



DISRUPTIVE INFORMATION IN CANADA

Date: January 16th, 2025

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 January 16th, 2025, Dr. Ahmed Al-Rawi presented “Disruptive Information in Canada” for January’s Digital Roundtable. 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 challenges of defining misinformation and disinformation, the role of social media in polarization, and the geopolitical dimensions of disruptive information.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

Disruptive information was framed as false or misleading content that erodes public trust and destabilizes democratic processes. Dr. Al-Rawi examined the blurred boundaries between misinformation, disinformation, and fake news. His analysis underscored the influence of political elites, social media dynamics, and foreign actors. The discussion was critical for understanding the evolving threat landscape in digital communications and its implications for national security.

BACKGROUND

Presentation

Dr. Al-Rawi stated that establishing truth requires more than the examination of factual data; it relies on the combined wisdom of a team of professionals whose conclusions are influenced by experience and context. However, truth generally operates on a spectrum. When context is missing or misconstrued, understanding one’s intention or attempting to predict the potentially harmful impact of information can neither be scientific nor logically feasible.

He defined disruptive information as verifiably false material that creates discordance with scientific or expert consensus, whether intentionally or not. Disruptive information is a communication strategy that encompasses different terms, some of which (e.g. “Fake News”), have been so frequently misused that

they have lost their meaning entirely. Actors who engage with disruptive information can have an impact on public trust in the news industry and other democratic institutions. Audiences find it increasingly difficult to distinguish real dangers from rhetorical posturing as a result of this dilution of meaning.

Discourse surrounding disruptive information falls within the dimensions of elite and public senders. Journalistic elites (both mainstream and alternative media), political elites, and non-traditional players such as actors within the oil and gas or vaping industries have significant influence over public opinion by either supporting or contradicting expert consensus.

Additionally, disguised political elites, including foreign trolls, their sympathizers, and actors who buy advertisements to secretly advance their goals, add to the diverse spectrum of organizations that contribute to and gain from disruptive information. Foreign state and non-state actors utilize disinformation and disruptive information to shape public opinion and political dynamics by targeting issues around human rights and pre-existing political wedge issues and controversies.

Dr. Al-Rawi noted that social media platforms serve as divisive spaces that facilitate the exchange of disruptive information. The prevalence of anti-establishment views on social media sites like Instagram and X (Twitter) exacerbate social tensions, making it easier for the proliferation of disruptive information. Because social media algorithms favour public engagement over the accuracy of their content, disruptive information gets amplified beyond the silos in which they are created, reaching far more users.

According to a study conducted by Dr. Al Rawi, social media sites like Meta fact-check fewer than 5% of information that has been flagged, with the majority of previously marked content being subjected to "shadow banning" instead of complete removal. The narrow focus of social media fact-checking is unable to keep up with the quick spread of misleading material, jeopardizing opportunities to fight disruptive narratives.

The safeguards provided by freedom of expression make it difficult for legal and regulatory structures to combat disinformation. Legal action is often only viable in situations when false information is proven to have caused actual injury, for example the Alex Jones case. Legislators face additional difficulties with the development of AI-powered systems that can produce extremely persuasive but inaccurate information. Strong regulatory frameworks are critical to reduce the dangers presented by misinformation generated by artificial intelligence.

Question & Answer Period

How can the U.S. and Canada collaborate against mis/disinformation amid shifting political leadership?

While both countries collaborate through initiatives under the G7 and Five Eyes, Canada faces significant gaps in addressing foreign influence, as efforts are predominantly U.S.-focused.

With Meta ending fact-checking, does social media fact-checking aid public understanding?

Only a small fraction of flagged Instagram content is reviewed while most posts get “shadow banned” rather than removed.

Are disinformation campaigns adequately exposed and prosecuted?

Prosecutions are rare due to freedom of expression protections; legal action has only occurred in cases where demonstrable harm was evident.

Is the U.S. TikTok ban an effective countermeasure against disinformation?

The push for a TikTok ban is driven more by financial and geopolitical interests of U.S.-based tech giants than by genuine security concerns.

Why is a catch-all term like “misinformation” prevalent instead of nuanced distinctions?

While terminologies differ, they all share a general meaning of false information. The central and most important issue is the erosion of trust.

How can the public discern truth from disinformation, especially with an upcoming federal election?

The volume and sophistication of false narratives make it extremely challenging for the average citizen to verify information without extensive research.

What impact does AI have on the spread of disinformation, and what regulatory measures are needed?

AI technologies further complicate the information landscape, necessitating urgent development of robust regulatory frameworks—despite current limitations in governmental authority over major tech companies.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

- Defining Disruptive Information: disruptive information encompasses false or misleading content that undermines public trust in institutions. The distinctions between misinformation, disinformation, and fake news remain complex.
- Foreign Influence Operations: both state and non-state actors use disruptive information to influence political discourse, exploiting existing social divisions.
- Social Media Polarization: social media algorithms and platform policies contribute to the amplification of divisive narratives, favoring anti-establishment voices.
- Regulatory and Legal Challenges: There are significant gaps in legal frameworks to address misinformation, with few cases leading to prosecution due to robust freedom of expression protections.
- AI and the Future of Disinformation: AI plays a crucial role in the propagating of false narratives. Moving forward, government regulation of social media policies and AI capabilities is necessary to mitigate the spread of misinformation.

FURTHER READING

Al-Rawi, A. (2024) *Online hate on social media*. Palgrave Macmillan Cham
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