

RRM Open Data Analysis

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Digital Information Ecosystem Report - January 2021

Findings

- Rapid Response Mechanism (RRM) Canada did not detect significant indicators of foreign interference (FI) in the Canadian digital information ecosystem in January 2021.

Purpose

This report presents summary findings from research and analysis covering January 2021, aimed at detecting FI in the Canadian digital information ecosystem. It is the second in a series of monthly reports leading up to the 44th Canadian General Election (GE44). This series of reports is designed to establish a baseline of online behaviour to facilitate the identification of anomalies linked to potential FI as the election nears.

Methodology

The report leverages a combination of in-house and off-the-shelf tools to examine publicly available digital platforms and websites for indicators of foreign interference in January 2021.¹ In total, RRM Canada accessed a sample of approximately 1.3 million Twitter posts relating to Canadian politics² as well as approximately 6,100 submissions to various Canada-related forums on the Reddit platform.³ Separately, 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's methodology builds on past experience and assesses a set of indicators associated with FI, including: circulation of false, misleading, and polarising narratives; alignment of narratives with the objectives of hostile actors; or unprecedented 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.

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, from web domains and webpages, and 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 each site structures data access differently. RRM Canada also leverages manual, open source investigations and qualitative analysis, as well.

² 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": "({@AnnemiePaul OR Annemie 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 @yfbianchet 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 3 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"), ("Annemie 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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January 2021 Baseline

Twitter

Due to technical difficulties, RRM Canada was only able to directly sample Twitter data between January 16 and 31, 2021.⁵ Of the 1.3M tweets, from approximately 500K unique accounts in this sample, the most shared content came primarily from well-established Canadian sources. Top domains shared within our Twitter data analysis are as follows:

1. torontosun.com – 22098 links;
2. cbc.ca - 20 519 links;
3. theglobeandmail.com – 12 759 links;
4. ctvnews.ca – 11 482 links; and
5. nationalpost.com – 8 742 links.

Some of the most shared stories on Twitter included:⁶

- Travel restriction announcement from the PM;⁷
- Video message from the PM about BellLetsTalk day;⁸ and,
- Parody of the PM’s response to the US cancelation of the Keystone XL pipeline.⁹

Reddit

RRM Canada also analyzed all submissions to several popular Canada-related forums on the Reddit platform between January 1 and 31, 2021.¹⁰ Of the 6,178 submissions in this collection, the most engaged links, as measured by likes (called “upvotes” on Reddit), include the following content:

1. CTV news article discussing the potential decision by the government to list the Proud Boys as a terrorist organization¹¹ - 88,980 upvotes;
2. Post linking to a photo of the Alberta Minister of Agriculture in a “MAGA” hat - 41,827 upvotes;¹² and
3. CBC article discussing the US President’s decision to cancel the Keyston XL pipeline - 24,128 upvotes.

Of the 6,178 submissions in this collection, the most engaged links, as measured by user comments, include the following content:

⁵ Twitter recently changed its API to limit search term samples to 7 days in the past. As such, RRM Canada now samples the API more frequently.

⁶ 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.

⁷ <https://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/now-is-just-not-the-time-to-be-flying-pm-trudeau-announces-new-travel-restrictions-1.5287311> more also here <https://twitter.com/lopezdoriga/status/1355217564134232065/video/1> and

⁸ <https://twitter.com/JustinTrudeau/status/1354778270915551233/video/1> and here <https://twitter.com/JustinTrudeau/status/1354917001374953475/photo/1>

⁹ Share in both the article and a tweet from the News Parody site The Onion. See here <https://www.theonion.com/tearful-justin-trudeau-chains-self-to-keystone-pipeline-1846111163> and here <https://twitter.com/TheOnion/status/1353749235846549506/photo/1>

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ <https://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/feds-looking-at-declaring-proud-boys-a-terrorist-organization-in-wake-of-u-s-rioting-1.5259790>

¹² <https://imgur.com/itsCkPt>

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1. CTV news article discussing the potential decision by the government to list the Proud Boys as a terrorist organization - 3,377 user comments;
2. Article discussing support for universal basic income¹³ - 2,840 user comments; and
3. National Post article discussing new quarantine restrictions for travelers¹⁴ – 2,634 user comments.

Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and Reddit through BuzzSumo

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

1. The potential decision by the government to list the Proud Boys as a terrorist organization - 4 articles with 528,200 engagements;¹⁵
2. The Prime Minister and other parties' response to Keystone XL cancelation - 2 articles with 222,100 engagements;¹⁶
3. Articles discussing Canadians travelling abroad and for holidays - 2 articles with 135,600 engagements;¹⁷
4. The Prime Minister's statement on the US Capitol riots - 1 article with 124,900 engagements;¹⁸ and
5. The Prime Minister's statement on US President Joe Biden's inauguration - 1 article with 105,800 engagements.¹⁹

Foreign Government Sponsored Accounts

RRM Canada monitors 462 accounts that belong to Chinese, Russian and Iranian government sources. For the January reporting period, these accounts did not appear to focus on Canada or any Canadian political issues, based on our search criteria outlined in footnote 2.

RRM Canada did not observe any significant indicators of foreign interference in its monitoring of the broader Canadian digital information ecosystem, as it relates to the major themes identified above.

Analysis of Notable Issues of Potential Foreign Interference**Intersections between Indian and Canadian media ecosystems**

RRM Canada's December 2020 reporting indicated an increase in attention by various Indian news sites to Canadian politics, following Prime Minister Trudeau's November 30, 2020, remarks concerning farmers' protests in India. December reporting also included reference to Indian news sources reporting on Canada Chinese relations. During the January 2021 reporting period, RRM Canada observed government aligned Indian, along with several other foreign alternative media sources, leveraging a Canadian alternative media outlet to further

¹³ <https://cultmtl.com/2021/01/3-in-5-canadians-supports-universal-basic-income-canada-as-high-as-30k-year-quebec/>

¹⁴ <https://nationalpost.com/news/politics/canadian-government-to-force-incoming-travellers-into-hotels-for-quarantine>

¹⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/11/canada-considers-adding-proud-boys-terrorist-list-alongside-isis-al-qaida> , <https://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/feds-looking-at-declaring-proud-boys-a-terrorist-organization-in-wake-of-u-s-rioting-1.5259790> , <https://canadalive.news/2021/01/07/the-proud-boys-must-be-named-a-terrorist-group-believes-jagmeet-singh/> and, <https://globalnews.ca/news/7562953/ndp-proud-boys-terrorist-group/>

¹⁶ <https://globalnews.ca/news/7592405/trudeau-premiers-keystone-xl> , <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/justin-trudeau-disappointed-biden-cancel-keystone-xl-pipeline>

¹⁷ <https://globalnews.ca/news/7607191/covid-canada-international-travel-restrictions/> and <https://www.tvnouvelles.ca/2021/01/02/exasperee-par-les-voyages-dans-le-sud-une-intensiviste-interpelle-trudeau>

¹⁸ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/riots-washington-capitol-hill-trudeau-trump-1.5866237>

¹⁹ <https://pm.gc.ca/en/news/statements/2021/01/20/statement-prime-minister-canada-inauguration-joe-biden-president-united>

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the spread of narratives relating to Canada and China internationally. Other Canadian alternative sources have, in turn, cited Indian sources in a kind of self-reinforcing loop.

On January 14, 2021, Rebel News published a story titled "COVID Coverup: Trudeau gov't helped China hide origins of COVID-19."²⁰ This story claimed the Canadian government hid details about a pneumonia outbreak among Canadian Armed Forces members who participated in military games in Wuhan, China in November 2019. Several foreign alternative media outlets subsequently cited the Rebel News article in similar stories about a Canadian cover-up of the early spread of COVID-19. Among these foreign sources was an article published by Oplndia, an outlet aligned with the Indian governing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).²¹ The January 15 an Oplndia article, titled "Justin Trudeau helped China to cover-up origin of Coronavirus at inception of the outbreak: Claims Canadian portal quoting military document",²² was in turn cited in two articles by the Canadian outlet Cultural Action Party of Canada on January 15²³ and 16.²⁴

In addition to foreign government aligned Oplndia, sources citing the Rebel News article also include the Epoch Times,²⁵ Gnews.org,²⁶ and Europe-Israel.org.²⁷ While Epoch Times and GNews.org are anti-Chinese Communist Party sources owned by Chinese dissidents, they are also known for publishing disinformation and conspiracy theories aligned with elements of the US alternative right.²⁸ Europe-Israel.org is a French language source whose stated mandate is political activism in support of the state of Israel.²⁹

In all cases, none of the foreign source articles garnered much engagement on social media and RRM Canada did not observe any signs of coordinated activity to spread these articles on-line.³⁰ Nonetheless, many open-source researchers have observed that FI campaigns now typically leverage existing domestic narratives and sources.³¹ RRM Canada notes that these foreign sources quickly reacted to and built upon this Rebel News content, followed by their quick adoption by the Cultural Action Party of Canada over the course of less than 3 days. **Given the speed of this spread, and the confluence of mutually reinforcing narratives seen in this case, hostile state actors may judge that leveraging and building upon existing domestic narratives may prove to be an effective way to shape Canadian political discussions.** As such, RRM Canada will continue to research the interactions between Canadian and various international and diaspora information ecosystems in order to identify and detect any signs of potential FI campaigns.

²⁰ https://www.rebelnews.com/covid_coverup_trudeau_govt_helped_china_hide_origins_of_covid_19/

²¹ For more sources on Oplndia BJP alignment see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oplndian>

²² <https://www.opindia.com/2021/01/canadian-pm-justin-trudeau-helped-china-cover-up-origin-of-coronavirus/>

²³ <https://capforcanada.com/trudeau-government-accused-of-cover-up-regarding-spread-of-pandemic-virus/>

²⁴ <https://capforcanada.com/28128-2/>

²⁵ <https://fr.theepochtimes.com/le-canada-aurait-aide-la-chine-a-couvrir-la-propagation-du-virus-selon-un-rapport-1648127.html>

²⁶ GNews.Org has published several stories citing the Rebel News article see: <https://gnews.org/zh-hans/755605/>, <https://gnews.org/zh-hant/793497/>, <https://gnews.org/zh-hans/793467/> and <https://gnews.org/861801/>

²⁷ : <https://www.europe-israel.org/2021/01/le-canada-aurait-aide-la-chine-a-couvrir-la-propagation-du-virus-selon-un-rapport-le-gouvernement-canadien-aurait-connu-l'existence-du-virus-des-octobre-2019/>

²⁸ See here <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/20/business/media/steve-bannon-china.html> and

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/24/technology/epoch-times-influence-falun-gong.html>

²⁹ <https://www.europe-israel.org/about/>

³⁰ RRM Canada monitors for foreign, state sponsored disinformation, as such the domestic sources were not examined further.

³¹ This phenomenon has been noted by Both the Atlantic Council's DFR Lab as well as The German Marshall Funds Alliance for Securing Democracy. For examples see here: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/event/foreign-interference-us-politics-kremlin/> and here <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/foreign-amplification-of-voter-fraud-narratives-how-russian-iranian-and-chinese-messengers-have-leveraged-post-election-unrest-in-the-united-states/>

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