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G7 RRM CANADAOPEN DATA ANALYSIS REPORT¹

DIGITAL MEDIA TRENDS FOR APRIL 2019

Key Findings

G7 Rapid Response Mechanism Canada (RRM Canada) assesses that there were very likely **no significant foreign interference campaigns** targeting the Canadian elections in the online space in April 2019. However, RRM Canada:

- Notes a near 50% increase in alt- and far-right media sources shared² in social media posts in April compared to March. Posts from these sources echoed anti-immigrant sentiment, as well as general dissatisfaction at perceived government incompetence and corruption in Canada.
- Despite the increase in shares of alt- and far-right media sources, the vast majority of the controversy on social media related to the federal elections focused on the federal carbon tax and SNC Lavalin story. Although exploitable by foreign actors, the discussion appears domestic in origin.

[1] RRM Canada 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. In total, RRM Canada collected approximately 2.7 million posts relating to the 2019 federal elections in the month of April. This is similar to the 2.9 million posts observed in March.

April Key Cases

Increased Prevalence of Alt- and Far-Right Media

[2] RRM Canada observed a near 50% spike in alt- and far-right media sources shared during the month of April compared to our March data collection.

[3] The Post Millennial (www.thepostmillennial.com) domain³ saw a jump from 9,656 to 14,226 shares. This site carried a range of stories focusing on SNC Lavalin, floods in Ontario, and the federal carbon tax, which came into effect for large parts of Canada in April. RRM Canada notes that, although considered an alternative news source biased in favour of conservative and libertarian positions, the Post Millennial is generally factual in its reports.⁴ Although not considered extremist, increases in the popularity of this news source could possibly indicate a rejection of established media sources. Increased popularity of explicitly biased news sources may also be an indicator of increased social polarization. Increased social polarization and rejection of established media are vulnerabilities previously exploited for foreign interference purposes.⁵

[4] Articles from the anti-immigration Cultural Action Party for Canada (www.CapforCanada.com) domain were shared 12,545 times during the month of April compared to 8,631 times in March. The far-right message board 8 Chan (8ch.net) saw posts containing the names of Canadian politicians and/or parties increase by 46% from 9,958 posts in March to 14,602 in April. Posts from these sources mostly focused on immigration and Canada's foreign aid priorities. While the Cultural Action Party for Canada is not necessarily extremist, they are a source of false or

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 "Shared" is a term that generally refers to when users include an image, a link to an article or other content within their social media posts.

³ Within this report, domain names refer to a website's home address. Individual articles hosted on a website are usually delineated by a slash following the domain name. i.e. "www.thepostmillennial.com" is the domain whereas "www.thepostmillennial.com/newsstory" is a link to an article on that domain.

⁴ <https://mediabiasfactcheck.com/the-post-millennial/>

⁵ <https://www.newknowledge.com/articles/the-disinformation-report/>

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misleading information regarding immigration and current government policies.⁶ 8 Chan is a message board and internet forum known to host hate groups and discussions which actively call for violence against minorities. This was most visible in hosting the manifesto of the 15 March 2019 Christchurch Mosque attacker, among other race motivated mass shooters.⁷ Recent news stories reveal that Kremlin linked actors may have sought to exploit and exasperate racial divisions to foment violence within the United States.⁸ Despite the history of this source, **RRM Canada did not observe posts from this source calling for violence in any Canadian context.**

[5] As a baseline, mainstream news sites mostly saw no significant increases in shares on social media between March and April 2019. For comparison, Global News had approximately 50K shares, Toronto Sun 42.5K shares, Globe and Mail 33K shares, and CTV News approximately 25K shares. Only the foreign media source The Guardian (www.theguardian.com) saw an increase of 44%, jumping from 21K to 30K shares on social media. Shared articles from the Guardian were mostly based on continued coverage of the SNC Lavalin story.

[6] Despite carrying stories related to Canada, immigration and SNC Lavalin, Russian state media was not widely shared or discussed in social media discussions related to the Canadian federal elections. Of note, the bulk of Russian media coverage of SNC Lavalin was on the Sputnik News France site (fr.sputniknews.com). As no sharing of these stories was observed within our collection, RRM Canada assesses with moderate confidence this was done in a failed attempt to target French speaking Canadians. **Moreover, RRM Canada did not observe any widespread or coordinated attempts to amplify either Russian state or any other media** during the month of April. As such, RRM Canada assesses with high confidence that the spike in alt- and far-right content was domestic in nature.

Potentially Divisive Topics in the Canadian Digital Landscape

[7] The exploitation of socially divisive issues continues to be a known Kremlin tactic observed across democracies and now increasingly focuses on leveraging domestic voices.⁹ Reports indicate that the recent European Union elections did not see coordinated disinformation campaigns linked to Russia¹⁰; however, transnational far-right disinformation networks are emerging.¹¹ At this time, RRM Canada does not assess April's spike in far right content as related to either the Kremlin or transnational European far-right networks.

[8] Figure 1 (below) is an analysis of topics and subtopics discussed within the Canadian digital landscape during the month of April. This topic analysis is based on machine topic classification of a random sample of 300K posts from our April collection. Within this data, the topics of SNC Lavalin and carbon tax appear to be the most discussed and controversial subjects that may be exploited by a foreign actor or transnational far-right network. At this time, discussions related to these topics appear to have domestic points of origin.

⁶ Although often misleading, RRM Canada has not observed this site call for violence or discrimination against minorities. As such, they are not considered extremist. Several sites have debunked stories from this source; however, a quick glance at the homepage is indicative of the kind of articles they publish. <https://capforcanada.com/>

⁷ <https://www.vox.com/recode/2019/5/3/18527214/8chan-poway-synagogue-shooting-christchurch-john-earnest>

⁸ <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/russian-documents-reveal-desire-sow-racial-discord-violence-u-s-n1008051>

⁹ <https://www.poynter.org/fact-checking/2019/how-russias-disinformation-strategy-is-evolving/>

¹⁰ <https://qz.com/1625142/eu-elections-2019-even-russia-isnt-interested/>

¹¹ <https://www.dw.com/en/vast-far-right-disinformation-networks-discovered-in-eu/a-48823382>

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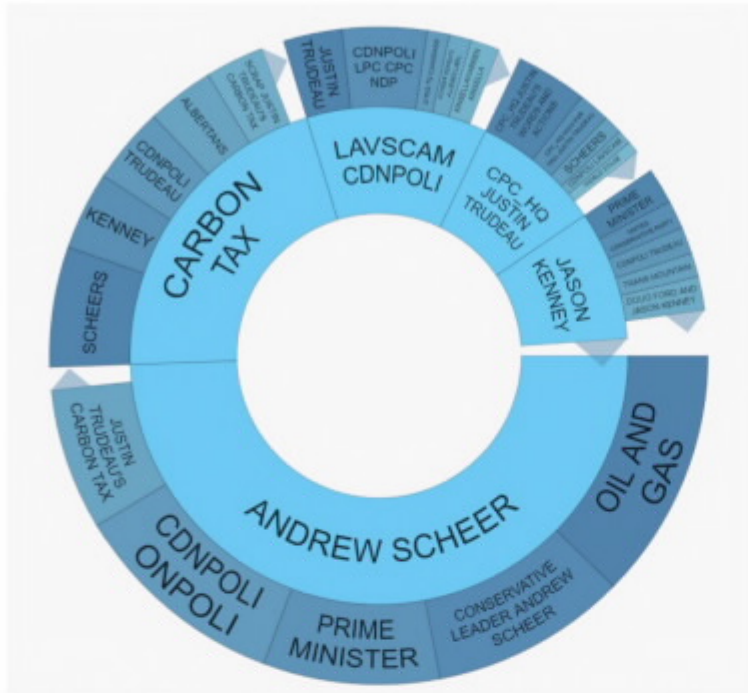


Figure 1: Canadian Politics Topic Wheel. The central circle (light blue) illustrates the most mentioned topics discussed in the Canadian digital landscape in April 2019. The outer circle (dark blue) breaks down the most mentioned topics into more specific subjects of conversation. For April, Conservative Party leader Andrew Scheer featured prominently. This was because his name was mentioned along with topics such as the federal carbon tax and topics related to the Prime Minister. This does not indicate positive or negative sentiment or popularity. Metrics about specific politicians and/or parties are not collected or analyzed by RRM Canada.

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