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GE44 Observations and Lessons Learned

RRM Canada did not observe any indications of any sustained state-sponsored information manipulation campaigns in its monitoring of the broader Canadian digital information ecosystem throughout the writ period for GE44. Similar judgments have been made by contracted partners at the Media Ecosystem Observatory (MEO) and private analytics firm Yonder-ai.

Chinese State Media and Amplifiers

RRM Canada observed what could possibly be a Chinese Communist Party (CCP) information operation that aims to discourage Canadians of Chinese heritage from voting for the Conservative Party of Canada (CPC). Throughout the 9-17 Sept reporting period Chinese-language articles from the Global Times suggesting the CPC “almost wants to break diplomatic relations with China” received widespread engagement on Chinese social media. Similar, or slightly editorialized content was also shared among WeChat news accounts aimed at Chinese speaking Canadians. Chinese state-broadcaster, Xinhua, also produced a video with similar content and shared it on the popular short-form video platform, Douyin. At the same time, various news reports indicated that WeChat users in two Vancouver area ridings had received private messages encouraging electors to vote for against the CPC. Moreover, rumours circulated on the WeChat platform indicating that CPC leader Erin O’Toole would ban WeChat if elected and that Conservative MP Kenny Chiu’s private members bill would require all ethnic-Chinese with connections to China to register as foreign agents. Due to limited visibility into the WeChat platform, it was impossible to confirm/deny coordination between CCP media and these Canadian WeChat news accounts sharing the content originating on Global Times nor could RRM Canada confirm/deny inauthentic amplification of these narratives. Similarly, the other rumours circulating on the WeChat platform may be disparate and unrelated narratives that emerged organically as Chinese-Canadians made judgments about the perceived China-hawkishness of the CPC platform. As such, while it is possible that a coordinated effort was directed by actors linked to the Chinese state, other viable explanations exist for anti-CPC narratives to emerge among Chinese-speaking Canadians.

- RRM Canada should devote further resources to better understand emerging and established Chinese platforms such as WeChat and Douyin.
 - How?
- Given an almost certain dearth of Chinese language skills among analysts for the foreseeable future; RRM Canada should investigate machine translation capabilities and other NLP techniques to better detect and understand emergent Chinese language narratives

Russian State Media and Amplifiers

State and affiliated media of known foreign interference (FI) actors focused on issues in Canada/GE44 as well as Afghanistan. For example over the 18-19 Sept reporting period, Russian state-media outlet RT published a podcast hosted by George Galloway that discussed GE44 with strong anti-LPC sentiments. Galloway is one of RT’s most popular hosts on social media; however, at this time he has not shared this episode of his podcast on his social media feeds, and it is not clear what level of engagement it is receiving.

- RRM Canada should conduct further study into the potential for the role of podcasts in the conduct of information operations.

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- In addition to investigating options to measure engagement with Podcasts, RRM Canada should conduct training into target audience analysis (TAA) in order to assess likely audiences that foreign content is targeting.

Alternative Media Platforms

RRM Canada analysed alternative social media platforms Gab, BitChute and Rumble, as well as the web browser, Dissenter and did not observe FI activity. However content on BitChute included calls for violence against PM Trudeau.

- Sustain. RRM Canada should continue to further understanding of alternative and emerging social media platforms with a focus on any potential nexus between FI and IMVE.
- As part of a broader analysis of foreign state activity on Social Media, RRM Canada should define any links to or from mainstream social media and alternative platforms in order to better define the ways in which these alternative platforms impact broader discussions and mobilize various audiences to action.

India State and BJP Media and Amplifiers

In late 2020 and early 2021 RRM Canada observed heightened interest in Canadian politics from media supportive of the current ruling party in India. This interest very likely stemmed from remarks from PM Trudeau on the situation surrounding ongoing farmers protests in India. Despite this interest, RRM Canada did not observe content related to Canadian politics from these media outlets throughout the writ period for GE44. Private analytics firm Yonder-ai was also specifically asked to monitor these outlets and accounts that generally promote their content. Yonder-ai's findings are identical to those of RRM Canada.

- Sustain. Despite a lack of interest in GE44, RRM Canada should continue to monitor narratives promoted by Indian state media and BJP Media due to India's growing importance in international relations as well as Canada's large Indian diaspora, who may be influenced by these outlets.

Contracted Reporting

RRM Canada contracted reporting/monitoring from two external parties: Private analytics firm Yonder-AI and a civil society organization named the Media Ecosystem Observatory (MEO). MEO found that while interest in GE44 from Chinese state-linked media outlets increased during the writ period with mounting criticism of the CPC and Erin O'Toole, MEO found no evidence of inauthentic activity. Moreover, MEO survey data indicated that China related issues were of minimal importance to Canadian voters. While Yonder-ai did not observe any indications of a sustained campaign targeting GE44; in general, Yonder assessed that Chinese state-aligned accounts were generally supportive of the LPC. Conversely, Russia-friendly accounts amplified Peoples Party of Canada-related content. Despite general support for the LPC and PPC respectively, Yonder-ai reporting indicates that both Chinese and Russian state-aligned accounts generally show low levels of engagement with Canadian political discussions overall. Yonder reporting often flagged single accounts and only a few Tweets engaging with Canadian political discussions. As such RRM Canada judges that, at the individual account level, analytic confidence in attribution is low; however, analytic confidence should increase with aggregate monitoring of many accounts.

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- Sustain. Both MEO and Yonder-ai provided useful insights for further investigations and bolstered RRM Canada's internal assessments about FI in GE44
- While Yonder reporting proved useful, RRM Canada should continue to investigate other firms, as they emerge, who are providing similar services in order to better judge strengths and weaknesses for each firm's methodologies.
- At this time, RRM Canada is unaware of any other firms monitoring for covert state-linked information operations. RRM Canada should investigate further collaboration with Yonder-ai in our broader reporting mandate.

Inauthenticity

Following the initial reports from Yonder about low levels of engagement with Canadian politicians from state-linked accounts on Twitter as well as generally high levels of inauthenticity, RRM Canada began to collect tweets from all accounts that interacted with the three main party leaders. @JustinTrudeau, @erinotoole and @theJagmeetSingh were the only twitter accounts monitored due to bandwidth considerations stemming from limited access to the Twitter API. Overall RRM Canada collected almost 370K tweets which interacted with the accounts of Party leaders in some way, such as retweet, like or replied to. When filtering for accounts with a default profile and less than 15 followers: 46K accounts interacted in some way and 7,879 retweeted @JustinTrudeau; 9.7K interacted with and 2,747 retweeted @erinotoole; and, 6.2K accounts interacted with @theJagmeetSingh with 1,689 of those being retweets. Moreover, many of most active accounts interacting with party leaders were almost certainly employing some kind of automation software. RRM Canada is unable to assess any foreign links or ascertain the identity or motivations of the actors operating these likely inauthentic accounts.

- Domestic monitoring is increasingly difficult due to the proliferation of tactics typically associated with FI activity; however, RRM Canada should continue efforts to understand the Tactics, Techniques and Procedures associated with hostile-state information campaigns in order to better identify their signatures where possible.
- RRM Canada should continue to monitor for broader signs of coordinated information operations in the online space which align with the foreign policy objectives of hostile state actors as well as broader trans-national narrative competitions which may impact Canada and/or Canadian interests.

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