TRANSPHOBIC MEMES IN THE QUEBEC ALTERNATIVE NEWS INDUSTRY

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Context

Since early 2021, we have been studying reactionary, far-right populism in Quebec online contexts: reactionary populism is highly affective—saturated with emotional terms that convey menace, urgency, and authenticity (Capelos et al. 2021). These postures ground group identity in opposition, using strong emotions to incite political engagement based on grievance, disaffection, and antagonism towards democratic institutions and social pluralism. It is thus affective in the active sense: it attaches specific emotions to specific bodies (social categories: queer, racialized, marginalized) and mobilizes adherence – it incites, classes and cleaves the polity (Ahmed 2013). In our research, we have noted the clear but complex ways in which hyperpartisan media sites influence Quebec online contexts.

The conference theme of "industry" offers a compelling analytical lens for what we have come to see as transnational discursive campaigns that use online popular culture to consolidate a "countercultural" vision of hard to extreme right politics (Rewriting Ripley 2021; Miller-Idriss 2020). Hyperpartisan sites form a "mirror universe" (Steve Bannon's strategy for *Breitbart*), counterposing their passionate partisanship against what they deem the fraudulent objectivity of mainstream media. Such sites are "transgressive in style, openly ideological, extremely biased in favour of a political leader and attacks the other side's point of view, often at the expense of facts" (Rae 2021, 1118). Following a preliminary analysis of the flow of "anti-woke" memes into Quebecois online discourse, we note the overrepresentation of hyperpartisan media in the distribution of what might

be seen as opportunistic (i.e. not necessarily coordinated) influence campaigns. In our preliminary study, we observed that "anti-woke" hashtags and memes were heavily freighted with transphobic images and messages and co-occurred with a range of other far-right content (with strong currents of anti-immigration, anti-queer, misogynist, "anti-system," and conspiracy themes). Presented in mocking tones and mobilized by hyperpartisan sites, transphobic memes participate in fostering "a far-right youth counterculture that weaponizes humor, valorizes provocation and trolling" (Miller-Idriss 2020, 154). In mapping the distribution patterns of this content, we documented 1) the extent to which a range of seemingly "independent" sites distribute the same content within a short period of times; 2) how "anti-woke" hashtags and memes served to consolidate a far-right worldview and package it as countercultural; 3) and finally, how transphobic content came to constitute something of a "federating" theme – an ideological entry point into or representative of a larger ensemble of sociopolitical arguments that support broad right-wing cultural hegemony. The prominence of transphobia in hyperpartisan media in the past few years (Bellemare et al. 2021) has made it a "popular" object for reactionary individuals who use transphobic content in their efforts to promote a larger "anti-woke" agenda (Miller-Idriss 2020). Hyperpartisan media do not simply represent transphobic content as "news", but leverage and radicalize trending themes to form larger networks of reactionary influencers.

Objectives

The aim of this project was to document and analyze the various sources of disinformation/propaganda of the reactionary populist right in Quebec (QC). Specifically, in this first iteration, we documented the movement of transphobic memes from anglophone hyperpartisan media sites to QC influencers. To pursue these objectives, we 1) identified key hyperpartisan sites active in spreading transphobic content; and 2) noted the uptake and transformation of this content in our QC sample. In the future, we will 3) trace the diffusion of this content in francophone networks.

Corpus

To establish our initial corpus, we identified Quebecois accounts producing content indexed by "anti-woke" hashtags on Google, TikTok, Twitter, and Reddit during June and July 2023. Once selected, we catalogued the content produced by prolific accounts and used 4CAT to identify imagery associated with the war on "woke". We also analyzed how such content was articulated with transphobic content and which accounts of American and Anglo-Canadian influencers were shared the most frequently. The repetition of content (hashtags, memes, news items, reposts, videos) between larger hyperpartisan media outlets (in the U.S. and Canada – *The Daily Wire*, *Rebel News*) and in the smaller Quebec-linked network of influencers led us to investigate the dynamics that enabled transphobic content to travel so quickly (and effectively) between different countries, across linguistic barriers and without coordination. In phase one of the study, we qualitatively analyzed the content, the themes, the targets and the rhetorical devices present in the collected tweets and their replies in the given period. We employed social network analysis (using Gephi) to document the sources of frequently shared content and to map the diffusion of content to other platforms. For phase two, we focused on Twitter since it has been "identified as the social network that

is most conducive to the dissemination of homophobic and transphobic hate speech, followed by YouTube and Facebook" (Sánchez-Sánchez et al. 2024, 222). By tracking a range of right-wing content, we traced the opportunistic mobilisation and reach of transphobic content between a range of right-wing influencers producing content linked to Quebec politics. Once the Twitter accounts of the most active disseminators of transphobic content were identified, phase 2 quantified the extent of the tweets' reach by measuring the number of likes and retweets. To follow the political scope of this loose network of alternative influence, we added accounts linked to the populist Quebec Conservative Party to the corpus.

Discussion

Our initial results point to the extent to which transphobic content travels between different right-wing ideological camps, producing strange bedfellows (from Christian nationalists to right libertarians) – what could be called a popular front of far-right populism. Right-wing influencers repetitively linked shared imagery of trans people as threats – "grooming", menacing women and children, dominating unfairly in women's sports. This imagery fueled right-wing metanarratives regarding the need to protect (imagined) imperiled "white identity" and rigid gender binaries. The influencers in our corpus, with a variety of ideological goals, contributed to the diffusion of far-right messages to a wider public under the guise of "anti-system" messaging. We noted a variety of content delivering a similar worldview through diffuse participation both organized and coordinated by lobbies, *as well as* spontaneous/uncoordinated participation by individual actors. Together, they contribute to a larger cultural-political struggle that seeks to delegitimize multicultural, democratic governance.

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