

Straight Talk



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Combatting information warfare and building a resilient society

With Elisabeth Braw and Marcus Kolga

Western countries need to counter information warfare from hostile foreign states and they can do so by building a more resilient society. To discuss this topic, this Straight Talk features Elisabeth Braw, a visiting fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, and MLI senior fellow Marcus Kolga. This publication is based on a transcript of their recent discussion with MLI Senior Fellow Balkan Devlen, as part of a project supported by the NATO Public Diplomacy Division.



Elisabeth Braw is a visiting fellow at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), where she focuses on deterrence against emerging forms of aggression, such as hybrid and grey zone threats. She is also a columnist with *Foreign Policy*, where she writes on national security and the globalised economy.



Marcus Kolga is documentary filmmaker, writer, human rights activist. He is a senior fellow at the Macdonald-Laurier Institute and director of DisinfoWatch.org.

MLI: To talk about societal resilience and how to build a more resilient society, we are pleased to welcome two guests: Elisabeth Braw, a visiting fellow at the American Enterprise Institute who focuses on emerging national security threats, such as hybrid warfare and grey-zone threats, and MLI senior fellow Marcus Kolga, one of the leading experts on disinformation in Canada and a world-renowned human rights activist. Marcus is also the founder of MLI's recent project, [DisinfoWatch.org](https://disinfowatch.org).

For our first question, perhaps we could start with Elisabeth. In your opinion, what are the primary obstacles for building a more resilient society?

Elisabeth Braw:

Thank you very much for having me here. The most important obstacle is that the West has so little experience on this issue. For 30 years, and in some countries even longer, there has been this culture or mentality fostered by decision-makers and the rest of society that all you need to do is to look after yourself. That's fine when there are no problems affecting the whole of society. But when there are indeed problems affecting the whole of society, it's not enough to just go after your own happiness. You have to come together with your fellow citizens to help keep society safe.

That's where we're failing, and not just in a particular country but in every Western country. It's not that people are somehow unsuited to it, whereas during World War II they somehow miraculously became the greatest generation. No, we all have the potential of making great contributions to society, we just need to be told how to do it, and the government and other civil society actors need to provide a framework for how we can do that. It's not a structural problem; it's what you might call a mechanical one.

MLI: In a way, we don't have the muscle memory, right? We didn't exercise that muscle of being resilient over the past 30 years, and we didn't need to engage with a whole-of-society effort, and that makes us vulnerable at this stage.

Elisabeth Braw:

Yes, and it's worth mentioning that the situation is better in some countries. Finland, of course, has maintained its general setup of total defence and Estonia has pursued a similar path, though maybe not as comprehensive as Finland. Latvia is also building up

total defence as well, and Sweden is resurrecting total defence. I myself grew up with total defence in Sweden, so even I have a bit of muscle memory of that. Those who are, let's say, 30 years old and younger don't have that muscle memory.

MLI: The Swedish government sent these brochures to every household in Sweden about what to do in the case of a breakdown, including an invasion, right?

Elisabeth Braw:

Yes, the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency update; in fact, a Cold War leaflet, but they updated it to include contemporary crises including cyber-attacks and so forth. And they sent it to every household in the country by post, because if there is a cyber-attack, you won't be able to access your digital copy of the leaflet online. This was in May 2018, and when it was sent out, there was a lot of ridicule around the world because the Swedes seemed a bit paranoid.

I remember speaking with certain government agencies in the UK, and I said, "Well, you know, I think it would be a great step for the UK to send out a similar leaflet, because people need to be prepared." They said, "No, no. It would frighten people. It would panic." Lo and behold, in 2020 a crisis arrived, and people were not prepared.

MLI: Exactly. Marcus, what are the primary obstacles when building a more resilient society in your opinion?

Marcus Kolga:

I look at this problem obviously from a more Canadian perspective, even though I do have an Estonian background, so I understand what's going on there. I also keep an eye on what's happening in the Nordic and Baltic countries, in Sweden, Finland, Estonia, and Latvia to a certain degree, in order to compare them to what Canada is doing.

Sadly, the current Canadian government has failed to even really acknowledge the problem. During the federal election in 2019, we did acknowledge it. We set up some infrastructure to deal with foreign interference and information warfare targeting the election. That infrastructure remained in place for some three to four months in advance of the election. However, as soon as the election was over, those institutions simply disappeared overnight. That leads me to believe that the current government sees disinformation and influence operations as strictly a problem that af-

fects elections. In my view, that's the primary obstacle that we face in this country in addressing the problem.

I think the other problem is that, because we've allowed this to go on for as long as it has, we haven't followed our allies among the Nordic countries, the US, the UK, Taiwan, among others. Now, we're facing growing polarization. And, in my everyday work right now with Disinfowatch.org, I'm keeping an eye on some of the narratives that are emerging. Foreign actors may have shifted towards COVID-related and vaccine-related topics, but conspiracy theories continue to be the dominant narrative – and these actors are plugging into the uncertainty and the emotional situation that COVID has brought on in Canada.

Those narratives are simply growing, and they are dividing our country more than ever. It's polarizing us, and right now we're not doing anything to address that. This deepening polarization, and the enabling effect that social media has in promoting those narratives, represent an existential threat to our democracy and society as we know it today. If we don't address it and work with our international allies in addressing it, we're in for real trouble.

MLI: Two things stand out from your comments. First, given how vast Canada is and the distribution of both physical infrastructure and identities across the country, it is very important to develop a strategy to deal with potential threats to society resilience.

Second, Canada seems to be a playground for a variety of actors engaging in these information operations, including China, Russia, Iran and others, which has taken its toll. Could you elaborate a little bit on this?

Marcus Kolga:

There are two points on that. First, while Canada identifies itself as a middle power, I think we're a little bit more than that. Canada holds a great deal of influence within international institutions like NATO, the G7, and the UN. We've taken some pretty strong actions; especially in the post-Crimea world, we've taken a very strong position on Ukrainian sovereignty over Crimea and Donbass. We have placed sanctions on Russian entities involved with that. We've adopted Magnitsky sanctions back in 2017, for example. I think the Russians see Canada as a place where they can try to influence policy in hopes of influencing broader policy.

Second, Canada's multicultural diversity introduces some significant opportunities for some of these regimes to try to influence Canada's foreign policy through those communities. For instance, there are 600,000 Russian speakers in Canada and well over a

million Chinese-Canadians. There are various different influence campaigns here.

Certainly, Russian-language state-media seeks to influence those communities in hopes that they will then broadcast their views and that the government will change their policies to conform to those views. The same goes for the Chinese community in Canada. Right now, we're going through a fairly significant moment for the Chinese community, given Beijing's new laws enacted in Hong Kong, its aggression against Taiwan, etc. There's significant conflict brewing within the Chinese community, and I think that Beijing will want to take advantage of that.

MLI: Elisabeth, let me turn to you with regards to disinformation/misinformation and particularly the relationship between how we can counter these attempts at influencing our communities. How should we adopt a more proactive approach, rather than just reacting to the disinformation campaigns?

Elisabeth Braw:

I think the fundamental challenge that we have is the increasing distrust of authorities, whether it be government authorities, political parties, or news media in our societies. In the past few years, there has been a tendency for people to pass around salacious stories on the Internet, because they don't really care. It's essentially like reading tabloids. But when you read the tabloid, you read it and then you put in the recycling. But when you pass around and share links of similarly salacious content on the Internet, you obviously poison the public discourse much more.

I think there has been growing awareness about this problem since 2016. The US election was obviously a wakeup call for lots of people, even though people in many parts of Europe had previous encounters with disinformation. But the US election was a wakeup call that disinformation, rather than being just a guilty pleasure, is a real threat to our societies. What do we do about it, other than acting more responsibly on the Internet?

I think that the trust between ordinary citizens and news media can be restored. It is really broken in many cases, and people talk about mainstream media in a sort of a pejorative sense. News organizations should do what legislators do, which is to have an open house or office hours: a couple of hours each week or a couple of days in some cases where the legislators essentially are available to their constituents to talk about whatever the constituents are interested in. It's not perfect, but it gives constituents access to the MPs, and they realize that they do work for us.

I think news organizations should do the same thing. Obviously, they can't have offices in every little town everywhere, but they could do sort of a national tour every now and then. Set up a pop-up office in various towns, and invite people to come in and talk to journalists and see how you make a TV show, see how you make a regular show, see how you make a newspaper or website. People would discover that actually it's not that nefarious. It's just people going about their work. There is great potential there.

Then, obviously, disinformation and information literacy should be taught more in school. Who could argue with that?

MLI: The idea of putting a human face to that non-descript media would probably increase the trust in people, so I think that's an excellent idea. A very low cost if you think about it.

Elisabeth Braw:

A local citizen who came in to visit could then be invited to select the stories for the next day or segments in case of radio and TV, and they would realize that you have to make a decision between a wide array of news developments. And if something doesn't get covered, it doesn't mean that there is a conspiracy against it. It's just that it competes with a large number of stories from around the country and the world.

MLI: Exactly. Marcus, you are one of the leading experts on disinformation in Canada. Could you give us a couple of ideas about how we can proactively deal with this problem, rather than just trying to react to whatever our adversaries are doing each time they launch a new information warfare operation?

Marcus Kolga:

Before that, I just want to pick up on a point that Elisabeth made about journalists. One of the things that I'm seeing is that conspiracy theorists often try to cast doubt on mainstream media and established journalists. Before COVID, I tried in some of my lectures to humanize journalists. They're constantly accused of having biases, and quite frankly, journalists are human beings, and they do have biases, and we need to acknowledge that.

However, journalists are also professionals, the ones that work in mainstream media at large, international and national newspapers and television; they are trained to put their biases aside. This is one of the things that I think we need to keep reminding our citizens, certainly in Canada. While these biases exist, you can trust mainstream media and established media because they have policies in place – they have correction policies and editorial

policies that ensure that facts are being reported and not just wild opinions and conspiracies.

This, I think, needs to be part of a broader effort at digital media literacy training, and we should be looking at countries like Sweden and Finland as to how we start doing this at a very early age, because right now, we're falling behind.

In Canada, we can start by establishing an independent office or agency that has the power to coordinate a whole-of-government and whole-of-society response to the problem of disinformation. Other countries are doing this, but in bits and pieces. The US is doing this, with the US State Department's Global Engagement Center, which is doing quite a good job. The UK has developed policies to push back, and Taiwan, I think, is a great leader. We need to look at those countries. We should also be working with them to create a coordinated response among our allies, because there's no point working on this alone or duplicating our efforts. This is a common problem that we see across the board.

One of the most important things that we need to start doing here in Canada is to address the problem with a greater degree of seriousness. We need to acknowledge that what we're engaged in is information warfare, and that the primary target is the undermining of our nation, our government, and society. Using terms like meddling or monkey business, for example, takes away from the seriousness of the problem.

It also requires that our government takes it seriously as a public safety issue, so ensuring that our response includes departments like public safety, national defence, and foreign affairs. Right now, it's beyond me why the Department of Heritage, which is responsible for culture in Canada, is primarily responsible for funding any sort of civil society and government response to this problem. If we continue approaching it this way, I'm not sure that we're going to address the problem successfully.

MLI: I think this is a nice segue to another topic - that this should not be only a government effort. It needs to be a more broad-based effort. How can we involve the private sector and civil society?

Elisabeth Braw:

I remember a few years ago people started talking about the whole-of-government approach, and that felt very noble. The talk is still about whole-of-government, but the reality is our adversaries deploy a much wider range of actors, so it's totally insufficient for us to respond just with the government. Our governments are

small. Our governments don't have the power to command the rest of society what to do, or tell them what to do, or in a crisis to tell them to take particular actions.

We need a whole-of-society approach, and that's nothing new. That's what total defence is based on. Somehow it seems new, now that we've been used to not doing very much for the common good for international security. And that, by the way, includes the private sector. The private sector hasn't been asked to do anything, apart from going out and making money and making more countries more prosperous. That's a worthy activity, but now we need them to do more to help keep the country safe.

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Something that I've proposed, for example, is joint military-industry grey-zone exercises where the armed forces and key companies would exercise defence against, and response to, grey-zone attacks, which can be anything from cyber-attacks to disruption of supply chains. At the moment, they don't exercise for such things. If crises were to happen – and it did happen, not in a hostile way, but it did happen during the early stages of COVID-19 when countries weren't getting personal protective equipment (PPE) – we can exercise for those things. One NATO member state is actually about to launch its very first exercise of this kind. That's all very positive, and I think other countries will follow. I think it's what we need, and not just as a crisis response when something happens but to demonstrate to our adversaries that we are prepared and that there is no point trying to attack our civil societies.

Short of exercises, I think there a lot of things that governments can do as well to involve the private sector. The very easiest and first steps they should take is to give regular consultations to not just risk managers, but to top executives so that they have a good understanding of national security threats. They can have those threats and developments at the back of their heads when they make commercial decisions. Currently, nobody can force them to have that as a decisive factor when they make commercial decisions, because obviously their objective is still to satisfy shareholders. But at least they can have it at the back of their heads.

Starting with that, and all the way to grey-zone exercises by the armed forces and industry, I think we can achieve a great deal. By the way, it's in the private sector's interest to be part of the solution, because they are already finding themselves in the firing line of grey-zone attacks, so they know that something is happening. I think it is not just in their interest but very much something that they want to happen, for the government to reach out to them and invite them to be part of the solution.

MLI: Exactly. The idea that we need to sort of involve these private sector actors in developing these resilience policies, making them as partners rather than just being on the receiving end of the government diktat. Marcus, let me turn to you and get your ideas about how we can involve civil society, non-governmental organizations, the private sector, and others.

Marcus Kolga:

If we're talking about involving the private sector, I think we really need to start looking at tech, and we need to start engaging them immediately, especially in the Canadian context. Without their participation and partnership in addressing the problem, we won't be able to do this properly. Social media and specifically their algorithms – which is what feeds information, both good and bad, based on our biases, and which prey on our emotions – really do represent an existential threat to our societies. Currently, they're the vehicles that are carrying conspiracy and disinformation warfare payloads created by both domestic and foreign actors into Canadian newsfeeds on social media.

If they don't voluntarily regulate themselves, then I think we're going to have to look at imposing some sort of regulation over their algorithms. What we really need them to do right now is to dial back the algorithms on disinformation and conspiracy theory narratives that we're seeing right now. There is precedence to this.

Taiwan has successfully done this. I spoke with their digital ministry Audrey Tang about a year ago. She explained that they are working with civil society and with the tech giants, specifically Facebook, to address disinformation. They are monitoring Chinese disinformation attacks against Taiwan and alerting the ministries involved and Facebook as well. Facebook in turn agreed to dial back the algorithms on specific narrative when these sorts of information attacks are detected.

That means pulling it from the top of a newsfeed on anyone's feed, but not censoring. Maintaining freedom of speech principles

but also controlling – and not amplifying – that narrative. I think this is something that we need to do. Clearly, Facebook has shown some openness to doing this. I think Twitter is being much better. Google and YouTube remain extremely problematic. For instance, YouTube is being used by the Russian government as the primary delivery platform for their state-media RT.

In Canada at one point, RT was available on basic cable networks and basic satellites, so in the most basic cable packages you could have RT automatically feeding propaganda into Canadian homes. The Russian government was actually paying our cable providers to do this. After some pushback, they've now bundled it with an international news package. In fact, I don't think it's even with the international news package. I think you have to specifically order it.

I don't think most Canadians would order Russian state-media as a standalone product, yet they're able to get it on YouTube. The big problem with this is that YouTube is enabling that disinformation, but they're also helping monetize it. They're actually making money off foreign propaganda on these channels.

I spoke with some of the people at Google last week, and we were looking at some of these issues, and one of the most important and most significant broadcasters of conspiracy theories right now, as part of Russia's sort of disinformation ecosystem, is a Canadian website called globalresearch.ca. It was named in a recent State Department report about Russian disinformation, which even mentioned that they had at one point eight GRU officers writing for it.

I knew that Google ads were being served on the website, and therefore helping financially support this conspiracy theory site. So I went on the website recently, and sure enough, Google ads are still being served on Global Research, a platform that has been clearly identified as part of Russia's disinformation ecosystem. Until tech giants like Google end their enabling of this sort of activity, I think we've got a lot of work to do. If we're talking about the private sector, we need to start there first and foremost in addressing this problem.

MLI: I think it's also crucial that these efforts to engage with and if necessary regulate the private sector is not seen as some sort of top-down bureaucratic effort to stifle private enterprise or freedom of expression. They should instead be seen as a whole-of-society approach that involves the broader segments of society, through the engagement of the civil society institutions. That ac-

tually serves, as Elisabeth highlighted, the common good.

Marcus Kolga:

Absolutely, and I would again point to Taiwan as a model of success. Here is a country that has brought together private sector (Facebook) and is working directly with civil society. Civil society is very important to that entire defence mechanism that Taiwan has set up in detecting and monitoring foreign disinformation and informing the government of when they're seeing this happen.

This is something that Canada needs to look into, ensuring that there's some sort of an independent body or maybe a taskforce that looks into this issue, one that can be trusted. Any top-down sort of effort that has a heavy government hand in it is going to feed into the polarization that we're seeing now. We're that far gone, so I think conspiracy theorists would actually use that to help prove their point. Involving civil society is a critical part of any sort of defence that we develop here in this country at least.

MLI:

I wanted to ask you both to come up with actionable policy recommendations on how to build a more resilient society and how to avoid failing to do so in the coming years. Let me start with Elisabeth. If you were sitting here today with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and the NATO Secretary General, and if you were to give them one or two actionable policy suggestions on how we can increase our societal resilience and how we can build a more resilient society, what would that be?

Elisabeth Braw:

Well, of course I would propose grey-zone exercises for the armed forces and industry, not just because I came up with the idea, but because I think it's really the most actionable one that individual countries can pursue. It also doesn't require the commitment of a lot of money, because we have to remember that it's difficult to commit major sources of funding, especially now that national coffers are drained. I think grey-zone exercises with industry and the armed forces would be a very productive way forward.

Another thing I would propose is resilience training. It's something I have thought a lot about, and it's not something that NATO can impose. But national governments can pursue it, and it would be for the benefit of all of NATO. It could be a three-week training course for teenagers or indeed for citizens of all ages, and it could be even set up so you could take the course either in your home country or in another NATO member state. That would not just increase resilience to a certifiable standard, because people would obviously learn and need to pass a test to complete the

course, but also it would bring citizens of NATO member states together in a way that has just never happened. As a result, it would increase cohesion within NATO, and I think increase appreciation of NATO within NATO member states. We have to remember that NATO support is, let's say, of varying levels within the alliances. In some patriotic countries it's quite significant, and in some countries not so high.

MLI: Marcus, let me turn to you with the same question. What would be your recommendations if you were sitting with the prime minister today together with the NATO Secretary General, and what would your actionable suggestions on how to build a more resilient society?

Marcus Kolga:

I could not agree more with Elisabeth's points. I think coordinating overall a broader literacy training would be especially important in order to reinforce that sort of resilience. There are other points where we can work internationally with our allies.

One of them is imposing a cost to this sort of activity. I think that to date – other than a few countries imposing sanctions – actors are able to engage in this sort of information warfare with complete impunity. The US imposed sanctions on Yevgeny Prigozhin over the past couple of months. These are the sorts of things that we need to be doing on an international level. We now have the United Kingdom, the United States, the EU, and Canada who have all adopted Magnitsky human rights sanctions. Australia is coming online soon, and I think Japan just recently held a hearing and are kicking off their own sort of process to adopt this sort of legislation.

If we work together, this tool can become very effective – if all of those countries were to impose sanctions on Yevgeny Prigozhin, for example, or anyone else who is known to be actively engaging in using information warfare to advance the interests of nations like Russia, like China, like Iran. This will start imposing a cost to that sort of activity, and it may make those individuals who are doing it think twice before they start engaging in that behaviour.

The other thing that we need to start doing is working together to support civil society and free independent media. The US has done this historically quite well with Voice of American and Radio Free Europe, though unfortunately those institutions have become quite politicized over the past several years, especially right now. I think with the new Biden administration, this should be one area that we look at.

The US does this very well through those institutions. Current Time TV offers a very good opportunity to sort of push back and start beaming pro-democracy narratives and the truth back at Russia. We should be doing the same with China. For Canada, we have some very good experience with ethnic media and third-language media as well, and we can possibly work with countries like the US and the EU on it.

The other point is to coordinate a cyber-strategy to defend ourselves against this information warfare and to cooperate amongst each other to approach the digital giants and social media. I think that if we work together and push back, the social media giants will have no other option than to listen and to work with us, rather than individually. Those are sort of three ideas that I might propose to the prime minister and NATO.

MLI: Excellent. I cannot agree more with both of your suggestions on how we should proceed, and in particular ask that we should start imposing costs on those that are waging this warfare against our societies. This has been a great conversation. I would like to thank you both for taking the time to sharing your views.

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323 Chapel Street, Suite 300,
Ottawa, Ontario K1N 7Z2
613-482-8327 • info@macdonaldlaurier.ca



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