

Truck Fudeau: Algorithms, Conspiracy and Radicalization

Truck Fudeau: *algoritmos, conspiración y radicalización*

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 public health mandates used in Canada and elsewhere proved to be potent measures for radicalizing new groups to right-wing ideas and gatherings, as well as for broadly mainstreaming anti-government and anti-media rhetoric. This is visible online on the sites of some influencers who have waged a battle against COVID-19 mandates, and in real world protests such as Canada's Freedom Convoy, an event that culminated in a three-week occupation of Canada's capital, Ottawa, from January 29 through February 20, 2022. The movement had some appeal beyond its core groups and picked up momentum as time went on. The rise of right-wing populism in Canada is a result of multiple factors, but in this article, we will limit the purview to how an anti-vax and anti-mandate movement served to radicalize newcomers to a position antithetical to that of public health authorities and mainstream opinion, and also how this ideological struggle was mobilized and received via algorithm-driven online media.

Key words: algorithms, conspiracy, radicalization, Canada, convoy, COVID-19, anti-vax, vaccine mandates.

RESUMEN

Las disposiciones sobre salud pública respecto al COVID-19 que se emitieron en Canadá y en otros países constituyeron fuertes medidas para que nuevos grupos con ideas derechistas se radicalizaran y agruparan, así como para extender la generalizada retórica antigubernamental y contraria a los medios de comunicación. Esto se puede apreciar en línea en los sitios de algunos *influencers* que han librado una batalla contra las medidas que se tomaron respecto al COVID-19 y, en el mundo real, en protestas como el llamado Convoy de la Libertad de Canadá, un evento que culminó en una ocupación durante tres semanas de la capital del país, Ottawa, del

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29 de enero al 20 de febrero de 2022. El movimiento tuvo cierta influencia más allá de sus grupos promotores y perduró mucho después del lapso en que tuvo lugar. El ascenso del populismo de derecha en Canadá es resultado de múltiples factores, pero en este artículo nos limitaremos a ver únicamente cómo un movimiento antivacunas y antiordenamientos sirvió para radicalizar a quienes hubieran sido neutrales, para hacer que adoptaran una posición antitesis contra las autoridades de salud y la opinión mayoritaria, y también cómo su lucha ideológica fue movilizadada y recibida vía algoritmos dirigidos por los medios en línea.

Palabras clave: algoritmos, conspiración, radicalización, Canadá, Convoy, COVID-19, antivacunas, disposiciones sobre la vacuna.

Unpopular COVID-19 public health measures used in Canada and elsewhere proved to be potent measures for radicalizing new groups to right-wing ideas and gatherings, as well as for broadly mainstreaming anti-government and anti-media rhetoric. This is visible online on the sites of some influencers who staked their credibility on waging a battle against COVID-19 mandates, and in real world protests such as Canada's Freedom Convoy, an event that culminated in a three-week occupation of Canada's capital, Ottawa, from January 29 through February 20, 2022. The chattering classes tried to explain this movement away as a plot organized by right-wing agitators that united malcontents, kooks and lost souls looking for meaning in the midst of chaotic times. However, the reality was that the movement had some appeal beyond its core groups and picked up momentum as time went on. The rise of right-wing populism in Canada is a result of multiple factors, but in this article, we will limit the purview to how an anti-vax and anti-mandate movement served to radicalize newcomers to a position antithetical to that of public health authorities and mainstream opinion, and also how this ideological struggle was mobilized and received via algorithm-driven online media. Of particular interest is the seemingly ironic alliance between the anti-government right wing with a new-age, homeopath-oriented community already wary of, or opposed to vaccinations.

This paper is written, on the one hand, for an audience of media educators, and, on the other, media ecologists. Trying to make sense of the events of early 2022 as refracted through the complex prism of traditional and social media, both juked by algorithms, presents some challenges and limitations for media literacy. Entrenched positions that we see present between those who favor the convoy and those who condemn it do not enhance the conditions of dialogue necessary for sharing critical frames and heuristics. In fact, a tug of war over the concept of "critical thinking" is part of the struggle here. The anti-vax opinion leaders, some aligned with anti-woke

sentiments, claim to be critical thinkers who are awake, unlike “sheeple” who are asleep. Thinking critically and skeptically is the province too of media education, so there is a disconnect between the word and its application. Today, it seems, those who think critically are those who one agrees with. We conclude the article with some remarks on the potential for online radicalization in the current context and the resultant challenges for media literacy.

As much as we seek answers to how the convoy coalitions formed and were sustained, there is another animating concern present in this article which is the paradigmatic shift that we are living through in the production, reception and circulation of information. A media ecologies perspective necessitates attention to the wholesale change to the media environment while steering clear of technological determinism where we confuse the aha moment with fundamental changes in communication. Thus, we will consider separately 1) datafied social media; 2) widely held conspiracies; and 3) incipient and latent populism. While seeking a road map through the informational chaos at the heart of the convoy, we will set some parameters in order to distinguish between technology (media), stories (conspiracies), and political formation (populism) as evidenced in an analysis of the online discourse and activity associated with the anti-vax movements and the Ottawa protests. We need to live with the complexity between media, conspiracy and populism. It is not enough to talk in a vacuum about algorithms and new media as though they alone were responsible for the instability in truth and meaning we can identify today. Nor is it sufficient to isolate the human tendency to story to seek meaning in the face of chaos and change. Finally, it would be a type of counter-conspiracy to try to pinpoint the source or leaders of the populist discontent as though there is a cabal of master-puppeteers responsible for the circus. In this paper, we make a modest and perhaps at times messy attempt to draw these three spheres together.

THE TECHNOLOGY: DATAFIED SOCIAL MEDIA

An internet search shares some characteristics of a slot machine; push the button and see what comes out. If you are lucky, your stars will align, and an adequate response to the question behind the search terms will emerge. Left to our own devices—without information gatekeepers and knowledge brokers—and aided by coded response mechanisms conditioned by algorithmic formulas and the clicks of millions of other users, we are inserted into a world of information chaos where ideas compete for attention like so much clickbait. Whether there was ever a time of enduring trust during the era of one-way information flow associated with newspapers, publishing

houses, radio and television, the idea of a common public sphere upon which it depended has increasingly been eroded since the advent of a participatory web 2.0. Social media had its heady participatory culture moment in the early days of the 21st century, but it has been, to a significant extent, eclipsed by the data-driven micro-targeting of data capitalism and also hijacked by malevolent actors intent on using the web's potential for persuasion and manipulation to their ends (Wylie, 2019; Berners-Lee, 2019).

At this point, we have enough experience with the outrage machine of the internet that the circulation of extreme ideas hardly raises an eyebrow. The internet is the *agora* of the current moment, and one of the main arbiters of internet discourse is a series of long strings of AI code, governed by a thin regulatory framework managed for the most part voluntarily by a small number of information mega-corporations. Media companies have always viewed their audiences and packaged their programming to correspond with our tastes and interests in an ongoing feedback loop and that continues in the era of data capitalism (Cheney-Lippold, 2017; Bucher, 2018). In this datafied age of digital media, every interaction with media devices, platforms and programs is registered and indexed into dynamic databases which enable persuasion on a meta-level in a manner that has come to impact decision making on an epic scale. Examples include the Brexit decision in the UK and the election of Donald Trump in the US (Wylie, 2019). As has been amply demonstrated, echo chambers form quickly around certain questions and concerns we may have, limiting access to differing and opposing views (Rhodes, 2022; Tufekci, 2015). This is an algorithmic response to our web activity and of those who have followed similar paths down the Internet rabbit hole.

As much as algorithms have come to direct and channel our access to information, our information environments remain highly populated with human agency (Laterza, 2021). Drawing on the work of mathematician David Sumpter, who sought to measure the impact of datafied research in the promotion of Donald Trump by Cambridge Analytica, Vito Laterza underscores the human factor in the equation. Ideas and provocations circulating online don't just emerge out of a vacuum from an information slot machine, or of "data alchemy" (Laterza, 2021), but rather they have an origin that is authored, programmed, amplified and circulated by other people. First, are a wide range of knowledge producers—who may work for established media, emergent internet media, alternative media, cultural spheres, NGOs, corporations, governments, or underground troll farms, and create media content, whether print, visual, audio or a combination of these. Some of these "knowledge producers" work consciously to foment discord, doubt and disinformation. Second, are programmers and algorithm developers who enable the flourishing of certain voices,

ideas, and communication modalities, on the one hand, or censor, minimize, deprioritize and shadowban people and ideas on the other. And, third, are amateurs like us, alongside potentially 7 billion people and your Uncle Frank. End-users play a key role in creating and circulating content, which combines with the media content of the knowledge producers to shape the raw material that is reframed and sorted by algorithms. We might mistakenly circulate misinformation; knowingly spread disinformation; deliberately provoke anger through outrage farming; clog the pipes with fuzzy kittens and fart jokes; or diligently maintain a narrowcast media studio of our own.

The information casino typical of the internet today churns out different outputs to different end-users based on their previous web activities, those of their friends, and those of others like them. Algorithms don't simply circulate those ideas and personas that we have selected ourselves, but rather they suggest or impose new content upon us that may broaden our horizons but is often targeted to agitate and anger us in new ways. All media consumption and production involves some kind of a reflection, selection, and a deflection of reality (Burke, 1966) and two-way social media have contributed to an erosion of trust in media and a return to the cultural and rhetorical conditions of suasion (Hoechsmann, 2019). Despite their prevalence and the intensity of their use, social media have proven to be unreliable information sources, though relationships (family, community, affinity groups, etc.) reignite the conditions of trust which can make social media effective for localized information sharing (Sterrett et al., 2018). Algorithms are new and little understood, which adds to the difficulty of confronting or channeling them to social outputs that are ethical and horizontally shared (O'Neil, 2016; Bucher, 2018).

THE STORY I: THE GREAT RESET

The World Economic Forum (WEF) and its annual conference in Davos have long been understood as the beating heart of neoliberal capitalism. For a rapidly growing portion of the public in North America, typically associated with anti-vaccine and anti-mandate movements, it has become the beacon of The Great Reset, a sinister plot to quickly impose an eco-fascist, surveillant supra-state upon citizens of a large number of world nations. Fanning the flames of this "theory" are great numbers of internet users, but also certain celebrity opinion leaders or "new age influencers" such as JP Sears (2021) and Russell Brand (2021). Alongside other high profile media pundits such as Fox News' Tucker Carlson and internet radio guru and author Glenn Beck, Sears and Brand promote the idea that a cabal of "globalist" politicians and corporate leaders including Justin Trudeau, Joe Biden, Bill Gates and George

Soros and Davos founder Klaus Schwab are in the process of a takedown of Western democracies and the mass appropriation of all material possessions of citizens, in favor of debt servitude in a surveillant New World Order which surpasses even China's social credit system by imposing biopolitical bondage, initiated through a program of digital IDs and mass vaccination. The BBC published some data analytics that show the circulation of 10 million great reset posts and tweets between June 2020–May 2021, starting in June 2020 when Prince Charles narrated a video called #TheGreatReset (The Royal Family 2020) and reaching its apex in November of 2020 after a Justin Trudeau video extolling the strengths of, and need for, a great reset (*Global News*, 2020).

The Great Reset is the background story that motivates many of the anti-vax groups who have formed to protest against vaccines and vaccine mandates, tools put in place by governments to restore the social and economic functions of societies that have been ravaged by the COVID-19 pandemic. When Justin Trudeau said to a virtual gathering of the UN in September 2020 that “this pandemic has provided an opportunity for a reset,” alarm bells went off in the Twittersphere. It was pointed out widely that Trudeau had taken the Global Young Leaders training offered by Davos and Schwab, and this new damning evidence surely indicates that he is a foot soldier for Schwab's designs on a global takeover. Missed by the great reset conspiracy theorists is the second part of the statement where Trudeau explains that “this is our chance to accelerate our pre-pandemic efforts to reimagine economic systems that actually address global challenges like extreme poverty, inequality and climate change” (Smyth, 2020).

The WEF is ambitiously pushing the great reset as a post-COVID change agenda that aligns with the UN Sustainable Development Goal to eradicate global poverty by 2030 (United Nations, n. d.). WEF leadership is forthright and direct about its proposed agenda which should interrupt business as usual with new models that can make radical change to the treatment of human and natural environments. Saadia Zahidi, the Managing Director of WEF, says that “if we want to change where the focus of our recovery will go, then we need a new dashboard for the new economy that needs to encompass people, planet, prosperity and institutions” (World Economic Forum, 2021). The first of eight predictions of the future in 2030 released by the WEF, “you will own nothing, but you will be happy,” has been adopted as evidence of evil intentions by those convinced that the great reset is the thin edge of an Orwellian new world order (World Economic Forum, 2017). The slide, which features a smiling young male, is drawn from a video no longer available on YouTube in English (but in circulation in Spanish), providing conspiracists more evidence that

something sneaky is going on. Ida Auken, a Danish Social Democrat who favors circular economic models where items are shared, was the author of the prediction as part of an anecdote describing a future city:

Welcome to the year 2030. Welcome to my city - or should I say, "our city." I don't own anything. I don't own a car. I don't own a house. I don't own any appliances or any clothes. It might seem odd to you, but it makes perfect sense for us in this city. Everything you considered a product, has now become a service. We have access to transportation, accommodation, food and all the things we need in our daily lives. One by one all these things became free, so it ended up not making sense for us to own much. (Auken, 2016)

According to Auken, she wrote this futuristic blog to "start a discussion," not as a "utopia or dream of the future [but] a scenario showing where we could be heading—for better and for worse" (Auken in Reuters, 2021).

THE STORY II: INFLUENCERS AND THE GREAT RESET CONSPIRACY

The Great Reset has taken on a life of its own among anti-vaccination groups and is discussed and deconstructed in depth by some popular and prominent pundits such as Russell Brand and J.P. Sears. The anti-vax movement has not been waiting for these opinion leaders to share these insights, but rather traces a long history in alternative communities associated with homeopathy, unschooling, alternative lifestyles and a tendency toward leftist political orientations. This older anti-vax tradition is bolstered by a claim to purity and the "natural immunity theory": that barriers to germs, like physical distancing and masks, weaken our immune system. Vaccines are just one more synthetic loaded gun aimed at our immune system" (Jarry, 2020). In the time of public health measures and mandates that limit activity for those not immunized against COVID-19, this same social grouping has proven prone to conspiratorial thinking, aligned with right-of-center discourses such as The Great Reset. Influencers like Brand and Sears are representative samples of the angry hippie, shouting out their positions on vaccine mandates, state control and global domination. Their identically-titled online videos on YouTube and Facebook, "You will own nothing, and you will be happy? The Great Reset," have been viewed at least 2.5 million (Brand) and nearly 5 million times (Sears). Beyond their prominence as high-end clickbait, the wide circulation of these videos demonstrates the receptivity of people to the plausibility of these theories of a mass takedown of Western countries by a global cabal led in most scenarios by Schwab and a cabal of others including Bill

Gates, George Soros, and some prominent politicians that include Joe Biden and Justin Trudeau.

The “Awaken with JP” portal has 3 million followers on Facebook, 2.44 million on YouTube, 1 million on Instagram and 125,000 on Twitter, making it safe to say that JP Sears is a popular influencer on multiple platforms with significant reach. Using parody, hyperbole and sarcasm, Sears employs humor to target lighter topics including the over-stated benefits of coconut oil and gluten-free diets to more serious issues including vaccinations, systemic racism and democracy. In keeping with his constant attacks on liberals more generally, and “nursing-home resident” Joe Biden in particular, Spears aligns with a conservative, right-leaning agenda. He mocks body positivity, ridicules the LGBTQ+ community, and rants against mask wearing, among other issues. While his sharp tongue and over-the-top performances are well suited to the comedic nature of viral content, his performance supports his entrepreneurial sideline as a purveyor of holistic products and life coaching services. At the end of a rant on the travel mask mandate, for example, he introduces a teeth-whitening product by sharing “statistics I’m about to make up,” followed by an actual pitch of the product. His body-building, health-focused angle appeals to the ultra-masculine subsector of the American right, while his long hair, cross-dressing, and spiritual-health message is more aligned with a historical left perspective. His new-age influencer recipe reaches a wider audience, leveraging emotional content to catapult viewership into the hundreds of thousands.

Russell Brand presents a different flavor of paranoid hippy influencer content for consideration. With 5.5 million followers on Facebook, 5.55 million on YouTube, 2.8 million on Instagram and 11.1 million on Twitter, it is clear Brand has successfully curated a social media following of substantial proportions. A crossover between book tuber, online therapist and journalist, he too sports a rebellious hipster manne and promotes “Freedom” on branded T-shirts available for purchase online. Brand, like Sears, encourages a spiritual “awakening” for listeners who subscribe, and promotes approaches to well-being and self-care, as well as meditation. Brand also self-promotes at the end of his segments, but rather than pushing a sponsored product, he pushes further engagement with his own content. Brand is not a doctrinaire alt-right character like Sears, and he has interviewed and praised a number of left-of-center and dissident writers such as Naomi Klein, Henry Giroux and Edward Snowden. Like American rogue-right podcaster, Joe Rogan, Brand has forged a politically promiscuous brand that makes his pivot towards the World Economic Forum and Great Reset surprising, but only to some extent. The reach of his messages and his eclectic political past make him a prime candidate to carry the anti-vax, anti-World Economic Forum message.

THE STORY III: READING THE NEWS ON FACEBOOK

Misinformation and disinformation are a problem on social media, and they were a problem in newspapers, radio and TV well before Facebook was even a glimmer in Mark Zuckerberg's eye. The difference now is that this one newsstand serves almost 3 billion people (Meta, 2022), with algorithms in place that determine what news should be given top priority. Those priorities are driven not by journalistic rigor or a track record for ethical representation but by a corporate model that privileges obsession and "engagement"—attracting users and keeping them there. Rather than a traditional media offering, where content is massified, Facebook curates a special collection of material just for "you," driven by algorithms shaped by your previous habits, interests, clicks and shares, and then aggregated with other users with similar search habits. According to a study executed by Pew Research Center in 2020, Facebook stands out as a consistent source of news for around one-third of Americans, more than any other platform (Shearer and Mitchell, 2021).

While Facebook's algorithm-driven newsfeed provides news drawn from a diversity of media sources that range from Adbusters and Al Jazeera to Fox News and Breitbart, amateur narrowcasters— us!—play a vital role as creators and circulators of content. Studies show that familiarity with the sender of a particular news item enhances trust in its veracity (Sterrett et al., 2018). The emotional appeal of media content is key to its success on Facebook and ensures a spreading effect according to Davis and Graham, "studies indicate that information diffusion is consistently tied to emotional arousal, with varying effects of emotional tenor across contexts" (2021). Some posts are more emotionally engaging than others and it appears that populist appeals to a coming conspiratorial take down such as The Great Reset are highly volatile.

Despite claims that conservative voices are filtered or censored on social media (Vogels et al., 2020), the opposite is true, that in fact such voices are highlighted and accelerated. A Facebook executive interviewed by *Politico* indicated that "right-wing populism is always more engaging," and evokes "an incredibly strong, primitive emotion" by touching on emotional touchstones such as "nation, protection, the other, anger, fear" (Thompson, 2020). Kevin Roose, a technology columnist for *The New York Times*, points out:

Facebook is not a giant right-wing echo chamber. But it does contain a giant right-wing echo chamber — a kind of AM talk radio built into the heart of Facebook's news ecosystem, with a hyper-engaged audience of loyal partisans who love liking, sharing and clicking

on posts from right-wing pages, many of which have gotten good at serving up Facebook-optimized outrage bait at a consistent clip. (Roose, 2021)

Given a feedback loop that reinforces engagement through emotional appeal, it is no surprise that algorithms have been programmed to favour such material. Ex-employee Adam Conner told *Politico* that “Facebook is not a mirror — the newsfeed algorithm is an accelerant” and that “it’s absurd for Facebook to say this is just something that’s playing out in a neutral way. This feels like an abdication of responsibility” (Thompson, 2020).

Pushing back at facile technological determinism, Chris Bail argues that social media functions less like a mirror and more like a prism, refracting our identities into a distorted representation of reality that favors extreme views and exaggerated perspectives. Drawing upon multiple research studies, Bail found that even when social media might provide exposure to opposing viewpoints, study participants tended to seek out—or pay attention to—similar perspectives as their own to insulate themselves from criticism and doubt. Rather than a passive social media audience that bathes itself in non-threatening content, Bail describes an active audience that uses social media as a space of identity building, to “present different versions of [them]selves, observe what other people think of them, and revise [their] identities accordingly” (2021: 20). While it is clear from reports made by whistleblower Frances Haugen, formerly a data scientist at Facebook, that the company was made aware of serious concerns, the drive to maximize profits seems to trump any attempts to safeguard users of the platform. Testifying in front of the U.S. Congress, Haugen explained, “The result has been more division, more harm, more lies, more threats and more combat. In some cases, this dangerous online talk has led to actual violence that harms and even kills people” (Allyn, 2021). U.S. Senator Richard Blumenthal, chair of the congress subcommittee that held the hearing, projected some doubt as to a quick fix when he stated: “I hope we will discuss as to whether there is such a thing as a safe algorithm” (Allyn, 2021).

To gauge the incoming tide of toxic content rising to the top of Facebook’s never-ending feed, we ran a small search exercise to test this theory. Our approach was simple: each co-author used their own Facebook page to perform a search for the phrase “The Great Reset” and documented the results. The search was done in the last week of April 2022. The top ten search results were noted and investigated further, focusing on “pages” for the sake of consistency and leaving out sponsored content including ads, products and articles. The results included a list of public groups, public profiles, and community pages (Figure A). Half of the listings in both search groups contained anti-vaccination content. This is remarkably high when

you consider we are searching from Canada-based locations, where the vaccination rate is over 82 percent, (Government of Canada, 2022). The algorithm does seem to consider location, for example, suggesting in both of our lists Derek Sloan, a relatively low-profile Conservative politician based in Ontario. The Facebook algorithm appears to have a built-in system to provide further information about vaccinations, presumably to fight misinformation, which states, “Visit the COVID-19 Information Centre for vaccine resources.” Five listings out of the 20 had posts which were flagged by Facebook as containing “False Information: Checked by independent fact-checkers” or “Missing Context: The same information was checked in another post by independent fact-checkers.” In our view, it is problematic that the search algorithm provides pages containing misleading or false information within the top 10 list of *any* search, when misinformation and disinformation are a clear cause of concern.

A formalized study was executed by Facebook with similar findings, communicated in a report titled “‘Carol’s Journey’: What Facebook Knew about How it Radicalized Users” (Zadrozny, 2021), yet not much seems to have changed since. A researcher at Facebook created a fake profile defined as Carol Smith—a Trump supporter who liked whichever groups were suggested by Facebook’s recommendations (Tiffany, 2021). In under a week, Carol was pushed towards communities focused on QAnon conspiracy content. Thousands of internal documents including these concerns were disclosed by Haugen to Congress in the summer of 2021 (Perrigo, 2021). According to Haugen, although “Facebook has publicized its work to combat misinformation and violent extremism relating to the 2020 election and insurrection . . . in reality, Facebook knew its algorithms and platforms promoted this type of harmful content, and it failed to deploy internally recommended or lasting countermeasures” (Mac and Kang, 2021). While it would appear fairly straightforward to downgrade the position of false and misleading information when it has been fact-checked, tweaking the algorithms does not always provide the expected result. Even when studies observe social media behavior after an algorithm has been purposefully tweaked to favor upvoted rather than downvoted material—which means giving more attention to the posts that were garnering positive attention, and less attention to posts that were getting numerous “dislikes”—the downvoted material still thrives (Davis and Graham, 2021). While algorithms are an important piece of the puzzle in the spread of misinformation, disinformation, and hate online, altering them may not alone provide a suitable solution.

Figure A

Title	Members Likes or Friends	Extracted quotation	Content in 10 most recent posts						
			COVID Denial	Anti-vax comment	FB "Get Vaccine Info"	FB False Info Warning	FB Content Missing Warning	Freedom	WEF
The Real Great RESET	822	"We have to choose: OUR Real Great RESET or THEIR Fake Great RESET."	x	x	x	x		x	x
The World Economic Forum	11,100	"...for all those who are interested in how the world economy works..."							x
The Great Reset	149	"They are taking complete control over our lives in every aspect."	x	x	x			x	
The Great Reset	3,002	"I believe scripture encourages us to be alert not fearful!"		x					x
Your Liberty Project	33,112	"The Great Reset or just a coincidence? 🤔"		x			x	x	
The GREAT RESET	1,684	"A Spiritual Podcast, promoting love, healing, wisdom, and other philosophical subjects."		x	x				
Derek Sloan, Conservative	97,000	"Leader of the Ontario Party"			x			x	x
The Great Reset	90	"It's time to RESET... see you tonight cola."							
The Great Reset	373	"Are you ready for the great global reset, coming to a Village, Town and City near you"							
Stu Burgeiere	143,972	"The Glenn Beck Program, Stu Does America"		x	x				
The Great Reset	978	"A place to post positive changes to the world and society..."							
The Real Great RESET	822	"We have to choose: OUR Real Great RESET or THEIR Fake Great RESET."	x	x	x	x		x	x
The Great Reset	149	"They are taking complete control over our lives in every aspect."	x	x	x			x	
Your Liberty Project	33,112	"The Great Reset or just a coincidence? 🤔"		x			x	x	
Derek Sloan, Conservative	97,000	"Leader of the Ontario Party"			x			x	x
Individual	NA	"Engineer, game developer and US Army combat veteran fighting the "Great Reset" ..."	x	x	x	x		x	x
Conservative Freaks	32,000	"We're Christian Conservatives, we LOVE America..."						x	
Individual	2,400	"I don't do vibrating, frequency raising, or hopium."							x
Individual	144	"Over the Road Truck Driver"							
Alexandr Dugin, Politician	19,000	"From here -- monopoly, World Government, Great Reset, cancel culture, wokeism..."							
Collective Totals / 20			5	10	9	3	2	11	7
			% 25%	50%	45%	15%	10%	55%	35%
Yellow listings were repeated in both lists									

Source: List of top ten results generated by Facebook on the words "The Great Reset." Blue categories indicate captions and warnings flagged by Facebook algorithms and fact-checkers. Table by Miranda McKee.

**THE POLITICAL FORMATION:
#TRUCKFUDEAU @FREEDOMCONVOY22**

The story of the occupation of downtown Ottawa in February 2022 by an alliance of truck owners and a cross-sectoral collection of people fed up with vaccine mandates dominated the headlines in Canada and became international news, resulting in some mimicry elsewhere and a lot of admiration from anti-vaxxers and right-wing agitators, including high-profile opinion leaders such as Fox News anchor Tucker Carlson and former U.S. President Donald Trump. In Canada, there was a lively and highly polarized debate between those in favor of the occupation and those opposed.

As much as each side wanted to reduce the other to a simplified version of its complexity, these were coalitions or alliances rather than discrete, identifiable groups. Much has been said and written about the core groups that made up the Freedom Convoy, including prominent right-wing activists; our interest is in the second layer, those people that joined the convoy as the days and weeks proceeded, including those who appeared predisposed to making the conversion, taking the red pill, or being awakened. The terms red pilling and awakening are widely used to describe the perspective of those who discover new-found clarity to see the social, economic and political order differently than before.

The Freedom Convoy was made up of core groups of organisers who were experienced not only in generating and maintaining the kind of publicity needed to bring diverse groups of people together in a shared cause, in this case occupying a core part of a Canadian city in the heart of winter, but also the logistical abilities to keep this project rolling. The eclectic coalition that made up this protest included “physical economy” workers—oil patch workers, truck owners, truck drivers, former first responders, former military personnel, and disaffected workers from multiple sectors—and also some from the “laptop economy,” a distinction that had been made in the press to describe the economic sectors differently impacted by COVID-19 mandates and shutdowns. Ottawa streets, particularly those concentrated around Canada’s parliament buildings, were blockaded by heavy trucks and a network of tents and other temporary structures were added to give the occupation a village feel and to feed and support a large network of volunteers and participants. Notably, alongside the industrial gridlock of the long lines of trucks, many idling and spewing diesel fumes, there was a festival environment set up where music, speeches, games, playgrounds, and even hot tubs were used to provide fun and entertainment to the assembled crowds that grew substantially on weekends when an ever-growing number of converts would stream in to take in the event, blow off some steam, and typically vent some outrage at the prime minister.

Politics of outrage fueled the event, directed primarily at Justin Trudeau and the World Economic Forum, but more generally at vaccine mandates, vaccines and the restrictions that were commonplace through the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic. This outrage galvanized a movement made up of disparate groups who brought forth a bricolage of dissatisfactions from the “physical economy” that include general economic decline, Wexit (separatist) concerns from the Alberta oil patch (that reveal a deep divide over the question of climate emergency), and nostalgia for a prelapsarian past (that conceals a lightly veiled white supremacy). Alongside these more activist groups, was a coalition of more spontaneous adherents who were made up of the welcome wagon of small-town support along the route of the convoy as it wound its

way to Ottawa, disaffected young people, and an eclectic grouping of new-age and alternative health community members. Many of the spontaneous convoy supporters were drawn into protest for their shared anti-vax and anti-mandate positions, seen to be stretched to the limit by a number of decisions of the federal government that limited mobility and access to those who were not vaccinated for COVID-19. The apparent outliers from the more traditionally right-wing members of this coalition were members of alternative health communities drawn to the conflation of the convoy's mantra of "freedom (from)" with their long-term scepticism towards Western medicine in general, and vaccinations in particular.

Preliminary results from a study we conducted of Twitter posts during and after the Ottawa occupation show a pattern of associations that leads from basic assumptions that were prevalent previous to the online radicalization. Taken from a series of keywords drawn from news articles on the convoy, associated Tweets were aggregated and categorized using sentiment analysis. These tweets were drawn from a time period ranging from January–August 2022. The keywords included: vax, vaxx, sheeple, vaccine injury, shedding, needle, crunchy (as in granola), big pharma, choice, freedoms, and plandemic.

The categories we identified are mapped on a diagram (Figure B) that demonstrates interrelationships that were present, either due to proximity in a Twitter thread or the use of shared hashtags and other keywords. At the center of our plotting are two linchpin categories: "vaccines can be dangerous" and "my freedom is at stake." We then tried to identify common points of entry, or the "gateway drug." This would be a starting point previous to a total shift of perspective, an awakening or red pill experience. Some of the gateways include: "leader is dumb," "if you're vaccinated, why do you care if I'm not?" "pandemic is over, why bans?" "natural medicine" and "our bodies have natural immunity," and "respect choice." The linchpins such as "vaccines can be dangerous," the "healthy antivaxer anecdote," and "my freedom is at stake," were intermediary steps verging on a change of perspective. Red pilling begins to register in associations with "these bans are basically segregation" or "(vaccine) shedding is the real pandemic." This stage includes a strong antipathy for any official accounts, such as "they are fudging the data" and the "leader is lying."

Figure B



Source: Results of Twitter content analysis, January–August 2022 using seed words vax, vaxx, sheeple, vaccine injury, shedding, needle, crunchy, big pharma, choice, freedoms, and pandemic. Content analysis and data visualization by Bhargavi Kumaran.

Our preliminary analysis of these tweets needs to be extended across a deeper data pool and followed up with interviews of convoy participants. Nonetheless, this pattern of tweets is suggestive of the relationships between prevalent concept/beliefs and points us toward the kind of slippages in reasoning that fueled some of the outrage behind the Freedom Convoy protests. Most interesting to note is how the points of entry and linchpins demonstrate the inclusion of differing groups within the convoy coalition. In particular, the merger of a type of neoliberal individual rights perspective (“my freedom is at stake”) with a new age, always already anti-vaxxer positionality (“vaccines can be dangerous”). Both perspectives lead, eventually, to the conclusion that the data is being manipulated and the leaders are lying, central claims by the Ottawa Freedom Convoy. From there, it is a side step to adopting the

mantra that mainstream media (MSM in the words of the protesters) is coordinated and manipulated by those in power, thus eroding the space and potential for investigative journalism to continue to flourish.

CONCLUSION

The environment that has led to this profound distrust of the mainstream media is also one of significant upheaval in media environments. Over the past twenty years, the way in which people receive knowledge, information and the news of the day has changed dramatically. In *The Cult of the Amateur* (2007), a controversial screed at the time against the heady optimism of early web 2.0 participatory culture, Silicon Valley veteran Andrew Keen argued that newsrooms and news media would be profoundly impacted by the rise of amateur citizen journalists and bloggers, precipitated also by the decline of the economic model that had sustained news gathering. The primary target of people's anger at the convoy was Trudeau, but the mainstream media was seen to be in cahoots with the government and not to be trusted. Instead, other media ecosystems filled the void, including hastily produced newspapers such as *Pandemic Papers* and the already existing *Druthers*.

Creative and persistent use of social media was also central to the success of the convoy, facilitating the spread of core ideas and increasing the base. "Do your own research" is a mantra of the protestors who suggest this is the way to awaken oneself to what is really going on, and not to be swayed by the mainstream media. Given the way that algorithms function by associating future findings with previous content, doing one's own research on social media is likely to result in more of the same content, and yet given that social media companies set algorithms to keep users scrolling, mild content often yields to more spectacular content. Memes in circulation mocked Justin Trudeau, and there was a particular focus on his ill-chosen term for the protestors: a "fringe minority with unacceptable views." When the convoy was forced to decamp after the federal government invoked a special Emergencies Act, the sleeper cells returned to their home bases around the country, whether in truck stops or health food shops. What was remarkable with the convoy is the unexpected alliances that gelled around the anti-mandate theme. The resulting polarization of the Canadian body politic continues after the convoy protests, each side arguing the other is to blame.

It is too late to stem the flow of disinformation in the digital environments of late capitalism (Crary, 2022), and hence it is vital to continue to develop media literacy awareness and ability. Strategies such as fact-checking, cross-referencing, and identifying credible sources provide some defense against the emotional pull of fake news and may

be the only credible approach to battling the radical algorithms we currently face. However, cases such as the Freedom Convoy demonstrate that media literacy has an uphill battle ahead due to several factors. For one, right-wing populists—following the lead of Donald Trump—have waged an ongoing campaign of encouraging distrust of the mainstream media. Second, challenging long-held belief systems such as a distrust of vaccinations, and the corporations behind them, is not a small case of misinterpretation, but rather goes to the bedrock of some people’s belief systems. Third, the formation of algorithm-driven echo chambers reinforces confirmation biases and provides a continual source of further evidence of anything one wants to prove to believers and disbelievers on a daily and even minute-by-minute basis (as in the case of the highly popular practice of “doomscrolling”). To defend against disinformation, we need robust regulatory frameworks, but also a population with critical media literacy skills (McDougall, 2019), though, in some cases, this is not enough.

The vaccination debate is ample proof that some beliefs are deeply rooted and rational discourse does not always win the day. Media literacy is a necessary support to critical consciousness and awareness in the 21st century, but people will differ on core issues. The solution, when possible, is dialogue across divergent perspectives. That being said, in the face of information overload, the organized chaos of the internet, real-life consequences of echo chambers, alternative facts, and a total loss of confidence in shared truths, media literacy must be increasingly accorded recognition as a necessary life skill for individuals, communities and nations.

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