Rebel personalities: Canada's far-right media
by Greg Elmer and Anthony Burton

Abstract
This paper questions the influence of far-right media in Canada in light of the emergence of populist politics globally and the recent (2022) domestic truck protests, occupations and border blockades. In lieu of enumerating far-right activity online this paper questions the impact and funding sources of online influencers and news channels headed by former media and political staff. Canada’s Rebel Media organization has served not only as the leading far-right media hub, but also as an incubator of other personalities that have gone on to create other online news sites.

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Introduction
In a comprehensive review of global political attitudes published by Pew Research, Canada is ranked as a benevolent, liberal, and welcoming nation — a net contributor to world peace and stability (Poushter, 2018). Such public opinion studies are particularly embraced by American researchers and pollsters, keen to gauge international comparisons during turbulent times at home, abroad, or both. America’s search for contrasting values, political leadership styles, government policies, or the political mood, has long turned to a seemingly benign Canada. The Trump presidency and a populist nationalist politics have only amplified this trend.

The 2022 truckers’ protests, border blockades, and weeks-long occupation of Canada’s national capital may however have fundamentally changed international perception of America’s sleepy northern neighbours. Yet in Canada concerns over homegrown forms of online hate, disinformation, abuse, and extremist political activity have been increasing over the past decade. Such concerns led the Trudeau government to establish a series of programs to investigate solutions to such threats (Canadian Heritage, 2021), this on the heels of researchers’ warning of the threat posed by potentially violent far-right groups across the country (Perry and Scrivens, 2019). Given the anonymity of many of these groups, enumerating the scale of extremist far-right politics in Canada has arguably left more questions than answers. Perry and Scrivens’ book-length study of Canadian right-wing extremist (RWE) groups found only small group membership, though they concluded that the risk of violence and other threats were “not negligible”. [1] The recent seizure of a large cache of weapons at a trucker border protest in the
western province of Alberta has unfortunately supported such a claim (Gibson, 2022).

While Perry and Scrivens’ early study incorporated some analysis of RWE on Web sites, a recent report from the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) (Hart, et al., 2021) has since expanded on their study to include an analysis of multiple social media platforms and properties. That report, however, focused more on the challenges of online research than on the presence of Canada’s far-right online. These difficulties are themselves a talking point. Due to the anonymity and instability of far-right groups, some have argued that their pervasiveness or actual threat posed to Canadian society may be overstated (Kay, 2021). Indeed, the ISD report’s focus on counting discrete examples or accounts exhibiting right wing extremism (RWE) also concludes that the “… comparative scale of this activity is difficult to determine” [2].

This is not to downplay the potential threat of RWE activity in Canada, or its potential to disrupt civilian life — a threat only reinforced by recent “Freedom Convoy” trucker protests in Ottawa and at critical border crossings across the country. What these protests have also revealed is the role that conspiratorial narratives — emerging from right-wing media — play in these movements (Ling, 2022). There is arguably a growing consensus that Canada has emerged as a global hotspot for far-right online media, or at least has produced far more influential personalities per capita than other Western countries [3].

This paper then seeks to build upon the previously mentioned research initiatives on Canadian right-wing extremism with a more focused study of far-right opinion leaders and online influencers. Politically speaking, these individuals are obviously not the “political” liberal media, as Trump has framed them, though some self-identify as “journalists”. Rather, in addition to having backgrounds in mainstream media or political parties, these online influencers are more likely to straddle a wide spectrum of conservative political and professional communities, often defending their provocative, coded, and transgressive performance of conservative and far-right opinions as forms of free speech.

While Canadian media producers have been historically overshadowed by powerful American media programming, our paper demonstrates that with the advent of digital streaming platforms and lower barriers to creating digital media properties, Canada’s far-right has cultivated a select number of influential Internet ‘personalities’ — voices that have gone on to make significant contributions to populist far-right politics in the United States and elsewhere [4]. This paper takes up this phenomenon to determine the online reach of Canada’s most influential far-right personalities, comparing their online presence to those of politicians, journalists, legacy media outlets such as the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) and the Globe and Mail national newspaper. The paper builds upon the authors’ recent studies of crowdfunding in politics and Canadian far-right media to determine how such far-right media channels and personalities financially sustain or grow their online operations.

The paper first turns to Twitter to determine which users receive the most mentions from tweets posting about contemporary political issues or well-known national figures in Canada. While an obviously limited and imperfect measure of online popularity, Twitter arguably remains one of the most pluralistic platforms where contemporary political opinions and news reports are routinely posted [5]. We then take the most mentioned far-right figures in this Twitter study and analyze their presence on social media, any previous affiliation with or roles in political parties, and experience with news organizations. This portion of our paper is designed to provide context to these figures, as political interlocutors and online influencers that move in and out of multiple media and political roles. The paper concludes with an analysis of the financial infrastructure of these far-right personalities and their online platforms. Our conclusion highlights how hybrid media-political campaigns are fueled by embedded fundraising campaigns and ubiquitous donation buttons onto pages hosting video content. To provide context for empirical studies of Canadian far-right media, we first begin with a history of the Canadian alternative media landscape, illustrating the unique interplay in Canada between contemporary agitational media, mainstream or legacy media outlets, and the traditional federal political parties.

From the mainstream to online stream: Canada’s far-right media

In their study of the 2016 U.S. election’s media landscape, Benkler, et al. (2018) argue that the far-right news ecosystem that propelled Donald Trump to victory emerged from a combination of two factors: unprecedented private funding and ideological rebellion against traditional news outlets like the New York Times and the Jeff Bezos-owned Washington Post. This combination catalyzed the rise of what Benkler, et al. dubbed an “alternative media ecosystem”, constituted by Web sites like Breitbart and the Daily Caller that produced low-quality yet ideologically rich content for far-right audiences [6]. These Web sites created a highly self-referential media sphere by positioning themselves as an alternative to “elitist” and liberal mainstream media.

Given the amount of funding that has supported the American “alternative media ecosystem” a direct comparison to Canada is difficult. There are no Canadian
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billionaire benefactors like Robert Mercer (owner of Cambridge Analytica) willing to fund the equivalent of Breitbart News [7]. Consequently, Canadian far-right media have grown their operations through online platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook.

These pundits differ from their predecessors through their use of social media. Cunningham and Craig (2017), in their discussion of “social media entertainment”, explained how the media’s form influences its connection with the audience. Distinct from traditional forms like television, social media entertainment fosters a sense of authenticity through its distinctive mode of address. The direct, audience-centric form establishes a dialogic relationship with fans through the latter’s labour investment, on both the affective and relational terms (Baym, 2015; Papacharissi, 2015). Rebecca Lewis outlined the unique nature of this mode and its adoption by bootstrapped political influencers. In her 2020 study of three YouTube-based agitational personalities, Lewis illustrated how this mode of address functions in the far-right political sphere. These far-right pundits focus on differentiating their content from mainstream media, where “certain political influencers have specifically aligned micro-celebrity practices with reactionary, anti-progressive, and frequently conspiratorial politics” [8].

The radical right in North America has historically adopted newer media distribution formats to reach audiences, from Rush Limbaugh’s broadcasting on by-then neglected A.M radio waves in the early 1990s (Rosenwald, 2019) or self-published paperbacks in the 1960s (Hemmer, 2016). Former U.S. Vice President Mike Pence, for example, first rose to prominence hosting an A.M. radio show where he billed himself as “Rush Limbaugh on decaf” (Rappeport, 2016). By contrast, while far-right media in Canada takes pains to position itself against the political and media establishment, it shares roots with one of these (albeit traditionally conservative) mainstream media outlets and their cultivation of on-air personalities. From the outset, the Sun News Network (SNN), founded by Quebecor CEO Pierre Karl Péladeau in 2011, sought to offer a mix of Fox News style opinion programming and anti-establishment rhetoric, often aimed at the CBC and other news outlets. At a press conference announcing the network, former Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s Director of Communications Kory Teneycke offered a laundry list of targets for SNN: they would be “taking on the mainstream media” and its “smug, condescending, often irrelevant journalism. We’re taking on political correctness. We will not be a state broadcaster offering boring news by bureaucrats, for elites, and paid for by taxpayers” (Gohier, 2010). SNN would be “unapologetically patriotic” and “controversially Canadian”, countering the “lefty bias” in traditional Canadian media (Gohier, 2010). When the channel launched, its opening content embraced a bevy of national symbols: after playing a video of “O Canada” against a backdrop of maple leaf flags, mounted police, and ice hockey superstars, Sun News Network host Krista Erickson announced that her own show, “Canada Live”, would be a contrarian take on the day’s news events before ending the channel’s introductory segment by introducing the channel’s crown jewel of programming. “The Source”, an opinion show hosted by Ezra Levant, was the flagship program for one of the Canadian far-right’s leading gadflies [9]. Levant, along with a host of others who became on-air personalities for SNN, were already writers for the company’s Sun chain of newspapers: for example, on the day of the launch Erickson was introduced to Sun newspaper readers as a “SUNshine girl”, the full page glamour photo of women that dates back to the Toronto Sun’s launch in 1971 (McKeon, 2011).

After nearly four years, over $C46 million dollars of losses, and a refusal on the part of Canada’s broadcasting regulator to mandate cable television providers to include the channel in basic packages, Sun News Network closed in early 2015. Just a day after the demise of SNN, Ezra Levant released a YouTube hosted video announcing his online news outlet Rebel Media (Faguy, 2015) [10]. Rebel Media began with Levant and former SNN host Brian Lilley at the helm, but the channel quickly took a tack that proved too extreme. Lilley, upon his resignation in 2017, explained:

I am not comfortable being associated with … a group that, rightly or wrongly, is being increasingly viewed as associated with the likes of [neo-Nazi and coiner of the term “alt-right”] Richard Spencer. Like many of you, I had family that fought the Nazis, I never want to be in the same room as one. I am also not comfortable with the increasingly harsh tone taken on issues like immigration, or Islam. There are ways to disagree on policy without resorting to us versus them rhetoric (quoted in Houpt, 2017).

While Levant sought to distance Rebel Media from these associations with the American alt-right after a white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, additional resignations followed, signaling the potential departure of Rebel Media from mainstream conservatism [11].

While members of the Rebel with establishment conservative ties quickly flew the roost, others were not so quick to move on. Ezra Levant’s career has an improbable parallel in one of Canada’s most internationally recognized far-right voices, the co-founder of VICE and self-anointed “godfather of hipsterdom” Gavin McInnes. McInnes, who has been contributing to Rebel Media since 2015, is perhaps now best-known as the founder of the “Proud Boys,” a “fraternal order” whose dictates include “minimal government, maximum freedom, anti-political correctness, anti-racial guilt, pro-gun rights, anti-Drug War, closed borders, anti-masturbation, venerating entrepreneurs, [and] venerating housewives” (The Elders, 2017). While the Proud Boys garnered their own fair share of publicity, it was in a manner much different from what shot him to fame in the first place: VICE News grew into US$2.5 billion dollar business by 2015, while the Proud Boys were designated a “hate group” by the Southern Poverty Law Centre (SPLC) and a “Terrorist entity” by the Canadian government (Jacobs, 2021).
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Since this time, McInnes has gone back and forth dissociating himself from the group in a manner not unlike his frequent departures and returns from another digital media company of a slightly different flavour: Rebel Media. In 2017, McInnes left Rebel Media but reappeared in 2019 as the character “Miles McInnes”, a satirical millennial character whose video titles include “Celebrate Pride Month by Going Gay!” (Rebel Media, 2019).

While McInnes’ global importance for the far-right is likely unparalleled, Rebel Media under Levant’s leadership has steadily emerged as an incubator for far-right personalities, many of whom have gone on to develop their own online channels and brands. Lauren Southern for example would amass a loyal following on her YouTube channel, and would receive long form attention from influential mainstream magazines like the Atlantic intrigued by her Toronto condo lifestyle and dates with a neo-Nazi boyfriend (Lombroso, 2020). Faith Goldy used her role as on-air host at Rebel Media to normalize white supremacist voices, though she was shortly thereafter fired after appearing on a podcast for a neo-Nazi Web site (Goldsbie and Gordon, 2017). Goldy would later run for mayor of Toronto advocating the monitoring of Mosques and police carding (Budd, 2018). The self-proclaimed “Albertan Nationalist” Keean Bexte would leave Rebel Media to found The Counter Signal, a site that draws on a mix of platforms to channel far-right critiques of government.

While each of these far-right personalities have seen their audiences grow online, there are no studies that quantify their potential reach and influence. Are their channels and voices largely marginal in Canada’s media landscape? Do they only speak to their own followers? To identify some of the more successful and influential far-right personalities the paper conducted a study of Twitter mentions, as but one measure of online influence, to contrast with legacy media and politician accounts. Since the study represents only a snapshot in time, it does not purport to be a comprehensive investigation of the totality of far-right personalities in Canada, or obviously historical trends [12]. Rather by providing a one-time snapshot of popular voices, this work lays the groundwork for a more fulsome analysis of the common and divergent backgrounds, media strategies, and funding sources of some far-right personalities.

Legacy media, far-right media

While Canada lacks the deep pockets of a Fox News or the upstart One America News Network (OANN), our research shows that far-right personalities and their media outlets in Canada — at least on popular Internet platforms such as Twitter — are reaching audiences almost as large as those of legacy broadcast news media such as the Canadian Broadcast Corporation (CBC), CTV, and Global. To determine the popularity of legacy media channels and far-right online media celebrities we collected tweets posted in the fall of 2019 from the month of June through the aftermath of the year’s federal election in October. The tweets were collected using the Twitter Capture and Analysis Toolkit’s capture module, which collects all tweets that appear under given search terms (Borra and Rieder, 2014). The search terms were accumulated using the snowball method: beginning with a week’s sample of tweets that mentioned the accounts of Canadian federal political parties and their leaders, the most popular hashtags and users mentioned in this sample were then added to the final query collection for capturing (see the Appendix for search terms) we found that far-right media outlets and personalities received 10 percent of all tweets mentioned compared to 17 percent for mainstream or so-called legacy media organizations (see Figure 1 for the raw numbers).
While the raw numbers from our Twitter sample help to contextualize the popularity of far-right voices in general, we next ranked the popularity of specific accounts to determine the owners of the accounts. Returning to our Twitter sample we ranked the top 50 most mentioned accounts, visualized in Figure 2.
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Figure 2: Top 50 most mentioned Twitter accounts.

Note: Larger version of Figure 2 available [here](#).

Figure 2 shows that far-right media personalities and media channels constituted 20 percent of the top 50 most mentioned Twitter accounts. Notably, Rebel Media’s founder Ezra Levant (second from the left on Figure 2) received more mentions on Twitter than any legacy media accounts with the exception of CBC News. Other far-right personalities, such as Spencer Fernando and Manny Montenegrino, also received mentions on Twitter that rivaled mainstream media accounts.

Compared to legacy media, social media is highly personalized. Individuals maintain control over their tweets and their accounts often include personal information, affiliations, and other profile-like information. Communications on Twitter, particularly when combative, tend to be personalized, that is directed against the individual account holder. Schmidt (2014) has referred to this form of communication as “personal publics”. Our findings further support this characterization of Twitter — since far-right personalities receive comparatively more mentions than some legacy media accounts, including the Toronto Sun and CTV News. What’s more, our research also found that far-right personal accounts received far more mentions than their own institutional media accounts. Indeed, we previously noted Rebel Media’s early efforts to support the personal branding of their own online hosts and personalities.
But beyond this question of personal branding, and of personal publics in general on Twitter, there remains the question of far-right politics, and methodological considerations when categorizing our Twitter account holders. What makes a far-right personality? In response to this question, the following section offers a more qualitative analysis of our top five far-right media personalities, noting where they affirm and potentially diverge from Perry and Scrivens’ definition and characterization of extreme far-right politics.

Far-right personalities

Given his longstanding status as the chief agitator of the Canadian far-right, it is not surprising to find Ezra Levant — former Sun News host and co-founder of Rebel Media — among the most mentioned Twitter accounts in our sample. Levant ranks above many legacy media outlets and journalists, including his former SNN partner and Rebel Media co-founder Brian Lilley and the editorially conservative Toronto Sun newspaper. Indeed, Levant received nearly three times more Twitter mentions than his media organization’s account @RebelNewsOnline reaffirming the power of personalities online.

While not as high profile as Levant or as active in building far-right news channels in Canada, former lawyer to Prime Minister Stephen Harper, our next account holder Manny Montenegrino received considerable attention on Twitter for his controversial statements. During the writing of this paper Montenegrino’s account was under suspension from Twitter, making it difficult to highlight his statements. But his Instagram account provided insights on his politics. One shared image, a screenshot of a YouTube hosted video of Donald Trump, exclaims “Trump is still the REAL PRESIDENT of the people” while a series of other images sought to undermine the efficacy of COVID vaccines (Montenegro, 2022). While Montenegrino has not spun his popular far-right commentary on Twitter into an online media Web site or channel he is a favourite guest of Rebel News’ flagship The Ezra Levant Show. Montenegrino’s role as an influencer is largely restricted to this role as lawyer. He is often brought onto Levant’s program to offer legal interpretations and support to Levant’s outrage on a range of topics, mostly typically targeting opposition to fossil fuel critics, environmentalists, and members of the Trudeau government.

Another regular guest on The Rebel, Spencer Fernando, uses his Twitter account to mock the federal Liberal government while pushing Conservative party policy further to the right. A regular contributor to The Western Standard and The Post Millenial, Fernando does not shy away from controversial statements that dismiss the significance of racism in Canadian society, as was recently evidenced in a recent Twitter post (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Spencer Fernando Twitter post.
Fernando was however not always associated with the far-right, in 2014 he was dumped by the Manitoba Progressive Conservative Caucus for a blog post supporting an inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, supporting Pride celebrations, and ending the war on drugs (Fernando, 2014). He later worked as chief of staff to Rana Bokhari, then leader of Manitoba’s Liberal party. After departing the Liberal leader’s office his blog posts shifted in tone and started to emulate content commonly associated with Trump supporters: “October Surprise: FBI Opens New Probe Into Clinton Emails” and “Hungary’s PM Compares EU to Soviet Union” (Fernando, 2016). A recent post compared vaccine mandates to WWII opposition to Nazi Germany and the cold war battle with the Soviet Union (Fernando, 2021b).

While sharing a degree of popularity on Twitter, our next account holder W. Brett Wilson stands distinctly apart from all other far-right personalities in our Twitter influencer study. Wilson is not associated with Rebel Media, nor does he have any obvious political or partisan links. Wilson’s inclusion in our Twitter influencer study however reminds us that far-right ideologies and personalities are clearly not monopolized by Rebel Media, or restricted to the dark Web, 4chan, 8chan, and other obscure and insular spaces on the Internet. Rather, Wilson is among the most well-known Canadian entrepreneurs, largely due to his stint as a judge-investor on CBC’s entrepreneur-pitch reality television program Dragon’s Den. In 2011 Wilson received one of the country’s highest civilian honours, the Order of Canada (Office of the Secretary to the Governor General, 2012). Wilson is, in short, not a marginalized or “fringe” Canadian personality.

After leaving the Dragon’s Den however, Wilson’s online comments have become increasingly controversial. While he apologized for online remarks directed at Calgary mayor Naheed Nenshi, widely interpreted as racist (Gibson, 2020), Wilson’s Twitter account continues to offer a bevy of offensive comments on a litany of issues. In just one day in August 2021 for example, Wilson referred to Liberal supporters as “morons”, referred to French speaking Canadians as an “interest group”, and responded to Liberal Minister Omar Alghabra (a Canadian and Syrian citizen) posting that “He doesn’t appear to understand English” (Figure 4).
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While not as highly ranked in our sample as Levant, The True North’s founder Candice Malcolm was also included in our top 50 most mentioned Twitter accounts. Malcolm currently writes for SUN News as a columnist and has spent a total of 19 months working in politics, six months as an aide for Alberta’s Wildrose party in 2011 and then 13 months as the Premier of Alberta’s press secretary (Malcolm, 2019). She has also spent time with a bevy of right-wing Canadian think tanks and policy groups like the Canadian Taxpayers Federation and the Canadian Global Affairs Institute. Early in her career Malcolm attended the Koch Summer Fellow program and the Fraser Institute.

While Malcolm holds some mainstream conservative views and alliances, she has also maintained a steadfast focus on the dangers of immigration. In 2018 the Sun newspaper was forced to issue an apology after she claimed an Iman had a history of supporting terrorism. Malcolm’s previously published book on multiculturalism and immigration was given promotional space in mainstream Canadian publications such as Policy Options but was heavily criticized in the same publication for lacking evidence, with the review noting that it read more like “a rant than a critique” (Griffith, 2016). While engaging in questions of policy the book is largely motivated by concerns over the changing ethnic makeup of Canadian society. Like others on the far-right, Malcolm has also recently posted tweets undermining the significance of COVID-19 and vaccination efforts in Canada.
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Self-proclaimed Alberta based “journalist” and “freedom lover” Keean Bexte, formerly of Rebel Media, was also highly cited in our Twitter study. Bexte straddles the line of gadfly and stalker journalist, though he also reportedly admitted to working for an online company that sold flags and paraphernalia appropriated by white supremacists (Seatter and Milton, 2018).

Much like Levant, Bexte’s videotaped interviews and questioning of politicians also include swipes at the “mainstream media”, and persistent claims of being excluded from media pool events. Bexte’s videos are performances meant to provoke a sense of exclusion from the mainstream. On Twitter Bexte frequently directs uncivil and hyperbolic comments at politicians and journalists accounts. On 29 July of this year he referred to Trudeau as a “dictator”, asked a journalist if he had a vasectomy, and directed the following abusive tweet to former Health Minister Patty Hajdu:

![Candice Malcom Twitter post.](image)

**Figure 5:** Candice Malcom Twitter post.
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Summary of personalities

Our review of far-right personalities on Twitter, while just a snapshot in time, has clearly demonstrated that audiences are flocking to Internet accounts with a history of posting uncivil, xenophobic, and abusive content online. While some of these personalities claim to have been marginalized by legacy or mainstream media and other liberal elites, our research shows that on the Internet at least, these personalities compete for attention with the CBC, CTV, Global, and other national news outlets. This is particularly significant given that recent studies estimate nearly half of Canadians receive their news primarily from online platforms (Charlton and Leclair, 2019).

Part of the power of these far-right voices is their ability to speak to multiple audiences, and to have access to legislators and established media organizations.

Figure 6: Keean Bexte Twitter post.
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They gain such influence, in part, from their backgrounds. All of our personalities, save Wilson, have experience as political staffers and advisors — though as we’ve already noted Wilson received one of the country’s highest civilian honours (Table 1). Perhaps more striking though is the degree to which our most popular far-right personalities are connected to one online media outlet, Rebel News. Four of the five individuals have had — or continue to have — close associations with Rebel Media. Both Keean Bexte and Candice Malcolm worked as on air personalities, while Spencer Fernando and Many Montenegrino regularly appear as guests on Levant’s Rebel News programs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personality</th>
<th>Web site</th>
<th>Social media</th>
<th>Rebel Media</th>
<th>Politics</th>
<th>Other media</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manny Montenegrino</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Instagram, Twitter (suspended)</td>
<td>Regular guest</td>
<td>Former Conservative Party lawyer</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spencer Fernando</td>
<td>spencerfernando.com</td>
<td>YouTube, Twitter, Instagram</td>
<td>Regular guest</td>
<td>Former Manitoba Liberal, Conservative staffer</td>
<td>Western Standard, The Post Millennial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W. Brett Wilson</td>
<td>In progress</td>
<td>YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, Twitter</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Dragon’s Den (CBC), National Post</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keean Bexte</td>
<td>The Counter Signal</td>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>Former staff</td>
<td>Former Conservative staffer</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candice Malcolm</td>
<td>True North Centre/TNC.news</td>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>Former staff</td>
<td>Former Conservative press secretary</td>
<td>Sun Media columnist</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unlike the United States, where far-right personalities, online media channels, and Web sites have been referred to as “pipelines” (Benkler, et al., 2018) that send users to ever more radical and toxic content and opinions, these findings suggest that Rebel Media may serve as a far-right personality incubator in Canada. While these former Rebel personalities have moved on to host their own online programs and platforms, we can also see that they draw from the very same audiences. Figure 7 shows a ranking of the top mentioned domain names (Web sites) among those that included @RebelNewsOnline in their tweets [13]. Perhaps not surprisingly the top mentioned Web pages and videos were hosted on the Rebel Media Web site, a finding that highlights the self-referential nature of social media channels. The ranking also reaffirms our previous conclusion that the Rebel’s former staff and likeminded far-right personalities are regularly promoted by Levant’s followers and online audiences. Commonly cited Web sites are few, with the CBC receiving practically no mentions by comparison.
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Figure 7: Top mentioned Web domain names among Rebel Media tagged tweets [14].

The financial infrastructure of far-right media

While some social media companies have chosen to “deplatform” or otherwise suspend some far-right personalities for their controversial, harmful, and toxic posts, our research has found that a bevy of technologies designed to support fundraising and other forms of media financing remain accessible to all on the Internet, including our personalities under study.

The funding of far-right personalities and their digital media channels is particularly germane given the tactics used by far-right personalities designed to cause offense, troll, or stage conflicts that are later used to solicit funds from viewers and readers. In other words, conflict is staged to both reaffirm specific political issues, while also serving as a rallying call for the funding of such media. The use of such provocations has also led to the proliferation of lawsuits, which again serve as fodder for further fundraising. Indeed a 2013 profile, Ezra Levant recounted that “he has lost track of how many his legal representatives are currently fighting” (Gatehouse, 2013).

There are of course limits to the power of personalities, regardless of their bluster. Our final study (Table 2) details how both far-right personalities and the most prominent media channels studied in this report fund their ongoing operations. There is a noticeable lack of explicit advertising on Web sites, though personalities and channels receive funds from YouTube’s embedded advertising network. Estimates of Rebel Media’s income from YouTube ranges from Can$5,000–Can$23,000/month, though the Post Millennial by comparison comes in much lower at roughly Can$100/month (Noxinfluencer, 2022; Youtubers.me, 2021; Net Worth Spot, 2022).

Almost all personalities and channels prominently highlight their calls for donations and reaffirm the independence that such funding affords. Different levels of membership or subscriptions are also used to entice audiences to contribute financially. Three media channels run online stores. Of all the far-right personalities and channels analyzed, only Rebel Media made liberal use of crowdfunding techniques.

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Table 2: Funding of Canadian far-right media.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rebel</th>
<th>Post</th>
<th>Proud</th>
<th>TNC.news</th>
<th>Spencer</th>
<th>The Counter</th>
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Rebel Media’s donate button leads to a page where viewers are asked for one time or monthly contributions in cash or cryptocurrency, facilitated by Apple Pay, Google Pay, and Internet e-transfer (Rebel Media, 2021a). An add-free subscription prompting exclusive member only programming runs from Can$8/month to Can$250/year (Rebel Media, 2021b). An online store features T-shirts that mimic Trump’s critiques of American democrats (including a MAGA T-shirt with maple leaf), merge the Rebel Media and bitcoin logo, and likens COVID-19 to George Orwell’s 1984.

Fundraising is a particularly robust component of Rebel Media’s revenue stream. Their profiled stories, highlighted through their programs, are often coupled with fundraising campaigns. For instance, a story detailing the arrest of a New Brunswick pastor charged with not enforcing COVID related laws leads readers to a petition and a “Save Pastor Phil — Legal Fund”. Upon closer inspection though donations are channeled to a registered charity named “The Democracy Fund” (Rebel Media, 2021c). Earlier in 2021 Levant posted a video promoting the launch of the fund, though Rebel Media also noted that “If you prefer, you can still contribute directly to Rebel News” (followed by a link to the donation page) (Rebel Media, 2021d). The fundraising appeal thus blurs the line between funds for Rebel Media, one of their COVID related campaigns “Fight the Fines”, individual stories broadcast by Rebel Media, and funds for specific individuals the application of COVID related laws.

While Rebel Media commonly refers to their “crowdfunding campaigns”, and clearly utilizes the power of their online audience to spread the work on their funding endeavours, their fundraising is based on their own Web site, not crowdfunding platforms like GoFundMe. We did however find a number of “proxy” campaigns launched by unknown individuals fundraising for Rebel Media’s Democracy Fund on GoFundMe (Brodeur, 2020). One such campaign for example acknowledges the Rebel’s financial support for their cause while launching their own call for funds (Zeng, 2021). Thus while Rebel Media does not directly fundraise on crowdfunding sites, their audiences and supporters have begun to echo and parlay the outlet’s fundraising campaigns on GoFundMe.

By comparison, Canada Proud’s homepage is dominated by subscription and donate buttons. The site claims that it is entirely funded by donations and that “...Canada Proud reaches more people on Facebook each week than the CBC and Toronto Star.” The donation page which remains focused on the defeat of Trudeau some weeks after the 2021 federal election reminds the reader that it is a “registered non-profit” and that “every dollar you donate will be used to fund our mission of defeating Justin Trudeau in the next election” (Canada Proud, 2021) Like Rebel Media, Canada Proud also offers an online store, mostly selling branded T-shirts, to partially fund their operations.

Compared to Rebel Media, Candice Malcolm’s True North News (TNC), offers a rather sparse set of funding mechanisms. There are no advertisements on the site, and no evidence of systematic crowdfunding or other ongoing fundraising campaigns except for a subscription and donation styled membership, which runs from a suggested Can$10 to Can$500 monthly ongoing donation. The site’s store is also rather modest, yet again maintains the focus on Malcolm as a personality. The store offers four books for sale, three of which are authored by Malcolm, the only other, on pulse weaponry is penned by Sun columnist Anthony Furey.

Spencer Fernando’s Web site is the only one reviewed that included advertisements and commercial appeals from common Canadian brands such as the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Media</th>
<th>Millennial</th>
<th>Network</th>
<th>Fernando</th>
<th>Signal</th>
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<tr>
<td>Donation via Web site</td>
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<td>yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Subscription</td>
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<td>no</td>
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<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Store/Merchandise</td>
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<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crowdfunding</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Stripe</td>
<td>Stripe</td>
<td>In-house</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Rebel Media’s donor button leads to a page where viewers are asked for one time or monthly contributions in cash or cryptocurrency, facilitated by Apple Pay, Google Pay, and Internet e-transfer (Rebel Media, 2021a). An add-free subscription prompting exclusive member only programming runs from Can$8/month to Can$250/year (Rebel Media, 2021b). An online store features T-shirts that mimic Trump’s critiques of American democrats (including a MAGA T-shirt with maple leaf), merge the Rebel Media and bitcoin logo, and likens COVID-19 to George Orwell’s 1984.
supermarket chain Loblaws, Stack TV, Peoples Jewelry, and cell phone provider Koodoamog, among others. On his donation page Fernando opposes government funding for media and calls upon the “Patriotic Canadian' to contribute in order to “... help preserve and promote the fight for the truth” (Fernando, 2021a). Fernando runs a monthly subscription account, but its 26 listed patrons would not seem to factor as his main sources of revenue. That said, his site remains rather modest, and reads more like a blog, heavily promoted to his 20,000 followers on Facebook.

Keean Bexte’s The Counter Signal, while linking to his more active YouTube and Facebook accounts, also calls for monthly donations and-e transfers on his site. Like Rebel Media, Beeexte also includes the donation information in the margins of his posted stories (Bexte, 2021).

Given the emphasis on donations and other online forms of fundraising, the personalities discussed in this paper are forced to engage in an online battle for attention, a process that has led to increasingly divisive and toxic forms of communication. Such inflammatory content, often highlight in video titles or other prominent online spaces, also mirrors the general trend to visually highlight explosive and often misleading “clickbait” language to encourage users to engage further in stories (Munger, 2019). While there remain some connections to more mainstream versions of conservative journalism and revenue streams, particularly the Sun newspaper, these personalities have had to cull together a mix of platforms, payment systems, and communication strategies to fund their operations.

Determining the exact source and amount of funding for these channels and personalities however remains imprecise and incomplete. YouTube revenues are imperfect estimates based on imprecise calculations of online audience engagements. Some of these personalities likely also receive income from speakers’ fees and other promotional and contractual engagements. Levant, for instance, reportedly asks upward of Can$10,000 for lectures [15]. We would anticipate that the cultivation of online personas would be a contributing factor in far-right personalities acquiring such contracts.

By comparison, our study of far-right personalities and channels clearly identified a worrying trend in far-right media — the mixing and blurring of fundraising, legal challenges and lawsuits, and so-called news. This begs the question, to what degree are these three practices now reliant upon each other as fuel for success? While many of these far-right voices bemoan the bias of mainstream media, particularly those that receive public funding, the reliance upon conflictual frameworks and processes (lawsuits) and socially networked supporters lends itself to emotional appeals and strongly held opinions and grievances.

Conclusions

While many voices on Canada’s far-right criticize their marginalization from the mainstream media, our research has shown that their most popular personalities gain as much attention and mentions on the Internet as legacy media journalists and channels. It remains to be seen however how visible such content is for more mainstream audiences — or outspoken critics of the far-right — given the rather insular nature of Twitter conversations at least. Part of the success of such personalities lies in their mobilization of content across Internet platforms, including those that facilitate financial support. Unlike most progressive voices in Canada, the far-right, especially those associated with Rebel Media, have emerged as social media experts or “influencers” with wide name recognition. This study concludes that the power of individual far-right voices is not an accident, much like mainstream and legacy media news, the far-right has promoted a relatively small set of individuals, some with their own branded channels, others with their own programs, and still others who seek to develop a unique persona and style. Given the lack of a major “mega-funder” or established broadcaster, our paper’s findings may start to explain why some have suggested that Canada’s far-right has gained an ‘oversized’ prominence internationally from the small but supportive set of online networks and infrastructures. In short, the Canadian far-right has gone online, and has worked harder and been more successful at creating branded personalities and content.

Our focus on the success of a small group of online personalities, supported by our Twitter research, offers important insights on the far-right’s role in personalizing politics. The focus on individuality, personal voice, and the freedoms associated with political speech are all valued and essential components in a free society. Yet, as has been detailed here, Internet-based communication is distinctly and intensely competitive and attention-seeking. While conflict has always been a key component of media agendas, the personalization of Internet voices has also served to channel, promote, and amplify sharp personal exchanges and insults. Yet this personalized politics, which can lead to more overt forms of online stalking, doxxing, and abuse, is not particularly emblematic of the far-right personalities under study here. Nor are our popular personalities to be understood as right-wing extremists per se. Rather, our paper first hypothesized and now concluded that our far-right personalities walk a fine line between civil forms of political critique, and of course free speech, while also maintaining clear populist and far-right agendas that exhibit forms of nationalist sentiment, cultivate a questioning of immigrants, and undermine COVID-related science.
Part of this posturing is due to the tensions between social media’s ostensibly democratic visibility and these influencers’ exposure to potential censorship. When pundits such as Lauren Southern and Faith Goldy moved on from their days at the Rebel, they suffered cutoffs from income supplies — Southern has since been banned from Patreon and demonetized by YouTube (Gordon, 2017), while Goldy was banned from Facebook in 2019 (Hensley, 2019). The rhetorical strategy of our sampled figures, then, is partly designed to avoid these bans. By positioning themselves as less extreme than figures like Goldy, our sampled platforms (and their visible personalities) remain accessible to audiences while being able to drive users to their own Web sites and spaces. The comparatively “lighter” right-wing extremism of our sampled figures, then, is influenced by what has been established as permissible speech by mainstream platforms (de Keulenaar, et al., 2021).

Given their ongoing links to mainstream conservative voices and institutions, our findings suggest the need for further research on popular opinion leaders online, their impact on more radical ideologies on the fringes, and conversely in mainstream political parties and media. Our snowballing method of collecting a rather sizable number of Twitter search terms may admittedly need refinement, particularly for those future research projects that seek to determine the influence of far-right online personalities in relation to particular issues. One of the most repeated targets of the far-right in Canada is the current Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. Images broadcast from trucker convoy protests across the country highlighted the venom directed toward the PM, as represented in rather abrupt and profanity laced posters and bumper stickers. Our findings suggesting a rather small and self-referential set of Web sites among Rebel Media “fans” would seemingly reaffirm this future approach, where a study might more accurately trace the radicalization of the far-right among more cohesive, issue, and “target” focused online users (Neville and Langlois, 2021).

Lastly, our study of funding sources of Canadian far-right media also reaffirms the conclusion of our Twitter-based studies; namely that Rebel Media serves as a central informational node on the far ideological right in Canada, while also serving as an incubator of online personalities. The funding study suggests that while some deplatformed media channels have migrated to ideologically favourable properties, others such as Rebel Media have taken advantage of a robust crowdfunding and fundraising infrastructure that remains readily accessible across the Internet. Content wise, the ‘native’ fundraising infrastructure of Rebel Media further raises important questions about the campaigning function of this purportedly journalistic property, and subsequently the role that provocative and shocking commentary plays in driving not only eyeballs to Rebel News but also a steady stream of funding.

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Notes


3. For a helpful definition of far-right ideologies see Perry and Scrivens (2019), where they identify a common set of qualities such as appealing to nationalist sentiments, xenophobia/racism, and anti-democratic values. (pp. 4–5). A recent report by Davey, et al. (2020) found over 6,000 “right-wing extremist channels, pages, and accounts across 7 social media platforms…” (p. 5).

5. Though Murthy (2018) also notes that this dynamic has also led some to question whether “Twitter is threatening freedom of the press and democracy” (p. 14).


8. Lewis, 2020, p. 3.


10. Rebel Media has also been periodically referred to by its staff and others as The Rebel and Rebel News, but for the sake of simplicity we will just use the one term throughout the paper.

11. The National Post, widely recognized for its conservative editorial positions and columnists, referred to The Rebel in an article detailing the fallout after the departure of Lilley, Barbara Kay, and John Robson as “an ultra-conservative online Canadian media outlet” (Humphreys, 2017).

12. Because of our focus on the individual celebrity culture that drives much of the alt-right’s online popularity in Canada and the period in which this study was conducted, there are two large organizations that this study leaves unexamined. The Proud Network, led by former Harper aide Jeff Ballingall, is the umbrella organization that runs the popular social media pages Canada Proud (over 250,000 followers on Facebook) and Ontario Proud (over 440,000), among others. The Post Millennial, with just over 90,000 followers on both Twitter and Facebook, runs a generic hard-right beat fear mongering immigration, transgenderism, and antifa, and regularly finds its articles reposted on the Proud network (Ballingall joined the publication in 2019 as its “Chief Marketing Officer”). The two properties provide much of the fodder for followers of Canada’s alt-right mediascape, with the Proud Network essentially an astroturfed version of an amateur meme page and the Post Millennial providing a legitimate-appearing specialist on issue concerns. While Ballingall’s ties to both are clear, he remains behind the scenes on both, and neither pages emphasize the personality-driven approach of the Web sites that this study focuses on.

13. For the three-week period of 1 July to 19 July 2019.

14. These are the top four-most popular URLs amongst Rebel audiences on Twitter in the three-week period from 1 July to 21 July 2019.


References


Rebel personalities: Canada's far-right media


Rebel personalities: Canada's far-right media


Appendix: Search terms for data

Rebel personalities: Canada's far-right media

by Greg Elmer and Anthony Burton.

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