2023

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Information Warfare in Canada: Countering AI-backed Misinformation, Disinformation and Malinformation (MDM) Surrounding the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

Biographies

Roman Vysochanskyy
Master of International Public Policy
Roman Vysochanskyy is a scholar with extensive experience in the fields of philosophy and humanities. His areas of specialization span Introduction to Philosophy, Ancient Philosophy, Phenomenology, and Postcolonial Studies. Roman has proven competence in Orientalism and Postcolonial Studies, and International Public Policy within the Context of Security and Governance.
From 2016 to 2022, Roman functioned as an independent scholar and tutor after holding a tenure-track position as an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Ivan Franko National University of L'viv, Ukraine, from 2008-2016. Roman's vast academic journey includes prestigious awards such as the Fulbright Scholar Program at Columbia University and a grant from the Polish National Commission for UNESCO.
In 2022, Roman joined the interdisciplinary environment of the International Public Policy Program at Wilfrid Laurier University, BSIA, Waterloo, CA, having received his Ph.D. in Social Philosophy and Philosophy of History from Ivan Franko National University of L'viv, Ukraine in 2011. He also holds an Hon. MA and BA in Middle Eastern Studies from the same institution.

Halyna Padalko
Master of Arts in Global Governance
Halyna Padalko (She/Her): worked in media communications in Ukraine for 9 years as the TV host of a socio-political talk show "The opposite view LIVE", press officer of the Ukrainian Digital Transformation Institute, and Chief Communications Officer for the Ukrainian "Vivat" publishing house. In 2020 Halyna was elected a deputy of the Lutsk City Council. She is working on her PhD in Computer Science at the National Aerospace University "Kharkiv Aviation Institute" analyzing propaganda in the social media using Artificial Intelligence approaches.

Abigail Viktoria Ollila
Master of Arts in Global Governance
Abigail Ollila graduated from the University of Waterloo with a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in History. She owes her passion for governance to this academic background. Examining the systems of the past informed and compelled her desire to contribute towards a brighter future.
Abigail engaged deeply with her undergraduate community and served in a variety of volunteer positions, including President of the History Society, editor of the Waterloo Historical Review, and Public Relations Director of a campus political club. Her co-op positions in digital communications allowed her to explore the world of advertising, for which she still holds a soft spot. She especially enjoyed designing literature for a local MP candidate during the 2019 federal election. The experiences that shaped her trajectory the most, however, were her positions at Wahgoshig First Nation as Executive Assistant to the Chief and at Indigenous Services Canada as a Junior Compliance Analyst.
Today, Abigail centers her research with the Balsillie School around northern and Indigenous governance. She is particularly interested in modern treaties and their ability to cultivate co-governance between Indigenous and non-Indigenous stakeholders. She hopes that her findings will benefit policymakers as they implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). She intends to build a career in government.

Summary

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has sparked a global crisis with geopolitical, economic, and humanitarian implications. Misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation (MDM) are exacerbating the situation by making it difficult for the public and policymakers to understand the conflict's realities. The widespread use of artificial intelligence (AI) and generative adversarial network (GAN) techniques to create varied content forms will likely increase the complexities of combating propaganda. To meet the challenges that these emerging technologies bring, Canada needs an updated information warfare strategy.

This policy paper evaluates Canada's current efforts to counter MDM surrounding the conflict in Ukraine and presents a comprehensive approach to support informed decision-making, promote truth, and foster resilience against AI-backed foreign manipulation.

Background

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has resulted in an increase in the use of MDM to manipulate public opinion, which poses a threat to Canada's national security and interests. However, despite fragmentary legislation and institutional approach to MDM (e.g., Canadian Centre for Cyber Security (2018), Canadian Elections Act (2018), Digital Charter (2019), and Bill C-26 (2022)), Canada still lacks a unified and regulatory national MDM policy and the existing strategies reflect separate stakeholders' concerns and suggest partial attempts to counter MDM challenges.

Nonetheless, in the purview of global conflicts and regular interventions of foreign actors in domestic affairs, the Canadian government's position fully acknowledges that three key forms of information may lead to minor or significant harm and can be identified as MDM.

Misinformation is false information that is not intended to cause harm. Disinformation means that false information is meant to manipulate, damage or lead people, organizations and countries in the wrong direction. The term «misinformation» refers to information that is based on the truth but often exaggerated in a manner which misleads and may cause harm.

In light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the principal MDM narratives directed at Canadian audiences include:
- Justifying the invasion due to NATO expansionism and depicting NATO as an aggressive entity using Ukraine as a proxy against Russia.

- Sowing distrust in institutions and elites by labelling Ukraine as a fascist state, extrapolated from Bandera and Azov narratives, even painting President Zelenskyy with the same brush.
- Specifically undermining trust in Canada's Liberal government and Prime Minister Trudeau.
- Misrepresenting the Ukrainian Canadian Congress and the Ukrainian diaspora in Canada as successors of fascist collaborators, with a targeted focus on Chrystia Freeland to weaken her advocacy for Ukraine.
- Advocating "peace at any cost" narratives, promoting the idea of Ukraine surrendering its sovereign territory under the guise of reducing war-induced suffering and economic crisis.
- Justification of Russia full-scale invasion of Ukraine to protect Russian-spoken people who live there.
- Stoking nuclear fear related to Russia's potential while attempting to restrict weapons supply, framing assistance to Ukraine as criminal.

The rise of sophisticated AI, particularly large language models, has escalated the disinformation threat by generating abundant false messages, creating deceptive profiles, and fabricating narratives. Such disinformation poses a challenge to both ordinary citizens and experts in disinformation research. With the ongoing evolution of generative adversarial network (GAN) models, global researchers are pursuing technological solutions to detect AI-generated content. Some countries—Italy, for instance—have restricted the use of these technologies. Yet, these measures may fall short in countering foreign-sourced propaganda. Skilled disinformation actors often find ways around such bans. Therefore, it's imperative to keep pace with technological advancements and understand potential approaches and strategies that could be used against Canada.

Methodology

The research evaluated peer-reviewed journal publications from academic studies and pertinent reports. This stage involved searching the literature for the phrases «misinformation», «disinformation,» and «malinformation,» together with the words «Canada» and «Canadians."
We then applied institutional analysis to examine the formal and informal rules and procedures of the institutions involved in policy-making.

Objectives

The objectives of this policy paper are as follows:

- To outline and enhance Canada's efforts to address MDM surrounding the Russian invasion of Ukraine;

- To provide a framework for stakeholders, including elected and public officials involved in the public policy decision-making process (e.g., government officials, members of Parliament, members of Indigenous governments, representatives of provincial legislatures, and municipal officials), to comprehend the goals and workflow of MDM campaigns; and

- To suggest an initial set of measures that may help with the detection and neutralization of any MDM campaign before it targets the information environment—thereby reducing its impact, and promoting public resilience to counter MDM.

Analysis

Regardless of the outcome of these attacks, the very fact that both local and foreign actors are waging MDM campaigns against internal consumers—particularly during elections, pandemic outbreaks, and war conflicts—is cause for alarm. MDM campaigns can have both immediate and long-term effects. However, quantifying their full impact can sometimes be challenging.

The immediate effects of MDM actions may include the following:

- Creating new societal splits by inciting disagreements over ideologies, politics, gender, race, and religion. This heightened tension may increase overall rates of violence, discrimination, bullying, and harassment. For example, spreading doubts and presenting multiple interpretations of events related to the war in Ukraine could create uncertainty.
- Generating and triggering certain emotions towards newsworthy issues, thus accelerating the spread of disinformation more rapidly than credible news. Cultivating a population that is more susceptible to propaganda enhances the effectiveness of manipulative narratives.
- Posing a severe risk to personal and public health. Health-related disinformation 'infodemic' campaigns can result in widespread mistrust of medical professionals' recommendations.
- Causing financial harm to citizens by inducing panic that leads to misguided financial decisions. For example, fostering fear and apprehension by emphasizing the potential nuclear threat.
- Damaging the reputations of individuals, governments, businesses, and other institutions. For instance, facilitating discussions on the perceived uselessness of supporting Ukraine and its people in their conflict with Russia.

MDM campaigns and strategies could also have detrimental long-term impacts on democratic societies. These long-term disinformation effects might:

- Undermine trust in democracy and its core values.
- Disrupt democratic order, the political system, and discredit democratic institutions, thus undermining the fundamental notions of truth and eroding trust in concrete evidence and logical reasoning—effectively subjectivizing the very concept of truth itself.
- Secure economic, intelligence, military, and strategic geopolitical advantages. For example, diminishing strategic military and humanitarian support provided to Ukraine, thereby weakening its position and stability and undermining the relations between Canada and Ukraine.
- Impose and align national interests with those of hostile actors. For example, minimizing the legal repercussions and potential future accountability for war crimes committed, thus reducing the standing of such crimes within the international community.

Due to the overall characteristics of the short and long-term effects of MDM operations, the Canadian government's existing measures against MDM campaigns, particularly in relation to the Russo-Ukrainian context, are extensive but fail to form a comprehensive and robust strategy. The strategy is marked by notable gaps, such as the lack of an integrated national approach that synergizes legislative initiatives, the strengthening of public resilience, efficient deployment of technology, and international collaboration. This implies a need for policy enhancements to ensure a more holistic and effective response to disinformation threats. The proposed policy improvements are:

- Assembling a specialized team to enhance Canada's ability to understand, monitor, and identify state-sponsored MDM from Russia and other countries (e.g., China, Iran, etc.).
- Creating a digital team that will track, analyze, and label the sources and narratives of Russian propaganda, using AI tools for analyzing text, photo, audio, and video formats of fakes. This includes supporting the creation of fact-checking tools to combat foreign propaganda.
- Strengthening the sanctions regime against the Russian state, Russian businesses, and individuals in Canada who spread Russian propaganda narratives.
- Censoring mass media sources that are owned or affiliated with Russian beneficiaries and are inclined to promote MDM narratives.
- Launching educational campaigns on detecting disinformation narratives for citizens and various stakeholders.
- Prohibiting the use of any recognizable symbols of the Russian war against Ukraine, in particular the St. George's ribbon, the special Russian war-tokens Z and V, and the flags of the unrecognized republics of the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) on Canadian territory, as

these are considered to promote hate speech and support for Russia's terrorist regime.

- Recognizing the current Russian state as a terrorist regime.

Recommendations

In response to the Ukraine crisis and related MDM issues from the Russian invasion, Canada needs a multi-faceted national strategy. It should encompass five core pillars: legislative action, public resilience, technological measures, hostile actor targeting, and international cooperation.

Legislative Measures:
- Implement laws criminalizing MDM that jeopardizes national security, public health, or democratic processes.
- Modify existing hate speech and violence incitement laws to incorporate MDM content that escalates ethnic, religious, or political tension.
- Mandate online platforms to regularly report their content moderation measures against MDM, ensuring transparency.
- Enhance privacy laws to avoid unauthorized personal data access, a potential MDM catalyst.

Public Resilience:
- Persist in public awareness efforts, teaching Canadians about MDM and ways to counteract it. Partner with educational institutions to infuse media literacy and critical thinking into all levels of curricula. Back research into the psychological and social aspects of MDM susceptibility, devising evidence-based interventions.

Technological Measures:
- Foster government, private sector, and academic collaborations to generate advanced technologies like AI and machine learning tools for real-time MDM identification and counteraction.
- Launch a national centre dedicated to MDM trend monitoring and analysis, providing early identification, warnings and coordinating responses to Kremlin's false information networks and narratives.
- Allocate ample resources and commit to AI solutions that can regularly both assess and reinforce Canadian government institutions' response to Russian MDM campaigns.

Hostile Actor Targeting:
- Boost intelligence and law enforcement proficiency to pinpoint and disrupt MDM campaigns conducted by domestic and foreign entities.
- Broaden sanctions against individuals, organizations, and state actors implicated in MDM activities against Canada or its allies.
- Fortify cybersecurity measures to defend critical infrastructure and sensitive data from MDM-related cyber-attacks.

International Cooperation:
- Engage with allies and international organizations to share intelligence, best practices, and technological resources for combating MDM.

Advocate for international norms and agreements that deter MDM and penalize culprits.
- This holistic strategy can help Canada effectively counter MDM related to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and other threats, thus preserving national security and democratic values. However, policy recommendations for the sections of Legislative Measures (1, 2), Building Public Resilience (1, 2), Targeting Hostile Actors (1, 2), and International Cooperation (1) may have unintended consequences that include limiting freedom of speech, creating a false consensus, political bias, increased censorship, misuse of power, reduced transparency, and collateral damage.

Conclusion

Addressing the challenge of MDM surrounding the Russian invasion of Ukraine requires a multifaceted legislative approach that combines public awareness and education, technological international cooperation, and support for independent media. By implementing these policy recommendations, Canada can contribute to countering MDM, promoting truth, and strengthening resilience against manipulation in the digital age.

Given Canada's significant scientific research capabilities, it must be a leader in employing AI technologies to detect, promptly notify, and effectively combat foreign propaganda within its territorial boundaries. By leveraging its expertise, Canada can position itself as a prominent advocate for AI-driven solutions in the ongoing battle against deceptive information dissemination.

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