BRIEFING NOTE

TO:	**The Honourable Pascale St-Onge, Minister of Canadian Heritage**
RE:	**Canada's efforts for dealing with Mis/Disinformation & International Strategies**
FROM:	
COPIED:	
DATE:	20 March 2024
FILE #	N/A

For Information – Fact Sheet

Purpose

Last month, you requested more information on this subject. The Department has prepared the attached fact sheet for your information.

The fact sheet summarizes efforts by six Departments and agencies under four Ministers:
- Your Department:
  - Canadian Heritage -- Digital Citizen Initiative
- Prime Minister:
  - Privy Council Office -- Impact Canada
- Minister Leblanc:
  - Privy Council Office – Democratic Institutions
  - Public Safety Canada – National Counter-Foreign Interference Coordinator
  - Communications Security Establishment – Canadian Center for Cyber Security
  - Elections Canada – Electoral Integrity
- Minister Joly:
  - Global Affairs Canada – G7 Rapid Response Mechanism

It also summarizes international efforts:
- European Union's Digital Services Act
  - Requires Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs) and Very Large Online Search Engines (VLOSEs) to adhere to obligations for accountability, transparency, and requires that they assess and mitigate risk to address harms including disinformation, verified by independent audits, and participate in crisis and rapid response mechanisms.
  - Rules came into effect on February 17, 2024, and apply to platforms including:
    - VLOPs: Amazon, Aylo (Pornhub), Booking.com, LinkedIn, Facebook, Pinterest, Snapchat, Stripchat, TikTok, Twitter, XVideos and Wikipedia.
    - VLOSEs: Google Search, Bing.
- Australia's Voluntary Code of Practice on Disinformation and Misinformation
- Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development report

Further opportunities

- Department officials would be pleased to offer further information or briefings on these subjects.
- We could also set up a meeting or find communications opportunities with recipients with projects funded by PCH's Digital Citizen Contribution Program.

..../!Undefined Bookmark, [APG]

[APG]

FACT SHEET
CANADA'S EFFORTS FOR DEALING WITH MIS/DISINFORMATION &
INTERNATIONAL STRATEGIES

Context

- In response to the increase in false, misleading, and inflammatory disinformation published online and through social media, the Government of Canada has made it a priority to help equip citizens with the tools and skills needed to critically assess online information. Canada's work is in line with the global strategies being put in place by other countries to combat disinformation, emphasize transparency, adopt systemic approaches, and cooperate with civil societies and stakeholders.

Background

- Misinformation refers to news or information that is verifiably false, inaccurate, or misleading. Misinformation can quickly spread across the Internet when it is shared by readers and amplified through social media algorithms[1]. Disinformation is false information that is deliberately intended to mislead.

- According to a Statistics Canada Survey, in 2023, 59 percent of Canadians said they were very or extremely concerned about any type of misinformation online, and 43 percent felt it was getting harder to decipher online truth from fiction compared with three years earlier.

Canada's Efforts for Dealing with Mis/Disinformation

- There are eight units spread across six Government departments and agencies involved in the issue of online mis/disinformation. The Department of Canadian Heritage, Global Affairs Canada, Public Safety Canada, the Privy Council Office, Elections Canada, and the Canadian Security Establishment all lead activities pertaining to online disinformation.

Canadian Heritage – Digital Citizen Initiative

- Established in 2020, the Digital Citizen Initiative is a multi-component strategy aiming to support democracy and social inclusion in Canada by building citizen resilience against online disinformation and other online harms. It also supports a community of Canadian researchers that promote a healthy information ecosystem, to help Canadians and the Government understand online disinformation and its impact on Canadian society, and in turn build an evidence base to identify potential action and develop future policymaking.

- The Digital Citizen Contribution Program supports the priorities of the Digital Citizen Initiative by providing funding for activities to strengthen citizens' critical thinking and resilience towards online disinformation. It also supports research projects which aim to better understand disinformation as well as other online harms and their impacts in a Canadian context. The Digital Citizen Initiative has a joint research initiative with the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and provided multiyear funding for the Public Policy Forum's Digital Democracy Project and MediaSmarts' Media Literacy Week. The Digital Citizen Initiative also includes a multi-stakeholder engagement initiative aimed at building consensus among civil society, online platforms, and like-minded countries with respect to online content.

---

[1] The Daily — Concerns with misinformation online, 2023 (statcan.gc.ca)

.../!Undefined Bookmark, [APG]

[APG]

Privy Council Office – Democratic Institutions and Digital Communications Coordination Unit

- Privy Council Office - Democratic Institutions leads an integrated response to protect Canada's democratic institutions, including the federal electoral process; coordinates policy development across different government departments and agencies; and ensures a whole-of-society approach to addressing foreign interference in democratic processes and disinformation. It facilitates interdepartmental collaboration and information sharing and helps to align strategies, research, and action among relevant stakeholders. The Privy Council Office's Digital Communications Coordination Unit coordinates the digital communications channels across the Government and provides direction and advice to departmental communications teams regarding communications approaches to mis-and disinformation.

Impact Canada – Impact and Innovation Unit (housed within the Privy Council Office)

- Announced in Budget 2017, Impact Canada is a government-wide effort that helps departments accelerate the adoption of innovative funding approaches to deliver meaningful results to Canadians. In 2020, Impact Canada partnered with Health Canada and the Public Health Agency of Canada to study disinformation trends in Canada related to the pandemic and how to mitigate its effects, resulting in new behavioural science research on the subject.

Global Affairs Canada

- Global Affairs Canada houses the G7 Rapid Response Mechanism, which serves as the permanent secretariat to the G7 Rapid Response Mechanism in Canada. Rapid Response Mechanism monitors the digital information environment for foreign information manipulation, including state-sponsored disinformation, and produces open-source data analysis related to foreign policy priorities.

Public Safety Canada

- The National Counter-Foreign Interference Coordinator is housed within Public Safety's National and Cyber Security Branch. While the Coordinator's office focuses on foreign interference more broadly, one of the ways threats can manifest themselves is through coordinated and sophisticated disinformation campaigns. Public Safety Canada works with key allies, including our G7 and Five Eyes partners, to collectively address various aspects of cybersecurity, including malign activities like state-sponsored disinformation.

Communications Security Establishment – Canadian Centre for Cyber Security

- The Canadian Centre for Cyber Security, housed within the Communications Security Establishment, collaborates with various government agencies, the private sector, and international partners to monitor and analyze disinformation campaigns, share threat intelligence, and provide guidance to protect critical infrastructure.

Elections Canada

- Elections Canada takes measures to safeguard the integrity of the electoral process. It monitors and investigates potential instances of online disinformation during election periods, educates voters about disinformation risks, and promotes transparency in political advertising.

…./!Undefined Bookmark, [APG]

[APG]

International Strategies

- Various countries are implementing or discussing laws that focus on transparency, such as the UK's Online Safety Bill and pending US legislation aimed at platform accountability and transparency. One of these strategies is the European Union's *Digital Service Act*.

European Union: Digital Service Act

- The *Digital Service Act* is a new set of European Union-wide rules for digital services acting as intermediaries for consumers and goods, services, and content. The *Digital Service Act* creates common but tailored (tiered) obligations and accountability rules for online services available to European users to counter the dissemination of illegal content and in certain cases also harmful content. Specific additional obligations apply to platforms with over 45 million average monthly active users in the European Union (10 percent of the European Union's population), the so-called Very large online platforms or Very large online search engines. In April 2023, the European Commission designated 19 operators as Very large online platforms and Very large online search engines. A second set of three Very large online platforms was designated in December 2023. The *Digital Service Act* obligations start to apply to Very large online platforms and Very large online search engines four months after their designation.

- Enforcement of the *Digital Service Act* is a shared responsibility between the member states and European Commission. The *Digital Service Act* required member states to designate a Digital Service Coordinator as the national competent authority for the supervision and enforcement of the *Digital Service Act* by February 17, 2024. The Digital Service Coordinators will be required to cooperate and coordinate amongst themselves and with the European Commission, including to respond to crisis situations. Since February 17, 2024, all online intermediaries need to comply with their respective set of due-diligence obligations under the *Digital Service Act*. The European Commission supervises the Very large online platforms and Very large online search engines in relation to the additional obligations that are imposed on them because of their reach while the other obligations are supervised by the Digital Service Coordinators. Fines (to be set by member states or by the European Commission depending on the competence) can be up to six percent of the provider's global annual turnover.

- The *Digital Service Act* aims to protect fundamental rights online, such as freedom of expression, information, and opinion, and to tackle the spread of disinformation and other societal risks. The Act requires online platforms to have easy-to-use flagging mechanisms for illegal content, transparent and fair terms and conditions, effective internal complaint-handling systems, and out-of-court dispute settlement mechanisms.

- The *Digital Service Act* also requires Very large online platforms or Very large online search engines to perform risk assessments on their services and to implement risk mitigation measures to address potential harms to society, such as disinformation, illegal content, or cyber violence. They also must undergo independent audits and comply with voluntary crisis protocols to coordinate rapid responses to disinformation. Furthermore, the *Digital Service Act* introduces a crisis response mechanism for cases where Very large online platforms or Very large online search engines are used for the rapid spread of disinformation that poses a serious threat to public health, security, or democracy.

..../!Undefined Bookmark, [APG]

[APG]

- The *Digital Service Act* makes advertising more transparent, as disinformation campaigns have utilized targeted advertising on digital services, ensuring that it is clearly labelled, and that information is available about who is placing the ad and why users are seeing it. It also introduces a ban on advertising that is targeted using protected data or aimed at minors.

- The *Digital Service Act* encourages platforms to sign up to the voluntary code of practice on disinformation. This is a self-regulatory agreement among online platforms, advertisers, and other relevant actors to fight against the spread of online disinformation in the European Union. It contains 44 commitments and 128 specific measures in different domains. The Code complements the broader regulatory framework in the Europe Union.

Australian Voluntary Code of Practice on Disinformation and Misinformation

- The voluntary Code of Practice on Disinformation and Misinformation, overseen by the Australian Communications and Media Authority, aims to mitigate harms from false and misleading content on digital platforms. Australia's draft 2023 misinformation laws also aim to address challenges posed by undisclosed Artificial Intelligence in discerning truth, which threatens social institutions and credible news, but risk impinging on free speech. Critics highlight the need for clearer definitions of misinformation and disinformation, a more stringent standard for "reasonable harm," and concerns over content authorized by the government being exempt. This reflects a broader international challenge, as seen with the European Union's provisional agreement on the *Artificial Intelligence Act*, which proposes a risk-based approach to Artificial Intelligence regulation.

Summary of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development Report

- The Facts Not Fakes: Tackling Disinformation, Strengthening Information Integrity report evaluates global efforts to counter misinformation and disinformation, guiding governments to uphold trustworthy information and democratic freedoms. This report incorporates feedback received from the 12 members of the Steering Group of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development DIS/MIS Resource Hub and independent external experts.

- This report is the first baseline assessment that presents how governments are upgrading their governance measures and institutional architecture to support an enabling environment where reliable information can thrive, while ensuring the vigilant protection of freedom of expression and human rights. It also examines the synergies between different policy dimensions to provide a better understanding of the conditions that contribute to a healthy information system.

- The report highlights that countries are reevaluating their policies to combat disinformation without compromising democratic freedoms. This new reality has therefore acted as a catalyst for governments to explore more closely the constructive roles they can play in reinforcing the integrity of the information space – namely, how to support environments more favourable for researched and fact checked, trustworthy, and reliable information necessary for the functioning of democracy.

.../!Undefined Bookmark, [APG]

[APG]

- Despite varying national contexts, the report highlights common priorities and strategies. It advocates for a shift from piecemeal to systemic approaches in addressing disinformation, emphasizing the need for coordinated, evidence-backed policies and continuous evaluation of their impact. Setting specific timelines for policy implementation and assessment is critical, with immediate measures to counter disinformation, especially during elections, complementing broader, long-term initiatives aimed at addressing underlying issues. These comprehensive strategies should encourage the development of a more robust information environment and invest in enhancing societal resilience and empowering citizens.

- The report concludes that governments alone cannot tackle these challenges. Cross-country learning and cooperation can lead to more effective policies in democracies facing similar problems. Moreover, enhancing information integrity requires a concerted effort from all stakeholders—businesses, media, academia, civil society—to ensure public access to accurate, diverse, and timely information.

Prepared by: [_____], Digital and Creative Marketplace Frameworks

.../!Undefined Bookmark, [APG]