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Problematic Reasoning Under the Guise of Anti-Māori Talk: A Case Study of the Three Waters Tweets

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ABSTRACT

Drawing from a subset of Twitter/X quotes (or tweets) on the politically controversial Three Waters Reform, this study identified forms of anti-Māori discourse through a deductive analysis. A complementary analysis was conducted to unpack how problematic reasoning fueled racism against Māori. Our results revealed distinct and interconnected themes—"resources," "culture," "stirrer," "privilege," and "one people"—that portrayed Māori as undeserving, lacking expertise, threatening, and unworthy of equitable treatment, as New Zealand citizens are entitled to enjoy liberal democratic values. Anti-Māori speakers employed problematic reasoning tactics to obstruct the public from understanding the truth or to encourage others to form ill-informed opinions through emotions, supposed authority, and conspiracy. Exemplar tweets were provided to illustrate the myriad instances of false information related to patterns of anti-Māori discourse. Evidence from this study makes the case for addressing racism on social media and creating interventions to expand media literacy amongst the public to discern problematic reasonings.

KEYWORDS

disinformation; Indigenous; Māori; racism; water

Introduction

Racism in Aotearoa New Zealand has a settler colonial foundation (Jackson, 2020). The subjugation of Māori (the Indigenous peoples of Aotearoa) began with the Doctrine of Discovery, which sought to exterminate Māori and dispossess them of their whenua (land), mātauranga (knowledge), and taonga (all that was valuable) as the British established their white supremacist agenda (Human Rights Commission, 2022). Colonization is not a single event from the past, as we continue to witness breaches of te Tiriti o Waitangi (e.g., the disestablishment of the Māori Health Authority and the repeal of Treaty obligations from the Oranga Tamariki Act) that undermine Māori tino rangatiratanga (self-determination) (Fitzmaurice-Brown, 2024). The populist coalition government elected in 2023 also introduced a Treaty Principles Bill designed to

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replace te Tiriti articles with new principles, allegedly championing political equality but effectively demanding Māori assimilation (O'Sullivan, 2024).

Within online spheres, The Disinformation Project (2023) has observed rising anti-Māori racism rooted in white supremacist ideologies. The racist messages are shrouded in misinformation (false information shared without malicious intent) and disinformation (false information deliberately created to cause harm) that promotes fears of a "civil war" in Aotearoa if te Tiriti justice is pursued, opposition to co-governance, and claims of "white genocide," along with denying Māori Indigeneity. Racism online is further normalized through the dissemination of anti-Māori rhetoric by high-profile individuals in conservative groups, including politicians (The Disinformation Project, 2023). Anti-Indigenous sentiments in Aotearoa are part of a larger, global pattern, as noted by The Disinformation Project (2023), which found that far-right conspiracies, such as those spread by QAnon in the United States and groups discrediting the Voice referendum in Australia (Graham, In Press), are being repackaged and re-shared here. These sentiments intersect with other forms of systemic oppression targeting minoritised groups such as Islamophobia, anti-LGBTQIA+, and anti-immigration (Cheng, 2022; Hannah et al., 2021), with a shared objective of sustaining the status quo that upholds whiteness (Asafo & Tuiburelevu, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a condition where far-right ideologies can thrive, fueled by growing distrust toward the Labor Government (at that time) following lockdowns and mandatory vaccination measures (Hannah et al., 2021). The study of problematic reasoning that constitutes mis/disinformation in Aotearoa is more timely than ever. We have seen its impact in promoting anti-vax movements that contradict scientific evidence, provoking offline violence (e.g., the broken home case of Te Pāti Māori candidate Hana-Rawhiti Maipi-Clarke), and inciting violent clashes between police and protesters during the occupation at Parliament grounds in 2022 (Hannah et al., 2022). When left unaddressed, mis/disinformation on social media can radicalize individuals into far-right movements and harm the social cohesion of society (Hannah et al., 2022; Spoonley et al., 2020). It also endangers the safety of minoritized groups at the center of racist discourses (Phillips, 2023; The Disinformation Project, 2023), as there were extreme cases of conspiracy theorists calling for the extermination of Māori (Griffiths, 2022).

Anti-māori and mis/disinformation

Although there is a developing body of research that examines the various forms of anti-Māori (Black et al., 2023; Maydell et al., 2022; Moewaka-Barnes et al., 2012; Rankine, 2020) and anti-Indigenous attack (Mackay & Feagin, 2022), few local and international studies have linked this literature to mis/disinformation online which spread more rapidly to wider audiences. Internationally, there are pockets of research discerning forms of mis/disinformation, which provide tools for the public to verify if the statements are logical, reasonable, and plausible (Froehlich, 2020; Rodrigo-Ginés et al., 2024; Sturgill, 2021). Beyond this, however, existing research has largely focused on the psychological effects of false information and individual motivations to distort or disengage from facts (Ecker et al., 2022; Pettigrew, 2017). A notable gap remains for critical race-informed studies to explore how the spread of false information can

exacerbate racism against Indigenous peoples—especially as settler-colonial nations such as Australia, Canada, and New Zealand develop and implement reconciliation-focused policies (Graham, 2024; Human Rights Commission, 2022).

Drawing on more than three decades of research on patterns in how Pākehā (white European New Zealanders) and tauiwi (non-Māori) talk about Māori (Moewaka-Barnes et al., 2012; Nairn & McCreanor, 2022; Nairn & McCreanor, 1991), Kupu Taea (2020)—a media research group—has collated 14 themes that Pākehā employ to assert dominance over institutions, resources, society, and culture. Examples include the proposition to treat all New Zealanders as a single, undifferentiated group, without recognizing Māori as Indigenous peoples (one people); the denial of Māori equitable access to resources despite the social disadvantages caused by settler colonialism and ongoing racism (Māori privilege); and the reduction of Māori to a backward and primitive tribal group (Māori culture). Each theme addresses a specific depiction of Māori, but in unison, they reflect broader, systemic entanglements with white supremacy, white fragility, and colorblindness (Asafo & Tuiburelevu, 2022; Crawford & Langridge, 2022).

In this study, we drew on Sturgill's two-category classification of mis/disinformation to detect problematic reasoning in how speakers spread false information. The first category includes distraction tactics that hinder audiences from getting close to the truth, such as *ad hominem attacks* (which critique the speaker rather than the idea) and *red herrings* (which introduce an unrelated issue as a smokescreen). The second category comprises misleading tactics that steer audiences toward forming opinions based on poor justifications. Examples are when a speaker tried to appeal to *force* (exaggerating negative consequences of an event to generate fear) or appeal to *popularity* (presenting themselves as the stronger candidate simply by pitching to the choir). These tactics violate key criteria for a good argument by creating or perpetuating false beliefs, or causing the loss of and impending the acquisition of actual facts (Sturgill, 2021).

Three water context

Twitter/X is a popular social media platform for people to share information about social issues and connect with others through microblogging (Mir et al., 2022). In this study, we used the Three Water discussion on X's discussion as a case study to debunk the misconception that social media is a "neutral" platform that shares only "objective" information. In 2020, the Labour Government initiated the Three Waters Reform Programme to enhance the quality of our drinking water and to improve wastewater and stormwater management (Palmer, 2021). The program was spearheaded by the Local Government Minister Nanaia Mahuta and was one of several bills (e.g., alongside Māori Health Authority) that provoked controversy for proposing increased Māori representation in decision-making processes (Shine, 2023). Under the reform, the ownership of water infrastructure assets will be transferred to publicly owned regional entities, which will have equal representation from local councils and mana whenua (Māori with historic and territorial rights over specific land). This arrangement reflects Te Mana o te Wai (an Indigenous approach to protecting the essence of water and ecosystems) and the interests that iwi Māori have in how water services are delivered under te Tiriti o Waitangi.

Despite the reform's documented benefits in tackling inequities in water service delivery nationwide, fearmongering over co-governance dominated media coverage, which was rife with mis/disinformation and racism (Shine, 2023). After failing to progress, the Three Waters Bill was renamed the Affordable Water Services Reform in 2023 to boost local council involvement. It was ultimately discarded altogether by the current coalition government, which introduced the Local Water Done Well Bill that forms new council-controlled organizations (CCOs) for water services (Brown, 2024).

Objective

Language is a fundamental aspect of social relationships and reflects social cohesion in Aotearoa (Nairn & McCreanor, 1991; Spoonley et al., 2020). In this study, we monitor how Māori are portrayed online as an Indigenous group who have been oppressed through colonial and racial oppression. This is set against the backdrop of more Māori reconnecting with te reo (language) and te ao (worldview) through the kōhanga reo movement (language revitalisation) (Smith, 2017) and various national movements (e.g., Toitū Te Tiriti) that call on the Crown to honor its Tiriti obligations to uphold Māori tino rangatiratanga (self-determination) (The Hui, 2024).

This study is an extension of our earlier research that used a topic modeling algorithm which identified six key topics—governance, capability, safety, race, conflict, and other—that best explain the mentions of Three Waters on X (Tan et al., 2025). We observed a recurring thread linking these topics—anti-Māori sentiment—which this study aims to explore in greater depth, including how the public legitimizes racist attack on Māori. This paper seeks to address two primary research questions: 1) How are anti-Māori sentiments articulated online? and 2) How do mis/disinformation campaigns spread racism against Māori? In addressing these questions, we demonstrate the operation of different problematic reasonings (Sturgill, 2021) that underline anti-Māori sentiments (Kupu Taea, 2020).

Method

Between 2019 and 2022, we compiled 32,240 tweets through Twitter's (v2) Application Programming Interface (API) that made reference to Three Waters. We randomly selected 200 tweets from each of the six topics to illustrate the emergent themes representing the studied topics. As part of an initial discursive analysis, a team of three researchers, who met regularly, coded the tweets to describe different aspects of the issue described. Each researcher was tasked to code 100 tweets from each of the six topics. The derived codes were reviewed again for 200 tweets for each topic until all researchers were satisfied that "meaning saturation" (Hennink et al., 2017) had been achieved and that no further insights would emerge. For a detailed account of the discursive analysis of Three Waters topic modeling, see Tan et al. (2025). This subset of tweets forms the data for this study. In cases where an individual is not a political figure, we have redacted their personal information in a tweet (e.g., personal Twitter handle).

For this study, we conducted a directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) on the 1,200 tweets to identify themes of anti-Māori talk based on a coding framework

provided by Kupu Taea (2020). During this deductive step, each tweet was assigned to a pre-identified theme, or to multiple themes in cases of overlap. The framework is grounded in years of empirically informed research (Nairn & McCreanor, 2022), and each theme is broadly framed to allow flexibility in portraying its inherent meaning in nuanced ways. Next, we drew on Sturgill's (2021) two-category classification of mis- and disinformation to systematically unpack the forms of problematic reasoning in the exemplar tweet used to delineate the essence of each theme. Not all tweets are lengthy or provide enough detail for in-depth analysis; therefore, only those clearly relevant to the themes are included in this manuscript. The first author carefully selected the tweets for each theme, which were subsequently reviewed by other authors.

Results

In the Three Waters discussions, five themes of anti-Māori rhetoric stood out within the discourse surrounding Māori leadership in the water reform and access to water as a "resource."

Theme 1: Māori resources

The Three Water Reforms proposes to have equal representation of members from local councils and hapū and iwi for each regional entity, but some in the public perceive this arrangement as a threat to tauiwi. This reaction builds on the assumption that decisions made by "New Zealanders" through their elected council members will serve everyone's interests. The desire to preserve the status quo of predominant Pākehā resource control is tied to concerns that others will miss out on economic gains from the reform, as well as the epistemic racist belief that Māori lack expertise in water management.

> @[De-identified] Watch NZ to see this all playing out right now. 3 Waters is a grab for all of the water to be under co-government with Māori. Names being changed all over…soon New Zimbabwe. (Tweet 1)

In Tweet 1, the speaker introduced a *red herring* by bringing up an issue (i.e., their dissatisfaction with the increased use of Māori terms) unrelated to the topic of water reforms. The message sought to gaslight readers by creating a narrative of fear that "Three Waters is a grab [of rights from tauiwi]" and employed a hyperbolic metaphorical reference to the situation in Zimbabwe. This fear-based persuasion technique resembles a *slippery slope*, as the speaker implied that New Zealand would inevitably spiral into political and economic turmoil if co-governance of water structures is implemented.

Despite the array of benefits the water reform could offer, the topic of "co-governance" became a hyperfocus and a major point of public contention, particularly over the inclusion of more Māori voices in resource distribution decisions. For some, the disgruntlement toward reform is part of the wider discontent with other government policies at the time such as the creation of Te Pūkenga (a national polytechnic network) and the merging of Radio New Zealand with TV New Zealand. The investment in these entities was described by some (including in Tweet 2) as "wasteful spending" as they saw no immediate, tangible benefits compared to "non-race-based" issues they

deemed as more essential, and this sentiment was *generalized* to the water reform proposal.

> @nzherald NO to co governance! NO to three waters! NO to diminished democracy! NO to wasteful spending without any gain or production. NO to subversion of our OIA [official information request]. The list goes on. (Tweet 2)

In Tweet 3, the speaker conveniently launched an *ad hominem attack* on the Māori members of parliament (MPs) responsible for advancing some of the "tribal-based" policies (see Theme 2). This includes the Honorable Nanaia Mahuta (the MP overseeing the Three Waters Reform) who was labeled a "racist" for advocating for iwi and hapū representation. Such an attack attempts to discredit the entirety of the proposal by disparaging the integrity of the MP in-charge.

> @[De-identified] The waste is all the money Ardern is spending on Three Waters, merging TV programmes and Consultant fees which never come to anything. Oh, and racist projects created by Willie Jackson and Mahuta. I could go on? (Tweet 3)

Theme 2: Māori culture and management

There is an unspoken, unnamed norm in Aotearoa that is widely accepted as colour-blind, universal, and superior—Pākehā/white supremacy (Asafo & Tuiburelevu, 2022). Within this Pākehā-Māori racial hierarchy, Māori culture, reo (language) and mātauranga (knowledge) risk being relegated as primitive, irrelevant, and inadequate for Aotearoa to compete on the capitalist world stage. This theme includes stereotypes depicting Māori as financially incapable and inexperienced, thus unfit for management roles.

Several speakers, including in Tweet 4, drew on the term "tribe" to frame Māori as distinct from contemporary New Zealand society. While Māori in Aotearoa use the notion of iwi (tribe) to emphasize a shared identity rooted in common ancestry, the reference to Māori as "tribe" here reinforces the deficit-framing that Māori society has yet to fully evolve. The criticism of Māori society as inferior to western governance and the accusation of favoritism in Indigenous cultures is akin to a *strawman argument*. The speaker amplified the message that conflicts of interest are undesirable in political decisions and attempted to *appeal to popularity* by rallying public disapproval. However, the central reason for developing of the water reform proposal (i.e., to address water crises with equal input from local councils and mana whenua) was intentionally omitted from the discussion by the speaker to mislead others.

> Tribal people don't see nepotism as a problem. It's how they operate. The interests of the tribe are the priority, not the nation. This is why we have 3 Waters. (Tweet 4)

In a similar way, the speaker in Tweet 5 likened policies promoting Māori leadership and outcomes to corruption within tribal communities. A *conspiracy* was put forth that Māori are orchestrating a grand plan to gain disproportionate influence in the government. Building on stereotypes that characterize Māori society as unstable, corrupt, and factional, the speaker contended that policies such as the water reform would culminate in social upheaval including potential conflict between Māori and the "working and middle classes." The speaker was also *appealing to the force* by employing a

slippery slope argument by insinuating that catastrophic consequence will befall the nation unless the proposal for co-governance is discontinued. The tweet is intended to manipulate public's emotions which is a devious tactic that would render the need for evidence unnecessary if successful.

> @nzherald A paragon of nepotistic corruption. point is under the nitemare of "co-governance," Māori health and 3 waters, this will be the norm as we slide into the morass of third-world tribal conflict hegemony and chaos with the working and middle class. (Tweet 5)

Theme 3: One people

A primary argument made by political parties opposing the water reform proposal is that it is divisive, claiming that Māori are given more rights than other New Zealanders (see also Theme 5 for an explanation of how Māori are socially constructed as "privileged"). These parties sought to incite moral outrage amongst the public, who believe in the principle that New Zealanders are "one people" and ought to be treated equally.

Speakers in Tweets 6 & 7 chastised the Labor Party with *ad hominem attacks* for supposedly infringing New Zealand's core liberal democratic values, which are anchored in ideals of freedom and equality. They alleged that Labor's policies are anti-egalitarian because they create a "two-tier" society that undermines tauiwi citizenship rights. In their *appeal to pity*, these speakers engaged in *slippery slope* reasoning, arguing that the government's policies were designed to "bully" and "discriminate" against them as hardworking taxpayers who are entitled to equal "one person, one vote" rights. They also stoked panic amongst the public, warning that New Zealand's constitution could disintegrate if policies they—as individuals—had not consented to, were pushed forward.

> @NewstalkZB NZ Labour. The party for bullies. Nothing new in that. We've all known that since Jacinda mandated vaccines and made NZ a two-tier society. And then there's the bullying of NZ over 3 Waters and removal of democracy too. (Tweet 6)

> Bully behaviour is very much the way of Arderns Government. Laws, appointing Māori to Councils. Three Waters. Passing laws that discriminate. What could be more bully, than flouting democratic rights. (Tweet 7)

Whether intentional or not, the terms "New Zealanders" and "Kiwi" seem to exclude Māori (see Tweet 8). "Kiwi" is portrayed as a single culture to justify Pākehā control over resources and decision-making. This framing obscures te Tiriti's intent to guarantee Māori tino rangatiratanga (while assigning kāwanatanga (governance) to the Crown over its subjects) and compels the assimilation of Māori (Came et al., In Press). In Tweet 8, the speaker *appealed to authority* by asserting that if the government does not heed the voices of "Kiwis," it should at minimum consider the opinion of the Controller and Auditor-General (an Officer of Parliament). The Auditor-General's role involves providing recommendations for effective structural reforms; however, the speaker erroneously infers that the Officer raised concerns and opposed the proposal without thoroughly reviewing the submission (see Ryan, 2022).

> The Government has not listened to Kiwis, will they listen to the Controller and Auditor-General? #ThreeWaters (Tweet 8)

Theme 4: Māori as stirrers

Individuals who do not conform to the status quo are labeled as "stirrers" for disrupting the social order of New Zealand society. Māori stirrers are stereotyped as anything from troublemaking savages to elitists driven by a hunger for power and personal political gain.

Speakers in Tweets 9 and 10 plotted a *conspiracy* in which the government had a secret, coordinated plan to deceive and coerce the councils and the public into accepting the water reform. In Tweet 10, the speaker developed a *slippery slope* argument that implies the water reform will snowball into a major national crisis, though no evidence is given for how or why this would occur. Further, Nanaia Mahuta was subjected to *ad hominem attacks* as a stirrer who led the reform and deliberately spread false information to increase Māori representation in decision-making roles that would otherwise fail. By casting Nanaia as the source of mis/disinformation, the speaker urged people to distrust her and to doubt the integrity of anything proposal she initiated.

> In June 2021, Cabinet secretly agreed to a mandated approach to the Three Waters reform. Mahuta then went into overdrive with a misinformation campaign, dishonestly and knowingly telling councils that the plan was voluntary and councils @TheBFD_nz (Tweet 9)

> @[De-identified] The Mahuta debacles, Māori co-governance as well as 3 waters. There is probably much more at play we will never find out about until it's too late. (Tweet 10)

Theme 5: Māori privilege

As the Crown implements policies to address intergenerational inequities for Māori, Māori are often portrayed as receiving rights or benefits unfairly withheld from others. This theme gains traction through the belief that Pākehā New Zealanders today should not be held accountable for the historical wrongs of settler colonialism, and by the zero-sum thinking which asserts that other groups are equally disadvantaged or at risk of marginalization due to "Māori privilege."

The speaker in Tweet 11 attempted to *poison the well* by prematurely concluding that tauiwi have been unfairly excluded, without addressing the merits of the consultation with mana whenua who have historically been excluded from decisions regarding their land. This argument prejudices others into thinking that the water reform is a "racist" bill before they have a chance to learn about the specifics. Further, the speaker *appealed to pity* by evoking a sympathetic reaction from "New Zealanders" for the "injustice" they supposedly faced by being "told to sit down, shut up" which did not literally happen. The tweet also argued that (tauiwi) New Zealanders are being ignored by the "biased" select committee members who only listened to feedback from Māori. Through tagging individuals and groups that opposed the water reform, the speaker sought to elevate the authority of these entities and garner support from those with similar perspectives.

> They had consultation with mana whenua before they even started this process. The rest of us? We're being told to sit down, shut up and that the Three Waters Select Committee will not listen to New Zealand. @dbseymour, @NZNationalParty and @TaxpayersUnion—what are my options? (Tweet 11)

In Tweet 12, the speaker set up a *black and white fallacy* by framing the reform as an "either-or" policy that grants Māori control over water resources. This rhetoric also resembles a *red herring*, with the speaker positioning themselves as a justice advocate and condemning a supposed "minority takeover" despite this stance not actually being stated in the proposal. The speaker put out a bait (i.e., an extreme version of an argument) to distract others from exploring alternative explanations that could clarify the complexity of the issue at hand.

> 3 waters was only designed to be a minority group takeover and leave us the bill for repair costs and extra payouts for the group. (Tweet 12)

As Prime Minister at the time, Jacinda Ardern was framed as the public enemy for introducing "tribal-based" policies. A myriad of *ad hominem attacks* were launched against her, such as in Tweet 13, which sought to discredit her leadership during the Covid period. Criticisms of the water reform were reduced to individual attacks or attacks on the Labor Party, insisting that the proposal was flawed merely because she championed it.

> Hey @jacindaardern—you spent years lying to kiwis ("you won't get covid" "we won't force anyone to get jabbed") and trying to divide us ("he Puapua" "3waters"). Now you're surprised we don't like or trust you or Labour. What did you honestly expect! #nzpol #resignjacinda (Tweet 13)

Discussion

Through a case study of Twitter/X discourse surrounding a Crown proposal to increase capacity for Māori to assert tino rangatiratanga—the Three Waters Reform—we unpacked the myriad forms of problematic reasoning used to fuel mis/disinformation about Māori. X is not a neutral information playground and there is evidence that it is a popular platform used to circulate messages that appeal to right-wing groups (Taraktaş et al., 2024; The Disinformation Project, 2023). It is also no secret that Elon Musk (the owner of X) is a proponent of right-wing rhetoric (Zhang et al., 2025). The politics in Aotearoa is not immune from overseas influence (including through X) as Musk has previously expressed favor for the National Party—a center-right New Zealand political party—and complimented the current leader for having "good energy and talking directly to the public" (Plessis-Allan, 2024).

Echoing past research on anti-Māori talk in traditional media (Moewaka-Barnes et al., 2012; Phillips, 2023), this study demonstrates the ongoing relevance of Māori portrayals as "stirrers," "primitive," and "privileged" within an online medium. While these are specific depictions of Māori that regulate their rights to access water resources, we found the overlapping nature of these themes in reinforcing Pākehā/white supremacy. In particular, these themes reinforce white hegemony through the discourse of "one people," which denies hapū and iwi Māori a seat in regional entities for the water reform. Further, we observed inconsistent characterization of Māori that ranged from the stereotype of Māori as "tribalists" lacking management expertise to the reference of Māori as "elitists" with a nefarious, sophisticated agenda to take over the country. Such anti-Māori talks are conveniently and strategically utilized by dominant groups

to justify the oppression of Māori. While we are uncertain to what extent overseas anti-Indigenous discourses have shaped anti-Māori rhetoric in Aotearoa, the presence of terms such as "tribal" and "apartheid" that are less common here, implies a link that could be explored further in future studies (Mackay & Feagin, 2022).

What is often perceived as a harmless personal opinion expressed through social media messages (including tweets) can, in fact, play a significant role in perpetuating dominant discursive trends. These include opposition to political leaders and actions attempting to redress Māori inequities, even when users are unaware of the broader implications of their participation. In this study, we revealed how anti-Māori sentiments flourish through problematic reasoning that propagates mis/disinformation. Anti-Māori speakers generally show little interest in seeking or uncovering the truth, and their speeches are agenda-driven to distract the public from logical arguments and lead them to poor judgments and decision-making. In the Three Waters discussion, multiple speakers launched *ad hominem attacks* on entities they disagreed with, with Māori and female politicians more likely to be targeted and scapegoated. Some of these tweets sought to score points by swaying the public away from voting for these specific candidates ahead of the 2023 election. This tactic mirrors patterns seen in the U.S. election, where researchers found some conservative politicians' use of dog-whistling to express prejudice toward non-dominant, non-white groups (Pettigrew, 2017). The prejudiced intent underlying these subtly bigoted messages is often difficult to discern for audiences without media literacy training, as we encountered tweets that ostensibly championed liberal democracy, multiculturalism, and anti-oppression on the surface, but were, at their core, fundamentally racist against Māori.

Exaggerated claims were employed to invoke public's anger, frustration, and disappointment which prompted them to jump to conclusions about the water reform without having a comprehensive understanding of it. By using problematic reasoning such as the *strawman argument*, *red herring*, and *slippery slope*, the speakers quickly spread mis/disinformation about the reform to cause others to care less about source credibility. Psychologists have written about cognitive, social, and affective factors that lead people to endorse false information (Ecker et al., 2022; Pettigrew, 2017). In this study, we saw a trend of speakers leaning toward rejecting facts due to fear of disrupting the status quo (which they benefit from) and actively sharing these messages to radicalize others to counteract against the imagined threats. Social media platforms have algorithms that feed us content aligned with our interests (Chander, 2017), which may lead to risks of willful ignorance (intentionally ignoring certain facts) and confirmation bias (only reading information that supports our existing beliefs) (Froehlich, 2020).

Studies have found increasing polarization in the political spectrum, with those on the right being more prone to be subjected to mis/disinformation (Pew Research Center, 2014). With the sheer volume of information readily available on social media, convincing others from the other end of political spectrum to accept facts can be a complex and challenging task. Despite extensive empirical evidence produced by Māori and allied scholars (e.g., Haar et al., In Press) on the benefits of equitable Māori representation across various spheres of Aotearoa society, why do some individuals choose to dismiss these facts? Exploring problematic reasoning offers a pathway to understanding this phenomenon, opening avenues for interventions such as addressing

Pākehā and tauiwi fragility (Crawford & Langridge, 2022), debunking myths about te Tiriti o Waitangi, educating the public to provide a balanced perspective and form logical arguments, and fostering opportunities for intercultural contact.

Limitation

There are a few limitations to consider when interpreting the findings of this study. First, our case study approach of analyzing a subset of tweets is not intended to represent all online and offline discourses surrounding the Three Waters reform or to generalize New Zealanders' perceptions of the issue. Instead, it is an exploratory study examining the forms and scale of anti-Māori problematic reasoning, supplementing an earlier study that explored topical discussions of the reform. Next, the focus on textual data meant we did not analyze memetic materials, images, or video clips, which may have different effects on spreading mis/disinformation. Lastly, we did not collect information about whether users had verified profiles on X, so we could not select quotes from this category, even though other studies have shown verified users have greater impacts in disseminating information (e.g., higher retweets and likes) (Mir et al., 2022).

Final words

In a recent interview (Maniapoto, 2024), the Labour Leader Chris Hipkins reflected on his regrets on the water reform, admitting that he did not make the "public case strong enough" to highlight its benefits. He acknowledged having "left the minister responsible—Nanaia Mahuta—on her own to explain that," and in hindsight, would have encouraged "Pākehā ministers getting out there and explaining what we were doing and why we were doing it." The obligation placed on Māori ministers to bear the responsibility of advocating for te Tiriti justice constitutes a form of cultural labor. It should instead be the responsibility of all ministers to uphold the nation's constitutional document, including controverting the problematic reasoning and anti-Māori narratives presented in this study.

We have solved only a piece of the puzzle of anti-Māori mis/disinformation, a hallmark of hate speech in Aotearoa. In this study, we demonstrated how facts can be manipulated, cherry-picked, and discredited to present an alternative, appealing narrative that persuades the public to adopt anti-Māori speech, behaviors, and attitudes. The temporality of language underscores the importance of continuing to study anti-Māori talks across different mediums, time periods, and theoretical frameworks (e.g., the integration of problematic reasonings). We anticipate that anti-Māori sentiments to have grown under the current populist government, which has introduced a range of laws seeking to undermine te Tiriti. This includes the removal of proposed hate speech laws recommended following the Christchurch mosque attacks in 2019, with opposition mainly from those citing freedom of speech concerns. "No one's exercise of free speech should make another feel less free" (Jackson, 2018). The defence for free speech can inevitably become "a shield for racist invective" when the history and ongoing Indigenous struggles for freedom of colonization, land dispossession, and racism are willfully ignored, to pave the path for settlers to launch anti-Māori attack (Jackson, 2018).

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