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OPINION

Canada's best defence against foreign influence is an informed public

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While the scale and impact of Russian, Chinese, Iranian and other foreign influence efforts vary by issue and campaign, their persistent presence now poses a challenge across virtually every dimension of our democratic society.

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Foreign influence operations on social media have spread across Western democracies for more than 15 years. Their aim is not just to mislead us. It is to turn us against one another, poison democratic debate and undermine our shared sense of what is true. These campaigns are a persistent threat to our cognitive sovereignty: the right to form opinions and participate in democratic debate free from external manipulation.

Public awareness is one of Canada's strongest defences against malign foreign influence. The more Canadians understand who is targeting them, which grievances adversaries are exploiting, and how those narratives are being amplified, the harder it becomes to manipulate democratic debate.

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Generative AI is making information influence cheaper, faster and easier to execute at scale. In 2016, the Kremlin required a staffed troll farm and a multimillion-dollar budget; today, they can manufacture the appearance of grassroots consensus in minutes. In late August, OpenAI disrupted a Russian

operation that used ChatGPT to mass-produce multilingual posts and fake engagement for a fabricated think tank called the “International Burke Institute.” Canada needs tools capable of detecting these campaigns at machine speed, so that researchers, journalists and officials can expose them before manipulated narratives take hold.

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The broader geopolitical environment is also growing increasingly complex. As adversaries continue to invest in influence capabilities, we must strengthen our growing ability to distinguish legitimate persuasion from foreign manipulation intended to inflame domestic divisions and advance external interests.

For years, reluctance left Canada exposed. Investigative reporting by journalists like Robert Fife and Steven Chase, along with civil society advocacy, helped force a national public inquiry on foreign interference. Justice Marie-Josée Hogue's commission confirmed what experts had warned: foreign interference is an existential threat to Canadian democracy.

Despite the persistence of these campaigns, Canadians are becoming more aware, vigilant and, ultimately, resilient as foreign operations increasingly face public scrutiny. When malign actors, narratives and tactics are exposed by civil society, media, researchers, government and public officials, their anonymity weakens. Awareness functions as democratic inoculation: it helps citizens recognize manipulation, forces adversaries to adapt, and makes open debate harder to exploit.

This level of vigilance is more critical than ever to protect our democracy. Canada remains a significant battleground – and issues surrounding the Alberta independence movement have been a recent focus. In May, our team published a report, leveraging analysis from both artificial intelligence and human expertise, to document how foreign actors were targeting Canadian national unity. We found Russian state-linked operations, including the Pravda News Network, laundering Russian propaganda and amplifying separatist content, while U.S.-based influencers promoted anti-Canadian views to millions online.

While the impact of these threats is difficult to isolate or measure, exposing them at critical moments of decision making can significantly heighten public awareness. The national media coverage that followed performed an important democratic function: it helped bring the narratives and tactics targeting Canadians and Albertans into public view. Since then, Russian information operations focused directly on Alberta appear to have ebbed, although it is difficult to determine why. The decline may reflect reduced activity by separatist leaders, a tactical shift by foreign actors, or other changes in the information environment.

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A significant milestone occurred in August, when Alberta Premier Danielle Smith publicly acknowledged that foreign bot farms were targeting the province's referendum debate. Following briefings from CSIS and the RCMP, she urged Albertans to verify online sources before sharing content. Her balanced warning showed how public recognition of foreign tactics can strengthen civic defence.

No single intervention can undo the damage caused by conspiracies, falsehoods and other foreign information operations. But much as inoculation builds resistance to physical contagions, repeated exposure of the actors, narratives and tactics behind foreign influence campaigns can strengthen public resilience, limit their reach, and help build a broader societal immunity to manipulation.

When political leaders, researchers and journalists expose foreign influence operations in a co-ordinated and unified way, they can deny adversaries the cover of anonymity and limit their ability to manipulate legitimate public debate. Broad public awareness of such tactics remains Canada's most effective first line of defence because it helps citizens recognize manipulation and make their decisions freely, while continuing to debate the country's future on our own terms. Informed citizens are harder to deceive, harder to divide, and better able to protect Canada's cognitive sovereignty.

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