RRM Open Data Analysis   FOR OFFICIAL USE ONLY

Digital Information Ecosystem Report - March 2021

Findings

- Canada, among other countries, was likely the target of an overt, well-researched, and coordinated Twitter campaign to call for an end to the Ethiopian government's military operations in Tigray and a UN investigation into possible war crimes in the region.
- 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 March 2021, aimed at detecting foreign interference (FI) in the Canadian digital information ecosystem. It is the 4th 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 and to alert decision-makers to any potential FI activity.

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 March 2021.[1] In total, RRM Canada accessed a sample of approximately 2 million Twitter posts relating to Canadian politics[2] as well as approximately 3,630 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 politics[4] on Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and Reddit received the most engagement. RRM Canada also monitors 462 accounts that belong to Chinese, Russian and Iranian government sources.

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[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] 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 canadiens 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 canadiens 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":"(@justintrudeau 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)}. Due to a technical failure in our scripts, data for March 21, 22 and 29 is missing from our sample.

[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 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. Partner government organizations and leading non-government partners also inform RRM Canada's reporting.

March 2021 Baseline

Twitter

Of the 2M tweets in the March 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 – 29, 053 links
2. theglobeandmail.com – 19, 616 links
3. nationalpost.com – 19, 589 links
4. torontosun.com – 17, 307 links
5. blacklocks.ca – 11, 529 links

Some of the most shared stories on Twitter in March 2021 included:[5]
- Articles on the situation in the Tigray region of Ethiopia;[6]
- An OPIndia article sharing a video allegedly showing a distant relative of NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh assaulting a man participating in a pro Government of India rally in Brampton, ON;[7] and
- A Globe and Mail article on the status of clean drinking water in First Nations communities across Canada.[8]

The issue of clean drinking water is frequently raised in the Canadian political context. Similarly, as discussed in previous RRM Canada reporting, India's media ecosystem regularly reports on events in Canada. However, given our Twitter data search contained only terms related to Canadian politics, we found the number of tweets related to the conflict in Tigray in the March dataset unusual; we explored further in the case study below.

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[5] Exact number of shares if 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] See: https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/02/world/africa/ethiopia-tigray-blinken.html , https://www.straitstimes.com/world/i-dont-feel-safe-survivors-allege-rape-by-soldiers-in-tigray , https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-a-pogrom-is-happening-in-ethiopia/ and https://www.france24.com/en/tv-shows/eye-on-africa/20210311-us-condemns-ethnic-cleansing-in-ethiopia-s-tigray-region-eye-on-africa-france-24

[7] See https://twitter.com/AskAnshul/status/1367714249393369090/photo/1 , https://twitter.com/reachind_USACAN/status/1366424072343724034/video/1 , https://twitter.com/reachind_usacan/status/1366310583587463170 , https://www.opindia.com/2021/03/jagmeet-singh-jodhveer-dhaliwal-maple-tiranga-rally-attack , and https://nationalpost.com/news/politics/ndp-leaders-brother-in-law-in-altercation-under-police-probe-as-south-asian-canadian-factions-clash-over-india-unrest

[8] See here: https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-ottawa-pressed-to-make-good-on-promise-to-end-all-long-term-drinking/ and https://twitter.com/kkirkup/status/1366356516664733699/photo/1

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Reddit

RRM Canada also analyzed all submissions to several popular Canada-related forums on the Reddit platform March 1-31, 2021.[9] Of the 3,630 submissions in this collection, the most engaged posts, as measured by likes (called "upvotes" on Reddit), include the following content:

1. A before and after photo of a forested area following an old growth logging operation[10] – 15,558 upvotes;
2. A photo of a rare "Bank of Upper Canada" coin discovered while metal detecting near Oshawa, Ontario[11] – 15,317 upvotes; and
3. An article from the Toronto Star advocating a tax on extreme wealth[12] – 13,222 upvotes.

Of the 3,630 submissions in the March collection, the most engaged posts, as measured by user comments, include the following content:

1. A BNN Bloomberg article on the rising cost of residential real estate in Canada[13] – 1,615 comments;
2. A City News Toronto article on the potential merger between Shaw and Rogers Communications[14] – 1,538 comments; and
3. A CBC article comparing Canada and New Zealand government policy responses to rising residential real estate values[15] – 1,507 comments.

Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and Reddit through BuzzSumo

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

1. An article from The Toronto Star on the Supreme Court ruling on Carbon pricing;[16]
2. An article about a Nigerian immigrant achieving success in Canada's tech sector;[17] and
3. Two articles on U.S. President Biden's decision to share AstraZeneca vaccines with Canada and Mexico.[18]

Foreign Government Sponsored Accounts

RRM Canada monitors 462 accounts that belong to Chinese, Russian and Iranian government and state-linked sources. For the March reporting period, these accounts did not appear to focus on Canada or any Canadian

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[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 divided 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] reddit.com/r/canada/comments/lzsi2i/before_and_after_of_old_growth_forrest_in_british/

[11] https://www.reddit.com/r/canada/comments/m4jsht/found_while_metal_detecting_just_outside_oshawa/

[12] https://www.thestar.com/opinion/contributors/2021/03/29/taxing-extreme-wealth-to-offset-the-costs-of-the-pandemic-would-be-unquestionably-fair.html

[13] http://www.bnnbloomberg.ca/toronto-home-prices-1.1571283

[14] https://toronto.citynews.ca/2021/03/15/rogers-shaw-deal/

[15] https://www.cbc.ca/news/business/canada-and-new-zealand-both-have-hot-housing-markets-but-only-1-has-plan-to-cool-things-down-1.5942438

[16] https://www.thestar.com/politics/federal/2021/03/25/supreme-court-rules-canadas-carbon-price-is-constitutional.html

[17] https://www.legit.ng/1408487-nigerian-woman-canada-celebrates-owning-4-different-houses-getting-honours-age-35.html

[18] See https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/biden-administration-share-millions-astrazeneca-vaccine-doses-canada-mexico-n1261425 and https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/astrazeneca-vaccine-canada-mexico-biden-b1819182.html

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political issues. However, accounts of various Chinese officials continue to comment on the parliamentary vote to recognize the situation of the Uighur people in China as a genocide.[19]

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 themes identified above.

Analysis of Notable Issues of Potential Foreign Interference

The Conflict in Tigray dominates Canadian political discussions.

Since November 2020, the Ethiopian government has been conducting a military offensive against the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in the country's northern region. Open source reporting indicates that the Ethiopian government has used a combination of Internet blockages, intimidation of aid workers and the media, and restrictions on foreign journalists in order to shape the narrative around this conflict. TPLF supporters in the diaspora have, in turn, used social media to keep the conflict in the public eye. Open source reporting indicates that activists on social media spread pictures depicting alleged war crimes and atrocities as part of a campaign to demonize the current Ethiopian government, to pressure Western governments to intervene in Tigray, and to push the Nobel committee to rescind the prize of Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. Some of the photos used in these campaigns are real while others are taken from different conflicts and reported as taken from the Tigray region. [20]

Throughout the first two weeks of March, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield made comments condemning Ethiopian military actions in Tigray and accusing Ethiopian security forces of committing acts of ethnic cleansing in the region. U.S. Officials are calling for the removal of Ethiopian troops and for an independent investigation into possible war crimes. On March 10 and 11, protests and counter-protests were held in Washington and in cities across Canada by supporters and opponents of the Ethiopian military actions in Tigray.[21]

On March 14, tweets about the conflict in Tigray represented 65% of the RRM Canada data sample for Canadian political discussions for that day. These tweets predominantly expressed views supportive ending the military operation in the region and appear to have been at least partially coordinated through the website omnatigray.org.

The Onmatigray website, which was also shared openly on Twitter, has a number of pages dedicated to Twitter campaigns targeting various countries, including Canada, the UK, Italy, Australia and others with hashtags critical of a perceived lack of government action in condemning the Tigray conflict.[22] RRM Canada has no further information with respect to the site.

Accounts employing hashtags listed on the Onmatigray page for Canada predominantly tweeted with mentions of the Twitter accounts of Canada's Prime-Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs and opposition

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[19] Exact metrics are difficult to calculate, however manual review indicates that twitter users appear to have mentioned Canada and at least one of the official Chinese accounts followed by RRM Canada. Official Chinese accounts continue to call the parliamentary vote on genocide "misguided" while other users mention the official twitter accounts of the UN delegations or leaders of multiple countries, including Canada, China and others to support UN action or a declaration of Genocide in the Tigray region of Ethiopia.

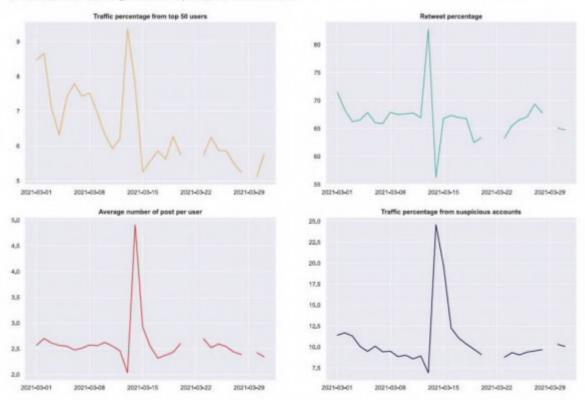[20] https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/africa/2021-04-08/ethiopias-perilous-propaganda-war

[21] https://calgary.ctvnews.ca/video?clipId=2159142, https://london.ctvnews.ca/ethiopian-canadians-rally-in-london-ont-over-conflict-back-home-1.5341684

[22] https://omnatigray.org/trudeau-canada/ see here for other countries https://omnatigray.org/our-campaigns/

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leaders.[23] RRM Canada notes that in addition to Canadian political leaders, the accounts of at least two political staff from the Prime Minister's office were also targeted in this campaign.

The daily trends figure[24] below shows a March 14 spike in the overall percentage of traffic generated by the most active users, the percentage of retweets vs original content, the average number of posts per user, and the amount of traffic generated by suspicious accounts.[25]

The Washington Post similarly reported inauthentic campaigns on Twitter conducted by real activists versus bots.[26] According to a Canada-based activist interviewed by The Washington Post, these campaigns are an organized movement with documentation and online webinars to teach people how to share materials on Twitter. The Canada-based activist described a loose networks of activists using the WhatsApp platform to coordinate and teach others how to set up accounts and promote hashtags on Twitter.

The mobilization of the Ethiopian diaspora, who may not ordinarily have Twitter accounts, for the express purpose of drawing attention to the conflict in Tigray likely explains the anomalous activity observed by RRM

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[23] Within our data set, Tigray was mentioned in concert with @justintrudeau 97945 times; @marcgarneau 41, 512 times, @karinagould 23, 148 times; @rpatricktravers 21614 times, @thejagmeetsingh 18, 125 times; @marcisurkes 17, 037; and @erinotoole 15, 060 times.

[24] Gaps in the above graph are due to missing data for those time periods. Missing data was caused by a technical failure in our Twitter sampling scripts.

[25] In this case, RRM Canada listed accounts which were newly created, underdeveloped with no profile picture or biographical information, or existing account which were dormant or rarely used prior to this campaign on our around March 14th. At the level of individual accounts these indicators would not necessarily indicate inauthenticity however, in aggregate and as a percent of the total conversation sampled this likely indicates some level of a coordinated campaign.

[26] https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/11/17/ethiopias-cracking-down-tigray-activists-are-spreading-news/

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Canada. Similarly, the combination of real, fake and/or decontextualized imagery depicting atrocities reported by other sources is likely explained by the loose network of activists attempting to share as much of this imagery as possible without resources, or possibly inclination, to fact check individual photos.[27] Finally, the targeting of political staff from the PM's office, who are not typically featured in Canadian political news, is probably explained by activists coordinating and researching methods to draw influential eyes to the content of their tweets.

RRM Canada assesses that Canada, among other countries, was likely the target of an overt, well-researched, and coordinated Twitter campaign to call for an end to the Ethiopian government's military operations in Tigray and a UN investigation into possible war crimes in the region, as the U.S. has done. While we do not assess this campaign is state-sponsored or either coercive or clandestine, it does demonstrate that actors – even with limited resources – can impact the Canadian online information space. This in turn demonstrates a potential vulnerability that may be leveraged by malign actors, and provides further insight into the various motivations, tactics, actors and activities present and noteworthy in the digital ecosystem.

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[27] Due to resource constraints, RRM Canada did not examine any imagery contained within our sample of Twitter data.

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