

**Delegitimizing the Legitimate:
Dark Social Movements on Telegram**

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Abstract:

In this study, we empirically examine conspiracies on the end-to-end encrypted instant messaging platform Telegram. Using the theoretical framework of dark social movements, we provide a first look at conspiratorial topics disseminated by right-wing extremists in Canada. This study examines conspiracies related to the Great Reset, Great Awakening, United Nations, technology, China, deep state, COVID-19, Islamophobia, and the New World Order. To conduct our study, we downloaded all 270,806 posts available across 21 Telegram channels selected based on their affiliation and/or association with the far-right in Canada. Using mixed-methods entailing traditional content analysis of sampled data as well as a digital investigation of the overall dataset, our findings illustrate a tendency to delegitimize the legitimate with seven conspiratorial topics and trends related to COVID-19, the interconnected nature of conspiracies, technology (5G Network, QR Codes, etc.), the Great Awakening, the deep state and political polarization, children-saving, and critical race and/or religion. We discuss how dark social movements on Telegram orbit around increasingly mainstream conspiracies that enable the far-right to coordinate activities, share similar ideas, and troll opponents.

Keywords: Telegram; Canada; conspiracy theories; Far-right; social media; social movements

Introduction

In recent years, misinformation, disinformation, and fake news on social media have taken center stage in the public arena (Rauchfleisch et al., 2021). Information pathologies like false information, propaganda, and conspiracy theories are heavily implicated in the subversion of national politics and the amplification of social dichotomies (Culloty & Suiter, 2021). Our study focuses on conspiratorial topics like the Great Reset, Great Awakening, United Nations, technology, China, Deep State, COVID-19, Islamophobia, and New World Order across Canadian Telegram channels. Telegram is a cross-platform, cloud-based end-to-end encrypted instant messaging service with public (searchable) and private (invite only) channels where administrators can broadcast an unlimited number of messages to subscribers (Urman & Katz, 2020). Private channels provide more secretive communication while public channels afford large-scale coordination and mobilization of users (Urman & Katz, 2020).

Telegram (2022) features a secret chat where messages can be unsent or set to self-destruct, which is appealing to far-right users who seek digital refuge on platforms with low content moderation. Not surprisingly, Telegram experienced a spike in users in January 2021 (see Figure 1), corresponding with the attack on Capitol Hill (Molla, 2021), the closure of Parler, Donald Trump's deplatformization from mainstream social media, and the aftermath of WhatsApp's revised terms (Volpicelli, 2021; see also Audrey et al., 2021), making it a prime platform to examine the kind of conspiratorial topics Canadian right-wing extremists (RWE) circulate on Telegram.

Modern information networks - like the ones on Telegram - allow coordinated campaigns to disseminate conspiracies (Pereira et al., 2020). “[S]ocial media has provided both conspiracies and conspiracy theories with fertile new grounds on which to hatch” (Gabriel, 2017, p. 218). Telegram's mobile messaging application has social media features that are routinely adopted by social movements, including RWE, who use it to organize and “disseminate racist and violent ideology” (Baumgartner et al., 2020, p. 840). Substantial attention has been placed on the ideological asymmetries that circulate on social media (Freelon et al., 2020) related to topics like Islamophobia, anti-immigration, climate change, QAnon, and COVID-19 (Culloty & Suiter, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic proliferated the number of “conflicting reports, hoaxes, and conspiracy theories” in the digital sphere, prompting the World Health Organization to declare an “infodemic” - when an abundance of conflicting claims makes it difficult for the public to know “what to believe” (Culloty & Suiter, 2021, p. 1).

Classic conspiracy theory attempts to “make sense of the political world,” but “new conspiracism piles bare assertion on bare assertion” as evidenced by QAnon's mash-up of conspiracies (Rosenblum & Russell, 2019, pp. 20-27). Conspiracy theories are narratives employed to express injustice and articulate real or imagined fears. Conspiracies are also a vehicle for mobilization and a lens to interpret political and motivational tools for populist and militia movements. Not all conspiracy theories result in radicalization, nor do they spur political action or mobilization, but many conspiracies across North America are entwined in both (Garry et al., 2021). We focus on conspiracies because it “is one of the most pervasive and prominent worldviews of our time,” and there is an urgent need to take “conspiracy culture seriously, instead of dismissing it as irrational or invalid” (De Maeyer, 2019, pp. 21-23).

While there is substantial work on conspiracy, our study fills a gap in the literature by providing a first look at the conspiratorial topics circulating in Canada. Using dark social movements, we develop a novel codebook to examine ten primary conspiratorial topics. Our seven main findings illustrate a tendency to delegitimize the legitimate with everything from COVID-19 to technology and the Great Awakening using text, hashtags, and emojis. COVID-19 conspiracies dominated discourse attempting to discredit lockdown measures, mask-wearing mandates, and vaccinations using self-proclaimed experts. For example, conspiracists argue that 5G technology spreads the COVID-19 virus and is a tool used by the evil cabal to enslave humanity. The third prominent conspiracy is the Great Awakening, which shows how conspiracies are rooted in politics and the tendency for conspiracies to overlap. The four additional findings include conspiratorial topics related to the Deep State, saving children, race and/or religion, and the tendency for conspiracists to weave conspiracies together.

Dark social movements

To explore how conspiracy theories move through digital platforms, we examine “bad actors” with a focus on dark social movements (Culloty & Suiter, 2021, p. 2). “Bad actors” is a term for people or groups that “intentionally create and propagate disinformation,” including through social movements (Culloty & Suiter, 2021, p. 11). Similar to internet networked social movement theory, dark social movements include identity, ideology, and network formation (Langman, 2005, p. 45), all of which are motivated by political and ideological interests, often around subjects like anti-immigration or Islamophobia (Culloty & Suiter, 2021). Platforms allow counter-narratives to materialize and provide a platform for extremists to air grievances through relationships that form around a common enemy (Perry et al., 2016, p. 68).

While it is difficult to measure or define “ideologically motivated violent extremism,” these dark social movements share a “framework of beliefs, ideas, concepts, and literature that cuts across far-right groups which makes it possible to identify actors within this ideology” (Amarasingam et al., 2021, p. 7). During the pandemic, dark social movements in Canada anchored onto “anti-lockdown and anti-public health measure movements,” likely as a way to “lure anti-vaccine activists and conspiracy theorists to their cause” (Amarasingam et al., 2021, p. 7). Movements that predated the pandemic, pivoted, or created groups to “co-opt and/or subvert others” (Amarasingam et al., 2021, p. 10).

The anti-mask, anti-lockdown, and anti-vaccination movements have coalesced into networks, and while some members may return to their regularly scheduled lives when COVID-19 dissipates the sense of distrust in institutions and the feeling of disenfranchisement will not simply disappear, which could lead to continued conspiratorial beliefs. Others who are now fully networked will remain connected to “extremists as they move to the next issue,” which will likely be some semblance of a return to common RWE preoccupations like “anti-immigration, Islamophobic and antisemitic views, policies and violence” (Amarasingam et al., 2021, p. 10). Amanda Garry et al. (2021) argues that conspiracy and extremist ideologies are different, but they can intersect. “While conspiracy theories may not have mass radicalizing effects, they are extremely effective at leading to increased polarization within societies” (Garry et al., 2021, p. 156). Conspiracy theories expose enemies and those who are unaware of the truth by an in-group

that prioritizes their knowledge of truth, their morality, and most importantly, their role as the social heroes who will save the world.

We see the role of conspiracy theories as an inherent aspect of dark social movements enacted through improvisational conspiracism. Michael Barkun (2013, p. XI) argues that there are different types of conspiracy theories with the most prevalent being “improvisational conspiracism.” This exists when there are significant subcultures or a group within a larger culture that holds beliefs or interests outside of the mainstream. Mainly rising or appearing during times of crisis, improvisational conspiracism is composed of heterodox religion, esoteric and occult beliefs, fringe science, and radical politics, and it has a potent influence on politics within the nation (Barkun. 2013, p. XI).

What brings these various ideas like fringe science and heterodox religion together, is what Barkun (2013, p. 2) refers to as “stigmatized knowledge,” which is a belief that secret hidden evil forces are controlling human destinies. A scapegoat always plays the role of evil within a conspiracy theory. Barkun (2013) refers to this as a systemic conspiracy, when a conspiracy is believed to have broad-based goals, such as to take over the control of a country, a specific region, or the entire world. While these goals may seem quite grandiose, a single organization seems to be at the center of these plans and is envisioned as completing them through the infiltration and subversion of existing institutions (Barkun, 2013, p. 53). An important aspect of systemic conspiracies includes event conspiracies, which are when an evil group is responsible for single or multiple events with a singular objective (Barkun, 2013, p. 50). When various forms of conspiracies come together, they are called “superconspiracies” (Barkun, 2013, p. 52).

Multiple conspiracies are linked together hierarchically and eventually nested within each other. At the top of the hierarchy is an all-powerful evil force, and it manipulates and controls conspiratorial actors lower on the hierarchy (Barkun, 2013). When individuals begin to take a conspiracy seriously, there is inherently less trust in the institutions of the nation. The conspiratorial plot is evident in the churches, universities, government, banks, and the media. Due to these institutions not being trusted, the believer turns to the ideas and groups that are condemned by these very institutions (Barkun, 2013). Stef Aupers (2012) argues that contemporary conspiracy culture is different in that it is less about the “other” and is now directed at the institutions of modern society. Aupers (2012) argues that modern conspiracists produce and reconstruct cultural meaning, through the mixing of rationalism, and a strong sense of the metaphysical. This mainstreaming of conspiracy and distrust in institutions and positions of authority helps to foment the normalization, institutionalization, and commercialization of fringe ideologies and conspiracies.

First wave examinations of conspiracy theories in the 1960s include Richard Hofstadter’s (2012) *paranoid style* whereby the paranoia felt by believers is not a personal attack, but an attack or danger for the country. Hofstadter positions conspiracists from this time as people who believed the nation was taken from them and they were fighting to get it back (Hofstadter, 2012). Hofstadter (2012) underscored the importance of style, aesthetic, and narrative dimensions, but the approach impeded research because it pathologized and marginalized the conspiracies (Uscinski, 2018). Michael Pfau modified Hofstadter’s work by

distinguishing paranoid style as an “exception to the rule” and Gordon Wood made the case that theorizing conspiracies is a rational activity, not within the fringes of society, but “rooted in the social mainstream” (Uscinski, 2018, p. 36). The pathologizing paradigm has been challenged since the 1990s with greater appreciation for the fact that conspiracies are widespread in nature and have “potentially serious consequences” (Uscinski, 2018, p. 36).

Early research, like the assumptions held by Hofstadter, “tended to take for granted that conspiracy theories are held by distinctive kinds of people with identifiable and flawed characteristics, and most work in the field holds that belief in conspiracy theories is irrational” (Uscinski, 2018, p. 37). Conspiracies are no more widespread today than they were in the past, but there is a greater appreciation for how ingrained and mainstream they are (Uscinski, 2018), as well as the grave consequences they can have on democracy.

Mark Fenster (1999) states that conspiracy theories are effective when politics are interpreted through a conspiratorial lens by those individuals and groups for whom politics are inaccessible. This inaccessibility renders politics as something that is impenetrable or secret (Fenster, 1999). Fenster (1999) also notes that although conspiracy theories can be wrong and appear simplistic in their presentation of ‘answers,’ they may harbour a problem or issues that need to be discussed or addressed. Beneath the conspiracy could be issues such as structural inequities, an unjust political order, a dysfunctional civil society, or an exploitative economic system (Fenster, 1999).

The conspiracy could provide a response to these issues for the adherents when society as a whole or the social safety net does not. Those who feel disenfranchised will seek out others who understand or feel the same and create a community or social group of like-minded individuals. Doosje et al. (2016, p. 79) argue that there are five characteristics of radical groups, the first being that the group perceives that there is a serious problem in society. Once having perceived the problem, the group is dissatisfied with the manner in which it is being dealt with by institutions. The institutions blamed are predominantly the police and politicians who are understood as not acknowledging or paying attention to the problem or are simply not doing enough to handle the issue. This lack of acknowledgement or action cultivates distrust in institutions and an understanding that authorities are not legitimate (Doosje et al., 2016, p. 80).

Dark social movements often form identities and build collective action around conspiracies. While dark social movements continue to create political and social gains, the ISMs tend to focus on building collective identities and articulating resistance through symbolic or cultural grounds, rather than traditional political channels. Social movements emerge from existing conditions in society and amplify “causes” or injustices laid upon the “other” to create strategic agendas that produce an “alternative social imaginary” (Langman, 2005, p. 44). The collective identity of RWE on social media platforms is constructed through interaction, negotiation, and the opposition to “others.” Through the sharing of information, these groups create a notion of “we” and delineate who the “them” are, creating well-defined borders of in- and out-groups (Gaudette et al., 2021, p. 3493). The creation of the collective identity is relational to the creation of the collective enemy or the other. These collective identities create social boundaries that are used by the RWE movements to illustrate the moral, cognitive, affective, and behavioural differences between “us” and “them” (Perry et al., 2016, p. 79).

Through the denigration of the other, a common cause, threat, or fate is the catalyst to motivate people to act together to protect their collective (Perry et al. 2016. p. 72). The internet and social media platforms provide a community where individuals can express their deconstructions, or interpretations of the official versions of the truth, as well as interact with other accounts of reality.

Social movement theory and social media scholarship exists in dichotomies around those who are optimistic (Castells, 2012; Lotan et al., 2011; Shirky, 2008) versus those who see social media as superficial and unproductive in the development of social movements (Gladwell, 2010; Morozov, 2011). In recent years, social movement theories have grown to include internet-based social movements and cyberactivism. Despite this divisiveness, it is important to recognize that internet-based social movements are positive *and* negative in nature. As conceptions of power within social media are utopian *and* dystopian, so too are the ramifications of online/offline social movements, the logic of which extends into dark social movements . The advent of the internet created an entanglement between RWE groups and technology, which has expanded internet-networked social movements numerically and globally "to publicize messages of hate" (Perry et al., 2016, p. 77). According to Perry et al. (2016, p. 68) the globalized nature of the internet mimics the globalized understanding of the threat to the "rightful authority and even survival of the white race and the white culture". Within this virtual public sphere, dark social movements connect instantaneously to build strategies, spread ideologies, and frame causes of injustices (Langman, 2005, p. 44).

Alternative platforms allow counter-narratives to materialize and provide a stage for extremists to air grievances through relationships that form around a common enemy (Perry et al., 2016, p. 68). On Telegram, RWE groups operate as dark social movements that strategically appeal to "mainstream sensibilities" to recruit and grow movements (Tetrault, 2021, p. 1). Communication technologies propel mobilization structures that are fluid, open, and participatory (Langman, 2005). Individuals are recruited into social movements through four factors: 1) the framing of information; 2) a personal identity that is receptive to this informational framing; 3) a location that is conducive to activism; and finally, 4) ties to social actor networks with similar concerns (Langman, 2005, p. 52). Framing and meaning construction are helpful for understanding the sociopsychological processes in the formation of digital coalitions. This framing develops a relatable belief system for participants and provides grievances and motivations that are well-defined, linked, and extend to create a collective identity and solidarity among group members. Within the theory of framing and meaning, the role of media is integral to building movements as relational frames that encompass the role of media in the discourse between the individual members, the movement as a whole, and the movement within the public sphere (Langman, 2005, p. 44).

Conspiracy theories, while often portrayed as being based on socio-economic position and education, are used as a narrative for expressing injustice (Gabriel, 2017), an articulation of fears both real and imagined, which are then propagated as the basis for some social movements. Conspiracies are one of many tools utilized for mobilization (Yablokov, 2014). The use of conspiracy theories as a lens to interpret the political and as a motivational tool for populist and militia movements has played a significant role in the United States. Yet, it should be noted that our research focuses on the role of RWE and conspiracy theories in Canada - a geographical area

not included within the scholarship of conspiracy theories and RWE movements. These theories have provided a conduit for the expression and symbolic representation of the fears of the extreme-right. In defining the far-right and the use of fear and conspiracy for mobilization, important commonalities need to be acknowledged. There is a common trope of making their nation more ethnically homogenous and demanding a return to more traditional values. Descriptions of those in power and national institutions are seen as being under the control of elites who place internationalism before the nation. Elites or powerful individuals are described by the extreme-right as putting their own self-interests ahead of those they represent. This notion of fear and dread is an important component of the power of conspiracy theories, in that they can provide an ‘answer’ or rationale as to why these fears manifest. Linked to politics, religion, and racism conspiracy theories have served as justification for political mobilization, activism, and in some cases, violence. Politically, populism and conspiracy are usually connected.

Historian Michael Kazin (1998, p. 1) created a definition of populism: “a language whose speakers conceive of ordinary people as a noble assemblage not bounded narrowly by class, view their elite opponents as self-serving and undemocratic, and seek to mobilize the former against the latter”. Public policy scholar Nathan Jessen (2018, p. 680) argues that populists are critics of power, and conspiracy theories provide a mode for that criticism. In essence, the populists feel that the government and those in authority do not represent the people, or the silent majority. Through conspiracy theories, populists are given an identity for the hidden controlling factors preventing their representation.

The link between conspiracy and populism can be found in the features both address. Populism provides a mechanism to mobilize people against the established power structures and the values of a society. Predominantly appealing to a sense of resentment against a perceived injustice in society, it calls for radical change and the elimination of hierarchical structures in society. In essence, populism provides a conduit to express unfairness and injustice, but it also serves as a recourse and remedy (Betz et al., 2004, p. 313). Populism emphasizes the sovereignty of the people, promotes attacking the elite and ostracizing of the “other,” and invokes nationalism. Nationalism is not merely defined by borders but can articulate an understanding of a people united by geolocation, united by traditions, values, and community. This can take a negative turn when nationalism is articulated by RWE which envision the people of the nation through a narrow and exclusive identity as white, male, heterosexual, Christians (Perry, 1998, p. 32). Conspiracy theories can be a dark social movement tool to spread nationalism and populism through fear of a crisis of identity and creating a perceived enemy through politics and ethnonationalism.

The articulation of the enemy as both elites and liberal politicians in our data as well as the focus on two significant global conspiracy theories: the Great Reset and the Great Replacement. The Great Replacement theory is the belief that through immigration white people will be replaced in the geopolitical unit of a nation (Feola, 2021, p. 529). The use of this conspiracy theory is one of the many scare tactics used to spur nationalism and populism. The Great Replacement theory, unlike most conspiracy theories, does not position a group of people against an evil cabal or against elites but defines the in-group by them being simply white (Feola, 2021, p. 530). The conspiracy that white people are being replaced in Western countries politicizes the concept, not only within the confines of immigration policies, but also to the idea

that the nation, including values, traditions, and political power, are being taken from one group, and given to others (Feola, 2021, p. 530). This trope links to Hofstadter (2012) and political paranoia of disenfranchisement, as well as Fenster's (1999) definition of conspiracy as voiceless and disenfranchised from the political realm.

The term "The Great Reset" is from a 2016 video released by the World Economic Forum (WEF), which asked economists to describe the future. Then in May 2020, the WEF held a virtual conference with politicians, economists, and public figures to discuss structural reforms to global capitalism - a Great Reset in light of the pandemic and the economic effects. WEF leader Klaus Schwab and economist Thierry Malleret (2020) published a book under the same title. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau also discussed the great reset in a short video on the WEF's program. Conspiracists soon linked the great reset to a worldwide, communist cabal that wanted to destroy free-enterprise capitalism (Schuller, 2021, p. 195). Both of these conspiracy theories are global in nature and are linked to the COVID-19 pandemic and the preventative measures that were put into place, such as lockdowns and mask mandates. The preventative measures were "evidence" of the eventual take-over of Canada by an evil cabal through their actions to restrain freedoms, both individual and religious. In this study, our goal is to answer the following research question: What is the salience of conspiracy topics that Canadian RWE discuss on Telegram?

Method

In this study, we use mixed methods to combine the traditional content analysis approach on a representative sample data alongside a digital method to analyze the whole dataset. We retrieved the data using a Python script to collect all the available Telegram messages posted on Canadian far-right group channels (Al-Rawi, 2021). To find these relevant channels, we consulted previous literature, thoroughly searched the messaging app using our mobile phones and the web and used the Telegram Analytics site (<https://tgstat.com/>). We cannot claim that we covered all the available Canadian RWE channels on this site because it is not possible to know them all, but we believe that we have included the major ones. All the 270,806 posts were retrieved from 21 Telegram channels selected based on their affiliation and/or association with Canadian RWE. These Telegram messages were posted between April 14, 2019, until September 4, 2021, when the data was collected (Figure 1 and Table 1).

To design our codebook, a group of four researchers used emergent coding in content analysis to inductively identify the major topics (Wimmer & Dominick, 2013). The researchers identified the following 10 topics that were both exhaustive and mutually exclusive: (1) The Great Reset (World economic forum-Klaus Schwab), (2) Great Awakening, (3) UN (Agenda 2030-/C-15/UNDRIP), (4) Technology-software-microchip Q/5G Network/R Codes/4th Industrial Revolution, (5) China displacement/infiltrations/military (Chinese takeover of the government and military via CCP influence), (6) Deep State, (7) COVID-19 related, (8) Islamophobic, (9) NWO (conspiracy of a secretly emerging totalitarian "one-world" government), and (10) other (minor topics like Social Credit System, White Replacement, Blue Beam Project, survivalist movement, climate change, anti-Semitic, etc.). Though these categories are exhaustive and mutually exclusive, each Telegram post is coded with the potential of having more than one topic that can assist the researchers in identifying the salience of conspiracies.

Two coders examined over 10% of the total sample or 200 Telegram posts, and the intercoder agreement was acceptable in the second attempt $\alpha \geq 0.760$, using Krippendorff's Alpha (Krippendorff, 2010).

Next, we manually content analyzed the top 1000 most viewed Telegram posts from all the channels after removing irrelevant, vague, or replicated posts. Google Translate was used to decode ten posts in other languages, which typically included German or Spanish. These top Telegram posts received a total of 351,001,320 views. Specifically, we found 1,153 Telegram posts that fell into the other category and were removed from our dataset. When calculating the percentages, we removed this category from the analysis to focus on the major topics. We used the views metrics because it is the only one that we were able to extract, and we needed to follow a systematic procedure to filter our data for the manual analysis. Because the dataset is large and we wanted to fully understand the dataset, we decided to use a digital method to identify the most frequent words, phrases, hashtags, and emojis (Author, 2021).

Findings

To answer the study's research question pertaining to the salience of conspiracy topics discussed by RWE on Telegram in Canada, we highlight seven main findings linked to primary conspiracies or conspiratorial trends, including COVID-19, the interwoven nature of conspiracies, technology, #TheGreatAwakening, the Deep State and political polarization, #Savethechildren, and conspiracies related to race and/or religion.

4.1: COVID-19: Emojis, delegitimation of doctors, the vaccine, and passports

As we found in Table (2), pandemic-related messages on Telegram represent the highest percentage of posts (42.2%) as well as views (38.9%). This was expected due to the magnitude of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the whole world. This finding is corroborated with our digital analysis. For example, we observe from the top 50 most recurrent hashtags in Table (3) that 18 out of 50 (36%) hashtags directly relate to the pandemic, indicating that this is the most widely discussed topic among Canadian RWE. In this respect, the word 'Covid' is the 7th most frequent term found in the whole dataset (n=5180). We can also see that among the top 20 most used emojis are 🗳️ (n=1079), while other related ones include 🍷 (n=231) and 😊 (n=84) which all refer to the pandemic. The discourses around COVID-19 are centered around freedom of choice and resisting anti-authority measures in an attempt to delegitimize the public health directives and guidelines.

These information pathologies gain traction because posters include fake experts to foster credibility and delegitimize the legitimate. For example, one post features an alleged list of 49 doctors who "clearly explain why vaccines aren't safe or effective," while another post says, "Army Doctor Reveals More Soldiers have died from the Vaccine than died from COVID." Another trend to delegitimize COVID-19 vaccinations is to claim that elites are not being vaccinated. For example, one post says, "Nurse exposes how Justin Trudeau and his wife didn't actually take the Covid Vaccine." The most recurrent hashtag is #Justsayno, suggesting that 'resisting' public health measures is the appropriate path for RWE because the liberal government has an agenda in implementing public health measures. The #Justsayno hashtag

often connects to Toronto's anti-lockdown leader and self-proclaimed antivaxxer 'Chris Sky' (n=304) (also known as Christopher Saccoccia), who authored a book *Just Say No* to encourage public opposition to COVID-19 vaccinations and restrictions.

Telegram users share right-wing media clips from outlets like *The Stew Peters Show* and personal social media posts with captions like, "Chris Sky lays out the COVID-19 hoax and medical tyranny in 2 minutes" and "Chris Sky on the Quackccine Passport: 'Do Not Comply.'" The majority of 'Chris Sky' posts reference information pathologies around COVID-19, but a few also connect him to the Great Awakening. One post says, "Canada Huge Demonstrations Against Tyranny, Chris Sky leading the way in Montreal, The Great Awakening 🇨🇦 WWG1WGA".

Similar hashtags are used to communicate the idea of collectivising to counter governmental policies like #Weareallessential (n=29), #Riseup (n=24), #Joinus (n=22), #Hugsovermasks (n=20), #StayOpen (n=16), #MakeCanadaFreeAgain (n=15), #Unitednoncompliance (n=14), and #Nomorelockdowns (n=14). There are clearly attempts to form a dark social movement whose objective is to establish some kind of collective anti-pandemic behavior by appropriating the language of resistance and civil disobedience. These dark social movements collectivise to form networks, and subsequently group identities around political, financial, and ideological interests as a way to amplify resistance. For instance, we find amongst the most frequent words and phrases terms like 'freedom' (n=1807) and 'Keep Canada Free' (n=48). One trend within the dataset was for RWE to denounce COVID-19 entirely, considering it a hoax which is one aspect of these information pathologies. For example, one post claimed that COVID-19 was a "lie" and "was developed by the pharmaceutical company that produces biological weapons." Another post said, "None of this was about Covid. That's just a flu. Operation Warp Speed is a global military operation."

Some of these discourses are meant to spread conspiracies about the government and health authorities which is evident in the use of some conspiratorial terms like #Wwg1wga (n=92) which is mostly used by QAnon, #clotshot (n=19) or #Covidvaccinevictims (n=14) which both serve to disseminate fear about the efficacy and safety of the vaccine, and other conspiracies like #Thegreatawakening and #Agenda2030. Generally speaking, QAnon is an umbrella conspiracy which includes several COVID-19 and political based conspiracies. The Great Awakening is a conspiracy where people believe the masses will 'wake up' and see the conspiracies of the world and rise up against the governments and cabals to save the world. As one post indicates, people who are red pillled are "awakened to truth that has been hidden by the media," blue pillled individuals are in "a state of bliss believing the media," and black pillled people were "awakened at one point" but have gone "back to sleep." Posts often include references to "powerful white hats," corrupt bankers, governments, politicians, and elites, the deep state, and the integration of pedophilia in military and governments.

4.2: Connecting conspiracies with other conspiracies

Conspiracies are often interwoven with other conspiracies. For example, the COVID-19 vaccine is also associated with other conspiracies around the alleged attempt by the Canadian government to create genocide for the sake of depopulating the masses. This is evident in the use

of some sinister- sounding hashtags like #Depopulation (n=24), Death (n=22), #Crimesagaisthumanity (n=17), and #Genocide (n=17). In fact, the word ‘vaccine’ (in singular and plural forms) is the second top word in the whole dataset (n=8773), while other related words like ‘vaccinated’ (n=2045) are among the top 50 ones. In terms of recurrent phrases, we can find that the top phrase is actually ‘Vaccine passports’ (in two formats) (n=782) followed by other related ones such as ‘covid vaccine’ (n=684), ‘vaccinated people’ (n=303), and ‘covid vaccines’ (n=300). It is important to mention here that there are many conspiracies surrounding the vaccine passport, producing a high volume of posts related to protests and opposition to government-regulated passports. One post encouraged people to “flood” the Human Rights Commission’s phone numbers across Canada with “complaints and concerns about health passports.”

A large volume of posts was related to concerns, protests, or state-wide bans of vaccinations in other countries, including France, the United States, and China. The concern over vaccination passports is also evident from the use of the following emoji sequence  (n=25) which refers to the alleged lethal impact of the vaccine. For example, one Telegram post mentioned the following: “Choice to be Silent, is NO LONGER YOURS. this is Genocide!! ”, while another example offers clear disinformation on the vaccine: “HIV IN THE VACCINES! ”. This fear and conspiracies about the vaccine stem from the Tuskegee experiments in the 1930s, where African American men were tested for the long-term effects of suffering from syphilis but the men were never told the purpose of the experiment. The subjects were told they were being treated for bad blood but were not receiving any treatment whatsoever. In 1972, a whistleblower revealed the truth and ended the experiment (McVean, 2019).

There is a great deal of disinformation about the nature of the vaccines and their ingredients. For example, one Telegram post mentions the following: “MY POST LISTING ALL THE INGREDIENTS PRESENT IN THE INOCUPUNCTION , SUCH AS POTASSIUM CHLORIDE ALSO USED IN DEATH-JABS, ETC, SAYING THAT "THIS CANNOT BE SO AND IS THEREFORE A PSYOP, SINCE WE NOW KNOW THAT THE VILES CONTAIN 99% GRAPHENE."   WHAT AN IDIOT, EH!!    SO HERE YOU GO.  ” The high volume of posts with cross-over conspiratorial topics suggests dark social movements attach to pandemic issues as a way to co-opt and subvert others to existing causes. As stated below, there is a clear attack against liberal figures who are often associated with Jews and/or Muslims. For instance, the star of David emoji  (n=6), often used in pejorative ways as one Telegram post mentions the following conspiracy: “Johnson & Johnson  sold baby powder containing cancer- causing asbestos. IMAGINE TRUSTING THESE COMPANIES TO INJECT YOU WITH A RUSHED EXPERIMENTAL GENE THERAPY DRUG?       ”.

As part of the conspiracies, it seems here that the poster believes that Johnson & Johnson is run by Jews and its intention is to harm people. Other vaccine- related conspiracies can be seen in the frequent use of phrases like ‘Chinese communist party’ (n=83) and ‘social credit system’ (n=41), with one post stating, “‘Vaccine Passports’ are a coercive tool to force social compliance and a China-like social credit score upon the public.” Within the posts, COVID-19 is often referred to as “the China Virus.” In fact, the #China (n=26) hashtag is among the top 50 most used ones in the dataset. Several posts are also about alleged Communist infiltration, boycotting

Chinese products, cyber-attacks originating from China, and artificial intelligence technologies developed in China that surveil global citizens so “nobody can hide.”

4.3: Technology conspiracies: 5G, cryptocurrency, and platform surveillance

Based on our manual analysis of the data, conspiracies around technology make up the second highest percentage of topics (25.9%) as well as Telegram views (27.5%). In relation to the digital analysis, we found several references to the site (www.drcharlieward.com) (n=48), which provides fake medical advice on the alleged harmful effects of the 5G networks with links to My Patriots Network RWE site (<https://mypatriotsnetwork.com/?ref=5>) (See Figure 2). Discourse was also centered around untraceable technologies and cryptocurrencies, platform surveillance, censorship, and governance, as well as dark platforms. The linking of 5G technology through conspiracy theory is the belief that the new technology is the cause of the spread of the COVID-19 virus and the waves spread by 5G are a tool used by the evil cabal to control and eventually enslave humanity. This is a global conspiracy theory that is not uniquely connected to Canada, yet it is popular among some Canadians. Unfortunately, the resistance against such potentialities has led some individuals to destroy 5G towers through arson (Jolley et al., 2020, p. 628) including a few incidents that occurred in Quebec (CBC News, 2020).

4.4: #TheGreatAwakening

The third most frequent topic is the Great Awakening (12.4%) that scored (11.7%) in terms of the percentage of views. This finding also aligns with our digital analysis, for the term #TheGreatAwakening (n=17) is found among the top 50 most frequent hashtags. In this respect, we find a summary of different conspiracies including the Great Awakening articulated with the use of emojis in the following message which was posted on @Keepcanadafree Telegram channel:

- 🐰👁️ Are You Awake? 🐰👁️
- 🇺🇸 #Intel
- 🌟 #The Great Awakening
- 🌐 #Future Proves Past 🗿
- 📖 #Knowledge
- 🧠 #Intelligence
- ∞ #Consciousness
- 🗡️ New World Order 🗡️
- 🇬🇧 #BREXIT
- 🧬 The #Matrix
- ❤️ #GoOD Vs #Evil 🦴
- #DominionVotingSystems #Dominion
- 🇺🇸 WWG1WGA 🇺🇸🗡️
- <https://t.me/areyouawakeyet>
- <https://t.me/areyouawake1>
- 🇺🇸 WWG1WGA 🇺🇸🗡️
- 🌟 #Breaking & Uncensored News 🌐
- ✂️ #Q ✂️
- 🗿 #Truth
- 🐸 #Memes 🐸
- 🐰 "#Conspiracy 🧠 #Theories"
- ⚡ #Divine #Wisdom
- 🇺🇸 #Election #News
- 🗡️ #Covid #Plandemic #Agenda
- 🌀 #Quantum
- #Q 🇺🇸 #QSent Me 🇺🇸 #WWG1WGA
- 🗡️ TELEGRAM GROUP CHAT
- 🗡️ TELEGRAM CHANNEL
- 🗡️ WHATSAPP CHAT
- <https://chat.whatsapp.com/Cmd0jh8>

- #ElectionDay2020
- #HoldTheLine
- #wwglwga #news #nwo #agenda21
- #Trumpwon
- #nothingcanstopwhatiscoming
- [kEY2IFhMG10gPCp](#)
- #TheMoreYouKnow
- #FuckTheTraitors
- #areyouawake
- #releasethekraken

4.5: Deep State, New World Order, and political polarization

The fourth major topic that is identified in our manual analysis is related to the Deep State conspiracy (9%) with (10.7%) views. Our digital analysis shows similar results, for some of the most frequent phrases include ‘Deep State’ (n=321) and other related ones like the [New] ‘World Order’ (n=241).

There is also clear political polarization in the Telegram discussion mostly represented in the affiliation with American politics specially to express support for the former US president, Donald Trump. For example, the word ‘Trump’ is the 15th most recurrent term (n=3446), while ‘Trudeau’ (n=2199) and Biden (n=1872) are in the top 50 words. As for the top phrases, they include ‘Justin Trudeau’ (n=558), ‘President Trump’ (n=527), ‘Bill Gates’ (n=488), ‘Joe Biden’ (n=361), and ‘Donald Trump’ (n=246). For example, one Telegram post mentions the following: “🇺🇸🇺🇸🇺🇸 BILL GATES IS AN EVIL 🇺🇸🇺🇸 SCUMBAG 🇺🇸”. In line with this polarization, we find attacks against ‘mainstream media’ (n=360), often accusing it of being ‘fake news’ (n=265). In fact, the analysis of the most frequent emojis show the use of far-right symbols such as pepe the frog 🐸 (n=1072), the OK sign 🙌 (n=128), and the snake 🐍 (n=10). Others who are not white are often described as aliens 👽 (n=52), such as in the following post: “Canada does NOT need a lil terrorist commie mini Jagmeet. 🇺🇸🇺🇸🇺🇸”.

4.6: #Savethechildren

The other theme is related to children which is evident in the use of hashtags like #Savethechildren (n=39), (n=37), and #Children (n=14). In fact, this is related to an aspect of the QAnon conspiracy theory which focuses on the alleged human trafficking attempts by liberal figures to sexually exploit children, and the roots of these claims can be traced back to the Pizzagate conspiracy theory - “a false rumor that Hillary Clinton and her top aides were involved in various crimes,” including “running a child-trafficking ring out of a Washington pizza parlor” (Aisch et al, 2016).

A similar disturbing and related hashtag is #Adrenochrome (n=16) which is a reference to a century-old anti-Semitic myth that global elites are harvesting children’s blood to extract adrenochrome, a chemical that is injected into the elites to keep them young and healthy (Friedberg, 2020). One post combines the adrenochrome conspiracy with other conspiracy theories noting, “Wuhan is the epicentre of nucleaire reactors, Bitcoin corruption, adrenochrome production, human slavery, biochem laboratories. This is why the 3 gorges dams need to go down and wipe out evil from the earth.” The posts about adrenochrome often reference “elites” and the “3 Gorges dam.” Upon examining phrases that are made up of 2-3

words, we can find that terms such as ‘human trafficking’ (n=236) and ‘‘Child sex trafficking’ (n=90) are amongst the most frequent ones, too.

4.7: Race and religion

Finally, there are minor conspiracies which discuss other issues like ‘critical race theory’ (n=83), ‘Black Lives Matter’ (n=49) and ‘dominion voting system’ (n=40). For instance, one post states the following false claim about BLM: “🌐 CIVIL UNREST - Leaked audio has surfaced of (allegedly) John Sullivan admitting Antifa and BLM involvement in US Capitol Siege”. Similarly, some of the most frequent phrases include the Blue Beam project, a Canadian-based conspiracy where the Devil/Satan take over as the world leader and a blue beam will form a holograph that will confuse, and then lead the public astray. At that point, the gods will emerge as holograms and explain all religions are wrong, before Satan takes the throne and the world is enslaved. For instance, the following Telegram post states: “Check out this link, it is a document detailing "3D holographic display using strontium barium niobate". AKA Project Blue Beam; how they can stage a fake alien 👁️ invasion or a solar deity in the skies.  <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/ADA338490>”.

Conclusion

In this study, we empirically examined dark social movements across 21 Telegram channels. Our work fills a substantial gap in the literature by offering a first look at salient conspiratorial topics in Canada. The combination of lax moderation protocols and mass communication to users provides a safe haven for far-right actors to mobilize their followers to spread hate and misinformation without fear of any legal repercussions. The technological affordances of Telegram encourage dark social movements by the Canadian far-right. As a result, our findings illustrate how Telegram is rife with conspiracy theories.

Using a novel codebook entailing 10 major conspiratorial discourses, we highlight how the dissemination of these conspiracies cultivate dark social movements for members of the far-right to coordinate their activities, share similar ideas, and troll their opponents, especially liberals, immigrants, and anyone who does not fit their white supremacist ideology. These findings demonstrate how dark users actively diminish credible authorities and the broader implications that occur when disinformation gains traction and becomes ever more mainstream. Delegitimization occurs across multi-modal formats including texts, emojis, and hashtags.

As Mark Fenster (1999) argues, the exclusion of extremists is a form of de-legitimization of radicalism, creating an “other” from the “normal” of mass society. This separation can lead to conspiracy theories that can be used by political movements to disrupt existing political parties and create new coalitions. Conspiracy can also be a very valuable tool for populism to arise. The manual content analysis approach in combination with a digital method to analyze the whole dataset allowed us to develop seven main findings, including identifying six primary conspiracy theories and one conspiratorial trend within Canada, all of which have an overarching tendency to delegitimize the legitimate. The conspiracies include COVID-19, technology, the Great Awakening, the Deep State and political polarization, #Savethechildren, and critical race and/or

religion. A conspiratorial trend that we uncovered was the tendency of conspiracists to weave conspiracies into other ones.

The interwoven nature of conspiracies was particularly prevalent with COVID-19-related conspiracies. While conspiracies are timeless, there is also a degree of timeliness to them (Uscinski, 2019). As COVID-19-based issues anchored around anti-lockdown, anti-mask, anti-vaccination, and anti-vaccination-passport policies, dark social movements pre-dating the pandemic pivoted in such a way as to co-opt or subvert these causes as their own (Amarsingam et al., 2021). As our findings show, COVID-19 conspiracies dominated discourse attempting to discredit lockdown measures, mask-wearing mandates, and vaccinations using fake experts. Conspiracists argue that 5G technology spreads the COVID-19 virus and is a tool used by the evil cabal to enslave humanity. The third prominent conspiracy is the Great Awakening, which shows how conspiracies are rooted in politics and the tendency for conspiracies to overlap.

Within the overall dataset, the highest percentage of posts (42.2%) and views (38.9%) were related to the pandemic. The use of hashtags such as #Weareallessential (n=29), #Riseup (n=24), #Joinus (n=22) helps to amplify the calls to resistance against the perceived tyrannical measures made by the government. Additionally, popular leaders such as ‘Chris Sky’ (n=304) can use Telegram to mobilize their followers and encourage a larger anti-lockdown, anti-vaccine movement. The organized and coordinated information networks on Telegram demonstrate how the use of hashtags, such as #Depopulation (n=24), Death (n=22), #Crimesagaisthumanity (n=17), and #Genocide (n=17) can help spread global conspiracies related to the pandemic such as 5G technology (25.9% of posts) the Great Awakening (12.3% of posts) and the Deep State (9% of posts).

As “conspiracy theories are often difficult to parse” (Chess & Shaw, 2014), more attention to the salience of conspiracy topics in Canada is needed across platforms. Future studies should look at a range of discourses (text, memes, images, emojis, etc.) and explore these conspiratorial topics on alternative platforms, like Rumble, Gettr, BitChute, and GAB, which are frequented by the Canadian far-right. There is also a need to study conspiratorial topics by French-speaking RWE groups. Topics may need to be added or removed from the codebook as discourses evolve. Conspiracy as a mainstream phenomenon is a global concern, but given the lack of literature within this area, it is particularly important for further research to focus on conspiracies within the Canadian context.

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