

The NZ media and the occupation of Parliament

Commentary: There is little reason to doubt that groups like Advance New Zealand, Voices for Freedom and *Counterspin Media* have been funded in part by donations from ‘the people’ or ‘everyday Kiwis’; New Zealanders are no less likely to disseminate misinformation—and fund that dissemination—than any other group. Nonetheless, questions remain about the role of foreign linked entities like Himalaya New Zealand on the fringe of New Zealand politics. Parliament grounds have been cleared and the grass will regrow, but the disinformation networks behind the protests remain. The role for media in the coming months, and likely years, will be to not ignore these disinformation networks (and not unwittingly provide content for them) but to investigate them and analyse the role they are playing in the contemporary ‘post-truth’ world.

Keywords: alt-right, anti-vaxxers, citizen’s arrest, conspiracy theorists, Counterspin Media, disinformation, harassment, mainstream media, New Zealand, Parliament protest, post-truth, protesters, QAnon, violence

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ON 4 February 2022, 200 protesters converged on the New Plymouth police station where former Taranaki Regional Council candidate Brett Power was making ‘an official complaint’ against New Zealand’s Minister of Health Andrew Little. Power claimed that Little was culpable for any adverse effects of the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine and liable to be arrested. Further, he claimed, incorrectly, that if the police did not arrest Little within 24 hours then a citizen’s arrest could be made.

Protesters then descended on the offices of the *Taranaki Daily News* where they sang the New Zealand national anthem and chanted ‘tell the truth!’ The protest was reported on by the *Taranaki Daily News* (one of the Stuff media mastheads) which also noted that two district councillors spoke at the rally (Protestors March on New Plymouth Police Station, 2022). Also reporting on events was *Counterspin Media*, an online video programme which promotes itself as an alternative to ‘mainstream media’.

The following weekend, *Counterspin* was broadcasting their coverage of a convoy to Wellington in opposition to vaccine mandates in a livestream that



Figure 1: Brett Powers being arrested at the New Zealand Parliament protest on 9 February 2022.

lasted almost 14 hours. Correspondents were familiar faces to those who have been paying attention to New Zealand’s conspiracy theorist fringe. In the north was Shane Chafin, the US-born former pharmacist who had previously been in the news for heckling Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern about alleged vaccine related deaths, causing her to move a press conference inside (Fisher, 2021). In the south was Heather Meri Pennycook, a former parliamentary candidate for the Advance New Zealand party, an alliance between former National Party MP Jami Lee Ross and conspiracy theorist Billy te Kahika. Pennycook had gone on to found the Agriculture Action Group, which targeted rural New Zealanders with conspiracy theories about climate change and United Nations Agenda 21 and Agenda 2030 (Clark, 2021b).

Counterspin hosts and correspondents were among the protesters who rallied outside Parliament, providing not just sympathetic coverage of the protest, but working to shape the course of action taken by protesters. In the early days of the occupation of Parliament grounds *Counterspin* had issued a ‘Call To Action’ with emails to subscribers: ‘Everyone needs to mobilise and get to Wellington now!’, ‘Are you going to choose FREEDOM or Tyranny?’, ‘This is the fight between good and evil, for the future of our beautiful country’. Host Kelvyn Alp used his platform to criticise the Destiny Church affiliated Freedom and Rights

Coalition for taking a more moderate approach to protesting than he would prefer. On the February 9 livestream, he announced that at 3pm that day protesters would attempt to breach the police line in order to carry out the citizens' arrest of Health Minister Andrew Little.

Brett Power, who had travelled from New Plymouth, gave a speech that was streamed live on *Counterspin*, and then attempted to enter the Parliament building. He was arrested along with two others. The three were charged with obstruction. Power's speech and footage of his arrest would be repeatedly replayed during *Counterspin* livestreams in the following days.

Counterspin Media launched on GTV, a platform started by former Trump advisor Steve Bannon and dissident Chinese billionaire Guo Wengui, also known as Miles Guo. The pair also founded the New Federal State of China, a dissident political group opposed to the Chinese Communist Party regime. A report released by Graphica Research in May 2021 described Guo as being 'at the centre of a vast network of interrelated media entities which have disseminated online disinformation and promoted real-world harassment campaigns'. The report stated that the network 'acts as a prolific producer and amplifier of mis- and disinformation, including claims of voter fraud in the US, false information about COVID-19, and QAnon narratives' (Graphica, 2021).

Linked with GTV is the Himalaya Farms Network, which acts as a network of embassies for the New Federal State of China working to expand the movement and organise volunteer efforts. According to an interview carried out by Guo, The Himalaya Farms, of which the New Zealand branch is one of 23, have been instructed to find supporters, 'acquire local media', 'take advantage of your social network' and 'gather more wealth'. The Himalaya New Zealand website, which has since been revamped, previously stated, 'We aim to counter false narratives forced through left-leaning mainstream media and compromised key NGOs within New Zealand' (Clark, 2021a).

It was Tex Hill of Himalaya New Zealand who approached Alp and co-host/producer Hannah Spierer (who previously went by the pseudonym Sarah Smith) about starting a show on *GTV*, and organised a studio for them to use (*Counterspin Media*, 2021). A few months before this, Hill was among protesters outside the lower Queen Street branch of the ANZ bank which had blocked money transfers to GTV. Hill told *The New Zealand Herald* that he had successfully sent more than US\$100,000 to GTV via the BNZ, but a smaller amount sent with an ANZ credit card bounced back after three weeks. The *Herald* noted that the previous week *The Wall Street Journal* had reported that the FBI was examining Guo and the money used to fund his media efforts in the United States, including his work with Steve Bannon (Parker, 2020).

In November 2021 New Zealand's Financial Markets Authority issued a warning to investors about GTV and other Guo linked entities, noting that GTV

was not licensed to offer investments to New Zealand residents. The US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) charged GTV with conducting an illegal unregistered offering of GTV shares and digital assets. Dozens of investors in GTV, almost all Chinese speakers, had sued the company and Guo (Financial Markets Authority, 2021). GTV shut down on 2 March 2022 amid Guo's ongoing legal troubles (Friedman, 2022).

Counterspin has continued after the demise of GTV, uploading their videos to the Canadian video sharing website Rumble, and banned.video which is part of the network of websites operated by American conspiracy theorist Alex Jones. The hosts, who are also directors of the *Counterspin Media* company, vehemently deny receiving any funding from either Guo and Bannon or Jones. When confronted by a TVNZ1 reporter during the occupation of Parliament grounds, Alp claimed they were funded by 'the people'.

It is unclear whether *Counterspin* is receiving any funding from The New Federal State of China or its associated entities. Given that the show regularly and consistently propagates falsehoods, claims made by Spierer and Alp should not be taken at face value. The connections with Himalaya New Zealand are clear and the producers of the show were not using GTV by coincidence.

David Fisher of *The New Zealand Herald* was the first journalist to investigate Alp's background in light of the protests he had been encouraging. Two decades before starting *Counterspin*, Alp had founded the New Zealand Armed Intervention Force (NZAIF), an armed militia with the stated aim of overthrowing the New Zealand government.

In the intervening years Alp procured investments for a mining venture in the Solomon Islands via the Caratapa Group of Companies. The gold mine never eventuated and the company was in receivership from 2012 through to December 2020. Public records show that Alp himself was bankrupt from 2013 to 2019 (Fisher, 2022).

On February 22, RNZ spoke to one man who would talk to the media about his funding of the protest, Red Stag CEO Marty Verry, who had given a donation he initially described as 'not significant' via a website used to raise money to support the protest. The host pressed him on the amount he had donated and asked if he was happy to fund the alt-right, a question he evaded, though he did answer a further question asking if he was happy to fund people making death threats by telling the host that he was not (RNZ, 2022).

Appearing on RNZ again on March 3, following the protests' violent end, Verry told *Checkpoint* he regretted his donation. 'I haven't been at all impressed with the way it's evolved over time. I think a dangerous fringe got in there and started to take it over and I think it lost the support of the public.' (Red Stag boss regrets funding, 2022). RNZ noted that violent imagery and rhetoric was present from the beginning of the protest

No media questioned Verry about the relationship between his father, the late Phillip Verry, (Hartvel, 2020) and Kelvyn Alp. The senior Verry was a conspiracy theorist who blamed many of the country's problems on the Bank of New Zealand (BNZ). In 2002, he claimed BNZ owed him and his associates NZ\$8.3 million following the failure of his import company, Khaya Holdings, which forced the sale of his 1600ha family farm. He had hired Alp as his 'negotiator' and Alp, along with other members of the NZAIF, had turned up during the night dressed in military garb at the home of BNZ managing director Peter Thodey (Hill Cone, 2002). Although the younger Verry's financial support for the protest could be a coincidence, this link to Alp should have been explored.

Disinformation online: Not a new problem

The occupation of Parliament grounds was the outcome of mis- and disinformation being disseminated online. Although the violent scenes on March 2 were unprecedented, the burning of property (primarily the property of protesters themselves but also Parliament's playground for children) was not the first time conspiracy theories had spurred people to destructive behaviour. In 2020, 17 cellphone towers were either set on fire or otherwise vandalised, causing hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of damage. While these acts have not been definitively linked to conspiracy theorists, they followed an increase in conspiracy theories spreading online that linked fifth generation mobile services (5G) to the COVID-19 virus (Pasley, 2020).

Sue Grey, the lawyer and Outdoors Party leader, perhaps best known for her opposition to vaccines, had been a propagator of disinformation about 5G. Following the alleged arson attacks on telecommunications infrastructure she wrote on her website

People were angry about new cell towers well before the COVID-19 became an issue. It is not surprising that people feel frustrated when dangerous and unwanted technology is installed outside their homes. I do not believe this current spate of cell tower vandalism is directly related to 'corona virus'. It is more to do with frustration that the government we elect to represent us is not listening to us and acting for corporations rather than New Zealanders. (Grey, 2020)

Grey became a fixture on *Counterspin Media* during the occupation of Parliament grounds and was described by 1 News as a protest organiser. Grey had spearheaded legal challenges to vaccine mandates and provided legal representation to Destiny Church member Paul Craig Thompson, who was arrested alongside Bishop Brian Tamaki at an anti-lockdown protest held in defiance of a public health order prohibiting large gatherings (Kapitan, 2022).

Documents released under the *Official Information Act* in August 2021

show that in March 2020, two years before protesters would clash with police on Parliament grounds, the Electoral Commission had identified misinformation and disinformation as a critical risk in the upcoming election, noting several reasons that non-state actors may have an interest in influencing New Zealand's information sphere, including through spreading disinformation. The report advised that far-right or white nationalist groups may have an interest in New Zealand politics because of the terrorist attack on Christchurch mosques and the subsequent ban of semi-automatic weapons (DPMC, 2021).

When protesters stormed the Capitol Building in Washington DC in January 2021, prominent figures in New Zealand's populist right were cheering them on. 'Hold the line patriots!' tweeted Damien de Ment from his since removed Twitter account, adding in a subsequent tweet 'They cannot let rumbling discontent in NZ boil over like USA. They fear the boldness and righteousness of what Patriots will do to secure freedom for all' (Braae, 2021).

While de Ment has had his accounts removed from mainstream social media platforms (in addition to Twitter, his YouTube and most recently his Facebook account have been deleted), he has maintained a following on Telegram where he writes of 'Nuremberg' trials for politicians, journalists and others involved in the COVID-19 vaccine roll-out, claiming that following these 'common law' trials there will be executions. Notably, signs referencing hangings and Nuremberg trials were carried by the protesters outside Parliament in February 2022.

A report published in April 2021 by Tohatoha Aotearoa Commons and SMAT (Social Media Analysis Toolkit) investigating the spread of white supremacist, extremist, and conspiracy content on social media during the 2020 election, found that conspiracy theories related to the 6 January 2021 insurrection in Washington DC—when five people died—including those spread by hate groups, were cross-pollinating with New Zealand specific content. Concurrently, conspiracy theories related to COVID-19 and the public health response were influencing the discourse on electoral processes (SMAT & Tohatoha, 2021).

A report published by The Disinformation Project in November 2021 showed just how much online mis- and disinformation increased in the latter half of that year, noting that both posts and engagement 'drastically increased' since mid-August 2021 and 'show a trajectory of growth and spread that is increasing, widening, and deepening every week'. The report goes on to note that 'it is by order of magnitude more than the content speed and spread over 2020, and even in the first half of 2021' (The Disinformation Project, 2021).

These findings were widely reported in the New Zealand media at the time of the report's release. *Newshub* reported that much of the disinformation was being used to steer people 'towards extreme ideologies such as white supremacy and QAnon', and that on the Telegram channels studied by the Disinformation Project there was extreme misogyny targeting female politicians, researchers and

journalists, as well as Nazi imagery and photographs of hangings (Cook, 2021).

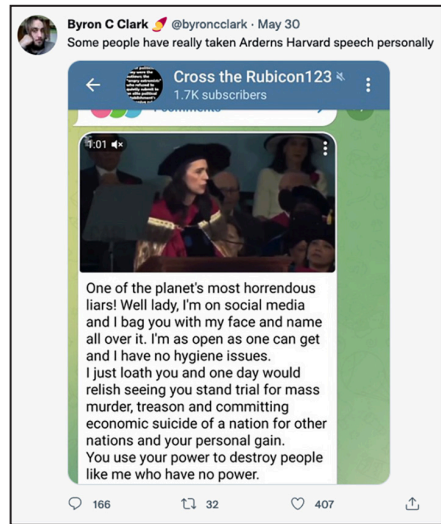
Quoting the report’s lead author, Kate Hannah, *Newshub* also notes the ‘closer link between COVID-19 disinformation and wider sets of fringe beliefs’. *Stuff*’s coverage of the report pointed out that the COVID-19 outbreak and the rollout of vaccine were used as symbols to ‘push various far-right and conservative views’ and that ‘Language specifically targeting individuals and minority groups has become more violent and graphic’ (Broughton, 2021). Coverage in *The Spinoff* quoted Hannah at length:

We started noticing that there was a closer link between COVID-19 disinformation and wider sets of fringe beliefs. From August last year we noticed it was becoming two or three steps to take people through to white supremacist or far-right ideologies, QAnon material, extreme misogyny, incel material and transphobic material, and we started viewing COVID disinformation as one of the entry-level ideas that draws people down these further disinformation ideology pathways. (Reeve, 2021)

The February 2022 convoy was not the first far-right influenced anti-vaccine mandate protest to arrive at Parliament. *The Spinoff* editor Toby Manhire described a protest at Parliament in November 2021 as revealing ‘a new, ugly, dangerous side to our country’. While that protest was peaceful compared to what would occur three months later, it was reported protesters told journalists they would ‘get what’s coming’ (Manhire, 2021).

A violent protest was years in the making, and while not inevitable, it was highly predictable. A November 2021 intelligence report from the Combined Threat Assessment Group (CTAG) that was only released publicly after the events of the Wellington protests, had noted that the rise in threatening online rhetoric in relation to COVID-19 mitigation efforts meant the possibility of a violent protest could not be discounted (NZSIS, 2021).

This was the context in which the occupation of Parliament grounds took place. Journalists and commentators who ignored or downplayed that context



BYRON CLARK TWITTER

Figure 2: An example of social media misogyny—continuing after the Parliament protest—directed at Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern after her memorable speech about democracy and gun control at Harvard University on 26 May 2022 when she received a standing ovation (*The Guardian*, 2022).

arguably contributed to the environment of misinformation. Political analyst Dr Bryce Edwards described protesters as merely ‘eccentric’ when speaking to Newstalk ZB, and said on RNZ’s *Morning Report* that describing them as ‘far right’ was an unfair smear, which drew an unsparing response from Morgan Godfrey, who also appeared on the programme. ‘Bryce is absolutely wrong to gloss over the involvement of the far-right, we have seen the involvement of *Counterspin Media*, we have seen the involvement of currents in society that I think the vast majority of New Zealanders will find very uncomfortable’ (Mediawatch, 2022).

Newsroom, a publication that has arguably provided more in-depth coverage of New Zealand’s far-right fringe than any other, published a video from lead investigations editor Melanie Reid titled ‘A visit to freedom village’ that provided sympathetic coverage to the protest and in particular the anti-vaccine group Voices for Freedom, which it described as one of the key players at the event (Reid, 2022).

Voices for Freedom was so pleased with the way the group was portrayed in the piece that they wrote in their email newsletter to supporters, ‘In a time where balanced reporting has been rarer than a politician’s tootsies on Parliament grounds, we were pretty happy with the final result’, encouraging followers to share the story, which they did—making it at one point the most viewed page on the *Newsroom* website (Chapman, 2022). The misinformation network used by Voices for Freedom was now being used to promote coverage in the usually loathed ‘mainstream media’.

Protesters and the funding

Reid did question the group about their funding. Co-founder Alia Brand spoke of small donations from ‘everyday Kiwis’, and Claire Deeks said a ‘handful’ of people had contributed toward the \$200,000 used for a court case the group pursued (Reid, 2022). Reid did not question the group further to ascertain who that handful of large backers were.

Deeks was a candidate for the Advance New Zealand Party in 2020, and number three on the party list (this was not mentioned in the *Newsroom* video). The expenses return filed by the party after the 2020 election show that \$10,000 was spent on ‘campaign consultancy’ from Doms Kitchen Ltd, a company set up by Deeks for her food blog Doms Kitchen (Advance New Zealand, 2021). Deeks has yet to be asked about what services her company provided to the party she was involved with in exchange for this sum.

Advance New Zealand has an underexplored connection to global misinformation networks. On 12 October 2020, a few days out from the election, co-leader Jami Lee Ross appeared as a guest on Steve Bannon’s *War Room* show, in front of several flags—New Zealand and the New Federal State of China. Ross is described by Bannon as the first elected official to ‘stand with the free men and women of the Federal State of China’ (War Room, 2020)

A loophole in electoral laws meant that the unregistered New Zealand Public Party led by Te Kahika and forming a component of Advance New Zealand was able to collect \$255,000 in donations without declaring their sources to the Electoral Commission, meaning the funding of Advance New Zealand is more opaque than for other parties (Shand, 2020).

There is little reason to doubt that groups like Advance New Zealand, Voices for Freedom and *Counterspin Media* have been funded in part by donations from ‘the people’ or ‘everyday Kiwis’; New Zealanders are no less likely to disseminate misinformation—and fund that dissemination—than any other group. Nonetheless, questions remain about the role of foreign linked entities like Himalaya New Zealand on the fringe of New Zealand politics.

Monitoring the far-right

If journalists wait until the far-right are protesting in public to report on them they will be missing a lot of the story. Public actions can be crafted to present a certain image of these movements, and that image can be disingenuous—for example the ‘carnival atmosphere’ of the Wellington protest in its early days. On the burgeoning ‘alt-tech’ platforms where these events are organised people speak more openly about their beliefs and their aims. This space has been monitored thoroughly by The Disinformation Project (<https://www.tepunahamatatini.ac.nz/>) and SMAT (<https://smat-app.com>), it is also a space where any journalist covering the far-right should be.

Parliament grounds have been cleared and the grass will regrow, but the disinformation networks behind the protests remain. The role for media in the coming months, and likely years, will be to not ignore these disinformation networks (and not unwittingly provide content for them) but to investigate them and analyse the role they are playing in our contemporary ‘post-truth’ world.

Who's Who? Key figures behind the events at Parliament



Kelvyn Alp

Co-host of *Counterspin Media* alongside partner Hannah Spierer. A former soldier who once founded a militia with the stated aim of overthrowing the government. During the protests he advocated for militant tactics and criticised more moderate elements.



Phil Arps

A notorious Christchurch-based white supremacist. Known for being the first person arrested for sharing the livestream of the 2019 Christchurch mosque shooting. He was arrested in Picton after having told people he was on his way to a 'public execution'.



Chantelle Baker

Described on her Facebook page as a 'news personality', Baker made a name for herself livestreaming the protests at Parliament, with engagement on her videos at times surpassing news media. Those livestreams became a significant vector for the spread of misinformation.








Leighton Baker

Former leader of the New Conservative Party and the father of Chantelle. He attended the protests and often tried to position himself as a mediator between the protesters and police. He was among those arrested in the final days of the occupation of Parliament grounds.



Karen Brewer

A Northland-based conspiracy theorist originally from Australia, where she was ordered to pay A\$875,000 for defamation against a member of Parliament she accused of operating a child sex trafficking ring. She has a small but dedicated following who frequently protest outside the home of the Governor-General, calling on her to issue the writs for a new election.

 <p>Counterspin: Covid-19 - The Other Side</p>	<p>Shane Chafin</p> <p>A former pharmacist who now appears on <i>Counterspin Media</i> as a 'medical correspondent'. Chafin gained media attention after his persistent questioning of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern about alleged vaccine related deaths caused her to move a press conference inside.</p>
	<p>Damien de Ment</p> <p>A moderately successful YouTube personality up until his channel was removed for spreading misinformation. He has long called for trials and execution of politicians, journalists and others involved with the COVID-19 public health response. He attended the protests briefly and appears occasionally as a guest on <i>Counterspin Media</i>.</p>
	<p>Brad Flutey</p> <p>A prominent conspiracy theorist from Northland who occasionally guest hosts <i>Counterspin Media</i>. He was arrested during the protests and appeared in the Wellington District Court accused of encouraging protesters at Parliament to behave in a manner likely to cause violence, and then for failing to comply with police orders. He attributed protesters becoming ill with COVID-19 style symptoms to 'EMF radiation'.</p>
	<p>Sue Grey</p> <p>A lawyer known for her opposition to vaccine mandates, fifth generation mobile network technology, and the use of 1080 poison by the Department of Conservation. She was a frequent guest on <i>Counterspin Media</i> and other livestreams throughout the occupation of Parliament.</p>
	<p>Liz Gunn</p> <p>A former news reader for <i>One News</i> who has since made the transition to fake news. Throughout the protests she appeared frequently as a guest on <i>Counterspin Media</i>.</p>

	<p>Elliot Ikilei Former deputy leader (and for a brief period, leader) of the New Conservative Party, he provided sympathetic coverage of the protest on his media platform <i>The Daily Examiner</i>.</p>
	<p>Brett Power A Sovereign Citizen from Taranaki who attended the protest in Wellington planning to conduct a citizen's arrest of the Minister of Health, which he had announced outside the New Plymouth police station a few days prior after obtaining a case number from police.</p>
	<p>Brian Tamaki Self-ordained bishop of the evangelical Destiny Church, which is behind the Freedom and Rights Coalition. Bail conditions imposed on him for organising and attending protests during COVID-19 lockdowns prevented him from personally attending the protests in Wellington, though the Freedom and Rights Coalition had a strong presence.</p>
	<p>Billy Te Kahika The former co-leader of the now defunct Advance New Zealand Party. He did not attend the 2022 protests himself, but his new organisation, The Freedom Alliance, had a presence. Te Kahika had organised and attended numerous protests against COVID-19 related restrictions throughout 2020 and 2021.</p>
	<p>Action Zealandia A small white supremacist group which keeps the identities of their members hidden. According to their Telegram channel, members attended the protests. A video filmed from a construction site near Parliament was also disseminated by the group, leading to changes in security measures at Parliament.</p>
	<p>Voices for Freedom An anti-vaccination lobby group founded by Claire Deeks, a former candidate for the Advance New Zealand Party, with Alia Bland and Libby Jonson. One of the relatively moderate groups involved in the protest.</p>

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