



CANADIAN INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL  
CONSEIL INTERNATIONAL DU CANADA

### **Call for Canadian research partner**

The CIC would like to commission research into a case study from the Canadian political context to test the applicability of disinformation research drawn from a comparative case in Germany. This will contribute to a broader effort of mutual learning between likeminded liberal democracies on shared challenges outlined at <https://democraticsolidarity.net>.

#### **Issue**

In today's hyperconnected world, the methods by which malicious use of social media undermines democratic practice have many similarities from one country to the next. However, the vast majority of research into the pernicious impact of disinformation is national in scope. A comparative analysis of disinformation trends across two or more democracies could shed light into the weakening of democratic discourse by laying bare the international sources as well as the domestic dynamics of radicalization.

To prompt this comparative analysis, the CIC seeks to support research into radicalization in one country by determining the presence of processes of radicalization observed in another. To do so, the research should hold many variables constant (for example studying instances with the same timeframe, the same polarizing issue, and the same technology platform) in order to isolate the impact of the radicalization process in one country on the radicalization of the other.

We will also vary the media environment, in order to further focus in on the communications mechanisms at play in radicalization, in instances where it is less likely that political actors or citizen movements are interacting organically with one another.

#### **Understanding radicalization**

There are many processes by which political discourse is impacted by the use of digital communications technologies. Recent scholarship in Germany has identified one specific process that had a recent impact in radicalizing political discourse in that country. Since Germany represents a country with similar political values and similarly robust democratic

culture, but with a different media environment to Canada, this research presents an ideal starting point.

The research led by Dr. Ulrike Klinger was published in February 2022 in the journal *Information, Communications and Society*.<sup>1</sup> In a study of the mainstreaming of extremist political views critical of the UN's 2018 Global Compact for Migration, Dr. Klinger's team found that information generated by anti-democratic forces were intentionally borrowed by legitimate political actors without the offending source identified. This "source-washing" enabled the AfD to mobilize popular support for far-right policies on a scale and a speed that would be extremely unlikely otherwise.

The specific mechanisms that served as a bridge between anti-democratic and democratic political actors were:

- Network monitoring (by which a political party identifies potentially useful content from illegitimate sources)
- Network alignment (by which the online networks of a political party operate in parallel to the network of the anti-democratic movement, enabling the rapid establishment of many connections between the two networks);
- Superspreaders (a small number of individuals who disseminate the bulk of the information); and
- Networked framing and agenda-setting (by which a political party adopts a particular representation of an issue, and adopts a corresponding political position)

Their analysis of Twitter data suggests that the sudden and large-scale public opposition to the GCM on the mainstream right wing of the German electorate in late 2018 occurred because of network monitoring by the AfD of the extremist anti-democratic movement known as the Identitarians, because the networks of the AfD and the Identitarians were aligned and because superspreaders were able to amplify misleading content rapidly. These three factors led to widespread mainstream political debate of the extremist framing of the issue as a deliberate foreign plot to 'replace' the white population of Germany, a position which bears no relationship to the reality of the UN initiative and which polarized German public opinion.

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<sup>1</sup> Ulrike Klinger, W. Lance Bennett, Curd Benjamin Knüpfer, Franziska Martini and Xixuan Zhang, "From the Fringes into Mainstream Politics: Intermediary Networks and Movement-Party Coordination of a Global Anti-Immigration Campaign in Germany" <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2022.2050415>. Dr. Klinger is Professor for Digital Democracy at the European New School of Digital Studies at Frankfurt (Öder), Germany

## Research question

The CIC would like to commission research into the operation of similar processes of radicalization in the Canadian media environment. The research should focus on the same issue (the Global Compact for Migration) in the same time period (Summer 2018 - Winter 2018) or a similar issue at a later period and on the same platform (Twitter).

The research question is as follows:

“Were similar mechanisms for transmitting false or misleading information about the Global Compact for Migration (or a similar issue) into mainstream political discourse (network monitoring, network alignment, superspreaders) present in either the English- or French-language media environment in Canada?”

## Proposed timeline

Preliminary results would be due by May 23, 2023

The CIC intends to host a discussion of the preliminary findings with Dr. Ulrike and her team, as well as other disinformation experts in government and Canadian research institutions, on May 29.

We aim to publish the final version of the research paper (complete with edits) by September 2023. Your involvement and input will be required for this process.

## Publication

The CIC will publish the results in Behind the Headlines, the policy research paper series we have published since 1941. We aim to publish between 2500 and 4000 words, with references. Your paper with the research analysis and findings would be published in our 2023 series.

## How to Apply

Please indicate your interest by sending an email to [samantha@thecic.org](mailto:samantha@thecic.org), with a proposal outlining how you propose to conduct the research, including data collection methods, options for researching the media environments of both official languages, potential variations in the two political environments that should be taken into account, and any additional research considerations. Please include your academic c.v. and any previous publications you consider relevant to this research.

### Compensation

The budget for this research is CAD 8000, to include any research expenses, the honorarium and any applicable taxes.