

Countering Disinformation

Rapid Response Mechanism Canada
Centre for International Digital Policy

RRM Canada

- Team of 8 policy and data analysts, set up as a pilot in 2018
- Focussed on countering disinformation and information manipulation as key vectors of foreign interference
- Has two-fold mandate:
 - Monitor and detect foreign state sponsored interference online; during elections as part of the Security and Intelligence Threats to Elections Task Force (SITE)
 - Engage internationally, primarily through the G7 RRM (led and coordinated by RRM Canada) and the [REDACTED]

Current Monitoring Priorities

- Russian disinformation in the context of the war in Ukraine (bi-weekly situational reports) – this is part of a 6-part GAC strategy that also includes: communications, diplomatic engagement, sanctions, capacity building and international cooperation.
- PRC disinformation about Taiwan (new line of reporting, post-Speaker Pelosi visit and G7 call for the PRC to end military exercises in the Taiwan Strait)
- Gendered disinformation
- *Ad hoc* reporting (COVID 19, convoy protests, etc.)

International Engagement

- Reflects RRM Canada monitoring priorities
- G7 RRM
 - Annual Report on Disinformation
 - Support for German Presidency
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- Carnegie-led multi-stakeholder crisis network to counter Russian disinformation and support the integrity of the Ukrainian info environment
- Collective approaches vis-à-vis PRC (data analytics projects with Germany and the US)

Value Added of RRM Canada

- Provides additional situational awareness to decision makers (GRSP officers of online spaces)
- Supports communications and programming strategies both at home and internationally (through G7 RRM and)
- Acts as an early warning mechanism for colleagues working on disinformation files across GoC (during election cycles)
- Facilitates shared open source methodologies and threat assessment across like-minded governments (through G7 and other forums)
- Allows for cooperation with researchers and think tanks
- Demonstrates Canadian commitment by coordinating the G7 RRM

Next Steps

- Renewal and enhancement of RRM Canada (announced in March)
- Includes resources to build a dedicated Russia team by 2023 (announced in June)
- Will increase RRM Canada contingent from 8 to 15.
- Prepositioning to cover Indo-Pacific (Indo-Pacific Strategy)
- Deepen capacity to cover key hostile actors and issues
- Better leverage open source reporting for communications purposes
- Aim to strengthen G7 RRM response dimension
- Work with the Lab to support the establishment of norms

Upcoming Events

- Seminar on developing norms to counter disinformation – under the auspices of the Canada-EU Joint Ministerial Committee (September, 2022)
- Conference on emerging technologies and disinformation and G7 RRM meeting – under the auspices of the German G7 Presidency (October, 2022)
- Roundtable on Countering the Spread of State-Sponsored Disinformation around COVID-19 Vaccines (to meet Canada’s commitment to support the US-led Global Action Plan to End COVID-19, in particular, Line of Effort 3 specific to mis/disinformation (late November, 2022))

Key Trends in Disinformation

- Transnational, multi-dimensional and cross-platform
- Difficult to distinguish between foreign and domestic actors
- Foreign state actors leverage domestic polarising issues, conspiracies, and voices (and sometimes vice-versa)
- Coalescence/alignment of disinformation communities (pro-Kremlin, anti-vax, climate change denial, misogynist, etc.)
- Boundaries between public diplomacy and malign information manipulation are blurring (grey media sites, Wolf Warrior Diplomacy)
- Growing role of alternative social media platforms

Evolution of Russian Tactics Techniques and Procedures (TTPs)

- From the use of bots and trolls (2010) to *enabling* and amplifying extreme voices to polarize societies (2022)
- Part of a long-standing broader hybrid toolkit
- Relentless disinformation operations against Ukraine since 2014
- Since invasion in February 2022 state-attributed and affiliated disinformation operations have increased in scale, breadth, and geography
- Kremlin has suffocated independent information, arresting journalists and dismantling media infrastructure, especially in occupied territories of Ukraine, and banning or restricting access to social media.
- Russia has also increased its targeting of the Global South (namely Africa and Latin America).

Evolution of PRC TTPs

- Massive network of media assets, including: diplomatic corps on Twitter, state-controlled outlets, multi-lingual state-backed “influencers” on Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok and a network of diaspora news channels on WeChat and Weibo.
- Some of these outlets make clear their affiliation with Beijing, others carry out their work covertly on both U.S. and PRC based social media platforms.
- Beijing can move quickly to saturate social media platforms with a CCP-friendly editorial line, micro-target its message to a specific community, or marshal opposition to figures out of favor.
- Beijing has used both overt and covert tactics to voice its displeasure for candidates or political parties it deems unfavorable.