

The protest lost at parliament – but it unequivocally won the social media war

[By Duncan Greive](#) CEO / Publisher



A University of Otago researcher watched in awe as misinformation overwhelmed the mainstream truth-based channels on social media.

Sanjana Hattotuwa tells a story about growing up in a country at war, near an airport in Sri Lanka which was a key conduit between the capital of Colombo and the front in the north. Each day government-controlled press delivered good news about how well the war was progressing; each

night he was kept awake by the sound of turbo-prop planes transporting casualties back to hospitals in the city.

This dissonance between reality and the official narrative shaped around it became an abiding obsession and then a life's work. His background makes him perfectly placed to examine what we now call information disorder – the growing breach between objective reality and a growing group engaged in increasingly extreme conspiratorial thinking.

Hattotuwa set up Groundviews, a civic media site for Sri Lanka, and has worked alongside giants of this era's battle for truth including Maria Ressa, the Filipino journalist who last year won the Nobel peace prize. He recently completed doctoral studies on the "intersection of social media, political communication and violence generation" at the University of Otago and now works as part of Te Punaha Matatini scrutinising the same territory.

We live in an era characterised by a phenomenal volume of public and private communication happening all at once, with a tiny number of platforms hosting and monetising an enormous proportion of it. It is at once accessible to almost anyone, but also maddeningly opaque, with private groups and algorithms which surface content for different audiences meaning that no one can ever have a true sense of what anyone else's media consumption is like.

Aotearoa for a long time had a very highly regulated mass media, and that controlled and licensed era is within living memory for half our population. Which is in part what makes it so jarring to witness thousands of people who have crossed over from a shared reality into a the mess of conspiracy theories which culminated in the extraordinary scenes at parliament last week. [As Toby Manhire put it](#), we saw a “reel of scenes that seemed to come from some faraway place, beamed against the backdrop of our parliament.”

Yet while it was a confronting rupture to many, for Hattotuwa it was – while still shocking – also essentially predictable. He had been following the rising tumult of the occupation on social media for weeks, and experienced the events of last Wednesday through a barrage of social media communications.

“I had multiple tabs open, multiple live streams, multiple sources of real time information coming, in multiple sources of commentary around those channels and vectors. So it was, I suppose, for many, an information overload,” he says. “It’s not easy.”

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I spoke to Hattotuwa on Thursday for my podcast The Fold, which takes a broad view of Aotearoa's media landscape on a weekly basis. He was impassioned and thrillingly articulate in cataloguing what he had seen, and the dramatic escalation in reach and impact which led directly to the growth of the occupation. For so long there has been a sense from politicians and institutions that what happens online is somehow lesser and abstracted, with only a very limited real world impact. Setting aside the idea that things which happen online are any less real for many, we saw very viscerally last week that online radicalisation leads directly to real world behaviours.

The prime minister seemed to acknowledge that the period of allowing a largely libertarian social media was over in her press conference that day, when she suggested that the time was coming when we would have to understand how so many could "succumb to such wild and dangerous mis- and disinformation." The thing is, it's not a mystery: Hattotuwa has shown that live videos from the occupation grew at an unprecedented rate, overtaking the reach of the entire mainstream media multiple times and for long periods.

He gives data to back up what many of us in the media had seen through social analytics in recent weeks – any content about the occupation attracted incredible engagement. And posts which expressed support for it or disdain for politicians and journalists exploded. For example, a [February 22 post](#) by former Act party leader Rodney Hide

under the headline 'the protestors have won', run on Sean Plunket's new website The Platform, attracted over 5,000 Facebook interactions, despite the company not having officially launched. To put it in context, that's more interactions than all of the more than 200 posts to Facebook by Newsroom – which has largely covered the disinformation complex of the protest superbly – during that week, *combined*.

All that still pales by comparison to the two core communication vehicles of the protest: Telegram and Facebook live, which Hattotuwa scrutinised most closely. He says "there was a greater volume, there was a greater velocity, which is a speed and there was more diversity in the vectors, which is the platforms. That's volume, vector and velocity. Then there's also another way of looking at which is in terms of speed, scope and scale. So that was an accelerated production of violative harmful material, and they have a greater audiences to which it was reaching."

While engaging with content is not the same as endorsing it or believing it, the events of Wednesday show just how powerful it was for some, and how ineffective any attempts to rein it in have been. Hattotuwa has engaged with Facebook at a corporate level for years, and believes that while there are many genuine and talented people working to try and solve this fiendishly complex problem, they are unable to effect change – the growth and revenue generating parts of the business are simply too powerful.

Which is to say that change seems extremely unlikely to come from within. There is a rising political movement worldwide which is intent upon meeting this pernicious challenge with regulation. The events of last week, and a new tone from the prime minister in response, have created a sense that there might finally be progress on that front here. For Hattotuwa the attention and emphasis are overdue, but welcome.

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