

THE IMPLICATIONS OF MISINFORMATION FOR PUBLIC ORDER POLICING

*Dr. Laura Huey, University of Western Ontario
Canada*

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KEY EVENTS

On September 8th, 2022, Dr. Laura Huey, a professor of Sociology at the University of Western Ontario, presented on *The Implications of Misinformation for Public Order Policing*. The presentation was followed by a question-and-answer period with questions from the audience and CASIS-Vancouver executives. The key points discussed in Dr. Huey's presentation highlighted the risks and effects of misinformation around policing and how they can quickly spiral globally and have harmful effects on the police force's reputation and police officers.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

The main theme of Dr. Huey's presentation was about the spread of misinformation and how it can affect Canadian police forces and police officers at a personal level. Dr. Huey also discussed how both sides of the political spectrum seem to have come together to destabilize public policing.

Question & Answer Period

During the question-and-answer-period, Dr. Huey discussed the divide that social media has created between law enforcement and the public and some of the most common policing misperceptions. She also delved into what could be more effective in countering extremist narratives, as well as what has not or might not work and why.

BACKGROUND

Presentation

Dr. Huey began her presentation by highlighting that national security is now endangered by the divisive political spectrums. According to Dr. Huey, extremist attacks on public policing seem to be receiving almost no attention. The irony of these attacks, she said, is that far-right and far-left extremists seem to be joining a common cause: the destabilization of public policing. As an example, Dr. Huey pointed to the manufactured story of the “RCMP’s killer horse”, which claimed that an RCMP horse had trampled and killed an old lady during the Freedom Convoy protest. This false story originated with the Convoy protest in downtown Toronto, where after several hours of police officers trying to push protesters out of the downtown core area, the Toronto Mounted Police was called in. In the process of pushing people out, a person was impacted by a horse; however, this person was not seriously hurt and was back to the protest the next day.

Dr. Huey stated that his kind of misinformation is a classic example of how false information can spread rapidly and cause global outrage. The story of the “RCMP’s killer horse” resulted in the Ottawa police call center being subject to national and international harassment.

After becoming aware of this false story and how it had spread, Dr. Huey decided to conduct some interviews with Canadian police officers, and she learned that police officers' involvement in these protests was blending in with their personal lives. They were being harassed online, they were losing friendships, and their family members were also being harassed. Dr. Huey also learned that police officers from Alberta have been dealing with that same situation for two years already.

Some of the consequences of the spread of misinformation through social media included police officers being subject to fake arrests by sovereign citizens, doxxing, and threats. Although this has decreased, Dr. Huey predicts that these kinds of attacks will become a common occurrence. She also noted that this kind of behavior seems to have increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. The worst example of police targeting happened in Alberta, where protesters began to stockpile weapons planning to kill police officers if they tried to shut down their border protest.

Dr. Huey stated that it is particularly concerning that the acceptance of these kinds of tactics is growing not only in the far-right and far-left of the political spectrum but also creeping into the center. Unfortunately, very little information

is being made public about such incidents, but we need to pay attention to these kinds of tactics as they also threaten democracy, Dr. Huey stated.

Question & Answer Period

When Dr. Huey was asked whether she believed social media had created a greater divide between law enforcement and the public, she agreed and noted that public policing seems to be behind on recognizing the severity of misinformation. She also added that there are some police officers who still seem surprised by anti-police sentiment posts in social media. Dr. Huey pointed out that due to the pandemic, people spent more time online, allowing them to entrench in their echo chambers.

Dr. Huey also emphasized that there is a misperception that the police are paramilitary and follow an authoritarian system and, therefore, are more inclined to agree with views on the extreme right. However, she mentioned that this is not supported by evidence or reality. For example, even though the majority of police personnel got vaccinated and followed COVID mandates, a few groups which were in disagreement with public policy and claimed to be policing-centric were the ones that received more attention. The public did not hear about how the majority of police officers were endangered by the actions of those who took extreme views within their organizations.

Dr. Huey pointed out that it is too late to regulate social media to an extent of eliminating ideas that have already spread widely. De-platforming people also does not seem to have any effect because these groups eventually find another way to continue spreading their narratives. Dr. Huey stated that this can sometimes be counterproductive as they might move to places where it is more difficult to counteract their narratives.

In order to develop better measures to counter extreme narratives, there needs to be a better understanding on how extremists are able to manipulate people intellectually, emotionally, and financially so effectively. Dr. Huey also stated that the way we counter extreme narratives needs to change. Government involvement in countering this issue could have been effective thirty years ago, but with the current political environment, government involvement might incite more violence.

To conclude, Dr. Huey reiterated that the police need to be more proactive in countering misinformation, which starts by recognizing that this issue exists. Messages to counter radicalization need to be put in places where people are more

likely to congregate, while also considering demographics and the effect that having a certain person delivering that message will have.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

- The spread of misinformation about policing affects not only police forces' reputation, but also police officers' personal lives.
- Some of the effects of the spread of misinformation in social media include police officers being subject to fake arrests by sovereign citizens, doxxing, and threats.
- National security is now endangered by the divisive political spectrums.
- Far-right and far-left extremists seem to be joining a common cause: the destabilization of public policing.
- The acceptance of attacks on police is growing not only in the far-right and the far-left of the political spectrum, but it is also creeping into the center.

Question & Answer Period

- Social media has created a greater divide between law enforcement and the public, and the police seem to be behind on recognizing the severity of misinformation.
- There is a misperception that the police are paramilitary and follow an authoritarian system and, therefore, are more inclined to agree with views on the extreme right.
- It is too late to regulate social media to an extent of eliminating ideas that have already spread widely; therefore, how we counter extreme narratives needs to change.
- In order to develop better measures to counter extreme narratives, there needs to be a better understanding on how extremists are able to manipulate people so effectively.



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