

Policing knowledge in and of the pandemic

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October, 2021: On videocall from across the ditch (local slang for Australia) our family members repeat the mantra, “it’s just a flu” - reflecting the even greater problem with social messaging and public opinion faced over there by the state and national authorities charged to protect public health. But here in Aotearoa New Zealand we seem to be catching up fast, judging by the recent rallies protesting against the main planks of the pandemic response - restriction of physical contact and universal vaccination. A message of ‘it’s just a flu’ shows how ignorance meshes with knowledge as highlighted by the concept of agnotology, which recognises ‘ignorance’ as a constitutive force in knowledge systems (Proctor, 2008). It is true that both Covid-19 and the flu are caused by coronaviruses, but this engrained, fallacious message has had literally fatal effects in Australia.

On both sides of the Tasman it now seems inevitable that the highest price in terms of lives lost to and blighted by this disease will be paid by the indigenous populations (Archibald-Binge, 2021; NZ Herald, 2021). This epidemic is an unprecedented test of humanity - of each one of us as individual human beings, as well as our collective social systems and our societies overall. It is a test of our level of civilisation in moral and philosophical terms, by which to counter such a systemic threat as a viral illness that can transmit from one person to another in the most casual of contacts, such as passing in a hotel hallway.

A virus is a peerless symbol of liminality, occupying as it does the taxonomic border between life and non-life, as defined by science. In Aotearoa New Zealand, the current spreading (November 2021) of the delta variant of the Covid-19 coronavirus, having once successfully eliminated the alpha or native form from our shores last year, serves as a stringent lesson about the limits of national learning capacity. This learning requires all of us to work intelligently and compassionately together, for the good of us all. The corrosive effects of extended periods

of restrictions on the mental health and overall wellbeing of a population weigh against the aims of those restrictions. Thousands upon thousands of Aucklanders, patiently abiding by the restrictive rules, were stung to see images of large-scale doctrinal protest rallies and orgiastic parties, attended by other Aucklanders in contemptuous defiance of the public health restrictions on gatherings.

Likewise, it is completely unacceptable that non-Māori anti-vaxers tried to appropriate the 2021 annual He Whakaputanga commemoration, flying in to headline their event, showing callous disregard for the vulnerable communities of Te Taitokerau (Waatea News, 2021). Northland is one of the least-vaccinated, highest-Māori regions of the country, cut off and endangered by its proximity to ‘Tāmaki McCovid’ (a play on Tāmaki Makaurau, the modern Māori name for Auckland). Meanwhile our family members who reside in the far-flung coastal communities of Northland continue to report seeing hordes of Aucklanders arriving at their holiday homes. Tricks like changing a bank account address get them through the northern checkpoint (just north of Te Hana). If working from home, so it appears their thinking goes, one may as well be at the beach, as long as the cellphone tower is handy for wireless broadband access. The Taitokerau Border Control is a Māori community group mounted in response to these dangers, working with police to help protect their vulnerable communities by staunching the flouting of these pandemic rules (Radio New Zealand, 2021).

This pandemic highlights how little we as average citizens know about viruses, vaccines, epidemiology, and many other specialised fields of knowledge that are currently directing our daily lives under pandemic conditions. It is always difficult to cope with sudden upheavals in social conditions; mental illness, family harm, and drug and alcohol abuse have all spiked under the extra pressure caused by the shutdowns. Such negative experiences increase the attractiveness and plausibility of anti-pandemic groups, as close at hand as one’s digital device. A view from agnotology on conspiracy theories and falsehoods about the pandemic, and how these are ‘going viral’ on social media, illustrates the idea that as knowledge grows and becomes more widely available, so does ignorance; as the saying goes, ‘the more you know, the more you don’t know’ (Proctor & Schiebinger, 2008).

While the internet has made many aspects of knowledge work more readily accessible and therefore democratic, it has also amplified the promulgation of false ideas and conspiracy

theories. In supreme irony, the restricted conditions imposed by the pandemic response, which led to many more people spending more time online, have boosted the spread of ignorance in the form of these misconceived conspiracies and dangerous lies. Studies show how people become more susceptible to propaganda and extremist politics when they are socially isolated and spend extended periods of time online. In this way, the restrictions on movement imposed to limit community spread of the virus have inadvertently contributed to the spread of ignorance in the form of misinformation and propaganda.

Just as the virus occupies a liminal biological space between life and non-life, social media occupies a liminal discursive space between knowledge and ignorance. Facebook can seem relaxing and is used innocuously by many people, but also has negative, sometimes deadly, effects on the mental health of teenagers. Social media spreads misinformation extremely efficiently, demonstrating the principle that untruth holds an inherent advantage over truth. Lies tend to win out over truth and become more strongly engrained in popular thought and the national imaginary, perhaps (at least in part) because lies can be made to seem simple and plausible, whereas comprehensive explanations of socio-scientific phenomena such as the current pandemic are invariably extremely complex. Through the lens of agnotology, this perverse principle demonstrates how ignorance grows alongside the growth of knowledge - a clear example being the current explosion of anti-vaccine sentiment in Aotearoa New Zealand, now that vaccine mandates have been announced in large employment sectors including health and education.

The anti-vaccine movement is fueled by people's mistrust of science, research and experts. Toni Inglis (2015) shared personal testimony as an expert US nurse of the increasing difficulty she had faced in recent years of persuading parents to immunize their infants. Vaccines are one of the greatest success stories of science, yet skepticism about their safety, including the purported link to autism, has seen the growth of an international "grassroots movement contemptuous of science and government [that] opposes systematic vaccination" (Inglis, 2015, p. 11). Such anti-vaccine sentiment may explain a recent uptick in annual rates of measles, a disease once considered eliminated through vaccination by the year 2000.

It is all very well to blame "public skepticism" (as does Inglis) for the "persistence of misinformation" (p. 11), but this overlooks the causes of that skepticism, such as the public

(gradually and increasingly) finding out how they/we have been harmed and misled for many decades about various claims involving experts and science. Thalidomide, Apollo 13, Chernobyl - the disasters caused by applications of science are legion. In terms of misleading the public, the tobacco industry is an exemplar case study for agnotology, whereby scientific knowledge of the fatal effects of smoking was concealed for decades, putting profit before people (Proctor, 2012). The conspiracy by the oil industry to bury awareness of how burning fossil fuels has caused global warming is probably an even worse and even more topical example of experts using science to mislead the public.

Public skepticism is an idea worth unpacking in more detail in relation to public perceptions of science and its outcomes, good and otherwise. It is closely related to a notion of critical citizenship - what might be called 'healthy skepticism' - but there is also a form of disaffected rejection of societal measures, such as the pandemic response, which could be considered 'harmful' public skepticism. It is this latter version of the concept that concerns Inglis, in relation to the growing vaccine hesitancy she observed. There is a clear link between a sense of alienation from society and a form of skepticism that leaves people vulnerable to misinformation. Misinformation spread through social media is being blamed as one factor in low rates of vaccination among young Māori (1News, 2021; Martin, 2021). As a result of the ethnic vaccination gap (and possibly an ethnic gap in compliance with other measures) the proportion of Māori cases is high and rising. It is even rumoured that right-wing political influences (supported from the US extreme right) are deliberately targeting Māori with anti-vaccine propaganda for muderously racist reasons.

This growth of anti-vaccination opinion is an example of dangerous anti-science beliefs, a danger that motivated the much-discussed letter written 'in defence of science' that appeared in the *New Zealand Listener* magazine in July 2021 (Clements et al., 2021), a few weeks before the start of the delta outbreak in Auckland, in August. This letter claims that criticism of science is dangerous and misguided because science "provides immense good [and] is helping us battle worldwide crises such as Covid" (p. 4). But as the reality of the delta outbreak is showing, science and scientific truth is ineffective alone to prevail against untruth and ignorance in the form of lies, propaganda and conspiracy theories.

The letter writers argue that, as humanity, we “increasingly depend on science, perhaps for our very survival. The future of our world, and our species, cannot afford mistrust of science” (Clements et al., 2021, p. 4). But neither can we afford blind faith in science of the triumphalist textbook kind, as endorsed by these writers. Having described the supreme importance of science, the writers turn to debunk the mysterious claim that Indigenous knowledge is science, stating that “in the discovery of empirical, universal truths, it falls far short of what we can define as science itself.” Their final sentence is emphatic: “Indigenous knowledge may indeed help advance scientific knowledge in some ways, but it is not science” (Clements et al., 2021, p. 4). The claim is mysterious because it is not clear who made it. It does not appear in the quotations the writers provide as evidence of the danger to science presented by Māori knowledge. The disjunction between the first and second halves of the letter demonstrate a logical weakness that seems to betray its anti-Māori intent and/or effect (Stewart, 2021).

There is an analogy to be made between the anti-vaccine campaigns currently impacting on Māori and the *Listener* letter, with three axes of similarity. First, both are concerned with anti-science attitudes and opinions, and the nature of knowledge as having politically significant dimensions: the end of naive empiricism (and its myths such as ‘the scientific method’). Second, both involve the relationship between Māori and Pākehā, which is hierarchical and operates at many levels, on both material and symbolic-intellectual-discursive planes. Third, both include conspiracy theories, loosely defined as deliberate spreading of dubious information or casting of aspersions, making them two examples of the workings of agnotology.

To assert that more people are dying from the vaccine than from the virus, and encouraging people to gather in super-spreader events, are having fatal effects in our national community. To assert that science is in danger from Māori knowledge or its advocates may be at a different level in terms of physical harm, but it is equally untrue and, arguably, equally immoral in its deliberate inculcation of false alarm. The difference is that only the *Listener* letter styles itself as authoritative scholarly opinion, leaning for an imprimatur of respectability on the signatures of seven senior professors from the top science university in the country. It falls to those of us in the academy who care about these things to make a stand for truth and science, when racism masquerades as scholarship.

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