



21 July 2021

[Redacted]

Reference: OIA-2020/21-0619

Dear [Redacted]

**Official Information Act request relating to the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet's strategic framework - resilience to misinformation and disinformation**

Thank you for your Official Information Act 1982 (the Act) request received on 26 May 2021. You requested:

*"a copy of DPMC's strategic framework for strengthening resilience to mis/disinformation. If any briefings have been prepared for Cabinet or any minister relating to the development or implementation of this strategy, I request a copy of these as well"*

The time frame for responding to your request was extended under section 15A of the Act by 20 working days because it necessitated consultations to be undertaken before a decision could be made on the request. Following this extension, I am now in a position to respond.

The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC) is currently coordinating efforts across government to help strengthen resilience to misinformation and disinformation in New Zealand. To date this has included supporting efforts to ensure clear and effective communications on the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, developing tools to understand the varying forms of misinformation and disinformation, and establishing reporting processes for misinformation and disinformation.

As identified in the document: *COVID-19 Vaccine Communications and Engagement Approach*, the strategic framework for strengthening resilience to misinformation and disinformation is in development by DPMC. DPMC is establishing partnerships with non-governmental partners with the aim of establishing a multi stakeholder forum. This forum will ensure that our citizens and communities are able to highlight their concerns, and work directly with government agencies, academia, technology companies and other agencies to co-design the strategic framework for strengthening resilience to misinformation and disinformation.

The development of the strategic framework is in draft form, and we do not consider it is in the public interest to release the document at this stage. Accordingly, I have decided to withhold in full your request for the strategic framework under section 9(2)(g)(i) of the Act, to maintain the effective conduct of public affairs through the free and frank expression of opinion.

In regard to the part of your request for briefings prepared for ministers, there is one document within scope: *Strengthening New Zealand's Resilience to Mis/disinformation* dated 26 January 2021. I have decided to partially release this document to you noting that some information, including Attachment A, is withheld under the following sections of the Act:

- section 6(a) as the release of this information would be likely to prejudice the security or defence of New Zealand or the international relations of the Government of New Zealand
- section 6(b)(i) as the release of this information would be likely to prejudice the entrusting of information to the Government of New Zealand on a basis of confidence by the Government of any other country or any agency of such a Government
- section 9(2)(a) to protect the privacy of natural persons
- section 9(2)(f)(iv), to maintain constitutional conventions related to the confidentiality of advice tendered by Ministers of the Crown and officials.

In regard to the part of your request for Cabinet papers this part of your request is refused under section 18(e) of the Act as the document alleged to contain the information requested does not exist.

In making my decision, I have taken the public interest considerations in section 9(1) of the Act into account.

You have the right to ask the Ombudsman to investigate and review my decision under section 28(3) of the Act.

This response will be published on the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet's website during our regular publication cycle. Typically, information is released monthly, or as otherwise determined. Your personal information including name and contact details will be removed for publication.

Yours sincerely



Tony Lynch  
**Deputy Chief Executive  
National Security Group**





# Briefing

## STRENGTHENING NEW ZEALAND'S RESILIENCE TO MIS/DISINFORMATION

To: Prime Minister & Minister for National Security & Intelligence (Rt Hon Jacinda Ardern)

Date	20/12/2020	Priority	Routine
Deadline	29/01/2021	Briefing Number	2021NSP/031

### Purpose

1. To seek your agreement to coordination mechanisms for addressing mis/disinformation issues, and endorsement to develop a strategic framework to strengthen New Zealand's resilience to mis/disinformation.

### Recommendations

1. **Note** that while work has been done by agencies, academia and civil society to address COVID-19-related disinformation, this activity is currently not coordinated in pursuit of a common strategy;
2. **Agree** that, given the multiple equities for this issue, DPMC leads government efforts to strengthen resilience to disinformation, in close coordination with the proposed Interagency Coordination Group;
3. **Note** that officials consider it is preferable for efforts to counter mis/disinformation to be primarily driven from outside of government, i.e. by civil society organisations, academia and the media;
4. **Agree** that DPMC and the Interagency Coordination Group develop a Strategic Framework for Strengthening New Zealand's Resilience to Mis/Disinformation for consideration by Ministers in <sup>s9(2)(f)(iv)</sup>

YES / NO

YES / NO

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5. **Agree** that the following group of Ministers should be the first points of referral for work to strengthen New Zealand's resilience to mis/disinformation:

- i. Minister for National Security & Intelligence (Rt Hon Jacinda Ardern); YES / NO
- ii. Minister of Education & Minister for COVID-19 Response (Hon Chris Hipkins);
- iii. Minister of Health & Minister Responsible for the GCSB and NZSIS (Hon Andrew Little);
- iv. Minister for Broadcasting and Media & Minister of Justice (Hon Kris Faafoi);
- v. Minister of Internal Affairs (Hon Jan Tinetti);
- vi. Minister for Digital Economy and Communications (Hon Dr David Clark).


6. **Agree** to refer this paper - for discussion around the proposed recommendations - to the Group of Ministers at Recommendation 5, and to the following Ministers whose agencies will be represented on the Interagency Coordination Group:

YES / NO

- i. Minister of Arts, Culture and Heritage (Hon Carmel Sepuloni)
- ii. Minister of Foreign Affairs (Hon Nanaia Mahuta)
- iii. Minister of Police (Hon Poto Williams)

7. **Indicate** if you wish to discuss elements of the proposed strategy – including disinformation monitoring, working with civil society and engagement with Ministers – at the next available national security and intelligence briefing.

YES / NO

 Tony Lynch <b>Deputy Chief Executive</b> National Security Group DPMC
20/01/21 ...../...../.....

Rt Hon Jacinda Ardern <b>Minister for National Security &amp; Intelligence</b>
...../...../.....

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**Minister's office comments:**

- ☐ Noted
- ☐ Seen
- ☐ Approved
- ☐ Needs change
- ☐ Withdrawn
- ☐ Not seen by Minister
- ☐ Overtaken by events
- ☐ Referred to

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**Contact for telephone discussion if required:**

Name	Position	Telephone	1st contact
Dan Eaton	Director, National Security Policy Directorate, DPMC	9(2)1a	
Greg Mitchell-Kouttab	Principal Policy Advisor, National Security Policy Directorate, DPMC		✓



# STRENGTHENING NEW ZEALAND'S RESILIENCE TO MIS/DISINFORMATION

## Executive Summary

1. While mis/disinformation is not a new phenomenon, its reach and veracity has increased exponentially in recent years via social media channels. Its impact on national security through the potential erosion of trust in democratic institutions and the undermining of public health campaigns – became dramatically apparent through 2020.
2. Several of 6(a) have witnessed unprecedented social and political polarisation driven in part by disinformation campaigns conducted by both state and non-state actors. Fuelled by fundamental distrust in the media and the political process, these countries face a significant challenge in trying to counter disinformation.
3. Mis/disinformation can create and amplify social divisions, challenge national values, foster extremist views, break down social cohesion and, in some cases, incite violence towards minority groups. Conspiracy theories can also have a corrosive effect, undermining trust in public institutions and the social contract, with attendant consequences for policy making and service delivery.
4. New Zealand still has relatively high levels of public trust in media and state institutions. This was positively demonstrated in 2020, as media outlets and civil society organisations successfully countered ('pre-bunked') a number of COVID-19 and elections-related disinformation campaigns before these could take hold in the population.
5. We cannot take this situation for granted, however, as we are unlikely to remain immune from these global trends.

6.

7. Oversight of mis/disinformation is a sensitive issue, as any public commentary or perceived control of a "counter-disinformation effort" can reinforce conspiracy meta-narratives about state manipulation of information and give legitimacy to those claiming an erosion of free speech.



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9(2)(f)(iv)

8.

9(2)(f)(iv)

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9(2)(f)(iv)

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9(2)(f)(iv)

11. We would welcome a discussion with you on the policy proposals outlined in this paper and the attached report. In particular, we would welcome your views on:
- how we engage with, and lift the capacity of, civil society, the media and academia to lead efforts to counter disinformation in New Zealand;
  - whether monitoring should be done by government agencies or by non-governmental partners (e.g. universities and/or private organisations); and
  - how you would envisage Ministerial engagement on this sensitive issue.

### Purpose

12. To seek your agreement to coordination mechanisms for addressing mis/disinformation issues, and endorsement to develop a strategic framework to strengthen New Zealand's resilience to mis/disinformation.

### Background

13. In October 2020, DPMC's National Security Policy Directorate took an earlier version of the attached Policy Insights paper to the Security and Intelligence Board (SIB)<sup>2</sup> to update them on work undertaken across the system to understand and counter the disinformation problem – particularly in relation to COVID-19 – and to highlight the gaps in New Zealand's ability to respond to disinformation.
14. SIB Chief Executives agreed that officials should seek guidance from Ministers on the proposed coordination of, and strategic framework for, strengthening New Zealand's resilience to mis/disinformation.

<sup>1</sup> That group will comprise: DIA, DPMC, MBIE, MFAT, MCH, MOE, MOH, MOJ, NZ Police, NZSIS and the GCSB.

<sup>2</sup> SIB is a governance board that brings together chief executives with national security responsibilities and focuses on external and internal security threats and intelligence issues.



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15. Given the complex crossover of mis/disinformation with a number of other significant national security issues, it should be noted that there will be some useful connections between this work and the development of a number of countering violent extremism (CVE) and social inclusion-based initiatives arising from recommendations of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Terrorist Attack on Christchurch Masjidain.

**Disinformation** is false or misleading content (or the omission of content) designed to achieve a strategic purpose. Whether for ideological or commercial goals, the effort is designed to influence audience perceptions, opinions and/or behaviour (e.g. QAnon conspiracy theories).

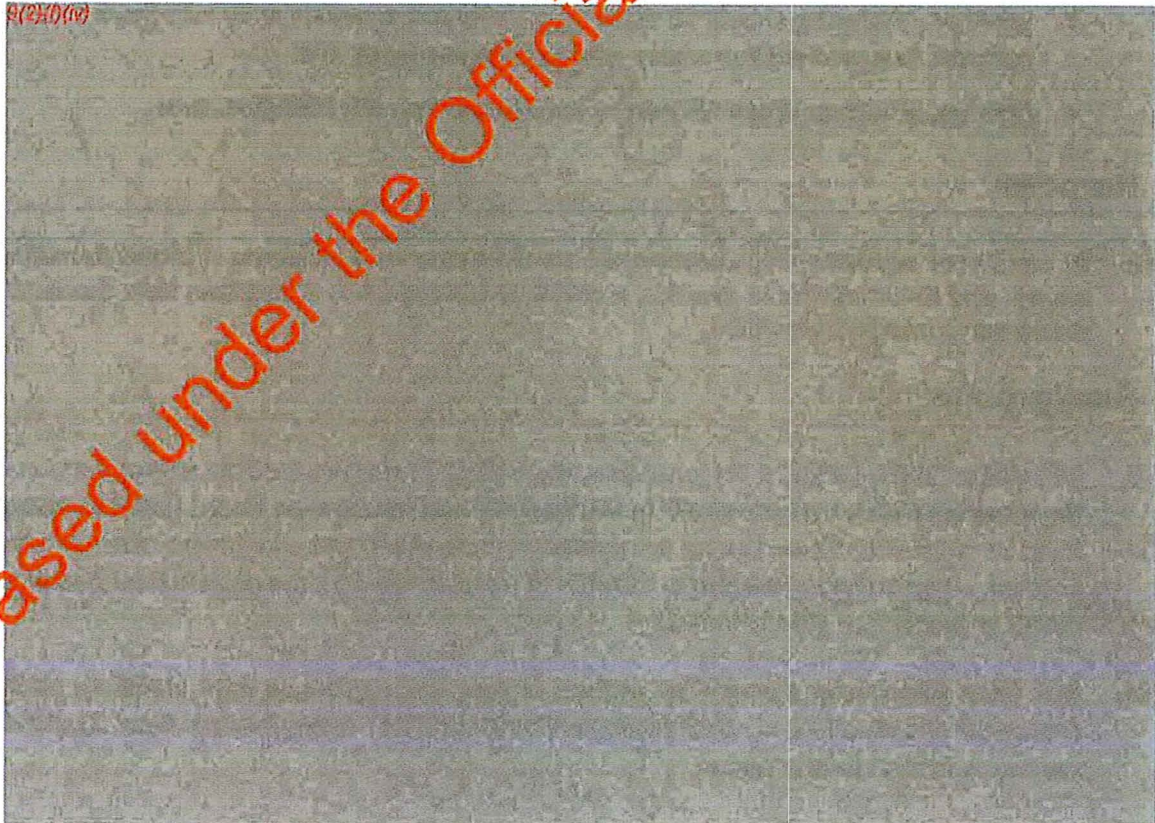
**Misinformation** is information that is false or misleading, but is not produced or disseminated in pursuit of an underlying ideological or commercial purpose (e.g. anti-fluoride information).

### Building & Strengthening NZ's Resilience to Mis/Disinformation

16. Since the first COVID-19 lockdown in March, during which we witnessed the rapid spread of COVID-19-related disinformation, agencies have done a lot of work to understand and respond to the problem. Using academic and non-governmental research as the basis, agencies and media outlets have become more adept at proactive communications strategies to counter mis/disinformation narratives and, where possible, to get ahead of potential mis/disinformation campaigns (e.g. COVID-19 vaccines).

17.

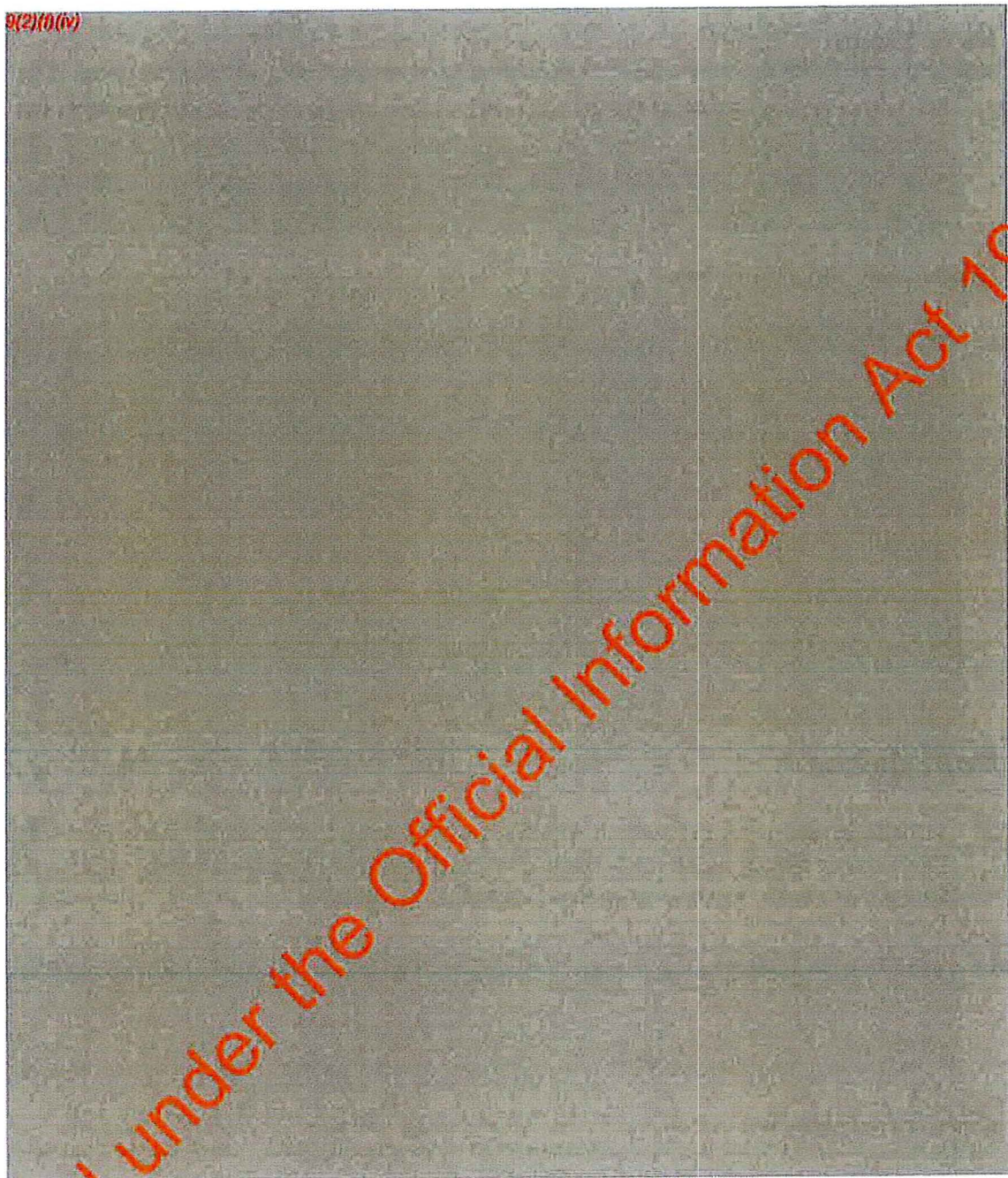
18.



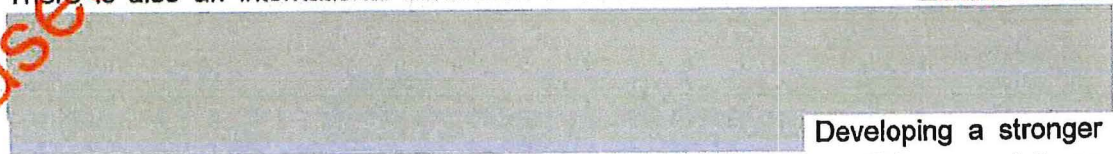


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9(2)(b)(iv)



19. There is also an international dimension to mis/disinformation issues. 6(b)(i)



Developing a stronger domestic approach to mis/disinformation would effectively and credibly support these international engagements.

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**Next Steps**

20. Subject to your agreement, DPMC will commence work, in close consultation with the Interagency Coordination Group, on developing the proposed strategic framework.

9(2)(f)(iv)

**Financial Implications**

21.

9(2)(f)(iv)

22.

**Consultation**

23. This paper was consulted with the nascent Interagency Coordination Group comprising: DIA, DPMC, GCSB, MBIE, MFAT Ministry for Culture and Heritage, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Justice, NZ Police and NZSIS.

24. 9(2)(f)(iv)

**Communications**

25. As part of the process to develop a Strategic Framework, we will work with non-government partners to establish the most appropriate and effective communications approach.

26. International experience shows that it is best not to directly address mis/disinformation, particularly through an official spokesperson, as this can lend legitimacy to the message/messenger or reinforce government conspiracy narratives.

Attachments:			
Attachment A:	Restricted	Strengthening New Zealand's Resilience to Mis/Disinformation	



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DEPARTMENT OF THE  
PRIME MINISTER AND CABINET  
TE TARI O TE PIRIMIA ME TE KOMITI MATUA

## ATTACHMENT A

B(2)(b)(iv)

Released under the Official Information Act 1982

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