

NZ's 'disinformation dozen' drove three-quarters of fake news chatter on final day of Parliament protest

Related video: How the Parliament protest ended. Credits: Image - Getty Images; Video - Newshub

A dozen social media accounts were responsible for spreading most of the false information at the end of the Parliament protest, new research has found.

The anti-mandate Parliament protests kicked off in February and lasted three weeks before police removed the group who were camped out on Parliament's lawn.

While the protests initially started peacefully they soon descended into violence and mayhem.

Now new research has found a small group of social media accounts were responsible for most of the fake news being spread online towards the end of the protest.

The research from The Disinformation Project: Te Pūnaha Matatini; Centre for Science in Society, and Te Herenga Waka looked into how the occupation came to be about. Researchers closely monitored mis- and disinformation on social media before and during the event.

Along with identifying key things that exacerbated the protest, the research found a small group of social media accounts were responsible for spreading most of the false information during the protests.

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The research, which is yet to be peer-reviewed, noted: "Aotearoa New Zealand's 'misinformation dozen' on Facebook were responsible for a considerable proportion of posts and engagement during the Parliament Protest".

"On 2 March alone, 73 percent of interactions in the mis and disinformation ecology were generated by just a dozen accounts," the authors said.

The research also found at two points during the protest, conspiracy theory accounts were generating more interactions than mainstream media accounts.

On February 10, the pages studied on Facebook generated 252,917 interactions compared to mainstream media pages which generated 230,624 interactions. The authors said mis- and disinformation pages remained dominant for the next 72 hours.

The same pattern was studied again on March 2 with false information pages on Facebook generating 357,089 interactions, compared to mainstream media's 247,620 interactions. The gap between the page's interactions increased from 22,293 on February 10 to 109,469 on

March 2.

"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 research said.

The research said in the months leading up to the protest, the shift to COVID-19 Alert Level 4 across Aotearoa, the transition to the COVID-19 Protection Framework, increasing offline protest activity across the country, and the Omicron outbreak exacerbated, entrenched and expanded the amount of disinformation across the country.

Police have arrested around 220 people for their involvement in the protest.

Notable groups that attended the protest include Voices for Freedom, New Zealand Doctors Speaking Out with Science, Destiny Church and Counterspin Media.

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