

For Public Release

RRM Open Data Analysis

FOR OFFICIAL USE ONLY

Digital Information Ecosystem Report – June 2021

Findings

- RRM Canada did not observe any significant indicators of foreign interference in its monitoring of the broader Canadian digital information ecosystem.
- Chinese state-run media and officials have been leveraging the discovery of unmarked graves at residential schools in Canada to deflect criticism of human rights abuses in Xinjian; however, RRM Canada has not observed any indication of covert amplification or manipulation of these narratives in online discussions relating to Canadian politics.

Purpose

This report presents summary findings from research and analysis covering June 2021, aimed at detecting foreign interference (FI) in the Canadian digital information ecosystem. It is the 7th 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 FI in June 2021.¹ In total, RRM Canada accessed a sample of approximately 2 million Twitter posts relating to Canadian politics.² RRM Canada also analysed approximately 7,500 submissions to various Canada-related forums on the Reddit platform.³ Finally, 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.

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 @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 @ppolulaireca 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).

[APG]

For Public Release

RRM Open Data Analysis

FOR OFFICIAL USE ONLY

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 state 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](#). Government and non-government partners also inform RRM Canada's reporting.

June 2021 Baseline**Twitter**

Of the approximately 2M tweets in our June 2021 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 – 5,435 links;
2. ctvnews.ca – 2,979 links;
3. nationalpost.com – 2,675 links;
4. globalnews.ca – 1,878 links; and
5. thestar.com – 1,411 links.

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

- An NDP petition for the government of Canada to drop appeals against two Canadian Human Rights Tribunal rulings ordering compensation for residential school survivors and mandating Government services for First Nations children;⁶
- An English language article from an Indian news outlet, News18, reporting on a poll indicating that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's approval rating is higher than many other world leaders, including Prime Minister Trudeau;⁷ and
- A National Observer article on Bill C-12 and Canada's efforts to achieve net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050.⁸

Reddit

RRM Canada also analyzed all submissions to several popular Canada-related forums on the Reddit platform, from June 1-30, 2021.⁹ Of the 7,525 submissions in this collection, the most engaged posts, as measured by likes (called "upvotes" on Reddit), include the following content:

⁵ 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.

⁶ The NDP petition is available here: <http://www.ndp.ca/respect-indigenous-kids-st-210602>. Further explanation relating to the court cases is described in this CTVNews article: <https://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/singh-demands-trudeau-drop-legal-battle-against-first-nations-children-survivors-1.5454745>

⁷ This article is only tangentially related to Canadian politics, although PM Trudeau was mentioned by name in the headline along with US and French Presidents Biden and Macron and German Chancellor Merkel: <https://www.news18.com/news/india/pm-modis-global-approval-ratings-stands-at-66-highest-among-13-world-leaders-3860579>.

⁸ <https://www.nationalobserver.com/2021/06/23/opinion/climate-accountability-bill-c-12-isnt-perfect-has-some-teeth>

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

[APG]

For Public Release

RRM Open Data Analysis

FOR OFFICIAL USE ONLY

1. A Financial Post article on skilled worker emigration from Canada to the U.S.¹⁰ – 13,861 upvotes;
2. An article from a local news outlet on the burning of two Catholic churches in the South Okanagan region of B.C.¹¹ – 13,172 upvotes; and
3. A Global News article on recent polls relating to federal political parties¹² – 11,426 upvotes.

Of the 7,525 submissions in the June collection, the most engaged posts, as measured by user comments, include the following content:

1. The Financial Post article mentioned above about emigration to the U.S. – 4,148 comments;
2. The Global News article mentioned above about recent polls – 3,677 comments; and
3. A Gizmodo article on proposed legislation to impose fines for online hate speech¹³ – 2,290 comments.

Although not reflected in the top submissions by the above engagement metrics, RRM Canada noted that more than 1 in 8 submissions during the month of June related to the discovery of unmarked graves near residential schools, the burning of Churches, and calls to cancel Canada Day and remove various statues. RRM Canada did not observe any indication of coordinated inauthentic behaviour in the spread of this content or discussions surrounding it.

Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and Reddit through BuzzSumo

According to the BuzzSumo analytics platform, the top-shared articles about Canadian politics in June 2021 included the following stories:

1. A Reuters article covering Prime Minister Trudeau calling on the Catholic Church to apologize for its role in running residential schools;¹⁴
2. The India based News18 article on Prime-Minister Modi's approval rateings also observed within our top 3 most shared stories in our Twitter sample;¹⁵ and
3. A Reuters article covering Prime Minister Trudeau's promise to increase efforts to combat far-right hate groups, following an attack that killed four members of a Muslim family in London, Ontario.¹⁶

Analysis of Notable Issues of Potential Foreign Interference

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://financialpost.com/investing/the-u-s-poses-a-serious-threat-of-enticing-canadas-skilled-workers-to-move-south>

¹¹ <https://www.castanet.net/news/Penticton/338248/Two-Catholic-churches-in-Similkameen-region-burned-to-the-ground>

¹² <https://globalnews.ca/news/7991602/ipsos-poll-election-liberals-tories-june/>

¹³ <https://gizmodo.com/canada-to-make-online-hate-speech-a-crime-punishable-by-1847163213>

¹⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/trudeau-says-pope-should-apologize-canadian-soil-churchs-role-residential-2021-06-25/>

¹⁵ As per footnote 7 however BuzzSumo data indicates that this article also received high engagement of Facebook as well as Twitter but almost none on the Reddit platform. This article is only tangentially related to Canadian politics, although PM Trudeau was mentioned by name in the headline along with US and French Presidents Biden and Macron along with German Chancellor Merkel. <https://www.news18.com/news/india/pm-modis-global-approval-ratings-stands-at-66-highest-among-13-world-leaders-3860579>.

¹⁶ <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/canada-will-act-dismantle-far-right-groups-after-muslim-family-attack-trudeau-2021-06-08/>

[APG]

For Public Release

RRM Open Data Analysis

FOR OFFICIAL USE ONLY

Chinese State Media leveraging discovery of unmarked indigenous graves at residential schools

On July 21, the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensics Research (DFR) Lab published an analysis of Chinese officials and state-run media outlets attempting to deflect criticism from ongoing human rights abuses in Xinjian.¹⁷ DFR Lab reports that these officials and media outlets are leveraging the discovery of hundreds of unmarked graves near the sites of several former residential schools in Canada in order to challenge Canada's credibility in calling for a UN investigation into human rights abuses in Xinjiang. Chinese officials have also criticized the U.S. and other countries, citing issues of racism and the death of George Floyd in an attempt to delegitimize the broader international coalition calling for a UN investigation in Xinjiang.¹⁸

While other countries have been the target of Chinese state-run media and diplomatic criticism, Canada has been the most recent focus. Throughout June and into July, DFR Lab observed various Chinese state-run media sites including China Daily, China Global Television Network, Global Times, Xinhua, China Central Television, China News Service, and The People's Daily publish nearly 90 different articles on Canada's record on human rights and indigenous relations. According to DFR Lab, many of the articles published on these sites were then further publicized by Chinese diplomats and officials online. Chinese state-run media outlets in turn quoted these same officials, creating what DFR Lab judges to be a self-perpetuating cycle of narrative promotion.

DFR Lab analysts did not observe any indications of covert amplification or other signs of coordinated inauthentic behaviour in the spread of this content or the online discussions surrounding it. RRM Canada's Twitter sample shows a handful of suspicious accounts¹⁹ spreading and interacting with GlobalTimes' articles on residential schools, including at least one account that has since been suspended by Twitter. Given the low levels of overall engagement with this content, it is extremely unlikely to have had any significant impact on Canadian online discussions. Moreover, a review of posts relating to Indigenous affairs shows what appears to be multi-faceted discussions in our June Twitter and Reddit samples. For example, a word-cloud of the top 100 Twitter hashtags from our June sample, shown below in Figure 1, demonstrates several prominent hashtags related to Indigenous issues in Canada. A manual review of tweets using these hashtags did not reveal any links to any of the Chinese state-run media outlets or Chinese officials. On both Reddit and Twitter, various well-known Canadian and international media outlets covering these issues formed the vast majority of linked content and the broader discussion saw little mention of the situation in Xinjian.

¹⁷ <https://medium.com/dfriab/china-weaponizes-discovery-of-graves-at-canadian-residential-schools-to-avoid-xinjiang-criticism-6bf618a6e954>

¹⁸ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/china-canada-joint-statement-un-china-1.6071184>

¹⁹ RRM Canada observed approximately 15 accounts that were anonymous, generally pro-PRC with no profile picture or a generic background, newly created, or suspended accounts spreading this content. Although suspicious, such small numbers of accounts are extremely unlikely to have impacted online discussions and may be explained by many other reasons.

[APG]

