DISINFORMATION AND RUSSIA-UKRAINIAN WAR ON CANADIAN SOCIAL MEDIA

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SUMMARY

The Russia-Ukrainian war has led to a large disinformation campaign, largely spread through social media. Canada has been a target of these influence campaigns to affect Canadian public opinions. In this policy brief, we venture to examine the prevalence of pro-Russian narratives on Canadian social media as well as identify major influencers creating and spreading such narratives. Additionally, using artificial intelligence, we seek to examine the reach and nature of pro-Russian disinformation narratives.

Our research team has been collecting more than 6.2 million Tweets globally since January 2022 to monitor and measure Russian influence operations on social media. We find that pro-Russian narratives promoted in the Canadian social media ecosystem on twitter are divided into two large communities: 1) accounts influenced by sources from the United States and 2) those largely influenced by sources from international sources from Russia, Europe, and China.

First, pro-Russian discourse on Canadian Twitter blames NATO for the conflict suggesting that Russia's invasion was a result of NATO's expansionism or aggressive intentions toward Russia. In this context, pro-Russian propaganda

argues that the West has no moral high ground to condemn the invasion and nations such as Canada, the US, and the UK are trying to force Europe into this conflict to benefit materially. Second, it is suggested that Western nations are propping up fascists in Ukraine, thus justifying Russia's actions. Thirdly, pro-Russian narrative attempts to amplify mistrust of democratic institutions, be it the media, international institutions, or the Liberal government. Faced with the challenges associated with foreign interference, it is important to gain a deeper understanding of the spread of disinformation in Canada.

INTRODUCTION

In February 2022, Russian forces began their invasion of Ukraine, sparking the largest military conflict in Europe since the end of the Second World War. In concert with conventional fighting, both adversaries engaged in information warfare. Though propaganda has long been a major aspect of war, the development and spread of social media in recent decades has greatly increased its reach and effectiveness, making the information domain a critical battleground. In particular, disinformation—false information intended to manipulate, cause damage, or guide groups and people in the wrong direction[1]—has become a major concern and a key element of modern warfare. In this respect, Canada has been a target of influence operations where foreign powers have been using social media to influence Canadian public opinions, sentiment or public discourse. Because of Canada's role in international sanctions against Russia, Public Safety Minister Marco Mendicino stated in a recent interview that "Canada and all allies remain on high alert for Russian retaliation in the form of disinformation and foreign interference."[2]

If Canada is to successfully meet the challenge of this foreign interference, it is important to gain a deeper understanding of the disinformation that is being spread. In this policy brief, we begin by examining the prevalence of pro-Russian narratives on Canadian social media, and then identify major influencers creating and spreading such narratives. We close with an analysis based on artificial intelligence that examines the reach and nature of pro-Russian disinformation in these narratives.

POLICY BRIEF

- Pro-Russian disinformation prevalent on Canadian social media

- Russian influence operations originate from two major sources: US and Russian vectors

- Predominant narratives focus on blaming NATO for current war

- Canadian right-wing online communities are most vulnerable to Russian disinformation campaign

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[1] "How to Identify Misinformation, Disinformation, and Malinformation (ITSAP.00.300)." Canadian Centre for Cyber Security, Government of Canada, 24 Feb. 2022, https://cyber.gc.ca/en/guidance/how-identify-misinformation-disinformation-and-malinformation-itsap00300.

[2] Woolf, Marie. "Canada and Allies on High Alert for Russian Disinformation and Interference: Minister." CBCnews, CBC/Radio Canada, 13 Apr. 2022, https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canada-high-alert-russian-disinformation-1.6419067.

Pro-Russian narratives promoted in Canadian social media can be divided into two large sub-communities: 1) accounts influenced by sources from the United States and 2) those largely influenced by sources from Russia. Both communities have been spreading five primary narratives:

1. Implying NATO expansionism legitimizes the Russian invasion

2. Portraying NATO as an aggressive alliance using Ukraine as a proxy against Russia

3. Promoting a general mistrust in institutions and elites

4. Suggesting that Ukraine is a fascist state or has extensive fascist influences

5. Promoting a specific mistrust of Canada's Liberal government, and especially of Prime Minister Trudeau

APPROACHES & METHODOLOGY

The data underpinning this analysis are composed of 6.2 million Tweets from around the world since January 2022. Profile information was collected for accounts that initially Tweeted and re-Tweeted using key terms (Russia, Ukraine, NATO, Русс, Росій, Укра, НАТО) associated with the current conflict in Ukraine. A location filter was then applied, limiting the dataset to Tweets associated with Canadian Twitter profiles. Second, we used Social Network Analysis (SNA) to build a retweet network, establishing a connection between accounts and mapping out online conversations pertaining to the war. A community detection algorithm allowed us to divide profiles into different clusters—communities of similar profiles—as well as to identify main influencers, both abroad and in Canada, promoting pro-Russian narratives. Finally, we used a deep learning algorithm to categorize the main narratives being discussed in each of the clusters.

Figure 1
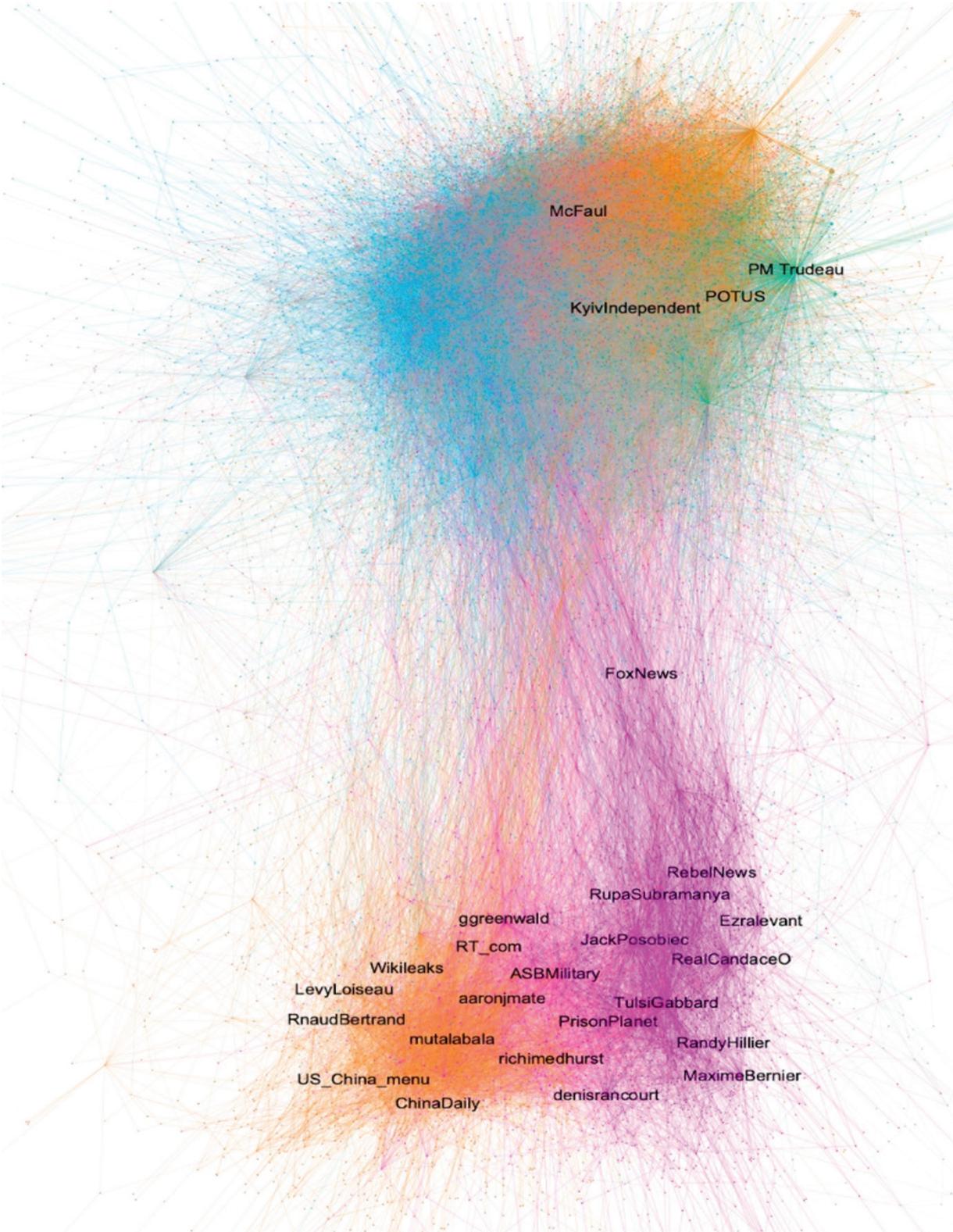
Social network of Canadian Twitter. US-influenced and Russia-influenced pro-Russian accounts are in magenta and red clusters respectively, ~25% of the network.

RESULTS

Figure 1 presents the social network of the Canadian Twitter ecosystem focusing on the war. Of the total accounts collected, approximately 25% were spreading pro-Russian talking points. These profiles were split between those influenced by US accounts (in magenta) and accounts influenced by Russian disinformation campaigns (in red). US-influenced profiles accounted for approximately 56% of the pro-Russian communities and Russia-influenced profiles were the remaining 44%.

The top accounts in the US-influenced and Russia-influenced vectors are in Tables 1 and 2, respectively. The Degree Score measures how much an account interacts with other accounts. Thus, a higher degree score indicates a more influential account. Table 1 illustrates how the primary accounts promoting pro-Russian narratives belong to prominent US right-wing influencers such as Tulsi Gabbard, Jack Posobiec, or Candace Owens. In Canada, we also find similar accounts associated with the Right such as Rupa Subramanya, Rex Glacer, Maxime Bernier, or Ezra Levant. Table 2 shows international accounts associated promoting Russian-backed narratives.

Table 1:
Top US-influenced Accounts.

Account	Score (degree)
TulsiGabbard (US)	552
JackPosobiec (US)	279
MaajidNawaz (UK)	210
Ggreenwald (US)	196
Rupasubramanya (Canada)	175
RealCandaceO (US)	171
Rexglacer (Canada)	171
ShellenbergerMD (US)	156
MaximeBernier (Canada)	154
Denisrancourt (Canada)	147
RealAndyLeeShow (Canada)	137
Ezralevant (Canada)	115
ClintEhrlich (US)	109

Table 2:
Top Russian-influenced Accounts.

Account	Score (degree)
richimedhurst (Austria)	409
Aaronjmate (US)	259
Wavetossed (Canada)	259
tiffin1963 (removed)	239
ASBMilitary (removed)	200
Gacheri_ss (removed)	167
BenjaminNorton (International)	166
hardbop34 (Canada)	151
peacepumpkinpic (Canada)	135
johnpilger (Canada)	129
MaxBlumenthal (US)	121
billm9 (Canada)	120
RnaudBertrand (China)	116

Both communities pushed the same five main narrative frames through their Tweets and re-Tweets. Figure 2 presents the frequency of these narratives within the pro-Russia communities in the time leading up to and immediately following the beginning of the invasion. There is overlap between these narratives and several similar topics.

Figure 2: Timeline of discussion intensity for the five main narratives.
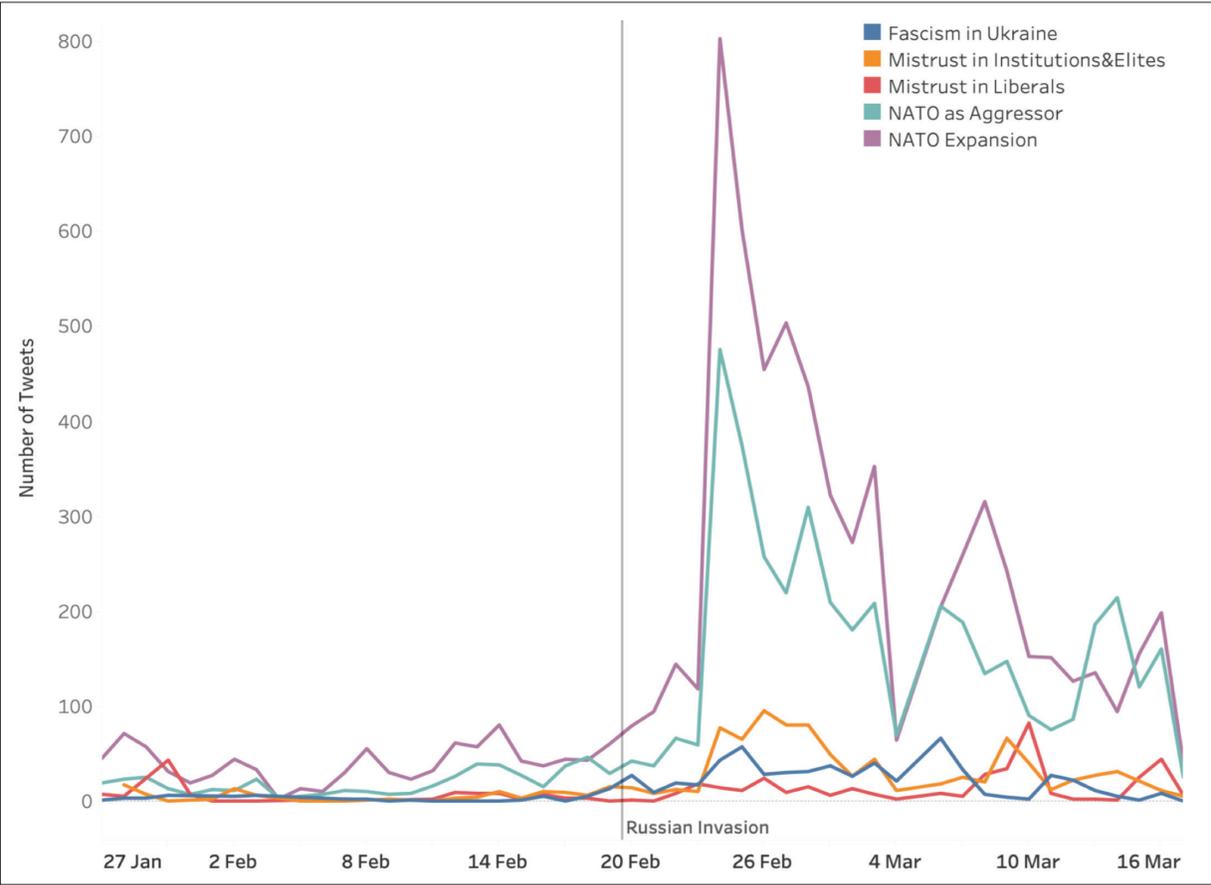
The predominant narrative justified Russia's invasion as a response to NATO expansionism. It tended to characterize the Russian invasion as a reasonable or expected consequence of the military alliance's continued admittance of former Eastern Bloc states, placing the borders of the alliance closer and closer to Russia.

A related but distinct narrative portrays NATO as an aggressor in the conflict, using Ukraine as a proxy to wage war against Russia. This narrative posits that, among other things, NATO staged a regime change within Ukraine to install a more friendly government; that NATO troop placements within Eastern Europe were intentionally provocative toward Russia; and that the continued funneling of funds and material into Ukraine is an act of aggression by the alliance.

The third narrative expresses a mistrust in institutions and elites. It suggests that mainstream media outlets and international observers or institutions are mouthpieces for NATO and its goals. The institutions cannot be believed as they are largely funded by western governments. Additionally, it is suggested that the media cannot be trusted as it has lied to justify conflicts like the Iraq War that benefited the West or focuses strongly on Russian actions while ignoring those taken by NATO.

The fourth narrative justifies the invasion by framing it as a war waged against a state that is either fascist or heavily fascist-influenced. They point to the presence of the neo-Nazi Azov Battalion in the Ukrainian National Guard as proof. The Tweets spread the common Russian government talking point that Ukraine is run by a fascist regime.

The fifth narrative fosters mistrust in the Liberal government of Canada, especially Prime Minister Trudeau. Though very similar to the general mistrust in institutions, this example was pervasive enough to form a distinct narrative. It characterizes Trudeau and the Liberals as lying about the conflict to further their own political goals.

CONCLUSIONS

The framing of pro-Russian discourse on Canadian Twitter focuses largely on the role and actions of NATO and its member states, with little regard to the actions of Ukrainians, Ukraine, or the actual events occurring in the war. NATO is blamed for the conflict for reasons of structure (expansion) or agency (aggressive intention). A significant mistrust of institutions is present within these communities, be it the media, international institutions, or the Liberal government. Other narratives include the West propping up fascists in Ukraine; the West having no moral high ground to condemn the invasion; and nations such as Canada, the US, and the UK trying to force Europe into this conflict to benefit materially.

CONCLUSIONS

- Main foreign influences promoting Russian narratives originate from the US or from Russian and Chinese-backed accounts

- Five main narratives:

  1. NATO expansionism justified invasion
  2. NATO is using Ukraine as a proxy against Russia
  3. A mistrust in institutions and media
  4. Ukraine is fascist, justifying invasion
  5. Mistrust of Trudeau

About the Authors

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