**Staying social: How NZ Parliament communicated with the public during the pandemic and what’s changed (nearly) five years on**

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ABSTRACT:

In the four and a half years since March 2020 and the first New Zealand COVID-19 lockdown, the way people interact with social media and other external engagement platforms has changed.

Using the New Zealand Parliament as a case study, this paper investigates how social media and the Parliament website were used during the pandemic to highlight the work of Parliament and its people through the Epidemic Response Committee, education resources, and other work. New Zealand Parliament staff utilised live streaming, informational articles and direct communication with the public to ensure audiences understood that democracy was continuing, and that Parliament was resilient to the changing times. The paper will consider how the Epidemic Response Committee live streams became central viewing and built new communities around New Zealand politics, while exploring what political discussion means in a neutral space. It will consider the use of the 24-hour news cycle and mis/disinformation had an impact on social media spaces, and what impact this would have two years later during the Parliament occupation.

Linking into theories around crisis communications and using social media metrics from 2020 and today, this paper explores how things have changed in the nearly five years since the very first lock down and what a response could look like in a future crisis.

In the four and a half years since March 2020 and the first New Zealand COVID-19 lockdown, the way people interact with social media and other external engagement platforms has changed. Using New Zealand Parliament as a case study, this paper investigates how social media and the Parliament website were used during the pandemic to highlight the work of Parliament and its people. New Zealand Parliament staff utilised live streaming, informational articles and direct communication with the public to ensure audiences understood that democracy was continuing, and that Parliament was resilient to the changing times. The paper will consider how the Epidemic Response Committee live streams became central viewing and built new communities around New Zealand politics, while exploring what political discussion means in a neutral space. Linking into theories around crisis communications and using social media metrics from 2020 and today, this paper explores how things have changed in the nearly five years since the very first lock down and what a response could look like in a future crisis.

**Background**

A crisis is defined as any unexpected event interrupting or affecting (or having the potential to) the running of an organisation[[1]](#footnote-2). As such, how organisations communicate with their internal and external audiences, becomes “crisis communications”. The COVID-19 pandemic was a crisis unlike anything seen for several decades, with a Government initiated lockdown taking place in New Zealand from March – May 2020, and again in 2021. This crisis changed the way Parliament engaged with the public, from the daily livestreaming of an ad hoc committee, to increased direct messaging with concerned members of the public, and beyond.

Before the internet became widespread, audiences received their news in daily (or twice daily) newspapers and via the evening news. In the United States, the Cable News Network (CNN) popularised 24-hour news followed by other cable networks. News sites began posting on the internet in the 1990s but were not always updating around the clock. For example, while *the New York Times* started posting news online in 1996, 24-hour updating did not start until 2000[[2]](#footnote-3). In the 25 years since, the lines between journalists and others who share or create news stories has blurred, with many websites hosting news stories outside of the mainstream media. As well as this, journalists may break news on social media before reporting on their own news site[[3]](#footnote-4). Think of RNZ Political Editor Jo Moir breaking the news of New Zealand political figures resigning by simply tweeting their name followed by “gone burger” thereby both breaking news and becoming part of the news cycle herself[[4]](#footnote-5). The pressure to create new news constantly, and the blurring of what constitutes as “news” allows mis- and disinformation to thrive. Misinformation is false or misleading information, but not created or shared with the intention of causing harm, meanwhile disinformation is false or misleading information shared with the intention of causing harm. Both can be harmful, particularly in crisis situations like the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 is an infectious disease, first identified in China at the end of 2019, becoming a global pandemic in early 2020. The first COVID-19 case reached New Zealand on 28 February 2020. From 25 March – 14 May, New Zealand was in a Government-initiated national lockdown; New Zealand Parliament met on Wednesday 25 March to pass legislation associated with COVID-19 in New Zealand and then stopped sitting for a time. The Epidemic Response Committee was formed to ensure the legislature could continue to scrutinise the Government and virtually met for the first time on 31 March. New Zealand Parliament would return to the Debating Chamber on Tuesday, 28 April. Communicating to the public (as well as members and staff), the changes happening in and around New Zealand’s House of Representatives was integral and required significant engagement via the website and social media (on top of internal communications). It also required social media posting outside of standard business hours, so the public could remain informed about Parliament’s workings as soon as news of any change in COVID-19 alert level (the system of managing COVID-19 outbreak in New Zealand) broke.

The Parliamentary Engagement team encompasses staff from Parliamentary Service and Office of the Clerk and oversees implementing the Parliament Engagement strategy. The strategy recognises that is crucial for New Zealand Parliament to actively engage with the public to maintain its relevance. The Communications team and Social Media Advisor for the New Zealand Parliament accounts sit within this team. In 2020, New Zealand Parliament’s social media presence was predominantly Facebook based. As well as the New Zealand Parliament flagship page, each subject select committee had its own page, and there was a page for the now disestablished ad hoc Abortion Legislation Select Committee. New Zealand Parliament also had a smaller presence on Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, and Instagram. Facebook was the main channel utilised for audience engagement during the COVID-19 lockdown, with Twitter primarily used to post one-way updates. Instagram took a more youthful approach with brighter graphics and short videos about how Parliament continued working. To contrast, in 2024, Instagram is the primary social media platform used by NZ Parliament for posting updates. Reels have replaced livestreams, and Facebook and LinkedIn are used for less timely content. X is rarely used except for posts about Royal Assents (still the main way people find out about Assented bills), and Hansard updates. The overarching social media strategy aims to push people to the Parliament website for cross-platform collaboration and advertise the different offerings by Parliamentary Service and Office of the Clerk (for example, education resources and tours, and making a submission to a select committee).

**Social media in numbers**

The social media landscape in New Zealand in 2020 was quite different to 2024. In 2020, New Zealand had a population of 4.8 million with 75% active social media users[[5]](#footnote-6).

* This was a 3.5% increase on 2019[[6]](#footnote-7).
* In February (prior to lockdown), New Zealanders reported spending an hour and 45 minutes a day using social media.
* Facebook was the third most used website and one of two social media sites (with YouTube) to be featured in the top 10 used websites list.
* The top 10 social media sites used by New Zealanders were YouTube, Facebook, Facebook Messenger, Instagram, Pinterest, WhatsApp, Snapchat, Twitter, and Skype[[7]](#footnote-8). TikTok did not appear in the top 16.

In 2024, New Zealand has a population of 5.25 million, 78.7% of which use social media[[8]](#footnote-9).

* In February, users reported spending 1 hour 59 minutes on social media a day, a 16 minute decrease (12%) from 2023[[9]](#footnote-10).
* Facebook and YouTube remain in New Zealand’s top used websites. The top 10 used social media sites used are now Facebook, Facebook Messenger, Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok, Snapchat, iMessage, Pinterest, X and LinkedIn.
* Social media users spend 29 hours using TikTok per month, 12 hours more than on YouTube in second place[[10]](#footnote-11).

In the first six months of 2020, the New Zealand Parliament flagship social media channels grew 104.2% in engagements (how people interact with a post, e.g. like, comment, share) in comparison to the six months prior[[11]](#footnote-12).

* The total follower count on these platforms grew 21.4% compared to the previous six months.
* The platforms sent a combined 1,544 private messages and public posts (up 15.6%) and received a total of 20,567 inbound messages, comments, and posts (up 60.9%)[[12]](#footnote-13).
* April was the busiest month in this period with 8,000 inbound messages and comments.

Where Parliament’s social media saw the most exponential growth in engagement during this period was in Facebook video views. In the first six months of 2020, New Zealand Parliament’s video viewership grew 278.2% to 373,868 viewers due to the high levels of engagement in the Epidemic Response Committee Facebook live streams, and educational webinars taking place during the Covid-19 lockdowns.

**Social media**

The Epidemic Response Committee (ERC) was an ad hoc committee formed in March 2020 to scrutinise the Government’s response to COVID-19. The Committee met via Zoom on Parliament’s usual sitting days (Tuesday to Thursday) and the hearings were livestreamed on Parliament’s Facebook and Vimeo accounts, and broadcast on Parliament TV. It was the first select committee to be broadcast on Parliament TV. In its early sessions the committee primarily questioned Ministers and senior officials on the epidemic response, bringing in community and business leaders as weeks went on[[13]](#footnote-14). The ERC received significant social media engagement from the public, particularly in its first few weeks while New Zealand was at Level 4 of the COVID-19 response. At its peak the committee had over 1,000 live stream viewers at any given time (20,000 total views including post-live) and 1,000 comments on live stream feeds. The ERC community was not only based on Facebook –the #nzpol on Twitter was filled with live-tweets of ERC meetings and more than one news site reviewed the members’ backgrounds on the livestream feed. The live streams were prime viewing. As the lockdown continued, the novelty of tuning into watch Parliament-lite live on Facebook dwindled. When New Zealand moved to COVID-19 Alert Level 3 on 27 April (a time when more people could return to work) ERC began to drop and the last livestreamed committee meeting on Thursday 21 May had an average of 190 live views (16,000 total views) and 89 total comments. The Epidemic Response Committee was disestablished on 26 May 2020[[14]](#footnote-15).

While this paper focuses on the New Zealand Parliament flagship channels, it is worth noting that during this period other select committees also continued to live stream items of business on their own Facebook pages, with varying degrees of engagement.

Research conducted by Colmar Brunton on behalf of Office of the Clerk and select committees showed that in general New Zealanders were six times more likely to have watched or listened to select committees after the COVID-19 lockdown than before. Further, listeners and viewers on Facebook livestream doubled since lockdown. While Office of the Clerk had been livestreaming select committee meetings since 2018, the COVID-19 pandemic and the ERC made them more prevalent by livestreaming to larger audiences on New Zealand Parliament’s main Facebook page, and those of politicians, parties and media. The Office of the Clerk has moved away from livestreaming select committees on Facebook, however, the success in the ERC showing New Zealanders select committees in action shows there is merit in continued promotion of select committee video. This could include highlighting a different select committee a week on social media or embedding a live stream in the front page of the website occasionally, particularly for wider Parliamentary business like the three-yearly Standing Orders Committee.

Select committees were not the only live streams taking place on Parliament accounts during the COVID-19 lockdown. The Parliamentary Engagement team also held livestreamed webinars on a variety of Parliamentary topics to support people’s engagement with and understanding of Parliament. Eight webinars were held between April and August 2020 with topics focusing on select committees, how laws are made, petitions, the Budget, elections, question time, Executive and Cabinet, and Māori Electorates and the Māori Electoral Roll. The webinars were hosted by a rotating roster of staff and experts, and like the ERC, live streamed to Facebook from Zoom. Initially Facebook was used solely for gaining registrations to attend the webinar on Zoom, given the popularity of Facebook Live, were livestreamed to Facebook from *Get to Know the Budget Process* on 11 May. Webinars were hosted primarily with a youth audience in mind and had an average of 50 views per live stream, with over 1000 views on Facebook post live. While the webinars generally had positive feedback, with one comment calling the Budget webinar “excellent content and well executed in a short space of time[[15]](#footnote-16)”, New Zealand Sign Language users criticised the lack of NZSL. Since then more work has been done to ensure New Zealand Parliament has a range of video resources for Deaf users, including a series made with Deaf Aotearoa. Webinars ceased at the end of 2020, when New Zealand reached Level 1 and Education visits and tours could restart.

The livestream tour of Parliament also took place in 2020. In lieu of in person tours (which didn’t run until New Zealand was at Level 1), the Parliamentary Engagement and Visitor Services teams created a 25-minute Facebook live stream tour where the host sat in front of B-roll footage of rooms typically seen on a tour of New Zealand Parliament on a green screen. Called *The House from home* the live stream intended to ensure that New Zealanders across the country (and anywhere in the world) still felt close to their Parliament. The host was sent some of the questions from Facebook comments to answer while hosting the tour as well as working from the standard tour script. The live stream eventually received 6,300 views and 53 comments[[16]](#footnote-17). This video had an important role in communicating with audiences. For much of 2020, New Zealanders had no way of seeing Parliament in person. This tour communicated with its audience at a place they already were, on Facebook, without having to travel to Wellington to see “where the action happens”[[17]](#footnote-18). Most of the communication of 2020 focused on members of Parliament (as in the ERC) or parliamentary procedure (as with the webinars), this live stream showed audiences Parliament as a place, and the home of their democracy. Viewers had multiple queries about different rooms, which were either answered live by the host or later in the comment section. This ensured the audience were provided with correct information about Parliament and felt heard.

**Public response, comments and the threat of mis- and disinformation**

New Zealand Parliament was not responsible for national COVID-19 communications. The Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC) set up the COVID-19 Response Group to handle the “Unite Against COVID-19” public information and communications. The Unite Against COVID-19 social media presence was first set up on 18 March, prior to this (and while the page was gaining traction) New Zealand Parliament social media channels received queries as a first port of call. Messages asked for government assistance with businesses and for more information on specific rules around the lockdowns, things Parliament as a legislative body could not help with. While Parliament itself could not help with the public’s specific queries, staff responded to queries with information about the difference between Parliament and Government, and the correct place to get help.

*Example query response:*

*Kia ora [NAME]
Thank you for getting in touch. This page posts updates and information on behalf of the New Zealand House of Representatives (which passes New Zealand's laws). We're independent of the Government (which applies those laws, sets policy, and does the day-to-day running of the country).
COVID-19 is being handled by the Government. You can find out more about what constitutes as being an Essential Business on the "Unite Against COVID-19" Facebook page and on their website here:*[***https://covid19.govt.nz/government-actions/covid-19-alert-level/essential-businesses/***](https://covid19.govt.nz/government-actions/covid-19-alert-level/essential-businesses/)*.
Hope this helps. Ngā mihi,
XX from the Parliamentary Engagement team*

On 20 March 2020, the New Zealand Parliament Facebook page posted[[18]](#footnote-19) advising people to visit Ministry of Health or Unite Against COVID-19 for accurate COVID-19 information, to direct people to correct contacts and avoid mis- or disinformation. This is a rarity due to the requirement of impartiality and public misconceptions around Parliament and Government. The Unite Against COVID-19 social media presence eventually outgrew New Zealand Parliament’s, with the page exceeding 300,000 followers, and New Zealand Parliament received less messages around the lockdowns.

New Zealand Parliament received negative comments and messages about the lockdown and the Government’s wider response to COVID-19 from the beginning, specifically when it came to the economy, immigration and border closures. One message from May 2020 to the New Zealand Parliament Facebook page read:

*“I would like to let the government know that I think NZ needs to get back to business before the economy is totally destroyed. As there has been no community transfer and all cases are now nearly nil. I will not vote labour if the country is not opened immediately... We should be able to vote on this, it is like living in a communist country.”*

General dissatisfaction with the Government was managed by responding to the messenger or commenter with guidance on the difference between Parliament and Government, and an email address to the most appropriate Ministry. Mis- and disinformation became prominent in the comments sections as the COVID-19 pandemic continued past the initial lockdown. The first (tagged) comment containing disinformation appeared on New Zealand Parliament’s Facebook page in December 2020 with a link to an explainer on the “Covid-19 hoax”. As the COVID-19 vaccine was introduced to New Zealand, anti-vax commentary on Parliament’s social media and elsewhere grew. As reported by Logically for DPMC anti-vax content across New Zealand social media began increasing in September 2021, peaking in January 2022 (near coinciding with the occupation of Parliament lawn) and again in January 2023[[19]](#footnote-20). In general, comments were hidden on Facebook and Instagram where possible due to the comment breaking one of the New Zealand Parliament’s social media guidelines, and because of the harm that the disinformation could cause. Disinformation is not specifically listed in New Zealand Parliament’s social media guidelines, and this is something that should be considered in any future update due to the harm it can cause. Anti-vax, anti-mandate and anti-Government content peaked on New Zealand Parliament channels during the occupation in early 2022 and was hidden or responded to where required.

From 7 April 2020 until the ERC’s disestablishment, ERC livestreams were made available to political parties and politicians to cross-post on their own Facebook pages. This gave people the opportunity to watch the stream if they did not usually engage with Parliamentary procedure but did interact with specific parties or politicians. This practice was continued in future Parliamentary live streams including the Budget Statement and leaders’ speeches in 2020, 2021 and 2022. While cross-posting video content gave the ERC livestreams and subsequent videos a larger social media reach, it may have contributed to ongoing political arguments in the comment sections of videos of the New Zealand Parliament channel. Comment sections allow people to have a voice and share their views, however due to the political commentary taking place social media moderators had to ensure commenters were respectful of each other and those in the committee hearing. There was a fine line between allowing natural disagreements between commentators and full political arguments, and this was toed on multiple occasions.

In February 2022, the Clerk of the House made the decision to turn off commenting on all select committee live streams at the request of select committee chairs’ who had received complaints of bullying behaviour. This was particularly evident during the hearings of controversial bills of the time including the COVID-19 Public Health Response Act 2021, Conversion Practices Prohibition Legislation Act 2022, and the Births, Deaths, Marriages, and Relationships Registration Act 2021 where management of comments became a wider effort within the Office of the Clerk because of the vitriol and disinformation being posted. Following the Clerk’s decision, the Office posted on all select committee Facebook pages “it's important to us that everyone who is able to have their say to a select committee feels comfortable, and [restricting comments] is intended to protect those who are giving oral evidence to a committee via live stream”[[20]](#footnote-21). In January 2024 select committees stopped live streaming on Facebook altogether due to the constant technical issues affecting the platform and its connection with Zoom. The move supported the Office of the Clerk’s plan to bring select committee and House-sitting content together in one easy-to-use Parliament platform that would not require making an account or having Facebook to access[[21]](#footnote-22). This system is in progress, the first stage of it is now online as *Parliament Video.*

**Website**

Alongside social media, the Parliament website was used to share information with the public about COVID-19’s effect on Parliament and the ERC. Between 25 March 2020 (when New Zealand went into Alert Level 4) and 8 June 2020 (when New Zealand went to Level 1) 15 “feature” articles were published by the communications team to the New Zealand Parliament website. Five of these (*Select committees will run as usual during COVID-19 alert level 1, COVID-19: What is the Epidemic Response Committee?, The laws helping the Government support New Zealand during the COVID-19 epidemic, Anzac 2020* and *New legislation referred to the Epidemic Response Committee*) were directly related to the workings of Parliament due to the pandemic. A further three (H*uri haere i te Pāremata i te reo Māori, ahakoa āhea, ahakoa kei hea! / Tour Parliament in te reo Māori, anytime, anywhere!, How is the pay of MPs and Ministers set?* and *Check out Parliament’s new education resources*) were related to the pandemic but are not about them specifically. For example, *Check out Parliament’s new education resources* highlights the webinars and education resources for schools[[22]](#footnote-23). Other articles were about Parliament the upcoming General Election. The website had a hub relating to the ERC so the public could find out about the committee members, the items of business they were considering and reports. The hub still exists in the history section of the Parliament website – showing how fast the world moves in a crisis. Website stories were important long-form communications with the public about what Parliament was doing.

**Conclusion**

The COVID-19 pandemic was not the first significant event to take place during New Zealand Parliament’s time on social media, but it changed how the channels operated in a crisis. Livestreaming was truly brought to the forefront of the New Zealand Parliament brand and took select committee action to people’s homes in a much bigger way than previously. With news around COVID-19 breaking at all hours of the day, New Zealand Parliament’s channels responded, broke news and managed audience expectation and messages to ensure that New Zealanders were comfortable their democracy was continuing. If there are future crises it would be helpful to consider how disinformation is managed as a rule, and how Parliament can work with the correct agencies to ensure information cuts through to the most people and in the most accessible way possible.

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