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RRM CANADA OPEN DATA ANALYSIS
SEPTEMBER 13, 2021

GE44: Chinese Communist Party Social Media Accounts Spreading Negative Narratives about the Conservative Party of Canada

Key Findings

- RRM Canada has observed what may be a Chinese Communist Party (CCP) information operation that aims to discourage Canadians of Chinese heritage from voting for the Conservative Party of Canada.
- RRM Canada has observed CCP media accounts on Chinese social media platforms WeChat and Douyin (China's equivalent of TikTok) sharing widely a narrative that the Conservative Party of Canada's election platform suggests leader Erin O'Toole "almost wants to break diplomatic relations with China".
- The narrative originated from CCP tabloid *The Global Times*, which recapped a *Hill Times* report on Canadian political parties' proposed China policies on September 8.
- The narrative has now grown in considerable scale:
  - On September 9-12, a number of popular WeChat news accounts that service Chinese-speaking Canadians actively shared the narrative that O'Toole wants to break off relations with China; they did not credit the Global Times, obscuring the narrative's point of origin.
  - Some accounts added commentary, such as "Chinese-Canadians are scared" of the Conservatives' platform, and questioned whether "Chinese compatriots should support the Conservative's if they use this rhetoric?"
  - Respected state news agency *Xinhua* (China's equivalent to AP or *Reuters*, and the highest-ranking state-media organ next to the People's Daily) shared videos on Douyin that read: "according to former policy advisor Jocelyn Coulon, the Conservative's policy almost wants to break diplomatic relations with China."
- RRM Canada is unable to determine whether there is coordination between the CCP media that originally promoted the narrative and the popular WeChat news accounts that service Chinese-speaking Canadians that are now amplifying the narrative. WeChat news accounts that service Canadians are all registered to individuals in China. While many of these WeChat news accounts are well-established and recognized Canadian-Chinese news sites, some may have unclear links to CCP media groups.
- RRM Canada is also unable to determine whether there was inauthentic activity that boosted user engagement with the narrative as Chinese social media platforms are completely non-transparent.

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Purpose

This Open Data Analysis[1] is part of Rapid Response Mechanism (RRM) Canada's efforts to monitor the digital information environment for signs of foreign state sponsored information manipulation related to Canada's 44th General Election (GE44). RRM Canada has identified a narrative first put forward by the *Global Times* about the Conservatives and leader Erin O'Toole that has grown in considerable scale over the past six days (beginning September 8). The narrative suggests that Beijing may be trying to discourage Canadians of Chinese origin from voting for the Conservative Party of Canada.

Methodology

RRM Canada used a combination of methods to analyze this influence operation, primarily manual review of Chinese social media platforms including WeChat, Douyin, Weibo, Xigua Video and Bilibili, as well as open source forensic digital analysis including, website archives, social listening tools, and cross-platform social media ranking tools.

Findings

Summary of Initial Research

RRM Canada first detected the narrative that "The Conservatives almost want to break diplomatic relations with China" in two *Global Times* articles published on September 8. The articles featured variations of the following headlines: the Conservatives' platform "mentions China 31 times", the party "almost wants to break diplomatic relations with China"; or, the Conservatives' platform appears to take a tougher stance on China, while the Liberals' platform "has tried to avoid talking about China" only mentioning China "once." The Global Times dubbed this phenomenon "a magical sight."

The *Global Times* article was prompted by the publication of a piece in the *Hill Times* that reviewed the three major Canadian parties' stances on China-Canada relations. However, according to data analytics tools BuzzSumo and Crowdtangle, the *Hill Times* piece did not receive any major engagement with a Chinese-speaking audience, and it is likely that the *Global Times* was the first Chinese publication to engage with its content. The two *Global Times* articles on the topic received high levels of engagement (over 100K page views each).

It is unclear what prompted the *Global Times* to engage with the *Hill Times* piece on September 8. Similar articles published by the *Toronto Star* on September 4 and *Global News* on September 6 elicited no response from CCP media. The Conservative Party platform, published on August 16, 2021, also did not elicit a response. RRM Canada notes that the timing coincided with the first Canadian Leaders' Debate and increasingly close polling numbers.

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[1] Rapid Response Mechanism (RRM) Canada produces Open Data Analysis to chart trends, strategies and tactics in foreign interference. This analysis supports the G7 RRM, an initiative agreed by the G7 in 2018, to strengthen coordination to identify and respond to diverse and evolving threats to G7 democracies, including through sharing information and analysis, and identifying opportunities for coordinated response.

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Reach and Impact of the Campaign

Canadian WeChat news accounts began engaging with the *Global Times* narrative on September 9. The accounts copied the content and form of the *Global Times* piece on the Conservative Party of Canada, but did not credit the publication, thus obscuring the narrative's point of origin. Canadian WeChat accounts, such as *York BBS, GTA Life, iToronto Life,* and *Vancouver Headlines*, also added commentary to the articles, with lines like: "the Conservatives' platform contains many policies that are unacceptable to Chinese people", "Chinese are frightened by the platform" and "[the platform] challenges Chinese people's bottom lines!" Two of the Canadian WeChat articles questioned whether "Chinese compatriots should support the Conservatives if they use this rhetoric?"

York BBS, GTA Life, iToronto Life and *Vancouver Headlines* are some of the most popular Canada-focused news accounts on WeChat and have a following of 150K to 415K followers each. Unless otherwise credited, WeChat users would not know that the narrative about the Conservatives and O'Toole originated from the *Global Times* and would assume the articles were original reporting from the Canadian WeChat accounts. The articles published by the accounts all received high levels of user engagement (5K to 20K page views).

Furthermore, CCP media accounts on Douyin (the Chinese-version of Tiktok) published videos that repeated the September 8 *Global Times* headline. *Xinhua*'s Douyin account (26 million followers) shared a video that the Conservatives' platform mentions China "31 times" and that an "expert" says the Conservative Party of Canada "almost wants to break diplomatic relations with China." The video received over 29K engagements. *Xinhua* is China's official state-run press agency, plays an equivalent role to AP or *Reuters*, and is the highest-ranking state-media organ next to the *People's Daily*. In comparison to the *Global Times*, which is known for publishing salacious headlines and bombastic rhetoric, *Xinhua* has a reputation for publishing official and respectable news content that often reflects the true intentions of the Chinese Communist Party.

Other Notable Narratives

RRM Canada notes that WeChat news accounts in Canada continue to post a false claim that private member's bill C-282 (An Act to establish the Foreign Influence Registry), introduced by Conservative Party of Canada Member of Parliament Kenny Chiu, would require "all individuals or groups with ties to China" to register as agents of the Chinese government. Prior to this, RRM Canada observed WeChat news accounts in Canada posting a false story claiming that Conservative leader Erin O'Toole would ban WeChat if elected. It is unclear where these two narratives originated.

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Next Steps

Following the discovery of the widened scale of the negative Conservative Party narrative, RRM Canada increased its observation of Chinese social media platforms and introduced new search terms in English and simplified Chinese to better understand the narrative's impact. RRM Canada will continue to monitor Chinese platforms and the greater Chinese news ecosystem throughout the writ period.

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