Fighting Online Hate and Disinformation

Policy Recommendations on Online Hate

Horrific events in the last century have demonstrated that words matter. Hateful and deceptive words can lead directly to violent actions—as we have seen with the Ukrainian Holodomor; the Jewish Holocaust; the Armenian Genocide; the Rwandan Genocide; as well as the more recent persecution of the Yazidi people in Iraq and of Tatars in Russia-occupied Crimea.

We must be vigilant in identifying and exposing online hate and targeted disinformation that has the potential to incite violence or promote injustice against ethno-cultural, racial, religious and other identifiable groups. The rapid proliferation of social media and online communications has made this task more urgent than ever for today's policy-makers.
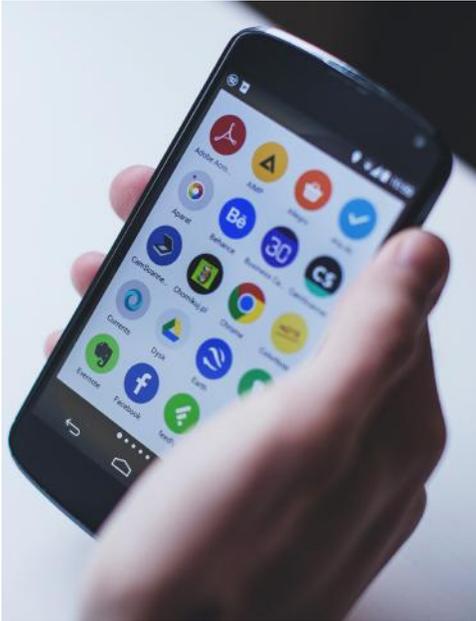
The Ukrainian community in Canada has experienced an increasing volume of targeted online operations in the form of organized disinformation. This sophisticated information warfare—as part of the total Russia's war on Ukraine—is intended to undermine our community by distorting historical truths and creating "alternative facts," sowing division, and weakening support for democratic institutions.

Russia's information warfare reaches far beyond the Ukrainian Canadian community; disinformation activities have targeted Canadian media, decision-makers, civil society organizations, and other groups. According to a recent report by the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, "a survey of 17,847 tweets from 14 pro-Kremlin accounts where articles and memes are frequently retweeted, including by the Russian Embassy in Canada, reveals that the vast majority of shared content is linked to Russian state media, and extreme left and right conspiracy sites." Russia's trolls and bots posting as impartial Canadians are active on all social media platforms and knowingly promote false stories of criminal activity, conspiracy theories, and accusations of xenophobia against pro-Ukrainian public figures.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

- Define Online Hate and Disinformation
- Advance a National Strategy
- Strengthen Cyber-Security
- Hold Social Media Platforms to Account
- Remove Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik from Canadian Airwaves

Multiple think-tanks in Canada, the US and the EU have established that these malign influence operations are not specific to one platform, one actor or one targeted group. Information warfare is a global problem; interference in democratic elections has been confirmed in the United States, Europe, and Latin America. Its intent is to sow division within and between western democracies and alliances; subvert international institutions; erode public trust and social cohesion; and ultimately end the rules-based order established following the Second World War.

The UCC proposes a series of recommendations to define, identify, and monitor online hate and disinformation campaigns in Canada, to strengthen Canda's cyber-security infrastructure and to work together with traditional media as well as social media networks to ensure that online hate and disinformation is identified and curbed.

The rapid proliferation of online hate and targeted disinformation needs to be addressed by today's policy-makers

Recommendations

Define Online Hate and Disinformation

The first step in addressing the threat of online hate and disinformation is to define these activities for what they are—an attempt to undermine western democratic and social values.

The UCC calls on the Government of Canada to recognize and define Russian disinformation activities as a subversive and deceptive form of communication, with the potential to cross over into online hate.

Advance a National Strategy

The Ukrainian Canadian Congress along with the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs (CIJA) and a diverse group of Canadian organizations, call on the Government of Canada to formulate a national strategy to combat online hate and disinformation which includes at least four core elements: defining hate, tracking hate, preventing hate and intervening to stop hate.

Strengthen Cyber-Security

Budget 2019 proposes "to strengthen the cyber security of Canada's critical infrastructure with $144.9 million over five years and long measures to further strengthen and safeguard Canada's democratic institutions." As the Government of Canada introduces a new cyber-systems framework, the UCC will continue to advocate for a

effective response to cyber attacks from Russia on our democracy and public institutions. The number and complexity of these attacks are likely to grow as the 2019 General Election draws nearer. The UCC will continue to work with both Ukrainian and Canadian institutions, along with think tanks and other organizations working to fight disinformation and to identify and expose fake news and propaganda.

Hold Social Media Platforms to Account

The UCC supports recent statements from the Canadian government that it may consider strategies for action in cases where social-media networks fail to remove hate speech from their platforms. The UCC urges the Government of Canada to work swiftly and comprehensively, in concert with industry stakeholders, to eliminate online hate from social media networks, including Russian disinformation campaigns that knowingly promulgate hatred or aggression against Ukraine and Ukrainians. The Canadian government should also require platforms to clearly identify automated social media accounts, known as bots.

Remove Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik from Canadian Airwaves

Russia Today (RT), Sputnik and other Russian state-sponsored television propaganda is a serious threat to the integrity of impartial news programming in Canada. The UK broadcasting regulator, Ofcom, is currently considering removing Russia Today (RT) from British airwaves due to repeated breaches of impartiality. The UCC supports the immediate de-bundling of RT and similar disinformation broadcasts from basic cable packages as the first step toward the eventual removal of such broadcasts from Canadian airwaves. We believe that these networks are in contravention of the Television Broadcasting Regulations, 1987, as licensees are prohibited from broadcasting false or misleading news under section 5(1)(d). ∎