Making freedom great again:
conspiracy theories, affective nostalgia and alignment, and the right-wing base grammars of the #freeedomconvoy

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Abstract:

The so-called "freedom convoy," which began in January 2021 in Ottawa, Canada, garnered international attention and sparked a flood of social media conversations. Far-right extremists and Twitter users sympathetic to this cause employed various strategies of "affective rhetoric"--the practice of instilling emotion in readers by appealing to their values and beliefs–in order to incite emotional reactions and influence public opinion. These extremists and sympathizers used these affective rhetorical techniques, such as fear mongering, demonizing, exaggeration, and polarization, to both maintain public engagement and increase public acceptance of their ideas, not only about the convoy, but about their larger ideals and aims as well. These larger extremist ideals include: the desire of a "golden age" of freedom; the concept of an "us" vs. a "them"; and the restoration of a "traditional" patriarchal white supremacy. The danger of this flooding of social media channels with such strategies and ideals can lead to increased public acceptance and reinforcement of the radicalized views of extremists, which can eventually lead to even more radical and dangerous ideas becoming acceptable in public conversation, particularly through conspiracies. As my research shows, online actors exploited a variety of conspiracy theories, including: The Great Reset; vaccines as weapons of mass genocide; medical martial law; and framing the Ukraine war as a hoax or a distraction. Thus, in the wake of the "freedom convoy," movement, to get a sense of how these extremist conversations were framed, I analyzed tweets circulating with #IStandWithTruckers and #TruckersForFreedom2022. Using discourse analysis, I examine the affective rhetorical strategies of persuasion, ideals, and conspiracy theories that Twitter extremists and sympathizers employed to maximize political conflict and to shift the acceptability of extremist discourse in the public sphere.

Keywords: #FreeedomConvoy; Twitter; Conspiracy Theory; Affect; Right-Wing Extremism