

Canadian Intelligence: The Case of Media Manipulation and the CSIS Agenda

CSIS report on media disinformation conflates activists with conspiracy theorists

By [Abigail Curlew](#)

Global Research, August 28, 2018

[Socionocular](#) 15 May 2018

Region: [Canada](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

Note to readers: please click the share buttons above

Accusations of fake news across the political spectrum have transformed a very concerning issue into a weapon of delegitimization. A recent report published by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) titled [Who Said What? The Security Challenges of Modern Disinformation](#) have conflated anti-globalization activists, who oppose military intervention, environmental destruction and global labour exploitation with conspiracy theorists and “foreign nationals” in the sharing of disinformation.

The report, which emerged out of a workshop organized by CSIS for the purposes of academic outreach, reflects a common attitude that state security and intelligence agencies have towards social and environmental justice activists—that of flippant dismissal and demonization. Though the spy agency claims that this report does not reflect an official position, **it does reveal some logics underlying the surveillance of political activists**. The report had obscured any of the workshops participants or the reports authors under the [Chatham House Rule](#).

The immense popularity of social media and its omnipresence in how we communicate and share information has transformed the social and political landscape in ways that are only now being unveiled.

[As a controversial experiment conducted by psychologists has demonstrated](#), people’s emotions can be remotely shaped through computer algorithms over social media platforms. Called “moral contagion,” psychologists working with Facebook secretly manipulated the news feeds of close to 700 000 Facebook users and silently influenced how they express emotions online. [The idea of mass manipulation has recently overtaken the news cycle with the Cambridge Analytica leaks, revealing the role of socially hacking user’s political sensibilities to aid Trump’s election win](#). Clearly, there is a case for concern with how social media landscapes can be used as tools of surveillance and manipulation, this is especially concerning when groups use a combination of bots, social media exploits, and fake news to manipulate people on mass for political gain.

Edward Snowden aptly framed the situation in a recent tweet, “[Business that make money by collecting and selling detailed records of private lives were once plainly described as “surveillance companies.” Their rebranding as “social media” it the most successful](#)

[deception since the Department of War became the Department of Defense](#)". In other words, we've been duped. The tools we use to organize our social life are being used against us for profit, surveillance, and policing.

In the CSIS report, the authors collapse any distinction between activists, conspiracy theorists, and hostile foreign nationals into the category of "independent emergent activists" who are understood as "agents of disinformation". This report asserts that activists distrustful of Western governments engage in the amplification of conspiracy theorists from the political left and right and are susceptible to being hijacked by foreign state disinformation organizations.

Instead of providing a nuanced approach to understanding emerging digital threats in our social media landscape, the report conflates the political lefts opposition to violent military interventions and the exploitation of the global south to online conspiracy theories. There is a big difference between asserting that foreign nationals are able to influence how activists share news stories and activists also being implicit in producing disinformation.

Political and military violence overseas are hardly half baked conspiracies, for an instance, [there have been legitimate concerns with unceremonious killing of innocent civilians overseas via US drone strikes](#). According to an investigation run by The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, [in a staggering 4,737 strikes to date, there have been between 737-1,551 civilians killed and barely any media coverage](#). Opposition to such violence inflicted by the Western World through the "war on terror" isn't merely ideological activist "propaganda", it is the expression of legitimate concerns that non-Western human life can so easily be rendered disposable by Western nation-states.

CSIS has muddied the water of the very issues it sought to address. At best, it provides vague and ambiguous background information that is unable to distinguish between activists and trolls. At worse, they have contributed to their own campaign of misinformation by not providing sober nuances of complex issues in social and environmental justice.

This is not surprising. It's within the interests of Canadian state security and intelligence agencies to slander and dismantle the legitimacy of claims from activists. [Both CSIS and the RCMP have a long history of spying on activists who are viewed as a threat to either the government or "critical infrastructure."](#)

With that said we can't minimize the impacts of disinformation and fake news on our media landscape. These concerns signal the emergence of forms of media manipulation that can be deployed on mass while targeting an individual's specific tastes and dispositions.

[According to a report published by the Data & Society Research Institute, there is still no legal or political consensus on a definition for fake news or how to approach the issue](#). There are also concerns around the question of who gets to draw the distinctions around what is true and false, acceptable or propaganda. They offer a nuanced approach to understanding the context from which fake news emerges, and how we might collectively approach mediating its negative impacts. And most importantly, they do so in a way that is careful not to throw activists under the bus.

As the report observes,

"With 'fake news,' the risk is not necessarily that it will overtake real news, but

that democracy itself might drown in information.”

If we are to approach this issue, **we need to be careful not to fall into a state policing bias that privileges security concerns over the ability to engage in political dissent, whistleblowing, and holding the power to account.**

*

***Abigail Curlew** is a PhD student of the sociology of surveillance at Carleton University, a freelance and independent journalist, and an feminist activist. She writes about (trans)feminism, surveillance, security, and the cultural politics of the Internet. Follow me on Medium: <https://medium.com/@abigail.curlew>*

The original source of this article is [Socionocular](#)
Copyright © [Abigail Curlew](#), [Socionocular](#), 2018

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Abigail Curlew](#)

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: publications@globalresearch.ca

www.globalresearch.ca contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: publications@globalresearch.ca