

The conspiracy pandemic and wannabe demagogues

Demagogues or wanna-be-demagogues thrive when people feel threatened. And there's nothing like a conspiracy story to amp up the threat level. How much of a problem are conspiracy stories and the people spouting them?

The New Zealand First bus is off the road, and possibly not coming back without its legendary driver. A cruise around rural New Zealand before the election showed the billboards of a range of new parties. A surprising number of these are pushing wild conspiracy theories.

While one of Winston Peters' favourite themes – the dangers of immigration – was irrelevant come campaign time, some of these upstart parties are keen proponents of an intermeshed set of theories around fluoridation, 1080, 5G, vaccinations and of course Covid-19. From a political point of view this makes sense – if the major parties are going for the public health approach to containing Covid-19 – social distancing, testing and tracing, then going full anti-Covid ensures you the differentiation to make your political brand pop.

When plagues sweep in, people look for the culprits. Fear motivates suspicion of outsiders (who might have brought the contagion), and an increased willingness to believe in conspiracies.

As psychologist Jan-Willem van Prooijen has noted conspiracy thinking makes great sense – for people living in small bands just 12,000 or so years ago. The risk that you would be attacked by the people from the other side of the mountain or across the sea was very real. They could do that with a dawn surprise attack, or by employing sorcery. People have evolved to be sensitive to those threats – the conspiracy meme goes way back. What was a real danger when we lived in small bands rather than nation-states might seem less relevant now. But our evolved responses still play out.

In 1898 the “Russian flu” spread along transport routes into Europe and the United States. The germ theory of illness was still young, and no-one had yet identified any virus. Some noted that the epidemic was more common where outside electric light was common. You might note a connection to the present-day targeting of 5G towers. There was no medical remedy (though public health propositions such as hand-washing were promoted). An opportunity for those promoting dubious remedies. Quinine (the first anti-malarial) was popular. Strangely hydroxychloroquine, popularised but not used by President Trump, is also an anti-malarial.

But we do need to be wary, not all conspiracies are necessarily wrong-headed. There is good evidence of Russians poisoning people in Salisbury in 2018, and of attempting to poison the democratic process by meddling in the 2016 presidential election, employing a range of strategies including providing WikiLeaks with emails hacked from the Democratic National Committee.

None of the contender political parties or their leaders is targeting the Russians – the enemy they have identified is the state and pan-national organisations such as the UN and WHO.

This is consistent with them contending for the role of “outsiders” in New Zealand. They position themselves as opposed to the authorities, who they portray as having only their own vested interests at heart. The upstart contenders contend that they are aligned with “true” Kiwis. The leaders of these start-ups position themselves as challengers, outsiders who are untainted by the bad intents and efforts of the insiders, the elite manipulators.

How do you identify someone who we could describe as a wanna-be demagogue? They articulate theories that have no basis in fact, such as the dangers of 5G and the benign nature of Covid-19. Their theories are not intended to be fact-checked, rather they are designed to drive negative emotions. They identify an enemy (that tribe over there) who are responsible for the threat. They conflate that enemy with existing authorities – governments or pan-national organisations.

The most powerful antiseptic in dealing with those touting such conspiracies is a leader who is seen as “one of us”, rather than an alien impersonator. University of Otago researcher Damien Scarf reports that Jacinda Ardern does this factor. She gets herself photographed delivering baking to her Sunday caucus meeting. She is seen as crafting a sense of us working collaboratively and constructively together.

How strong a movement are the pro-conspiracy, anti-authority parties? Of the four that Alex Braae of The Spinoff caught in Nelson during the election campaign (Advance NZ, New Conservative, Outdoors and One) – together they achieved 2.8% of the vote – up there with NZ First on 2.7% (and yes, combined – they would have cleared 5%).

Trying to argue the point with someone who has drunk the conspiracy kool-aid is not easy. The research-based evidence is suspect, the researchers are from the other side. And for the conspiracy believers, the different pieces fit together – if the disease is spread by 5G towers and chips, then vaccinations aren’t going to help. Nor are face-masks.

Check what they do believe – belief in conspiracies can be considered as a dimension, and you are more likely to make progress with someone who is not fully down the rabbit hole. Establish common ground – perhaps on the value of representative democracy or of exploring important issues objectively. Challenge what is not fact. And put things in historical context – we have been here before with pandemics, and we have found what works. Vaccinations offer more hope than quinine or hydroxychloroquine.

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