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| Speak Up – Kōrerotia  Misinformation and disinformation in the 2023 election campaign  20 September 2023 | |
| Male | This programme was first broadcast on Canterbury’s access media station Plains FM and was made with the assistance of New Zealand on Air. |
| Female | Coming up next conversations on human rights with “Speak Up” – “Kōrerotia”, here on Plains FM. |
| Sally | E ngā mana,  E ngā reo,  E ngā hau e whā  Tēnā koutou katoa  Nau mai ki tēnei hōtaka: “Speak Up” – “Kōrerotia”.    Tune in as our guests “Speak Up”, sharing their unique and powerful experiences and opinions and may you also be inspired to “Speak Up” when the moment is right.  This is “Speak Up” – “Kōrerotia” with Sally Carlton, your host. Te kaupapa o te rā: Today we’re going to be talking about the New Zealand election campaign. We’re only a month away from the 2023 elections, and as with all elections things are hotting up in the media and elsewhere around the different parties and what they might be saying. This election I feel is a really interesting one, there are some topics that I haven’t seen come up in previous elections quite so much, particularly co-governance being one of them, AI (artificial intelligence) being another one, the use of AI and the issue of misinformation and disinformation.  So today’s show is going to take two parts. We’re going to be speaking firstly with Nicole Skews-Poole from the Disinformation Project about what is information, disinformation, misinformation and what’s going on with that; and then the second part of the show will be an interview with Ursula Cheer from the University of Canterbury and Tommy de Silva from The Spinoff, thinking about how misinformation, disinformation is spread in the media.  So firstly, Nicole it’s really lovely to have you on the show, thank you so much for taking the time and I’m really keen to hear about the Disinformation Project that you’re part of and the kind of work that it does. |
| Nicole | Kia ora, thank you for having me, Sally. The Disinformation Project was founded in 2020 initially to look at the Covid misinformation that was starting to be spread online in the early days of the pandemic and so as Kate Hanna who was the founder and director soon discovered, those communities that had originally kind of been stood up to provide people with kind of black-and-white answers to a really scary thing that was happening that people were understandably reaching out for multiple sources of information about, grew to encompass topics that weren’t related to Covid and some of those topics, over quite a short period of time became quite extreme and quite conspiratorial. And so for the last three years the Disinformation Project has kind of widened its remit to look at what we call kind of the disinformation landscape in Aotearoa which is a number of online channels and communities and some key influences that put forward provably false information in a highly organised and often quite harmful way.  Now is probably a good time to talk about the difference between disinformation and misinformation. So misinformation is when somebody truly believes that what they are telling you is true but it is not. So obviously the level of harm there and the level of intent there is quite different. Disinformation is false information knowingly spread, and often deliberately, to cause harm or to cause disharmony or disruption. And increasingly we are seeing that disinformation is actually a highly organised machine, there are provable links to foreign interference globally but also in Aotearoa and in the communities that are formed around disinformation ideas and Aotearoa have strong… yes have strong signatures that show there is some foreign interference there and the crossover with some really extreme and quite harmful beliefs like white nationalism and white supremacy and anti-globalism and antisemitism and misogyny and transphobia and stuff like that are all emergent themes, both globally and in New Zealand. |
| Sally | And you say that it can be easily disproven, is that simply a matter of looking at other sources? |
| Nicole | I think ‘easily disprove’ is interesting. I mean, if you’re looking at something like the idea that there’s been a government-covered up genocide that Covid was sort of a false flag around, that can obviously be relatively easily disproven and doesn’t make a lot of sense or feel like something that most right-minded people can understand how people come to believe.  We’re not a fact-checking agency, we study the landscape and watch what instances of disinformation are getting kind of glommed onto and growing within that landscape. The ultimate kind of I guess mitigation to false information is good, trusted sources of information. And that’s not a responsibility that lives with any one sector or any one person or agency, that’s sort of a full package of primary prevention measures around things like media literacy and critical thinking.  The reason why we recently put out a statement to say that politicians that had been spreading false information about their opponents actually needed to do better is because people need to be able to trust leaders as authoritative sources of really good information and so all of those things kind of come together to create fact checking and to create kind of people that have the skills to not believe something just because it's shared to them on social media and seems like it might be a nice neat clean answer to some really tricky stuff. |
| Sally | And how does this idea of misinformation and disinformation tie into the no doubt related idea of fake news? |
| Nicole | Fake news is really interesting. Fake news is one of those things that is algorithmic. Part of fake news in disinformation thrives on social media algorithms that drive things that are controversial or upsetting or really get people commenting and sharing and so that obviously creates an incentive for quite blunt, often quite irresponsible things that end up going viral simply because they elicit strong responses in people. And so you know, when media unquestioningly picks up on something that’s kind of gone viral and reports on that, is if its virality makes it authentic in some ways. That’s one of the ways in which we see fake news.  The concept of fake news isn’t… it depends on who you speak to about it because people will talk about fake news being reporting that they don’t like because it maybe, you know, brings them into a critical view. But then also we do see a lot of disinformation communities form around a shared idea that all mainstream media is fake news and that they are not to be trusted as a source and so I think the term itself has come to mean very different things to very different people.  Whereas we know that disinformation as a concept and a phenomenon is something that is being globally researched in a similar way to how we are at the Disinformation Project, so that you can actually sort of peer review and share research findings and data at a global level and see actually the patterns and the growth of this as a global phenomenon. |
| Sally | Really interesting, that idea that different people are looking at it in a different way. |
| Nicole | It’s something you say when you don’t like the news, right, and people don’t like it for various reasons. I think sharing false information though, and sharing disinformation, whether it’s deliberate or accidental, is definitely something that we see, I just would tend to say that that’s accidental disinformation sharing or misinformation sharing rather than fake news, you know. Unless it’s not accidental and then yeah, that becomes actually part of that disinformation machine. |
| Sally | You mentioned in there that there’s harm associated with sharing disinformation and some of its intent is to make people question, to make people fearful in some respects. It can certainly sow discontent and disunity among communities and that’s why it’s quite a worry. What are we seeing in terms of the election that we’re talking about, the 2023 election, and how are you guys seeing disinformation, misinformation, coming through? |
| Nicole | I think you summed it really nicely. It is a phenomenon that seeks to sow distrust and really impact social cohesion and electoral democracy in negative ways. You know, I think it’s important to say first up that having a healthy level of distrust in power and government is absolutely normal and actually a really important part of democracy. In particular in Aotearoa there are many communities who have historically got good reason to distrust the government.  What we’re talking about here though goes beyond that and goes to some really extreme ideas that ultimately create a, you know, a schism between people and their friends and their family and their communities and then eventually wider society because their ideas and the things that they’ve come to believe about the world are based on provably false information that plays on existing biases and existing stereotypes and existing fears in times of uncertainty and really kind of elicits and like an anger from people, about this idea that the government is ultimately trying to hurt them and perhaps there are other kind of in groups of people, shadowy kind of groups, that are also out there to hurt them and therefore the system as a whole, being society and democracy should either be actively undermined or completely disengaged from.  And so in the leadup to an election, ideas like that are really harmful because not only can they be really awful for the individual people and communities that are impacted by those beliefs and also the marginalised people that are often on the sticky end of some of those highly bigoted ideas, it also makes people not want to vote and go out and sort of disrupt people that do want to vote.  We’ve seen disinformation communities stand up tools in sites encouraging people to believe that their vote might be tampered with or there might be a lack of electoral integrity in the vote or the vote counting process. I think it’s highly likely that we will see some groups say that whatever outcome of the election is the result of some kind of vote tampering or miscount or some other grander government conspiracy and in the short term, as people are trying to hold candidate forums and election events and those kind of really important meetings where people can go and look the people that want to represent them in parliament in the eye and ask them questions, we’re seeing a lot of groups roll out disruption strategies to sort of get their members to go to those events and just make it really unbearable for everyone. And that’s different from the normal heckling and kind of justified protest that we might see of candidates, this is actually people that are seeking to just make the concept of an election and all of those really important kind of democratic events, really unpleasant so that people ultimately disengage and distrust the process. |
| Sally | And I know that The Disinformation Project wasn’t around earlier, but do you think this is different to how it has been in previous elections? |
| Nicole | Yes I do and I think you know, the measurable growth in disinformation communities in Aotearoa in the last three years has created a real issue for our electoral democracy and our social cohesion that is coming to a head now. |
| Sally | And any idea why it’s coming now? |
| Nicole | Covid was, I think, for a lot of people, the catalyst to enter these disinformation communities. But since then with the growth of technology and tools available, those communities have increased their spread, increased how kind of polished they are and how well organised they are which then seeks to amplify their false messages and their harmful messages and draw more people in. And also as we discussed, the heart of disinformation is to encourage people to distrust and disengage from society and democracy. So obviously when an election period starts, that stuff starts to get really white hot. |
| Sally | In terms of what is going on, what do you think you, as The Disinformation Project, and we, as interested, concerned citizens, could or should be doing in the leadup to the election but also beyond that? |
| Nicole | I mean, long term there are a number of things that would really help kind of curb the spread of disinformation. A lot of that is platform responsibility on those social media sites that are so critical to the spread of really harmful and false ideas. Some of it is intervention from a societal and government level into some of those groups that are really measurably increasing kind of harm on communities and targeting certain people in communities.  We talked about the primary prevention kind of element where, you know, when societies are really good at critical thinking and media literacy and you know, really kind of protective of their democracy and their ability to engage with democracy in a way that isn’t really hostile and aggressive and sort of being disrupted by bad actors, all of those things kind of help mitigate the spread of disinformation.  For us at The Disinformation Project, what we’re looking at is a longitudinal study of how these groups are growing and what they’re catalysing around and so obviously the election will be a key data point and a key research point for us going forward and as the election period keeps going.  I think for an individual citizen that’s concerned about disinformation in an election period, a really important thing to do is to hold candidates to account. So that’s you know, making sure that if you have the opportunity to talk to candidates, finding out what they think of disinformation, whether they understand it – which they should if they’re seeking to represent Aotearoa; at this point it’s a known issue. And whether they have good ideas about combating it or whether they are kind of seeking to write it off as like a… you know, we see sometimes people saying like oh disinformation is just what you call something you don’t like, you know, and that would really raise alarm bells for me as a voter actually.  If I was talking to a candidate and they seemed to somehow want to defend or benefit from disinformation, that would make me distrust them and perhaps their integrity around this stuff given what we know about those communities and the kind of awful overlaps that they have. And so I think if we look to our candidates to actually be informed and have some good and robust ideas about how we can combat this going forward, that says that there are actually people that understand the issue and actually understand the issue is not going anywhere, it’s just going to get worse. And so actually we should really put a high level of responsibility on politicians to come up with some solutions for that and that the parties that they’re affiliated with, you know, maybe actually do have some action plans around this stuff. Because we know, as I say, it's not going away. |
| Sally | Well thanks, Nicole, it’s been really great to have your input and I’m sure this has really set the scene for the kōrero that’s coming up with the other two, thank you very much. |
| Nicole | Thanks for having me Sally, cheers. |
|  | **MUSIC BY MUSAH KING – BELLA CIAO** |
| Sally | That was ‘Bella Ciao’. Having spoken with Nicole of The Disinformation Project, we’re now moving into the second part of the show where we’ll talk with Ursula Cheer of the University of Canterbury and Tommy de Silva of The Spinoff, continuing with the kōrero around misinformation and disinformation and probably also expanding into broader humans rights themes in the campaign. Te kōrero tuatahi: could you please introduce yourselves, both of you? Tell us a wee bit about why you are taking part in today’s conversation. Ursula, perhaps we’ll start with you. |
| Ursula | Kia ora koutou. Hi Sally and hi Tommy and hi to our audience. Ko Ursula Cheer tōku ingoa, nō Ōtautahi ahau. I’m a law professor at the University of Canterbury, so I’m a law professor here, I’ve been here for over 26 years now teaching law and I specialise in media law which is a very broad church but it certainly covers aspects around publications during the election, run up to the election and over the election period and so on – and so that’s why I’m very interested in this topic. |
| Sally | Okay thank you Ursula and I think having a legal perspective on this, I think it’s quite important actually. Someone who is able to talk to what can and what cannot be done legally. |
| Ursula | I’ll do my best, it’s quite complex. |
| Sally | I bet it’s also quite difficult to get some of that information across in a way that a lay person can understand as well. |
| Ursula | It’s always that way with the law, but yes we’ll have a go. |
| Sally | Great. And Tommy? |
| Tommy | Tēnā koutou kātoa, thank you for having us on here, Sally, cool to be part of this kaupapa. So as Sally said, I am a writer at The Spinoff. I’m primarily focusing at the moment on Māori political reporting but before I was here, I guess my sort of entrance into that sort of a sphere was I worked as a junior researcher at the University of Auckland for a while. So at the start I was doing Māori historical research and then after that I was part of the Māori politics project and then after that, my last job at the University of Auckland was at the Māori research centre.  So definitely I have a sort of research and te ao Māori lens on a lot of things that I see around are happening in Aotearoa. It’s been a cool experience to be a writer, I’ve only been doing it this year but yes, look forward to engaging in this kōrero. |
| Sally | Actually that’s quite funny Tommy, a month or so ago I posted a paper that you’d obviously written that was around Māori placenames and saying this is a really interesting article given what we’ve just been discussing and then I kind put two and two together and thought oh, great that we’re having you on this show as well. |
| Tommy | New Zealand is a very small world, those things seem to happen more and more regularly. |
| Sally | That’s true. So we’ve heard from Nicole about the differences between misinformation and disinformation, what would be really great to hear from both of you is some examples perhaps, whether positive or negative, of how we have seen misinformation and disinformation play out in this campaign – whether that’s political parties or individual politicians or campaign materials, however you want to be thinking about it – but some kind of concrete examples would be really useful. |
| Tommy | I guess if we’re looking at some specific examples, again looking at it from that sort of Māori political lens, obviously only just a couple of days ago we had Winston Peters say that Māori are not the indigenous people of New Zealand, which was an interesting take to say the least. And obviously there’s been a bit of a kōrero as well from the Act party about co-governance and I guess that’s a particularly big issue this year given how much it played into the national conversation last year around the whole Three Waters kaupapa. But at the same time this year we’ve obviously had the stop co-governance tour by Julian Bachelor, and I’m not saying I know this for 100% certain but I don’t think it would be an accident that he’s sort of ramping his conversation during the election campaign and I guess going back to what the Act party is saying, they have… I recently wrote a story about their co-governance policies and their ideas to essentially can co-governance. They’re not wanting to can it entirely, they don’t mind some things that are already established, for example the Tupuna Maunga Authority in Tāmaki Makaurauu and the Waikato River and those sort of things, they don’t mind those because those are older established things. But any other sort of governmental, co-governance arrangements, they’re not too keen on those. And I talked to quite a few experts from different fields, some historians, got some input from old politicians and that sort of stuff and some decolonisation activists and the long story short is that it seems that Act might be sort of biting on those misinformation and disinformation conversations that other people like Julian Bachelor are bringing up.  I’m not saying they’re saying exactly the same things but they’re definitely cut sort of from the same cloth, at the moment at least, with what they’re saying. I guess the thing to take with a grain of salt is that it is an election campaign and people do always say things to garner votes and it’s not necessarily that they will actually do that. If we harken back to the start of Labour’s rein in 2017, they proudly said they were going to build 100,000 Kiwi Build homes and obviously nowhere near that amount has been built.  So I guess that’s a thing to take with a grain of salt but still, yes there’s definitely been from parties all over a bit of dis- and misinformation on that sort of co-governance topic. |
| Ursula | Kia ora. I think misinformation, you know the sort of George Bush “I misspoke” situation, that’s an interesting one. I mean, if you think of the questioning that’s going on at the moment about National’s tax promises and there’s a lot in there around will it stack up. You’ve got the media, I think, doing a good job there of getting views of various experts, economics and so on about whether it is going to stack up or not. With those sorts of statements you’ve got sort of mixtures of statement of fact and promises about the future, what’s going to happen in the future. That’s really hard to try and work out where they fit in relation to misinformation or disinformation.  If it comes out that there’s a general view that the numbers don’t stack up, a bit like we had that in previous election campaigns and they were quite significant as regards to the outcome of those elections then… that has shown to be correct that they don’t stack up, the best that you can say about that is that it’s misinformation, it’s a kind of misspoken, you know, genuine mistake. Parties promise things and they sit down and do their sums and do their best to ensure they… they’re not deliberately trying to mislead the electorate. That’s an interesting example.  I think in terms of the example you gave, Tommy, about the housing, building houses and so on. We’ve just had an example of that because a complaint was made up north in relation to the Labour Northcote MP, Shannon Halbert and things that had been said in his campaigning pamphlets. And we’re seeing this happen a lot more often now, I think, that you’ve got individuals who are keeping a close eye. You know, maybe in the past people just trusted this information and didn’t really question it but I think personally there’s a lot more questioning going on now and people do think about well where can I go to complain about this, it’s wrong.  With the Shannon Halbert complaint, the ASA has dealt with that quite quickly. They use a fast track process, sensibly, around the election campaign and they didn’t uphold the complaint. But I think what we’re finding is that with all these bodies who are required to deal with these complaints, they’re having to become investigators of fact much more than they did in the past and you know, that’s a bit of pressure on a body like the ASA which is a self-regulatory body, it’s not established by statute, it doesn’t have a lot of resourcing and that sort of thing. The BSA is different, it’s a statutory body – but they’re all, I think, having to step up and do more of this sort of fact finding than they had to in the past which is very interesting. |
| Sally | It’s interesting the idea that you’ve raised there, Ursula, that the spread of misinformation and disinformation is perhaps actually empowering some people to look deeper into some of this material. |
| Ursula | I think so and I think if you look at, for example there’s lots of really good material online at the moment for people who want to find out what they can do – the Electoral Commission, the BSA, the ASA, they all have got good fact sheets, quick guides, that sort of thing. And one thing the Electoral Commission has said, if you find misinformation or disinformation online, they’ve suggested don’t share it. They said even if you want to correct or highlight it, don’t share it because you are spreading it around if that’s the case and what they have said is a better approach is to post or share the correct information. So they’re kind of saying don’t engage down on the same level but get the correct information out there and I think that’s a great idea.  But also the Electoral Commission has got really good just sensible advice to people about trying to verify things and if something doesn’t look right, then there might be some things you can actually do about that and that includes, you know, as a starting point don’t trust it and then don’t share it and then try and verify it. So I think this is very good, very sensible advice. |
| Tommy | I think that advice to not share is very pertinent right now. Recently I suggested to my editor that maybe I could write a story about Julian Bachelor’s stop co-governance tour and I read the whole booklet that they’d been sending out to most households in New Zealand, just to sort of see what their perspective was. And from my experience, having done historical research in the past and done a lot of research and study into New Zealand’s history, I could pick out and see these things that were wrong and I said to my editor, “Can I write a story giving the alternative view compared to Julian Bachelor’s booklet?” and they sort of said maybe but it’s probably in the long run better to not give more oxygen to those fires. And as you say, Ursula, yes, even if you’re just sharing it on social media to try and debunk it yourself, a good percentage of the people that are reading that might actually… have never seen that before and think oh this other person that my friend is trying to debunk, I like what they’re saying. |
| Ursula | Yes I think it’s important that people don’t just become cynical and be encouraged by this to walk away from being involved and then maybe ultimately even not vote. I think it’s important to try and encourage people as you say, to try and verify if they can but also stay in the process, stay interested in it, don’t just think oh there’s so much out there, I don’t know what’s going on. I think the media have a hugely important role there, Tommy, and I’ve been really impressed so far with how well the media is getting out there and I’m really interested to hear you talk about how you and the editor thought about whether you would go with that story or not.  There was a story on Stuff about Julian Bachelor and I must say I found it interesting and helpful because it gave an overview but it kind of… it did present some of his views without putting the other side and I did wonder about that a bit. Good work by the media generally as far as I can tell so far, it’s excellent. |
| Tommy | And I guess to add one little small point to what you just said, harkening back to when you talked about National’s tax plan: obviously that came out two or three weeks ago now but there’s still reporting coming out, there’s still experts who are giving their two cents to the media essentially every day or every other day we hear something new about that. And that is great that there is that level of scrutiny for these players. I guess maybe this wouldn’t have happened to such an extent in the past because I guess this disinformation and misinformation project is quite well engrained by this point after, you know, the recent American elections and the sort of whole freedom movement around the world.  As you said before, that is sort of in people’s minds more now from my perspective as someone inside the media. It’s good to see that we’re not letting people off Scott free and just really are sort of trying to get down into the nitty gritty of what they’re saying. |
| Sally | Tommy, you chose a song? |
| Tommy | @Peace, that’s one of Tom Scott’s aliases and he’s quite an esteemed New Zealand hip hop artist. A lot of his songs talk about the reality of New Zealand, at least from his perspective and the sort of disempowerment that Māori have experienced and he’s not afraid to, in his music, talk about things like the housing crisis and other issues that are facing New Zealand. I chose by Home by @Peace, given that it was the Tom Scott song where he sort of talks about New Zealand politics without swear words. The rest of them have a lot of bad language and I thought maybe not, so we’ll go with the PG version. |
|  | **MUSIC BY @PEACE – HOME** |
| Sally | To change the direction a wee bit, one thing that has cropped up for me quite a bit as I’ve been observing is the use of the word ‘racism’ or ‘racist’, which I feel has been used a fair amount and I think it probably relates to the issue of co-governance. Any thought you’ve got on that and the use of that kind of really evocative, emotive terminology? |
| Ursula | What I certainly feel that the term ‘racist’ has been devalued through overuse and it’s just as soon as anybody even raises issues about race or how different races are treated and should be treated and that sort of thing, you can’t go any further if that label racist or racism is put out there and it stops a proper wānanga about going on about it. I’m a firm believer… well I have been, until recently, a firm believer in basic freedom of expression theory around good old John Stewart Marketplace of ideas and the good information and the bad information all goes into the mix and the truth emerges from that. But it’s got to be worked on, it doesn’t just emerge magically and I’m a bit concerned because I think misinformation and disinformation has or maybe interfering with the effectiveness of that theory. But I can’t so far something better to replace it, I still think functioning democracies do depend on as much freedom of expression as possible, as long as you don’t do harm to others – and then of course there’s room to argue about what is actually harm.  But in an election period especially, we’ve got to have that debate going on. If people want to go out and travel the country and take their campaigns around the country, it concerns me at the moment that there’s barracking going on and people being driven out of the places that they set up to speak in, the hecklers’ veto I think is of a concern. People should be allowed to speak. And freedom of expression does of course depend on people speaking in a way that respects others and doesn’t involve physical interference in any way, doesn’t involve over-shouting. You know, it’s okay to go to a meeting and shout a bit or whatever but to plan to actively disrupt the meeting so that it stops, I think that’s actually undermining of the electoral process in a democracy.  I know people get worked up about what individual speakers are saying but we don’t have a right in this country to not be offended by things, we do have a right to be protected against real harm such as real incitements to perhaps physically hurt people, interfere with people’s safety and so on. There are difficult questions around racist statements that are just really complex. Governments will continue to try and deal with the issues of hate speech, you know, which our government has spent some years trying to deal with and come up with a nice bright new shiny way to deal with hate speech and then this year of course they stopped that and it was too difficult to carry in an election I believe, and they’ve given it to the Law Commission to do some long-term work on.  The thing is that people need to be able to speak. I certainly believe that it is better to have more speech rather than less. Western democracies are meant to be tolerant societies and that’s why lots of people from overseas countries that aren’t tolerant move here. We’ve got to, I think, as a bottom-line, still try and preserve as much freedom of expression as possible and to ensure that people understand the responsibilities that go with freedom of expression.  I believe it certainly comes back to what you talked about with Nicole, I think, they are strongly arguing for civics to be taught in schools and that is something I have been pushing for years that we really, really need so that people understand the basics of freedom of expression, the responsibility of being a citizen, yeah how to make those things work in our system. Sorry that’s a long rant. |
| Tommy | Completely agree with everything that you say. To add to that, I think it’s really interesting that both sides of the political spectrum right now during this election campaign are calling each other racist. The left are calling the right racist for opposing co-governance and the right are calling the left racist for propping up co-governance – which is a fascinating thing that I haven’t necessarily seen. This is only my second time being able to vote so I’m still a novice and I can’t say what happened in 2005 because obviously these similar issues came up then. But yes from my experience of the couple of local and national elections I’ve seen, I haven’t seen both sides sort of calling each other racist like that which is very interesting.  But I completely agree with what you say Ursula, about that need for a more respectful and civil conversation. And I think it was really pertinent what Chris Finlayson said – so obviously when he was in government with the National party, he was the Treaty negotiations minister for – I’m not sure if it was the whole time but at least the majority of the John Key administration – and he came to the perspective through that experience that co-governance, it’s not something to be feared. And that is not necessarily a perspective that many current or former right-wing politicians are confident to say.  But I was really taken aback by him by him being very, very confident and proud to say that. But the thing that he said is that although he supports the initiatives in some regard, he doesn’t support them everywhere. He does think that there has been not a very civil and respectful conversation to explain what these issues are and when that happens, that’s when the polarisation occurs.  And I think it’s really important, Ursula, that you brought up the idea of civics education. I was always the politics sort of interested kid in high school at least and I always wanted to learn more about politics but it’s quite a difficult thing to get your foot in the door, especially as a teenager or a high schooler. A lot of the information out there, even from the Electoral Commission and those sorts of things, the terminology, even though they try to make it as layman terms as possible, is still a bit confusing for more ordinary people. And so I ended up finding a charity that sort of teaches high schoolers civics education and that was a very empowering moment for me to understand that all it takes are a couple of days of simple ordinary and straightforward conversation with people that know a bit more about it and you can learn about politics and how it functions and how it operates quite easily.  And so I am a huge supporter of civics education. Having done that in high school, it was an amazing opportunity to learn and so when I got into university, I volunteered for the charity to teach civics education to high school students and that was another very, very empowering opportunity for me.  The amount of those young people who are really keen and really excited to learn about how they can engage with the political process, even before they are old enough to vote. You know, there’s a significant proportion of them – obviously there’s always that argument, especially now with the lowering the voting age campaign, that should 16 year olds have the vote, and I’m not saying that every 16 year old is informed enough to vote – but there are a lot of young people that are very, very interested and would love to learn and yes, would be great to see more civics education.  But I guess the issue that has been brought up to me a couple of times by people that are older than me that also have similar interests in this space, is that it’s quite hard to teach these things without imparting a bias, whether that’s implicit or a conscious bias. Teachers vote for certain parties and if they’re in that position and they said here, now you have to teach civics education not necessarily having done much preparation for that in the past aside from say some government resources that they’ve just made and hand off to them, I guess that might pose an issue. But in the long run I still think it’s a very, very important thing for us to do, installing some form of civics education, just so we can have those more respectful conversations.  Because obviously right now the conversation around co-governance and those sorts of issues is very polarising, both sides are essentially yelling at each other and saying how they are terrible. But it would be more helpful for all of the voters if they got into a room and civilly sat there and talked and had some sort of moderator. But I guess most of us not having the opportunity to learn anything about civics, we look at our political affiliations as we are, right, and we don’t want to hear anybody else, whereas you know when you actually get down and have a respectful conversation with someone who you think may have oppositive political views with you, you may find a lot of common ground and that would be an amazing opportunity for us as a nation to be able to have those more civil conversations. |
| Ursula | Yeah we’re not saying that would be easy, it’s quite hard to do this, it’s quite hard to control your emotional responses when somebody is saying something you might consider… I’ve got two daughters who are in their 20s, they’re still living at home, and I hear them shouting at the radio and you know, they’re getting quite worked up about this election. And yes, we all tend to do that but yes, as you say if you’re having a proper… and I like the Māori model on the marae. You can wānanga and it can be robust but everybody sort of sets to and it stays on the marae and everybody understands the rules around that and you hopefully get a good exchange of views and so on.  So what we’re getting at the moment, of course, in social media encourages that is a lot of people locked in their own, just maybe with one source of their information and they don’t have to talk to anyone else about it and that’s of course how radicalisation occurs. Just as a basic exchange of information, it’s tricky with the siloing that’s going on due to social media and so on and civics again as you say, hopefully would help with that.  I would like any civics course to include aspects of media and how to use media and particularly how to use social media and that sort of thing. It’s hard but it’s rewarding, I think is what we’re both saying. |
| Tommy | Yes, completely agree with that. |
| Sally | In addition to our long wish for civics education, what other kinds of checks and balances do we have in place to work around some of the terminology, kind of the violence actually, that we’re seeing? |
| Ursula | I’m happy to touch on the legal aspects. There’s quite a lot and that’s a bit tricky for people, too, because then it’s not all in one place. But having had a quick look at the various sort of regulatory bodies and so on that can be involved and I’ve been quite impressed this campaign, to see how they’re trying to package up their information and to link it over to the other places that might be relevant so that anyone who might want to complain or is trying to find out what to do can find their way eventually through the systems. The problem with what’s available in terms of the law is that it is sort of complaints-driven, and that’s always time consuming.  Something that is complaints-driven happens after the event but unfortunately that’s the only way it can happen and most of these regulatory bodies are based on the idea that someone complains and then a body, a relevant body, looks at the complaint, decides whether to uphold it or not and then that either results in the removal of the material or the ceasing of a campaign or that sort of thing. But of course it doesn’t stop the fact that the information has been out there for a little bit of time anyway.  But the way most of these bodies have tried to respond is to develop fast-track procedures during the election, so they really tried to deal with these complaints as soon as they can so it becomes more effective if they do it that way. But just summarising in a general way – and there’s a great little diagram in the Advertising Standards Authority Election Guide that they’ve put out for this year and it’s online, talking about who does what – so the BSA (the Broadcasting Standards Authority) deals with TV and radio, party and candidate ads and programme content. The ASA, that’s the Advertising Standards Authority, deals with paid party and candidate ads in other media and paid and third party election ads in all media, and then there’s Electoral Commission which has responsibility for political advertising, identifying themselves, making sure they include the requirements for things like promoter statements and that they stick within their expenditure limits, that sort of thing. And then we’ve got the New Zealand Media Council which deals with complaints about print or digital news sites and editorial content as well.  So that’s just a basic quick summary and as I say yes, it requires citizens to take initiative around complaining, basically, and that’s better I think, than going out and chopping down a billboard or defacing a billboard, although some of those are quite funny but some of them are very unpleasant as well. I think billboards are just… they’ve got this huge attraction, not only perhaps to people who are racist but also to people who want to draw penises on billboards and things like that.  So that’s always going to happen, that sort of thing. Duncan Webb, one of our Christchurch MPs, he’s had a picture up all year near his clinic and I think his teeth have been blacked out the entire time that picture has been there, so there’s just that attraction I think to that sort of thing from people who are fooling around. But it gets more serious around election time and that’s when a complaint might be something that you want to do.  There’s the general law as well, things like defamation and perhaps privacy which are there in the background if its serious enough to think you want to get a lawyer in and bring some sort of court action which is expensive and time consuming and quite stressful. So there’s those sorts of things as well but the bodies I’ve outlined there are sort of… they’re meant to be sort of reasonably quick and accessible ways of making complaints that don’t cost too much.  The only other thing that I would say, and it’s a bit of a segue for Tommy to have a chat, and that’s really we are really quite dependent on the media at the moment I think, to put the record straight as much as possible and keep trying to weed through the misinformation and disinformation out there and highlight what can be highlighted and corrected and so on. And then there’s people like me who might work in universities who can make commentary and that sort of thing as well, wherever we can. So that’s my summary, it’s not perfect, it’s probably not as quick as would be desirable but there are those avenues there. Over to you, Tommy. |
| Tommy | Thank you for that overview, that’s really helpful. And I guess my one suggestion for the sort of checks and balances question is to just engage with those ASA, BSA and Media Council processes because it’s very empowering when people do that but it’s also very important that people do that. Because as the media, sometimes we do get things wrong and we should be called out when that’s the case, obviously there might be information that we misinterpret. I think it’s really important that everyday New Zealanders do sort of interact with the ASA, BSA and the Media Council and unfortunately, I guess, with many of the sort of governmental bodies and regulatory agencies like that, it can be a daunting process to get your foot in the door and to understand how the sort of claims process works.  But the thing is, the more that you do that, the more comfortable you will be with that process and the easier you will be able to sort of put your complaint forward. And that’s super important because, as I said before, we don’t always get it right in the media and it’s super important, especially during an election year that we are held to account and obviously we are trying to hold all the politicians during this election campaign to account but if no one is holding us to account then it is really, you know, we are not the be all, end all authority. So we really do need everyday New Zealanders to engage with those processes and tell us what we have got wrong. |
| Sally | That seems like a great place to wrap it up actually, a piece of homework for everybody listening, to think about how you might engage, how you might contribute to combatting the spread of misinformation and disinformation and holding people to account, whether that’s the media or politicians or whoever is spreading material online particularly. I’d like to say tēnā kōrua, thank you both so much, this has been a super, super interesting chat and one that I think is really important generally but particularly over the next month or so. So thank you so much. |
| Tommy | Thank you for having me, much appreciated. |
| Ursula | Kia ora Sally and really enjoyed it and yes, all I would say to people is stay staunch, do your own investigating, look through the media, stay staunch and make sure you vote. |
| Sally | Actually that’s a really good reminder, yes, make sure you vote! And we’re going to finish with a song, we’ve got ‘Maralinga’ by Paul Kelly, which was Ursula’s choice. |
| Ursula | Paul Kelly is a brilliant poet musician telling about life in Australia, he’s also a great rock-and-roller. The reason I chose this song is because it’s from the perspective of an Aboriginal woman talking about what happened to her and her family due to the atomic bomb tests in the Australia desert in the 1950s, and it’s just so beautifully expressed and I think it’s a good example of one people, due to ignorance and making big mistakes, treating another people as less than human. And I thought that tied in well with some of the themes we’d been talking about today. |
|  | **MUSIC BY PAUL KELLY & THE MESSENGERS - MARALINGA** |