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Information Trolls vs Democracy: An examination of disinformation content delivered during the 2019 Canadian Federal Election

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Published on: Jan 11, 2021

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Abstract

This research explores the role of fake news content delivered during the 2019 Canadian Federal election. The aim of this study is to explore the methods and techniques utilized by the perpetrators of fake news in the construction of false information pieces. This research also seeks to examine whether the disinformation discovered during the election falls within the realm of criminal interference. In conducting a qualitative content analysis of 20 articles published by *The Buffalo Chronicle* within the six-month period leading up to the election, this research finds that there are two specific techniques utilized to manipulate the reader: 1) the inclusion of trigger topics and 2) the use of true facts used in combination with unverifiable for false facts. This research further also contends that there is evidence to suggest that there was suspected foreign interference at play.

Introduction

Social media platforms have become an increasingly embedded and useful tools utilized by many individuals, groups, businesses, agencies and political parties to circulate information delivery. Through social media, we are able to connect with friends and family, stay up to date on the latest products and gadgets, engage in conversation with others, and maintain an updated knowledge on local, national, and global events. This evolving technology has the ability to connect people through rapid dissemination of information. Previous communication tools are still commonly used, but they cannot compete with the streamlined capabilities that social media platforms possess in the distribution of information. Social media platforms can be beneficial to bridge the geographical gaps that can hinder social cohesion; yet, it is the very same technology that can be accessory to social divisiveness. The nature of the content that is being shared and circulated can have significant consequences for the people who consume the material.

The main focus of this research is to explore the nature and scope of fake news, the techniques and mechanisms used to create and deploy false information pieces, to understand how disinformation may influence a reader, and whether any of the actions involved in the distribution of false information crosses the border into criminal activity. *The Buffalo Chronicle* quickly became an issue of concern during the time of the 2019 Canadian Federal Election as viral stories with minimal or zero factual basis were quickly becoming widespread on social media platforms (Oved, Lytvynenko, & Silverman, 2019, Oct 18). Through employing a qualitative content analysis of articles

published by *The Buffalo Chronicle*, the methods used in the construction of the false information pieces can be examined and analyzed. Through this examination, the scope, target, and purpose of the article can be inferred which may be useful in the development of future counter-measures to disinformation.

Literature Review

As media consumers engage with an endless stream of information, the ability to infer the accuracy, quality, and legitimacy of the messages delivered to them can become more burdensome. Social media platforms occupy a unique role due the constant presentation of social engagement materials delivered to the user. As the users become overloaded with information, the risk of accepting false information as real becomes higher. There is a level of dangerousness posed when false information is accepted as factual by the consumer and is then used to guide their political decisions. Social media has become a tool used by many to find and access important information related to democratic elections. The evolving reliance on social networks has led to the conception of 'cyber-ghettos' which are conceived in a realm of social media where fake news content fills the void when reliable news content is inaccessible or unavailable (Kumar & Krishna, 2014). Cyber-ghettos exist when sectors of cyber space serve as an echo chamber where information, views, and opinions are propagated amongst those who hold similar ideologies. This results in limited access and exposure to alternative perspectives (Kumar & Krishna, 2014).

Bakir and McStay (2018) discuss the dangers of echo chambers. The authors note that a key tenant of functional democracy is that the citizens must be well-informed in order to make democratic decisions. An ill-informed citizen who is guided by fake news may vote differently in elections as their inspiration is directed by unreliable facts. Citizens form their decisions about key social and democratic issues through the information they interact with. Far-reaching deceptive facts delivered through fake news can significantly impact democratic outcomes. Echo chambers then serve as a silo where incorrect information is further propagated and circulated, but not corrected. This causes the ill-informed citizen to remain in the dark as their view based on dubious facts remain unrevised. A key tool necessary in the creation of echo chambers, as noted by Bakir and McStay (2018), are the algorithms applied to online networks. Algorithms are applied to newsfeeds and they selectively determine, based on the data inputted into the algorithm, what kind of content a user is likely inclined to appreciate viewing. Algorithms consider the information that is available about the user which can include their friends and followers, their browsing history, purchases

that they have made, and the types of content they typically post and engage with. Algorithms can increase the possibility of confirmation bias as they further re-circulate the same views that the user appears to favour without providing other potential perspectives or counter information (Bakir & McStay, 2018).

To better situate this research, it is important to engage with relevant literature that examines the implications of misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda and how fake news fits within this discourse. While they are not synonymous terms, misinformation, disinformation, propaganda, and fake news. all share very similar attributes; however, it is their differences that distinctly define them. Misinformation is considered to be information that is introduced as accurate information, but it is later discovered as being inaccurate; disinformation is deceptive and untrue information which is purposefully distributed as propaganda (Lewandowsky, Stritzke, Freund, Oberauer, & Krueger, 2013). Propaganda can be best understood as politically motivated information materials which are typically biased or misleading (Kumar & Krishna, 2014). Disinformation, like misinformation, can later be recognize as false, but the propensity for harm caused by the dissemination of disinformation before it is deciphered as false can be significant.

This research next examines fake news through the lens of social constructionism. Social construction theory proves valuable as a framework to interpret the role of claims makers in the production of fictitious knowledge. Claims makers are entities or individuals who hold significant authority through their ability to generate social knowledge. Through the construction and injection of information into the public domain, their role is to provide information to the masses; however, when the information established by claims makers is inherently flawed, the consequences for information consumers can be catastrophic. This review also considers the ability of false fact claims makers to facilitate information warfare (Libicki, 2007). To appraise the criminality associated with intentionally disseminating false information related to election issues, this research will explore relevant Canadian cases and legislation to interpret the Canadian legal perspective on election-focused fake news.

Social constructionism is focused on the processes of social interactions that construct notions of social reality; what we perceive as knowledge is subject to an elaborate network of social interaction which influences how we understand the social and natural world (Lindgren, 2005). Further, these products are conceived through the understanding that power is exercised via social structures. Power is exercised through these social institutions and represent the constructed outcome of knowledge

that becomes a segment of social reality. Power is then an integral aspect in the social construction process and is inherent to our ideas on knowledge and realities (Lindgren, 2005). Fake news construction fits within this paradigm as it is created by a claim maker who engineers the information product to be disseminated within society. It then exists as a segment of social reality as people interact with the fake news piece and interpret its derived meanings. Fake news constructionists exercise considerable power through their role in establishing knowledge (although inherently flawed) facilitated among various social structures.

During the 2016 U.S Presidential election, there was considerable concern regarding Russian interference authored by the Russian IRA and other Russian hacking groups (Berghel, 2017; Haataja, 2019). The Russian IRA can be considered as a social structure which exercises its power to create information material. The organization had developed a strong hold among U.S social media consumers and provided targeted and manufactured information across their social media platforms. Through the deception on behalf of the IRA, social media users accepted the legitimacy of these groups and welcomed the constructed information materials created by the IRA to penetrate into their newsfeeds. As the IRA created social media groups and pages became socially accepted by social media users, they further evolved to become a legitimized social structure with the influential capability to create social fact. In exercising their power to project counterfeited knowledge to the masses, they were able to inject their constructed narratives to encourage a pre-determined outcome.

Information Trolls and Information Warfare

Social media is the platform used by most creators of fake news to circulate their material. A key characteristic of social media is that it facilitates the exchange of images and communication in an efficient and casual manner. This feature makes trust relatively easy to establish (Waschke, 2017). While many people find social media an attractive platform to stay connected and to have a diverse body of information at their finger-tips, these qualities attract, what Waschke (2017) refers to as, the 'cybervillain'. The term cybervillain is broad. It can largely encompass any person who has any malicious intent who commits their villainous deeds within the cyberworld. While creators of fake news can be argued to fit within the definition of a cybervillain, the definition isn't specific in focus to those who intentionally manipulate the minds of consumers with falsified information.

Another potential term which can be used to refer to the perpetrators of fake news is 'moral entrepreneur' (Carlson, 2018). Based from Cohen's (1972) concept of moral

panics, Carlson (2018) further applies the classic concept to fake news and the creation of public anxiety. The author approaches the topic by equating fake news to be an informational moral panic. An important element in the relation between Cohen's moral panics, and the creation and spread of fake news, is that moral panics heighten public anxiety about a specific social threat. People perceive this threat to be a considerable issue that could lead to crime and disorder. The construction of these social threats become greatly exaggerated and can dominate social discourse which may result in an over-reaction. Carlson's (2018) examination of fake news through Cohen's moral panic framework illustrates the potential social destruction that disinformation campaigns can manifest. Through the induction of moral panics, fake news can threaten the democratic process and promote social unrest towards issues that may not require immediate social reaction (Carlson, 2018). This further illustrates how fake news is not only the product of social construction but can also be consequential in an over-reaction to socially constructed threats.

Libicki (2007) discusses the concept of information warfare. Information warfare is defined by the author as "the use of information to attack information" (p. 20). This definition is based on the premise that decisions are made as a result of the information that has been received by the decision maker; if the information received by the decision maker is inaccurate, or incomplete, the decision maker's output may not align with the decision that would have been made based on the reception of accurate aggregated data. The motivation for an information attack is to manipulate the outcome decision located on the other end of the information exchange. Typically, this will be advantageous to the attacker as they can assist in influencing poorly guided decisions or late decisions. Libicki (2007) also notes that false information can promote the receiver to make a wrong decision, but so too can adding contradicting and obscured information to the already dysfunctional information. Another method of attack mentioned is that one does not need to alter already existing information, they can instead wage war by modifying the credibility of the information that has been delivered and received. The author refers to those who engage in information war as 'information warriors'.

Cybervillians (Waschke, 2017), moral entrepreneurs (Cohen 1972; Carlson, 2018), and information warriors (Libicki, 2007) are all accurate language to describe those who create fake news. This paper proposes another term to denote disinformation creators; the term recommended is 'information trolls'. Internet trolling refers to someone who makes "inflammatory, rude, or upsetting statements to elicit strong emotional responses in people" (Vicente, 2020, Jan 21, para. 2). Trolls may have many

motivations for their actions. They may be creating chaos in a forum for their own entertainment, or they may have a very specific agenda that can be attained by eliciting a desired emotional response among their audience (Vicente, 2020, Jan 21). Fake news writers use various techniques to push a specific agenda and can have a major impact on the views of media consumers (Guo & Vargo, 2018). The main commodity in their agenda-setting ventures is the dispersion of information. Information is a useful weapon when striving to achieve a desired outcome within the public domain. Thus, information trolls is a conclusive term to specifically address the perpetrators of fake news.

Information Trolls During the 2019 Canadian Federal Election

Within the context of the 2019 Canadian Federal election, there is current evidence to suggest that, much like the influence of the Russian IRA in the 2016 U.S Presidential election, there was a misinformation campaign at play in targeting Canadian democracy during Canada's 2019 Federal election. During the time leading up to the election, *The Buffalo Chronicle* became a significant concern to the legitimate Canadian news media and the Canadian government due to viral stories being published on their website which contained material depicting information that had minimal or zero factual basis (Oved, Lytvynenko, & Silverman, 2019, Oct 18). In an investigation completed by investigative reporter, Marco Oved, and two BuzzFeed journalists, Jane Lytvynenko and Craig Silverman (2019), it was confirmed that the person behind the website, Matthew Ricchiazzi had previously offered his services to individuals and businesses to publish positive or negative coverage of political candidates for a price. In their investigation of election records, they discovered that in 2018 Ricchiazzi received \$2000 (USD) and *The Buffalo Chronicle* received \$1000 (USD) from a political committee which was formed to advocate for the election of Joel Giambra as Governor of New York. Regardless of being debunked by a variety of fact-checking sources, *The Buffalo Chronicle's* stories were liked, commented, and shared by Facebook users over 200,000 times and they had accumulated 4.4 million Facebook fans. Of further interest, while the website is said to cover both U.S and Canadian political content and is based in Buffalo, New York, 8 out of the 10 the *Buffalo Chronicle's* most popular articles on Facebook were related to Canadian politics and were published on their website within the 8 months prior to the Canadian election (Oved, Lytvynenko, & Silverman, 2019, Oct 18). Many of the stories are published anonymously without mention of the article's author and include unsubstantiated stories with anonymous sources cited (News Guard Tech, 2020).

Another considerable red-flag in relation to *The Buffalo Chronicle* is that while the website appears to be owned by Ricchiazzi, the copyright statement identifies 'The Buffalo Chronicle Media Group'. However, according to News Guard Tech (2020), there are no companies registered under that name in New York, anywhere else in the U.S., or in Canada. *The Buffalo Chronicle's* website domain is registered with a service which provides the owner with anonymity over their location and identity. To increase further suspicion, the website's contact address provides a location in Buffalo, New York; however, the address associated belongs to an abandoned building (News Guard Tech, 2020). Due to minimal transparency in both company ownership and journalist identity, a history of publishing false stories, previous transactions with political advocacy committees, and the use of a service to keep the domain owner's identity anonymous, it is possible that a significant foreign entity played a role in influencing the 2019 Canadian election. It is clear that Canada was a victim of an active disinformation campaign; however, the person, company, or group responsible for waging an information attack on Canadian democracy is unclear.

Methods

A content analysis was implemented to analyze 20 articles published by *The Buffalo Chronicle* during the election period. The file containing the raw fake news dataset was imported into Microsoft Excel. The fake news articles were collected through The Dark Crawler which is a web-crawling application. The goal of a web-crawling program is to automate the collection of data and resources that are hosted on the internet (Grega, Glowacz, Anzel, Lach, & Musia, 2014). The web-crawling application was tasked to collect all posts from the *Buffalo Chronicle's* Facebook page. Each post collected included a link to an article published by them. The researcher then examined the date of the post to determine if the post was posted within the 6-month period prior to the date of the election. Any post which was published between April 21st, 2019 to October 21st, 2019 was included in the analysis. The researcher then followed the linked article for each post to determine if the article linked to the post was related to the election or to Canadian politics in general. If the article was not, it was removed from further analysis. Overall, 22 posts from the Buffalo Chronicle were collected by the web-crawling application. One case was removed due to not falling within the election period and the second case was removed due to being completely unrelated to the election. In total, 20 posts were selected for analysis. After removing the selected cases, the researcher added the full text of each article to each linked case and then transferred the data-set from Microsoft Excel into NVivo for further qualitative analysis.

Rather than simply analyzing the social media post content posted on the *Buffalo Chronicle's* Facebook page, the researcher conducted a content analysis of each article linked to the post to create a more meaningful and detailed analysis. Content analysis is beneficial for this study as it enables the researcher to identify intentions, focus, or communication trends within the content data provided by individuals, groups, or institutions. As this research is an exploratory study, this qualitative research method is advantageous as it enables the researcher the ability to describe the attitudinal or behavioural responses that occur within the communication method, reveal patterns and trends, and assist to uncover the emotional and psychological states that occur within the groups of interest (Columbia University, 2019). In exploring the content found within texts, researchers are able to draw inferences about the message that is being conveyed, the audience it may intend to attract, and the culture that may be connected to the content (Columbia University, 2019).

Content analysis requires the researcher to analyze language and word usage within text. Themes which occur in the data are then attached to the texts through consistency and connection (Neuendorf, 2016). The primary goal of content analysis is to take large amounts of texts and transform them into a concise summary of thematic results (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017). The qualitative content analysis follows the data abstraction process as outlined by Erlingsson and Brysiewicz (2017). The researcher first read over the 20 texts once to become familiar with the type of information conveyed in the posts. Once basic-level familiarity was established, condensed meaning units were created. Meaning units condense the text into more workable pieces while still preserving the meaning found within the text. As the messages became more concise, the researcher was able to assign them a code. Codes serve as labels which help to organize texts into their related subgroups. Codes were then organized into categories; codes were grouped together into overarching categories based on their similarities to each other through related content. From these categories, themes were extracted based on the deep interpretation of the data.

Findings

The Buffalo Chronicle is an independent journalism platform based in Buffalo, New York. The Buffalo Chronicle Media Group has attracted considerable negative attention as they are considered to have, “frequently published false and unsubstantiated conspiracy theories, often aimed at left-leaning politicians” (News Guard Tech, 2020, pp. 1). Through qualitative analysis of all 2019 Canadian Federal election-related posts, which were captured by the crawling engine and posted during the 6-month

period from April 21st, 2019 to October 21st, 2019, various themes emerge. The first major theme uncovered involves the use of trigger topics as an attention grabber and mechanism to deliver the intended narrative. The second major theme relates to the tendency to use accurate and verified information combined with opinion, speculation, and unverifiable facts to further provide additional substance to their message.

Finding 1: Trigger Topics

Within the 20 pieces of fake news content analyzed, each article utilized a controversial topic to be the basis of the article's foundation. Once the trigger topic is established as the article's main foundation, the remainder of the piece develops the further story, often using speculation and unverified information (although not in all cases) to extend the story's commentary. The foundational topics discussed tend to be centred around issues that are often sensitive or emotionable. The main trigger topics embedded in the articles are the SNC Lavalin Scandal, the treatment of Indigenous peoples in Canada, and sexual misconduct.

The SNC Lavalin Scandal

In a Buffalo Chronicle article called, "'Deep and penetrating' relationship may taint Butts' testimony" (*The Buffalo Chronicle*, 2019, March 6) an examination of Trudeau's friendship with Gerald Butts is conducted. Besides the implied sexual relationship between Trudeau and Butts as depicted in the headline, the remainder of the article continues to illustrate a picture of corruption within the Liberal government, without naming it as such. An unnamed source from McGill allegedly states that,

"Justin Trudeau and Gerald Butts had the kind of 'deep and penetrating' relationship that is common among privileged young men in their late teens and early twenties: lofty in their aspirations, pedestrian in their work ethic, and, at times, ambiguous in their orientation" (para 2).

The information conveyed by the unnamed source begins to bring into question the credibility and work ethic of the two political actors through describing the details of their friendship during young adulthood while attending university. In considering the sexual innuendo contained in the headline, the mention of 'ambiguous in their orientation' can be interpreted to suggest that the unnamed source of is inferring a sexual relationship between the two young men. It is also interesting to explore the words used by the source. The sexual innuendo implied in the headline is further integrated and amplified within the comment included by the unnamed source. This

snippet of dialogue appears to further push the idea on the reader about the idea of sexual relationship between Trudeau and Butts.

The article further includes a suggestion related to deep-seeded corruption within the Liberal government through implying that the two men have long been working together to develop political schemes to get themselves ahead. A caption on a picture in the article where Trudeau and Butts can be seen in a park in exercise gear states that,

“Trudeau and Butts are long-time friends who work together, who exercise together, and who hatch political plans together.”

This excerpt indicates that the two ‘hatch’ political plans together. After the depiction of the two men, who are suggested to have a sexual relationship, is painted as having a close-knit bond characterized by minimal work ethic and high aspirations, this section of the article further implies that the two manifest political schemes together. The article further states without reference to a source that,

“Both undergraduates in the liberal arts, the two young men’s friendship grew from a shared a jovial disposition, left-leaning political views, and an occasional fondness for pairing the music of early-90s grunge with their favored varieties of marijuana” (para. 7).

In further characterization of both political figures, the article now references their left-wing political affiliations and engagement with marijuana culture while painting them as irresponsible young men. Following this illustrated characterization, the article begins to discuss their roles in the SNC Lavalin scandal. The news piece appears to bring into question the credibility of both men while inferring collusion through their roles in the SNC Lavalin. In describing their purported behaviours of their early 20s while relating it to a current day issue, their perceived political integrity as people in positions of authority decreases in the reader’s mind. Regardless of whether corruption has existed or does exist at the Federal level, the news piece is an effective psychological piece. Through the inclusion of information that is unverifiable, this article persuades the reader to accept a constructed reality which depicts the narrative of two young, reckless, and irresponsible young men who are now involved in large-scale corruption.

The Mistreatment of Indigenous Peoples

An article titled, “Federal spending on foreign abortions increased to \$700m, infuriating Canada’s Indigenous people” (*The Buffalo Chronicle*, 2019, Sept 3) depicts a sensitive topic which remains to be an issue of concern for many Canadians across the country. While the federal spending announcement for foreign-aid spending for sexual, reproductive, maternal, and child health in countries where women’s rights are under attack is fact (Carber & Woo, 2019, June 19), the remainder of the article frames the issue in a partisan manner. The article mentions that, “according to a First Nations activist, Canada is paying \$700 million to kill the babies of Indigenous people around the world” (para. 2). The tone of this message appears to take on a pro-life stance on women’s reproductive rights while framing the issue within the topic of the mistreatment of Indigenous peoples in Canada. However, following this, the article takes a more factual turn as it progresses by noting that many Indigenous communities in Canada still do not have access to clean drinking water. In spending \$700 million in foreign aid, it is argued that the money could instead be spent locally to increase access to drinkable water among remote Indigenous communities.

Interestingly, all articles which are based on the mistreatment of Indigenous peoples in Canada use accurate information to convey the intended message. All articles which cover the other trigger topics contain far more opinion, speculation, and unverified facts. The common theme that appears within the articles which are based on the lived experiences of Indigenous peoples are that they take the experiences and concerns of Indigenous communities and then further relate that information to a broader political message. Rather than direct coverage about the issue in question, a political perspective is influenced within the overarching message that is delivered. For example, in the article referenced above, rather than exploring the alarming number of Indigenous communities who do not have access to clean drinking water, the support for the international reproductive rights of women become under scrutiny which further implicates the Liberal government to be the primary concern of the article. This then overpowers the coverage of the challenges that Indigenous communities experience by directing focus away from the systemic problems associated with the marginalization of Indigenous peoples. Through forcing the reader’s attention towards a separate issue where the message is politically motivated, a desired conclusion is manipulated. The factual information about the marginalization of such communities may be used to attract the reader to gain their trust, then through manipulation, a political leaning is influenced among the audience.

The respect for Indigenous communities within the articles created by *The Buffalo Chronicle* appears to be superficial. While coverage of the issues faced by Indigenous communities across Canada remains high, their terminology used shows an apparent lack of respect and consideration for the communities they are covering. One of the articles which focuses on the mistreatment of Indigenous peoples in Canada is titled, “Ontario judge riles an Indian community, as Rez Fox fleeces a revered civic leader” (*The Buffalo Chronicle*, 2018, Jan 2). The headline uses the term ‘Indian’ in describing an Indigenous community. The use of the word “Indian” to describe all Indigenous cultures and communities across North America was dubbed by early European colonizers. The term ‘Indian’ is oppressive as colonizers labelled all Indigenous peoples as one racial group while ignoring existing and individualized tribal identities, cultures, traditions, and languages. Reducing all Indigenous cultures and communities to one monolithic label imposes oppression and subordination on Indigenous communities and upholds the notion that Western identities are superior (Yellow Bird, 1999). The *Buffalo Chronicle* article continues to further use the label ‘Indian’ as a descriptor within the article by referring to lawyers who are versed in Indigenous legal issues as “indian lawyers” (para. 3) and by again referring to Indigenous communities as “indian communities” (para. 3). While the independent journal does highlight important issues that are experienced by Indigenous communities across Canada, their attention to these concerns appear superficial and are used to push a personal agenda.

Sexual Misconduct

Sexual misconduct appears to be a theme which emerges from the nature of the *Buffalo Chronicle* articles which are explored. One article titled, “Costumes, role-play whet a young Trudeau’s sexual appetite” (*The Buffalo Chronicle*, 2019, Oct 12) states that,

“In his early to late-20s, Justin Trudeau had a robust and wide-ranging sexual appetite — most especially for costumes and role play, a former classmate tells *The Chronicle*” (para. 1).

In this quote, the unnamed source divulges into the alleged sexual interests of Trudeau through discussing his enjoyment of role play and costumes. Just one month before the 2019 Canadian Federal election, images surfaced of Trudeau from 2001 where the Prime Minister can be seen wearing an Aladdinesque style costume, with a turban, and with the inclusion of his face darkened with black paint while surrounded by four women (CBC News, 2019, Sept 20). Due to the disrespectful and racist nature of this costume, this understandably sparked considerable outrage across the country and

became a significant source of media attention as Trudeau campaigned for re-election. The *Buffalo Chronicle* article discussed Trudeau's sexual interest in costumes and role-play. Following the widespread story of Trudeau's previous controversial choice of costume, this article likely builds off the negative image that many readers already associate with Trudeau's costumes. This article then takes this story a step further through suggesting that there are sexual motivations behind his dress-up choices.

As the article progresses, Trudeau is painted as a sex-crazy, marijuana smoking, mischief maker. Much like the article explored in the SNC Lavalin example, this article further emphasizes the narrative of Trudeau's apparently reckless youth while progressing the anecdote to include tales of Trudeau's sexual escapades. According to an unnamed former classmate, Trudeau is,

"...one of the coolest dudes you could ever party with, always the first to whip his dick out, so to speak (para. 8)."

The article later describes an alleged contest where Trudeau made it his mission to ejaculate on as many campus chalkboards as possible. The article uses the trigger topic of sexual misconduct to further develop a narrative where Trudeau is depicted as an irresponsible teenager. This is likely to invoke a sense of disgust and mistrust from the reader which may be used to discredit Trudeau as a reputable public figure. During election time, small inferences such as this can have significant consequences.

Finding 2: The Use of True Facts in Combination with Unverifiable or False Facts

Another common theme which emerged from the analysis of articles published by *The Buffalo Chronicle* was the inclusion of legitimate and verifiable facts combined with opinion, facts that are not verifiable, and/or pure speculation. An article titled, "'Political grandmaster' Frank Iacobucci is at the center of SNC Lavalin, Kinder Morgan scandals" (*The Buffalo Chronicle*, 2019, March 11), includes both factual information in combination with unverifiable fact and speculation as a means of message delivery. The article begins by including true facts regarding Iacobucci's career including his service as a Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada until his retirement in 2004 (Peter A. Allard School of Law, 2020). The article continues on to state that,

"Suddenly, this week, nearly everyone in Ottawa wants him to testify before the House of Commons' justice committee regarding his involvement in the SNC Lavalin scandal, following widespread rumors that it was Iacobucci who first insisted that Jody Wilson-Raybould be removed as Attorney General (para. 2)."

It can be confirmed that Wilson-Raybould, former Attorney General, was removed from her position and moved into the position of veteran's affairs minister. Further, much speculation exists on the rationale behind Wilson-Raybould's removal from her previous position (Zimonjic, 2019, Jan 14). Wilson-Raybould testified in the House of Commons on February 27th, 2019 regarding the SNC Lavalin scandal and her understanding about the corruption and bribery which occurred on behalf of the Liberal Government in their handling of SNC Lavalin. She noted in her testimony that, as Attorney General, she was included in discussions regarding the affair. She stated that during these discussions, she made it very clear that she would not participate in Trudeau's backdoor motion to prevent SNC Lavalin from being prosecuted. She further included her concerns that she was being removed from the justice department for her decision to remain neutral (Thomson, 2019, Feb 28).

There is evidence to support corruption within the Liberal government; however, the *Buffalo Chronicle* article from March 11th, 2019 takes facts and dilutes it with speculation to progress the narrative further. The article even notes that through 'widespread' rumours, it was former Supreme Court Justice Iacobucci who insisted that Wilson-Raybould be removed as Attorney General. The headline further attempts to connect Iacobucci as a master political manipulator who is behind all Liberal government scandals without any significant evidence to support the claim. The article also mentions that, "a source close to the talks suspects that Trudeau had tasked Iacobucci with 'essentially bribing' every Indigenous community along the pipeline's route, in order to secure approvals as quickly as possible" (para. 3). Based on the account from the unnamed source, who has a *feeling* that Trudeau has asked Iacobucci to bribe Indigenous communities, the suggestion of wide-spread corruption becomes more encompassing.

Readers who have heard of the legitimate coverage of alleged corruption within the Federal government may be inclined to search for more information that is publicly available. As reliable public information is limited on this subject, they may resort to finding less reputable sources to satisfy their desire for further information. The *Buffalo Chronicle* appears to fill the gap of wanting more information about a sensationalized topic where reliable reporting is limited; however, the additional information used to provide supplementary coverage is heavily speculation-based while being presented as fact. This seems to be a common pattern within the *Buffalo Chronicle* articles. Within the articles explored, there are real and verifiable facts, typically involving a story that is highly sensationalized. These facts are then embellished with speculation in a way which appears to present the information as

factually legitimate. It is of further interest to note that no authors of *The Buffalo Chronicle* articles are directly named. Instead, the writer remains anonymous. The coverage appears to highly target the Liberal government and are posted and re-posted during the time leading up to the election. Each article commonly links to one overarching message which is delivered through various tactics: The Liberal government is corrupt/ill-suited to be re-elected as Federal government.

Discussion

Methods and Techniques to Construct Disinformation Narratives

Through analyzing the content created by *The Buffalo Chronicle*, engagement with affective materials appears to be a highly useful technique to encourage a user reaction. Trigger topics between both organizations included political scandals, the mistreatment of Indigenous peoples, sexual misconduct, and political corruption. A common feature among information trolls is the use of noise to distract the reader or to amplify attention towards an already heavily sensationalized topic; this can then be used to push a specific agenda and can have a major impact on the views of media consumers (Guo and Vargo, 2018).

The SNC Lavalin scandal was a significant story throughout the election period. This topic has provided the external public a peep into the possibility of internal corruption within the Federal government. Due to the significant weight on the allegations made in relation to the scandal, a lot of questions remained unanswered. Leaving a void to be filled, information trolls were able to inoculate their supplementary materials into the media information system. In doing this, fake news communicators used the opportunity to amplify the message about to the possibility of corruption. Amplifying one issue is an effective tactic to capture the reader's concentration and block out other information signals. This can greatly reduce the ability for the democratic population to collect and assess all of the available information that is included in their personal political affiliation analysis (Carlson, 2018).

The objective of negative affective words embedded within fake news text appears to perform reader manipulation by inciting anger. Based on a person's ideology, their position on these issues can be at ends with people who occupy a different ideology. Through the incitement of anger, the reader is directed to feel strongly negative emotions towards those who stand on the other end of the issue. This can expand the divide between people who have different political perspectives and eliminate the common ground while pushing both parties to polarized ends of the issue. Divisive

dialogue through inciting anger is effective in manipulating voter's values and beliefs. This can be used to compel a person to stand firmly on one extreme end of the political spectrum while condemning the perspectives of those who reside on the other side (Berghel, 2017; Haataja, 2019).

As more people like, comment, or share a post, the post becomes more popular. The primary priority in Facebook algorithms are to keep users active and engaged through providing attractive content on their newsfeed (Cooper, 2020). Due to newsfeed algorithms, the content on a user's newsfeed typically caters to their personal preferences. As most fake news content is premised on partisan passions (Berghel, 2017), the content is likely to be received well by the user. In seeing the same information on more than one platform, the user is likely to further internalize the perceived validity of the information being provided. Due to newsfeed algorithms and the amplification of frequent signals sent from partisan sources, the user is also at an increased risk to experience the effects of information echo chambers. As the user navigates the echo chamber, information which substantiates what they already know and believe promotes confirmation bias. The same information is being re-circulated to them and their newsfeed algorithm continues to provide content that aligns with their current beliefs ultimately limiting their exposure to counter-information (Bakir & McStay, 2018).

A significant danger associated with echo chambers is not only the lack of exposure to information that explores other perspectives, but also the danger associated with incorrect information being accepted but never corrected (Bakir & McStay, 2018). As counter-evidence to a false fact cannot permeate the information silo, the ill-informed citizen remains misguided by illegitimate information as credible evidence to enlighten to individual is out of reach.

Evidence of Criminal Interference – Foreign Interference

When foreign entities become involved in the democratic process of a country they do not belong to, the ability for the democracy to function as it should with external influence becomes crippled. Foreign bodies may inject their influence into the political affairs of another country to encourage a result which may be beneficial to foreign interests. Section 282.4 of the *Canada Elections Act* (2000) states that no person who is not a Canadian citizen or permanent resident can influence an elector to vote or not vote, or to unduly influence them to vote or not vote for a particular candidate or party. This means that parties external to Canada who are determined to be influencing a voter's election decision are in violation of this section.

Throughout the research, the findings indicated that foreign interference in the 2019 Canadian Federal election was at play during the pre-election period. This research explored the fake news content delivered to Canadian media consumers containing false information about the Canadian political landscape. As 8 out of the 10 most popular stories published by *The Buffalo Chronicle* were related to Canadian politics and were all published within an 8 month window leading up to the election (Oved, Lytvynenko, & Silverman, 2019, Oct 18), the non-Canadian based online independent journal fits the definition of foreign interference.

Section 3.7 of the *Criminal Code of Canada* (1985), determines Canadian legal jurisdiction. This section states that any person outside of Canada who commits an act (that would constitute a criminal offence if it were to be committed within Canada) against a Canadian citizen, is deemed to have committed that act within Canada and are subject to legal punishment within the Canadian justice system. It has been established that the foreign interference which took place is in violation of section 282.4 of the *Canada Elections Act*. Section 491.2 (1)(q) of the same act notes that in order for guilt to be found guilty of collusion under 282.4, intent must be proven. The alleged man behind the website, Matthew Ricciazzi's, has a history of offering his services to publish positive or negative coverage of political candidates for a fee; further, he and *The Buffalo Chronicle* both received funding from a committee which was formed to advocate for the election of Joel Giambra as Governor of New York (Oved, Lytvynenko, & Silverman, 2019, Oct 18). If an investigation were to uncover evidence that a transaction was involved in the disinformation attack against the Liberal party, intent would be established, and a guilty verdict may be reached. The issue now relates to the realism of carrying out an investigation against a foreign entity.

In establishing guilt for the offence of foreign interference, it is important to know who was responsible for the act. Would the guilty party be the man behind the site, or the person(s) who crafted the disinformation article? To answer these questions, an investigation would be required to understand the nature of the circumstances associated with the crime. The capacity for police to conduct complex investigations within the intricate bounds of technology may be limited by tools and technological expertise (Brown, 2015). It is currently unknown whether Ricciazzi also authored each piece of disinformation, or whether he simply approved and uploaded each article. The authors of the articles in question remain anonymous; this would necessitate considerable methods of investigation. Complex investigations into cyber crime are often not within the abilities of the police. They require a high level of sophisticated expert knowledge and significant resource allocation. For example, an investigation

may yield information about an IP address of interest which may assist the identification of the suspect. However, the IP address alone is not sufficient evidence as a user with technological know-how can simply circumvent detection through manipulating their IP details. This makes identifying the suspect behind the computer increasingly more difficult without an expert understanding of cyber investigative methods (Kao & Wang, 2009).

If an investigation were to be successfully carried out and a suspect, or suspects, were identified, the next step would be extraditing the person(s) from the host country to Canada to participate in the adversarial process. This requires the cooperation of the country where the suspect is located. *The Buffalo Chronicle* is said to be located in Buffalo, New York; however, there is evidence to suggest that this simply may not be true (News Guard Tech, 2020). If the U.S location is true and the suspects responsible are also residing in the U.S, then the plausibility of extraditing the suspects to Canada for prosecution is feasible given the existence of an extradition treaty. In the circumstance where those responsible are found to not be located in the U.S and instead currently reside in another country where an extradition treaty does not exist, the likelihood for conviction of the crime significantly decreases due to a likely absence of international cooperation with a Canadian investigation. Investigations which transcend borders require the country of interest to allocate their resources to a crime which was not committed against their own citizens. Unless the crime also affects their own citizens, requesting law enforcement assistance can be a tough sell.

Social Construction Theory and Information Trolls

What we perceive as knowledge is subject to an elaborate network of social interaction which influences how we understand the social and natural world (Lindgren, 2005). It is through social interactions that reality is constructed. The ability to construct knowledge and reality relies in the legitimacy of the social structure that is being engaged with. When the structure is perceived as holding a legitimate role in the dissemination of information, the power to create knowledge is permitted. Issues arise when knowledge creation structures misrepresent their qualifications. Through deception, claims makers who engineer false information while presenting it as real knowledge have come to be socially accepted among their audience and have accumulated considerable power. Through establishing power, fake news creators are able to interject their “distorted signals uncorrelated with the truth” into social reality (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017, p. 212). The more the signal becomes accepted by the social body, the more power of influence it possesses.

Information trolls construct a false depiction of reality through manipulating their perceived legitimacy to produce knowledge. Authors of the content delivered by *The Buffalo Chronicle* are exemplary of the disingenuous process of socially constructed knowledge. In carefully crafting knowledge pieces to include affective content focused on contentious issues, they are effective in encouraging moral panics to ensue. By inducing a moral panic through a disinformation campaign, social unrest is manufactured, and a threat is assumed towards an issue that may not be relevant to the overall picture (Carlson, 2018). In establishing trust among the social body in their role to produce knowledge, information trolls can be effective in forcing social discourse to place attention to constructed threats unassociated to genuine reality. Disinformation campaigns weaponize information and are a form of non-material cyber attack which can pose a threat to an entire democratic system (Haataja, 2019). This research has provided evidence for the existence of information warfare within the 2019 Canadian Federal election which has been characterized by foreign interference.

Recommendations

As social media becomes more ingrained in culture, the ability for false information to use social media platforms as a method to deliver informational violence becomes more powerful threat. Information warfare can threaten the entire system of democracy through inoculating false narratives into the information news media while actively engaging in deception to encourage acceptance among their audience members (Haataja, 2019). In a world of addictive media consumption habits, the solutions to such an intricate issue are likely not simple themselves. When developing counter-strategies to prevent fake news circulation, Kumar and Krishna (2014) note that is much more advantageous to prevent fake news circulation rather than to try and address it after it has become infectious within the public domain.

Routine activities theory (RAT) states that there are three essential elements which make it likely for a crime occur when these elements converge between time and space (Felson & Cohen, 1980). The elements are: 1) a motivated offender, 2) a suitable target, and 3) absence of a capable guardian. According to Felson and Cohen (1980), if there is a person who is motivated to commit a crime, and the opportunity to commit that crime is met by a target that is suitable to their motivation and it is unguarded by a capable person or thing, a crime is likely to occur. Typically, this theoretical framework is applied to crimes which occur in the physical domain; however, a parallel can be drawn between RAT and crimes which occur in the cyber domain.

Within the context of this research, all elements of RAT can be identified and may help explain both the occurrence of disinformation campaigns, as well as, offer insight into potential solutions to prevent them. The motivated offender can be understood as the person, group, or institution responsible for orchestrating the information attack. The motivations may potentially be money, political power, or notoriety. The suitable target is the information consumer. The goal of the motivated offender is to infiltrate the reader's newsfeed with false information materials. In many social media platforms, there is an absence of a capable guardian. As most social media platforms are powered by user content without significant controls or filters, the content that is generated for public viewing does not involve a process of scrutiny and review, such as, publications in an academic journal or a legitimate newspaper would. To prevent disinformation from gaining public attention and affecting the reader's mind, removing one of the three elements of RAT would reduce the likelihood of information violence (Felson & Cohen, 1980).

There is no perfect solution to prevent the spread of information warfare. Consumers of all news media should stay vigilant and critical when reading news media pieces; however, this may be a lot to ask of consumers as the stream of information is constant. Information is administered to consumers every time they open their social media pages, turn on the television, open up a magazine or catalogue, drive past a billboard, listen to the radio, or watch a movie. Due to the steady stream of information signal, it is unlikely that a consumer would be able to critically assess the validity of all messages. Fact checking websites and resources have become more popular and provide information about the source's background which may be helpful in determining whether the information is being delivered by a trusted source. Information trolls use strategic deception to construct and disseminate disinformation, the onus is placed on the consumer and the source host to respond to and mitigate threats of information warfare.

Conclusion

This research has provided evidence to support that during the 2019 Canadian Federal election, there was an active disinformation campaign with the potential to constitute foreign interference. The integrity of Canadian democracy is threatened by information warfare. While this research cannot contend how large of an impact disinformation campaigns had on the 2019 Canadian Federal election, it does highlight some of the methods and techniques used by information trolls in their construction of fake news pieces. Through understanding and recognizing the techniques used by

information trolls, those tasked to detect deliberately created fake news pieces are better equipped to flag deceitful messages and prevent them from infecting political public discourse.

It should be noted that social media and fake news are only two individual nodes that can be utilized to inject disinformation to the public discourse and influence public thought. Within the social constructionist theoretical framework, what we understand as knowledge is subject to an elaborate network of social interaction (Lindgren, 2005). This research focuses on a limited number of factors which may help to explain the interaction between false information and a person's change of beliefs or values; however, there are many other factors to consider within this interaction that are well beyond the scope of this study. A person's upbringing, their family unit, the influence of friends or role models, their school or working environment, and additional psychological factors are just a few of the many variables to consider in understanding how disinformation spreads, and why it may have an affect on the democratic voter's mind. Future qualitative research should seek to examine and explore these variables in more depth.

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