

Digital Information Ecosystem Report – July 2021

Findings

- RRM Canada did not observe any significant indicators of foreign interference in its monitoring of the broader Canadian digital information ecosystem.

Purpose

This report presents summary findings from research and analysis covering July 2021, aimed at detecting foreign interference (FI) in the Canadian digital information ecosystem. This is the final report in a series of monthly reports leading up to the 44th Canadian General Election (GE44). This series of reports was designed to establish a baseline of online behaviour to facilitate the identification of anomalies linked to potential FI as the election neared and to alert decision-makers to any potential FI activity. With GE44 now scheduled for September 20, 2021, RRM Canada will assume a daily reporting posture for limited distribution in accordance with Security and Intelligence Threats to Elections Task Force (SITE TF) protocols.

Methodology

This report leverages a combination of in-house and off-the-shelf tools to examine publicly available digital platforms and websites for indicators of FI in July 2021.¹ In total, RRM Canada accessed a sample of approximately 265,000 Twitter posts relating to Canadian politics.² RRM Canada also analysed approximately 7,200 submissions to various Canada-related forums on the Reddit platform.³ Finally, RRM Canada used the BuzzSumo platform to determine which news articles relating to Canadian politics⁴ on Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and Reddit received the most engagement. RRM Canada also began to trial a new tool that monitors a list of 114 alternative media outlets assessed, with varying degrees of confidence, by partner governments, civil society and academic organizations to be aligned with state-sponsored disinformation.

¹ The scope of the report is limited in terms of access to platforms and data. Currently, RRM Canada has some capabilities to collect and analyse data from Twitter, Reddit, and web domains and webpages, as well as some limited new capabilities on YouTube. Other platforms may limit us from obtaining data or lack commercial/out-of-the-box solutions. Search terms used to collect data can differ significantly between platforms and tools, as each site structures data access differently. RRM Canada also leverages manual, open source investigations and qualitative analysis.

² Due to changes in Twitter rate limiting or third party collection tools, this month saw a considerable drop from our usual collection of approximately 2 million posts. Review of the collection reveals a fairly uniform distribution with no gaps in data across dates and queries. For the purposes of this monthly, RRM Canada accessed the Twitter API to analyse sample tweets through the following query terms: {"general_pol": "#cdnpoli OR #elxn44 OR #election44 OR #elx44 OR #polcan OR #election2021 OR #elxn2021", "parties": "(#PPC OR #NDP OR #NPD OR #PLC OR #LPC OR #CPC OR #GPC) AND (canada OR canadian OR canadians OR canadien OR canadiens OR #canada OR ottawa OR #CDNpoli OR #Polcan)", "parties_2": "(#liberal OR #liberals OR #greens #green OR #conservative OR #conservatives)" AND (canada OR canadian OR canadians OR canadien OR canadiens OR #canada OR ottawa OR #CDNpoli OR #Polcan)", "voting_terms": "(vote OR votes OR voting OR ballot OR ballots OR election OR elections OR elxn OR #elxn OR #election OR scrutin OR scrutins) AND (canada OR canadian OR canadians OR #canada OR ottawa OR canadien OR canadiens) NOT "elections canada", "libs": "(@justinrudeau OR Trudeau OR (Liberal Party Canada) OR @parti_liberal OR @liberal_party)", "cons": "(Erin O'Toole OR (Conservative Party Canada) OR ("O'Toole" AND (Erin OR Conservative OR #CPC OR #cdnpoli OR #polcan)) OR @erinotoole OR @CPC_HQ OR @PCC_HQ)", "greens": "(@AnnamiePaul OR Annamie OR (Paul AND Green AND Canada) OR (Green Party Canada) OR @CanadianGreens)", "NDP": "(@theJagmeetSingh OR (Singh AND (jagmeet OR NDP OR canada OR #cdnpoli OR #polcan)) OR "New Democratic Party" OR "NDP" OR @NDP OR @NPD_QG)", "block": "(Bloc Québécois OR @yfblanchet OR (Blanchet AND (Yves OR Canada OR #BQ OR #cdnpoli OR #polcan)) OR @BlocQuebecois)", "PPC": "(People's Party of Canada OR (Bernier AND (Maxime OR Canada OR Party OR #cdnpoli OR #polcan)) OR (Maxime Bernier) OR "People's Party" OR @ppopulaireca OR @peoplespca OR @MaximeBernier)}.

³ RRM Canada accessed all submissions to three communities or subreddits which aggregate issues relating to Canada and Canadian politics. These communities were /r/Canada, /r/CanadaPolitics, and /r/OnGuardForThee.

⁴ Buzzsumo search terms included ("Canadian Election" OR "Canadian Federal Election" OR "44th General Election"), ("Bloc Québécois" OR "Yves Blanchet" OR "Yves-François Blanchet"), ("Erin O'Toole" OR "Conservative Party of Canada" OR "Parti conservateur du Canada"), ("Trudeau" OR "Justin Trudeau" OR "Liberal Party of Canada" OR "Parti libéral du Canada"), ("Annamie Paul" OR "Green Party of Canada" OR "Parti vert du canada"), ("Maxime bernier" OR "Parti poluaire" OR "people party"), (NDP OR NPD OR "jagmeet singh" OR "New Democratic Party" OR "Nouveau Parti démocratique"), and (Canada).

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RRM Canada's methodology builds on past experience, assessing a set of indicators associated with FI, including: circulation of false, misleading, and polarising narratives; alignment of narratives with the objectives of hostile state actors; or highly suspicious and abnormal shifts in volume and scope of engagement on a given topic accompanied by signs of coordination and inauthenticity. All RRM Canada reporting is subject to an ethical and methodological framework. Government and non-government partners also inform RRM Canada's reporting.

July 2021 Baseline

Twitter

Of the approximately 265,000 tweets in our July 2021 sample, the most shared content came primarily from well-established Canadian sources. Top media source domains shared within our Twitter data analysis are as follows:

1. cbc.ca – 1,854 links;
2. thestar.com – 820 links;
3. ctvnews.ca – 804 links;
4. globalnews.ca – 611 links; and
5. nationalpost.com – 466 links.

Some of the most shared stories on Twitter in July 2021 included:⁵

- A YouTube video by global activists within the Tigrayan diaspora;⁶
- A Washington Post article about the state of the Conservative Party of Canada;⁷ and
- A Global News article about the contracting practices of the Conservative Party of Canada.⁸

Reddit

RRM Canada also analyzed all submissions to several popular Canada-related forums on the Reddit platform, from July 1-31, 2021.⁹ Of the 7,227 submissions in this collection, the most engaged posts, as measured by likes (called "upvotes" on Reddit), include the following content:

1. A Reddit text post by a user discussing the rising cost of living in Canada¹⁰ – 29,267 upvotes;
2. A VICE News article about calls to tax the Catholic Church¹¹ – 25,449 upvotes; and

⁵ Exact number of shares is difficult to measure as Twitter data is less structured compared to other data sources and content can be shared in multiple ways. RRM Canada continues to refine our data aggregation and filtering methodologies and more precise measurements will be included in future reporting.

⁶ Previous RRM reporting has described this campaign by global diaspora activists from the Tigray region of Ethiopia. Canada is one of many countries targeted in an effort to draw attention to alleged human rights violations in the Tigray region. The video can be seen here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=96Nke0EQbX8>

⁷ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/07/15/canada-conservative-party-erin-o-toole-shambles/>

⁸ <https://globalnews.ca/news/8053232/otoole-supporters-party-insiders-taxpayer-funded-contracts/>

⁹ Reddit is a social news aggregation, web content rating, and discussion website. Users submit content to the site such as links, text posts, and images, which are then voted up or down by other users. Once a piece of content is submitted, it can also be discussed among reddit users in a comments section. Reddit is subdivided into forums called communities or "subreddits" which aggregate content by topic. For this reporting period RRM Canada downloaded and analyzed all submissions from the r/Canada, r/CanadaPolitics and, r/OnGuardForThee subreddits. Future reports may expand the list of relevant subreddits and user comments will also be accounted for as we continue to refine our methodologies,

¹⁰ https://www.reddit.com/r/canada/comments/oncjbj/is_the_canadian_dream_dead/

¹¹ <https://www.vice.com/en/article/m7ep4x/there-are-growing-calls-to-finally-tax-the-catholic-church>

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3. A link to Government of Canada vaccine coverage information with a user editorialized title of "69.69% of Canada's population has received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine"¹² – 19,765 upvotes.

Of the 7,227 submissions in the July collection, the most engaged posts, as measured by user comments, include the following content:

1. The user post mentioned above about the rising cost of living – 9,544 comments;
2. A National Post article about divided views of COVID-19 related restrictions among vaccinated and unvaccinated Canadians – 5,739 comments;¹³ and
3. The user post mentioned above about vaccine coverage in Canada – 5,075 comments.

Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and Reddit through BuzzSumo

According to the BuzzSumo analytics platform, the top-shared articles about Canadian politics in July 2021 included the following stories:

1. A CTV News article covering the Prime Minister's announcement that unvaccinated Americans will not be able to enter Canada;¹⁴
2. A Global News article on the appointment of Mary Simon as Canada's new Governor General;¹⁵ and
3. A Cult MTL¹⁶ article on a statement by the Prime Minister about abortion in Canada.¹⁷

Suspicious or State-linked Alternative Media Websites

RRM Canada monitors a list of approximately 114 websites outlets assessed, with varying degrees of confidence, by partner governments, civil society and academic organizations to be aligned with state-sponsored disinformation.¹⁸ Throughout July, these websites published approximately 10 articles related to Canada, primarily commenting on Indigenous affairs and the discovery of unmarked graves around the sites of several former residential schools in Canada. Although these websites have been reported to, at least on occasion, amplify state-sponsored propaganda and disinformation, individual articles do not necessarily indicate a state-sponsored information campaign. Given the small number of articles published on these sites, and the widespread coverage of these issues by the mainstream media, RRM Canada does not assess that this content is part of a state-sponsored information campaign.

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¹² Link to post with editorialized title here:

https://www.reddit.com/r/canada/comments/ot1zma/6969_of_canadas_population_has_received_at_least/

¹³ <https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/vaccinated-canadians-feel-entitled-to-greater-freedoms-than-non-vaccinated-as-tensions-rise-poll>

¹⁴ <https://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/unvaccinated-tourists-won-t-be-welcome-in-canada-for-quite-a-while-pm-trudeau-says-1.5501924>

¹⁵ <https://globalnews.ca/news/7762995/mary-simon-new-governor-general-canada/>

¹⁶ Cult MTL is a Montreal based English language news website that was established in 2012 by former staff of the Montreal Mirror following the closure of the newspaper. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cult_MTL

¹⁷ <https://cultmtl.com/2021/07/justin-trudeau-every-woman-in-canada-has-a-right-to-a-safe-and-legal-abortion/>

¹⁸ The full list is updated and changes frequently however many of these websites are described by former US national security official Clint Watts in a recent article on Russia's disinformation ecosystem: <https://clintwatts.substack.com/p/russias-disinformation-ecosystem>

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