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G7 RRM CANADA

OPEN DATA ANALYSIS REPORT¹

BUFFALO CHRONICLE STORIES ABOUT CANADIAN POLITICS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The online news provider Buffalo Chronicle has been disseminating salacious stories about Canadian politics leading up to the Canadian federal election.
- BuzzFeed News and Toronto Star reported on 18 October 2019, that 8 out of 10 of Buffalo Chronicle's most popular articles in 2019 have been about Canada and that the news site's owner reportedly said that he would accept payment to publish negative articles about politicians.
- Avaaz, an online platform aimed at mobilising international social action, posted a petition calling on the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) to investigate who may have paid the Buffalo Chronicle's owner to promote fake news related to Canada's federal election, with over 22,000 signatures as of 22 October 2019.
- RRM Canada cannot ascertain if the stories about Canadian politics were artificially amplified, only that they received more attention than other content published by the same news provider.
- RRM Canada also assesses that it is very likely that ad revenue is not/not the motivation for publishing this content.
- RRM Canada cannot assess either the motivation for the publication of these stories or its potential impact on the Canadian federal election. At this point, we have no evidence to suggest that the articles in any way compromised the integrity of the federal election.
- RRM will undertake further research and analysis to ascertain how Buffalo Chronicle content is disseminated on social media with a view to try to establish whether foreign actors are involved.

CONTEXT

RRM Canada undertook preliminary research to identify potential indicators of foreign interference related to Buffalo Chronicle stories about the Liberal Party of Canada and the Canadian Prime Minister. The research was conducted after BuzzFeed News and Toronto Star reported on 18 October 2019, that 8 out of 10 of Buffalo Chronicle's most popular articles in 2019 have been about Canada and that the news site's owner reportedly said that he would accept payment to publish negative articles about politicians.² These reports prompted Avaaz, an online platform aimed at mobilising international social action, to post a petition calling on the RCMP to investigate who may have paid the Buffalo Chronicle's owner to promote fake news related to Canada's election. As of the morning of October 22, the petition has garnered over 22,000 signatures.³

The Avaaz petition states that "these stories have reached an estimated 20 million views and counting." The RRM assesses this number as greatly exaggerated based on its own open-source analysis but cannot fully quantify engagement at this point. RRM Canada notes that Facebook, the primary platform for the article's amplification, had around 240,000 engagements on all Buffalo Chronicle stories involving Canada between March and October 2019.

METHODOLOGY

RRM Canada's mandate is to monitor for and analyze potential cases of foreign interference, regardless of the political party affected or political nature of any given issue.

¹ The Purpose of Open Data Analysis reporting is to assist in charting trends, strategies and tactics in support of the activities of RRM Canada. 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 <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/janeltyvynenko/matthew-ricchiuzzi-buffalo-chronicle-trudeau-claims>

³ https://secure.avaaz.org/campaign/en/canada_defend_our_democracy_11/

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RRM Canada analyzed 15 articles from Buffalo Chronicle, as well as 20 Facebook pages and 10,000 posts on Twitter, Reddit and various news outlets and blogs that amplified the articles.⁴ The engagements were distributed as follows across the reviewed platforms:

- 91% on Facebook
- 4% on Twitter
- 0.8% on Reddit
- 4.2% across other digital platforms

FINDINGS

On 18 October 2019, the news outlet BuzzFeed News published a report claiming that Buffalo Chronicle is one of the “influencers” in the Canadian federal election and that it is targeting Canadian voters with disinformation. The report claims that “eight of the Buffalo Chronicle’s ten most popular articles on Facebook are about Canadian subjects and were published in the last eight months.”⁵ Using in-house tools and methodology, RRM Canada can confirm the latter. RRM Canada determined that the top 15 stories about Canada originally published by the Buffalo Chronicle, between March and October 2019, garnered a minimum of 279,500 social media engagements across Facebook, Twitter and Reddit.⁶ This engagement is high for the Buffalo Chronicle, which had a total of 400,000 engagements across all its publications, including these 15 stories, for the same time period.

Some of these stories were cited by alternative and mainstream news publications and were debunked by fact-checkers from Agence-France Press⁷ (Facebook fact-checking partner) and Snopes.⁸

BuzzFeed News and the Toronto Star⁹ report that the owner of Buffalo Chronicle, an American named Matthew Ricchiazzi, has previously stated that he would be willing to publish negative articles about political opponents for a fee.¹⁰ RRM Canada cannot confirm this claim. Buffalo Chronicle engages in a number of poor journalistic practices worth noting. Namely, it relies almost exclusively on unnamed sources; its stories tend to run without bylines; and it publicizes a list of writers, none of whom show their affiliation with Buffalo Chronicle on their personal social media or other online pages.

Posting Patterns and Narratives

RRM Canada data indicates that prior to March 2019, Buffalo Chronicle had on average fewer than 6,000 visitors per month. On 16 March 2019, it posted an article: “Karina Gould, the Minister of Democratic Institutions, reached out to social media giant Google to pressure the firm to curtail political criticism of the Trudeau government on its platform.”¹¹ The article became the news provider’s most popular piece of content with 44,000 social media engagements. It was published in advance of former Minister Jody Wilson-Raybould’s testimony before the House of Commons’ Justice Committee.¹²

Buffalo Chronicle published five other stories around the SNC-Lavalin, which received a total of 25,000 engagements. In comparison, Buffalo Chronicle’s other stories published in March 2019, on subjects unrelated to Canada, received fewer than 100 engagements each. Buffalo Chronicle’s articles regarding SNC-Lavalin led to an increase in the numbers of monthly visitors to news provider’s website, reaching a historic high of 63,000. Since March, the number of monthly

⁴ Recent analysis of the Canadian Digital Media landscape from the Public Policy Forum’s (PPF) Digital Democracy Project indicates that alternative media sources with an ideological underpinning are not popular news sources in Canada. Nevertheless, they enjoy more prominence on Twitter among users who interact with Canadian political hashtags. As such, the conversation on Twitter does not necessarily reflect the perspectives of the broader Canadian population. The prominence of Twitter data combined with our lack of access to Facebook data limits the analytic scope of the findings of this report.

⁵ <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/janeltyvynenko/matthew-ricchiazzi-buffalo-chronicle-trudeau-claims>

⁶ Engagements on social media mean the number of various interactions including likes, shares, re-tweets, etc.

⁷ <https://factcheck.afp.com/canadas-national-newspaper-was-not-barred-publishing-scandal-involving-pm-trudeau>

⁸ <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/trudeau-sex-scandal-school/>

⁹ <https://www.thestar.com/news/investigations/2019/10/18/theres-little-canada-can-do-to-stop-the-flow-of-false-viral-stories-from-buffalo-website.html>

¹⁰ In a 2010 email obtained by BuzzFeed News and the Star, he asked if a local political candidate wanted to purchase content in the City Politic, another website he runs. “Fees are as follows: positive articles about your candidacy are \$200; negative articles about your opponents are \$400; and an editorial endorsement is \$300,” the email read.

¹¹ <https://buffalochronicle.com/2019/03/16/at-trudeaus-behest-gould-instructed-google-news-to-limit-canadian-access-to-foreign-press/>

¹² Engagements are measured across Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit.

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visitors to the Buffalo Chronicle website has tapered down, averaging 20,000, but is still above the number of monthly visitors the site had prior to March. The publication of disinformation about Canada has increased traffic to the Buffalo Chronicle.

Lack of Advertisement Revenue

Considering the increase in web traffic to the page, RRM Canada investigated if ad revenue could be the motivation for generating these stories. False, inaccurate or misleading stories are often used by websites that wish to generate ad revenue; this is commonly referred to as "clickbait." Clickbait uses salacious content to attract attention and increase readership and ad revenues. However, there are no third-party advertising links to the website. RRM Canada observed four ads on the website, none of which appear to be revenue generating. Three ads on the website do not link to active websites. One of them, Seneca cigarettes, does not link to a website and two other ads, for the Niagara Falls Welcome Center, redirect users to an error page. A fourth advertisement for La Nova Pizza appears to be functioning properly. However, BuzzFeed reports that this company did not pay Buffalo Chronicle for this ad. On this basis, RRM Canada assesses that it is very likely that ad revenue is not the motivation for publishing this content.

Facebook Engagement

Buffalo Chronicle stories about Canada over the past year have received most of their social media engagements on Facebook. There are at least 2013 Facebook pages that have posted content from Buffalo Chronicle. There is no discernable pattern for these pages, which comprise the following communities and subjects: patriot movements, occupy movements, indigenous rights activists, anti-environmentalists, pro-environmentalists, alternative news pages, political meme pages, anti-Trudeau and anti-Harper pages, etc. As can be expected, Facebook pages that have garnered the highest number of engagements on Buffalo Chronicle stories tend to be extremely partisan pages which oppose the Canadian Prime Minister. Further analysis is required to determine the authenticity of these pages.

Twitter Engagement

RRM Canada identified 10,000 Twitter accounts that have shared and amplified the Canada-related content from Buffalo Chronicle in the past year. Further analysis is required to provide a comprehensive evaluation of this data. However, a qualitative assessment of the accounts points to the presence of known domestic actors that regularly amplify this type of content. Additionally, RRM Canada observed some accounts that primarily interact with Qanon,¹⁴ MAGA,¹⁵ KAG,¹⁶ Patriot and meme accounts are also engaging with this content. This is indicative of the target audience of this content, as well as the type of accounts that would amplify it. Buffalo Chronicle's Twitter account was suspended by Twitter; however other Twitter users post and share Buffalo Chronicle content on the platform.

NEXT STEPS

RRM Canada will undertake further research and analysis to ascertain how Buffalo Chronicle content is disseminated on social media with a view to try to establish whether foreign actors are involved.

¹³ <https://www.facebook.com/TrudeauFollies/> (Trudeau Follies); <https://www.facebook.com/CCMBC123/> (Coalition of Concerned Manufacturers & Businesses of Canada); <https://www.facebook.com/StandupforCanada/> (Canada Matters); <https://www.facebook.com/AnonymousIndigenousUnit/> (anonymous Indigenous Unit); <https://www.facebook.com/Watershed-Sentinel-106472301541/> (Watershed Sentinel); <https://www.facebook.com/JustinTrudeauNot/> (Justin Trudeau Not); <https://www.facebook.com/TrudeauMustGoIn2019/> (Trudeau Must Go in 2019); <https://www.facebook.com/Mountain-Media-559755277738490/> (Mountain Media); <https://www.facebook.com/NorthShoreNOPE/> (North Shore NOPE: No Pipeline Expansion); <https://www.facebook.com/pugetsoundradiocom/> (Puget Sound Radio); <https://www.facebook.com/cdnpoliticalmemes/> (Canadian Political Memes); <https://www.facebook.com/Canada-Israel-Friendship/> (Canada-Israel Friendship Association); <https://www.facebook.com/Freebirdmediacanada/> (Free Bird Media); <https://www.facebook.com/MB-Patriots-667670030032300/> (MB Patriots); <https://www.facebook.com/cda.patriots/> (Canadian Patriots); <https://www.facebook.com/NORSKK/> (NORSKK); <https://www.facebook.com/CanadaFamilyLawReform/> (Canada Family Law Reform Write One Letter Campaign); <https://www.facebook.com/DumpHarper/> (C-FAR Canadians For Accountable Representation); <https://www.facebook.com/ OccupyCanada/> (Occupy Canada).

¹⁴ According to the FBI Qanon is "an anonymous government official known as "Q" posts classified information online to reveal a covert effort, led by President Trump, to dismantle a conspiracy involving "deep state" actors and global elites allegedly engaged in an international child sex trafficking ring."

<https://info.publicintelligence.net/FBI-ConspiracyTheoryDomesticExtremism.pdf>

¹⁵ "Make America Great Again" (often abbreviated as MAGA) is a campaign slogan used in American politics that was popularized by Donald Trump in his 2016 presidential campaign.

¹⁶ "Keep America Great" (often abbreviated as KAG) is a campaign slogan used in American politics that was popularized by Donald Trump for his 2020 presidential campaign.

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