Viral but Under the Radar:

Unmasking the Convergence of Far-Right and Pandemic Articulations on BitChute

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Abstract:

The study aims to trace the emerging Canadian online discourse resisting COVID-19 official and public health measures and its relationship to far-right ideologies on the alternative platform of BitChute through the analysis of the top watched videos from eight Canadian channels. Employing articulation theory as an analytical prism, it aims to identify:1) Which organizational/individual identities are associated with the collected accounts and what is their relationship to the far-right? 2) What are the major themes in the videos? 3) What ideologies are associated with these themes? The analysis reveals six key articulations: pseudo-legal actions and language, political conspiracies, medical and scientific language and expertise, war analogies, activist rhetoric and tactics, and family values. These discursive articulations disclose linkages between concepts that are usually contradictory but are bonded together in the conjecture moment of the pandemic. This convergence points to the sophistication and innovativeness of far-right discourse in responding to COVID-19 and to their continuing invocation of older tropes and metaphors that have characterized their ideologies

Keywords: Articulation Theory; Bit Chute; Far-right; Canada; COVID-19.

Introduction

In a leaked recording of a meeting with caucus staff, Alberta Premier Jason Kenney warned his fellow Conservative party members that some extreme voices, who were skeptical of public health measures, would seize control of conservative politics in Canada (Cecco, 2022). His comments came a month after the 2022 Freedom Convoy protests against pandemic measures had paralyzed the nation's capital for weeks and blocked traffic at two major points on the Canadian border. These events provided a glimpse into an emerging trend where elements of far-right and anti-COVID-measure movements had been merging in different ways. While the connection between these discourse elements has been forged (digitally) for a while, it has become increasingly stronger.

A body of literature indicates that since March 2020, the COVID-19 crisis has become a ripe ground for promoting and spreading extremist and far-right messages online. A study conducted by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue and BBC Click Investigation found an exponential increase in engagement by far-right and other fringe groups with COVID-19 disinformation on Facebook since the early weeks of the pandemic (ISDG & BBC, 2020). The United Nations Security Council also warned that extremist far-right groups are using COVID-19 conspiracies and disinformation to "radicalize, recruit and fundraise." According to another study by O'Connor (2021), the number of users joining Telegram channels associated with extreme right-wing ideology has grown since the beginning of the outbreak. One Telegram channel focused on messaging related to the pandemic, increased its user base by 800 percent, from 300 to 2,700 users in March 2020 alone (O'Connor, 2021). The far-right's focus on coronavirus has been reflected across social media.

Our research is positioned in a growing corpus of literature that examines the emerging linkages between the far-right and anti-COVID-19 measure discourses. It traces the nexus of far-right ideologies and responses resistant to official COVID-19 public health measures on BitChute, an alternative platform central to fringe and far-right politics in Canada (Rogers, 2020). However, we do not look at COVID-19 as only an opportunity for far-right groups to spread their messages. Instead, we consider it a moment of articulation in which "practices articulated around contradictions, which do not all arise in the same way, at the same point, in the same moment, can nevertheless be thought together" (Slack, 1996: 123). Articulation theory examines how different, seemingly disparate, ideological elements come together to create a discourse; it explores the process of how connections are created between these elements. This perspective allows for a nuanced interpretation of what and how ideological elements come together, under certain conditions. It additionally adds to the understanding of the discursive actions adopted by far-right organizations to navigate changing socio-political conditions.

This is relevant to current trends within the far-right. As Stern notes (2019), the contemporary far-right focuses on metapolitics or "privileging cultural intervention over institutional political change" (p. 29). The far-right works to influence culture by not only producing media, but also bringing in newer ideas to reformulate the right and change the left/right paradigm. This includes creating cultural spaces (publishing houses, websites and pop culture etc.) and "ceding turf from the left" by reclaiming unions, environmental movements and media, with the aim of uniting disparate white nationalist movements and converting new

audiences to their cause (Stern, 2019: p. 29). This is not to say that movements opposing COVID-19 public health measures are not working towards institutional political changes. Rather, these movements, which are mostly promoted through online media, incorporate a variety of ideas and cultural influences (both within and outside of the far-right) into their movement discourse.

To better grasp these dynamics, the pandemic needs to be conceptualized as a social and political event rather than merely a biological one (Chapelan, 2021). It is becoming increasingly clear that the COVID-19 pandemic is a very complex phenomenon. While it is not unique in the history of infectious diseases, its tremendous impact as a crisis on modern society has become clear through its role in intensifying society's precariousness, tensions, and frictions. As a crisis, the pandemic offers a mix of threats and opportunities (Carroll, 2010) and becomes a key arena where new forces are articulated, and radical and alternative discourses take ground. It is a "field of struggle" (Chapelan, 2021) where new powers emerge and contend with mainstream ones.

The central premise of this study is that the ideological components – that is, the values, assumptions, and worldviews – expressed in some anti-COVID-measures discourses found on alternative media such as BitChute involve the negotiation between different sets of values: those embraced by far-right constituents in the Canadian national context and those related to the emerging movements opposing COVID-19 public health measures. In analyzing this assemblage, we also acknowledge the fragmented nature of the far-right (Dongen & Leidig, 2021) and the influence of Canadian national and political conversations. Through the case of BitChute, we examine possible intersections between far-right and anti-COVID-19-measures movement's values.

The article begins with an overview of articulation theory, our theoretical approach, and a discussion of the far-right and populist movements in Canada. This will be followed by a discussion of BitChute, more specifically, BitChute's political, technical, and economic features, its relationship to the far-right and its importance as a hub for voices opposing COVID-19 measures. The third section outlines our methodological approach and data. Here, we analyze the observed ideologies, which we argue are characterized by articulations and linkages that are innovative and might seem contradictory. We conclude by reflecting on the implications of our findings for new configurations of emerging discourses.

Articulation

Research on discourses countering COVID measures tends to focus on fake news (or disinformation, which is intentionally misleading) and misinformation (unintentionally sharing inaccurate information). While important, these studies pay insufficient attention to the discourse as a site of articulation, a process which will be expanded upon in the following section. A study of stories published on 50 websites in the US has found that "fake news is defined more by partisan viewpoints than misinformation" (Mourão & Robertson, 2019: 2091). Rone argues that the defining feature of many anti-COVID-measures movements is not misinformation since fake news is a small part of political mobilization aimed at partisan audiences (Rone, 2021).

Therefore, we use articulation as both a theoretical prism and an analytical approach to establish the elements that make up anti-COVID-19-measures discourse and their linkages to the far-right

Articulation theory, which comes from post-structuralism, has been developed primarily by Earnest Laclau, Chantal Mouffe and Stuart Hall (Slack, 1996). The term articulation has had a variety of medical, biological and enunciative uses (Slack, 1996), but in all its contexts, the word suggests some unity and joining (Slack, 1996). In discourse analysis, articulation means "a way of thinking the structures of what we know as a play of correspondences, non-correspondences and contradictions, as fragments in the constitution of what we take to be units" (Slack, 1996: 113). Articulation can be understood not as a neutral or natural link, and this means that there is no predetermined link between an ideological force and its articulated concept (Hall, 1986). Instead, articulation is a process of creating connections between disparate things in the same way we think of hegemony as not merely a domination, but also a process of creating this domination (Slack, 1996). Such a view of articulation makes us understand the linkage as something that is not necessary and inevitable. As Hall argues in his interview with Grossberg, "a theory of articulation is both a way of understanding how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere together within a discourse and a way of asking how they do or do not become articulated, as specific conjunctures, to certain political subjects" (Grossberg, 1986: p. 53).

Understanding anti-COVID-measures responses as more than fake news opens up the possibility of looking beyond technological solutions (Mourão & Robertson, 2019) to counter inaccurate information. Articulation as epidemiology encourages us to look at more complex interventions. Because articulation is never infinite or "essential" (Grossberg, 1986), there is always a potential for resistance. Resistant interventions can be made through what Stuart Hall calls "re-articulation." Hall (1989) argues that re-articulation becomes possible through problematizing the connections between ideological elements and their current uses and creating alternative articulations by combining them with other factors. The goal of articulation theory involves first recognizing the ideological components of articulation and connecting these elements to political, social, economic, and technological contexts. Then, through rearticulation, it may offer alternative perspectives or hidden articulations to restructure connections between an ideology and its "structural levels of operation" (Foss, 2009: 242).

Principally, articulation theory calls attention to conjunctures of elements of identities and power. These conjunctures can be understood as brief historical moments where different ideological values assemble. The conjecture captured in this article is the pandemic where different concepts have been combined to shape discourse on BitChute. Elements of identities in this discourse refer to ideological positions, discursive spaces, and social groups, which intersect with far-right values and positions. The article aims to account for the relationships between different ideologies and considers these relationships' significance during the pandemic.

The Far Right and Populism in Canada

Canada has a long history of far-right movements, which were influenced by other movements in America and from Europe. Like the U.S., Canada had an active Klu Klux Klan movement in the early twentieth century, Nazi activism between WWI and WWI and neo-Nazi skin heads in the 1970s and 1980s (Perry, Scrivens, 2016: pp. 819-820). The far-right continued to be active in

Canada into the 1990s with groups like the Heritage Front, led by ultra-violent Wolfgang Droege. In the 21st century far-right anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant groups from Europe PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West) and Soldiers of Odin grew across Canada (Perry et.al, 2016: p. 827). As well, the now designated terrorist group, Proud Boys, was also founded by a Canadian, Gavin McInnes in 2016 (Stern, 2019: 71).

While recognizing the complexity of these groups, and the shifting nature of Canada's far-right, it is imperative that we provide a definition of the far-right in Canada. While recognizing that these elements are present in some, but not all, of Canada's far-right movement, Perry and Scrivens (2016) define it as:

> ….a loose movement, animated by a racially, ethnically, and sexually defined nationalism. This nationalism is typically framed in terms of White power and is grounded in xenophobic and exclusionary understandings of the perceived threats posed by such groups as non-Whites, Jews, immigrants, homosexuals, and feminists. As a pawn of the Jews, the state is perceived to be an illegitimate power serving the interests of all but the White man. To this end, extremists are willing to assume both an offensive and defensive stance in the interests of "preserving" their heritage and their "homeland" (p. 821)

It is important to note that another important part of the Canadian right more broadly is right-wing populism. As Perry et.al (2017) argues, Canadian politics have been influenced by America, especially with the election of US president Donald Trump who embraced blatant islamophobia and xenophobia and embraced elements of the far-right. Canada has had a long history of different kinds of right-wing populism for decades before Trump including politicians who directed suspicion towards Muslims and immigrants (Perry et.al, 2017: pp. 64- 67).

Perry et.al (2017) contend that: "Populism is most suitably conceptualized as a communication strategy used by a plurality of actors – from professional politicians to activists – to construct 'the people' and articulate the people to a movement against a real or imagined elite" (P. 55). They state that populists tend to:

> (1) emphasize the sovereignty of the people; (2) advocate for the people; (3) attack the elite on behalf of the people; (4) ostracize "bad others" juxtaposed against "good people", especially along racial lines, and; (5) invoke the national community or heartland, typically as a vision under threat from "foreigners" or "outsiders"
>
> <div align="right">(Perry et.al, 2017: p. 55)</div>

While there may be some points of overlap, such as nationalism, attacking the other, and the illegitimacy of the state, it is possible to have movements that are populist, but not necessarily far-right. As we will see in later sections, these populist features are common in the anti-COVID-19 measures movement. There are elements of the far-right that connect to right-wing populist movements and vice versa, but they are not the same nor are they always mutually exclusive.

BitChute and Alternative Media

The article approaches BitChute's online video material as a form of alternative media in which an anti-COVID-measures discourse is articulated. There has been a tendency in academic research to associate alternative media with progressive ideologies and resistance against hegemonic media (Rone, 2021). According to alternative media scholar Dorothy Kidd, alternative media publishes and utilizes the local language of a marginalized group intending to change society and politics, "allowing spaces to generate historical memories and analyses, nurture visions for their futures, and weed out the representations of the dominant media" (Kidd, 1999: 116). To John Downing (2000), who has also researched and written extensively on alternative media, alternative media are small-budget and decentralized and should have revolutionary and radical agendas.

Recently, however, there has been a shift towards exploring ways far-right and fringe groups embrace alternative media and use them in ways that resemble activists' use of alternative media (Rone, 2021). This shift is in response to mainstream platforms such as Twitter and YouTube increasing their efforts to detect and remove harmful material. The move from major social media companies drove fringe groups to smaller platforms that either promised to advocate for free speech or operated with limited policing (Ray, 2022). Platforms such as Telegram, Gab, Parler, Gettr and BitChute, to list a few, resemble a growing trend whereby the far-right metastasizes and continually spreads to various alternative platforms. These platforms are centred within the United States and can defend the inclusion of banned and demonetized content under the principle of freedom of speech. As Robinson (2022: 199) writes, "Alt-right activities online have always extended across multiple social networks, yet it is more recently the case that multiplying platforms—new platforms popping up online as alternative social spaces—pose an added challenge for researchers."

An underexplored platform in this space is BitChute, a social media video-hosting platform launched as an alternative to YouTube. It was the first to focus on video and is growing in popularity. The website was created in 2017 by Ray Vahey, who is based in the United Kingdom. Vahey claims that the inspiration for designing BitChute was his growing concern over censorship from massive platforms like Facebook and YouTube (Doward & Townsend, 2020; Maxwell, 2017; Rudee, 2020; Trujillo et al., 2020). Utilizing Bit Torrent, Vahey created a platform that allows peer-to-peer video sharing without relying on the heavy infrastructure supporting other social media platforms (Maxwell, 2017).

Since the platform's launch, it has been a haven for those banned from YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook (Blake, 2018; Harwell et al., 2021). Therefore, they have been struggling to defend themselves against the allegation of being a new breeding ground for violent ideologies (Davis, 2020; Rudee, 2020; Trujillo et al., 2020). While the company presents itself as a platform with a mission to "provide [creators] with a service that they can use to flourish and express their ideas freely," the site has become a ground for extreme worldviews (BitChute, 2021). The company's community guidelines prohibit "incitement to hatred," "threats or incitement to violence," and "harassment," but its content shows that it fails to implement these guidelines.

Due to the continuous allegations of providing a platform for extreme ideologies, BitChute has also had to constantly migrate to an infrastructure indifferent to the content creators that BitChute hosts. For instance, in 2018, PayPal decided to ban BitChute from receiving any financial contributions from supporters (Blake, 2018). Other platforms and financial apps have also banned content creators active on BitChute, such as Patreon and GoDaddy, to list a few (Andrews & Pym, 2021; Blake, 2018). However, the platform has managed to survive the barrage of bans by switching to the American company Epik to register its domain name. Epik is best known for hosting websites that actively support neo-Nazism, white supremacism, and other harmful ideologies (Harwell et al., 2021; Whittaker, 2021). Furthermore, to ensure income for content creators on BitChute, several monetized accounts have found a willing company to expedite financial transactions by using SubscribeStar.com, which, like Patreon, provides content creators the ability to monetize their content (Andrews & Pym, 2021).

In its operation, BitChute's videos are characterized by many of what Atton (2022) describes as the features of alternative media. These videos are produced independently away from large and mainstream corporations. The website provides a dynamic platform for groups on the political margin who are banned from accessing mainstream social media. Hence, it allows banned creators to reach and communicate with new audiences and gradually widen their impact and influence public opinions. The videos could be understood as articulations that generate relations between different discourses. Documenting political activities also provides a sense of belonging and community (Ekman, 2014), which is essential for these marginalized groups who feel socially and politically isolated. While migration to non-mainstream platforms such as BitChute has increased, researchers have had to play catchup with platforms that spring up faster than researchers can become acquainted with (Robinson, 2022). We intend to understand the articulations in one of the alternative media platforms, which sprang up alongside a crisis moment.

Methodology

In this article, articulation is used as a theoretical prism and a methodological approach that can be used to analyze anti-COVID-measures videos on BitChute. As a methodological approach, articulation is a form of ideological criticism that seeks to "identify the assumptions, presuppositions, or premises behind the artifact that constitute its ideology" (Foss, 2009: 243). The main goal of ideological criticism is "to make visible ideology embedded in an artifact." The use of articulation theory as a methodology to study such content is valuable because it helps account for the relationships established between social groups and ideologies and considers the significance of these relationships within specific historical and social contexts (Hanczor, 1997).

Our sampling strategy followed a data-led process, which means we surveyed BitChute to identify prominent users and channels on the website. The channels were chosen for review due to the thousands of views each channel and their videos garnered. We looked at channels that discuss COVID-19 in the Canadian context. This ethnographic approach resulted in eight channels: 1) Sons of Enos 2) Kevin J Johnsons 3) WDL_Northern_Ontario 4) Liberty Talk Canada 5) BrightCanNews 6)Without_Fear 7) CanadaPoli and 8) Vaccine Choice Canada.

We have chosen the three top-watched videos from each channel out of these channels. The selection process was done between February and April 2022. The dates of the selected videos ranged from December 2020 until January 2022, with a peak in April and September 2021.

The methodological approach draws heavily from the guidelines outlined in Foss's book Rhetorical Criticism (2009) and Tripe's Ideologies of Intervention(n.d.). Studying the videos, we mainly looked at 1) Which organizational and individual identities are associated with the collected accounts and what is their relationship to the far-right? 2) What are the major themes in the message? 3) What are the ideological assumptions articulated in the videos?

To begin, the actors, or participants, were identified. We tried to identify who was behind the channels, who is speaking, what interests the speaker seems to hold, and their other platforms. Due to ethical concerns, we do not share the identities of those who are behind the videos (unless they are public figures). The aim is to understand how they identify themselves in the context of the wider anti-COVID-measure movement, but not personal identifiers (e.g. names, other personal identifying information) as these are not relevant to the aim of the study, but more importantly, may interfere with their privacy.

While we have rich content, but a small amount, a qualitative approach allows us to go in-depth to examine the messaging within these videos. Messages in the videos were analyzed to explicate connections made between different elements within ideology and connections between different social groups. The videos would then be watched several times, analyzed, and coded to identify common themes. We also identified presented elements such as major arguments, motifs and particular terms that provided clues to the embedded ideologies (Foss, 2009).

Analysis

A fundamental tenet of articulation theory is understanding the connections between the actors involved. The first part of the analysis section identifies the actors and their social and political affiliations and contexts in which the discursive acts in question took place. This is followed by an analysis of emerging themes and ideological underpinnings of the 24 videos.

Actors

Our research focused on videos that responded to COVID-19 measures in Canada. The research yielded eight channels under two BitChute categories. Some fell under BitChute's "News and Politics" category, such as BrightCanNews, Son of Enos, Kevin J. Johnsons, and Liberty Talk Canada. Others fell under "Health & Medical," such as Vaccine Choice Canada and WDL_Northern_Ontario. Without_Fear and CanadaPoli could not be categorized as they did not fit under one category. We also found that some channels produced their content while others curated and re-uploaded content from other sources. In some cases, however, it was unclear whether the channel's creators participated in producing the content or merely uploaded it from another channel. It was also unclear whether the uploads were done with permission from the original creators.

The channels used different templates for their videos, including vlogs, testimonials, on-the-scene videos, interviews, and educational content. The difference in styles impacted the formality of the content, and this difference in formality also appeared in disclaimers and claims of objectivity. Some channels were blatant about their political orientation, such as Son of Enos, who described himself as a "digital soldier" against media that is "complicit in a conspiracy to commit genocide" (Son of Enos, n.d.); Mark Paralovos, the creator of the CanadaPoli channel, also declares in his about page that "I support the People's Party of Canada and Maxime Bernier" (Canadapoli, n.d.). Kevin Johnson, a Calgary mayoral candidate, who is mainly known in for his "hateful" and " Islamophobic" (Nasser, 2019) comments against Paramount Foods owner Mohamad Fakih; he was sentenced for 18 months in jail for six separate breaches of a 2019 court order forbidding him from continuing to defame Fakih (Passafiume, 2021).

Some channels adopted a more cautious approach to the language employed in their content. Vaccine Choice Canada, for example, accompanied its videos with a disclaimer stating that "this information is not intended as legal, health or nutritional advice. It is provided for informational purposes only" (Vaccine Choice Canada 1, 2022; Vaccine Choice Canada 2, 2021; Vaccine Choice Canada 3, 2020). In a similar light, Without_Fear cautions on its description page, that "no particular political or religious viewpoints are advanced - regardless of what you might find in any video" (Without_fear., n.d.).

While the channels' political partisanship varied from one to another, they all had some form of alliance with the political right. Vaccine Choice Canada, for example, was not always political. However, their history and BitChute videos show an increasing partnership between the group and the political right. Ted Kuntz, the president of Vaccine Choice, founded the group in the 1980s after his son's diagnosis of autism, which happened after his vaccination (Bramham, 2021). This led him to believe that there was a link between autism and vaccines. His videos were banned from YouTube for vaccine disinformation (Vaccine Choice Canada, 2022).

Recently, Kuntz has embraced the political right. In March 2021, he was interviewed on Faytene TV, a YouTube channel hosted by B.C.-based evangelist Faytene Kryskow. Although it is a "medical channel," the Without_Fear channel features figures known for their Islamophobic and antisemitic content.

Articulations in BitChute Videos:

Within the videos studied for the analysis, six major themes emerged: 1) Promotion of pseudo-legal actions and language, 2) Recycling of political conspiracies, 3) Authority through medical and scientific language and expertise, 4) Use of war analogies, 5) Appropriation of activist rhetoric and tactics 6) Appeal to family values.

Promotion of Pseudolegal Actions and Language: The promotion of pseudolegal actions and language is one of the most prominent themes in the selected videos. Opposition to public health measures is channelled in these videos through "pseudo-legal" (Netolitzky & Warman, 2020) content, requests, and trials. The word "Nuremberg 2.0" is thrown around in many of the analyzed videos. The premise of the "Nuremberg 2.0" theory is that the COVID-19 vaccines

constitute medical experimentation, and anyone involved— including governments, scientists, journalists and doctors –should be held accountable for "Crimes against humanity" (Son of Enos 2, 2021). It references the trials of Nazi leaders that took place after World War 2 and invokes a second wave of trials against people assumed accountable for lock-down and vaccine-related damages.

While it is not official law in any country, the Nuremberg code constitutes a set of research ethics designed to ensure that Nazi horrific experiments would not be carried out against any people (Balzer, 2022). The words "Nuremberg Code" is hijacked in the videos to support trials against people "liable" for conducting and carrying out COVID-19 public health measures, but the concept is not new to the far-right. Far-right and anti-Muslim activists used the word for years, accusing politicians of betraying Western countries by transforming the white ethnicity of the population (Balzer, 2022). This idea is often described alongside concepts like "White Genocide" and the "Great Replacement" conspiracy theory. "Great replacement" was based on an idea long-held by the far-right, but coined by French writer Renaud Camus, which claims that the white race was being "replaced" by non-white populations, often through immigration, and was therefore facing imminent extinction (Amarasingam, Argentino & Macklin, 2022:7). Great replacement theory was a common theme in manifestos produced by perpetrators to justify their attacks; including mass shootings in Buffalo (2022), El paso (2019) and Christchurch (2019) (Amarasingam et al., 2022).

In one video (WDL Northern Ontario), a man, who claims to be a nurse, argues that in his place of employment, the elderly are dying after getting vaccinated (WDL_Northern_Ontario 2, 2021). The captions of the video state that "Testing on people with an experimental drug is a direct violation of the Nuremberg code of 1947…This is international law and part of your inalienable God-given rights" (WDL_Northern_Ontario 2, 2021). Another video introduces the "R. Maarman vs. South Africa " case, in which Maarman required the Presidency of South Africa to produce evidence of the Sars-CoV2 virus in isolation. In the BitChute video, it is claimed that Maarman's legal victory resulted in compensation for the people in South Africa for COVID-related "damages" and "free the people of Debt-Slavery imposed by the Central Bank" (Son of Enos 2, 2021). A search on South Africa's Constitutional Court website revealed that the case was far from victorious as the Constitutional Court immediately dismissed it in 2021 (Constitutional Court of South Africa, 2021).

Other videos feature similar cases of challenging health officials and politicians in Canada with "Victorious" results (Son of Enos 1, 2021). A video shows the Canadian conservative commentator Stew Peters interviewing Patrick King, who argues that he had the Provincial Health Minister of Alberta subpoenaed to provide evidence that the COVID-19 virus existed, but the minister was unable to provide the evidence and, therefore, the case was dismissed. The video claims that the province of Alberta lifted all COVID-19 restrictions after health officials could not provide evidence in court that the virus existed. Multiple sources, including Lajka (2021), confirm that the case was dismissed for "technical" reasons, and Alberta relaxed its COVID-19 restriction, not because of King's case, but because the province reached its predetermined vaccination goals.

The captions of another video (Son of Enos 3, 2021) state that "every FOIA [Freedom of Information Act] request had come back stating the virus has never been isolated." This, according to Son of Enos, is because isolating it would reveal that the virus was a "chimera bioweapon." Other videos encourage people to take action and use "international" (BrightCanNews 1, 2021) cases to convince Canadian courts. A video (BrightCanNews 1, 2021) shows a provincial prosecutor, who claims that they will be terminated soon, explaining the Canadian legal system and its court levels. While the video has accurate information about the Canadian legal system, it infuses its content with conspiracy language, such as describing the vaccine as a "genocide." The central argument of another video (Vaccine Choice Canada 2, 2021), also intended to educate people about their legal rights, is that government-imposed vaccination is unconstitutional. The video claims to "empower Canadians in making educated and voluntary medical decisions." However, it omits the fact that Section 1 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in the Canadian Constitution indicates that rights and freedoms are subject to reasonable limitations that can be justified in a free and democratic society. Through the Oakes test, the Supreme Court of Canada has created a system to determine whether limitations on a given right or freedom are justified. However, this part of the Canadian legal system has been completely absent in the videos as certain rights and freedoms are presented as absolute.

Another central pseudolegal argument in the videos is patent claims around COVID-19, which are mainly promoted by Dr. Martin, who runs a company called M-CAM. The company analyzes patents to estimate the commercial value of companies. In one of the videos (Without_fear_Canada 3, 2021), Martin claims that the virus was patented before any SARS outbreak in Asia. He also claims that the patent clearly lays out the specific gene sequence and that it was synthetically modified using gene technology, making it a pathogen. Although this theory has been debunked, Dr. Martin features it in many of the videos on BitChute (Spencer, McDonald, & Fichera, 2021). Overall, BitChute anti-COVID-19-measures videos present the use of innovative pseudo-legal language as a major strategy for fighting against COVID-19 measures.

Recycling of Political Conspiracies: The second major theme in the anti-COVID-19-measures videos is the repeated references to political conspiracies that have dominated far-right discourses. It appears that the pandemic, however, has become the new location for these conspiracies. One of the conspiratorial motifs found in the videos is the "Great Reset." According to this theory, "global elites" are using, or even manufacturing, the pandemic to pass their draconian and totalitarian laws. One of the channels promotes the idea that political parties in Canada have been "infiltrated" as part of the "great reset" through which "the UN is trying to take over the states" (Liberty Talk Canada 1, 2021). Another channel states on its description page that part of its mission is to cover the "great reset," interpreting COVID-19 as "part of the plan to gain control over the food supplies…and over you" (WDL_Northern_Ontario 1, 2021). Bill Gates is said to play an important role in the Great Reset conspiracy theory; for example, his alleged "prediction of COVID-19" in 2015 is taken as evidence of his role in planning the conspiracy (WDL_Northern_Ontario 2, 2022).

While the Great Reset conspiracy was triggered by the World Economic Forum Summit in 2020, the conspiracy of the New World Order predates the Davos meeting to the 90s when the

concept was used to describe an alleged conspiracy between government actors in the United States and globalist actors to disarm Americans and eliminate their freedom (ADL, 2017). This conspiracy has been around among far-right groups in Canada. To these groups, COVID-19 has become part of the New World Order in which powerful elites are plotting world domination (Liberty Talk Canada 1, 2021, & Son of Enos 2, 2021). In an interview (Liberty Talk Canada 3, 2022) with one of the Freedom Convoy organizers and other guests, the host starts the interview with a discussion of protests as a quest for freedom but then the conversation switches to globalism and freemasons:

> Actually, there's a video of the leader in Nova Scotia or New Brunswick that does all these mason symbols…I had an ex-mason come on my show and he said 'oh yeah, that's a mason symbol to his other mason people that are involved in this' in agreement that they are doing this for Mr global and those are mason signs and he did it right on camera.
>
> (Liberty Talk Canada 3, 2022)

Elements of other conspiracies popular on the right are incorporated into a wider COVID-19 "great reset" conspiracy; much like "globalists," free masons play an important role in other conspiracies and extremist movement narratives.

Warning of emerging new totalitarian laws, some videos refer to the "history" of other places to draw comparisons between historical events and what is constructed as an inevitable Canadian reality. Kevin Johnson, for example, warns that vaccine passports are analogical to the surveillance system in the former Soviet Union: "soviet union…medical records…papers..they asked about political affiliations…detain you and your kids and…rape your wife…we are doing the same thing now with vaccine passports" (Kevin Johnson 3, 2021). A video on CanadaPoli compares the Canadian Government's use of social media influencers to promote vaccine uptake to the employment of bloggers by "communist Vietnam " in 2013 to support the Vietnamese government. These historical parallels, while ignoring the cultural and historical context, demonstrate how common far-right anxieties such as fears of communist control and the so-called New World Order are invoked in discourses opposing COVID-19 measures.

Authority through Medical and Scientific Language and Expertise: Another theme observed in BitChute's videos is the use of medical and scientific language and expertise. Overall distrust in in experts, doctors and science is a common theme in the literature on conspiracies and anti-COVID-19 responses (Chapelan, 2021; Mortimer, 2017). However, our study found that while anti-establishment and anti-elite attitudes are omnipresent in the videos, (alternative) medical experts are recruited to give weight to their claims. This also fits with the authoritarian sentiments in conservative politics. On its About page, the channel of WDL_Northern_Ontario asserts that "All the videos are from credible sources. You can do a web search or a Linked-in search for any of the Doctors here to find your own proof" (WDL_Northern_Ontario About, n.d.). BitChute's videos portray this form of knowledge as the "real science suppressed and censored" (Son of Enos 3, 2021).

The medical claims range from blatantly false information to more accurate and rational ones that are, however, deployed to exaggerate certain claims. A doctor in one of the videos

promotes the (false) idea that COVID-19, like AIDS and Ebola, is a SARS virus enhanced with HIV to form a bioweapon (Son of Enos 3, 2021). He goes on to describe COVID-19 vaccines as a "Frankenstein technology" designed to be a "death factory" (Son of Enos 3, 2021).

Interestingly, both the virus and the vaccine are classified as "bioweapons" and attempts by conspiring agents, such as the pharmaceutical industry, to kill people. The doctor identifies himself as one of many "silenced" doctors fighting the enemy and saving the people. However, he grounds this conflict in biblical terms advising his audience "not to be bothered by the size of your opponent but the size of God" (Son of Enos 3, 2021). Scientific concepts like "bioweapons" and virus features are combined with more religious factors such as a struggle against evil (conspiring forces creating bioweapons) –with God on their side—to save humanity and share the Truth.

The intersection between science and religion appears not only in the analyzed videos' content, but also in the relationships between the different actors. For example, a doctor, in one video, claims that mRNA causes cancer and miscarriage (Without_Fear_Canada 3, 2021). In the latter half of the video, he speaks about vitamin D deficiency as the main cause behind flus and proposes that vitamin D and ivermectin are the main effective drugs against the virus. The forum where he spoke was hosted by Idaho's lieutenant Republican governor (Spencer, 2021), Janice McGeachin, who was featured in a YouTube post in 2020, posing with a Bible and a gun advocating against public health measures related to the pandemic (Idaho Freedom TV, 2020).

Ideas featured in the selected videos are supported with the use of sophisticated medical and scientific terms such as "oxygenate… ventilate (Vaccine Choice Canada 3,)" "enzyme," "chromosomes" (Son of Enos 3, 2021), "pathogen," and "gene sequence (Without_Fear 3, 2020). Describing the mRNA vaccine, Dr. Martin, for example, states that it is "not a vaccine. It is mRNA packaged in a fat envelope that is delivered to a cell. It is a medical device designed to stimulate the human cell into becoming a pathogen creator" (WDL_Northern Ontario 3, 2021). A doctor in another video describes COVID-19 as a blood disorder rather than a respiratory disorder (Vaccine Choice Canada 3, 2020). The videos typically feature not one, but groups of experts, even when some members of the group are completely silent throughout the video. The panel format gives an air of formality and professionalism while imbuing the videos with a type of credibility. Doctors' statements are sometimes presented as part of a series of testimonies by doctors from around the world (Without_Fear_Canada 2, 2020). The professional identities of these doctors are always highlighted, although in many cases it has been difficult for us to confirm their alleged professional identities, credentials, or medical backgrounds.

Some videos are largely conspiratorial, describing COVID-19 as a "hoax" (Without_Fear_Canada 2, 2020), but some deliver more rational arguments. In an interview with a PPE instructor, Drea, who is a reporter for Rebel News, discusses the impact of masks on people's health. While this is clearly an anti-mask video, they refrain from describing it as a conspiratorial plot, but instead question the lockdown for health reasons, such as the need for exercise (WDL_Northern_Ontario, 1, 2021). Doctors, who support COVID-19 health measures, are also classified in two ways: either as conspiring with other elites to kill people (Son Of Enos 3, 2021) or silent for fears of losing their careers and grants (Bright Can News 2, 2021).

Use of War Analogies: The fourth theme that emerged from the videos is the prevalence of war rhetoric and metaphors. Many of the channels use war metaphors to describe their missions. Son of Enos describes himself as "a Canadian patriot who answered the call to become a #DigitalSoldier [against] media [that] is complicit in a conspiracy to commit genocide" (Son of Enos, n.d.). Another channel cites a quote warning against letting evil win by complacency, which has been falsely attributed to the eighteenth-century philosopher Edmund Burke: "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing" (WDL_Northern_Ontario, n.d.).

The war-time metaphors are very clear. The warriors are the alternative media, marginalized doctors, Freedom Convoy trucker protestors and frontline workers who oppose the vaccine and COVID-19 public health measures. The enemy, however, is ubiquitous; it is the UN, elites, enemy doctors, politicians, pharmaceutical companies, and mainstream media. The main "traitor" (Kevin Johnson 3, 2021) is Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. The weapons are the vaccine and the virus "bioweapons." People under lockdowns are "hostages…no longer free" (BrightCanNews 3, 2021).

The battlefield is physically embodied in clashes between law-enforcement and anti-mask demonstrators. For example, a video shows the altercation between Chris Sky and York police. The message of the video is that York police do not represent Canada and its laws but "continue to break the law by using laws that mean nothing just to get people into custody and hurt them" (Kevin Johnson 2, 2021). By juxtaposing "Chris Sky Vs York Police " (this is the title of the video), the video evokes a sense of Canadian nationalism while at the same time making it clear that the police are not a symbol of "true" Canada. One of the videos describes the "mariners for freedom" convoy as "we're in a war" physically. (Liberty Talk Canada 1, 2021). This war language is meant to appeal to nationalist and patriotic sentiments.

Another example is a channel that states on its about page that "we want our old Canada back" (WDL_Northern_Ontario, n.d.). Resistance against COVID-19 measures is lodged in a language that evokes traditional nationalist values such as liberty and freedom. Kevin Johnson describes an anti-mask rally as "not anti-mask rally…vaxxed and masked are welcome at the freedom rally…it's about freedom" (Kevin Jonson 2). At a rally, ex-prosecutors describe themselves as "we are the free ones." The war analogy is useful for appealing to nationalist and patriotic sentiments. It also effectively appropriates and thus counters the mainstream war language used to describe the "fight" against COVID-19. It is also important to note that wider war against an ever-present enemy is common in extremist discourses, including religious extremists –such the far Christian right—(Juergensmeyer 2017) and more contemporary far-right conspiracies like QAnon (Argentino & Amarasingham, 2020).

Appropriation of Activist Rhetoric and Tactics: The nationalist war-imbued worldview, disseminated in videos, intersects with a language that appropriates the language and tactics of progressive and social justice movements, which has been a common method employed by the far-right (as well as the wider political right), especially in the case of struggles for free expression (or free speech) and the right to demonstrate (Moskowitz, 2019). We have observed the adoption of strategies of resistance that (progressive) activists typically use to address problems of inequality and injustice. Many videos critique the media's alleged suppression of

"counter-narratives" (BrightCanNews 2, 2021; Canadapoli 3, 2021). As an example, resembling the title of left political economy critique of the tech industry, a book promoted in one of the videos is titled *The Rise and Fall of Monetized Youtube Channels: Big Tech and Speech in Justine Trudeau's Canada* [sic] (Canadapoli 3, 2021).

However, these anti-elite attitudes become contradictory in the videos. On one side, there is a critique of corporations, big tech companies and the pharmaceutical industry: the Canadian speaker in one of the videos condemns how society becomes all about money (BrightCanNews 1, 2021); another video condemns corporations for blocking the oppositional voices (BrightCanNews 2, 2021). On the other side, there is the condemnation of lockdowns and universal incomes because they "harm the economy" (Kevin Johnson 3, 2021): A speaker compares what Canada does to prevent the spread of COVID-19 to Communist countries (CanadaPoli 3); two doctors in a video attribute media censorship to "corporations" and "resent of capitalism" at the same time. (BrightCanNews 3, 2021). These contradictory attitudes, we believe, are due to the different articulations constituting the examined discourse: a historical anti-communist conspiratorial worldview combined with anti-corporation activist rhetoric that proponents of justice and equality usually advocate. The two articulations of anti-corporation animus with a neoliberal attitude combine to make an anti-vaccine discourse.

Another tactic is the use of ethnic diversity to promote anti-vaccine messages. One video, for example, shows members of the Sikh community discussing how upset they are with Jagmeet Singh's denunciation of the trucker convoy (Liberty Talk Canada 2, 2022). Sikh individuals are shown holding signs that say "Thank you to our truckers" and "Trudeau is the real TERRORIST" (Liberty Talk Canada 2, 2022). For the video's creators, showcasing ethnic diversity is a strategy for recruiting new audiences and defending themselves against accusations of white supremacy.

In one of the on-the-scene videos, a group of people coalesce near the Canadian American border to send an S.O.S. message to the United States to "let our neighbours know" that "we are no longer free as the charter allows" to leave the country (BrightCanNews 3, 2021). The sending of an SOS for activism resembles the actions of Indigenous activists in 2009 who made a human banner to send an "SOS Amazon " message to the world to act on global warming and highlight global warming's impact on the peoples of the Amazon (Savos, 2009). Other tactics include urging people to vote in federal elections (Kevin J. Johnson 2, 2021) and calling for solidarity actions by encouraging people to pull kids from school and hire teachers who were fired (BrighCanNews 1, 2021). This proclaimed commitment to plurality, solidarity, and justice and the use of tactics usually used by Indigenous and progressive activists reflect the actors' adaptive use of language as they promote themselves as the alternative "revolutionary" (WDL_Northern_Ontario, n.d.) power.

Appeal to Family Values: Another articulation observed in the discourse is the rhetorical appeal to family values in the sense that the videos link a person who values family as equivalent to someone who rejects COVID-19 health measures. It is not surprising that the theme of family exists; family has been historically used as a "safe" propaganda tool (Tripe, 2012). An ex-prosecutor tells her audience that she "will fight until my grandchildren have a future" (Bright Can News 1, 2021). Another video shares a similar image of a parent protecting their children:

"I'll not allow them to hurt my kids...I'll do what I can do" (Canadapoli 3, 2021). Reproduction is also used as a tool to galvanize opposition to vaccines. Stories of stillbirths and miscarriages after vaccinations are narrated in the videos to deter people from getting COVID-19 vaccines.

Protection of children and the family is a trope that not only appears in the religious right's fights against abortion, feminism or LGBTQ+ rights, or white nationalists protecting (white) children and families, but it is also a central theme in more recent far-right conspiracies like the QAnon Conspiracy (whose followers also promote COVID-19 conspiracies) where the central (baseless) claim is that a cabal of Satan-worshiping powerful elites (including members of the democratic party and prominent figures in business and entertainment) are running a global child sex-trafficking ring and are plotting against President Donald Trump who is the chosen one to destroy them (Amarasingam & Argentino, 2020).

QAnon followers claim to be saving children from being trafficked and abused (and eaten) by elites and try to widen their reach by touching on issues that are more mainstream like concerns about child welfare and human traficking. For example, QAnon Instagram influencers would often use hashtags like #SaveTheChildren along with memes with manipulated or incorrect frightening statistics on child trafficking to broaden its appeal (Rothschild 2021, p. 133). By framing vaccines as dangerous, these BitChute creators frame the government's promotion of COVID-19 vaccination as a policy to purposely harm or kill children. While not as dramatic as QAnon's theory, it uses a similar appeal of protecting children, which is an effective way to galvanize their audiences.

Conclusion

This paper offers insights into a discourse emerging in response to COVID-19 through an inspection of Canada-based popular videos on the alternative media of BitChute. Our analysis of themes and related ideologies in the sampled videos points to the innovativeness and complexity of the political far-right facing COVID-19. It specifically shows that the discourse resisting COVID-19 measures on BitChute includes a range of different articulations: pseudo-legal actions and language, political conspiracies, medical and scientific language and expertise, war imagery, activist rhetoric and tactics, and family values. These discursive articulations disclose linkages between concepts that do not appear logical but are bonded together in the conjecture moment of the pandemic. Some references are expected from far-right politics such as nationalism, conspiratorial thinking, and appeal to family values. However, the videos tell a more complex story of ideologies. Progressive activists' strategies and language of justice and human rights, for example, are used by actors to present themselves as alternative and marginalized voices. Scientific and pseudo-legal terms are embedded in heroic biblical stories and political conspiracies. Neoliberal values are expressed in juxtaposition to anti-establishment attitudes.

Articulation is not only a useful tool for understanding anti-COVID-19 measures movements but also wider trends in the contemporary far-right and the conspiracies they promote. As mentioned previously, the new right has privileged cultural influence as a form of "soft power" to shift notions of the left/right paradigm (Stern 2019). Previous studies have noted

that the contemporary far-right is more fragmented and has shifted to a space where involvement in specific groups is less clear and online media has allowed for the growth of more flexible transnational movements; instead of emphasizing strong ties to a specific group, violent extremists draw "a shared culture and set of beliefs" (Amarasingam, et al, 2022). For example, conspiracies like the Great Replacement act as more like a "vessel" for perpetrators to justify targeting whichever group they blame for "replacing" the white population (e.g. Muslims, Jews, Latinx, or Black Americans) and often draw from sources like other manifestos, 8Chan posts, and other historical and cultural ideas to create their own connection to The Great Replacement conspiracy (Amarasingam et. al, 2022: 7). The QAnon conspiracy is another example of a far-right conspiracy that is interpreted and expanded upon by its followers who pull from influences as diverse as biblical prophecies, popular culture, new age spirituality, antisemitic conspiracies and older New World Order conspiracies (Amarasingam and Argentino 2020; Rothschild, 2021).

Many contemporary far-right movements pull from seemingly contradictory ideas to create new articulations and therefore, new linkages to their movement. Our analysis strengthens the claim of articulation as an important analytical perspective in studying far-right-related responses to COVID-19. This perspective has made it possible to observe how the invocation of multiple ideologies is used in a manner intended to render the discourse compelling in the Canadian context. By looking at the discursive articulations and the linkages between seemingly disparate ideas, this study is providing an insightful approach to study the formation and evolution of other, (mostly) online, far-right conspiracies. Articulation as a method of analysis that provides an understanding of the discourse as a complex activity of meaning-making rather than as one ideology.

Although the specificity of BitChute does not allow for broad generalizations about other alternative media, we want to highlight three observations derived from our analysis. First, the far-right have reapplied some of their well-known tropes and conspiracies to interpret and represent COVID-19 measures. Having previously used Nuremberg and New World Order to oppose issues such as immigration, they reuse these conspiracies to oppose COVID mandates. This, we believe, will have the potential of mainstreaming their fringe ideologies and establish further some of their ideological tenets since new audiences (skeptics of COVID measures) have been engaged. Second, alongside these old ideologies, new articulations have developed such as the sophisticated use of pseudo-legal and scientific language. These new developments may blur the line for general audiences between anti-COVID-19-measure discourse and (mainstream) expert knowledge. Despite the skepticism towards experts, these groups are still reliant on their own set of experts and use of expert language to establish their legitimacy. Third, the analysis has revealed a repertoire of voices, some of which are conspiratorial, but others are grounded in rational terms.

Future studies can explore other forms of anti-COVID-19 measures alternative media on other alternative platforms to determine what ideologies are used to make up the discourse. As well, this method could be employed to study other extremist conspiracy theories or movements to determine what common ideologies are employed to make their discourse relevant to more audiences. This research can also be combined with a quantitative analysis to determine how prominent these specific discursive articulations are on BitChute and perhaps other alternative platforms.

Awareness of these nuances will help better engage and intervene in this discourse. Rather than approaching it as fake news, we should think of the anti-COVID-measure discourse beyond dichotomous terms – as right or false. Intervention efforts should produce "re-articulations" that negotiate these different nuances and build new articulations. This approach provides insights, not only into how certain pathways into the far-right are developed but understanding what other ideologies they are appealing to, which can be useful for practitioners to understand how the far-right establishes connections between itself and movements with which it typically does not associate.

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