United We Scroll:

An Analysis of Canadian COVID-19 Convoy Content on TikTok

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Abstract

In January of 2022, the self entitled #UnitedWeRoll convoy arrived in Ottawa and other locations around Canada to demonstrate against COVID-19 health measures and protest governments in Canada. While the group originated online, the in-person demonstrators commenced a month-long occupation that impacted international trade, community safety and brought the still raging conversation about COVID-19 even more to the forefront of Canadian society. With online communities being an influential venue for political discussion, it is important to understand the role of social media platforms and how social media content creators contribute to social and political movements on and offline. In this research, I analyze social media content produced by members of the far right on TikTok using the 2022 Canadian anti COVID-19 mandate demonstrations as a case study in order to gain insight into how far right movements in Canada grow and recruit new members to their networks.

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Introduction

In the winter and spring months of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic spread throughout the globe and necessitated immediate and long lasting changes to virtually all aspects of lives and societies - from personal responsibilities like wearing face masks and remaining distant from social circles, to wide ranging societal changes like increases in workers working from home, capacity limits on social spaces, and eventually, incentives for the public to vaccinate themselves against this novel virus. As with any large-scale social disruption, the COVID-19 pandemic and the various approaches to which governments took to limit its spread caused political divisions. On one side, groups argued that COVID-19 mandates and other preventative measures were a small price to pay to limit the spread of a virus already known to be deadly, and a virus which we had no information of the long term implications. On the other side, groups argued that it was not society's place to limit the freedom of individuals, and individuals could assess their own risk to protect themselves against COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic was also an opportunity for an already growing and thriving far right movement to capitalize on division and uncertainty, and grow to become an even larger political and social force. Far right groups and individuals subscribing to fringe conservative beliefs had already been increasing in numbers, and the lead up to the 2016 United States presidential election saw a notable resurgence of active far right movements made up of individuals who felt disenfranchised by traditional electoral processes, with the goal of pushing extreme conservative values and promoting far right policy to legislators. Now the fringe right has grown to such an extent that labeling the ideology as "fringe" is misleading - as the term now represents a considerable faction of mainstream conservatives.

A notable characteristic of the modern far right is the ideology's ability to succeed and grow in online spaces. Large mainstream social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and others have all acknowledged the existence of fringe groups on their platforms and taken steps to combat far right disinformation (Klar, 2022). However, the growing popularity of the short-form video hosting platform TikTok, which coincided with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, planted the seeds for a new avenue for far right content. TikTok is owned by Beijing-based tech company ByteDance, and allows users to create short videos and share them with their network, while the app uses intricate algorithms to suggest additional content to users based on their content viewing preferences. TikTok had 1.2 billion monthly active users as of the end of 2021 and is expected to reach 1.8 billion by the end of 2022 (Iqbal, 2022).

After succeeding in becoming a large presence on TikTok, anti COVID-19 mandate activists also began demonstrations offline. In January of 2022, the self entitled #UnitedWeRoll or #Freedom convoy, a group of demonstrators advocating against any imposed COVID-19 health measures, and advocating more generally against the current government, arrived in Ottawa and other locations around Canada, and commenced a month long occupation that impacted international trade, community safety and brought the still raging conversation about COVID-19 even more to the forefront of Canadian society.

With online communities being an influential venue for political discussion, and several high profile social movements like #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo growing from online movements to in-person demonstrations, it is important to understand the role of social media platforms and how social media content creators contribute to these movements. How has social media influenced political movements broadly, and how did TikTok facilitate the development of the Canadian anti COVID-19 mandate demonstrations specifically? A case study and a critical

analysis of pro-convoy TikTok Canada can provide valuable insights into how far right movements grow and adapt to new scenarios, and how social media algorithms impact larger political movements.

This topic represents an important intersection in the field of Communications and Technology, as online social spaces have a growing impact and role in how individuals and groups communicate about political and social causes. Individuals are shaping their personal political views based on information they are consuming through online social spaces, and that information is coming from more non-traditional sources than ever before, instead of just traditional news media and government sources (Cowburn and Oswald, 2021). My research contributes to the growing body of knowledge of politics on social media, and specifically the role that TikTok plays hosting content creators who post political content. That research is closely connected to another important and timely topic, that of far right movements and how they adapt to new social and technological spaces. As my literature review will demonstrate, far right groups are adept at using emerging social networks and communication technologies to share their views with new audiences and recruit new members. TikTok represents a new frontier for far right groups to organize, and the enormous social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic is a topic well suited for disinformation from the far right.

My literature review will also demonstrate that social media platforms have a motivation (or in some cases, an obligation) to prioritize financial success over all other considerations, and as such, are potentially motivated against taking action to moderate far right content and users. Particularly, Gillespie (2018) and his "economics of popularity" model provides an important framework when looking at competing motivations and decisions made by platforms. Additionally, TikTok is further shielded from outside influence to moderate far right content due

to the platform's connections with China. These factors provide insight into why TikTok has been the platform of choice for many far right content creators.

It is important to note that far right movements evolve quickly, and use complex key words and coded messages to share their views amongst each other and prospective members. As such, this study is limited to the time and place in which it took place, Canada in winter 2022. In addition, content creators do occasionally face moderation from their platform, and so users from my dataset may become unviewable or choose to leave the platform.

In this research, I reviewed and analyzed 78 pieces of TikTok content about the convoy, making sure to include creators of ranging levels of influence. Users from my dataset posted videos using techniques that will help those videos appeal to new audiences, while being mindful of the TikTok platform's moderation and content suggestion policies. TikTok content on the topic of anti COVID-19 mandate demonstrations contained important similar themes, and content could be easily categorized into groups with other similar videos. I categorized these videos and found links between these themes and research from my literature review, including the far right's notable ability to adapt to new circumstances and recruit new supporters through the "Alt-Right pipeline."

While I always intended to focus my research on far right movements in Canada, that topic on its own is too broad and unfocused for a capstone project. The convoy demonstrations provided an ideal case study to anchor my research into Canada's far right movements. Additionally, I originally intended to review social media content on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and TikTok, as these platforms represent large mainstream networks, user created content and opportunities for discourse and relationships between content creators and content consumers. However, upon initially researching content on these platforms, I found a notable

difference in the content produced on more established networks like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram when compared to TikTok. While content on other platforms seemed better positioned to comment on unfolding events from a distance, the content on TikTok seemed to be immersed in the topic it discussed.

Through this comparative analysis of social media content produced by members of the far right on TikTok, and through using the 2022 Canadian anti COVID-19 mandate demonstrations as a case study of a far right movement, I gained insight into how far right movements in Canada grow and recruit new members to their networks, particularly during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through this research, and through an understanding of existing research in my literature review, I gathered examples of how the far right use content and social media platforms to reach new members, attempt to influence public opinion and government policy, and capitalize on major social and political events to continue to grow the far right movement.

Literature Review

<u>Literature Review Introduction</u>

The goal of this literature review is to present an understanding of the existing research and debates of topics related to political participation on TikTok and the 2022 Canadian anti COVID-19 mandate protests. An understanding of previous research has helped to connect the 2022 demonstrations to the larger understanding in research of how far right movements operate and evolve, and how TikTok's platform governance has contributed to the growth of far right movements in Canada. Through this literature review, I have gathered research on the evolution of the far right in recent years, how the far right engage with politics and government, and how the far right attract new members to grow their political presence. These factors are particularly relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic, where the far right have capitalized on uncertainty during a stressful societal shift and advocated for dangerous policies with great costs to lives and livelihoods.

<u>Overview of Methodology and Search Process</u>

I used two primary databases while conducting searches for relevant research. I chose Political Science Complete, and Communication & Mass Media Complete (through the EBSCOhost platform). Both databases garnered topical results, though the searches through Political Science Complete were slightly more relevant to my particular topic. I organized my search terms into three general categories. The first category is searches about far right movements, and would include terms like "Alt Right," "Far Right," "Conservative", "Extremist," "Radicalization," "Disinformation," "Misinformation," and "Fake News." The second category is search terms about the Canadian context, and includes "Canada/Canadian" and the various Canadian provinces. I used the third category to focus results on the impact of far right groups in

traditional electoral and political processes, and included terms like "Politics," "Elections," "Government", and "Voting."

I also made several searches with some additional qualifying key words, such as a focus on online far right movements (with search terms like "Digital," "Online," "Social Media [and listing specific platforms like YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and TikTok]"), as well as searches to include the impact of the far right on public policy and public opinion related to the COVID-19 pandemic (with search terms like "COVID-19," "Pandemic," "Coronavirus", and "Vaccine"). Finally, in order to focus on recent research, I occasionally searched within certain year brackets, such as around 2016 to correspond with the election of United States President Donald Trump, or particularly 2020 to correspond with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

While far right movements have long been a part of our political spectrum, and much research has been done about the historical impacts of far right groups, the resurgence of the far right and their ability to impact traditional electoral and government processes is a recent enough phenomenon where researchers have needed time to study and document. As such, up until recently, my research on the topic of far right movements has had to rely heavily on using academic research on historical far right movements to create links to journalism and non-academic research on contemporary far right movements. Though with my more recent review of current sources, I was able to compile a much more comprehensive list of recent research on the topic.

Review of Literature

While searching for topical research for this literature review, I was able to find many recent articles that related in some part to my research topic. From an initial exhaustive selection of well over 1,500 search results, I narrowed the results down to just over 50 academic sources

that I felt contributed to my specific research topic. Primary reasons to exclude a particular entry included a lack of connection to Canada or the Canadian political context, a focus on historical far right movements (especially when I was able to find research on contemporary far right movements that arrived at similar conclusions), or research that focused on extremism or radicalization for groups other than the far right (such as a considerable amount of research on muslim extremism or radicalization of certain groups in small geopolitical conflicts around the world).

I can summarize the topics that emerged through my searches into three main categories (though these categories have certainly emerged as a direct result of my specified search terms, not necessarily as an organic collection of research); political participation in Canada, the rise and current state of far right movements, and the impact of fringe groups on traditional political and government institutions and processes. Additionally, I used media reports to track the outcome of events in the 2022 anti COVID-19 mandate demonstrations, and conducted a literature review specifically on the TikTok platform.

Political participation in Canada

Before examining what impact the far right has had on Canadian politics, it is first helpful to understand Canadian politics more broadly. Cochrane (2010) examines the historical and contemporary divide between the mainstream left and mainstream right in Canadian politics. Cochrane finds that, in comparison to other similar democracies, Canada has a notably larger gap between the mainstream left and right, and those who subscribe to each group. That gap exists in part due to the different ways in which those on the left and right organize their opinions about the political world around them.

Cochrane tracked the ideological gap between the left and the right over the last few decades, and notes that it first began to grow during the 1980s. It widened again in 1993 as the populist Reform party supplanted the Progressive Conservatives as the dominant force on the Canadian right. Cochrane uses a scoring system to apply a numerical figure to an ideology in order to compare the distance between two ideologies, and found that "in short, Canada's major political parties were divided ideologically in the latter decades of the twentieth century to an extent that they had not been divided previously… And the new ideological divide is wide by cross-national standards" (Cochrane, 2010). This gap is an important context when considering far right movements, as these movements exist even further right than the "mainstream" conservative ideologies that Cochrane considered.

When examining the gap between mainstream left and mainstream right in Canada further, Merkley (2021) found that ideology is a major influence on several factors that contribute to individual identity in Canada, and that influence is likely to continue widening the gap between the two ends of the spectrum. When individuals consume knowledge that already corresponds with their existing beliefs, they in turn avoid information that challenges those beliefs and asks them to expand their value systems. Further, a market demand (both within Canada and internationally) for content that exclusively caters to existing ideological values as opposed to apolitical or heterogenous values puts pressure on media organizations to create content that caters to ingroups and widens the ideological divide further.

Ambrose and Mudde (2015) examined Canadian multiculturalism and its role in slowing the spread of far right movements. While they optimistically declared the far right "an almost negligible force today (in 2015)," and even went so far as to say that the far right has never been a prominent force in Canadian politics or society (an assertion that many other sources in my

references list would surely argue against), their examination of Canadian multiculturalism as a force against rising far right movements is certainly appropriate. In fact, several sources have found an inverse link between diverse societies and the far right, and so a formal policy of multiculturalism in Canada is certainly a defense against rising far right movements.

Far Right Movements

It is valuable to define what exactly distinguishes the far right from other political movements. Though existing on the fringes for several years, this movement really came into public focus alongside the candidacy of former President Donald Trump. The movement is primarily characterized as an effort to unify various elements of the American and international far right and push them into the mainstream, particularly when it comes to issues of race, gender, sexuality and class (Rehman 2017, page 29). The movement is predominantly young, white and male, and is reflective of a broader push under modern conservatism to cater to a sense of a helpless hegemony under attack by scapegoat groups. This group is also credited with radicalizing members into violent acts, with a large spike in far right extremism in recent years (Haltiwanger, 2019).

Another key characteristic of modern far right movements is their use of technology to grow. Groups in the far right have utilized major platforms like YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and TikTok to grow and post content, particularly content that demonizes groups and can often incite violence. Leniency on the part of large social media platforms have not only allowed these movements to grow unhindered, but provided them with the confidence that their members can push the envelope without being held to account. These platforms use various tools of network building (suggesting friends, involvement in confined private groups/pages, grouping

posts based on similar content) to allow users to connect to others with similar interests, and even offer tools to allow for pseudio anonymity, such as faceless and nameless profiles.

The Canadian Journal of Communication recently released an edition with articles specifically dedicated to analyzing the far right in Canada, and as it describes in its release, "It seeks to historicize, contextualize, and engage with far right politics as a mediated and communicative phenomenon in Canada." This collection of articles provides necessary insight into the far right in Canada today. In particular, Neville & Langlois (2021) confirm that the far right in Canada are consistent with important factors of the far right across the world, such as placing themselves in opposition to an imagined threat of a unified liberal, multicultural and globalist front. Neville and Langlois also confirm that the far right have mostly coelessed behind a specific federal political party in Canada, that of Maxime Bernier's People's Party of Canada. Additionally, Tuters and Burton (2021) delve into a longstanding key player of the far right in Canada, the Rebel. Tutors and Burton find that several of the individual contributors to the Rebel act as a sort of "micro-celebrity," and smartly use vernacular and coded messages popularized by the far right to grow their audience.

In this way, Tutors and Burton echo Lewis (2019) in "*This Is What the News Won't Show You: YouTube Creators and the Reactionary Politics of Micro-celebrity.*" Lewis performs a content analysis of influencers and micro-celebrities on YouTube, and finds that streamers making political content have to both differentiate themselves from traditional mainstream media, and position themselves as a credible yet sensational choice for viewers. By specifically differentiating themselves from traditional media (and by extension, the traditional spectrum of mainstream political discourse), YouTubers and micro-celebrity content creators tend to promote the reactionary political views found in far right movements. The Rebel is an important actor in

the Canadian far right, as they exist specifically to push Canadian content to the far right in Canada. When much of the content consumed and created by far right groups either transcends national boundaries or is catered to areas with a large far right population like the United States, a dedicated Canadian actor is important to study.

Tuters and Burton (2021) also bridge a gap in research left by Heft et al. (2020) when they examined right-wing digital news infrastructures in several western democracies, but did not specifically examine Canada. Heft et al. titled their research *"Beyond Breitbart"* to illustrate how large an influence the online 'media' platform Breitbart has on far right movements, though that influence is not exclusive (I use a quotation when saying media here to distinguish from traditional media organizations. While Brietbart writes articles and pushes their own form of investigative action, they do not conform to the standards of quality or verifiability required by traditional media. Even traditional news sources that have catered to the far right [such as Fox News] are notably distinguished from Breitbart. Similarly, while the Rebel markets themselves as the Rebel *Media*, I [and others] omit the "media" portion due to their nonconformity with the standards of traditional journalism). In fact, Heft et al. studied over 70 online platforms, and found the transnationality of the far right meant that nationally situated organizations still cater to themes popular in far right groups in other countries. Relating back to Tuters and Burton, the Rebel, in order to remain popular amongst the far right in Canada, must create content consistent and popular with international far right movements. In Canada specifically, Canadian politicians and the Canadian public have been targeted by international far right activists, including through the "manipulation of social media to spread false or misleading information relating to Canada on Twitter, and foreign state-sponsored media disparaging Canadian cabinet ministers" (Dawood, 2021).

Far right movements in Canada have followed the trend of far right movements around the world in succeeding due in part to social media platforms being incentivised to push extremist content. Social media platforms are businesses that exist in a capitalist landscape, and as such, have a mandate both to make money to support operational costs and make money to generate wealth for shareholders. There are several potential opportunities for social media platforms to make money through different business models, such as a subscription model, though the most popular model is through advertising and sponsored content. In order to make money through advertising and sponsored content, social media platforms are encouraged to ensure users stay on the platform for as long as possible, so that they continue to consume sponsored content, and the platform continues to get paid by advertisers. If financial obligations are the primary (or even near-exclusive) motivators for platforms as organizations, then the methods these platforms use to convince users to spend more time on their platforms are always justified.

Gillespie (2018) explains how platforms meet their financial obligations through the "economics of popularity." In this model, platforms develop algorithms to push suggested content to users to keep them on the platform longer, but the nature of that content is inconsequential. Whatever content engages that user, whether it is funny cat videos or extremist content, is beneficial to the platform. "Angry" content is particularly effective at engaging users and encouraging them to consume further content, and Alt-Right content is particularly angry, encouraging users to build hostile views towards feminism, progressivism, and marginalized people. While these platforms have community guidelines, they are often murky to navigate and difficult to enforce. For example, the Counter Extremism Project (CEP) studied several far right pages on Facebook. After monitoring closely for two months and checking them against

Facebook's terms of service, CEP reported several violations such as hate speech content. Facebook only removed a small handful of the pages (Dearden, 2019).

Gillespie argues that if platforms continue to prioritize the economics of popularity over encouraging healthy, untoxic and deradicalizing content, then they will continue to develop algorithms and policies that will foster continued Alt-Right and extremist content.

The "Alt-Right Pipeline" is a term used to describe the gradual transition from moderate to extremist views, and is crucial in understanding how the far right is attracting new members. As Munn (2019) says in *Alt-right pipeline: Individual journeys to extremism online*, "a fully functioning media system <makes> it easy for audience members to be incrementally exposed to, and come to trust, ever more extremist political positions… <Trusted users> hosting a guest not only provides them with a platform for their ideas, but transfers to them a degree of trust." Munn examines video testimonials from individuals who were gradually converted to the Alt-Right, and details examples of individuals who began by watching videos on mundane or moderate subjects. For example, one user began by watching self help videos, a common start point for the Alt-Right pipeline. Eventually, the YouTube content suggestion algorithm (and Gillespie's economics of popularity) proposed a self help style video from an Alt-Right commentator, though the video wasn't explicitly focused on Alt-Right content. After consuming one video, the user was drawn to further videos by the same creator, which included more and more Alt-Right content. The viewer grew to trust the content creator, who in turn introduced the viewer to more Alt-Right figures.

The first steps along the "Alt-Right Pipeline" are often small changes to traditionally moderate content, or subtle questions to convince viewers to change the way they think about certain issues. For example, in *It's okay to be White: laundering White supremacy through a*

colorblind victimized White race-consciousness raising campaign, Brooks (2020) details a white supremecist campaign on social media to introduce mainstream audiences to white nationalism (white supremacism being closely linked to the Alt-Right). The campaign had a simple start, to spread a message that it is "okay to be white." On the surface, this message is harmless, as it does not imply that it's *not okay* to be any other race, or that white is intrinsically better than any other race. However, users who engaged with this topic were encouraged to ask follow up questions, such as if diversity and inclusion were actually covert ways of progressives forcing white people to feel bad about their identity. The users have taken their first step along the "Alt-Right pipeline," as they are now primed to consume further content, and their social media profiles have been flagged by content suggestion algorithms to receive more and more extreme content.

The Impact of Far Right Movements on Traditional Political Processes

After examining what far right movements look like today, we then turn to how far right movements can impact traditional political processes. Hartley & Khuong (2020) examined the structural governance failures that have emerged in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic when it comes to misinformation and influence from far right movements. The researchers found that the misinformation and fake news that far right movements often circulate were effective at compromising the efficacy of evidence-based policy interventions, and caused further damage through undermining the credibility of scientific expertise. By undermining trust in science and traditional institutions, the far right pushed a narrative that the government and the scientific community was not to be trusted about COVID-19 matters, and many individuals who followed that far right content went on to decide not to follow public health guidelines such as masking, social distancing and getting vaccinated against COVID-19. Now we have seen that individuals

who have refused to follow those same public health guidelines are more likely to contract COVID-19, make use of limited healthcare resources, and potentially die. This erosion of trust in institutions, Harley and Khuong found, potentially had severe longer-term consequences. As Hier (2021) found, there are economic, social and political implications to underreacting to a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic also exacerbated the growing division between the right and left (Nossal, 2021). However, governments and social media platforms have tools at their disposal to combat that misinformation. While not a silver bullet, Harley and Khuong proposed that "the intuitive policy intervention would appear to be more robust means of fact-checking content on social media and efforts to disabuse the public of false notions concerning the science of the virus."

While COVID-19 is a topical issue to research the impacts of the far right on public policy, it is certainly not the only issue. The far right was active prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and was active in discussions of immigration, globalization, poverty reduction, policing, and several other issues. One major theme in far right content that has parallels to COVID-19 is their impact on discussions around environmental policy. Forchtner (2020) found that far right movements were likely to promote anti environment views and claims that climate change is a hoax perpetrated by the groups the far right place themselves in opposition from (such as the left, feminism, certain ethnic groups or countries). Similar to COVID-19, a failure to act in environmental issues is leading to economic and health impacts, though on a longer timeline than the COVID-19 virus.

The far right is also eroding trust in journalists, who are key pillars in the protection of liberal democracies. In "*The kiss of death. Public service media under right-wing populist attack,*" Holtz-Bacha (2021) found that the far right are a driving contributor to failing trust in

mainstream media groups. This finding has been replicated in other jurisdictions, such as the United States and the Netherlands (Hameleers, 2020). Relating back to Merkley (2021) and the Canadian context, this failing trust in mainstream media organizations pushes individuals to more fringe platforms, and those platforms push radicalizing content and perpetuates the vicious cycle of disinformation.

The 2022 anti COVID-19 Mandate Demonstrations

The anti COVID-19 Mandate demonstrations have many names depending on the individual referring to them. Supporters of the demonstrations titled the demonstrations the "United we Roll" convoy, using the #UnitedWeRoll hashtag. Active opposers of the demonstrators used titles like "occupation" or even "insurrection" instead of convoy or protest, given the severe anti government nature of the demonstrations. Regardless of the title, these demonstrations occurred so recently that academia has not been able to publish literature discussing the events. Media reports of the events offer insight into Government reaction, social views, and the actions of participants in demonstrations.

While the anti COVID-19 mandate movement has been active in Canada as long as there have been any public health measures to combat COVID-19 (and it is still an active community even with virtually no remaining restrictions or mandates), the COVID-19 convoy was a specific event during a measurable period of time in Canada. For the purposes of this research, I am considering the anti COVID-19 mandate convoy to have taken place between January 23, 2022 and February 23, 2022, including primarily the main occupation in downtown Ottawa but also the associated blockades along major border crossings and the smaller convoys that occasionally frequented other major cities in Canada. I will include content posted between January 20, 2022 and March 1, 2022, in order to cover content posted while the COVID-19 convoy was front of

mind for content creators.

While there were initial conversations and speculation about a large-scale movement prior to January 23, 2022, that date marked the primary departure of several groups from across Canada driving towards Ottawa (CBC News, 2022, February 17). By January 28, 2022, a large group of convoyers had arrived at their destination in Ottawa, and by January 29, 2022, several thousand participants were demonstrating on Parliament Hill. The week of January 31, 2022 saw national public debate and discussion around the convoy, and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Ottawa Mayor Jim Watson condemning the events.

February 4, 2022 saw the first sign of action taken to slow the momentum of the convoy with the crowdfunding platform GoFundMe announcing it would not release funds to the convoy organizers, as the events violated the GoFundMe rules on violence and harassment. However, the occupation of Ottawa continued, and on February 6, 2022, the City of Ottawa declared a state of public emergency. Police enacted new enforcement measures, and tensions continued to rise between convoyers, the police, the public, and the government. On February 7, 2022, an Ottawa judge granted an injunction seeking to silence the ever present horns from the convoy trucks, a present complaint from community members. These events marked some of the initial interactions between convoyers and the justice system.

On February 11, 2022, the province of Ontario declared a state of public emergency, leading into the third week of the occupation in Ottawa and on February 14, 2022, the federal government invoked the *Emergencies Act*, an act not used in its 34 year history (Tunney, 2022). The federal government argued that the severity of the convoys and blockades necessitated additional tools to restore order against illegal and dangerous activities. In particular, the *Emergencies Act* allowed the federal government to combat the finances fueling the convoy,

requiring crowdfunding platforms and other associated financial organizations to register with the Financial Transactions and Reports Analysis Centre of Canada (FINTRAC), the national financial intelligence agency.

On February 16, 2022, police issued letters to members of the convoy stating that they could face arrest if they remained parked in downtown Ottawa. By February 20, 2022, police had arrested 191 people and towed 79 vehicles, laying a total of 389 charges (Pringle & Raymond, 2022). With convoy numbers dwindling and participants returning home, the federal government revoked the *Emergencies Act* on February 23, 2022, declaring the "immediate emergency situation over" (Turnbull, 2022).

In total, CBC estimated that the economic impacts of the convoy range from losses of $44 million to $200 million (Hwang, 2022). Impacts also include widespread social unrest, disorder, instances of mischief, thefts, hate crimes and property damage in Ottawa, including an alleged member of the convoy attempting to commit arson in an Ottawa apartment building and reports of downtown residents feeling unsafe (Connolly, 2022). Connolly quotes one downtown Ottawa resident during the demonstrations saying "We don't have a sense of security right now. Everybody's terrified. Everybody's worried about violence. Everybody's worried about being assaulted."

TikTok

TikTok is still a relatively new entry to the slate of dominant mainstream social media platforms, and it has taken the world by storm, quickly amassing a large following and now having over a billion users (Iqbal, 2022). Although new, TikTok's wide adoption has necessitated academic research into the platform, and researchers are now beginning to publish their research

on the platform. Given the usual timelines for academia to release research, the available research is still developing every day.

For example, Mwilima et al., 2018 examines the existing approaches to determining the use of political communication in various social networks, especially among youth. While this source would normally be a welcome influence on my research, it is only published in Russian and my ability to translate the research into English is currently limited. However, from what I can discern, Mwilima et al. determined that TikTok has contributed to increased politicization for young people, and researchers expect those young people to grow into adults who continue to stay politically engaged at higher numbers than previous generations. TikTok continues to be an avenue for youth and young people to discuss and react to politics, and the platform is especially friendly to political ideologies to the fringe of mainstream movements (Epp, 2020).

Han & Kuipers (2021) were able to release research that connected with TikTok and the COVID-19 pandemic, however the research does not focus on politics, rather networks and trends on TikTok. Han & Kuipers studied a TikTok trend that emerged in China at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, where mainly mothers used the #workfromhomewithchildcare hashtag to post humorous videos about their attempts to balance working from home and taking care of their children. This research shows how quickly a trend can develop on TikTok, becoming an overnight phenomenon and allowing some content creators with a limited following to amass large amounts of views, likes, and new followers.

While TikTok has similar functionalities to other platforms in terms of the ability to create, share and view video content, one distinction on the platform is its moderation policies. TikTok's moderation policies have grown more and more important as other social media giants have begun to reexamine how they moderate the content on their platforms. Zeng & Bondy

Valdovinos (2022) discuss the global reach of the TikTok platform, and how that international popularity necessitates the platform to examine their moderation policies through different national contexts. Zeng & Bondy Valdovinos note that TikTok has been temporarily or permanently banned in several geographic locations, such as India, Indonesia and Pakistan, as a direct result of certain content allowed on the platform. In addition to what types of content is or is not permitted on the app, Zeng & Bondy Valdovinos discuss "visibility moderation," or the process through which digital platforms manipulate the reach and visibility of user-generated content through their complex algorithms. The researchers find that TikTok's moderation policies do not protect against some dangerous and harmful content in the same way that other large social media platforms do. In the United States, TikTok moderation and data-collection policies sparked a legal battle, where the United States Government employed the use of both the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) and the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS) in an attempt to force TikTok to cease U.S. operations and to change ownership ("United States Pursues Regulatory Actions Against TikTok and WeChat Over Data Security Concerns," 2021).

TikTok's Chinese ownership and the role of TikTok in diplomacy is a topic of much interest in the literature. French (2020), Long (2020) and Aassar (2021) have all researched how TikTok fits into Chinese international relations, including how TikTok's popularity amongst users hinders the effectiveness and reasonability of regulatory actions against TikTok by other governments. In a case study on the Middle East, Aassar (2020) Finds that TikTok has facilitated China laying the foundations of an effective communication strategy, where it previously was only able to exercise limited soft power. While still early, this research demonstrates that the

state of China has direct influence into TikTok's moderation policies, and those moderation policies are not easily influenced by other governments around the world.

Analysis and Discussion

The far right are a major force in Canadian politics, swaying public opinion and impacting public policy for the worse. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided an opportunity for far right movements to have an even greater impact, contributing to the spread of the virus which has resulted in deaths, strains on healthcare and other institutions, and impacts to the economy. The far right have even contributed to the erosion of trust in science and public institutions, a trust that will take time and energy to rebuild.

However, through the combined efforts of governments, regulators and social media platforms, it is possible to slow the spread of far right movements and potentially even reverse the damage they have caused. Tenove (2020) proposed three broad areas where policy makers could apply their efforts: international and national security policies, accountable representation addressed through electoral regulation, and threats to the quality of public debate and deliberation countered by media regulation. Additionally, structural changes to social media to reduce Gillespie's economics of popularity and disincentivize platforms from pushing extremist content (changes further discussed by Srnicek (2016) and platform capitalism) would hinder modern far right movements.

Researchers have identified several major actors in the Canadian far right, such as the Rebel, and discussed how those actors influence and further the causes of the far right movement. Researchers have also identified similarities between the far right in Canada and the global far right, both in terms of the way these groups grow and interact, and the ideological values they promote. However, I believe there is still more research needed on the present day

landscape of the far right in Canada, particularly as it relates to social media. Social media is heralded as a driving force in the resurgence of the far right in and around 2016 due to larger platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Instagram incentivising extremist content and facilitating connections between like minded content creators and consumers in the far right.

However, much has changed since 2016, both on the part of the far right and the part of social media platforms (take TikTok for example, a predominant player among major platforms and one that only recently became popular). For example, those mainstream platforms have begun to take (limited but welcome) action to moderate extremist and far right content. And now individuals on the far right have begun migrating to different platforms who are more willing to allow radicalizing content. Now, these platforms act as the first stop along the Alt-Right pipeline, where content consumers familiarize themselves with moderate political views from a moderate sounding voice, before gradually promoting radicalizing content and pushing users to secondary platforms.

Summary

In summary, existing research has shown that the far right has been able to grow and succeed as a movement due to its ability to change and adapt to new circumstances. Additionally, this literature review has provided insight into TikTok as the most recent platform of influence in the world of social media platforms, while also demonstrating the effectiveness of far right content to succeed on platforms. When a new topical issue like COVID-19 develops, the far right develop messaging to push their ideology in the COVID-19 conversation. When platforms begin to moderate their content, they use coded language to draw in new members and transition them to new platforms. The far right's ability to adapt quickly is precisely the reason why researchers need to be constantly reevaluating what they know about the far right. Without constant review,

the far right will develop faster than researchers and governments abilities to defend against them.

Research Design and Methodology

<u>Introduction</u>

My research design was a qualitative case study using a discourse analysis to review social media content from participants in the 2022 convoys across Canada. The goal of the discourse analysis was to gain insight and context into the goals of the convoy, its connection to the broader far right movement in Canada, and how the movement continues to adapt and grow similar to other far right causes in recent years.

<u>Design</u>

I chose to complete a discourse analysis due to the interactional relationship between both content consumers and content creators, and individuals within far right movements. A discourse analysis helped analyze the actions of individual users beyond simply individual behaviors, and interpret them within the context of broader societal behavior. Discourse analysis was particularly useful when researching contemporary far right movements due to the decentralized nature of these movements, and the horizontal structure of leadership. There is no single hierarchical body determining messaging, key issues or identity; rather, identity is determined through discourse between members and through ongoing informal conversations across several platforms. In a discourse analysis, text is considered a communicative process that occurs in a social setting and, thus, is subject to social structures, norms, and processes. Understanding these social structures, norms and processes and how they influence communication in text is important for understanding not only the literal text, but subtexts and other meanings in the text and presentation of information (Wall, Stahl, & Salam, 2015). Particularly, discourse analysis in the Habermasian tradition provides a framework for examining communication and authenticity through four validity claims: the communication's comprehensibility, truthfulness, and legitimacy, and the speaker's sincerity (Wall, Stahl, & Salam

2015. Page 11).

Case study methodology is also an important tool for this research as I used the 2022 anti COVID-19 mandate demonstrations as a case study to represent online political action by far right groups transitioning into broader social movements or political organizations. One benefit of a case study, similar to a discourse analysis, is the focus on relationships. As Denscombe (2010) says, "Relationships and processes within social settings tend to be interconnected and interrelated. To understand one thing it is necessary to understand many others and, crucially, how the various parts are linked. The case study approach works well here because it offers more chances than the survey approach of going into sufficient detail to unravel the complexities of a given situation" (Denscombe, 2010, p. 53). Understanding the relationships between content creator and consumer, between creators and each other, and between creators, consumers and the broader political network provides crucial insight into what tools these networks use to grow.

Denscombe provides good practice for generalizing from individual case studies, such as to identify significant features on which comparison with others in the class can be made; and show how the case compares with others in the class in terms of these significant features. I believe that this case study will be able to demonstrate both of those requirements, as far right groups have been employing similar tools and actions to grow on social media since well before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Members of far right movements have also mastered the use of coded language, memes, and slang to spread their message. Someone may make a political statement that may not seem problematic at first glance, but is actually tied to a fringe movement when the viewer is aware of the context of the statement, and knows the meaning of the meme or slang used. Contemporary far right movements, more than historical fringe groups or contemporary mainstream

conservative politics, require knowledge of interactions, relationships and power as opposed to reviewing curated content detached from the context where it was created.

My research is impacted by my general predisposition towards critical studies. The far right as a political movement is intrinsically tied to questions of power, oppression and privilege. The movement exists as an opposition to feminist and progressive movements that aim to rectify systemic injustice, and is defined by its commitment to hegemonic masculinity. Members of far right ideologies focus on the power and status they expect to receive in society due to their identity, and they perceive any identity other than their own receiving power or status as a direct threat to their standing. As such, critical studies are crucial to fully understand the context of far right movements. As Merrigan, Huston, and Johnston (2012) say on page 222, "scholars who conduct critical studies try to reveal how our use of language and social practices can perpetuate injustices to members of society." Further, creators of far right content have capitalized on feelings of disenfranchisement and perceived discrimination by those who have chosen to not follow COVID-19 precautions. As such, these individuals see themselves as facing similar injustices and oppression that the far right has historically advocated against marginalized groups, making critical studies an important lens for this research.

Additionally, the sociocultural tradition is an important lens to use when exploring far right movements because of the specific focus on processes that produce and reproduce social order. Sociocultural perspectives examine the roles of social and cultural processes as mediators of human activity, thought, and communication. This perspective is important for understanding how individual and cultural development and communication are intertwined. Particularly, the sociocultural tradition incorporates social interactional processes playing a key role in learning and development, and examines how communication is influenced by social relationships (Nasir

& Hand, 2006). This analysis is important when examining how far right movements grow and recruit new members, and how far right groups can make extremist and radical policies appeal to a mainstream audience. Particularly, the symbolic actions present in the process of radicalizing someone into a far right movement (often referred to as the Alt-Right or far right Pipeline), such as different methods of engaging with digital content creators, performative ideological actions, and coded messaging present ample opportunity for analysis through a Sociocultural lens. Analyzing the far right can be viewed as a distinct culture within society, allowing us to view intersections and interactions between groups as representative of actions of individual behavior, as well as group dynamics (Craig 1999, p.144).

Participants

I began by identifying content creators on TikTok who attended the convoys or rallies against COVID-19 mandates, or who posted content about these topics. I have identified 3 popular creators with over 100,000 followers on a social media account, as well as 10 smaller creators, with between 5,000 and 50,000 followers. All of these content creators have posted at least two (and in most cases, several) pieces of content on TikTok expressing supportive views about the convoy. These streamers may not exclusively be popular with Canadians (as in, they can have a wide international following as well), but post about Canadian topics of interest and represent themselves as Canadian content creators.

To decide on the individual content creators I would examine in this research, I decided to also take advantage of TikTok's content algorithm which suggested content I might be interested in based on what the app knows about me. First, I needed a blank account to ensure the algorithm was not suggesting content based on what TikTok previously knew about my content preferences. I downloaded the TikTok app on a device that had not previously downloaded the

app and was not connected to any accounts affiliated with me or another user (a wiped iPhone device). I created a new TikTok user account with a new email address and limited the personal information I shared. I was required to disclose a birthdate, and selected my actual birth year of 1995. I accepted the randomly generated username of the word "user" followed by several randomly generated numbers.

I then searched for 10 keywords from my list of far right terms through the TikTok search function. Interacted with the first search results from each search, by viewing the whole video and liking the video. I then returned to my TikTok home page, and was presented with several accounts that TikTok had suggested I follow.

I clicked through each selected account until I arrived at an account that met my qualifications. The first 7 small-mid sized accounts that met the standards to be included in this study all presented as heteronormative white males that looked to be over 30 years old. Even though it would not be representative of the population of creators making content on this subject, I made the determination to limit the remaining 3 small-mid accounts to creators who were women or members of a visible minority, in order to capture perspective from marginalized groups. The next three creators who met the qualifications for inclusion in the study and were not white males were all white women, and 25 further organic searches did not uncover a single non-white presenting content creator who met the criteria for inclusion.

Setting

This study takes place on the TikTok platform. I originally intended to review social media content on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and TikTok, as these platforms represent large mainstream networks, user created content and opportunities for discourse and relationships between content creators and content consumers. However, upon initially researching content on

these platforms, I found a noticeable difference in the content produced on TikTok and the content on the other social media platforms. I found the content on TikTok to show a much greater variety of in-depth content created by pro-convoy creators, especially creators in the small-to-medium follower range. While content on other platforms seemed to respond to events as they unfold (and respond to government and media sources as they interact with the convoy), the content on TikTok seemed to be driving the conversation.

There is certainly a diverse array of content present on the remaining platforms, but much of that content is centered around announcements from traditional media sources or government announcements. For example, a media organization may tweet information about a topic, spurring retweets, comments or subtweets (posts that refer to a particular user without directly mentioning them) about that topic. Conversely, content on TikTok appeared to be much more "user driven," with individual creators posting more broadly about issues that they are interested in, though not always directly associated with recent content from media or government sources. I can only speculate regarding the reason for the difference in content, but one potential reason is the amount of time that media and government accounts have had to become established on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. As long standing accounts with consistent followings, they may have the ability to shape the conversation more effectively than on TikTok where they may not yet have garnered the same influence.

Another potential reason is the platform functionalities on each social network. The "like" and "share" options on Twitter, Facebook and (to a lesser extent with sharing) Instagram allow content from one source to spread widely while remaining true to the original source, even if new users add comments. Comparatively, while TikTok has "stitch" or "duet" features that allow users to make videos responding to other content, those features require the creator to go

through the effort of creating a whole new piece of video content themselves, compared to simply hitting "retweet" and having someone else's content broadcasted to your audience.

<u>Instrument</u>

I reviewed the three highest viewed/highest engagement pieces of TikTok content about the convoy from each user, as well as three random posts posted after January 1, 2022 from each user (78 posts in total). This strategy for identifying content ensured I am including both the most popular content, as well as a likelihood to include a "day-in-the-life" style video that the most engaged fans will consume as well.

<u>Procedures</u>

After initial viewing of each of the videos, I assigned categories to similar videos and analyzed those categories for themes, purpose and other required analysis. Additionally, through this research and my knowledge of far right topics, I inductively developed a list of far right terms, topics and messaging, to help frame my viewing and capture various themes that may be present in the videos. The three main categories of key words and phrases are:

1. Explicit political beliefs and policy opinions: The content creator makes specific and explicit reference to a political figure, party or social issue. For example: a content creator making a reference to the United States Republican party, or Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, or the Black Lives Matter movement. This category also crucially includes a desire to change government policy, such as explicitly requesting the removal of COVID-19 precautions or calling for a change of government/removal of a specific politician.

2. Far right terms and messaging: The content creator makes specific reference to an item on a predeveloped list of far right terms and topics. For example, the content creator

mentions immigrants or cultural diversity in a negative way, mentions feminism or progressivism as 'invading' traditional spaces, or speaks to non-authoritative governments being authoritarian or their countries needing violent revolution.

3. Non-political comments: This category will be intrinsically broad. In categorizing non-political comments (or comments that a general consumer would not normally associate with traditional politics), I hope to gain insight into how members of far right groups may seek to grow their group through discussing non-political topics, and how views on those topics may still be influenced by the large far right movement.

Additionally, in analyzing this content, I paid special attention into how far right groups have attempted to influence public opinion and traditional political processes. "Traditional political processes" is a relatively vague term, so first it is necessary to examine precisely what it is that the far right is influencing. Firstly, traditional political processes refer to anything associated with elections to public office. Elections include the act of voting and the influence that a group of like-minded voters can have on the results of an election, but also the larger influence of a vocal group participating in political discussions in and around an election, and how their participation influences public participation in that election. On another level, far right groups participating in an election also influences the candidates in that election, who can now cater their platform and policies to attract that group to vote for them (or, candidates who already support the far right and belong to a far right movement may decide to seek election with the knowledge that voters in the far right will turn out to polling booths in their favour). However, traditional political processes extend past an election period. I also hope to examine how the far right is pushing the Overton Window (the range of political views that is considered "acceptable" in mainstream society [Lehman, 2020]) to the right. Through moving the Overton Window, the

far right can influence public support and government policy. As a sizable group of vocal individuals, far right groups can shape public policy on key issues through public protests, formal misinformation campaigns, and even word of mouth to other individuals who are connected to an individual in the far right.

<u>Analysis</u>

The 3 large content creators proved more difficult to select. While I expected the TikTok algorithm to prioritize the larger content creators, only 3 content creators appeared organically through the selection process outlined above. Upon further research, several of the primary organizers of the COVID-19 convoy, who while the convoy was going on had a substantial following on TikTok, now no longer had a TikTok account (I reviewed a list of primary organizers and influencers through a CTV news article written by Parkhill, 2022). Though these individuals may have decided independently to remove themselves from the platform, it is likely that TikTok determined their content had violated their terms of service or community guidelines, and had their accounts suspended.

I had several initial reactions throughout the process of selecting content. Firstly, I was surprised that the TikTok algorithm did not suggest a higher number of larger content creators throughout the process, especially early on. However, the suggested accounts were overwhelmingly in the 2,000-10,000 follower range, with only a small number of accounts outside that bracket. Additionally, while not surprised at the lack of diversity in suggested candidates, I was expecting even a small number of women or non-white presenting content creators to appear organically without having to extend the selection parameters to include those creators. The suggested accounts were exclusively white, almost exclusively male, and overwhelmingly looked to be over the age of 30, or older.

Finally, the account with the most followers had over 1 million followers, which is a substantial amount for any TikTok account. However, this person also has a severe physical disability that impacts their facial features. Upon initial review of the content on this account, it appears that approximately two thirds of the videos featured content about their physical disability, and one third featured content about Canadian politics. As such, it would be difficult to determine exactly how many followers this individual has accumulated due to their political beliefs, and they may not belong in the large influencer category in the same way that the other creators do. However, several videos from this account are apparent attempts to capitalize on the popularity of the account as a whole in order to divert viewers to content more directly related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the Canadian convoy. In summary, I utilized TikTok's own suggested content feature to provide me with a sample size of public accounts creating video content on COVID-19 and the Canadian 2022 anti mandate demonstrations. I analyzed a selection of this content, paying particular attention to the relationships between the creator, a viewer and the larger network of far right content creators on TikTok.

<u>Summary</u>

In summary, I used TikTok's content suggestion process to find 13 accounts that have posted content about the 2022 Canadian anti COVID-19 mandate demonstrations. I reviewed a sample of content from each account, looking for recurring themes and classifying similar content into groups.

Data Collection Report

Due to the publicly available nature of the content I have reviewed, I have not faced ethics related issues surrounding my data collection. I only included creators who posted content from accounts that did not include privacy settings or limited who is able to view their videos.

As an additional measure to ensure confidentiality, I have not referred to any creator by name or listed their account handles. In screenshots of their videos, I have redacted all account information including account handles .

My dataset includes 13 content creators and 78 pieces of content totaling 43.55 minutes of content.

Findings and Discussion

<u>Introduction</u>

I found several key findings in this research to help answer my research question of "how has social media influenced political movements broadly, and how did TikTok facilitate the development of the Canadian anti COVID-19 mandate demonstrations specifically?" Content creators posted videos using techniques that will help those videos appeal to new audiences, while being mindful of the TikTok platforms moderation and content suggestion policies. I found content to contain important similar themes, and content could be easily categorized into groups with other similar videos.

<u>Data Presentation</u>

While reviewing videos, I classified content into three broad categories: semi-scripted informational videos, live footage, and thematic/brand building content. The following is a breakdown of the amount of content in each category:

	Amount of Videos	Total Cumulative Minutes
Semi-Scripted Information	32	23.54 minutes
Live Footage	25	11.46 minutes
Thematic/Brand Building	21	8.55 minutes

In semi-scripted informational videos, content creators usually record a static video with themselves in frame, usually from the chest up. These videos either have a neutral presenting background, such as the interior of a house or car, or the video is using TikTok's "green screen" filter to present an image behind the creator. The content of these videos do not appear to be scripted word-for-word, but have a clear goal to present an idea or topic. These videos are also created in an environment where content is easily editable and re-recordable, and so we can

assume that a final posted video achieves the desired result of the creator, containing the information they hoped to relay. One example from the dataset is a 59 second video, shot "selfie style" where the creator films themselves from approximately the chest and up, focusing on their face. The creator has added a caption above their head with white letters saying "TRUDEAU NEEDS TO GO!!!" that is visible for the whole duration of the video. The creator is outside, but not much of the background is visible in the video other than the sky and a grouping of trees. The creator is dressed in a casual gray T-shirt and brown hoodie, and speaks for the whole 59 seconds. The creator speaks as if he is speaking directly to Justin Trudeau in the video, and speaks with a raised voice, sounding frustrated. He starts the video by describing Justin Trudeau's motivation behind the COVID-19 mandates and prevention policies to "stick a needle in every man, woman and child," before pivoting to the assertion that anti COVID-19 mandates no longer follow up-to-date scientific best practices. He goes back and forth between discussing Trudeau, using terms like "failed leadership," "backroom deals," and "against science," and discussing attendees at the demonstrations in Ottawa as "fighting for freedom," and being "open minded." He ends the video by arguing that science changes, and Justin Trudeau is anti science by still promoting COVID-19 mandates. The video does not have a caption, but uses the hashtags #AVrboForTogether #arresttrudeau #freedomconvoy2022 #freedomconvoy2022 #truckers #ontario #ottawa #military #militarytiktok #canadatiktok. In addition to the spoken word audio recorded by the content creator, the creator has also added the song "God We Need You Now" by Struggle Jennings & Caitlynne Curtis (2021) as additional background music. When considering discourse analysis in the Habermasian tradition and the framework for examining communication and authenticity through four validity claims (Wall, Stahl, & Salam, 2015), the creator put effort into ensuring his communication was comprehensible by making use

of the TikTok "captions" feature which displays a written recount of the words as he speaks them, and the captions were accurate and clear. Regarding truthfulness, the creator did not provide any evidence surrounding his claims of Justin Trudeau's motivations or actions, the scientific legitimacy of COVID-19 mandates, or the actions and motivations of individuals attending the anti COVID-19 mandate demonstrations and so the creator provides no evidence of the truthfulness of his claims. However, the content creator touches on several points and key messages that appear in other videos by creators who attended the demonstrations, such as disapproval of the Canadian government, skepticism about scientific consensus and praise for the other attendees at the demonstration, and so viewers familiar with and supportive of this type of content would likely view the communication as legitimate. Finally, this creator has posted a large amount of content on the topic of COVID-19 and has videos of himself attending the anti COVID-19 mandate demonstrations in Ottawa, so viewers and supporters would likely see him as an authentic voice in this discussion.

In live footage videos, content is often presented without context or narration from the content creator, and is often a recording of events as they are taking place. Sometimes different shots from the same or similar events are edited together, and there is occasionally a brief section of spoken content to provide context. Examples are footage of group events or videos of trucks in the convoy, exemplified by a video from my dataset where the creator filmed a scene in downtown Ottawa during the protests at a street intersection. On one side of the intersection, police cars have blocked off the street. On the other, there is a man in a bright yellow vest waving a variation on the Gadsden flag, a flag popular with the Libertarian movement featuring a snake on a yellow background with the words "Don't Tread on Me" (Walker 2016) (this individual had a flag with a black background instead of the traditional yellow). As the filmer

pans the video along the street, several pick up trucks drive by with large Canadian flags waving behind them. Three other participants in the protest come into view by the sides of the road, all waving Canadian flags. The video continues to pan, showing more vehicles with various flags, such as one with a black background and bold white letters spelling "FUCK TRUDEAU." The audio of the video is a continuous stream of honking from personal vehicles and semi trucks for the full 27 seconds, and the caption of the video is "The sound of #freedom ! #freedomconvoy2022 #protest #ottawa." This video is shot in one continuous take.

Thematic/brand building content is the most diverse of the categories. This category includes a wide variety of content, ranging from "duet" videos, a function on TikTok where the content creator records a video that is played alongside a previously recorded video (usually from another user). These videos usually contain the content creator reacting to or agreeing with content from the original video, but without adding independent content or much new information. This category also includes several videos of the content creator staring into the camera while music or a selection of audio plays in the background, sometimes with a short sentence displayed in text on the screen. Sometimes these music videos are combined with the "duet" function, with several content creators posing for the same audio side by side.

Analysis

The semi-scripted informational videos provide the most language content to analyze, as they contain several minutes of spoken word that the creator could re-record and edit to ensure their desired message was shown in the end result. As these long form videos spent time discussing COVID-19 and the scientific data surrounding COVID-19, creators often referenced different sources of data, research and public discussion surrounding COVID-19 and government policies. Creators often present these sources in a narrative style consistent with how a

newscaster or columnist may present a new source, such as to give the perception that the creator is a reasonable and reliable source. However, in these videos, content creators were very focused on the aesthetics of traditional research (or, looking as though they are adhering to traditional research best practices), while being disinterested in the results and processes of traditional research (such as ensuring sources are reliable and discussed with knowledge of the context in which they were created) (Weir, 2017). TikTok videos are relatively short when compared to other video based content mediums (such as YouTube with functionally no time limit), and these creators appear to have dedicated considerable time to building a persona where they care about sources and the results of fair research. Creators used phrases like "new research," "discredit," and "evidence" while discussing claims that vaccines are not effective (or are downright harmful) and claims of COVID-19 not being a serious or life threatening public health pandemic. These types of statements aimed at building credibility occurred in 17 different videos in this research, often mentioned several times in a single video.

However, the standard of credibility was not consistent between sources the content creator considered to be in favour of public health measures (such as media reports arguing that restrictions can reduce the spread of COVID-19, or sources promoting the efficacy of vaccinations) and sources critical of public health measures (such as sources arguing that COVID-19 is not harmful or deadly, or that vaccinations are more harmful and deadly than the virus). For sources that are aligned with the creators existing views, the creator does not dedicate time in the video to review whether an anti public health measure source was credible, whether research adhered to any scientific best practices, or whether data was fabricated or displayed in a misleading fashion. However, in instances where content creators discussed pro public health measure sources, all of these factors were discussed and critiqued heavily. Videos that featured

content such as statements from public health officers, news articles from traditional sources of news media or anything they considered to be in favour of public health measures or supportive of governments that have enacted public health measures, were discussed in an exaggerated and hyperbolic fashion, such as claiming actions would have far reaching and authoritarian impacts, or that the actions were the next step in a wider plan for global undemocratic and authoritarian action (often referred to as the "Great Reset").

One video from my dataset illustrates this dichotomy - a semi-scripted informational video where the creator is walking outside and speaking into the camera in a selfie-style video. The creator starts his video with the phrase "I just want to understand this," and uses similar phrases several other times in the video, as if to provide a perception that he is a passive and objective viewer looking to engage with the data in good faith. The creator then asserts that there is overwhelming evidence that COVID-19 was created in a laboratory, and world governments are responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic. The creator reassures that there are multiple sources for this information, and it can be taken as factual. The creator then reviews some of the social and health impacts of the pandemic, stressing the harm of government response (such as business closures, livelihood impacts, etc) for example: "an 18 month lockdown of small businesses cost people their jobs, their homes, their livelihoods, and cost the economy trillions of dollars." The creator spends a considerable amount of time reviewing the harm and ensures the blame is on "lockdowns," not "COVID-19." Then, briefly at the end of this segment of the video, mentions that "and if you believe the government numbers, there are deaths too." On one side, emphasizing harsh impacts from government policy align with the goals of the far right to paint governments as authoritarian and government response to COVID-19 as being worse than the virus itself. On the other side, using vague terminology and passive language like "there are

deaths too," minimizes the blame on the COVID-19 virus itself. Sources of information for COVID-19 being purposely created by government laboratories are believed without hesitation, but reports of COVID-19 causing death are preceded by cautionary warnings of uncredible government sources.

When using Habermas' framework for examining communication and authenticity through four validity claims (Wall, Stahl, & Salam, 2015), this content was easy to hear and understand (though did not make use of the TikTok caption option which would have been an additional tool to ensure comprehensibility). Further, while the creator did not explicitly provide any sources or references to back up his claims, he did stress that sources do exist, and took time to claim that these sources are factual. While these assurances do not meet any standard for providing evidence of truthfulness, they do provide the opportunity to reassure a viewer who might trust the content creator. Additionally, the creator does touch on real and widely recognized impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as economic impacts and (though he seems to begrudgingly mention) deaths. These references help provide legitimacy to this creator. Finally, similar to other creators in the dataset, this creator has posted a large amount of content on the topic of COVID-19 and has videos of himself attending the anti COVID-19 mandate demonstrations in Ottawa, so viewers and supporters would likely see him as an authentic voice in this discussion.

In short, content creators included content to, at face value, counter any narrative that a scientific consensus was in place that disagreed with their assertions on COVID-19 matters. To a neutral viewer, or a viewer already primed to be sympathetic to a pro convoy narrative, this content uses terms and concepts with which they may have passing familiarity in order to give the content and creator a scene of credibility and legitimacy. When introducing or reviewing pro

convoy and anti COVID-19 health measure content, creators used terms that a viewer would associate with credibility and safety. When introducing or reviewing anti convoy or pro COVID-19 health measure content, creators would use terms that a viewer would associate with skepticism, distrust, and fear.

However, approximately two thirds of the semi-scripted informational videos in my dataset did not discuss mandates or COVID-19 at all, or only mentioned these topics briefly in passing but not as a basis for the substance of the video. In many of these other videos, the substantive topic was the protests themselves, divorced from the matters they were protesting. Similar to the live footage videos discussed in the following section, these videos focused on attempting to convey wide appeal for the convoy and mass attendance at demonstrations, as well as a curated look into exactly who is attending these demonstrations.

Additionally, semi-scripted informational videos contained the most explicit textual references to other like minded content creators. While live footage videos often contained visuals of other content creators and thematic/branding content videos often contained content connected to other creators through TikTok's "duet" function or other platform functionalities, there were multiple instances of creators directly referring to their interactions with or support of other creators in semi-scripted informational videos. Many of these callouts came in the form of references, such as when one creator gave a "shout out" to another for being the first (or the first in the creators network) to discuss a certain topic, issue or development.

These callouts also often refer to previous conversations that have taken place using TikTok's "live" function. The live function allows content creators to stream live video and audio content, which can be consumed live by viewers, who are also able to interact with the creator in real time through comments, likes and other TikTok platform functionality. Another ability of the

"live" function is for multiple creators to appear on the same live video at once, and have live discussions with each other in front of the viewing audience. The live videos themselves are not automatically saved to TikTok once complete (and so while live videos were popular during the events of the anti mandate protests, the content of those live videos are not available to be included in this study), however creators may post follow up videos alluding to the conversations that have taken place through this platform function. The primary impacts of these shout outs and references to other creators appear to be to twofold: firstly, to direct viewers to consider following the referenced creator (and therefore helping that other creator grow their network), and secondly, to show new followers who may be familiar with the referenced creator that the new creator is interested in similar topics (and therefore hoping to gain new followers who already follow that referenced creator). In short, these references appear to aim to connect distinct but similar networks of content consumers, and symbiotically grow the followings of each creator. Additionally, these references may provide a sense of legitimacy to a smaller creator when they reference a more established creator with a larger or more devoted following.

Several videos in this category implicitly or explicitly mention the TikTok algorithm (a term used to encompass both the content suggestion algorithm that determines what content TikTok shows to what user, as well as content moderation and community guideline enforcement, or the content creator facing disciplinary action as a result of posting certain content). By implicitly mentioning these topics, some creators requested that viewers engage with the video (through commenting, liking, sharing, etc) in order to "help out" the creator or to make sure the content is shared more widely. Creators also substituted certain terms related to COVID-19 with code words, alluding to how using the original word may result in the video or account having their views or reach artificially suppressed by the platform (in one example from

my dataset, one creator used the popular substitute "cookies" instead of COVID-19, stating "I gotta say cookies instead of the other word or they'll [TikTok] flag me for saying it and then they won't show anyone the video"). By explicitly mentioning the "algorithm," creators would blame the algorithm for their content being flagged or being removed. One creator stated that TikTok's "algorithm didn't want to show you (the viewer) the real convoy" and so viewers needed to interact with and share the video to help share the creator's message.

Additionally, the broader COVID-19 denying or mandate opposing community on TikTok has decentrally created an organic and constantly evolving list of slang for various COVID-19 terms, specifically to dodge real or perceived threats from the TikTok algorithm and community guidelines/terms of service that TikTok may limit reach or ban content and creators all together. Creators were careful not to use words like "COVID," "COVID-19" or the names of emerging variants like "Delta" or "Omicron." Instead, a common and widely understood substitute for "COVID-19" was "cookies." Instead of "vaccine," creators used terms like "jab," "prick," "experiment (or experimental jab)." Instead of "unvaccinated," some creators used the term "pureblood," a reference to the Harry Potter franchise (where villain characters within that franchise assign social hierarchies based on strict bloodline and genealogical rules, an unsubtle narrative metaphor for racism, particularely antisematism by Nazis in World War II) (Barratt, 2012). As mentioned above, the creators use these terms with explicit reference to how TikTok's moderation and algorithms may limit their account exposure or enforce moderation.

Live footage content provided a "day-in-the-life" style recount of events, even if the dictated events are highly curated and do not necessarily represent a traditional day or organic and authentic scenes. These videos overwhelmingly displayed some sort of crowd or group gathering, in order to convey a sense of momentum or public support for a cause. A handful of

these videos also displayed recordings of speeches or other events as a historical recount of events as they transpire. The majority of speech content in videos in this category is loud cheering, or short phrases where the content consumer cannot easily understand the words due to cheering or honking in the background of the video. In place of language, visuals take on the primary focus for many videos in this category.

The below screenshot (the username has been redacted) is a representation of this style of footage from my dataset. The entire video is 11 seconds long, and features a panoramic view of a crowd of people and several anti COVID-19 mandate branded signs and vehicles. The only words in the video are the creator stating the province where the scene is taking place ("we're here in Saskatchewan, everybody"), followed by several seconds of silence, and finishing the
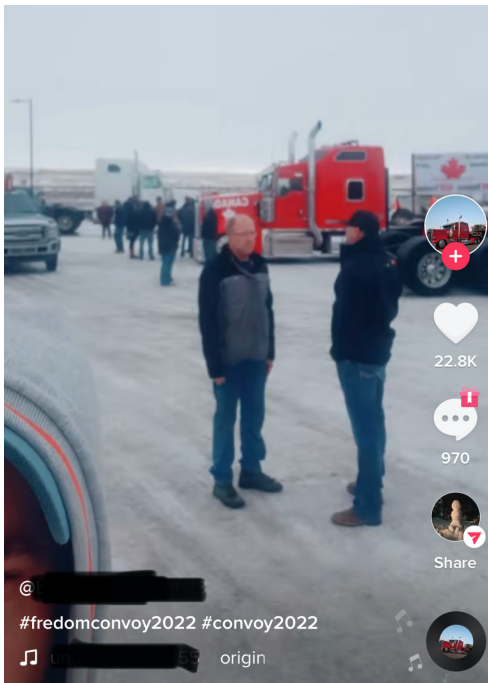
video with a close up of the creators face saying "get ready for it Trudeau, we're coming." This video features several small crowds of people, and appears to have the goal of conveying a sense of growing momentum and that the movement is serious. This video was posted on January 23, 2022, before the first wave of the convoyers arrived in Ottawa. At this time, supporters of the convoy were trying to prove that their movement was serious, and that they had real plans to travel to Ottawa (which would happen by the following week). When considering the group of people and the excitement in the scene, viewers could easily believe that the convoy and protest events should be taken seriously.

A viewer arriving at a video in this category might be given the impression that the issue

being discussed is widely supported, as the video displays a passionate crowd. Discernable language may be drowned out by cheering or chanting, leading to the impression that supporters of this cause are positive and mainstream.

When viewed in the context of the Alt-Right pipeline and the goal of recruiting new members to support the convoy and other far right causes, this style of video breaks down the social stigma of supporting a cause that may be seen as fringe. These videos display crowds of supporters forming an ingroup, and a community that a viewer and prospective supporter could see themselves joining. By showing these large crowds, videos show a sense of momentum building, and prospective members have the option of entering the movement with a sense of excitement before delving deeper into the policy goals of the movement.

Though the content in the "thematic/brand building content" category varied, the purpose or desired impact of the content in this category had consistent similarities. That purpose appeared to be building a general association between the content creator and traditional heteronormative masculinity, traditional conservative values and extreme anti government individualism juxtaposed against the desire to show that a creator is part of a larger community of likeminded individuals. This category rarely featured any spoken or written content other than short captions or an occasional short sentence written in text on the video. In this short text, creators were often intentionally vague on the purpose and goal of the video, such as by declaring opposition to an ambiguous "they" or "them" that can apply to a government, non conservatives, people who are vaccinated, or any group depending on the desires of the content creator.

Videos classified in this category made heavy use of TikTok's duet function, where content creators can record a video that is displayed side-by-side with a video already posted by

another user. Other users can in turn duet this new video, creating a newer video with all previous users. This feature is similar to, but distinct from the "stitch" feature, where a content creator can display a short (up to 5 second) portion of another video, before recording their own video after that portion has played. In a duet video, users can react in what is seen as real time to what is conveyed in the original video. Creators from this dataset who duetted a video overwhelmingly used the duet function to signal support to ideas or individuals featured in the duetted video, sometimes adding no new text or audio content of their own, rather using basic facial expressions or hand gestures to convey support. The primary goals of this style of video seem to be to either gain new followers and viewers who may be supporters of the original video's creator, or signal to the dueters viewers and followers that the creator being duetted is creating content that should be consumed.

In one example from the dataset (a screenshot of which is posted below, the username of the creator has been redacted), several creators made use of the "duet" function on TikTok. This example had six users displayed, with the content creator I was reviewing as the most recent "dueter," four other creators dueting, and one user creating the original video. The video had no caption and no hashtags, but the original video had a distant recording of a sign with the words "TRUDEAU FOR TREASON." The audio was an intense sounding choir leading into an electric guitar with heavy distortion, playing the introduction to a hard rock cover of "Sweet Dreams" by Eurythmics, reminiscent of the audio that may accompany an action movie trailer. The users, similar to other examples in the thematic/brand building content category, had used various visual filters to remove colour and emphasizing grey contrast. Each creator who was duetting stared directly into the camera with a stoic expression as the music played.

3 out of the 5 duetters recorded from their car, 2 out of the 5 wore aviator style sunglasses

and 3 were wearing ball caps. Interestingly in this example, two of the 5 duetters were women,
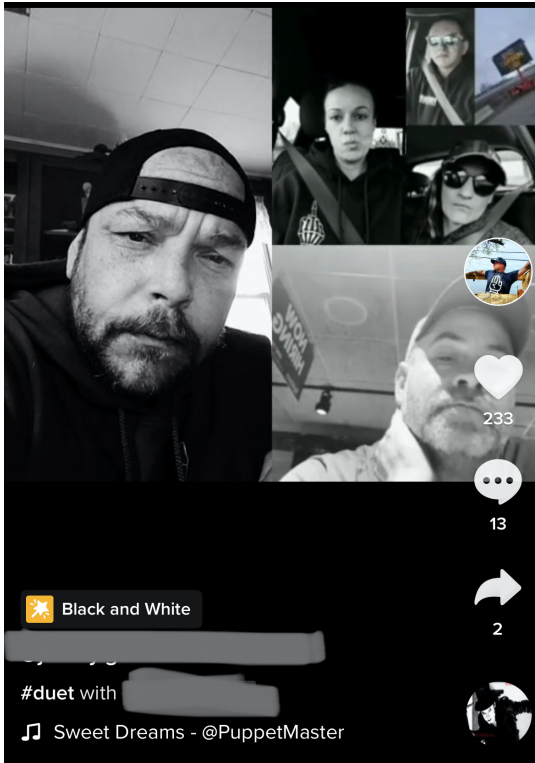
which was a statistical outlier for the content I reviewed. By the 6th duet, the text on the sign of the original video was no longer visible and so there was no indication of the goals or intentions of the video unless a viewer was willing to engage in further exploration of the duetted videos (though a user would have to proceed through 5 other duet videos to arrive at the original, which is not an insubstantial effort compared to the swift "next video" TikTok style). Instead, most users would be met with a wall of stoic faces, staring into the camera, while cinematic rock music plays in the background. Out of the 21 thematic and brand building content identified in the dataset, 14 videos made use of the "duet" function.

Summary

Through creators' explicit discussion of algorithms, implicit references to content suggestion and moderation, and choices they made while creating their content, content creators seemed innately aware of TikTok's content suggestion algorithms, and have created content that is likely to benefit from those algorithms. Whether creators mention other creators for social clout and authority (both by sharing their authority with up and coming creators, and by hoping to grow their audience by mentioning larger creators), carefully curate the words they use to appeal to new members, or frame videos in order to convince viewers that the content creator and the issues they are presenting are widely supported.

One key difference between TikTok and other popular platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram is the amount of tools available to content creators when posting their content. While Twitter only offers 280 characters of text and the ability to attach photos or videos, TikTok offers a full suite of video editing functionalities. From the ability to edit multiple shots together into a single video, to adding voice overs or background audio, to hundreds of community designed filters ranging from greenscreens to fun house mirror effects to virtual reality effects, fully utilizing the full suite of TikTok's options requires the user to be relatively technologically literate, certainly more so than with other major content platforms. While youth and young people tend to be early adopters of many new social networks and social media platforms, and TikTok is traditionally known as being popular with young users, these creators appeared to be older, but still maintained strong platform literacy and comfort using these relatively advanced video editing tools. Using these tools further helped creators develop content that would more successfully appeal to audiences, as that content has a sense of legitimacy and professionalism compared to videos with similar content but no attention grabbing effects.

Discussion

<u>The Real and Perceived Influence of the TikTok Algorithm</u>

Many users on the TikTok platform who post content about COVID-19 in Canada have grown to thousands or tens of thousands of followers, a handful have even amassed hundreds of thousands of followers, and the content that these creators produce tend to feature similar content themes and visual identities. However, it is worth lending additional thought into how these similar themes and identities became the dominant styles of videos: Are creators at the forefront of trends and viewer preferences, or does the TikTok algorithm prioritize specific content production practices while content that deviates from those practices has little chance of reaching viewers and growing the creators network? While answering that question in a comprehensive fashion is out of scope of this research, in which I've focused on the TikTok platform facilitating the development of the Canadian anti COVID-19 mandate demonstrations, this research can offer insights into the relationship between TikTok's content suggestion algorithm and the content that the algorithm suggests. Content creators seemed innately aware of the existence of the TikTok content algorithm and its ability to both drastically increase a video's reach or stop a video from reaching anyone. In my research, there were multiple examples of content creators specifically mentioning the algorithm, mostly in reference to actions that viewers could take (such as liking, commenting or sharing) in order to trigger the algorithm to suggest the video to more viewers and increase the video's reach. Several creators had numbers in their profile handles that referenced the amount of account iterations they have had to create due to moderation from the platform, such as one user in my dataset who had created five previous accounts with the same username, first without any numbers and then ending with 2.0, 3.0, 4.0, 5.0, and his current account (created January 2022) ending in 6.0. Each of these previous

accounts had faced moderation or other disciplinary action from the platform. Additionally, two

of the creators in the dataset preemptively created what they called a "backup account," and requested their followers to follow that secondary account in case their primary account received disciplinary action. A screenshot of one of these instances from the dataset is posted here, where the creator asked the "real Canadians" and "patriots" who supported his content and the anti COVID-19 mandate demonstrations to follow his backup account, which he listed using a white text caption. The creator added "Eye of the Tiger" as backup music to the video.

Additionally, several of the demonstration organizers are no longer on the platform, after once having accounts with hundreds of thousands of followers, and so from the perspective of these creators, moderation action is a real threat. But from the perspective of TikTok as a content platform, Gillespie's (2018) economics of popularity still apply, and TikTok benefits from content that engages an audience, regardless of the ethical considerations of that content. Many TikTok creators add links to their accounts on other platforms in their account biographies, which are listed on their main account homepage. While creators who create content for a mainstream audience may include their Twitter, Instagram, Facebook or YouTube accounts, the creators included in this research, when including these links, tended to not include these mainstream platforms, instead opting for platforms like 4Chan or Telegram, which have more lenient community guidelines conducive to far right views (Urman & Katz, 2022). Due to the prevalence and activity of these creators on TikTok instead of other mainstream social media

platforms, we can deduce that TikTok is still benefiting from these creators, and as such has incentive to have their algorithm promote this content.

Continuing Popularity of Anti Mandate Content

One metric of a successful movement, and successful content that fueled that movement, is the long term continuation of support for that movement. At the time of the anti COVID-19 mandate demonstrations in Ottawa and across Canada, Canadians saw tangible impacts to their day-to-day lives from municipal, provincial and federal COVID-19 response, such as proof of vaccination requirements for some public activities, face mask requirements for some public spaces, and capacity limits on group sizes in some circumstances. However, at the time of writing this research, Canadians face virtually no limitations on their personal activities to reduce the spread of a still spreading COVID-19 virus, regardless of an individual's vaccination status. Yet, content creators have continued to produce a steady stream of popular content with the same themes of oppression, freedom and scientific uncertainty that they produced during the anti mandate demonstrations.

The continued popularity of COVID-19 convoy protestors is another example of the constantly developing nature of modern far right movements. These movements take interest in several individual issues, be it COVID-19 vaccinations, 5G technology developments, immigration, climate change or others, and use these issues to promote their causes in connection to larger themes of xenophobia, claims of tyranical governments, and white heteronormativity. Just as the Yellow Vest Movement started as a group in France advocating for lower gas taxes and transitioned into an international series of protests against immigration, climate action and the United Nations (Ehs & Mokre, 2021), the various factions of the anti vaccine and anti COVID-19 mandate groups transitioned early on to include themes of anti liberalism and

opposition to perceived liberal causes like climate change and social equality. The ability for far right movements to shift their short term focus to fit into their longer term goals is another reason why it is important to understand how the far right has grown online throughout the COVID-19 pandemic: individuals who may not have been members of a far right group before the pandemic but who responded positively to COVID-19 themed content from far right creators, may be at increased risk of following the far right into whatever topic of interest the far right focuses on next.

Connection to the Broader Far Right Movement Online

Due primarily to the social distancing and gathering limits put in place to slow the spread of COVID-19 since March of 2020, the anti COVID-19 mandate protests were some of the first opportunities for members of the far right to gather and interact as a broader community in several years. That first opportunity, combined with far right movements constantly evolving to discuss new issues and include new members, meant that even social groups who were not explicitly organized around discussing COVID-19 and government mandates, announced support for the convoy. Because members from diverse groups with diverse interests participated in the convoy and the discussions around the convoy, many popular themes in social media content expanded to not only include specific mentions to COVID-19, but larger opposition to liberalism and government action.

There are several "entry points" on the Alt Right pipeline, where individuals will consume topics with a variety of different interests, and that content will push the user towards more content with more extremist themes. One frequent topic which acts as an entry point for an Alt Right pipeline is wellness influencers (Dickson, 2022), and while not originally explicitly concerned with the topic of COVID-19, users who began their journey towards fringe topics by

being interested in wellness were also quick to express their support for the convoy. This and other partnerships across the far right make sense, as individual members of far right networks tend to have diverse interests and be willing to support other causes to further their own.

Conclusion and Limitations

One primary limitation of this research, as discussed earlier, is the contemporary nature of new far right movements. Far right movements today (after almost two years of the COVID-19 pandemic) are very different from these movements two years ago, which are again very different from the commonly viewed resurgence of the movement in the lead up to the 2016 United States presidential election. The fact that these movements are developing so quickly makes it difficult for researchers to keep up with trends. However, there is still research that can speak to contemporary far right movements, and it is possible to create linkages between recent research and current trends. As such, far right movements will continue to present opportunities for further research, both in terms of how far right groups continue to influence current issues and trends (such as COVID-19 content on TikTok) as well as how far right groups react to whatever new and emerging issues may arise in the future.

Another limitation is how these movements function while specifically examining the Canadian context. Another feature of current far right movements is that they tend to be more transnational than historical movements (due in large part to the role of social media platforms in facilitating the growth of these groups), and so these movements tend to focus on issues that transcend national borders, or that are highly specific to a geographic location where there happens to be a large number of members in far right groups (in the case of my research and much of the literature review, this happened to be the United States where there is a large and active far right movement). However, by creating linkages between research on the far right more broadly, and research that focuses specifically on Canada, it is possible to bridge that gap. Further opportunities for research include how far right movements in Canada may be similar or different than international counterparts, and the international growth of far right movements.

My research is an entry in a growing assortment of research in the important intersection of Communications research and Technology research, an intersection that has deep connections with social movements and political activism. Social networks and self expression in online spaces have a growing impact on traditional political processes, and online communities continue to represent a growing percentage of venues for sharing political views. With views being shaped based on information consumed in social spaces, researching politics on social media (and specifically the role of emerging platforms like TikTok) is important to provide context to broader research on political action and political communication.

Through this research, I have endeavored to gain insight into far right groups in Canada by asking the research question: "how has social media influenced political movements broadly, and how did TikTok facilitate the development of the Canadian anti COVID-19 mandate demonstrations specifically?" In conclusion, the 2022 anti COVID-19 mandate demonstrations were the most recent in a long line of successful far right political actions, in this case garnering media visibility, government reaction and new interested members of the network. Content creators both made strategic use of, and luckily benefited from, TikTok's content algorithm which pushed far right content to new viewers with less moderation than seen on other platforms. The creators used the term "algorithm" as a stand in for the platforms moderation policies, community guidelines, disciplinary action, content suggestion and general viewer content preferences, and there were several instances of creators explicitly referencing the "algorithm" as a reason for them making certain decisions or as rationale to expect action from the viewer. Through my research, I found that creators made full use of TikTok's suite of (sometimes complex) video editing functionalities. From the ability to edit multiple scenes together into a single video, to adding audio effects, to hundreds of community designed filters ranging from

virtual reality to colour grading, making full use of TikTok's video creator tools required the users in my dataset to be relatively technologically literate. Using these tools further helped creators develop content that would more successfully appeal to audiences, as that content has a sense of legitimacy and professionalism compared to videos with similar content but no attention grabbing effects. Through my research, I also found that the COVID-19 pandemic and government action to slow the spread of COVID-19 presented a popular first step on the "Alt-Right pipeline," where content creators could use the major social and political impact of the pandemic to push their content to new viewers, who then may consume more far right content pushing their own views further to the right.

Through my literature review, I found that TikTok is bound by the constraints and opportunities of Gillespie's (2018) "economics of popularity" model, likely seeing tangible financial benefit by allowing or encouraging this content, while simultaneously being protected from influence by those who may wish to advocate for harsher moderation policies by the platforms close ties to the Chinese state. As TikTok's major concern is if content is "engaging" (and so it keeps viewers on the platform longer, so they watch more advertisements and the platform makes more advertisement revenue), the platform has little incentive to moderate or discourage far right content.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted virtually all aspects of society and the economy, and provided many new opportunities for the far right to reach out to new members. TikTok's rise in popularity at the same time as the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, combined with their various financial and geopolitical motivations to allow far right content, created the conditions necessary for anti COVID-19 mandate content to grow in popularity and propel the Canadian self-titled "United we Roll" anti COVID-19 mandate demonstrations from a series of social media posts to

a large scale in person demonstration and the first invocation of the *Emergencies Act* in its 34 year history. The Alt-Right pipeline is a metaphor for a very effective transition from someone with moderate or apolitical views, to someone who is an active member of the far right and participates in a movement known for xenophobia, bigotry, dissinformation and social injustice. The TikTok creators in my dataset who created content in support of the anti COVID-19 mandate demonstrations represented a crucial step along that pipeline, an opportunity for viewers to become introduced to far right language and themes. The economics of popularity incentivizes the TikTok platform to continue to push users through this Alt-Right pipeline so that users continue to be angry, continue to be engaged, and continue to consume TikTok advertisements.

COVID-19 and the social and political responses to the virus provided another in a long line of topics of interest for the far right, who continue to thrive in online environments. However, with the ever present connection of xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia and other harmful ideologies with intrinsic ties to the far right, the success of anti COVID-19 mandate content is not just harmful in the fight against the COVID-19 virus, but harmful as it contributes to the rising threat of the far right ideology.

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