

## RRM Open Data Analysis

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## Digital Information Ecosystem Report - December 2020

## Findings

- Rapid Response Mechanism (RRM) Canada did not detect significant indicators of foreign interference (FI) in the Canadian digital information ecosystem in December 2020.

## Purpose

This report presents summary findings from research and analysis covering December 2020, aimed at detecting FI in the Canadian digital information ecosystem. It is the first in a series of monthly reports leading up to the 44<sup>th</sup> 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.

## Methodology

The report leverages a combination of in-house and off-the-shelf tools to examine publicly available digital platforms and websites<sup>1</sup> for indicators of foreign interference in December 2020. In total, RRM Canada accessed<sup>2</sup> approximately 1 million posts relating to GE44. RRM Canada's methodology builds on past experience and assesses 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 unprecedented 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.

## December 2020 Baseline

**Overview (Engagement, Activity, Volume):** RRM Canada monitored national and international news coverage discussing Canadian political parties, party leaders and mentions of elections in Canada<sup>3</sup> on the *Cision* platform. In total, RRM Canada identified 142 959 articles relating to Canadian politics or elections. Of those, 71% came from Canadian sources, 17% from US sources, and 2% from sources the platform determined to be India-based. RRM Canada judges that Indian interest in Canadian politics likely stems from remarks made by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on 30 November 2020. The top read articles, according to Cision, all come from the Yahoo news feed.<sup>4</sup> Given our proximity to the US,

<sup>1</sup> 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, from web domains and webpages, and some limited new capabilities on YouTube. Other platforms may limit us from obtaining data or lack commercial/out-of-the-box solutions. RRM Canada also leverages manual, open source investigations and qualitative analysis, as well.

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this monthly, RRM Canada used Netlytic to analyse sample tweets through the following query terms: (#cdnpoli OR "Canadian election" OR #elxn44 OR #election OR "Federal election"), ("Bloc Québécois" OR @yblanchet OR "Yves Blanchet" OR @BlocQuebecois), ("Erin O'Toole" OR "O'Toole" OR "o toole" OR #otoole OR "Conservative Party of Canada" OR "the conservatives" OR @erinotoole OR @CPC\_HQ OR @PCC\_HQ OR "True Blue" OR "Take Back Canada"), (@justintrudeau OR "Trudeau" OR #trudeau OR "Justin Trudeau" OR "Liberal Party of Canada" OR "the liberals" OR @parti\_liberal OR @liberal\_party), ("People's Party of Canada" OR "PPC" OR "Maxime Bernier" OR "Bernier" OR #bernier OR "People's Party" OR @ppopulaireca OR @peoplespc OR @MaximeBernier), (@theJagmeetSingh OR "Jagmeet Singh" OR "Jagmeet" OR "New Democratic Party" OR "NDP" OR @NDP OR @NPD\_QG), (@AnnemiePaul OR "Annemie Paul" OR "Green Party of Canada" OR "Green Party" OR @CanadianGreens).

<sup>3</sup> Cisions sampling and data processing methodologies are somewhat opaque to RRM Canada's analysts, these metrics appear unremarkable and do not point to any indications of FI in within the search terms used in this collection

<sup>4</sup> This is not surprising given Yahoo News acts as a news aggregator, populating its site with articles from various sources.

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significant Canada-related news coverage is to be expected. The bulk of all articles detected on Cision were shared on the following social media platforms: Facebook, Reddit and Twitter.

**Themes and Narratives:** RRM Canada sought to obtain a baseline for the top themes from stories shared on social media broadly, as it relates to the Canadian digital information ecosystem for the month of December.<sup>5</sup> These top themes were:

- Covid-19 vaccines, including details on roll out, use, and speed.<sup>6</sup>
- The rise of new variant strains of Covid-19, in particular originating from the United Kingdom.<sup>7</sup>
- Trade relations and border closures, including between United Kingdom and the United States.

Top themes on Twitter<sup>8</sup> relating to Canadian politics included the following: Canada-China relations; social justice issues related to democracy as well as economic and social justice; protests; and US political activities.

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 major themes identified above. Those issues that met RRM Canada's threshold requiring deeper analysis based on primary assessment were: 1) criticism of Canada's politics in the Indian online information sub-ecosystem, and 2) Peoples' Liberation Army winter training in Canada.

### Analysis of Notable Issues of Potential Foreign Interference

#### *India Farmer Protest and Indian Information Ecosystem<sup>9</sup>*

On November 30, 2020, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau made comments expressing concern for Indian farmers, primarily from the Indian state of Punjab, who had travelled to Delhi, to protest Indian government farm reforms.<sup>10</sup> Following these comments, RRM Canada observed an increase in the level of interest for Canada in the Indian news ecosystem with various sources publishing negative stories about Prime Minister Trudeau and Canadian politics. RRM Canada observed Indian news media publish articles critical of PM Trudeau and the Liberal government, including, in some cases, false or misleading narratives about the following subjects:

<sup>5</sup> RRM Canada employed a mixed method approach, including searching for news articles referencing 'Canada' that acquired the highest number of social media engagements across major social-media platforms. This included the use of Buzzsumo and in-house tools to examine sharing of content across social media platforms to determine key themes for the month of December.

<sup>6</sup> Sample stories include: "Health Canada approves Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine", "Personal support worker becomes first Ontarian to get dose of COVID-19 vaccine", "Trudeau says 249,000 vaccine doses to arrive in Canada by the end of the year".

<sup>7</sup> Sample stories include: "Britain cut off by Canada and others as new Covid strain Spreads", "Canada PM Trudeau indicates U.S. border restrictions to last a long time", "Canada halts flights from U.K in response to new coronavirus strain".

<sup>8</sup> RRM Canada currently acquires a sample of tweets from Twitter's REST API v1.1 that meet its search criteria. This is not an exhaustive collection of all tweets meeting the search criteria but is understood to be a representative sample of a broader conversation on Twitter. The top five links shared on Twitter related to Canada included: <https://twitter.com/TajinderBagga/status/1333741421384278016/video/1>; <https://twitter.com/AOC/status/1334330687797792768/video/1>; <https://twitter.com/TrulyMonica/status/1341242869097484288/photo/1>;

<sup>9</sup> RRM Canada notes that our analysts are less familiar with non-western digital information ecosystems including India's – this is a potential vulnerability that could be exploited by foreign threat actors to shape opinions among diaspora audiences within Canada. Given the increased interest of Indian news media sources in Canada and Canadian politics, RRM Canada will continue to monitor this information ecosystem for signs of covert influence campaigns targeting Canadian or other global diaspora audiences.

<sup>10</sup> See: <https://www.reuters.com/article/india-canada/india-formally-protests-to-canada-over-trudeau-remarks-on-farm-protests-idUSKBN28E1AD>

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- PM Trudeau's 2018 visit to India;
- Canadian "vote banks" politics attempting to appeal to Sikh/Punjabi diaspora;
- Depicting PM Trudeau as a sympathizer to Khalistani separatists;
- Canada as an overall hub for terrorists;
- Canada-China relations (including recent PLA story); and,
- COVID-19 related federal spending and perceived misuse of public funds.<sup>11</sup>

In monitoring key political issues likely to play out during the Canadian elections, it is our assessment that (Canadian) discussions around these topics may be vulnerabilities that could be exploitable by foreign hostile actors, particularly those targeting diaspora communities.

Supplementing open source investigation and qualitative analysis, RRM Canada conducted a large-scale analysis of nearly 600 websites and more than 1800 webpages discussing the PM's remarks regarding the ongoing protest in India in order to monitor for any suspicious activity that would indicate covert foreign information operations.<sup>12</sup> RRM Canada identified 34 websites that consistently published stories critical of Canada. Of these websites, *TheWire.in* and *HindustanTimes.com* ranked among the most referenced websites (2.5%) in the larger collection alongside established sources like *NPR.org* and *NYTimes.com*. Indian articles referencing Canada performed on average slightly better than other stories shared during the month of December.<sup>13</sup> **RRM Canada did not observe any significant indicators of foreign interference, such as inauthentic coordination, amplification or dissemination of content, targeting the Canadian digital information ecosystem.**

### ***People's Liberation Army Winter Training in Canada***

On December 9, 2020, The Globe and Mail published an article on the controversy surrounding the China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) military exercises in Canada.<sup>14</sup> This story subsequently circulated online including on YouTube. RRM Canada, using open source investigation and experimental tools leveraging YouTube's recommendation algorithm, tried to determine the spread of false or misleading narratives and signs of potential artificial amplification and coordination of videos on the PLA story.<sup>15 16</sup>

<sup>11</sup>See: <https://www.wionews.com/india-news/why-justin-trudeaus-trip-to-india-in-2018-turned-out-to-be-a-diplomatic-fiasco-346771>;  
<https://ifenewsnetwork.com/india-slams-canadian-pm-justin-trudeaus-idiotic-comments-on-indian-internal-issues/>;  
<https://tfiglobalnews.com/2020/12/01/justin-trudeau-interferes-in-indias-internal-affairs-tries-to-appease-khalistani-elements-again/>.

<sup>12</sup> Websites were collected using Google's API on the week of December 21<sup>st</sup> and the sample was increased by collecting all webpages that referred to or were referred by the previously collected websites.

<sup>13</sup> Articles by *TheWire.in* concerning Canada received in average 1300 social media share compared to 1200 for their other content (1530 articles for the month of December).

<sup>14</sup>See: <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/politics/article-global-affairs-objected-to-canadian-military-decision-to-cancel/>

<sup>15</sup> RRM Canada used the following query terms: "PLA" and "Canada" for its initial collection. The purpose of analysing the sample of 14 videos was to determine the spread of potential information manipulation within parts of the YouTube ecosystem, based on the recommendation algorithm.

<sup>16</sup> Past instances of disinformation and artificial amplification of false and misleading narratives in the Chinese information space inform RRM Canada's research and analytical approach. YouTube has been identified as a vector of foreign disinformation in various reports by partner organisations, see : [https://public-assets.graphika.com/reports/Graphika\\_Report\\_Spamouflage\\_Returns.pdf](https://public-assets.graphika.com/reports/Graphika_Report_Spamouflage_Returns.pdf); <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/reply-all-inauthenticity-and-coordinated-replying-in-pro-chinese-communist-party-twitter-networks/>. It is worth noting that YouTube remains understudied by RRM Canada compared to other platforms.

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RRM Canada's analysis uncovered a total of 421 YouTube videos related to the PLA's military exercises in Canada. The dataset of YouTube videos predominantly indicate user accounts are directed towards established Canadian, US, or European based news sources such as CBCnews, Globalnews, CTVNews, DWNews, or PBS News Hour.<sup>17</sup> No known Chinese government media sources were observed within this collection. While the bulk of this data was produced by established western sources, RRM Canada observed two news sources from India reporting on the PLA controversy and directing criticism towards PM Trudeau.<sup>18</sup> Analysts also found one channel producing ideologically driven content likely by and for US audiences, and another systematically republishing videos from the Indian news channel Wion.

Separately, RRM Canada did identify relevant and notable anomalies regarding PLA activities in Canada in its broader monitoring of the Canadian digital information ecosystem.<sup>19</sup> RRM Canada notes that the most widely spread link that includes the word 'Canada' in its title is a Youtube video from a closed account titled 'Fighterjet F16 downed by Chinese Troops in Canada #Invasion to Honduran Carvan,China Flooding' (all errors in title). This video appeared on December 12, three days after the Globe and Mail published a story about the People's Liberation Army of China conducting exercises in Canada. Buzzsumo and CrowdTangle data indicates that this link was shared between 4.2 million and 5.0 million times on Facebook, nearly entirely on private pages and in private groups.<sup>20</sup> **RRM Canada did not observe any significant indicators of foreign interference, such as inauthentic coordination, amplification or dissemination of content, targeting the Canadian digital information ecosystem.**

**Next Steps**

RRM Canada will continue to explore the evolution of issues highlighted in this report, as well as emerging threats and vulnerabilities for information manipulation that have the potential to be exploited by hostile foreign actors.

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<sup>17</sup> In the analysed sample of YouTube videos, 30% of the suggested videos, redirected user accounts towards established news sources.

<sup>18</sup> Stories Include: "Trudeau wanted to give Chinese PLA an edge over India. Canadian military foiled his plan" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qF94X3Vd5UA>, "The Trudeau Government wanted the PLA to train in Canada" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YUMpoBBq9dE>.

<sup>19</sup> RRM Canada searched for the term 'Canada' with sites that end in .ca brings back thematically similar results and identify key themes, trends and anomalies in articles produced in the month of December.

<sup>20</sup> RRM Canada does not have access to internal Facebook data and cannot independently verify the metrics. Large volumes of engagements exclusively on Facebook can be an indicator of an error in the metrics or an example of inauthentic activity.

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