

THE AGE OF DISINFORMATION

No, you cannot afford to ignore the disinformation crisis:

A call to action for Canadian magazines

By Alice Matthews and Dr. Julie Posetti

INTRODUCTION

If I were an agent of disinformation and I was trying to push something, I would actually put magazines in my whole campaign, because if something gets picked up in a magazine, it's almost like laying an Easter Egg. A year later you can point to it and say 'well, look actually this magazine wrote about it'. Dr. Claire Wardle, Executive Director, First Draft¹

It is not only breaking news websites and high-profile global media brands that are vulnerable to disinformation in its various manifestations. The magazine industry is also at significant risk, including in Canada. In fact, some experts suggest that the common features of magazines—niche themes, loyal audiences, longer deadlines and shelf life—might make them particularly attractive disinformation targets. So, it is essential that Canadian magazines assess their vulnerabilities with regard to disinformation and attempt to insulate against them.

This whitepaper was commissioned by Magazines Canada to explore not just the risks confronting Canadian magazines in the 'Age of Disinformation'², but also the opportunities for insulating and inoculating the magazine industry and its audiences against the pernicious impacts of viral disinformation, which has acknowledged implications for democracy³.

The disinformation pandemic as it applies to magazines—as distinct from the daily news cycle—has been significantly understudied. But disinformation is already seeping into “slow journalism”⁴—through attacks on magazine columnists doing the work of debunking false stories, or polluting information ecosystems to the point that audiences struggle to differentiate between verifiable information shared in the public interest, and what's just toxic waste. It's therefore up to magazines

¹ Dr. Wardle was interviewed for this white paper on 21 January 2020

² This whitepaper is a product of a Canadian Government-funded Magazines' Canada initiative called “Magazine Strategies in the Age of Disinformation” <https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/news/2019/07/backgrounder--helping-citizens-critically-assess-and-become-resilient-against-harmful-online-disinformation.html>

³ For a working understanding of the manifestation of the global disinformation crisis, along with its causes and consequences for journalism, see *Journalism, Fake News and Disinformation* (Iretton & Posetti 2018). Free to download here in multiple languages, including English, French, Spanish, Chinese, Arabic and Russian: <https://en.unesco.org/fightfakenews>

⁴ For a discussion of 'slow journalism' see Peter Laufer's (2014) *Slow News: A Manifesto for the Critical News Consumer*

themselves to build awareness and share knowledge about the ways in which the crisis is evolving, and how it manifests.

Regardless of the size or scope of a magazine, complacency is not an option. Niche themes and loyal audiences make magazines ripe targets for disinformation agents, and the potential impacts of viral disinformation or orchestrated disinformation campaigns on their operations or their readers should not be underestimated. This becomes more important as techniques of deception become more sophisticated and disinformation is monetized on an industrial scale. This is a reality recognized by Charles Grandmont, editor of news magazine *L'actualité* who was interviewed for this whitepaper. He said the impacts of disinformation on the Canadian magazine industry are a major concern. But this should not be a concern limited to news magazines, as acknowledged by *Electric Autonomy Canada* Publisher Nino Di Cara, who was also interviewed for this whitepaper. "It's a reality of life for every industry," Di Cara said. "The magazine industry, like any publishing operation, has an extra special responsibility as providers of information."

First Draft's Executive Director Claire Wardle acknowledged that most of us are ill-prepared to deal with the vulnerabilities that increase the risks of being preyed on by purveyors of disinformation or being caught in their webs. "And, I think if we haven't thought about it, then agents of disinformation have," she said.

This reality demands conscious engagement with the causes and consequences of the disinformation crisis—no matter how small your publication, nor how niche or innocuous its content—and upskilling to help defend against the problem.

However, this whitepaper is not just a call for defensive action in response to a serious threat, it is also designed to open up room for innovative responses to disinformation that build editorial expertise, expand reporting repertoires, directly engage audiences in the fight back and help deepen trust.

Approach to the research

This whitepaper maps developments in information pollution, its vectors and its manifestation by combining a review of current literature (including industry, academic and intergovernmental research) with interviews (email and audio) of Canadian magazine editors, publishers and

journalists, along with international disinformation experts and representatives of industry bodies.⁵

Of the seventeen Canadian magazine titles the authors contacted for this paper, nine responded: three agreed to interviews (*L'actualité*, *Up Here* and *Electric Autonomy Canada*); two declined participation due to time pressures and lack of capacity (*This Magazine* and *Shameless*); and four reported that disinformation was not a big issue for their magazine (*UPPERCASE*, *Vie Des Arts*, *Asparagus*, and *Annex Business Media*). These titles were sourced from a list of contacts provided by Magazines Canada including a mix of digital, consumer, arts and literary and B2B (Business to Business) titles.

Additionally, the following expert actors working to combat disinformation from within journalism, and through assistance provided to journalism, were interviewed for this whitepaper. They are:

1. Craig Silverman, Media Editor, BuzzFeed
2. Dr. Claire Wardle, Executive Director, First Draft
3. Fergus Bell, Founder, Fathom
4. Cherilyn Ireton, Executive Director, World Editors Forum (WAN-IFRA)
5. Andrew Yates, Managing Editor, Huffington Post Canada

This whitepaper is divided into six chapters which cover:

1. A new way of thinking about disinformation that expands beyond the realms of electoral processes, foreign bots and breaking news;
2. The manifestation of the disinformation problem in Canada and responses to it
3. The state of the Canadian magazine industry and the relevance of the disinformation crisis to it;
4. Case studies in disinformation impacts from Canadian magazines;
5. Potential vulnerabilities and weaknesses identified in the magazine industry regarding exposure to information pollution or 'information disorder'⁶ and the identification of

⁵The authors draw on inputs from 14 expert actors, including nine magazine editors and publishers (out of 17 contacted) and five interviews with Canadian journalists and international experts.

⁶Wardle, C & Derakhshan, H. (2017 pp25-26) Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making. *Council of Europe Report*. 27 September 2017. <https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-research/168076277c>

opportunities for magazines to respond creatively to the problem of disinformation in ways that help support a healthy information ecosystem;

6. Finally, this paper provides a series of recommendations and suggested actions (supported by resources) designed to prompt pre-emptive and defensive responses to the disinformation crisis from the Canadian magazine industry.

Limitations

This whitepaper does not represent a systematic or holistic study of the issues associated with disinformation in reference to the entire Canadian magazine industry. It should therefore be seen as a starting point for further research and, more importantly, research-informed action to help insulate Canadian magazines and their audiences against the impacts of the global disinformation crisis.

A note on terminology

Noting the weaponization of the term ‘fake news’ by political actors seeking to discredit critical journalism and promote attacks on journalists, the authors have opted not to use it, other in the context of direct quotes or references to publications and initiatives that incorporate the term.

About the authors

Alice Matthews is an award-winning Australian journalist and presenter. She has contributed to a number of international publications including *UNESCO’s Journalism, ‘Fake News’ & Disinformation* (2018) handbook and the organization’s landmark global study *Protecting Journalism Sources in the Digital Age* (2017), led by Dr. Julie Posetti. After five years working for the ABC, Australia’s public broadcaster, Matthews is now the co-host of current affairs and satire program *The Feed* on SBS, the country’s multicultural broadcaster.

Julie Posetti (PhD) is Global Director of Research for the International Center For Journalists (ICFJ) based in Oxford (UK). She is an award-winning academic and journalist whose international career spans three decades. Dr Posetti researches and writes at the intersection of journalism safety, media freedom, media and gender, journalism and disinformation, and the digital transformation of journalism. She is the author of UNESCO’s *‘Protecting Journalism Sources in the Digital Age’* (2017) and co-editor of *‘Journalism, ‘Fake News’ and Disinformation’* (UNESCO 2018). She is a senior researcher affiliated with Sheffield University’s Centre for Freedom of the Media (CFOM) and the Reuters Institute for the Study (RISJ) of Journalism at the University of Oxford.

CHAPTER ONE: IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT ELECTION HACKING

Election hacks with origins in the Kremlin, Macedonian teenagers making small fortunes from troll farming, vast bot networks seeding disinformation—these are the disinformation stories we're most familiar with. But, while there is ample evidence to suggest nefarious actors, including foreign agents, have orchestrated disinformation campaigns designed to swing elections,⁷ and the existence of troll farms is well-established,⁸ a more nuanced understanding of the 'disinformation wars' is required to enable the development of effective defences.

Disinformation tactics have evolved since the 2016 US election, moving beyond outright lies (like the Pope Endorsing Trump or Hilary Clinton selling Weapons to ISIS⁹) to include more subtle and sophisticated forms of deception. "[Disinformation] builds false narratives by layering true and false, selecting and omitting information, misleading for strategic intent. And it often works specifically by creating doubt," Kate Starbird, Co-Founder of the University of Washington's Centre for an Informed Public has said.¹⁰ First Draft's Claire Wardle identifies two causes for this evolution of tactics. "[It's] partly because the platforms have clamped down on [disinformation],¹¹ partly because people are more aware of this issue. All that means is we see more subtle attempts to push misleading narratives."¹²

A deceptive interpretation of a truthful event is the most successful strategy used by fabricated news websites, according to researchers.¹³ An example of this is a real private member's bill in Ontario introduced to stop hate rallies impacting the legislature,¹⁴ which ended up as the peg for an

⁷ Hilder, P (2019) *They were planning on stealing the election*, Open Democracy 28 January, 2019 Hilder, P. (2019). 'They were planning on stealing the election': Explosive new tapes reveal Cambridge Analytica CEO's boasts of voter suppression, manipulation and bribery.. openDemocracy. 28 January 2020. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/dark-money-investigations/they-were-planning-on-stealing-election-explosive-new-tapes-reveal-cambridg/>

⁸Subramanian, S (2017). Inside The Macedonian Fake-News Complex. The Macedonian Teens Who Mastered Fake News. *Wired*. 15 February, 2017. <https://www.wired.com/2017/02/veles-macedonia-fake-news/>

⁹Silverman, C (2016). This Analysis Shows How Viral Fake Election News Stories Outperformed Real News On Facebook. *BuzzFeed*. 16 November 2016. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/viral-fake-election-news-outperformed-real-news-on-facebook>

¹⁰First Draft (2020). Year in Review: 'We all are vulnerable to disinformation and we get played in different ways'. *First Draft*. 3 January 2020. <https://firstdraftnews.org/latest/year-in-review-we-all-are-vulnerable-to-disinformation-and-we-get-played-in-different-ways/>

¹¹Needleman, S.E (2019). Users Adopt New Tactics to Spread Misleading Information Online. 24 October 2019. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/users-adopt-new-tactics-to-spread-misleading-information-online-11571958180>

¹² Dr. Wardle was interviewed for this white paper on 21 January 2020

¹³Rachel R. Mourão & Craig T. Robertson (2019 p2090). Fake News as Discursive Integration: An Analysis of Sites That Publish False, Misleading, Hyperpartisan and Sensational Information, *Journal of Journalism Studies*, Volume 20, 2019. 20:14, 2077-2095, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2019.1566871>

¹⁴Bill 84, Prohibiting Hate-Promoting Demonstrations at Queen's Park Act, 2019. <https://www.ola.org/en/legislative-business/bills/parliament-42/session-1/bill-84>

article misleadingly headlined ‘Canada Moves to Ban Christians From Demonstrating in Public Under New Anti-Hate Proposal’ on a far-right US website.¹⁵ Articles of this nature amount to disinformation according to the definition below, as they go beyond merely a “favorable interpretation” (a definition more suited to spin, which is standard practice for politicians) to a new level of deceit.

What makes disinformation any different from propaganda and spin?

Propaganda has existed since humans could craft messages.¹⁶ But, it’s never before involved the potent combination of social media algorithms enabling virality, micro targeting, simple techniques for fabricating content, digital advertising and, as the BBC’s Mike Wendling says, “people prepared to make stuff up to earn some easy cash.”¹⁷

For this paper, the authors draw on the groundwork of UNESCO’s *Journalism, ‘Fake News’ and Disinformation* handbook,¹⁸ and apply this definition of disinformation: “All forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm, or for profit,”¹⁹ from the EU’s high level group on ‘fake news’ and online disinformation. “Public harm” includes attempts to confuse and manipulate people, to ignite passions for ill effect and exploit polarization; to cast doubt on legitimate reporting and other public interest information, and to profit by doing so.²⁰ Together, these acts have the potential to “inhibit the ability of people to make evidence-based decisions on matters of societal importance - for

¹⁵Rogers, K. (2019). How a real story turns into online disinformation. *CBC News: The National*. 18 September 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aswitMI9lRo&feature=youtu.be> [accessed on 17/02/2019]

¹⁶ Posetti, J & Matthews A (2018) *A short guide to the history of ‘fake news’ and disinformation* (ICFI) <https://www.icfi.org/sites/default/files/2018-07/A%20Short%20Guide%20to%20History%20of%20Fake%20News%20and%20Disinformation%20ICFI%20Final.pdf>

¹⁷ Wendling, M. (2018) The (almost) complete history of ‘fake news’. *BBC News*. 22 January 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-42724320>

¹⁸Ireton, C. & Posetti, J. et al (2018 p7) *Journalism, ‘Fake News’ & Disinformation: Handbook for Journalism Education and Training*, UNESCO Publishing. 2018 [http://repository.ou.ac.lk/bitstream/handle/94ousl/928/journalism_fake_news_disinformation_print_friendly_0%20\(1\).pdf?sequence=1](http://repository.ou.ac.lk/bitstream/handle/94ousl/928/journalism_fake_news_disinformation_print_friendly_0%20(1).pdf?sequence=1)

¹⁹De Cock Buning, M et al (2018 p10). A multi-dimensional approach to disinformation. Report of the independent High level Group on fake news and online disinformation. *European Commission*. March 2018. https://blog.wan-ifa.org/sites/default/files/field_blog_entry_file/HLEGReportonFakeNewsandOnlineDisinformation.pdf [accessed on 17/02/2019]

²⁰ Ireton & Posetti (2018) Op. Cit.

instance, in public health, climate change and national security.”²¹ But, disinformation is vast and complicated in its motivations, its formats and its spread.²²

Breeding Grounds

Where there is passion, emotion and information overload, there is disinformation. It is a case of opportunism and exploitation; a CBC News analysis showed that disinformation-seeding trolls (in this case they were Russian) tweeted the most during devastating events like Fort McMurray Fire in 2016 and the Quebec City mosque shooting in 2017.²³ In Australia, a more recent example is the 2019-2020 bushfire crisis. Misleading information labelling the disaster an “arson emergency” spread widely, seeking to diminish the role of climate change in the catastrophe. In that instance, it’s important to note that the spread of the ‘arsonists are largely responsible’ disinformation narrative²⁴ was substantially enabled by climate change denying elements of the local Murdoch press.²⁵

Disinformation agents target divisive issues like climate change, religion and immigration. They aim straight for the emotional jugular, “the heart of our values systems,”²⁶ and appeal to identity politics.²⁷ They do not always aim to fool people outright. Mostly, their intention is to cause confusion, seed division and raise doubt, with the ultimate aim of influencing political agendas and/or making money.²⁸ Purveyors can be anyone from intelligence agents, political party operatives, representatives of corporate entities, or highly partisan publishers, to citizens

²¹Rubin, V. (2019 p1018), "Disinformation and misinformation triangle: A conceptual model for “fake news” epidemic, causal factors and interventions", *Journal of Documentation*, Vol. 75 No. 5, pp. 1013-1034. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JD-12-2018-0209>

²²Wardle, C & Derakhshan, H. (2017 p4) Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making. *Council of Europe Report*. 27 September 2017. <https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-research/168076277c>

²³ Rocha, R. (2018) *CBC News*. 3 August 2018. Data sheds light on how Russian Twitter trolls targeted Canadians. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/russian-twitter-trolls-canada-targeted-1.4772397>

²⁴Knaus, C. (2020). Disinformation and lies are spreading faster than Australia’s bushfires. *The Guardian*. 12 January 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/jan/12/disinformation-and-lies-are-spreading-faster-than-australias-bushfires>

²⁵ Cave, D (2020) “How Rupert Murdoch is Influencing Australia’s Bushfire Debate” in *The New York Times*, 8 January, 2020 <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/08/world/australia/fires-murdoch-disinformation.html>

²⁶Starbird, K. (2019). Disinformation’s spread: bots, trolls and all of us. *Nature*. 24 July 2019. <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-02235-x>

²⁷Mourão, R.R. & Robertson, C.T. (2019 p2090). Fake News as Discursive Integration: An Analysis of Sites That Publish False, Misleading, Hyperpartisan and Sensational Information, *Journal of Journalism Studies*, Volume 20, 2019. 20:14, 2077-2095, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2019.1566871>

²⁸Ireton, C. & Posetti, J. et al (2018 p10) Journalism, ‘Fake News’ & Disinformation: Handbook for Journalism Education and Training, *UNESCO Publishing*. 2018 [http://repository.ou.ac.lk/bitstream/handle/94ousl/928/journalism_fake_news_disinformation_print_friendly_0%20\(1\).pdf?sequence=1](http://repository.ou.ac.lk/bitstream/handle/94ousl/928/journalism_fake_news_disinformation_print_friendly_0%20(1).pdf?sequence=1)

“evangelised over an issue.”²⁹ Their targets are often partisan audiences resistant to facts that challenge their concrete beliefs, who “have a penchant for news that confirms their prejudices.”³⁰

This kind of emotional provocation is used to aid the spread of disinformation online, allowing it to outpace much legitimate news and attempts at fact-checking and debunking.³¹ BuzzFeed’s media editor Craig Silverman has made the disinformation beat a major focus of his role. In one investigation, he found that during the final three months of the 2016 US election campaign, the three top performing fake election stories received more engagement than the three top performing stories for major organizations like *The New York Times*, NBC News and others.³² And we can’t keep blaming bots for the proliferation either;³³ it was real Canadians behind the spread of a fake sex scandal story implicating Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, for example.³⁴ When it comes to multipliers, emotive content and content consumed via friends or family is more likely to be shared on social media than straight news stories,³⁵ which is what makes these platforms such effective vectors for viral distribution of disinformation.

Attempts to diminish a journalist’s credibility are also a common feature of disinformation campaigns and disinformation tactics (such as using manipulated images) are deployed to target them. Female journalists are disproportionately targeted in this manner,³⁶ facing “direct attacks on

²⁹Wardle, C & Derakhshan, H. (2017 pp25-26) Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making. *Council of Europe Report*. 27 September 2017. <https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-research/168076277c>

³⁰Martens, B. et al (2018 p43), The Digital Transformation of News Media and the Rise of Disinformation and Fake News. Digital Economy Working Paper 2018-02, Joint Research Centre Technical Reports. (April 20, 2018). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3164170> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3164170>

³¹Vosoughi, S. (2018) The spread of true and false news online. *Science*. 9 March 2018. Vol. 359, Issue 6380, pp. 1146-1151 DOI: 10.1126/science.aap9559 <https://science.sciencemag.org/content/359/6380/1146> ; Martens, B. et al (2018 p6), The Digital Transformation of News Media and the Rise of Disinformation and Fake News. Digital Economy Working Paper 2018-02, Joint Research Centre Technical Reports. (April 20, 2018). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3164170> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3164170>

³²Silverman, C. (2016). This Analysis Shows How Viral Fake Election News Stories Outperformed Real News On Facebook. *BuzzFeed*. 16 November 2016. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/viral-fake-election-news-outperformed-real-news-on-facebook>

³³Starbird, K. (2019). Disinformation’s spread: bots, trolls and all of us. *Nature*. 24 July 2019. <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-02235-x> ; See also: Needleman, S.E (2019). Users Adopt New Tactics to Spread Misleading Information Online. 24 October 2019. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/users-adopt-new-tactics-to-spread-misleading-information-online-11571958180>

³⁴McIntosh, E. (2019). A fake Justin Trudeau sex scandal went viral. Canada’s election-integrity law can’t stop it. *Canada’s National Post*. 10 October 2019. <https://www.nationalobserver.com/2019/10/10/news/fake-justin-trudeau-sex-scandal-went-viral-canadas-election-integrity-law-cant-stop?fbclid=IwAR33PdXVG8fWtb6W-nExDj1cE0ScNc2D6oBQvqFqQVHMCsQo47uKEeCTicQ>

³⁵Bakir, V. & McStay, A. (2017) *Fake News and the Economy of Emotions* Digital Journalism (Taylor and Francis) July 2017. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/21670811.2017.1345645> [accessed

³⁶Posetti, J. (2017). Fighting Back Against Prolific Online Harassment: Maria Ressa in L. Kilman (Ed) op cit See also: Resolution 39 of UNESCO’s 39th General Conference which notes “the specific threats faced by women journalists including sexual harassment and violence, both online and offline.” <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0026/002608/260889e.pdf>

their identity as women.”³⁷ Those journalists who debunk disinformation are also more frequent targets of online threats, abuse and attempts to discredit their work.³⁸

Battlegrounds

Facebook and Twitter have long been recognized as sites targeted by purveyors of disinformation and Instagram is foreshadowed as a 2020 hotspot.³⁹ Canada’s *National Observer* revealed that Pinterest’s algorithm promoted anti-Trudeau propaganda during the 2019 election campaign⁴⁰ and Reddit was “overlooked” as a “major” disinformation player.⁴¹ Closed groups on Facebook, messaging apps like WhatsApp and online ads have also been deemed “new battlegrounds.”^{42, 43} Though Canadians aren’t huge adopters of WhatsApp (only 4 per cent use it for news, compared to 19 per cent globally⁴⁴), the Canadian government has expressed concern over disinformation on private messaging apps.⁴⁵ Even TikTok recently moved to ban disinformation campaigns,⁴⁶ though this didn’t stop a Vancouver student posting a video falsely claiming his friend was the first confirmed case of Coronavirus in the country. That video got more than 4 million views before it was taken down.⁴⁷

³⁷OCCEÑOLA, P. (2018) Fake News, Real Women: Disinformation Gone Macho. *Rappler*. 15 December 2018.

<https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/217563-disinformation-gone-macho>

³⁸Posetti, J. (2018) *Combatting Online Abuse: When Journalists and their Sources Are Targeted*, in Journalism, ‘Fake News’ & Disinformation: Handbook for Journalism Education and Training, *UNESCO Publishing*. 2018

[http://repository.ou.ac.lk/bitstream/handle/94ousl/928/journalism_fake_news_disinformation_print_friendly_0%20\(1\).pdf?sequence=1](http://repository.ou.ac.lk/bitstream/handle/94ousl/928/journalism_fake_news_disinformation_print_friendly_0%20(1).pdf?sequence=1)

³⁹Cook, J. (2019) How Instagram Became A Hotspot For Vile Conspiracies And 2020 Disinformation The platform's latest influencers are election hoaxers and conspiracy theorists. *Huffpost*. 9 October 2019. <https://bit.ly/2SS7WF6>

⁴⁰Orr, C. (2019) Pinterest's algorithm promoted anti-Trudeau propaganda during election. *Canada's National Observer*. 2 December 2019. <https://www.nationalobserver.com/2019/12/02/news/pinterests-algorithm-promoted-anti-trudeau-propaganda-during-election>

⁴¹McIntosh, E (2019) Exclusive: The Liberal government let Reddit off the hook on disinformation. *Canada's National Observer*. 21 October 2019 <https://www.nationalobserver.com/2019/10/21/news/exclusive-liberal-government-let-reddit-hook-disinformation>

⁴²Posetti, J et al (2019) *Lessons in Innovation: How International News Organizations Combat Disinformation through Mission-Driven Journalism*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2019-04/Posetti_Lessons_in_Innovation_FINAL.pdf

⁴³Wardle, C. (2019). Closed groups, messaging apps and online ads: The new battlegrounds of disinformation. *First Draft News*. 8 November 2019. <https://firstdraftnews.org/latest/closed-groups-messaging-apps-and-online-ads-the-new-battlegrounds-of-disinformation/>

⁴⁴Brin, C. (2019 p9) Digital News Report: Canada 2019 Data: An Overview. *Reuters Institute For The Study of Journalism*.

⁴⁵CBC (2020) Government worried about disinformation in private messages. *CBC*. 9 February 2020. <https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/1695609923734>

⁴⁶Núñez, M. (2020) TikTok Finally Bans Disinformation Campaigns In Updated Community Guidelines. *Forbes*. 8 January 2020. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/mnunez/2020/01/08/tiktok-finally-bans-disinformation-campaigns-in-updated-community-guidelines/#24d2331723d6>

⁴⁷Ghaffary, S. & Heilweil, R. (2020). How tech companies are scrambling to deal with coronavirus hoaxes. *Vox*. 31 January 2020. <https://www.vox.com/recode/2020/1/31/21115589/coronavirus-wuhan-china-myths-hoaxes-facebook-social-media-tiktok-twitter-wechat>

The Many Masks of Disinformation

“Narrative Laundering”

Perhaps one of the most unsettling developments in disinformation strategies has been the sophisticated layering of deception adopted by “long-game” agents. The Stanford Internet Observatory investigating the online operations of Russia’s intelligence arm (the GRU) found⁴⁸ that false information was not their only tactic. False or fabricated sources for that information were also identified by the Observatory as features of their disinformation campaigns.

*The GRU was running narrative laundering operations globally, creating media fronts, fake think tanks, fake journalists who got articles placed in authentic popular independent media outlets—this all served to legitimize or conceal the origin of state-sponsored propaganda.*⁴⁹

Meanwhile, fake think tanks have “raised disinformation to a pseudoscience,” according to Emma Grey Ellis from *Wired*,⁵⁰ who reported that the three biggest fake think tanks in the US are all connected to the white nationalist John Tanton (and US President Donald Trump has tweeted an article citing one of them).⁵¹

“Narrative laundering” also includes the use of fake academic publications,⁵² along with fake accounts and profiles and it has huge implications for journalists working for any outlet in terms of their approaches to verification and fact-checking. “How do you know who this source is? Have you really interrogated them? Because that source could have created a whole social media profile for themselves with a LinkedIn account, Facebook account and if you check all that out you can think ‘that guy called Bob seems real’. That is the challenge,” First Draft’s Claire Wardle said.⁵³

⁴⁸DIRESTA, R. & GROSSMAN, S. (2019). Potemkin Pages & Personas: Assessing GRU Online Operations, 2014-2019. *Stanford Internet Observatory*. <https://fsi-live.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/potemkin-pages-personas-sio-wp.pdf>

⁴⁹Interview with Renee DiResta with First Draft (2019). Year in Review: ‘Journalists need to recognize they are a target of influence operations’. *First Draft*. 30 December 2019. <https://firstdraftnews.org/latest/year-in-review-journalists-need-to-recognise-they-are-a-target-of-influence-operations/>

⁵⁰Grey Ellis, E. (2017) Fake Think Tanks Fuel Fake News—And the President’s Tweets. *Wired*. 24 January 2017. <https://www.wired.com/2017/01/fake-think-tanks-fuel-fake-news-presidents-tweets>

⁵¹See: <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/746414797416243200>

⁵²Gillis, A. (2019). The Rise of Junk Science. *The Walrus*. 9 July 2019. <https://thewalrus.ca/the-rise-of-junk-science/>

⁵³ Interview with Claire Wardle op cit

“Disinformation for Hire”

There are disturbing cases of public relations firms monetizing disinformation. BuzzFeed, in partnership with The Reporter (an investigative news site in Taiwan), revealed in an article⁵⁴ that one firm was offering “to use every tool and take every advantage available in order to change reality according to our client's wishes.” As BuzzFeed’s Craig Silverman, and his colleagues Jane Lytvynenko and William Kung concluded:

*If disinformation in 2016 was characterized by Macedonian spammers pushing pro-Trump fake news and Russian trolls running rampant on platforms, 2020 is shaping up to be the year communications pros for hire provide sophisticated online propaganda operations to anyone willing to pay.*⁵⁵

This practice was first identified by South Africa’s online magazine, *Daily Maverick*, in a collaborative investigation that ultimately caused the collapse of UK PR Firm Bell Pottinger.⁵⁶

Magazine editors and publishers need to understand that PR firms can be hired to generate fake reviews and create impressions of popularity, authenticity and credibility that a product has not actually earned, according to Silverman. For example, magazines engaged in consumer journalism need to appreciate that “[The] product space is rife with people using fake reviews, [and] fake engagement, of companies ripping off products,” he said.⁵⁷

Consumer magazines in particular could provide a vital service to their audiences by investigating the manipulation of online reviews and recommendations and matching legitimate product reviews produced for their readers with the debunking of inauthentic product-related content purporting to reflect consumer satisfaction. Further, they could investigate the networks and agencies behind such manipulation.

⁵⁴Silverman, C. et al (2020). Disinformation For Hire: How A New Breed Of PR Firms Is Selling Lies Online. *BuzzFeed News*. 6 January 2020. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/disinformation-for-hire-black-pr-firms>

⁵⁵Silverman, C. et al (2020). Disinformation For Hire: How A New Breed Of PR Firms Is Selling Lies Online. *BuzzFeed News*. 6 January 2020. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/disinformation-for-hire-black-pr-firms>

⁵⁶ See: <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2019-09-26-navigating-your-way-in-a-world-filled-with-untruths/>

⁵⁷ Craig Silverman was interviewed for this paper on 23 January 2020.

Categories of disinformation

The following categories are taken from Wardle and Derakhshan's (2017) suggestions for Thinking About 'Information Disorder'.⁵⁸ The authors have included them here, along with some current examples of each in practice, but they also recommend completing the practical exercises associated with them in Ireton and Posetti's (2018) UNESCO handbook *Journalism, 'Fake News', and Disinformation*.⁵⁹

1. Misleading content

In practice: In addition to the example of the misrepresented Ontario private members bill discussed above, this includes ads that mimic editorial style and content but are not sufficiently labelled, such as the recent case of *Teen Vogue*. The magazine deleted a "glowing story" about Facebook, after suspicions were raised that it was an ad.⁶⁰

2. False context

In practice: Legitimate photos of Justin Trudeau surfaced in 2019, but they were used completely out of context to create a false impression. One was in the form of a meme claiming he spent Victoria Day in May that year at a mosque, when in fact the image was of him at an Eid Al-Adha celebration in September 2016.⁶¹ Another was an image of Trudeau in a wheelchair along with a caption claiming he was ridiculing wheelchair users,⁶² when in fact it was part of the experience at an event organized by the Canadian Paraplegic Association.

Old content published with false context online can easily be brought back to life, exploited and used to deliberately misinform.

⁵⁸ As outlined in: Ireton, C. & Posetti, J. et al (2018 pp 49-50) *Journalism, 'Fake News' & Disinformation: Handbook for Journalism Education and Training*, UNESCO Publishing, 2018
[http://repository.ou.ac.lk/bitstream/handle/940usl/928/journalism_fake_news_disinformation_print_friendly_0%20\(1\).pdf?sequence=1](http://repository.ou.ac.lk/bitstream/handle/940usl/928/journalism_fake_news_disinformation_print_friendly_0%20(1).pdf?sequence=1)

⁵⁹ Ireton & Posetti (2018) Op. Cit.

⁶⁰ Abrams, R. & Cecilia Kang, C. (2020) The Mystery of Teen Vogue's Disappearing Facebook Article. *The New York Times*. 8 January 2020.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/08/business/media/teen-vogue-facebook.html>

⁶¹ AFP Canada. (2019) No, Justin Trudeau did not spend Victoria Day celebrating Ramadan at a mosque. *AFP Fact Check*. 30 May 2019.
<https://factcheck.afp.com/no-justin-trudeau-did-not-spend-victoria-day-celebrating-ramadan-mosque>

⁶² Lopez, C. (2019). La désinformation la plus efficace est aussi la plus facile à produire. *L'actualité*. 2 October 2019
<https://lactualite.com/politique/la-desinformation-la-plus-efficace-est-aussi-la-plus-facile-a-produire/>

3. Imposter content

In practice: This ranges from imposter brands to entire titles. In the UK, BBC branding was used to advertise the wrong election date⁶³ and the EU Disinformation lab revealed that defunct newspapers titles were being revived as “local news sites.”⁶⁴ First Draft found one example of imposter content paid for by Welsh Conservatives that mimicked a tabloid magazine: “You & Your Family” was in the style⁶⁵ of entertainment magazines like *Real People* and *Heat*.⁶⁶

4. Manipulated content

In practice: This includes ‘deepfakes’ such as the fake porn video used to discredit prominent Indian journalist Rana Ayuub⁶⁷ and doctored images, audio and videos, like that of US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi appearing to slur her speech,⁶⁸ or Justin Trudeau’s “joke” video.⁶⁹ But, Fergus Bell, founder and CEO of Fathm, doesn’t believe ‘deepfakes’, especially in the form of distorting politicians’ appearances, are the most pressing issue, pointing instead to the wider and harder to combat problem of ‘false context’, or what others call ‘shallow fakes’.

“Yes, everyone needs to be aware of [deepfakes]. But, they're not being produced en masse at the moment and in most cases if we build in a process in a newsroom that just gets a journalist to ask if there was someone else in the room that witnessed the moment, that negates a lot of the deepfake problems,” he said.⁷⁰ However, small magazines, and individual journalists, like understaffed local news organizations, can find such verification processes challenging, and the impact of ‘deepfakes’ (which are difficult to debunk) on audiences can be significant.

⁶³Wardle, C. (2019). Disinformation agents will target Canadian journalists. *Policy Options Politiques*. 11 September 2019 <https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/september-2019/disinformation-agents-will-target-canadian-journalists/>

⁶⁴Sharman, D. (2019) Defunct newspaper titles revived as fake local news sites, report claims. *Hold the Front Page*. 22 November 2019. <https://www.holdthefrontpage.co.uk/2019/news/victorian-regional-newspapers-revived-as-fake-news-titles-probe-claims/>

⁶⁵ See: <https://bit.ly/2SDKSec>

⁶⁶ Morrish, I. (2019) UK general election 2019: Boris Johnson quote disputed, more suspicious Facebook ads and party publications get the magazine treatment. *First Draft*. 7 December 2019. <https://firstdraftnews.org/latest/uk-general-election-2019-boris-johnson-quote-disputed-more-suspicious-facebook-ads-and-party-publications-get-the-magazine-treatment/>

⁶⁷ Harwell, D. (2018) ‘Fake-porn videos are being weaponized to harass and humiliate women: ‘Everybody is a potential target’” in *The Washington Post*, December 30, 2018. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2018/12/30/fake-porn-videos-are-being-weaponized-harass-humiliate-women-everybody-is-potential-target/>

⁶⁸ See: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2019/05/23/faked-pelosi-videos-slowed-make-her-appear-drunk-spread-across-social-media/>

⁶⁹ See: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/technology/trudeau-media-bribery-fake-video-1.5273163>

⁷⁰ Fergus Bell was interviewed for this paper on 17 January 2020.

5. Fabricated content

In practice: Think of the WTOE5 site that published an article suggesting (falsely) that the Pope endorsed Donald Trump for President.⁷¹ People wanting to debunk legitimate stories and investigations may comment online, linking back to sites like this to add ‘evidence’ to support their argument. Such acts of fabrication have a long lifespan and they’re hard to rein in, even if a website or platform removes them.

Niche topics? Trusting readers? You’re perfect fodder

Limiting our understanding of disinformation limited to election meddlers and foreign bots makes it easy to assume agents of disinformation aren’t considering magazines as targets. After all, magazines traditionally had stronger fact-checking processes (at least at the news magazine end of the spectrum) and longer deadlines, and therefore they might not see themselves as potential targets.

“If I were an agent of disinformation and I was trying to push something, I would actually put magazines in my whole campaign,” First Draft’s Claire Wardle told the authors. “Because if something gets picked in a magazine it’s almost like laying an Easter Egg. A year later you can point to it and say ‘well, look actually this magazine wrote about it’.”

The fact that trust is high among magazine audiences, who typically demonstrate their loyalty through subscriptions, makes them very appealing targets. “They tend to be around niche topics—whether it’s cars or foreign policy—so if you were trying to push a certain narrative then why not try and do that with magazines?” Wardle asked.

⁷¹Ireton, C. & Posetti, J. et al. (2018) Journalism, ‘Fake News’ & Disinformation: Handbook for Journalism Education and Training, UNESCO Publishing. 2018
[http://repository.ou.ac.lk/bitstream/handle/94ousl/928/journalism_fake_news_disinformation_print_friendly_0%20\(1\).pdf?sequence=1](http://repository.ou.ac.lk/bitstream/handle/94ousl/928/journalism_fake_news_disinformation_print_friendly_0%20(1).pdf?sequence=1)

CHAPTER TWO: NO, IT'S NOT AN AVALANCHE, BUT THE SNOW IS FALLING

In this chapter, we highlight a dusting of recent cases of disinformation in Canada.

*Oil pipelines, immigration, and—especially in Quebec—religion continue to be polarising issues and concern regarding disinformation is on the rise*⁷²—Colette Brin Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019: Canada.

Both oil pipelines and immigration have become topics targeted by foreign Twitter trolls,⁷³ generating fabricated headlines like “Canada's Prime Minister begs Nigeria President for one million immigrants.”⁷⁴ Climate change and religion are also polarizing issues, with Indigenous issues, spats between the Canadian and Saudi governments and “Wexit”⁷⁵ also proving divisive and attractive to disinformation agents.

Canadians as a whole are perhaps not so divided, though. The Digital Democracy Project found only 16 per cent of Canadians have been exposed to “strongly partisan news sources” and political polarization was attributed to political party loyalty.⁷⁶ Low levels of political polarization and high levels of trust have been identified as reasons disinformation was not “the avalanche” that was expected during the 2019 Canadian national election.⁷⁷ According to The Edelman Trust Barometer, a survey by the global communications firm, ⁷⁸ nearly 75 per cent of Canadians trust professional media. But the Barometer also shows almost the same percentage are worried about false information.

⁷²Brin, C. (2019) Digital News Report: Canada 2019 Data: An Overview. *Reuters Institute For The Study of Journalism*. <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2019/canada-2019/>

⁷³ Rocha, R. & Yates, J. (2019). Twitter trolls stoked debates about immigrants and pipelines in Canada, data show. *CBC*. 12 February 2019. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/twitter-troll-pipeline-immigrant-russia-iran-1.5014750>

⁷⁴ Ouatik, B. & Yates, J. (2019) Fake online stories claim Trudeau begged foreign leaders 'to send him a million immigrants'. *CBC*. 14 June 2019. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/false-news-stories-trudeau-begs-immigrants-1.5174319>

⁷⁵*Western Canada Exit: Alberta's separatist movement which gained more traction after the 2019 election*. See: Livinson-King, R. (2019) Wexit: Why some Albertans want to separate from Canada. *BBC*. 11 October 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-49899113>

⁷⁶ Paas-Lang, C. (2019) Canadians are polarized, and intense party loyalty could be to blame: study. *Globalnews.ca*. 12 September 2019. <https://globalnews.ca/news/5892865/canada-polarization-study/>

⁷⁷ Flamini, D. (2019) Canadian fact-checkers are pleasantly surprised by the small amount of false electoral content. *Poynter*. 7 October 2019. <https://www.poynter.org/fact-checking/2019/canadian-fact-checkers-are-pleasantly-surprised-by-a-low-amount-of-false-electoral-content/>

⁷⁸JESSICA VOMIERO, J. & SORENSEN, E. (2019) Most Canadians trust media, but a similar share worry about fake news being weaponized: survey. *Globalnews.ca*. 15 February 2019. <https://globalnews.ca/news/4964202/canadians-fake-news-weaponized/>

Buffalo 'Bullshit' Running Rampant

During Canada's 2019 election campaign, some stories containing false information, like Justin Trudeau's sex scandal, "ran rampant."⁷⁹ While disinformation did not have an enormous impact on the polls—certainly not to the extent of the 2016 US election⁸⁰—it did occur.

In an interview for this whitepaper, HuffPost Canada's Editor Andrew Yates pointed to a new outlet that appeared before the election called *The Buffalo Chronicle* "...they were the one source of full-on bullshit disinformation where they were generating false news about Justin Trudeau."⁸¹ The website was being run by a 33-year-old New Yorker⁸² and Facebook allowed *The Buffalo Chronicle* to 'promote' the article, a BuzzFeed News-*Toronto Star* investigation revealed.⁸³ Even though the stories were debunked, three got an average of 2,900 shares each, most from real Twitter users⁸⁴ and spread to 25 million people.⁸⁵

Foreign-language disinformation campaigns were also identified on WeChat,⁸⁶ as well as in Facebook ads during the election.⁸⁷ And old photos shared of former Prime Minister Stephen Harper after PM Trudeau's blackface scandal also resurfaced out of context.⁸⁸ But the level of disinformation was "not high enough to compromise the election,"⁸⁹ given none of these incidents was problematic enough to raise the alarm with the Canadian government's special "Critical Election Incident Public Protocol" panel.

⁷⁹Robins-Early, N. (2019) Canada Joins The Growing List Of Countries Where Election Misinformation Reigns. *Huffpost*. 17 October 2019. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/canada-election-misinformation-trump_n_5da76552e4b0a9a0f1d0c192?ri18n=true

⁸⁰National Post (2019) So far, federal election has had little misinformation or disinformation: researchers. 10 October 2019. *National Post*. <https://nationalpost.com/news/politics/election-2019/election-has-been-mostly-free-of-mis-and-disinformation-research-shows>

⁸¹Andrew Yates was interviewed for this white paper on 22 January 2020

⁸²Lytvynenko, J. et al (2019). The Canadian Election's Surprise Influencer Is A Buffalo Man Targeting Canadians With Viral Disinformation. *BuzzFeed & Toronto Star*. 18 October 2019. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/janellytvynenko/matthew-ricchiazzi-buffalo-chronicle-trudeau-claims>

⁸³Silverman, C. et al (2010) The Buffalo Chronicle Ran Facebook Ads Promoting Dubious Trudeau Stories. *BuzzFeed & Toronto Star*. 29 October 2019. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/facebook-let-the-buffalo-chronicle-run-ads-for-trudeau>

⁸⁴Thompson, E. (201) 'More needs to be done,' Gould says after some online election meddling detected. *CBC*. 28 October 2019. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/election-misinformation-disinformation-interference-1.5336662>

⁸⁵McIntosh, E. (2019). A fake Justin Trudeau sex scandal went viral. Canada's election-integrity law can't stop it. *Canada's National Post*. 10 October 2019. <https://www.nationalobserver.com/2019/10/10/news/fake-justin-trudeau-sex-scandal-went-viral-canadas-election-integrity-law-cant-stop?fbclid=IwAR33PdXVG8fWtb6W-nExDj1cE0ScNc2D6oBQvqFqQVHMCSQo47uKEeCTicQ>

⁸⁶Zhou, S. (2019) In this Toronto Suburb, Liberals Face Chinese-Language Disinformation Campaign. *Vice*. 17 October 2019. https://www.vice.com/en_ca/article/7x5mpz/in-this-toronto-suburb-liberals-face-chinese-language-disinformation-campaign

⁸⁷Lum, Z (2019) Federal Parties' Attack Ads Went Beyond English And French. Why Not Their Election Platforms? *Huffpost*. 11 October 2019 <https://bit.ly/2SA6LEp>

⁸⁸Rogers, K. (2019) An old photo of Stephen Harper in Indigenous garb is being misrepresented online. *CBC*. 23 September 2019. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/technology/stephen-harper-headaddress-trudeau-blackface-1.5294119>

⁸⁹Thompson, E. (201) 'More needs to be done,' Gould says after some online election meddling detected. *CBC*. 28 October 2019. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/election-misinformation-disinformation-interference-1.5336662>

Similarly, Yates said disinformation was not his main concern as Canada voted in October's federal election. "Most of it for me is just about having to combat the spin of political parties who really try to push their message forward by only telling a part of the story that favours their point of view," he said. This is a reminder for editors and journalists across the spectrum, including magazines, to maintain critical approaches to assessing information from official sources, while also improving disinformation detection and methods of countering it.

Killer Asteroids and Ad Fraud

As magazines battle for more ad revenue online, false news sites are making money by making up content. What's more, their stories can get priority over legitimate reporting on search engines like Google. "Are we Ready for Defending Earth from a Killer Asteroid?" was the headline of an article that Google News promoted in August 2019, ranking it higher than the original version of the story.⁹⁰ A BuzzFeed investigation found that the website had no office in Canada and its staff photo was that of an Ontario theatre cast for a Shakespeare performance.

The existence of such stories "...shows how easy it is to masquerade as a reliable or authentically Canadian source of information and to build up an audience and generate revenue with stolen and/or misleading content," Craig Silverman and Jane Lytvynenko wrote in their investigative article for BuzzFeed.⁹¹ Fake local news sites like 'City of Edmonton News' also "generated more pageviews than authentic local news operations...and at their peak earned more revenue from problematic ads than leading news outlets in those cities," Silverman found in a separate investigation.⁹²

What's being done to combat disinformation in Canada?

The Canadian Government's 2019 Digital Citizen Initiative kicked-started a suite of responses to the causes and consequences of viral disinformation through funding research and digital media literacy projects—the kind of work which had previously been limited to the likes of expert journalists or non-profits like Media Smarts.

⁹⁰Silverman, C. & Lytvynenko, J. (2019) These "Canadian" Websites And Facebook Pages Are Actually Run From Overseas. *BuzzFeed*. 28 August 2019. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/canadian-websites-and-facebook-pages-run-overseas>

⁹¹Ibid

⁹²Silverman, C. (2019) These Hugely Popular Local News Sites In The US And Canada Are Fake. *BuzzFeed*. 6 November 2019. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/fake-local-news-sites-albany-edmonton>

The \$7 million in funding has gone towards more than 20 different projects.⁹³ The Initiative has given rise to responses like News Media Canada's SPOT program, CIVIX's series of democracy bootcamps, the Fédération Professionnelle des Journalistes du Québec's (FPJQ) workshops for cégep and university students and Magazine Canada's Age of Disinformation Initiative (from which this whitepaper emerged). Meanwhile, Journalists for Human Rights received funding for a series of learning materials, *New Canadian Media* ran anti-disinformation training for journalists "to help mitigate the impacts of disinformation within Canada's immigrant communities" and fact checking initiatives like Détecteur de Rumeurs⁹⁴ (Rumor Detector) also received funding.

Other initiatives include The Canadian Journalism Foundation's 'Doubt It' campaign and *National Observer's* The Democracy and Integrity Project. While a number of Canadian media organizations now have reporters or beats dedicated to disinformation, such as BuzzFeed Canada, *L'actualité* and CBC (including Décrypteurs), to name a few. The Department of Canadian Heritage is also supporting The Digital Democracy Project, set up to monitor election disinformation.

The federal government's preparations to combat disinformation (specifically foreign interference) in the lead up to the 2019 election were described by Politico as one of the "most detailed plans anywhere in the Western world."⁹⁵ The government's approach⁹⁶ included the above-mentioned Critical Election Incident Public Protocol,⁹⁷ involving a taskforce to alert the public and other agencies to disinformation and interference attempts, as well as the Bill C-76 which compels tech companies like Facebook and Google to track digital political ads and make the information publicly available.⁹⁸ It also amends the Canada Elections Act⁹⁹ to allow the banning of certain false statements about candidates during an election.¹⁰⁰

⁹³ Full list of initiatives funded by the Canadian Government. Backgrounder – Helping Citizens Critically Assess and Become Resilient Against Harmful Online Disinformation <https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/news/2019/07/backgrounder--helping-citizens-critically-assess-and-become-resilient-against-harmful-online-disinformation.html>

⁹⁴ See: <https://www.sciencepresse.qc.ca/detecteur-rumeurs>

⁹⁵ Panetta, A. & Scott, M. (2019) Unlike U.S., Canada plans coordinated attack on foreign election interference. *Politico*. 4 August 2019. <https://www.politico.com/story/2019/09/04/canada-foreign-election-meddling-1698209>

⁹⁶ Funke, D. & Flamini, D (ND). A guide to anti-misinformation actions around the world. *Poynter*. <https://www.poynter.org/ifcn/anti-misinformation-actions/#canada>

⁹⁷ See: <https://www.canada.ca/en/democratic-institutions/news/2019/01/safeguarding-elections.html>

⁹⁸ Bryden, J. (2018) Bill C-76 Passed By Senate Just In Time To Apply For 2019 Vote. 11 December 2018. *Huffpost*. https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/bill-c76-passed-senate_ca_5cd57d00e4b07bc7297889a6

⁹⁹ Canada Elections Act bill: <https://www.parl.ca/LegisInfo/BillDetails.aspx?billId=9808070&Language=E>

¹⁰⁰ Lytvynenko, J. et al (2019). The Canadian Election's Surprise Influencer Is A Buffalo Man Targeting Canadians With Viral Disinformation. *BuzzFeed & Toronto Star*. 18 October 2019. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/janelytvynenko/matthew-ricchiazzi-buffalo-chronicle-trudeau-claims>

Is it something to worry about?

It's fair to say disinformation has not been a crippling issue for Canadian news media—yet. But it has impacted on audiences significantly enough for the government and news organizations to meaningfully seek to counter it.

As techniques of deception become more sophisticated and commercially driven, news magazine *L'actualité* Editor Charles Grandmont, says the impact of the issue on the Canadian magazine industry should, in fact, be a major concern:

Because the grave economic difficulties of the industry make it increasingly harder to summon the resources to adequately do our job and the digital ad revenues grabbed by Facebook and Google won't come back.¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ In an email interview on 21 January 2020

CHAPTER THREE - YES, CANADIAN MAGAZINES SHOULD CARE

The dramatic structural changes that magazines have experienced are also affecting journalism internationally and deliver significant implications for the spread and ‘stickiness’ of disinformation online. These are described in detail in *Journalism, ‘Fake News’ and Disinformation*,¹⁰² which states: “Journalism is ‘under fire’, facing a virtual ‘perfect storm’ of convergent pressures that feed the ‘information disorder.’”

Canadian magazines are not immune to global trends associated with digital transformation such as business model upheaval and dramatic shifts in patterns of information production, publication, distribution and consumption. Statistics Canada notes that periodicals publish the majority of titles in digital and print (73.1 per cent), or digital-only (4.7 per cent).¹⁰³ Magazines have also experienced increased competition for subscriptions as well as the challenges of ad blocking and losing revenue to the likes of Google, Facebook, Amazon or Apple.

The industry, consisting of more than 2,000 titles across Canada,¹⁰⁴ is “in decline,”¹⁰⁵ according to the latest IBISWorld Industry Report and this is largely as a result of shrinking ad revenue.¹⁰⁶ “Over the five years to 2019, falling consumer demand and a continued decline in print advertising spending have devastated the Magazine and Periodical Publishing industry in Canada,”¹⁰⁷ the report states.

The good news is that fake websites and disinformation agents have not joined Facebook or Google in sucking advertising revenue from magazines (yet). However, like news organizations around the globe, magazines have to do “more with less”. Along with constrained resources and diminished staffing, “they’re dealing with demands for increased content output in shorter amounts of time, and they’re dealing with an immediate (publishing) environment where maybe they didn’t necessarily start,” BuzzFeed’s Craig Silverman told the authors.

¹⁰² See esp. Module 3 pp 55-69

¹⁰³ Statistics Canada (2019) Periodical publishing, 2017. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/190125/dq190125c-eng.htm>

¹⁰⁴ Rutledge, M. (2019) Canada’s magazines antidote to misinformation. *The Hill Times*. 18 October 2019. <https://www.hilltimes.com/2019/10/18/canadas-magazines-antidote-to-misinformation/220291>

¹⁰⁵ Ross, O (2019 p11) IBISWorld Industry Report 51112CA Magazine & Periodical Publishing in Canada. *IBISWorld*. 15 December 2019.

¹⁰⁶ Statistics Canada (2019) Periodical publishing, 2017. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/190125/dq190125c-eng.htm>

¹⁰⁷ Ross, O (2019 p4) IBISWorld Industry Report 51112CA Magazine & Periodical Publishing in Canada. *IBISWorld*. 15 December 2019.

Advertising Incentives

To better support Canadian magazines amid declining ad revenue, Magazines Canada Executive Director Melanie Rutledge has appealed to the Canadian Government to update laws on income tax deductibility for advertisements:

*While ads placed on Canadian-owned digital platforms are not tax deductible, ads placed by Canadian advertisers on foreign-owned digital media platforms qualify as a tax-deductible business expense...This is a pronounced disincentive for advertisers to invest in Canadian digital platforms.*¹⁰⁸

This call came in the context of magazines being positioned as an antidote to disinformation.

“At the heart of this effort is a commitment by writers and editors to carry out comprehensive and in-depth research, thoughtful and critical reporting and, most importantly, rigorous fact-checking. Magazines are able to devote more time and energy to this task than other publications,” Rutledge wrote.

This point has a solid evidence base: Canadians do trust magazine media.

Increasing Audience Confidence

In most countries, trust in the media is steadily decreasing—around a third of people across the world have less trust in newspapers and magazines than they did five years ago.¹⁰⁹ But, Canada appears to be bucking the trend, particularly when it comes to political information.¹¹⁰ More than 70 per cent of Canadians reported trust in traditional news media including magazines in 2019, a seven-point increase on 2018, an IPSOS survey showed.¹¹¹ And they’re getting savvier at detecting deception.

¹⁰⁸Rutledge, M. (2019) Canada’s magazines antidote to misinformation. *The Hill Times*. 18 October 2019. <https://www.hilltimes.com/2019/10/18/canadas-magazines-antidote-to-misinformation/220291>

¹⁰⁹Bridges, L. (2019) The impact of declining trust in the media. *Ipsos*. 1 August 2019. <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/impact-declining-trust-media>

¹¹⁰Owen, T. et al (2019) DDP RESEARCH MEMO #1: MEDIA, KNOWLEDGE AND MISINFORMATION. *Digital Democracy Project*. August 2019. <https://ppforum.ca/articles/ddp-research-memo-1/> - SEMINAL

¹¹¹Bricker, D. (2019) In Era of Fake News, Trust in Traditional News Sources Rebounding. *Ipsos*. 10 May 2019. <https://www.ipsos.com/en-ca/news-polls/Trust-In-Traditional-News-Sources-Rebounding>

In addition to the IPSOS survey, a separate Reuters Institute study found that 70 per cent of Canadians have looked at different coverage of a story, and if unsure of a story's accuracy, either decided not to share it or relied on more "reputable" news sources instead.¹¹² But in a 2019 study, the Canadian Journalism Foundation found only around one-third of consumers will regularly try to confirm if news is accurate.¹¹³

The Foundation also found that when it comes to concern about disinformation, 83 per cent are most worried about misleading information that might compromise their health by spreading incorrect information about medical risks and benefits.¹¹⁴ This offers a significant opportunity for journalists, editors and publishers to focus on reporting on these themes that incorporates effective debunking. It also potentially points to emerging opportunities for new magazine publishing ventures in the health and well-being space, which is rife with problematic content, emphasizing reliable, evidence-based, trustworthy reporting.

The appetite for magazine consumption persists. Vividata's Winter 2020 Survey found 77 per cent of respondents read a magazine brand in the past month (food, travel and health magazines are the most popular).¹¹⁵ Vividata's Fall 2019 study found 85 per cent of Canadian adults read a magazine or news brands weekly via print or digital platforms.¹¹⁶

Statista, drawing on 2016 figures, shows weekly readership of print magazines was higher among Canadians aged between 50 and 69 years old, with 67 per cent of respondents saying that they read print magazines each week, compared to 44 per cent of respondents aged 21 to 34-years-old.¹¹⁷

¹¹² Brin, C.& Nielson, R. (2019) A paltry number of Canadians are paying for online news. *The Conversation*. 12 June 2019. <https://theconversation.com/a-paltry-number-of-canadians-are-paying-for-online-news-118651>

¹¹³ CFJ (2019). News Consumption Survey Canadian Journalism Foundation - Final Report. *Canadian Journalism Foundation*. April 2019. <http://cjf-fjc.ca/sites/default/files/CJF%20News%20Consumption%20Survey.pdf>

¹¹⁴ CFJ (2019 p47). News Consumption Survey Canadian Journalism Foundation - Final Report. *Canadian Journalism Foundation*. April 2019. <http://cjf-fjc.ca/sites/default/files/CJF%20News%20Consumption%20Survey.pdf>

¹¹⁵ Vividata (2020). Capturing the dynamic media habits of Canadians: Vividata's Winter 2020 Survey of the Canadian Consumer. *Vividata*. 5 February 2020. https://vividata.ca/press_release/capturing-the-dynamic-media-habits-of-canadians-vividatas-winter-2020-survey-of-the-canadian-consumer/

¹¹⁶ Vividata (2019) Vividata's Fall 2019 Study marks first major release with its new core measurement partner Ipsos Canada. *Vividata*. 13 November 2019. https://vividata.ca/press_release/vividatas-fall-2019-study-marks-first-major-release-with-its-new-core-measurement-partner-ipsos-canada/

¹¹⁷ Watson, A. (2018). Share of Canadian adults who read print magazines weekly as of September 2016, by age group. *Statista*. 26 April 2018. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/830946/canada-weekly-readership-print-magazines-by-age/>

Disinformation and Magazines: why should any of this matter?

90 per cent of Canadians have fallen for “fake news” at least once,¹¹⁸ and The Canadian Journalism Foundation’s News Consumption Survey revealed 40 per cent of news consumers aren’t confident they can always tell the difference between disinformation and legitimate reporting.¹¹⁹

While Canadians say they’re getting better at spotting “fake news,”¹²⁰ it is clear that disinformation has “muddied the informational waters.”¹²¹ And we’re in trouble if audiences can’t differentiate, according to Andrew Yates, editor of HuffPost Canada. “If in the mind of the audience *The New York Times* or Huffpost is the same as the *Buffalo Chronicle*,¹²² if to them it's all just noise, then it prevents us from doing our jobs properly.”¹²³

First Draft’s Claire Wardle says agents of disinformation are seeking out the most vulnerable aspects of the ecosystem, whether it be smaller publishers that haven’t been trained or ones that have been ripped apart and have fewer resources. “They’re [disinformation agents] trying to find what aspects of their defenses are the weakest and they happen to be in places where people don’t expect disinformation,” she says.

That makes magazines prime targets.

¹¹⁸ Canada’s Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI) CIGI-IPSOS GLOBAL SURVEY INTERNET SECURITY & TRUST 2019 PART 3: SOCIAL MEDIA, FAKE NEWS & ALGORITHMS <https://www.cigionline.org/sites/default/files/documents/2019%20CIGI-Ipsos%20Global%20Survey%20-%20Part%203%20Social%20Media%2C%20Fake%20News%20%26%20https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/fake-news-facebook-twitter-poll-1.51699160Algorithms.pdf> & <https://doubtit.ca/>

¹¹⁹ Canadian Journalism Foundation (2019). News Consumption Survey - Final Report. April 2019. <http://cjf-fjc.ca/sites/default/files/CJF%20News%20Consumption%20Survey.pdf>

¹²⁰ Bricket, D. (2019) In Era of Fake News, Trust in Traditional News Sources Rebounding. *Ipsos*. 10 May 2019. <https://www.ipsos.com/en-ca/news-polls/Trust-In-Traditional-News-Sources-Rebounding>

¹²¹ Ireton, C. & Posetti, J. et al. (2018) Journalism, ‘Fake News’ & Disinformation: Handbook for Journalism Education and Training, *UNESCO Publishing*. 2018 [http://repository.ou.ac.lk/bitstream/handle/94ousl/928/journalism_fake_news_disinformation_print_friendly_0%20\(1\).pdf?sequence=1](http://repository.ou.ac.lk/bitstream/handle/94ousl/928/journalism_fake_news_disinformation_print_friendly_0%20(1).pdf?sequence=1)

¹²² Lytvynenko, J. et al (2019). The Canadian Election’s Surprise Influencer Is A Buffalo Man Targeting Canadians With Viral Disinformation. *BuzzFeed & Toronto Star*. 18 October 2019. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/janelylytvynenko/matthew-ricchiazzi-buffalo-chronicle-trudeau-claims>

¹²³ Andrew Yates was interviewed for this white paper on 22 January 2020

CHAPTER FOUR: CANADIAN MAGAZINE CASE STUDIES

Doxxing, Inboxting, and Information Gaps

The magazine sector has not escaped the impacts of the ‘Age of Disinformation’. Articles from imposter news websites are being used to discredit legitimate content online, journalists are being abused and threatened in the context of disinformation campaigns targeting them and inauthentic press releases are sent at spam levels to magazine email accounts.

Based on the original research conducted for this whitepaper, the authors have selected three case studies from Canadian magazines experiencing and seeking to combat the impacts of disinformation on their audiences and operations. These are: the news magazine *L’actualité* (hybrid print and digital); a community issues magazine from far northern Canada, *Up Here* (hybrid print and digital); and the car magazine *Electric Autonomy Canada* (digital only).

Case study 1: *L’actualité*

*L’actualité*¹²⁴ attracts approximately a million readers per month and is among the top Canadian French news brands accessed online.¹²⁵ It is the largest French-language magazine in Canada, covering news and current affairs including politics, the economy, business, culture, society, education and science.

The Experience: Online Attacks and Personal Threats

It is no longer a surprise to *L’actualité* Editor Charles Grandmont, when the content they publish online is met with a barrage of attacks. “[They’re] from fringe groups trying to repudiate our facts with bogus claims from fake news sites. Stories about gender, religion and immigration are sure to generate such reactions,” he said.¹²⁶

While more incendiary topic areas tend to be beacons for the injection of misleading and inaccurate information, the issue connected to the disinformation crisis that most troubles Grandmont is that of the harassment of his female journalists. In one instance, an alt-right ‘activist’ threatened to ‘dox’ contributor Camille Lopez, a journalist specializing in debunking disinformation,¹²⁷ one of the beats

¹²⁴ See: <https://lactualite.com/>

¹²⁵ Brin, C. (2019) Digital News Report: Canada 2019 Data: An Overview. *Reuters Institute For The Study of Journalism*. <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2019/canada-2019/>

¹²⁶ In an email interview on 21 January 2020

¹²⁷ She wrote about her experience in *L’actualité*’s here: <https://lactualite.com/societe/les-tentacules/>

identified by researchers as a ‘lightning rod’ for online attacks. Doxxing¹²⁸ involves the publication of a target’s personal details—such as an address and phone numbers—online, with a view to exposing them to physical risk. It is an increasingly prevalent tool used to threaten and intimidate female journalists, in particular in the context of targeted attacks connected to orchestrated disinformation campaigns.¹²⁹

According to Grandmont, in Lopez’s case, the alt-right ‘activist’ threatened to call on his network to physically attack Lopez. “She lodged a formal complaint to the police, who decided to press charges against him. He was found criminally responsible for inciting the commission of an assault and sentenced by a Quebec Court judge to a two-year probation, with severe restrictions, including the interdiction of any contact with our contributor and a compensation for the loss of revenues,” Grandmont said.

However, according to Grandmont’s account, Lopez was so deeply shaken by the events, that she was still “unable to resume her full journalistic duties” eighteen months later. Such reactions to targeted and gendered online abuse are not uncommon. They can include psychological injury, retreat from social media engagement and public reporting duties, loss of income and withdrawal from the journalism profession all together.

The Impact on Reporting: Taking the Middle Ground

In addition to the physical threats and online attacks, *L’actualité* has identified the polarization of audiences as a consequence of the disinformation crisis. It has responded by doubling down on ethical journalism and reaffirming commitments to its editorial policies and mission statement. “Which is to claim more than ever the centre ground in political and social issues...Our reporting aims to highlight the new ideas, personalities and angles that can help our society move forward,” Grandmont said. “It’s a never-ending combat!”

Practically, the magazine seeks to offer editorial diversity, with stories published reflecting perspectives from across the political spectrum. It’s about “[helping] people understand others who don’t think like them,” Grandmont said. This is a potentially important function for news and features magazines in the effort to combat disinformation: enabling the reflection of a diversity of

¹²⁸ “Publishing someone’s personal information in an environment that implies or encourages intimidation” from Henrichsen, J. (2015) The dangers of journalism include getting doxxed. Here’s what you can do about it. *Poynter*. 19 May 2015. <https://www.poynter.org/reporting-editing/2015/the-dangers-of-journalism-include-getting-doxxed-heres-what-you-can-do-about-it/>

¹²⁹ Posetti, J. (2018) *Combating Online Abuse: When Journalists and their Sources Are Targeted*, in Journalism, ‘Fake News’ & Disinformation: Handbook for Journalism Education and Training, *UNESCO Publishing*. 2018

opinions and experiences through content that is more nuanced, lends itself to more engaging narrative techniques and is slower paced.

The Countermeasures: Disinformation Coverage and Public Outreach

The countermeasures *L'actualité* has adopted in response to disinformation have been robust and wide ranging, from strict vetting processes to public outreach.

Editor Charles Grandmont says the magazine practices four different layers of fact checking and relies on a network of experts to help when more complex verification in specialized fields is required.

L'actualité's reporting on disinformation has been extensive, from Camille Lopez's column "devoted exclusively to debunking false stories spreading online,"¹³⁰ to content that assists readers with media literacy, helping them understand "information perils in various fields." For example, the magazine commissioned an adaptation of an article that first appeared in *The Walrus* magazine called *The Rise of Junk Science* by Alex Gillis, which draws readers' attention to "fake publications corrupting the world of research—and influencing real news."¹³¹

Other examples provided by *L'actualité* included:

Reporting on disinformation and misinformation:

- A fact-checking column by Quebec science journalist Valérie Borde called "Faut-il avoir peur?" (Translation: Should we be afraid?),¹³² which targets "stories where there is a lot of disinformation spinning around, like vaping, climate change and GMO (crops) etc."
- One of the magazine's most read stories in 2018 was a long read about the immigration process,¹³³ by Alec Castonguay, *L'actualité's* political bureau chief. Castonguay also wrote a piece called *A letter from Quebec to my friends in Alberta*,¹³⁴ which was translated into

¹³⁰ See Camille Lopez's articles here: <https://lactualite.com/auteur/camillelopez/>

¹³¹ Gillis, A. (2019) Le cancer qui ronge la science. *L'actualité*. 6 November 2019. <https://lactualite.com/sante-et-science/le-cancer-qui-ronge-la-science/>; Gillis, A. (2019). The Rise of Junk Science. *The Walrus*. 9 July 2019. <https://thewalrus.ca/the-rise-of-junk-science/>

¹³² See Valérie Borde's articles here: <https://lactualite.com/auteur/valerieborde/>

¹³³ Castonguay, A. (2017) Demandeurs d'asile : la grande désillusion à venir. *L'actualité*. 10 August 2017. <https://lactualite.com/societe/demandeurs-dasile-la-grande-desillusion-a-venir/>

¹³⁴ Castonguay, A. (2018). Le pétrole de la colère : lettre à mes amis de l'Alberta. *L'actualité*. 18 December 2018.. <https://lactualite.com/politique/le-petrole-de-la-colere-lettre-a-mes-amis-de-lalberta/>

English and published by Macleans,¹³⁵ when facts were being misrepresented around the feuding premiers François Legault and Jason Kenney in connection to the issue.

- Columnist and economist Pierre Fortin¹³⁶ also writes articles aimed at correcting misconceptions about economic and social issues.

Public outreach:

- The magazine supported a series of public conferences¹³⁷ organized by Valérie Borde, where researchers explained what credible science said about a broad range of topics like genetic testing, for example.
- It held a panel event¹³⁸ discussing the impact of disinformation in September 2019, sponsored by Chief Scientist of Québec that featured journalists Camille Lopez, Alec Castonguay and Pierre Fortin (mentioned above). It also involved a story series¹³⁹ on crowd-sourced science projects.
- The magazine has also joined the Covering Climate Now¹⁴⁰ initiative, bringing together hundreds of media outlets around the world to collaborate on ways to improve climate coverage.

When tackling disinformation, the most important thing is to keep the industry “united and mobilized,” Charles Grandmont said. “We have to share and pool resources whenever it’s possible, whether it be through content collaborations, training, legal or governmental representation. We must continue to raise public awareness and education around those issues.”

Grandmont said that while disinformation has been a huge challenge, it has also unlocked innovative ways to improve the work *L'actualité* does, in order to adapt to the “new reality.” For example: “It helped us find new ways to fulfill our mission, like the production of long-form documentaries in partnership with a Quebec TV network,” he said.

¹³⁵ Castonguay, A. (2018) A letter from Quebec to my friends in Alberta. *Macleans*. 20 December 2018. <https://www.macleans.ca/opinion/a-letter-from-quebec-to-my-friends-in-alberta/>

¹³⁶ See Pierre Fortin’s articles here: <https://lactualite.com/auteur/pierrefortin/>

¹³⁷ Public conferences are via Centre Déclic, “a non-profit organization that creates opportunities for scientists and the public to meet in the form of participatory conferences.” See its website here: <https://centredeclic.ca/>

¹³⁸ Facebook event for the panel event: “Dissection de l’info | Comment se porte votre sens critique?” <https://www.facebook.com/events/496153167628438/>

¹³⁹ See the crowd-sourced science initiative here. Boule, M. 2019. Lending a helping hand to science. *L'actualité*. 3 September 2019. <https://lactualite.com/sante-et-science/preter-main-forte-a-la-science/>

¹⁴⁰ For more information on the Covering Climate Now Initiative see here: <https://www.coveringclimatenow.org/>

He also praised federal and provincial programs designed to support robust, independent journalism as a bulwark against disinformation. “The increasing support of the Canadian and Quebec governments through well-crafted programs to help the production of independent journalistic content is also a positive development,” Grandmont said.

Case study 2: *Up Here*

*Up Here*¹⁴¹ is a magazine dedicated exclusively to covering northern Canada, with around 100,000 readers per issue and 47,000 people reached monthly on Facebook. It is the largest circulation publication in the north, and it is independently owned and operated.¹⁴²

The Experience: Space Aliens Running the World

Up Here reports getting about four or five emailed ‘press releases’ a week containing disinformation.

“[They’re] from hyper partisan or false news sources, ranging in content from climate change being a myth to space aliens running the world. I’m often surprised they don’t get swept up in the spam filter,” Editor Jacob Boon said in an interview for this white paper.¹⁴³ The syntax, bad grammar, poor spelling and “unprofessional” nature of the releases make them easier to detect as fraudulent content, according to Boon.

However, none of these ‘press releases’ specifically targeted the magazine with content that’s relevant to it. “We’re a pretty niche magazine. I can’t recall anyone sharing false leads or hoaxes regarding northern Canada—the type of content that would theoretically be of interest to us,” Boon said.

The Impact on Reporting: Think Twice, Publish Once

Up Here understands the advantages, as well as the perils, of stories going viral.

“I’m sure many still view it as the goal for any article. But I always try to be aware now of how the framing of a story can be misinterpreted or spiral out of control from the original outlet,” Boon said.

¹⁴¹ *Up Here*’s website: <https://uphere.ca/>

¹⁴² *Up Here*’s 2020 media kit describes the magazine as the voice of Canada’s far north. Find it here: https://uphere.ca/sites/default/files/up_here_2019-08-14_2020_media_kit_-_sales.pdf

¹⁴³ In an email interview on 21 January 2020

Considering the potential of how a story might be recontextualized or reframed, feeds into the publishing thought process.

Boon said the big challenge is to “...‘think twice and publish once’ on content that could be seized on by those with bad intentions.” This is particularly important in the editorial framing of northern Canada’s “mostly Indigenous, long overlooked and disenfranchised populations.”

The Measures: avoid breathing more life into disinformation

Boon views disinformation as a means of controlling the conversation. “Sometimes, once the lie has been told, it doesn’t matter that it gets exposed. The idea is still there.” This assertion resonates with those on the editorial frontline of disinformation combat, like internationally celebrated editor Maria Ressa of Rappler.com in the Philippines, who says, “A lie told a thousand times becomes a truth.”¹⁴⁴ And research in the field of psychology bears this out: a recent study determined that frequent repetition of false information rendered it less likely to be detected as such by consumers.¹⁴⁵

Pointing to the ‘long tail’ of disinformation and the potential for magazines to be caught in the mire, *Up Here’s* Editor Jacob Boon said magazines can often be the “last mouthpiece for an insidious game of telephone playing out across the web.” This is because being outside the news cycle can make magazines more prone to recycling already debunked content. “Magazines—maybe because of the long production times—can still be bringing up a ‘fake fact’ we all thought we left behind months ago,” Boon said.

This pinpoints an important issue for consideration: any time there is an article addressing disinformation, “the mere fact of casting a spotlight on it will amplify it a bit,” *The New York Times’* Matthew Rosenberg has said.¹⁴⁶

Up Here says that combating disinformation may end up being a market solution. “The ones who rely on what is found to be fake will lose credibility, subscribers, support and money.”

Case Study 3: *Electric Autonomy Canada*

¹⁴⁴ Posetti J, Simon, F & Shabbir N (2019b) *What if Scale Breaks Community: Rebooting Audience Engagement When Journalism Is Under Fire*, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford
<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2019-10/Posetti%20What%20if%20FINAL.pdf>

¹⁴⁵ Effron, D. A., & Raj, M. (2020). ‘Misinformation and Morality: Encountering Fake-News Headlines Makes Them Seem Less Unethical to Publish and Share’. *Psychological Science*, 31(1), 75–87. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797619887896>

¹⁴⁶ Kwan, V. (2019) When does reporting become a megaphone for disinformation? *First Draft*. 14 August 2019.
<https://firstdraftnews.org/latest/when-does-reporting-become-a-megaphone-for-disinformation/>

*Electric Autonomy Canada*¹⁴⁷ is an independent, digital, B2B magazine that launched in May 2019, covering Canada’s transition to electric/autonomous vehicles.

The Experience: Filling In Information Gaps

Electric Autonomy Canada Publisher Nino Di Cara says disinformation hasn't directly affected the magazine to his knowledge, at least not in the sense of attempts to pull a hoax on the magazine, share false leads or target journalists.

But the magazine’s mission is in part to “help overcome information gaps and correct misinformation,” Di Cara said. “It has been said that the development of electric vehicles over the last few decades has been held up due to protective practices of the oil and auto-maker industries.”¹⁴⁸

One function of niche publications drawing on specific expertise can be to educate mainstream journalists and that’s a role Di Cara acknowledges. “Journalists in mainstream media (print and TV) are not always well informed about the merits of EVs,” Di Cara said. “Part of our purpose is to provide solid information for the EV industry and also others, such as mainstream media, who want to learn about it.”

The Impact on Reporting: Potential for Fact Checking to be Compromised

There’s no doubt disinformation is “a reality of life for every industry,” according to Di Cara. He said magazines, like any publishing operation, have an extra special responsibility as providers of credible information. “But commercial pressures for reduced advertisers and subscription revenues mean that the effectiveness of fact-checking can be compromised,” he said. This is in part due to reduced resources and pressure to publish quickly online.

This experience speaks to the role niche magazines can play in fighting disinformation—simply by being aware of information gaps and filling them with “engaging powerful narratives” that set the record straight.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷Electric Autonomy’s website: <https://electricautonomy.ca/about/>

¹⁴⁸In an email interview on 14 January 2020

¹⁴⁹Wardle, C & Derakhshan, H. (2017 p78) Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making. *Council of Europe Report*. 27 September 2017. <https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-research/168076277c>

The Measures: Share What's Gone Wrong

The magazine has employed a freelance editor, freelance journalists and recently hired its first full time editorial associate. "As publisher, I'm heavily involved in every story we produce and so that, as well as the rigour of our highly experienced editor, are our primary quality control measures," Di Cara said.

When it comes to what the magazine industry could do differently to engage with the disinformation crisis and address its impacts, knowledge sharing is one possibility. "Share information on what has gone wrong and how they have overcome it. But it takes courage for publishers to stand up and share such information," Di Cara said

CHAPTER FIVE - VULNERABILITIES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Magazines are as vulnerable as everybody else in the digital environment, according to Cherylyn Ireton from the World Editors Forum. “Disinformation is pervasive,” she said. Which means they, too, need to pay attention to the increasing sophistication and monetization of disinformation and the sensitivities around reporting on the issue. Magazines also need to have a comprehensive understanding of the ways in which journalists are being targeted as well as an awareness of how a lack of transparency can erode trust—or even how use of a simple stock image can tie them to acts of disinformation.

Time to pay attention

While it can be tempting to dismiss disinformation as a major issue for magazine media, increased knowledge sharing, education and training can help provide an effective countermeasure to combatting disinformation. As this report demonstrates, magazine media—from business media to arts & literary and consumer publications—are not immune from being disinformation targets. *Asparagus* magazine, which covers sustainable living with a focus on science, indicated it hadn’t been strongly affected by disinformation agents yet, mostly because it is “very new and very small,” founder Jessie Johnston said. “If someone wanted to get a false story spread widely, our outlet would not be the way to do it,” she said. Johnston also cited time pressures associated with producing a start-up magazine fuelled by part time staff that impeded their ability to think deeper about the impact of disinformation, but she also expressed the desire to do so.

Similarly, arts and literary magazines *Vie Des Arts* and *UPPERCASE* did not identify disinformation as a problem or an issue of concern. The authors anticipated that disinformation would be of reduced concern in this category of magazines—not due to good practice measures being in place to combat disinformation, but rather because the nature of their content may make such magazines less susceptible to disinformation. However, it is worth recalling that international literary magazines were the subject of some spectacular hoaxes in the analogue era.¹⁵⁰

Other arts and literary titles like *This Magazine* (“one of Canada’s oldest alternative journals, covering progressive politics, ideas and culture”¹⁵¹) and *Shameless* (an “independent Canadian voice for smart, strong, sassy young women and trans youth”¹⁵²) cited looming deadlines and

¹⁵⁰ See, for example, the Hitler Diaries fraud perpetrated on *Der Stern* magazine in the 1980s <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/diary-of-the-hitler-diary-hoax>

¹⁵¹ This Magazine’s website: <https://this.org/about/>

¹⁵² Shameless’ website” <http://shamelessmag.com/about>

limited staff capacity impacting their ability to take part in the research for this paper, with *Shameless* elaborating that it would need to give the issue more thought.

Disinformation as it applies to magazines as a whole needs more thought, more research and more discussion. “It’s definitely a section in the whole information ecosystem that is understudied and not understood as well, and [that] could therefore make it very vulnerable,” First Draft’s Claire Wardle said.

A lack of resources to dedicate to this space can create a blind spot. To avoid this, experts say that sharing knowledge and collaboration is key.

The following are examples of areas where trust, credibility and safety can be put at risk in the context of convergent digital era threats to journalism’s sustainability, which have allowed disinformation to thrive. Concurrently, they are spaces where collaboration, transparency and training can be potentially effectively deployed.

1. Vulnerability: Superficial Fact Checking and Verification

Magazine journalism is built on “in-depth research and rigorous fact-checking.”¹⁵³ But, it is vital that magazine journalists are aware of the growing sophistication of deception, including fake think tanks, fraudulent publications and inauthentic social media accounts, which require additional layers of verification. “We have evidence of long-term plays when [agents] are dropping pieces of information one at the time, so unless you fact-check right down, you can be fooled,” First Draft’s Claire Wardle said. “We do a lot of training and people don’t necessarily get beyond first-line verification. They don’t really understand how information could have been manipulated or realize how they could be caught out,” she said.

Opportunity: Training and Upskilling

Fergus Bell from Fathom said magazines that don’t face the same breaking news pressures as news publications (on and offline) are definitely a good line of defence. But he said that they are at a disadvantage because journalists working in breaking news have had to develop new skill sets when it comes to real time verification, which have not yet been widely replicated in the magazine industry because there hasn’t yet been a desperate need for them.

¹⁵³Rutledge, M. (2019) Canada’s magazines antidote to misinformation. *The Hill Times*. 18 October 2019. <https://www.hilltimes.com/2019/10/18/canadas-magazines-antidote-to-misinformation/220291>

2. Vulnerability: Journalists Being Targeted

L'actualité's experience is a dire example of abuse and threats designed to “discredit a journalist, undermine their confidence, divert their attention and ultimately to chill their reporting”¹⁵⁴ Such targeting is a common occurrence for journalists on disinformation beats, according to Craig Silverman from BuzzFeed, who has been targeted himself. “People look to find a way to dismiss whatever your findings are...and you do see people trying to discredit you and your organization,” he said.

As previously indicated, female journalists who report on the theme of disinformation are particularly vulnerable because they are more brutally and prolifically targeted in general online and disinformation tactics targeting them sexually are typically deployed.¹⁵⁵

Opportunity: Putting Awareness and Response Plans in Place

Charles Grandmont from *L'actualité* says it's important to ensure journalists - including freelancers—report any threats to the editor and remind staff of risks of posting personal information online. He advises media organizations to have a plan in place to deal with any threats, including notifying the police. Grandmont also encourages journalists to seek psychological support. “Be on the lookout for signs of post-traumatic stress disorders in the weeks and months afterwards,” he said.

Grandmont's advice reflects emerging international good practice responses. Celebrated Philippines Editor Maria Ressa, who was one of the first journalists in the world to turn the tools of investigative journalism on the problem of orchestrated state-sponsored disinformation campaigns, has lost count of the number of online death and rape threats she's received. In addition to psychological support, she recommends employers openly acknowledge the seriousness of the problem and tighten security online and offline in tandem.¹⁵⁶ The frequently gendered nature of these attacks also demand a gender-sensitive approach to the development of guidelines, policies and training developed in response to the problem.

¹⁵⁴Ireton, C. & Posetti, J. (2018) Op. cit. p116

¹⁵⁵ Posetti, J. (2018) *Combatting Online Abuse: When Journalists and their Sources Are Targeted*, in Journalism, 'Fake News' & Disinformation: Handbook for Journalism Education and Training, UNESCO Publishing. 2018

¹⁵⁶Ireton, C. & Posetti, J. (2018) op. Cit. p123

3. Vulnerability: Reporting on Disinformation

Covering disinformation too early can pump oxygen into misleading content and covering it too late can allow it to spread unchecked. Debunking conspiracies and falsehoods also has the potential to pique more interest and direct more traffic,¹⁵⁷ or even give audiences key words to “search for alternative facts,” according to First Draft.

Opportunity: Cover the issues attracting disinformation more deeply

First Draft says the more time media organizations spend monitoring disinformation, the easier it is to find where the 'tipping point' is. Its recommendation is to do more reporting that helps explain the issues that tend to attract disinformation: “Any reporting that pre-empts some of the most common and powerful narratives might help inoculate some of the disinformation.”¹⁵⁸

4. Vulnerability: Blurring Advertorials with Independent Editorial Content

When it comes to making journalism sustainable, branded content has been deemed one of the “best, most proven business strategies”¹⁵⁹ and the global content marketing industry is projected to be worth \$412 billion by 2021.¹⁶⁰ However, as outlined in UNESCO's *Journalism, 'Fake News' and Disinformation* handbook, “the lines between fact, entertainment, advertising, fabrication and fiction are increasingly blurred,”¹⁶¹ undermining trust in the process.

One such example is a *Teen Vogue's* January 2020 article about Facebook that “stunk of sponsored content,” according to *Mashable*, and initially ran with no byline or disclaimer.¹⁶² It was harshly criticized because, “what should have been branded as sponsored content was presented as an authentic critical article which it wasn't,” Cheryl Ireton, Executive Director of the World Editors

¹⁵⁷Kwan, V. (2019) When does reporting become a megaphone for disinformation? *First Draft*. 14 August 2019. <https://firstdraftnews.org/latest/when-does-reporting-become-a-megaphone-for-disinformation/>

¹⁵⁸ Wardle, C. (2018). 5 Lessons for Reporting in an Age of Disinformation. *First Draft*. 27 December 2018. <https://firstdraftnews.org/latest/5-lessons-for-reporting-in-an-age-of-disinformation/>

¹⁵⁹ Wilpers, J. & Senor, J. (2019-20 p7) INNOVATION IN MEDIA 2019-2020 WORLD REPORT. *FIPP*.

¹⁶⁰ Silber, T. (2018). Multinational Conglomerate GE Goes All In On Content Marketing. 20 June 2018. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/tonysilber/2018/06/20/multinational-conglomerate-ge-goes-all-in-on-content-marketing/#2075931b63da>

¹⁶¹Ireton, C. & Posetti, J. et al (2018 p59) Journalism, 'Fake News' & Disinformation: Handbook for Journalism Education and Training, *UNESCO Publishing*. 2018 [http://repository.ou.ac.lk/bitstream/handle/94ousl/928/journalism_fake_news_disinformation_print_friendly_0%20\(1\).pdf?sequence=1](http://repository.ou.ac.lk/bitstream/handle/94ousl/928/journalism_fake_news_disinformation_print_friendly_0%20(1).pdf?sequence=1)

¹⁶² Morse, J. (2020) Glowing Facebook story pulled from Teen Vogue following serious WTFs. *Mashable*. 19 January 2020. <https://mashable.com/article/facebook-teen-vogue-sponsored-content-election-integrity/>

Forum said in an interview for this whitepaper.¹⁶³ “Magazines are suffering from the same commercial pressures as newspapers, so I think the vulnerability is to people who can pay for content or campaigns that are seemingly journalism, but are in fact pushing a really strong commercial line.”

As magazines’ product placements and product reviews get harder to identify as sponsored content, such publications risk being tarred with the ‘disinformation brush’ and audience trust is jeopardized as a result.

Opportunity: Increased Transparency

According to Cheryl Ireton, had *Teen Vogue* been more explicit about their relationship with Facebook or published content alongside the advertorial offering a more critical examination of the issues, there may not have been such blowback and erosion of trust.

“At the end of the day, journalism’s job is to be critical, and I think the *Teen Vogue* example bypasses that process,” Ireton said. “From an audience perspective, it's information you can't trust and that's the big worry.”

Ireton also suggested that magazines issue statements about their attitude towards sponsored content and how they work with PR agencies. “I think part of the trusting news movement is to be very explicit about who you deal with, why you deal with them and what you take from them. And to give more of the backstory of what you're doing and why you're doing it,” she said.

5. Vulnerability: Public Relations Firms Monetizing Disinformation

There is a market for making any product or company look more credible, more reliable or more trusted than it really is. As discussed, a plethora of marketing firms has sprung up ready to design and deploy fake quotes, fraudulent ‘news’ websites and false narratives for the right price. As BuzzFeed’s Craig Silverman reported, this “professionalization of deception” could impact magazine media. “Magazines do a lot of service content, they do a lot of beauty content, they do a lot of product reviews and recommendations,” he noted. “There is absolutely a risk if they don't have good vetting processes for understanding how people can fake social proof.”

¹⁶³ Cheryl Ireton was interviewed for this white paper on 10 January 2020. She is also an Editor and Contributing Author of UNESCO’s Journalism, ‘Fake News’ & Disinformation Handbook

Silverman said that magazines should think about how clients themselves may be paying for their own engagement or creating perceptions of virality. “There are people who put a lot of faith in their fashion/beauty magazines of choice and if magazines don't continue to uphold their standards that could certainly be one area of impact.”

Opportunity: Train Your Business End

Historically, there has been at least a theoretical separation of editorial and business divisions within media outlets, but digital transformation has increasingly resulted in the colocation and even convergence of these functions. This is a good thing for disinformation combat according to First Draft's Claire Wardle, who said there needs to be more collaboration between the two. “There's always an attempt to find where the weaknesses in the defenses are,” she said. “[Disinformation actors] are much more likely to manipulate somebody on the business side because they haven't probably gone through the same editorial training. The business side has got targets, it has incentives to move quickly and not necessarily to think through the repercussions.”

The other obvious opportunity that exists involves fashion, beauty and other consumer-oriented magazines focusing fact-checking efforts on authentic product assessments and the debunking of claims about products and services.

6. Vulnerability: Stock Photos

As operational budget cuts continue to bite, more and more media organizations are replacing professional photographers and photography with stock imagery. However, apart from the loss of quality and originality, there are also disinformation implications. During Fergus Bell's exploratory work on misinformation in science journalism, he came across an unexpected vulnerability. Whenever there was a story about malaria, he found every publisher and publication would use the same stock image of a mosquito. “That became a problem with images because if there was a fake news site using the exact same stock photo...they all looked the same,” he says. This could in turn cause people to mistake false content for credible journalism. For example, mistaking a fraudulent story about a “cure” for malaria for a public interest story about treatment in a reputable health magazine.

Opportunity: More Original Imagery

Stock photos can unintentionally put legitimate websites in the same basket as fraudulent websites by creating a veneer of synthesis. “One thing we determined that would help counter misinformation in science journals was to have better imagery attached to scientific stories, original photography would improve the health of our media system,” Bell said.

“The magazine industry has an advantage here, it doesn't have to use stock images...It has that little bit more time to be able to find better images and original content,” Bell said. This highlights the need for images embedded from social media to be vetted as well. “You have to do a little bit of due diligence on verification of imagery because if you are going to connect it to a story, you cannot afford for that to undermine your journalism,” Bell said. Even doing a Google Reverse Image Search on a stock image to ensure it doesn't crop up in connection with any debunked stories associated with acts of disinformation would be a good start.

7. Vulnerability: Blending in With Information Pollution

In 2008, US academic Clay Shirky famously said, “There's no such thing as information overload, only filter failure.”¹⁶⁴ However, many filters have failed us, particularly on the social media platforms where the information floods are now at tsunami levels thanks to algorithmic amplification and credible information is often hard to surface amid the detritus. In this environment, trusted sources are blended with less reputable ones and audiences find it harder to identify the reliable brands, facilitating the rise of disinformation.¹⁶⁵ What's more, it's an environment where editors are no longer the gatekeepers—they have lost control of how legitimate stories or images spread and their capacity to filter out the pollution has waned. Information shared completely out of context and debunked falsehoods can be resurfaced again years after the fact. So, if imposter content or fraudulent news websites look similar to legitimate organizations, how can genuine content stand out?

¹⁶⁴ See: https://archives.cjr.org/overload/interview_with_clay_shirky_par.php

¹⁶⁵ Martens, B. et al (2018 p43), The Digital Transformation of News Media and the Rise of Disinformation and Fake News. Digital Economy Working Paper 2018-02, Joint Research Centre Technical Reports. (April 20, 2018). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3164170> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3164170>

Opportunity: Show Your Workings and Work Your Brand

It's time for journalism of all kinds to 'show its workings,' according to Fergus Bell. "A mathematician has to show how they got to the endpoint. We now need to show how we get to our endpoints," he says.

"For a long time, editors have said no one is interested in how we do it, they're interested in the story. But, how we do it is so important now because that is what separates us from the people that make content that merely looks like ours."

"The way magazine journalists can help is to talk about how they worked with a source, talk about where the information has come from, talk about how the person that interviewed is qualified to talk about what they're talking about," Bell said.

"I think it's a misconception that people are not interested in that."

Other studies show in addition to the rise of disinformation creating an appetite among audiences for increased transparency, it's also created an appetite for trusted brands.

The *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019* found that "People are once again paying more attention to 'reputable' brands."¹⁶⁶

8. Vulnerability: Under-Resourced Media Organizations

Many magazines are operating at minimum strength while trying to maintain the essentials of the job (news gathering and reporting), creating challenges that seem more immediate and demanding than the potential threat of disinformation. "One of the threats for these smaller operations is that they would probably literally say 'I don't have time to think about this, I'm just trying to keep my head above water,'" Craig Silverman observed.

"But when you're in that scenario, if by chance your topic or your area happens to be something that gets into the news, all of a sudden you're going to be operating in a different environment. Being prepared for that moment is something that would serve them well," he said.

¹⁶⁶ Newman, N. et al (2019 p30) Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019.
https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/inline-files/DNR_2019_FINAL.pdf

As experts interviewed for this paper have alluded to, if purveyors believe disinformation isn't a focus for magazine media, that's probably the next place they will look.

"If you are working in media in today's environment you need to be aware of some of the fundamentals around how media manipulation is occurring, how misinformation and disinformation are produced and spread, and also how journalists can be targets of trolling campaigns and harassment campaigns," Silverman said. "The magazine industry, like everyone, needs to make sure there's a base level of knowledge and understanding."

Opportunity: Collaboration

Experts the authors interviewed for this white paper, along with proactive editors like Charles Grandmont from *L'actualité*, believe working together is key.

Fergus Bell goes as far as to say that collaboration is the only method to tackle the crisis. He said that if magazines find common formats to be transparent about "showing their workings" it could make a significant difference. "If everyone does that, that's going to change the way that people start to analyse and the way what the audience starts to expect from us," Bell said.

According to Bell, "they'll ultimately start to see the difference between those editors and journalists who can show their workings and those who can't."

"Social platforms have recognized that they are a target: it's important that the media does so as well." – Renee DiResta¹⁶⁷

"Trust is not a competitive issue"

There is one thing magazines can learn from agents of disinformation: "They are actually very collaborative," First Draft's Claire Wardle said. "They retweet each other's material, they share the same messaging...They know the people on the quality side—we are not as good as that."

Collaboration has driven innovation for purveyors of disinformation, but it can do the same for magazines, according to Fathom's Fergus Bell. "Trust is not a competitive issue. It benefits everyone

¹⁶⁷See: <https://firstdraftnews.org/latest/year-in-review-journalists-need-to-recognise-they-are-a-target-of-influence-operations/>

to collaborate on creating a trustworthy and trusted ecosystem for our industry,” he said. “There are ways that we can do that around standards, around transparency over methodology, around the way we communicate what we're doing in this space.”

CHAPTER SIX: Conclusion and Recommendations

One of the worst potential consequences of the global disinformation crisis is the prospect of audiences downgrading their trust in *all* information because they're finding it harder to discern facts from falsehoods, legitimate publications from fraudulent ones and hyper-partisan content from critical independent journalism. The results include the undermining of public health and disaster communications, along with the destabilisation of democratic processes and increasing threats to the sustainability of independent journalism.

Canadian magazines arguably have a role to play as a bulwark against some of these 'Age of Disinformation' effects, as a result of their loyal audiences, capacity for long form and explanatory reportage, and expertise in niche subject areas. It is therefore worth supporting projects and programs designed to strengthen quality magazine journalism that serves diverse audiences—from investigative news magazines and regionally focused outputs, to business and travel publications, through to those covering consumer issues, art and literature, and health and wellbeing periodicals.

However, disinformation purveyors seek out the most vulnerable aspects of the information ecosystem—from small publications with poorly trained staff and limited resources, to those with weak defences or complacency, and niche, impressionable audiences. These factors are what make magazines, including Canadian titles, prime targets for disinformation agents.

That's why it's vital that magazine editors, publishers and journalists are aware of the growing sophistication of disinformation tactics, including fraudulent sources, faux think tanks, inauthentic social media accounts and fake publications. In this context, it's important that magazines return to their roots of "in-depth research and rigorous fact-checking."¹⁶⁸

As *Up Here* Editor Jacob Boon pointed out to the authors, combating disinformation may end up being an economic leveller for the magazine industry: "The ones who rely on what is found to be fake will lose credibility, subscribers, support and money."

Based on the research underpinning this white paper, the authors have produced six key recommendations for action to help insulate magazines against disinformation and deploy them in the defence of credible journalism. These recommendations focus on strengthening research and

¹⁶⁸Rutledge, M. (2019) Canada's magazines antidote to misinformation. *The Hill Times*. 18 October 2019. <https://www.hilltimes.com/2019/10/18/canadas-magazines-antidote-to-misinformation/220291>

verification capabilities; improving trust in magazine brands through ethical and transparent practice; leveraging the loyalty of niche audiences; collaborating in the fightback; preparing for attack; and avoiding avoidance.

Six key recommendations for action

1. Promote understanding of the causes and consequences of the Disinformation Age, while ensuring fact-checking and verification skills are fit for digital purpose

The problem: While magazines have a long tradition of expertise in fact checking and verification, aided by longer publishing deadlines and capacity to develop deep knowledge specializations, Digital Age manifestations of an age-old problem¹⁶⁹ require more sophisticated combative skills.

Effective countermeasures:

- **Prioritize knowledge sharing and training** designed to ensure research and verification skills on editorial teams are fit for Digital Age purpose (e.g. social media verification techniques).
- **Develop a more sophisticated understanding** of the causes and impacts of the present disinformation crisis on journalism and the public's 'right to know.'
- **Develop specialized disinformation beats** relevant to your niche.
- **Be a gap filler.** Niche magazines could help fight disinformation pre-emptively, simply by being aware of information gaps and working to fill them with powerful and engaging narratives that could help debunk falsehoods and promote credible, verifiable information.

Resources to aid implementation:

- Take inspiration from diverse projects featured in this whitepaper e.g. The Democracy and Integrity Project¹⁷⁰ (*The National Observer's* non-partisan fact checks and investigations on disinformation in connection with the rise of hate); and the development of disinformation as a specialist magazine beat à la *L'actualité*.
- UNESCO's handbook for journalism education and training: *Journalism, 'Fake News', and Disinformation* (Ireton and Posetti 2018) which is [available to download for free](#) in 13 languages.

¹⁶⁹ For a timeline of development and discussion of the characteristics of disinformation in the Digital Age, see <https://www.icfi.org/news/short-guide-history-fake-news-and-disinformation-new-icfi-learning-module>

¹⁷⁰ See: <https://www.nationalobserver.com/special-reports/democracy-and-integrity-project>

- *A Short Guide to the History of 'Fake News' and Disinformation* (Posetti and Matthews 2018) from the authors of this whitepaper, published by the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ). It is published in three languages and is also [available for free download](#)
- The informational blog posts, training tools and projects curated by First Draft News: <https://firstdraftnews.org/training/>

2. Bring your audiences with you: Truth, trust and collaborative combat

The problem: Increasingly, the conflation of fact and fiction is undermining public trust in *all* information, enabling easier manipulation of public opinion by nefarious actors. Magazines' loyal, niche audiences and their long 'shelf life' make them a desirable target for disinformation purveyors.

Effective Countermeasures:

- According to a Canadian Journalism Foundation survey, 83 per cent of respondents were most worried about disinformation that might compromise their health by spreading incorrect information about medical risks and benefits.¹⁷¹ This offers opportunities for **reporting on these themes that leverages specialist knowledge to aid debunking**. It also points to emerging opportunities for new magazine publishing ventures in the health and wellbeing space that offer reliable, evidence-based, trustworthy reporting.
- **Mobilize your audiences and strengthen loyalty** through membership/subscriber programs and events exploring the causes and impacts of the disinformation crisis.
- **Consider collaborative reporting projects** that leverage the collective expertise of other niche titles, and even audiences with specialist knowledge.

Resources to aid implementation:

Draw inspiration from the Canadian organizations, campaigns and initiatives featured in this report. For example:

- *L'actualité* supported a series of public conferences¹⁷² where researchers explained what credible science says about a broad range of topics, including a panel discussion¹⁷³ about

¹⁷¹CFJ (2019 p47). News Consumption Survey Canadian Journalism Foundation - Final Report. *Canadian Journalism Foundation*. April 2019. <http://cijf-ic.ca/sites/default/files/CJF%20News%20Consumption%20Survey.pdf>

¹⁷²See: <https://centredecliac.ca/>

¹⁷³ See: <https://www.facebook.com/events/496153167628438/>

the impacts of disinformation. It also involved a story series¹⁷⁴ on crowd-sourced science projects.

- Public Policy Forum,¹⁷⁵ for “under-served” communities.
- CIVIX, a news literacy initiative aimed at teenagers.¹⁷⁶
- The Canadian Journalism Foundation’s ‘Doubt It’ campaign¹⁷⁷ (which seeks to help the public verify information).
- News Media Canada’s ‘SPOT Fake News’ media literacy project.¹⁷⁸

Learn from the examples of media organizations fighting back on the frontline of the ‘disinformation war’ in the Global South, like Rappler in the Philippines, the Daily Maverick in South Africa, and The Quint in India. Detailed case studies can be found in these research reports from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism:

- [*Lessons in Innovation: How International News organizations Combat Disinformation through Mission-Driven Journalism*](#) (Posetti, Simon and Shabbir 2018a)
- [*What if scale breaks community? Rebooting audience engagement when journalism is under fire*](#) (Posetti, Simon and Shabbir 2018b)

3. Practice transparency and accountability

The problem: “The lines between fact, entertainment, advertising, fabrication and fiction are increasingly blurred,”¹⁷⁹ undermining trust in the process of journalism.

Effective countermeasures:

- **Reveal reporting processes:** take your audiences behind the scenes.
- **Clearly delineate advertorial/sponsored/native content:** do not be tempted to blur the lines for short lived profit.

¹⁷⁴ See: <https://lactualite.com/sante-et-science/preter-main-forte-a-la-science/>

¹⁷⁵ See: <https://ppforum.ca/project/local-news-democracy/>

¹⁷⁶ Brin, C. (2019) Digital News Report: Canada 2019 Data: An Overview. *Reuters Institute For The Study of Journalism*. <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2019/canada-2019/>

¹⁷⁷ See: <https://doubtit.ca/>

¹⁷⁸ See: <https://spotfakenews.ca/>

¹⁷⁹ Ireton, C. & Posetti, J. et al (2018 p59) Journalism, ‘Fake News’ & Disinformation: Handbook for Journalism Education and Training, *UNESCO Publishing*, 2018
[http://repository.ou.ac.lk/bitstream/handle/94ousl/928/journalism_fake_news_disinformation_print_friendly_0%20\(1\).pdf?sequence=1](http://repository.ou.ac.lk/bitstream/handle/94ousl/928/journalism_fake_news_disinformation_print_friendly_0%20(1).pdf?sequence=1)

- **Interrogate your advertisers' methods** to avoid tainting by association.

Resources to aid implementation:

- A case study to learn from—a *Teen Vogue* advertorial about Facebook that “stunk of sponsored content.” It initially ran with no byline or disclaimer and it backfired spectacularly.¹⁸⁰

4. Unite against divisive forces

The problem: Journalism is competitive, but industry unity and professional collaboration are critical to combating the global disinformation crisis. Going up against disinformation alone will not work. This is partly because the disinformation agents are themselves well-organized and highly collaborative.

Effective countermeasures:

- When tackling the problem, *L'actualité* Editor Charles Grandmont told us that the most important thing is to keep the industry “**united and mobilized**” for battle.
- **Combative resources (training, knowledge, forensic verification tools, etc.) should be pooled and shared** between titles and magazine stables wherever possible.
- Experiment with **collaborative investigations**.
- **Consider aggregating** legal resources.
- **Consolidate lobbying** efforts.
- **Share with industry colleagues your experiences** of being targeted and the methods you're using to try to fight back to allow others to learn from your mistakes as well as your successes.
- **Make a particular effort to support very small magazines and publishers** who have limited capacity to engage with the problem but need to be strong links in the credible information chain.

¹⁸⁰ Morse, J. (2020) Glowing Facebook story pulled from Teen Vogue following serious WTFs. *Mashable*. 19 January 2020. <https://mashable.com/article/facebook-teen-vogue-sponsored-content-election-integrity/>

Resources to aid implementation:

- Draw inspiration from collaborative disinformation reporting initiatives, including the joint BuzzFeed-Toronto Star [investigation into the 'Buffalo Chronicle' debacle](#) which saw Facebook implicated as a vector.

5. You are not immune from online violence: Be prepared for security threats and safety risks

The problem: Online violence against journalists is now a well-documented feature of orchestrated disinformation campaigns and a tool used more broadly to chill critical journalism. Disinformation agents have learned that directly attacking journalists online can aid their attempts to seed doubt, confusion and fear, with female journalists and those reporting on disinformation being disproportionately targeted. The violence can manifest in a variety of ways—from gendered harassment and abuse through to threats of sexual and physical violence, and digital security attacks including doxxing and surveillance.¹⁸¹

Effective countermeasures:

- **Publishers must have a plan in place** to deal with any threats made against staff and contributors, including notifying the police and increasing security—on and offline (because these threats do not remain in the digital world).
- **Psychological support** should be sought and provided in the weeks and months following an attack.
- *L'actualité* Editor Charles Grandmont recounted a serious case in which one of one of his female contributors reporting on the theme of disinformation was targeted. He said it was **important to ensure journalists—including freelancers—report any threats to the editor and remind staff of risks of posting personal information online.**
- **Provide training and resources** focused on integrated digital, physical and psychological safety, to enable proactive self defence.

Resources to aid implementation:

- ['Combating online abuse: when journalists and their sources are targeted'](#) (Posetti, 2018) in UNESCO's *Journalism, Fake News and Disinformation* (Free download)
- [Fighting back against prolific online harassment: Maria Ressa](#) (Posetti, 2017)

¹⁸¹ Posetti, J (2018) 'Combating online abuse: when journalists and their sources are targeted' in Ireton, C & Posetti J's *Journalism, Fake News and Disinformation* (2018) Op. Cit.

- *Online Harassment of Journalists: The Trolls Attack* (2018) Reporters Sans Frontiers (RSF)/Reporters Without Borders. Free to download in English https://rsf.org/sites/default/files/rsf_report_on_online_harassment.pdf and French <https://rsf.org/fr/actualites/rsf-publie-son-rapport-harcelement-en-ligne-des-journalistes-quand-les-trolls-lancent-lassaut>
- The International Press Institute’s (IPI) ‘[On the Line](#)’ project, which provides a suite of resources based on analysis of defensive practices in European newsrooms.

6. Don’t act like an ostrich or you risk being a sitting duck target for disinformation agents

The problem: Believing your publication is too niche to be a target or limiting your understanding of the disinformation crisis to the role of foreign election meddlers and bots makes you an easier target. And, as *Up Here* Editor Jacob Boon told the authors, magazines can often be the “last mouthpiece for an insidious game of telephone playing out across the web.” This is because being outside the news cycle can make magazines more prone to recycling already debunked content and acting as ‘down chain’ amplifiers of disinformation.

Effective countermeasures: All of those outlined above.

Finally, the authors would also recommend investment in more detailed studies of the magazine industry internationally in reference to its vulnerability to targeting by disinformation agents and its potential role in countering the contemporary disinformation crisis. Our review of the literature—across the spectrum, from academic to industry publications—confirmed what some of the interviewees noted: this industry is vastly understudied as it intersects with disinformation, particularly in digital contexts.

We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Canada Periodical Fund of the Department of Canadian Heritage.

**THE AGE OF
DISINFORMATION**