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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6q68m0sr>

Author

Castro-Rea, Julián

Publication Date

2019-04-26

Data Availability

The data associated with this publication are available upon request.

Berkeley Center for Right-Wing Studies Working Paper Series

**My Girlfriend Became Neo-Nazi:
The Right's Presence and Activity in the Internet**

**by Julián Castro-Rea
University of Alberta, Canada**

**Presented at the Inaugural Conference on Right-Wing Studies
April 25-27, 2019**



Institute for the
Study of
Societal Issues

MY GIRLFRIEND BECAME NEO-NAZI: THE RIGHT'S PRESENCE AND ACTIVITY IN THE INTERNET

Julián Castro-Rea
Department of Political Science
University of Alberta, Canada

ABSTRACT

Currently, one of the favourite tools that the political right makes use of to spread out its message is the internet. Either in popular social media—Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter—or within specialized websites, right-wing organizations and personalities take good advantage of the internet's ability to reach mass audiences worldwide in record time. The internet has become a powerful tool to educate, recruit, fundraise, campaign, and overall wage “the battle of ideas” on the right's side. The title of this paper expresses this realization, after the author's lived experience. Indeed, the internet has arguably become the most powerful tool for the purpose of spreading out right-wing ideas.

This paper discusses the role that the right's presence on the internet has played in this ideology's rise to popularity and its successful attempts at winning elections. It highlights the main messages that specialized websites and the public chat groups available over Twitter, Facebook and Instagram spread around selected issues, such as climate change, immigration, gay rights, and race in Canada; in an attempt to determine the direction that they want to give to public debate on those matters.

Based on the case study of the spring 2019 provincial elections in Alberta, Canada, I test the hypothesis that the frequency and radical features of messaging distributed by right-wing websites and chat groups in social media increase around election times, as an expression of a sustained and successful effort at influencing the vote along their ideological direction.

INTRODUCTION

Political campaigning is not anymore what it used to be. The old-fashioned methods of canvassing, writing letters, organizing rallies, etc. have given way to the overwhelming power of the internet to sway the citizens' opinion and vote. Indeed, the internet has nowadays the power to educate and shape the minds of the electorate in political affairs.

As Monyka Kopytowska explains, political campaigning has been through a process of “mediatization”, which she defines as:

a meta-process transforming the relationship between media, society and politics through creating a common spatiotemporal, cognitive and axiological sphere of shared experience, and supplementing the social activities which previously took place only face-to-face with virtual interaction... what makes this process possible is the mechanism of ‘proximization’, allowing for the reduction of the temporal, spatial, axiological, cognitive and emotional distance between the blogger and his or her audience, and thus for the mediation of experience and the creation of a virtual community around the ‘networked public sphere.’¹

Virtual communities recreate physical communities of the past, by creating the proximization illusion of personal identification among its members. Of course, mediatization is not exclusive to political campaigning, it touches nowadays virtually any area of social interaction. But political campaigners of any sort—parties, special interest groups, social movements—discovered recently the huge potential that proximization offers for getting their message through at a fraction of the cost and effort than it took in the past.

¹ Kopytowska, Monyka, “A case study of ‘proximization dynamics’ in Polish and British political blogs” in Cap, Piotr and Urszula Okulska, *Analyzing Genres in Political Communication*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2013; pp. 379–421.

It all started with the smart, targeted use of social media in Barack Obama's presidential campaign in 2008². This campaign was such a paradigmatic digital triumph that it propelled social media onto the radar of marketers within political organizations worldwide. Obama's team, more so than his opponents', made innovative use of the digital media as tools of political campaigning once again in 2012, equally for campaign finance, strategy, voter mobilization, innovation in social media and data analytics³.

Social media offer the advantage of being adaptable to specific targeted audiences. Candidates are able to carve out specific public personae, adapt their messages to different publics, and work with the timing of electoral cycles. Besides, what works in a specific medium may not be as effective in another one, so the study of each platform has to be differentiated⁴.

Parties are not the only political actors seeking to increase their influence with the help of the internet. Online-based interest groups have emerged, which like any other interest group aim at influencing public policy and engaging with stakeholders⁵. In order to actually become influential, interest groups must be able to mobilize enough resources (funds, followers, impact, etc.); otherwise the internet will only further empower political actors that already have other channels available to influence policy⁶.

² Harris, Lisa & Paul Harrigan, "Social Media in Politics: The Ultimate Voter Engagement Tool or Simply an Echo Chamber?", *Journal of Political Marketing*, 14:3, 2015; pp. 251-283.

³ Bimber, Bruce, "Digital Media in the Obama Campaign of 2008 and 2012: Adaptation to the Personalized Political Communication Environment" in *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, no. 11, 2014; pp. 130-150.

⁴ Kreiss, Daniel, Regina G. Lawrence & Shannon C. McGregor, "In Their Own Words: Political Practitioner Accounts of Candidates, Audiences, Affordances, Genres, and Timing in Strategic Social Media Use" in *Political Communication*, n. 35, 2018; pp. 8-31.

⁵ Whitesell, Anne, "Interest Groups and Social Media in the Age of the Twitter President" in *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2019; pp. 219-230.

⁶ Scaramuzzino, Gabriela & Roberto Scaramuzzino, "The Weapon of a New Generation? Swedish Civil Society Organizations' Use of Social Media to Influence Politics" in *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2017; pp. 46-61.

Social media are challenging the traditional ability of mass media to set the agenda of public affairs conversation. Jessica T. Feezelli found that:

...being exposed to political information through Facebook yields an agenda-setting effect by raising participants' perceived importance of certain policy issues... participants exposed to political information on Facebook exhibit increased levels of issue salience consistent with the issues shared... these effects are strongest among those with low political interest⁷

Not everyone is just the same in the social media environment. Highly active users achieve the status of opinion leaders that are able to exert direct or indirect political persuasion⁸. Determining who are those influencers is crucial to make sense of an existing social media network. Moreover, during electoral campaigns they have proven their ability to influence the vote's direction. This is shown in the fact that even if internet users are not necessarily representative of a country's citizenry social media have a remarkable ability to reflect voting intention polls and predict electoral results⁹ Indeed, social media have even influenced the way that citizens view their civic roles, their political identity and their views about government service provision and spending¹⁰

⁷ Feezelli, Jessica T., "Agenda Setting through Social Media: The Importance of Incidental News Exposure and Social Filtering in the Digital Era" in *Political Research Quarterly*, vol. 71, no. 2, 2018; pp. 482-494.

⁸ Weeks, Brian E., Alberto Ardèvol-Abreu & Homero Gil de Zúñiga, "Online Influence? Social Media Use, Opinion Leadership, and Political Persuasion" in *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* vol. 29, no. 2, 2017.

⁹ Ceron, Andrea et al, "Every Tweet Counts? How Sentiment Analysis of Social Media Can Improve Our Knowledge of Citizens' Political Preferences with an Application to Italy and France" in *New Media & Society*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2014; pp. 340-358.

¹⁰ Ingrams, Alex, "Connective Action and the Echo Chamber of Ideology: Testing a Model of Social Media and Attitudes toward the Role of Government" in *Journal of Information Technology and Politics*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2017; pp. 1-15.

THE RIGHT IN THE INTERNET

This proliferation of media messaging has mostly benefitted the right. Mark Litter and Matthew Feldman suggested that the explosion and variety of social media posting have allowed fringe political actors to avoid standard barriers to popularizing their extreme views. This process makes it possible that extreme and populist ideologies move from the political fringes to influencing mainstream politics¹¹ More often than not, these fringe actors feed the right-wing discourse.

Facebook activity also greatly benefits the right. This social media platform is known to exploit sensationalism to increase its viewership—now estimated to somewhere between 1.4 and 2 billion people a day, around one quarter of the global population—, to the extent that extreme positions attract polemic and thus the attention of the broader public. As a Facebook moderator trainer explains: “If you start censoring too much then people lose interest in the platform... It’s all about making money at the end of the day”¹². Although in principle sensationalism may come from either extreme of the political spectrum, it systematically benefits right-wing options.

Moreover, social media are more likely to promote selective exposure when it comes to acquiring political information, thus contributing to escalate political polarization. That is, people who obtain their information about public affairs on the internet as opposed to television or newspapers are more selective of the kind of news they want to hear, usually simply reinforcing their existing views, biases and prejudices¹³. People who are on the right of the political spectrum will gravitate

¹¹ Littler, Mark and Matthew Feldman, “Social Media and the *cordon sanitaire*. Populist Politics, the Online Space, and a Relationship that Just Isn’t There” in *Journal of Language and Politics*, vol. 16, no. 4, 2017; pp. 510-522.

¹² CBC News Network, *Inside Facebook*. Documentary, broadcast December 1, 2018. Available online at <https://www.cbc.ca/passionateeye/episodes/inside-facebook>

¹³ Min, Hee & Seongyi Yun, “Selective Exposure and Political Polarization of Public Opinion on the Presidential Impeachment in South Korea: Facebook vs. KakaoTalk” in *Korea Observer*, vol. 49, no. 1, spring 2018; pp. 137-159.

toward right-wing sources, comment and analysis. Eventually, every source they consult will simply reinforce their views and biases; shutting them off from alternative perspectives.

Indeed, interaction through social media is more likely to promote confrontation than face-to-face or anonymous online communication. Social media users perceive more political disagreement, news are filtered and used to promote such disagreement rather than finding common ground¹⁴ In other words, social media are an excellent tool to promote partisanship, even radicalization, than other means of political communication.

Social media are also useful tools to stir emotions translated into political attitudes. Emotions promote public agenda-building, and create a bandwagoning effect that favours the candidate who is perceived as winner, its supporters being more emotionally invested and more likely to vote¹⁵

The negative emotional contents of right-wing media postings has been documented, and contrasts with their progressive, liberal or left-leaning counterparts. Porismita Borah's content analysis of US presidential candidates' Facebook postings in 2008 and 2012 showed that both Republican candidates John McCain and Mitt Romney resorted more frequently to fear appeals and negative attacks than Barack Obama, who tended to rather use humour and enthusiasm in his posts¹⁶. These finding are consistent with the theory developed

¹⁴ Barnidge, Matthew, "Exposure to Political Disagreement in Social Media Versus Face-to-Face and Anonymous Online Settings", in *Political Communication*, no. 34, 2017; pp. 302-321.

¹⁵ Kim, Ji Young, David Lynn Painter & Maridith Dunton Miles, "Campaign Agenda-Building Online: The Effects of Online Information Source and Interactivity on Affective Evaluations and the Salience of the Election" in *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, no. 10, 2013; pp. 326-340.

¹⁶ Borah, Porismita, "Political Facebook Use: Campaign Strategies Used in 2008 and 2012 Presidential Elections" in *Journal of Information Technology and Politics*, vol. 13, no. 4, 2016; pp. 326-338.

by Ruth Wodak¹⁷, who claims that negative emotions are the main tool in the arsenal of right-wing discourses.

Beyond traditional emotional appeals, the right is also adopting novel strategies to better communicate their message. Andrea Schneider has shown how a new generation of right-wing transnational NGOs is adopting a manipulated version of human rights discourse to better pass their ideological message. Indeed, an exclusive understanding of human rights based on identity serves to justify exclusionary, xenophobic messages¹⁸. This is also clear in the use of alleged feminist values to oppose abortion, on the grounds that the interruption of pregnancy may be used to discriminate against female fetuses¹⁹

THE ALBERTA ELECTIONS 2019

Research leading to this paper is focused on the campaign for the April 16, 2019 elections in the province of Alberta, Canada.

Alberta is a unique province within Canada, for at least the following reasons:

- a. It is Canada's wealthiest province in per capita terms, basically due to its massive oil sands deposits that are at the basis of the province's most profitable industry.
- b. Historically, it has resented subordination to other more influential provinces (mainly Ontario and Quebec) and the federal government. Asymmetry between its vast wealth and limited political influence has

¹⁷ Wodak, Ruth, *The Politics of Fear. What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean*, London: Sage, 2015.

¹⁸ Schneider, Andrea, "The New Defenders of Human Rights? How Radical Right-Wing TNGOs are Using the Human Rights Discourse to Promote their Ideas" in *Global Society*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2019; pp 149-162.

¹⁹ Saurette, Paul and Kelly Gordon, *The Changing Voice of the Anti-Abortion Movement: The Rise of "Pro-Woman" Rhetoric in Canada and the United States*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015.

fueled the so-called “Western alienation”, expressed in constant calls for a new deal with the rest of Canada if not outright separation

- c. The province also shows a strong social and fiscal conservative tradition; affirmed with over eighty years of consecutive governments with conservative parties at the helm. This brand of ideological continuity is so influential that it has blended itself with the very Albertan identity as perceived in some social strata and regions, especially working class and rural areas.

These basic definers of provincial identity have been put under stress over recent years. The oil industry has felt the full blow of the global fall of oil prices and oversupply in the United States, aggravated by the high cost of processing heavy crude oil sands, the single buyer nature of the province’s sales south of the Canadian border, and the excessive reliance of the provincial economy on the energy industry alone. Since late 2015, the federal government is led by the Liberal Party, strong of a majority based on the regions that have traditionally defined the balance of power in Canada, Ontario and Québec. Albertans resent a perceived indifference of the federal government to the woes of the oil industry, coming up with tepid responses to the massive layoffs that crisis in this industry has brought about. Equally important is Ottawa’s inability, frequently perceived as unwillingness, to get rid of the political and legal obstacles in the way of the construction of pipelines that would allow Alberta to increase its oil exports beyond the US, to Asian and European markets.

Alberta’s conservative identity was profoundly shaken with the election of a social-democratic government in May 2015. The surprising election of the New Democratic Party (NDP) to the helm of the provincial government reflects the growing influence of urban, cosmopolitan, younger voters that came to the province from other Canadian regions or from abroad, to a large extent attracted by the oil boom. Rachel Notley, party leader and provincial Premier, has an impeccable social-democratic pedigree as daughter of long-time party leader Grant Notley (from 1968 to 1984). This new cohort of progressive citizens conflicts with

small town and rural Albertans, who resent the election of a left-leaning party as an affront to the provincial identity and values.

Building on these challenges, the two main parties on the right merged in February 2017 to create the United Conservative Party (UCP), under the leadership of former federal cabinet minister Jason Kenney.

CONTRIBUTION OF RIGHT-WING SOCIAL MEDIA TO THE CONSERVATIVE VOTE: SOME EVIDENCE

The presence of the right-wing in social media plays the role of unofficial third party advertising: they promote the conservative vote either explicitly, by encouraging voters to support specific candidates or parties, or indirectly, by repeating and reinforcing the themes and messages distributed by official campaigns. Moreover, social media offer several advantages over regular partisan propaganda, namely:

- a. They are free for the party or candidates,
- b. They are beyond the scrutiny of electoral authorities and can ignore legal expenditure limits,
- c. They don't rely on the willingness of journalists in traditional media outlets to carry their stories, most of which are also bound by the standards of professional journalism,
- d. They have immediate distribution and impact,
- e. They don't have to stick to approved party talking points or even to accepted canons of public decency and political correctness. Indeed, they can afford to exaggerate a point, use crude language and humour, carelessly step into controversial political terrain, even create fake news or tell outright lies with impunity,
- f. They are unable to provoke a backlash to the parties or candidates, to the extent that they don't represent their authorized point of view,
- g. They are immune to legal action.

For all those reasons, social media can provide a valuable premium to any party's effort to reach broader audiences and make their message pass as common sense.

Social media played an important role in promoting the UCP and its candidates during Alberta's 2019 elections. They profusely elaborated on the emotionally loaded themes of the decline of the oil industry, Ottawa's mistreatment of Alberta, the social-democratic government alleged misunderstanding of the province's core social values and complicity with its federal mishandlers.

Indeed, messaging online seems to have been the main influencer during the campaign, especially for younger voters; as determined by research carried out by Anatoliy Gruzd, Canada Research Chair in Social Media Data Stewardship and Director of Research at the Social Media Lab, Ryerson University (Canada). He discovered that several groups not directly affiliated with political parties tried to sway the vote during the campaign, circumventing the controls that legally bind parties. A major case in point of such groups is *Shaping Alberta's Future*, an openly declared conservative organization whose director, Douglas Nelson, formerly collaborated with Jason Kenney, UCP's leader. Gruzd points out that despite the clear influence that social media had, it remains difficult to accurately measure their actual impact on voting²⁰.

For this research, a follow-up of social media activity (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, news online, blogs and open fora) guided by the online tracker Keyhole yielded important results to gauge the contribution of right-wing websites, commentators, tweets and chat rooms to promote the conservative vote.

²⁰ Interviewed by journalist Jenny Russell, *Edmonton AM*, CBC Radio One, April 2, 2019; available <https://www.cbc.ca/listen/live-radio/1-17-edmonton-am>

Three hashtags were consistently followed throughout the campaign, all of them believed to be associated with the conservative movement: #neveragainndp, #fiercelyalbertan, and #abucp.

In what follows, a summary of key findings is presented:

1. #neveragainndp

During the study period, this hashtag generated 1,807 posts created by 1,062 users. Only 15% of those posts were original, the vast majority (78%) were simply forwarded or retweets. More impressively, it reached 1,912,871 views, and provoked 3,517,814 reactions.

The top three influential users were @iliveasnatalie, with an average of 251 engagements per day; @tearsofrudeau, with 74 engagements; and @albertaseparate with 36.

@iliveasnatalie (Natalie) is an interesting character. She defines herself as an “intellectual rebel”, in a clear reference to the website *The Rebel* (<https://www.therebel.media/>), a hub for Canadian right-wing online activists. Fiercely opposed to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his Liberal party in power, she takes aim at every policy coming from the federal government. She declares in her Twitter front page: “I meant to use Twitter to advocate for education, and women empowerment. But I follow politics here for now, until Trudeau is voted out.” She has 3,323 followers and 9,251 likes.

Her most popular postings read as follows:

Remember that pesky UN Migration Compact? Remember how we were called “fear mongering, racist, xenophobic ... blah blah” because the

agreement was supposedly “not legally binding?” Well ... SURPRISE! IT IS legally binding! 🤔 [#UNCompact](#) [#Trudeaufortreason](#)²¹ ()

Trudeau is the worst thing to have happened to Canada. Change My Mind. 🤔 [#CHANGEMYMIND](#) [#TrudeauMustGo](#) [#TrudeaulsDone](#) [#trudeaufortreason](#)²²

Even though these posts don't mention Alberta's campaign explicitly, they play into the strategy followed by the UCP to conflate their rival incumbent party NDP as one and the same as the federal Liberals, in order to bypass the popularity of Premier Rachel Notley. The first post is also clearly anti-immigration and anti-UN, two popular right-wing themes.

@tearsoftrudeau does not identify with a single individual, it rather presents itself as a source of news, opinion, and jokes about Canadian politics. Based in Toronto, its main motivation seems to be to oppose anything related to Prime Minister Trudeau. It offers a link to a strange website (<https://roserambles.org/2018/08/11/canada-pm-justin-trudeau-son-of-alleged-rapist-and-pedophile-pierre-trudeau-august-11-2018/>) that claims that Trudeau's father, former Prime Minister Pierre E. Trudeau, was a rapist and pedophile.

Its most influential post reads as follows:

In Canada [@JustinTrudeau](#) applauds Facebook for censoring his political opponents. In USA [@realDonaldTrump](#) sues Facebook for discrimination of free speech. [#leadership](#) [#TrudeaulsDone](#) [#TrudeauForTreason](#) [#Canadistan](#) [#FreeSpeech](#) [#cdnpoli](#)²³

²¹ Posted April 6, 2019; 367 retweets, 362 likes.

²² Posted March 25, 2019; 207 retweets, 798 likes.

²³ Posted March 28, 2019; 171 retweets, 305 likes.

Again, no mention of Alberta; but this post contributes to the environment of hate and despise against the current Prime Minister, and by ricochet against Premier Rachel Notley. Also, interestingly, in order to pull a more effective jab at Trudeau the post praises US President Donald Trump, unpopular among most Canadians and therefore a toxic reference to any party or candidate wishing to be elected.

In turn, @albertaseparate is another team of unidentified people advocating the province's separation from Canada in order to take away from Ottawa what belongs to Albertans. This extreme form of Western alienation has 3,332 followers and 325 likes. It features extreme anti-NDP contents, calling its followers to get rid of the "socialist" and "accidental" government

Its most popular post is the following:

Alberta should not pay for the rest of Canada, enough is enough!
[#albertaseparation](#)²⁴

Even if they did not make it to the top positions for the way people reacted to them, it is worth reproducing some selected messages below, to appreciate the tone and radical features of the conversation taking place under this hashtag.

On April 7, these images were posted by *inhaledswine* on Instagram, in a clear reference to the carbon tax implemented by Trudeau and other provincial governments, including Alberta's, as a measure to fight against climate change:

²⁴ Posted April 7, 2019; 73 retweets, 133 likes.



As these postings show, excessive rhetoric and insults fly abundantly over this hashtag, in a way that would be unacceptable in mainstream media and suicidal for any candidate. Once again, the immediate target is Prime Minister Trudeau, indirectly by association Alberta's incumbent left-wing government.

The sources most often cited under the #nevearagainndp hashtag are *The Unshackled* (<https://www.theunshackled.net/>), allegedly Australia's most popular right-wing online hub (286 citations), followed quite a distance apart by Canadian conservative newspaper *Toronto Sun* (85 citations), and Canadian business supplement *Financial Post* (36 citations).

One full third of all engagements carried negative contents, and almost three fourths (74%) were produced by men.

2. #abucp

This hashtag stands for “Alberta United Conservative Party”, the most important conservative party participating in the elections. As it turns out, the explicit reference to the party was not a guarantee of focused, intense social media activity; as I will discuss in what follows.

During the period studied, this hashtag generated 30,671 posts created by 8,360 users. Only 21% of those posts were original, the vast majority (73%) were simply forwarded or retweets. It reached 13,886,738 views, and provoked 59,865,247 reactions; which suggests that the hashtag grabbed attention beyond Alberta, with only 2,615,000 registered voters²⁵.

The top influencers in this hashtag are not conservative actors, but actually UCP critics: actor Aidan Gallagher ([@AidanRGallagher](#)), United Nations Environment Goodwill Ambassador for North America and overall environmental advocate; Guy Q ([@GuyQuenneville](#)), self-described as “Husband, Father, Labour Minded, Social Worker”; and Roberta Lexier ([@rlexier](#)), Associate Professor of General Education at Mount Royal University, who studies social movements, social change and left politics in Canada.

²⁵ Data from Elections Alberta official website www.elections.ab.ca/voters consulted April 16, 2019.

Despite their important number of followers—especially A. Gallagher’s impressive 161,606—, the contents of their postings and reactions to them do not contribute to the main purpose of this paper, so their discussion is not necessary here.

The sources most often cited under this hashtag are *CBC*, Canada’s publicly funded media network, Albertan mainstream newspaper *Edmonton Journal*, and Canadian right-of-centre magazine *MacLean’s*. That is, all journalistically sound sources, which shows that most people using this hashtag are authentically driven to get information and not propaganda.

About one third (32%) of engagements carried negative contents, above positive (30%) but below neutral (38%). Again, almost three fourths (71%) were produced by men.

3. #fiercelyalbertan

This hashtag had 7,881 posts from 1,375 users during the period studied. Over 38 thousand people (38,489) interacted with these posts. The hashtag reached 2,375,010 viewers; and elicited 16,889,698 reactions.

The most influential users were @albertaparty with 12,859 followers and 78 average daily engagements; @bmasonndp with 15,041 followers and 76 engagements; and @crackmacs, with 31,667 followers and 71 average engagements. The problem is that neither of those top influencers is conservative or right-wing: the first one refers to the Alberta Party, a minor contender in the April 16 elections, the second belongs to leftist Member of Alberta’s Legislative Assembly Brian Mason, the third one is an entertainment network based in Calgary. In short, against my expectations #fiercelyalbertan turned out to be a poor choice for investigating the right’s activity online. This is confirmed with the top choices of sources of information: the Alberta Party website, the local newspaper *Edmonton Journal*, and the link-sharing service *bit.ly*.

Interestingly though, 67% of all posts were positive, only 8% negative; a situation that greatly contrasts with authentic right-wing hubs online. However, as for the other hashtags followed, three quarters of all users were male.

CONCLUSIONS: HOW SOCIAL MEDIA ARE A VALUABLE ASSET FOR THE RIGHT

In the end, the UCP prevailed in the April 16 elections. The intense conversation that took place in the internet during the electoral campaign served to reinforce—with inflated rhetoric, hyperbole, toxic humour, irony, ridicule, insults and outright falsehoods—the diagnosis that the main provincial party on the right had made of the situation: an irresponsible government, allied to its cronies in Ottawa, is destroying Alberta with useless taxes and overregulation instead of promoting the conditions for the recovery of the energy industry and the creation of employment. The provincial government campaign to dismiss those claims by spreading actual information could not stop the bandwagon effect created by the social media, which ended up creating the illusion that the conservatives were only expressing the “common sense” about a critical situation and the way to solve it.

The strategy of attacking popular Premier Notley by proxy, aiming at her “friend” Prime Minister Trudeau, paid off. The narrative according to which they were one and the same thing was promoted in conservative online circles, and eventually believed by large swaths of the electorate. Many users pledged to vote against Notley’s party as a way to punish Trudeau, or as dress rehearsal for the federal elections coming this fall.

This election is the first one won by the UCP, a party resulting from the merger in 2017 of the two main conservative parties in the province. Being the most visible and successful manifestation of the institutional right, this party is a magnet for

right-wing and extreme right individuals²⁶ Some of them were selected as candidates, to cater to the social conservative constituency, although some had to be discarded when their extreme right past was exposed²⁷. However, the vast majority of extreme right supporters is invisible, only manifesting itself in online conversations, contributing to promote the conservative vote as veritable third-party advertisers.

Admittedly, research presented in this paper is only a glimpse into the complex world of online right-wing politics. It was narrowed down in order to make the vast amount of information available more manageable. The steps taken to narrow down were not the most efficient possible. I discovered that obvious keywords, such as names of parties and leaders, do not necessarily yield the best results. The right uses code words for their activity online and in social media. It is therefore necessary to be familiar with those codes for research purposes.

Overall, however, the main point is this paper has been demonstrated: the frequency and radical features of messaging distributed by right-wing websites and chat groups in social media increase around election times, as an expression of a sustained and successful effort at influencing the vote along their ideological direction.

The power of social media to distort the advantages of the internet was recently acknowledged by the Canadian government, who proposed the adoption of a

²⁶ Macdonald, Neil, "Why is conservative politics such a natural home for white supremacists?" in *CBC News online*, April 16, 2019, available at <https://www.cbc.ca/news/opinion/conservative-politics-1.5099222>, consulted April 19, 2019.

²⁷ Namely, Caylan Ford, who made appeasing postings in support of White supremacists; Jeremy Wong, who supports "conversion therapies" for gay people; Eva Kiryakos, who posted anti-immigrant and anti-gay comments online; Tunde Obasan, who is against gender equality and Grant Hunter, friends with White supremacists. Three more candidates—Leila Houle, Nicole Williams and Lance Coulter—were discovered hanging out and posing for pictures with members of White supremacist group Soldiers of Odin. Among controversy, candidacies of all those people were eventually withdrawn. However, another controversial anti-gay candidate, Mark Smith, retained his candidacy and ended up winning the election in his Drayton Valley riding.

Digital Charter of Rights and Freedoms to legally restrict existing abuses²⁸. Only time will tell if the law is able to curb the enormous potential of social media for political mobilization and manipulation.

²⁸ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/digital-internet-canada-laws-1.5143522>, accessed May 21, 2019