

ASSESSING THE CANADIAN INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT DURING THE 2019 FEDERAL ELECTION

A DFRLab Report



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Introduction

The 2019 Canadian Federal election was the most momentous digital event in Canadian history, observed and debated by a population of roughly 25 million social media users.¹ It was an event that required unprecedented diligence by elections security officials, who warned of “covert and overt” online foreign interference efforts of the sort that had previously targeted the 2016 Brexit referendum and U.S. election.² These concerns were widely shared by Canadian voters. Five months before the October 21 vote, 71 percent of Canadians expressed worry that foreign governments would use social media to affect the outcome of the election,³ and 74 percent of Canadians were concerned that the same manipulative tactics would be harnessed by domestic special interest and partisan groups.⁴

The result was a contentious and polarizing election cycle. Ultimately, the incumbent Liberal Party, led by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, lost 20 seats as well as the majority it had claimed in 2015, being reduced to 157 seats. The Conservative Party, led by Andrew Scheer, gained 26 seats for a new total of 121. The Liberals were forced to form a minority government, becoming the governing party with the lowest share of the popular vote in Canadian history. Voter turnout was lower than it had been in 2015, dropping by 2.6 percent.

The Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) of the Atlantic Council conducted periodic surveys of the Canadian information ecosystem in the month before and three months following the 2019 Federal Election. Given work conducted by other researchers focused on Canadian Facebook and Twitter content, the DFRLab’s work emphasized less-trafficked platforms like Pinterest and Reddit. This research was focused on determining the extent of both attributable and suspected foreign interference that targeted the elections process and on better understanding how the domestic information environment contributed to these efforts.

Because of language limitations, this analysis focused on the Anglophone information environment. The DFRLab recognizes that the Francophone information environment may have its own unique contexts and characteristics. After an initial review of election-related messages, the DFRLab determined that resources would be best spent by focusing on content related to the incumbent Liberal Party and Conservative Party, to the exclusion of the other three national parties, as the volume of problematic information targeted at these smaller parties was less substantial.

This open-source examination of the Canadian digital landscape demonstrated that negative content targeted parties and party leaders across the political spectrum, but the DFRLab observed a disproportionate volume of that negative content as directed at Trudeau and the incumbent Liberal government. None of the evidence pointed to any other party or party leader’s direct involvement or endorsement of the negative campaigns against Trudeau. On Twitter, anti-Trudeau hashtags such as #TrudeauMustGo greatly exceeded the volume and intensity of hashtags targeting any political figure associated with the Conservative, Bloc Québécois, New Democratic, or Green Parties.^{5,6,7}

1 | Tiffany Lizee, “Social media plays major role in 2019 federal election,” *Global News*, October 21, 2019, <https://globalnews.ca/news/6060008/social-media-federal-election/>; “Digital 2020 Canada,” 2019, <https://wearesocial.com/ca/digital-2020-canada/>

2 | Craig Silverman, Alex Boutiller, Jane Lytvynenko, “Canada’s Spy Agency Says Voters are Being Targeted by Foreign Influence Campaigns,” *Buzzfeed News*, July 2, 2019, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/canada-election-foreign-influence>

3 | Insights West, “Canadians Alarmed Over the Influence of Social Media in Upcoming Elections,” May 10, 2019, <https://www.insightswest.com/news/canadians-alarmed-over-the-influence-of-social-media-in-upcoming-2019-elections/>

4 | Ibid

5 | Caroline Orr, “A New Wave of Disinformation Emerges with Anti-Trudeau Hashtag,” *National Observer*, July 25, 2019, <https://www.nationalobserver.com/2019/07/25/analysis/new-wave-disinformation-emerges-trudeaumustgo>

6 | Nicole Bogert, “Truth Tracker: How does Anti-Scheer Sentiment Stack Up Against Anti-Trudeau Talk Online,” *CTV News*, October 17, 2019, <https://election.ctvnews.ca/truth-tracker-how-does-anti-scheer-sentiment-stack-up-against-anti-trudeau-talk-online.14643010>

7 Ibid.

On Facebook, some ideologically motivated extremist groups went so far as to propose fantasy scenarios to assassinate Trudeau.⁸ On Pinterest, anti-Trudeau messages mixed with virulent anti-immigration and anti-Muslim memes, sown by inauthentic accounts and boosted by Pinterest's own algorithms.⁹ In general, the election witnessed ample cases of viral misinformation and coordinated inauthentic behavior.

Despite recording a number of suspicious digital phenomena, however, the DFRLab could not confidently attribute any of these events to the operations of a foreign government. This could be due to broader changes in the tactics of foreign actors or a determination by adversarial governments that coordinated interference did not justify the commensurate risks and costs. The growth of counter-disinformation initiatives and public awareness since 2016 has led foreign troll farms and other such entities to turn to more covert and clandestine methods.¹⁰ While the DFRLab has still made attributions under these circumstances (see 2019's Operation Secondary Infektion), it requires access to corroborating evidence and technical backend data that was not available in this case.¹¹ Instead, the clearest signs of "foreign" interference came in evidence of coordinated political trolling by Canadian and U.S. ideological extremist activists, motivated largely by grievances regarding their assertion of white-ethnic cultural identity.



Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau being targeted by Canada Proud, a grassroots organization that started off as a meme collective. The story shared here was unconfirmed. (Source: Canada Proud/Facebook)

This report proceeds in four parts. It begins with a review of Canada's information environment and patterns of political news consumption. Next, it analyzes counter-interference initiatives undertaken by the Canadian government. After this, the report provides a general discussion of mis- and disinformation during the 2019 Federal Election. It examines content spread on Pinterest and Reddit - platforms selected for their political influence and relative lack of study in the Canadian context - as well as amplification by domestic Canadian actors of Russian state propaganda. The report concludes with policy recommendations on how to secure future Canadian elections.



8 | Patrick Cain, Jeff Semple, "Closed Facebook Groups Where Extremists Thrive, 'Would Curl Your Inards,' Expert Says," *Global News*, October 29, 2019, <https://globalnews.ca/news/6091196/facebook-investigating-19000-member-anti-muslim-group>

9 | Kanishk Karan, John Gray, "Trudeaus and Trudeauun'ts - memes polarize in Canadian elections," DFRLab, November 19, 2019, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/trudeaus-and-trudeauun'ts-memes-have-an-impact-during-canadian-elections-4c842574dedc>.

10 | Darren Linville, Patrick Warren, "Russian Trolls can be Surprisingly Subtle and Fun to read," *Washington Post*, March 8, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/russian-trolls-can-be-surprisingly-subtle-and-often-fun-to-read/2019/03/08/677f8ec2-413c11e9-9361-301ffb5bd5e6_story.html

11 | Nika Aleksejeva, Lukas Andriukaitis, Luiza Bandeira, Donara Barojan, Graham Brookie, Eto Buziashvili, Andy Carvin, Kanishk Karan, Ben Nimmo, Iain Robertson, Michael Sheldon, "Operation: 'Secondary Infektion,'" June 2019, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Operation-Secondary-Infektion_English.pdf

Canada's Information Environment

As a wealthy, industrialized nation that embraced the digital revolution early, Canada's level of internet penetration – approximately 93 percent – remained essentially unchanged between 2015 and 2019.¹² However, these interceding years saw significant changes in the demographics and behavior of Canadian internet users, as well as broader changes within the digital ecosystem.

Between 2015 and 2019, the estimated number of active Canadian social media users rose from 16.2 million to 25 million: 67 percent of the population.¹³ The most significant changes occurred in those Canadians aged 55 or older. In 2015, just 24 percent of older Canadians reported using social media on a mobile device, but, by 2019, that figure had more than doubled to 57 percent.¹⁴ Facebook and Twitter were used predominantly by Canadians under 35 years of age in 2015, but older Canadians had largely closed the gap by 2019, seeing 79 percent and 27 percent usership respectively.¹⁵ Fully half of older Canadian internet users were now active on YouTube.¹⁶

As older Canadians have become more fluent in social media platforms, younger Canadians have sought new refuges. Instagram has remained the domain of Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z, while Snapchat and Reddit (a platform that hosts hundreds of thousands of specialized discussion forums) are used by Millennials and Generation Z almost exclusively.¹⁷ Interestingly, the image-sharing service Pinterest rose sharply in popularity between 2015 and 2019. Its usage is highest among Baby Boomers and Generation X (21 percent and 25 percent, respectively).¹⁸

The internet has also become increasingly central to Canadian social and civic life. In 2019, three quarters of Canadian internet users reported spending 3-4 hours online each day. One-fifth said they had not gone more than 8 hours without logging on.¹⁹ Canadians consume a significant amount of political news through the social media. According to a 2018 Pew study, 42 percent of Canadians reported using social media to track current events at least once each day, a figure second only to South Korea.²⁰ Today, more than half of Canadians consider social media their top news source.

Even as Canadians consume more news through digital platforms, however, they often remain distrustful of the medium itself. Only 32 percent of Canadians report trusting social media as a news source²¹, a number that remains relatively similar through different age groups.²² Indeed, nearly half of all Canadian social media users report having encountered stories that were "obviously false" in nature.²³

12 | Simon Kemp, "Global Digital and Social Media Stats: 2015," *Social Media Today*, January 22, 2015, <https://www.socialmediatoday.com/content/global-digital-social-media-stats-2015>.

13 | *Ibid.*

14 | "2019, Canada's Internet Factbook," Canadian Internet Registration Authority (CIRA), April 2019, <https://www.cira.ca/resources/corporate/factbook/canadas-internet-factbook-2019>

15 | Melody McKinnon, "2019 Report: Social Media Use in Canada," *Online Business Canada*, June 30, 2019, <https://canadiansinternet.com/2019-report-social-media-use-canada/>

16 | *Ibid.*

17 | *Ibid.*

18 | *Ibid.*

19 | "2019, Canada's Internet Factbook," Canadian Internet Registration Authority (CIRA), April 2019, <https://www.cira.ca/resources/corporate/factbook/canadas-internet-factbook-2019>

20 | Pew Research Center (@pewresearch), "The use of social media for getting news varies considerably across the 38 nations in our survey," <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2018/01/11/people-in-poorer-countries-just-as-likely-to-use-social-media-for-news-as-those-in-wealthier-countries/>, January 11, 2018, 8:56 AM, <https://twitter.com/pewresearch/status/951497982750359553>

21 | "Canadians like, but don't trust, social media for news, according to CJF poll conducted by Maru/Matchbox," Cision, April 9, 2019, <https://www.newswire.ca/news-releases/canadians-like-but-don-t-trust-social-media-for-news-according-to-cjf-poll-conducted-bymaru-matchbox-879309205.html>

22 | *Ibid.*

23 | Megan Devlin, "2 in 5 Canadians Report Finding Fake News on Social Media," *CTV News*, October 16, 2019, <https://bc.ctvnews.ca/2-in-5-canadians-report-finding-fake-news-on-social-media-1.4641230>

Canadians have historically maintained a high level of trust in broadcast news media, as well as the broader journalistic profession.²⁴ Yet this trust has begun to decline, likely driven by uncertainty regarding digital media. According to the Edelman Trust Barometer, Canadian trust in all forms of media declined over the course of 2019 by an average of 7 percent.²⁵ Trust in online search engines declined the most, by 9 percent, as more Canadians became aware of the imperfect algorithms that govern them.²³

Canadian political and media practices have changed to reflect the growing salience of digital platforms. The Liberal Party's surprise 2015 victory was owed in part to Justin Trudeau's effective use of social media as a tool of voter engagement and persuasion.^{26,27} In the words of political scientists Mireille Lanlancette and Vincent Reynaud, Trudeau harnessed the power of "celebrity politics" via Instagram and other platforms.²⁸ This enabled him to generate earned media and drive online conversation, as opposed to simply reacting to it. However, Trudeau's digital profile also created more surface area for misinformation and misleading narratives.

Canadian Conservatives, observing the increasing importance of online campaigning, adopted a different approach, focused less on candidate promotion than on the utilization of a vast, largely informal network of digital surrogates and supporters. This strategy paid dividends during the 2018 Ontario election, in which an independent Facebook group, "Ontario Proud," became a major force for voter mobilization, eliciting more social media shares than either *CBC* or *CTV News*.²⁹ Thanks in part to this enthusiasm gap, the incumbent Liberal provincial government was defeated. Buoyed by the Conservative victory, the founder of Ontario Proud created a new organization, "Canada Proud," with the goal of replicating this success on the national stage.

The 2019 Federal Election, therefore, saw a competition between two competing digital models. The Liberals relied on the unmatched reach of Trudeau's social media presence, coupled with targeted online advertising that sought to boost individual candidates among particular constituencies (although the Conservatives outraised the Liberals three-to-two, the Liberals would devote significantly more resources to

Ontario Proud
Sponsored

It's time to vote out Kathleen Wynne! LIKE our page if you agree!

AND LOST BILLIONS
IN SCANDALS

One reason you're seeing this ad is that **Ontario Proud** wants to reach people interested in **Canadian Taxpayers Federation**, based on activity such as liking Pages or clicking on ads.

There may be other reasons you're seeing this ad, including that Ontario Proud wants to reach **people ages 35 and older who live or were recently in Ontario**. This is information based on your Facebook profile and where you've connected to the internet.

A political advertisement by Ontario Proud targeting Kathleen Wynne, Former Premier of Ontario. (Source: CBC/Facebook)

24 | "Seven in Ten (69%) of Canadian Have 'Trust and Confidence' in Traditional Media," *Ipsos*, May 28, 2008, <https://www.ipsos.com/en-ca/news-polls/seven-ten-69-canadians-have-trust-and-confidence-traditional-news-media>

25 | "Trust in Canada: Edelman Trust Barometer 2020," Edelman Canada, <https://www.edelman.ca/sites/g/files/aatuss376/files/202003/2020%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer%20Canada%20-%20FINAL.pdf>

26 *Ibid.*

27 | Ian Austen, "Justin Trudeau and Liberal Party Prevail with Stunning Rout in Canada," *New York Times*, October 19, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/20/world/americas/canada-election-stephen-harper-justin-trudeau.html>

28 | Mireille Lanlancette, Vincent Reynaud, "The Power of Political Image: Justin Trudeau, Instagram, and Celebrity Politics," *American Behavioral Science*, November 2017, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/321396251_The_Power_of_Political_Image_Justin_Trudeau_Instagram_and_Celebrity_Politics

29 | Lee Berthiaume, "Conservatives rake in most fundraising money in 2019 despite decline," *The Canadian Press*, January 31, 2020, <https://globalnews.ca/news/6491109/conservatives-fundraising-2019/>; Alex Boutilier, Jane Lytvynenko, Craig Silverman, "Liberals outspend Conservatives nearly three to one on social media," September 20, 2019, <https://www.thestar.com/politics/federal/2019/09/20/liberals-outspend-conservatives-nearly-three-to-one-on-social-media.html>; Tester Digital, "Ad Spending Skyrockets as Election Draws Near," *Tester Digital*, https://www.testerdigital.ca/ad_spending_skyrockets_as_election_draws_near

Facebook advertising before the gap closed in the final days before the election).³⁰ The Conservatives, meanwhile, ran largely untargeted online advertisements while benefiting from the significant digital grassroots mobilization that Canada Proud and other unaffiliated groups, who conveyed the Conservatives' campaign messaging to highly engaged audiences.^{31,32} There was no comparable

digital-native organization among Liberal activists.³³ Such heavy emphasis on independent and third-party political organizations also opened the door to the possibility of interference by malign foreign governments. In the months before the election, it was discovered that millions of Canadian Facebook users had engaged with a number of purportedly domestic news pages that were actually run by accounts based in Kosovo, Israel, and the United States. Although these pages were not primarily focused on politics (one of the most popular stories asked, "Are we Ready for Defending [sic] Earth from a Killer Asteroid?"), their success demonstrated the ease with which misinformation spread by foreign actors might penetrate the national conversation.³⁴

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Add your name if you agree Education Minister Stephen Lecce should be fired.

Lecce is creating chaos in Ontario's world-class education system. His actions are hurting students, teachers and parents. Enough is enough - he needs to go!



Tell Ford: Fire Stephen Lecce
 Add Your Name
 NORTH99.ORG

Sign Up

See Ad Details

An advertisement by North 99 asking users to sign their names on a petition to oust Stephen Lecce as the Education Minister. (Source: North99/Facebook)

30 | "DPP Research Memo #6: Political Advertising on Facebook," Digital Democracy Project, October, 2019. <https://ppforum.ca/articles/ddp-research-memo-6/>
 31 | Craig Silverman, Alex Boutilier, Jane Lytvynenko, Marco Chown Oved, "A New Wave of Canadian Partisan Media is Invading Your Facebook Feed," *Buzzfeed News*, July 24, 2019, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/canada-partisanmedia-ontario-proud-north99>
 32 | "DPP Research Memo #6: Political Advertising on Facebook," Digital Democracy Project, October 2019, <https://ppforum.ca/articles/ddp-research-memo-1/>
 33 | Ibid.
 34 | Craig Silverman, Jane Lytvynenko, "These 'Canadian' Websites and Facebook Pages are Actually Run From Overseas," *Buzzfeed News*, August 28, 2019, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/canadian-websites-and-facebook-pagesrun-overseas>

Canada's Preparedness Against Foreign Interference Efforts

Despite its relatively small population and geographic isolation, Canada has long played an outsized diplomatic role through its commitment to international law and human rights. Recent examples include its August 2018 condemnation of Saudi Arabia over unjust imprisonment of political dissidents, its December 2018 arrest of Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou for extradition to the United States, and its January 2020 pressure campaign on Iran to reveal details of the destruction of Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752. These efforts have won Canada great accolades. They also make the nation a target for cyber-attacks and information operations.³⁵

Russia has targeted Canada in the information domain. This is due to Russian-Canadian tensions flowing from a variety of sources, including Canada's leadership role in NATO and active engagement with Ukraine and Latvia; and Canada's close military and intelligence relationship with the United States. During Russia's 2016 and 2017 information attacks against the United States, Internet Research Agency operatives reportedly targeted Canada, focused on topics like Canada's construction of the Keystone XL pipeline, its integration of asylum-seekers, and the legacy of the Quebec City mosque shooting.³⁶ In the words of Canadian National Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan, "When we stand up for human rights, and when we stand up... to nations like Russia who are going against the rules-based order... you become a target."³⁷

Therefore, as the date of the 2019 Federal Election approached, Canadian intelligence officials anticipated some level of foreign interference. They initiated a number of measures with the goal of "recognizing the importance of protecting Canadians from foreign interference, protecting our democracy, and ensuring our next election is fair and free."³⁸ The plan to defend Canadian democracy against foreign interference focused on the education of citizens about deceptive online tactics; a reform of government systems to improve the anticipation of threats and identification of information vulnerabilities; and working with social media platforms to increase the transparency of their content moderation practices and commitment to preventing foreign interference.

Critical to this effort was the Election Modernization Act (EMA) Bill C-76, which was officially put into force on June 13, 2019.³⁹ The bill updated numerous rules and procedures that governed Canadian elections. The measure included particular actions intended to combat both electoral misinformation and foreign interference:

35 | Craig Silverman, Alex Boutilier, Jane Lytvynenko, Marco Chown Oved, "Canadian Political Parties Have Already Been Targeted by Foreign Hacking Ahead of the Fall Elections," *Buzzfeed News*, April 8, 2019, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/janelytvynenko/canada-targeted-hacking>

36 | Roberta Rocha, "Data sheds light on how Russian Twitter trolls targeted Canadians," *CBC*, August 3, 2018, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/russian-twitter-trolls-canada-targeted-1.4772397>

37 | "Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan Warns Voters that Russia Will Meddle in 2019 Canadian Election," *Globe and Mail*, November 18, 2018, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-nato-report-urges-members-to-prepare-for-more-russian-meddling-in/>

38 | "Government of Canada unveils plan to safeguard Canada's 2019 election," Government of Canada, January 30, 2019, <https://www.canada.ca/en/democratic-institutions/news/2019/01/government-of-canada-unveils-plan-to-safeguard-canadaselection.html>

39 | Statutes of Canada 2018, Chapter 31, Bill C-76 Royal Assent, December 13, 2018, <https://www.parl.ca/DocumentViewer/en/42/1/bill/C-76/royal-assent>

- The prohibition of “false statements” regarding a candidate, prospective candidate, party leader, or prominent figure associated with a party. Such false statements were limited to matters of fact: a misrepresentation of the criminal record of an individual or a lie regarding their citizenship, education, or other professional qualification.
- The outlawing of third parties’ use of funds from a foreign entity for partisan advertising or activities. Additionally, foreign third parties were banned from conducting partisan advertising efforts or activities during the pre-election and election periods.
- Finally, the requirement that large digital platforms that made a business selling advertising space would have to publish a public registry of this advertising. This requirement applied to partisan advertising published during the pre-election period, as well as all election advertising published during the election period.

Concurrent with the enforcement of the EMA, the Canadian government also introduced the Critical Election Incident Public Protocol. This response mechanism was intended to inform Canadians of a serious threat to the integrity of the 2019 federal election. If a panel of senior civil servants determined that an incident threatened “Canada’s ability to have a free and fair election,” a formal announcement would be triggered, in which the government disclosed the nature of the threat to the general public. This protocol was limited to threats that occurred during the writ period.⁴⁰

Finally, in a parallel line of effort beginning in February 2018, the Canadian government pledged \$50 million CAD in grants to support journalism over a 5-year period.⁴¹ This initiative was intended to support local reporting in underserved communities, possibly lessening the influence of untrustworthy and misleading sources of information. Such a government funding program for independent media was largely unprecedented among Western countries’ attempts to battle mis- and disinformation. It demonstrated the extent to which the Canadian government recognized information manipulation as a whole-of-society problem, requiring similarly holistic solutions.



40 | “Cabinet Directive on the Critical Election Incident Public Protocol” Government of Canada, July 9, 2019, <https://www.canada.ca/en/democratic-institutions/services/protecting-democracy/critical-election-incident-publicprotocol/cabinet.html>
41 | Karen K. Ho, Mathew Ingram, “Canada Pledges \$50 million to Local Journalism. Will it Help,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, February 28, 2018, https://www.cjr.org/business_of_news/canada-journalism-fund-torstar-postmedia.php

Selected Cases of Dis- and Misinformation During the 2019 Federal Election

During their survey of the Canadian information ecosystem before and after the 2019 Federal Election, DFRLab researchers observed numerous instances of political dis- and misinformation, which lingered outside the regulatory authority of the Canadian government. The vast majority of this content was almost certainly domestic in origin. Beyond the activity of Russian state media broadcasters, the DFRLab could not make any further attribution.

Over the course of the election, the issue most frequently associated with mis- and disinformation was that of immigration. In particular, refugee quotas remained a significant wedge issue during the election and a favorite talking point for Twitter trolls, who spread false stories about immigrant crime rates and who frequently engaged in anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim hate speech.⁴² This was reflective of broader changes in Canadian political discourse. As the election neared, public polling found that 63 percent of Canadians believed that the nation should lower its immigration quotas, as it was reaching a "limit" in how it could integrate them. This represented a marked shift from 2014, in which only 36 percent of Canadians had expressed a desire to decrease immigration numbers.

Interestingly, actions taken by the Canadian government to safeguard and improve elections processes also sowed the seeds of viral misinformation. The EMA was a regular target. False stories alleged that the bill would allow residents without Canadian citizenship to vote in the general elections – an obvious distortion of the bill's conferring of voting rights to Canadians living overseas for more than five years.⁴³

Over the course of its analysis, the DFRLab focused on two case studies. The first regards the interchange of virulent, anti-immigrant hate speech over multiple platforms and online communities. The second regards the opportunism shown by Russian state media in its Canadian election coverage. These cases, evidencing coordinated trolling around nativist rhetoric and amplification of domestic political scandal by foreign media, most resembled the Russian information operations conducted against the United States in 2016.⁴⁴

42 | Teresa Wright, "Majority of Canadians Think Immigration Should be Limited: Poll," *Global News*, June 16, 2019, <https://globalnews.ca/news/5397306/canada-immigration-poll/>

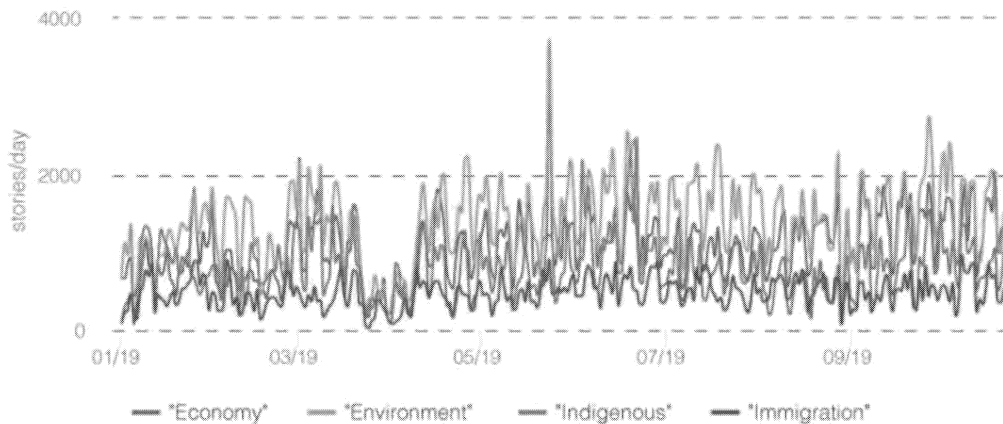
43 | Teresa Wright, "Poll suggests majority of Canadians favour limiting immigration levels," *CBC*, June 16, 2019, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canadians-favour-limiting-immigration-1.5177814>

44 | Kaleigh Rogers, Andrea Bellemare, "Misinformation Circulating Online Stokes Fears of Voter Fraud Ahead of Federal Election," *CBC News*, August 30, 2019, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/technology/voter-fraud-confusion-misinformation-1.5264689>

Keyword trend analysis of Canadian media from January 2019 through the elections suggested the topics that received the most attention during the Canadian elections were Environment, Economy, Indigenous, and Immigration. "Environment" stories were the most popular with about 1,400 stories per day; "Economy" had about 1,060 stories per day; "Indigenous" had almost 800 stories per day; and "Immigration" had roughly 500 stories per day. Although "Immigration" received the least amount of mainstream coverage, it still received many keyword hits on social media. In particular, there are about 33,000 "Immigration"-related mentions on Twitter from January 1, 2019 to October 22, 2019. About 14 percent of these mentions were deemed to be negative, while out of 18,000 mentions of "Economy," about 10 percent were negative. While sentiment analysis is not a perfect tool, it does offer insight into the makeup of the Canadian information ecosystem.



Keyword analysis of different topics in Canadian media



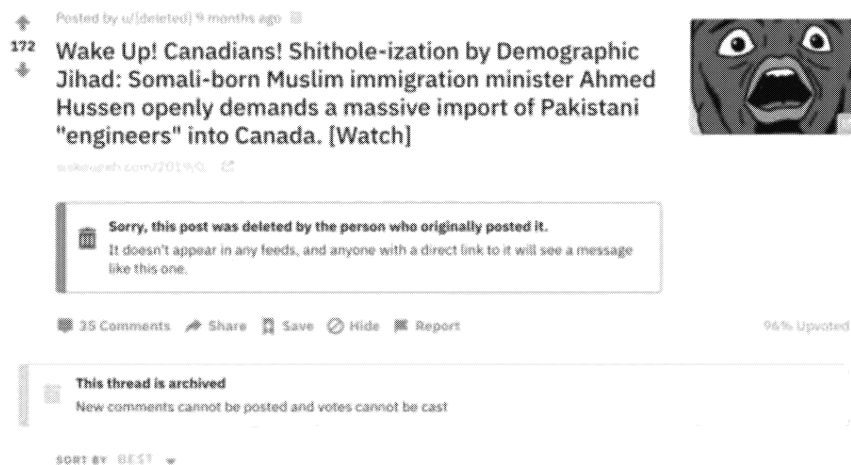
The visualization shows how different keywords were covered in the Canadian media. "Environment" consistently received the greatest coverage in national and provincial media sources, as determined by the content analysis open-source tool MediaCloud. This analysis was conducted by examining keyword mentions in articles over the course of 2019. (Source: DFRLab generated using MediaCloud data)

Overlapping anti-immigrant narratives and communities

As online discourse increasingly revolved around immigration during the 2019 Canadian Federal Election, some ideological extremist communities became "echo forums," which are dedicated to a single topic of discussion and which endeavor to speak with a single ideological voice. This behavior was especially evident on Reddit through the rapid growth of r/MetaCanada, a subreddit founded in 2011 and initially featuring general, off-color humor before coming to focus exclusively on nativist posts and memes.

In time, r/MetaCanada also appeared to associate closely with the r/The_Donald a Reddit community that became the locus of influence efforts for then-candidate Donald Trump in 2015 and 2016. (r/The_Donald was “quarantined” by Reddit in June 2019 and banned in June 2020 for attempting to incite violence and engaging in the spread of hateful content.)^{45,46} After the 2016 U.S. election, r/MetaCanada’s membership rose sharply, from 6,500 in November 2016 to 31,000 by October 2019.⁴⁷ r/MetaCanada’s tone – racist, misogynistic, and Islamophobic – came to match that of r/The_Donald closely. Like r/The_Donald, r/MetaCanada became a gathering place for ideological extremist activists as election day drew near.

A post that derives the slang language by the U.S. president in which he referred to Haiti, El Salvador, and African countries for questioning their immigration to the United States. The post on MetaCanada took the U.S. language and added a Canadian spin.



The visualization shows how different keywords were covered in the Canadian media. “Environment” consistently received the greatest coverage in national and provincial media sources, as determined by the content analysis open-source tool MediaCloud. This analysis was conducted by examining keyword mentions in articles over the course of 2019. (Source: DFRLab generated using MediaCloud data)

Using an open-source tool to analyze commenting activity in r/MetaCanada, the DFRLab found significant user overlap with majority-American subreddits: r/HillaryForPrison, r/DrainTheSwamp, r/TuckerCarlson, r/DebateAltRight, and, of course, r/The_Donald. The existence of a common userbase demonstrates strong ideological cross-germination between these Canadian and U.S. ideological extremist communities. It also suggests that ideological extremists within the United States may have attempted to interfere directly in the Canadian elections, just as they interfered in the 2017 French elections on behalf of the politically conservative, anti-immigration candidate Marine Le Pen.⁴⁸

45 | Donie O’Sullivan, “Reddit slaps ‘quarantine’ on popular pro-Trump forum The_Donald over threats of violence, CNN, June 27, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/06/26/tech/the-donald-subreddit-quarantined/index.html>

46 | Casey Newton, “Reddit bans r/The_Donald and r/ChapoTrapHouse as part of major expansion of its rules,” *The Verge*, June 29, 2020, <https://www.theverge.com/2020/6/29/21304947/reddit-ban-subreddits-the-donald-chapo-trap-house-new-content-policy-rules>

47 | Subredditstats.com, <https://subredditstats.com/r/metacanada>

48 | Nicholas Vinocur, “Marine Le Pen’s Internet Army,” *Politico*, February 3, 2017, <https://www.politico.eu/article/marine-le-pens-internet-army-far-right-trolls-social-media/>



Pinterest's recommendation pathway via the Pinterest content algorithm, leading a user from an anti-Trudeau meme to an anti-Hillary meme to an anti-#MeToo meme to an anti-Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez meme. (Source: DFRLab)

However, the vocalization of anti-immigrant and Islamophobic sentiments was not limited to echo forums. These views were expressed through memes, messages, videos, and other content formats that spread across numerous social media platforms, including ones that did not typically host political content. For instance, on Pinterest, clusters of anti-Trudeau memes were automatically grouped alongside racist, bigoted content, thanks to the power of the Pinterest recommendations algorithm.⁴⁹ If users briefly explored this galaxy of anti-Trudeau content, they were steered toward other memes that assailed American politicians like Hillary Clinton and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, as well as those that attacked the #MeToo movement.⁵⁰

49 | Karan, Gray, "Trudeaus and Trudeau's — memes polarize in Canadian elections.". DFRLab researchers conducted tests of the Pinterest recommendations algorithm using a "blank" account and found that such blank accounts were quickly directed to anti-immigrant, misogynistic content when engaging with "Pins" related to the 2019 Canadian Federal Election.

50 | Ibid.

Where Pinterest's algorithms passively pushed users toward increasingly anti-immigrant and Islamophobic content, Twitter's algorithms – long the focus of ideologically motivated extremist activists – were actively gamed and manipulated in the months leading up to the 2019 Federal Election. In one case in September 2019, Canadian and U.S. ideologically motivated extremist activists coordinated in order to amplify the hashtag #TrudeauMustGo until it trended internationally, helping elicit roughly 34,000 tweets from approximately 5,000 accounts.⁵¹

Disinformation researchers reported the activity to Twitter, alleging that the hashtag campaign showed evidence of automation and inauthentic coordinated activity. Twitter's policy team replied, noting that this was coordination between human activists and therefore permitted under Twitter's terms of service.⁵²

All the while, Canadian citizens and journalists who saw the trending hashtag were left with the impression that this was an organic expression by Canadian voters.⁵³

Opportunism by Russian state broadcasters

In the United States, RT and Sputnik International are registered as foreign agents under the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA), a law that requires agents representing the interests of a foreign government to disclose information about their activities and finances in the interest of transparency. Canada lacks such a law.

When the Trudeau blackface scandal erupted in September 2019, the news went instantly viral, becoming one of the biggest political headlines in the final weeks before the election.⁵⁴ The reporting – to include reporting by international media and foreign state broadcasters – was generally accurate and balanced. By contrast, Russian state media leaned heavily into editorialization. One RT headline, "The many faces of Justin Trudeau: Canadian PM memed mercilessly after brownface debacle," walked a thin line between international and partisan reporting.⁵⁵ It appeared to be the latest move in a concerted anti-Trudeau editorial campaign that had gained steam since RT had named Trudeau a year earlier to its list of "Top 10 Russophobes of 2018."⁵⁶

51 | Nicole Bogert, "Truth Tracker: Are Bots Amplifying #TrudeauMustGo? Twitter Says No," *CTV News*, September 26, 2019, <https://election.ctvnews.ca/truth-tracker-are-bots-amplifying-trudeaumustgo-twitter-says-no-1.4612390>

52 | *Ibid.*

53 | Elizabeth Dubois, Anatoly Gruzdt, Jenna Jacobson, "When Journalists Report Social Media as Public Opinion," *Policy Options*, September 28, 2018, <https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/september-2018/when-journalists-report-social-media-as-publicopinion/>

54 | Anna Purna Kambhampaty, Madeleine Carlisle, Melissa Chan, "Justin Trudeau Wore Brownface at 2001 'Arabian Nights' Party While He Taught at a Private School," *Time*, September 19, 2019, <https://time.com/5680759/justin-trudeau-brownface-photo/>

55 | "The many faces of Justin Trudeau: Canadian PM memed mercilessly after brownface debacle," *RT*, September 19, 2019, <https://www.rt.com/news/469123-trudeau-brownface-scandal-memes/>

56 | "Top 10 Russophobes of 2018: See who made RT's prestigious list this year," *RT*, October 16, 2018, <https://www.rt.com/news/441417-top-10-russophobes-2018/>. (The Atlantic Council, and specifically the DFRLab's Ben Nimmo, were in first place on the list.)



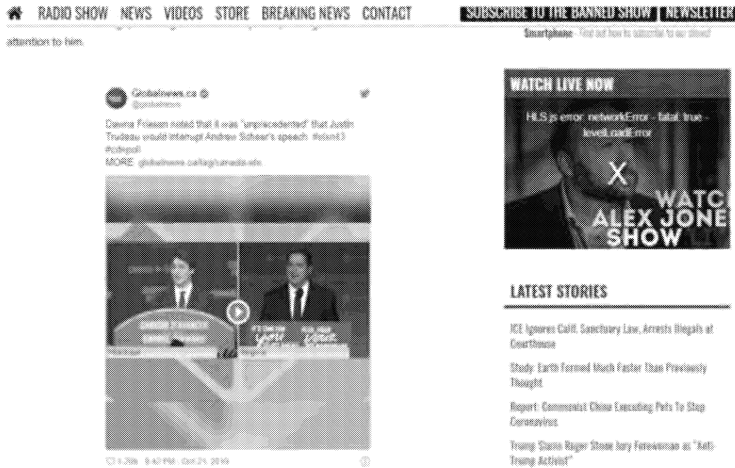
The RT headline was cross-pollinated across several social media platforms, as well as multiple Reddit communities. (Source: Reddit)

In another instance of sensationally slanted coverage, Sputnik International published a story about Alberta separatism – “Birth of the Republic of Western Canada is a Cry of Our Heart – Wexit Alberta Founder” – on October 20, 2019, one day before the federal election.⁵⁷ While the story was ostensibly a profile of a pro-secession Albertan community leader, it focused almost exclusively on the alleged failings of the Liberal government. It used coded language – e.g., Trudeau’s “globalist” agenda, Trudeau’s climate change “rhetoric” – popular among ideologically motivated extremist activists. Given the timing of the piece, this was likely an attempt to circumvent political advertising restrictions imposed by the EMA on foreign media outlets.

As a final example, on October 22, 2019, RT published its first post-election article: “Losing majority with hysterical dignity? Trudeau’s ‘victory speech’ turns into scandal, as he jumps on stage interrupting rival.”⁵⁸ As with most Russian coverage of Canadian elections, the headline was an example of extreme anti-Trudeau, anti-Liberal editorialization. The “scandal” allegation in this case was extrapolated from a quote from a Global News anchor, who called Trudeau’s interruption of Scheer’s speech “unprecedented.” U.S. alternative media outlet InfoWars took things a step further, writing an even more hyperbolic story based on the “unprecedented” reference.

57 | Denis Bolotsky, “Birth of the Republic of Western Canada is a Cry of Our Heart – Wexit Alberta Founder,” *Sputnik News*, October 20, 2019, <https://sputniknews.com/world/201910201077102166-birth-of-the-republic-of-western-canada-is-a-cry-of-our-heart/>

58 | “Losing majority with hysterical dignity? Trudeau’s ‘victory speech’ turns into scandal, as he jumps on stage interrupting rival,” *RT*, October 22, 2019, <https://www.rt.com/news/471506-canada-trudeau-election-minority/>



InfoWars embedded the Global News tweet in order to legitimize its reporting, all the while flooding the narrative with further hyperbole. (Source: Infowars)

headline, repackaged by alternative media and subsequently amplified by mainstream broadcasters – has become endemic in cases of foreign interference. The process typically functions without the need for active coordination. Rather, it works through the complementary incentives of the foreign state media (which seeks to share its content free of cost) and the alternative media (which seeks to make money by way of contrarian or conspiratorial content). When a mainstream outlet subsequently covers or shares the alternative media story, it is the foreign state media that benefits most as it watches its seeds bear fruit.

Compared to other actors in the 2019 Federal Election – notably large, unregulated partisan Facebook groups – Russian state broadcasters ultimately commanded only a small amount of direct digital influence. But the gamesmanship and clever marketing of propagandists shows how readily they can adapt to new regulations or exploit traditional broadcasters in unconventional ways. Should the diplomatic relationship between Canada and Russia grow more contentious, these Russian influence efforts (many adversarial in nature) will likely grow more aggressive, resourced, and sophisticated.



Unintentional spread of the information that accelerated Russian talking points on Canadian national affairs. (Source: CTVNews/Facebook)

That rhetoric was picked up by CTV News, too. On Facebook, the outlet shared an article with the following title: “Losing majority with hysterical dignity?’ Trudeau’s ‘victory speech’ turns into scandal, as he jumps on stage interrupting rival,” reads an international headline.” In so doing, CTV News was likely aiming for the maximum possible audience engagement. In the process, however, it pushed RT’s coverage further into the mainstream, ensuring a large and new readership was exposed to the Russian broadcaster’s editorial positions.

This sort of inadvertent information laundering – a foreign state media

Conclusion and Recommendations

That rhetoric was picked up by CTV News, too. On Facebook, the outlet shared an article with the following title: “‘Losing majority with hysterical dignity?’ Trudeau’s ‘victory speech’ turns into scandal, as he jumps on stage interrupting rival,’ reads an international headline.” In so doing, CTV News was likely aiming for the maximum possible audience engagement. In the process, however, it pushed RT’s coverage further into the mainstream, ensuring a large and new readership was exposed to the Russian broadcaster’s editorial positions.

This sort of inadvertent information laundering – a foreign state media headline, repackaged by alternative media and subsequently amplified by mainstream broadcasters – has become endemic in cases of foreign interference. The process typically functions without the need for active coordination. Rather, it works through the complementary incentives of the foreign state media (which seeks to share its content free of cost) and the alternative media (which seeks to make money by way of contrarian or conspiratorial content). When a mainstream outlet subsequently covers or shares the alternative media story, it is the foreign state media that benefits most as it watches its seeds bear fruit.

Compared to other actors in the 2019 Federal Election – notably large, unregulated partisan Facebook groups – Russian state broadcasters ultimately commanded only a small amount of direct digital influence. But the gamesmanship and clever marketing of propagandists shows how readily they can adapt to new regulations or exploit traditional broadcasters in unconventional ways. Should the diplomatic relationship between Canada and Russia grow more contentious, these Russian influence efforts (many adversarial in nature) will likely grow more aggressive, resourced, and sophisticated.

Now, with the election over, it is important to reflect on steps that can even better safeguard Canada’s democracy in future:

- **Avoid undue politicization of the topic of foreign interference and social media manipulation.** One of the great challenges in writing reports on this subject is to strike an appropriate partisan balance. The fact is, because of the Liberal Party’s incumbency and the specific narrative tactics of ideologically motivated extremist activists, anti-Liberal Party actors in the 2019 Federal Election clearly employed more misleading narratives than their competitors. This does not mean that the Conservative Party engaged in or endorsed such tactics. When discussing such a sensitive issue, a distinction must always be drawn between the conduct of traditional (and contentious) politics and the conduct of information operations intended to mislead or suppress voters.
- **Consider new laws to designate foreign agents, particularly during elections.** An electoral democracy must take great care before considering any measures that might proscribe or limit journalistic activity, even if that activity is conducted by agents of an adversarial foreign power. However, it is the case that Russian state media in particular has begun to use its coverage of Canadian politics toward aggressive ends. It is also the case that the United States – with strong, constitutionally enshrined journalistic protections – has nonetheless had a system in place for decades to designate foreign agents. Canada should consider adopting a similar model.
- **Revisit the remit of bodies intended to counter “foreign interference.”** Canada has established, and successfully tested, a number of governmental initiatives intended to mitigate foreign interference efforts by state actors. In the case of the 2019 Federal Election, however, the clearest indications of “foreign” interference came in political trolling coordinated between U.S. and Canadian ideologically motivated extremist activists. Do such nonstate, transnational

interference efforts also fall within the remit of the Critical Election Public Protocol? As the nature of foreign interference continues to evolve, so must governmental definitions and procedures.

- **Build more government oversight and enforcement capability for social media.** Finally, Canada should expect more disclosure and responsibility of the social media companies that have fundamentally transformed its politics within the space of a decade. Canadian regulators – notably the privacy commissioner – should be granted sufficient powers of compellence so they do not have to sue companies in federal court for a maximum fine of less than \$100,000 CAD, as occurred in the case of privacy violations by Facebook.⁵⁹

Although social media platforms had taken significant steps to counter foreign interference by the time of the 2019 Federal Election, it is unclear to what extent these actions were driven by pressure from the Government of Canada. In the future, Canada should work in close concert with its G7 partners – and, especially, the United States – in order to generate more pressure to affect rapid platform policy changes.

Just as the tactics of foreign interference and social media manipulation are continually evolving, so must appropriate government responses. This will be a long, iterative process. The Canadian government has distinguished itself as a pioneer in the field of digital resilience and democratic defense. While there is much work left to do, Canada is in a good position to get the job done.



59 | Tiffany Hsu, Ian Austen, "Canada Says Facebook Broke Privacy Laws With 'Superficial' Safeguards," *New York Times*, April 25, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/25/technology/facebook-canada-privacy.html>

Appendix A:

Glossary

Alternative Media: An outlet which purports to report news but which does not fulfill basic standards of credibility and transparency (see the nine credibility criterion developed by NewsGuard).⁶⁰ In general, alternative media fails to either report factual news, promptly correct errors, distinguish between news and opinion reporting, avoid deceptive headlines, clearly label advertising, or disclose ownership and financing.

Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior: When a group or network of social media accounts use deceptive online behavior to mask their motivations. Coordinated inauthentic behavior is a standard developed by Facebook in order to remove accounts engaged in influence operations.⁶¹

Disinformation: False or misleading information, spread with the intention to deceive.

Foreign Influence: Effort by a foreign government to influence issues or policies in the target nation in a way which benefits its interests.⁶²

Foreign Interference: Foreign influence that is covert, deceptive, or coercive in nature and that may imperil the political or governmental policies of the target nation.⁶³

Misinformation: False or misleading information, spread without evidence of intentionality or coordination.

Internet Research Agency: A Russian entity (sometimes referred to as a “troll farm”) that engaged in foreign interference in the 2016 U.S. elections on behalf of Russian business and political interests.

Subreddit: A sub-community within Reddit devoted to a specific subject.

Troll: An individual who systematically posts inflammatory, divisive, abusive, and hyperpartisan content, often under the cover of anonymity.

60 | NewsGuard, <https://www.newsguardtech.com/ratings/rating-process-criteria/>

61 | Facebook, “Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior Explained, December 6, 2018, <https://about.fb.com/news/2018/12/inside-feed-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior/>

62 | “Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme,” The Australian Government, December 2018, <https://www.ag.gov.au/integrity/foreign-influence-transparency-scheme>

63 | Ibid.

Appendix B:

Canadian Government Ministries and Departments

The role of safeguarding Canada against foreign interference falls to a number of agencies.

Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS): is Canada's primary national intelligence service. It is responsible for collecting, analyzing, reporting, and disseminating intelligence on threats to Canada's national security and for conducting operations, covert and overt, within Canada and abroad.

Democratic Institutions Secretariat of the Privy Council Office: is mandated to improve, strengthen and protect Canada's democratic institutions.

Part of the mandate of Dominic LeBlanc, the President of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada (the Minister responsible for the Democratic Institutions Secretariat), is to lead a review of measures the Government of Canada put in place to protect its electoral process from cyber threats, particularly the Critical Election Incident Public Protocol, and bring forward recommendations to further protect Canada's electoral and democratic institutions from cyber and non-cyber interference. This includes working with existing and new domestic and international stakeholders, as well as other orders of government, to strengthen Canada's whole-of-society preparedness, resilience and civic engagement in the face of evolving threats to democracy.

Global Affairs Canada (GAC): is currently led by three ministers – the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Minister of International Trade, and the Minister of International Development. The Minister of Foreign Affairs is responsible for foreign policy matters and, as the senior minister in the department, has overall responsibility for the department.

Rapid Response Mechanism Canada (RRM Canada): acts as an early warning system by providing open-source data analytics pertaining to threats to democracy and leveraging the G7 RRM network, in terms of information exchange and the potential response. Additionally, RRM Canada conducts open-source analyses of recent elections in order to identify tactics and trends in foreign interference. Before the 2019 Federal Election, RRM Canada published previous studies of the European Parliamentary Elections, Ukrainian presidential election, and Alberta election.

Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP): Canadian federal and national police service. The responsible for direct law enforcement action in order to defend Canadian elections from foreign interference.

Security and Intelligence Threats to Elections (SITE) Task Force: worked to prevent covert, clandestine, or criminal activities from influencing or interfering with the electoral process in the lead up to the October 2019 Canadian federal election. The Task Force is comprised of officials from the Communications Security Establishment, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, and Global Affairs Canada. SITE did not observe any activities that met the threshold for public announcement or affected Canada's ability to have a free and fair election.

Other relevant agencies:

Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC): is an administrative tribunal that regulates and supervises broadcasting and telecommunications in the public interest.” The CRTC’s mandate is entrusted to it by the Parliament of Canada and administered through the Minister of Canadian Heritage. It focuses primarily on achieving policy objectives established in the Broadcasting Act, the Telecommunications Act, and Canada’s Anti-Spam Legislation.

Office of the Chief Electoral Officer (CEO): is the nonpartisan agency responsible for administering Canadian Federal elections and referendums. Elections Canada is an office of the Parliament of Canada and reports directly to Parliament rather than to the Government of Canada.

Office of the Privacy Commissioner: along with the CEO, provided guidance to Canadian political parties about complying with the Elections Modernization Act in April 2019. The Privacy Commissioner, however, played no oversight role in enforcing the Act.

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Taken from: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/intellectual-independence-policy/>

About the Digital Forensic Research Lab:

The DFRLab's mission is:

To identify, expose, and explain disinformation where and when it occurs using open source research; to promote objective truth as a foundation of government for and by people; to protect democratic institutions and norms from those who would seek to undermine them in the digital engagement space.

To create a new model of expertise adapted for impact and real-world results.

To forge digital resilience at a time when humans are more interconnected than at any point in history, by building the world's leading hub of digital forensic analysts tracking events in governance, technology, security, and where each intersect as they occur, as well as a network of #DigitalSherlocks.



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