

The murmuration of information disorders

Aotearoa New Zealand, mis- and disinformation ecologies and the Parliament Protest

Abstract: The Parliament Protest from February 2022 to March 2022 was a significant online and offline event in Aotearoa New Zealand. Offline, its physical presence captured the attention of the nation and fuelled debates about ideas of legitimate protest in Aotearoa New Zealand. Online, its data signatures showed never-seen-before popularity with misinformation, disinformation, and extremist thought. In this working paper The Disinformation Project (<https://thedisinfoproject.org/>) incorporates quantitative and qualitative data analysis to explore the role misinformation and disinformation played in the nurture and nature of the protest on Parliament grounds. The article also explores how the protest was projected on social media, disinformation and misinformation ecologies associated with it, and lasting impacts on social cohesion, identity, news media and democracy in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Keywords: authoritarianism, democracy, disinformation, extremism, identity, misinformation, New Zealand, news media, Parliament siege, QAnon, social cohesion, social media, The Disinformation Project, transdisciplinary

KATE HANNAH, SANJANA HATTOTUWA and KAYLI TAYLOR
The Disinformation Project, Aotearoa New Zealand

One day it will be our job to try and understand how a group of people could succumb to such wild and dangerous mis- and disinformation. And while many of us have seen that disinformation and dismissed it as conspiracy theory, a small portion of our society have not only believed it, they have acted upon it in an extreme and violent way that cannot stand. We have a difficult journey in front of us to address the underlying cause of what we have seen here today.¹

Introduction

P RIME Minister Jacinda Ardern spoke these words on 2 March 2022, following the removal of protesters from a three-week occupation of Parliament grounds in central Wellington. The protest was notable to many in

Aotearoa New Zealand for the scenes of violence, arson, clashes between police and protestors, hostility and harms directed against journalists, and numerous arrests.² The occupation of Parliament grounds and subsequent disruption to much of the surrounding area within central Wellington began on 8 February 2022, as a collection of individuals and groups who had travelled by convoy from across the country, inspired by the Canadian trucker convoy protesting vaccine mandates. The duration and disruptive nature of the occupation, affecting businesses, schools, Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington, and the public service drew significant domestic and international media attention, particularly given strong interest in what has widely been perceived as Aotearoa New Zealand's success in managing the COVID-19 pandemic. While the longest and largest protest took place outside Parliament, there were other protests across the country in Dunedin, Wānaka, Picton, Christchurch, and Auckland.³

The months leading up to the protest—particularly the shift to COVID-19 Alert Level 4 across Aotearoa New Zealand in August 2021, the transition to the COVID-19 Protection Framework (traffic light system), increasing offline protest activity across the country, and the Omicron outbreak—exacerbated, entrenched and expanded domestic information disorders studied since the start of the pandemic. From November 2021 the vectors, velocity, and volume of mis- and disinformation in Aotearoa New Zealand steadily increased. Growing numbers of individuals subscribed to and engaged with mis- and disinformation across a range of social media platforms and products, including but not limited to Facebook Pages, Groups, public posts on personal Facebook accounts, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Telegram and TikTok.

The Parliament Protest also saw the use of new instant messaging apps, like Zello. The offline Parliament Protest coincided with an outbreak of Omicron, and almost-daily record case numbers. On February 6—Waitangi Day—when the convoys started from their respective locations, the Ministry of Health reported 208 community cases of COVID-19.⁴ On March 2, when the physical protest outside Parliament was brought to an end, the Ministry of Health reported 22,152 community cases.⁵ There were reports of COVID-19 cases among the protestors.⁶ The protest was listed as a location of interest for COVID-19 on February 23, with all attendees considered close contacts.⁷

In our November 2021 public report, The Disinformation Project (TDP) described and analysed the nurture, nature and significant nodes of disinformation in Aotearoa New Zealand since August 2021. We noted a set of tipping points: shifts from vaccine hesitancy to vaccine resistance, increasingly competing ideas regarding state versus individual rights, and the normalisation of the targeting of individuals and communities with online and offline harassment. We also noted the prevalence of a range of tactics: the use of memetic material and testimony to spark humour and strong emotion, language usage and genre difference by

platform, and overall an increase in dangerous speech.⁸ These tipping points and tactics played out with stronger emphasis during the Parliament protest. The Parliament Protest was unlike any other event, process or domestic development studied by TDP. The significance of the protest and its role in the embedding of information disorders will take years to fully understand. In this working paper, we look at the Parliament Protest and ask: how did Aotearoa New Zealand end up here? We expand on themes, tipping points, and tactics first described in our November 2021 paper and how they were reflected at the Parliament Protest. We conclude with implications for social cohesion, and steps forward.

Methods

TDP is a transdisciplinary research project which, since 2020, has studied publicly available data via social media, websites, and other source material, including contemporary academic research, to analyse the scope, scale and spread of mis- and disinformation in Aotearoa New Zealand. In our study, we use the following definitions:

- *Misinformation*: ‘false information that people did not create with the intent to hurt others’
- *Disinformation*: ‘false information created with the intention of harming a person, group, or organisation, or even a company’
- *Malinformation*: ‘true information used with ill intent’⁹

These provide framing tools through which we code and analyse material, provenance, propagation, engagement, and potential offline impacts. Throughout this paper we refer to these inter-related, socio-technological, and inextricably entwined phenomena as mis- and disinformation, with the resulting impact on socio-political landscapes as information disorders. Mis- and disinformation are transmitted within and across platforms to far-reaching audiences. Producers of mis- and disinformation are often closely connected, or act in concert, cross-promoting each other’s material or from common sources to reach wider audiences. We describe these complex phenomena as ‘ecologies’—systems and networks that mirror and migrate content, discourses, language, beliefs, perceptions, and values across different platforms to audiences.

In line with the increasing spread of mis- and disinformation, the number of product and platform surfaces studied by TDP has continued to expand. We currently focus on, in no particular order, Telegram, Facebook Pages, Groups, public posts on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and any sign-posted content on the.nz ccTLD, other websites, or on platforms like Rumble, Odysee, Gab, and Gettr. The study of mis- and disinformation provenance, production and propagation across these platform and product ecologies has been conducted daily, since September 2021.

Platforms and genres

On March 2, Telegram served as a viral and vital vector to exchange tactical and strategic information. Simultaneously, Telegram channels were dominated by narrative frames projecting ‘police brutality’ and, consequently, promoting violence. This protest period also saw unprecedented divides in how pro-protest ecologies on Twitter engaged with anti-protest ecologies on the platform, and vice-versa. Depending on how they viewed the Parliament protests, Twitter users followed and engaged with vastly different and violently opposed narratives of the protest on the platform. Each narrative frame featured a specific ecology of hashtags, denoting strong affinity to, or dismissing those involved in, and organising, the protests.

TDP also studied preliminary data on how videos recommended on YouTube, based on viewing protest-related content produced by mis- and disinformation accounts on the platform (including livestreaming on it), pushed viewers towards content that was progressively more conspiratorial, and with more pronounced harms including around anti-vaccination, anti-mandate, INCEL, misogynist, hyper-masculine, anti-authoritarian, Identitarian, and sovereign citizen content from the United States, United Kingdom, Europe and Australia. Following the end of the Parliament Protest, there was a drop in content production and related commentary— illuminating the inter-relationship between offline developments, and online ecologies. As the Parliament Protest showed, coordinated offline and online protests in the future will be more complex, diverse, dispersed, opportunistically collaborative, and stochastically realised.

Describing the complex meta-level scaffolding of disinformation operations, including Russian disinformation we have observed since mid-February, we draw from the theoretical approaches of Jacques Ellul, who identified two main forms of propaganda vectors: strategic messaging and tactical messaging. Strategic messaging, Ellul noted, was a long-term gaze, and consequently, resulted in investments that would bear fruit over decades, not days.¹⁰ Seen from an ecological perspective, in the way TDP studies mis- and disinformation, this is not unlike seeding ideological frames around what is desired as an intended outcome, including the fundamental characteristics of Aotearoa New Zealand as a nation-state, and consequently, what is required to harvest this desired goal. Tactical messaging, on the other hand, is aimed at generating more immediate results, within a strategic messaging and ideological framework. TDP sees both strategic and tactical disinformation messaging constantly at play in Aotearoa New Zealand, aimed at (anti-democratic) long-term socio-political change as well as more immediate results through heightened tactical content production. These efforts result in, online, emotional contagions through reflexive sharing and reactions, and through the instrumentalisation of anger, antagonism and anxiety, give rise to, offline, the formation and cementing of attitudes, perceptions and behaviours without critical reflection.

During the Parliament Protest, researchers at The Disinformation Project studied complex nebulae of information disorders through livestreams from the protesters themselves, mainstream media coverage, and online discourses. Throughout the protest, from February 6 to March 2, TDP studied data from tens of millions of posts and comments on Meta/Facebook product and platform surfaces alone, alongside hundreds of hours of live-streamed footage, tens of thousands of tweets, hundreds of YouTube videos, and tens of thousands of posts and comments on Telegram. The total volume of material studied was much greater, embracing websites, and multimedia material hosted on alternative platforms.

Context

Since November 2021 and our first public report, there have been several developments and shifts in Aotearoa New Zealand's experience with COVID-19. On 3 December 2021, Aotearoa New Zealand shifted to the COVID-19 Protection Framework (traffic light system).¹¹ The three-tiered (Red, Orange, Green) Traffic Light system offered greater freedom to those who are vaccinated, while offering more restrictions on those who decided not to be vaccinated. On 20 December 2021, following provisional approval from MedSafe and consultation with the COVID-19 Vaccine Technical Advisory Group, Cabinet approved the use of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine for ages 5-11.¹² Vaccine passes were not implemented for children aged 5-11, meaning regardless of vaccination status they could participate in all activities.¹³

From the time of the announcement of the vaccine rollout for tamariki, TDP observed elevated levels of volatility online. With the beginning of the rollout on 17 January 2022, this further intensified. The vaccine was described as 'poison', compared to D-Day, and heavily resisted. This resistance was based upon mis- and disinformation and COVID-19 denialism. A total of 120,000 children received their first dose of a paediatric dose of the Pfizer vaccine on the first day of rollout.¹⁴ One misinformation super-spreader alleged that five children had collapsed at a vaccination site—something that was debunked by health professionals.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the lie went viral across the mis- and disinformation ecologies studied by TDP, fuelling fear and tension surrounding the COVID-19 vaccine for children.

The shift to the Red tier of the traffic light system in response to the outbreak of Omicron across the country amplified mis- and disinformation production.¹⁶ TDP's sustained study of information disorders since September 2021 gave us a unique perspective on the Parliament Protest, and its origins. Various issues and themes contributed to the mobilisation seen in the early days of the convoy, leading up to the occupation of Parliament grounds: the COVID-19 pandemic, the way fear and hysteria have been generated within the mis- and disinformation community, and the rise in conspiratorial thought. This long, grounded gaze

helped establish events of February 6 and thereafter not as the beginning of violative sentiment, but as an accelerated shift away from predominantly online violent ideation to offline confrontation and kinetic harms.

The Convoy and early days of the occupation of Parliament grounds

Facebook groups and Telegram channels dedicated to organising a domestic version of the Canadian trucker convoy emerged over the weekend of 29-30 January 2022. The protests in Canada, organised by truckers and conservative groups¹⁷ were celebrated and virtue-signalled across domestic Telegram channels studied by TDP. Suggestions for a local version gathered increasing support and traction. By the beginning of February, plans had been drawn up for times and dates to leave Cape Reinga in the North Island and Bluff in the South. Alternative media platforms studied by TDP expressed interest in featuring the organisers to promote the convoy. The convoy was the most significant domestic event studied by TDP to date—including new irrigation patterns around the seed and spread of content, the pace of production, various vectors used for content production, virality, cross-pollination within and between social media ecologies, and levels of engagement.

Convoys left Cape Reinga, and Bluff at 6.30am on 6 February 2022.¹⁸ The ability of the convoy organisers to control route, pace, messaging, and personnel during the travel towards Wellington was limited. Communication channels were unclear, and an organised Spotify playlist was disrupted by those opposed to the protesters.¹⁹ This period of the convoy also saw a shift to the use of Zello—a walkie-talkie like communications and instant messaging app allowing for the easy sharing of voice and text messages. The use of Zello for coordinating offline protest activity of this nature was a first in Aotearoa New Zealand, and soon became a site of conflicting communications, methods of protest, modes of assembly, strategies, tactics and information, especially among those present at Wellington and Picton using it. Protesters arrived at Parliament on February 8 and set up camp on Parliament grounds. On February 9, an individual attempted to arrest Minister of Health Andrew Little for his alleged crimes in relation to the rollout of the COVID-19 vaccine.²⁰ February 10 saw a significant escalation of tension between police and protesters, including 120 arrests.²¹ The offline developments coincided with high levels of online content production—including livestreams from producers on Parliament grounds, audio notes, photos, and video. The study of this material revealed a clear disconnect between controllers of the Convoy's Zello channel, and other official Telegram, Twitter, and Facebook accounts, with how the Convoy was presented, promoted and perceived by others present.²² These same groups present in front of the Beehive, were simultaneously fighting among themselves.²³ The Convoy's chats offered prosocial commentary, including repeated calls for calm, asking for the police to be treated

with respect, and to not engage in antagonising behaviour. However, online calls from other mis- and disinformation producers and the offline behaviour of protesters was highly violative, instigating kinetic violence, and consequently, amplifying volatility offline, by stoking anger, anxiety and antagonism, online. This significant divergence and its instrumentalisation is important to understand within the context of the Convoy and subsequent Parliament Protest. Communication and intentions varied greatly among producers of mis- and disinformation, self-proclaimed leaders and organisers, creating complex, confusing and chaotic environments for protesters on the ground and those outside.²⁴

Within this miasma of competing and complementary content, the most viral content often featured pushback against politicians, political parties, government, judiciary, and Parliament. Some individuals, like Prime Minister Ardern, were consistently targeted with extremely misogynistic, vulgar, violent, and vicious commentary and content. While mainstream media coverage focussed on the Parliament protesters physically present in front of the Beehive (or elsewhere around the country, like Picton), there was comparably little recognition for the mis- and disinformation undergirding the protests, online and on social media. This online world and its impact on offline discourse is the focus of TDP's research.

Early on February 10, there was a breakdown between the original goals of the convoy²⁵ and the strategies encouraged by an influential disinformation media super-spreader on social media. Discourses from the Convoy official accounts, especially on Zello, promoted non-aggression, asked protesters to treat police respectfully, and remain calm. Simultaneously, however, the Convoy's original focus on mandates was becoming increasingly less significant and giving way to far-right narratives of individuals and groups who used the protest as an opportunity to radicalise people, erode social cohesion, and push forward their own parochial agendas. Our warning in November 2021 that anti-vaccination and COVID-19 mis- and disinformation were being used as a Trojan Horse for the norm-setting of far-right ideals was fully realised during the Parliament protest.

Platform and product growth

Our November 2021 working paper analysed the increasing role of Telegram as a significant wellspring of harms in Aotearoa New Zealand, including mis- and disinformation. Subscribers to around 140 accounts TDP studies daily continue to increase at pace. On 31 December 2021, the total number of subscribers across the channels and chat groups studied on Telegram, allowing for duplication, totalled 243,341. By 14 January 2022, there were 258,370 subscribers. The number rose to 270,873 by January 28. By February 11, TDP recorded 307,613 Telegram subscribers: an increase of nearly 27,000 in just two weeks. By March 4, this number increased to 353,377.

The sustained and significant rise in followers highlights the reach and appeal

of mis- and disinformation promoted on Telegram, featuring text, photo, video, memetic, and audio material—in other words, an enclave of harmful content that is not dependent on off-platform hosting.

Beyond Telegram, Facebook Pages and Groups saw rapid increases in popularity. February 2022 alone saw more followers added to the mis- and disinformation ecologies on Facebook than from September 2021 to January 2022. The same growth trend held for Instagram account constellations promoting mis- and disinformation.

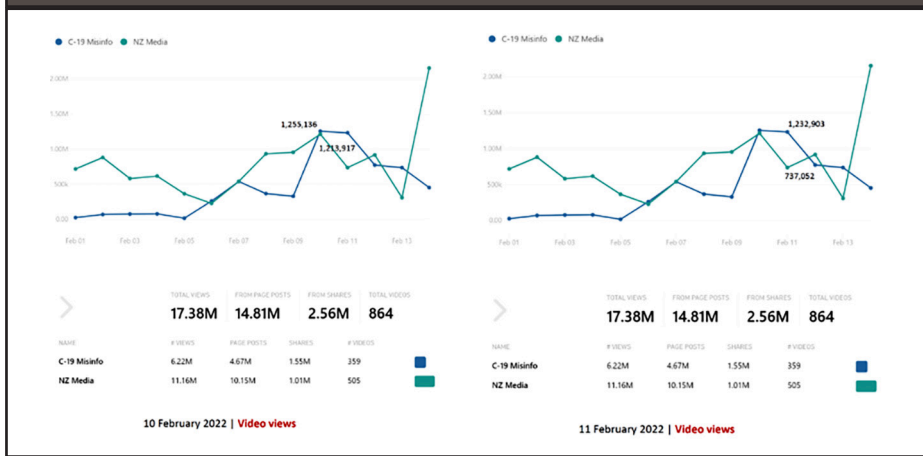
On 2 March 2022, saw content engagement signatures that were unprecedented, eclipsing the anomalous trends studied by TDP after February 10. March 2 is more consequential in several ways, including how just one Facebook Page belonging to a domestic misinformation super-spreader generated the most and second-highest engaged with posts from 1-3 March among ALL public Facebook Pages in Aotearoa New Zealand.²⁶ TDP had never before studied a single misinformation super-spreader account on Meta platforms dominate engagement in mis- and disinformation ecologies, and furthermore, eclipse engagement by the country's mainstream media on the same platform.

There are fundamental implications, out-of-scope for this report, around what this means for the country's information ecologies in general, and consequently, the perception of and engagement with a shared reality, as a cornerstone of democratic stability and electoral integrity. These are epochal shifts—in large part, because Aotearoa New Zealand had till the protest onset, enjoyed a media landscape that never had mis- and disinformation communities challenge mainstream media engagement. Significant shifts—over two consecutive months—suggest that if these patterns even loosely hold, significant sections of the country's population will no longer be predominantly informed about critical, offline developments, as well as underlying causes, motivations, intentions and drivers, through professional, accurate, impartial journalism or official, government sources.

The Parliament Protest was the single greatest offline accelerant to engagement around and growth of Facebook Page and Group based mis- and disinformation ecologies since TDP's focus on information disorders at the onset of Alert Levels 4 and 3 lockdowns caused by outbreaks of the Delta variant of COVID-19 in our communities. This pattern held with Instagram as well, which is a significant issue. In many countries and contexts, Instagram is used by a much younger demographic than Facebook Pages and Groups who may not understand the harms they are exposed to because of following, trusting and sharing updates from mis- and disinformation accounts. The duration of the protests saw 88,900 new followers to Instagram mis- and disinformation accounts studied by TDP. To put that into perspective, February alone saw more follower growth than September 2021 to January 2022 combined.

Splintered realities

Figure 1: NZ video views on Facebook on 10-11 February 2022



These graphs (Figure 1) show the video views on Facebook for mis- and disinformation producers and the country’s mainstream media with official Pages on the platform studied by TDP, on February 10 and 11, respectively. For the first time, mis- and disinformation producers gathered more video views than all of the country’s mainstream media Pages combined. On February 11, video content by mainstream media was viewed less than the day before, while engagement with mis- and disinformation accounts remained about the same.

Figure 2: Most used phrases in Instagram posts 10-11 Feb 2022



These wordclouds (Figure 2) highlight the most commonly used phrases in posts to Instagram on February 9-11. The wordcloud on the left is from the constellation of accounts studied by TDP on the platform promoting harmful mis- and disinformation. Those on the right are from mainstream media accounts on the platform. Wordclouds illuminate, through key phrases and what they mean, or (re)present, how a particular community, or ecology, perceives and seeks to define an online or offline development. Here we find not just

fundamentally different vocabularies, but diametrically opposing worldviews. Mis- and disinformation ecologies are heavily laden with conspiratorialism, COVID-19 denialism, and other harms, including from QAnon wellsprings in the United States, imported into Aotearoa New Zealand.

From February 1 to March 4, mis- and disinformation accounts studied on Instagram received higher engagement than accounts from mainstream media. This is important to consider given a younger demographic uses the app, including as a news and information vector.

During the Parliament Protest, offline events resulted in older conspiracy theories gaining more visibility and traction. These included beliefs in chem trails, vaccinations administered through the water supply, and electromagnetic fields making people feel ill.²⁷ Some protesters took to wearing hats made from tinfoil as protection.²⁸

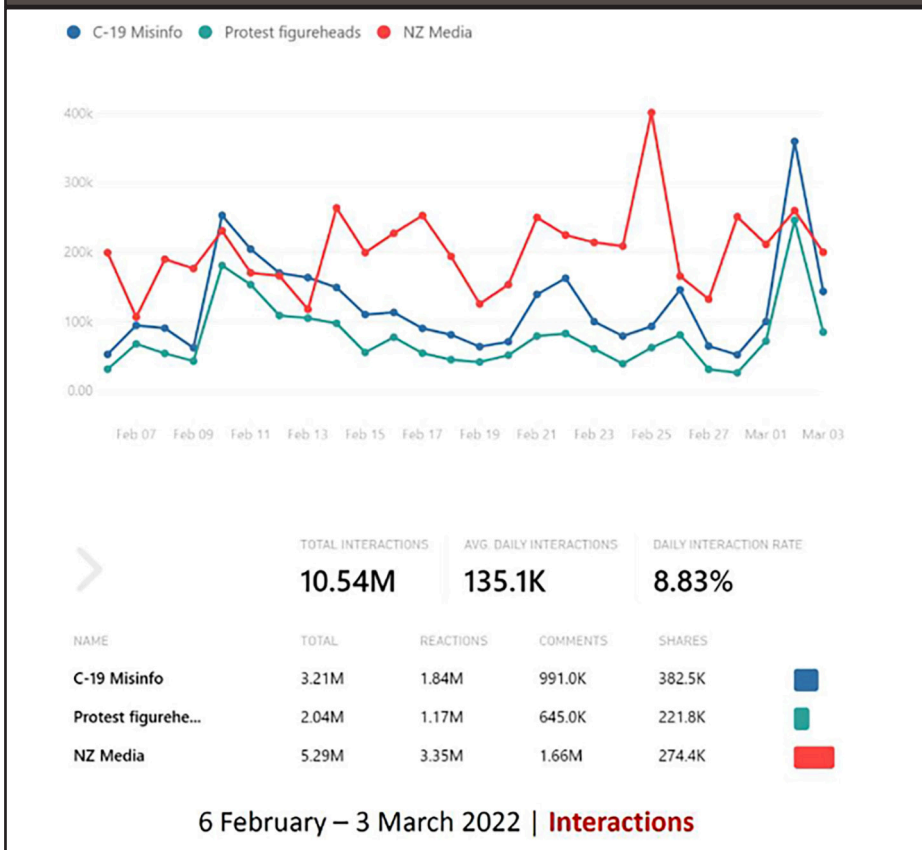
The online engagement with mis- and disinformation Facebook pages was beyond anything TDP had studied previously. Aside from the virality of videos noted above, interactions illuminate appeal, and responses. On February 10, the Pages studied on Facebook generated 252,917 interactions. Mainstream media pages (reviewed for comparison) generated 230,624 interactions. For the first time in TDP's study of information disorders in Aotearoa New Zealand, mis- and disinformation producers on Facebook generated more interactions than mainstream media. Mis- and disinformation pages remained dominant over the next 72 hours.

The same pattern was studied again on March 2. Mis- and disinformation pages on Facebook generated 357,089 interactions, compared to mainstream media's 247,620 interactions. The gap between each ecology's interactions increased from 22,293 on February 10 to 109,469 on March 2. There is no prior point of comparison for these data signatures. In calling these developments a tectonic shift in the country's information and media landscapes, we understand these metrics as evidence of an entrenchment of splintered realities in under a month, with spikes in engagement closely aligned with offline developments, led by police enforcement actions.

The narrative frames, language, and perspectives differed greatly from mis- and disinformation pages to mainstream media pages. Depending on which ecology they trusted as providing a true and accurate capture of the Parliament Protest, New Zealanders were presented with radically different narratives of the protest, at complete odds with each other.

The graph below (Figure 3) Facebook interactions around a cluster of mis- and disinformation pages studied, 12 protest figureheads,²⁹ and mainstream media from February 6 to March 3. Aotearoa New Zealand's 'misinformation dozen' on Facebook were responsible for a considerable proportion of posts and engagement during the Parliament Protest. On March 2 alone, 73 percent of interactions in the mis- and disinformation ecology were generated by just a dozen accounts.

Figure 3: Facebook interactions, February 6 - March 3 2022



TDP sees these, and related developments during the protest, as significant, unprecedented shifts in the country’s media and information landscapes, impacting on the integrity of democratic discourse, social cooperation, the negotiation of difference, perceptions of trustworthiness, and truth.

International conspiratorialism

As the Parliament Protest came to a violent end on March 2, frames emerged suggesting that ‘Antifa’ activists were supporting offline violence. The use of ‘Antifa’ as a narrative frame to deflect attention from the perpetrators of the violence who were part of the Parliament Protest reflected how any violent confrontation, Neo-Nazi graffiti, QAnon, MAGA, or pro-Trump sign, violative language, and antagonism was deflected during the entirety of the protest—blamed on external players, deemed false flags, alleged to be staged, or presented as a conspiracy to undermine what was projected as a peaceful protest.

Multiple alleged screenshots from the alleged Antifa New Zealand Facebook

page were circulated on Telegram, Facebook and Twitter. There were clear discrepancies. The number of engagements (likes, reactions, comments, and shares) on the various screenshots did not align with timestamps. TDP examined the screenshots through a process that surfaced if they had been manipulated (i.e., Photoshopped). Every photo that claimed ‘Antifa’ was to blame for the fires, was heavily manipulated. One of Aotearoa New Zealand’s leading misinformation producers on Facebook was a key source seeding the false attribution of violence to ‘Antifa’, including over Facebook livestreams viewed, at the time, by tens of thousands of concurrent viewers, and more widely shared. Just as right-wing media platforms in the United States alleged ‘Antifa’ had infiltrated the Capitol Hill protesters and fuelled tension on 6 January 2021,³⁰ mis- and disinformation producers in Aotearoa New Zealand alleged ‘Antifa’ were responsible for fires and rioting in the dying moments of the Parliament protest. Both lies have been debunked.³¹ Despite this, the narrative around a domestic ‘Antifa’ movement went viral within Aotearoa New Zealand’s mis- and disinformation ecologies. This false narrative, which spread within minutes on March 2, was cemented further on March 3, and by March 4 overwhelmed anybody who dared question it. This loss of a grounded, factual, accurate narrative about individuals who instigated the violence on 2 March 2022 is concerning. The government’s own Combined Threat Assessment Group (CTAG) raised concerns during the Parliament Protest, warning of the potential for ‘act[s] of extremist violence’.³² They further warned about the possibility of protest attendees being radicalised while attending the Protest, warning that the threatening rhetoric espoused by some protesters could become the dominant narrative.³³

The impact of Russian mis- and disinformation

Even before the invasion of Ukraine, RT News repeatedly featured the Parliament Protest. RT’s editorial line is, quite explicitly, to amplify ‘anything that causes chaos’³⁴ in what academic studies have called ‘one of the most important organisations in the global political economy of disinformation’.³⁵ RT is not just linked to Russian disinformation and propaganda, but also significant COVID-19 misinformation,³⁶ leading to de-platforming of accounts from YouTube in Germany. Generating unprecedented engagement, a post on the Parliament Protest was seen nearly 110,000 times on Telegram, on a channel with over 233,000 subscribers. RT News featured the protest in several other posts.

Just a day after the invasion of Ukraine, imported Russian propaganda dominated domestic anti-vaccination, and anti-mandate mis- and disinformation ecologies studied by TDP. Small, niche accounts on Telegram irrigated harms that, very quickly, were featured in much larger and more influential channels and groups, through cross-pollination of content. Though the provenance of much of the content was foreign, the text and (conspiratorial) spin framing the original

material was pegged to domestic frames, often linked to the protests. In other words, a pro-Kremlin gaze with violent, visual content from Ukraine was used to generate attention around the Parliament protests. Posts featured the Ukrainian flag as a symbol for paedophiles, a trope and visual metaphor that was popular in the anti-vaccination Telegram ecologies already imbricated with QAnon conspiratorialism. Pro-Putin content studied was also profoundly toxic, with foundations emanating from, and promoting, hyper-masculinity, and deep misogyny.

In mid-March, one of Aotearoa New Zealand's leading misinformation producers on Facebook produced a video on the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. The video featured the false claim of bio-weapons factories in Ukraine constructed and funded by the United States, and promoted claims consistently made by Russian propaganda, since the start of the invasion, that Putin was guided by a desire to destroy these factories. Using Candace Owens as an authoritative source on the issue, and as an example of apophenia, a spurious connection was drawn between bio-labs and bio-weapons by referencing the gain of function research associated with Chinese bio-labs, in the context of COVID-19. The strategic script was designed to promote a pro-Kremlin narrative frame, among this producer's followers, and a wider community. TDP found this video, and pro-Kremlin narrative frames on Ukraine seeded by other domestic disinformation producers as very concerning. This content undermined the role of facts, evidence, international law, and normative democratic frameworks. An older mis- and disinformation framework to amplify vaccine resistance and hesitancy, was now a narrative infrastructure employed by disinformation producers to promote pro-Kremlin propaganda, that in turn, helped cement anti-vaccination, anti-mandate and anti-government perspectives.

By the end of March, in what was a sustained and stark content signature, every domestic Telegram channel studied had pivoted to a near-exclusive framing of the Ukraine war through pro-Putin and pro-Kremlin frames. QAnon conspiratorialism and content on these channels and pro-Putin propaganda was a distinction without a difference. We also saw the migration of tactics—from the import of disinformation from wellsprings outside Aotearoa New Zealand, to Russian disinformation's adoption, and adaptation, as a strategic toolkit, or blueprint. Content from QAnon sites in the United States, Russian propaganda channels and platforms, correspondents and individuals affiliation with Russian propaganda channels, an array of foreign nationals in Ukraine producing content on the war through pro-Kremlin perspectives, conspiratorial and disinformation producers from the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia, and pro-Trump and pro-MAGA channels and individuals in the United States seeded on small, niche channels, and then, rapidly, cross-pollinated to larger channels, remain key features in the irrigation of explicitly pro-Putin disinformation in domestic ecologies studied.

Language and frames

Language, imagery, and framing features within narratives have become increasingly violent and anti-social, as we noted in August–November 2021. Language at the Parliament Protest once again revealed the entrenchment of violent expression, misogyny, and other hallmarks of dangerous speech as the norm. Increasing violence, conspiratorialism, and a divergence between the sentiments and attitudes offered by mis- and disinformation producers and mainstream media were notable.

Targeting of communities and individuals

At the Parliament protest, violence became visible to a wider section of Aotearoa New Zealand’s society. Threats against visible figures such as politicians and the media were increasingly reported upon by the mainstream media—highlighting that the protest was not merely a ‘festival atmosphere’ but a home to violent extremist thought and action. As we discuss later, there were—and are—risks that members of the crowd who were exposed to extremist, dangerous speech will begin to adopt those positions.

In addition to the targeting of public figures, passers-by also experienced targeting, intimidation and violence. Two students from Wellington Girls’ College wrote about the harassment they and their friends had received—violence and threats that eventually resulted in the school moving online.³⁷

We have studied how public figures experience harmful attention and hate speech from those within mis- and disinformation communities.³⁸ We noted that figures like the Prime Minister, as well as women across government, academia, public service, journalism, Māori leadership, and any form of public life are targeted in a sustained, significant manner. Since November 2021, the production of hateful and violent expression has become more heightened, and also more visible to the wider public, migrating from enclaves of hate within Telegram, to commentary that is vicious, vulgar, and violative, on Meta/Facebook platforms as well as Twitter, and YouTube commentary.

Violent threats were further directed towards Members of Parliament. Mis- and disinformation producers said things like ‘they [politicians] all need to be carted away’, ‘your days are numbered’ [directed to politicians] and describing politicians as ‘filth and scum’ and ‘lame ducks’. This fits against a backdrop of increasing threats against politicians.³⁹ TDP has observed the growth of this volatility for many months, growing at pace.

In addition to this, journalists received—and wrote about—their experiences of targeted abuse and harassment at the protest. *One News* journalist Kristin Hall described the hostility shown towards media, politicians, and the public as having a ‘different tone’ than previous protests she had covered.⁴⁰ Māori leaders were also attacked, as were members of academia and public service.

Disinformation producers instigating offline violence in Aotearoa New Zealand, and at the Parliament Protest, used two techniques—‘plausible deniability’ and ‘conversational implicature’ to encoding violence. These calls for violence are performed in ways that allow violent intent to be communicated, transmitted and acted upon, while maintaining—for legal and other purposes—distance from long-tail and downstream consequences, online and offline.

Plausible deniability and conversational implicature are two techniques used by charismatic religious and populist political leaders in the Global South, implicated in significant offline violence, Islamophobia and even genocide in countries and contexts like Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and India.

Conversational implicature is the act of implying what is said, without explicitly saying it—dog-whistling, encoded or thinly-veiled—especially with content that appeals to, and is aimed at, violent extremist rhetoric. This speech frame allows room for a ‘reactive reversal’ if the audience does not respond well to what is implied.⁴¹ Since what is implied is not explicitly stated, this leaves the intended audience in a ‘grey zone’ within which some listeners are more likely to hear and act on the coded intent. Plausible deniability and conversational implicature were used prior to the Parliament Protest, during its offline events, and have been used afterwards to distance instigators of violence from the consequences of their calls.

Implications

We noted in November 2021 the risk that COVID-19 denialism and anti-vaccination discourse was being used as a kind of Trojan Horse for norm-setting and norm-entrenchment of far-right ideologies in Aotearoa New Zealand. The Parliament Protest show TDP’s prediction to be true. Mis- and disinformation in Aotearoa New Zealand continues to work to create shifts in Aotearoa’s social and political norms. Key mis- and disinformation producers affirm and promote an idea of Aotearoa New Zealand that pulls away from progressive values of social inclusion, justice, and equity that are increasing in social and political discourse. Instead, they long for systems that promote New Zealand European identity, traditional gender roles, and a patriarchal family structure.

This sets a concerning precedent for Aotearoa New Zealand—something worth both acknowledging and working on to help resist and counter. These issues were not magically resolved following the dissolution of the Parliament Protest—mis- and disinformation and conspiratorial thought continues to impact on the lives and actions of our communities. The ongoing implications of this, and for how Aotearoa New Zealand moves forward, should not be underestimated.

The Parliament Protest has and will impact on Aotearoa New Zealand’s political and social norms. The divergent perceptions of the protest by protesters themselves and the subsequent splintering of narratives around provenance,

purpose, presentation and pertinent productions have profound implications for social cohesion, and the way difference is negotiated, online and offline.

These splintered realities reflect the experience of other countries. Regarding the Ottawa protest, Canadian journalist Andrew Coyne wrote that a shared reality was being challenged.⁴² He said that protesters and those who were denying vaccination had removed themselves from the systems through which knowledge was transmitted, and thus were vulnerable to people looking to manipulate them.⁴³ Similarly, events of 6 January 2021 in the United States resulted from a lack of shared narratives: polling found that half of Republicans believe the storming of the Capitol was a non-violent protest, or the work of left-wing activists to discredit Trump.⁴⁴ Further, 60 percent of Republicans believed the 2020 US Election was ‘stolen’.⁴⁵ These beliefs have significant impacts for the way Americans interact, the way government operates, and beliefs in electoral integrity. The path dependency of splintered realities in Aotearoa New Zealand will follow a similar socio-political trajectory.

TDP maintains that the mis- and disinformation which fuel this splintering of reality will grow apace, entrenching cultish mindsets and algorithmically amplified divergence, leading to information disorders not unlike what we can see internationally—on both sides of the Atlantic since 2016, around the Capitol Hill insurrection, and for years prior in Global South contexts. These underlying drivers of information disorders and offline consequences can be understood by what Dutch psychologist Nico Frijda called the ‘law of apparent reality’, whereby emotions are generated by events perceived as real, and the intensity of emotions depends on the degree to which they consider the event to be real.⁴⁶ An inability to distinguish between real, fictive, and imagined events is a consequence of information disorders and the expansion of online mis- and disinformation into offline realities. These are significant challenges facing Aotearoa New Zealand society and government that must be addressed.

The pandemic has contributed to increased attention to ideas around social cohesion. A May 2020 report highlighted that at the time, Aotearoa New Zealand was experiencing high levels of social cohesion despite the pandemic but noted that social cohesion could deteriorate.⁴⁷ Subsequent analysis, including TDP’s November 2021 report, and work led by Paul Spoonley in December 2021, made it clear that existing inequalities across education, health, and ethnicity threaten to undermine social cohesion and collective wellbeing.⁴⁸

A lack of shared narratives poses significant risks to memory-making. In her writing on history and memory, Sarah Churchwell argues that myths can influence the remembering of history.⁴⁹ Contemporary myths are known by many names—conspiracy theories, fake news, and moral panics, but they all have significant implications for understandings, meaning making, and historical memory.⁵⁰ This has significant implications for Aotearoa New Zealand as we move forward from

the Parliament Protest and shore up social cohesion. For Aotearoa New Zealand to operate within democratic, inclusive, and progressive values many in this country celebrate, continued efforts towards social cohesion are required.

Social cohesion relies on trust and cooperation between people with different values and identities.⁵¹ At the He Whenua Taurikura hui in June 2021, TDP director Kate Hannah stated that Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and the partnership relationships the realisation of Tiriti justice enables, are the necessary starting point for any discussion or development of a strategy which seeks to address and make redress for the impacts of online harm, hateful and violent extremism, and disinformation for Aotearoa New Zealand. It is from a position of the partnership that Te Tiriti provides that Aotearoa can make a global contribution to these pressing and intermediate issues.⁵²

Conclusion

Disinformation highlights differences and divisions that can then be used to target and scapegoat, normalise prejudices, harden us-versus-them mentalities, and justify violence.⁵³ This is now the case in Aotearoa New Zealand; disinformation and its focus on difference are at risk of cementing themselves within how we interact with one another. We have discussed the highly divergent understandings protesters had of the Parliament Protest, its physical manifestations and founding ideals; further strengthening our warning in November 2021 around how mis- and disinformation related to COVID-19 acts as a Trojan Horse to push followers towards more violently exclusive, supremacist, xenophobic, racist, far-right and extremist ideologies. We saw this play out at the protest. The ostensibly original and more moderate goals of the Convoy were pushed aside and replaced with extremist narrative frames, including calling for the armed storming of Parliament, the execution of public servants, academics, journalists, politicians, and healthcare workers.

The online enclaves of mis- and disinformation production in Aotearoa New Zealand cannot be treated as a minor incursion to an otherwise equitable society. On multiple occasions mis- and disinformation pages studied on Facebook received greater engagement than mainstream media—with serious implications for how people understood the protest and what took place. The end of the Parliament Protest did not signify an end to conspiratorial thought in Aotearoa New Zealand Covid but we must end our complacency in recognising these harms and their potential outcomes. Te Tiriti o Waitangi and the relationship it creates are our starting point when responding to mis- and disinformation, and online extremism in Aotearoa New Zealand. Renewing efforts for social cohesion, honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and reflecting critically on our past, our shared present, and our ideas for the future must be the starting point to re-building trust in Aotearoa New Zealand in 2022 and beyond.

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Kate Hannah is the director of The Disinformation Project and a historian of science and technology. She works within and across fields of cultural history, critical science and technology studies, and public understandings of science and technology. Guiding Hannah's research with The Disinformation Project are questions around how disinformation narratives are targeting and radicalising people in Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally, and how information disorders are intertwined with narratives and tropes of white supremacy, racism, and extreme misogyny.

Dr Sanjana Hattotuwa is a research fellow with The Disinformation Project. Since 2002, he has studied the uses of social media and digital technologies to strengthen peace, human rights, and governance, with policy input and research conducted in South Asia, South East Asia, North Africa, the United States, Europe and the Balkans. His doctoral research investigated information disorders in Sri Lanka, and the representation of New Zealand's March 2019 Christchurch massacre on Twitter. He currently focusses on disinformation's growing imprint on fragile, and mature democracies.

Kayli Taylor is a researcher with The Disinformation Project and a historian. Taylor's previous research has investigated topics of gender, queer histories, sexual violence, and student activism. Taylor's research interests extend to assessments of power structures, the way they influence our lives, and how equitable systems can be built and maintained.

info@thedisinproject.org

