



INCIDENT DEBRIEF

Russian Funding of US and Canadian Political Influencers

December 2024



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INCIDENT RESPONSE TEAM

This incident debrief is issued by the Canadian Digital Media Research Network (CDMRN). Incident response team member organizations include DisinfoWatch, the PolCommTech Research Lab, the Media Ecosystem Observatory, and Carleton University.

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Incident Debrief

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Summary

- ◆ Russia accurately identified pro-Russian and overtly divisive voices in the West and empowered them with additional financial resources.
- ◆ We found no evidence of influence from Tenet Media or Tenet Media influencers over Canadian politicians.
- ◆ We observe that the Tenet Media influencers have significant following and influence in Canada and found many clear instances of Canadian influencers sharing and repacking Tenet Media content to their own audiences.
- ◆ Tenet Media influencer content frequently aligns with stated Russian objectives of sowing distrust and division in the west. Of specific concern to Canadians, they regularly and intensely criticize Canadian public policy decisions and many high-profile Canadian politicians.

On September 4, 2024, the United States Department of Justice indicted two Russian nationals for allegedly funding a media company, now identified as Tenet Media, for covertly funding and spreading Russian propaganda. Tenet Media was founded by two Canadians, Lauren Chen and Liam Donovan, who reportedly accepted \$10 million USD from Russian sources through their online American and Canadian networks and platforms. Five Americans (Benny Johnson, Dave Rubin, Tim Pool, Matt Christiansen, Tayler Hansen) and one Canadian (Lauren Southern) were recruited and joined Tenet Media for its launch in November 2023 (we refer to this group as the *Tenet Media influencers*). This incident (hereafter the *Russian Tenet Media case or incident*) highlights the ongoing and prevalent threat of Russian interference and influence in the Canadian information ecosystem. The Canadian Digital Media Research Network responded to this event with an investigation that produced eight [incident updates](#) (referenced as IU1–8 throughout). We conclude our investigation with this debrief, although note that this is unlikely to be the last we hear about Russian or other foreign funding of influencers who are consequential for Canadian political discourse.

Incident Assessment

This **moderate incident** highlights an important pathway and vulnerability in the information ecosystem: the ability of foreign actors to influence and manipulate Canadians using Canadian and non-Canadian social media influencers. The Tenet Media operation primarily targeted US-based social media personalities, but nevertheless heavily impacted Canadians due to the attention they pay to the US information ecosystem and its major influencers [\[IU2\]](#).

Russia appears to have targeted a specific set of influencers through Tenet Media that:

1. have decidedly pro-Russian views and sympathies;
2. produce divisive and polarizing content that aligns with stated Russian objectives; and
3. are influential and popular voices in a specific and largely online community.

We observe that Russia is funding these influencers to try and sway the information they produce and share and, subsequently, the beliefs and attitudes of their audiences and communities. Those online communities contain many Canadian voices and listeners. Despite significant coverage of these events, Canadians who are part of those online communities are unlikely to have heard about Russian funding or influence, and even if they have heard of it, they may distrust official institutions discussing the campaign's attempts to influence them. This very skepticism is part of the campaign's effectiveness in eroding trust and shaping narratives within these communities [\[IU5\]](#).

A critical concern is any real or perceived Russian influence over Canadian politicians or other institutional actors. Similar to the [Kirkland Lake bot incident](#), there was a near-immediate linking of foreign interference to partisan politics in the online discourse: in the two weeks following the indictment, the online conversation linked the revelations with Pierre Poilievre and the Conservative Party of Canada [\[IU7\]](#). We find no evidence of such a link: there are minimal public interactions between

Tenet Media influencers and Canadian politicians. Moreover, no Canadian politician regularly produces content online that is comparable to that of the Tenet Media influencers or in their online ideological neighbourhood [IU6].

While we see no direct influence on Canadian politicians, **this case does pose a significant cause for concern** as the Tenet Media influencers have influenced the Canadian information ecosystem in three important ways:

1. Directly reaching Canadians

Many Canadians directly consume content produced by Tenet Media influencers. For example, approximately one quarter of Canadians are able to identify at least one Tenet Media influencer from their picture [IU5]. Online influencers, within and across borders, are increasingly becoming important political actors that can leverage their platforms to disseminate disinformation and shape public discourse [IU3], and they are doing so in the Canadian context.

2. Reaching Canadians through Canadian influencers

The Tenet Media influencers are popular online voices and are central to an online ideological neighbourhood which includes many prominent Canadian voices [IU6]. Their influence is further amplified beyond their core audience through their interactions with and influence over prominent Canadian voices. We found that Canadian influencers that closely align with Tenet Media in the online information ecosystem echo and amplify their content across multiple degrees of separation, extending their reach and influence to Canadians who may not directly follow Tenet Media influencers [IU3].

3. Through shaping perceptions of Canadian public policy

Across all podcasts produced by Tenet Media influencers, we found regular and intense criticism of Canadian public policy and Canadian politicians. Canada was rarely discussed in a positive light, and claims that undermine trust in Canadian institutions were frequently made [IU4]. Through their podcasts and other content, the Tenet Media influencers regularly sow distrust in Canadian (and more generally, Western) democracy, public policy, and political leaders: all stated objectives of the Russian operation.

This incident has been classified here as moderate, in view of the financial resourcing behind the information operation, the reach of the impacted influencers, and the covert editor-

ial control of content by Russian operatives [IU1]. We do not consider the incident to have met the threshold for a major incident given the lack of implication by, or direct influence over, institutional Canadian political actors, and the limited informed complicity of the impacted influencers.

Lessons learned

The Russian funding of Tenet Media is a sobering reminder of the wide range of tactics available to those seeking to manipulate the Canadian and international information ecosystem. While Tenet Media itself did not produce highly engaging content and Russian involvement was publicized rapidly, the democratic implications of the incident are considerable. We highlight four significant lessons learned.

1. Influencers are a potent vector for foreign information operations

Social media influencers, particularly those with established ideological leanings and significant online followings, represent a critical and unaddressed vulnerability in the Canadian information ecosystem [IU1, IU2, and IU3]. In the case of Tenet Media, it seems as though Russian operatives identified and targeted influencers with demonstrated pro-Russian sympathies that were already embedded within ideological communities (that contained many Canadian voices and listeners) [IU4, IU5, and IU8]. It appears that this strategy was used to amplify Russian-aligned narratives by leveraging the credibility and organic reach of these influencers. Despite public exposure of their funding sources, the impacted influencers and their communities have responded defensively and dismissively to calls for reflection. The Canadian public is fortunate that the US indictment publicly revealed this funding, but detecting operations exploiting the reach of influencers is extremely challenging.

2. The Canadian information ecosystem is particularly vulnerable to US-based dynamics and influence

The interconnected nature of the US and Canadian information ecosystems poses a unique challenge to the Canadian context. The US has historically been a major target of foreign influence operations and any such operations are extremely likely to have second-order impacts in the Canadian context. In this case, the Tenet Media influencers generally have extremely low interest in and knowledge of the Canadian context, public-policy or current events, but nevertheless talk about Canada often and are hyper-critical of Canadian public policy [IU4]. The enabling and

amplification of such narratives creates significant challenges for Canadian policymakers attempting to counteract foreign interference and safeguarding domestic discourse.

3. Communities with narrow information streams are particularly vulnerable

Among the many online communities being targeted by foreign influence, this case highlights how specific communities are uniquely vulnerable. Those who consumed Tenet Media content were unaware of its covert Russian funding, and even after the indictment and subsequent coverage, those most familiar with Tenet Media influencers did not necessarily hear about the allegations or make the connection with foreign influence [IU5]. Conversely, those who did learn about the indictment were not those who were aware of, nor followed, the implicated influencers. Those informed of the incident were significantly more likely to regard it as a threat to future Canadian elections than those less familiar with the details of the funding scheme. While in this instance it is an ideological community, linguistic or platform-based communities could also be vulnerable targets. Narrow and homogenous information environments are ripe for foreign actors to exploit. Leaders within such communities may resist acknowledging foreign targeting, further complicating efforts to raise awareness and build resilience.

4. How Canadians respond to information incidents continues to make the problem worse

The way Canadians and the influencers responded to this incident provides key insights into the attitudes and behaviours that emerge in response to foreign influence and interference events. Following the release of Tenet Media indictment, online discussion linked the incident to the Conservative Party of Canada and its leadership through the use of #PierrePutin and associated hashtags and narratives [IU7]. Beyond the wider response by the public, the influencers directly involved have trivialized legitimate concerns raised about their awareness of the Russian funding of Tenet Media and the editorial control exerted over Tenet Media content, instead framing themselves as the victims of a Russian information operation. Having Canadians and influencers respond to foreign interference in such a partisan and dismissive manner demonstrates a disconnect from the seriousness of the matter and also constrains our ability to learn from these incidents. The nature of our online discourse and the way in which foreign interference is frequently politicized in Canada engenders distrust and blame, and limits opportunities for reflection and collective improvement.

Décembre 2024

Compte rendu d'incident

Financement russe d'influenceurs politiques américains et canadiens

Résumé

- ◆ La Russie a identifié avec précision les voix pro-russes et celles qui sèment ouvertement la discorde à l'Ouest et les a dotées de ressources financières supplémentaires.
- ◆ Nous n'avons trouvé aucune preuve de l'influence de Tenet Media ou des figures de proue influentes de Tenet Media sur les politiciens canadiens.
- ◆ Nous avons observé que les influenceurs de Tenet Media ont une audience et une influence significatives au Canada et nous avons trouvé de nombreux exemples clairs d'influenceurs canadiens qui partagent et reformulent le contenu de Tenet Media pour leur propre audience.
- ◆ Le contenu des influenceurs de Tenet Media s'aligne fréquemment avec les objectifs russes déclarés de semer la méfiance et la division dans l'Ouest. Ce qui est particulièrement inquiétant pour les Canadiens est le fait que ces influenceurs critiquent régulièrement et intensément les décisions entourant les politiques publiques du Canada et de nombreux politiciens canadiens connus.

Le 4 septembre 2024, le département de la justice des États-Unis a inculqué deux ressortissants russes pour avoir prétendument financé une entreprise médiatique, désormais identifiée comme Tenet Media, afin de financer et diffuser de manière dissimulée de la propagande russe. Tenet Media a été fondée par deux Canadiens, Lauren Chen et Liam Donovan, qui auraient accepté 10 millions de dollars de sources russes par l'intermédiaire de leurs réseaux et plateformes en ligne aux États-Unis et au Canada. Cinq Américains (Benny Johnson, Dave Rubin, Tim Pool, Matt Christiansen, Tayler Hansen) et une Canadienne (Lauren Southern) ont été recrutés et ont rejoint Tenet Media pour son lancement en novembre 2023 (nous appelons ce groupe les influenceurs de Tenet Media). Cet incident (ci-après l'affaire Tenet Media russe ou l'incident) met en évidence la

menace constante et répandue de l'ingérence et de l'influence russes dans l'écosystème canadien de l'information. Le Réseau canadien de recherche sur les médias numériques a réagi à cet événement en menant une enquête qui a donné lieu à huit mises à jour sur l'incident (appelées IU1-8 dans le présent document). Nous concluons notre enquête par ce compte rendu, tout en soulignant qu'il est peu probable que ce soit la dernière fois que nous entendons parler de financement russe ou étranger d'influenceurs ayant un impact sur le discours politique canadien.

Évaluation des incidents

Cet incident modéré met en lumière une voie importante et une vulnérabilité dans l'écosystème de l'information : la capacité des acteurs étrangers à influencer et à manipuler les Canadiens à l'aide d'influenceurs canadiens et non canadiens sur les médias sociaux. L'opération de Tenet Media ciblait principalement des personnalités des médias sociaux basées aux États-Unis, mais a néanmoins eu un impact considérable sur les Canadiens en raison de l'attention qu'ils portent à l'écosystème de l'information américain et à ses principaux influenceurs [IU2].

La Russie semble avoir ciblé, par l'intermédiaire de Tenet Media, un groupe spécifique d'influenceurs qui :

1. affichent des opinions et des affinités résolument pro-russes ;
2. produisent un contenu qui divise et polarise et qui s'aligne sur les objectifs déclarés de la Russie ; et
3. sont des voix influentes et populaires dans une communauté spécifique et principalement en ligne.

Nous observons que la Russie finance ces influenceurs pour tenter d'influencer les informations qu'ils produisent et partagent et, par conséquent, les croyances et les attitudes de leur public et de leurs communautés. Ces communautés en ligne regroupent de nombreuses voix et auditeurs canadiens. Malgré

une couverture importante de ces événements, il est peu probable que les Canadiens qui font partie de ces communautés en ligne aient entendu parler du financement ou de l'influence de la Russie, et même s'ils en ont entendu parler, ils pourraient se méfier des institutions officielles qui abordent les tentatives de cette campagne de les influencer. Ce scepticisme fait partie de l'efficacité de la campagne qui vise à éroder la confiance et à façonner les récits au sein de ces communautés [IU5].

L'influence réelle ou perçue de la Russie sur les politiciens canadiens ou d'autres acteurs institutionnels constitue une préoccupation majeure. Comme pour l'[incident du bot de Kirkland Lake](#), il y a eu un lien presque immédiat entre l'ingérence étrangère et la politique partisane dans le discours en ligne : dans les deux semaines suivant l'inculpation, les discussions en ligne ont associé les révélations à Pierre Poilievre et au Parti conservateur du Canada [IU7]. Nous n'avons trouvé aucune preuve d'un tel lien : les interactions publiques entre les influenceurs de Tenet Media et les politiciens canadiens sont minimales. De plus, aucun politicien canadien ne produit régulièrement du contenu en ligne comparable à celui des influenceurs de Tenet Media ou ne s'inscrit dans leur sphère idéologique en ligne [IU6].

Bien qu'il n'y ait pas d'influence directe sur les politiciens canadiens, **cette affaire est très préoccupante** car les influenceurs de Tenet Media ont influencé l'écosystème canadien de l'information de trois manières importantes.

1. En atteignant directement les Canadiens

De nombreux Canadiens consomment directement le contenu produit par les influenceurs de Tenet Media. Par exemple, environ un quart des Canadiens sont capables d'identifier au moins un influenceur de Tenet Media à partir de leur photo [IU5]. Les influenceurs en ligne, à l'intérieur et à l'extérieur des frontières, deviennent de plus en plus des acteurs politiques importants qui peuvent tirer parti de leurs plateformes pour diffuser de la désinformation et façonner le discours public [UI3], et c'est ce qu'ils font dans le contexte canadien.

2. En atteignant les Canadiens par l'intermédiaire d'influenceurs canadiens

Les influenceurs de Tenet Media sont des voix populaires en ligne et occupent une place centrale dans un courant idéologique en ligne qui inclut de nombreuses voix canadiennes de premier plan [IU6]. Leur influence est encore amplifiée au-delà de leur public principal grâce à leurs interactions avec, et leur influence sur, des figures canadiennes marquantes. Nous avons constaté que les influenceurs canadiens qui s'alignent étroite-

ment avec Tenet Media dans l'écosystème de l'information en ligne se font l'écho de leur contenu et l'amplifient à plusieurs degrés de séparation, étendant ainsi leur portée et leur influence aux Canadiens qui ne suivent peut-être pas directement les influenceurs de Tenet Media [IU3].

3. En façonnant la perception des politiques publiques canadiennes

Dans tous les balados produits par les influenceurs de Tenet Media, nous avons relevé des critiques régulières et virulentes à l'égard des politiques publiques canadiennes et des politiciens canadiens. Le Canada est rarement abordé sous un angle positif, et des affirmations visant à saper la confiance envers les institutions canadiennes sont fréquemment formulées [IU4]. Par le biais de leurs balados et d'autres contenus, les influenceurs de Tenet Media sèment régulièrement la méfiance à l'égard de la démocratie, des politiques publiques et des dirigeants politiques canadiens (et plus généralement occidentaux). Ces actions s'inscrivent directement dans les objectifs déclarés de l'opération russe.

Cet incident a été classé dans la catégorie des incidents modérés, compte tenu des ressources financières utilisées pour l'opération d'information, de la portée des influenceurs concernés et du contrôle éditorial dissimulé exercé par des agents russes sur le contenu [IU1]. Nous ne considérons pas que l'incident ait atteint le seuil d'un incident majeur, étant donné l'absence d'implication ou d'influence directe sur les acteurs politiques institutionnels canadiens, et la complicité limitée et non éclairée des influenceurs concernés.

Leçons tirées

Le financement russe de Tenet Media rappelle de manière frappante l'éventail des tactiques dont disposent ceux qui cherchent à manipuler l'écosystème de l'information au Canada et dans le monde. Bien que Tenet Media n'ait pas produit un contenu particulièrement engageant et que l'implication de la Russie ait été rapidement rendue publique, les implications démocratiques de l'incident sont considérables. Nous soulignons quatre leçons importantes à tirer de cette affaire.

1. Les influenceurs sont un vecteur puissant pour les opérations d'information à l'étranger

Les influenceurs des médias sociaux, en particulier ceux qui ont des tendances idéologiques bien établies et qui sont très suivis en ligne, représentent une vulnérabilité critique et non traitée dans l'écosystème canadien de l'information [IU1, IU2]

et [IU3](#)]. Dans le cas de Tenet Media, il semble que les agents russes aient identifié et ciblé des influenceurs aux affinités pro-russes avérées qui étaient déjà intégrés dans des communautés idéologiques (qui contenaient de nombreuses voix et auditeurs canadiens) [IU4](#), [IU5](#) et [IU8](#)]. Il semble que cette stratégie ait été utilisée pour amplifier les récits alignés sur la Russie en tirant parti de la crédibilité et de la portée organique de ces influenceurs. Malgré la révélation publique de leurs sources de financement, les influenceurs concernés et leurs communautés ont réagi de manière défensive et désinvolte aux appels à la réflexion. Le public canadien a de la chance que l'acte d'accusation américain ait révélé publiquement ce financement, mais il est extrêmement difficile de détecter les opérations qui exploitent la portée des influenceurs.

2. L'écosystème canadien de l'information est particulièrement vulnérable à la dynamique et à l'influence des États-Unis

La nature interconnectée des écosystèmes d'information américain et canadien pose un défi unique au contexte canadien. Les États-Unis ont toujours été une cible majeure des opérations d'influence étrangères et toute opération de ce type est extrêmement susceptible d'avoir des répercussions de second ordre sur le contexte canadien. En l'occurrence, les influenceurs de Tenet Media ont généralement un intérêt et une connaissance extrêmement faibles du contexte canadien, des politiques publiques ou de l'actualité, mais ils parlent néanmoins souvent du Canada et sont très critiques à l'égard des politiques publiques canadiennes [IU4](#)]. La facilitation et l'amplification de ces récits posent des problèmes importants aux décideurs politiques canadiens qui tentent de contrer l'ingérence étrangère et de préserver le discours national.

3. Les communautés disposant de flux d'information étroits sont particulièrement vulnérables

Parmi les nombreuses communautés en ligne ciblées par l'influence étrangère, cette affaire met en évidence la vulnérabilité particulière de certaines d'entre elles. Ceux qui consommaient le contenu de Tenet Media n'étaient pas au courant de son financement secret par la Russie. Même après l'inculpation et la couverture médiatique qui a suivi, ceux qui connaissaient le mieux les influenceurs de Tenet Media n'ont pas nécessairement entendu parler des allégations ou fait le lien avec l'influence étrangère [IU5](#)]. Inversement, ceux qui étaient au courant de l'inculpation n'étaient pas ceux qui connaissaient ou suivaient les influenceurs impliqués. Les personnes informées de l'incident

étaient beaucoup plus susceptibles de le considérer comme une menace pour les futures élections canadiennes que celles qui connaissaient moins bien les détails du système de financement. Bien que, dans ce cas précis, il s'agisse d'une communauté idéologique, les communautés linguistiques ou basées sur des plates-formes pourraient également être des cibles vulnérables. Les environnements d'information restreints et homogènes sont particulièrement propices à être exploités par des acteurs étrangers. Les leaders au sein de ces communautés peuvent résister à l'idée de reconnaître l'ingérence étrangère, ce qui complique davantage les efforts pour sensibiliser et renforcer la résilience.

4. La façon dont les Canadiens réagissent aux incidents liés à l'information continue d'aggraver le problème

La façon dont les Canadiens et les personnes influentes ont réagi à cet incident donne un aperçu des attitudes et des comportements qui émergent en réponse à des événements d'influence et d'ingérence étrangères. À la suite de l'inculpation de Tenet Media, les discussions en ligne ont établi un lien entre l'incident et le Parti conservateur du Canada et ses dirigeants grâce à l'utilisation des mots-clés #PierrePutin et de hashtags et récits associés [IU7](#)]. Au-delà de la réaction générale du public, les influenceurs directement impliqués ont banalisé les préoccupations légitimes soulevées par leur connaissance du financement russe de Tenet Media et du contrôle éditorial exercé sur le contenu de Tenet Media, en se présentant plutôt comme les victimes d'une opération d'information russe. Le fait que des Canadiens et des influenceurs réagissent à l'ingérence étrangère de manière aussi partisane et désinvolte témoigne d'un décalage par rapport à la gravité de la situation et limite notre capacité à tirer des leçons de ces incidents. La nature de notre discours en ligne et la manière dont l'ingérence étrangère est fréquemment politisée au Canada engendrent la méfiance et le blâme, et limitent les possibilités de réflexion et d'amélioration collective.

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Overview

Russian Funding of US and Canadian Political Influencers

- ♦ **Charges:** On September 4, the United States Department of Justice released an indictment against two Russian nationals, alleging that they funded a media company — since identified as Tenet Media — to spread Russian propaganda on social media.
- ♦ **Canadian involvement:** Tenet Media's owners, Canadian influencer Lauren Chen and her husband Liam Donovan, allegedly accepted almost \$10 million USD from the Russian-government funded media outlet RT in exchange for promoting Kremlin-approved narratives through Tenet's network of American and Canadian online personalities.
- ♦ **Why it's important:** Russian disinformation campaigns are a known threat to the Canadian information ecosystem. The scrutiny of and evidence against Tenet Media joins a growing list of Russian interference efforts in Canada.

What happened?

On September 4, 2024, the U.S. Department of Justice (DoJ) unsealed charges against two employees of Russian state media network RT for conspiracy to violate the American Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) and conspiracy to commit money laundering. The indictment describes a nearly \$10 million USD scheme to create and propagate content that aligns with Russian political motives through an unnamed American company.

Based on the details of the indictment, news media has identified the company involved as the Tennessee-based Tenet Media, owned by Canadians Lauren Chen and her husband Liam Donovan. Tenet Media is a subsidiary of Roaming Millennial Inc., also owned by Chen and incorporated in Montreal, Canada. The FBI is investigating, and the case will be prosecuted by the Southern District of New York and the Justice Department's National Security Division Counterintelligence and Export Control Section. Neither of the Russian actors have been arrested as they are believed to be in Russia.

On September 5th, the day after the indictment was unsealed, YouTube removed at least four channels associated with

Chen, including her main channel and a pop culture channel, MediaholiC, after “careful review” by the site and its ongoing investigation to “combat influence operations.” Tenet Media's YouTube channel has also been blocked, while its content creators also appear to have been banned from the platform.

Allegations

Two Russian nationals, Kostiantyn Kalashnikov and Elena Afanasyeva — employees of RT — are alleged to have worked with Tenet Media, owned by Chen and Donovan, to create, post and share hundreds of videos that pushed Russian talking points.

Under the guise of an invented Belgian investor — Eduard Grigoriann — Kalashnikov worked with Chen and Donovan to establish their company, recruit talent (for which Chen and Donovan received a fee), and produce and share content.

Tenet Media's founders invoiced Grigoriann and received payment through a series of shell corporations.

Once production of the videos began — in the Fall of 2023 — Afanasyeva, using a false identity, was brought on-board first ostensibly as an editor and then in a second persona as an advisor for the fictitious investor. In these roles, she tailored messaging, provided content and encouraged the network's influencers and producers to share it widely.

Almost 90% of all Tenet Media's bank deposits from October 2023 to August 2024 came from RT wire transfers, suggesting that RT was Tenet's main funder.

The indictment claims that Tenet “[actively](#) concealed the company's links to Russia” from influencers and the public.

What is RT?

Formerly known as Russia Today, RT is a media organization controlled, funded, and directed by the Kremlin. In March 2022, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine the previous month, RT was banned from operating or broadcasting in Canada, as well as the United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union. According to the indictment, since being sanctioned, RT has created an “entire empire of covert projects”, designed to shape public opinion in Western countries. One of these “covert projects” included funding Tenet Media.

What is Tenet Media?

Tenet Media was founded in 2022 by Canadian political commentator Lauren Chen and her husband Liam Donovan. Chen is more widely known as the right-wing political commentator “Roaming Millennial” on YouTube. Tenet Media is operated by



Left: Image of a fake Eduard Grigoriann profile (Kostiantyn Kalashnikov) included in the indictment (Paragraph 15.i., page 13).

Top right: Tenet Media influencers Benny Johnson, Lauren Southern, Dave Rubin, Tim Pool, Matt Christiansen, and Tayler Hansen.

Bottom right: Lauren Chen, co-owner of Tenet Media

Roaming USA and incorporated in Tennessee, but is a subsidiary of Chen's Canadian company, Roaming Millennial Inc.

Tenet Media officially launched in November 2023 after recruiting six headline creators in addition to Chen: Benny Johnson, Tim Pool, Dave Rubin, Lauren Southern, Tayler Hansen, and Matt Christiansen, all of whom have substantial social media followings outside of their affiliation with Tenet Media. Before being removed by YouTube, Tenet Media had 316,000 subscribers.

In addition to these influential voices on the American right, Chen and Donovan recruited a Canadian one: Lauren Southern. Southern is a prominent Canadian far-right commentator, with over 560,000 followers on X and 712,000 subscribers on her personal YouTube channel, who has extensively promoted conspiracy theories on social media. On contract for Tenet Media, Southern produced various videos focused on Canada, such as "Canada is Becoming a COMMUNIST HELLHOLE." It is unclear if these videos were influenced by RT.

How did Canada respond?

The Canadian owners of Tenet Media have not been indicted in the United States or Canada. The FBI in the United States is currently investigating the relationship between Tenet Media and RT, but it is still unclear if Canadian law enforcement is

involved in the investigation. In an [emailed statement to CTV News](#), the RCMP declined to confirm whether or not they were investigating, instead stating that they work with both domestic and foreign partners to "share intelligence and enable the prevention, investigation, and enforcement of criminal sanctions evasion."

On September 6—two days after the indictment was released—Canadian Public Safety Minister Dominic Leblanc [announced](#) that the federal government was collaborating with the United States, stating that "any Canadians who illegally assist in Russia's persistent attempts to use disinformation, criminal and covert activities, and corruption to undermine our sovereignty and democratic processes will face the full force of Canadian law."

Timeline of events

Spring 2021: Chen is said to have begun working for the parent company of RT.

19 January 2022: Tenet Media is incorporated in Tennessee.

March 2022: RT is banned in Canada, the United States and other countries, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

December 2022: Chen (identified as Founder-1 in the indict-

ment) starts working for “Eduard Grigoriann” to launch a new Youtube channel.

Spring 2023: Chen, Donovan and RT operatives work to recruit headlining names to be part of the network.

May 2023: Tenet Media applies for its current operating name.

November 2023: Tenet Media publicly launches. Over the following 10 months, it posts over 2000 videos on YouTube, accumulating more than 16 million views.

4 September 2024: The DoJ unseals its indictment.

5 September 2024: Tenet Media and Lauren Chen’s other channels are removed from YouTube.

5 September 2024: Blaze Media fires Chen. Turning Point USA removes Chen’s profile from their website.

6 September 2024: Canadian Public Safety Minister announces that the federal government is collaborating with the United States on the issue.

10 September 2024: Canadian MP Ron McKinnon requests for the Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security to launch an emergency meeting to investigate the issue.

12 September 2024: US Secretary of State announces that the US, Canada and Britain will be part of a joint diplomatic effort to fight Russia’s efforts.

13 September 2024: Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister issues a statement condemning RT’s activities and states that Canada will not tolerate any foreign interference.

16 September 2024: Meta bans RT’s accounts on Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and Threads, along with banning other Russian state media networks.

19 September 2024: Canadian Public Safety and National Security Committee passes a motion to launch an investigation on the issue.

10 October 2024: Canadian Public Safety and National Security Committee passes a motion to summon Chen to appear before them.

16 October 2024: Justin Trudeau, under oath, alleges that American political commentator Tucker Carlson is funded by RT.

5 November 2024: Lauren Chen stands before the Canadian Public Safety and National Security Committee and refuses to answer questions from MPs.

5 November 2024: Canadian Public Safety and National Security Committee passes a motion to refer Chen to the House of

Commons for breach of privilege.

5 November 2024: Canadian Public Safety and National Security Committee passes a motion to summon Liam Donovan and Lauren Southern to appear before them.

21 November 2024: Lauren Southern testifies before the Canadian Public Safety and National Security Committee. She is dismissive of Russian influence and the (lack of) success of Tenet Media.

Why does this matter?

Russian narratives promoted by Tenet Media have circulated among Canadians. Tenet Media contracted Canadian influencer Lauren Southern, who created over [50 videos](#) related to Canadian politics, and likely gained significant engagement from Canadian users on many of their videos across multiple social media platforms.

According to the indictment, the narratives pushed by RT and promoted by Tenet Media were not simply positive messages about Russia but ones intended to amplify polarization and [weaken democracy](#). While some content is clearly linked to Russia and public perception of its government’s activities (e.g., the indictment [describes](#) RT’s request that Tenet Media produce content blaming Ukraine and the United States for a terrorist attack on a Moscow music venue in March 2024), influencers primarily stressed “[highly divisive culture war topics](#)” linked to domestic debates, such as transgender rights and racial divides. **The overall goal of RT’s relationship with Tenet Media appears to be to cause “chaos” and increase division among Americans—and, consequently, Canadians.** Further research is necessary to understand the full scope of the messages RT pushed Tenet Media to promote and the impact of these messages on online discourse and the political climate in both the United States and Canada.

Unfortunately, RT’s involvement with Tenet Media is not an isolated incident of Russian influence in Canadian politics. Russia has launched innumerable [disinformation campaigns](#) targeted towards Western audiences, including Canadians, with the intention of misleading users, polarizing voters, and weakening democratic institutions. It is important for Canadians to be aware of this threat and capable of identifying disinformation when they encounter it.

What are we doing about it?

This notification launches an investigation into efforts by the Russian government to influence the Canadian information eco-

system using English- and French-language online personalities.

Key questions we are focusing on:

- ◆ **Content:** What narratives have RT and other Russian-backed entities pushed into the Canadian information ecosystem?
- ◆ **Network:** Which influencers in Canada have promoted Kremlin-approved narratives and messages to their followers?
- ◆ **Impact:** How much engagement have these narratives received? Have they significantly influenced political discussion in Canada?

Research response

The CDMRN is conducting research to understand the situation in more depth and to characterize its impacts on the Canadian information ecosystem. This study will use a combination of techniques including survey and social media analysis. In the coming weeks, we will release incident updates on topics including:

- ◆ **Impacts of this information incident:** Insights into how it has affected public perception (e.g., should Canadians be concerned, does it impact their trust in politicians, media, or the electoral process), and what factors generated the most impact on Canadians perception (e.g., was it the Russian-funded campaign or the media coverage about it).
- ◆ **Diagnostics of this information incident:** Insights into public awareness of the Russian-backed content (e.g., have people seen the content and where) and their beliefs about the situation (e.g., what do people think happened, where do they believe it originated from, who they think is responsible), as well as more insight on foreign interference in Canadian political discourse.
- ◆ **Foresighting information incidents:** Insights into how this incident compares to other historical foreign influence campaigns and what similar efforts might look like going forward.

Additional updates may be provided as the event unfolds.

Incident Update 8

Pro-Russian narratives among Tenet Media influencer podcasts

Aengus Bridgman and Jean-Romain Roy
Media Ecosystem Observatory &
Network Dynamics Lab

Key take-aways

- ◆ All the Tenet Media influencer podcasts frequently discussed Russia and were among the most frequent sharers of pro-Russian narratives over the past four years, far in excess of relevant comparison groups.
- ◆ While we saw a high level of propagation of pro-Russian narratives among these influencers prior to the invasion of Ukraine, these narratives increased dramatically after the invasion. It is likely that the Tenet Media influencers were identified as worthy of recruitment and support given their clear pro-Russian sympathies.

- ◆ We find no evidence that the establishment of Tenet Media itself increased pro-Russian narratives among Tenet Media influencers.
- ◆ Tenet Media productions themselves did not frequently discuss Russia but when they did, pro-Russian narratives, particularly regarding western governments not acting in the interests of their own citizens and information control and manipulation in the west, were found in excess of even other Tenet Media influencers’ content.

In this incident update, we evaluate shows (podcasts and videos) produced by Tenet Media and by those influencers recruited to be part of Tenet Media. Our evaluation focuses on the extent to which:

- ◆ Russia is an area of interest for the influencers and Tenet Media
- ◆ Pro-Russian narratives are platformed and espoused on Tenet Media and Tenet Media influencer content
- ◆ The content and attitudes of Tenet Media influencers noticeably shifted as a result of joining Tenet Media

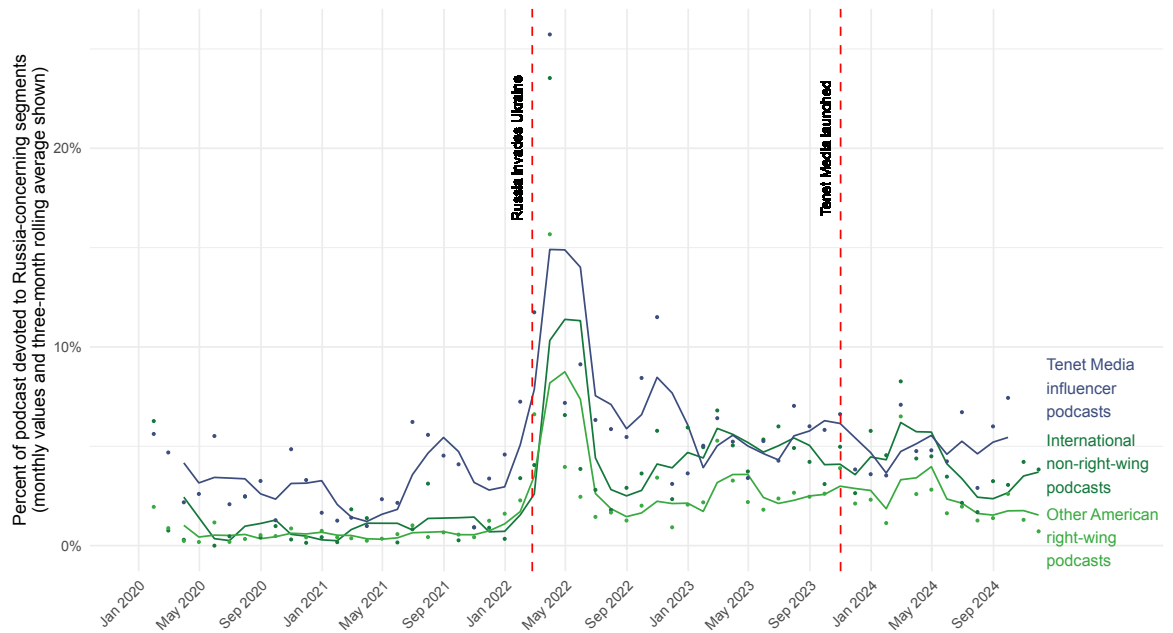
To do this, we assess the Tenet Media Influencers’ statements and the statements of those that have been platformed/hosted over the past four years concerning Russia over the period where Russia invaded Ukraine as well as the conception, establishment and launch of Tenet Media. We collected and transcribed

Group	Description	# of episodes	# of hours of content
Tenet Media influencer podcasts	All podcasts hosted by the three most popular Tenet Media influencers: Tim Pool’s Timcast IRL, Culture War, Daily Show, Dave Rubin’s The Rubin Report, and Benny Johnson’s The Benny Show	4,290	29,735
Other American right-wing	A selection of comparable American right-wing podcasts: The Ben Shapiro Show, The Dan Bongino Show, The Matt Walsh Show, Mark Levin Podcast, Candace Owens, and The Glenn Beck Program.	9,021	27,753
International non-right-wing podcasts	A selection of center and center-left podcasts from the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom: Today in Focus, News Agents, The Inquiry, The Rest is Politics, The Intercept Briefing, Pantsuit Politics, The Bulwark Podcast, The Herle Burly, and The Strategists.	3,145	4,977
Tenet Media Rumble content	All videos posted on Tenet Media’s official Rumble channel.	560	609

Table 1: Analytical groups of shows (podcasts and web series) used in this analysis of pro-Russian narratives among Tenet Media content and that produced by Tenet Media influencers

Figure 1:

Proportion of all podcast time devoted to Russia-discussing segments in podcasts January 2020 to October 2024, with rolling three-month average line shown for each of the three podcast categories.



Data for this plot comes from 20 shows collected from January 2020 to October 2024, for a total of 16,456 shows and 62,465 hours of content, which collectively discuss Russia 28,052 times. Russian-concerning segments were identified as those mentioning at least one of the following terms: Zelensky, Ukraine, Russia, Putin, Donbas, Crimea or Kremlin.

4,819 episodes from six shows: Tenet Media on Rumble and the five podcasts produced by the major Tenet Media influencers: Tim Pool (Timcast IRL, Culture War, Daily Show), Dave Rubin (The Rubin Report), and Benny Johnson (The Benny Show). The five podcasts are the same ones as analyzed in [Incident Update 4 Discussion of and sentiment towards Canada on Tenet Media influencer podcasts](#), but this update also includes 560 Tenet Media episodes posted on Rumble and focuses on pro-Russian narratives instead of content directed at Canada. We collected data going back to January 2020, well before the Russian invasion of Ukraine. All five of the shows predate the conception of Tenet Media and have been running since 2020 or 2021, while Tenet Media Rumble content is only available since November 2023.

As attention to the region and conflict dramatically shifted over the entire information ecosystem during the 2020-2024 period, we also collected, transcribed, and analyzed comparable show samples from popular right-wing American creators as well as a selection of American, Canadian, and UK-based creators with a focus on current affairs. Table 1 shows the different data sources used in this analysis.

Transcribed video and podcast data is uniquely well suited for evaluating the three areas described above: these creators have spent hundreds of hours discussing current affairs including frequent news stories concerning Russia, Ukraine, and other

global geopolitical events. These conversations provide rich ground to understand the true and unfiltered opinions of the influencers.

How often is Russia discussed?

First, we assess the frequency of conversations about Russia across the show groups over time (Rumble content is excluded here as it covers just the last narrow time period). We identified Russian-concerning segments by keyword searching for related entities (e.g., Russia, Ukraine, Zelensky, Donbas, etc.). Figure 1 displays attention paid to Russia over time, with the y-axis showing the percentage of all podcast time devoted to Russian-concerning segments in a given month for each of the three podcast categories (Tenet Media influencer podcasts, International non-right-wing podcasts, and Other American right-wing podcasts). The Figure shows two key potential inflection points that may have shifted attention towards or away from Russia among the influencers: the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the launch of Tenet Media.

Figure 1 shows that the Tenet Media influencer podcasts devoted the most attention to Russia prior to the invasion, at a rate approximately four times that of the right-wing podcasts and nine times more than centrist and left-leaning international podcasts. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, all podcast cat-

egories significantly increased coverage, with the Tenet Media influencer podcasts continuing to devote the most attention to Russia. After the launch of Tenet Media, the Tenet Media influencers did not increase their attention to Russia and overall coverage, but continued to devote more of all podcast time than both other categories of shows. Across the whole time period, the five Tenet Media influencer podcasts discussed Russia for approximately 325 hours.

Was the content of the podcasts more sympathetic to Russia after Tenet Media was founded?

Next, we evaluate the extent that these discussions shared pro-Russian narratives that have emerged over the past four years. These narratives are often used to criticize the west, promote Russian interests, and undermine the Ukrainian government. To do so, through extensive manual review by both authors, identified [hundreds of distinct narratives](#) related to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and debates about the relative merits of Western and Russian forms of government. These narratives were ultimately grouped into 5 major narratives, each consisting of 5 sub-narratives: see the full mapping [here](#). The main narratives assessed were the following:

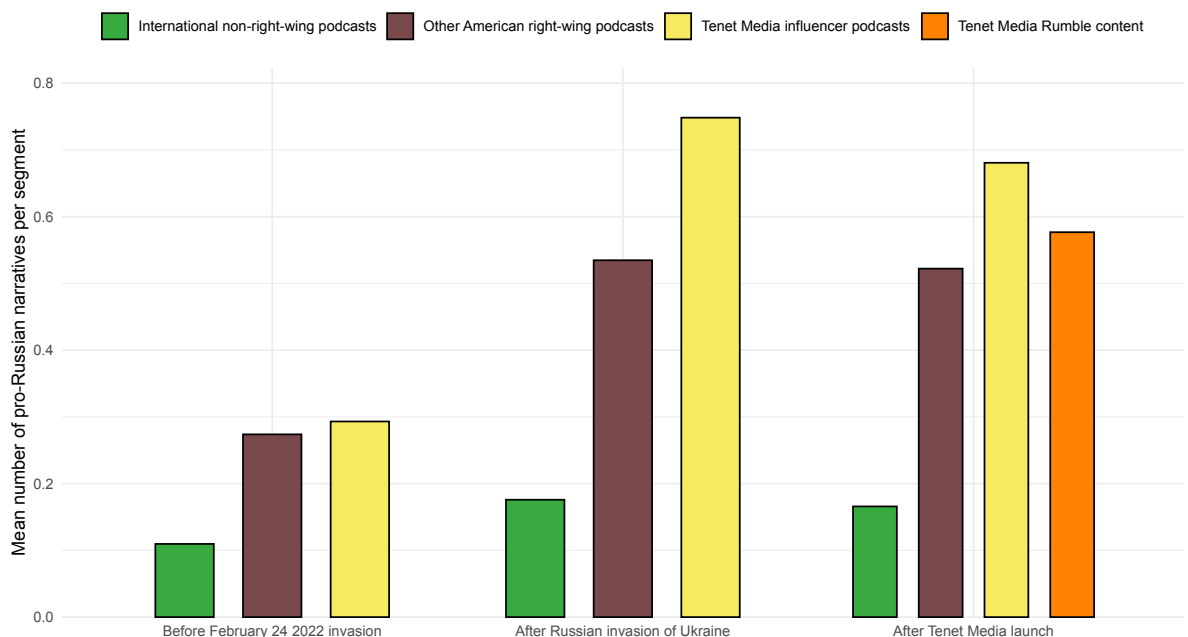
1. Western military encroachment caused the conflict;
2. Legitimacy, sovereignty, moral, and humanitarian narratives;
3. West not acting in the interests of its own citizens;
4. Decline of western influence and culture; and
5. Information manipulation in the west.

Using LLM assistance (GPT-4o), we classified the approximate 28,000 segments of podcasts and videos that concerned Russia for the presence or absence of these narratives. If a segment was classified as containing a narrative, we validated that the narrative was present AND that it was endorsing the narrative using a separate LLM (Llama3.1:70b): we required a double positive. See Examples 1 and 2 from Tim Pool for example texts that contain numerous pro-Russian narratives identified by our classification method. All segments and their associated classifications are available [here](#).

“Guest: They think that all of a sudden Putin woke up one night and decided to invade Ukraine and be a jerk. And that’s not what’s happening. In fact, he’s the one who’s been pushing for peace talks. NATO sabotaged it because they don’t want a peace agreement. They want to put an economic hurt on Russia and they don’t care how many Ukrainians get slaughtered to do it. The Ukrainians are just cannon fodder for an economic war pushed by the West and NATO.

Figure 2:

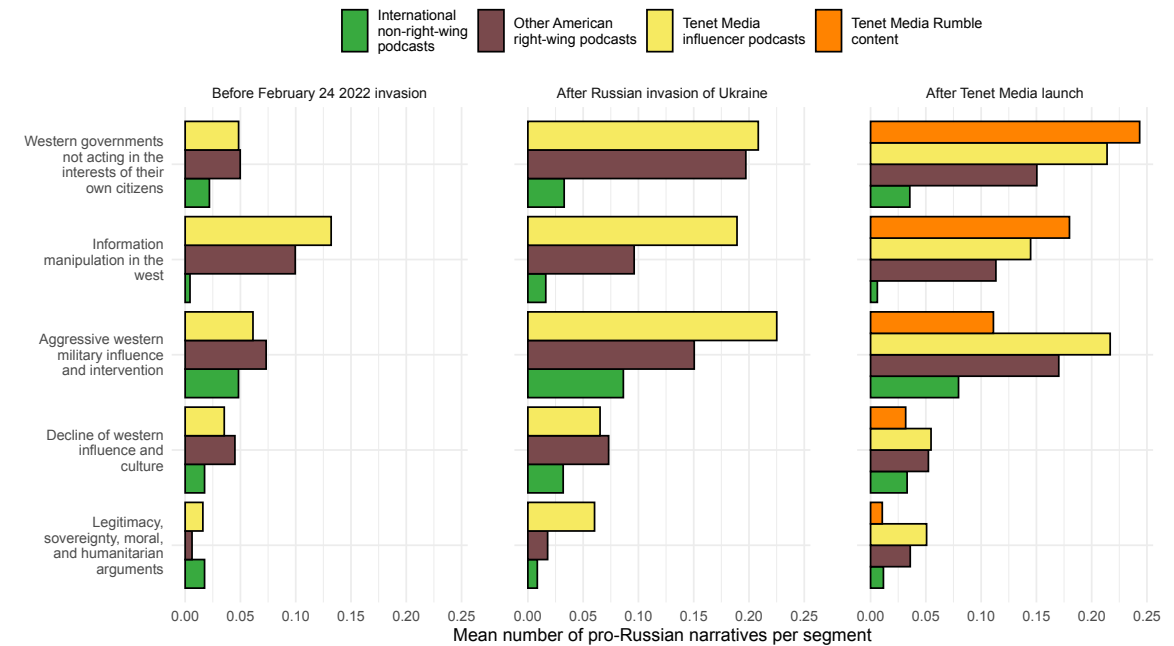
Prevalence of Pro-Russian narratives in podcasts for three key periods (pre- and post-Ukraine invasion, post-launch of Tenet Media), from January 2020 to October 2024 for the four show groups. A y-value of 0.5 indicates that, on average, 1 out of every 2 segments about Russia includes a pro-Russian narrative.



Data for this plot comes from 21 shows collected from January 2020 to October 2024, for a total of 17,016 shows and 63,074 hours of content, which collectively discuss Russia 28,250 times. Russian-concerning segments were identified as those mentioning at least one of following terms: Zelensky, Ukraine, Russia, Putin, Donbas, Crimea or Kremlin.

Figure 3:**Prevalence of**

Pro-Russian narratives in podcasts for three key periods (pre- and post-Ukraine invasion, post-launch of Tenet Media), from January 2020 to October 2024 for the four show groups. A y-value of 0.5 indicates that, on average, 1 out of every 2 segments about Russia includes a pro-Russian narrative.



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Tim: You're familiar with the Qatar Turkey pipeline? It's all interconnected. And I always phrase it this way because, you know, I'm the milquetoast fence-sitter guy. I'll say the United States wanted to build a pipeline through Syria, through Turkey, into Europe to offset the Gazprom natural gas monopoly. And then Syria said, no, our ally Russia would not appreciate it if we allowed you to compete with them and it would hurt their, you know, hurt them economically. So Syria, Russia, Iran, they wanted to build an alternate pipeline that would tap the same gas field and send it up through Iraq and Turkey into Ukraine, into Europe, which would give Russia more control. And then, I guess, the United States just got really lucky. Somehow, Syria fell into civil war. And, of course, we opposed Bashar al-Assad because of all the awful things he did."

Example 1: [Timcast IRL 716](#), February 16th, 2023

"This is psychotic. Ukraine is the enemy of this country. Ukraine is our enemy. Being funded by the Democrats, I will stress again, one of the greatest enemies of our nation right now is Ukraine. They are expanding this war. Now, don't get me wrong. I know you've got criminal elements of the US government pushing them and guiding them and telling them what to do. Ukraine is now accused. A German warrant issued for blowing up the Nord Stream pipeline is triggering this conflict. Ukraine is the greatest threat to this nation and to the world. We should rescind all funding and financing, pull out all military support, and we should apologize to Russia."

Example 2: [Tim Pool Daily News](#), August 22nd, 2024

Figure 2 plots the prevalence of these narratives about Russia during the three key periods for our three podcast groups plus the Tenet Media Rumble content (given the content is only available after the launch of Tenet), with the y-axis showing the frequency of the narratives across all three podcast groups. Tenet Media influencer podcasts post more frequently about Russia so instead of showing total number of narratives, we show normalized likelihood to share pro-Russian narratives in conversations about Russia to provide an idea of what a listener would hear if they listened to a single segment about Russia from one of these shows.

Prior to the invasion, we find that both Tenet Media influencer podcasts and other American right-wing podcasts were far more likely to share pro-Russian narratives than the other podcast group. After the invasion, the frequency of these narratives increased substantially—particularly for the Tenet Media influencer podcasts. After the launch of Tenet Media, the overall frequency of narratives has remained high, with Tenet Media influencer podcasts sharing far more pro-Russian narratives than the international non-right-wing podcasts and even more than comparable right-wing podcasts in the United States. The launch of Tenet Media is not temporaneous with any increase, however, the Tenet Media influencer podcasts continued to share pro-Russian narratives throughout 2024 at a rate higher than that of other American right-wing podcasts. Tenet Media Rumble content showed rates of pro-Russian narratives comparable to that of other American right-wing podcast content.

What narratives about Russia emerge from the podcasts?

Next, we explore the exact pro-Russian narratives that are being espoused on Tenet Media influencer podcasts and official Tenet Media content. Figure 3 shows the prevalence of top-level narratives across the four show groups, again grouped by time period, again using the classification method described above.

Prior to the invasion we see narratives around information manipulation in the west being most prevalent among both Tenet Media influencers and other American right-wing podcasts, with minor engagement with any other narrative. After the invasion, however, narratives about aggressive western military influence and intervention and western governments not acting in the interests of their own citizens exploded. Across almost all categories, the Tenet Media influencers were the most likely to platform and espouse pro-Russian narratives. They started doing so right after the invasion and have continued steadily since then. Again, the launch of Tenet Media does not appear to have had a meaningful impact on the exact narratives espoused and over time the frequency of all the narratives have faded somewhat (but less so for the Tenet Media influencers). For Tenet Media Rumble content, the narratives of western governments not acting in the interests of their own citizens and information manipulation in the west were significantly more prevalent than that American right-wing or other Tenet Media personality content.

See Examples 3, 4, and 5 from The Benny Show, the Ruben Report, and direct from Tenet Media for further example texts that contain numerous pro-Russian narratives identified by our classification method.

“We staged a coup in that country. We installed our own leaders. And then we made Ukraine a client state of ours. It is effectively a United States state right there on the border of Russia. That’s what we did. Here, according to the New York Times, they talk about the unbelievable number of CIA station houses in Ukraine. How the CIA has all these agents sitting in Ukraine, working with the military. How these agents come under fire from Russia. That seems a little dangerous. I thought this was Ukraine fighting Russia. Wait a second. No? Yeah. No.”

Example 3: [The Benny Show](#)

[Hunter Biden EXPOSED as a CIA Asset!? The TRUTH about The Biden Crime Family NIGHTMARE in Ukraine](#), June 13th, 2024

“This Ukraine-Russia situation is spinning out of control incredibly fast. Let me, for the record, because it’s a Monday, just say I am not for war. I would prefer not to go into World War III. I would rather

help the people of America, say, in East Palestine, who are having some problems because of a massive explosion and chemicals in the water, than continuously giving money to Ukraine with no receipts and having no freaking idea what’s going on over there. But somehow we do everything backwards here, right? The media is in it with the politicians. They really, really want not only to continue driving us to the path towards war, but to make sure that if you somehow ask a question about that, you will be thought of as a Russian stooge or a Putin operative or you’re on the take or something like that.”

Example 4: [Rubin Report SNL Crowd Goes Silent as Woody Harrelson Goes Off-Script on COVID](#), February 27th, 2023

“So anyway, all right, let’s get to the next, well, to the to the big story of the day, which is that that Joe Biden has signed that for an aid bill completely expected, of course, but he has in fact signed it today going to send 95 billion combined dollars worth of stuff to Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan. This after the Senate passed the bill yesterday, we’re just like in the house. There is unusually broad bipartisan support to send money. We don’t have to go to other people’s war zones on the other side of the world. If it’s all for defending freedom, of course, not for enriching congressional friends and stock portfolios, but the final vote in the Senate was 79 to 18.”

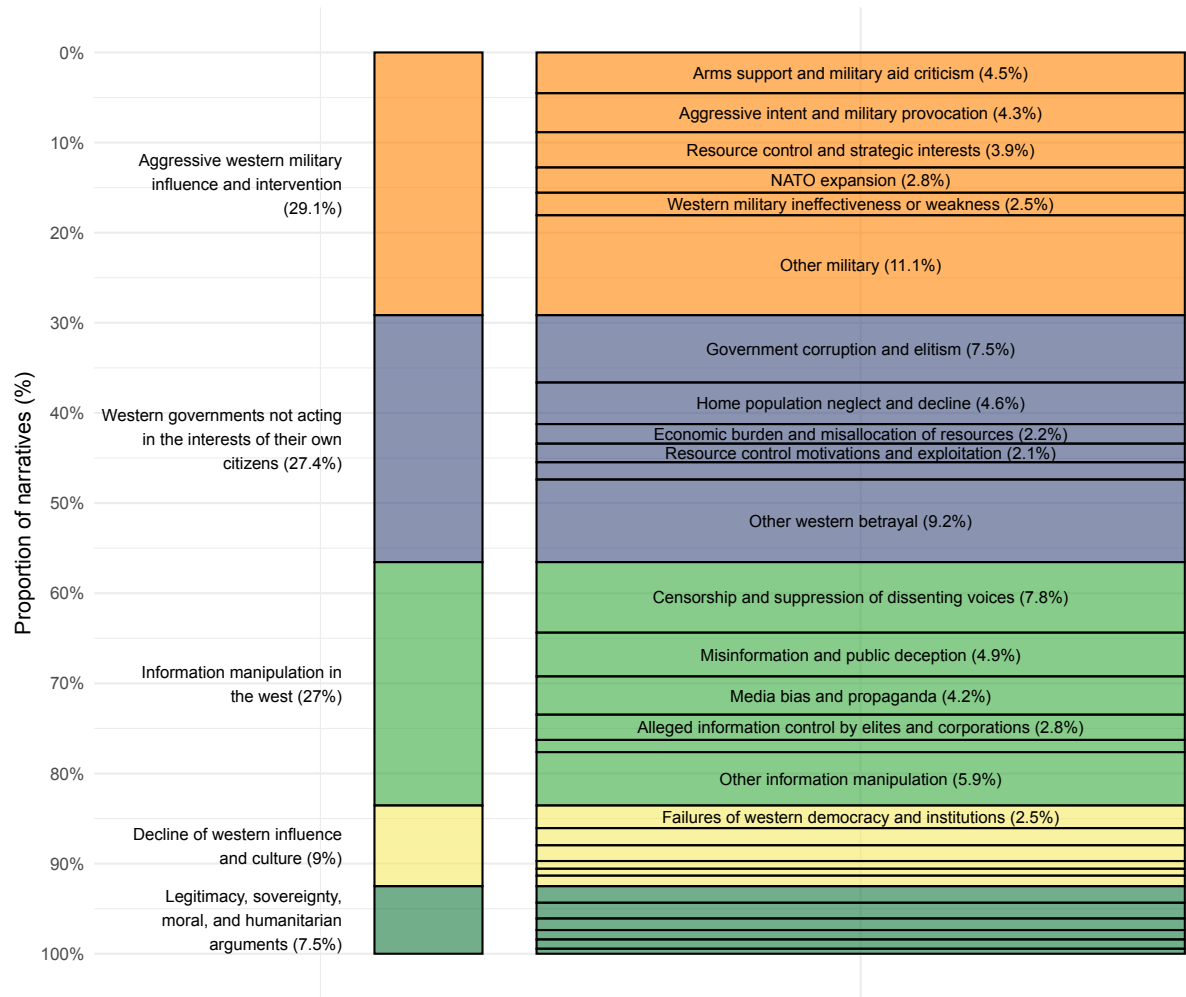
Example 5: [Supreme Court Hears Homelessness Case, ‘Crackhead Barney’ v Alec Baldwin | The MC Hour #23](#), November 8th, 2023

For each of the narratives described above, we further assessed sub-narratives as found [here](#). Figure 4 shows the sub-narratives that are the most-commonly shared on Tenet Media influencer podcasts and Tenet Media videos across the whole period. The Figure shows the relative frequency of the narratives and sub-narratives against each other. Again, we observe that pro-Russian narratives around aggressive western military influence and intervention, information manipulation in the west, and western governments not acting in the interests of their own citizens are the most frequently espoused on the Tenet Media influencer podcasts. Several sub-categories stand out as well, with (western) Government corruption and elitism and Censorship and suppression of dissenting voices both being over 7.5% of all pro-Russian narratives shared.

Conclusion

Our evaluation has shown that the Tenet Media influencers regularly discussed Russia and espoused and platformed pro-Russian views on their podcasts far in excess of relevant comparison groups. We have provided examples of pro-Russian messaging above but there are thousands of examples available

Figure 4:
Pro-Russian nar-
ratives in podcasts
and Rumble content
produced by Tenet
Media influencers
from January 2020
to October 2024 as
a proportion of all
pro-Russian narra-
tives found in their
content.



Data for this plot comes from 5 podcasts and the Tenet Media Rumble channel collected from January 2020 to October 2024, for a total of 4,819 episodes and 26,029 hours of content, which collectively discuss Russia 12,386 times. Russian-concerning segments were identified as those mentioning at least one of following terms: Zelensky, Ukraine, Russia, Putin, Donbas, Crimea or Kremlin. All narratives identified here have been validated by a second LLM.

for [review](#). We conclude that the influencers selected for support and funding by the RT operatives (through Tenet Media) were most likely chosen as a result of their large audience and consistent pro-Russian messaging. While their messaging did not shift after the establishment of Tenet Media, they were already among the most severe pro-Russian apologists in western political discourse. As shown in [Incident Update 4 Discussion of and sentiment towards Canada on Tenet Media influencer podcasts](#) these podcasters also produce a steady stream of anti-institution and polarizing content, often in relation to Canada. In this sense, funding these influencers advanced two Russian strategic objectives: spread of pro-Russian narratives and cultivation of polarization and institutional distrust in the United States and Canada.

Methodology

Data collection

We first collected all podcasts produced by Tenet Media influencers: [Timcast IRL](#), [Tim Pool Daily Show](#), [Tim Pool Culture War](#), [The Rubin Report](#), and [The Benny Show](#), with a total of 4,290 podcast episodes from January 1, 2020 to September 19, 2024. We also collected podcasts from two comparable groups. First, from other right-wing podcasts in the United States including The Ben Shapiro Show, The Dan Bongino Show, The Matt Walsh Show, Mark Levin Podcast, Candace Owens, and The Glenn Beck Program, with a total of 9,021 episodes. Second, nine international podcasts representing center and center-left views including Today in Focus, News Agents, The Inquiry, The Rest is Politics, The Intercept Briefing, Pantsuit Politics, The

Bulwark Podcast, The Herle Burly, and The Strategists, with a total of 3,145 episodes. We also collected the audio of all 560 Tenet Media videos available on the video-sharing platform Rumble. We then used OpenAI's [whisper-base-en32](#) to transcribe the text of all the podcasts.

We then identified all Russia-concerning segments by doing a keyword search for at least one of the following entities: Zelensky, Ukraine, Russia, Putin, Donbas, Crimea or Kremlin. We extracted text in a 250 character window around each of the mentions of a Russia-related entity, with sentence completion up to 400 characters and then combined overlapping segments. This gave us 17,016 distinct podcasts or videos with 63,000 hours of content and 28,248 mentions of Russia.

Classification of segments

To develop our narrative scheme, we identified hundreds of distinct narratives related to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and debates about the relative merits of Western and Russian forms of government. These narratives were ultimately grouped into 5 major narratives, each consisting of 5 sub-narratives. The main narratives employed were the following:

Western military encroachment: Narratives about NATO, U.S. military actions, and alleged provocations or aggression in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. This includes Western arms support, expansionist policies, and criticisms of the military-industrial complex.

Legitimacy, sovereignty, moral, and humanitarian justifications: Narratives questioning Ukraine's sovereignty, endorsing Russian territorial claims, and more generally framing Russia as morally justified in its actions, often using historical context. May highlight humanitarian consequences of the conflict due to the west, such as civilian casualties or refugee crises.

West not acting in the interests of its own citizens: Narratives focused on the criticism of Western sanctions, the financial burden of supporting Ukraine, and/or Western economic decline or self-harm due to foreign policy decisions. May highlight corruption claims, economic sanctions, resource control motivations, and home population impoverishment narratives.

Decline of western influence and culture: Narratives about the decline of Western power and influence, promoting a multipolar world order with increasing roles for Russia and China. May highlight how Western society is morally or culturally declining and even contrast it with Russian traditional values.

Russian-related information manipulation: Narratives suggesting Western media bias, censorship, misinformation, and suppression of anti-war voices, including claims of Western governments hiding the truth in relation to international conflicts.

Other narrative: Narrative that does not match any of the other topics

The full schema of narratives can be found here. For each segment that contained mention of a Russia-related keyword we used the following prompt with GPT-4o.

Does this snippet of a podcast conversation contain any of the following?

1: Narratives about NATO, U.S. military actions, and alleged provocations or aggression in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. This includes Western arms support, expansionist policies, and criticisms of the military-industrial complex.

2: Narratives questioning Ukraine's sovereignty, endorsing Russian territorial claims, and more generally framing Russia as morally justified in its actions, often using historical context. May highlight humanitarian consequences of the conflict due to the west, such as civilian casualties or refugee crises.

3: Narratives focused on the criticism of Western sanctions, the financial burden of supporting Ukraine, and/or Western economic decline or self-harm due to foreign policy decisions. May highlight corruption claims, economic sanctions, resource control motivations, and home population impoverishment narratives.

4: Narratives about the decline of Western power and influence, promoting a multipolar world order with increasing roles for Russia and China. May highlight how Western society is morally or culturally declining and even contrast it with Russian traditional values.

5: Narratives suggesting Western media bias, censorship, misinformation, and suppression of anti-war voices, including claims of Western governments hiding the truth in relation to international conflicts.

For every narrative that the conversation contains provide me with the associated number (e.g. 1,3,4). If no arguments are found reply with a 0. Provide no additional response.

Then for each time GPT-4o identified the presence of a narrative, we checked to see if any of the sub-narratives were present. For example, for **Western military encroachment**:

Does this snippet of a podcast conversation contain any of the following?

1: Narratives that focus on the expansion of NATO and other Western alliances as a form of provocation, destabilizing influence, or encroachment on Russian security. Western actions might lead to nuclear escalation.

2: Narratives suggesting that Western military actions are provocations aimed at Russia, portraying the West as the aggressor. This may include framing Western support for Ukraine as a deliberate attempt to escalate conflict.

3: Narratives criticizing the provision of weapons and military aid to Ukraine, often framing it as irresponsible or escalatory. This could include arguments that support for Ukraine support benefits the military-industrial complex rather than promoting peace.

4: Narratives highlighting perceived weaknesses or failures within western military structures, often contrasting them with Russian capabilities. May include claims about specific politicians being bad negotiators or weak leaders (e.g. Biden) whereas others would be stronger (e.g. Trump).

5: Narratives that suggest Western military involvement is motivated by control over resources, energy infrastructure, or strategic territories, rather than humanitarian or security concerns.

For every narrative that the conversation contains provide me with the associated number (e.g. 1,4). If no arguments are found reply with a 0. Provide no additional response.

After all segments had been classified into level1 and level2 narratives, we checked that the narrative was actually present and was not being refuted using the following prompt using Llama 3.1:70b:

You will be provided a narrative and a conversation segment from a podcast. Your task is to evaluate if the podcast segment contains language that supports the narrative (1), refutes the narrative (2), or does not contain the narrative (0).

The narrative is as follows:

The podcast segment is as follows:

You must provide me with a single number: 1 for supports, 2 for refutes, and 0 for does not contain. Do not provide any other information.

Any non-1 responses were treated as not having the narrative for the analysis.

Incident Update 7

Don't "Russian" to conclusion: An X analysis of downstream conversations in Canada

Mika Desblancs-Patel
Media Ecosystem Observatory

Key takeaways

- ◆ Following the indictment on Sept 4th, we identified a surge in hashtags like #PierrePutin claiming that Poilievre is acting in the interest of the Russians.
- ◆ The surge of PierrePutin hashtags lasted for 12 days hitting a peak of 1475 posts which accumulated 1,303,303 views.
- ◆ We identified a set of influential accounts sharing these hashtags, yet did not find sufficient evidence to suggest this narrative was manufactured by a subset of accounts or by bots

Introduction

When the news broke that [Tenet Media and six right-wing influencers had received money from Russia](#), many worried about how successfully the scheme had spread misinformation, polarized Canadians or eroded trust in their elected officials and large media companies. Beyond the event, there is growing concern that the way these revelations are handled can be substantively damaging, perhaps even more so than the campaign itself.

In a previous update, [a survey analysis of awareness and importance of Tenet Media influencers in Canada](#), we report that one in four Canadians are aware of the case. In this update, we try to uncover how Canadians handled news of the incident by looking at how they engaged with the story on social media, specifically X/Twitter (referred to as X for the remainder of the post). We focus on X mainly because this story was most widely known among X users (38%).

We investigate how Canadians talked about the Tenet Media case on X by exploring the following questions:

- ◆ How much were Canadians talking about the incident on X?
- ◆ What types of discussions emerged about the story? Which hashtags were used?
- ◆ How did major hashtags about the story emerge?
- ◆ Was the emergence of #PierrePutin manufactured?

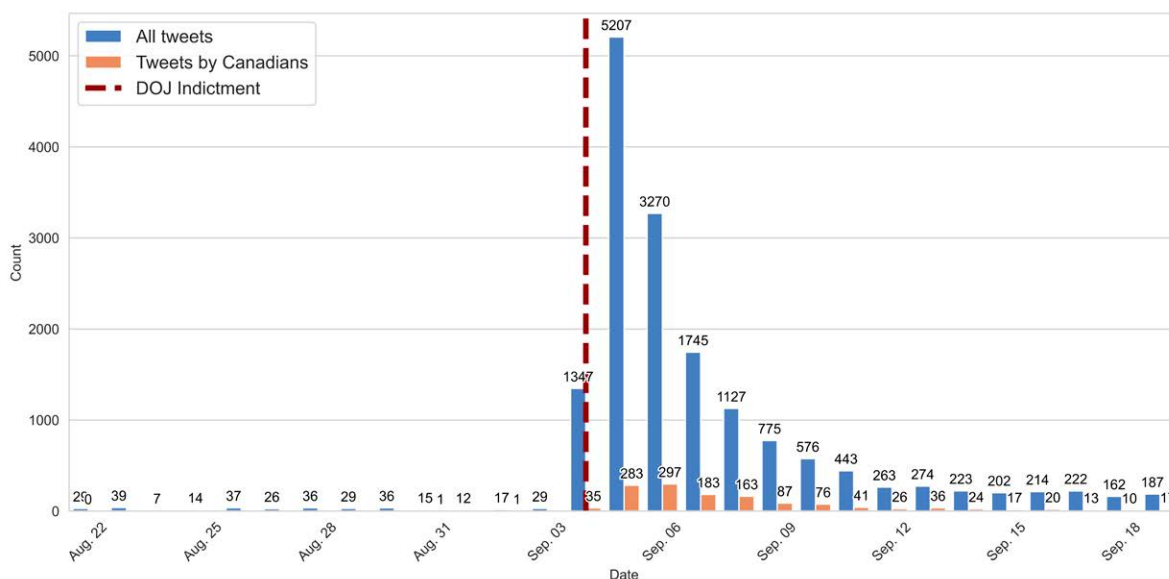


Figure 1:

Number of posts per day on X mentioning "Tenet Media" for all users on X as well as users whose public location is in Canada. The X-axis shows the days and the Y-axis the post count. The numbers above the blue and orange bars are the post counts for that day for all posts and those posted by users whose public location is in Canada.

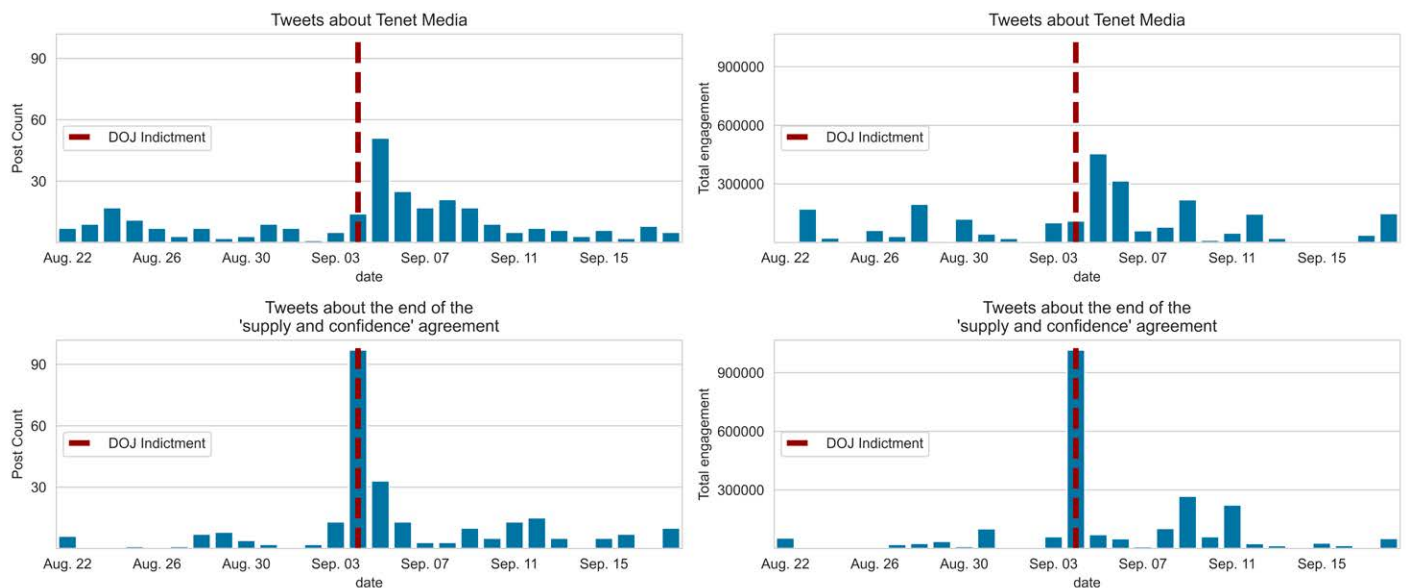


Figure 2:

Distribution of the posts about Tenet Media versus the end of the 'supply and confidence' agreement from influential Canadian X accounts by post count (number of daily X posts) and total engagement (likes + quotes + reposts + replies + views)

How much were Canadians talking about the incident on X?

To address this question, we assessed the presence of "Tenet Media" in conversations on X. To do so, we collected posts using X's advanced search mentioning the terms "Tenet Media" or in discussions mentioning "Tenet Media" 14 days before and after Sept. 5th 2024 (August 22nd to September 19th 2024). In total, we collected 16,563 posts with Figure 1 showing count per day. Among all posts, 5,888 (~36%) had poster location data available, of which 1,330 (~23% of all posts posted by users whose location was public) were from users in Canada. Unsurprisingly, we find that the majority of the discussion on X happened immediately after the indictment was released publicly.

To evaluate the amplitude of this story in comparison to other stories that emerged on the same day, we contrasted engagement with the NDP announcement on Sept. 4th 2024 of the [end the Supply and Confidence agreement with the Liberals](#). We chose this story because a) both the DOJ's and the NDP's announcement happened on the same day, b) the story was heavily discussed across outlets in Canada and we knew it was popular. We applied the same collection method as in the previous

section and looked up the presence of "supply and confidence" in conversations on X over the same period. In total, we found 977 posts from users in Canada. **We find that the Tenet Media story was more widely talked about on X than the supply and confidence agreement.**

To further evaluate differences in engagement between the two stories, we looked at the discussion using the Canadian Digital Media Research Network's list of influential accounts in Canada. Because the amount of posts about each topic is much smaller and manageable, we looked up a wider range of keywords associated with each story to capture as many as possible. Looking at Figure 2 we find that, among accounts in our list, the 'supply and confidence' story generated more acute engagement than the Tenet Media story during the period of September 4-19, 2024. At its peak on Sept. 4th, the 'supply and confidence' story generated 97 posts (cumulative total engagement 1,015,755¹) while the Tenet Media story, on Sept. 5th, received almost half, 51 total posts (cumulative total engagement 454,737). The post count for the supply and confidence agreement, however, rises and falls quickly (219 total posts for the period) while the Tenet Media story was more sustained (196 total posts for the period). As demonstrated in Table 1, the supply-and-confidence received

more overall attention as it was posted about 219 times and saw a total engagement of 1,934,009. Meanwhile, the Tenet Media story was posted about 196 times with a total engagement of 1,662,230.

Table 1 also demonstrates the differences in the types of accounts spreading the story. The ‘supply and confidence’ story was primarily, though not overwhelmingly, spread by Canadian news outlets, sharing 56% of the posts (123 posts out of 219) and capturing 52% of all engagement (1,007,482 out of 1,934,009). On the other hand, the Tenet Media story was shared overwhelmingly by Canadian influencers, making up 85% of the posts (167 posts out of 196) and 67% of total engagement (1,109,489 out of 1,662,230).

We find that overall the supply and confidence story was more popular than the Tenet Media story among accounts in our list of influential accounts. This divergence in attention paid to the Tenet Media story captures a difference between influencer-driven social media (who were much more interested in the influencer-focused Tenet Media story and can explain why general users followed suit) and more traditional media and political actors (who were more interested in the institutional politics supply-and-confidence story).

What types of discussions emerged about the story?

To better understand discussion associated with the story, we identified popular Canada-focused hashtags in the dataset of posts we collected. We evaluate these hashtags to focus on how the conversation matters in Canada, identify posts associated with the broader conversation, gauge opinions and identify dominant narratives on a topic.

The most popular hashtags were stance-neutral (e.g. #TenetMedia, #Russia, #cdnpoli), while many expressed a stance (e.g. #PierrePutin, #IStandWithTrudeau). We cataloged all popular hashtags which expressed a Canada-specific stance and came up with a list of hashtags to follow over the same period. We then generated a new dataset by collecting all posts referencing one or more of these hashtags in the same date range (these posts did not necessarily contain ‘Tenet Media’). In total we collected 46,178 unique posts, see the methodology for the full list of hashtags.

Among this new dataset of posts, we broadly grouped the hashtags into in 10 mutually exclusive categories:

- 1. Pro-Trudeau (e.g. #IStandWithTrudeau2025, #CanadaStandsWithTrudeau)
- 2. Anti-Poillievre (e.g. #SickOfPoillievre, #PierrePoillievresUnelectable)
- 3. Anti-conservative Party (e.g. #NeverVoteConservative, #NeverCPC)
- 4. PierrePutin i.e. posts linking Poillievre to the Russian propaganda campaign (e.g. #PierrePutin, #PierrePoillievresARussianAsset)

Image 1:

Example of a post about the Tenet Media story posted by a Canadian user expressing a politically charged hashtag



Table 1:

Post count, number of unique users, and total engagement per account type for both the Tenet Media story (“Tenet media”) and the supply-and-confi- dence story (Supply & conf) for the period ofSept. 4th till Sept. 19th, 2024.

Seed Type	Post count		Number of unique users		Total engagement	
	Tenet media	Supply & conf	Tenet media	Supply & conf	Tenet media	Supply & conf
Canadian influencer	167	86	63	53	1,109,489	912,300
Canadian politician	2	10	2	9	1,312	14,227
Canadian news outlet	27	123	5	75	551,429	1,007,482
Total:	196	219	70	137	1,662,230	1,934,009

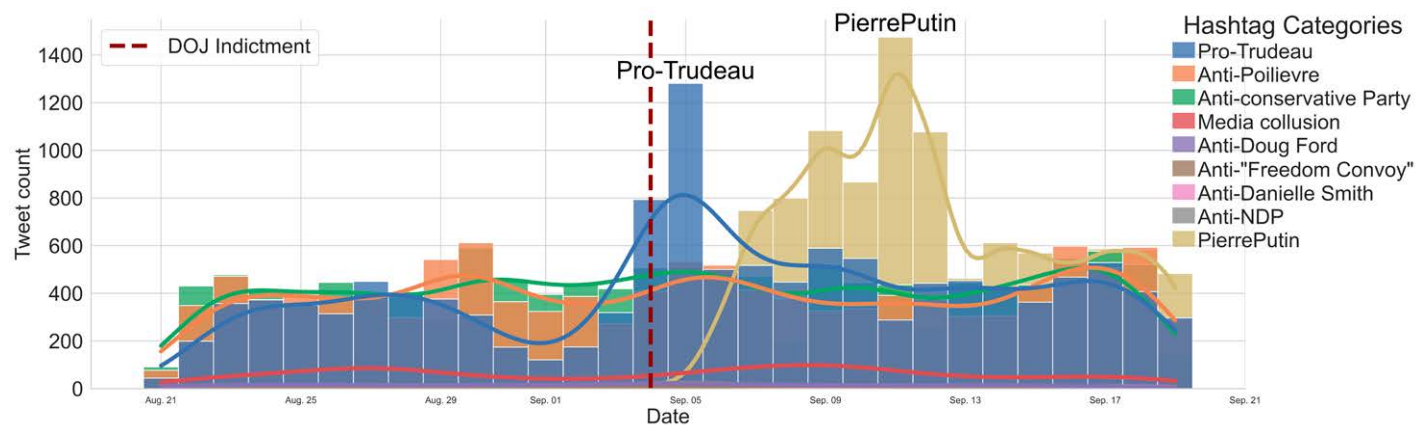


Figure 3:

Daily count of posts containing a hashtag in each of the categories (excluding neutral hashtags). The color code is on the right in the “Hashtag Categories” section.

5. Anti-“Freedom Convoy” (e.g. #FreeDumbConvoy)
6. Anti-NDP (e.g. #SelloutSingh)
7. Anti-Doug Ford (e.g. #DougFordIsCorrupt)
8. Anti-Danielle Smith (e.g. #DanielleSmithIsUnfitToLead)
9. Media collusion (e.g. #CdnMediaColludes)
10. More neutral hashtags (e.g. #cdnpoli, #canada, #Russian-Interference)

Figure 3 shows the counts of posts containing a hashtag in each of the categories (excluding neutral hashtags) during the period before and after the announcement of the DOJ indictment.

Of the 10 groups of posts, we find that two exhibit significant changes in evolution trends between the period before and after the DOJ indictment came out: **the pro-Trudeau, and PierrePutin hashtags**. Usage of both these hashtags changed on or around September 4th.

We next try to understand whether the increased use of these two hashtags associated is because of the Tenet Media story or another event in the information ecosystem?

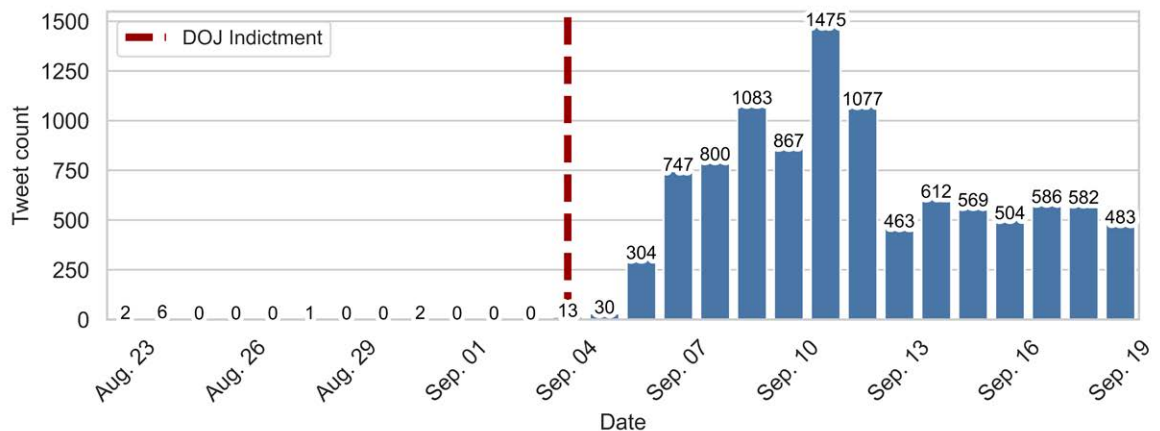
The rise of pro-Trudeau hashtags appears to coincide with the NDP’s announcement ending the Supply and Confidence agreement with the Liberals on September 4th. To disentangle the two, we assessed the content of posts containing pro-Trudeau hashtags on Sept. 5th 2024, the day uses of the hashtags spiked. We found that approximately 14% of the 1281 posts contained mentions of “NDP,” “Jagmeet,” “Singh,” “supply and confidence”

or “agreement.” On the other hand, only ~1.8% of the same 1281 posts contained words related to the Tenet Media story like “tenet,” “Russia,” “Putin,” the “DOJ,” “influencer,” “fund” and “disinfo.” This spike appears to be much more strongly associated with the end of the NDP agreement than the Tenet Media story.

The rise of the PierrePutin hashtags, on the other hand, seem much more likely to be associated with the news of the Russian disinformation campaign. First, we found 28% of posts containing PierrePutin hashtags had words related to the story (we excluded the word “Putin” in our keyword search to avoid catching the “Putin” in e.g. #PierrePutin) on the 11th of September, the day of the highest point in PierrePutin hashtag use. Furthermore, the second most used hashtag in this group is #PierrePoillievreIsARussianAsset and is clearly about the story. Finally, hashtags in this category went from virtually unused before Sept. 4th to trending on X a couple days after. Among posts collected in our dataset, before Sept. 4th (from Aug. 22 to Sept. 4th), we find only 11 posts by 5 users containing hashtags in the PierrePutin hashtag while, at its highest point on Sept. 11th, there were 1475 posts by 519 users. The combination of the presence of related keywords in posts containing the hashtags, thematic proximity between the Tenet Media story and the hashtags’ content, along with the sharp increase in use is strong indication that the Tenet Media story prompted increased use of the hashtag. **From the strong increase in PierrePutin hashtags in the days following the release of the indictment, many posts on X argued that Poillievre was acting in the interest of the Russian government.**

Figure 4:

Total number of posts per day containing PierrePutin hashtags (the numbers above the bars indicate the count of posts for that day)



How did PierrePutin hashtags emerge?

We next evaluate the extent to which the use of hashtags associating Pierre Poilievre and Russian information operations was produced organically and by Canadian voices. We find sporadic use of #PierrePutin prior to the Tenet Media Incident, with 11 posts from 5 users containing hashtags in the PierrePutin category from August 22 to September 4. Six of these posts argued it was hypocritical for Poilievre to celebrate Ukrainian Independence day while not supporting Canada's aid to Ukraine. Going further back, we find that the first instances of the PierrePutin hashtag happened as early as March 2014 (see Image 2), but again that hashtag were not used at any meaningful scale.

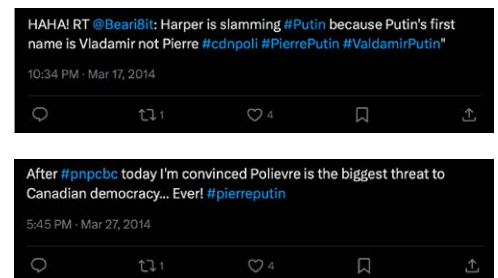
Evaluating the period following the Tenet Media incident, Figure 4 shows a full evolution of the hashtag in our date range by indicating the daily count of posts containing the #PierrePutin and associated hashtags within the PierrePutin category.

As shown, we find hashtags in this category started to rise on the 4th of Sept. with 13 posts, then 30 the next day, 304 the following, before climbing to 747 posts on the 7th and continuing its ascension to 1,475 on the 11th.

Figure 5 captures the evolution of the number of views of posts with these hashtags. First the total number of views of posts containing these hashtags spikes on the 8th of Sept, three days before the spike in the number of posts on the 11th. On the 8th, the hashtag #PierrePutin was so popular it was trending on Canadian X. Furthermore, the evolution of daily total views drops off faster than the daily post count with total views dropping to under half of its peak the very next day, and only going down afterwards.

Image 2:

The first two posts on X using the #PierrePutin hashtag

**Figure 5:**

Sum of the total number of views per day of posts containing PierrePutin hashtags (the numbers above the bars indicate the count of posts for that day)

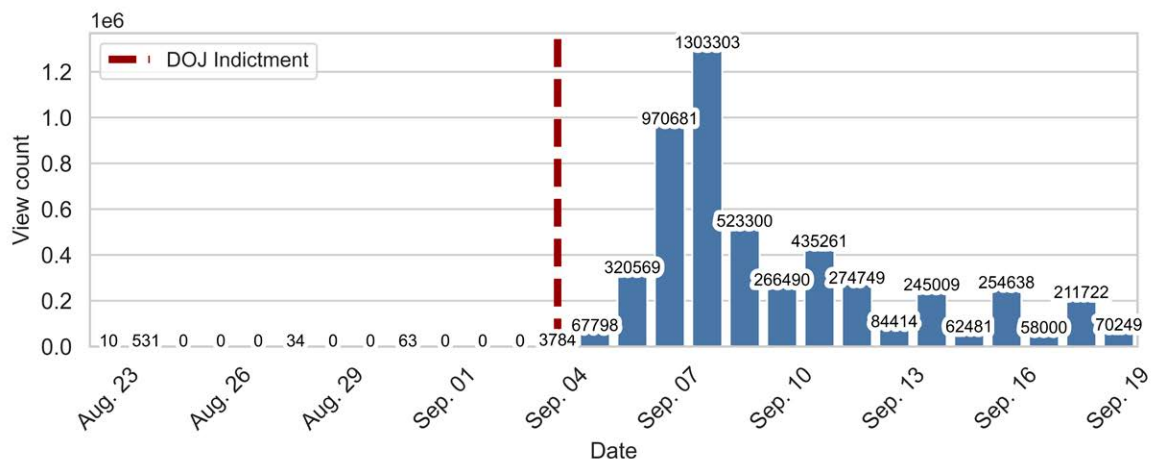
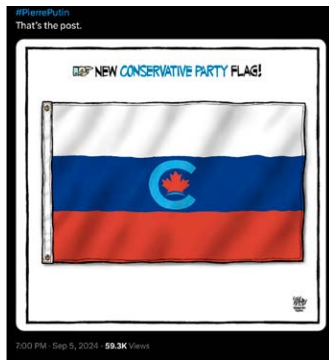


Image 3:

The first post containing a hashtag in the PierrePutin category (here #PierrePutin) to garner a significant amount of views.

**Image 4:**

The post with a hashtag in the PierrePutin category (here #PierrePutin) which got the most views in our period.



So who was using the PierrePutin hashtags? When were they using it and how?

We identified some trending posts which drove attention to the narrative. The first one to garner mass attention was posted on the 5th and accumulated almost 60k views. That's almost 90% of the total view count from posts with PierrePutin hashtags that day. It claims Poilievre and the Conservative party are acting in the interest of the Russian government by showing a picture of the Russian flag with the Canadian Conservative Party logo in the middle.

A day later, on the 6th, a post was shared with the following text: "Pierre Poilievre's refusal to go through NSICOP security clearance screening is looking more and more plausibly connected to the Russian influencer disinformation and election interference campaign in the US and Canada #RussianInterference #PierrePutin #cdnpoli #elxn45"

This post, accompanied with an image of Poilievre in Parliament, collected around 68K views, 20% of the total views that

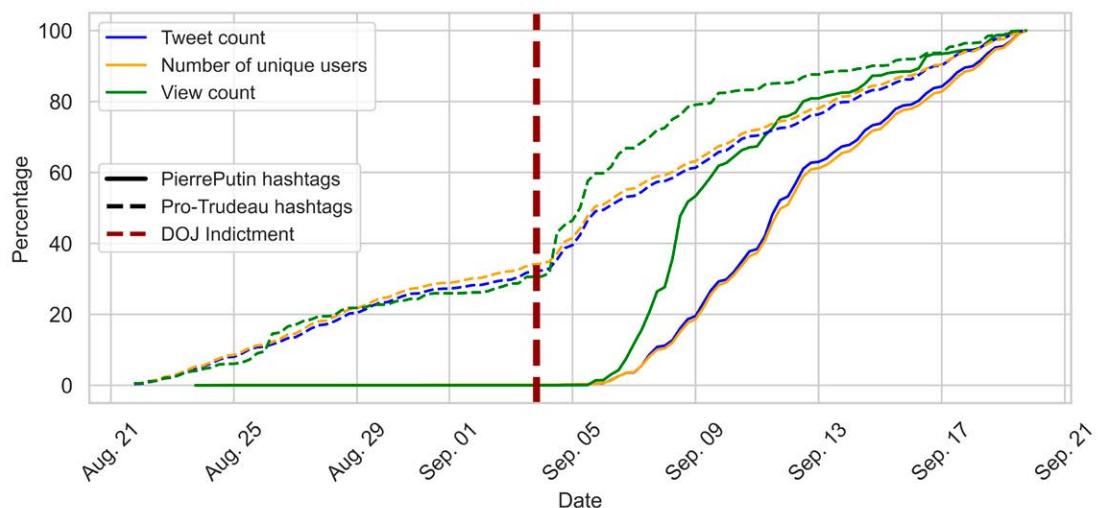
day. While many posts made vague claims about Poilievre's ties to the Russian government, others, like this one, were more explicit and precise in their accusations.

Finally, the top 6 most viewed PierrePutin posts occurred between Sept. 7th and 8th, with the most viewed post occurring on Sept. 8th and garnering almost 150K views (see Image 4). The post quotes a post sharing a video of a well-known political journalist criticizing Poilievre. The accusations here are more specific than the prior ones (e.g. Image 3) but they remain quite vague. This post appears to be generated as a way to join the conversation criticizing Poilievre more than hypothesizing explicit links with the Russian government and the Tenet Media right-wing influencers.

While #PierrePutin and other hashtags categorized as PierrePutin are not new, they garnered a lot of attention and use in the days following the Tenet Media story release. Many of the highly viewed posts contributed to the spread of the hashtag category made vague accusations or hypothesized about potential links between Poilievre, the Canadian Conservative Party, and the Russian government.

Figure 6:

Normalized cumulative distribution of the total number of tweets, number of unique users, and sum of all tweet views over a 6 hour timespan of tweets containing pro-Trudeau hashtags (dashed lines) and PierrePutin hashtags (continuous lines).



Was the emergence of PierrePutin manufactured?

To answer this question, we sought out to identify if the emergence was organic (i.e. follows a natural evolution of engagement and attention) or manipulated (i.e. produced by bots or some other inorganic behavior).

First, we looked at the relationship between the number of posts with PierrePutin hashtags posted every six hours in our range, the number of unique users who posted them, and the total view counts of those posts. Figure 6 plots the normalized cumulative distribution of the number of posts, the number of unique users, as well as the view count. On the same Figure, we show equivalent metrics for the group of pro-Trudeau hashtags which had received attention around the same time.

Looking at Figure 6, we find that the number of posts and number of unique users who posted them have almost the exact same growth pattern throughout the entire period. We find little to no divergence between the cumulative distribution curves for the post count and number of unique users, i.e. we don't see a gap as speculated above. This indicates that there was a more or less constant ratio of post count to unique users throughout the entire time span. Furthermore, comparing to the evolution of another group of pro-Trudeau hashtags which were trending in relation to the NDP announcement of the end of the "supply and confidence" agreement, we find that the relation between the daily view count, number of posts and number of unique users is very similar for both hashtag categories. We find that PierrePutin hashtags followed a lifecycle similar to that of other hashtags.

For the second portion of this analysis, we manually reviewed the accounts that garnered the most attention for each day over the time period for which we collected posts. While some of the accounts were very frequent posters, we do not suspect any of the accounts of being bots. The users posted a variety of different political opinions, used human-like language (e.g. slang and culturally aware lingo), and exhibited reposting and quoting behavior similar to that of other users. We find no evidence that the emergence of the hashtag was inorganic and conclude it was Canadian users that responded to the Tenet Media incident by attempting to paint Pierre Poilievre and the Conservative Party as being beholden to Russian interests.

Conclusions

The DOJ indictment exposed a Russian-led influence campaign. In response, some Canadians took the opportunity to argue

that Pierre Poilievre is acting in Russia's interest. They did this despite no evidence in the indictment or elsewhere showing that Poilievre and the Canadian Conservative Party have any formal ties to the RT executives who funneled money, Tenet Media, or the influencers who received Russian money. While some members share similar opinions, this does not constitute evidence that they are under the influence of Russian propaganda.

Methodology

Posts about Tenet Media and the end of the Supply and Confidence agreement

To identify posts about the Tenet Media story we looked for (case insensitive): "tenet," "doj" and "indictment" and ("influencer" or pundits or "russia"), "influencers" and ("russia" or "russian"), "foreign" and "interference," along with the names and Xtwitter handles of those involved (dave rubin, tim pool, lauren southern, benny johnson, matt christiansen, tayler hansen, liam donavan, kalashnikov and afanasyeva). For the supply and confidence stories, we looked for "supply and confidence," "press conference" and "jag," "press conference" and "singh," "press conference" and "ndp," "agreement" and, again, one of either "singh," "jag" or "ndp," "non-confidence" and "agreement," "early election" along with "government" and "fall." For keywords for both stories we also included their french equivalents (e.g. ("dja" or "département de la justice") and "acte d'accusation" and ("influenceur" or "russie" or "russe")).

List of hashtags collected from posts mentioning "Tenet Media":

'pierreputin', 'neverpoilievre', 'pierrepoilievreisarusasianasset', 'nevervoteconservative', 'pierrepoilievreislyingtoyou', 'istandwithtrudeau2025', 'pierreputinevre', 'trudeau2025', 'cdnmediafailed', 'nevervoteforpoilievre', 'freedumbconvoy', 'womenagainstopoilievre', 'poilieverislyingtoyou', 'putinpierre', 'nobodylikespierrepoilievre', 'istandwithtrudeau', 'pierreislyingtoyou'

Hashtag categorization for the 100 most used politically charged hashtags:

PierrePutin = "pierreputin", "pierreputinevre", "pierrepoilievreisarusasianasset", "pierreputinresign", "pierreputin", "pierrepoilievreisaforeignasset", "putinpierre", "pierrepoilievreisaforeignasset", "pierreputin", "comradepierrepoilievre", "neverpierreputin", "peirreputin"

pro-Trudeau = "istandwithtrudeau", "istandwithtrudeau2025", "trudeau2025", "canadiansstandwithtrudeau", "istandwithtrudeau"

deau”, “therearemillionsofus”, “trustinjustin”

anti-Poillievre = “neverpoillievre”, “nevervoteforpoillievre”, “womenagainstopoillievre”, “pierrepoillievreislyingtoyou”, “pierrepoillievreislying”, “pierrepoillievreisweird”, “pierreislyingtoyou”, “pierrepoillievresign”, “pierrepoillievreisunelectable”, “pierrepoillievreisafascist”, “pierrepoillievreisamisogynist”, “sickofpoillievre”, “pierrepoillievreisunelectable”, “peepee”, “conmansenseparty”, “nobodylikespierrepoillievre”, “pierreisnotmycanada”, “pierrepoillievreisafraud”, “pierrepoillievreisaliar”, “pierrepoillievreisamaga”, “pierrepoillievreispathetic”, “poillievreisunfitforoffice”

anti-Conservatives = “nevervoteconservative”, “nevertrustaconservative”, “nevertrustaconservatives”, “neverconservative”, “nevercpc”, “republiconpartyofcanada”, “maplemaga”, “nevereverttrustconservatives”, “neverconservatives”, “nevertrustconservatives”

anti-Singh = “selloutsingh”

anti-Freedom Convoy = “freedumbconvoy”, “freedumbconvoy”

anti-Doug Ford = “dougfordiscorrupt”, “dofomustgo”, “ford-failedontario”

anti-Danielle Smith = “daniellesmithisunfittolead”, “callanelectiondaniellesmith”, ‘daniellesmithisaliar’, “daniellesmithiscorrupt”, “danithedictator”

Anti-Cdn Media = “cdnmediacolludes”, “cdnmediacorruption”, “cdnmediafailed”, “cdnmediafails”

Notes

- 1 We calculate total engagement by summing posts’ likes, reposts, quotes, replies and views.

Incident Update 6

The relevance and role of Tenet Media personalities in Canadian political discussion

David Hobson, Jean-Romain Roy,
Ben Steel, and Aengus Bridgman
Network Dynamics Lab and
Media Ecosystem Observatory

Key take-aways

- ◆ There has been little direct public digital interaction between Canadian politicians of any political party and the Tenet Media personalities over the past two years and no Canadian politicians are consistently producing content similar to that of the Tenet Media personalities.
- ◆ However, there is a set of Canadian influencers who do directly interact with the Tenet Media personalities and who produce content that aligns in substance and timing. These influencers serve as a bridge between the Tenet Media personalities and the larger Canadian information ecosystem.
- ◆ The content of Tenet Media personalities tends to align to the topic areas of interest to the Russian funders and also outperforms posts about other subjects. Canadian influencers also post content that aligns with Russian objectives but these posts are less frequent and tend to only somewhat outperform other topic areas.

Introduction

As part of our [ongoing investigation](#) into the funding of Tenet Media by Russian intermediaries promoting specific topics and narratives, we assess the relevance of influencers hired by Tenet Media to the Canadian information ecosystem. Here we focus on all those hired by Tenet Media — five American political commentators Benny Johnson, Dave Rubin, Tim Pool, Matt Christiansen, and Tayler Hansen, and one Canadian political commentator Lauren Southern (hereafter collectively referred to as Tenet Media personalities). All six influencers have denied being aware that any of the money came from Russian

sources.² In our investigation we also observed that Tenet Media personalities post only infrequently about the Russia-Ukraine conflict. We make no claims about awareness or complicity, and instead focus on the key fact that the Russian funders are targeting these individuals, their audience, and their broader online community or neighbourhood. The Russian interest in this community is material and an examination of the Canadian implications is key to understanding who Russia is ultimately interested in encouraging and influencing. Throughout this incident update, we have chosen to not include the names of the Canadian influencers and politicians in the network plots to not polarize and distract from the central findings of the update.

Do Canadians interact with Tenet Media personalities?

We begin the investigation by looking at which Canadian politicians and influencers (hereafter Canadian entities) have direct interactions with the Tenet Media personalities. Specifically we look at which Canadian politicians and influencers have been publicly engaging with their content, and which Canadian politicians and influencers are the Tenet Media influencers publicly engaging with. For this investigation, we focus on initiated interactions (i.e. any mention of, report, reply, or quote on X, or an Instagram co-authorship or usertag) between Tenet Media personalities and the Canadian Digital Media Research Network's list of Canadian entities. Over the period examined,

Example 1:

A Tenet Media personality mention of an influential Canadian entity on X



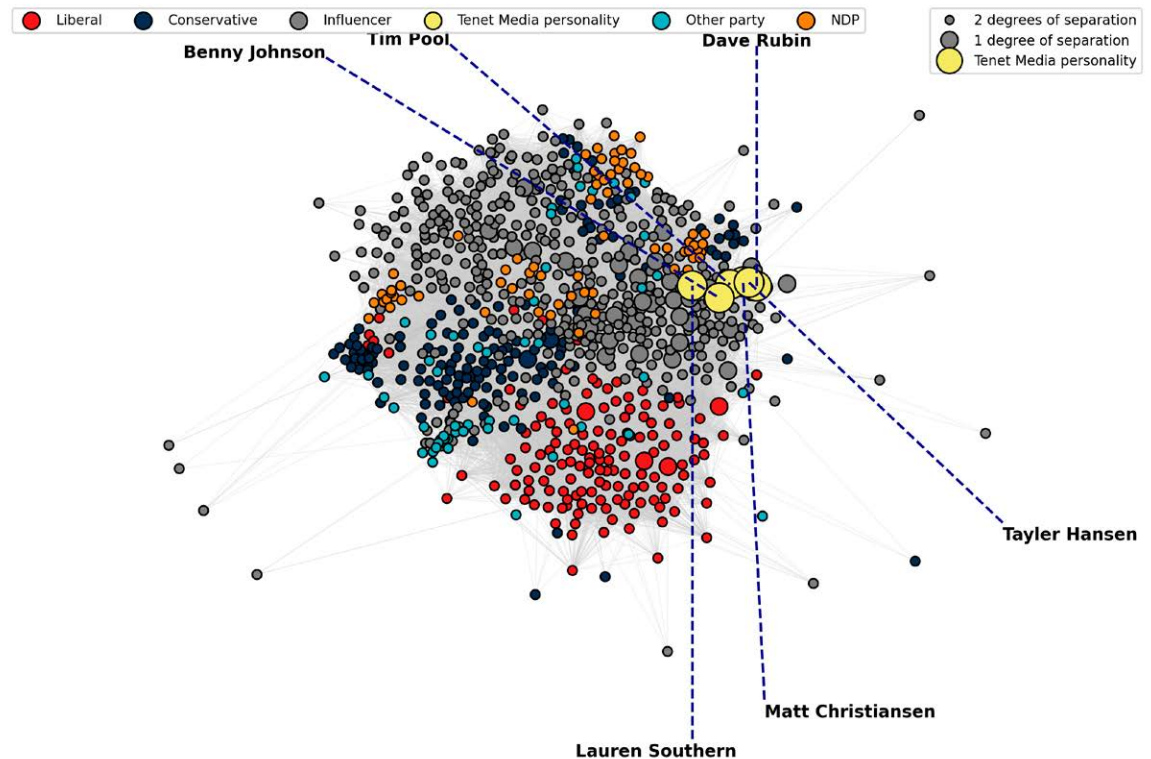
Example 2:

A Tenet Media personality co-posting with an influential Canadian entity on an Instagram post



Figure 1:

Network visualization of directed interactions from Tenet Media personalities to Canadian entities within 2 degrees of separation.



Tenet Media personalities initiated an interaction with 55 distinct Canadian entities a total of 715 times, and 161 distinct Canadian entities initiated an interaction with the Tenet Media personalities a total of 1993 times. We visualize these direct interactions as networks in Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1 shows interactions initiated from Tenet Media personalities (large yellow circles) to Canadian entities (shown as medium circles and referred to as those with one degree of separation) and then initiated interactions from those to other Canadian entities (shown as small circles and referred to as those with two degrees of separation). Example 1 shows an initiated interaction from July 2024 where Matt Christiansen mentions @BillboardChris - a BC-based political activist with a large audience. Example 2 shows an initiated interaction from June 2024 where Dave Rubin co-publishes a conversation with Gad Saad, a Professor from Concordia University in Montreal who has a very large online following, on Instagram.

In Figure 1, Canadian influencers are highlighted in grey with Canadian federal and provincial politicians in Liberal red, Conservative blue or NDP orange. The relative placement of each entity is determined by frequency of interactions, with a force-directed algorithm positioning entities closer together when

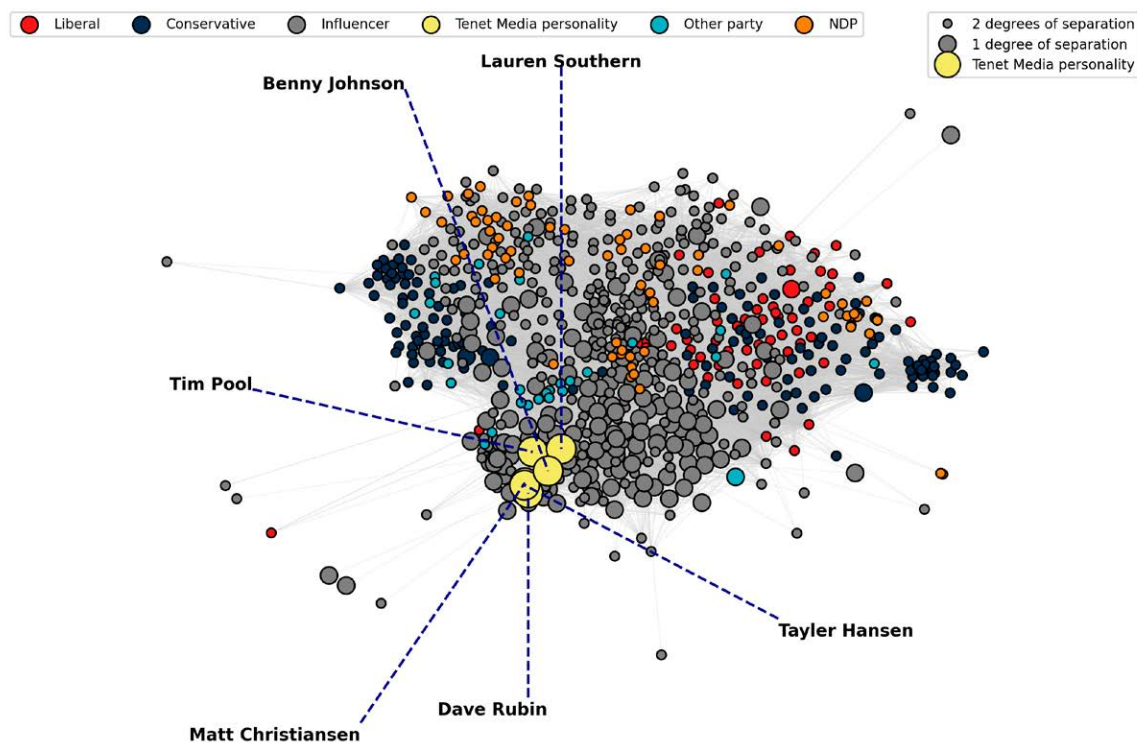
they share many common interactions. A one degree of separation means at least one interaction initiated by a Tenet Media personality to a Canadian entity. A second degree of separation means a Tenet Media personality initiated an interaction with a Canadian entity (the one degree) who in turn initiated an interaction with another Canadian entity (the second degree).

Critically, Tenet Media personalities have initiated interactions with only a small number of politicians in Canada ([Justin Trudeau](#), [Pierre Poilievre](#), [Maxime Bernier](#), [Melissa Lantsman](#), [Mark Gerretsen](#), [Francois-Philippe Champagne](#), and [Sean Fraser](#), shown with examples of interactions). Instead, the bulk of their interactions are with Canadian influencers who in turn interact with other Canadian entities. In this way, Canadian influencers provide a bridge between Tenet Media personalities and the broader Canadian information ecosystem.

Next, in Figure 2, we look at interactions initiated to Tenet Media personalities (large yellow circles) from Canadian entities (shown as medium circles and referred to as those with one degree of separation) and then from other Canadian entities to those one degree of separation entities (shown as small circles and referred to as those with two degrees of separation). Example 3 shows a one degree of separation interaction from

Figure 2:

Network visualization of directed interactions from Canadian entities to Tenet Media personalities within 2 degrees of separation.



Jordan Peterson, a former professor from University of Toronto with an enormous online following to Tenet Media personality Lauren Southern on X

Like Figure 1, Canadian influencers are highlighted in grey with popular online profiles of Canadian politicians in Liberal red, Conservative blue or NDP orange. Again, positionality in the network is determined using a force-directed algorithm, with entities positioned close together being those who share common interactions. There are only five instances of a politician directly interacting with a Tenet Media personality—all relatively minor.³ The bulk of interactions are with Canadian influencers who in turn are interacted with by other Canadian entities. Again, it is a set of Canadian influencers that provide a bridge between Tenet Media personalities and the broader Canadian information ecosystem.

Example 3:

A Canadian account on X quote tweeting a Tenet Media personality



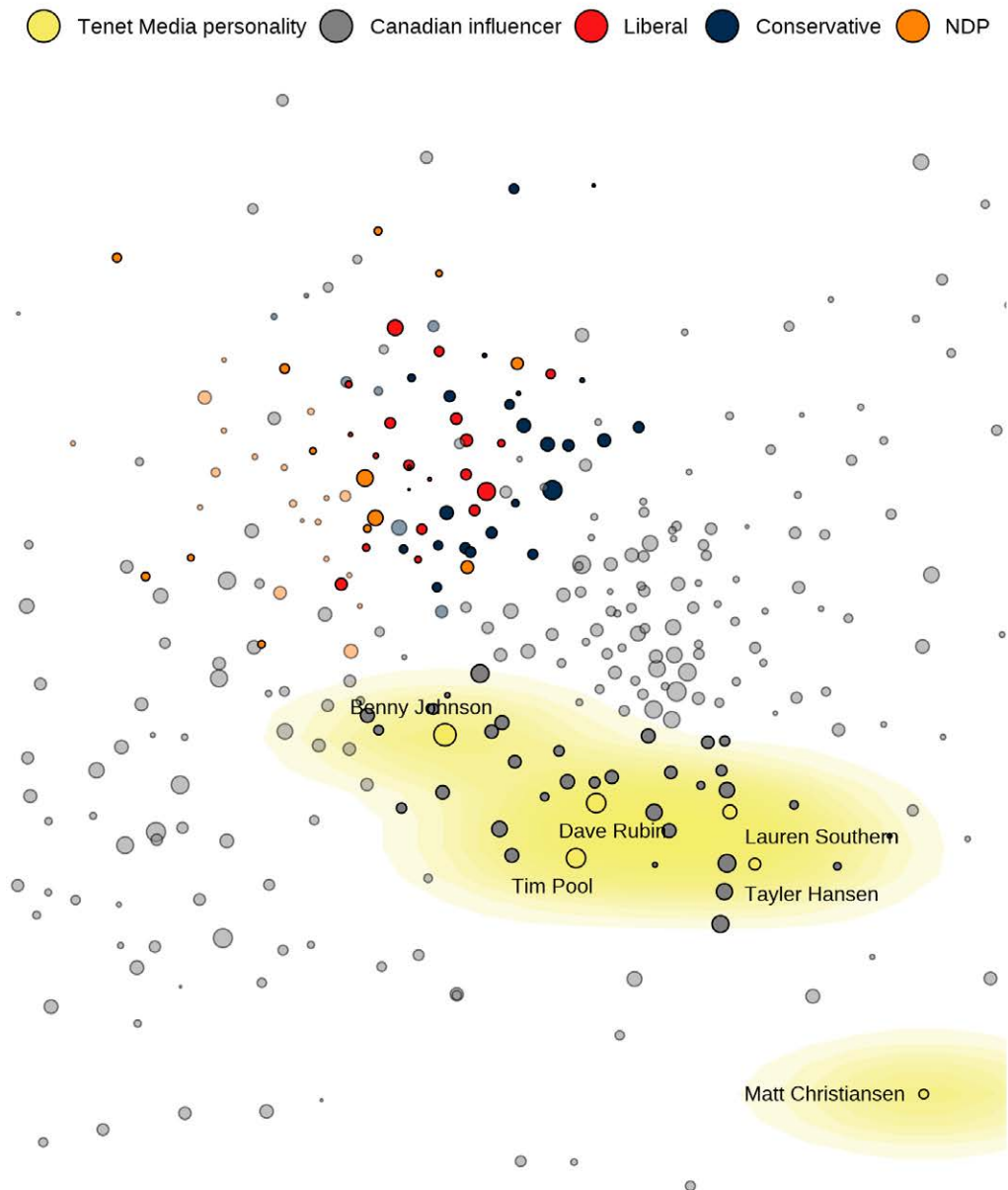
What influence do Tenet Media personalities have in Canada?

This influencer bridge appears to be a key conduit by which the messaging and content of interest to Russian operatives enters the Canadian information ecosystem. We next map the influence Tenet Media personalities have in Canada by evaluating the similarity between what Tenet Media personalities and Canadian entities have posted over the past two years. For every possible pair of entities (e.g. Benny Johnson to Justin Trudeau, Justin Trudeau to Pierre Poilievre), we assess the directional influence of one entity to another through behaviours. Specifically, we look at how often one entity shared the same web links, used the same hashtags, mentioned the same other users, or posted semantically similar content, to another. We aggregate each of these behaviours and combine them into a single directed measure that captures the strength of the influence from one entity to another. We then take all those connections and project them into a network visualization using a force-directed algorithm: entities are pulled closer together when they influence one another (share a lot of similar content and behaviors) and pushed further apart where they do not.

Figure 3 shows a projection of these connections, with each circle representing the social media accounts of a Canadian entity,

Figure 3:

A directed network visualization of Tenet Media personality influence and proximity to Canadian entities



Node size reflects the log of engagement with all posts across X, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok since January 1, 2023 ($n = 7,562,471$). Node edges created using shared urls, mentions, hashtags, and high cross-post cosine similarity between text embeddings. All edges scales using inverse frequency (i.e. common hashtags and posts about events like New Years or Canada Day are not heavily weighted).

each size of circle representing how much engagement they receive online, the color of the circle representing the type of entity (i.e. Conservative politician, Liberal politician, Canadian influencer, etc.), and the distance and clustering between the circles indicating the similarity of their content in comparison to other personalities and entities. See the methodology for additional details. The Figure also shows the neighbourhood

(an online community that posts and behaves similarly) of the Tenet Media personalities in yellow. The Figure visually shows circles of Canadian influencers that reside in the Tenet Media neighbourhood as well as Canadian politicians (not in the neighbourhood) as fully opaque, while other Canadian entities are faded out. Figure 3: A directed network visualization of Tenet Media personality influence and proximity to Canadian entities

Again, we do not see a single Canadian politician at either the federal or provincial levels in the neighbourhood of the Tenet Media personalities. This finding is critical - no Canadian politicians are consistently producing content similar to that of the Tenet Media personalities. Instead, there are approximately 20 Canadian influencers who are within their neighbourhood and produce similar content. Some of these influencers are also those who mention and are mentioned by them. The impact that Tenet Media personalities have in the Canadian information ecosystem is partially through these Canadian influencers. In effect, the yellow zone highlighted in Figure 3 indicates the general community target of the Russian operatives, with the rest of the information ecosystem subject to the influence of those contained within.

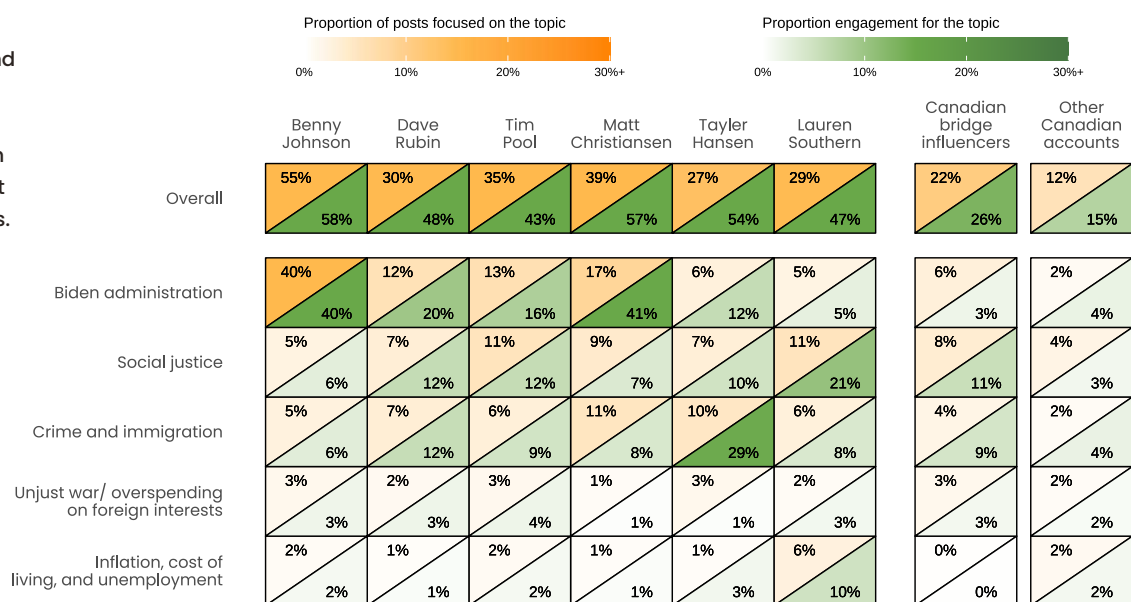
What do these bridge influencers focus on?

What are these influencers discussing? In [IU4](#) which focused on the podcasts of the Tenet Media personalities, we evaluated the topics that Tenet Media personalities focused on in relation to Canada and the stated topics/narratives that the US-indictment flags as those Russian operatives want to “[exploit in the course of an information campaign in/for the United States.](#)” Here, exploit refers to the objective of exacerbating the already-high levels of political polarization in the United States, which is also on the rise in Canada. They are as follows (with quotes from the indictment):

1. The economy and inflation (“Encroaching universal poverty. Record inflation. Halting of economic growth. Unaffordable prices for food and essential good.”)
2. Job loss (“Risk of job loss for white Americans.”)
3. Issues of social justice focused on race, gender identity, sexual orientation, and disability rights (“Privileges for people of color, perverts, and disabled”)
4. Controversies and/or misinformation (“Constant lies of the [Biden administration] about the real situation in the US”)
5. Migrants/Immigration (“Threat of crime coming from people of color and immigrants (including new immigrants from Ukraine)”)
6. Foreign spending (“Overspending on foreign policy and at the expense of interests of white US citizens”)
7. Amplifying false claims (“Constant lies to the voters by the [Democratic Party] in power.”)
8. Escalating war (“America is suffering a defeat despite [Biden’s] efforts. We are being drawn into the war. Our guys will die in Ukraine.”)

We use a similar approach to IU4 to use large language models to classify all the posts on X of: 1) all the Canadian bridge influencers (those in the shaded yellow neighbourhood in Figure 3); 2) a random sample of high-engagement posts across all other influential Canadian entities; and 3) all posts from Tenet Media

Figure 4:
Topic frequency and proportion engagement aligned with stated Russian objectives for Tenet Media personalities.



Based on 39,540 number of tweets from 397 distinct users (Tenet Media personalities, bridge influencers, and high-engagement Canadian entities), with a total engagement of 231,406,921. All data from January 1, 2023 to September 19, 2024, with classification done by GPT-4o.

personalities. All data is from January 1, 2023 to September 19, 2024, as given previously. Given the low percentages in some of the categories, we grouped several of the topics together:

1. Unjust war/overspending on foreign interests (Topics 6 + 8)
2. Social justice (Topic 3)
3. Inflation, cost of living and unemployment (Topics 1 + 2)
4. Crime and immigration (Topic 5)
5. The Biden administration (Topics 4 + 7)

Figure 4 is a matrix plot showing the frequency these topics are discussed and engaged with for each Tenet Media personality - topics are plotted along the y-axis and personalities along the x-axis. Two Canadian groups of accounts (bridge influencers and all other influential Canadian entities) are also included on the right. The upper triangle for each entity-topic pair shows the percentage of all content shared that is about that topic and the bottom triangle shows the percentage of overall engagement with all content for the topic-entity combination. For example, the top left box shows that 40% of Benny Johnson posts are about the Biden administration and those posts receive 40% of his overall engagement. Triangles with higher percentages are darkened to show importance. For example, 11% of Lauren Southern's posts are on issues of social justice but 21% of her engagement comes from those posts (i.e. they are comparatively much more popular). Note that all percentages are estimates due to model error (the classification technique being necessarily imprecise) and results should be interpreted as directional. Percentages do not add up to 100 because not all posts align with one of the narratives.

A significant proportion of the content generated by The Tenet Media personalities aligns with the five topics, ranging from around 25% (Tayler Hansen) to over 50% (Benny Johnson). In all cases, this content overperforms in engagement: their audiences are much more likely to engage with content related to these five topics than other topics. All the American Tenet Media personalities frequently post critiques of the Biden administration, often in a controversial way (e.g. from Benny Johnson: "WATERGATE 2.0! Biden ORDERED FBI Raid on Trump as STUNNED White House Lawyers Declare Raid ILLEGAL"), and also posts frequently about crime/immigration and social justice. The one Canadian personality is much less focused on American political scandal and instead posts heavily about social justice issues. She also mentions inflation and the economy at a higher rate than the Americans - this is primarily in the context of the housing crisis in Canada.

The Canadian bridge influencers do post more about these topics, overall, than other Canadians. This is driven chiefly by a much higher interest in American politics than the aver-

Example 4:

A post from Tenet Media personality Lauren Southern which has been classified as about Crime and immigration



age Canadian entity account. However, there is no substantial difference in engagement on other topics between the bridge influencers and the other Canadian accounts. This suggests that the specific topics of interest to RT operatives are of lesser importance to the Canadian conversation. This is in stark contrast to the Tenet Media personalities who both post more about the topics, but also see much larger engagement from them. Overall, these bridge influencers are more tuned in to American politics and pay closer attention to those issues but are otherwise not producing content aligned with the stated Russian operatives objectives.

Methodology

Direct interactions

Data for the direct interactions as well as the similarity network is from the Canadian Digital Media Research Network dataset of social media activity of Canadian politically influential entities, which includes relevant metadata (e.g. likes, shares, etc.). We counted a direct interaction as any of: a mention of another user on any platform, an X retweet, reply or quote tweet, or an Instagram co-author and usertag. Looking at the range of January 2023 to September 2024, we summed all these interaction counts between users with equal weighting for each type. Due to high interaction counts between some users, we applied the log function to all summed interaction counts, with the intuition that there is a diminishing importance as interaction numbers increase.

We use these logged interaction counts to construct a network. Using Dijkstra's algorithm to find shortest path lengths, we find the set of nodes that are at most two degrees of separation from the Tenet Media personalities, by interactions targeted from the Tenet Media personalities to Canadian public figures for Figure 1, and by interactions targeted towards the Tenet Media personalities for Figure 2. Filtering the network to only these close public figures, we then combine directed edges into a single undirected edge between public figures by the harmonic mean, with the intuition that interactions between two figures are more heavily weighted downwards by the weaker relationship. Put another way, if person A frequently interacts with person B, but person B only occasionally interacts with person A, the

mutual relationship weight is only slightly higher than the lowest weight. We then apply the Force Atlas 2 network layout algorithm to the network, from the *cugraph* Python library, to obtain two dimensional node positions. We group the nodes into 6 groups: Liberal politicians, Conservative politicians, NDP politicians, politicians of any other party, Canadian influencers, and Tenet Media personalities. We size the node based on its degree of separation from the Tenet Media personalities.

Similarity network

To analyze the influence of Tenet Media personalities on Canadian political discourse, we assessed the connections and content similarities between Tenet Media personalities and Canadian entities. Using a list of 2,254 Canadian politicians and prominent Canadian entities, we measured the level of alignment between Tenet Media personalities and Canadian entities based on shared web links, hashtags, mentions, and simultaneous content themes.

Entities with one or more social media accounts served as nodes in the network (individual entities represented as circles), and similarity in content (links, hashtags, mentions, and textual similarity within a 24-hour period for post pairs, shown as lines in the Figure) between accounts formed the edges. We calculated an edge weight based on the frequency and relevance of shared content, filtered by an edge threshold to focus on the strongest connections. Node size was scaled by the log of total engagement, and nodes were categorized by political affiliation (e.g., Liberal, Conservative) or influencer type, with Tenet Media personalities marked as a distinct class.

We constructed an undirected network in R using the *igraph* package, where each node represents an influencer or politician, and edge weights represent content similarity. The Fruchterman-Reingold force-directed algorithm arranged the network layout, with nodes pulled closer for high similarity and pushed apart for low similarity, enabling clusters of related entities to form naturally.

The network projection displays Canadian entities, with each node's size reflecting the log of total engagement and color indicating type (e.g., Conservative politician, Liberal politician, Canadian influencer). Nodes within the Tenet Media sphere of influence and important Canadian politicians appear fully opaque, while other entities are faded. The distance between nodes in the final network plot represents the level of content alignment. Closer nodes signify greater content similarity while farther nodes indicate dissimilarity.

The density region surrounding Tenet Media accounts is shaded. To visually highlight the neighbourhood of Tenet Media, we conducted a 2D density estimation (*kde2d*) within the network to identify high-density clusters of accounts that shared similar

content with Tenet Media personalities. We set a cutoff threshold to emphasize regions with strong similarities in content.

Topic classification

We first collected the posts from all the Tenet Media personalities: [@Lauren_Southern](#), [@bennyjohnson](#), [@RubinReport](#), [@TylerUSA](#), [@Timcast](#), [@MLChristiansen](#), for a total of 33,682 posts from January 1, 2023 to September 19, 2024. We then used GPT-4o to classify the topics of the tweets using the prompt below. Topics 6 and 8 were combined (into Unjust war/overspending on foreign interests), topics 1 and 2 were combined (into Inflation, cost of living and unemployment), and topics 4 and 7 were also combined (into the Biden administration). 23,458 posts from bridge influencers identified in the network analysis were also classified using the same method for the same time period. Finally, 21,075 posts from Canadian entities were also classified using the same method.

For the following text passage, indicate which of the following categories best applies to the text. Indicate your answer as a single number with no explanation. If more than one category applies, choose the most applicable one, and if two apply equally, select either number. If none of the categories applies, reply with "0".

Categories:

1. Inflation, halting of economic growth, unaffordable prices for food and essential goods;
2. Job losses (or risk of job losses) for white Americans;
3. Privileges or general discussion about people of color, the disabled, or the LGBT community;
4. Threat of crime coming immigrants or from people of color;
5. Overspending on foreign policy, especially at the expense of white Americans;
6. That the US is being drawn into the war in Ukraine.
7. Lies about the Biden administration;

Text: ""

{text}

""

Notes

- 2 [Dave Rubin](#), [Tim Pool](#), [Lauren Southern](#), [Benny Johnson](#), [Tyler Hansen](#), and [Matt Christiansen](#).
- 3 <https://x.com/johnkoury/status/1749671794657968162>, <https://x.com/bobbaileypc/status/1813732416412086654>, <https://x.com/bobbaileypc/status/1827699607842755058>, <https://x.com/tsorbara/status/1730788967409238412>, <https://x.com/CHPCanadaLeader/status/1753488251980243216>, https://x.com/Prominent_Bryan/status/1794924563224236104

Incident Update 5

A survey analysis of awareness and importance of Tenet Media influencers in Canada

**Chris Ross, Jennie Philips,
Blake Lee-Whiting, Aengus Bridgman**
MEO

Key takeaways

- ◆ Approximately one quarter of Canadians are aware of the incident or recognize any of the Tenet Media influencers, with highest awareness among men, politically interested people and X/Twitter and YouTube users. Conservatives are the least aware in comparison to Liberals and NDP party affiliates.
- ◆ Respondents felt that this incident is to the greatest benefit of Russia (66%) and Donald Trump (55%). Few Canadians judge that either Justin Trudeau (8%) or Pierre Poilievre (15%) benefit.
- ◆ Canadians are strongly in favour of action by government and social media companies. Generally, they are interested in increased transparency, removal of offending accounts, and an RCMP investigation of any implicated Canadians.

Introduction

As part of our ongoing response to the Russia Tenet Media case (see here for [the story and timeline](#)), we assess Canadians' awareness of and attitudes towards the incident. Specifically, we ask:

- ◆ How aware are Canadians of this incident? And of the Tenet Media influencers?
- ◆ Is this threat an effective tool to mislead Canadians and how much of a threat is it to future elections?
- ◆ What are the associated beliefs about the incident, i.e. who benefits most?
- ◆ How do Canadians feel social media companies and the government should respond?

To answer these questions, we conducted a survey to a nationally representative set of Canadians and analyzed their responses.⁴ All findings are weighted to age, gender and region.

Exposure to the Incident

How aware are Canadians of the incident?

Figure 1 below shows awareness of the incident, which we referred to as 'Russian funding of political influencers through Tenet Media' in the survey question phrasing. We assessed general awareness of the incident as well as analyzed further by specific demographics including gender, age, political interest, as well as social media use including TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and X/Twitter.

Overall, a quarter of Canadians (25%) expressed familiarity with the news story relating to this incident. Of the different demographics and attitudes we looked at, men, politically interested individuals, older people, NDP partisans, and users of YouTube and X/Twitter were more likely to claim awareness of the incident. Men were twice as likely to have heard of the story, and those with high political interest more than three times as likely as those with low political interest.

How aware are Canadians of the Tenet Media influencers?

While many Canadians had heard about the incident, they may not be necessarily directly familiar with the influencers themselves. To better understand the audiences of the influencers involved in the incident, we evaluated how many Canadians simply recognized the influencers. We provided an image of four influencers involved (see Figure 2), and asked survey respondents if they knew who they were. If the respondent indicated "yes" to a photo, we then verified this knowledge by asking the respondent to select their name from four options.

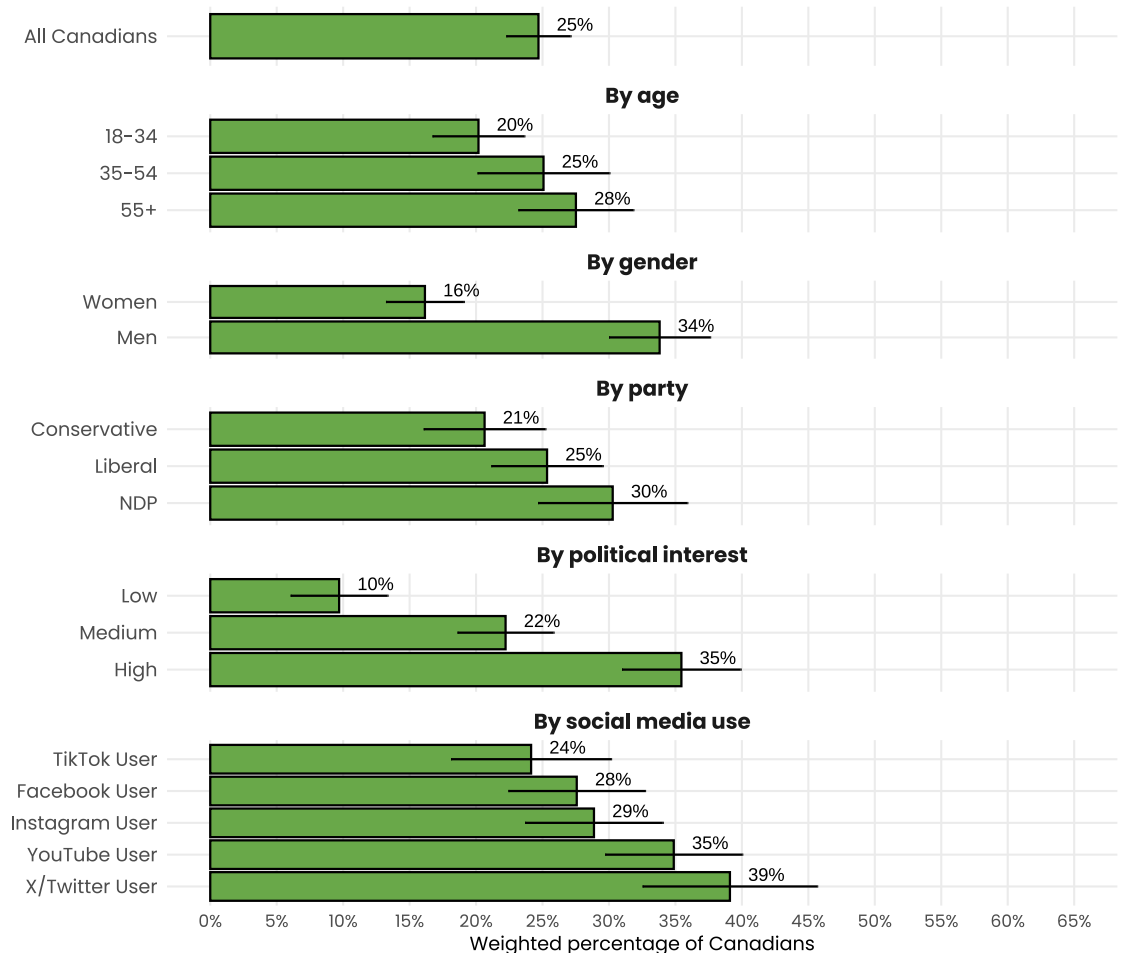
Figure 3 shows the percent of respondents who were able to correctly identify at least one Tenet Media influencer, broken down by the demographic and social media usage categories identified above. While many of the demographic trends align with the awareness of the incident plot above, there are some interesting differences. Men, politically interested people, and users of Twitter and YouTube were also more aware of these influencers - similar to awareness of the incident. However, there are no clear partisan differences in influencer awareness. Moreover, older Canadians (55+) are half as likely to recognize one of the influencers as they are to have heard about the Tenet Media story. Conversely, younger Canadians are more likely to recognize the influencers than to have heard about Russian funding Tenet Media. Those consuming content from these

Figure 1:

Percentage of
Canadians aware
of the incident by
demographics and
social media use

There are a lot of major news stories around the world.
Please select any stories that you're familiar with.

Russian funding of political influencers through Tenet Media



Based on 1220 survey respondents, with standard errors shown at the 95% confidence level.

influencers may be less aware of their ties to the Russian government (given their low familiarity with the case). Not shown in the Figure, Tim Pool was the most recognizable to Canadians with 10%, followed by Dave Rubin at 7%, Lauren Southern at 6%, and only 4% for Benny Johnson.

Threat Assessment

Is this threat an effective tool to mislead Canadians and how much of a threat is it to future elections?

We assess the extent Canadians perceive the incident to be a threat. In the context of this Russian case, we assessed perceived threat as it relates to Canadian elections. Beyond

questions asked in our response survey, we situate threat perception among other measures from our [monthly situation reports](#), generative AI and foreign influence. We also included the option to rate the use of fake social media accounts engaging in political content (below labeled as 'Political Bots') in reference to [bot activity on social media platforms](#). Figure 4 shows that Canadians who were unaware of the Tenet Media incident (prior to taking the survey) rank it as less concerning than the other challenges (6.1/10). However, those who were previously aware of the incident rank it as concerning as challenges like Political Bots, Generative AI, and Foreign Influence more generally.

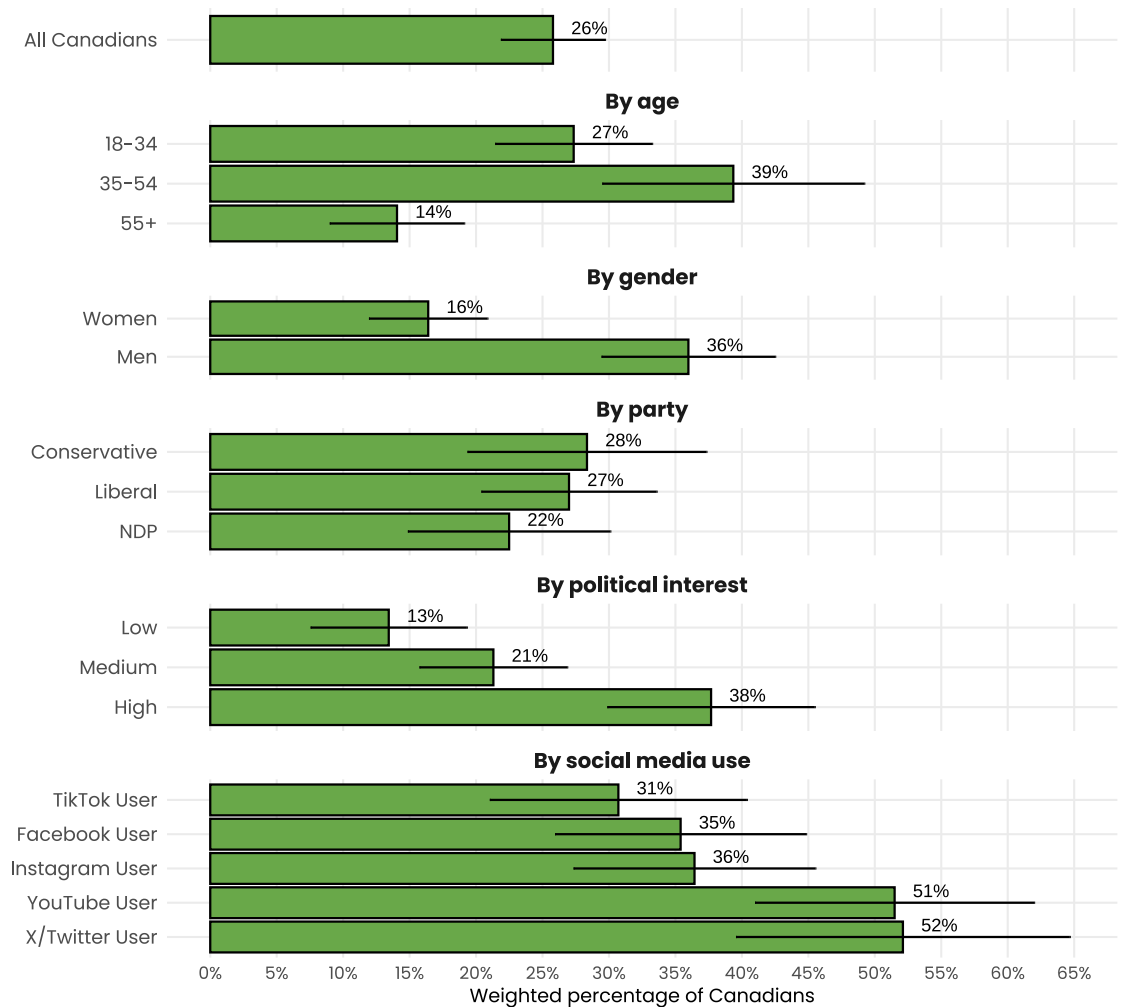


Figure 2:
Four most well-known Tenet Media influencers (from left to right: Lauren Southern, Tim Pool, Benny Johnson, and Dave Rubin)

Figure 3:

Percentage of Canadians aware of the incident by demographics and social media use

Able to recognize and then name at least one Tenet Media influencer



Based on 1220 survey respondents, with standard errors shown at the 95% confidence level.

Figure 4:
Level of concern
about perceived
threats to elections

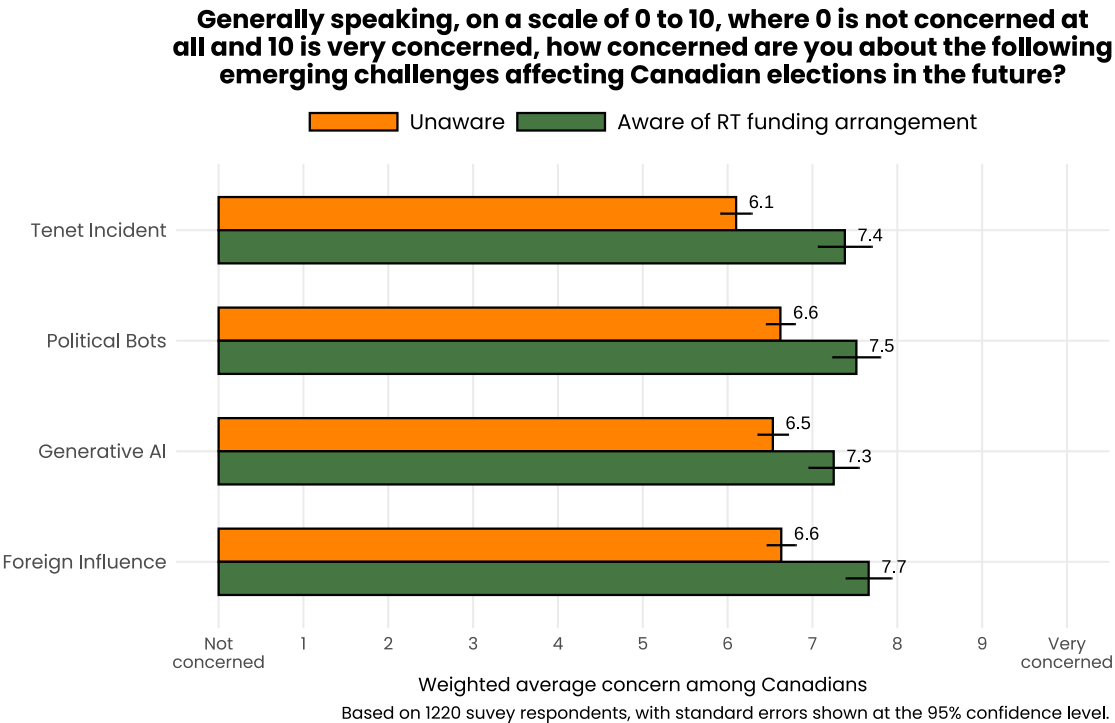
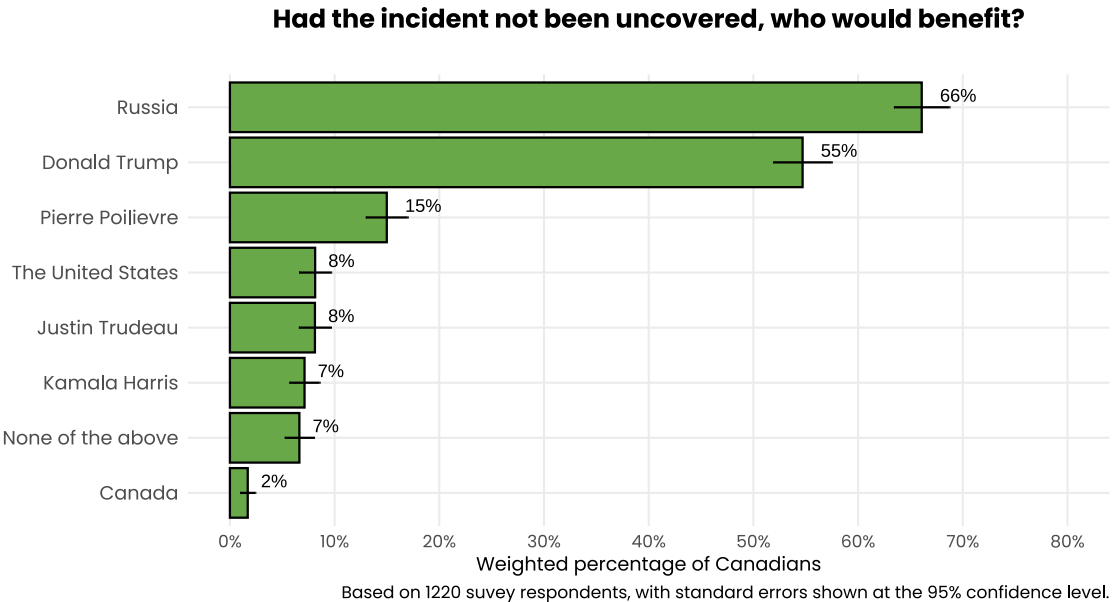


Figure 5:
Percentage of
Canadians percep-
tions of benefit by
political leaders and
countries



Interpretations

What are the associated beliefs about the incident, i.e. who benefits most?

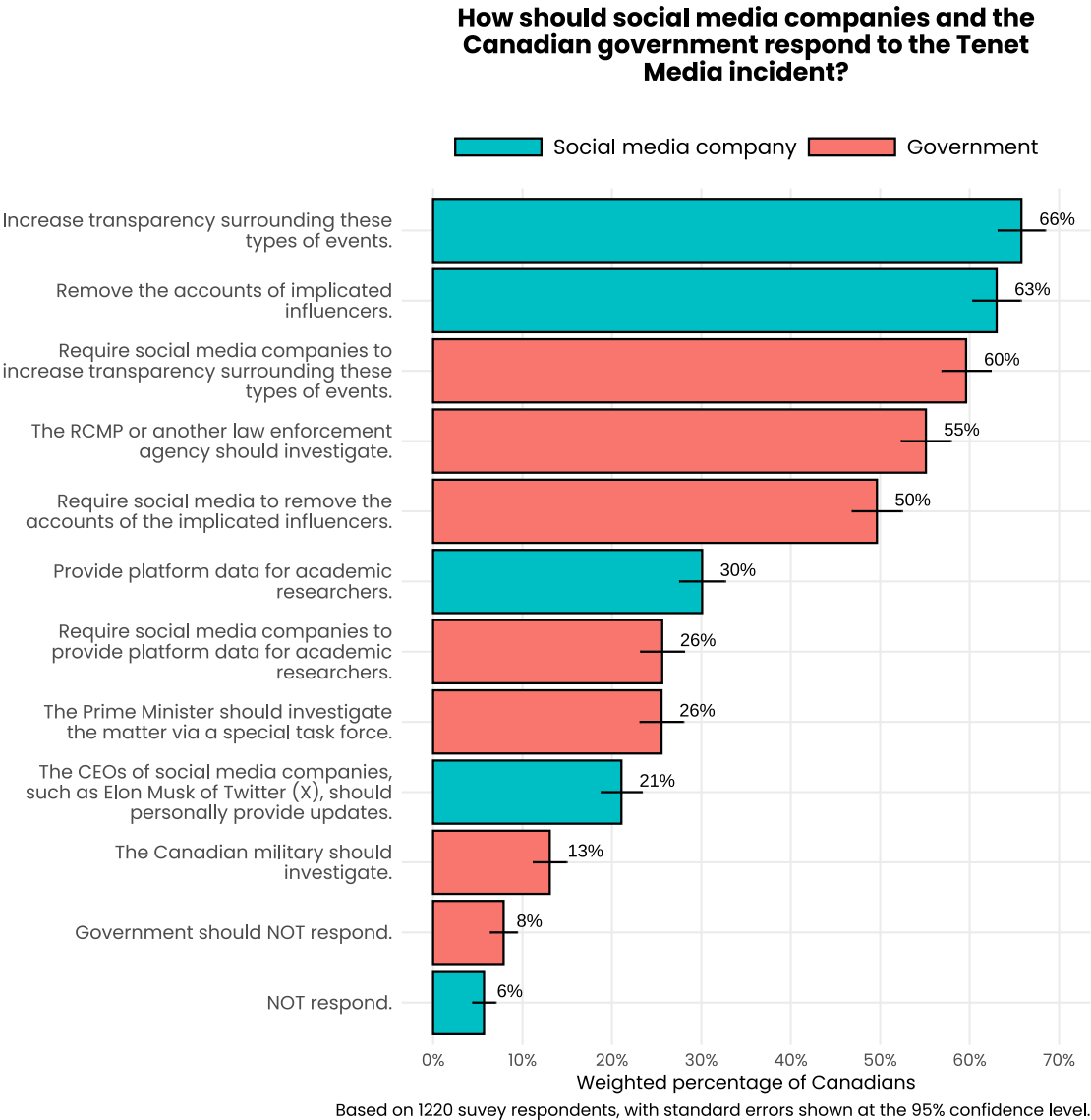
To gauge who Canadians believe stood to benefit from the incident, we asked which political leaders and countries would benefit had the incident not been uncovered. Figure 5 shows the distribution of Canadian perceptions of who benefits the most. Overall, the most perceived beneficiary of this incident is Russia (66%), closely followed by Donald Trump (55%). The rest of the options (Pierre Poillievre, The United States, Justin Trudeau, Kamala Harris, and Canada) did not break 15%.

Figure 6:
Percentages of Canadian perceptions of social media company response tactics

Response

How do Canadians feel social media companies and the government should respond?

Finally, we evaluate Canadians' support for potential responses to the incident by social media companies and the Canadian government. Figure 6 shows potential responses ordered by how many Canadians support them. We asked about the following potential social media responses: increasing transparency of the event, removing implicated accounts, providing data for researchers, and the company CEO to personally update on the matter; and the following potential Canadian government



responses: transparency reports, investigation by the RCMP, forced removal of accounts, researcher access to data, task force investigation, and a military investigation.

Canadians feel social media companies are slightly more responsible to act. Approximately two-thirds of respondents think social media companies should increase transparency around the event and remove accounts implicated in the incident (66% and 63%). For preferred government responses, nearly two-thirds of respondents think requiring transparency reports from social media companies is an appropriate response (60%). Approximately half of respondents support an RCMP investigation and forcing the removal of implicated accounts (55% and 50%). While allowing better data access for researchers to analyze the incident would greatly help the public and policy-makers better understand the event, only 30% of respondents support increased transparency by social media companies and 26% support the Canadian government requiring social media companies to provide platform data.

Conclusion

As we continue to characterize the impact of this incident, this update finds that overall engagement with the story was moderately low, and awareness of the influencers involved was low as well. Our findings do, however, demonstrate an interesting phenomenon — many of those familiar with the incident were not familiar with the influencers, and, conversely, many familiar with the influencers did not know about the incident. This finding, a common phenomena associated with mis and disinformation, demonstrates a disconnect in information pathways between the sources uncovering these types of incidents and the audience that is most in need of the information. This demonstrates a critical vulnerability in our information ecosystem and suggests value in rethinking the mechanisms we use to inform the general public about foreign influence and interference events.

Notes

- 4 Data for this report includes survey responses from 1220 Canadian adults conducted from September 25th to 30th using a commercial survey panel provider. The margin of error for a comparable probability-based random sample of the same size is +/-2.59%, 19 times out of 20.

Incident Update 4

Discussion of sentiment towards Canada on Tenet Media influencer podcasts

Sejal Davla, Nader Hedfi, and Aengus Bridgman, Media Ecosystem Observatory

Key take-aways

- ◆ Tenet Media influencers collectively produce thousands of podcast episodes that are consumed heavily in the United States and Canada. These podcasts often reference Canada, where 490 episodes (out of 1,952) aired since January 1, 2023 had a total of 1,115 distinct discussions related to Canada.
- ◆ Regarding issues of interest to Russian operatives, Tenet influencers generally focus on discussions around conventional political actors (e.g. Trudeau, CBC, RCMP, etc.) along with issues of social justice and immigration.

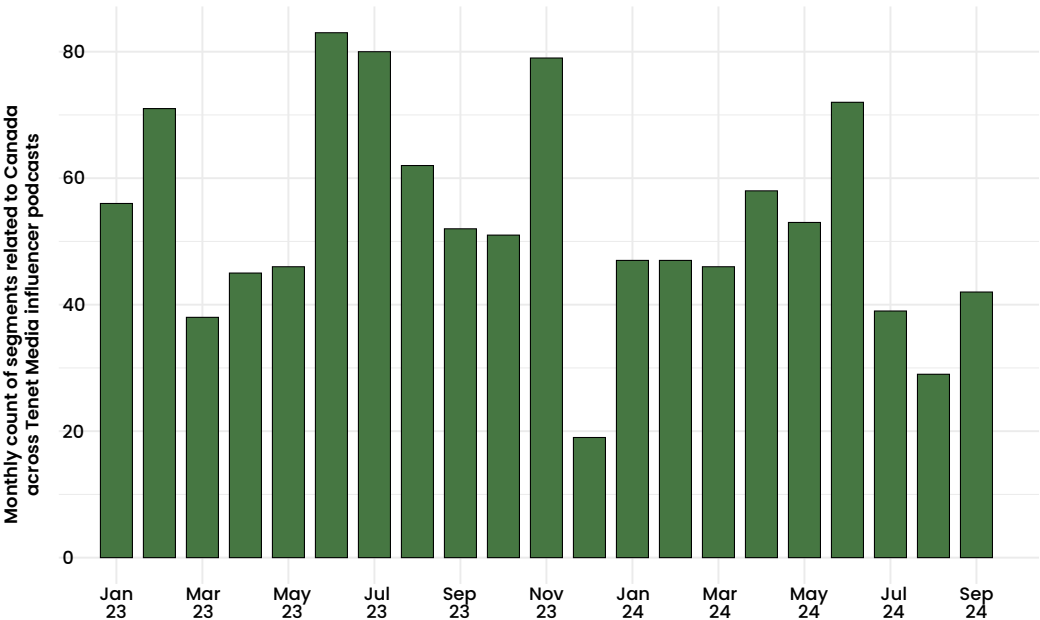
- ◆ Tenet media influencers tend towards a high degree of negativity when discussing Canada and only rarely discuss anything positive about Canada. Notably, discussions about Canada in relation to immigration and social justice issues are overwhelmingly negative in tone.

The **Tenet media influencers** collectively produce an enormous volume of long-form political discussion through their podcasts. In this incident update, we analyzed all podcast content from the Tenet media influencers who have podcasts, namely Tim Pool (Timcast IRL, Culture War, Daily Show), Dave Rubin (The Rubin Report), and Benny Johnson (The Benny Show). We collected, transcribed, and annotated 1,952 podcast episodes, from January 1, 2023 to September 19, 2024, extracting any mention of Canada, Canadian places, and politicians using keywords. Here, we describe the extent to which the five podcasts associated with these three influencers discuss Canada, what topics they focus on, and the overall sentiment towards Canada in their discussions.

How often is Canada discussed in these podcasts?

We first evaluate the extent to which the five podcasts discuss Canada, Canadian political figures or events, or Canadian institutions over the past two years. Figure 1 shows the frequency of segments related to Canada for the five podcasts, aggregated

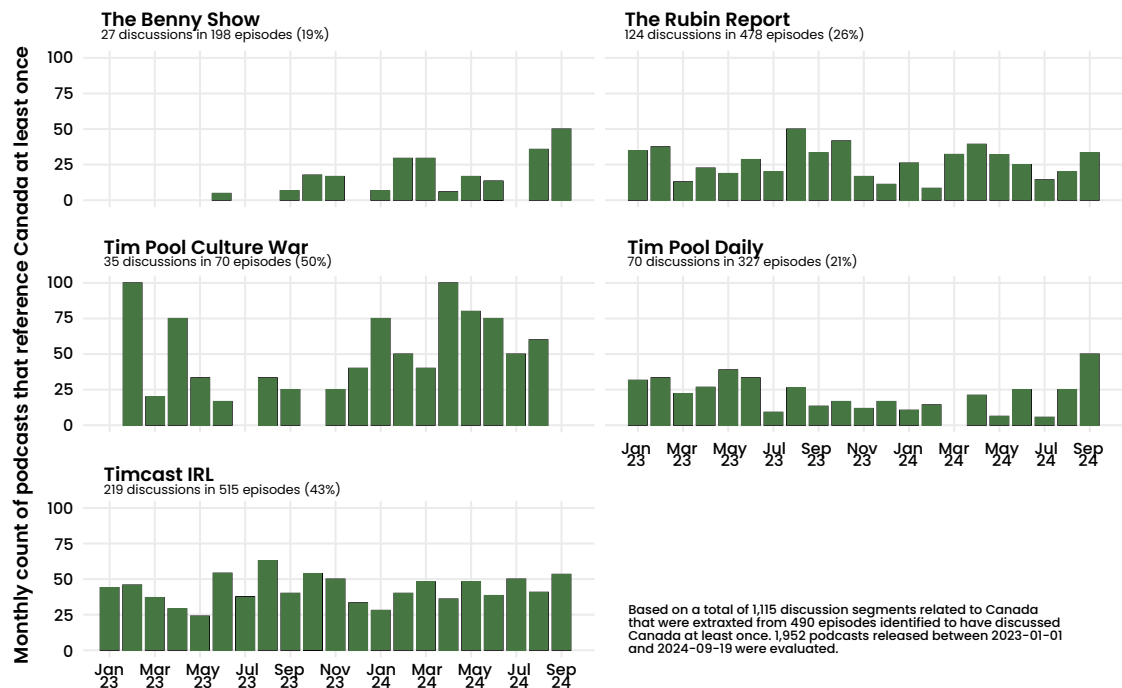
Figure 1:
Count of references to Canada in Tenet Media influencer podcasts by episode release week



Based on a total of 1,115 discussion segments related to Canada that were extracted from 490 episodes identified to have discussed Canada at least once. 1,952 podcasts released between 2023-01-01 and 2024-09-19 were evaluated.

Figure 2:

Percentage of podcast episodes that reference Canada at least once by podcast by month



by month. While volume varies, this figure demonstrates how Canada is regularly mentioned and discussed by podcast hosts and guests. See Excerpt 1 from Tim Pool's Culture War which mentions the favourable environment in Canada towards effective undercover journalism.

Figure 2 shows the percentage of all podcast episodes that have segments related to Canada, aggregated at the monthly level and disaggregated by podcast. Tim Pool's Culture War referenced Canada the most frequently with 50% of the 70 episodes aired since January 1, 2023, including at least one mention of Canada. On the other hand, The Benny show had only 19% of episodes with any Canada-related mentions.

How do these podcasts discuss and invoke Canada?

We assess the extent to which Tenet Media personalities discuss Canada negatively or positively in their podcasts. We employ a LLM (Llama3.1:70b) to classify the sentiment as it relates to Canada. As shown in Figure 3, looking at the averages, we find that just shy of 50% of discussions mentioning Canada are negative, while only 16% are positive. While there is a large variability in the extent of negative sentiment between podcasts, the Rubin Report is overwhelmingly negative, with over 60% of the Canada-oriented discussions being negative. On the contrary,

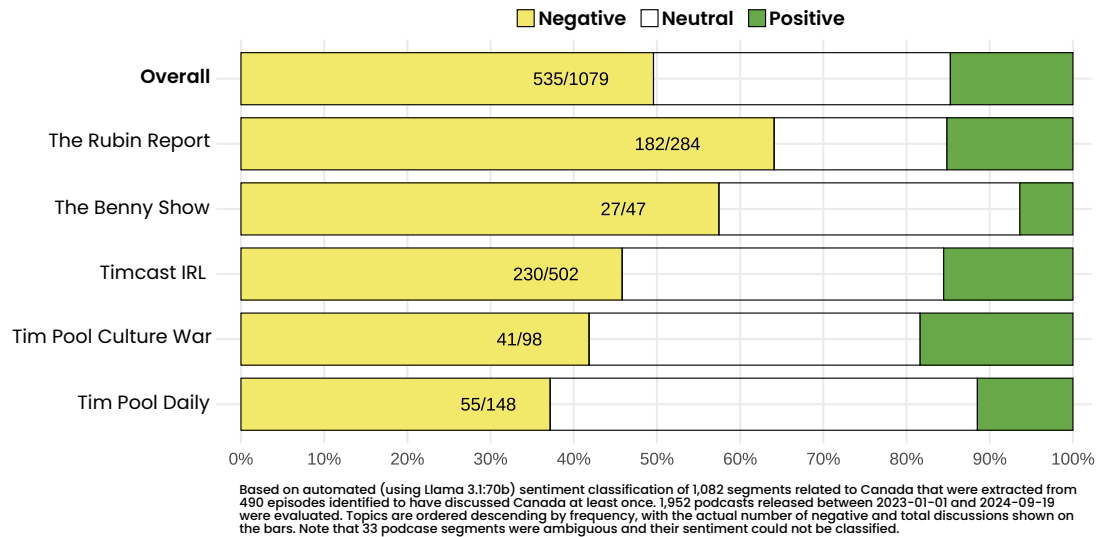
podcast segments with a positive tone were consistently low (10-20%) for each of the 5 podcasts. See Excerpt 2 from Dave Rubin's The Rubin Report podcast - this one is an example of a podcast excerpt we would label as negative about conventional political actors. Specifically, this podcast criticizes the Canadian Prime Minister and labels him as unqualified, a liar and pushing 'authoritarian evil.'

What topics do the podcasts cover when discussing and invoking Canada?

The [US Justice Department's recent indictment of Russian-government sponsored actors](#) details information on the strategy, objectives, and approach of the Russian influence operations. In this analysis, we took into consideration topics and sentiments belonging to eight categories that, according to the indictment, "[should be exploited in the course of an information campaign in/for the United States](#)." Here, exploit refers to the clear objective of exacerbating the already-high level of political polarization in the United States, which is also on the rise in Canada. Using the eight categories of topics and sentiments,⁵ we identify five categories that apply to Canada:

1. Social justice
2. Discussion of conventional political actors and their controversies

Figure 3:
Percentage of
podcast segments
referencing Canada
by podcast and
sentiment (positive,
neutral or negative)



3. The economy, inflation, and job loss

4. Immigration, migrants, refugees, etc.

5. Foreign spending and unjust and escalating wars

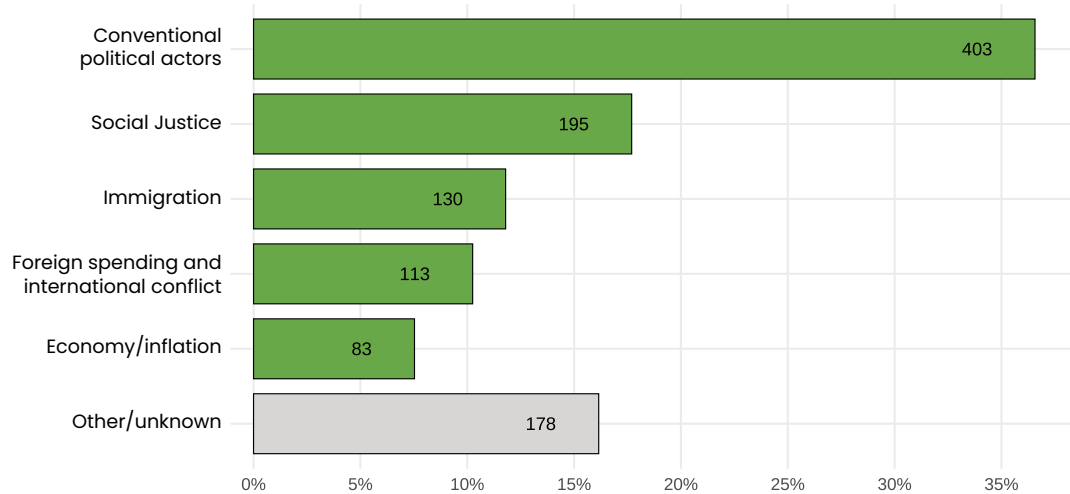
We assessed and classified all discussions of Canada into one of these topics where applicable, with the results shown in Figure 3 for all classified posts. Posts that did not apply to these topics were labeled as ‘Other/Unknown.’ See Excerpt 3 for an example from Tim Pool’s Timcast IRL which highlights violent crime in Canada. The post is classified as negative and about immigration. We find that the topics most commonly discussed in relation to Canada by the Tenet influencers relate to discussion of conventional political actors, typically Trudeau, the Liberal Party, CBC, the RCMP, etc. (at over 35%)—almost double compared to other topics of social justice (18%) and nearly triple that of immigration (12%).

While discussions related to Canada came in the context of several US and global issues, we also found episodes that heavily focused on Canada. One notable example is Timcast IRL episode #828 in July 2023 which has the highest number of segments discussing Canada (43). The episode description included “the sad downfall of Canada” and featured the popular Canadian Youtuber and former People’s Party of Canada candidate [David Freiheit](#) as a guest. The conversation was wide-ranging and included many of the categories of content identified in the DOJ indictment that “should be exploited”.

Issues of social justice and immigration were heavily discussed, with considerable criticism of conventional political actors. Specific discussion areas include:

- ◆ **Racism, cancel culture, and wokeness:** As shown in Excerpt 4, the podcast begins with the claim that it is “madness in Canada.” There is a discussion about wokeness and how white people are affected with specific reference to the [suicide of a school principal](#).
- ◆ **Medical assistance in dying:** There is a discussion on Canada’s Medical Assistance In Dying ([MAID](#)) law (see Excerpt 5) in the context of declining economic conditions, especially affecting people that are homeless and/or affected by mental and chronic illnesses.
- ◆ **Replacement theory and eugenics:** Discussion about Canadian assisted suicide policies and their impact on people dealing with mental and physical illnesses and homelessness, led to conversations about these measures being potential eugenics efforts and part of the conspiracy commonly called ‘replacement theory.’ This theory claims that (white) populations are being intentionally demographically and culturally replaced by non-white peoples in western countries.
- ◆ **Out-of-touch politicians:** Quebec’s language bill ([Bill 96](#)) and the recent [Avery’s Law in New Brunswick](#) are discussed as examples of how Canadian lawmakers are not working towards solving important problems.
- ◆ **Criticism of the RCMP:** One discussion focuses on a comparison between the [Canadian trucker’s protest](#) and the [January 6 attack on the US Capitol](#), including claims that RCMP officers are neo-nazis.
- ◆ **Government censorship:** Discussion about Meta’s news ban, Quebec’s Bill 96, and Avery’s Law as a means for the Government to control content and other aspects of people’s lives.

Figure 4:
Percentage of
podcast segments
discussing Canada
that are oriented
around topics/
sentiments of
interest to Russian
operatives



Based on automated (using Llama 3.1:70b) topic classification of 1,102 segments related to Canada that were extracted from 490 episodes identified to have discussed Canada at least once. 1,952 podcasts released between 2023-01-01 and 2024-09-19 were evaluated. Topics are ordered descending by frequency, with the actual counts shown on the bars. Note that 13 podcast segments were ambiguous and their topic could not be classified.

How do the podcasts discuss these topics?

Combining our sentiment and topic classifications (Figures 3 and 4), we further categorized podcast discussions to identify which specific areas drew the most positive and negative attention. As anticipated above in the sentiment analysis section, we find that in the discussions topics of interest to the Russian operatives tend strongly towards negative sentiment, particularly towards Canada and its political leadership. As shown in Figure 5, the most negative topic is in relation to social justice, specifically to what the Russian operatives term “[privileges for people of color, perverts, and disabled](#)”, but we describe here as efforts to advance social justice. Discussion of conventional political actors and immigration are also both negative in character - with over 50% of discussions being negative in character and only 10% being positive. Excerpt 5 highlights an example of a social justice and negative classification where the discussion highlights and criticizes the Canadian government approach to both gender affirmation surgery and medical assistance in dying.

While Canada may not be the explicit target of the Tenet Media influencer operation, the influencers frequently invoke Canada on their podcasts to discuss topics and sentiments aligned with Russian operatives’ interests. Discussions that invoke Canada, when they are positive are negative, almost always characterizing Canada and Canadian institutions, politicians, and policies in a negative light. Canada is regularly depicted as an example of what can go wrong—particularly concerning social justice and immigration—and is used as a cautionary tale.

Tenet Media influencers evaluated here have all claimed no knowledge of or influence from the RT influence operation ([Dave Rubin](#), [Tim Pool](#), [Benny Johnson](#)). Nevertheless, this analysis demonstrates that the podcast content produced by these influencers consistently is negative in tone and covers topics and sentiments aligned with Russian operative interests.

For Canadians who regularly consume content from these influencers, we urge caution and advise that you ensure that the political content you are regularly consuming, whether from Canadian or international sources, is providing you with a rich and nuanced picture of Canada.

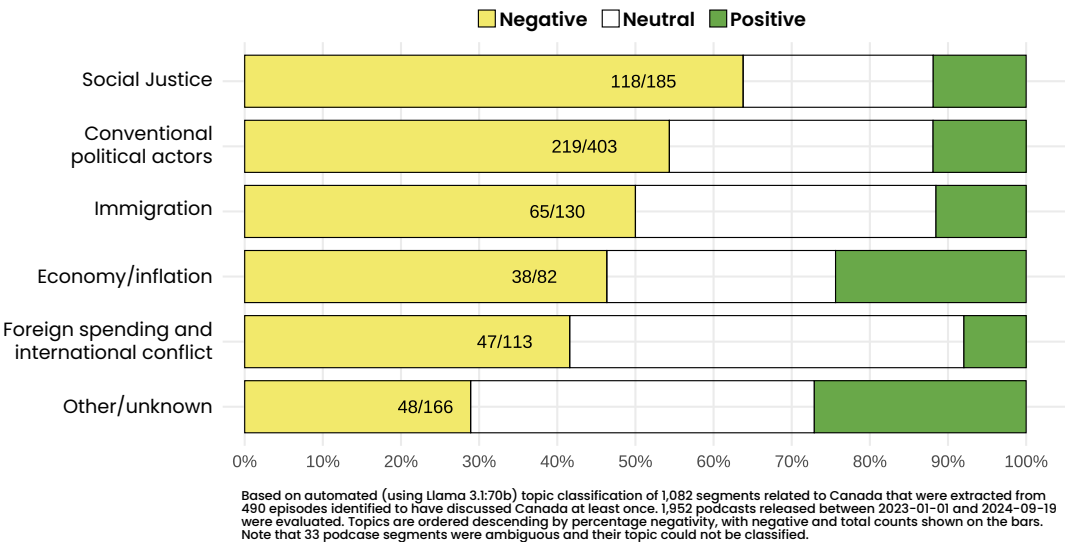
Note that this analysis has focused on Canadian content and interest. As with all our data, we are happy to provide full transcripts of all podcasts to other researchers that seek to better understand the information ecosystem. Get in touch!

Methodology

We first collected all podcasts produced by Tenet media personalities: [Timcast IRL](#), [Tim Pool Daily Show](#), [Tim Pool Culture War](#), [The Rubin Report](#), and [The Benny Show](#), with a total of 1,952 podcast episodes from January 1, 2023 to September 19, 2024. We then used OpenAI’s *whisper-base-en32* to transcribe the text of all the podcasts.⁶ Using a dictionary, we identified segments of the transcription that discussed Canada and found that 490 episodes discussed Canada at least once. We then captured the context of the discussion using 250-character limits on either side of the key term identifying the discussion focused on Canada. We extended these windows if Canadian terms were

Figure 5:

Podcast segments discussing Canada that are oriented around topics/ sentiments of interest to Russian operatives, grouped by sentiment



repeated within the window and also extended the window to capture complete sentences. This yielded a dataset of 1,115 distinct discussions of Canada.

We then used Llama 3.1:70b⁷ to classify the sentiment towards Canada of the using the following prompt:

Here is a snippet of a podcast transcription.

Is this conversation, which includes reference to Canada, speaking about the country in a positive or negative way? Consider the full context of the text and whether or not the reference to Canada is suggesting something positive or negative about the country.

First, provide me with a single lower-case word: positive/negative/neutral/unknown followed by a period. Then provide me a single-sentence explanation for your answer. You will break my script if you do not comply with these instructions.

<podcast window>

We also asked Llama 3.1:70b to separately identify the core topic of the discussion using the following prompt:

Here is a snippet of a podcast transcription.

In this conversation, which includes reference to Canada, what is the central issue being discussed? Consider the full context of the text. You can only choose from the following six options.

1: LGBTQ+, gender identity, trans-rights, transphobia,

- being woke, disability rights, race
- 2: Immigration, refugees, crime, racism, etc.
- 3: Bad economy, inflation, and job loss
- 4: Foreign spending and/or unjust or escalating wars
- 5: Discussion of conventional political actors and their controversies
- 0: Other/can't tell
- I need you to provide me with a single character as a response. IT MUST BE a single number from the list above. You will break my script if you do not comply with these instructions.
- <podcast text>

5 From the DOJ indictment of September 4, 2024: 1) Encroaching universal poverty. Record inflation. Halting of economic growth. Unaffordable prices for food and essential goods; 2) Risk of job loss for white Americans; 3) Privileges for people of color, perverts, and disabled; 4) Constant lies of the U.S. Political Party B administration about the real situation in the country; 5) Threat of crime coming from people of color and immigrants (including new immigrants from Ukraine); 6) Overspending on foreign policy and at the expense of interests of white US citizens; 7) Constant lies to the voters by U.S. Political Party B in power; 8) *Last but not least* — America is suffering a defeat despite Candidate B efforts. We are being drawn into the war. Our guys will die in Ukraine.

6 <https://huggingface.co/openai/whisper-base.en>

7 <https://ollama.com/library/llama3.1:70b>

Incident Update 3

Exploring Impacts of Using Influencers for Foreign Interference

Elizabeth Dubois, Michelle Hennessey, Michelle Bartleman, Louise Stahl

Key take-aways

- ◆ Influencers are incredibly important actors for the production and spread of political information
- ◆ Influencers amplify content by spreading their message across platforms, frequent collaborations with other influencers, and by accessing audiences of more traditional political actors
- ◆ The reach and influence of these kinds of campaigns extends beyond the initial viewers of the videos paid for by Russia

This update characterizes some types of impacts associated with using influencers as a conduit for propaganda in light of the recent US indictment of two Russians on charges related to the illicit funding of the American right-wing media company, Tenet Media (see [more about this story here](#)). The real power of using influencers in propaganda and disinformation campaigns is the potential for their messages to spread across a network of online communities. As shown by the examples sketched out below, the messages conveyed in the alleged Russian-funded social media content spread through online networks, reaching well beyond the accounts that were paid and their direct followers.

We look at three examples of Tenet-associated influencers (Lauren Chen, Lauren Southern and Tim Pool) to illustrate the broader network and relevance of these revelations. As a co-founder of Tenet Media, Canadian-born influencer Lauren Chen is widely reported to be referred to as “Founder-1” in the indictment. Former Rebel media commentator and Canadian Lauren Southern is believed to be “Commentator-4” in part because they later referred to as “she” in the indictment, leaving her as the only possibility, presuming Chen is “Founder-1.” Political commentator, podcast host, and YouTuber Tim Pool is believed to be “Commentator-2,” based on the subscriber count mentioned in the indictment.

What we mean by a “network of influencers”

Content creators, whom we also call influencers, on social media are sometimes thought of as small independent media outlets, each broadcasting their own messages. But this metaphor misses a crucial aspect of what makes using influencers to spread messages so valuable: their network. Influencers rely on relationships with their audiences and with other influencers in order to build even bigger audiences and reach more people. Indeed, most social media platforms are designed to promote re-sharing and commenting on content which means that once a message is posted online, it can spread across the platform. This spread is a process influencers are often highly skilled at extending.

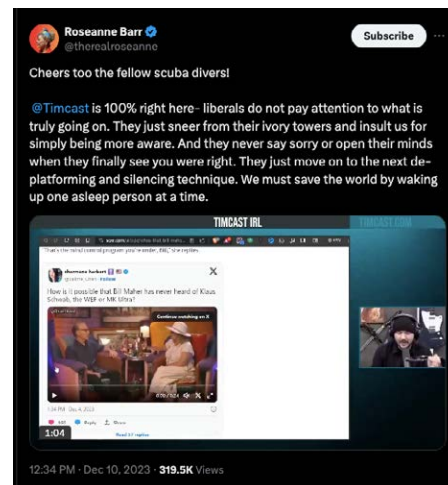
How Influencers increase their engagement and reach

Influencers’ messages often reach far beyond their immediate followers on a single platform. Three strategies they employ are: 1) leveraging multiple platforms; 2) collaborating with other influencers; and 3) diversifying their network beyond influencers.

1. Leveraging Multiple Platforms

Making use of a variety of platforms enables influencers to reach audiences in different ways, sometimes sharing different kinds of content or sharing the same content in different forms. For example, Discord, Telegram, and subscription-based access to websites are sometimes used to create more secluded spaces for communities to comment on and discuss content posted on more open platforms like YouTube and Rumble. Prior to the indictment, Chen was active on platforms including: Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Rumble, Telegram, Truth, Gab, and Discord. Similarly, Pool has maintained a presence on YouTube, X, Instagram, Rumble, Facebook, Discord, Minds, and has his own network of podcasts and a website which includes a subscription-only section.

Different platforms allow these networks to cast a wide net, reaching larger audiences and spreading similar content over a multi-day period. For example, Roseanne Barr’s podcast interview (also shared on YouTube) with Bill Maher on December 3, 2023, was later discussed by Tim Pool on one of his podcasts. A week later, Barr posted a clip from Pool’s episode on X. While Pool’s commentary - an hour into the episode - could have been missed by many listeners, Barr’s concise one-minute video likely captured the attention of many more users. In this way, a single conversation was extended over a week-long period.



Left: Screenshot of Roseanne Barr's podcast interview with Bill Maher on Youtube, December 3, 2023, that was picked up by Tim Pool.

Right: X post by Roseanne Barr sharing a clip of Pool's episode using her interview with Maher

2. Collaborating with other influencers

Collaborations are an important way influencers are able to [obtain new subscribers or followers](#). The algorithms underpinning most social media platforms tend to amplify collaborations, which reinforces and supports the creation of networks. Similarly the trend of reaction videos builds connections across influencers wherein one influencer creates a video reacting to content someone else previously created.

For example, Chen's debate with three other female influencers on Tenet Media's *The Culture War* with Tim Pool generated at least 14 third-party reaction videos. While the original video generated 236K views (now removed), the reaction videos garnered over 80k views combined. There were also nearly 448K views of clips of the debate shared by Tim Pool directly to his YouTube channel, and over 151K views on video clips of the debate posted by Pearl (one of the other influencers involved in the debate). Together, these reaction videos, promotional snippets, and behind the scenes clips generated nearly three times the attention of the original video itself, demonstrating the ripple effects that a single piece of content can have on the wider media environment.

There are many examples of collaboration among the Tenet media influencers. For example, In 2023, Lauren Southern released her video on American gun rights through [Timcast, the online home of Tim Pool](#), who has three times her number of YouTube followers.

Other collaborations took place beyond Tenet media. For example, Chen was a guest on a [pro-versus anti-Trump Republican panel debate](#) hosted by Jubilee Media (1.9M views), sparking multiple reaction videos with a combined 373K views.

3. Diversifying their network beyond influencers

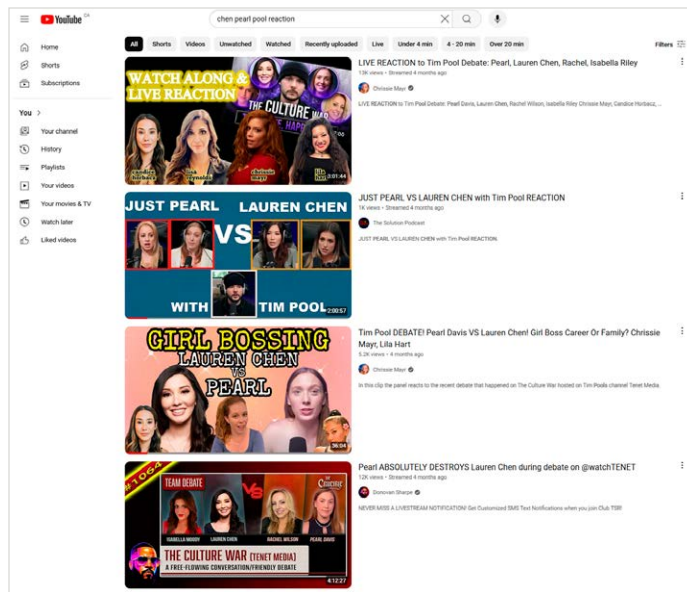
Finally, influencer networks extend beyond other influencers and include connections to more traditional political actors including journalists, elected officials, and more. Coverage of disinformation and their creators can be an important way conspiracy theories are [amplified in the wider media ecosystem](#) which incentivises off-platform network building. For example, Lauren Southern has made regular media appearances as a political commentator, including with Tucker Carlson on Fox News, *The Daily Wire*, as staff for Sky News in Australia, and even for RT. She has also appeared as a guest on podcasts or YouTube channels of other influencers.

Consequences of influencer networks for propaganda and disinformation spread

As influencers use these strategies to increase reach they are bringing additional influencers into the process of spreading propaganda messages without those additional influencers necessarily being aware they are part of the propaganda campaign.

Influencers are each embedded in a much wider network of not just followers but other influencers and other kinds of political actors, each with their own audiences. One podcast episode or YouTube video can spark discussions that spread across these networks, with people potentially sharing propaganda messages they have no way of knowing were paid for by Russia.

And it isn't just the extremely online folks or conspiracy theorists, many people now rely on online personalities for their news ([Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2024](#)). We also know [people tend to believe information more if they have seen it](#)



Left: Examples of reaction videos to Chen's debate with three other female influencers on Tenet Media's The Culture War with Tim Pool

Right: Lauren Southern's video on American gun rights shared through Timcast

repeatedly, something a network of influencers can quickly facilitate. This makes influencer networks a particularly useful tool for spreading propaganda and disinformation.

From a legal perspective it makes sense to track the money, but we need to dig deeper if we are trying to understand the impact of these kinds of campaigns on our information environment and on potential threats to democracy. We need to be thinking about the structure of the influencer networks foreign actors are injecting messages into, about the people unwittingly re-sharing those messages, and about how much wider the reach of messages like these really can be. Understanding the structural and dynamic dimensions of influencer networks is needed to mitigate and prevent the spread of disinformation, to get high quality information out, to encourage critical digital media skills, and ultimately to strengthen the media ecosystem which underpins our democracy.

Incident Update 2

An Inflection Point on the Current State Russian-Directed Foreign-Interference Operations

Key Takeaways:

- ◆ Russian goals remain the amplification of narratives that suit their interests, especially where messages promote fear and social division.
- ◆ Russia is using social influencers (“trusted voices”) rather than artificially generated and automated content. Rather than an innovation, this is a return to prior practices.
- ◆ Canada may not be directly targeted, but it is implicated through our closely interlinked information ecosystem with the US, Canadian influencers participating in foreign interference activities directly and indirectly and where Canada serves as a foil for preferred Russian narratives

The threat of foreign interference before a US election re-emerged in the past few weeks with the news that the US Department of Justice (DOJ) [indicted two Russians](#) (both employees of state-broadcaster RT) for covertly funding and directing a media company to further Moscow’s preferred narratives. Shortly thereafter, the DOJ announced that it had seized 32 internet domains used in Russian government-directed foreign malign influence campaigns. The [accompanying affidavit](#) asserted that Russian entities are keeping a list of approximately 2,800 media organizations and social media influencers, spanning 81 countries.

As we continue our ongoing investigation, we find ourselves at an inflection point where reflection is needed on how this case fits into the bigger picture. Is this a new-form of interference or is it simply a modification to ongoing, more traditional interference tactics? Is Canada a target or do we at least play a role? To address these questions, we ask the broader question: what does the indictment say about the current state of Russian-directed foreign-interference operations today?

We observe four main things:

1. The goals remain the same

Although their tactics have varied over the years, the overall Russian objective is constant: [the promotion of divisive narratives](#) that sow discord in the West, and promote Russian interests. This includes:

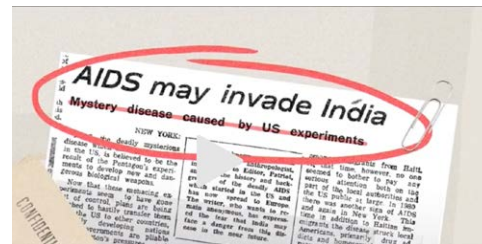
- ◆ undermining citizen confidence in democratic governance;
- ◆ amplifying politically divisive issues;
- ◆ eroding trust between citizens;
- ◆ elected officials and democratic institutions;
- ◆ popularizing Russian foreign policy agendas; and
- ◆ creating general distrust and confusion over information sources that blur the lines between fact and fiction.

2. “Trusted Voices” over bots

Importantly, Russia does not create these narratives but seeks out voices which already have an audience and articulate these views. Many of the influencers amplified by Russia sincerely believe what they are saying; indeed, many can attribute their influence through their authenticity and ability to speak to the emotions and fears of their audience. Meanwhile, there have also been cases of free-lance writers [unwittingly being hired to produce articles](#) where political angles may be inserted later.

3. This is a return to form rather than an evolution

While much has been made of the use of “bots” during the 2016 US Presidential election, the use of real influencers rather than artificial and automated accounts is [more of a return to form](#) than an evolution in tactics. For decades during the Cold War Russians sought to create front groups and sponsor friendly voices, such as the Canadian-Soviet Friendship Society, to influence Canadians. They also worked to place articles with their preferred narratives in left-leaning publications to sway public opinion. Infamously, [they propagated a false story](#) that the United States created HIV/AIDS in a biological weapons



Source: [The long history of Russian disinformation targeting the U.S.](#)

laboratory that would be published in up to 30 newspapers, including the Montreal Gazette.

While these campaigns may have only been marginally effective during the Cold War, social media has allowed for far greater and faster reach.

4. When it comes to Russian foreign interference, Canada is collateral, participant and example

Canadian intelligence agencies believe that our democratic processes [are not directly targeted](#) by Russian online foreign interference campaigns, yet this case acts as a harsh reminder that Canada is not only affected, but also implicated. First, as our information ecosystem is so heavily interlinked with the United States, there is obvious carry-over in terms of narratives on our political discourse. A [2021 study found](#) that Canadian users on Twitter (now X) followed “far more accounts based in the United States than in Canada.” Moreover “for every tweet retweeted from a Canada-based user, 10 tweets are retweeted from U.S.-based users.”

Second, as a close reading of the FBI indictment shows, [Canadian influencers are allegedly directly and indirectly involved](#) in Russia’s efforts to engage in foreign interference. This includes the owner of Tenant media and one of the paid influencers.

Finally, Russian controlled entities are opportunistic and will amplify narratives about Canada, especially when stories can be used to make wider points applicable to other Western countries, and/or when the country can be used as a convenient foil and morality tale for the United States. [There is strong evidence to assert](#) that this was the case during the February 2022 Convoy, where RT’s coverage emphasized clashes between protestors and police. It “framed the protestors as victims of an aggressive government” and repeatedly used phrases such as “dictatorship” and “crackdown” to focus criticism on the Canadian government and to a lesser extent, a supposed global elite. Canadian Convoy supporters eagerly shared this content, while RT’s coverage heavily featured Canadian far-right influencers and protesters. This approach not only amplified support for the Convoy, but also portrayed Canada as a repressive regime which Americans should fear in their own country.

Recommendations

For over a decade researchers have examined the problem of disinformation, misinformation and foreign interference but have struggled to find practical solutions that are compatible

with the principles of free speech in a democratic society. Yet the events of September 2024 suggest three key takeaways that may contribute to combatting malign foreign interference.

The first takeaway is **transparency**: by coming forward the US Department of Justice was not only able to disrupt the Tenet Media operations, but also provide a useful example and case study for researchers and journalists. Being bold and directly communicating to citizens the kinds of threats that the intelligence community is seeing helps to dispel the murkiness in which disinformation operations thrive.

The second takeaway is **timeliness**: one of the criticisms of the US intelligence community in the aftermath of the 2016 election is that they knew Russia was engaged in foreign interference but did not act. This hesitation may no longer be the case: authorities have been quick [to attribute attempts to hack and leak](#) Trump campaign documents to the media to Iran, shortly after media organizations reported receiving suspicious emails containing documents. While building a criminal case may take time, notifying the public of these kinds of events as soon as possible may be more significant than providing an account in a post-election report.

The third takeaway is **enforcement**: while many of the activities around foreign interference and disinformation campaigns may be murky, some involve crimes for which individuals may be prosecuted. This includes money laundering, sanctions avoidance, hacking into computer systems and, in the case of the United States ([and soon Canada](#)) failing to register as a foreign agent. While prosecuting individuals based overseas may seem a waste of time, it imposes costs for individuals who may one day seek to travel abroad and exposes them globally as agents working on behalf of a foreign power who one day may seek to target other democracies abroad.

In summary, while countering the threat of foreign interference and disinformation is difficult, Canadian authorities can learn from this example: transparency, timeliness and enforcement are important strategies the government can employ to counter disinformation and foreign interference. But it requires a willingness to take risks, to act quickly, and to ensure that Canadian law-enforcement has the capacity to act - all significant challenges for cautious policymakers, especially during an election. In the end, the opportunity is there, Russia is just hoping we won’t take it.

Incident Update 1

Exploring RT, Russian Operations and the role of and impact on Canada

Marcus Kolga, Disinfowatch

Key takeaways

1. The Kremlin is extremely motivated to influence and manipulate the Canadian and US political information environment.
2. Canadians were identified as key individuals in this operation in potential contravention of Canadian sanctions laws.
3. RT employees freely directed the development of content, narratives and tone on the Tenet platform and among collaborating influencers.

As outlined in our initial [incident notification](#) on September 4, 2024, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) [indicted](#) two RT employees for their involvement in a covert propaganda scheme targeting North American audiences, facilitated by a company ([Tenet Media](#)) allegedly founded by two Canadians and employing a Canadian far-right social media influencer. This indictment surfaces **the need to better understand the clandestine nature of the Russian government's information and influence operations and the broad reach of these campaigns**. In this case, RT—recognized by both the U.S. and Canadian governments as a key component of Russia's intelligence apparatus—was used to organize, fund, and direct a platform targeting English-speaking North American audiences with far-right political content. Well known influencers with large existing audiences were identified, recruited and leveraged to transmit narratives that were aligned with Russian government objectives.

This investigation aims to explain the connection between RT and Russian information and influence operations over time and describe its influence, clarify the objectives behind these operations, and situate this case in the Canadian context identifying the relationship with and impacts on Canada.

RT's Role in Russian Information and Influence Operations

RT was founded in 2005 by the Russian government's RIA news agency. RT is a Russian state-supported and controlled media outlet that is used to advance and promote Russian government narratives on a wide range of domestic Russian and foreign issues using a mix of some factual reporting, disinformation and propaganda. It presents itself visually as a conventional media outlet to lend credit to the platform and reach a wide foreign audience. The US DOJ indictment states that “RT has pursued malign influence campaigns in countries opposed to its policies, including the United States, to sow domestic divisions and thereby weaken opposition to Government of Russia objectives.”

On September 13, 2024, The US Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken [declared](#) that RT functions “like a de facto arm of Russia's intelligence apparatus”. Canada's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Melanie Joly [stated](#) “RT has become actively engaged in Russia's global disinformation and influence efforts by acting as an extension of Russian intelligence services, relying on state-backed hacking, psychological and information operations, covert influence and military procurement.”

RT has been banned from Canada's public airwaves, cable and satellite systems and was placed on Canada's sanctions list in July 2022, which outlaws the provision of any service to RT (and all other Russian state media channels). Unlike the EU, which has banned RT from its internet—including social media—RT's English and French language websites, along with its social media accounts, remain accessible in Canada, and its videos are hosted on the Canadian platform Rumble.

RT's editor-in-chief, Margaret Simonyan, [declared](#) in February, 2024, that RT's covert network continues to influence public opinion in the West despite bans on its broadcasts. Simonyan said that Russia was “able to build an enormous network, an entire empire of covert projects that is working with the public opinion, bringing truth to Western audiences,” emphasizing that RT's network of clandestine projects are crucial in disseminating Russian-aligned narratives to Western audiences.

Objectives of Kremlin Information and Influence Operations in Canada

The primary objectives of Russian information and influence operations targeting Canadians are to erode public support for Ukraine and to undermine our democracy through polarizing narratives, communicated through both official state media channels, proxies and a large network of influencers.



"Canada Is Becoming A COMMUNIST HELLHOLE: Kat Kanada Interview" video, comparing Canada to Soviet-era bread queues, posted to the Tenet channel on the Rumble video platform

An [affidavit](#) released by the FBI on September 4, 2024, related to the Russian Doppelganger campaign, includes high-level strategic documents from the Russian Presidential Administration. These documents detail the objectives, tactics, techniques, and procedures employed by the Kremlin to achieve its goals.

One of the Kremlin documents outlines a project aimed at inciting international conflict by identifying polarizing issues within countries allied with the United States and exacerbating internal tensions within them. This strategy involves creating false narratives and pro-Kremlin propaganda, which are disseminated into Western information environments through influencers, YouTube videos, and various social media platforms.

According to the affidavit, 2800 people have been identified by the Kremlin in 81 countries as friendly influencers - many of whom work in think tanks, media and academia. These influencers are a key component of Russia's influence operations.

Involvement of Canadians and Potential Legal Violations

According to the US DOJ indictment, Canadian individuals and entities played significant roles in the creation and operations of the new media company, Tenet Media. This included content production directed by RT employees, who actively influenced narrative direction. It also included the involvement of Canadian entities in financial transactions linked to RT's parent organization, ANO TV-Novosti. The scheme may have violated Canadian sanctions laws and Canada's C-70 legislation and the Foreign Influence Transparency Registry.

RT Funding and Content Strategy

The DOJ indictment notes that Tenet Media received approximately \$10 million USD to promote and amplify con-

tent and themes that aligned with Russian state objectives. RT employees, Kostiantyn Kalashnikov and Elkena Afanasyeva, directed content specifically aimed at amplifying divisions within Canadian and U.S. society, aligning with Russia's broader strategy of weakening Western opposition to its actions, and eroding public and government support for Ukraine.

Sovereignty of Canada's Information Environment:

Content produced under these covert operations targeted Canadians, threatening the sovereignty of Canada's information environment. More than 2,000 videos created by Tenet Media garnered over 16 million views on YouTube, showcasing the broad reach and influence of Russian narratives masked as independent journalism. Many of these videos included polarizing content specifically targeting Canadian issues.

For example, a video [posted](#) to the Tenet channel on the Rumble video platform titled "Canada Is Becoming A COMMUNIST HELLHOLE: Kat Kanada Interview" compares Soviet-era bread queues, with all queues in Canada to suggest that Canada is becoming "a communist hellhole". The video has had 27,600 views on Rumble. Since all Tenet Media videos have been removed from YouTube, we accessed an archived, September 5, 2024, version of the YouTube video and found that it had received 29,000 views. A segment of the same video posted to the Tenet Media Twitter/X account has received 79,100 views as of September 17, 2024.

Services Provided to RT

A key piece of evidence cited in the DOJ indictment involves a contract between RT's parent company ANO TV-Novosti and a Canadian company, identified as "Canadian Company-I," owned by a Canadian identified as Founder-1.

Between March 2021 and February 2022, one of the Canadian founders of Tenet media is alleged to have created 25 opinion articles for RT under this contract, many of which were overtly pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian. RT created a dedicated page to feature the content produced by this individual.

From October 21 to May 2022, the other Canadian founder of Tenet media is alleged to have worked with RT's German subsidiary Ruptly.

According to the indictment, the two Canadians "also invoiced U.K. Shell Entity-I more than \$760,000 for their own fees and commissions, some of which they asked to be paid to Canadian Company-I's bank account in Canada."

Between January and June 2024, RT employee, Elena Afanasyeva, posted links to approximately 841 video clips and directed employees of Tenet Media to blame Ukraine for the ISIS attack on a Moscow theater to undermine western support for Ukraine.

Kostiantyn Kalashnikov, another key figure identified in the indictment, managed multiple RT covert distribution channels and edited content for U.S. Company-1 without disclosing his RT affiliation. His involvement exemplifies the concealed tactics used by RT to manipulate Western media landscapes, using trusted local figures to lend credibility to disinformation campaigns.

Concluding Summary and Recommendations

The indictment of RT employees by the U.S. Department of Justice exposes the depth and complexity of Russia's covert propaganda operations targeting North American audiences, which are facilitated through media entities like Tenet Media, which involved Canadians in potential violations of Canadian sanctions laws.

In addition, the FBI affidavit and investigation into the Russian Doppelganger campaign highlights the Kremlin's extensive efforts to manipulate and influence Western political information environments.

RT's strategic use of clandestine funding, deceptive practices, and international recruitment underscores its role as a tool of the Russian intelligence to promote disinformation, sow division, and undermine Western democratic institutions. Despite sanctions and bans, RT's content continues to infiltrate Canadian media platforms, threatening the sovereignty of Canada's information environment and threatening to erode the cohesion of Canadian society.

Russian state controlled media platforms, their clandestine proxies and think tanks are key vehicles in transmitting Russian narratives in to Western information environments.

Canadians who collaborate with sanctioned Russian state media outlets and think tanks, should be investigated and identified to reduce the impact of Russian information operations in Canada and ensure transparency within our information environment.

Recommendations

Basic Sanctions Enforcement

RT and other Kremlin-controlled state media and think tanks were added to Canada's sanctions lists in 2022-23. Canada must rigorously investigate suspected violations of these sanctions and hold offenders accountable to maintain the deterrent effect and integrity of these measures.

Application of C-70 Legislation

The government should apply Canada's C-70 legislation to scrutinize and hold accountable individuals and entities that facilitate foreign state influence and propaganda efforts in contravention of Canadian laws.

Strengthening the Foreign Influence Transparency Registry

Canada should expedite the implementation and enforcement of the Foreign Influence Transparency Registry to identify and expose Kremlin directed activities that seek to covertly manipulate Canadian public opinion and policy. Transparency and accountability in our political and information environments will reinforce democratic resilience.

Public Awareness Campaigns

Raising public awareness - among newsroom managers, elected officials and leaders of our political parties - about the tactics used by foreign influence operations is critically important to building resilience against disinformation. This includes educating Canadians on how to identify and critically assess manipulated content, especially on social media platforms.

These measures are vital to protecting Canada's information environment, safeguarding democratic processes, and maintaining the integrity and sovereignty of Canadian media against covert foreign influence.