

Introduction: Connection Issues

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As we write this introduction for the second instalment of alt-rights for the *Canadian Journal of Communication*, trucks roll across Canada as part of a “Freedom Rally.” What do we make of the latest catalyst for increasingly far-right politics in Canada—embraced by conservative politicians, “freedom lovers,” and vocal anti-vax movements? Can we find meaningful politics uniting fans of the rally that, for some, could mimic the January 6, 2021, attacks on the U.S. Capitol Building (Woolf & Bryden, 2022)?

Perhaps we might look at its disconnections. The Canadian Trucking Alliance, the organization that speaks for professional drivers, has denounced the protest (McKeen & Leavitt, 2022). GoFundMe has withheld the rally’s funds until the organizers disclose how the funds, which near \$4.5 million at time of writing, will be spent (McGregor, 2022). Most striking, the Rally’s first day coincides with Canada’s first National Day of Remembrance of the Québec City Mosque Attack and Action Against Islamophobia. These disconnections seem as important as claims to the convoy’s coherence.

This second instalment looks closer at the disconnections and connections of the alt-rights in Canada. What connects the alt-rights in Canada, if anything, remains contentious. Oftentimes, algorithmic homophily, as described by contributor Wendy Chun (2021), problematically stands in for political association. Should we talk about an increasingly coherent and delineated alt-right movement, or still-fractious gatherings and groupings?

The answer is neither. Our use of the *alt-rights* always had a plural intention meant to trouble the early use of the singular *alt-right* as a catch-all, originally used to unite Donald Trump’s “patriots” with white nationalist and neo-monarchists.

What we offer is an anxious term, representing the frictions of these political mutations at work in Canadian body politics.

Rather than organized links and alliances, alt-rights benefit from structural affinities evidenced, as throughout this special issue: what crosses through them is an emotional politics of betrayal and loss and the decline of imagined notions of “real” (read: sometimes white Anglo Judeo-Christians, sometimes québécois de souche) Canadians. As Fatima Syed (2021) insightfully writes of those protesting Trudeau in the 2021 campaign,

These largely white groups of protestors that have followed Trudeau have an unfair privilege that has been afforded to them by all aspects of society: they largely get away with their hateful rhetoric and actions, and don't get called out or punished for it. (para. 17)

What, then, binds the alt-rights is a political privilege toward outrage and entitled violence accepted by a nation-state founded on the violence of settler colonialism and extractive capitalism. The aggression masks an affective politics that marginalizes those who are deemed not to fit in—both peoples of colour and immigrants—but also those who do not fit within the demands of a culture of extractivism such as climate activists or sensitive liberals.

We attend to these deeper connections as our field reconciles with its own lived disjunctures. All four of the editors of this special issue are professionally connected to X University, formerly known as Ryerson University, either by working there in the past or as current faculty working in undergraduate or graduate programs. Being connected to an institution named specifically to honour the architect of the residential school system serves as a reminder that our research takes place in deeply colonial spaces.

This is one example of the challenges in Canadian communication studies: knowing its disconnections. We take seriously André Brock's (2021) warning that “Disinformation is only perceived as bad when it serves to disrupt the interests of whiteness and white power” (para. 5) Headlines about the rise of the alt-rights in Canada overlook that these movements have always been here, that worries about disinformation remain focused on a small pocket of Canadians entitled to outrage.

What we see here in tracing the long history that leads from petroculture to #wexit or deep stories of Old Stock Canadians is a chance to articulate how Canadian communication studies might better attend to these structural histories in accounts of the alt-rights. Here we draw inspiration from the critical disinformation syllabus, which aims “To foreground questions of power, institutions, and economic, social, cultural, and technological structures as they shape disinformation” (Marwick, Kuo, Cameron, & Weigel, 2021, para. 3).

Some disconnections come as the field's object of study moves from marginalia to a central preoccupation. Communication and media are a constitutive crisis for

any governing agenda, and yet, the very problems of communication have become technical ones. Such a tension compounds the present matters of research access; simply put, researchers are cut off from critical data to study the alt-rights. Yet, there is another disjuncture around whether we have let the very question of commutative inquiry be reframed as a data issue, effectively muting concerns over whether the data should be collected in the first place.¹ In each of these articles, we also find methods to navigate this *compromised* vantage point with the failing for the God's eye trick of big data, a theme emphasized by Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren Klein (2020), as well as Greg Elmer, Ganele Langlois, and Joanna Redden (2015).

The four articles in this issue consider disconnection as a conceptual, methodological, and mediated issue. **Melody Devries** introduces the homophilic avatar to reconsider affinities to the alt-rights, countering conventional psychologizing of the alt-rights through archetypal research. Also concerned with matters of association, **Javier Ruiz-Soler** and **Wendy Chun** question how the Wexit movement relates to other alt-rights and find a regional conservatism distinct from harder alt-rights. As Devries, Soler, and Chun find conceptual disconnects in the alt-rights, **Sandra Robinson** and **Luke Munn** find literal ones. Robinson calls for a *disconnection studies* to attend to the strategic, planned disconnections of alt-rights from social media toward alternative social media. Munn offers an important look into one of those destinations: the platform Gab.

This special issue section continues to explore new opportunities for more engaged, connected research that have appeared in this journal. Sandra Smeltzer and Leslie Shade (2007) wrote, "Communications as a field in Canada has a long history of being critical, policy-oriented, and interventionist" (p. 14). That engagement is part of a necessary tradition that now must navigate a turn toward disinformation studies that runs counter to critical tradition. Reflecting on the insurgency at the U.S. Capitol Building on January 6, 2021, Daniel Kreiss (2022) calls for a re-connection of sort to "*center power and interest* in studies of disinformation and propaganda" (para. 8). In offering up this anxious approach to the alt-rights, we seek to disconnect alt-rights as a fad and reconnect the label to deeper questions of power and culture that have enabled a politics of alienation and outrage and, at its worst, Canada's troubled history of extreme right-wing violence and terrorist attacks.

Note

1. Many have made this point, but Fenwick McKelvey best recalls that Sara T. Roberts made this point on Twitter most recently.

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