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Russia used state-funded propaganda outlet to whip up support for the 'Freedom Convoy' and undermine the Trudeau government

By Caroline Orr | Analysis | February 10th 2023



Illustration by Caroline Orr for Canada's National Observer

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Homegrown protesters who participated in Canada's "Freedom Convoy" last year had no idea, but Russia used a state-funded propaganda outlet in an effort to exploit their grievances, amplify social divisions and delegitimize the Trudeau government. The convoy's three-week occupation of downtown Ottawa clogged the capital and prompted the government to invoke the Emergencies Act before police cleared the blockades.

It's hard to say how successful the Russian propaganda campaign was, but for the first time, we can see how it operated.

Russian state-funded propaganda outlet RT (formerly Russia Today), which has been called an "information weapon" by its own editor-in-chief, produced a higher volume of convoy-related coverage than any other international media outlet. Fox News stepped up to produce the second-highest amount of coverage just as Russian propaganda decreased.

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The RT site describes the outlet as a global TV news network providing news “overlooked by mainstream media,” current affairs and documentaries featuring “alternative” perspectives and acquainting international audiences with a Russian viewpoint on major global events. Despite RT’s description of its coverage, the “alternative” perspectives it offers are actually just news-like productions of Russia’s foreign policy goals and interests, according to the U.S. State Department.

As part of its coverage, RT sent correspondents to do on-the-ground reporting in Canada, which mostly consisted of interviews with convoy organizers and supporters. The sympathetic coverage and “exclusive” interviews with convoy participants cultivated support for the convoy, and as a result, RT’s coverage was shared relatively widely on social media by Canadian supporters. Connecting with domestic influencers and encouraging them to share foreign propaganda is a known tactic associated with foreign influence campaigns. It’s also a way to make foreign propaganda appear more legitimate to local audiences.

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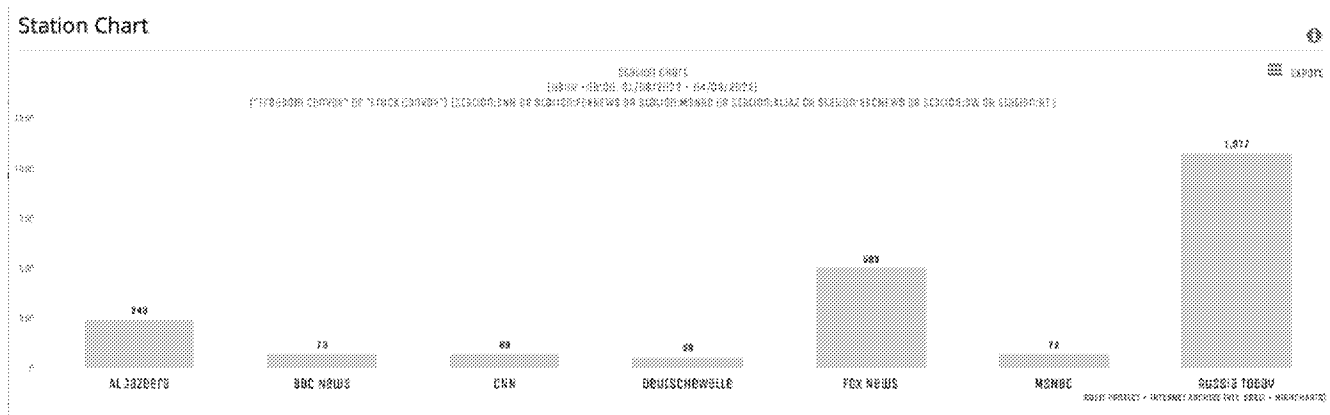
As the U.S. Department of State explains, outlets like RT disguise themselves as conventional media outlets to provide “disinformation and propaganda support for the Kremlin’s foreign policy objectives.”

It is well documented that Russia tries to exploit domestic protest movements in an attempt to destabilize western democracies. It has been caught using a variety of tactics: providing support for certain politicians and political groups, starting local activist groups, even organizing rallies as it did south of the border, promoting Black Lives Matter and Blue Lives Matter rallies on Facebook. Propagandists conspired to infiltrate BLM groups – for example, in one case, they insinuated themselves into a Baltimore group, contacting local activists who pretty quickly figured out that something was wrong. Russia has also produced and amplified media reports, created deceptive social media personas and more. Russian operatives have been known to work both sides of divisive issues by providing support for protesters while also inciting violence against them.

Russian propaganda outlet provided more coverage of the convoy than any other international media outlet

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My analysis showed Russian state-funded propaganda outlet RT devoted extensive coverage to the truck convoy, both online and on television. Using Google Jigsaw's Global Database of Events, Language and Tone (GDELT), I analyzed trends in convoy-related television coverage across seven international media outlets: Al Jazeera, BBC News, CNN, DW, Fox News, MSNBC and RT. The study found RT spent more time covering the convoy than any other international media outlet and had a higher raw volume and percentage of convoy-related coverage than nearly all other international media outlets combined. Fox News had the second-highest volume of convoy-related coverage, but it didn't even reach half the volume of RT.



Overall coverage volume, as measured by mentions of the keywords "Freedom Convoy" or "Truck Convoy" per 15-second interval of airtime, across seven international media outlets from 1/8/2022 through 04/08/22. RT had a higher raw volume and higher percentage of convoy coverage than almost all other stations combined. (Data Source: GDELT)

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Looking at convoy-related coverage over time, the study found RT was the first international media outlet to refer to the truck convoy in its on-air coverage, with the volume of coverage reaching its highest point on Feb. 13, 2022. RT's early dominance of international convoy-related television coverage is important because it likely allowed RT to set the tone and influence of other coverage.

In addition to television, Russian state media also produced a significant amount of online content related to the truck convoy — the site RT.com alone published more than 250 articles. That's just a baseline figure, as it's likely RT also published additional articles about the convoy that did not contain the specific key phrases used in the search. Most of this coverage was supportive of the truck convoy and critical of the Canadian government and/or specific Canadian politicians, particularly Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. The dominant themes covered by RT included police intervention, fundraisers, the Emergencies Act, cryptocurrency and civil unrest. The tone of coverage emphasized clashes between protesters and police, framed the protesters as victims of an aggressive government and amplified divisions along political/ideological lines. One former RT employee described this style as “anything that causes chaos.”

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This is just the first in a three-part series from Caroline Orr covering Russia's involvement in the truck convoy. Stay tuned for the second part, it's a doozy. If you want to get notified when part two comes out, sign up for updates on this page

It is unclear how many people were actually reached by RT's coverage of the convoy, as RT's own estimates of its viewership are known to be exaggerated, and the share of the population that sees RT each month varies widely by country. However, as the Nieman Lab put it in a 2022 report, "RT doesn't need a huge audience to be influential — only the right one." Furthermore, as stated above, RT should not be viewed as an isolated entity, but rather as one part of a complex disinformation ecosystem with roots that trace back to the Russian government and intelligence agencies.

Critical, independent, Canadian media is disappearing. We need your financial support to continue producing fearless journalism that helps us break important stories on disinformation in our national dialogue, hold corporations and politicians accountable, and produce in-depth reporting to make sense of Canada's changing climate. Will you support critical journalism and become an annual subscriber for only \$99.99?

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Note: This article is based on Caroline Orr Bueno's research published as "Russia's Role in the Far-Right Truck Convoy: An analysis of Russian state media activity related to the 2022 Freedom Convoy" in The Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare.

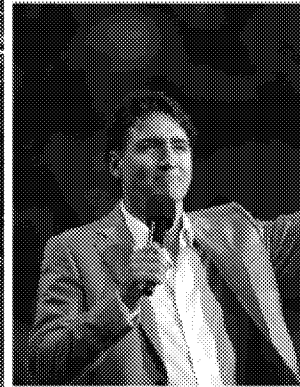
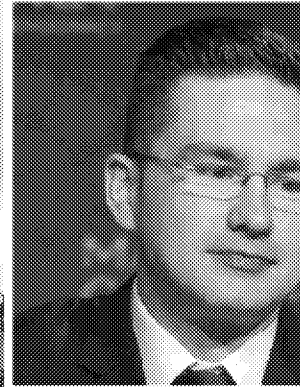
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Les Hicks | a year ago

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Wow, this has to be the most one-sided article I've seen on Canada's National Observer. I have to presume that the author is a spokesperson/apologist for the US government. Her statements like : "Despite RT's description of its coverage, the "alternative" perspectives it offers are actually just news-like productions of Russia's foreign policy goals and interests, according to the U.S. State Department." and ""As the U.S. Department of State explains, outlets like RT disguise themselves as conventional media outlets to provide "disinformation and propaganda support for the Kremlin's foreign policy objectives."" rely on information sources provided by the US State Department, that bastion of truth telling (yeah, right!).

Has Ms. Orr heard of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Voice of America, and Alhurra, all of which spread American biased propaganda to Europe and Asia and are American broadcasters under the control of the US government's International Broadcasting Bureau. As well, for a historical perspective, During the Cold War, the United States ran covert propaganda campaigns in countries that appeared (to the US) likely to become Soviet satellites, such as Italy, Afghanistan, and Chile.[41] According to the Church Committee report, US agencies ran a "massive propaganda campaign" on Chile, where over 700 news items placed in American and European media resulted from CIA activities in a six-weeks period alone. When the US's 9/11 happened, nobody seemed to remember Chile's 9/11 , the US backed military coup begun on Sept 11, 1973, that overthrew the democratically elected socialist government of Salvador Allende, leading to the dictatorship of the US backed general Augusto Pinochet. During Pinochet's rule, thousands of Chileans (and also some American citizens) were disappeared and murdered by his regime with the full backing of the American Government.

Here in Canada the US government directly interfered in our 1963 election by covertly sending one of it's premier electioneering consultants to assist Pearson's Liberal Party in it's campaign and win over Diefenbaker's Conservative government. The reason? - Kennedy hated Diefenbaker, partly due to Diefenbaker's refusal to allow the US to place nuclear warheads on Canadian missiles. Pearson, in a clandestine visit to the US to consult with Kennedy, agreed to the US demands and after the election nuclear warheads were indeed installed on our missiles. This is the type of new item that you will not find in the mainstream media and is the type

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In 2006, The Pentagon announced the creation of a new unit aimed at spreading propaganda about supposedly "inaccurate" stories being spread about the Iraq War. These "inaccuracies" have been blamed on the enemy trying to decrease support for the war. Donald Rumsfeld has been quoted as saying "these stories are something that keeps him up at night". One of the propaganda items that the US spread, as told by Colin Powell in a United Nations speech, was the outright lie that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction that were an imminent danger to the US. Powell gave this speech when he, and the rest of the leaders of the US government, knew that this was a lie. The result of this American propaganda? - the deaths of 50 odd thousand American troops and anywhere from half a million to a million Iraqi civilian deaths.

Let's remember that the US government has persecuted many whistleblowers and journalists who provided the public with the truth of the US's lies about just about everything. Edward Snowden is still stuck in exile in Russia after revealing the US government's increased spying program (Prism) on it's own citizens. Chelsea Manning faced years in prison for her releasing to Wikileaks the proof of American war crimes in Iraq. Wikileaks founder and publisher Julian Assange has been held in solitary confinement in a super max prison in England for several years while awaiting the results of British legal deliberations as to whether he could be extradited to the US to face a possible 175 year prison sentence, all for the crime of publishing Manning's evidence of the US government's disgusting war crimes.

Before RT America was forced to shut down due to the US government's pressure, it was one of the few sources of independant news analysis from the likes of journalists like Chris Hedges & Abby Martin, and political commentators like George Galloway, the former British Labour MP. These and other commentators were allowed to provide alternative views on news items that couldn't be found in the mainstream media and they were effective in countering the multitude of lies spread by the US and other western governments.

I am beginning to become more and more disappointed and disgusted with Canada's National Observer's one sided news analysis stories that it has run lately. I expected more of this media outlet when I first started supporting it financially and

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Chris Hedges is so full of shit, it runs out of his ears.

Les Hicks | a year ago

Would you care to explain exactly why Chris Hedges is full of s***?

Alex Botta | a year ago

You seem to be accusing most media, even some independent outlets, of being one sided. Yet your commentary is as one sided as one can get: anti-American.

Of course, the USA has committed great sins. No secret there. But you are coming across as being pro-Putin. Ignore Russia's sins (including constant streaming of lies and barbaric war crimes) at the peril of your credibility.

In my view, it's the role of independent media to call ALL nations on their manipulative tactics, propaganda and human rights abuses, including Canada, the USA, Russia, China, Iran, etc. etc. etc.

Les Hicks | a year ago

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I agree that independent media should provide critical, unbiased news and analysis, but in this case the author was quoting the U.S. State Department as her sources - the same department that has been guilty of prolific lies resulting in military coups and wars in many countries throughout the world. If the National Observer is going to print this type of biased analysis it should also include analysis by commentators not relying strictly on official US propaganda outlets like the State Department. Anti-US? - I would describe it more as anti-US government foreign policy, not anti American general public, many of whom are also very critical of their nation's historical and current interference in the internal politics of other nations. There's a difference between criticizing a nation's government and criticizing it's citizens. Your argument is comparable to AIPAC's labelling anyone who criticizes the apartheid government of Israel as being anti-semitic. There are many members of the American Jewish community who are extremely critical of the Israeli government's policies (and the American government's policies as well).

Alex Botta | a year ago

The topic is Russian propaganda. Not a peep about that in your commentary. If the article was on US or Israeli propaganda, then your comments are in the realm of invited debate. Omitting Russia from your narrative on a piece focused exclusively on RT media is, in some minds, a deflection, an effort to change the subject and an expression of support at one level or another for Russia.

Please say it isn't so.

Dennis Hoberg | a year ago

Seems some are confused. The article is about the manipulation of freedom convoy organizers, participants and the politicians willing to

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Colleen Fuller | a year ago

"...according to the U.S. State Department." "As the U.S. Department of State explains..." Really? I am really stunned the National Observer would publish this kind of diversionary crap. Stunned and super disappointed. After claiming that RT coverage "cultivated support for the convoy" the author admits that "It is unclear how many people were actually reached by RT's coverage of the convoy..." Who is the one shoving propaganda down our throats here?

Ray Weleschuk | a year ago

Russia has RT. Canada has CBC to provide copy and paste material to rest of the Liberal funded creative writers (refuse to call them Journalists). NO included. Let the name calling begin from Trudeau supporters.

Alex Botta | a year ago

So, Ian Hanomansing, Adrienne Arseneault, Rosemary Barton and regular guest Andrew Coyne are actively infiltrating other nations and Canadian media to spread left wing anti-government propaganda, lies and conspiracy theories? Bit of a stretch there, and slightly hard to pin Coyne down as a mouthpiece for Trudeau.

Moreover, the CBC ad revenue prevents them from dissing the private sector more than any other mainstream media outlet, which kinda defeats the stated purpose of the CBC having to practice deeper investigative journalism not tied to vested interests. A small exception can be made for Marketplace, even though it's mainly about consumerism. The CBC is now almost indistinguishable from CTV and Global. The BBC is also watered down compared to decades past, but at least it's got an ad-free 24 / 7 world-wide news service and some decent

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In fact, the anti-Trudeau / Liberal talking point is now a copy / paste and much parroted line I regularly see in comment sections of many Canadian media outlets. Who needs online bots when you've got so many brainwashed, semi-literate minions following the right wing script?

All of that ignores the question, Why the hell is a major mouthpiece for Putin so interested in anything that goes on in Ottawa if they didn't have an ulterior motive to sow discord in a G7 democracy? Most of the world out there is really not that interested in Canada. Millions change the channel to Kardashian Inc. and Tic Tok dance videos.

Dennis Hoberg | a year ago

Agree Alex. Also 10 or more of past years Harpers appointed 7 of the 9 CBC directors have held sway in setting standards.

Betsy Cornwell | a year ago

I wouldn't be so sure that protesters had no idea they were being supported by Russian propaganda. It is quite likely that many of the Canadian donors knew or suspected the Russians were involved and that many of the convoy "leaders" were in on the "joke".

Janine Harris-W... | a year ago

This should be no surprise. Follow the money and asks who benefits most. The people who most benefit from disruptive disinformation campaigns like Brexit, the "Freedom" Convoy, and January 6 are not the poor schmucks who were conned into supporting them. Who benefits most when members of NATO are distracted and destabilized by fringe elements within their own borders?

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You're talking about NATO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, that was created in the late forties to counter the supposed threat of expansion of the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, at which time the US government promised Gorbachev that after the unification of East and West Germany, NATO would not expand any further eastward towards Russia's border - a promise that was almost immediately broken. Can you explain to me why NATO continued as an entity when it's reason for being was no longer relevant? Are you aware that NATO (including Canada) was guilty of the crime of international aggression when it bombed civilians in Yugoslavia and Libya, neither of which campaign was approved of by the U.N.? The hypocrisy in the international news reporting that we receive from the mainstream media outlets is astounding to witness. This is why it is important to seek out various sources of news and analysis to try to gain a true understanding of what is happening here in our own country and around the globe.

Robert Broughton | a year ago

You're talking nonsense.

Alex Botta | a year ago

Indeed.

Alex Botta | a year ago

Well, here's a couple more for you:

The Holodomor genocide (4 million Ukrainians died in that artificial famine), and today's propagandized infatuation with Stalin in Russia. Thirty million people dead by the rule of one man.

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And Putin's written promise not to invade Ukraine when Ukraine sent all its nukes and major collection of weapons to Russia after the breakup of the USSR. A couple of decades later and here we are, 87,000 civilians murdered in Mariupol alone, and the Russian trademark method of conquest by reducing cities to piles of rubble after lying about liberating them from Nazis, Satan or Godzilla.

Putin doesn't even have a silly little Neville Chamberlin moustache to laugh at.

As for NATO, you are once again deleting a vital piece of information: No one forced any nation to join NATO. They applied for membership voluntarily, and they did so with the approval of their own people after being oppressed by Moscow under USSR rule for so long. No wonder Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania and the Baltic states are Ukraine's best friends in the world today.

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