Combatting disinformation: confronting digital authoritarianism and strengthening democracy

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Issue

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

Background

Framework

Our approach to disinformation is grounded in a human rights-based approach (HRBA). A 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).

A HRBA aims to empower rights-holders and build the capacity of duty-bearers and responsibility-holders to respect, protect, promote and fulfill human rights (ENNHRI 2020; Government of Canada 2017). A HRBA is important to the study of disinformation as it informs Canada's international response to combatting digital authoritarian regimes that prioritizes Canadian values and interests. To explore this, we begin with the broad background on DA regimes and their threat internationally, move into the discussion of technology internationally and at home, and conclude with a look at Canada's role and the need to act.

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 Meserloe 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 DAs include technologies such as surveillance, censorship, and social control which are exported internationally to advance the aims of the DA (Yayboke 2020). Many of these technologies can serve dual purposes and can be used as a tool of repression by when used within a DA regime but may serve a purpose in a democratic nation, for example, cell phone GPS tracking.

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 digital authoritarianism model appeals to lower-income governments that lack China's economics and human capital capacities and centralized governments as its disinformation technology is low-tech and low-cost (Polyakova & Meserole 2019; Morgus 2019). Moreover, Russia's model is alluring 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).

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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 (Tenove 2020). 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
    o Have reduced opportunities to contribute or encounter diverse views in political discourse with the lack of quality information available due to the promotion of bots, fake accounts, etc. that flood communication platforms,
    o Encounter disrespectful deliberation that targets social groups, or promotes false claims, conspiracy theories that prompt moral dislike towards 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 have 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 (House of Commons, 2018). Digital media has become an essential source of political information (Jungheer 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 (McKay and Tenove 2021). Elements of digital media, such as the diversity and anonymity of users and the ability to micro-target users are exploited to promote disinformation (McKay and Tenove 2021). 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 (Trudeau 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 DA's 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 (Brown 2022).

The most recent Freedom House Report shows that in the regions of Central Europe and Asia, only 20% of nations are consolidated democracies, leaving 4 of every 5 nations as currently authoritarian regimes, or as fragile democracies, who are more likely to see their democracy compromised. Given that many of these nations, as well as other Canadian allies, have upcoming elections (Council of Europe, n.d.), an action plan for supporting the combat of

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misinformation is going to be crucial not just for now but going forward if Canada is to continue to support our allies and our broad interests in protecting democracy internationally.

Canada's two most recent elections in both 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 nations internationally, throughout both elections, Canada grappled with the challenge of addressing disinformation while not infringing on freedom of speech, while also finding a balance in warning citizens without portraying the entire digital ecosystem as inherently dangerous (Bridgman et al. 2022). Other solutions have begun to emerge out of the private sector. Big tech companies such as Microsoft are currently developing Artificial Intelligence programs which can flag misinformation as posts, or entire accounts (Trivedi 2021), however, 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 frequently cited example of misinformation, the 2016 US election is not just a past case study, but demonstrates a lack of trust in electoral systems and a renewed cynicism internationally towards the validity of democracy (McKay and Tenove 2021). This is particularly worrying given our current state. As the world continues to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, disinformation has grown, both in the fact that people spend more time online and are therefore vulnerable to disinformation for DAs (Butcher 2021), but also in the way that the pandemic has exposed a new avenue for disinformation to spread and cause division around the globe (Springer and Özdemir 2022).

Given Canada's chairship of the Freedom Online Coalition (FOC) for the year 2022, Canada has a limited period of time with which to act and lead as not just an influencer, but the shaper of international agendas. Further, Canada's participation in the FOC requires 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, with ensuring freedom and human rights a cornerstone of this strategy (Trudeau 2021). Canada's commitment to implementing the digital charter demonstrates our recognition of the value of democratic interests being protected online and must be expanded to Canada's international interests.

Public perception and disinformation

Disinformation is discounted by some researchers arguing there is a lack of empirical finding to back the threat of digital disinformation sensed by the public (Jungherr & Schroeder, 2021). Instead, they offer the explanation of a "moral panic" that the public feel in relation to the digital content they consume. However, these fears, even if perceived, should be understood for the role they can inevitably play in creating a vulnerable society that is susceptible to misinformation and mistrust. If the fear of disinformation is unfounded, yet it is pervasive, it is at least clear that 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 might 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% of URLs on Twitter were linked to domains linked to purveyors of disinformation (Jungherr and Schroeder 2021). Evidently, empirical research does not have a far-reaching impact on the public the way

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disinformation does, making disinformation truly a threat larger than the researchers are willing to recognize.

The nature of the digital space is understood as a decentralized public space open to anyone with internet access and this 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 a possibility 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 flows. The Canadian government must maintain and restore the trust of its citizens in the government, 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 that 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 (Keely, Truon and Shahbaz 2017) (CADSI 2019). Members of the public, researchers, investigative journalists or the average citizen do not always have the tools and expertise to continuously decipher between information and disinformation therefore the government must assume the role of a mediator and regulator to ensure the information ecosystems are safe from disinformation.

While the Canadian government has launched programs like the the Digital Citizens Initiative (DCI) aimed at building citizens resilience, civil literacy, and critical thinking against disinformation (Government of Canada 2022), some of the larger salient actors in the digital world are yet to be regulated at a federal level at scales beyond the reach of the average citizens. Further challenges facing the Canadian government include the immense cost burden for the Canadian government in combating the inexpensive spread of misinformation. Moreover, as Canada looks to respond, balancing the threat of restrictive policies that infringe upon media freedoms while still limiting the dissemination of disinformation presents an uphill battle for policy makers and GAC (Bellemare and Ho 2020).

Recommendations

1. Leveraging Canada's position as Chair of the Freedom Online Coalition, Canada should facilitate the establishment of a multi-stakeholder, multinational research center housed within the FOC. An independent research institute would bridge the gaps between policymakers, 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, 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 the algorithmic amplification of information on 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. Canada should expand on existing public and in school education programming through partnerships with like-minded partners in governments, academia, and education sectors, Canada should promote media literacy skills to limit the impact of misinformation campaigns and limit the resources required to stop misinformation campaigns. It is important that these campaigns maintain public trust and focus on identifying disinformation without sowing fear of information found on the internet

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3. The Canadian government must recognize its role in regulating these powerful communication technologies in ways that promote transparency, accountability and awareness regarding online activities. Canada can adopt the European Union's approach to tackling the issue of disinformation arising from the digital industry. The EU 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 the citizens to 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.

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