



EXAMINING INFORMATION DISSEMINATION AND MANIPULATION: DEMAND-SIDE DISINFORMATION

Date: November 19, 2025

Disclaimer: This briefing note contains the encapsulation of views presented by the speaker and does not exclusively represent the views of the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies.

KEY EVENTS

On November 19, 2025, Dr. Paul Buvarp presented *Demand-Side Disinformation* at the 2025 West Coast Security Conference. The presentation was followed by a question-and-answer period with audience members and CASIS Vancouver executives. The session examined how disinformation spreads through the exploitation of human cognition and engagement-driven media systems, with particular attention to the role of social media architectures and demand-side dynamics. The presentation concluded with proposed approaches for building resilience to disinformation.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Disinformation was framed as a demand-driven phenomenon shaped by engagement-optimising systems rather than solely as a supply-side problem of falsehood production. Dr. Buvarp argued that disinformation can succeed when it aligns with cognitive preferences for narrative meaning, identity affirmation, and moral coherence. Within highly polarized political environments, these dynamics are amplified by algorithmic systems that prioritise emotional engagement over factual precision.

BACKGROUND

Dr. Buvarp grounded his analysis in a distinction between what he described as “Stone Age Cognition” and “Present Cognition.” Stone Age Cognition refers to humans’ long-standing preference for knowledge encoded as narrative, which has historically enabled information to persist across generations. Such narratives

are emotionally resonant, symbolically structured, and reinforce communal identity. This cognitive mode privileges meaning and coherence over precision and factual completeness, making narrative-driven information particularly durable.

Present Cognition was defined as a reflective and reinforcing cognitive environment shaped by modern digital systems. Social media platforms algorithmically mirror users' existing dispositions, often intensifying psychological stress and polarization. Unlike traditional narrative transmission, which evolved within stable social contexts, algorithmic curation dynamically adapts to user behavior, prioritising attention capture over accuracy or social cohesion.

Dr. Buvarp stated that these systems do not meaningfully recommend content users "like," but instead promote content users cannot disengage from. This can result in emotionally charged and polarizing narratives being systematically elevated, while factual or nuanced information is structurally disadvantaged. He noted that platforms such as TikTok are examples where content engaging strong emotional responses is algorithmically privileged, regardless of informational harm.

Within this environment, Dr. Buvarp suggested that the medium itself reshapes what is treated as credible information, with emotional salience outweighing verification. Disinformation succeeds not primarily because it deceives, but rather that it provides stories that are identity-confirming, morally coherent, and psychologically satisfying. Persistent narratives endure not due to evidentiary strength but because they align with group identity, moral framing, and tribal affiliation. Dr. Buvarp stated that fact-checking alone is insufficient to counter narratives that function at the level of meaning rather than accuracy.

Dr. Buvarp framed disinformation as native to engagement-driven architectures, adapting more effectively to these systems than factual content. This dynamic poses risks to national resilience by undermining institutional legitimacy and social cohesion. It was emphasised that effective responses must address the underlying cognitive and structural environment rather than focusing solely on individual false claims.

Three broad approaches were proposed by Dr. Buvarp to address this. First, counter-disinformation efforts must align with existing cognitive archetypes

rather than attempting to overwrite them with purely factual rebuttals. Moral and identity-based uncertainty cannot be resolved through technical fact-checking alone. Second, education on healthy information consumption was identified as critical, including norms that encourage reduced exposure rather than constant engagement. Third, demand-side resilience requires addressing the structure of the information ecosystem itself, recognizing that disinformation persists because it is well-adapted storytelling shaped by societal demand and platform incentives.

Question and Answer

Where do you see the biggest gaps or contracts on how countries prepare for non-kinetic security challenges and what countries do you view as adapting rapidly and preparing well?

Dr. Buvarp highlighted a paradox related to institutional trust in which high levels of trust between citizens, government, and media can increase vulnerability to disinformation by reducing skepticism toward authoritative narratives. Conversely, societies with lower institutional trust may develop informal “antibodies” that enhance critical scrutiny due to historical experience with misinformation or state manipulation. These were presented as context-specific factors shaping national vulnerability rather than universal indicators of resilience.

In contexts where distrust exists with traditional media, this can create a high demand for alternative, often foreign aligned narratives. Are there strategies to reduce demand for manipulative content in these contexts?

Dr. Buvarp emphasised that fragmented media ecosystems increase demand for alternative narratives, including those aligned with foreign or extremist actors. He argued that strengthening community cohesion and interpersonal trust can mitigate these effects by reinforcing inclusive national and cultural identities. Identity-building, when non-exclusive, was described as a means of creating social resilience that reduces susceptibility to manipulative narratives without suppressing pluralism.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

- Disinformation is best understood as a demand-side phenomenon driven by engagement-optimising systems that exploit human preferences for narrative meaning, identity affirmation, and moral coherence.
- Cognitive dynamics, particularly the interaction between narrative-based “Stone Age Cognition” and algorithmically reinforced “Present Cognition,” create structural advantages for disinformation over factual content.
- Effective resilience strategies must be context-specific, addressing underlying cognitive and societal conditions through education, healthy information norms, and trust-building rather than relying on uniform or purely technical countermeasures.

FURTHER READINGS

Burda, R., Fitzpatrick, M., Buvarp, P., Seese, G., and Brown, D. (2025). *Cognitive Warfare Indicators and Warnings Identification Framework*. Masaryk University; NATO STO.

Buvarp, P. (2023). The Space of Influence: Developing a New Method to Conceptualise Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference on Social Media. *Journal of Information Warfare*, 22(2), 31–51. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27240864>



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