

# Combatting Disinformation: Confronting Digital Authoritarianism and Strengthening Democracy

Brandon Dickson, Zahra Ludin and Emily Miller

## Issue

Foreign digital authoritarian (DA) actors have increasingly used disinformation tools on social media that threaten democracies by targeting democratic tools including political participation, public deliberation, and fair elections.

## Background

### Framework

Combatting disinformation requires a human rights-based approach (HRBA). An HRBA is a conceptual framework underpinned by:

- participation and inclusion
- accountability, transparency and inclusion
- non-discrimination and equality
- empowerment
- links to human rights (ENNHRI 2020).

An HRBA aims to empower rights-holders and build the capacity of duty-bearers and responsibility-holders to respect, protect, promote and fulfill human rights (ibid.; Global Affairs Canada 2017). An HRBA is important as it informs Canada's international response by prioritizing Canadian values in combatting disinformation.

### Authoritarian Regimes and the Disinformation Threat

Digital authoritarianism is the use of digital technology by leaders with authoritarian tendencies to surveil, repress and manipulate domestic and foreign populations to their own advantage (Polyakova and Meserole 2019). The emergence of digital technology has provided an opportunity for authoritarian regimes to exploit technology to quell opposition and preserve political control. The tools used by DA regimes include technologies such as surveillance, censorship and social control, which are exported internationally to advance the aims of the DA (Yayboke and Brannen 2020). Many of these technologies serve dual purposes: DA regimes can use them as a tool of repression whereas democratic regimes can use them for electoral information. For instance, the Chinese government collects data on citizens through their use of social media (Bartholomew 2020) while in Canada, social media is considered a valuable tool for citizens to access information about when, where and how to vote (Elections Canada 2020).

The two most dominant perpetrators of DA are China and Russia, but their strategic playbooks are significantly different. For example, China has developed an impressive legal and technical infrastructure for censorship and surveillance, whereas Russia has combined disinformation technology alongside a repressive legal regime. Russia's

DA model appeals to lower-income governments that lack China's economic and human capital capacities and centralized governments, as its disinformation technology is low-tech and low-cost (Polyakova and Meserole 2019; Morgus 2019). Moreover, Russia's model is appealing to those countries with similar legal frameworks (Morgus 2019). Russia has proven its ability to manipulate foreign populations through disinformation campaigns and interference in elections and referendums, as evidenced in the 2016 US presidential election and the 2020 EU referendum (Thompson 2020; Tenove 2020; Tworek and Tenove 2019).

Disinformation involves the "intentionally false or deceptive communication tactics that actors use to advance their political or economics aims" (Tenove 2020). Both domestic, foreign, state and non-state actors promote disinformation, as evidenced in the 2016 US election with Russian actors, US political candidates, journalists, and citizens promoting disinformation (ibid.). Disinformation campaigns pose a threat to:

- Elections, where false information may be spread about where, when, and how to vote;
- Competition among political candidates, where false information may be spread about candidates;
- Political deliberation, where citizens may
  - have reduced opportunities to contribute to or encounter diverse views in political discourse, given the lack of quality information available due to the promotion of bots, fake accounts, and so forth that flood communication platforms,
  - encounter disrespectful deliberation that targets social groups, or promotes false claims, conspiracy theories that prompt moral dislike toward electoral candidates or public officials,
- Democratic institutions, such as journalists, news media and institutions of expertise, where the dissemination of false information crowds out and devalues these institutions' contributions to public discourse and overwhelms users with conflicting information, having the potential effects of decreasing trust in these institutions.

Disinformation campaigns impacted the information environment during elections in 24 countries in 2019 (Freedom House 2019). The emergence of the internet

and the decline of traditional media has structurally transformed the information sharing environment, expanding public discourse to include more diverse and dynamic opinions that previously had been mitigated by traditional media infrastructure (Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics 2018). Digital media has become an essential source of political information (Jungherr and Schroeder 2021), but the structure and patterns of online communication pose challenges to the health of democracy (McKay and Tenove 2021). For example, social media's platform algorithms dictate the discoverability of content, arrange the content in newsfeeds, and disseminate micro-targeted lists of trending topics (ibid.). Elements of digital media, such as the diversity and anonymity of users and the ability to micro-target users are exploited to promote disinformation (ibid.). The Department of Foreign Affairs has been tasked with responding to foreign interference in democratic processes and advancing support for democracy through defending the right to freedom of expression (Office of the Prime Minister 2021) and this includes addressing the threat of disinformation.

### **International Disinformation and the Threat to Democracy**

The disinformation threat is on full display in Eastern Europe right now. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has seen the role of disinformation and DAs come to the forefront as Russia looks to use disinformation to weaken Ukraine and prevent its allies from intervening in the name of eroding democracy (Aylward and Brown 2022).

The most recent Freedom House Report shows that in the regions of Central Europe and Asia, only 20 percent of states are consolidated democracies, leaving four of every five states as currently authoritarian regimes, or as fragile democracies, which are more likely to see their democracy compromised. Given that many of these states, as well as other Canadian allies, have upcoming elections (Council of Europe n.d.), an action plan for combatting misinformation is going to be crucial, not just now but in the future, if Canada is to continue to support Canadian allies and Canadian interests in protecting democracy internationally.

Canada's two recent federal elections in 2019 (Bridgman et al. 2020) and 2022 (Bridgman et al. 2022) have shown some success in limiting the impact of disinformation campaigns on elections through targeted intervention and education campaigns promoting positive engagement practices

with media throughout the entire election period. Like many other states, Canada grappled with the challenge of addressing disinformation in the 2019 and 2022 elections. This required balancing the right to freedom of speech with cautioning citizens about some forms of digital information without portraying it as inherently dangerous (ibid.). Other solutions have begun to emerge out of the private sector. Big tech companies such as Microsoft are currently developing artificial intelligence programs that can flag posts, or entire accounts, as misinformation (Trivedi et al. 2021). Concerns have been raised about the fallibility of such technology and the threats it poses if used against the interests of free speech by DA regimes.

Recent research has shown that when individuals perceive others to have been influenced by disinformation, their satisfaction with democracy declines (Nisbet, Mortenson and Li 2021). The 2016 US election is not just a case study, but demonstrates a lack of trust in electoral systems and a renewed cynicism internationally toward the validity of democracy (McKay and Tenove 2021). With people spending more time online during the pandemic, DA actors took advantage of social media to spread misinformation, expanding their reach and increasing the vulnerability of users online (Butcher 2021). The expanded reach of DA regimes has resulted in an avenue for further international division as DA regimes seek to increase their power and reach (Springer and Özdemir 2022).

Given Canada's chairship of the Freedom Online Coalition (FOC) for 2022, Canada has an opportunity to be a shaper of international agendas. Canada's participation in the FOC allows for a Canadian response to international human rights abuses committed by DA regimes. The recent re-election of Prime Minister Trudeau saw a reaffirmation of the central role the digital world will take in government strategy; ensuring freedom and human rights is a cornerstone of this strategy (Government of Canada 2021). Canada's commitment to implementing the digital charter demonstrates the Canadian government's recognition of the value of democratic interests being protected online and must be expanded to Canada's international interests.

### Public Perception and Disinformation

Some researchers disregard disinformation, insisting there is a lack of empirical finding to support the public perception of disinformation as a threat (Jungherr and Schroeder 2021). These researchers contend it is "moral panic" that the public perceives in the digital content

they consume. However, the public fear of disinformation should be understood for its role in creating a society that is susceptible to misinformation and mistrust. If the fear of disinformation is unfounded yet pervasive, it is a symptom of a core problem within the society (Nisbet, Mortenson and Li 2021). The dismissal of the public's fear of disinformation will feed into the already growing mistrust in governments and democratic institutions (Lee 2022). This requires addressing some of the challenges states may face when tackling the issue of disinformation. For example, during the Covid-19 pandemic, research showed that only around 1.1–1.8 percent of URLs on Twitter were linked to domains of purveyors of disinformation (Jungherr and Schroeder 2021). Evidently, empirical research does not have a far-reaching impact on the public the way disinformation does, making disinformation a greater threat than some researchers are willing to recognize.

Digital space is understood as a decentralized public space open to anyone with internet access, which therefore leads to the unfiltered and unregulated publication of content from around the world at unparalleled speed, and at much cheaper rates. As a result, digital technology makes the sharing of targeted and curated content possible by players such as powerful private media agents, state-owned media outlets, politicians with affiliations or stakeholders as well as a platform for citizens to become active political participants beyond the polling stations (Luo, Cai and Cui 2021). The digital space has quickly become a nexus where both information and disinformation flow. The Canadian government must maintain and restore the citizens' trust in the government and domestic democratic institutions.

Some of the key players that share this digital space are large social media companies such as Google, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, which have unique roles in facilitating global communication of ideas and movements. However, they have largely been unregulated by states, including when they have directly undermined the capacity of the state to govern (Kelly et al. 2017; CADSI 2019). Members of the public, researchers, investigative journalists and the average citizen do not always have the tools and expertise to continuously decipher between information and disinformation, given the rate at which the information market is expanding. The government must assume the role of mediator and regulator to increase the transparency and accountability of information online.

While the Canadian government has launched programs such as the Digital Citizen Initiative, aimed at building citizens' resilience, civil literacy and critical thinking against disinformation (Canadian Heritage 2022), some of the larger salient actors in the digital world have yet to be regulated at a federal level at scales which can impact their interaction with average citizens. Further challenges facing the Canadian government include the immense cost burden for the Canadian government in combatting the fast and easy proliferation of misinformation. Moreover, as Canada looks to respond to disinformation a delicate balance must be reached as restrictive policies may violate media freedoms and incur unintended consequences, potentially even increasing opportunities for disinformation (Tenove 2020; Bellemare and Ho 2020).

### Recommendations

1. **Leveraging its position as chair of the FOC, Canada should facilitate the establishment of a multistakeholder, multinational research centre housed within the FOC.** An independent research institute would bridge the gaps between policy makers, industry and civil society to enable greater research on the measurement of the effects of disinformation and the impact of interventions across countries. In collaboration with industry, media, civil society and researchers, Canada should aim to develop data-sharing rules and acquire access to the data from digital platforms to increase the accountability and transparency of governance. Research should focus on social, paid and algorithmic amplification of information online and the internal governance of digital platforms to better understand how foreign actors exploit the structure of the digital information environment to promote disinformation.
2. **Building on the success of Canada's Digital Citizen Initiative, Canada should partner with like-minded governments, academics and education sectors to expand digital literacy education internationally.** The Digital Citizen Initiative, in cooperation with GAC, has shown great success domestically at promoting media literacy skills. The promotion and exporting of such a program internationally would limit the impact of misinformation campaigns around the world. A program to support foreign governments would be more cost effective and limit the resources required to stop misinformation campaigns, thereby
3. **Following international best practice, the Canadian government should adopt a more systems-based approach instead of a content-based model in order to establish a transparent digital ecosystem in which users are just as informed regarding harmful digital activities as governments are of the harmful practices of large tech companies.** Canada can adopt the European Union's approach to tackling the issue of disinformation arising from the digital industry. The European Union has adopted the Code of Practice on Disinformation, which is a voluntary agreement wherein online platforms, social networks, advertisers and advertising agencies self-regulate their practices by disclosing information about the origins of information, its method of production and distribution, as well as the traceability and sponsors of the information. This would allow citizens to interpret and disseminate the information with more confidence. Moreover, the Code of Practice encourages diversity in content in order for citizens to have access to "free and independent media" to make informed decisions for themselves.

### About the Authors

**Brandon Dickson** is a student in the Master of Arts in Global Governance program at the Balsillie School of International Affairs.

**Zahra Ludin** is a student in the Master of International Public Policy program at the Balsillie School of International Affairs.

**Emily Miller** is a student in the Master of Arts in Global Governance program at the Balsillie School of International Affairs.



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