



## **DISRUPTIVE ASPECTS OF THE CANADIAN INFORMATION SPACE**

**Date:** November 19, 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 19, 2024, Professor Ahmed Al-Rawi presented *Disruptive Aspects of the Canadian Information Space* 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 revolved around how disruptive information encompasses verified false information with the potential to distort scientific or societal consensus. Wealth elites, political figures, media outlets, and disguised state actors are major contributors, using disruptive information to influence democratic trust and societal stability. This contributes to social fragmentation and radicalization to violence, as seen in cases like the Quebec Mosque shooter, who was influenced by far-right conspiracy theorists.

### **NATURE OF DISCUSSION**

Disruptive information, which includes misinformation, disinformation, conspiracy theories and other types of false information, is impacting social cohesion and democratic trust in Canada and across the globe. Key disseminators include foreign trolls, wealth elites, political figures, fringe journalism, and the general public. This disruptive information has the potential to radicalize people to violence, and therefore must be addressed through coordinated effort from government NGOs, researchers, and the public.

### **BACKGROUND**

Disruptive information is verified false information that has the potential of creating, whether intentional or not, disruption in the scientific or collective expert knowledge consensus. This can encompass misinformation, disinformation, false information, conspiracy theories, fake news,

malinformation, and misleading claims; however, in order to properly categorize a piece of information into one of the above categories, it is crucial to understand the intention. Dr. Al-Rawi noted that disruptive information can be used to categorize information that has the potential to cause disruption regardless if we know the intentions and consequences of it or not.

The main disseminators of disruptive information include wealth elites, including lobbyists for corporate interests such as the oil and tobacco industries; political elites, with their use of ads and public statements; journalism elites, whether mainstream or fringe; disguised political elites, especially foreign state news, trolls and sympathizers; and the general public. All of these actors can have an impact on democracy and trust in democratic institutions and the news industry.

Several state-affiliated disruptive information campaigns are active in Canada across social and traditional media platforms. Russian campaigns often targeted racialized Canadian politicians and immigration, often supporting far-right causes. Iranian influence, on the other hand, often supports more pro-social causes, including Khalistan, Palestine, and Black Lives Matter. Chinese trolls tend to focus on human rights issues in Canada, while Saudi actors are more concerned with their own internal affairs, suggesting that Canadians should turn their focus internally instead of criticizing the Kingdom for its human rights record. Other types of disruptive information campaigns can include far-right conspiracy theories, which take advantage of real or perceived concerns to proliferate. Despite the many angles taken by these types of communications, the result is the same: to potentially sow division and discord in Canadian society.

Disruptive information has measurable effects on social cohesion and radicalization. For example, there is a clear connection between Canadian far-right trolls and influencing individuals into carrying out violent acts of terror. This includes Alexander Bissonette, who attacked a Quebec Mosque in January of 2017 after engaging heavily with far-right conspiracy theory contributors. Another example of this is Brenton Tarrant, the Christchurch Mosque attacker, who supported both Stefan Molyneux and Rebel News anti-Muslim and anti-immigration content. Professor Al-Rawi noted that future research about disruptive information should be focused on new and alternative social media sites.

## **Question and Answer**

*You mentioned how so many organizations, from vaping and oil companies, to the Russian government, utilize the term “misinformation” to change the legitimacy of the claims against them. In your eyes, what should be done for the counteraction of information surrounding the spread of misinformation, and hatred against minorities, such as Russian targets of Arabs, or Iran and Khalistan?*

This requires collective effort, which will take contributions from the general public as well as researchers and government agencies. Although this is the ideal situation, it is unlikely to happen as many political figures and parties generally benefit from polarizing the public especially during times of election.

*How do misinformation and conspiracy theories fuel the effects that we see in recent accelerationist attacks and ideologies, and is there a way to counteract it in your eyes?*

Going back to the main point of concern, researchers and government officials should find a way to think hard about the issues behind conspiracy theories and polarization. For example, when Prime Minister Trudeau called the convoy protesters a fringe minority, many nearby citizens got mobilized due to a perceived lack of sympathy to their concerns.

*What does Canada need to do to rigorously clamp down on the disinformation operations without further incensing individuals who already feel disenfranchised by the government? Would hostile actors not react to these interactions by attempting to cause further chaos?*

Healthy online systems start from the top. A nonpartisan fact-checking system to offer the Canadian public unbiased views about political claims would help hold Canadian politicians accountable and create a foundation for a more equitable society.

### **KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION**

- Disruptive information encompasses verified false information with the potential to disrupt scientific or societal consensus. The term allows categorization without requiring immediate understanding of intent or consequence.
- Wealth elites, political figures, media outlets, and disguised state actors are major contributors, using disruptive information to influence democratic trust and societal stability.

- Russian campaigns often target immigration and racialized politicians to support far-right ideologies, while Iranian efforts back pro-social causes, and Chinese and Saudi actors focus on human rights and internal critiques, respectively.
- Disruptive information in Canada contributes to social fragmentation and violent radicalization, as seen in cases like the Quebec Mosque shooter and London, Ontario truck attacker, who both were influenced by far-right conspiracy theorists.
- Effective countermeasures require collaboration between researchers, policymakers, and the general public, with initiatives like nonpartisan fact-checking systems to build trust and counter misinformation without exacerbating public alienation.

### FURTHER READING

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