

Working Paper: The murmuration of information disorders

Aotearoa New Zealand's mis- and disinformation ecologies and the Parliament Protest

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What is the Disinformation Project?

The Disinformation Project (TDP) is an independent research group studying misinformation and disinformation in Aotearoa New Zealand.

What are misinformation and disinformation?

- Misinformation is false information that was not created with the intent to harm people.
- Disinformation is false information that was created with the intent to harm a person, community, or organisation.

What do you study?

We study the way misinformation and disinformation spread by looking at public-facing pages and groups across several platforms on the internet – including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Telegram. Every day, we look at the posts and comments on these publicly available platforms, to develop a picture of the way misinformation and disinformation are spread and their impacts on people living in Aotearoa New Zealand.

During the Parliament protest from February 2022 to March 2022, we studied material from tens of millions of posts and comments on Facebook and Instagram, 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. This content, alongside content on websites and other platforms, offers us a picture of how misinformation and disinformation were being transmitted and how it impacted the protest activity.

What happened at the Parliament protest?

A lot. As well as the offline protest action outside Parliament, which gathered significant media attention; there was an entire world of online material. This included misinformation, disinformation, dangerous speech, and conspiratorial thought. This kind of information underpinned the way protestors were engaging with each other, the Police, and the Government.

The Parliament Protest was highly popular online – on multiple occasions (10 February, 11 February, and 2 March), misinformation and disinformation account constellations across social media platforms generated significant engagement, and in the case of Facebook Pages, resulted in interactions than those generated by all of the country's mainstream media pages.

The Parliament Protest had the single greatest offline engagement on Facebook since TDP began studying such rates of engagement at the onset of the Level 4 lockdown in August 2021 to respond to the Delta outbreak of Covid19 in Aotearoa New Zealand. The same trend occurred on Instagram, which typically caters to a younger demographic. These young people may not understand the harms they are exposed to via mis- and disinformation accounts. The three-week duration of the protest saw 88,900 new followers to Instagram mis- and disinformation platforms studied by TDP. For context, the month of February 2022 saw more follower growth than September 2021 to January 2022 combined.

Language also became more vituperative, vicious, and violent. In a report released in November 2021, TDP warned about the spread of dangerous speech online, and the increasing use and normalisation of violent language and narrative frames, including memetic content. The Parliament protest realised our fears around the expansion and entrenchment of this harmful discourse. Violent expression, misogyny, and other violent, dangerous speech frames were prevalent in online and offline discourse studied during the protest. In particular, key figures across government, journalism, public service, Māori leadership, and academia were targeted in significantly violent ways. The nature and normalisation of this discourse was beyond anything TDP had studied in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Why does this matter?

The way we talk with, and about, one another matters, including how we perceive and negotiate differences. Everyone deserves to be talked about in ways that uphold their dignity. The Parliament Protest, and the language that emerged from it, challenge this. Disinformation highlights differences and divisions that can be used to target and scapegoat, normalise prejudices, harden us-versus-them mentalities, and justify violence. Disinformation and its focus on social division are at risk of cementing increasingly angry, anxious and antagonistic ways around how we interact with one another, eroding social cohesion and cooperation.

This has dangerous implications for our individual and collective safety.