

Parliament protest created 'explosion' in numbers consuming online misinformation

The number of people consuming misinformation and disinformation online “exploded” during a weeks-long protest occupation of Parliament grounds – a shift researchers warn created “splintered realities”.

A study also found [a group of 12 figureheads at the occupation](#) – called the “misinformation dozen” – were responsible for a major increase in engagement with disinformation on Facebook.

“It exploded. The protest was an accelerant across all the platforms that we looked at. There has been nothing like it to date,” researcher Dr Sanjana Hattotuwa said.

On Wednesday, Hattotuwa and a group of researchers that make up The Disinformation Project published their report on what they called “information disorders” during the occupation. The report compared the effect of the protest with data on misinformation and disinformation gathered daily since September 2021.

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DAVID WHITE/STUFF

A police line at the anti-mandate and anti-vaccination protest that occupied Parliament grounds and surrounding streets earlier this year.

“There is nothing to suggest that those who joined [the misinformation channels] in the months of study have migrated away, [they think] there is reality that is founded on facts, evidence and science,” he said.

The report did not name the protest 12 figureheads but they included [social media influencer Chantelle Baker](#), online conspiracy broadcaster Counterspin and anti-vaccination campaigners Voices for Freedom.

Also on the list, Hattotuwa said, were former [political candidate Billy TK](#), New Zealand Doctors Speaking Out with Science, and Destiny Church leader Brian Tamaki’s Freedom and Rights Coalition.

On March 2, the day the occupation ended in a violent riot, 73 per cent of the interactions within the protesters’ own Facebook “ecology” occurred on the accounts of these 12 figureheads.

“It isn’t as if these were the only people doing what they were doing and this is just also on Facebook pages,” Hattotuwa said.

DAVID UNWIN

A man sits in front of a chalked wall at Parliament during an anti-mandate protest occupation that ended on March 2.

During the protest there was also rapid growth in subscribers to protest-related channels on Telegram – a largely unregulated messaging platform that has become a haven for violent extremists and conspiracy theorists.

Of the Telegram accounts studied, 258,370 subscribers in January became 353,377 subscribers in the days following the protest's end. These numbers were cumulative totals, including instances where a single person might operate more than one Telegram account.

The growth of misinformation and disinformation subscribers had plateaued since the protest ended and many vaccine mandates were lifted, yet the followers had remained.

Braden Fastier/Stuff

Police clash with protesters as they remove tents and camping equipment from an occupation on Parliament's grounds.

The most harmful activity and "violent vocabulary" took place on Telegram, Hattotuwa said, which was now migrating to Facebook and Twitter.

He said such dangerous speech was the "foundation" of violent acts that occurred offline.

The Government's intelligence agencies, during and immediately after the protest, produced [terror risk reports warning it was "likely" a small minority of the protesters could carry out extremist violence.](#)

Hattotuwa said the producers of disinformation were not the type to be violent themselves but they created a permissive environment for violence.

The report said the producers of disinformation deployed speech techniques such as "plausible deniability" and implication – as in "dog-whistling" or thinly veiled language – to call for violence.

"They create a distancing between them and anything bad that happens. They can say, 'We didn't want it to happen' ... but they justify it as well and they create the conditions for it to happen."

Hattotuwa said the impact of these "information disorders" needed to be taken seriously, as it would lead Aotearoa into a situation comparable to that of the United States, where conspiracy theories have fuelled a growing political divide.

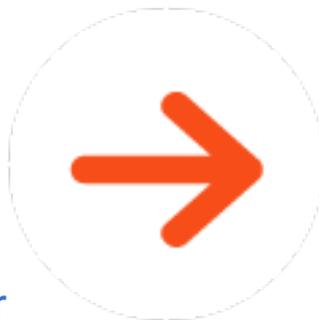
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