



INCENDIARY ALCHEMIES: HOW CONSPIRACY THEORISTS, INTERNET ALGORITHMS, AND FAKE NEWS STORIES FOILED FIRST RESPONDERS AND UNDERMINED EVACUATION ORDERS IN THE SHUSWAP FOREST FIRES

Date: November 18, 2024

Disclaimer: This briefing note contains the encapsulation of views presented by the speaker and does not exclusively represent the views of the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies.

KEY EVENTS

On November 18th, 2024, Dr. Wade Deisman presented *Incendiary Alchemies: How Conspiracy Theorists, Internet Algorithms, and Fake News Stories Foiled First Responders and Undermined Evacuation Orders in the Shuswap Forest Fires*. The presentation was followed by a question-and-answer period with questions from the audience and CASIS Vancouver executives. The key points discussed were the erosion of the conditions of possibility for democratic engagement, the role of digital culture in the process of public opinion formation, and the need for framework which acknowledges that the confluence between corrosive forces can create cascading synergies.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Dr. Deisman examined the Shuswap Forest Fires through an extended case method to illustrate the effect of various forces utilizing digital culture to undermine democratic institutions. He used Hootsuite, Facebook, and Newswhip, to show that during the forest fires, previous relationships of consent between first responders and local residents were challenged using digital media. Dr. Deisman concluded that democratic consent has become more fragile, and that a Gestalt Approach whereby the police are more interconnected is needed to combat this.

BACKGROUND

Presentation

Dr. Deisman argued that a convergent recombination of key elements within digital culture have had the effect of undermining the ability of the public to discern what is happening when events occur. There are four “conditions of possibility” to enable democracy to function effectively; information articulation, information adjudication, public opinion formation, and political will formation. Dr. Deisman formulated that democracy as a “steering mechanism” for policy requires the people to properly fulfil these four functions. Using the 2023 Shuswap Forest Fires, however, Dr. Deisman illustrated that the populace is finding these four requirements increasingly challenging.

Dr. Deisman used the 2023 fires, as an example of an ‘incendiary alchemy’ which enabled the democratic institution of ‘consent’ to be challenged. Democratic consent was challenged due to the influence of digital culture on the four “conditions of possibility”; for instance, the sheer mass of digital issues such as misinformation and conspiracy theories meant that information adjudication became overwhelming. This was articulated during the 2023 fires by a growing distrust of first responders by local residents who had been influenced through digital media purporting several claims, including the government withholding resources, corrupt first responders, and premeditated shortages. Dr. Deisman argued that damaged morale of first responders and the acceptance of democratic consent led to open defiance.

Dr. Deisman concluded that approaches that accept the fragility of democratic consent are needed. This is crucial since first responders rely on consent to fulfil their jobs, however, trust is not guaranteed. Dr. Deisman argued that a Gestalt approach that appreciates the unforeseen, significant impact that digital media has on democratic institutions is needed. Dr. Deisman argued that this would mean a more interconnected police force with increased cooperation between higher and lower modalities to combat the current challenges to democratic institutions.

Question and Answer

What is the attraction of conspiratorial thinking as a cross-border issue? Why would a Canadian audience be attracted to a US origin conspiratorial framework?

Individual's perspectives become more extreme over time due to online communications that cause a confirmation bias. Due to online communications the importance of the Canadian-US border in exchanging ideas has decreased. There is a long history in the Canada of similar anti-government thinking to that of the US

Do you see any similarities between this case study and Hurricane Helene?

During Hurricane Katrina there were various conjectures regarding the government's actions. This has become a pattern, and shows a weak spot in our democratic institutions, whereby first responders rely on Democratic Consent.

What is the Singularity you foresee in the concept of Misinformation?

The effects of AI are becoming apparent to the general public. Remedies to misinformation include, education, and coming to acceptance with the link between AI, conspiratorial theories, and misinformation.

How can researchers use extended case methodology?

The methodology focused on the link between the micro and the macro for instance, during the fires the alt-right forces were acting at the micro level, but also this impacts macro level information flows. The method involves looking at the local context and how this will affect at the national level. For instance, regarding the 2023 fires, climate change denial is the micro and the extended case study method allows us to see how it plays out at the macro level.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

- Digital Media challenges existing “conditions of possibilities” for effective democratic institutions. Therefore, new approaches are needed to protect democratic institutions.
- Misinformation and other forces deteriorated relationships of trust between first responders and local residents during the 2023 Shuswap Forest Fires. Subsequently, if this deterioration escalates, natural disasters are likely to become more harmful.
- A holistic and Gestalt approach that focuses on the entirety of the issue is needed to combat the growing challenge to democratic institutions. Consequently, this will demand for resources and a collective effort.

FURTHER READING

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