Wonks and War Rooms
S04 E03 - Propaganda, Government Comms, and Disinformation with Shuvaloy Majumdar

Episode Transcript

Elizabeth: [00:00:04] Welcome to Wonks and War Rooms, where political communication theory meets on-the-ground strategy. I'm your host Elizabeth Dubois. I'm an associate professor at the University of Ottawa, and my pronouns are she/her. Today, I'm recording from the traditional and unceded territory of the Algonquin people. In today's episode, we're talking about propaganda, government communications, disinformation, how to distinguish between them, if that's even possible. We're going to talk a little bit in this episode about the use of disinformation as a propaganda tool by the Russian state, and it's important to know that we recorded this episode in early February before Russia had invaded Ukraine. And so while a lot of what we talk about is definitely interesting and relevant, we don't talk about the specific circumstances of what's going on right now. With that, I will hand it over to Shuvaloy, my guest to introduce himself.

Shuvaloy: [00:00:53] Yes, hi, Elizabeth! I am Shuvaloy Majumdar, I am the foreign policy director and Munk Senior Fellow at the Macdonald-Laurier Institute. Prior to that, I served John Baird as policy director to the Foreign Minister of Canada, and they picked me after I spent five years in Iraq and Afghanistan working with Iraqi and Afghan civil society, independent media journalists. And so that's basically a summary of my background.

Elizabeth: [00:01:20] That's awesome, thank you so much. We are going to be talking about the idea of propaganda and government messaging and then this idea of mis- and disinformation, because a lot of these terms are kind of thrown around together and

I want to dig into the similarities and differences. So we'll kick off with some academic definitions and see whether or not that kind of jives with your experience.

Shuvaloy: [00:01:44] Mm hmm.

Elizabeth: [00:01:44] Let's start with propaganda. [Propaganda](#) is a sustained communication campaign. It's designed to enforce ideological goals, manage opinions and generate a sense of loyalty, often within a group. That group might be a small, specific part of the population, or it might be the population more broadly. It can be a slow, evolving and sustained campaign, or it might be more immediate calls to action at particular moments.

[00:02:13] What both kinds of campaigns have in common is they are attempts to exercise influence in order to evoke particular desired responses or to try and spread or confirm particular doctrine. There's some ideology and specificity behind the goals of these campaigns, and these kinds of propaganda campaigns can come in any form. They can be text based, audio, video or a combination. Often today they are, in fact, a combination of a bunch of different ways of communicating information. But I think the one that is most common to have learned about back in school is, you know, wartime propaganda from the Second World War. The posters that still kind of get shared and meme-ified online today. So this is the propaganda idea.

[00:03:04] Then there are some who say, well, isn't all government messaging propaganda then? And others then counter with, well, sometimes it's propaganda if it's this intentional campaign and other times it's just getting information out, therefore, it's not propaganda. So that's our first little tension. And then we've got mis- and disinformation, which is the sharing of information that is not factual or it is incorrect. Whether that's intentional or not is the difference between disinformation and misinformation. And there are questions there about whether or not mis- and disinformation necessarily needs to come in a campaign to be thought of as

propaganda, whether or not mis- and disinformation should be thought of as completely different. But certainly when mis- and disinformation come from government actors or political actors, there are often these claims that it is a form of propaganda. So that's where we are. How do those definitions sit with you? What are your first kind of reactions here?

Shuvaloy: [00:04:06] It's amazing. So propaganda, misinformation, disinformation are also subjective, right? So as you're describing this, theoretically, I think it's really defined by the eye of the beholder on this one. And in that eye, what I would say is most important is to think about what is the source, what is the content and what is the intended audience. And from there, I kind of would work backwards in terms of classifying what content is nefarious and what content is not nefarious because you will try and understand the intention behind where things come from. So then taking it a further step back, I would say there is a difference between content coming from countries that have democracy and accountability of their leaders versus countries that are authoritarian and have no democracy or dissent or the opportunity to challenge what the government is presenting. So that's kind of how I would try and unpack what to classify a piece of communication, whether it was propaganda, misinformation or disinformation and how intentional it all would be.

Elizabeth: [00:05:15] I love that I think that's really helpful this source/content/intentions kind of framework to think through that. So let's start with the source. You talked a little bit about, you know, is the source - if it's coming from the government, first of all, as a source, is it authoritarian or democratic or something other than that which can also exist? And so are you suggesting that propaganda, for example, can only come from one of those or you think about the propaganda that comes from authoritarian governments as different from democratic governments?

Shuvaloy: [00:05:51] So source belies intention, right? So if a government is saying, you know, the sky is blue, right? Would you consider that propaganda because it's coming from the government? I wouldn't. It would just be. It's a source, right?

Elizabeth: [00:06:09] Yeah.

Shuvaloy: [00:06:10] If if the source was something that was more nefarious, like if it's coming from the Kremlin and to say something like, you know, and they do things like this, they would say, you know, "Baltic nations and their forces are all homosexuals." They do provocative things like this. Then I would say that's propaganda, right? Because it's the full intention of spreading the source. What's the content and who [is] the intended audience? And combined, I would classify what is weaponized as propaganda versus what is intended as public information.

Elizabeth: [00:06:43] Yeah, that's really helpful and thinking about, yeah, we need to think about the source of the content and the intentions, but those things play into each other and we think about them together. You also use the word weaponize there in terms of a way of distinguishing between propaganda and just like government information. And so is propaganda always bad? Is it always used like or maybe bad is the wrong word, but is propaganda always a weaponized kind of thing? Is it always a weapon?

Shuvaloy: [00:07:17] No, as you mentioned, there [was] a lot of war propaganda in the West during the First and Second World Wars that were designed to push up public support for that effort. Would I consider that weaponized? No, but it was propaganda for Western public to maintain the kind of willpower they needed in the face of huge casualties in a distant war, which you wouldn't really be able to access overnight. The way in which information moves now is very different than it did 10 years ago, let alone 40 or 50 years ago. And so it would have been easy to propagandize populations like that then, whereas today it's obviously much harder.

Elizabeth: [00:07:53] Yeah, it's interesting because today it's harder, but also easier because we do have so many more forms of communication that are accessible to people. So an example here that I think about is some of the fears around disinformation that comes from foreign governments right now are being discussed as "spreading through YouTube without any checks" right or spreading through other social media platforms. These fears that it's just so easy to come into contact with that kind of propaganda. What are your thoughts on that?

Shuvaloy: [00:08:32] I think we're encountering massive disruptions in how information is communicated between people before there would be intermediaries, i.e. -

Elizabeth: [00:08:42] Mm hmm.

Shuvaloy: [00:08:43] - the nightly news. That would do two things. One, they would present here the facts as best as their journalism could produce around a particular event. And then second, they would have an area where they would provide context and opinions around why that event matters. Today, news of an event happening is transmitted faster than any newsroom can keep pace with, and therefore they're completely disrupted. These social media platforms have provided that kind of connectivity across not just geography, but languages too, which I think is really quite remarkable. The second is a lot of these institutions that were intermediaries of information with news -

Elizabeth: [00:09:27] Hmm.

Shuvaloy: [00:09:27] - Because they define a particular set of facts in one way and assume that that is the truth when there could be just as justifiably alternative assessments of those same facts. That is the truth for another perspective. And then third, audiences have really disaggregated themselves where they live and exist in

communities that agree with them, as opposed to communities that encourage respectful and robust debate. And so across the spectrum of how information moves and how news is assessed, it's completely disrupted. And I think we're in the midst of that massive change now as a result of how technology and YouTube and Facebook and all these platforms are trying to deal with the governance of those pressures.

Elizabeth: [00:10:20] Yeah, I think you're right, we've got another episode back in season one, I spoke with journalist Jane Lytvynenko about the high choice media environment. We talked about how, you know, newsrooms and journalists are making choices about what information to share and how and they have all of these different options. And then individuals are choosing who to pay attention to and what channels to use. And they have all of these options and that creates a very different information environment. And you mentioned the idea of people basically choosing information that confirms their existing beliefs or that is comfortable for them. It happens to be on only the topics they care most about. It's really interesting to hear you bring that up in the context of what this means for sharing government messaging, what it means for sharing propaganda and those sorts of things. And it makes me wonder why there's so much concern about government messaging in a context where people could all just choose to opt out of it if they've got these choices.

Shuvaloy: [00:11:22] And a lot of people, do you have a huge amount of apathy or selective information processing, right? So whether it's source content or audience, you have high quality sources and low quality sources. You have high quality content and low quality content, and you have high information audiences and low information audiences. And when governments are communicating, you know, in Canada, I love asking the question What is government in Canada? Is it the prime minister and his cabinet? Is it the parliament? Is it the permanent bureaucracies of the officials of various ministries? You know, it's a mixture of all three and then it is informed by our partisan environment in which the government could be the Liberal or Conservative Party. And there's a distinction between government communications and partisan communications

in which that line can get very blurry and intentionally gets blurry for the purposes of our national debate.

Elizabeth: [00:12:21] Right.

Shuvaloy: [00:12:22] So, yeah, I think, you know, government communications, you know, when I was a practitioner of being an adviser to a minister in the prime minister, government communications would not have any partisan references. It may have some political undertones. It certainly did have political undertones, but it was never a partisan theater. Meaning if I was to ever do Conservative branded things on my desk in my job as a taxpayer funded, you know, I worked for the government of Canada, I worked for the taxpayer. If I was doing partisan activities for the Conservative Party, supporting candidates, that kind of stuff that would have been illegal, wrong and immoral and should have been, you know, people would be fired

Elizabeth: [00:13:03] Right.

Shuvaloy: [00:13:03] For that. And that's also true for what they communicate, for the press officers, communications directors, et cetera.

Elizabeth: [00:13:09] Right, and so is it thought of in those kinds of roles as, "OK, this is government communication, we need to avoid it becoming propaganda," like is that one of the frameworks that gets used or what kind of language is used within those kinds of offices when you're negotiating that boundary there?

Shuvaloy: [00:13:30] That's a great question, so elected governments have many tools to communicate their messages, right? They can communicate it through the minister or the prime minister. They can communicate it in parliament through a parliamentarian. They can communicate it through a proxy, a staff member. A tweet, an opinion piece.

[00:13:50] You have so many tools through which the elected government can communicate a message. You can go directly to the press. The permanent government, the bureaucracies, you know, they would also respond to messages and when messages were deployed by, you know, the media were asked whether the public are asking a particular question. You know, the officials whose job it is to serve the public and public service. They have very strong barriers about not communicating political and partisan messages, and they are also a different quality of government message. And for the audience, whether it's the journalists or the public, you know, if you hear something coming from an official who is not part of the permanent government or the elected staff, then the information is just treated a bit differently. It's treated as a background for information. Here's the facts around what you know Canada had been doing at a particular country for a period of time, you know.

Elizabeth: [00:14:44] Mm hmm.

Shuvaloy: [00:14:44] So, you know, would we ever go out and intentionally think about propagandizing the public? No -

Elizabeth: [00:14:49] Yes.

Shuvaloy: [00:14:50] - But we would have priority themes and projects that we would want to keep reinforcing as the elected government to the public. And we would do that with strength and directly to the audience that we were trying to reach.

Elizabeth: [00:15:03] That's really helpful, and that speaks to that sort of like slow evolving, sustained campaign approach of propaganda and when we use propaganda there, that's like in the academic sense, that's not as much in the practical applied sense, right? But yeah, it is that slow, sustained approach. And then in contrast, in academic work, we talk about the sort of like in the moment, quick response type things. So thinking about the government's response when COVID 19 first started, those first

few weeks of messaging there, that wasn't a slow, sustained, planned out communication project because nobody knew that was coming. And so are there differences in the way like partisanship, for example, is negotiated during those intense happening now moments versus the long, sustained campaign approaches?

Shuvaloy: [00:16:01] That's a great question, I think it depends on the quality of the government. So for me, there is an opportunity when communicating on issues to reinforce the identity of the government with the electorate that supported it. And much of it can be performative, right?

Elizabeth: [00:16:20] Mm

Shuvaloy: [00:16:20] And you have a lot of very talented people who think about that every single day. Their job is to think about how to consistently present the brand of a party and a government that was elected by the public to deliver on a set of priorities, even for unanticipated ones like the pandemic? Then there's the issue's response for short term crises that come up that resolve themselves within a few weeks. And what does the government want to look like on those types of issues? Do they want to look like they're more deliberative or decisive? What is the objective and in good policy as well as good politics? So a lot of the time that I would spend is to try and figure out that balance between good policy and good politics and converge the two.

Elizabeth: [00:17:04] Mm hmm.

Shuvaloy: [00:17:04] The thorny files are the ones where you knew what the right policy was, but on the politics front, we're not ideal. Or you knew what the politics needed to be for the long term success of your government, but the policy was not necessarily ideal. So it's that balance between policy and politics that would inform how we communicated on any given issue. And I'm sure that would have been true for this government in the onset of the pandemic and throw. For example, in the beginning of

the pandemic, there would have been a huge need to provide certainty and comfort to the people of Canada that the government was functioning, that there would be an opportunity to respond to the threat globally -

Elizabeth: [00:17:43] Mm.

Shuvaloy: [00:17:43] - Even in a time in which there is no global leadership to deal with it. Zero. It's a really unprecedented time. And then over time, you know, it was the management of information and criticism. Right? Because it's not just what you're putting out, it's where the criticism could come from. And you saw parliament kind of diminish. You saw that, you know, daily press briefings provided one way communication, very little scrutiny to be offered back.

Elizabeth: [00:18:10] Yeah.

Shuvaloy: [00:18:12] And then you saw the wedge that the government deployed in the year or two afterward, where they started to talk about how, you know, it's either vaccine hesitancy or pandemic management, which I think polarized public opinion in a way that [is an] advantage to the government. Would you consider that propaganda? I would say it's very strong government messaging

Elizabeth: [00:18:35] Right.

Shuvaloy: [00:18:37] And maybe academics account that as propaganda. But you know, the information management of this government during the pandemic has been very effective.

Elizabeth: [00:18:46] Thank you, that's really helpful as an example there, and I like the idea of very strong government messaging. Does that count as propaganda from an academic perspective? For you, can you think of examples that would be in your mind

propaganda rather than the category of strong government messaging? Like what's the thing that makes you in your mind shift from this is just strong government messaging to know this is propaganda?

Shuvaloy: [00:19:14] I don't know if I can answer that. You know, I was worried you might ask me that because I was like, You know, what do I have an example of what is actual propaganda? I would say some of the performative stuff this prime minister does. That's visual content, pictures, photos like that kind of stuff.

Elizabeth: [00:19:28] Mm hmm.

Shuvaloy: [00:19:28] I would say that's pretty raw propaganda, whether it's taking a knee in the middle of a pandemic, in a mass gathering that, you know, the government policy is to stay away, but the prime is in the middle of.

Elizabeth: [00:19:41] Mm hmm.

Shuvaloy: [00:19:41] I think that was a propaganda departure between policy and politics. So yeah, I would say when you're on the political side of the balance between good policy and good politics, that's more propaganda and when you're on the more policy side of it, that's more basic information.

Elizabeth: [00:19:58] Thank you, that's a helpful way of distinguishing between them. Another thing that people kind of point to as a key difference between government communication and propaganda, and this is where the mis- and disinformation stuff comes in is like the veracity of the claims or the factualness of claims, right? So like some people suggest that government messaging is going to be largely fact based. There's going to be truth to it that you can find which itself is a bit of a tricky concept, given people have different perspectives. But then propaganda is not necessarily bound by a need to be as grounded in truth.

Shuvaloy: [00:20:42] Yeah.

Elizabeth: [00:20:43] What do you think of that view of distinguishing between them?

Shuvaloy: [00:20:45] I have a hard time distinguishing between any of them, right? Misinformation, disinformation and propaganda are words that I would find in a thesaurus search and intersperse when I'm typing something I don't want to use different ways to say the same thing. So for me, it's all fair. I don't spend a lot of time trying to think about the difference between them, but I do spend a lot of time thinking about the intention behind the information, right? Is the intention to do mass -move mass public opinion around a particular topic in a direction. I guess more propaganda.

[00:21:22] Is the objective to respond to allegations in ways that allow you to pivot. That's more misinformation. And maybe disinformation is more intentional where you're intentionally trying to distort the facts to your own benefit. But I also think [that] these words have different meanings in a democracy or in an authoritarian environment. Right. Because in a democracy where you have the freedom of debate, big wide debate, which I worry about because in Canada, I worry that we are losing our ability to have a diversity of ideas, the genuine debate. So I think that democratic space is shrinking and becoming increasingly authoritarian in our democracies in the western world at large because of the disruptions you describe. And I'm sure things that you would have talked about on other podcasts, but in an authoritarian environment where communication is managed from one source approved by one person and communicated with one view and no other views are tolerated or quashed or, you know, I see that as a lot more nefarious something that needs to be confronted. What I don't like is when we take leaders in the democratic world in which ideas are debated and characterized with the same language that comes from leaders of authoritarian worlds where the intentions are far more nefarious and far more serious.

Elizabeth: [00:22:47] Yeah, I think that's a really, really important distinction and the idea of trying to use the same terms and the same ideas to describe what our very different approaches to governing, to maintaining public cohesion, to manipulating opinion, whatever it is, that the approach is, as you describe in democratic versus authoritarian states, are just so different. Yet we do try to make those comparisons, and there is this attempt sometimes to compare authoritarian states in order to make a democratic leader look worse, right? Like if it's comparable to this authoritarian leader, oh my goodness, right? And that itself is part of a communication strategy, sometimes just in trying to describe what is happening, whether it's disinfo or propaganda or strong government messaging.

[00:23:45] The intentionality that you talk about makes me think about the idea of disinformation as a piece of information that is intended to harm or is intended to confuse people or as intentionally wrong versus disinformation campaigns, which are intended to have those broader shifts as outcomes, right? This idea of voter suppression being a potential intention of a disinformation campaign. And then we might think of things like the past few election cycles in Canada, in the U.S. and elsewhere where, you know, Russian interference was the big fear and it was Russian disinformation campaigns that were the big fear. When a government like that is creating content and having it disseminated to a different state. Is that propaganda in your mind?

Shuvaloy: [00:24:38] So throughout the Cold War, Radio Free Liberty, Radio Free Europe, BBC, CBC and others were platforms of news and information offered behind the Iron Curtain.

Elizabeth: [00:24:52] Mm hmm.

Shuvaloy: [00:24:53] They were indispensable to sharing events that were happening in areas where information was hard to access. In more contemporary times when

dealing with extremists and - this is work that I've done - standing up independent media in countries that have very fragile democracies or very nascent authoritarians, or you're trying not to let them succeed, requires training producers and journalists and broadcasters. All the technical stuff of getting something from a studio to a screen or into a newsprint or into a radio station is building institutions for how information can be shared.

Elizabeth: [00:25:35] Mm hmm.

Shuvaloy: [00:25:36] Where it falls apart is when, you know, during the Cold War, the Soviets would characterize that as Western propaganda.

Elizabeth: [00:25:46] Right.

Shuvaloy: [00:25:47] Right. Just as the extremists, whether they be religious or otherwise today characterized similar institutions as Western propaganda. They do so because they want to create an environment where their false reality of being threatened reinforces their authoritarian rule, and they do so very effectively. And they've also learned from these western threats as they would define them. Even though the intention of the West was never conquest, never to threaten, it was to emancipate, liberate, support, human dignity.

Elizabeth: [00:26:24] Right.

Shuvaloy: [00:26:25] But you know, for example, today in Ukraine, the Kremlin paints a completely opposite specious picture about how well NATO is threatening us because they're expanding into our neighborhood and they are defining, you know, they're trying to challenge the Kremlin and Vladimir Putin personally. I mean, they've invented from fiction the idea that NATO is aggressively threatening Russia when the facts are exactly the opposite, right? And so Russian propaganda has become so much more

sophisticated now because they've become so good at manipulating Western institutions. So they now know how to create a bot army, a fake army of people where in the thousands can connect with people in the West and make people who may share a small number of opinions feel like they're actually the community of a much larger number, more numerous. It is in their practice to develop mobs and to help encourage discord through mob appearances. And it's documented they've done this with the Black Lives Matter movement. They've done this with the full spectrum of who is on the left and on the right, and they're very active and capable of being able to implement that new tool of propaganda -

Elizabeth: [00:27:48] Mm hmm.

Shuvaloy: [00:27:48] - by planting a lie in the brain of a person and making that person believe it's true.

Elizabeth: [00:27:54] Right.

Shuvaloy: [00:27:55] So a long winded way, I'm sorry to answer it in such a roundabout way, but you know, that's why I struggle with the definition of propaganda. For me, what Russia does is propaganda because it's not based on any fact or any sense of the truth.

Elizabeth: [00:28:11] Yeah, and I think this is where disinformation comes in as one potential tool within a propaganda campaign. I think disinformation can exist outside of propaganda campaigns. And it can also be embedded in propaganda campaigns.

Shuvaloy: [00:28:29] Mm hmm.

Elizabeth: [00:28:29] And then also there can be propaganda campaigns that do not rely on disinformation at all, right? There is propaganda out there that is based on truth and factual information. Maybe it's mostly emotional pulls, but it's still at its core factual.

The point of it is not to mislead. The point of it is to galvanize around particular ideas or build loyalty or community or those kinds of things. So that's kind of how I see those connections there. But I think what you've drawn out really speaks to what some talk about as computational propaganda, and it encompasses this large array of different ways that digital tools and computational approaches have been embedded quite expertly by a number of different government governments into their communication strategies.

Shuvaloy: [00:29:22] Mm hmm. And even the governance around these platforms. Right, most people confuse Facebook and Twitter as like the town square.

Elizabeth: [00:29:33] Hmm.

Shuvaloy: [00:29:33] They're not the town, they're the mall. They want to drive up content to be on these platforms so they can sell stuff, right? That's the objective. Or to collect enough behavioral data so that they can sell more tailored stuff. Right? So -

Elizabeth: [00:29:49] Yeah.

Shuvaloy: [00:29:49] - it's like you're going to the mall and you get a carnival attention to the mall. So the more engagement, the better it is for these platforms. And the only way to accomplish more engagement is not to reconcile and do the hard work of, like, you know, deep discussion. You want to polarize people, you want an animated "us versus them" so that they come to the mall. And I think that places like the public square like where you have thought for public debate doesn't exist, it's diminished in countries that don't have those platforms. So. Yeah, no. I don't mean to meander on your point, but I take it very well, right? That there is cognitive warfare is a thing, and there are a lot of well-trained people who have spent a lot of time thinking through how to manipulate reality for people in ways that suit their own objectives.

Elizabeth: [00:30:43] Yeah, yeah, there's a lot we could talk about there, but we are running out of time, unfortunately. So before we end, I have my one last question pop quiz.

Shuvaloy: [00:30:55] Mm-hmm.

Elizabeth: [00:30:55] Can you define for me the difference between propaganda and disinformation?

Shuvaloy: [00:31:04] Propaganda. I think there are tools and objectives, right, so propaganda to your point, at the beginning of this is sustained communications not rooted in facts or any sense of facts for the purpose of moving mass public opinion. I mean, that's propaganda. Disinformation is tactic -

Elizabeth: [00:31:34] I like that.

Shuvaloy: [00:31:35] - it is designed to shape a debate toward a political outcome on the basis of a lie, right? Am I doing okay?

Elizabeth: [00:31:48] Yeah, I think so, I think so, I would say that disinformation doesn't necessarily have to be political or about politics, I think that it can be. And in the context of our conversation, it has been. But just, you know, for the listener, there's disinformation about beauty products, too. And yeah, and I think that your definition of propaganda is really helpful too. And the one thing that I would add is there is some propaganda that is rooted in some truths or partial truths. It's not necessarily purely disinfo, but I think what characterizes it even more is this intention to draw people together along ideological goals or toward ideological goals, I would say.

Shuvaloy: [00:32:38] Interesting. Yeah, no, I would accept that that's something that gets there. However, it's really difficult to use these words without appreciating the

context of authoritarian or democratic worlds, right? If this content is stuff that can be freely debated, then it kind of separates the low quality information from the high. If it's coming from a context that cannot be debated, then by its very virtue, Russian television, CCTV and others, provide very low quality information. Right. So yeah, and I think form matters, right? So propagandists can be branded by the state or it could be branded not as a state. So. Yeah. The complex questions the theory that you're working through here.

Elizabeth: [00:33:21] Yes, absolutely, and you know, we should also mention that, like our understanding of these terms, shifts and evolves over time, and you know, it makes me wonder what will we look back on about, for example, how COVID 19 has been addressed and what things might we look back on and label them as disinformation or label them as propaganda or label them as just strong government communication right over time and with space and distance, sometimes our views of how we understand content shift.

[00:34:01] All right. That was our episode on propaganda, government communication and mis- and disinformation. If you'd like to learn more about any of the theories or concepts we talked about today, you can check the show notes or head on over to polcommtech.ca, where you can find full transcripts that are annotated and they are available in both English and French. This special season on mis- and disinformation is brought to you, in part by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Digital Citizen Initiative.