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Like and Share If You Agree

Fake News and Digital Radicalization in Canada

Supervisor: Prof. Giovanni Cadioli

Candidate: Noa Shaina Spivak

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Abstract

In August of 2023, content from news outlets vanished from Meta platforms in Canada, marking the beginning of the Online News Act's impact upon social media giants. This event occurred in a time where misinformation and disinformation has become increasingly pervasive, and removed news from a public who had become reliant on Facebook as a viable news platform. What has remained unclear, is if an increase in misinformation and conspiracy theories in Canada can be connected to Meta's decision to remove content, or if the transformation of the Canadian digital ecosystem was an inevitability. My research seeks to explore the "fake news" on Facebook today and how Canadians are impacted and informed by it, especially as the country enters an electoral year, through an investigation of content posted on the platform, particularly those tied to anti-government sentiment. The intrinsic connection between the politics in the United States and Canada will be explored through a discussion of American conspiracy theories, and the role they play in the Canadian digital ecosystem. The data and statistics used to explore the psychology of misinformation, media literacy and changes in trends has been collected through a literature review of pre-existing sources, and the assessment of Canadian social media was achieved through a qualitative overview of selected case studies. This thesis contends that while Meta has left Canadians more susceptible to misinformation by removing news outlets from Facebook in Canada, the digital connection to the United States has greatly contributed to the rise of Ideologically Motivated Violent Extremism, and poses a threat to Canadian democracy.

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0.1 - Introduction

On August 9th, 2023, news sources vanished from Facebook and Instagram in Canada (Parker et al., 2024). Canadians were greeted with popups on the profiles of networks that read “People in Canada can’t see this content” in bold, with the added subheading: “In response to Canadian government legislation, news content can’t be viewed in Canada”. Suddenly, in a period where misinformation is already on the rise, people accessing social media in Canada no longer have access to verified sources.

What does this mean? Why does this matter? Why did this happen?

In 2023, the Canadian government passed Bill C-18, also known as the Online News Act (Aiello & Jones, 2023). The bill’s main purpose was to require technology corporations to pay Canadian news outlets for the traction they receive on their platforms. This came in a time of declining revenue in journalism (particularly advertisement revenue), such that 85% of Canadians identified as not paying for any news source, with 64% of respondents noting that they seek their news on social media (Aiello & Jones, 2023). When the act received royal assent in June of 2023, Meta (the parent company of Facebook and Instagram) announced that they would be removing news for all Canadians in order to comply with Bill C-18 (Edwards, 2023). The bill has been described by critics and corporations as a “tax on links”(Geist, 2023), which would impact the revenue and business model of the platforms themselves. Alphabet, Google’s parent corporation, was able to reach a payment deal with the Canadian government (Yousif, 2023), but Meta’s stance has remained unchanged.

Meta’s position has created an unassuming, but serious threat to Canadian democracy by removing news outlets from its platforms. Their algorithm leaves many of its users vulnerable, as a single interaction with a piece of misinformation can create a “rabbit hole” or “echochamber” of similar dialogue and beliefs (Cinelli et al., 2021). In fact, Meta has acknowledged that they have seen greater interaction with divisive content, and thus it is more likely to be widespread across their networks (van der Linden, 2023). More Canadians than ever are endorsing conspiracy theories and engaging in Ideologically Motivated Violent Extremism through social media. This is not a small, fringe group of Canadians, as one may assume when thinking about

conspiracy theories and violent rhetoric on the internet. In select surveys, it has been demonstrated that about 70% of Canadians are Facebook users (Parker et al., 2024), with 24% of Canadians indicating that they use social media as their primary source of news (S. C. Government of Canada, 2023b). The connection between the number of Canadians on Facebook and those who use social media for news is clear: There is now a large group who no longer are using verified sources to obtain their local and national news. With Meta's removal of the ability to share posts from verified news platforms, as well as striking them from news feeds altogether, Canadians are now more vulnerable than ever to misinformation, disinformation and malinformation.

Misinformation, disinformation and malinformation are matters of dire importance globally. The general public is increasingly more suspicious and concerned by their own ability to discern misinformation, and trust in journalism has continued to decline (Newman et al., 2024a). Fake news, as it's often generally referred to, spreads ten times faster than legitimate media (Vosoughi et al., 2018), relying upon emotional appeals- often seeking to cause outrage amongst its audience to ensure its virality. Those who spread disinformation have become more deceptive in their practices, such that it has become more difficult, even for young people who were raised in the age of the internet (van der Linden, 2023), to decipher disinformation headlines. Some misinformation can be harmless on the surface- Canadians report that a bulk of the misinformation they are able to point out relates to celebrities (Lockhart et al., 2024). Others, not so much. Disinformation campaigns have become a tool of foreign interference, and conspiracy theories can have violent outcomes. A prominent example of this is the January 6th Capitol Insurrection in the United States, where thousands of supporters of Donald Trump, committed to his disinformation campaign surrounding the legitimacy of the 2020 election, stormed the government building, killing a police officer, in addition to one of the rioters being fatally shot by the police officers responding to the attack (Cameron, 2022). It is evident that misinformation, disinformation and malinformation are one of the foremost challenges to contemporary democracies, and are becoming more deceptive and advanced in their appearances. In a time as perilous as the one we are in now, it is troubling that Meta would choose to remove access to news sources on its platforms in Canada.

This research seeks to explore the impacts of Meta's news ban on Facebook, with a focus on the spread of misinformation. In order to understand the relevance of the case studies used in this work, it is first necessary to have a concise definition for what constitutes violent extremism in the context of the internet. This will aid in demonstrating the risk that some of the commonly used rhetoric poses to the safety of the general public in Canada, especially minority groups such as immigrants, women and members of the LGBTQ+ community. Even in comments that do not have exact calls to actions, it is clear that there is an element of incitement and promotion of extremist and conspiratorial thought. Another facet in understanding the case studies is who believes misinformation, and why. This will highlight why there is a greater number of right-wing internet groups used in this research, and the differences in the misinformation disseminated by men and women. The so-called pipeline into violent extremism and conspiracy theories is incredibly individual, personal and somewhat casual given the unlimited access to the internet, and thus it is pertinent to understand the different avenues that draw people in.

The case studies demonstrate a division between those who engage in racist conspiracy theories, for example, and mothers who believe they are combating the promotion of paedophilia in schools. The case studies additionally propose that new forms of production and consumption have arisen in lieu of traditional news media being present on Facebook. These new production and consumption roles feature the emergence of bad faith actors, posing almost as news outlets, those who go between both roles and pure consumption. This theory in part aligns with the Canadian Security Intelligence Service's definition of the tiers of Ideologically Motivated Violent Extremism, as they describe producers of misinformation/disinformation as being within an at risk group, but additionally suggests that the consumers also may be on the cusp of outright incitement to violence.

Following a review of the case study, I will delve into the origins of the conspiracy theories and misinformation expressed by the producers and consumers. Doing so will aid in ascertaining whether the spread of misinformation on Facebook in Canada has been worsened by the Online News Act and the subsequent news ban, or if the cultural influence of the United States is to blame. Canada shares more than just a border with the United States, and events that occur down south of the border often reverberate into daily life and politics in Canada, such that misinformation connected to American events is adapted and recontextualized for Canadian audiences. An example of this, which will be analyzed in detail, is misinformation regarding

voting machines and electoral conspiracy theories, which originated in the 2020 US Presidential election and gained popularity amongst some voters in the 2024 British Columbia provincial election.

The methodology employed for this research is mixed. It is predominantly reliant upon a literature review, which is limited in relation to the Online News Act specifically, but broad in the study of how misinformation moves across Facebook and the origins of prominent conspiracy theories. The second chapter is focused on case studies, which are qualitative in nature. The case studies feature samples of posts and comments from select Facebook users and groups, who were chosen based upon following size, engagement and themes they commonly engage in. The content was also selected on a basis of personal lived experience; as a researcher hailing from Western Canada, much of the regional specific content is related to Alberta and British Columbia. In addition, the case studies were based on Facebook content predating January 6th, 2025. The information cut off was selected to cope with the change in information and national attention following the resignation of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who was a target of the majority of vitriol that was reviewed for this study.

This research, at its core, seeks to identify whether the Online News Act has worsened the digital ecosystem in Canada, or if the spread of misinformation was an inevitability. The timing of this research is pertinent- there will be a federal election in 2025, and it will be the first one since the Facebook news ban took place. It is urgent, now more than ever, to try to understand why misinformation has become commonplace on Facebook, and who is the most vulnerable to entering echo chambers that disseminate dangerous conspiracy theories. Understanding this may aid in the creation of new policy to combat online harms and misinformation, and further, underscore the need for more digital literacy. Canadians rely upon Facebook as a news source, and they have not changed their behaviour in regards to news consumption since the ban took effect, which will leave many people without verified information during a national election. This in and of itself poses a threat to democracy, but even more troublesome are the themes of anti-government and distrust in democratic processes that reign the comment sections of some Facebook groups. It is not an exaggeration to claim that disinformation and misinformation is one of the greatest threats Canada faces today; Justice Marie-Josée Hogue recently described disinformation and misinformation as being “noxious, and

it is powerful. It poses a major risk to Canadian democracy. If we do not find ways of addressing it, misinformation and disinformation have the ability to distort our discourse, change our views and shape our society.” (Zimonjic, 2025). This research explores the distortions in discourse and the risk they pose to democracy in order to assess the influence of the news ban and American misinformation on Canadian rhetoric.

Chapter 1: Definitions, Preconditions and The Internet

1.1 - What is Online Extremism and Digital Radicalization?

The speed at which social media has and continues to evolve has made it difficult to create a universal definition for what qualifies as online extremism. It is, however, necessary to understand and define how those terms manifest in Canada in order to contextualize the changes to the digital ecosystem in the face of the Online News Act. Online extremist acts as well as forms of radicalization predate the act, and have their strongest roots in the Covid-19 pandemic, when the public turned to the internet rather than be in total isolation. It was on social media, where people had turned to voice their frustrations, that the public was met with the endless echo chambers of conspiracy theories and rage. The Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) refers to these newly organized online groups and threats as Ideologically Motivated Violent Extremism “IMVE”, distinguishing them from Politically Motivated Violent Extremism and Religiously Motivated Violent Extremism (Intelligence Service, 2023). Organizations or individuals who perpetrate IMVE differ from the typical notion of violent extremist threats in that there is no complex leadership or cell structure, and those involved can appear to be lone wolves (this perspective is disputed as “an individual’s propensity to commit an act of violent extremism is first motivated or directed by a larger ideologically driven movement.” (*Committee Report No. 6 - SECU (44-1) - House of Commons of Canada, 2022*)). It is pertinent to understand that the individuals who commit acts of or are involved with IMVE are not people on the fringe of society; up to 50% of Americans today endorse at least one conspiracy theory (not all are violent in nature) (van der Linden, 2023). CSIS defines IMVE as “radicalization [that] is more often caused by a combination of ideas and grievances, resulting in a personalized worldview that is inspired by a variety of sources.”. The so-called pipeline into this form of violent extremism is incredibly individual, personal and somewhat casual given the unlimited access to the internet, where the ability to fact check sources is presently being fettered in Canada by Meta.

This chapter will attempt to create a clear definition for Ideologically Motivated Violent Extremism in its digital context, misinformation and disinformation, as well as recount the

manifestation of IMVE and misinformation in Canada during the pandemic. These definitions and investigation will seek to demonstrate the risk that online extremism poses to Canadian society, establishing a clear precondition for risk prior to the implementation of the Online News Act, as well as identifying who is at risk of promoting or believing misinformation.

1.2 - Definitions

In order to best understand why online misinformation campaigns pose a threat to national security in Canada, it is necessary to develop an operating definition of violent extremism. The primary difficulty with achieving a working definition is noted by the United Nations office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC, n.d.): It is often difficult to separate violent extremists from terrorism. Notably, the term Violent Extremism is often used interchangeably in policy, whereas terrorism is denoted in national criminal codes (*Terrorism and Violent Extremism*, n.d.). Many nations are in agreement about one major facet of violent extremists; it is split into three forms- political, religious and ideological.

What may separate violent extremists from terrorism is the manifestation. Our conception (and intergovernmental definitions) typically limits terrorism to punishable acts as its form tends to be physical, or acts of intimidation. To put it simply: these are actions that have come to pass. Researchers have contended that just because individuals hold extremist beliefs does not mean that they will engage in radical or violent behaviour (Striegher, 2015).

For the sake of this research, the Canadian definition will be taken into consideration to limit the breadth of this body of work, and maintain clarity. The Canada Centre for Community Engagement and Prevention of Violence defines Violent Extremism as a term describing the beliefs and actions of people who support or use violence to achieve extreme ideological, religious or political goals (*National Strategy on Countering Radicalization to Violence*, 2018). The Canada Security Intelligence Service views the three forms of violent extremists to predominantly be the encouragement or justification of the usage of violence to achieve its various categorical means (Intelligence Service, 2023). Further, in its recent committee report on IMVE, CSIS found that IMVE expands into three tiers of behaviour, all of which are mainly focused on the spread and growth of extremist ideology. Timothy Halwheg of the organization

stated that “Tier 1 activities comprise “passive engagement”, with online and offline violent extremist content. Though it may be abhorrent, he said, much of the online content that forms the narrative of violent extremists is Charter-protected free speech and therefore the people who engage with this content fall outside CSIS’s investigative mandate. Tier 2 activities see individuals transitioning from being passive content consumers to producing and disseminating extremist propaganda. Again, much of what these individuals are producing and disseminating is protected free speech and these activities cannot be investigated. Nonetheless, Mr. Hahlweg indicated that some Tier 2 activities “bleed into” Tier 3. He explained that as some Tier 2 activities show signs of transitioning to Tier 3, CSIS focuses on indicators that people are either “mobilizing to violence or potentially mobilizing to violence.”(Intelligence Service, 2024). The third tier sometimes mandates investigation by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, but can categorically be identified as hate crimes as opposed to terrorism. The RCMP definition states that “the Government of Canada uses the terms "terrorism" and "violent extremism" interchangeably from a policy perspective. However, from a criminal law perspective, only "terrorist activity" (terrorism) is currently defined under the Criminal Code (*Terrorism and Violent Extremism*).”

In summary, according to the Canadian Criminal Code and the Government of Canada, Violent Extremism may consist of ideological movements that fuel or support eventual acts of violence. It may not manifest in a physical form of violence, and it may be intertwined with hate speech. Violent Extremism is the encouragement of the use of violence and usage of violent rhetoric to achieve either political, religious or ideological means.

An important facet for understanding how Ideologically Motivated Violent Extremism has taken hold so broadly online is the Post-Truth Era. The term Post-Truth was first recorded in 1992 (Flood, 2016), used by the playwright Steve Tesich in reference to the public perception of the Iran-Contra scandal. The Oxford Dictionary defines Post-Truth as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping political debate or public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” (*Post-Truth, Adj. Meanings, Etymology and More* | *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2017). There is a harrowing quotation sample from Oxford Dictionary’s 2016 edition, which summarizes how the post-truth impacts social media and ideologically motivated violent extremism. “*Social media..has become a post-truth nether*

world in which readers willingly participate in their own deception because it feels good.”.

Indeed, with the rise of Donald Trump and the American Alt-Right, the usage of post-truth has surged in the form of the simplified terminology “fake news”. This vocabulary denotes the intentional misbelief and distrust in verified news media outlets, and the choice to participate in online circles that intentionally share and spread “alternative facts” (or, more simply put, mis/disinformation).

The difference between misinformation and disinformation is crucial in understanding the themes within this paper. The Canadian Centre for Cyber Security identifies three definitive strands of “fake news”, which they refer to as MDM (Canadian Centre for Cyber Security, 2022). This short form is Misinformation, Disinformation and Malinformation. Misinformation is false information that does not intend to cause harm; disinformation is false information that is “intended to manipulate, cause damage and guide people, organizations and countries in the wrong direction”(Canadian Centre for Cyber Security, 2022); malinformation is “information that stems from the truth but is often exaggerated in a way that misleads and causes potential harm” (Canadian Centre for Cyber Security, 2022). Malinformation is less used internationally, but retains relevance when discussing IMVE, as it can frequently be used as a pipeline to further conspiracy and extremist thought.

1.3 - What is the Online News Act?

The digital ecosystem in Canada has been impacted by the creation and implementation of the Online News Act, Bill C-18. The long title of the bill is *“an Act respecting online communications platforms that make news content available to persons in Canada”* (C-18 (44-1) - LEGISinfo - Parliament of Canada, n.d.). This policy seeks to aid the compensation of Canadian news media following a steady decline in advertisement revenue over the last few years (Aiello & Jones, 2023). The legislation was based on the Australian *“News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code”*, as cited by the department of Canadian Heritage in their initial press release (2022). The Australian act saw all mediation and evaluatory powers going under the portfolio of a Treasurer, an appointed minister (Flew et al., 2023). The

Treasurer is able to designate a social media or digital platform as being subject to the code, and decide whether the deals those designated platforms conduct are sufficient.

The Canadian News landscape is highly concentrated, and is predominantly composed of private sector businesses that own English and French-Language sources. The public news domain is the Canadian Broadcasting Company, CBC, which publishes in both official languages and is partially dependent upon advertisement revenue (Rochester et al., 2024). The four major corporations that make up the media landscape are among the largest businesses in Canada- Bell Canada Enterprises Inc, Rogers Communications, Telus Corp and Quebecor Inc¹ (Rochester et al., 2024).

It was the understanding of the Canadian Heritage committee that while revenue had declined for news media, Canadian traffic had increased revenue on platforms such as Meta steadily, with social media platforms representing 2/3rds of advertising revenue in 2015 (Fry, n.d.). Digital platforms (including social media) were reported to be the favourite source for news, but television and print have notably declined (Newman et al., 2024a). Additionally, survey respondents between the ages of 18-34 and 45-54 indicated a preference of seeking Canadian news stories out on Facebook rather than from the source website themselves (Korzinski, 2023). The recommendation of the department of Canadian Heritage was that the playing field for Canadian news networks ought to be levelled, such that access to Canadian news media, which was being impacted by its loss of revenue (be it through the unemployment of journalists and financial suffering of local sources), can remain stable.

The Online News Act contains a bargaining framework for news outlets and online platforms, which would require the dominant digital news intermediaries to provide Canadian news networks with compensation for the usage and sharing of their content on their platforms (Aiello & Jones, 2023), (2022). The platforms that are required to partake in this bargaining process and are part of a significant imbalance of bargaining power are defined as (Government of Canada, 2024):

¹ As the focus of this research will be on English language misinformation, the properties of Quebecor Inc will not be relevant to this study. It is, however, difficult to discuss journalism in Canada without mentioning Francophone networks, and thus they will be noted occasionally.

(a) the operator's total revenue from all sources in the previous calendar year is greater than \$1 billion; and

(b) the digital news intermediary in question is one of the following online communications platforms:

(i) a search engine that, during the previous calendar year, had an average of at least 20 million unique visitors in Canada per month,

(ii) a social media service that, during the previous calendar year, had an average of at least 20 million active users in Canada per month.

The legislation required that companies who fell under those parameters had to self-report to the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), the regulatory agency responsible for broadcasting and telecommunications (Flew et al., 2023). This differs from the Australian legislation, and thus streamlines the relationship between the platforms and news outlets by removing the so-called middleman. The other major change is notable transparency, as the Online News Act enforces a yearly audit to demonstrate the commercial effect and value of the contributions to news organizations (Flew et al., 2023).

As it stood at the time of the bill's announcement, the only companies which met these thresholds were Alphabet (Google) and Meta (Facebook, Instagram, Whatsapp) (Aiello & Jones, 2023). Alphabet had initially threatened to remove news sharing from their platform within Canada as well, but instead reached an agreement with the Canadian government in November of 2023 to pay publishers an annual fee of 100 million dollars (Aiello, 2023). It is the responsibility of the Canadian Journalism Collective (the bargainer in this circumstance, whom Alphabet selected) to distribute this annual sum amongst news outlets, and this distribution is regulated by clauses within the act and the CRTC (CRTC, Government of Canada, 2024). Seven million dollars will go to the CBC, 30 million is being set aside for broadcasters, and the remaining 63 million will be distributed amongst other news outlets, especially newspapers and digital platforms (Aiello & Jones, 2023). The criteria to receive funding include being a qualified Canadian journalism organization under the guidelines of Income Tax Act, produce news content that is of public interest, be based in Canada, employ two or more full time journalists, abide by journalistic ethics or belong to a recognized association with an ethics codes, or operation of an

Indigenous news outlet (*Government Bill (House of Commons) C-18 (44-1) - Royal Assent - Online News Act - Parliament of Canada, 2023*) (Djuric, 2024).

Meta has remained strong in their stance, with one unnamed source stating that "unlike search engines, we do not proactively pull news from the internet to place in our users' feeds and we have long been clear that the only way we can reasonably comply with the Online News Act is by ending news availability for people in Canada." (Aiello, 2023). In their official statement to the committee of Canadian Heritage, Meta relayed their stance by claiming that their platform in fact increases traffic to news media, and that the act punished Meta by making them pay for content that was under consumed to begin with ("Meta's Position on Canada's Online News Act," 2023).

1.4 - Facebook's Algorithm

An algorithm, at its most simple level, is a system which ranks where a post appears on your newsfeed based on its popularity or relevance to you (Oremus et al., 2021). The current model on Facebook has several criteria which feed into the company's goal of creating "meaningful social interactions" on the platform (Oremus et al., 2021), and assigns scores to posts. The algorithm "asks" itself four questions, according to Meta, when a user opens Facebook, in order to determine what the user most wants to see and interact with (*How Facebook Distributes Content*, n.d.). The primary question is regarding inventory; what content has been posted by friends and publishers (followed pages) since the user has last logged in? The second consideration are signals, which are very non-specifically described by Meta, but can range from who the poster was to how fast the user's wireless connection is at the time of opening the platform. The third level, and possibly the most dangerous, is the predictions that the algorithm attempts to make based on the user's previous interactions and interests. This can be influenced by time spent reading similar content, comment history and completion of videos. The fourth part of this system is the score of content, generated by the algorithm based upon likelihood to click, likelihood to share, reactions (Oremus et al., 2021), and more. A Meta whistleblower, Frances Haugen, revealed that the "angry" react button was given a weight that was five times more than that of the regular "like" reaction (Merrill & Oremus, 2021), and that

the system estimated that content that evoked emotional reactions or was controversial in nature was more likely to appear in news feeds (Merrill & Oremus, 2021).

In short, divisive content is given more weight and is thus more likely to appear across the platform (van der Linden, 2023). Internal documents from Haugen's leak demonstrate that Meta had been aware for years that its platform's "recommendation systems can very quickly lead users down the path to conspiracy theories and groups" (Zuidijk & Riley, 2021), and had even gone as far to demonstrate the same by creating dummy accounts with set interests, and within days, the algorithm began to recommend far right content and conspiracy theories (Zuidijk & Riley, 2021).

As previously mentioned, the third function of the algorithm is to predict user behaviour and interests. Based on its prediction, the system can assign a political leaning to a user's data. A 2019 study found that assignment occurred 51% of the time to its data sample, with 73% of those assigned a political group stating that the content fed to them by the algorithm accurately represented their worldviews (Hitlin & Rainie, 2019). This feature is similar within the Instagram algorithm, although the platform uses different formulaic approaches for the five facets impacted by a user's personal data and decisions (this being search results, feed, stories, explore and their video service, reels) (*Instagram Ranking Explained* | *Instagram Blog*, 2023). These assigned political beliefs are what can lead to echo chambers. In a regular environment where news is available on the platform, the pathway to echo chambers is usually created through the sharing of hyperpartisan content. These articles are clickbait-like in nature and highly divisive. They all but ensure that the reader who interacts with them is persuaded by the emotive style of writing, as opposed to seeking facts that contradict what seems to be a trustworthy article. Eventually, as the user reads more of these articles, the algorithm, through its third and fourth scoring method, all but guarantees that the user's newsfeed will be entirely made up of similar hyperpartisan content (Rogers & Niederer, 2020). This is what the intelligence community refers to as the "wilderness of mirrors" (Rogers & Niederer, 2020), a line from a T.S Eliot poem², that captures the idea that people become surrounded by lies until they can no

² These with a thousand small deliberations protract the profit of their chilled delirium, excite the membrane, when the sense has cooled, with pungent sauces, multiply variety in a wilderness of mirrors. - Gerontion, T.S Eliot

longer identify the truth. The algorithm's predisposition to creating social bubbles, where users will predominantly see content that aligns with their beliefs, can lead it to dangerous suggestions. A 2016 study by Facebook data scientist Monica Lee found that on the occasions that site members joined "extremist" groups on the page, such groups had appeared on their newsfeed as recommended in 64% of incidents (van der Linden, 2023). Further evidence of the impact of the algorithmic system on political exposure demonstrated that users saw far more "confirmation bias" and "like-minded content" while using the platform's ranked system, whereas a chronological feed featured more "cross-cutting" sources and diverse opinions (Guess et al., 2023). It is notable that the same study found that the engagement was higher through the ranked system, which demonstrates why Meta has a preference for using their current algorithm.

1.5 - Who is at Risk?

Seeking to define who is vulnerable to misinformation is incredibly complex. As previously mentioned, the path to conspiracy theories, radicalization or even just the spread of misinformation is extremely individualistic and personal. It does stand to reason, however, that there are individuals who are more susceptible to these dangers, especially as they become more pervasive.

The simplest way to explore risk factors is by demonstrating reliance on social media as a news source within Canada. A Statistics Canada survey from 2020 noted that a majority of respondents between the ages of 18 to 54 preferred to use the Internet to follow news events in the country. This survey does not distinguish between what form of digital news the respondents preferred, so this statistic serves as a basis for a digital preference (Government of Canada, 2023). This has been affirmed by the Reuters Institute Digital News Report, whose 2024 data demonstrates that 72% of their respondents noted a preference for the Internet as a primary source of news, which includes a 46% preference for social media specifically (Newman et al., 2024). Delving further into broad surveys, a more recent study conducted in 2023 revealed that 66% of Millennials and 85% of Gen Z respondents reported that they elected to seek news on social media platforms over traditional outlets. The respondents further noted that they were more likely to trust a piece of information if it had been shared frequently across social media

(Lebouc, 2023). A perhaps more significant discovery from multiple surveys is the erosion of trust in news media. The Reuters report found that overall trust in the news has dropped to 39%, with the 2023 survey showing that 26% of respondents specifically stated that the Online News Act and, in turn, the Meta News Ban caused them to trust media less. This erosion in trust ties into the ability to decipher what is true from misinformation and disinformation online. Consequently, people who do not trust news media may be unable to be vigilant, particularly when they become surrounded by misinformation online. In 2023, it was indicated that 43% of survey respondents noted that they felt it was more difficult then to distinguish between real news and misinformation, more so than it had been three years prior (Government of Canada, 2023). This data represents over 2 in 5 Canadians who feel troubled by their ability to separate out truth from false content.

But how often do people fall for misinformation amongst the people who feel it has become more complicated to recognize it? A survey on Online Harms conducted by The Dais, a policy think tank based out of Toronto Metropolitan University revealed that of their sample pool (2,500 respondents), 38% indicated that they had believed a piece of misinformation on more than one occasion, monthly (Lockhart et al., 2024). A 2022 Canadian Internet Use Survey noted that the national average of self-reported exposure to suspected misinformation was 70% (Government of Canada, 2024), and The Dias' report found the 2024 level of misinformation belief to be consistent with their findings from 2022. The findings of the report demonstrates that, while self reported, Canadians more often than not fall for misinformation when they encounter it. It is difficult to opine to what extent that is true as there is a need for more research of misinformation susceptibility in Canada, but the relevant data paints a picture of a population who is less capable of identifying misinformation, has been exposed to it more than ever and has become more vulnerable to believing it. The Dais survey additionally found that those who more often believe misinformation are more likely to trust social media and use it as their primary source of information. Further, they found that respondents with right-wing political leanings were more unable to pick out information (only 34% could identify six or more of eight given pieces of misinformation) than respondents with left-leaning affiliations (78% identified six or more pieces of misinformation correctly) (Lockhart et al., 2024).

There are further details affiliated with platform usage, as the Dais' report indicates that Facebook, although less so since 2022, and Instagram are highly relied upon as news sources.

This level of usage is in spite of the fact that the Meta news ban directly affects those two platforms, so it can only be presumed that the circulation of the news on those platforms has taken different forms, be it through uncited infographics, screenshots of news reports (Parker et al., 2024) and more. What is more concerning, beyond the reliance on Meta's platforms for information, is the fact that more than three quarters of Canadians are unaware of the news ban on Instagram and Facebook (Parker et al., 2024), with 51% of those being users who rely on Meta platforms for news. This statistic clearly shows that the habitual sharing and trust of news on the internet has not shifted amongst those who already had relied on social media platforms because they did not realize there was something to adjust around. Presently, when someone attempts to access verified news sources through Facebook or Instagram or share a link to an article on Facebook, they are greeted with a pop up that informs them that they are unable to do so as a result of the Online News Act. If 51% of Canadians are unaware, this could indicate they were not interacting with content that was from a verified news source to begin with, or continued to rely on screenshots or trust information shared by those within their digital network in the face of the news ban.

Who is vulnerable to misinformation? The data indicates that misinformation is pervasive and ever present in the digital ecosystem of Canada, and that more people are susceptible to believing it. Much of this misinformation is innocuous, with those who were later able to identify a source as having been false indicating that 22% of those reports related to celebrities and pop culture (Lockhart et al., 2024). However, there is evidence of belief in dangerous misinformation and disinformation, with 25% of the Dais survey respondents holding the belief - to some extent or entirely- there is a group in Canada seeking to replace "native born" Canadians with immigrants, a conspiracy theory known as the "great replacement theory" (Lockhart et al., 2024). This sentiment has its origins in White Nationalist groups, and is related to increased immigration in Western countries (Stokes, 2022). The types of conspiracy theories Canadians believe will be explored in depth later, but notably, it is not abnormal for members of the general public to hold conspiratorial beliefs, which is why it is difficult to concisely define who is more likely to believe misinformation. There are, however, some relationships between political leanings, age, gender and more that can explain vulnerability to misinformation both in Canada and in general.

As previously identified by the Dais results, more Canadians with right-wing political affiliations were unable to detect misinformation. This finding is consistent with American demographics, where the YouGov misinformation susceptibility test known as MIST-20 demonstrated higher success rates in identifying misinformation amongst Democrat voters (University of Cambridge, 2023), such that $\frac{1}{3}$ Democratic and Independent respondents scored highly on the test, while only 14% of Republican respondents achieved the same. An inability to successfully identify misinformation correlates highly with greater risk in the face of fake news. It is likely that the presented headlines in both the MIST-20 and Dais report contained information that seemed plausible to the right-wing respondents, or aligned with their preconceived political beliefs and thus created a confirmation bias effect where the respondents presumed those false headlines to be true, as it resembled some form of content or information they had regularly encountered. This confirmation bias effect continues even when providing evidence to those who believe misinformation- Researchers sought to test how entrenched misinformation and disinformation had become amongst the general public, and tested their theory against Donald Trump's false claim that his inauguration was the most attended one to date, at the time ("Trump Claims Media 'dishonest' over Crowd Photos," 2017). Using a group of just over 1000 Americans, the researchers showed each subject pictures of Barack Obama's inauguration ceremony and that of Donald Trump's. When asked to identify which one belonged to either president, 41% of Trump voters answered incorrectly, in contrast to 8% of those who voted for Hillary Clinton. Further, when simply asked which photo had more people in it, 15% of Trump voters incorrectly identified the picture of Donald Trump's inauguration, which plainly, had far fewer people in attendance than that of Barack Obama (Schaffner et al., 2017). This phenomenon is known as motivated cognition, which is closely related to confirmation bias (D. F. Stone & Wood, 2018). Confirmation bias is what is known in psychology as a heuristic; a mental shortcut for quick decision making. This heuristic occurs as individuals are faster to accept evidence that fits in with their preconceived perception of the world, as it requires more mental strain to process information that is contrary to it (van der Linden, 2023). Motivated cognition, however, is used to describe when individuals choose to accept something as fact because they are motivated (in this instance, politically) to do so, and thus are more susceptible to believing that a piece of misinformation that has been disproven is in fact true, as it aligns

with their worldview (Pasek et al., 2014) (van der Linden, 2023). Confirmation bias, as a heuristic, occurs to us naturally and is related to the ease and speed at which our minds are more likely to process information we agree with (van der Linden, 2023) (D. F. Stone & Wood, 2018), whereas motivated cognition occurs at a subconscious or conscious level, as there is more active choice involved in those beliefs.

Another factor which may be at play in vulnerability to misinformation is age group. The MIST-20 was administered to a group of 1516 Americans, and their results revealed that those between the age of 18-29 were more unable than respondents above the age of 65 to identify the false headlines (Sanders, 2023). This data feels counterintuitive, as young people are assumed to be much more tech savvy, and while they do demonstrate higher digital literacy, a Stanford study with a data pool of 8000 students revealed that 85% of respondents mistakenly identified clickbait titles placed by advertisers as being real news headlines (van der Linden, 2023). In fact, this rate of inability to identify misinformation in young people is in spite of the fact that older age demographics are more likely to share pieces of misinformation online and visit untrustworthy source web pages (Guess et al., 2020). However, other surveys and researchers have found that while the older age demographic have outperformed young people in surveys, there is not much evidence of the same in real digital interactions (Lyons, 2023). This could be in part to natural cognitive decline that comes with age, especially as studies have demonstrated that the heuristic of confirmation bias allows misinformation to be more quickly recalled, whereas it is more unlikely that older test subjects will be able to recall fact-checking information that they were previously shown regarding the same source (Brashier & Schacter, 2020). Another reason for older age demographics' ability to identify misinformation more so than younger ones, despite cognitive challenges, may simply be explained by ever growing general knowledge, of which there is a gap of many years between the older and younger group. Within the conducted misinformation surveys, the older adults are able to rely upon their pre existing knowledge to make judgements regarding the presented headlines, which are more often accurate, but online, they struggle with seeing these same headlines repeatedly and particularly have been proven to lack the digital literacy to identify whether an image is doctored (Brashier & Schacter, 2020). In short, young adults do not have the same knowledge basis to rely upon as older adults, and this can be an explanation for why they are more susceptible to false headlines.

What differentiates young adults from older adults is the packaging of the misinformation, as older adults demonstrate higher digital illiteracy and are more likely to believe misinformation that to a young person may be evidently false, whereas a young adult is tricked by misinformation that is close enough to one of their worldviews, and is packed and presented in a similar form to legitimate news pieces. Thus, it is difficult to state with any certainty whether one age demographic is more vulnerable to misinformation than another.

A final factor in vulnerability to take into consideration is gender. This issue has been less focused upon as a variable in general studies, but will be relevant later upon analysis of forms of misinformation presently being shared in Canada. The belief in misinformation seems to be equally distributed between men and women in most studies, but studies demonstrate that when it comes to challenging perceived misinformation, there is asymmetry between genders. Males are often more likely to comment on social media posts, and will typically challenge misinformation if they see a benefit that outweighs the cost in doing so. This can sometimes mean that men are more likely to challenge misinformation if they feel they stand to personally gain from having done so. Women, on the other hand, are more likely to challenge content if the material relates to them personally. This has to do with cognitive foundations, and a human desire to ensure that an issue that we are passionate about is portrayed accurately (Gurgun et al., 2024). It could be argued that this is inversely true- men are more likely to promote or believe conspiracy theories by which they personally benefit whereas women will do the same for content that personally affects them. This argument is demonstrated through various radicalization pathways/packaging of misinformation, particularly that of Pastel QAnon (Argentino, 2021) when it comes to women. This will be explored in greater depth in the second chapter, but the concept of Pastel QAnon refers to the means by which conspiracy theories are packaged and made more palatable to young women, especially those involved in spheres of health influencers and mommy bloggers. Women are essentially marketed and sold conspiracy theories through aesthetically interesting content and with messages that evoke an easy emotional response. An example of this is the QAnon conspiracy theories involving pedophilia, which employed hashtags such as “SaveTheChildren”, which would obviously appeal to young women with children and those with maternal instincts (Argentino, 2021). This represents the flipside of the way in which women are more likely to confront misinformation; it is also

possible that women are more vulnerable to misinformation that personally affects them, which is often achieved through the means by which the content is packaged. An interpretation for why men may be vulnerable to misinformation and conspiratorial thinking is multifaceted. In analyzing their likelihood to engage in confrontation over misinformation, which is often associated with a cost/benefit analysis and personal gain, one could perhaps see that men may be more prone to interacting with misinformation that they feel would benefit them if they were true. This does not necessarily have to be malicious in nature- it could relate to financial gain or another small milieu- but it could manifest in sinister ways. This may include various genres related to misogyny, racial theories and health issues (Lewis, 2019). In fact, we can infer based on the data regarding political leanings that it is plausible that more men than women believe conspiracy theories, as men are more likely to be right wing voters (Cassese et al., 2020). Additionally, studies have shown that during the Covid pandemic, men were more likely to endorse conspiracy theories than women (Cassese et al., 2020). As previously mentioned, it is difficult to say with any certainty to what extent gender impacts vulnerability to misinformation, especially as the ways in which misinformation takes form are vast and digital radicalization is incredibly personal, and thus difficult to predict.

We can clearly see that there are a multitude of variables that can impact whether an individual is at risk of believing misinformation. As more Canadians have increased their presence and dependence on the internet, their exposure to misinformation has greatly increased. This increase in social media usage may correlate with the decrease in trust in news media, as people are exposed to more and more off-putting headlines and images. Thus, the variables have expanded and have left many people exposed for a variety of reasons. This can range from preferred means of news coverage, political leanings and more. What is clear, in essence, is that most people with social media are vulnerable to misinformation. It is true that some people more than others may be vulnerable to misleading headlines, or are more likely to share a clearly doctored image, but the pervasiveness of misinformation is inescapable, and no one is entirely safe from exposure to and susceptibility to misinformation and conspiratorial beliefs.

1.6 - Manifestations of Ideologically Motivated Violent Extremism During the Covid-19 Pandemic

The Coronavirus pandemic forced many people into isolation with limited contact outside of their own households, and thus, the internet drew individuals in as a means to connect with others more so than before. A Canadian Internet Use survey found that 75% of respondents over the age of 15 were online more than they had been prior to the pandemic (Tenove & Tworek, 2022). A survey conducted by Stats Canada found that in July of 2020, “nine in ten Canadians (90%) used online sources to find information about COVID-19. The three main sources were online newspapers or news sites (63%), social media posts from news organizations or magazines (35%), and social media posts from other users or influencers (30%).” (Government of Canada, 2021). This clear increase in digital traffic dramatically shifted the climate of online discourse during the unprecedented early days of the pandemic. Users took to the internet to share their experiences of Covid-19, and this often included their grievances with the governmental reactions to the pandemic and the lockdowns. In this time, these expressions of frustrations resonated with various extremist circles, such as those on the far-right and incels (involuntary celibate), and lead to what a Canadian Anti-Hate Network investigation called “cross-movement networking” (Tenove & Tworek, 2022). Not only did these groups begin to interact more, they began to gain more traction. In the first six weeks following the initial lockdowns, online searches for terms and content relating to violent extremism increased by an average of 18.5% in the six largest Canadian cities (Moonshoot, 2020). Individuals and groups who already had notions or were strictly against the government were vulnerable to such content, and as such, ingested more of it than ever before and likely spread it to their friends.

What kind of violent extremist content rose during the pandemic? At the time, there was an increase in the overarching theme of anti-authority sentiment on the internet, typically aimed at health measures that restricted movement or introduced vaccination passports. The breakdown of extremist Internet searches from the first six weeks of the pandemic and rhetoric display a mix of worrying content that falls under the categories of misinformation, malinformation and

disinformation. Research has suggested that the information spread during the Covid-19 pandemic was predominantly misinformation in nature, as was shared repeatedly by individuals who did not seek to maliciously and blatantly lie (Bridgman et al., 2021). The overarching themes that dominated conspiracy theorist and extremist circles, according to a BC Human Rights Hate Inquiry, were that of Sinister Origins, Corrupt Elites, Freedom Under Siege, Causing Injury or Death, Incompetence, Racism, Xenophobia, Misogyny and Threats of Violence. These themes can overlap in content and usage, depending on who is being discussed and the context that leads to the post.

One of the major themes observed within a study of tweets from the province of British Columbia was “Freedom Under Siege”; the notion that personal rights and freedoms were being stripped from individuals by means of health restrictions during the pandemic. This theme was prominent among far-right (and even some moderate) political figures, aligning themselves with American politicians who were anti-lockdown. This group eventually evolved into a key example of a physical result of violent extremism, the Freedom Convoy movement.

The Freedom Convoy is a prime example of the cross-movement networking that occurred digitally during the Covid-19 pandemic. Vaccination requirements for employment were predominantly left up to the authority of the provinces, but the truck drivers who regularly had to travel across the American border fell under federal regulation due to the international nature of their work. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s administration announced that beginning in January of 2022, nearly two years after the pandemic had begun, the truckers would be required to be vaccinated to cross over the border and return. Of the nearly 120,000 drivers, 85% were vaccinated. However, anti-vaccination and themes of Freedom Under Siege had been festering online since the introduction of public health measures and this cause became a rallying point for many skeptical and disgruntled individuals. Those who chose to not be vaccinated often fell into the category of those who were skeptic of the vaccine (Causing Injury or Death). This can be attributed to a spread of misinformation regarding the safety and science behind the development of the vaccinations.

Vaccine misinformation was mostly spread through social media in Canada, as studies and reviews have found that mainstream media coverage of vaccinations was positive in nature and did not validate conspiracy theories (Owen et al., n.d.). The Media Ecosystem Observatory

found that in a poll of those who noted themselves to be “anti-vaxxers” or simply hesitant, the leading causes for their attitudes were notions that the Covid vaccines were unsafe or ineffective. Conspiracies related to the safety of vaccinations could range from the vaccines being “rushed”, to them containing microchips that would allow billionaire Bill Gates to track their movements. It is difficult to quantify the exact beliefs on that spectrum of the anti-vaxxers or vaccine hesitant, but this is a clear example of the slippery slope posed by those within online circles.

The truckers began to travel from British Columbia to Ontario to protest in Ottawa. Meanwhile online, they received support in the form of financial donations. These drivers began to stop and rally in cities, and the movement picked up speed in other provinces, with the truckers eventually converging on the Canadian capital at the end of January, 2022. The truckers blocked roadways through downtown Ottawa, imposing “extreme amounts of noise, horn honking, incessant diesel fumes and other pollution, blockage of the streets and intimidation.” (Fraser, 2024). Their presence not only impacted the feasibility of businesses, but also livelihoods and perceived safety of the city’s residents. After this occupation of the city began, leaders of this new movement emerged. Most of these leaders were not truckers, but were rather far-right extremists, who had past affiliations with conspiracy theorist, racist and anti-government movements. The Freedom Convoy became a banner for anyone who opposed vaccine mandates, public health measures and government control related to the pandemic and thus became an umbrella in a physical manifestation of cross-movement networking. One of the original organizers, Chris Barber, was a truck driver at the time of the convoy, and is largely credited with the mobilization of the protests through his social media presence (Holder & Jacquie, 2023). He, along with Benjamin Dichter, another trucker with a pre-existing social media platform, represent the sole drivers who were involved with the leadership of the Freedom Convoy. Benjamin Dichter, however, had affiliations with right wing extremism prior to the convoy, having spoken at The People’s Party of Canada’s rallies to express xenophobic conspiracy theories (Parkhill, 2022). This is not to say that Barber did not harbour any right-wing conspiratorial thoughts- he professed to having confederate flags in his home (Parkhill, 2022), which is often associated with far-right, American extremist movements (thus demonstrating further impact of American media on Canadian beliefs). Outside of these two individuals, the Freedom Convoy leadership was riddled with cross-movement networking. Tamara Lich, who is

often seen as one of the primary leaders and fundraiser, was a member of the far-right western separatist movement, Wexit, prior to the pandemic³. These individuals utilized their online presence to spread misinformation related to vaccination mandates and public health measures in Canada, and occupied the streets of Ottawa, saying that they would not leave until the measures were lifted federally (Parkhill, 2022), remaining in the city until the Emergency Measures Act was invoked in order to shut down the protest. In the month that the Convoy remained in Ottawa, additional border blockades occurred, with the most dangerous noted incident being the Coutts blockade in Alberta, where a small group of protestors were arrested for carrying a cache of weapons with the intent to harm the RCMP officers responding (“Mounties Seize Guns and Arrest 13 Protesters at Border Blockade in Alberta,” 2022). Among the Ottawa Convoy, clear extreme elements emerged, with Nazi imagery (Gillies, 2022) and open threats against Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his cabinet (Tasker, 2022).

The Freedom Convoy was a watershed moment in Canada, a physical manifestation that had arisen out of misinformation in a time of crisis. The increased conspiracy theories and threats that occurred online in the buildup, based on our established definition, can be explicitly categorized as Ideologically Motivated Violent Extremism. The Freedom Convoy can be interpreted as the manifestation of nearly two years of festering misinformation being spread through different echo chambers online. The Canadian Council of Academies estimates that two million Canadians were likely influenced by vaccine misinformation (Major, 2023). The influence of misinformation predominantly occurred in online circles, as the mainstream media in Canada did not perpetuate or repeat such conspiracy theories. The polarized rhetoric, which often began in American circles, was shared and repeated among communities in Canada. For example, former radio jockey and the now Premier of Alberta, Danielle Smith, endorsed and shared alternative “cures” to the coronavirus (including hydroxychloroquine, which was touted as a solution by former President Donald Trump)(Remski, 2023) and compared the vaccinated to the “followers of Hitler”, while calling the unvaccinated one of the most discriminated against minorities. Danielle Smith’s online activity is only a small example against a sea of many; these themes were repeated time and time again online, until it culminated in the Freedom Convoy. Threats of violence were repeatedly seen in many of these messages (Tenove & Tworek, 2022),

³ The Maverick Party, formerly known as Wexit Canada, is a Canadian federal political party. It advocates for constitutional changes to benefit, or the independence of, Western Canada, which includes British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut.

and much of the posts involved blatant racism, particularly against Asians, misogyny, particularly directed towards women in governmental positions, and themes of anti-Semitism.

During the first two years of the pandemic, there is clear evidence of members of the Canadian public at the very least engaging in Tier 1 Ideologically Motivated Violent Extremist Behaviours, by having passively engaged in what can be seen as hate speech. At its worst, individuals threatened to attack the Prime Minister or shoot members of the cabinet. The Covid-19 Pandemic and its resulting forms of anti-government protest demonstrate a distinct connection between misinformation campaigns and the potential for national instability in Canada.

Chapter 2: Hashtags, Memes and Conspiracy Theorists

2.1 - The Online World

In the first chapter, the psychology of misinformation, algorithms and examples of manifestations of online violent extremism were explored. This chapter will focus on the misinformation, trends and shared content available on Facebook. The intention is to explore common themes, point out variations in misinformation, and view what the Canadian digital landscape looks like currently in its totality. Case studies, descriptions of shared content and its engagement metrics, as well as comments and captions on repostings will serve as illustrative examples.

The Facebook algorithm is intended to serve the users, seeking to create further interactions between people behind the screen and their communities. The algorithmic system, however, fails to prevent the spread of dangerous content and the creation of echo chambers. Without the availability of verified sources, Canadians have sought to fill that gap through other means, some of which have been as innocuous as a screenshot (Parker et al., 2024) to replace direct links to news outlets. In turn, bad faith actors have also risen to fill the gap created by the Online News Act. These organizations do not consider themselves news outlets, but their content poses as such, often using phrases like “#Breaking”, or deriving snippets of politicians speaking out of context to instigate a reaction from their audience. These groups now show up as one of or even the top result when a user searches for political key terms on facebook, such as “Prime Minister Justin Trudeau”. This chapter, consequently, poses a secondary sub-thesis: the absence of verified news has created the opportunity for groups and individuals to fill distinct producer and consumer roles in the spreading and perpetuation of misinformation. This notion guides the selection of case studies and the understanding of the content currently being shared and used popularly on Facebook in Canada at present.

2.2 - Production and Consumption Cycle

The proposed sub-thesis above requires basic assumptions and definitions of production and consumption, contextualized in a digital environment. From these definitions, we can create a basic model with which we can interpret the case studies employed in this chapter. The roles of production and consumption are noted in CSIS' aforementioned tier system of Ideologically Motivated Violent Extremism, where in the second tier, it is noted that "Tier 2 activities see individuals transitioning from being passive content consumers to producing and disseminating extremist propaganda." (Intelligence Service, 2023). This is crucial in understanding the threat that those in producer roles play, even if they attempt to make their work seem innocuous by never directly stating the misinformation that their followers voice for them in their comment section. When discussing producers/consumer relationships in the age of media, the consumer is often seen as "the audience", while in the past, producers have had rigid roles, often institutionalized (Napoli, 2009) and distant from their audience. Traditionally, the role of the producer and consumer was the difference between a television news broadcaster and those watching the program at home. The producers had no interactions with their audience, and the audience had minimal influence on the producer. However, the age of social media has shifted these relationships, as self produced content has risen on various platforms (Napoli, 2015). In viewing Facebook, we can categorize the news media outlets who had previously been able to thrive on the platform as being traditional producers, with limited to no interaction with their audience. They belong to a defined professional institution, and do not pose as being of the people, so to speak. In recent years, with the rise of social media, the traditional audience members have now risen into the roles of producers by becoming sources of news themselves, or even through the promotion of producers' content through comments, reposts and other mechanisms of interaction (Napoli, 2015). This definition of producers would essentially make all those who interact with content or post it producers in their own right, which is perhaps too broad for the CSIS Tier 2 acts of Ideologically Motivated Violent Extremism. It is also now unsuitable for the circumstances on Facebook created by the Meta news ban, given the absence of news accounts on the platform. Therefore, taking the pre-existing literature into account, the term producer within this research refers to those who post content as their primary function on Facebook, and consumers include commenters, rather than just passive interactors. The role of the influencer is highly relevant here as well, as the Pastel QAnon and Crunchy Moms case study is rife with them. Influencers are producers, given that they post content, but differ from the other

producers in that they have emerged from the audience (DiResta, 2024). They sometimes fill the role of citizen journalists (Gillmor, 2004). Even if they do not portray themselves as a news source, influencers are viewed as members of the crowd from which they came, and therefore are perceived to be authentic and accessible to the crowd, who actively participate in discourse with them (DiResta, 2024). Their engagement is more personal, and is unlike traditional media which disseminates content to the masses without interacting with viewers' comments. The influencer also serves as a curator of sorts; those with a dedicated base or higher followers are agenda-setters within their communities, choosing what stories will gain the attention and outrage of the consumers.

Using these definitions, we can theorize an operating production-consumption cycle that occurs on Facebook. Prior to the Online News Act, the producers, who were predominantly traditional media, shared content; in turn, consumers interacted with the content and often spread it. Now, with the absence of traditional media on Meta, aspects of the producer-consumer cycle have changed. The producers, some of which choose to purvey themselves as traditional media despite clear partisan affiliation, share content intended for two groups. One group is the citizen journalists and influencers, who either pose as smaller scale news sources, or act as voices of the crowd, repurposing the content of the producers to create new conversations or further the agenda of their communities. The other group is the everyday consumer, who interacts with the content of the producer, which in the form of reactions⁴ drives the desire of the producers to continue sharing similar content (which in this research, is often divisive), thus completing the producer-consumer cycle. The consumers' comments are the desired outcome of the producers, which fulfills the producers' objective of creating conversations through which news spreads. In many case studies, the objective is to voice misinformation and Ideologically Motivated Violent Extremist thought, which the producers restrain themselves from directly engaging in.

2.3 - Surveying Methodology

Creating a comprehensive overview of the Canadian digital ecosystem comes with its own challenges. For one, this research is being conducted by proxy, from Italy. As such, news

⁴ This is the replacement of the standard "like" button on Facebook, which allows the user to select between Like, Love, Care, Haha, Wow, Angry, and Sad.

networks are readily available, and the generated algorithms are using geo-location to push Italian content rather than organically recommend Canadian media. This limitation was dealt with through the usage of a Virtual Private Network, also known as a VPN. The downloaded VPN was from the Private Internet Access organization, and the suggested location setting of Montreal was used to mask the IP address of the computer used to conduct this study. By this means, I was able to review the perspective that all Canadians have on social media platforms (a lack of news and generated suggestions) as well as view the news networks pages' by turning the VPN off. This VPN access allowed for an analysis of interactions both on unverified content and on the profile pages of prominent Canadian news outlets, such as the CBC.

In order to moderate content, there had to be parameters for what qualified as markable misinformation, disinformation and online violent extremism. These parameters were also applied to a period limit of January 6th, 2025, marking the resignation of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. Many misinformation production accounts focus primarily on anti-Trudeau content, and the politics of the Liberal Party leadership race would have been too broad to cover, and difficult to account for as it will be on an ongoing matter until March 9th, 2025.

The selection of the sources for the analysis conducted here was based on a few factors. One factor was a blend of lived experience and political popularity. The province of Alberta is often regarded as being one of the more right wing provinces in the country, a reputation it has maintained for more than 40 years (Crary, 1998). Alberta's premiership was held by the Conservative Party of Canada from 1971 until 2015, and again, after its reformation as the United Conservative Party, from 2019 to the present day (*Premiers of Alberta*, n.d.). The relevance of the history is, of course, the previously mentioned political leanings affiliated with the belief and spread of misinformation, which is more often than not, right wing (Lockhart et al., 2024). This makes Alberta a ripe breeding ground for the spread of misinformation. Furthermore, recent events in Canada have refocused Alberta as being a leader in online violent extremism activity, with many of the convoy truckers originating from the province, and even being affiliated with provincial independence movements (Holder & Jacquie, 2023). Alberta is home to 84% of Canada's crude oil production (C. E. R. Government of Canada, 2024), and its economy is reliant on its production, which may explain the growth of conservative politics in

the province. With all of the above taken into account, some of the content used for this study is based in Alberta.

The other major determinant in content selection was assessing whether it clearly was misinformation/disinformation that related to themes of government and democracy. The content had to belong to some form of online extremism, conspiracy theory or openly aid in the perpetuation and spread of misinformation. In order to assess this properly, categories were created to limit the scope of posts and demonstrate the variety within the threat of misinformation. This resulted in the creation of three categories; **Professional Propagandists**, **Pastel QAnon and Crunchy Moms**, and **Red-Pills and Radicalization**.

The Professional Propagandists grouping reflects a genre of organized groups that professionally mobilize and weaponize intentionally vague content, or purposely share snippets out of context in order to foment hatred. These groups tend to be run meticulously, have a high degree of communications knowledge, and they usually have an end goal of influencing the political landscape. The groups used as case studies in this work predominantly share anti-government messaging. The Professional Propagandists serve as the main producers of misinformation, as their content has widely come to replace the presence of news outlets on Facebook. There is an extent to which they have become even more crucial in the determination of electoral outcomes, and frequently run advertisements with the intention of operating as an unofficial campaigner for Conservative party members. Their content sometimes appears to be the work of a legitimate news source, and does not disclose partisan associations.

The second group category of Pastel QAnon and Crunchy Moms is based on Argentino's research and terminology (Argentino, 2021), including his four gateways as a primary focus (MLMs, esoteric, lifestyle influencer and alternative healing). This includes women who believe anti-vaccination conspiracies, big pharma, theories involving children and other trends that relate to holistic ideas and wellness. The esoteric and wellness genre has also been nicknamed "Conspiritualism" by Sarah Wilson, a women's wellness author who noticed the shift within her industry in Australia (McGowan, 2021). The name for Pastel QAnon, as previously mentioned, relates to the way in which misinformation and dangerous conspiracy theories are branded and sold to young women (Argentino, 2021). Argentino's findings suggest that these influencers originated on Instagram, but there is likely a connection and a spread to Facebook as well, with a

different age demographic. The DAIS Online Harms survey demonstrates that people between the age of 16-29 in Canada are the most frequent daily users of Instagram, whereas Facebook is used daily predominantly by people aged 30-44, closely followed by the 45-59 age demographic (Lockhart et al., 2024). This age demographic difference may facilitate a change in tactics and beliefs between the platforms, as the lifestyle influencers, for example, tend to be younger women. This theory is the reason why the name “Crunchy Moms” has been included in this category. The term represents mothers who are anti-science, holistic practitioners and are strict in their adherence to only choosing natural products for themselves and their children (Miller, 2024). Argentino’s groupings do not clearly distinguish mothers, although it mentions their roles and influences in various groups, but in this research, they fall under their own sub-genre. They are not necessarily QAnon believers, but are still proponents of other forms of dangerous conspiracy theories. Observations of this parenting community have demonstrated a swing to the right and conspiratorial, which will be explained below. The Facebook case studies will reveal the way in which themes of motherhood and maternity have been weaponized to draw women in and spread misinformation rapidly across the platform (Bracewell, 2021). This group is both producers and consumers of misinformation on Facebook, with a high presence in the comments and sharing of Professional Propagandists content, but also running their own platforms and serving as frequent posters on personal pages. They are both influencers and citizen journalists who are perceived by the consumers as still being a member of their group and more accessible.

The third group is one that may be more associated with hate movements and violent extremism, which will be referred to by the name Red-Pills and Radicalization in this work. The term and concept of the Red Pill comes from the 1999 movie, *The Matrix* (Lawson, 2023). In the film, the protagonist is offered the choice between a red pill and a blue pill, the former of which will reveal the truth of the world he lives in, whereas the latter would allow him to continue to live in a simulation, blissfully unaware. The term has since been co-opted by a corner of the internet known as the “Manosphere”, but some scholars in the field choose to see the Red-Pillers as separate to the Manosphere, or its own subsect within it (Botto & Gottzén, 2024; James, 2024). The usage of the term Red-Pill here, however, broadly refers to men, particularly young men, who espouse misogynistic misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy theories online. The term “radicalization” in this grouping denotes a potential connection between these young men and other variants of hate speech. This includes the aforementioned great replacement

theory, and its young proponents who may have ties to incel groups, or feel a need to protect masculinity, which is one of the leading battles that manosphere groups claim to champion (James, 2024). Young men, particularly white young men, are now being drawn into extremist circles online more often (Kukreja, 2024). Consequently, this research groups incels and anti-immigrant proponents together. The common denominator is susceptible young men, who believe that they are protecting an aspect of their identity from whatever group they are discussing. There is often cross-movement networking (Tenove & Tworek, 2022) between this group and the Professional Propagandists, as they feed off each other in a symbiotic relationship, which will be demonstrated in the case studies below. On Facebook, there is a higher rate of consumerism associated with the Red-Pills and Radicalization grouping, as their commentary regarding immigration and feminism is a mainstay of the Professional Propagandist comment section, but they are less engaged in content creation on the platform. It could be argued that members of this group are sometimes associated with ownership of Professional Propaganda pages, but the distinction here serves to demonstrate the different uses of language and rhetoric disseminated.

2.4 - Case Studies

As previously mentioned, among the social media giants, Facebook and Instagram are some of the most used social media platforms in Canada (Lockhart et al., 2024), and the public, despite reporting an erosion in trust due to the Online News Act, still rely upon them for their news and general information (Newman et al., 2024a). We have established that this is a dangerous precedent given the lack of verified news, but in order to understand to what extent this is a genuine threat, we must examine the content shared on Facebook, given the greater ease with tracking interaction, as opposed to on Instagram, where it is difficult to determine where posts are being shared and commented upon outside of the original poster's profile. The posts and comments are all taken verbatim from Facebook, and have not been subject to any corrections to their spelling or grammar.

2.4.1 - Professional Propagandists

Amongst the Professional Propagandists, one organization that emerges at the top of search results for Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is the group “Canada Proud”. As stated above, the work of Professional Propagandists is predominantly anti-government by nature, and thus Canada Proud serves as an excellent case study for the first grouping of misinformation genres.

Canada Proud is a verified Facebook page operated by Mobilize Media Group LTD, a public relations and communications firm that describes itself as aiming to influence public opinion (*Mobilize Media Group*). The organization is based in Toronto, and operates subsidiary Facebook groups as well, such as Ontario Proud, which all cater to Conservative political views. Their founder and primary operator, Jeff Ballingall, has acted as a consultant for multiple electoral campaigns as well as a staffer in various federal and provincial administrations. The group has used microtargeting during political campaigns as a means to influence electoral outcomes through their shared content (Thompson, 2018), and are credited to some extent with Doug Ford’s initial premiership victory in the province of Ontario in 2018 (Crawley, 2018). The organization has also inspired spin-offs in other provinces, such as Alberta Proud and BC Proud, but is not known to be the operator of these pages nor advertises itself as affiliated with the pages. The group is also aware of the ways in which it has benefitted from the Online News Act, reporting a large increase in online traffic and interactions with its page in the months immediately following the withdrawal of verified news outlets from Meta (Kaye, 2024).

Canada Proud currently has 524K followers, and their posts enjoy over 1K reactions and a large amount of comments. In analyzing Canada Proud’s content, the group has a penchant for sharing content out of context, posting selected clips and quotes of prominent figures, primarily Justin Trudeau. Their posts can be classified as misinformation and disinformation due to the intentional removal of the original context of their content, and they foment conspiratorial and violent threats through their posts within their comment section, often from the Red-Pills and Radicalization group. Canada Proud need not say much more than a few lines of text to give rise to threats of violence. An example of such a post (Dec 30, 2024), is a share of a post from Canadian Crime Watch, which reads: *two people were injured after a fight escalated into a shooting outside a pub on the 8500 block of 132 Street in Surrey, BC last night. The police say they are looking for two South Asian males who fled the scene in a dark-coloured sedan.* As the

post is a reshare, there are less interactions, showing only 179 reactions and 164 comments. One commenter responds with “Not surprised. Mini India”, which was liked 21 times, while another writes “just part of the system used by the criminal government called 'sustainable development' or Agenda-21&30. Where all the criminal politicians do follow their directives, no matter of which party they are from. They refer to it as Democracy, that it is, a la WEF⁵.” to the enjoyment of four users.

The example demonstrates the danger posed by the content shared by Canada Proud, who are able to share their edited and highly “clickbait” form of news, without any counterbalance from verified news. The news is not inaccurate, but the account has a proclivity to share police reports as they solely relate to minority group criminals. The shared post described above is not their own, but the attitude it created amongst its viewers is in line with their mission statement on their page, which states “Fighting to defeat the Trudeau Liberals”. On December 28th, 2024, the group shared a video of Justin Trudeau speaking to the press on February 11th, 2022. This snippet is from the end of the Trucker Convoy’s occupation of Ottawa, and features the Prime Minister asking the protestors to leave, lest they suffer legal consequences. The clip is edited, with a clear cut between two points of the original speech, which occurs between Justin Trudeau’s original remarks and his response to a member of the press (cpac, 2022). In the video, Trudeau asks the protestors to leave and to bring their children home as well, stating “it’s time to go home, it’s time to bring your kids home from this protest, it is now an illegal protest and the consequences on them and on their families will be significant if they choose to continue with this illegal activity”. Canada Proud’s post is captioned “Remember how unhinged Trudeau became in 2022, making mob boss-style threats toward the CHILDREN of protesters? He’s always been an authoritarian lunatic.” The comments again range from threats of direct violence against the Prime Minister, to the perpetuation of various conspiracy theories. One such comment reads “Treason is a crime , this crime minister needs to be held to account”. The content shared by Canada Proud stylistically mimics a news source, as they seem to be reporting on pertinent Canadian events, but in reality, are bad actors, seeking to influence public opinion through overtly partisan content and foment hateful and sometimes violent responses. The video is intentionally taken out of context, meant to exacerbate a group that had likely been frustrated and engaged in political discourse during the Trucker Convoy.

⁵ World Economic Forum

The next case study within the Professional Propagandists category is “Alberta Proud”, which is not linked to Canada Proud as a corporation, but rather is run by their own organization. There is limited information publicly available about the organization, but their LinkedIn shows that the page is currently being managed by a woman based in Calgary, Alberta. Their mission statement on their Facebook page is “Something special about this province. Let’s stick it to the politicians and celebrities who disagree”. Delving further into the account’s details, the account transparency information displays that five people associated with the account are based in Canada, but two individuals are based in the United States. It should be noted that Facebook bases administrator location not only on the self-reported profile location, but also on the user’s geolocation. Moreover, the account has a long history of running political ads that have been targeted towards people based in Alberta with the intention of influencing the politics there. Their advertisement archive shows a flurry of content from the 2023 provincial election in Alberta, and the 2021 Calgary mayoral race. We can thus classify the organization as falling under the title of Professional Propagandists.

Alberta Proud’s content is not always dishonest, but rather, has the frequent intention of “rage-baiting”, a profitable form of posting meant to drive interaction by sharing emotionally provoking content (Gruet & Lawton, 2024.). One such post from September 20th, 2024 displays two photos, blocks of text and a caption. The first photo is of Justin Trudeau and New Democrat Party leader Jagmeet Singh⁶ shaking hands, which is juxtaposed by a photo of convoy leader Tamara Lich with a Canadian flag in her lap. Above her is a quote, which reads “If you’re a visible minority who stands for a government approved left-wing cause, you’re celebrated as a hero... The CBC will assign teams of reporters. But you’ll be treated a lot differently if you’re a Metis grandma with the wrong politics.”. Above it, a line of text reads “Isn’t it funny how the ones on the left cry about a divided Canada... when they’re the ones who created it?” The implications of this post alone are rooted in misinformation. As discussed in the first chapter, Tamara Lich was a leader of the trucker protest who had already been affiliated with far-right movements prior to the trucker convoy. Her own quote, which is affirmed by the text, is meant to state that her arrest and ensuing charges have been motivated by the fact that she is a minority who simply does not agree with the government. The post is also captioned “We can’t help but

⁶ Jagmeet Singh is Indo-Canadian and a practicing Sikh

shake our heads, as NDP leader Jagmeet Singh blames Poilievre for a divided Canada ... one that he and his best pal Trudeau created. Never forget. -#albertaproud”. This is one of the higher engagement posts on the page, with 1.3k reactions and over 300 comments and shares. The comments, like the ones from Canada Proud, are full of vitriol. One user writes “the Goebbels handbook”, while another contributes “Everything they say is designed to stall while the wef agenda is instituted. Jagmeet doesnt need 2.2 million, he's been paid multiple by his masters in the wef. He's the literal definition of controlled opposition. The pension story is a cover.” Alarminglly, the second comment has over 50 reactions, which could perhaps indicate that Alberta Proud followers who interact with their posts hold conspiratorial beliefs.

In a separate post from October 28th, 2024, there is a clear case of both rage-baiting and intent to cause misinformation. The post is a screenshot of a tweet, sharing that AIMCo (Alberta Investment Management Corporation), the corporation that manages provincial pensions, was hiring a senior Diversity, Equity and Inclusion and Indigenous Relations manager at the time. The post caption reads “Public sector employees - are you OK with this? Are you Ok with your pension fund manager being DEI supporters? Sound off below, #albertaproud”. The top comment states “It's gone too far. My employer now gives extra points if you are not from Alberta. They say if all things are equal the job goes to the person not from Canada ie visable minority and they decide if all things are equal. It's seems reverse discrimination is okay.”. This comment, in the context of the post, falls into the anti-immigrant rhetoric being driven by the Professional Propagandist pages, and is just a small example of near daily posts that Alberta Proud has on the page, driving angry reactions and fomenting misinformation.

Of the three provinces which experienced general provincial elections in 2024, the most dramatic race was that of British Columbia. The province has been led by centrist and left wing parties for nearly 100 years, and has not seen any substantial Conservative presence in nearly as long within their legislature. In October, the British Columbia Conservatives won 44 of 93 seats in the provincial election (*B.C. Legislature Welcomes 57 New Faces to Fill Its 93 Seats*, 2024), narrowly losing to the New Democratic Party in an election that dragged out for days due to the thin margins in some races (Aslam, 2024b). Despite losing, the rise of the Conservatives in British Columbia is significant, as in the last election, the party had less than 2% of the overall vote (Aslam, 2024a). Much of the reporting around the election ties the success of the

Conservatives to the federal political landscape, but it does not examine the way that the spread of “common-sense” policies (Watt, 2024) resonated strongly with misinformation groups, particularly regarding gender identity, drug usage and migrant crime rates. There are two Facebook groups which can be viewed as part of the Professional Propagandists who demonstrate the ways in which misinformation and the fomentation of hatred can heavily impact an electoral process in Canada. The first is West Coast Proud, who is part of the same organization that Alberta Proud belongs to (Vescera, 2024), and the other is BC Proud, which is run by the Pacific Prosperity Network and has a pre-existing history of violating electoral advertising rules (Wood, 2022).

West Coast Proud is followed by 20k Facebook users, and has an affiliated Instagram page where they post content as well. Similar to Alberta Proud, the page is run by six administrators, one of which is based in the United States. The page also has a documented history of having run electoral ads. The summary data from just one of their advertisements that ran between October 17th-19th reveals that the organization spent at least 3700 CAD on that video alone, and it achieved high viewership in its seven iterations, which were shared simultaneously to Facebook and Instagram. The advertisement does disclose at the bottom that the group was a registered third party sponsor, as per BC’s Local Elections Campaign Financing Act. The group has even spread its targeted advertising reach into some of the larger immigrant communities of Vancouver by publishing posts in Punjabi, the most spoken language in the province after English or French (Griffiths & Chan, 2022). Notably, Indo-Canadians primarily voted Conservative in the election and their concentrated areas of residence were the regions with the most electoral upsets (Hopper, 2024), and thus these ads were consciously created with the intention of targeting a rising Conservative voter demographic.

During the long drawn out tabulation, the page made posts that promoted misinformation around ballot tampering. On the 27th of October, the group posted a screenshot of a tweet that alleged that Elections BC staff were allowed to take ballots to their private residences during the advanced voting process, with the caption “What?”. This claim has been contextualized by Elections BC and experts in the province; the practice that the tweet claimed only occurs on special occasions in rural areas (Suarez, 2024). West Coast Proud, however, does not make this distinction and shared the tweet regardless. The post was reacted to 58 times, commented on 78

times and shared 17 times. Many of the comments relate to electoral validity conspiracy theories, with one commenter stating “In communist liberals Canada; everything is broken.”, which was liked 11 times, and another remarking “Of course they did. How else can the hide all the conservative votes.” to an audience of five users. This misinformation is dangerous, but commonplace amongst rhetoric around the BC election, which will be explored in the next chapter. Another post from West Coast Proud which experienced a high volume of shares was regarding a Pro-Palestinian demonstration in Vancouver on October 7th, 2024. The protest was led by Samidoun: Palestinian Prisoner Solidarity Network, which has since been designated a terrorist organization in Canada (Carrigg, 2024), and the videos of the demonstration show crowd members burning a Canadian flag. The caption from West Coast Proud is reactionary, stating “This is a video from a protest in front of the Vancouver art gallery, yesterday (Oct 7th). Protestors are seen burning a Canadian flag, and chanting "Death to Canada, Death to The United States, Death to Israel" "...We are Hezbollah, We are Hamas" and "Burn burn Israel". This is atrocious, hateful behaviour, and has no place in Canada. Does this not count as hate speech? Why weren't they arrested?”

The comments range from outrage, to violent threats. “If I see that btch around she's gonna get a sock in sa face , not saucy is she?”, one user writes, “Time to start eradicating the vermin in our country”, states another and a third comments “So truckers get the emergency act but these immigrants can come infiltrate from the inside & openly say they want death to Canada & the massive cheers erupted!! I think we need more guns boys.. as Canadians born & raised this makes my blood boil.. where is the arrests & massive deportation.. we want a free & clean @ affordable country to live in.. & this isn't helping anything!! If death to canada u want then go back to where u came from!!! Just saying..”. All three of these comments were liked or loved at least once. A fourth comment directly ties the protest to the federal government, remarking “Thank justin trudeau we let these terrorists in now we will have to suffer.”. The post was reacted to 82 times, commented on 71 times and shared 218 times. The captions on the shares reflect a similar sentiment to comments, with one individual captioning their reposting “This is what we are letting into Canada. This is brutal. Time for change folks. This has got to stop.”. This post is a key example of the role the Professional Propagandists play in the online ecosystem- the post was not necessarily false, but was shared without context or further misinformation. The intention of the post was to bait the consumers into engaging in violent extremism and hateful

rhetoric. The spread of hatred and misinformation is connected to the consumers, who, without news sources on the same platform, take the post as fully representative of one group and use it to further their extremist and dangerous political values.

BC Proud boasts a bigger following than West Coast Proud, with 89k followers on their Facebook page. As previously mentioned, they are affiliated with an organization called the Pacific Prosperity Foundation, and the account is run by two administrators who are both based in Canada. The group does not have an advertising history of the same recent scale as West Coast Proud, but has run political advertisements in the past. Their introduction describes the page as “BC Proud is a digital media advocacy organization focused on politicians and policies that hurt working British Columbians.”. The group did not post frequently, but had high engagement on their posts related to the provincial election. One such post features a picture of the New Democratic Party of British Columbia leader David Eby, edited in black and white against an orange backdrop (the party colours) and dollar bills falling behind him, with large text stating “Can you afford another four years?”. The post is captioned “Under David Eby's NDP:

- 1) Taxes have skyrocketed
- 2) The Government deals drugs
- 3) Healthcare is collapsing.”

This content is very thinly veiled campaign pieces for the Conservative Party, and lacks any cited information. It instead preys upon common sentiment about the state of British Columbia, and party talking points without context. The post was not shared as an advertisement and was thus not subjected to the Local Elections Campaign Financing Act, and information on the exact reach of the post is thus not available. It has 82 reactions, 80 comments and 21 shares. The top comment reads “No one can afford the NDP and the Trudeau liberals anymore.” and another states “No one can afford the NDP , we pay enough taxes , now , But then there is Vancouver, and they love their free drugs , and they are all snowflakes,they believe everything Ebi says . And don’t forget our healthcare is in , firing doctors and nurses”. These posts are more so on the side of electoral propaganda, and are very specifically targeted at engaging voters on Facebook. They still fall within the Professional Propagandists, and may demonstrate the extent by which the political climate in British Columbia was affected by social media organizations.

2.4.2 - Pastel QAnon and Crunchy Moms

The second category is the Pastel QAnon and Crunchy Moms, a demographic which skews older on Facebook. A common trend among these women is continued belief in vaccination related conspiracy theories, which are part of broader anti-government sentiments.

One account promotes herself as being a news host of what appears to be her own channel, and she has labeled herself as a public digital creator through Facebook's account information system. Her content relates to vaccinations, electoral conspiracy theories in British Columbia, and the protection of children. This third theme, as mentioned above, is what commonly brings mothers into these circles, and renders them susceptible to extremist misinformation. This woman is a former professional dancer, who claims to have left her trade due to industry corruption. She has 45k followers on the platform, but because her material isn't entirely exclusive to Canadian political content, it is impossible to state with any certainty what percentage of her followers are Canadian. Beyond her content relating to the protection of children, this woman's content falls under the Crunchy Moms for two reasons. The first being the anti-vaccination content, which has much to do with healthcare autonomy. The second is the regular sharing of a sponsor link for selling a natural supplement that claims to be an immunity booster, an affiliation common with the Crunchy Moms archetype. This account regularly shares content relating to accusations that the education system pushes pedophilia, sharing screenshots on October 18th, 2024, that the New Democrat Party of British Columbia was forcing school children to watch homosexual pornography and talk about pedophilia as a sexual preference. This particular post has 483 reactions and 214 comments, and is captioned

“More disgusting NDP run SOGI⁷ topic of P.O.R.N⁸ and M.A.P.S⁹ being FORCED on BC kids at school:

This school is on Vancouver Island...

I just spoke to a mother from this location. Some parents are not happy at all...and same with some children...

⁷ Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (*What Does SOGI Mean?* | SOGI 123, n.d.)

⁸ This style of writing is known as algospeak, an internet based linguistic styling often used to evade censorship, or “shadow banning”, the suppression of content from news feeds. (Lorenz, 2022)

⁹ Minor Attracted Persons (Farmer et al., 2024)

2 of the children said they were uncomfortable when the presenter started talking to them about M.A.P.S and male O.N male P.O.R.N ...The uncomfortable kids asked if they could leave the class and the teacher said NO and MADE THEM listen to the P.O.R.N teachings.”

The comments in response to this post have much to do with anti-government sentiment, homophobia, transphobia as well as general shock and outrage. This post also was shared 322 times, and in viewing those shares, it was predominantly done so by other women based in the province of British Columbia. Many of the shared versions are done so without any caption, and many more without any interactions that are publicly visible, but others differ. One user writes “Thos is how the NDP roll. Not my values.” while another reposts it twice, once to their own profile and another to a group, captioning it “The true colors of SOGI123, are finally shining through.... Another so-called Conspiracy Theory and mis/disinformation code cracked. None of us wanted to be right...”. The sheer volume of shares and additional comments demonstrate the rate at which this content spreads beyond the followers of a specific profile into mainstream circles.

This user’s posting style is consistent on the snippets of her homegrown news network, with one video from July 18th, 2024 captioned

“Important Liberty Talk Canada Episode:

Big FFFFAr-ma Was CAUGHT Purposely Giving Teen Girl "Pl@ceb0 Group" A Known T0xin behind p@rents backs. G!rls Harmed. Mainstream Med!cal Journals Deemed It "Uneth!cal." Parents/Girls Lied To. Why Is No One In Jail? We Absolutely Cannot Trust These Cr!minals Ever Again. The results of the investigation are now surfacing. Even mainstream med!cal journals are acknowledging this happened. Just calling it "uneth!cal." PEOPLE NEED TO START GOING TO JAIL. I also show a c!vil war happening in a small town in Dublin over the mass amount of lmm!grants being put in a building there. If you want show link references you have to get them from my RUM...ble channel.”

This particular post has been reacted to 180 times, commented on 17 times and shared 80 times. In analyzing the caption, there is evident cross-movement networking, with anti-immigrant sentiment being a commonality between all three types of misinformation/disinformation spreaders. The comments on this post display Islamophobia, and references the story to supposed incidents that have taken place in Canada. One commenter remarks “M us lims are mu slims! Those that do not terrorize can be made to comply by the

order of their Imam who is more like an army chaplain than a pastor because the religion is also their law & is also what governs them regardless of where they live. Remember, their mosques are their forward operating bases.”, while one of the many shares in regards to the vaccination misinformation reads “This is horrifying. I recall as a mom asking my doctor about the HPV vaccine for my two daughters. She said was safe. It was all a lie. I feel sick for believing ANYTHING is safe in my body. I apologized to my daughters for letting the school nurses inject them. It has to stop.”. The second commenter also displays beliefs in alignment with the Pastel QAnon and Crunchy Moms, and has posted content similar to this herself, demonstrating the consumer relationship between the producing account and its followers.

This account also engaged in conspiracy theories regarding the election in British Columbia, making multiple posts in the days following the election on the security of dominion voting machines, a debunked conspiracy theory connected to the American 2020 Presidential election (Tenbarge et al., 2024). She clarifies in the comment section on a post from October 21st that she does not believe that “any cheating/fraud or hanky panky happened or will happen.”, but the damage is already done. One commenter writes “Dominion is owned by Soros”, connecting the voting machine conspiracy to another popular theme in American conspiracies involving billionaire George Soros. Another comment remarks “If ndpukes get in you can bet it’s STOLEN ABSOLUTELY 100 %”, which is liked by 8 other users. This account falls in the category of citizen journalist/influencer. She posts content as if she is a producer, but does so from her own perspective, not as a member of a network. She is still a member of a distinct audience, who see her as one of her own. She responds to them often, showing a level of accessibility that the Professional Propagandists do not provide.

The second case study within the Pastel QAnon and Crunchy Moms is an ordinary Facebook user. She does not purvey herself as a news source, nor does she have a mass following. Her value to this case is her frequent shares, many of which are religious in nature, and often conspiratorial. She has many friends on the platform, some of whom regularly interact with her reposts. This woman owns her own holistic health service, where she sells products such as essential oils and shares her beliefs about the benefit of natural products. Many of her non-religious posts (although the theme is present in all of her posts), display her products. One

post from December 10th, 2024, has a photo of her holding up a small white circle. It is captioned;

“The gift of health is so powerful and life changing. I know personally how much these patches can improve and changes one’s life 🙏🏻🥰❤️ I know what it’s like to be laying in bed for day after day, week after week, month after month crying out to Jesus for health and healing

🗨️ I always knew I would be healed and I’m well on that journey now. I dealt with chronic Lyme disease that was greatly affecting my liver! 🗨️🗨️ Prayer, Faith for healing, and these patches have been an amazing trio for me! I thank God every day 🙏🏻❤️ At first, I said no to these patches as I was so tired of trying to get results and trying so many things. 🗨️ I realized that sometimes God answers prayer by offering us new tools to help us 🥰 If you want to try these phototherapy stem cell patches, now is a great time to get on board!!!

🔥🔥 Nothing goes in the body so no negative effects! Your own light is reflected back into your body to increase your collagen and stem cells. 🧬 Stem cells can heal and support your body!! I am seeing testimonies for almost every health ailment!! 🧬 I’ve seen testimonies for: Pain, Arthritis, Inflammation of all kinds, Muscle tears, Liver and kidney failure (my testimony), Strokes, Heart Issues, Gut issues, Parkinson’s, Dementia, Cancer, Fast wound healing from surgery, Autism, Neurological issues, Neuropathy, Autism, Weight loss, Better sleep, More energy and the list goes on!!!”

This is part of the Crunchy Moms grouping, and part of Argentino’s assessment of the Pastel QAnon, falling under the categories of Alternative Healing and Multi-Level Marketing (Argentino, 2021). There is no scientific evidence behind what she is promoting, and is incredibly dangerous to those who may be seeking cures to their illnesses. It should be noted that while this account shows traits of conspiratorial behaviour, she is not posting evident QAnon content. Rather, she seems somewhat normal at a quick glance. She enjoys sharing her favourite bible verses, images wishing others a happy Tuesday and updates about her new grandchild. She also shares “prophetic” worship videos, which have themes of end times and extreme anti-government notions, anti-vaccination graphics that stylistically match her happy Tuesday post, and screenshots of climate change denial articles. Her purpose as a case study is to demonstrate the relative normalcy of the individuals who fall into these echo chambers and share their beliefs, acting as an informer of their perceived reality to their friends online. It also displays the reach through which people encounter conspiracy theories- the woman has 1.3k

friends on Facebook, and given the design of the algorithm, it is likely that her posts end up on many of their feeds. This woman is on the consumer end of the misinformation cycle, as she is not a producer of original content and rather exists within the cycle to perpetuate conspiracies posted by others, and bring it within her network.

2.4.3 - Red-Pills and Radicalized

Seeking the Red-Pill community is difficult on Facebook. Most research around these groups indicate that they're more so on platforms such as Reddit (Zapcic et al., 2023), but the shared attitudes and values of these groups are still present on Facebook. The Canadian Museum for Human Rights, just days before the 35th anniversary of the Montreal Polytechnique Massacre (Rubertucci, 2024), shared a post regarding the danger of misogynistic violent extremism in Canada and the methods of recruitment used online today. The comments in response to this post are predominantly sympathetic, although others demonstrate a presence of such communities in the Canadian digital ecosystem. One commenter responds "The manosphere is only necessary because women have their own hive mind and men are being taken advantage of and need to learn how to not get played.", and another writes "The hate that hate produced."

This is an example of the ways in which this group is visible on Facebook- not through production, which is found more so on other social media platforms, but through consumption and interactions. The Red-Pills are often within the comment sections of political content related to women, perpetuating hatred and misogyny. One example of this is content and comments related to Canada's Foreign Affairs Minister, Melanie Joly (Blatchford, 2022), who has been at times considered a protege of Prime Minister Trudeau. A post from Canada Proud on an allegation that Global Affairs Canada spent 3.3 million CAD over a period of five years has a comment section full of troubling and casual misogynistic comments. One user writes "She looks like a drunk you would pick up in a bar. Easy sleazy Joly", while in a similar vein, another adds "Anyone have her number? Something tells me she parties..". "She couldn't have sex with the Turd unless she was completely drunk lol." states another commenter, furthering the disinformation regarding Joly and the Prime Minister, with more users contributing with comments such as "I guess if she's doing Trudeau, she may need the help.". These comments may appear to be outside of the scope of the extremes associated with the manosphere, but this

sexism is associated with some of the rhetoric of prominent manosphere influencers (Haslop et al., 2024). The usage of regressive and sexist stereotypes is used in this particular case, implying that Joly may have used a physical relationship with the Prime Minister to elevate her social standing, and the comments which overtly sexualize her are part of common harassment, and may be levelled against her as she is a woman in a position of power.

The Radicalized are more visible on Facebook, and represent anti-immigrant sentiment for the most part. Some of their comments have been mentioned in the Professional Propagandist case studies, but they have become so pervasive that it is necessary to dedicate further investigation to their ideology. As mentioned in the first chapter, there is a significant portion of the Canadian population who report an affinity with the “great replacement theory” (Lockhart et al., 2024), believing that there is some secret organization in Canada- often within the government- that seeks to replace native born Canadians with immigrants. The comment section of a “Proud to be Canadian” (parent organization of Alberta Proud and West Coast Proud) post from July 31st demonstrates the mainstream quality that the theory now carries within Canada. The post has snippets of an article from the Toronto Star¹⁰, and is captioned “As a follow up to the article about Canadians thoughts on immigration, today the Toronto Sun is reporting that 100% of people surveyed by the Privy Council in Ottawa said that Canada's immigration policy is headed in the wrong direction. They went on to say that high immigration numbers have directly contributed to the housing crisis and that immigration should be limited to those that can help fill labour shortages. What do you think?”. The post received 348 reactions, 157 comments and 85 shares. One user responds with a picture of Trudeau, with the text “The very concept of a nation founded by European settlers is offensive to me. Old stock White Canadians are an unpleasant relic, and quite frankly, replaceable. And we will replace them.”, which is attributed to Trudeau. This quote has been long debunked as falsified (PressProgress, 2021). This image is meant to create the belief that Trudeau has openly endorsed the great replacement theory and that his immigration policy is a reflection of the same. Another commenter holds the same perspective, and writes “Well trudeau said it himself, replace Canadians for the new Canadians because they dont [sic] abuse/wrongly take advantage of Canada, really, not so.”, attributing another piece of disinformation and dangerous conspiracy to the Prime Minister. This same

¹⁰ Mainstream newspaper

rhetoric is evident in the comments of a video posted by another Professional Propagandist page, National Citizens Coalition. The post is captioned “WATCH & SHARE: "Diploma mills" exploiting our system; ignored background checks; millions unaccounted for; overcrowded shelters and food banks; no homes; and less hope... The Trudeau Liberals' mass immigration disaster is completely of their own making, and it's having massive second-order effects across housing, healthcare, and even public safety. Every Canadian, both new and old, deserves a return to responsible targets. That means we have to Fire Trudeau. Get involved.”.

This summarizes the content of the video concisely, where a short snippet of Trudeau speaking about the benefits of diversity in Canada is juxtaposed against the statistics of rising housing costs, population growth and homeless crisis. The video is met with similar reception, and the falsified Trudeau quote mentioned above appears at least five times within the 2.2k comments, along with several other remarks all within the theme of the great replacement theory, including;

“The people that are coming now don't want to be Canadian they just want turn Canada to be like where they came from.”

“All by design. World leaders have been talking about the new world order and the a financial reset. Our government is no different. Believe them when they tell you, you'll owe nothing and you'll be happy.”

“europe has seen a increase in crime, protest and assaults on females since the increase of immigrants. Canada will be taken over not by war but by our government inviting and paying for immigrants to come into our country and take over. Canadians are now the low class in their own country. WAKE UP CANADIANS”

“Replacement Genocide is happening in Canada. Tell your kids to breed”

Beyond these quotes, another marker of the Radicalized is the usage of threats of violence. This is a form of violent extremism, and such encouragement is dangerous, and unfortunately normalized within these comment sections. “We also know you should be hanging from a tree!” is just one of many remarks that overtly threaten the life of Prime Minister Trudeau.

These comments just represent some of the many that are publicly available within the comments on Professional Propagandist posts. It is difficult to state with full certainty that this is a fringe minority, as there are always a few comments within this rhetoric under the posts,

suggesting that this extremism is growing. It is a large part of the consumer cycle, as their reactions are precipitated by the producers, who share news clippings without context, or post anti-government content with the sole aim of distorting truth. The producers are indeed bad faith actors, but the consumers have entered into echo chambers where they engage in spreading and furthering the agenda of the producers. In the case of the Radicalized, they pose a threat to Canadian democracy through violent rhetoric, fervent belief in conspiracy theories and a distrust in democratic processes, as demonstrated in the case studies regarding the provincial elections in British Columbia. They continuously feed into the purpose of the producers, which in turn, results in the creation of more dangerous content. The Radicalized clearly fit into CSIS' description of Tier 2 acts of Ideologically Motivated Violent Extremism, as they now step into an active role of promoting and spreading extremist content.

The case studies, as a whole, exhibit the impact of misinformation and the ways in which the Online News Act has left the Canadian news media cycle vulnerable to dangerous extremism.

Chapter Three: The Weird Neighbour

3.1 - The Sleeping Elephant

Canada shares the largest border in the world with the United States of America. This barrier, however, is not applicable to worlds beyond the physical. In 1969, during a visit to Washington, DC, then Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau described the relationship between Canada and America to then President Richard Nixon as such: “Living next to you is in some ways like sleeping with an elephant. No matter how friendly and even-tempered is the beast, if I can call it that, one is affected by every twitch and grunt.” (“Sleeping with a Very Cranky Elephant,” 2018). This phrase perfectly encapsulates one of the largest aspects of this thesis; the means in which events, attitudes and even conspiracy theories in Canada are shaped by American influence. Studies on the impact of American affairs on Canada go back nearly 100 years, and this exchange of culture and identity has continued to be a prominent part of how Canada and its own people behave. A reason for the powerful influence that America has over Canada could be what some scholars describe as a fragmented identity, or the lack of a cohesive national identity in Canada (Kymlicka, 2003). This sense of national identity is often so fragile that one of the sole unifying and definitive factors in what makes one Canadian, is that they are not American (Lipset, 1986). Pride in Canadian identity and a desire to protect Canadian culture from external factors have decreased drastically in public surveys over the last 50 years (Parkin, 2022). This weak sense of self among Canadians is likely a large part of what lends to the active following and absorption of the American news cycle. That is to say- Canadians share a bed with the sleeping elephant willingly, and enthusiastically. This relationship has persisted into the digital realm, with Canadians following more American news outlets and influencers than they do Canadian sources (Tenove & Tworek, 2022), and demonstrating an affinity with American politics and issues. An existing negative impact of American media and political influence was affirmed in a 1980 study, which demonstrated that higher consumption of American news media undermined a sense of Canadian identity (Barnett & McPhail, 1980). That study was conducted at a time where the only metric of cultural connectivity was television, so it is easy to imagine that the means by which Canadians interact with Americans have drastically increased in the age of the internet.

This chapter will explore this relationship in order to demonstrate that recent events in the United States serve as a major precipitant for the spread of misinformation in Canada. It will additionally explore if this would have occurred without the implementation of the Online News Act, and Meta's subsequent removal of verified news sources from their platforms. This study will involve the contextualization of the conspiracy theories mentioned in the previous chapter, a discussion of events in the United States that have lent themselves greatly to Canada's digital climate and the ties between far-right groups and influencers in the two countries. Similar to the case studies drawn from Facebook in the prior chapter, the information cut-off date is January 6th, 2025, with the remaining events being discussed in the section on study limitations and looking towards the future.

3.2 - Fake News and Witch Hunts

The election of Donald Trump in 2016 shocked journalists, and his attacks on news media outlets only became more fierce after he was sworn into the office of the President (Bush, 2018). His attacks on the media, which were unceasing through his first term as President, lead to a great increase in news mistrust amongst his supporters. A study in 2024 demonstrated that Republicans under the age of 30 were nearly as likely to trust social media as a reliable source of news than that of an actual news outlet (Eddy, 2024). In 2022, American trust in media remained relatively low, sitting at 34% overall, but with a great partisan divide when the respondents were asked to identify their political leanings; 70% of Democrats stated they had a great deal or fair amount of confidence in the news, while this was only true of 14% of Republicans (Gallup, 2022). This gap has been visible in multiple studies and events that have taken place over the last eight years, and oftentimes, researchers find that the dispersion and perpetuation of misinformation is asymmetrically committed more so by Republican affiliated accounts online (DiResta, 2024). Trump had always entertained conspiratorial ideas, such as claims that Barack Obama was not born in the United States, or that those who were "actually" behind 9/11 had not been caught (Haberman, 2016), but his rise to power brought his claims into the mainstream, and with it, a surge of influencers who enjoyed spreading such theories to a fervent and susceptible audience. These influencers were often amongst the "alt-right", a term associated with online

conservatives, and particularly those who make incendiary content (Marantz, 2016). The influencers in question are much like the Professional Propagandists, acting as if they are filling in the gap of news media through their social media content, livestreams and sometimes blog posts. They, however, are perhaps more personable, as they post content that sometimes pertains to other topics, such as fitness, parenting or men's mental health, which helps to widen the range by which they can draw people into their rabbit hole (DiResta, 2024) (Marantz, 2016). Many of these influencers were involved in the spreading of speculation around the health and sanity of Trump's opponents, such as supposed observations of Hillary Clinton being in poor physical condition. This was just the beginning, as many junctures of Trump's political career proved to deliver new, deeper conspiratorial behaviour that created long lasting effects. A primary example of an event that echoed into Canada was the way in which Trump and the influencers within his atmosphere discussed the Covid-19 Pandemic.

When the pandemic began, Trump was an early spreader of misinformation, falsely attributing its spread to the Chinese government, and claiming that the statistics of infected Americans were fake. He continued to be a superspreader, citing miracle cures, such as Ivermectin or Ultraviolet light, and did so at a public level (Stolberg & Weiland, 2020). These two themes are central to the genre of misinformation; alternate cures (as it pertains not only to the crunchy moms but anti-vaxxers at large) and shady disease origins. One study found that miracle cures were one of the most widely spread themes of misinformation, followed by ideas of a "new world order" or "deep state", Democratic party hoax, shady origins, and conspiracies involving billionaire Bill Gates (Evanega et al., 2020). The unifying factor of the volume of misinformation and conspiratorial content, according to studies, was mentions of Donald Trump (Blake, 2020). This study found that Trump's own rhetoric, sharing of posts from influencers who created disinformation content and policy choices were responsible for what had become a so-called "infodemic", where misinformation spread like wildfire, such that covid misinformation became common place and lead to manifestations of violent extremism in the physical world. This included mass shootings targeting Asian Americans (Chavez & Chen, 2022) as a result of the shady origins theme of misinformation and a drastic increase in violent confrontations and protests against covid restrictions, predominantly in Democratic states where stricter guidelines were imposed (Shepherd, 2020).

The American reaction to the Covid-19 Pandemic rippled into Canada quickly. Despite the fact that there was not the same level of polarization within government when it came to pandemic management (not to mention sheer acceptance of the reality of Covid) as in the United States (Bridgman et al., 2021), the volume of Covid misinformation present in media meant that spillover into Canada was inevitable. This was such that a study found that Canadians who spent more time on social media likely believed more Covid misinformation, merely due to the amount of American media present in Canada (Bridgman et al., 2021). This was reflected in events such as the Trucker Convoy, which was against Covid restrictions and was propelled into existence not only from frustration, but by aunty-authority sentiments that mirrored that of American protests (Panneton, 2022). These themes will be explored in the following section as means to trace origins back to American sources, but it is notable here as well that the events in Canada had a definite link to prior and concurrent events in the United States throughout the pandemic.

A defining moment in conspiracy and misinformation was the January 6th Capitol Insurrection. This event, despite the name, was not isolated to a single day but rather was a long spanning campaign of election denial, which culminated in violent extremism. Donald Trump's popularity began to evidently slip in the wake of the pandemic. Consequently, he began to make remarks casting doubt upon the security of mail in ballots, and insinuating a Democratic conspiracy against him. Such remarks included "The Democrats are trying to rig this election because that's the only way they're going to win", "There is no way you can go through a mail-in vote without massive cheating", and "The only way we're going to lose this election is if the election is rigged, remember that" (Niedzwiadek, 2020). He additionally reinforced that he was unwilling to commit to whether he would accept the results of the election, setting himself up to claim fraud if he were to be announced the loser (Gessen, 2020). There is no need to further define why these comments are, at best, misinformation. They are evidence in and of themselves of Donald Trump's attempt to plant seeds of doubt in the democratic processes within the United States. Further, these comments repeatedly affirmed to his base to prepare for a coup of sorts, in which some greater power was planning to steal the election from Mr. Trump. This theme of a secret/higher government power who wishes to control the world will be explored in the following section as well, contextualized within conspiracy origins and movements. Another aspect of the claims of election fraud was Trump's accusations of illegal immigrant votes and

voter fraud. This accusation had been a part of election misinformation prior to Trump's first election, but it grew following his first victory, when he insisted that illegal migrants had cast their votes for his 2016 opponent Hillary Clinton, thus falsely giving her the popular vote (Canon & Sherman, 2021). Trump's belief in the illegal migrant voting conspiracy gave mainstream credibility to a theory that had very little evidence and is often connected to racist, anti-immigrant sentiments among some Republican politicians. The combination of Trump's claims and his fervent following lead to the establishment of new organizations, and links between pre-existing extremist groups. Facebook saw an increase in groups related to the hashtag "#StopTheSteal", which were flooded with threats of violence, desires to begin a civil war and rallying cries to protest electoral certifications and ballot counts that were ongoing (Romm et al., 2020). The initial group was one of the fastest growing in Facebook's history, but was taken down by moderators when the content turned violent (Frankel, 2020). This did not stop new groups from springing up in their place, nor did it impede the movement from growth and cross-movement networking, spanning from the "mainstream" right wing to Neo-Nazi organizations (Sidner & Jones, 2020).

A prominent theory pushed by broadcasters, influencers and Trump-acolytes was that the voting machines had been hacked as part of one of the aforementioned plots to take the election away from Donald Trump. Dominion Voting Systems would go on to sue several networks and individuals for defamation (Bauder et al., 2023), but the damage had already been done amongst the true believers. As the January certification of the vote loomed, Trump began to organize his followers through a series of tweets to assemble in DC on January 6th for a Stop the Steal rally (Patterson, 2023). The day of January 6th and the violence that occurred now lives in the public memory internationally. The physical manifestation of the rabbit holes and Facebook groups led to five deaths, uncontrolled violence and placed the lives of government officials in danger, all in the name of electoral fraud conspiracy theories. The full events of the day are quite lengthy, complicated and overwhelming, but the basic matter of fact stands- those who engaged in this attempt to subvert legitimate democratic processes did so based on material they read online within their echo chambers.

An event similar to the January 6th Capitol Insurrection has not occurred in a comparable means within Canada, but evidence of fraying trust in democratic processes are beginning to appear in public opinion, with younger Canadians who self-identify as having right wing

political beliefs demonstrating lesser trust in election results (Lockhart et al., 2024). Additionally, the national trust in ballot counting efficacy has decreased, with survey respondents in 2023 indicating a decrease of 4% in their belief that all ballots in elections are counted fairly and in their entirety (Parkin, 2023). While these statistics seem slight and may not indicate a potential event on the same scale of the January 6th Capitol Insurrection, the evolution of electoral doubt may be a new concern in future elections. As will be discussed in the next section, conspiratorial beliefs regarding the British Columbian election gained some traction following the recounts, and there is already online chatter regarding whether a Conservative loss at the federal level in 2025 would be indicative of electoral fraud.

Trump's campaign to cast doubt upon legitimate democratic processes and handling of the Covid-19 Pandemic are crucial in understanding some of the aforementioned case studies, and the dynamics that have inspired new rhetoric in Canada. However, these events only represent a portion of the origins of misinformation on Facebook, and some of the comments exist within the context of remarks, rather than events as a whole. Among these is Trump's intentional smear campaign of verified media outlets. The term "fake news" predates the Trump presidency, but it was his first presidential campaign and term in office which introduced the weaponization of the term against the media, calling mainstream sources such as CNN and MSNBC dishonest, and casting doubts upon the credibility of the press (Li & Su, 2020). Trump would often use language associated with authoritarian regimes (Higgins, 2017), referring to the news as "the enemy of the people", which he sometimes would admit was as a result of what he felt like was unfair treatment from major outlets (Grynbaum, 2019). His adamant denial of the news and fact-checking lent itself greatly to most, if not all, disinformation/misinformation campaigns that emanated from the White House, including the aforementioned events of the Covid-19 Pandemic and the January 6th Capitol Insurrection. It is difficult to discuss contemporary issues with misinformation and distrust in the media without mentioning Donald Trump's contribution to the shift. As a figure with authority, he gave credibility to the notion that the media was intentionally dishonest, which gained a life of its own within partisan divides. This sentiment is at the core of this research, and can be viewed as a root cause of the "infodemic" that exists online. It almost certainly has contributed to the changes in Canadian trust of media; as previously mentioned, Reuters found that national trust in media has dropped

to 39%, a nearly 20 point decrease in a six year period (Newman et al., 2024a). Conservative Party leader Pierre Poilievre has made the defunding of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation a centre part of his campaign, saying that the network is biased and easily replaceable by the private market (S. Taylor, 2024b). Poilievre's popularity in the polls prior to January 6th, 2025, speaks to the extent that this narrative has been successful and may be viewed as a contributor to the decline in national media trust.

3.3 - Speaking in Memes

The case studies in Chapter 2 demonstrated rhetoric that sprawls across Facebook, and represents cross-movement networking. The misinformation perpetuated in those comments, however, is not inherently Canadian culture or language. In fact, their origins are often American, and often represent further proof of digital space contamination by American misinformation. To further demonstrate whether the Online News Act is responsible for the dissemination of misinformation and Ideologically Motivated Violent Extremism in Canada or if geographical relationships dominate the internet, it is necessary to explore the origins and backgrounds of the conspiracy theories and language used in the previous chapter.

“They refer to it as Democracy, that it is, a la WEF” “Everything they say is designed to stall while the wef agenda is instituted. Jagmeet doesnt need 2.2 million, he's been paid multiple by his masters in the wef.” “All by design. World leaders have been talking about the new world order and the a financial reset.”

These snippets of comments from the discussed case studies are united by a commonality: conspiracy theories relating to the World Economic Forum, and notions of elites who secretly control the world. The roots of this particular language of “reset” and “new world order” belongs to a more recent iteration of this type of conspiracy, relating to the WEF 2021 Great Reset theme as part of pandemic growth and recovery, but has its origins in much older forms of conspiracy theories (Gallagher & O'Connor, 2023). This conspiracy is often affiliated with right-wing circles, and as demonstrated in the case studies, is more frequently part of discourses relevant to anti-government sentiment, especially when discussing the leadership of

centrist and left wing parties. The conspiracy theory has been referred to as a “conspiracy smoothie” by author Naomi Klein, who attempted to understand how many various pieces of disinformation fell under the umbrella of this viral theme (Klein, 2020). It is difficult to define exactly what the entirety of the conspiracy is, as it is a catch-all term of sorts. One aspect during the pandemic was related to anti-vaccine rhetoric, insisting that global elites, such as philanthropist Bill Gates, were using the vaccinations in order to inject microchips in members of the public to track their lives (Koblentz-Stenzler & Pack, 2021). Scholars have noted a few key points in the rise of this conspiracy, with its first few mentions occurring around June of 2020 (Haskins, 2020), following the World Economic Forum summit in Davos (Gallagher & O’Connor, 2023), and again in October 2020 after an archbishop penned an open letter to Donald Trump, promoting the conspiracy theory (Vigano, 2020).

The superspreader event for this theory, however, is Canadian in origin. Fact checkers and researchers have indicated that the term did not trend online until a video of Justin Trudeau speaking went viral, as a result of his choice of language, wherein he stated that the pandemic could allow for a “reset” (Goodman & Carmichael, 2021). The video went on to spread amongst alt-right American influencers, but it also bilaterally took on a life of its own in Canada, especially within government circles. The then Conservative Party leadership hopeful Pierre Poilievre began a petition to stop Canada’s involvement in The Great Reset (Christensen & Au, 2023), and began to campaign on the promise of preventing ministers within his potential cabinet from having any involvement with the World Economic Forum (Zimonjic, 2022). The American perpetuation of the theory came from the intermediaries between the Trump administration and the public, such as then Fox News host Tucker Carlson, who described the plot as “What does the Great Reset look like? This is what it looks like: The people in charge doing whatever they want because they're in charge. There will be no live music in the Great Reset. Choirs will be illegal unless they are singing the praises of Kamala Harris. Christmas will be banned. ‘Sorry, put on your mask and spend the holidays alone. Good luck.’” (*“The Great Reset” Conspiracy Flourishes Amid Continued Pandemic* | ADL, n.d.). The Great Reset conspiracy theory featured as well on the podcasts of right wing influencers/pundits like Ben Shapiro, Glenn Beck and Charlie Kirk. The theory spread rapidly through both countries, and became entangled in Covid-era narratives. Evidently, the impact of this theory is still palpable in Canadian misinformation circles. The implication in these comments, which were made on posts by

Professional Propagandists, is that there is a circle of elites, which includes left wing government officials like Justin Trudeau and Jagmeet Singh, who are seeking to impose some form of total control over Canada, be it through financial memes or immigration policy. In an Abacus Data survey, $\frac{1}{5}$ respondents indicated that they believed to some extent that the World Economic Forum is “a group of global elites with a secretive strategy to impose their ideas on the world.” (Stokes, 2022), affirming the pervasive nature of this theory within Canadian dialogues.

The immigration policy aspect of The Great Reset theory also shares roots with the aforementioned Great Replacement Theory.

“Europe has seen an increase in crime, protest and assaults on females since the increase of immigrants. Canada will be taken over not by war but by our government inviting and paying for immigrants to come into our country and take over. Canadians are now the low class in their own country. WAKE UP CANADIANS”

“Replacement Genocide is happening in Canada. Tell your kids to breed”

These comments from the case study are specifically in alignment with Great Replacement Theory rhetoric. The name of the theory comes from a 2011 French publication by Renaud Camus (Bauder, 2022), who described a government plot to replace French citizens with African and Muslim migrants. While the name of this particular conspiracy theory is relatively new, its roots in racist rhetoric has long been a part of Western culture. A White Nationalist march in Charlottesville, North Carolina in 2017 gained international attention for its promotion of Replacement Theory and subsequent violence (Feuer, 2021). It was then that within North America, the isolation of this conspiracy to the corners of the internet ended and went mainstream. Multiple shootings in the United States followed, with the shooters citing incitement from Replacement Theory doctrine (Bauder, 2022). A 2022 survey found that $\frac{1}{3}$ of American adults believed that there was a conspiracy to increase the number of immigrants to reduce “native” American influence in elections and to replace them (Krummenacher, 2022). This replacement conspiracy theory was pushed by politicians such as Representative Elise Stefanik, Matt Gaetz (Confessore & Yourish, 2022) and Donald Trump himself, in another effort to delegitimize electoral results and foment anxiety about the failure of democracy (Joffe-Block, 2024). Tucker Carlson was one of the most visible proponents of the Great Replacement theory, using his late night show on Fox News to discuss the theory at least 400 times prior to 2023

(Confessore, 2022), initially discussing it in the context of decreasing birth rates in the United States, which is a key part of Camus' work on the topic (Bowles, 2019). The public visibility of these figures, who have some popularity in Canada (Lum, 2024), indicate a clear move of this rhetoric into the mainstream, where it is now commonplace to see the language related to Replacement theory as part of conversations around increased immigration. There is not much research on how this rhetoric entered Canada, as racism itself is historic and complex, but it has clearly come online within Canada. A 2022 survey revealed that 37% of respondents believed, to some extent, that "there is a group of people in this country who are trying to replace native born Canadians with immigrants who agree with their political view." (Mosleh, 2022). In 2019-2020, terms related to and the Great Replacement theory itself was searched for 25,000 times, and there was a surge of far-right searches in the same window (Bascaramurty, 2022). When it came to light that Freedom Convoy leader Pat King was known to have shared content related to the Great Replacement theory, Conservative Party members (who were in the midst of a leadership race at the time) publicly renounced the beliefs, despite any affiliations they had with members of the convoy (S. Taylor, 2022). Given that the theory was not pushed by politicians in Canada as it had been in the United States, the politicians can be eliminated as the potential proponents of the rhetoric into Canadian digital society. The next step on the rung of suspects is influencers, and as previously mentioned, Canadians follow more American content creators than they do Canadian influencers. It is difficult to state with any certainty whether this conspiracy theory migrated into Canada from the United States, but it is a fair assumption to make based on the timeline and contextual usage. In the comments used for the case studies, the language aligns with what has been pushed within American circles, demonstrating an affinity for the misinformation/disinformation south of the border.

A more "mild" interpretation of the Great Replacement theory has been a rise in anti-immigrant sentiment, with commenters suggesting that Canadian immigration policies were allowing in violent criminals, and that it was the intention of the Trudeau administration to do so.

"So truckers get the emergency act but these immigrants can come infiltrate from the inside & openly say they want death to Canada & the massive cheers erupted!! I think we need more guns boys.. as Canadians born & raised this makes my blood boil.. where is the arrests &

massive deportation.. we want a free & clean @ affordable country to live in.. & this isn't helping anything!! If death to canada u want then go back to where u came from!!! Just saying..”

It is notable that not all rhetoric is a direct connection to dark conspiracy theories such as the Great Replacement theory, but it does not make them any less hateful or dangerous. The arrests and deportations suggested in the comment may be inspired by the policies of the second Trump administration (Hutzler, 2024), which has promised to deport immigrants en masse through the declaration of a national emergency if need be. This is difficult to confirm however, as the commenter mentions economic frustrations, which has become an international talking point for populist and far-right political parties (Mahle, 2024).

Another theme of misinformation which has appeared in case studies, as mentioned in the prior section, is election interference and ballot rigging. In the American context, this conspiracy theory gained traction amongst Trump supporters, who maintained what some refer to as “the big lie”. The British Columbia Premier race demonstrated that the dangerous pieces of misinformation pushed by Donald Trump have begun to find a home in Canadian discourse, be it in relation to machine conspiracies or simply plots to “steal” races. During the drawn out ballot count, commenters speculated whether the election was being influenced by the electronic tabulators used for the first time in the provincial race, with lines such as “Dominion is owned by Soros”. The association of Dominion with accusations of electoral fraud is in connection to the events described in the prior section, which saw Dominion eventually suing Fox News and several individuals for defamation. Trump directly blamed Dominion’s machines for tampering with votes in his favour in his effort to change the outcome of the 2020 election (Nicas, 2020), and his disinformation campaign had a long-lasting impact on electoral trust. There is no clear data on how many individuals endorsed these conspiracy theories following the British Columbia election, but it is likely not a small fraction of the population. Conspiracies regarding mail in ballots were already on the rise in 2021, following the previous Federal election (S. Taylor, 2021) and it is reasonable to assume that sentiment has since increased. The BC elections were impacted by the nature of the recounts and delay in results, which mirrored the events of the 2020 American Presidential elections. John Rustad, the BC Conservative Party leader, did not undermine the results of the election, but he did note discrepancies and called for an independent

review, which did not quell the suspicions of his supporters who already were beginning to espouse dangerous conspiracies regarding the legitimacy of the election. Theories about the tampering with rural ballots began to spread through Facebook within comment sections, and were in part promoted by Professional Propagandists, as seen in the case studies. The origins of this rhetoric is undoubtedly American; prior to Trump's outlandish claims, there was no precedent for a major Western democracy to declare that there had been domestic foul play in the determination of its leadership races. This language entered Canada through the United States, and is perhaps one of the greatest threats to national democracy. The reactions to the British Columbian election was not one of encouraging violence, but it is evident that doubt in the electoral processes is growing and spreading amongst Canadians, as the national trust in ballot counting has declined by 4% (Parkin, 2023).

Perhaps one of the most complex conspiracy theories present in the case studies is QAnon. In short, QAnon refers to an anonymous poster from 4chan and 8chan message boards in 2017, who stated that he was a government insider with "Q" level clearance, and could thus access classified information regarding Donald Trump's secret war against "the cabal" (Roose, 2021). The cabal, within the QAnon lore, is a group of satan worshipping paedophiles, composed of prominent democrats, celebrities and religious figures. The believers of QAnon believe that there will be a day of reckoning, often referred to as "the storm" (Wendling, 2020), where the cabal members will be arrested and in some tellings, executed. QAnon is similar to the Great Reset, in that it too is a conspiracy theory smoothie. It encompasses themes of anti-semitism, 9/11 "truthers", conspiracy theories about the assassinations of both John F. Kennedy and Robert Kennedy, and its members are also proponents of Trump's electoral fraud claims (Roose, 2021). The cabal themes had manifested in Ideologically Motivated Violent Extremism just one year prior to the first QAnon post, in an incident known as Pizzagate, wherein an armed gunman entered a pizza restaurant in Washington, DC, insisting Hillary Clinton and other Democrats were running a child sex trafficking ring in the basement of the establishment (DiResta, 2024). Many of the individuals involved in the January 6th Capitol Insurrection were affiliated with QAnon (Barry et al., 2021), and it has shifted into the mainstream over the last four years (Zihiri et al., 2022), particularly with Donald Trump more frequently interacting with QAnon content (Bensinger & Haberman, 2023).

A core part of QAnon has been their ability to appeal to women through their “Save the Children” messaging, wherein they pose themselves as strong opponents of human trafficking and sexualization of minors (Roose, 2020), which has become a means by which they have been able to recruit new members. It has also resonated strongly with young women, who are reached through brightly coloured graphics and content that is presented as informative and aesthetically pleasing, as described in the Pastel QAnon theory (Argentino, 2021). Facebook attempted to control the presence of QAnon on their platform in 2020 by banning mentions of it, flagged key terms such as WWG1WGA (Where We Go One, We Go All), and shutting down some groups (Frankel, 2020), but members still found workarounds to continue sharing QAnon content. These loopholes are one of the ways that QAnon was still able to reach a broad audience, appealing to basic maternal instincts through its Save the Children messaging (Chamlee, 2021). This is where the crossover with the content shared in the case studies occurred, as there is a connection between the Save the Children aspect of QAnon and the belief that the promotion of LGBTQ+ rights and education is a left wing government effort to expose children to paedophiles. As previously mentioned, the women included in the case study do not necessarily believe entirely in QAnon, but subscribe to adjacent rhetoric. Researchers and journalists have noted that anti-transgender discourse became common amongst QAnon followers in 2021 (Dodds, 2022), with them framing the acceptance of transgender youth in American public policy as an act of paedophilia. This was able to enter mainstream discussions easily within the United States, as anti-transgender debates were already a part of politics, and given that the country had a long history of referring to homosexuals and those who identified as transgender as “groomers” (Astor, 2022).

QAnon is undoubtedly an American movement in its origin. There is no aspect of it which was developed elsewhere, as its lore is dependent on Donald Trump and American political issues. The movement is extreme in its entirety, and is not clearly represented within the case studies used for this research, but there are clear elements that come from it. When the influencer in this case study shares a story regarding paedophilia within the British Columbia school system, she is expressing a belief that originated from QAnon and its rhetoric, and identifying herself as being aligned with the Save the Children movement to some extent. Similar to the Great Replacement Theory, not everyone who images in discourse related to homophobia or transphobia in Canada is necessarily a believer in QAnon- but it does not make

their comments any less dangerous. The physical manifestations of QAnon in the past have consistently proven that its members are more than capable of Tier 3 acts of Ideologically Motivated Violent Extremism, through its usage of outrage and emotional appeals in Tier 2 content.

3.4 - Is This Who We Are?

The frayed sense of Canadian identity has left the nation vulnerable to external influences, which may have had a profound effect on the virality of conspiracy theories and misinformation. There has been a notable change in Conservatism in Canada, which perhaps acts increasingly in parallel with American politics. This chapter discussed Tucker Carlson as a superspreader within American misinformation circles, and noted that he has found some success in Canada. This is so much so that he brought his tour to Alberta, where he met with Premier Danielle Smith, and led the crowd in jeers against Prime Minister Trudeau (Megginson, 2024). This event should be of concern, and marks the digital ecosystem perfectly. Carlson, since his firing from Fox, has become something of an influencer, and he has enough fans in Canada that he sold out two events. This demonstrates the level to which Canadians choose to follow and believe American political influencers. That he was able to meet with other Canadian politicians, however, is indicative of a different change, which will be explored in the next section. It is evident that much of the misinformation pushed on Facebook in Canada relates to movements in the United States, which clearly shows that there is no digital border between the neighbours that dampens the influence of the international superpower that is the United States over Canada. This has left democratic systems in Canada vulnerable to the infodemic that has occurred in the era of Donald Trump, and transformed the way the public interacts with content online. The increase in Ideologically Motivated Violent Extremism on Facebook in Canada seems to correlate with content, political events and popular culture in the United States.

Conclusion: Where We Are, and What Comes Next

4.1 - Doom Scrolling

The Online News Act removed news from Facebook effectively, when Meta refused to cooperate with the government of Canada's legislation. This loss has changed the way in which Canadians interact with and seek information on platforms, which as mentioned earlier, has not removed their attention from Facebook. Rather, Canadians have turned to new means to share pieces of information on social media platforms, such as decontextualized screenshots or through pages who post as if they are news sources, but without the legitimacy, and often with bias. The danger here comes through this lack of context and intentional rage baiting. Facebook thrives on divisive content, which moves quickly across the platform, given a heavier weight by the algorithm. It is thus that groups like the Professional Propagandists have gained such substantial traction. Was this shift to misinformation, threats of violence and partisan division inevitable? Did the Online News Act worsen the digital ecosystem in Canada, or was it a part of the cultural exchange with the United States?

Facebook's algorithm is designed to maximize interactions, and it does so by any means. This means that often, rage bait and misinformation become king on the platform, as this content styling drives up traffic and shares. Though it does not purport itself to be a news platform, the interactions of Canadians say otherwise. Facebook has been a leading favourite for reading the news amongst Canadians for some time, which was one of the factors which lead to the Online News Act (Korzinski, 2023). The desire of the Canadian government to earn fair compensation for media outlets whenever their content was interacted with on Meta platforms left an already vulnerable nation even more open to misinformation. Canada had already seen the rise of the Freedom Convoy movement on Facebook and other social media platforms, which physically manifested as an incident of Ideologically Motivated Violent Extremism, and serves as an example of cross-movement networking. Many individuals who partook in this event were already isolated to rabbit holes and echo chambers, as their algorithms fed them content that only created a confirmation bias of their beliefs, be it related to health freedoms, anti-government or other frustrations that were engendered by the Covid-19 pandemic. The matter of the fact is that

this occurred prior to the Online News Acts introduction and implementation, an event which a high percentage of Canadians are dangerously unaware of (Lockhart et al., 2024). They have continued to use Facebook for news as though nothing has happened, and this has led to new roles, echo chambers and potential influence over the outcome of elections within Canada. The news ban is concurrent with a declining trust in media sources, which has further pushed Canadians to turn to influencers and opinion pages on Facebook for their information. All this has created new threats to national democracy, exposing the ways by which misinformation remains a pervasive and real threat to the lives of Canadians.

The roles of users that have distinctly changed and arisen absent verified media outlets on Facebook further affirm how misinformation and Ideologically Motivated Violent Extremism has blossomed online, and the complications in slowing what is becoming an infodemic of sorts. The producer/consumer cycle shifted, such that those who we would usually see as holding a binary role of consumption rose into the roles of producers. The Professional Propagandists, Pastel QAnon and Crunchy Moms, and Red-Pills and Radicalization emerged most prominently through an analysis of Facebook content. The Professional Propagandists, producer types, often posted content where they acted as if they were news sources, seeking to inform their audiences on negativities throughout the country, often aligned with the Conservative Party. Their ability to share news pieces out of context or focus upon pieces that aligned with radical, anti-immigrant sentiment, drove their interactions, and with it, the misinformation that occurred in their comments. Their commenters often belonged to the Red-Pills and Radicalization group, consumers, who would share vitriol related to the posts they were engaging with. This often included misogynistic content about female politicians, racial conspiracy theories, and threats or statements that were anti-government in nature. Immigration seemed to be a large driver for those consumers, but the Pastel QAnon and Crunchy Mom users were attracted to different content. The women within this subgroup were more engaged with content related to the safety of children, whether it be related to LGBTQ+ movements in schools or Covid-19 measures. This group is distinct from the other two in that the Pastel QAnon and Crunchy Moms served not only as consumers, but also emerged from the crowd as producers, serving as a mediator between the propaganda machine and rumour mill (DiResta, 2024). Their role as influencer makes them more relatable to their consumers, as they are still viewed as being one of their own; they are often

also mothers, and curate their content to the confirmation bias of their audience to maximize engagement. Anti-government ideology is still at the core of their work, as they are motivated by factors such as autonomy over health decisions, which can stretch into vaccination conspiracy theories, or beliefs that centrist and left wing governments are attempting to force paedophilia and transgender identities onto their children, which is related in part to QAnon conspiracy theories about the abuse and sex trafficking of minors (Dodds, 2022). They were involved in the networks of the Professional Propagandists as well, often seen in the comments of posts that related to the handling of the Covid-19 Pandemic by Prime Minister Trudeau. The variety in content demonstrates the Professional Propagandists' ability to serve as a source of outrage and misinformation for multiple networks, and engender cross-movement networking through their content.

Many of the themes in the comments of the Facebook posts included in the case studies seemingly mirrored political themes and rhetoric that have been occurring in the United States over the last decade. There is significant crossover between Canadians and Americans in online spaces- aside from speaking the same language, Canadians follow more Americans than they do Canadians, and thus consume more American content. Canadians do not have a strong sense of identity, which has allowed them to be subsumed by the superpower that is the United States and their affairs, and thus the conditions of their politics is no exception. It can be presumed that Canadians enter American echo chambers via recommendations related to the American influencers they follow, and begin to affiliate with political views from their southern neighbours. The influence of QAnon is palpable amongst the Pastel QAnon and Crunchy Moms subsect, although not to the entire extent of the true believers, which serves as clear evidence of the context by which the Canadian digital ecosystem has been infiltrated by American conspiracy theories. The same is true for the proliferation of the Great Replacement theory. Racism is a concept that is not new nor unique to either nation, but the specific rhetoric as it pertains to elections and immigration is distinctly American, which is affirmed by the open affiliation of Canadians with some of its perpetrators. Not every piece of rhetoric is entirely American, however, and rather demonstrates the affinity between American and Canadian alt-right users. The Great Reset conspiracy theory occurred bilaterally, with the origins in part relating to a video of Justin Trudeau, but spread predominantly by American influencers. It did

find a home amongst Canadian politicians, who further pushed it as a part of their platforms or publicly disavowed the World Economic Forum, showing some belief in the conspiracy to their supporters (Klein, 2020). The influence of American events, subsequent misinformation campaigns, and conspiracy theories have become a part of the Canadian political climate, and pose a risk to democracy themselves through the promotion of dangerous rhetoric.

4.2 - Content Unavailable

Has the Online News Act worsened misinformation in Canada, or was this inevitable? The way Canadians use Facebook has remained unchanged despite the implementation of the Online News Act and Meta's subsequent removal of news outlets (Parker et al., 2024), especially given that many are unaware that their ecosystem has been changed (Lockhart et al., 2024). This suggests that there was either a preference to engage with the Professional Propagandists prior to the ban, or that users were seeking political information from their circles rather than directly from the publishers themselves. The Professional Propagandists were able to adjust to the circumstances of the ban by shifting the means by which they shared discourse, or by continuing on as they had before. Media outlets suffered, with 30% of news media ceasing their online presence following the news ban (Parker et al., 2024), and thus the intended goal of the Online News Act has rather achieved the opposite outcome. In the context of this work, however, the greater concern are the multitudes of Canadians who rely upon Facebook for the news. Rather than adjust to the circumstances, as some influencers and news outlets have, Canadians continue to seek their information on Facebook, which is now dominated by biased bad faith actors, who choose to present themselves as sources of information. Their success has not been altered too heavily by the change (though this is difficult to ascertain, as will be discussed in the limitations), but they are now a primary source whereas in the past, they would be contending with the likes of CBC and CTV. This means that in some cases, discourse that involves misinformation has become dominant as the political information in the lives of some Canadians. Indeed, this is so much so that Canadians are now expressing high levels of conspiratorial thought, such as the substantial increase in general belief of the Great Replacement theory, whether it be openly or through discourse related to the increase of immigration within Canada

(Lockhart et al., 2024). There is no definitive evidence that the two are correlated, but the largest change to the online ecosystem since the last time this question was surveyed, 2022, has been the Facebook ban. In the two years between surveys, respondents' belief in some form of the Great Replacement theory has risen by nearly ten percent, so this is not an insignificant finding. When factoring in that those who believe misinformation are more likely to rely upon Facebook as a media source, it is reasonable to assume a connection between this change in attitude. Relying on this connection, we can surmise that to some extent, the Online News Act has allowed for the growth and spread of misinformation on Facebook. Operating without official news media and reliable fact checking options, the Professional Propagandists and other producers have been able to lead conversations on relevant national issues, unopposed. It comes down to the users to point out misinformation when it occurs, and as established in the first chapter, the combatting of misinformation is a psychological issue in and of itself. Not every user has the courage to begin online debates, and some are unmotivated to do so based on their sense of understanding of issues, which may be further impacted by an immediate unavailability of sources that counter such points on Facebook. The impact of the news ban has had some manifestation in dangerous scenarios, such as in the case of the forest fires in the Northwest Territories (Evans, 2023), where residents were exposed to misinformation and missed evacuation orders through media due to their reliance on Facebook as a news source. This example demonstrates how dire the circumstances for everyday Canadians is- misinformation can endanger lives, and people are now being regularly exposed to it, and many of them are unaware of the fact that they are unable to see news sources.

However, this spread of misinformation is not only a result of the news ban on Facebook. It is difficult to ignore the influence of the United States on much of the language and hyper partisan shift that has been occurring in Canada. As established in the third chapter, Canadians have a weak sense of identity, and are heavily impacted by all and any events that occur in the United States, so much so that Canadians follow American news closely as a means of staying up-to-date with regional issues. Government officials have gone as far as to call this consumption “obsessive” and concerning due to the political environment within the United States since the first Trump presidency (Cantin-Nantel, 2024). The ideological shifts are also represented through opinion polling of Canadians prior to the 2024 American Presidential election. Public support for Trump has risen in Canada, up overall by 5%, but more significantly, the public support for

Trump amongst Conservative voters is such that 44% of respondents indicated they would select him, with only 36% of Conservative voters selecting Democrat candidate Kamala Harris. Amongst the Conservative demographic in 2020, only 33% of respondents stated that they supported Donald Trump's campaign, which demonstrates a dramatic change in the four years between surveys (Parkin, 2024). Most of the content and users assessed in this study were aligned with the Conservative Party, which indicates a connection between their content and an affinity for Trump's politics. Such a connection could account for the misinformation and introduction of American hyper partisan content into the Canadian digital environment, such as comments regarding mass deportations of immigrants and accusations of electoral fraud. This is not to suggest that there has been a convergence of the two cultures entirely- Canadian voters still preferred Kamala Harris overall in surveys, and are ruled by a sense of "not being American" as their primary identity. This sense extends to the political differences, such as universal healthcare, gun control and social policies, and so this difference goes beyond identifying social behaviour but general societal values. However, it is clear that the American infodemic has spread into Canada, and has greatly impacted political discourse and attitudes. Was this inevitable, or did the Online News Act hasten the process?

Not much research has been conducted on the impacts that the Online News Act has had on polarization or shifts in misinformation, but it is not difficult to connect the dots. As polarization has continued to deepen in the United States (DeSilver, 2022), Canada has not been able to avoid symptoms of these same issues. This has always been part of the relationship between Canada and its internationally-dominant neighbour; "The Americans are our best friends whether we like it or not" (Webster, 2020), a relationship where our shared language, regional proximity and history has always created the conditions for a sharing of culture. The Americans are mass producers of media, and Canadians are some of its largest natural consumers. As a protectionist measure, Canada has long had the Canadian Content regulations, which mandate the promotion of Canadian media in the country (Henderson, 2008), laws which confirm the sheer volume of American media which has always been a part of Canadian consumption. In assessing the case studies for this work, many of the comments and content mirrored discourse that has been steadily growing within the United States over the last decade, comments which may have been learnt from consumption of American content. If Canadians

have continued to closely follow American media, it is possible that some may have taken these talking points and applied it to the world around them. Where Donald Trump sees a migrant problem, so do Canadians on Facebook, reacting strongly to vague posts about crimes in Vancouver neighbourhoods. This is to say- this new perspective, rhetoric and sense of political belonging would likely have occurred absent the Online News Act and the subsequent Meta news ban. Canadians are far from immune from American issues, and this influence will likely play a role in the 2025 Federal Election. However- it is likely that the Online News Act hastened this rapid descent into misinformation on Facebook amongst Canadians. The American influence would have arrived regardless, but it has become more difficult to combat it absent any verified news outlets on the platform. It is harder to confront misinformation with facts when the ability to share links to said facts has been revoked. Canadians have continued to consume news as they had before on Facebook, but are now engaging in conversations through their own networks, which likely leads to greater confirmation bias, or through accounts that portray themselves as sources of news, while sharing biased content. This has increased the risk of Ideologically Motivated Violent Extremism, as these groups tend to conform to an open network structure, emerging from societal disruption and pulling more people in, responding to outrage until they experience some catharsis of sorts (DiResta, 2024). In a tumultuous time like Canada faces now, it is no wonder that these echo chambers have continued to expand and their rhetoric has continued to spread, especially as their beliefs are often left unchallenged, only further allowing communal reinforcement.

4.3 - January 6th, 2025 and Forward

Before exploring the scientific limitations of this research, it is crucial to note the recent events in Canada which have drastically shifted some aspects of this work. In December, 2024, polling indicated that support for the Liberal Party, particularly the leadership of Justin Trudeau, was low, with the Conservative Party leading by 22 points near the beginning of the month (Presser, 2024). Concurrently, Donald Trump had been reelected in November, 2024 and began to threaten Canada regularly just days after his victory, referring to the country as the 51st state and declaring that he intended to impose crushing tariffs on Canadian goods (Stavis-Gridneff et al., 2024). The decline in Trudeau's popularity and fear of a recession began to put pressure on

the Liberal Party to force Trudeau out of leadership, seeing him as the party's biggest detractor in the polls. Trudeau refused to do so, and the events that followed have been described as a political crisis in Canada. On December 16th, Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland resigned from the cabinet, announcing this decision in a scathing letter that she uploaded to X (twitter) (Stavis-Gridneff, 2024). She posted this letter just hours before she was set to deliver an economic statement (Tasker, 2024), where she would have to announce the lofty deficit the nation's economy was running.

“On Friday, you told me you no longer want me to serve as your Finance Minister and offered me another position in the cabinet. Upon reflection, I have concluded that the only honest and viable path is for me to resign from the cabinet.”

Chrystia Freeland's letter rocked the Liberal Party, who had an emergency caucus meeting (Aiello, 2024), after which some sources revealed that one third of MPs present asked for the Prime Minister to resign. Over the three weeks that followed, the support for this stance swelled. By the end of December, it was widely reported that the provincial caucuses had asked the Prime Minister to step aside as party leader (L. Stone et al., 2024) as the Liberal Party hit their lowest point in polling (Levitz & Stone, 2025) before an election in nearly a century (Cecco, 2025a), while simultaneously, the New Democratic Party and the Bloc Quebecois announced their intent to vote with the Conservative Party on a vote of no confidence upon the return of Parliament (Walsh et al., 2024). The culmination of these events was the resignation of Justin Trudeau on January 6th, 2025. Standing in front of his residence in Ottawa, Trudeau announced in a televised broadcast that he intended to resign as Prime Minister upon the election of a new leader of the Liberal Party (The Globe and Mail, 2025). He cited the lack of confidence within the party as a reason for his resignation, choosing to put the fate of the Liberals before his own ambition. He also stated that he had been granted a prorogation of Parliament, effective immediately until March 24th, 2025. This tabled all and any proposed bills and issues, and blocked the ability of the Conservative Party to introduce a movement for vote of no confidence amidst the Liberal leadership race. This event has closely mirrored the resignation of Joe Biden as the Democratic candidate in the 2024 American Presidential Race, albeit with a different candidate selection process occurring.

Since this point, the Liberal Party has been occupied on two fronts. One has been the selection of its new leader, which has shaped into a race between former finance minister

Chrystia Freeland and the former Bank of Canada and Bank of England Governor Mark Carney (Proudfoot, 2025). The party is expected to elect a new leader on March 9th, 2025, and whoever wins will effectively serve as Prime Minister until an election is called. The other occupying matter for the Liberal Party, and for the majority of Canadians, has been a dramatic change in the political relationship with the United States and President Donald Trump. Trump continued to state that he intended to implement 25% tariffs on all Canadian imports to force action at the Canadian border on the entrance of illegal immigrants and fentanyl into the United States (Chase, 2025) and increase defence spending to meet the NATO targets (Murphy, 2025). He also continued, however, to mention the notion of annexing Canada, making it the 51st state, which he at one point said he intended to accomplish through economic means. The tariffs were set to come in place on February 4th, 2025, but Trump's imperialistic attitude changed the political landscape in Canada; he unintentionally united divided Canadians against the United States and revived the Liberal Party from the depths of political failure. Despite the potential economic impacts, business leaders and everyday Canadians widely supported retaliatory tariffs (Akin, 2025) on American imports, which Trudeau would later announce days before Trump's tariffs were set to come into effect (Stavis-Gridneff, 2025). Surveys found that 90% of Canadians were engaged with news related to changing relationship with the United States, and 91% of respondents favoured decreasing reliance upon their southern neighbour (Yousif & Copeland, 2025). The level of engagement is of particular note, as it is engagement similar to the beginning of the pandemic in Canada, underscoring how urgent Canadians view the tariff and annexation threats to be. The tariffs were postponed for 30 days by President Trump following commitments by the Canadian government to increase border security and appoint a fentanyl czar (Tunney, 2025), but public sentiment has remained strongly anti-American, with 85% of Canadians reporting that they were intentionally avoiding purchasing American goods, and attempting to increase their consumption of Canadian made products (Angus Reid Institute, 2025). This anti-American sentiment has bled into popular culture, with the booing of the American anthem becoming a regular part of National Hockey League games taking place in Canada (Baines, 2025), and rendered a recent international hockey final match between the Canadian and American men's national teams a politically charged spectacle of Canadian patriotism (LeBrun, 2025). This patriotism is unprecedented, such that digital anthropologists have noted that they have not seen such rapid expression of Canadian pride before (Pickrell, 2025).

In regards to the aforementioned fortune of the Liberal Party in the face of the tariffs, the impact has been evident in the reversal of public polling. The Conservative Party's candidate, Pierre Poilievre has relied on populist rhetoric that has drawn comparisons to Trump within Canada, and the increasingly negative relationship with the United States wounded what was meant to be a landslide victory for him and his party (Ljunggren, 2025). The polls have fluctuated throughout February, 2025, but the polls have consistently shown considerable shrinking in the Conservative's Party lead, with some even showing that the party may only win a minority government. Other polls have demonstrated that Canadians prefer Liberal leadership candidate Mark Carney over Pierre Poilievre to negotiate with Trump (Cecco, 2025b), with some polls indicating that should Mark Carney become the leader of the Liberal Party, the Liberals would be almost tied with the Conservatives in the polls. The change from the 22 point lead the Conservatives enjoyed in December to the present hair splitting numbers is seismic, and thus Donald Trump has effectively changed the face of the 2025 federal election (Rana, 2025), such that it is no longer going to be a referendum on the past 10 years of Liberal leadership, but rather an election where the primary issue will be Trump and Canadian sovereignty.

4.4 - Limitations

The summary of the past three months of Canadian political events has been included because it is, in and of itself, a limitation and a challenge to aspects of the research conducted here. I selected an information cut off date of January 6th, 2025, as much of the case studies I had been following and analyzing predominantly posted anti-Trudeau content. Obviously, Trudeau resigning presented an external shock of sorts to the Professional Propagandists' regular online behaviour, as they were forced to change their target. The changes to content would have made it more difficult to write about, especially as the Professional Propagandists now find themselves shifting their attention onto Mark Carney and other key left wing figures who were not focal points in the past.

The largest challenge posed by the recent events has been the impact of Trump. For one, part of this research discusses a lack of cohesive Canadian identity, which cites academic work where it demonstrates that this notion has been an issue for many years. However, the surge in

Canadian patriotism has entirely upended this notion. As discussed above, Canadians are more united now than they have been in years, an outcome which is perhaps linked to the fact that much of the Canadian identity is based on not being American. Thus, when threatened with becoming American, Canadians have responded quickly and earnestly (Pickrell, 2025). The popular culture events also denote a shift in the friendship that existed between Canadians and Americans, such that the tensions have carried over into sports and the digital ecosystem. This has also caused a pivot away from some of the Trump-like rhetoric discussed in both the case studies and the third chapter, as Canadians seek to further distinguish themselves from Americans and voice their displeasure with what used to be their closest ally. We can presume that the affinity that Canadian users previously showed for American politicians and institutions has faded significantly, especially given how widespread the Made in Canada consumer campaign is within the country. Therefore, it is presently more difficult to gauge whether misinformation is connected to American conspiracy theories and discourse, as the conversations in Canada have changed entirely and there is a conscious effort to disconnect from the United States. It is further difficult to track discourse presently due to the chaotic unfolding of events in the United States, including the actions of Elon Musk, and the way the unpredictability changes conversations driven by American misinformation.

Further limitations were more practical in their nature. Studies related to misinformation tend to be conducted through a few methods that require resources. One is quantitative surveying, which needs to be far reaching to yield successful results, and thus it is usually conducted through a hired firm (Boulianne & Hoffmann, 2024). Another method for assessing how the Facebook algorithm operates is a study wherein a dummy account is created on a blank device, and after being assigned attributes, interacts with suggested content to see what the natural tendencies of the algorithm are (J. Taylor, 2024). Such work requires access to a blank device, a good VPN or physical location in Canada and likely an ethics committee that can guide and approve the work. This type of study is complex, and I did not have access to these means to look deeper into how people perceive the algorithm and the exact extent to which Canadians are guided into echo chambers organically. Additionally, tools that have been used in the past to study misinformation have been shut down by Meta (Ortutay, 2024), which makes it difficult to assess the manner by which misinformation spreads on their platforms.

Timeline limitations will play a role in the future relevance of this work, and as previously mentioned, has already impacted the content assessed. This can be attributed to the issue-attention cycle, as theorized by Anthony Downs, an American economist. The cycle describes the five phases a visible political issue goes through public discourse, as it first gains attention in the pre-problem stage, is put in the centre of conversations by some dramatic occurrence in the alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm phase, a realization that the cost of progress is significant, followed by the gradual decline of intense public interest and then the post-problem stage, where the issue is eventually replaced by another one, and is put into a limbo of sorts (Downs, 1972). The issue-attention cycle occurs even more rapidly on social media, as the public is exposed to stronger language that underscores the importance of an issue, elevating more pieces of news to the alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm phase. This was seen in this study through the change of discourse from anti-Trudeau content to content related to relations with the United States. The issue-attention cycle shifted in such a way that the content I chose to study became a past issue, and inconsistent between the accounts I chose to track. In future work, my own case studies may become irrelevant as the misinformation in even weeks may be related to entirely different topics, depending on what issues are elevated to attention.

It is important to acknowledge my own biases in the selection of my case studies. I chose content that I was more familiar with, based on my regional knowledge and upbringing. The bulk of the case studies were related to issues in Alberta, my home province, or British Columbia, Alberta's neighbouring province. I have much more awareness of misinformation and extremism as it pertains to my lived experience in Canada, and thus sources that pertained to communities in Atlantic and Northern Canada were not featured as heavily. Additionally, this research examined right wing misinformation, and did not feature left wing content. It is true that the majority of misinformation is related to Conservative positions and extremism (Hibbert, 2024), but there is still evidence of misinformation and disinformation campaigns amongst the far left on social media platforms in Canada (McQuinn et al., 2024). The right wing material was selected for this study due to easier visibility as a researcher, and higher volume of content.

4.5 - Flu Season Goes Global

In scholarly works and journalism regarding the American influence on the world, there is a popular expression often used to describe the profound effect the United States has on the rest of the world. “When America sneezes, the world catches a cold”. This research explores the vulnerabilities within the Canadian digital ecosystem, and in a large part, the role that American populism and extremism has played in the spreading of violent extremist rhetoric. It is indeed true that Canadians are in danger, but the scope of this work is applicable to the state of the world at large. As discussed in the chapter on the relationship and origins of American misinformation to the language used on Facebook in Canada, hateful and violent rhetoric has a place of its own in the United States, and has fomented violent manifestations. However, the re-election of Donald Trump in 2024 has created a new era of challenges, particularly with major changes to the digital ecosystem, led by the tech billionaires who affiliate with the President. These challenges have also been accompanied by an increase in popularity of far-right politicians abroad, many of whom use the same populist language associated with Trump. The current Trump administration has aligned itself with Facebook founder and Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg, Amazon CEO and owner of the Washington Post Jeff Bezos, Google CEO Sundar Pichai, Apple CEO Tim Cook and Elon Musk, owner of X, Tesla and SpaceX who also has been serving as an advisor for Trump since announcing his support for the former President prior to the election (Swenson, 2025). The involvement of some of the richest men in the world in a presidency already rife with misinformation can only be- and has been, thus far- an extreme threat to the protection of truth, particularly on the internet.

After aligning himself with Trump, Zuckerberg announced that he would be ending the fact checking program on Meta platforms, and loosened the regulations around contentious topics, including gender and immigration (Isaac et al., 2025). He referred to the fact checking program and restrictions regarding hateful language as being a form of “censorship”, and that the platform was intended to be used as a space to speak freely, thus condoning the spread of both misinformation and violent extremism. Beyond the examples within this study regarding the Canadian and American context, removing fact-checking from Facebook is cataclysmic, as the app has become a flashpoint of sorts for international crises, such as the promotion of genocide in Myanmar, and the oppression of the voices of minority groups in Sri Lanka (Fisher, 2018).

Zuckerberg is not the only media tycoon whose actions are already echoing globally; Elon Musk's involvement in misinformation campaigns and the Trump White House has had profound effects on international politics and rhetoric.

Elon Musk had been a champion of technological development in the public perspective prior to the shift in his politics, a change which sources around him and biographers attribute to his eldest child coming out as transgender (Cuthbertson, 2025). His daughter's transition pushed him down a path of radicalization, and as this research has shown, there is a deep connection between anti-transgender ideology and the far right. Musk has stated on multiple occasions that "the woke mind virus killed my son" (Oliphant et al., 2025), openly connecting his daughter's identity to left-wing politics. Since his acquisition of Twitter, now X, in 2022, Musk has allowed extremist, far-right superspreaders of misinformation to return to the platform, such as the conspiracy theorist Alex Jones (Mather, 2024) and eased the community guidelines around hate speech. The past year has been the most consequential in regards to Elon Musk's online activity. Not only has the algorithm been modified to push divisive content, but polarization and pro-Trump content has become more prominent on the platform as a result of the lack of safety mechanisms, according to data analysts (Spring, 2024). Musk has put himself at the centre of global politics through his vast influence on the platform, endorsing the far-right in Germany (A. Taylor et al., 2025) and thus increasing international exposure to the Alternative for Germany party's platform and politicians, disseminated misinformation related to the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom (Landler & Castle, 2025) and has insisted that X is the only reliable source of news and information, and exists as the truth opposing traditional media. It is impossible to understate how dangerous it is that two of the richest men on earth are using their power and influence to undermine news media and democratic processes. Musk has also allowed X to become further infiltrated by foreign disinformation campaigns, as German researchers found an alarming number of bots associated with pro-Russian propaganda, working to influence the German elections such that it would benefit Russia in the war with Ukraine (Connolly, 2024). The circumstances that the changes to the world's biggest social networking platforms have and will continue to create are deeper echo chambers, with limited fact checking and encouraged divisive language. Both X and Meta have become tools in aiding the spread of Trumpism, and pose a threat to the world order. Misinformation has become so globally pervasive, that Donald Trump now has begun to act as a tool of Russian propaganda, insisting that the Ukrainian

President is a dictator, and that Ukraine is responsible for the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian war (Brennan, 2025). These statements are demonstrably false. America is unwell, and the world will not just catch a cold, but a life-threatening virus.

This research highlights the urgency in needing to combat misinformation in Canada, but Canada is not alone in facing this threat. There is a further need to research the influence of social media in other countries, and to what degree the rhetoric escaping the United States, promoted by some of the most influential men in the world, is creating a threat to democracy. One of the difficulties in researching misinformation and violent extremism online, as previously mentioned, is the constantly shifting attention of the public, and this too is an issue in fighting fake news as well. Audiences engage with corrections to misinformation less than the initial falsehood (DiResta, 2024), which demonstrates the uphill battle in promoting truth on social media. There is a great need for a global effort in promoting media literacy, supporting traditional media and preventing the descent of everyday people into social media rabbit holes, where they become informed by propaganda and harmful content. The findings of this research is applicable to other countries who have similar relationships to trust in media and reliance on social media as a primary news source- it may be Canada now, but the threat of Ideologically Motivated Violent Extremism and misinformation is not limited by borders.

4.6 - What Comes Next?

It has been a year and a half since Meta banned the sharing of news on their platforms in Canada. In that year and a half, Canadians have not changed much about the way they read the news, but their trust in journalism has declined. More Canadians than ever are reporting exposure to misinformation and online harms on social media platforms, and it is likely that this pattern will continue. The Online News Act was meant to protect journalists and emphasize the important role that news media plays in democracy, but the subsequent news ban has achieved the opposite. What future policy could manage this? Are Canadians able to fight the flow of American misinformation in their digital environment?

In the realm of policy, there have been attempts to create legislation to prevent Ideologically Motivated Violent Extremism from growing and spreading online. The most recent effort was Bill C-63, the Online Harms Act. At its inception, the bill sought to create safeguards for several issues that the internet poses. The legislation partially deals with threats to minors, including sexual victimization, bullying and exposure to harmful content (Lau, 2024). The other part of the act proposed regulations for content that foments hatred, and incites violence and extremism. This act would have required amendments to both the Criminal Code and Canadian Human Rights Act (Edwards, 2024), such that hate speech online to certain extents would be chargeable offences, and would allow victims to file claims with the Human Rights Tribunal and make the act of posting hate speech a form of discrimination. The bill was received with mixed reviews, with most of the criticism oriented towards the criminalization of hate speech (S. Taylor, 2024a), citing risks to free speech and the opportunities it would create for potential abuses. Eventually, the bill was divided in two to be able to, at minimum, pass the legislation written to protect minors (Zimonjic, 2024), but the Online Harms Act ultimately died upon the prorogation of Parliament in January, 2025 (Ferguson & Kim, 2025).

It is true that the Online Harms Act posed a danger to free speech, as its definitions of hate speech were perhaps too broad for daily online discourse, but the government of Canada could explore policy alternatives to better regulate misinformation and incitement to violence and extremism online. An example of an adaptable framework is the European Union's 2022 Code of Practice on Disinformation, which has been incorporated as a Code of Conduct on the Digital Services Act. The code is voluntary, but it holds the signatories responsible for the maintenance of truth and facts on their platforms by agreeing to demonetize purveyors of disinformation, more effectively label political advertisements, reduce manipulative behaviours such as misinformation spread by bots, empower researchers and fact checkers, and increase user access to information and reporting tools (European Commission, n.d.). This measure is a beginning to feasible policy meant to protect users from misinformation, and could be adapted to the Canada legislative system. It is, however, costly and would likely face similar changes to the Online Harms Act, in addition to requiring cooperation from social media platforms, the core of the problem with the Online News Act.

Ultimately, and unfortunately, the burden of prevention of misinformation falls to the general public. This will be especially so as Meta has announced that they are ceasing their fact checking system in the United States, and will expand this change internationally in the future (Isaac & Schleifer, 2025), instead switching to a community notes model, similar to what X uses. Should this come to pass in Canada, this will leave Canadian Facebook users entirely on their own. They will be not only without visible verified news content, but also reliant on the general public to tell them what is true and what is false. A recent investigation into foreign interference by Justice Marie-Josée Hogue found that Canada is extremely vulnerable to both domestic and foreign interference campaigns, and is without the tools to properly battle the threat (Trinh, 2025). Rhetoric online has become more vitriolic, and echo chambers are only becoming further reinforced by the mechanics of Facebook's algorithm. As conversations and interactions online become increasingly more partisan, it is important to assess what risk this poses to democracy in Canada. Using the definitions provided by various levels and agencies of the Canadian government, it can be surmised that within Canada, Ideologically Motivated Violent Extremism is the support or encouragement of violence to achieve ideological means. Much of this ideology stems from grievances that individuals hold, and recent reports show an increase in threats of violence against politicians, especially females (Bronskill, 2024). The spectrum of extremism among the Freedom Convoy during the Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated the lengths disinformation and misinformation can push individuals, and the violent rhetoric that can come along with such physical manifestations. There luckily has not been a flagrant attempt to destroy democratic processes in Canada as there was in the United States, but Ideologically Motivated Violent Extremism poses a threat to democracy nonetheless.

Online extremism polarizes individuals, creates distrust in political systems and often encourages violent extremist ideology. Canadians remain vulnerable to disinformation campaigns, and it is seen as one of the greatest threats to national security. The removal of news from Facebook and increasing presence of American influence has accelerated the spread of misinformation and disinformation, some of which is extreme in nature. The Canadian digital ecosystem is more vulnerable now than ever to a surge in violent extremism and distrust in democratic processes as a result.

Former intelligence and security advisor Jody Thomas recently affirmed that disinformation and misinformation is a problem which becomes increasingly worrisome each

year in regards to national security. “We worry about the military threat, we worry about domestic threats, radicalized youth, organized crime, but what worries me for the long term — because it's going to be pervasive and it's difficult to counter — is mis- and disinformation. The ability for those who want to do harm to deliberately mislead, to create stories, to amplify stories when most people are getting their news online in a way that we didn't see generations ago... You get fed the information that confirms what you already believe, and it doesn't matter if it's accurate or not. I think it's going to be a huge problem.”

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