



# A healthy state? Geopolitics, health, and safety: A keynote presentation for the European Conference of Law Enforcement and Public Health

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## ABSTRACT

Law enforcement and public health agencies operate in the context of their national government policies and resources. But improving and protecting health and community safety are made more difficult by four dark *geopolitical* forces which have been accelerating in recent years. *Neoliberalism* is driving governments to pursue low tax, low regulation small-state policies and aiding the expansion of uncontrolled globalization and colonialization of health-damaging manufacturing and services by multinational companies. The “*Sovereign individuals*,” first described in 1997, are the super-rich who have mastery over information technologies to avoid taxes and hide their wealth from governments. The vast offshoring of wealth has led to increasing inequalities in wealth and health, between rich and poor, further adding to civil distrust and unrest. Loss of revenues prevents government funding of health, welfare, and public protection whilst creating greater need for it. To explain the increasing poverty and harshness of life for the masses, there has been a rebirth and rise of *populism*. This has accelerated political corruption, created culture wars, fomented distrust of others, and added to global political instability. The information revolution has influenced all of these: it has created its own dark geopolitical force through the explosion of social media and industrial *disinformation* undermining individual critical thinking and democratic processes. Law enforcement and public health agencies face the consequences of these dark forces in their daily work, but they also need to understand more and develop more effective partnership responses to counter the worst excesses of the new geopolitical realities.

**Key Words** Neoliberalism; commercial determinants of health; public health; community safety; sovereign individuals; offshoring; populism; oligarchy; super-rich; information revolution; disinformation

In many countries and jurisdictions, the police are seen as agents of the state, keeping order and control. There is very little public trust in such police forces and understandable fear and suspicion of them. How the police deliver their role is determined by many factors, including national political culture, the expectations of the ruling classes, systems of accountability, and the rule of law. Public health practitioners can sometimes be seen in the same way, reflecting their earlier incarnations, in some countries, as “sanitary police” (Carroll, 2002), a view being reinforced by some extreme libertarians today, many rising to prominence during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The national landscape in which many police forces and public health services operate is one of declining democracy

(Herre, 2022). The perception of corruption in governments is increasing (Transparency International, 2023). Societal fears are rising as people contemplate job loss, climate change, loss of freedoms as citizens, and experiences of prejudice or racism. Trust in governments is in decline. Trust in scientists, on the other hand is largely holding up, alongside trust in co-workers, community members, and in national health services. Two thirds of people believe they are being lied to by journalists, by governments, and by business leaders. Distrust is the default position, with 59% tending to distrust evidence until they see otherwise, and 64% lack the ability to have constructive and civil debates about issues they disagree on (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2022).

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There are darker forces in play beyond national boundaries: *Geopolitics* is affecting the ability of police forces and public health services to create healthier, safer communities. *Geopolitics* concerns the influences of geography and economics on politics and on the relations between nations (Britannica, n.d.). *Geopolitics* has always influenced how countries behave and how their institutions are set up to act—whether this was in the era of colonialization, during the Cold War, or, in latter day times, due to neoliberalism. Recent features of the globalized world create new threats and pressures on public health and policing that are not confined within national boundaries. Four dark geopolitical forces have expanded rapidly and dangerously in the last few years: neoliberalism, the idea of the sovereign individual, populism, and disinformation.

### Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism can trace its origins to two Austrian economists, Friedrich Hayek and Ludwig Von Mises. Neoliberalism contends that “markets work: governments don’t.” Markets allocate scarce resources, promote efficient growth and secure individual liberty better than governments. Government represents bureaucratic bloat and political imposition. Markets embody human freedom. With markets, people get what they deserve; to alter the market is to spoil the poor and punish the productive (Hayek, 1944).

Neoliberalism demands low taxes, small government, no restrictions on trade, and no regulations on who can do what. Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, and economist Milton Friedman are widely credited with moving it into the political mainstream starting in the 1980s (Kuttner, 2019). Neoliberalism has been replicated across the westernized world and driven by the major world economic engines, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (Navarro, 2007).

In the health arena, neoliberalism has spurred on the health-damaging behaviours of the big multinational companies, helping them avoid paying taxes, following regulations, and being subject to restrictions to their advertising and marketing campaigns. Learning from the pioneering work of Big Tobacco, they have employed what are termed the *Merchants of Doubt* to subvert scientific evidence (Oreskes & Conway, 2010). They have suppressed impartial studies and funded alternative, and misleading, research. They have fielded their own scientists simply to seed uncertainty. None of their research has been required to prove conclusively their products are safe. Rather, it creates a climate of diversion and confusion, which respectable science is obliged to scrutinize and respond to, thereby wasting its time.

Multinational companies have heaped blame for the harms of their products on individuals who they portray as behaving badly and using their products irresponsibly. Ten multinational companies control most of what we eat (Oxfam, 2014); it is naïve to believe that we as individuals can manage our personal diets healthily without the control of Big Food’s production methods and without limitations on their marketing practice. The alcohol industry desperately tries to attribute the blame for drinking and driving on individuals and presents itself as a force for good, doing anything it can but reduce alcohol consumption on the roads (Hoe et al., 2020). The gambling industry’s “responsible gambling” campaigns blame individuals for their feckless behaviour with predictable negative effects on the heavily addicted (Marko et al., 2023).

Multinational companies have bought, bribed, and bullied politicians and trade ministries to obtain support for their interests and to remove non-tariff considerations from trade agreements. They have adversely influenced the ability of governments and trade blocs to create legitimate limits on their ability to sell their products (UK Faculty of Public Health, 2018). However, some countries have fought back in justifiably celebrated causes such as the Australian leadership on plain packaging for cigarettes (Hurst, 2015) and Uruguay’s successful defence of its tobacco control laws in the Investor State Dispute Resolution against Phillip Morris International Tobacco company (Tobacco Tactics, 2020). Aggressive marketing continues, especially in the Global South, and especially against women and children, where trade regulation is light and public protections are limited (Tobacco Tactics, 2021a). To this end, the much-vaunted Framework Convention on Tobacco Control now presides over a world tobacco market which has increased in size and profitability since the treaty first came in (WHO FCTC, 2023).

The edges blur between organized crime and legitimate business. The tobacco industry has deliberately fuelled and stimulated smuggling of cigarettes, and illegal and counterfeit trading of cigarettes. All of these promote consumption of tobacco and create new markets (Tobacco Tactics, 2021b; Beelman et al., 2000). Supply lines for cocaine and for tobacco were sometimes shared in South American free ports. Colombian drug cartels and other criminal intermediaries have been involved in tobacco industry–stimulated cigarette smuggling. The tobacco industry has been implicated in surveillance, subterfuge, bribery, and corruption in Africa (Tobacco Tactics, 2021a; Titeca et al., 2011; Jackson et al., 2021). Tobacco companies were also implicated in a break-in at health policy offices in Brussels, which led to the undermining of a European Union Tobacco Products Directive in 2012 (McKee et al., 2012). Money laundering, fraud, terrorism, and organized crime are all inextricably entwined (Perri & Brody, 2011). To be implicated with criminal intermediaries in smuggling tobacco is to be over the boundary of legal activity (UK Parliament Health Select Committee, 2000).

### The Sovereign Individual

Alongside neoliberalism as an economic philosophy, there is an enabling economic mechanism which has accelerated the rise of the super-rich and oligarchs and the offshoring of wealth. It was spelled out in the 1997 book *The Sovereign Individual* (Davidson & Rees-Mogg, 1997). Described as the “most influential book you’ve never heard of,” it is a playbook for the super-rich on how their fortunes can and should be hidden from meddling governments and thereby withheld from what are termed the *undeserving poor*. The sovereign individuals will have mastery over the new information technologies, enabling them to move their wealth offshore at the press of a button, out of sight of governments hungry for their tax revenues, which therefore become unable to provide a basic level of welfare for their citizens. The IT illiterate and those with limited access to the internet or wherewithal to use it will be made poorer. They will become the disenfranchised and disillusioned, progressively angrier, and more rebellious, and would need to be controlled.

The wealth of the super-rich has grown by unimaginable degrees during the pandemic years. The influence of oligarchs

has grown and created wealth sufficient to build private armies and send the super-rich into space or into the depths of the oceans. In 2021, Oxfam reported that the richest billionaires could give \$139,300,000,000 away and still be as rich as they were in 2020. These billionaires could end global hunger for about \$300 billion, a fraction of their overall wealth. Oxfam is among many calling for wealth taxes (Oxfam International, 2021). For some time, it has been clear that earnings are not increasing in accordance with productivity (Reich, 2011). In the meantime, the offshoring of undeserved profit by a small number of fortunate impresarios progressively takes away wealth which could enrich communities and improve social conditions for the majority. “The Panama papers” revealed a small fraction of this global theft of wealth; the 2016 exposure of the activities of offshoring finance consultancy Mossack and Fonseca showed the offshore holdings of 140 politicians and public officials from around the world with more than 214,000 offshore entities, connected to people in more than 200 countries and territories (ICIJ, 2016). Major banks have enabled the creation of hard-to-trace companies in offshore havens. Prominent clients and beneficiaries included the former presidents of Iceland and Ukraine, David Cameron, and Vladimir Putin (Harding, 2016).

Laundering of large sums of money has been possible onshore in major financial centres such as London. The so-called *London Laundromat* enabled Russian oligarchs to take up residence in London within 2 years, through an investor visa scheme, if they could invest £10 million in the United Kingdom (Neate, 2022).

### The Rise of Populism

Neoliberalism is the driving policy, creating wealth for some; sovereign individuals can harness the new information technology to offshore wealth in trillions, accelerating inequality in health, worsening poverty, and inflation, destroying hope and shattering expectations for the masses. Another dark force is needed, to explain and justify what is happening, to refocus blame and pacify the disenfranchised—it is the force of *populism*. Populism is a political movement that attempts to appeal to “the people” by convincing them that its leaders alone represent them and their concerns are being ignored by a real or perceived “elite establishment” (ThoughtCo, 2023). The current brands of populism distract attention from the real profiteers and exploiters and fire up the masses, demonize minorities and migrants, create culture wars and fuel non-stories while real news gets hidden (Horton, 2023). Populism also gets a major boost from the information revolution. Steve Bannon was the high priest of populism, recognizing the power of social media and other information technology applications to influence individuals in their political thinking and voting, and in their personal beliefs. Bannon described the social media world as being divided, not into left and right, but into bubbles, and tribes, a theme fully embraced by President Trump (Roberts, 2017). Bannon highlighted a worldview, popular in far right and alternative religious circles, that believes progress and equality are poisonous illusions. Science and expertise are to be ridiculed, derided, condemned, and rejected.

### Industrial Disinformation

The “second information revolution” brings considerable benefits for community safety and well-being, but it also

brings risks (McKee et al., 2019). The information revolution fuels neoliberalism, sovereign individuals, and populism. It is directly the cause of another dark force—industrial scale *disinformation*.

Social media can propel credible and appealing—but also dangerous and negative—ideas much more rapidly than rebuttals, counter arguments, and fact checking can respond. Bad ideas gain traction more rapidly than sound rational arguments. Social media enables fringe opinions like a “flat earth,” to reach a greater number of susceptible like-minded individuals more rapidly than before. Attention span is declining with the expansion of social media (Mohammed Ashrof, 2021). It is likely an audience has already made up its mind and is not open to new ideas, or to challenging old ones. Tribal thinking is more likely, and strengthened, with rational inquiry and argument further damaged. Public health and law enforcement agencies should be concerned about the power of social media to reinforce division and hostility. They also need to be watchful of the capacity of social media to fuel moral panics (Walsh, 2020).

The spread of inaccurate information may be *misinformation*: false information that is spread, regardless of intent to mislead. *Disinformation*, on the other hand, is false information that is intentionally designed to mislead (McKee et al., 2019). Disinformation may come from lone operators in the social media world. For example, individuals articulate legitimate concerns about vaccination on social media. What is new is the industrialization of disinformation through new information technologies. Bots, trolls, and click bait drive Russian-led efforts to promote uncertainty and hesitancy about vaccination and stimulate antivax sentiments (see Case Study 1) (McKee et al., 2019)

Russian “troll farms,” or “factories” and “troll armies” grew out of the propaganda war with Ukraine after the invasion of Crimea (Walker, 2015). They are the driver of large-scale

#### Case study 1: A case of disinformation for law enforcement and health first responders

An example of how information can be distorted by deliberate intent can be seen in one sequence of social media during the response to the murder of a police officer on Westminster Bridge in London, in 2017 (Hern, 2017). A photo was posted capturing the actions of bystanders on the scene, which could have been straightforward reporting: social media *information*. How viewers appraise the information may lead to some misunderstanding or misinterpretation, leading to *misinformation*. The photo was retweeted by “@SouthLoneStar” with a caption “Muslim woman pays no mind to the terror” and the hashtag “#banislam.” After some British media had picked up on this angle, they subsequently distanced themselves from it, when the photographer and the woman came forward and described the reality of her distress on the scene. The reality was that “@SouthLoneStar” was an operative of a Russian troll farm, paid to seed *disinformation*.

Blue light service responders operate in the social media environment and need to be aware of malicious and mercenary intent, even though it might distract from their urgent humanitarian action.

disinformation. The political philosophy is not always to promote a single cause, but rather to create division and uncertainty and reduce the ability for viewers to act, whether it is with “is vaccination a good thing?” or “will Russia really invade Ukraine?”

On the geopolitical level, industrial disinformation has been a major influence in the election of Trump, the Brexit referendum (Case Study 2; Dearden, 2017) and in other elections around the world. For example, villagers in North Macedonia posted significant pro-Trump disinformation on Facebook before the 2016 election, earning themselves substantially more money through “clickbait” than any regular job in their country could provide (Hughes & Waismel-Manor, 2021). The result of this activity was to amplify the significance of the social media airtime Trump seemed to be generating and contributed to his credibility and electability. Cambridge Analytica harvested Facebook profiles of over 50 million Americans from 2014 onwards and were able to create significant targeted advertising to influence voting towards Trump (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018).

The public health world has been slow to understand industrialized disinformation (Jamison et al., 2019). Studies of social media content often screen out duplicate messages, rather than recognizing them as bot-generated. Abuses of social media are poorly appreciated and unregulated, and social media bosses show inertia over tackling the misuse of their systems (Hoffman et al., 2019).

### Geopolitical Health after the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, these four aspects of the geopolitical world have come into stark relief.

**Neoliberalism:** We now clearly see disaster capitalism in action, with multinational companies operating in ways that harm others—whether they are fossil fuel companies, food suppliers, or public utilities in water or energy. War in Ukraine

#### Case study 2: Industrial disinformation and Brexit

Another example of automated or troll-driven disinformation is the case of “David Jones,” aka “@DavidJo52951945.” Ostensibly from Southampton, England, DavidJo had over 100,000 followers, built up since 2013. “He” tweeted feverishly anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant, pro-UK, pro-USA, anti-EU sentiments, interspersed with many pro-Russian, anti-Ukraine tweets. “He” had supported Russian claims to the Crimea and questioned Western reporting of the Malaysian Airline flight MA17 disaster, shot down allegedly as an act of Russian separatists over Crimea. During the Brexit campaign, tweeting was done over 12 hours daily, 7 days a week, at the odd times of 5 a.m. to 5 p.m. UK time; strange working hours, but not in Moscow or St. Petersburg. Many analysts have concluded this was a bot or troll operating from a Russian troll factory (Dearden, 2017).

Alongside the mass automation of messages from other bots and/or trolls, *talking to each other*, these would have amplified the credibility and bandwidth of the Vote Leave message and accelerated support for Brexit.

has become an opportunity and an excuse for profiteering and speculation.

**The Sovereign Individuals:** In particular, the Russian oligarchs have come into clear sight and the police have been required to implement sanctions imposed on them while, at the same time, defending the property of those individuals (Cannane, 2022).

**The rise of populism:** Absurd claims have been made to justify the war against Ukraine—“Ukraine is not a real nation” (Yekelchik, 2022). The role of Russian interference in the British populist ruling Conservative party has come strongly into the public eye. Some politicians have reflected that “the West” could have acted more strongly and rapidly to prevent the war if it had shown more resolve early on. However, this view omits the reality that British Conservative politicians were, and still are, in thrall to Russian money and influence (Webber, 2022). They were compromised politically; consciously, or carelessly, they were complicit in Russia’s world view. They were never going to call for stronger measures against Russia’s aggressive stance before the war. The Conservative party actively pursued a policy of attracting major donors—oligarchs, not just of Russian origin, but from other spheres of public and business life. Only in February 2022 did the Conservative party rename and finally close the “Conservative Friends of Russia,” a body which had been entertaining Russian diplomats and business people over 12 years. Ben Elliott, formerly a co-chair of the Conservative party, promoted high-class concierge services to an audience of Russian oligarchs from his company Quintessentially (Stone, 2022).

**Disinformation:** We have seen complex industrial-scale promotion of pro-Russian positions (The Conversation, 2023).

### CONCLUSION

The police and public health communities find themselves depleted of resources at a time when neoliberalism and the rise of the super-rich are creating widening inequalities in health and wealth and destroying social cohesion. When populist policies and industrial disinformation, which seek to lay the blame for societal ills on minorities and outsiders, and anywhere other than where it belongs, are added, there is a recipe for igniting social unrest on the one hand, and a collapse of the will to live on the other. Law enforcement and public health colleagues will be seen as people “in authority.” Law enforcement particularly will be required to police ever more draconian laws and the restriction of individual freedom. We will need to forge ever closer alliances and make appropriate and effective shared responses to the problems of community safety and well-being. We will need to be seen as wise to the dark forces which are distorting our ability to protect and improve the health and safety of the public. We will need to be seen as humanitarian, not authoritarian. We will need to be seen on the side of people and planet, not on the side of certain politicians and sovereign individuals.

Hayek and von Mises presented neoliberalism as an antidote to the centralized power they saw in Nazi Germany in the 1930s. Perhaps they did not foresee the attractiveness of their policy for dictatorships and their oligarchs, and the concentration of wealth and power this policy would inevitably create. Western post-war governments ignored the offer of

neoliberalism and proceeded to create democratic structures with state-led activities and social security; but they also neglected the insidious global growth of neoliberalism.

William Beveridge, architect of the British welfare state, said “We should regard want, idleness, ignorance, squalor, and disease as enemies of us all. That is the meaning of a social conscience; that we refuse to make our separate peace with evil.” The language he used was the language of wartime; coming out of World War II, Beveridge was seeking a “country fit for heroes” and “planning for an outbreak of peace” (Wikipedia, 2023). In the post-emergency period of our war with COVID-19 it is necessary for us to recognize the true enemies we face in neoliberalism, in the sovereign individuals, in populism, and in disinformation. We must plan for an outbreak of health and safety for all our global citizens.

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