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RRM CANADA WEEKLY TREND ANALYSIS
Report #3: Week of 2 – 8 September

Key Points

- RRM Canada did not observe any significant trends of foreign state-sponsored information manipulation in its monitoring of the broader Canadian digital information ecosystem during the period of 2-8 September. Contracted partner reporting validates this point.
- Tensions in online discussions continue to rise, which may present opportunities for foreign interference.
- Primary and secondary sources indicate continued efforts by Russia to influence outcomes of upcoming elections in Germany through cyber means ('hack-and-leak').
- Secondary sources reported on an extensive influence campaign by Russia targeting Western media outlets.
- RRM Canada analysis of an alternative social media channel, Gab, points to links between US and Canadian ideologically motivated narratives.

Objective

This is a third report in a series of RRM Canada weekly reports aimed at consolidating and summarising trends and findings associated with possible foreign state-sponsored information manipulation in Canada's 44th General Election (GE44). The report is based on in-house monitoring, primary and secondary sources, and contracted partners' reporting available to RRM Canada at the time of its compilation. The report: 1) provides a summary of RRM Canada daily threat updates shared with the Security and Intelligence Threats to Election (SITE) Task Force and contracted partner reporting; 2) brings relevant insight into foreign state-sponsored information manipulation based on experience from other democratic elections; 3) highlights issues related to influence campaigns by known hostile actors; and 4) provides an analysis of alternative social media channels.

1) Summary of RRM Canada Daily Threat Updates and Contracted Partner Reporting

- During the reporting period, RRM Canada did not observe any significant indicators of foreign state-sponsored information manipulation in its daily monitoring of the broader Canadian digital information ecosystem;
- The vast majority of content assessed by RRM Canada originated from recognizable Canadian news or information sites (either in English, French, Chinese, or Russian);
- Russian state-affiliated and mainstream media continue to cover events in Canada, including those related to GE44, but from a mostly neutral perspective and with limited engagements;
- Chinese state-affiliated media continue to cover Canadian events, with few references to GE44. RRM Canada observed and continues to monitor coverage of the following statements, which at present appear to be directed at a domestic Chinese audience and do not reference GE44, Canadian political parties or candidates:
 - Chinese Communist Party (CCP) media accounts on WeChat sharing widely Chinese Ambassador Cong Peiwu's comments that "a small number of people in Canada are hyping the so-called 1,000 days detention of the two Michaels."
 - A post from Ambassador Cong Peiwu that characterised Minister Garneau's remarks on the arbitrary detention of the two Michaels as "gross interference in China's judicial

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sovereignty” and which generated significant attention across CCP media accounts, WeChat, Weibo and Douyin.

- RRM Canada and its contracted partners (Yonder and the Media Ecosystem Observatory) continue to observe a significant overlap in discussions on GE44 issues between the U.S. and Canadian ideologically motivated groups and pundits.
- Contracted partners, as well as various news reports, point to increasing polarization, emotionally charged posts, and in some cases calls to violence in online discussions of Canadian politics. At this time, RRM Canada judges that the bulk of this content is domestic in nature. However, malign foreign actors, particularly Russia, are known to exacerbate existing social tensions to sow divisions in democracies.

Yonder monitoring identified accounts that may be associated with Russian state-sponsored actors who on a very small scale have amplified content supportive of accounts of two candidates of the Peoples' Party of Canada (PPC). At this time, the scale is very small (approximately 1-2 likes/retweets). However, Yonder judges that Russian actors may be testing the Canadian information environment in order to determine what narratives may gain traction within broader discussions of Canadian politics. RRM Canada notes that both PPC posts involved anti-vaccine and anti-lockdown content. As such, this activity may be related to broader Russian anti-vaccine campaigns and not directly targeting GE44. Yonder has also noted at least one possible Chinese state account amplifying similar pro-PPC content as well as another account amplifying pro-Vaccine messaging from Erin O'Toole and Jagmeet Singh. In all cases, Yonder cannot make a high confidence attribution. RRM Canada continues to monitor for indications of a broader sustained campaign to target GE44.¹

2) Potential Foreign Interference in Other Elections

Germany Bundestag elections (26 September 2021)

- On 6 September, the German government issued a formal protest to Russia over attempts to steal data from lawmakers in a potential attempt to interference in the upcoming German election. According to media, attackers affiliated with a hacker outfit *Ghostwriter* (likely connected with Russia's GRU military intelligence) used targeted spear-phishing to compromise personal accounts of lawmakers and politicians. These malicious activities form part of 'hack-and-leak' influence operations used to discredit political figures or sway public opinions. The German government's attribution was based on data aggregated over months of monitoring suspicious activities and appears to be a repeated occurrence. The German foreign ministry stated that it "views this unacceptable activity as a danger to the security of the Federal Republic of Germany and for the process of democratic decision-making, and as a severe strain on bilateral relations."

3) Foreign State-sponsored Campaigns Against Democracies

Russian state influence operations against Western media outlets

¹ This information is based on reports submitted by an independent service provider contracted to support RRM Canada's monitoring activities during GE44. It is provided here for your information only. Yonder views and assessments, in part or fully, are those of its authors and may not represent those of RRM Canada.

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- A [study](#) by Cardiff University (UK) identified a significant Russian influence campaign aimed at manipulating Western media outlets to spread propaganda and disinformation. The study found that 32 prominent media outlets across 16 countries were targeted via their reader comments sections. The campaign involved posting provocative pro-Russian and anti-Western statements in reaction to articles of relevance to Russia. These comments were then fed back to a range of Russian-language media outlets who used them as the basis for stories about politically controversial events. Other 'fringe media' and websites with track records of spreading disinformation, including those linked by Western security services to Russian intelligence agencies, were involved in further amplifying this content through their websites and social media accounts. Among the Western outlets targeted by this campaign were: *The Daily Mail*, *Daily Express* and *The Times* in the UK; *Fox News* and *Washington Post* in the U.S.; *Le Figaro* in France; *Der Spiegel* and *Die Welt* in Germany; and Italy's *La Stampa*.
- Out of 242 articles in the study, only two originally published by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) in March and April 2021 were translated into Russian by Russia Today/RT. The [first](#) article discussed the 2021 World Figure Skating Championship and covered performances by Russian athletes, and the [second](#) dealt with Russian claims to the Arctic Ocean seabed adjacent to the Canadian exclusive economic zone. While both translated versions ([1](#), [2](#)) were fairly close to the original CBC content, they also included sections featuring translations of original comments in English which were often critical of Russia. These translated comments, in turn, generated mostly negative responses by Russian readers. Both translated articles appear to have received minimal amplification on social media with likely low impact.

4) Alternative Media Environments: The Case of Gab

As part of its GE44 monitoring, RRM Canada conducts selective analysis of alternative social media channels. Gab is a social network with a similar infrastructure to Facebook.²

- RRM Canada did not observe any FI on Gab during this period. In relation to GE44, the vast majority of the most engaged posts on the Canada News group were negative towards PM Trudeau, with some supportive posts directed towards the People's Party of Canada (PPC). No posts contained overt calls to violence, but one post contained a screenshot of a tweet allegedly by Maxime Bernier stating that Trudeau is "very close" to inciting violence between vaccinated and non-vaccinated people. Another highly engaged post (97 likes, 76 reposts) contained a screenshot of a Telegram post by US Conservative personality Candace Owens containing a call-for-action.³ This is one example of American politics and personalities crossing over into the Canadian information ecosystem.

² Created in 2016, Gab is a [destination](#) for individuals who have been de-platformed by Twitter and Reddit for violating their terms of service. Gab facilitates an interface called *Dissenter*, which allows users who have downloaded the plugin to post comments to any website that can only be seen by other users who have downloaded the plugin. *Dissenter* has been reported on as a "far-right comment section on every site" by [Engadget](#). This analysis provides an overview on the top-engaged election-related posts on the "[Canada News](#)" Gab group between September 1-7, 2021. The group has over 39,000 members.

³ The post stated that "Justin Trudeau sold out Canada...Western citizens MUST unite against our treasonous leaders".

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