

July 5, 2022

Prof. Meric Gertler, President of the University of Toronto
Prof. Peter Loewen, Director of the Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy
Prof. Lorraine E. Ferris, Associate Vice President, Research Oversight and Compliance
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Dear Prof. Gertler, Prof. Loewen, and Prof. Ferris, (and colleagues from the University of Toronto),

Re: Independent investigation request on Citizen Lab's report "CatalanGate: Extensive Mercenary Spyware Operation against Catalans Using Pegasus and Candiru"

We hope this letter finds you well. We are grateful for the timely and considered responses that both Prof. Deibert and Prof. Ferris have produced to the communications sent to you by individual members of our academic associations. Equally, we also take note of your replies to Renew Europe Members of the European Parliament regarding the so-called "CatalanGate" report produced by your institution's Citizen Lab unit.

However, the signatories of this letter remain dissatisfied, and deeply concerned, by your decision not to allow an independent investigation of the practices highlighted in the reports available on our website: <https://paginadelforodeprofesores.wordpress.com/carta-a-citizenlab-sobre-catalangate/> .

These include:

- A variety of apparent conflicts of interests (political and economic), involving the authors of the report and the individuals collaborating with its fieldwork, which remain undisclosed.
- According to key participants, Citizen Lab's investigation in Spain sought evidence to feed court cases against NSO by WhatsApp, Apple and Catalan secessionist politicians. Apple's announcement of a \$10 million contribution to researchers for their support gathering evidence against NSO (that mentioned explicitly Citizen Lab) seems to confirm this.
- Findings reported in this non-peer reviewed study are not replicable and the authors refuse to provide samples that would allow any serious independent validation.
- Contrary to what the literature on forensic analysis (and usual scientific procedures) suggests, Prof. Deibert claims 100% reliability of their analytical processes and refuses to consider the possibility of false positives or other errors. However, several sources explain how to manufacture false positives.
- There is a very unusual lack of transparency concerning methodology. The authors refuse to report when, where and by whom the digital forensic analyses were conducted. It seems that no non-digital or non-remote analysis was conducted to verify infections.
- The authors refuse to report the number of devices investigated or the ratio of positives.
- There were no control groups.

- Citizen Lab’s authors express very serious accusations against the Spanish government for “illegal espionage” based on what the report claims to be “circumstantial evidence” (much of it from media interviews and social media). Most of the evidence pointing at Spanish authorship of illegal espionage is weak at best.
- The report does not consider any of the other plausible alternative hypotheses. It is surprising how the possibility of legally sanctioned surveillance, false positives, or espionage by the secret services of Russia, Morocco or Western countries is not even mentioned.
- Participants and some authors were evidently trying to maximise the number of positives. The reluctance to submit samples for external validation seems to confirm this. No conflict of interest or issues concerning the obvious lack of neutrality were acknowledged.
- Fieldwork was coordinated by a pro-independence activist, Mr. Elies Campo, and a presumed victim of espionage, without any prior research experience or completed higher education degree. This author also made false claims about his employment status and was not affiliated to Citizen Lab for most of the investigation period.
- No explanation has been given on why he was tasked with highly sensitive fieldwork or whether he was respectful of basic research ethics protocols.
- Only the devices of pro-independence politicians and activists were analysed. The authors do not explain the criteria used in the snowball sampling. There is very strong evidence suggesting that the cases submitted to analysis were filtered by two political parties.
- There are many contradictions and ethical concerns on how the fieldwork investigation in Spain started in July 2020. Then an unusually strong communication campaign coordinated by Catalan secessionist political parties and a lawsuit were launched within a week of the first analysis and before confirmation of any infection.
- Participants were alerted that they were likely being spied without consideration that this warning could mean interference with Spanish court sanctioned investigations. Many participants were legally monitored by Spanish security services when contacted and explained how to avoid surveillance. Others were awaiting trial, and some were even in prison.
- There are serious doubts concerning the relationship between Citizen Lab and Amnesty Tech. They claim to work independently and theoretically “peer-review” each other’s methods and provide “external validation”. However, both organisations work together most of the time. Prof. Deibert acts as advisor for Amnesty Tech, and for several years (including part of this investigation) two of the Amnesty IT experts worked for Citizen Lab.
- The name “CatalanGate” for the report (published on 18 April 2022) was chosen to match the slogan of the propaganda campaign that Catalan secessionist parties and organisations were preparing months before the publication of the report. The largest secessionist organisation registered the domain “CatalanGate.cat” in January 2022. Moreover, a Twitter account (182.6K-follower) currently named “@catalangate” has been used for years to promote secessionist communication campaigns.
- The report has been amended on Citizen Lab’s website after publication without any acknowledgement or explanation.

- Several of the participants in the investigation were investigated by their known ties with Russian intelligence services. Six of the participants, including the coordinator of fieldwork are suspected of collaborating with Russian secret services to create in 2019 the Tsunami Democratic blockchain-based platform to dodge Spanish security forces (it served to coordinate violent riots and blockades of roads, train stations and airports). Surprisingly, these well documented ties with Russia and Russian attempts to destabilise Spain and the EU by supporting Catalan secessionists are completely omitted from the report.
- The responses by Prof. Deibert regarding fieldwork investigation are contradicted by many of the spoken and written statements of several participants in the investigation.
- The authors have been called to provide expert testimony in parliamentary commissions and court cases launched by secessionist politicians (involved in this investigation).

We believe that the above overwhelmingly calls for an independent investigation, in order not to compromise the reputation of your institution.

King Regards,

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