Five ways for governments to better tackle foreign disinformation

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Responding to foreign disinformation poses many challenges. [Recent revelations about foreign interference](#) in Canada illustrate some of them.

Malign foreign entities and witting and unwitting domestic officials have complex roles that are in constant flux. An uncertain government is paralyzed by [partisanship and communication problems](#). Both [foreign interference](#) and government confusion threaten to further erode fledgling [public confidence](#) in government institutions.

My forthcoming article, [to be published soon, examines how the Canadian federal government is addressing Russian disinformation pertaining to the war in Ukraine](#). It reveals the benefits, limits and potential dangers in government responses. It also builds on [my earlier analysis of Canadian responses](#) to foreign [disinformation](#) in general to provide lessons for how to better address foreign disinformation overall.

Focus on Russia

After [Russia annexed Crimea in 2014](#), Canada's security and [intelligence agencies](#) warned Canadians about the reach and potential harm of Russian disinformation.

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, it has been [widely documented](#) that Russian entities, among others, have manipulated information on the war in Ukraine and within the larger geopolitical conflict between Russia and the West.

The Canadian government portrays Russia's deliberate disinformation, as well as inadvertent misinformation, [as existential threats](#) to the national security and democratic integrity of Ukraine, Canada and their allies.

This portrayal is aligned with government's interests to unite Canadians in support of Ukraine in the war. It also contributes to a rare, shared perception of threat among Canadians, bureaucrats and decision-makers.

In this context, the government has taken new foreign policy and security

efforts to address Russia's deliberate disinformation and more generally, its information manipulation.

Today, alongside its allies, [Canada acts to bolster Ukraine's security and warfare communications](#) as well as its democratic resilience. Many of these efforts save lives by helping Ukraine's military and its civilians to better obtain and share accurate information.

Safeguarding Canadian democracy

Other Canadian efforts have focused internally on protecting Canada's democracy. The government has sponsored actions at both individual and societal levels to strengthen democratic resilience. [It has launched institutional initiatives across departments and agencies, as well as internationally, to counter Russian efforts](#). These have improved government monitoring, reporting, sharing information and have helped to better co-ordinate responses.

Most controversially, Canada has [blocked Russian media outlets](#) and [sanctioned "disinforming agents"](#) to signal its discontent to the Russian regime.

[But my research on deterrence and disinformation](#) warns that some of the initiatives that were designed to communicate deterrence and show solidarity with Ukraine may paradoxically backfire and fuel mistrust of governments.

That's because blocking and sanctioning initiatives can be interpreted as governments interfering with freedom of speech. Also, when not uniformly applied to all disinformants, they can breed cynicism.

Overall, the government's substantial ad hoc actions in this area have not yet led to robust policies and lasting changes. Government actions have

been limited by the scale, complexity and constant evolution of modern disinformation. Governments need to work more with societal and [international organizations](#) to manage the challenge.

Responses to Russian disinformation have been more substantial than towards the manipulations of other foreign states, but there is no overarching and overall accountable organization. This is despite the [Protecting Democracy Unit](#), housed at the Privy Council Office and accountable to Public Safety.

Other promising steps include the creation of a [National Foreign Interference Coordinator](#) and [Bill C-70](#), which recently received royal assent and introduces the Foreign Influence Transparency and Accountability Act and other legislative amendments.

Five measures to take now

These may add to the government's toolkit. However, there is no long-term ethical strategy. Disinformation is context-specific and constantly evolving. Responses are often political.

Acknowledging these facts, my research has implications for government responses to foreign disinformation in general. Here are five ways forward to help tackle the problem:

1. Developing effective policies requires a unified mindset that foreign disinformation is an important challenge and that urgent action must be taken. That means raising awareness in a transparent fashion with quality and contextualized information. The government could outline what further actions are feasible, how effectiveness will be judged and consider unintended consequences.
2. There must be clear and transparent communication—among the

government, the public, different government departments and agencies, public servants and decision-makers. There is an opportunity to rethink the threshold for sharing information in Canada and to more openly and consistently share information to whatever extent possible.

3. Tackling disinformation requires whole-of-government co-ordination at home and in coalitions abroad. The exemplary co-ordination achieved through Canada's Global Affairs' [Rapid Response Mechanism](link) has until recently been focused mostly on Russia. That could be expanded, and its achievements replicated within other departments (for example, the military), while deepening international collaborations and focusing on new ways to leverage AI and open-source intelligence.

4. The public must be reassured that any blocking and sanctioning is administered fairly, consistently and transparently. The effects should be carefully assessed. Space for debate and dissent must be protected in order to preserve trust.

5. The government could develop long-term social resiliency by drawing on [civil society](link) to provide more tools and skills; for example, in digital literacy at the grassroots level. It could further encourage civil society organizations to come up with their own original solutions and partnerships to combat disinformation.

These suggestions are backed up by the recent [National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians](link) and [Public Inquiry into Foreign Interference in Federal Electoral Processes and Democratic Institutions](link) findings about covert targeting in Canada.

Canada's government and society could benefit from having a more comprehensive framework to protect the information space, including from foreign disinformation and interference. This must be done without undermining the principles of freedom of speech and with appropriate oversight and accountability.