

On Foreign Interference (Part III)

As in two previous essays I have dealt with the contemporary definition of “foreign interference” and with the ethical interphase of citizenship and “Intelligence” in a parliamentary democracy like Canada, in this essay I will try however to answer the question: How can anyone accurately gauge “foreign interference” in a world of totally unregulated electronic information, disinformation and propaganda?

In much earlier essays –such as *On the Withering Away of the State and the Three M's* (September 11th 2018) and *On the Death of Script at the Hands of Data* (July 7th 2019)– I have already explored the challenges posed by the new technologies to traditional political systems based on printed laws. This is a quote from the latter of the two: “Today, it has become almost impossible for democratic governments to enact legislation or regulatory safeguards fast enough to stem the tide of false, defamatory messages and/or propaganda circulating through so-called social media. Trolls and hackers...have been interfering with electoral processes...in the U.S.A.”

In the last few years, we have witnessed efforts by Western democracies to regulate social media, and even to indict some powerful corporate giants the likes of *Meta (Facebook)*, *X(Twitter)*, *YouTube* and *TikTok* –the latter two steps away from being banned in the U.S., accused of its potential use by the Chinese government to collect cyber-intelligence* via *TikTok's* Chinese parent company *ByteDance*. Of course, any American decision about *TikTok* will also have immediate repercussions in Canada, affecting millions of its subscribers throughout North America.

Relations between Canada and China have been deteriorating since the arrest on December 1st 2018, of Meng Wanzhou, executive and chief financial officer of Chinese business *Huawei*. She was detained by Canada Customs and subsequently placed under house arrest, acting on an extradition request by the U.S. Department of Justice, who was seeking her indictment regarding alleged financial transactions in violation of U.S. sanctions against Iran by *Skycorn*, which had functioned as *Huawei's* Iran-based subsidiary. After the D.O.J. negotiated a plea bargain, Meng was released from house arrest and left Canada for China on 24 September 2021. ** (If this not a clear example of foreign interference in Canadian governmental affairs by a superpower, I don't know what is.)

On November 6th 2023, Audrey Azoulay, Director-General of UNESCO, unveiled that international organization's action plan, the result of extensive worldwide consultations, and backed by a global opinion survey, which underlines the urgent need for action. In a press release on that day, Ms. Azoulay declared that... “Digital technology has enabled immense progress on freedom of speech. But social media platforms have also accelerated and amplified the spread of false information and hate speech, posing major risks to societal cohesion, peace and stability. To protect access to information, we must regulate these platforms without delay, while at the same time protecting freedom of expression and human rights.” ***

At a time of increasing international tensions and growing geopolitical alliances, it has become clear to me that unless we heed the words of Ms. Azoulay, we run the risk of repeating the mistakes of the past century and reinventing Fascism –but this time, armed with a thousand times more effective communications technologies than Goebbels ever dreamed of.

Written by ©Pascual Delgado, April 27th 2024.

* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_intelligence_gathering_disciplines

** https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meng_Wanzhou

*** <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/online-disinformation-unesco-unveils-action-plan-regulate-social-media-platforms>