

Special Section: Alt-Rights in Canada

Introduction

Ganaele Langlois & Natalie Coulter, *York University*

Greg Elmer, *Ryerson University*

Fenwick McKelvey, *Concordia University*

Over the past two decades, new political formations combining populism, neo-fascism, extractivism, racism, misogyny, homophobia and transphobia, white supremacy, and ultra-nationalism have stormed the globe. These new political formations have been grouped together under the nebulous denomination of *alt-right* (Ganesh, 2020; Gray, 2018; Salazar, 2018; Woods & Hahner, 2018). The term began as an act of political branding by white supremacist Richard Spencer (Bar-On, 2019) to normalize his extremist politics. Allum Bokhari and Milo Yiannopoulos (2016), early adopters of the term, described the alt-right in Breitbart News as an anti-establishment and “amorphous movement” (para. 2) comprised of dark intellectuals, conservatives, and meme makers.

In the U.S., we can trace the arc of these new anti-establishment grassroots and party-established movements from the rise of the Tea Party in 2008 to the election of Donald Trump in 2016 and the storming of the U.S. Capitol in January 2021. Canada is not exempt. A recent international report found that Canada is a world leader in online hate (Davey, Guerin, & Hart): the Proud Boys started in Canada, and while the populist People’s Party of Canada (PPC) did not win any seats in the latest federal election, it gained momentum and legitimacy in the current fractured pandemic context, garnering five percent of the popular vote. Recent media coverage of abusive anti-Trudeau protests drew yet more media attention to PPC leader Maxime Bernier.

Bernier’s media persistence exemplifies an important link between the alt-right and media tactics explored in this special issue of the *Canadian Journal of Communication* (CJC). The leader of the PPC excelled as an edgelord of Canadian politics, pushing intentionally at norms and laws to be rewarded by extensive Canadian media coverage and a strong fan base online. To many, Bernier’s small

but persistent support as well of his vitriol against Prime Minister Justin Trudeau might seem an anomaly, but as this special issue makes clear, the alt-right is not only a problem in other countries, such as the U.S., Brazil, or Hungary, but very much plays an influential role in Canada.

In response to this rise, there is an ongoing and active research agenda in mapping extreme right and hate groups in Canada, particularly through the Centre on Hate, Bias and Extremism at Ontario Tech University. Such research has rightly noted the long history of racist and hate groups in Canada and the ongoing structural injustices perpetrated against Indigenous peoples, immigrants, and Black communities. This special issue focuses on one key aspect of alt-right communities in Canada: their media and communicational presence. While the alt-right in the U.S. has seen its views propagated by specific legacy media (e.g., Fox News) and has benefitted from the financial support of private figures (e.g., the Koch Brothers), in Canada, alt-right media are by and large inhabiting social media platforms and benefitting from distributed forms of support. Key alt-right media players, such as Ezra Levant, moved to social media, where their online audience is comparable to those of legacy media such as CBC, CTV, and Global. Levant's network, Rebel News, has launched numerous alt-right figures, becoming an incubator for a certain kind of media celebrity status important to the alt-right globally.

The articles in the special issue explore how alt-right movements in Canada have gained legitimacy and visibility and have had an undeniable affective impact in the shaping of new and disturbing political imaginaries. They explore the alt-right as a media ecosystem and demonstrate how a combination of social media logics related to the attention economy and algorithmic filtering combine with mainstream media coverage, on-the-ground events, and demonstrations to provide multiple ways for the alt-right to gain a foothold in the national and global political consciousness.

The novelty of the alt-right and its media sophistication has challenged the design of a special issue itself. We have elected not to publish an entire issue but a series of smaller sections about the alt-right in forthcoming issues of the journal. This first section marks the first entry into questioning the mediation and mediatization of the alt-right, which forthcoming sections will elaborate on, specifically exploring:

- Spreadability and virality by examining the circulation of alt-right media objects—such as memes, hashtags, slogans, and so on—and understanding the algorithmic and user practices that make these objects gain in visibility and at times become central discursive components.
- Hate campaigns and violent political polarization through the interplay of online discourses and actions and on-the-ground events, which feed the construction of political imaginaries articulated around the positions of victims, enemies, aggressors, and defenders.

- Methodological and research considerations, especially understanding the risks and ethics that research into polarized and at times violence-prone communities present for researchers, as well as how to understand user cultivation into more and more radical alt-right discourses and actions.
- Political economy and platform analysis of the alt-right, particularly with regards to making use of grassroots organizing and funding tools in combination with the algorithmic logics of visibility and attention in both mainstream and alternative social media platforms in order to gain momentum and media presence.

This first issue begins our discussion of the alt-right with five articles exploring facets of the alt-right's media praxis. **Marc Tuters** and **Anthony Burton** analyze the alt-right's rhetorical style, honed on the Rebel's YouTube channel. Reflecting on a confrontation at an alt-right rally in Hamilton, Ontario, **Steven Neville** and **Ganaele Langlois** map the "enemy imaginaries" uniting the alt-right at the rally and beyond. The mediatization of currency matters for the alt-right, as **Greg Elmer** and **Sabrina Ward-Kimola** uncover in the political fundraising on GoFundMe during the 2019 federal election. **Ahmed Al-Rawi** focuses on Telegram, an important emerging platform for the alt-right, and the use of emojis to circumvent conventional content moderation. Finally, **Tanner Mirrlees** finds the transnational far right and Islamophobia readily on Twitter, where #removekebab tweets justify anti-Muslim violence, a tragic reminder of acts of hatred and murder against the faith in Canada.

We finished writing this editorial in the week following the 2021 federal election. PPC leader Maxime Bernier's loss did not cause him to vacate the political stage; instead, he took to Twitter on September 23, 2021, to dox three journalists, encouraging followers to play some "dirty tricks." The move should come as no surprise, as *doxing* and *brigading* are known media tactics of the alt-right (Tenove, 2020). And yet, both journalism and the research field itself have only begun to reflect on their relations to the alt-right. Indeed, any form of critical public inquiry and scrutiny into the alt-right carries actual risks. Too often, people doing research into the alt-right, be they journalists, citizens, or researchers, become the target of vicious online and offline harassment (Allison, 2020; Frangou, 2019; PolCommTech, 2021; Veletsianos, Houlden, Hodson, & Gosse, 2018). As research funding bodies such as the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada and Heritage Canada ask researchers to conduct public research into threats to democracy, there is a need to recognize systemic research risks (American Association of University Professors, n.d.).

We are happy to launch this issue with new *CJC* guidelines for authors about how to protect themselves from harassment resulting from research activities and

how to address it if it does occur. As the document makes clear, academic institutions and units should be doing much, much more to proactively protect researchers. Too often, researchers are made to bear personal responsibility for being attacked. We hope this special issue demonstrates that combatting the complex mix of extremism, polarization, mis- and dis-information, conspiracy theories, and white supremacy that surfaces through the alt-right requires new forms of systemic supports for engaged research.

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Ganaele Langlois is Associate Professor at York University. Email: gana@yorku.ca . **Greg Elmer** is Professor at Ryerson University. Email: gelmer@ryerson.ca . **Fenwick McKelvey** is Associate Professor at Concordia University. Email: fenwick.mckelvey@concordia.ca . **Natalie Coulter** is Associate Professor at York University. Email: ncoulter@yorku.ca .

Website

Centre on Hate, Bias and Extremism, <https://socialscienceandhumanities.ontariotechu.ca/centre-on-hate-bias-and-extremism/index.php>

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