



## **CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON IDENTITY AND DISINFORMATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE**

**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 18, 2024, Mr. Dean Jackson presented *Critical Perspectives on Identity and Disinformation in the Digital Age* for this year's West Coast Security Conference. The presentation was followed by a question-and-answer period with questions from the audience and CASIS Vancouver executives. The key points discussed included the three eras of study and response, approaches and limitations in confronting disinformation, and implications for future research and response.

### **NATURE OF DISCUSSION**

Mr. Dean Jackson examined the critical need for understanding and addressing the evolving nature of disinformation through its three distinct eras of study and response (state-sponsored disinformation campaigns, foreign interference, and engagement-driven algorithms) highlighting the importance of adaptive strategies and the limitations of current approaches. He emphasized that disinformation can undermine societal trust and democratic processes, and requires urgent and innovative responses.

### **BACKGROUND**

#### **Presentation**

Mr. Jackson outlined the evolution of disinformation, categorizing it into three distinct eras of study and response, marked by shifting tactics and increasing complexity. The first era focused on state-sponsored disinformation campaigns, with examples such as Russia's influence during the 2014 Ukraine crisis, marking the beginning of digital propaganda. The second era began around 2016, marked by an increase in significant foreign interference targeting democratic processes,

such as the U.S. presidential election and the Brexit referendum, highlighting how social media could be leveraged to manipulate public opinion. The third and current era is defined by the rise of engagement-driven algorithms on social media platforms like Facebook and X (formerly Twitter), which have simplified the rapid spread of disinformation without traditional media gatekeepers. This timeline reflects a progression from controlled, state-level operations to more decentralized, algorithm-driven threats that pose new challenges for governance.

Mr. Jackson reviewed three primary approaches to addressing disinformation — consumer, technical, and social — while also pointing out the limitations of each approach. Consumer-based strategies, such as media literacy programs and fact-checking initiatives, have been somewhat effective in raising awareness, but often struggle with deeply ingrained biases and beliefs. Technical solutions, like algorithmic adjustments and platform transparency, depend on the cooperation of tech companies and may fall short of addressing the underlying social and political factors driving disinformation. Social strategies that aim to bridge societal divides face the challenge of addressing complex identity-driven issues that make certain communities more vulnerable to disinformation. As a result, these approaches may only partially mitigate the one-dimensional elements, such as the targeting of specific demographic groups or the amplification of polarizing narratives on social media platforms. To address these challenges, Mr. Jackson proposed an integrated approach that blends technological interventions with efforts to address social polarization. He suggested that disinformation thrives in environments of division, where identity-based narratives are easily manipulated. This strategy would involve both reducing societal polarization and implementing technical measures to limit the spread of harmful content. Jackson highlighted the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration between technologists, policymakers, and social scientists in developing more effective solutions. By integrating efforts to tackle the root causes of disinformation with targeted technical interventions, this approach aims to offer a more comprehensive response to the evolving threat of disinformation.

### **Question and Answer**

*You noted funding as a pain point for effective programs. Is there a way you can envision motivating funding from robust resources such as Silicon Valley VCs?*

Mr. Jackson discussed the complexities of funding programs to counter disinformation, emphasizing the need for funders to align their strategies with the needs of grassroots organizations and local contexts. He noted that funding decisions are often influenced by political or organizational priorities, which can

lead civil society organizations to reshape their agendas to secure grants, potentially undermining the effectiveness of their efforts. He raised concerns about declining government funding, particularly in foreign aid, and highlighted the uncertain role of private wealth in filling these gaps. While philanthropic contributions could support critical areas, such as legal defense funds for researchers facing lawsuits or investigations, Mr. Jackson pointed out that political backlash has reduced tech companies' and Silicon Valley investors' appetite for funding such work. He urged funders to engage collaboratively with grantees, focusing on strategies that are context-specific and allow organizations to play to their strengths, ensuring solutions are more sustainable and impactful.

*When does misinformation and disinformation reach a legal threshold?*

Mr. Jackson explained that misinformation and disinformation can reach a legal threshold when they involve defamation or other harms, but proving liability, particularly in the U.S., remains challenging due to high legal standards and systemic barriers. He cited the Dominion Voting Systems lawsuit against Fox News as a rare example where evidence of intent, revealed during discovery, led to accountability. However, he warned that legal systems often favor well-resourced actors, enabling defamation suits to be weaponized by those accused of spreading disinformation, as seen in lawsuits against nonprofits that have struggled with the financial burden of defense. Additionally, Mr. Jackson highlighted the evolving legal debate around social media companies' roles in amplifying disinformation through algorithms and content moderation policies. While these platforms currently enjoy protections under U.S. law, courts may increasingly consider holding them accountable for how they exercise editorial control, especially as emerging platforms like TikTok highlight new challenges in content regulation.

*How do we trust AI to monitor these technological problems? AI is still very crude and lacks any ability to see the sentimentality expressed.*

Mr. Jackson highlighted the limitations of relying on AI to monitor technological problems, noting that while AI is widely used for content moderation, it remains imprecise and inconsistent. For instance, platforms like Meta use AI classifiers to estimate the likelihood of hate speech, but these systems face challenges in determining thresholds for human review and often miss nuanced forms of harmful content, such as fear-mongering. Additionally, AI tools are most effective in English, leaving non-English-speaking communities, such as Russian and Arabic users, inadequately protected. Despite its utility in reducing the volume of content requiring human review, AI is not a comprehensive solution

and lacks the ability to understand sentiment or context fully.

### KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

- Mr. Jackson outlined the evolution of disinformation across three eras of study and response: early state-driven propaganda, foreign interference in democratic processes, and today's algorithm-driven digital influence. This historical framework emphasizes the increasing sophistication of disinformation tactics and underscores the need for adaptive strategies to address modern challenges.
- Mr. Jackson discussed consumer, technical, and social strategies to combat disinformation, highlighting limitations such as ingrained biases, dependence on platform cooperation, and challenges in addressing identity-driven divisions. Understanding these limitations provides a roadmap for improving existing strategies and avoiding one-size-fits-all solutions that fail to address the root causes of disinformation.
- Mr. Jackson called for a socio-technical approach that integrates social science, technology, and policy to develop more holistic solutions. He emphasized interdisciplinary collaboration and tailoring strategies to local contexts. This highlights the importance of moving beyond siloed efforts to address the multifaceted and evolving nature of disinformation effectively.
- Mr. Jackson described how AI is used for content moderation, such as identifying hate speech, but noted its limitations in accuracy, contextual understanding, and effectiveness for non-English-speaking communities. This illustrates the need to refine AI tools and combine them with human oversight to ensure that moderation efforts are equitable and effective across diverse user bases.
- In addressing the legal threshold for disinformation, Mr. Jackson pointed to high barriers for proving defamation, the asymmetry of resources in legal battles, and the dual role of social media companies as content moderators and distributors. This highlights the structural inequities and regulatory gaps that must be addressed to hold accountable those who propagate and enable disinformation.

### FURTHER READING

Hendrix, J., & Jackson, D. (2024). *Musk, X, and Trump 2024: Where are the legal and ethical boundaries?* Just Security.  
<https://www.justsecurity.org/100265/musk-trump-legal-boundaries/>

Jackson, D. (2024). *As the post-election looms, the risk of social media-facilitated violence has grown*. Centre for International Governance Innovation. <https://www.cigionline.org/articles/as-the-post-election-looms-the-risk-of-social-media-facilitated-violence-has-grown/>

Jackson, D., & Martin, Z. (2024). *Forget deepfakes: Social listening might be the most consequential use of generative AI in politics*. Tech Policy Press. <https://www.techpolicy.press/forget-deepfakes-social-listening-might-be-the-most-consequential-use-of-generative-ai-in-politics/>

Tworek, H. (2023). Media/digital literacy in an era of disinformation. *The Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare*, 5(3), 252–256. <https://doi.org/10.21810/jicw.v5i3.5211>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

© (DEAN JACKSON, 2025)

Published by the Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare and Simon Fraser University

Available from: <https://jicw.org/>

The Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare  
Volume 7, Issue 3

