovereign citizen movement were stated. Describing the restrictions, Lambert stated that 'it became more and more clear to me that in actual fact, we would call that public law... I've come to the

conclusion that what we need to use against this system is common law, or land law’ (Counterspin Media, 2021c). Most of Lambert’s interview was littered with phrases and words that she made out to be some sort of silver bullet for her and listeners. As Professor Andre Geddis tells The Spinoff ‘The whole sovereign citizen thing is basically treating law like a form of magic. The idea is if you can find the right magic legal words you can unlock an entire new world – but it’s meaningless, it’s just jargon’ (Reeve, 2022a). Geddis, an Otago University law professor continued and offered a simple assessment of sovereign citizens, ‘From a constitutional law perspective, the technical term for what they’re calling for is “nuts”’ (Reeve, 2022a).

Lambert also appeared on the ‘LOCKDOWN SPECIAL #3’ episode which aired August 21st, 2021, (the same day she was arrested by police for failing to comply with lockdown measures by attending an anti-lockdown protest at Aotea Square) (Counterspin Media, 2021e). Both Alp and Spierer were at the protests as well, accused by the Debunking Conspiracies Aotearoa New Zealand (DCA) group as being the organizers of the protest (Debunking Conspiracies Aotearoa New Zealand, 2021). In a video that appeared on the August 21st episode, Alp and Spierer were involved in a confrontation with police near Aotea Square. When asked what they were doing there and to provide their details they claimed they were media representatives (Counterspin Media, 2021e). In the episode, Alp also joked that they were just out exercising.

Auckland remained in lockdown, at times strict and other times not as strict, for most of the rest of the year. Counterspin went into overdrive, churning out 57 episodes from the time Auckland went into lockdown in August 2021 till the end of December. That was about three episodes a week, quite a jump from the one, or two, weekly episode when they had first started only four months prior. Their attitudes towards lockdowns remained consistent throughout, never deviating from their original stance that it was an attack on people’s freedoms and a breach of human rights. ‘freedom’ and ‘Rights’ are words that were, and are, thrown around in abundance on Counterspin. It is certain that they were mentioned at least once in every episode. ‘freedom’ and ‘rights’ have long been key words used among the far-right and alt-right and are certainly being used more in recent years. Wodak (2020) states that the far-right and alt-right tend to use these terms in a way that advances typical straw man fallacies (such as the claim that ‘freedom of opinion is threatened’ in regard to the debate around free speech). Counterspin certainly used ‘freedoms’ and ‘rights’ in that way as well.

5.3 Vaccination

As mentioned in the previous chapter, 90 per cent of eligible people have completed two doses of the COVID-19 vaccine in Aotearoa New Zealand (Ministry of Health, 2023). Despite the overwhelming consensus that most people decided to take the vaccine to protect themselves from the virus, there is

still a vocal minority of people against it. Counterspin is one of these voices, as well as one of the key culprits in amplifying other similar voices, such as Voices for Freedom, since they launched. As Clark (2023) pointed out 'spreading misinformation doesn't have to convince everyone that your position is the correct one, it just needs to convince enough people that there's a debate going on' (p. 22). A hoard of episodes was specifically dedicated to the COVID-19 vaccine, with some titled 'COVID-19 VACCINE WARNING', 'Vaxx Injured & Coercion of Children' or 'Undeclared Nanotech found in New Zealand's Pfizer Jabs – Government on Notice'. Counterspin made sure to keep doing its part to convince as many people as they could that there was something wrong with the COVID-19 vaccine.

Spieler, as mentioned in the previous chapter, has been openly involved in or supportive of anti-vax groups such as Mothers Who Stand For Freedom and Voices for Freedom. Because Counterspin were almost non-existent online in 2020, there isn't much evidence of them being openly anti-vax at the time. However, one could assume that they were since they attended and spoke at a MWSFF event on December 5th (Mothers Who Stand For Freedom, 2020). It wasn't till 2021 that their anti-vax beliefs were visible online for everyone to see.

In a Facebook post on January 5th, 2021, Counterspin claimed to be the 'REAL COVID VACCINE' (Counterspin Media, 2021g). One could read into that post and conclude that Counterspin were calling themselves the antidote to the pandemic and their supposed reporting of the 'truth' would be the undoing of the government's plan to control the population. There was a lot of support for them in the comments below the post. One commentor sounding exactly like Alp, almost word for word, commented that 'Covid is a deceptive propaganda && [sic] Covid vaccines are equal to the mRNA poisons, and blood clots from AstraZeneca, for the sake of decreasing the population of Earth, for the sake of fake "Climate change"' (Counterspin Media, 2021g). But there were also people pushing back, including one commentor who accurately described what Counterspin were. They stated that 'it looks like a lot of text but with few actual facts. More like an opinionated blog' (Counterspin Media, 2021g). However, Counterspin continued to spread their opinions.

Aotearoa New Zealand would have its first vaccination on February 19th, 2021, with vaccinators the first recipients (New Zealand Doctor, 2023). By the time Counterspin began their first episode on GTV in April 2021, the vaccination rollout had already begun. In episode six, titled *STARVE THE BEAST*, which aired May 13th, 2021, Alp claimed 'it is not really a vaccine is it, it's more like an experimental serum, so if you start looking like a frog, start growing two heads, it's going to be a bit of a problem' (Counterspin Media, 2021f). Counterspin continued in the same manner for the rest of the vaccination rollout, spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories about what was in the vaccine and the effects of the vaccine, both on their video episodes and on their social media accounts. When the

vaccination mandates were announced in October 2021, Counterspin amped up their anti-vax episodes, with 21 episodes specifically about the vaccine, released in the month of October.

5.4 Vaccination Mandates

In their episodes surrounding lockdowns and vaccine, Counterspin would regurgitate popular talking points among the far-right and alt-right about the issue, which typically tended to be from America. Their discussion around mandates was no different. Their argument against mandates was similar to their arguments against lockdowns, they took away freedoms and rights. During the period in which the mandates were first being announced, Counterspin released short 'informative' videos, similar to the COVID-19 videos that the government were releasing about what alert levels the country was in. Counterspin video packages were titled 'COVID1984' and featured their take on the mandates and Ardern's supposed tyranny. George Orwell's dystopian novel '1984', had become a popular reference point among those who were anti-government during the time when mandates were enforced. The novel is a dystopian social science fiction and cautionary tale, which follows the life of Winston Smith, a low-ranking member of 'the Party', who is frustrated by the omnipresent eyes of the party, and its ominous ruler Big Brother.

Counterspin, like many others on the far-right, alt-right and conspiracist-right, believe that the New Zealand government are tyrannical, hellbent on infringing people's freedoms and rights. This reference to 1984 is not something recent, at least not in America, but it made its way to Aotearoa New Zealand. According to Rodden (2020), in 'every previous election season—stretching back at least to the eras of Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan in the 1970s and '80s—the agitprop language and “dystopian” vision of George Orwell's *1984* AND *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (or rather 1984, per the Newspeak-like American title) represent a significant shaping force in the media's analysis and the candidates' rhetoric' (p.261). Media and candidates from both ends of the political spectrum will use this rhetoric, whether it be from the left or right. Both would state that the other side would lead the country into the dystopia described in Orwell's novel (Rodden, 2020). In Aotearoa New Zealand, it seemed as though the only groups who used this rhetoric were those on the right, like Counterspin.

Towards the end of October 2021, Counterspin promoted and attended the Sovereign Hīkoi of Truth (SHOT), which protested lockdowns, vaccination and mandates, with the objective of ensuring that all New Zealanders had their freedom (Native Media, 2021). The convoy of protestors aimed to travel from Rotorua to Waitangi, despite Auckland and Waikato being in level three lockdown, with the rest of Aotearoa New Zealand in alert level two. A hīkoi is a Māori phrase that can be defined as a communal walk or march, done for publicity or as a form of protest. However, this one was condemned by iwi who said the protests were unhelpful and would put people at unnecessary risk (Andelane, 2021). On

October 27th, just after midnight, the convoy began from Rotorua, with Counterspin showing coverage throughout, with 22 videos dedicated to it. The convoy was stopped at the Mercer boundary, south of Auckland, and more than 50 participants were stopped by police at Auckland's northern border. They were trying to get into Tai Tokerau to then move onto Waitangi (Preston, 2021). A video posted on their Rumble channel, showed how Alp and Spierer had raced to join the convoy that was heading to the northern Auckland border, and managed to get past it (Counterspin Media, 2021h). Despite many not being let through the various borders, still around 2,000 protesters converged on Waitangi. Even though the majority of marae leaders did not want the hikoi there, they felt they had to honour their custom of manaakitanga (hospitality) (Kerr-Lazenby & Piper, 2021). Alp was invited to speak on the day, and within the first five minutes he claimed that he knew the pandemic was a scam, that the vaccine affected DNA, and that if people were concerned about their whakapapa (genealogy) they wouldn't take it (Counterspin Media, 2021i). He carried on with the same rhetoric as the Counterspin episodes. What was concerning was the number of cheers and applause he received from the crowd when he spoke. This indicated that the disinformation spread by Counterspin had found an audience. A popular comment that is made by those who oppose the mandates, is that it divided society into two groups – the vaccinated and the not vaccinated, a form of apartheid. Originally, 'Apartheid was a brutal form of institutionalised white supremacy enforced by South African authorities in the 20th century. Under it, people were given rights according to their race, with black Africans afforded the least and whites the most' (Rutledge, 2021). Most people understand the severity of what happened during apartheid in South Africa, which is why the idea that mandates are similar is ludicrous and offensive. However, that didn't stop some people from spreading this rhetoric. A pie shop in Kumeu came under fire for a controversial post they made on Facebook, suggesting New Zealand's new COVID-19 vaccine regulations were a form of apartheid. Despite the backlash they didn't back down, gaining support from those who agreed with their take, including, of course, Counterspin.

During December 2021, whilst Auckland was still in lockdown, Counterspin released two episodes titled 'NEW ZEALAND: Apartheid Has Begun' and 'New Zealand Apartheid Day 4: We Can Beat Them!'. In the first one, Counterspin spoke to two women who were against mandates and who would apparently have no job once implemented. Both talked about not wanting to get the vaccine after hearing bad stories about it, and both named Jacinda Ardern as a liar and bully (Counterspin Media, 2021d). In the second episode, an interview with former Auckland University of Technology (AUT) senior law lecturer, Amy Benjamin, took up the entirety of the episode. The first ten minutes of the interview consisted of Benjamin talking to Alp about being let go, or resigning, according to her, from AUT due to her comments about the Christchurch terrorist attack being a false flag. Benjamin believed that the New Zealand government was responsible for the terrorist attack. Throughout the rest of this

episode, she and Alp took turns in talking about the tyrannical government, mandates, and the vaccine, while spouting the popular conspiracy theory that COVID-19 was a bioweapon produced in Wuhan by former Chief Medical Advisor to the White House, Anthony Fauci, and Bill Gates, among other people. The episode ended with Alp asking Benjamin about how she was coping under the 'apartheid'. She detailed how she had members in her family who could not work, and the unfairness of it all. As the interview wrapped up, Alp made a remark that there were 'more of us than there are of them', in regard to the unvaccinated and vaccinated. While the vaccination data would have told him otherwise, there were, and are, a number of vocal people in Aotearoa New Zealand who believe the statements. We need only to look at the Parliamentary occupation to see evidence of this.

5.5 Counterspin's Role in the 2022 Parliament Protest and Occupation

The occupation of Parliament grounds was the outcome of mis- and disinformation being disseminated online (Clark, 2022). Even from just a small snapshot of the type of messages, mis and disinformation Counterspin were spreading, it is clear why Clark (2022), named them as one of sixteen key figures behind the events at Parliament. Counterspin were relentless in pushing out their so-called 'alternative' point of view about all things COVID-19 leading up to the Parliament protest. They continued with multiple episodes per week, never really having anything new to say, just spreading the same message. Certainly, though with each passing episode they became more animated in playing on the fears of their audience.

5.5.1 Before (Convoy)

Counterspin had already been playing to a specific fear within people, particularly parents, that something bad will happen to children. They did so frequently once the government announced on December 21st, 2021, that parents and caregivers had the opportunity to protect their children aged 5 to 11 against COVID-19 with the child version of the Pfizer vaccine (New Zealand Government, 2021). The rollout to children would begin on January 17th, 2022. From the beginning of 2022, and before the convoy began, Counterspin would ramp up their anti-vax efforts, with two episodes dedicated to child vaccinations. One was titled 'Jacinda - Stop Gene Jabbing our Children' and the other was titled 'The Latest on Kiddy Jabbing'. Counterspin promoted and attended the 'Hey Jacinda, Leave Our Kids Alone' event organised in Christchurch by The Freedom & Rights Coalition (Brian Tamaki). In a post on Telegram, it stated that both Alp and Spierer were in attendance (Counterspin Media, 2022j). Leading up to the convoy beginning, Counterspin posted on their Telegram page their 'OPERATION:RECLAIM' strategic plan, which detailed the way in which they would stop the alleged 'democide' (Counterspin Media, 2022a). In the post, which was written by Alp, the reason they were fighting was because if they didn't 'our children lose their future' (Counterspin Media, 2022a).

When the convoy left both ends of the country on February 6th, Counterspin employed their correspondents for coverage. Their correspondents were familiar faces to those who had been paying attention to New Zealand's conspiracy theorist fringe (Clark, 2022). Shane Chafin, a US-born former pharmacist who made the news for heckling Jacinda Ardern about alleged vaccine related deaths, was the correspondent in the north (Fisher, 2021). In the south was Heather Meri Pennycook, a former parliamentary candidate for the Advance NZ party, an alliance between former National Party MP Jamie Lee Ross and conspiracy theorist Billy te Kahika (Clark, 2022). Pennycook had gone on to found the Agriculture Action Group, which targeted rural New Zealanders with conspiracy theories about climate change and United Nations Agenda 21 and Agenda 2030 (Clark, 2022). Counterspin had all their bases covered. They had their correspondents attending different convoys up and down Aotearoa New Zealand, livestreaming on the platform, with a rhetoric that the majority of citizens are on their side. To an outsider, this was simply not true, but to their audience and even those on the fence, it looked like a big movement. This is why it was easy for Counterspin to rally followers to join them.

5.3.2 During

On the role Counterspin played during the Parliament occupation, Clark remarked that the 'hosts and correspondents were among the protesters who rallied outside Parliament, providing not just sympathetic coverage of the protest, but working to shape the course of action taken by protesters' (Clark, 2022, p.124). Counterspin were putting all their energy into what was happening on Parliament grounds. In the early days of the occupation, Counterspin issued a 'Call of Action' via email to their subscribers calling for everyone to 'mobilise and get to Wellington now!' and that it was a 'fight between good and evil, for the future of our beautiful country' and that they must choose between 'FREEDOM or Tyranny' (Clark, 2022). While it cannot be known for certain whether this call was answered by their audience, according to a review done by The Independent Police Conduct Authority (2023) only about 100 protesters were in attendance during the early days from February 7th to February 10th, although this quickly grew to about 3,000 over the following weeks. Counterspin certainly had a hand in growing those numbers.

During the 23-day occupation, Counterspin livestreamed most days, talking to various different people onsite, interviewing so-called experts in fields ranging from medical to legal. Sue Grey, the lawyer and Outdoors Party leader, well known for her opposition to vaccines, became a fixture on Counterspin during the occupation, where she continued to spread disinformation about 5G being the cause for COVID-19, as well as the claimed illegality of vaccine mandates. Host Kelvyn Alp made it very clear on multiple occasions during livestreams about his stance on the matter, and what he wanted to see going forward in regard to the occupation. He regularly used the Counterspin livestreams to criticise the

Destiny Church affiliated Freedom and Rights Coalition for taking a more moderate approach and instead advocated for militant tactics. On the February 9 livestream, he announced that at 3pm that day protesters would aim to carry out the citizens' arrest of Health Minister Andrew Little. Clark observes that 'Brett Power, who had travelled from New Plymouth, gave a speech that was streamed live on Counterspin, and then attempted to enter the Parliament building. He was arrested along with two others. The three were charged with obstruction. Power's speech and footage of his arrest would be repeatedly replayed during Counterspin livestreams in the following days' (Clark, 2022, p.125). Counterspin's livestreams were being watched by tens of thousands of people, and for some, it was their only source of information regarding the protest. Counterspin were key in creating a splintered reality, that TDP (2022) alluded to, and continued to create one even after the protests.

5.3.3 After

David Robie, former Professor of Communication Studies and Pacific Journalism at Auckland University of Technology, remarked concerning Parliament protest and occupation, how Counterspin and other similar entities contributed to a campaign of disinformation.

The riot climaxed a mounting campaign of disinformation and hate speech on social media fuelled by conspiracy theories circulated by New Zealand activist media such as Counterspin, which emulated their counterparts in Australia and the United States. Vitriolic death threats against political leaders and attacks on journalists and the media on an unprecedented scale were a feature of the protests. Anti-government messages were imported alongside white supremacist ideologies. Researchers have described the events as a 'tectonic shift' that will have a significant and lasting impact on Aotearoa New Zealand's democratic institutions. (Robie, 2022, p.105)

In the immediate aftermath, while scholars and those who have been monitoring the far-right, alt-right and also mis- and disinformation have looked to understand how the Parliament protest came about and how it could be prevented in the future, Counterspin had gained a bigger audience than before the protests. The vaccine pass mandates were scrapped not long after the protests, on April 4, and Counterspin saw this as a victory that came from the occupation. Yet, they still carried on with the same rhetoric that they were pushing during that period. Counterspin coverage of the protests raised their profile and soon after the protests came to an end, they looked to exploit this by undertaking a live covered 'Let's Not Forget Tour' (this also included a donation link in every episode description). From the beginning of May 2022 till about mid-June 2022, Counterspin visited twenty-six locations up and down Aotearoa New Zealand from Auckland to Dunedin, bringing in a substantial number of people at each location. As mentioned in the introduction, special guests that attended these events included well known figures of the far-right extremist movement in Aotearoa New Zealand, such as Damien De Ment.

Counterspin have succeeded in convincing enough people that there is a debate going on surrounding multiple topics like vaccines, lockdowns, or mandates, and have gained quite an audience who believe the disinformation that they spread. If the Parliament occupation is anything to go by, that same audience would do almost anything to defend their beliefs.

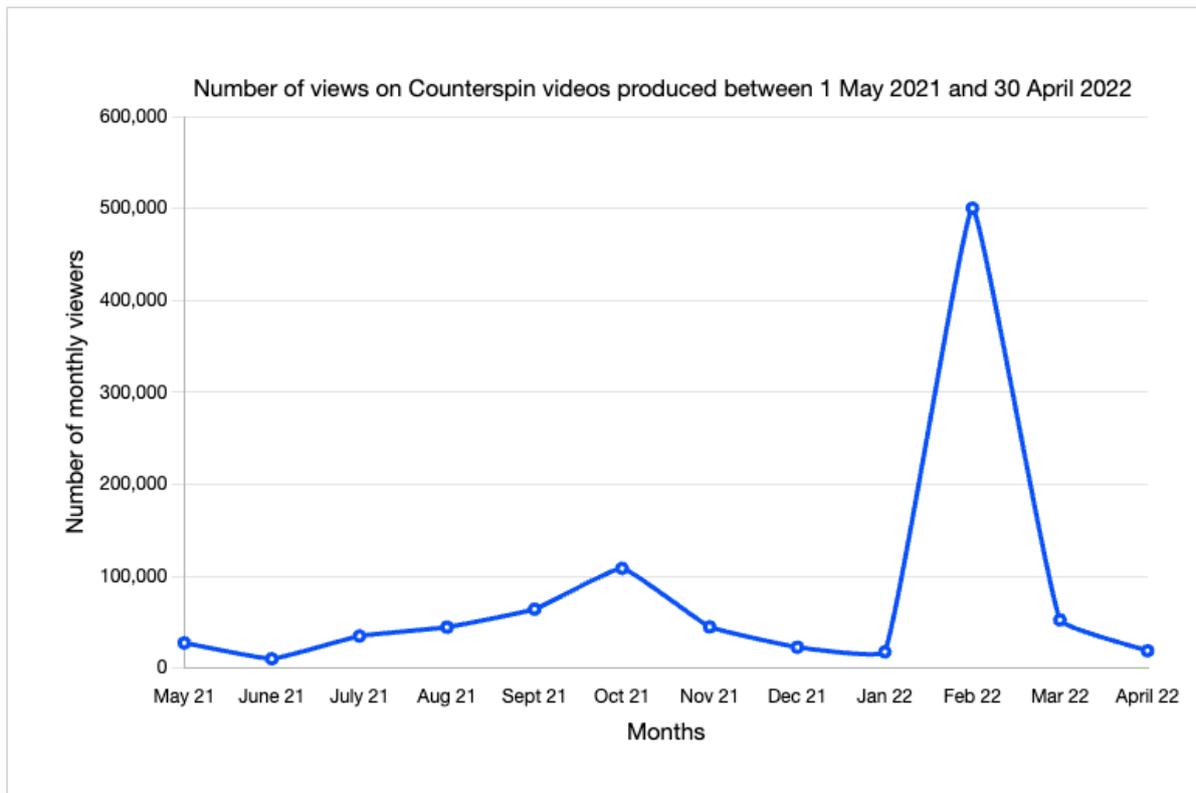
Chaper 6: Analysing Counterspin

6.1 Introduction

I will now critically analyse Counterspin’s language, specifically a range of keywords and phrases, to reveal far-right extremism with the capacity to undermine public sphere and public health principles. I have chosen to analyse texts that were produced within the 2022 Parliament protest timeframe of 29 January 2022 to 3 March 2022. As mentioned earlier, the protests were labelled as a tipping point in the embedding of information disorders by TDP (2022). As this section unfolds, it will reveal Counterspin’s role in this. In this context it is worth recounting the public exposure to Counterspin material.

As Figure 2 below shows, there was a large spike in the number of viewers watching the videos on Counterspin’s Rumble channel, over the 12-month period from 1 May 2021 to 30 April 2022. Views are based on the figure provided by Rumble for each video.

Figure 2: Number of monthly viewers of Counterspin videos on Rumble over 12-month period



The peak in viewers shown here explains why that particular period was chosen for analysis.

6.2 Ideology and Discourse Analysis

Drawing on the principles of CDA as discussed in the introduction, with the aid of ideology critique and keyword analysis, three texts produced by Counterspin have been selected. My purpose is to demonstrate the extent to which a far-right extremist ideology is interwoven in their language.

1. Counterspin Livestream on February 6th, 2022 (Day 1 of the convoy)
2. Counterspin's 'OPERATION: RECLAIM' Telegram post on January 29th, 2022.
3. 270 comments on the seven most viewed Counterspin videos on Rumble ²

Repeated concepts and keywords were identified in the samples and given a specific code. Counting how many times these codes were used throughout the sample came next. Once that was done ideology analysis and keyword analysis were employed to further the investigation. Far-right extremist ideology pervaded the language used by Counterspin. Ideology analysis revealed exactly how Counterspin used language to spread far-right extremism, and keyword analysis detailed how similar Counterspin was to other far-right extremist outfits.

6.3 First text: Counterspin Livestream on Sunday February 6th, 2022 (Day 1 of the convoy)

On Sunday 6th February 2022, Waitangi Day, the so-called 'NZ Freedom Convoy' departed from both ends of Aotearoa New Zealand, from Cape Reinga in the North Island, and Bluff in the South Island, and locations in between. All were set to converge on Parliament grounds in Wellington. Originally protests focused upon vaccination mandates, but as noted in previous chapters, that was soon accompanied by more extreme demands. Counterspin livestreamed from early in the morning, with Spierer in the studio, and Alp beamed in from Christchurch. They stayed streaming for just over thirteen hours. Within the livestream multiple narratives were at play. There was the anti-mandate narrative, the anti-vaccination and anti-science narratives, the anti-government narrative, and the anti-media narrative, with all of these having a far-right extremist undercurrent. This livestream is still the most watched video on Counterspin's Rumble channel, currently at 84k views as of October 2023 (Counterspin Media, 2022d).

² These are the seven most watched Counterspin videos on their Rumble channel, including the title and the number of views and comments on each.

1. REPLAY (Unedited) LIVE: CONVOY 2022 NZ DAY 1 – Sunday 6th February 2022 (84k views, 53 comments)
2. REPLAY (Unedited) LIVE: CONVOY 2022 NZ DAY 3 - Tuesday 8th February 2022 (70.1k views, 56 comments)
3. Replay: Kiwi Citizens have now served documents to the New Zealand Police for the Arrest of Health Minister Andrew Little (50.8k views, 31 comments)
4. REPLAY (Unedited) LIVE: CONVOY 2022 NZ DAY 4 - Wednesday 9th February 2022 (51.2k views, 61 comments)
5. REPLAY (Unedited) LIVE: CONVOY 2022 NZ DAY 2 - Monday 7th February 2022 (37.5k views, 33 comments)
6. REPLAY (Unedited) LIVE: CONVOY 2022 NZ DAY 17 Tuesday 22nd February 2022 (34.5k views, 23 comments)
7. Special Report: Kiwi Citizens Initiate Arrest of Health Minister Andrew Little (2nd February 2022) (25.8k views, 36 comments)

The livestream opens with both Spierer and Alp discussing the weather at both ends of the country, with the latter remarking that the weather in Christchurch was clearing up just in time for the trip to Wellington, ‘where the fun and games begin’ (Counterspin Media, 2022d). The livestream continues in the same manner; the feeling of anticipation of what was to come in Wellington permeated throughout. At the same time, Aotearoa New Zealand was in the red traffic light setting due to the omicron variant. Masks were still mandated for most indoor locations and social distancing was still being recommended. The occupation that they were planning would not be following the COVID-19 protection framework set out by the Government. It was stated by Alp that the government needs to be ‘put down ...because they are killing people, it is democide now people’. He then continued that the government was committing ‘a whole raft of crimes against humanity in breach of every Nuremburg code you could possibly think of’ (Counterspin Media, 2022d). The protestors were fighting the ‘good fight’ by going against a government, who was hellbent on taking away peoples ‘rights and freedoms’.

Counterspin’s language in this livestream contains conspiracies and half-truths, to justify them going against the government. As Pausch et al. (2021) observed, such material can ‘undermine the functioning of democratic societies, eroding individuals’ faith in the functioning of shared principles and values and diverting individuals’ interest towards undemocratic ideas and opinion leaders who point to simple solutions to complex problems’ (p.6).

Keywords

- **Freedom:** the quality or state of being free. A political right.

Synonyms	Antonyms
Autonomy, independence, liberty, self-determination, self-government, sovereignty	Captivity, Impotence, imprisonment, servitude, slavery, subordination, restriction

‘Freedom’ was used as a rallying cry for protestors who were in opposition to COVID-19 public health measures such as lockdowns and mandates, both in Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally. The government threatened people’s freedoms by putting them in lockdown and by taking away their autonomy to choose ‘what to put in their bodies’, through the implementation of vaccination mandates. In Aotearoa New Zealand Jacinda Ardern was the head of this government, she was the one who spoke to a nation and advised them that they would be heading into a nationwide lockdown. She was making the top decisions and was thus the greatest threat to people’s freedoms. Mainstream media, nothing more than the mouthpiece for the government, were telling their lies to the public, and threatening people’s freedoms because of this. These narratives, littered throughout the

livestream, were used as a rallying cry for more to join the convoy that was on its way to Parliament grounds.

The history of the word, and the idea of freedom is as long as history itself, and while this research focuses on how far-right extremists have co-opted the word, I will briefly mention below how the word has been used throughout history, so that we may distinguish between the two uses.

According to Oppenheim (1961), there is 'hardly a political struggle which has not been fought by one side or by both, by sword or by word, in the name of liberty' (p.3). From the fight for the abolition of slavery in the United States, or the struggle to end apartheid in South Africa, freedom was the end goal. Freedom is a right that all people should have, and the struggle for one's freedom is worth fighting for, so it makes sense that it would be used as a rallying cry. However, as Oppenheim (1961) observed, freedom to do or say something does not mean that one should. The legality of an action must also be considered. Here the legality of something does not always mean it is the right thing to do. It was legal to own slaves, and apartheid was enshrined in law.

'Freedom' can signal a desire for freedom from government intervention or overreach (Vermes, 2022). And it is a term that has thrived among far-right extremist groups, who often refuse to be 'bound by norms of equality, treating all people equally or norms to remedy inequality, whether that's trying to remedy discrimination or gender discrimination' states associate professor of political science at George Washington University, Elisabeth Anker (as cited in Vermes, 2022). She continues by saying that 'freedom' has been used by far-right extremist groups as part of push-back against efforts to remedy inequality.

It was used 117 times in the sampled Counterspin livestream. Spierer even sported a t-shirt with the word written boldly in white. In the first two minutes, the livestream crossed to Alisha and Gabrielle, both Māori women who would be the Counterspin correspondents for the day. They called in from Cape Reinga as the convoy was just about to get underway. Within the first few sentences, 'freedom' was used four times by one of the women, with Gabrielle stating that it was great to see all the 'freedom fighters' come together, 'it's just like a uniting of people that all have the same beliefs and believe that freedom is our right' (Counterspin Media, 2022d). Knowingly or unknowingly, all these people who had united under the banner of 'freedom', also unified under the much larger banner of far-right extremism. As Thompson's (1990) unification mode describes, one of modes and strategies in establishing and sustaining an ideology, is constructing a form of unity that embraces a collective identity, no matter the differences and divisions. During COVID-19, far-right extremism used 'freedom' within a strategy to lure in anyone that was against the proactive responses taken by those who aimed to limit the effect of the virus. In building a substantive collective, all in search of a common goal, there

may be differences in the understandings of ‘freedom’, but the goal remains. However, this does contradict Counterspin’s discourse around being a united front, as some are fighting for different reasons and outcomes than others. For example, this unification can blur the lines and divisions that once separated individuals within the collective. For example, one may originally be anti-vax but not a conspiracy theorist, but under the far-right extremist umbrella this is of less significance. In the case of our two Counterspin correspondents, Alisha and Gabrielle, the latter was a former nurse who left her job due to mandates and apparently did not want to vaccinate children. This was implicitly mentioned during the livestream in regard to ‘The Great Reset’³ conspiracy when they spoke about the governments so-called ‘crimes against humanity’. Because there was a culmination of different people all coming underneath one umbrella, it was easier for the far-right extremists to infiltrate their ideas incognito. Also at play is Thompsons (1990) dissimulation mode, in which ideology (such as far-right extremism) is concealed and denied. From the outside people will see a ‘freedom’ movement, when in actuality, there is far-right extremist ideology hiding in plain sight. Alp addressed critics in the livestream, such as TDP (2022) and Clark (2022) who had claimed that there were a lot of white supremacists within the ‘freedom’ movement.

We have so many that call this place home, we have so many nationalities that love this place and they raised their children here so to say this movement is full of the white supremacist thing, it’s just another distraction. (Counterspin Media, 2022d)

This is very similar to the whole ‘I can’t be racist, I have a [ethnic minority] friend’ statement used by some. Also, it supports what Tina Ngata wrote about far-extremist groups using minorities to legitimise their movement in the eyes of society and put them on the front lines to take the brunt of scrutiny (Ngata, 2020).

- **Tyranny; tyrannical; tyrant:** oppressive power exerted by government; an oppressive, harsh, or unjust act.

Synonyms Autocracy, authoritarianism, communism, dictatorship, totalitarianism	Antonyms Autonomy, democracy, freedom, sovereignty,
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The protestors who were making their way to parliament believed that they were fighting for their freedom from a ‘tyrannical’ government. The first utterance of ‘tyranny’ comes from Alp in the thirty-sixth minute of the livestream, when he addressed the people who had initially followed governments

³ The Great Reset conspiracy theory follows the idea that the World Economic Forum (WEF) and its “Great Reset” initiative, an effort to reduce global inequality and advance environmental initiatives in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, is actually a tool being used by the elites to reorganise society and institute a global, totalitarian regime (Anti-Defamation League, 2023)

orders but were now seeing the truth. He stated that ‘some of them have actually been, what we call, red pillers and they have had a crash course in tyranny’ (Counterspin Media, 2022d). Here, we have the combining of two very common conspiracy theories that far-right extremists have used in the past, which became very popular during the COVID-19 pandemic. The ‘red pill’ line is from blockbuster film, *The Matrix*, that has been co-opted by far-right extremist groups. They follow the narrative of how it plays out in the film in that taking the red pill equates with choosing to see the truth (Cunha, 2020). The refrain of ‘tyranny’ has long been used by far-right extremists in justifying why the ‘other’ needed to be stopped. The John Birch Society opposed the UN during the Cold War, on the belief that it was part of a covert Communist plot to establish a one world government that would eventually become a tyrannical international police state (Clark & Stoakes, 2023).

‘tyranny’ has its roots in Ancient Greek. Aristotle stated that it referred to an unjust government which does not serve the good of the collective/community, but rather serves the good of one person (Nyirkos, 2018). Most rational people would believe that ‘tyranny’ is bad and would fight against it. The issue with the use of the term by far-right extremists in Aotearoa New Zealand during the COVID-19 pandemic, is that there was no substance to the claim that the government, led by Jacinda Ardern, was a tyrannical enemy of the truth.

‘Resist tyranny. Now is the time to ensure your children and grandchildren are free’ remarked Alp in the third hour of the livestream. He stated that the government was coming after the children, and that is where the line should be drawn (Counterspin Media, 2022d). Spierer would compare vaccination mandates and passports to ‘medical tyranny’ soon after. The term was used 34 times during the livestream, not only by Alp and Spierer, but also by their correspondents, such as Shane Chaffin who reported live from the South Island. He repeated the claim of the two hosts, that the ‘people’ were rising up against ‘tyranny’. An antonym for ‘tyranny’ is democracy. This is ironic given that Counterspin, and far-right extremism as a whole, are anti-democratic, while also being culprits of appropriating democratic concepts to fit their agenda such as freedom. Evidence that Counterspin are constantly contradicting themselves.

Counterspin’s use of the term ‘tyranny’, combined with lies and conspiracy theories, is anti-democratic at its core. The effect it had was seen on the steps of Parliament, with many uttering the same anti-government lies.

- **Revolution; revolt:** an outbreak against authority; a sudden, radical, or complete change; a fundamental change in political organization, the overthrow of one government.

Synonyms	Antonyms
Insurrection, mutiny, rebellion, uprising	Counterinsurgency, counterrevolution

In the second hour of the livestream, Alp made the statement that ‘the revolution will not be televised by mainstream media, but they didn’t count on was Counterspin and other media groups of independent free-thinking people who will not be subjugated, working together in a collaborative effort’ (Counterspin Media, 2022d). The interesting point here, alongside other contexts in this livestream, is that Counterspin not only called the convoy that was headed to Parliament, the revolution. They also alluded to the fact that they, with other similar media organisations, were part of the ‘media’ revolution. Thus, not only is there a ‘revolution’ to overthrow the government, Counterspin were also part of a ‘revolution’ that aimed to overthrow mainstream media.

The ‘revolution’ against the government narrative pervaded the language used in the livestream, by Counterspin hosts and guests. It has been used 44 times. Much like the use of ‘freedom’, this term was a rallying cry. It allowed listeners to feel a part of something much bigger than themselves. The conscious decision made by Counterspin, and other protestors, to label the convoy, and subsequently the Parliament protests, a revolution, added to the ‘tyranny’ narrative, whereby a revolt was needed to overthrow a tyrannical government. While ‘freedom’ to choose regarding vaccination may have been the short-term goal, ‘revolution’ against the government was the movements long term objective.

As mentioned, positioning Counterspin as some sort of ‘revolution’ against mainstream media, was also a dominant narrative throughout the livestream. In the seventh hour of the livestream, Spierer stated that Counterspin, and other media outfits like them, were created by real people because it was necessary ‘in order to educate and bring information to others and make you feel that you’re not alone, you’re the majority. This human army is built now and it’s on its way’ (Counterspin Media, 2022d). Mainstream media only tell lies, while Counterspin and a few others, are telling the truth. They are the only people that can be trusted to give it to you straight. In their own words, they can be trusted to not tell you ‘bullshit’.

Far-right extremists have long called for a ‘revolution’ in the same way as Counterspin did during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, according to Bello (2019). far-right extremists, and their actions, cannot actually be described as undertaking a ‘revolution’. Instead, the movements of far-right extremists can be conceptualized as variants of counterrevolution. Bello described two types of counterrevolutions summarized below.

The first is the ‘classical class-based counterrevolution’ that represents the dominant classes’ pursuit of decisively defeating the revolutionary or radical reformist movements (8). The second type of counterrevolution ‘is directed not at a revolutionary or reformist movement from below but at a liberal democratic regime that is perceived as corrupt, incompetent, and unable to deliver the goods [...] including social reform, the elimination of corruption, or the provision of personal security’. (as cited in Gürel, 2020)

With Bello’s conceptual distinctions in mind, the convoy and Parliament protests are not in fact a ‘revolution’ but rather the second type of counterrevolution, where action is directed at a ‘liberal democratic regime’ that is seen as ‘corrupt’ and ‘incompetent’.

Bello’s description of the second type of counterrevolution provides an apt description for the overall tone of the livestream and the language used within it. The keywords that have been analysed play a role in creating such language, both on their own and also when used in connection with each other. They reveal far-right extremist ideology with the capacity to undermine public sphere and public health principles.

6.4 Second text: Counterspin’s ‘OPERATION: RECLAIM’ Telegram post on January 29th 22.

The ‘OPERATION: RECLAIM’ Telegram post was uploaded to the Counterspin Telegram channel on January 29, 2022, eight days before the start of the convoy. It contained a 9-step⁴ outline on what Counterspin believed needed to be done in order to ‘reclaim’ the country. The choice of language in the title of their so-called strategic plan already indicates what kind of action Counterspin called for. The Merriam-Webster dictionary (n.d.) lists nine definitions for the word ‘operation’. They include a procedure on a body to repair damage or defect, and something that involves practical application of principles or processes. The definition that is suitable here is when operation is defined as ‘a usually military action, mission, or maneuver including its planning and execution’ (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). While such language being used by Counterspin is unsurprising, given that host Kelvyn Alp is ex-military, what some audience members may not have known, is that this type of language is also a cornerstone among far-right extremists. According to Simi et al. (2013), there is a long history,

⁴ Counterspin’s 9-step plan in their ‘OPERATIO: RECLAIM’ Telegram post

1. Rapidly organize regional men/troops to secure locations
2. Politicians, council members, Media (editors, owners, reporters), police, judges business leaders etc. to be arrested
3. Prepare a negotiation team
4. Non-violence is preferred but expect to use violence
5. Beware of infiltration agents
6. Keep command structures compartmentalized to minimize disruption
7. Public messaging is key
8. A well written speech is needed just before action is commenced
9. A list of people most trusted to be shared amongst each other to ensure there are no delays

particularly in the US, that documents the organisational and membership overlap between far-right extremists and the military. In the US, since 1953, at least nine far-right extremist groups have been formed by active military personnel (Simi et al., 2013). More locally, apart from Counterspin, far-right extremist groups such as Action Zealandia, and now defunct groups such as Dominion Movement and Wargus Christi, have used similar military language. According to political reporter for RNZ, Anneke Smith, a soldier charged with espionage in December 2019, was found to be a member of Action Zealandia, Wargus Christi, and co-founder of the Dominion Movement (Smith, 2021). Counterspin is normalising this kind of language, to a large nationwide audience. Militarist style rhetoric is evident in the following statements.

Rapidly organise regional men/troops that will secure specific locations within their region, to hold public hearings for Crime against Humanity, Democide, aiding and abetting in those crimes, reckless disregards for life, conspiracy to murder/cause bodily harm etc. (Counterspin, 2022a).

We need to make places available to hold public trials, but I suspect a deficiency in numbers unless real Men step up on behalf of the people. (Counterspin, 2022a)

The use of sexist language was very apparent throughout Counterspin’s rhetoric, not only in excerpts of the chosen Telegram post. The use of ‘men/troops’ is very ‘on brand’ for Counterspin, as well as the far-right extremists. Despite Spierer being co-founder of Counterspin and co-host, Alp is the star and main driver. That is not to take anything away from Spierer, who is a suitable sidekick to Alp, advancing the same far-right extremist ideology, but she is mainly in the passenger seat. The analysed Telegram post only has Alp signing off. The common trope among far-right extremists that is used when talking about combating their enemy/enemies, is that only ‘real men’ will be able to defeat the evil forces at play. This is why one can expect a lot of misogynistic sentiment in their language, especially by those who believe that feminism is the reason for their misfortune and will destroy that last bastion of masculinity (Clark, 2023).

Keywords

- **Reclaim; Reclaiming:** as in to regain, to get again in one’s possession.

Synonyms	Antonyms
Recapture, recover, regain, retrieve	Lose, mislay, misplace

In the eighth step, out of nine within the Telegram post that detailed how to ‘reclaim’ the country, Alp advised that a speech must be written before the ‘action is commenced’. It must include something about ‘us all being one people, regardless of race, colour, ideological differences or lifestyle etc’ with a

short invite ‘to all to participate in reclaiming our nation’ (Counterspin Media, 2022a). The ‘reclaiming our nation’ narrative is the most dominant one. It is used three times in the Telegram post.

‘Reclaim’ or similar terms, have long been used by far-right extremists when it came to naming their different movements, or creating the dominant narrative to explain their actions. More recently, in Australia, the 2015 Islamophobic ‘Reclaim Australia’ movement became one of the biggest racist mobilisations, and there was a very clear far-right extremist influence with people bearing swastika tattoos and threatening violence, in some cases towards counter protestors (Bainbridge, 2015). In the UK, there is even a ‘Reclaim Party’ who are most concerned with immigration and have been very vocal with thinly veiled references to eugenics and racial population management (Manchanda, 2021). Tilley (2020) argued that the obsession with failing white birth rates, which has long been a concern of the far-right extremists due to population growth of minority groups since the 1920s and 1930s, had been rejuvenated in the context of fascist resurgence. Far-right extremists perceive that they are fighting to ‘reclaim’ what they perceive to have been stolen from them by their so-called enemies. Far-right extremists have long promoted a nostalgic view of a mythologised past, where their ideology was commonly accepted. They must ‘reclaim’ their nation in order to wind back the clock to a time where allegedly white supremacy and far-right extremism thrived in the mainstream.

Counterspin’s use of the term to name their strategic plan of operation is no coincidence. They are fully aware of the use of the term within far-right extremist movements and have used it as a rallying call to other far-right extremists. Without realising it, those who were not familiar with far-right extremist language, were simply fighting to ‘reclaim’ their country in terms of removing COVID-19 protections, such as lockdowns and mandates. However, in reality they were on the same side as far-right extremists fighting to ‘reclaim’ their country for more extreme reasons. Counterspin had mastered Thompson’s (1990) dissimulation mode, by concealing the far-right extremist ideology within their language.

- **Democide; Democidal:** The murder of any person or people by a government, including genocide, politicide, and mass murder.

Synonyms	Antonyms
Annihilation, ethnic cleansing, extermination genocide, mass murder, purge	-

Accusing a government of ‘democide’ is a serious claim, one that Counterspin made frequently during the analysed period throughout all their communications. The term occurs three times in the analysed Telegram post. It appeared in the first two sentences, in an apparent answer to those who had asked Counterspin about what could be done about the tyrannical government.

WHEN ASKED 'WHAT CAN WE DO TO STOP IT'?... MY RESPONSE IS: As you know, time is of the essence. The opposing demonic forces of democidal intent, have planned for 'almost' all eventualities. What they have not considered, is real and tangible action taken by the people in numbers. (Counterspin Media, 2022a)

Counterspin, as well other far-right extremists, used this term to stoke fear among the population during the COVID-19 pandemic. The use of 'democide' plays with already existing fears that some have towards the government, as well as the fears that vaccines can kill people. This fear is used to the advantage of Counterspin and others to grow their movements.

The accusation of 'democide' or 'genocide' against a government, are not new when it comes to the far-right extreme. In the US, several such groups, such as the neo-Nazi group National Socialist Movement, stoked anti-immigration fears in connection to other diseases, like Ebola and swine flu, by claiming that they would lead to a 'white genocide' (Ariza, 2020). Many of the conspiracy theories that are prominent within the far-right extreme, have the 'democide' and 'Genocide', against 'white people', narrative running through them. Thus 'The Great Reset' conspiracy theory according to Alex Jones, will lead to the extermination of all humans on earth.

In the analysed post, Counterspin, specifically Alp, are not accusing the New Zealand Government of trying to commit 'democide'. Rather they claimed that it had already occurred and now was the time for the government to pay for its crimes. Alp detailed how justice could be served in the first step which was 'to secure specific locations within their region, to hold public hearings for Crimes against Humanity, Democide, aiding and abetting in those crimes, reckless disregards for life, conspiracy to murder/cause bodily harm etc' (Counterspin Media, 2022a).

Far-right extremists have long used the expurgation of the other, which entails the construction of an enemy that is portrayed as evil, harmful or threatening (Thompson, 1990), to justify such views. Nazis did this with Jewish citizens. Local far-right extremists, such as Counterspin, have portrayed the Government, as well as the mainstream media and any other critics, as this evil other, that has committed 'democide'. In step two of 'OPERATION: RECLAIM' Counterspin called for the arrests of:

- Politicians
- Council Members
- Media Editors/owners/Reporters
- Police (those that have enforced mandates etc)
- Judges
- Business leaders

(Counterspin Media, 2022a)

Counterspin called for those included in the list above to be subject to a public trial. While that is as far as they go on the analysed Telegram post, Kelvyn repeatedly called for violence in their online livestreams when he was on Parliament grounds, going as far as to say that some politicians should be hanged (Stuff Circuit, 2022).

In November of 2021, TDP (2021) issued a warning that anti-vaccination and COVID-19 misinformation and disinformation were being used as a Trojan Horse for the normalisation of far-right extremism. By May 2022, the team behind TDP was arguing that this warning had come to fruition and was fully realised during the Parliament protest. Such is evident in the text analysed above.

6.5 Third text: Comments on the seven most viewed Counterspin videos

The decision to analyse the 270 comments that had been left on the seven most viewed videos on Counterspin's Rumble channel, was a conscious one. They presented an opportunity to reveal the language within Counterspin's audience and show the connections between the two. Out of all the comments that were analysed, only two voiced disagreements with what was being said in the Counterspin video. Both comments were made on the livestream for the third day of the protest on Tuesday 8th February, which was the second most watched video.

If you guys are stirring shit up you are no worse than our politicians.

You keep saying the election was rigged. So did the National party win? So did the Labour Party win? You say rigged because the New Conservatives only got 1.6% What happened to the New Conservatives?

(Counterspin Media, 2022f)

The rest of the 268 comments were in support of Counterspin and the protest, and within them were the same narratives that could be found in the language used by Counterspin throughout their communications. I refer here to the disinformation surrounding vaccination and lockdowns, as well as QAnon conspiracies.

The introduction of this thesis, in discussing the reasons for wanting to analyse and critique Counterspin, considered the possibility that their influence could grow among Māori and Pacific Islanders, thus subjecting them to far-right extremist ideology. A disturbing observation made when analysing the comments, is that Te Reo Māori and Samoan was sometimes used. Whether the people behind these comments are actually Māori or Samoan is unknown, but it is still a disturbing thing to see in calls for the execution of Jacinda Ardern. Below is one comment made by a user that was left underneath the 7th most watched video in the list and features both the use of Te Reo Māori and Samoan.

This man has done more for Kiwi human rights than the actual Human Rights NZ group. **Kia kaha** to all the "ordinary Kiwis" out there standing up for us. I hope to be involved somewhere, somehow. **Malo lava le galulue**. Great work!. (Counterspin Media, 2022b)

Malo lava le galulue (Thank you for your great work) is the only instance of Samoan, or any other Pacific language, in the analysed comments. Kia kaha (Stay strong in Te Reo Māori) is used five times throughout the analysed comments. There are 24 other instances of words in Te Reo Māori being used, including the use of 'kia ora' (hello), 'whanau' (family), 'aroha' (love), 'mahi' (work), 'waka' (canoe), 'manaakitanga' (expressing kindness and respect) and 'kainga' (home). As mentioned above, it is unknown whether the people using these words are Māori, but it is concerning to have the language among far-right extremist comments, and under a video produced by far-right extremists. Below is a comment by another user which consists of a full sentence in Te Reo Māori. It was left under the most watched video and attributes the convoy to be a blessing from God.

Te ahua nei manaakitanga o te Atua. Kaitaraiwa kite kainga. Welcome home Drivers. :) (It seems to be a blessing from God. The Drivers are going home). (Counterspin Media, 2022d)

While most commenters appear to be from Aotearoa New Zealand, there are some from around the world that voiced their support for what was happening. This is unsurprising, given that Rumble is an overseas platform, but it does show the international linkages between far-right extremists in different countries. There are comments of support from Australia, Canada, Japan, Italy and Britain. The last two, when further investigated had far-right extremist tendencies within the language used. Below is a comment which was left under the fifth most watched video.

Resistance GB in the UK is wanting to speak with someone here about what is going on. I have given him Counterspin's website details and Kelvyn's name and directed him to Telegram to try and get a hold of him so they too can do a piece on NZ Convoy. The world is standing up and saying NO MORE!. (Counterspin Media, 2022e)

If we look into Resistance GB we find a radical anti-lockdown, anti-vaccination and prominent spreader of disinformation and conspiracy theories, created and run by far-right extremist and former Tory councillor, Will Coleshill (Wells, 2022). As per the Resistance GB YouTube and social media accounts, neither Alp, nor anyone from Counterspin, has since appeared on their channels. Below is a comment which was left underneath the third most watched video. It features a phrase in Italian.

We the people will not be pushed around indefinitely. On a long enough timeline every tyranny falls. La gente come noi non molla mai! (People like us never give up). (Counterspin Media, 2022c)

The phrase became a slogan for the Italian far-right resistance against COVID-19 protection measures. Artist Francis Lalanne released a song with this phrase as the title, in response to 'having his freedom

extorted on the grounds of fallacious health arguments’ (Archyde, 2021). These comments are evidence that my earlier claim that a lot of far-right extremist discourse in Aotearoa had been imported, and that there is an interconnectedness between the international far-right ecology. It is also evidence that my initial concern about Counterspin’s messages being supported by Māori and Pasifika has unfortunately come to fruition.

Keywords

- **Media; Mainstream Media (MSM); Mass Media:** forms or systems of communication designed to reach a large number of people.

Synonyms	Antonyms
News	Alternative-media, community media, grassroots media, independent media

The most prominent narrative within the analysed comments was the distrust of mainstream media. Included under the banner of ‘media’ are the uses of ‘fake news’, ‘MSM’ and the designation of Counterspin to be ‘real news’. Altogether, there are 27 instances where ‘media’ are referenced, all in a negative manner. Previous chapters of this thesis have discussed the prominence of this narrative throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, especially regarding far-right extremism, so it is unsurprising that the rhetoric had found its way into the comments below Counterspin’s videos. Nonetheless, it is still a disturbing trend.

Counterspin as the antidote to this narrative, is one of the themes of the analysed comments. Counterspin called upon people to villainise, resist and turn away from the ‘media’. The word ‘media’ had almost become a derogatory term among the far-right extremists, in that if someone was to be labelled with it, that would be another way of saying that they could not be trusted as they only told lies. Below are two comments, one that was left underneath the most watched video, and the second that was left under the fourth most watched video. Both are clear about what they think of the ‘media’.

MEDIA = VIRUS. (Counterspin Media, 2022d)

You even have lame stream media supporting tamaki now and trying to smear counterspin!! (Counterspin Media, 2022g)

Both of the above comments accuse the ‘media’ of being and doing two different things. The first commentor likened the ‘media’ to a virus. It was a common narrative during the COVID-19 pandemic, among far-right extremists, anti-vax and conspiracy theorists, that there was no covid-19 virus, instead the ‘media’ were the real virus and needed to be eradicated. The second comment is a familiar

narrative, one that accuses the ‘media’ of creating a smear campaign against Counterspin. Both these narratives, as well as others that villainised the ‘media’, play into the hands of Counterspin in terms of gaining support, including monetary support. ‘Donating’ is used twice in the analysed comments. One under the second most watched video, and the other under the fifth most watched video.

thanks counterspin, you’re awesome, just donated some funds, keep up the good work. Right behind you! (Counterspin Media, 2022f)

Thank you for covering this. We are indebted to you for showing us the truth. Donating and sharing now, the least I can do. Come on NZ let’s support these people! (Counterspin Media, 2022e)

Turning people against mainstream ‘media’ works in the favour of Counterspin and other similar organisations. The analysed comments point to a worrying trend; anti-mainstream media rhetoric spouted by Counterspin has been growing among the general public. These online discourses also translated to offline action as many media journalists covering the Parliament protests received targeted abuse and harassment (The Disinformation Project, 2022). This trend lends its hand to both the undermining of public sphere and public health principles, as it pushes people away from reliable sources and towards less proven ones.

- **Jacinda Ardern:** Name of former Prime Minister of New Zealand.

Positive Nicknames	Negative Nicknames
Aunty, Prime Minister	Chinese Puppet, Cindy, Jabcinda, traitor

Painted as the tyrannical leader of the regime, Jacinda Ardern was the subject of widespread hatred and online abuse and misogyny, and it would be a disservice to look past the use of her name, and its variants, in this analysis. Although the amount of online abuse, as well as offline abuse, that was directed at Jacinda was wide in scope the following remarks will focus on references to her by Counterspin, and the wider far-right extremist network.

‘Jacinda Ardern’ is used 12 times in a negative manner within the analysed comments. The dominant sentiment around the use of the different variants of her name is the overwhelming dislike, and at times, full on hatred, involved. ‘Jail’ is used 5 times in the analysed comments, all in connection with ‘Jacinda Ardern’. ‘Trial’ is used 3 times in the same way. Below is a comment, which was left under the fifth most watched video, that perfectly represents the overall anti Jacinda Ardern narrative.

I can't listen to the coward traitor criminal Jacinda Ardern anymore. Her nauseating lying makes me physically ill to watch. I long for the day we put her and her coward associates to trial and incarcerate them for life for crimes against humanity. (Counterspin Media, 2022e)

As previously mentioned, both Counterspin and the wider far-right extremist network, make a habit of expurgating the ‘other’. ‘Jacinda Ardern’ became that ‘other’ very early on in her career as Prime

Minister, but it was her response to both the Christchurch Mosque shootings of 2019, and the COVID-19 pandemic that would unfortunately make her a prominent hate figure for far-right extremists and conspiracy theorist networks, locally and internationally (Hume, 2023). We see only a slice of this within the analysed comments, with a call for violence counted in one comment. Below is a comment which was left underneath the seventh most watched video. Below is a reply from another user.

End all this utter madness and put an arrest on all Fact Checkers on FB also and stop banning people from telling the truth, NZ is now becoming a communist country very quickly, BTW there are way more adverse effects not reported, or nothing to see bag, in NZ than you know about, way more. Jail Adhern for Treason

Jail is too good...Execute.

(Counterspin Media, 2022b)

These online messages also found their way offline, as many of these phrases were spouted during the Parliament occupation. They were written on signs that were held up, including one comparing Ardern to Hitler, and one that stated 'JABCINDA WE KNOW!! YOU SOLD YOUR SOUL TO THE DEVIL' (Pilcher, 2022). In an interview with Michelle Duff from Stuff NZ, Professor Paul Spoonley, whose work on the far-right extremists has been referenced in previous chapters, stated that the Parliament protests had provided a terminology and reason for being anti-Jacinda or against women in senior roles generally, he continued and stated, 'for them, sexism has been given a reason to exist again' (Duff, 2022). The language used by Counterspin had successfully aided this.

6.6 Discussion

This research set out to understand the far-right extremist ideology within Counterspin's language and how this undermined public sphere and public health principles. In general, the analysis found that the sample of texts from Counterspin, and their audience, normalised far-right extremism ideology. As one of Thompson's (1990) modes, legitimisation is when an ideology is established and sustained by representing itself as legitimate. It implicitly revealed itself within Counterspains language. In the three texts that were analysed, common keywords and themes were identified. It suggests that there is common ground between Counterspin's visual, audio and written language, and the language of their audience, with a far-right extremist narrative running throughout. My analysis also discovered common far-right extremism themes and narratives within Counterspains language, such as the 'us versus them' narrative, the 'take us back to better times' narrative, and finally the 'conspiracy over fact' narrative.

'us vs them'

No longer are we gonna be free range humans and we're certainly not gonna be put in to become battery humans, which is exactly what they want. We are gonna actually redefine what freedom really is on our terms - Kelvyn Alp. (Counterspin Media, 2022d)

Throughout the analysed texts, 'we', 'our' and 'us' are used all the time, whereas 'I' is used sparingly. The expurgation of the 'other' and unification, are the rhetorical strategies that have always been used by far-right extremists to incite hate toward the 'them' group. The purpose is to invoke fear and anxiety in the 'us' group in order to inspire action. These strategies are evident in all three texts, as previously discussed. Members of the 'us' group, as well as the 'them' group, tended to shift frequently depending on the issue, or depending on the personal feelings of Alp, Spierer and their audience. The comments revealed that in-fighting was apparent between Counterspin supporters and those who supported Brian Tamaki and Voices for Freedom. They quickly became members of the 'them' group in the eyes of a few commentators, who accused the two of being funded by the Government to purposefully grow dissent within the 'freedom movement'. The lines between the 'us' and 'them' blur sometimes for Counterspin. But in most cases, the division is pretty clear, the 'them' is everyone that disagrees with this 'fight against tyranny', such as the Government, media, medical professionals, 'liberals' etc. The 'us' are the people fighting for freedom. But there is a forced narrative within the texts. The 'us' referred to does not explicitly mention far-right extremists. These texts reveal that Counterspin had done a good job in concealing this. To an ordinary person watching or reading the texts, it just looks like someone who is passionate about personal freedoms.

Below is a comment from user that echoes Alp's irritation over accusations about the 'freedom movement' being filled with white supremacists. It suggests that the 'us vs them' rhetoric had found another subscriber.

I'm sick of the term, "white supremacist". We need to shun all language that has been ordained by the deceivers. Let's change the way we speak. My ancestry may come out of England and Ireland, but I was born in New Zealand. I have served my country in the military, I believe our Tangata Whenua are a precious possession, many of whom have been chucked under the bus...and not just by the white man. We need to get to a place where we eradicate this evil from the governance of our land, and then we need to move to a place of restoring what has been stolen from us all. (Counterspin Media, 2022d)

Here the 'us vs them' narrative directly undermined the main principle of the public sphere, that all people can come together to exchange different views and form public opinion. Counterspin, and their supporters, actively exclude those they do not agree with. This narrative also undermined a public health principle. Health officials and any medical professionals who actively worked to combat the virus, including administering vaccines were villainised. This compromised the ability of such people

to actively react to new threats. If people are persuaded to not trust public health, this undermines the capacity for public health professionals to contain the virus. Instead, they had to also focus on curbing the disinformation that was spreading.

'take us back to better times'

This is the New Zealand we've always been looking for to bring back again, we use to have it one day but while we were sleeping, they came like a thief in the night and stole it from us - Kelvyn Alp. (Counterspin Media, 2022d)

To give the quote some context, Alp said this at the end of the livestream, as the convoy from the south made camp in a park for the night, where apparently 400 trucks and 400 cars had come together. Alp remarked that it felt like a festival, and that people felt free. The COVID-19 pandemic period was rightfully labelled as an 'unprecedented time' by many. It was unexpected, and new territory for everyone. Many, understandably so, hoped to go back to a time before the pandemic, back to normal. An argument can be made that the above quote by Alp, is in reference to a time before the pandemic began. But in the context of Alp's rhetoric, and that of Counterspin generally, there is a far-right extremist undertone to the quote, and it is a claim that is consonant with MAGA rhetoric which further provides evidence that a lot of the discourse within the far-right owes a lot to the MAGA architects. This was seemingly unnoticed since it had become common at the time for people to wish for a time before the pandemic. Alp and other far-right extremists were only saying what everyone else was feeling. But unbeknown to some who agreed with this sentiment, was that Alp and those of his ilk, were not talking of the time just before the pandemic but of a different time. As Clark (2023) states, men in the far-right extremist space promote a nostalgic view of a mythologised past, when men could be 'real men', and they had the freedom to do and say what they wanted.

This narrative revealed itself in the analysed comments as well. This was seen when frequent commenter and the user that brought up GB Resistance replied to a user who had stated that we should eliminate debt and money, and only have a do not harm law. It is clear evidence of the 'mythologised past' which Clark (2023) alluded to in regard to how some men in the far-right extremist space hope to return to better times.

A millennia ago the dominant world system was an "offering" system, its what they refer to as the Paradise Times, even the Islamic/Eastern cultures acknowledge the paradise times. The Nordic peoples of old have written about this and to this day they still remember it even after all this time. It's a beautiful thing. (Counterspin Media, 2022g)

For this to be a dominant narrative within Counterspin's language is not surprising but given that some of these analysed come from Māori and possibly Pasifika audience members, it warranted further

scrutiny. This narrative undermined Counterspin's assurance that their 'freedom movement' catered to people from different walks of life and of different ethnicity. It undermined the involvement of those people because the wish to turn back time by Counterspin represents nostalgia for a world of racial uniformity. Māori and Pasifika people that turned up and rallied behind Counterspin and Alp, would in principle get cast aside in this return to a better time. That is what far-right extremists and white supremacists do. As Tina Ngata (2019) observed, they will use anyone to further their agenda, especially people of colour, so that no 'white bodies' are in the line of fire.

Public sphere and public health are affected by this narrative. The hope and wish to go back in time, by far-right extremists, directly undermined the work that was being done to make sure the public sphere and public health were accessible for everyone. It was a narrative that ultimately exploited the marginalised, which in turn undermined the public sphere and public health principles that aimed to serve underrepresented communities.

'conspiracy over fact'

we're on the cusp of transhumanism and they're definitely coming after our kids because they want them to be enhanced as they can just plug them in, and they can be the battery for these so-called elites - Kelvyn Alp. (Counterspin Media, 2022d)

The use of conspiracy theories was a cornerstone of Counterspin's language in the analysed texts. It echoed the language of far-right extremists around the world during the COVID-19 pandemic. The use of conspiracy theories is evidence of the links with, and influence of, international far-right extremists, particularly those in the US (including those that pontificate on QAnon theories). A prominent theme within the analysed texts, is the refusal of facts and scientific evidence, and a growing belief in sensational lies. If there was anything that would show the interconnectedness of the far-right extremist online ecology is, it would be the spread of conspiracy theories. The analysed texts show how QAnon claims, likely from the US, had made their way into Counterspin's language, and the language of their audience. Below are some of the examples of references to QAnon that were found in the analysed comments. Whether these users were made aware of QAnon through Counterspin is unknown, but Counterspin's amplification of those conspiracy theories would have definitely advanced their promotion to a local audience.

ThanQ for waking up the asleep. Greetings from New Zealand **WWG1WGA**. (Counterspin Media, 2022d)

Great job y'all are doing much love **WWG1WGAWW**. (Counterspin Media, 2022c)

Soo awesome to see this stand up happening. **WWG1WGA**. (Counterspin Media, 2022c)

The comments reference a canon acronym and hashtag meaning 'where we go one, we go all'. This is used as a rallying cry by the QAnon online community of 'digital soldiers' that battle against the Deep

State (The Anti-Defamation League, 2020). It's concerning because unless you know what to look for, these 'digital soldiers' can pretty much go undetected. Counterspin's language encouraged these narratives.

The preference for conspiracy theories over fact directly undermined public sphere and public health principles during the COVID-19 pandemic in Aotearoa New Zealand. The end goal in spreading certain popular far-right extremist conspiracy theories, such as QAnon, is to sow social discord. And that social discord was evident in the convoy and the subsequent occupation of Parliamentary grounds. These conspiratorial narratives fostered distrust of the Government and media. This led to the undermining of the public sphere as it created a division whereby people were encouraged to turn away from the democratic processes, which enabled them to debate and form opinions. Social discord also undermined the public health principle that medical professionals ought to respond unhindered to new and emerging threats. The kind of language spread by Counterspin created an unsafe environment for some public health officials.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

The far-right extremist discourse that pervaded Counterspains language during the COVID-19 pandemic and infodemic in Aotearoa New Zealand has the capacity to undermine public sphere and public health principles. In defence of this proposition, I have examined the history of far-right extremism in Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally and the links between the two. Such extremism draws heavily from the US political environment. Consequently, much of the discourse that exists there made its way to the far-right extremist networks in Aotearoa New Zealand. The prominence of QAnon claims within Counterspains language is evidence of this. This is also revealed by the vast and dynamic nature of the far-right Internet ecosystem. Counterspin can be understood in this context.

During this research it became clear that TDP's (2021) account of what had happened during the pandemic was substantially correct. Rhetoric surrounding the COVID-19 virus, vaccinations, and lockdowns, were being used as a trojan horse to embed and normalise far-right extremism. Counterspin contributed to this. Their key leaders, Kelvyn Alp and Hannah Spierer, had varying degrees of involvement within the far-right offline and online ecosystem before they created Counterspin. So, to term this as a far-right extremist entity, with far-right extremist ideology is straightforward. It was their very history and involvement within the far-right extreme that had enabled them to position themselves as a go-to media outfit within the far-right Internet ecosystem. They had created their own strategically influential community within this ecosystem. Their role before, during and after the Parliamentary occupation and protest is evidence of this.

The keywords ('freedom', 'tyranny', 'revolution', 'reclaim', 'democide', 'media', 'Jacinda Ardern') identified in the analysis are prevalent in far-right extremist language. However, they are not unique to far-right extremists, which makes it difficult to challenge since they are words in popular usage. Repetitive use of the keywords allows them to become part of what is seen as normal thinking, but when each word is investigated further, given the context of its use, it is possible to see that they are associated with far-right extremist ideology. Keyword analysis revealed the connections between them and a range of shared narratives and themes. The texts analysed promoted far-right extremist ideology, particularly its anti-democratic nature. They also reveal anti-science, anti-media and anti-progress thinking, which are also cornerstones of far-right extremist ideology. However, this ideology was never explicitly acknowledged in the analysed texts, either by Counterspin or its audience. The narratives and themes that were discovered in the analysed texts also revealed Counterspin to be a clearing house for international far-right extremism, particularly that from the US.

The COVID-19 pandemic provided an apt opportunity for these narratives and themes to gain prominence. The texts also revealed the opportunistic nature of Counterspin and its hosts, as they

latched onto the different narratives, whether it be the anti-government, antivax, or anti-media narrative, to boost their profile. The analysed comments threads revealed that Counterspin's language was being repeated by its audience. This is a worrying trend, given that most of Counterspin's language is laden with far-right extremist ideology, and conspiracy theories. On close analysis of the language within the three texts, many of the claims and arguments presented by Counterspin and its audience come from a conspiratorial source and lacked evidence and facts. However, my research also revealed that there was little to no audience pushback against or questioning of Counterspin's factual reliability or motives. In fact, Counterspin were applauded by its audience for being different than mainstream media. Some had even donated to Counterspin so that they could continue their work.

Analysis revealed the use of strategies that Thompson (1990) described, to establish and sustain an ideology, in this case a far-right extremist ideology. Dissimulation, unification, fragmentation, and legitimation were used within the analysed texts for the purpose of promoting far-right extremist ideology. Dissimulation was deployed to conceal the ideology, which occurred when Alp denied that the 'freedom movement' was filled with white supremacists on the basis that it was filled with people from all walks of life. The 'us vs them' narrative employed both unification and fragmentation strategies and revealed the constant othering and villainization by Counterspin of those who they perceived as enemies. These strategies worked together to legitimise far-right extremist ideology and thus undermine public sphere and public health principles. It encouraged people not to participate within the public sphere and promoted anti-democratic attitudes and tendencies. It directly undermined public health principles by villainising the actions taken by professionals and caused disruption to their response to an emerging health threat.

Counterspin were key players in the spreading of disinformation and QAnon conspiracy theories, and a purveyor and promoter of far-right extremism in Aotearoa New Zealand during the COVID-19 pandemic. A public sphere, and subsequently a democracy, cannot function properly if it cannot rely upon verified information. Counterspin were spreading claims and theories that had little to no truth to them. Public health principles were also affected by the spreading of false information. Public health officials found themselves having to combat an infodemic of harmful information, such as alternative cures to COVID-19, instead of being able to devote full resources against a new and deadly threat. Some in public health were also victims of the unfortunate consequences of the spreading of disinformation when they became targets of far-right extremists merely by suggesting that people should get vaccinated. For example, microbiologist and academic and science communicator, the University of Auckland's Associate-professor Siouxsie Wiles, was subject to threats, which included calls for her to be executed, for her commentary on COVID-19 and vaccines (Xia, 2023). Wiles has recently taken a legal case against the University of Auckland, claiming that they failed to protect her

from these threats (which included being filmed without consent by Billy Te Kahika). This hindered their ability to respond to a pandemic, which is a core principle of public health. Much like mainstream media, public health officials were villainised by Counterspin, and as their followers grew in number such officials were villainised by more people. The Parliamentary occupation affirmed this trend.

This thesis has focused mostly on the COVID-19 pandemic period (2020-2022), and the role of Counterspin during that time in undermining public sphere and public health principles by spreading disinformation and far-right extremist ideology. But they didn't cease activity after the last protestors were removed from Parliamentary grounds on March 2nd, 2022. In fact, as mentioned previously, they continued as per normal by embarking on a nationwide tour titled 'Let's Not Forget'. Their social media following continues to grow, and their content remains the same, with disinformation and conspiracy theories littered throughout. Their foothold on mainstream social media platform, Facebook, holds steady for now and displays constant engagement with followers (despite sharing disinformation and conspiracy theories).

An unfortunate outcome of the Parliamentary occupation is the notoriety gained by Counterspin and other similar groups and figures, as well as the associated rhetoric. Some people have used this newfound fame to try and gain a stronger public presence. Chantelle Baker now hosts a show on the newly formed Reality Check Radio. Other hosts include Peter Williams, Rodney Hide and Cam Slater. All of these figures were either at the Parliamentary occupation or showed support for it. If you read certain sections of their website, it might seem that you are on Counterspin. Statements such as 'We WILL cover the issues the establishment won't, and we WILL challenge the voices the mainstream media don't' or 'RCR is the antidote to the last two years of craziness' sounds eerily similar to that of Counterspin (Reality Check Radio, 2023). Reality Check Radio is very similar in that it spreads disinformation and conspiracy theories and tries to pass this off as normal discussion. It is clear that they have substantial monetary backing, with large advertising billboards apparent throughout the Auckland CBD.

Counterspin has considered the possibility of entering the radio universe. As of November 2023, this has not eventuated. But it wouldn't be a surprise if they did, it would just add to the already prominent worry that their influence is growing in Aotearoa New Zealand and that far-right extremist ideology is spreading unchecked. More recently, Counterspin were immersed in an election campaign, throwing their support behind regular guest, Liz Gunn's NZ Loyal Party. The party would go on to fail to get enough votes to enter Parliament. However, the change from a Labour led to National-led government is somewhat of an indication that Aotearoa New Zealand has shifted more to the right. This is not as far-right as Counterspin and their ilk, but the shift could still be partly influenced by disinformation,

conspiracy theories and far-right extremism. It is worth noting that Winston Peter's engagement with the Parliament 'protestors' and subsequent election and promotion to Deputy PM is troubling.

7.1 Further research suggestions

This study was primarily concerned with a certain period (2020-2022), with reference to a broader historical context. Further research could analyse the more recent period in greater detail. This warrants more investigation into the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and infodemic, and the Parliamentary occupation. A sample of post-occupation texts could be analysed to provide more insight into how far-right extremism continues to spread through language. These texts could derive from organisations similar to Counterspin (including various far-right figures in Aotearoa New Zealand). It is important to determine, on a continuous basis just how widespread this kind of far-right extremist language is.

I have discussed the ways in which far-right extremism has pervaded Counterspin's language and that of its audience in ways that have undermined public sphere and public health principles. But I have not provided a set of countermeasures. Building upon this study, one could research how to combat both Counterspin and far-right extremism as a whole in Aotearoa New Zealand. In saying that, I end this thesis with one possible response that made sense to me, from researchers Byron Clark and Emanuel Stoakes.

The authors of this article believe that sunlight will be the best disinfectant: dangerous conspiracist lies need to be addressed robustly in the here and now, their networks (and funding streams) investigated; any overseas links need to be exposed, with their claims debunked rationally and comprehensively in open access forums—long before a movement based on anti-science demagoguery establishes itself further. (Clark & Stoakes, 2023, p.14)

Before Counterspin and their friends gain more influence, let's disinfect them with sunlight!

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