

## LATEST INFORMATION INCIDENT (UPDATED 9/20): An Inflection Point on the Current State Russian-Directed Foreign-Interference Operations

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# Incident Update 2 | An Inflection Point on the Current State Russian-Directed Foreign-Interference Operations

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### Key takeaways:

1. Russian goals remain the amplification of narratives that suit their interests, especially where messages promote fear and social division.
2. Russia is using social influencers ("trusted voices") rather than artificially generated and automated content. Rather than an innovation, this is a return to prior practices.
3. Canada may not be directly targeted, but it is implicated through our closely interlinked information ecosystem with the US, Canadian influencers participating in foreign interference activities directly and indirectly and where Canada serves as a foil for preferred Russian narratives.

The threat of foreign interference before a US election re-emerged in the past few weeks with the news that the US Department of Justice (DOJ) indicted two Russians (both employees of state-broadcaster RT) for covertly funding and directing a media company to further Moscow's preferred narratives. Shortly thereafter, the DOJ announced that it had seized 32 internet domains used in Russian government-directed foreign malign influence campaigns. The accompanying affidavit asserted that Russian entities are keeping a list of approximately 2,800 media organizations and social media influencers, spanning 81 countries.

As we continue our ongoing investigation, we find ourselves at an inflection point where reflection is needed on how this case fits into the bigger picture. Is this a new-form of interference or is it simply a modification to ongoing, more traditional interference tactics? Is Canada a target or do we at least play a role? To address these questions, we ask the broader question: what does the indictment say about the current state of Russian-directed foreign-interference operations today?

We observe four main things:

### ***1. The goals remain the same***

Although their tactics have varied over the years, the overall Russian objective is constant: the promotion of divisive narratives that sow discord in the West, and promote Russian interests. This includes:

- undermining citizen confidence in democratic governance;
- amplifying politically divisive issues;
- eroding trust between citizens;
- elected officials and democratic institutions;
- popularizing Russian foreign policy agendas; and

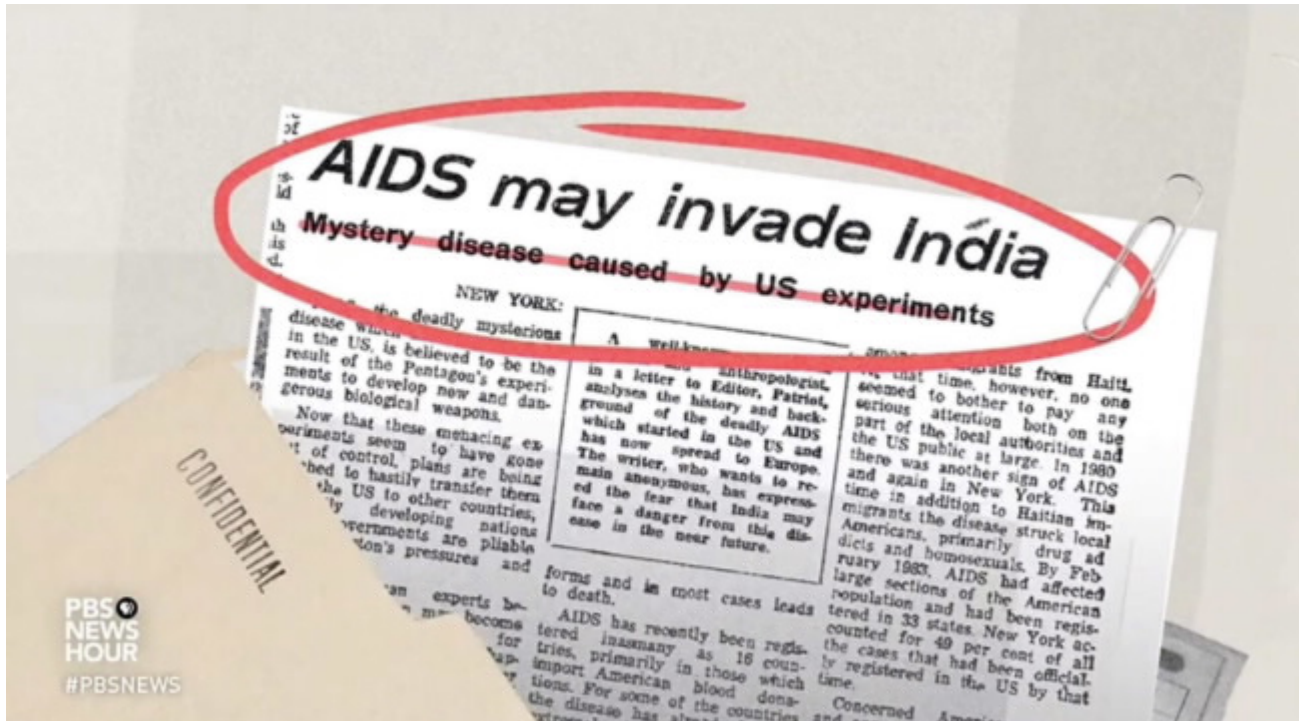
- creating general distrust and confusion over information sources that blur the lines between fact and fiction.

## **2. “Trusted Voices” over bots**

Importantly, Russia does not create these narratives but seeks out voices which already have an audience and articulate these views. Many of the influencers amplified by Russia sincerely believe what they are saying; indeed, many can attribute their influence through their authenticity and ability to speak to the emotions and fears of their audience. Meanwhile, there have also been cases of free-lance writers unwittingly being hired to produce articles where political angles may be inserted later.

## **3. This is a return to form rather than an evolution**

While much has been made of the use of “bots” during the 2016 US Presidential election, the use of real influencers rather than artificial and automated accounts is more of a return to form than an evolution in tactics. For decades during the Cold War Russians sought to create front groups and sponsor friendly voices, such as the Canadian-Soviet Friendship Society, to influence Canadians. They also worked to place articles with their preferred narratives in left-leaning publications to sway public opinion. Infamously, they propagated a false story that the United States created HIV/AIDS in a biological weapons laboratory that would be published in up to 30 newspapers, including the Montreal Gazette.



Source: [The long history of Russian disinformation targeting the U.S](#)

While these campaigns may have only been marginally effective during the Cold War, social media has allowed for far greater and faster reach.

#### **4. When it comes to Russian foreign interference, Canada is collateral, participant and example**

Canadian intelligence agencies believe that our democratic processes are not directly targeted by Russian online foreign interference campaigns, yet this case acts as a harsh reminder that Canada is not only affected, but also implicated. First, as our information ecosystem is so heavily interlinked with the United States, there is obvious carry-over in terms of narratives on our political discourse. A 2021 study found that Canadian users on Twitter (now X) followed “far more accounts based in the United States than in Canada.” Moreover “for every tweet retweeted from a Canada-based user, 10 tweets are retweeted from U.S.-based users.”

Second, as a close reading of the FBI indictment shows, Canadian influencers are allegedly directly and indirectly involved in Russia’s efforts to engage in foreign

interference. This includes the owner of Tenant media and one of the paid influencers.

Finally, Russian controlled entities are opportunistic and will amplify narratives about Canada, especially when stories can be used to make wider points applicable to other Western countries, and/or when the country can be used as a convenient foil and morality tale for the United States. There is strong evidence to assert that this was the case during the February 2022 Convoy, where RT's coverage emphasized clashes between protestors and police. It "framed the protestors as victims of an aggressive government" and repeatedly used phrases such as "dictatorship" and "crackdown" to focus criticism on the Canadian government and to a lesser extent, a supposed global elite. Canadian Convoy supporters eagerly shared this content, while RT's coverage heavily featured Canadian far-right influencers and protesters. This approach not only amplified support for the Convoy, but also portrayed Canada as a repressive regime which Americans should fear in their own country.

## Recommendations

For over a decade researchers have examined the problem of disinformation, misinformation and foreign interference but have struggled to find practical solutions that are compatible with the principles of free speech in a democratic society. Yet the events of September 2024 suggest three key takeaways that may contribute to combatting malign foreign interference.

The first takeaway is **transparency**: by coming forward the US Department of Justice was not only able to disrupt the Tenet Media operations, but also provide a useful example and case study for researchers and journalists. Being bold and directly communicating to citizens the kinds of threats that the intelligence community is seeing helps to dispel the murkiness in which disinformation operations thrive.

The second takeaway is **timeliness**: one of the criticisms of the US intelligence community in the aftermath of the 2016 election is that they knew Russia was

engaged in foreign interference but did not act. This hesitation may no longer be the case: authorities have been quick to attribute attempts to hack and leak Trump campaign documents to the media to Iran, shortly after media organizations reported receiving suspicious emails containing documents. While building a criminal case may take time, notifying the public of these kinds of events as soon as possible may be more significant than providing an account in a post-election report.

The third takeaway is **enforcement**: while many of the activities around foreign interference and disinformation campaigns may be murky, some involve crimes for which individuals may be prosecuted. This includes money laundering, sanctions avoidance, hacking into computer systems and, in the case of the United States (and soon Canada) failing to register as a foreign agent. While prosecuting individuals based overseas may seem a waste of time, it imposes costs for individuals who may one day seek to travel abroad and exposes them globally as agents working on behalf of a foreign power who one day may seek to target other democracies abroad.

In summary, while countering the threat of foreign interference and disinformation is difficult, Canadian authorities can learn from this example: transparency, timeliness and enforcement are important strategies the government can employ to counter disinformation and foreign interference. But it requires a willingness to take risks, to act quickly, and to ensure that Canadian law-enforcement has the capacity to act – all significant challenges for cautious policymakers, especially during an election. In the end, the opportunity is there, Russia is just hoping we won't take it.

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