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Framing Disinformation on Social Media in Canada

An unavoidable domestic and foreign threat

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Disinformation as a threat to Canada

Disinformation is now a threat with which Canada, like all Western democracies, must contend. Foes are not clearly recognizable and threats clearly discernable anymore. A 2018 Canadian Security and Intelligence Service (CSIS) academic outreach report highlighted that "[t]he reach and speed of the Internet and social media have escalated the potential impact of disinformation." (CSIS, 2018) At the time of that report, the direct involvement of a Russian sponsored "troll factory," producing misinformation from spurious accounts, during the 2016 American elections was well known. (U.S. Senate, 2019) Furthermore, this warning regarding the misuse of the Internet and social media is even more important as misinformation mechanisms like troll factories could now be producing Anti-Ukraine Propaganda. (Pro Publica, 2022)

However, the threat posed by disinformation is not only foreign, but also domestic: disinformation created by Canadians for Canadian consumption. For instance, pro-Russian Canadian groups have spread conspiracy theories about Canada's military mission in Ukraine and Chinese groups used WeChat, a social media platform very popular with the Chinese community, to disseminate political ads in violation of the Canadian campaign advertising law designed to prevent exactly this kind of targeting. (Kolga, 2019) This trend was made more apparent by the falsehoods shared by Canadian conspiracy groups supporting anti-vaccine and Covid-denying ideologies regarding the Covid-19 pandemic and Ottawa trucker protests.

Even though all disinformation is created by different actors with different motives, they often utilize the same platforms, and their impact can be similarly detrimental to Canada. The intent of this policy brief is to explore in parallel domestic and foreign disinformation on social media and the unique threat they each pose. Even so, joint solutions will be proposed since together they are two facets of a common problem. This policy brief will conclude with a number of recommendations for Canada drawing upon strategies put in place by other democracies.

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The Threat that Disinformation Poses

Disinformation—the sharing of intentionally false or misleading information used to advance the aim of the actor that shares them—is a fundamental threat to Canada. It has the potential to fragilize and, in doing so, jeopardize Canada's democracy. It is an attack on the very nature of the Canadian democratic system and on its values, imbued within Canadian society since Confederation.

The first possible impact of the proliferation of falsehoods is a loss of the truthful discourse that is necessary for democracy to flourish. The danger is that societal and political dialogue would be eroded by disinformation propagated on social media and assimilated by Canadians unmindfully scrolling that media. If its reach is broad enough, it could affect Canadian public opinion in a fashion uninformed by public discussion. Canadians would thus be oriented not according to the best information available and their values, but doctored information aimed at manipulating the Canadian democracy. Indeed, the public discourse is now partially governed by social media since 53% of Canadians declared gathering their news through social media in 2020. The trend will become increasingly significant as the proportion of the population using social media to garner knowledge on contemporary issues has increased by roughly one percent every year. (Newman et al., 2020)

In addition, disinformation has been linked with divergence in Western societies, through the creation of political/ideological poles that are increasingly antagonistic. The proliferation and reinforcement of these groups are not desirable for the Canadian democratic enterprise when their raison d'être is grounded in misinformation: it erodes the very premise of collaborative democracy. These polarized groups come to being since people generally seek information that aligns with their views, Canadians being no exception. (Schmidt et al., 2017) In fact, most disconcertingly, foreign and domestic treachery often attempts to create discord and reduce the political cohesion of Canadians in relation with political events. (McKay and Tenove, 2021)

Considering the threat that disinformation poses, it must not be taken lightly. It is an assault on fundamental social and political values of the Canadian democracy – and more generally, Western democracies. Referring to the Russian interference in the 2016 American election, former CIA Acting Director Michael Morell stated, "[i]t is an attack on our very democracy. It's an attack on who we are as a people … this is to me not an overstatement, this is the political equivalent of 9/11." (Morell and Kelly, 2016) Disinformation, whatever its source might be, must indeed be seen as an attack on what is most precious to Canada, its society, the democratic agency of its citizens and national cohesion.

Foreign Disinformation

Disinformation efforts aimed at Western nations by foreign entities have received considerable attention by scholars and intelligence practitioners since 2016. That pivotal year was marked by two important events which Russia attempted to influence through deceit: the 2016 American presidential election and the Brexit referendum. Russia leveraged social networks to generate disinformation and propagate it right into the homes of the countries concerned.

Adversary countries fund international news media targeted at Western audiences. These include Russia's RT (formerly Russia Today) and China's Global Television Network (CGTN). While publicly funded news media are common, for example, Berlin funds Deutsche Welle

and Paris supports France 24. The editorial policy of China and Russia's publicly funded news media are, unlike the German and French outlets, veiled in secrecy. It is common practice for state-funded media to have an autonomous board administering them to ensure independent reporting, but it is not the case for Russian and Chinese state media, who receive direction from the state and are shills for their national messaging. (Tucker et al., 2018) Indeed, they often propagate alternate narratives through their social media presence that diverge from the views of independent media. Their mission can generally be construed as one of influence aimed at promoting national interest rather than strict information. It is in fact a potent medium through which adversarial states propagate their vision of international events. Social media is their medium of choice since it can reach an increasing portion of the population, is often cheaper than traditional media and is least regulated. For instance, in Canada social media falls outside the jurisdiction of the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications, Canada's broadcasting regulatory agency.

Adversary states also leverage the social nature of platforms to create artificial network of accounts to spread (mis)information, "troll-factories" as they are referred to. Indeed, the Kremlin funded the Saint-Petersburg-based Internet Research Agency (IRA) to produce biased content for the 2016 American presidential election. These networks also took stances on Canadian political questions like that of the Keystone Pipeline and Justin Trudeau. (Panetta, 2018) The actors will have their accounts publish biased content and share it amongst themselves with the hope that it will expand beyond and reach the general public. A 2020 American Department of Homeland Security ban of Iranian-run accounts aimed at undermining American legitimacy highlighted both the enduring nature of this tactic and that those adversarial states other than China and Russia have not remained idle. In all, 900 accounts were banned. (DHS, 2020) This troll-factory tactic is not only cost-effective, being relatively inexpensive, but obscures the foreign origin of the disinformation making dissemination and assimilation easier.

The use of disinformation by antagonist countries against Canadians should be seen as a means to an end. It is only a vehicle used by adversarial countries to shift the international order in their favour. For instance, Russia supported Brexit through the reporting of its foreign media, not because of ill-feeling toward the European Union, but because a fractured Europe poses less of a threat than a united continent. (Flaherty and Roselle, 2018) Similarly, China made efforts to divert attention away from the outbreak of the pandemic in China and its relatively weak initial response to protect its image abroad and prevent damage to the soft power it has been cultivating. (Dubow, Lucas and Morris, 2021) This approach is pragmatic, states usually do not have a stake in the doctored information they disseminate, only in the results it may bring. The current disinformation campaign mounted by Moscow in Ukraine illustrates the practicality that motivates it: (1) a desire to obscure the motives behind the invasion, falsely reported by State media as to prevent genocide (RT, 2022)—and (2) to obscure the military situation.

Domestic disinformation

Closer to home, Canadians produce disinformation for political, religious or ideological motives. These influencers can be isolated or part of groups. Their motivations and causes

are as diverse as Canada. They can be focused on a particular topic, but often they maintain world views that bring them in conflict with the mainstream point of view. Hence, they often evolve in the fringes of the political sphere where the information environment is conducive to their misinformation. They form insular inward-looking communities due to the lack of general receptivity to their disruptive ideas. This, in turn, creates a highly polarized environment in which falsehoods are created, shared and assimilated in a circular fashion within highly cohesive and hermetic groups away from the mainstream and verified information. (Tucker et al., 2018)

The Covid-19 pandemic was eye opening as to the prevalence of disinformation created by Canadians against their own interest. In fact, the World Health Organization identified the "infodemic" that accompanied the pandemic as one of the greatest obstacles to swiftly overcoming Covid-19. (WHO, 2021) Canadian groups that spread anti-vaccine theories and related misinformation aired these ideas in social platforms as they were excluded from the mainstream media. (Stewart, 2021) They discarded scientific proof and the largely accepted narrative to promote their own alternative (and specious) narrative. Here lies both the advantage and the disadvantage of political discourse on social media, it gives a voice to those otherwise unheard whether their rhetoric is based on falsehoods or not. Consequently, such marginalized groups may become breeding grounds for opposition against governmental policies and for extremism as they constitute the only platform where their discourse is tolerated, if not welcomed.

Individuals and groups that diffuse domestic disinformation often believe it to be the truth, whereas opposing states have a more pragmatic purpose. In other words, international actors see disinformation as a means to an end, while for domestic groups, the diffusion of their narrative is the end. Their goal is to raise awareness for their cause and gather support. In this regard, domestic actors act with less rationality than international actors. Still, the impact of their false discourse is tangible and can have great national consequences.

Nexus between domestic and foreign disinformation

Viewing misinformation through a dichotomic domestic and foreign lens would be inadequate as it would discard the transnational nature of social media. There is indeed a dialogue of disinformation between the Canadian social media space and its foreign counterparts due to the very nature of social networks. This is exemplified by Covid-19 pandemic dialogues and anti-vaccine rhetoric. It was found through a Tweeter network study that Covid-19 skeptic rhetoric flowed inward from France and the United States through the interaction and resharing of the content by Canadian users with their own social media circles. It highlights the degree of connection the French-speaking population of Québec has with France and how the rest of Canada is highly connected with the United States. (Boucher, 2021) Thus, disinformation is not an exception, it can take a transnational form under the power of social media.

In addition, domestic misinformation can also be fueled by foreign actors. Adversarial states have indeed come to financially support it. Also, foreign disinformation propagated by state-controlled media and artificial networks can empower domestic groups in their campaigns. This interface is beneficial to malicious foreign actors. A successful influence campaign against Western democracies is participatory in nature. Canadians engage with

the misleading content produced by foreign sources and disseminate it. At the same time, it gives foreign (mis)information a veil of legitimacy since it is spread not by a foreign entity, but by fellow citizens. Such involvement by Canadians can increase the return on investment for the oppositional foreign entity as the campaign can take a life all of its own in the hands of domestic groups.

Addressing Domestic and Foreign Disinformation

Addressing online disinformation in constitutional democracies like Canada represents a considerable challenge because of the paramount importance of freedom of press and freedom of expression. A misguided "whack-a-mole" approach could result in infringements of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Decision makers and stakeholders must thus be careful when considering avenues to address this perceived vulnerability. It is exactly because of this nuanced and complex space governed by the rule of law that Canadian groups and foreign entities spreading disinformation are still operating. Totalitarian regimes do not have the same limitations and are thus more effective at preventing disinformation from spreading, but at the cost of civil liberties. These are transgressions incompatible with the Canadian democracy. (Kind, Pan, and Roberts, 2013) However, Canada could implement a more robust defence against foreign and domestic disinformation on social media by drawing from the experience of other Western democracies.

The first avenue is through the social media platforms themselves; cutting the channel used to convey disinformation to Canadians. In fact, these platforms have started leveraging algorithms to combat the very mechanisms that can make misinformation go "viral". In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, social networks have put in place fact-checking mechanisms to prevent the rampant spread of misinformation on their platform. For instance, after pressure by Western democracies, Facebook takes a three-prong approach to address misinformation on its platform: (1) it detects content that is likely to contain falsehood; (2) it is reviewed to confirm that the information is incorrect or misleading, and (3) finally, they act on the piece of content by reducing its spread, by limiting how much it will be seen. (Meta, 2021) These measures are commendable, but greater oversight of online social media and social networking services is needed. In addition, these processes must be made more robust and cover a broader range of topics since they are currently heavily focused on the Covid-19 pandemic and the Ukrainian crisis.

Furthermore, more transparency in disclosing all disinformation efforts is needed by Canadian stakeholders. In the United States, the release of the Senate Intelligence Committee report on Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election was a bombshell. It increased awareness of cognitive threats beyond a tight circle of scholars and intelligence practitioners. Indeed, it was the basis of bipartisan legislative and executive engagement. In this regard, Canadian intelligence agencies have a critical role to play. Although it is unrealistic to think that all the information that is collected by Canada's intelligence agencies can be disclosed, engagement by key members of the Canadian intelligence community would be beneficial to raise awareness. A talk given by David Vigneault, director of CSIS, one of the agencies responsible for the fight against disinformation, at the Centre for International Governance Innovation in February 2021 is an example of such engagement. It resulted in reaction in the

media and thus the engagement of the Canadian society at large. This is one of the avenues through which awareness of the issue can be raised.

This policy brief has to conclude with a warning against strictly reactionary approach: preventive measures must also be taken. Societal resilience is fundamental and entails Canadians being able to recognize disinformation and realizing the individual and societal danger it represents. For instance, broad measures have been taken in France to increase social media literacy through their Ministère de la Culture. (Ministère de la Culture, n. d.) The Department of Canadian Heritage has put a number of measures in place, like grants to the academic community to increase the understanding of the phenomenon, and also outreach to the Canadian public through advertisements and partnership with non-governmental organizations. (Department of Canadian Heritage, 2021) But the scope of these measures remains relatively limited. They have yet to reach into the Canadian classroom where the tech savvy and vulnerable next generation of social media users can be most easily reached.

Conclusion

The threat that foreign and domestic disinformation represents is significant. Both can jeopardize the stability, identity and interests of the Canadian society. While some measures have been taken, their scope does not match the threat that Canada is facing. Thus, Canadian policy makers should learn from the approach taken by fellow Western democracies to reinforce defence against cognitive attacks through social media. Canadian social media must stay a safe haven for truthful discourse and genuine debate free of actors that aim to weaken the Canadian democracy. Canadian national security actors should also be more transparent with the Canadian public regarding disinformation operations to generate public consciousness and discussion. Finally, the Canadian public must be better educated on the dangers of disinformation to prevent themselves from falling prey to malicious actors, both foreign and domestic. These measures must be taken earlier rather than later as adversarial actors get more proficient at propaganda just as the Canadian society simultaneously becomes more susceptible to it.

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