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G7 RRM CANADAOPEN DATA ANALYSIS REPORT¹

Digital Media Trends for February 2019

KEY FINDINGS

- The Canadian Focal Point supporting the G7 Rapid Response Mechanism (RRM) assesses that there were very likely no significant foreign interference campaigns targeting the Canadian elections in the online space in February 2019.
- Based on available open source evidence, a false ad about NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh, alleging that he is living in a \$15 million mansion is likely a click bait strategy for ad revenue. Sputnik was promoting the ad in a story about [Ottawa barring Sputnik from Lima Group meeting on Venezuela](#) published on 4 February.
- There was likely an inauthentic amplification tactic employed to distribute an article about an alleged role Minister Freeland played in the political situation in Venezuela. This story ranked third on Google among pieces mentioning Minister Freeland and Venezuela. The probability that this was an attempt at foreign interference exists, but is low.

APPROACH

[1] The RRM Canada team scraped publicly accessible digital media platforms for posts relating to Canada and Canadian politics to analyze the Canadian discussion in the digital space and confirm or deny the presence of foreign interference campaigns.

FEBRUARY KEY CASES

No evidence of foreign interference in online discussion about the 2019 Federal election

[2] The analysis of online conversations, focused only on the topic of the federal election,² indicates there were no identifiable attempts at foreign interference. The data shows that the top influencers in the online conversations are political leaders or official party accounts. Moreover, top subjects of conversations are almost certainly generated by a domestic audience. Meanwhile top articles shared and top hashtags used are very likely generated by a domestic audience.

Fake Article about NDP leader Jagmeet Singh

[3] On 5 February, Vancouver based news site, [theyee](#) reported that a link to a story with the headline "Jagmeet Singh Shows off His New Mansion" was hosted on the website of the Vancouver Courier. This fabricated story was actually sponsored content served up within Vancouver Couriers advertising links. The company responsible for distribution of the ad is the Taboola Ad Network (AdNet). Among other sites, this ad was also served to and displayed on the websites of Bloomberg, USA Today, NBC and the Weather Channel.

¹ The Purpose of Open Data Analysis reporting is to assist in charting trends, strategies and tactics in support of the activities of the Canadian Focal Point of the G7 Rapid Response Mechanism (RRM). The RRM is mandated to strengthen G7 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.

² The RRM Coordination Unit used the following Boolean search to research the social media landscape around discussion about the 2019 Canadian federal election: ("Canadian election" OR Election OR #election OR "Federal election") AND (@justin Trudeau OR #trudeau OR "Justin Trudeau" OR "Liberal Party of Canada" OR "the liberals" OR @parti_liberal OR @liberal_party OR "People's Party of Canada" OR "PPC" OR "Maxime Bernier" OR "Bernier" OR #bernier OR "People's Party" OR @ppopulaireca OR @peoplespc OR @MaximeBernier OR "Andrew Scheer" OR "Scheer" OR #scheer OR "Conservative Party of Canada" OR "the conservatives" OR @AndrewScheer OR @CPC_HQ OR @PCC_HQ OR @theJagmeetSingh OR "Jagmeet Singh" OR "Singh" OR "New Democratic Party" OR "NDP" OR @NDP OR @NPD_QG OR "Mario Beaulieu" OR "Bloc Québécois" OR @Mario_Beaulieu OR @BlocQuebecois OR @ElizabethMay OR @MayElizabeth OR "Elizabeth May" OR "Green Party of Canada" OR "Green Party" OR #cdnpoli)

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[4] The ad came to the attention of RRM Canada when the site was being promoted on Sputnik within a story about [Ottawa barring Sputnik from Lima Group meeting on Venezuela](#) publish on 4 February. Analyzing the UTM string³ of the URL points to the likelihood that the ad was used strategically for A/B testing. In this case, the unknown actor appears to be comparing the responses of different target audiences to this news story (i.e. does Target Audience Variant A click more often compared to Target Audience Variant B?). This is a common strategy in digital ad campaigns. Further, this explains why some of our analysts saw the ad while others did not. The ad was served to each analyst based on the audience profiles Taboola generates to decide which ads to dynamically serve as analysts individually visit websites. Audience profiles are built using “cookies” which track previous websites a device or computer has visited.

[5] In all cases the ad linked to Attorneycocktail.com, which hosted the fake story about Jagmeet Singh. Attorneycocktail.com is an example of a click bait website featuring stories about ‘get rich schemes’, fear mongering political content, and tabloid stories about celebrities. The site was created in December 2017 and is registered in Panama. There is no identifiable information about the owner of the website. It receives approximately 800K visitors per month. “Attorney Cocktail’s” Facebook page boasts 10k followers. The administrators of the Facebook page, according to Facebook, are located in Israel and Pakistan (Annex A). This ad campaign linking to the false story about Jagmeet Singh, appears to be using a purely AdNet based vector of dissemination, as we did not observe social media based amplification tactics promoting the original post on Attorneycocktail.com. **Based on the available information there is evidence of a foreign point of origin for this story; however, it is impossible to determine if this is simply for ad revenue or if it is an attempt at foreign interference.**

Disinformation Operation about Chrystia Freeland and Canada’s Involvement in Venezuela

[6] On 7 February, the website strategic-culture.org published an article entitled “How Chrystia Freeland Organized Donald Trump’s Coup in Venezuela” By Eric Zuesse. Strategic-Culture.org is the English version of the Kremlin-Affiliated site <https://www.fondsk.ru>.⁴ The article about Canada’s involvement in Venezuela gained little traction on social media; however, its Search Engine Optimization (SEO)⁵ score was artificially amplified giving it a better Google search ranking. The RRM Canada team was able to bring to light a “spider web” of websites republishing and citing content from this article, artificially amplifying its SEO ranking on Google via backlinks⁶ to the article. This is the type of low-lying activity and experimentation that expected ahead of the 2019 federal election. Strategically what is interesting is that there is a mix of both left-leaning and right-leaning political sites back-linking this story about the Canada’s Foreign Affairs Minister and Venezuela, indicating that there may be a

³ A UTM code is a simple code that you can attach to a custom URL in order to track a source, medium, and campaign name. This enables Google Analytics to tell you where searchers came from as well as what campaign directed them to you. A common use of UTM code is to create a vanity URL for each offline campaign, and then redirect that URL to whatever forwarding address you assign to it — most likely your main domain. This will give you the ability to track how a weekly newspaper ad, coupon, radio ad, or TV commercial is working without having to create custom landing pages for each campaign. By creating a separate UTM code for TV commercials and print ads, for example, you can get data on which generates more traffic, conversions, etc.

⁴ Fundsk.ru has played a role in past Kremlin disinformation operation (e.g. this April 2017 post by the DFRLAB <https://medium.com/dfriab/russias-fake-electronic-bomb-4ce9dbc57f8> or this June 2017 post by Stopfake <https://www.stopfake.org/de/fake-no-biometric-passports-for-ukrainians-in-occupied-territories/>)

⁵ Search engine optimization is the process of affecting the online visibility of a website or a web page in a web search engine's unpaid results. What it is is a measurable, repeatable process that is used to send signals to search engines that a webpage is worth showing in Google’s index. Though this process should occur organically by users visiting a website, this can be manipulated by multiple tactics to give an inauthentic SEO score thus artificially amplifying content.

⁶ Backlinks are powerful tools that can help develop a websites rank higher in search engines. Not only do backlinks allow for referral traffic to a website, they also build domain authority. Increasing domain authority is one of the main factors of ranking higher in the organic search results. Without backlinks, rising to the top of the search engine results is a nearly unachievable goal.

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strategic intention of having both sides of the political spectrum discuss this topic. **There is low probability that this could be a foreign attempt at interference in Canada's position on Venezuela.**

[7] On 7 February, strategic-culture also shared a video about the Lima Group meeting entitled "Regime Change Canadian Style for Venezuela,"⁷ which links to a YouTube video⁸ from "the Real News Network." The video has garnered 20K views since 5 February.

[8] The author of the article, Eric Zuesse, has many publications in Kremlin-affiliated or pro-Kremlin media outlets. Regularly appearing on official Kremlin media outlets such as RT News and writing for Sputnik News, Eric Zuesse also publishes for Kremlin-affiliated media outlets including Strategic-Culture.org, Globalresearch.ca, theaker.is, Russia-insider.com, unz.com, countercurrents.org, theduran.com, and paulcraigroberts.org. Further, Zuesse cites state-owned and semi-official Kremlin outlets in his work, reuses text directly from official state-owned and semi-official propaganda outlets and government spokespeople, often without attribution. Zuesse also has a history of echoing Kremlin propaganda "lines," by using themes, arguments, talking points, images, and other content similar to those used by official state-owned and semi-official Kremlin propaganda outlets. This combined with the strategic artificial amplification of the story, forms parts of the assessment of the low possibility foreign interference.

[09] In its analysis of articles and websites, Kremlin-affiliated propaganda sites and social media accounts were discovered by examining their technical characteristics, including Google Analytics IDs, Amazon affiliate codes, WHOIS data, hosting data, ad-network utilization, SEO techniques, social media activity, and word-frequency metrics. The SEO ranking of the article about Canada's involvement in Venezuela was artificially amplified by the use of backlinks across a network of known propaganda sites, click bait sites, and junk news sites regularly debunked by academics and journalists. The sites back-linking to the article on strategic-culture, create inauthentic ranking and perception of popularity, because back-links are especially valuable for SEO because they represent a "vote of confidence" from one site to another. In essence, back-links to a website are a signal to search engines that others vouch for the content. If many sites link to the same webpage or website, search engines can infer that content is worth linking to. Earning these backlinks can have a positive effect on a site's ranking position or search visibility. The inauthentic back-linking activity of Kremlin-affiliated websites, regarding the story about Canada's involvement in Venezuela, managed to get the Strategic-Culture article ranked as the 3rd article on Google in February, and as of 11 March the article is ranked 4 on Google (Annex B).

[10] The tie to Venezuela is another marker worth highlighting, as Venezuela is of key interest to Russia. The Putin regime considers Venezuela a strategic partner; and Moscow has become increasingly ardent in its support for President Maduro.⁹ A Carnegie Moscow Centre report confirms that "Russia's policy on Venezuela is heavily influenced by Igor Sechin, the head of Rosneft, Russia's national oil company."¹⁰

[11] Canada's position at the Lima Group, as well as Canada's endorsement of opposition leaders of Juan Gaido, makes this strategic amplification of a story (of the US using Canada to foment a coup in Venezuela, and smear campaign against the Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister) of strategic value to Russia. Based on the quantitative

⁷ <https://www.strategic-culture.org/news/2019/02/07/regime-change-canadian-style-for-venezuela.html>,

⁸ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HEcqdy_pJKU

⁹ <https://www.rferl.org/a/interview-russia-s-ties-to-venezuela-give-it-nuisance-power-over-the-u-s-/29728812.html>

¹⁰ <https://carnegie.ru/2019/02/03/russia-s-support-for-venezuela-has-deep-roots-pub-78276>

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and qualitative evidence at hand, RRM Canada can assess with medium confidence that this was an organized SEO amplification tactic. However, its foreign nature is difficult to ascertain.

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Annex A

Location of Attorney Cocktails Admins on Facebook

Page Information

- 📅 Page created on October 9, 2018
- 🔒 Page name has not changed
- 📍 Primary country location of people who manage this Page includes:
Israel (3)
Pakistan (2)

Annex B: Screen shot of Google search for "Chrystia Freeland Venezuela" in February.

Peaceful transition 'absolutely' possible in Venezuela, says Freeland ...
<https://www.cbc.ca/.../venezuela-peaceful-transition-absolutely-possible-freeland-1.50...>
 Feb 4, 2019 - Foreign Affairs Minister Chrystia Freeland said a peaceful transition of power is "absolutely" possible in Venezuela, even as embattled President Nicolas Maduro digs in his heels and opposition leaders in Venezuela refuse to rule out military intervention. ... It is not only possible ...

Canada's leadership on Venezuela is misguided, misdirected – and a ...
<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/.../article-canadas-leadership-on-venezuela-is-misg...>
 Feb 5, 2019 - Given the crisis in Venezuela, this attempt at "democracy promotion," as Foreign Affairs Minister Chrystia Freeland calls it, may seem admirable. But it has little to ...

Videos

Freeland says Venezuela's interim government full member of Lima Group | Watch News Videos...
 Global News - Feb 4, 2019

'Change is happening now in Venezuela': Freeland
 The Globe and Mail - Feb 4, 2019

Freeland says Venezuela's interim government made full member of ...
 Global News
 YouTube - Feb 4, 2019

How Chrystia Freeland Organized Donald Trump's Coup in Venezuela
<https://www.strategic-culture.org/.../how-chrystia-freeland-organized-donald-trump-c...>