

Topic modelling of Far-right Canadians' tweets on COVID-19

By: Ahmed Al-Rawi, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor,
Director of the Disinformation Project
School of Communication,
Faculty of Communication, Art and Technology,
Simon Fraser University,
8888 University Drive ,
British Columbia, V5A 1S6,
Canada
Email: aalrawi@sfu.ca
Website: www.aalrawi.com
<http://www.sfu.ca/communication/team/faculty/ahmed-alrawi.html>

Extended abstract

In this study, I empirically explore the public discourses around the pandemic by far-right Canadians. I collected 134,739 tweets in September and October 2021 just a few months before the Truckers' protest in Ottawa. These tweets were posted by 14 Canadian far-right sympathizers or supporters, representing all the available tweets (Table 1). Then, I used a Python program to search for words like "*virus*", "covid*", "corona*", and extracted 2,555 tweets. Next, I automatedly analyzed the tweets based on topic modelling, which is a machine learning method (Table 2).

In terms of activity, the independent MPP, Randy Hillier, is the most active in disseminating tweets on the pandemic 42% (n=1081). Incidentally, Hillier's Twitter account was suspended by Twitter in March 2022 for his continuous dissemination of covid-19 conspiracies. This is followed by the White supremacist, Frederick Paul Fromm 17.9% (n=459) and the leader of the People Party of Canada, Maxime Bernier, 13.6% (n=348).

The results show that the major topic discusses Canada that is allegedly turning into a police state with references to Stalinist and fascist measures. This is related to freedom of choice and liberties by emphasizing words like "tyranny" and how the Canadian government is allegedly violating citizens' rights when it comes to the vaccine mandate, mandatory masks, and vaccination passports. Incidentally, the users are allegedly fact checking the public health measures taken by the government and medical professionals, calling them "bogus science". For them, the pandemic is a manufactured scheme aiming at controlling people, and the Canadian government is using "fright tactics" with the help of the news media to achieve its goals. Chart 1 shows the proximity plot or the statistical association between "no more lock downs" (in one word) and other terms. As we can see, the third most connected term is "we are living a lie" (in one word) in reference to the pandemic as a whole, indicating the conspiratorial vision of these users.

The second topic focuses on Justin Trudeau and the Canadian news media with clear anti-Liberal and mainstream attacks and accusations that both are cooperating with China in neglecting the demands of the people.

The third topic discusses how Canadians do not need any government intervention because they are 'healthy' and there are no risks. Vaccines, on the other hand, are allegedly the real risk to the public. There are also many conspiracy theories around ivermectin (n=15) being an allegedly an effective drug to cure the virus. For example, one user retweeted a message stating: "Media Melts Down After Joe Rogan Says He Recovered From Covid in 3 Days After Taking Ivermectin".

The last topic is about public health and aims at casting doubt about Canadian public health policies around the pandemic especially the efficacy of lockdowns, masking, and social distancing. The discussions around this topic revolve around the accuracy of PCR tests and how they allegedly offer "false positive" results which blur the reality of the virus infection rates.

Finally, Chart 2 provides a visualization of the distribution of these topics based on the frequency of the most recurrent words, their conceptual clusters shown in the unique colors, and the strength of association with other terms.

Though the online dataset that I examined in this brief study is taken from tweets posted a few months before the Truckers' protest, we find that many conspiratorial topics and discourses explored here were echoed during the offline protest. This indicates some ideological alignment or affinity between these far-right figures and some of the protesters.

Keywords: COVID-19; far-right; Canada; conspiracy theories; disinformation

Table 1- A detailed list of the tweets posted by far-right Canadian users and sympathizers

No.	Username	Frequency
1.	@AW_HateWatch	9974
2.	@central_cap	7376
3.	@DMillardHaskell	3974
4.	@eurocanadians	1824
5.	@FrommPaul	14310
6.	@JFGariepy	19466
7.	@Lauren_Southern	4538
8.	@MaximeBernier	24638
9.	@Patriot_Gus	2319
10.	@PegidaCanada	18482
11.	@randyhillier	18519
12.	@StuWeC	170
13.	@TheRealKeean	8751
14.	@todd_branscombe	398
	Total	134,739

Table 2- Topic modelling of far-right tweets referencing the pandemic

TOPIC	KEYWORDS	EIGENVALUE
Police State/ Stalinist Tyranny	Stalinist; Medico; State; Police; Control; Big; Masks; Science; Good; Tyranny; Police State; Stalinist Tyranny; Stalinist Police State; Covid Police State; State Control; Adamsonbarbecue A Big Hell; Based on Bogus Science; Enabled Fright Tactics; Imposed on Us By Media; March Masks Did No Good; Restaurants; Revolt Against A Medico;	2.77
Justin Trudeau/ Cdnmedia	Cdnmedia; Trudeau; Cdnpoli; Canada; China; Justin Trudeau; Cdnmedia; Cdnpoli; Trudeau Government;	2.12
Healthy People	Risk; Healthy; People; Tyranny; Politicians; Medico; Healthy People; Healthy Adults; Risk From Covid; Covid Poses; Risk To Healthy; Recovery Rate;	1.60
Public Health/ False Positive	Test; Positive; False; Health; Care; Public; Public Health; False Positive; False Positives; PCR Test;	1.58

