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RRM Open Data Analysis

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Digital Information Ecosystem Report - April 2021

Findings

- Canada was the target of a campaign by student activists in India to hasten the granting of study permits to Indian students looking to attend schools in Quebec. The campaign had a small but measurable impact on our data collection of broader Canadian political discussion on Twitter.
- 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 April 2021, aimed at detecting foreign interference (FI) in the Canadian digital information ecosystem. It is the 5th 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 April 2021.¹ In total, RRM Canada accessed a sample of approximately 2.2 million Twitter posts relating to Canadian politics² as well as approximately 6,600 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 also monitors 462 accounts that belong to Chinese, Russian and Iranian government sources.

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 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": "{@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 @NDP_QG", "block": "{Bloc Québécois' OR @yblanchet 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 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.

April 2021 Baseline**Twitter**

Of the 2.2M tweets in the April 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. torontosun.com – 37,012 links;
2. cbc.ca – 30,616 links;
3. youtube.com – 24,653 links;
4. nationalpost.com – 23,440 links; and
5. theglobeandmail.com – 15,727 links.

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

- A Politico article about the Government of Canada potentially withdrawing funding for the Halifax International Security Forum following a decision by the forum to give an award to the President of Taiwan;⁶
- Two articles expressing concerns about new internet regulation in bill C-10;⁷
- A tweet from the Venezuelan Minister of Foreign Affairs commending a proposed resolution at the federal New Democrat Party (NDP) convention to remove Canada from the Lima Group.⁸

Although the Venezuelan Foreign Minister's tweet was about a Canadian political party, the tweet itself was in Spanish and likely aimed at rallying support among domestic audiences in Venezuela.

Reddit

RRM Canada also analyzed all submissions to several popular Canada-related forums on the Reddit platform April 1-30, 2021.⁹ Of the 6,608 submissions in this collection, the most engaged posts, as measured by likes (called "upvotes" on Reddit), include the following content:

1. A Toronto Star article supportive of continued border restriction with the US – 14,202 upvotes;¹⁰

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 <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/04/11/trudeau-half-fax-security-forum-taiwan-480722>

⁷ See here <https://nationalpost.com/news/politics/ottawas-move-to-regulate-video-posts-on-youtube-and-social-media-called-assault-on-free-speech> and <https://torontosun.com/opinion/columnists/lilley-trudeaus-internet-censorship-bill-must-be-stopped>

⁸ <https://twitter.com/jaarreaza/status/1380596745000869892/photo/1>

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.thestar.com/politics/federal/2021/04/06/the-us-would-like-to-loosen-border-restrictions-were-not-there-yet-justin-trudeau-says.html>

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2. A TV Ontario article about abolishing the practice of tipping – 14, 121 upvotes;¹¹ and
3. A Toronto Star article about Costco giving a permanent pay raise to its employees – 11, 176 upvotes.¹²

Of the 6,608 submissions in the April collection, the most engaged posts, as measured by user comments, include the following content:

1. The Toronto Star article mentioned above about abolishing tipping – 2,939 comments;
2. An article about the rising housing market – 2,730 comments;¹³ and
3. The above-mentioned Toronto Star article about restrictions at the US border – 2,285 comments.

Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and Reddit through BuzzSumo

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

1. An article from the Globe and Mail about a teenaged girl who died from COVID-19;¹⁴
2. A Forbes article speculating that a vaccine passport will be required for entry into Canada;¹⁵ and
3. A YouTube video of a pastor confronting police over restrictions on church service due to COVID-19.¹⁶

Foreign Government Sponsored Accounts

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

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***Indian student activists employ automation to advocate for policy change in Canada***

Since December 2020, the Quebec government has launched an investigation into recruitment practices for Indian students among a number of private colleges in the province. Quebec had also suspended ten colleges from issuing Quebec Acceptance Certificates, a document required for the federal government to issue study permits to foreign students. Since January, the suspension has been lifted while the investigation remains in progress; however, students contend that the federal government remains slow in granting the study permits and their futures remain uncertain.¹⁷ This uncertainty has been exacerbated since the April 22nd ban on flights from India and Pakistan to Canada.

Throughout April, Indian students have demonstrated in front of the Canadian General Consulate in Chandigarh and have been writing to federal government officials and Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC)

¹¹ <https://www.tvo.org/article/its-time-to-abolish-tipping-once-and-for-all>

¹² <https://www.thestar.com/business/2021/04/24/costco-gave-its-workers-a-permanent-pandemic-raise-and-didnt-tell-anyone-another-reason-why-its-developing-a-cult-like-following-in-canada.html>

¹³ <https://betterdwelling.com/canadas-property-bubble-is-now-so-large-a-soft-landing-would-take-19-years/>

¹⁴ <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-emily-victoria-vegas-13-is-one-of-the-youngest-people-in-canada-to/>

¹⁵ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/suzannerowankelleher/2021/05/01/canada-will-require-a-vaccine-passport-for-entry/>

¹⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=zIWxH7T1Szw>

¹⁷ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/indian-students-study-permits-1.6007583>

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in a campaign to promote awareness and pressure the Canadian government to resolve this issue.¹⁸ Social media has also been an active component of these student activist campaigns.

On April 19, content related to the Indian students' campaign began to appear in RRM Canada's data sample of Canadian political discussions on Twitter. RRM Canada also observed spikes in this content between April 24 and April 26. This content represented a daily average of approximately 9% of the total content of RRM Canada's data sample for April 19 and 24-26. In total, RRM Canada identified 190,149 tweets from 1,708 accounts that were likely coordinating their messaging through the use of hashtags such as #quebecstudentswantjustice, #Wakeupircc, and #giveresultstoquebecstudents. As seen in figure 1 below, the #quebecstudentswantjustice hashtag peaked at approximately 35,000 tweets for the day of April 26.

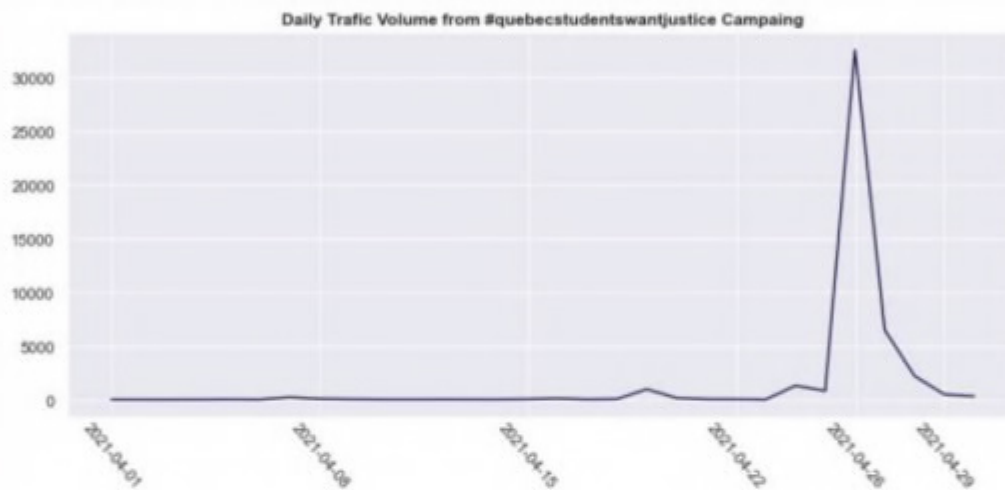


Figure 1: Within RRM Canada's twitter sample for April, the #quebecstudentswantjustice hashtag peaked at approximately 35 000 tweets for 26 April.

Some of the most active accounts spreading this content were likely inauthentic and almost certainly employed automation techniques. Specific indicators of inauthenticity are that many of these accounts were newly created in April 2021 with no profile picture or biographical information, and, in some cases were tweeting thousands of times per day. RRM Canada also notes that 112 new accounts which tweeted the #quebecstudentswantjustice hashtag were created on April 23, just before the bigger spikes between April 24 and 26. RRM Canada had previously observed that Twitter had suspended some of the most active accounts; however, they appear to have been restored as of May 17, 2021.¹⁹ Daily posting activity, in terms of tweets per day of the 1,708 accounts employing the #quebecstudentswantjustice hashtag within our broader data sample is shown in figure 2 below.

¹⁸ <https://www.ledevoir.com/societe/education/592050/des-etudiants-etrangers-pour-remplir-les-coffres>

¹⁹ Among other reasons, Twitter typically bans accounts either for inauthentic behaviour, such as tweeting out specific content at rates not possible without the use of automation. RRM Canada has no further information as to why Twitter banned and apparently restored these accounts.

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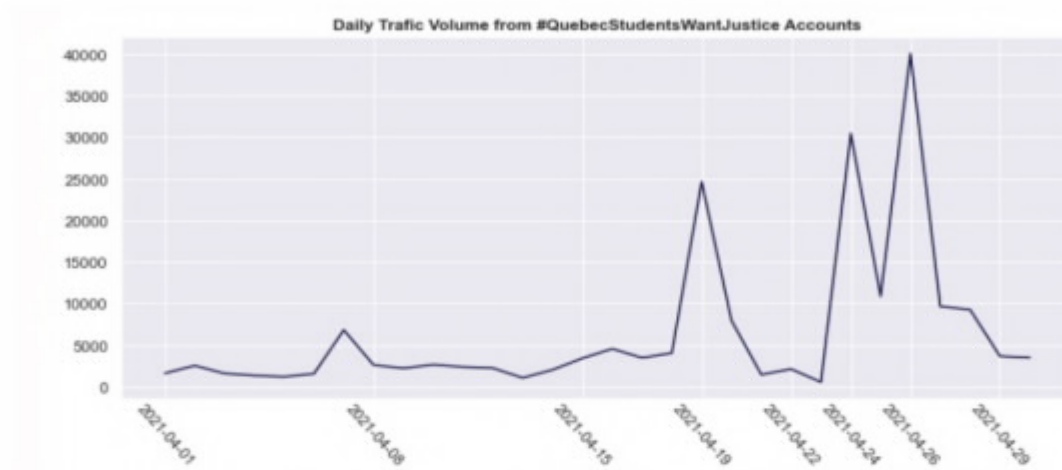


Figure 2: Posting patterns in terms of tweets per day of 1,708 accounts employing the #quebecstudentswantjustice hashtag. Initial spike in this content is observed on April 19, with more activity occurring between April 24-26.²⁹

Overall, this campaign had a small but measurable impact on our data collection of broader Canadian political discussion on Twitter and appeared directed at Canadian officials and institutions rather than the broader Canadian public. We do not assess this campaign is state-sponsored or coercive; however, at least some of the tech savvy activists supporting this campaign almost certainly employed inauthentic amplification techniques. As such, similar to the campaign conducted by elements of the Ethiopian diaspora described in the March reporting period, this case study demonstrates that actors with limited resources can impact the Canadian online information space. As malign actors are known to leverage or enable proxy or unaffiliated groups to further their own foreign policy objectives, RRM Canada continues to report on these emergent campaigns in order to gain insight into the various motivations and tactics of diverse actors operating in the digital ecosystem.

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²⁹ Figure 2 provides more granularity to the graphic as data is sampled from the accounts employing the hashtag that was initially observed in our broader data sample of discussions related to Canadian politics on Twitter.

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