Cross Platform Narrative Infrastructures: Towards an Understanding of the Narrative Mechanics of Right Wing Populist emergence (and what to do about it)

Abstract

This paper elaborates on a theory of cross platform narrative infrastructures to help explain how right wing populist movements emerge on national political stages world wide. Narrative infrastructures involve a mix of technologies, institutions, and cultural habits that make some stories easier to tell than others. This paper looks at three cases: the rise of the Tea Party in the U.S. in 2010 (which helped set the stage for the MAGA movement), the 2013 *Jornadas de Junho* (June Days) in Brazil (which helped create the platform for Jair Bolsonaro's election in 2018), and the Canadian Trucker Convoy of 2022 (which nearly propelled a right wing populist into the Prime Minister's office). All of these cases share certain patterns: an outbreak of protests that rely on internet platforms for coordination and solidarity while exploiting a mainstream press that is both attracted to and bewildered by the protests, politicians that turn the protests into a spring board towards power, and a resulting rupture in the norms and boundaries of political behavior and discourse. The emergence of social media, the related decline of traditional journalism's agenda setting power, and the persistence of conventional journalistic routines such as balancing and vox pop coverage that are vulnerable to trolling, together create a story telling environment that enables narratives that support grievance for its own sake and undermine shared truths. Better awareness of these dynamics on the part of journalists, activists, and politicians could help render political narrative environments that are more conducive to democracy.

Introduction

It's by now disturbingly familiar: another established electoral democracy thought to be immune to authoritarianism suddenly faces, as if from nowhere, a wave of protests or disturbances whose political demands seem confused but nonetheless garner widespread attention from both the press and politicians. The movements, armed more with slogans, attitude, and fanciful accusations cultivated in online enclaves than with clear policy proposals, go on to break unwritten rules, prompt friendly politicians to say and do things that would have ended the careers of politicians prior, and upend the political dynamics of their country. Journalists print corrective interviews with experts, politicians alternately try to ignore, mimic, or disparage the new entrants, intellectuals grope for underlying causes such as the collapse of the "center," or reactions to income inequality. None of this seems to have an effect, and the movements gain political power while forms of ethnocentrism, racism, misogyny, and queerphobia once thought behind us are revived with new virulence. Electorally, the movements sometimes win and sometimes lose, but they show no signs of disappearing. The story, with variations, has repeated itself in the US, India, Brazil, Sweden, Argentina, Holland, Germany, and Canada, among others.

A national conversation is built out of multiple ongoing narratives, and in ordinary times those narratives tend to flow in well-worn channels made of media systems, institutional structures and habits, and popular memories. Sometimes, however, something happens that cause the conversation to jump its banks and start to flow in new paths, rearranging the political landscape. In the 19th century, the steam powered penny press and expansion of suffrage arguably had that effect. In the 20th, mass advertising techniques and broadcasting similarly changed the contours of the conversation. In both centuries, major wars also had discourse-altering impact. As Raymond Williams said to a pre-war friend about the feeling of returning to Cambridge after WWII, "the fact is, they just don't speak the same language" (Williams 1985).

This paper proposes an approach to understanding the rise of right wing populism over the last two decades as a kind of linguistic, and more specifically, narrative transformation. Building on work by Papacharissi (2016), it offers the concept of "cross platform narrative infrastructures," environments built of multiple institutions, socio-technical arrangements, and cultural habits which taken together make some stories easier to tell than others. Right wing populism, this analysis suggests, still relies on mainstream news coverage for visibility and a kind of legitimacy centered on perceived impact – where negative coverage can be seen as success – while using social media to cultivate oppositional interpretations

and a sense of community. It emerges not by simply creating alternative meanings in online enclaves, but in an interactive relationship with both friendly and hostile political officials while exploiting traditional journalistic routines to "troll" the dominant narratives from within alternate interpretive frames. This is particularly effective when established communicators operate according to traditional rules and expectations in a context where right wing populists are operating by very different rules.

Narrative infrastructures are most visible in a moment of change, when new structures emerge; once they are established; once they become habitual the channels get dug in, they become both less visible and more robust, developing some capacity to self-sustain over time. This is why I focus on three case studies of emergence: 1) the rise of the Tea Party in the U.S. in 2009 (which set the stage for the MAGA movement), 2) the 2013 *Jornadas de Junho* (June Days) in Brazil (which helped create the context for Jair Bolsonaro's election in 2018), and 3) the Canadian Trucker Convoy of 2022 (which nearly propelled a right wing populist into the Prime Minister's office). While distinct, all of these cases share certain patterns: an outbreak of protests that rely on internet platforms for coordination and solidarity, a mainstream press that is both attracted to and bewildered by the protests, politicians that use the protests as a spring board towards power, and a resulting rupture in the norms and boundaries of political behavior and discourse.

"I know that my friends know that that today's *New York Times* is wrong": platform affordances and affect

In the spring of 2003, the administration of George W Bush was gearing up for the US invasion of Iraq, and the major news outlets in the U.S. were maddeningly accepting of the thin justifications for the war. The *New York Times* published a piece on the to that point mostly ignored U.S. presidential campaign of former Vermont Governor Howard Dean, and described his enthusiastic supporters as "Birkenstock liberals." At the time, I remember chortling at the phrase: like most of my fellow citizens of Burlington Vermont, I knew actual Birkenstock-wearing liberals, and I knew that Howard Dean's people weren't them. Dean supporters were more about gravy fries than bean sprouts, more Grace than Frankie.

There was a thrill for us in this knowledge: the *Times* was finally paying attention to an anti-war candidate, but just as importantly, I knew the *New York Times* didn't get it, and I knew that my fellow Burlingtonians also knew. I took comfort in the realization that, as they scanned the paper over their morning coffee, they were having the same feeling of "gotcha" towards the grey lady. I knew that my friends knew what the *New York Times* didn't. The

pleasure was in the intersection of knowing the *Times* was wrong while also knowing I was not alone in that knowledge.

if you lived in Burlington at the time, you would know about the venue on Main Street that was famous for its gravy fries and home to Howard Dean meetups, and the restaurant around the corner famous for its vegetarian sandwiches and Birkenstock-wearing customers. But what would happen over the coming summer was that the experience of *knowing that others know that mainstream media doesn't know* would be reproduced nationwide using blogs, meetups, and more. In short order, Dean's campaign would learn to turn mainstream media dismissals of the candidate into fundraising and recruiting opportunities. For example, in the wake of a mediocre interview performance on the Sunday news show, *Face the Nation*, the *Times* declared Dean finished. Dean's website and blogs called on his fans to demonstrate otherwise and subsequently broke another fund raising record, proving the *Times* wrong, which was no doubt thrilling to most of those who donated. Before long, this pattern turned a barely known candidate into a fund-raising juggernaut.

At the time, I thought of this moment as simply a triumph of the truth. Looking back, I realize that we were experiencing what Kreiss interpreted as the initial "digital" US presidential campaign (Kreiss 2012), i.e., a new relationship between audiences, politics, and journalism. In the decades since, it has become common to seek the experience of getting a kind of thrill of both validation and power from seeing something in a mainstream news outlet that you not only understand as wrong but feel a bond with those who share your interpretation. In the decades since, as internet-enabled insurgencies moved from the netroots era to the Arab Spring and now, to the crashing disappointment of many, have become associated with the rise of authoritarian populisms world wide, that particular structure of feeling has become sought after and exploited.

This pattern is not just a product of a new technology appearing on the scene: it involves a back and forth relationship between centralized and decentralized systems of information delivery, between established centralized institutions of journalism and various alternative communities which can range from churches to small local activist organizations to online enclaves of the manosphere. And it also involves structures of affect: the energizing thrill of one's political community scoring a point against the opposition becomes, not a side effect of working towards a political end, but the goal itself.

Calling it a product of a narrative infrastructure helps emphasize that the pattern is not just technological, that it necessarily involves cultural patterns, narratives, and affect. It also involves a back and forth between institutional sites of story generation, between perceived central information outlets like major newspapers and television news channels

on the one hand, and separate on- and offline enclaves like churches, gun clubs, social media, and chatrooms on the other.

Theories

Common explanations of right wing populism often describe it as a sudden "emergence" or "culmination" of pressures building elsewhere, or denigrate it as "extremism" without carefully exploring why, to its adherents, it does not seem extreme. Underlying structural causes, ranging from inequality to the covid pandemic, do create political pressures but those pressures can empower (and in some cases have empowered) progressive movements rather than right wing populist ones. (Especially in the recent US and Brazilian cases, inequality and frustration with the status quo initially looked like they would enable a shift to the left, viz Occupy Wallstreet and the June Days protests.) Exploring exactly how cultural and discursive mechanisms work in context allows for considering the possibility of relative autonomy, and avoids the dangers of reductive tautologous reasoning risked by variations of base/superstructure metaphors (Williams 1973).

Similarly, attributing the rise of populism to mis- and disinformation risks falling back on theories of false consciousness. While it is hard not to be "repeatedly shocked at the wildly inaccurate things people unblinkingly believe" within populist right wing movements (Skocpol and Williamson 2016, 199), mis- and disinformation generally work because they support the narratives into which they are inserted, not the other way around.

Classic cultural studies offers some suggestions for exploring culture and discourse in their material contexts: Raymond Williams' "structure of feelings" (Williams 1978, 128) and Stuart Hall's articulation theory (Slack 1996) point in the direction of a non-reductive analysis of how politics, culture, and social systems interact. But both scholars would likely agree that new political contexts call for new, if related, analytical tools.

In a study comparing the use of Twitter in the protests in Egypt during the Arab Spring with those of Occupy Wall Street, Papacharissi observed "Technologies network us, but it is our stories that connect us" (Papacharissi 2016). "[S]ocial media," she argues,

> help activate and sustain latent ties that may be crucial to the mobilization of networked publics. Online activity, however, does not present a guaranteed avenue to impact. It may bring about disruptions to the stability of powerful hierarchies that grant a movement momentum, which may accumulate over

> time. It typically does so in tandem with offline activity, and it really makes no sense to separate the two, or to treat social media as a space separate from the goings on of everyday social activities. Thus, within the sphere of everyday political and social activities, online activity may connect disorganized crowds and enable the formation of networked publics around communities, actual and imagined (Papacharissi 2016, 310).

[Master narratives and beyond: the stories that generate other stories, no longer singular (if they ever were), but they are nurtured in a context, an infrastructure.]

Urgent that we understand the anti-democratic movements that have broken out world wide, and towards that end admit the extent to which many of us have not predicted it. It's not just the early days of internet utopianism that missed what was happening. Can not deny that the internet interfered with a monopoly of centralized media.

On narrative vs frames, schemas, cognitive models.

The Tea Party 2009-2011

The Tea Party movement in the US emerged in 2009 in the wake of the US government's response to the 2008 market collapse and the election of Barack Obama. While long term Republican activists sought to make it a largely small government, pro-market libertarian movement, the presence of conservative evangelical Christians and occasional Confederate flags and racist depictions of Obama on protest signs rendered it on the surface politically incoherent. Its organizational dynamics involving a chaotic mix of local chapters and initiatives, wealthy conservative backers provided targeting funding and guidance, and extensive media coverage that ranged from cheerleading to denunciation, remain hard to characterize. It seems safe to say, however, that the Tea Party was the site of a new set of relationships between politics, media, and everyday life in the US which laid the conditions for the rise of Donald Trump and the Maga movement a few years later.

Skocpol and Williamson's 2016 study of the Tea Party based on extensive ethnographic interviews with Tea Partiers, eschews monocausal explanations. They argue against both "astroturf" and "grass roots" explanations. "The citizens we have met," they point out,

> who spend hours meeting with one another, arguing with officials, and learning about the workings of local, state, and national government—these people do not fit the caricatures espoused by some on the left. They are unglamorous, mostly older middle-class Americans. Billionaire-funded political action committees and longtime free-market advocacy organizations are certainly doing all they can to leverage and benefit from Tea Party activism. But they did not create all that activism in the first place, nor do they entirely control the popular effervescence (Skocpol and Williamson 2016, 12).

The Tea Party, they argue, "is best understood as a combination of three intertwined forces": 1) conservative grassroots activism, 2) a "panoply of national funders and ultra-free-market advocacy groups that seek to highlight and leverage grassroots efforts" to push the Republican Party towards the hard right, and 3) "conservative media hosts who openly espouse and encourage the cause" and who "have done a lot to create a sense of shared identity that lets otherwise scattered Tea Parties get together and feel part of something big and powerful" (Skocpol and Williamson 2016, 12–13).

White's (2018) analysis of the emergence of the Tea Party in the U.S. adds a very important explanatory variable: lthe routines of mainstream journalism. "[T]he Tea Party," she argues, "was a story produced by conservative leaders, reified by media echo chambers, shaped by competing nonprofessional media narratives, and intentionally promoted, lent significance, and given meaning by the national news media on the right, left, and center" (2018, ix).

Even when critical, she found that the media, particularly the then-prominent CNN, fell back on tropes that in aggregate labeled the chaotic emerging movement as if it were a "brand," a set of symbolic associations and attitudes, as distinct from a social or political movement with concrete policy goals. "The Tea Party," she writes,

> was a social movement frequently instigated, propelled, and integrated into the news media that reported on it—what makes it a brand is its function as an emotionally laden symbol that mobilized people through its reporting, rather

> than mobilizing its reporting based on people. Without the active intervention and participation of the press, the Tea Party as it exists (and existed) would never have come to be (White 2018, 6).

Besides the fact that the movement was by most accounts started by a CNN reporter ranting live on air from the floor of the Chicago stock exchange, as the movement developed, cable news reporters gave the movement liberal coverage, and often focused on easily available images to develop an analysis, and fell back on "balancing" in a way that smoothed over differences in the movement.

For example, when Tea Partiers waved signs depicting President Obama as an African witch doctor, CNN gave a Tea Party group coordinator a chance to reply, on air, that "That is not representative at all of what this movement is about," and to then attack the network for bias for even raising the question; having "balanced" the story, CNN left it at that (White 2018, 57). "Unlike typical activist rallies or protests," White notes, "accounts of the Tea Party from public officials (especially police) also did not dominate Tea Party reporting; instead they focused on views from pundits, political consultants, Tea Party attendees, Tea Party signs, and Tea Party leaders in media and politics" (White 2018, 60). Tea Party news coverage, she continues, "generally did not give space to opposing political views on relevant topics, rarely mentioned crowd numbers, and seldom discussed particular issues (outside of an anti-Obama agenda) or proposed solutions supported by tea partiers. Instead, this coverage focused primarily on . . . describing emotionally evocative Tea Party theatrics and rhetoric at events organized largely by Tea Party PACs and framed it as a social movement, without mention of concrete goals or positions (White 2018, 61).

This kind of coverage, White points out, did not just mischaracterize the movement, it influenced the movement, teaching it that imagery and attitude were more important than concrete political goals. "While political branding aims to make people feel like they belong to a community based on shared values," White argues, "it often accomplishes this sense of unity by allowing multiple items to fit under the same label" (p. 58). "News coverage that described the Tea Party as a brand," she writes, "allowed it to accrue power through the rhetoric and performance of both a political party *and* a protest group, and focused attention on its fundraising instead of specific policies or goals" (p. 74).

Whether learned directly or indirectly from Howard Dean's campaign,[1] the Tea Party did teach far right activists how to energize activists by generating news coverage, engage in

[1] Richard Vigurie, a new right stalwart since the Goldwater campaign in 1964, publicly chose to go into opposition to the mainstream of the Republican Party. Vigurie, who had been one of the few on the right or in

local politics by, for example, running for school boards, and challenging moderate Republicans in primaries. And unlike the Dean campaign, they learned to proceed in a relatively policy- and reality-free mode, where outrage and grievance became goals in and of themselves. It was in the next few years that Donald Trump stepped into the space created by the Tea Party to cultivate and exploit narratives such as the falsehood that Barack Obama was not a US citizen.

Brazil, the *Jornadas de Junho* of 2013, and the rise of Bolsanaro

The June Days (Jornadas de Junho) protests and their aftermath in Brazil were different from the Tea Party protests in that they were massive, involving millions, and had origins that at least appeared more left- than right wing. On June 13, 2023, a radical group made up largely of college students, some influenced by Occupy Wall Street, demanding free public transportation brought several thousand people into the streets of São Paulo to protest a 20-centavo increase in the bus fare. While there had been previous protests of this type, the brutal police reaction received substantial media coverage and attracted the attention of the whole country. Within a week, roughly 2 million were protesting across the country, and after the mayor of São Paulo acceded to the demands for free bus service, the demands expanded to improved public services, better health care and education, less corruption, and more democracy. By the end of the month, eighty-nine percent of Brazilians said they supported the protests (Datafolha 2013; Bevins 2018).

The meaning of the protests itself became a matter of struggle in the streets, the press, and the Brazilian Congress. By mid-June, non-student protestors waving Brazilian flags began showing up, leading to disputes with some of the original protestors, who thought the events should have nothing to do with flags and patriotism (Bevins 2018). The Worker's Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*, PT) led by Lula and his successor Roussef that had been in power for 13 years imagined that the protests were a request for more of their ongoing efforts to increase social democracy in Brazil. "[I]t is completely natural that young people, especially those who are obtaining things their parents never had, should desire more," wrote Lula (Silva 2013). But in a tangled process that is still much debated, the protests eventually took a different direction. New groups began showing up, and the almost entirely conservative-dominated Brazilian press changed their tone and approach to the

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the mainstream to publicly praise the Dean campaign's successes with internet organizing, helped sow the seeds in 2007 for what would become the Tea Party a few years later. See ("American Freedom Agenda" 2007).

protests, emphasizing a studied mix of drama, scandal, outrage, and criticism of the establishment.

With the help of the press, conservative politicians and activists gradually succeeded in redefining the problem as one of political corruption on the part of the powers that be. Pointing to what was represented as ongoing unbridled spending on sports mega-events – Brazil and Rio hosted both the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Olympics – became a target of popular rage. A bribery and kickback scandal involving a car wash launched in 2014 gradually expanded, received massive and breathless media coverage, and was effectively turned into a partisan political tool, eventually leading, in what many argue was a political misuse of the justice system, to the jailing of Lula and the impeachment of Rousseff. At roughly the same time, the MBL (*Movimento Brasil Livre* or Free Brazil Movement), led by a teenaged Brazilian who had cut his teeth making popular pro-market Youtube videos, was formed. Sometimes described as the Brazilian Tea Party, the MBL organized demonstrations in 2015 against the Workers Party ostensibly in the name of free markets but also in support of socially conservative views such as opposition to abortion rights or access to gender affirming care. All that created a context for the rise of Jair Bolsonaro, the hard-right throwback to the days of Brazil's dictatorship, the kind of man the original protesters considered a mortal enemy. With Lula in jail and prohibited from running for office, Bolsanaro was elected to lead the country in 2018.

The political situation in Brazil in the last decades is exceedingly complex, and new scholarship investigating those complexities is still emerging (e.g., Nemer 2027). As one political scientist put it, "June 2013 is a month that never ended" (Bevins 2018). One can nonetheless note some key patterns. First, the June Days vividly illustrate the point of Tufekci's analysis of the protests of the Arab Spring period: that social media have made it easier to quickly organize protests against unpopular regimes, but they have not solved the protracted problem of connecting protestors' goals into governing policies, that building a connection between the streets and the halls of government remains a difficult and slow process (Tufekci 2017).

For the purposes of this analysis, furthermore, the problem of the June Days is to a significant degree a problem of narrative, a problem of what the story of the protests should be and who gets to tell it. The protests themselves, as relayed to the public through a mixture of journalism, social media, and experiences in the streets, created a self-reinforcing narrative of justified outrage, and the ordinary people against the dominant powers. The Worker's Party, accustomed to having the world's ear for their innovative and by most measures highly successful governance, imagined that thoughtful public statements to the press and urban policy initiatives could bring protestors into the fold. But

the narrative infrastructures had changed since the PT was in opposition in the 1980s and '90s, which had shaped much of the leadership's experience. But the right wing, with some assistance from the largely sensationalist and conservative leaning mainstream media, and coupled to their willful indifference to accuracy and transparency, were able to craft narratives that fit the contours of the lives of people who were spending more time on Twitter and Facebook, who could find a sense of community in sharing the latest outrage and clever troll, for whom stories of criminals and corrupt politicians resonated with their self perceptions as upstanding citizens in a fallen world. The hard right in Brazil was able to exploit those narrative pathways to represent themselves as upstart outsiders rather than as holdovers from a disgraced past.

Canadian Trucker Convoy

The Canadian case in several ways exemplifies some of the trends already seen in the previous cases. Drawing from a larger study by the authors, a look at how it unfolded in the press allows us in particular to illustrate the patterns of interaction between news outlets and right wing activists.

There is a misleading explanation of the Freedom Convoy as initially sparked by cross border vaccine mandates, an explanation that persists to this day.[2] In fact, the convoy was organized by a group of alt right activists most of whom had long been concerned with things like pro-oil anti-environmental efforts, "Great Reset" conspiracies, anti-immigrant sentiments, western Canadian separatist ("Wexit") movements, and more. From 2019-2021, they tried various protest techniques, including a Canadian "yellow vest" movement directed against environmental regulation and to some degree immigrants, and some later truck convoys – with little success. In the fall of 2021, some of them turned to vaccine and mask skepticism as a possible galvanizing focus for their efforts. In December of 2021, they organized a protest against mandates called "Operation Bearhug" that travelled to Ottawa and staged a variety of events over a five day period. They received no media coverage, and fewer than 100 people showed up.

By the first of January of 2022, some of the same people were trying again, posting a call for what they called a "Convoy to End Mandates" to their social media feeds that went entirely unnoticed by the media. But if news media were ignoring right wing populists, at the time they could not ignore the Covid-19 pandemic. Special sections of news outlets with titles

[2] For example "The February 2022 protests were sparked by a federal vaccine mandate for truck drivers crossing the US-Canada border" (Murphy 2025); "But along came COVID-19 restrictions, which sparked the Freedom Convoy in mid-January 2022—a protest led by truckers and their supporters who opposed vaccine mandates and other public health rules" (Wark 2026).

like “Covid-19 Live Updates” collected constantly updated lists of articles about the pandemic, and many journalists were reassigned to the Covid crisis. Covid dominated the headlines and, it is safe to say, most citizens’ everyday life.

In the first week of January 2022 Canadian mainstream media were fixated on supply chains and trucks, if not truckers. Like most of the world, Canada was facing the exhausting resurgence of the omicron variant coupled with worries about slowdowns in global supply chains and related inflation. The relationship of these conditions to the struggling trucking industry were of acute interest in Canada because of the country’s tight interdependence with the U.S. economy, and the resulting economic exchange depended on trucks traveling back and forth across border.

On January 1, a fairly typical piece in the *Toronto Sun* began, “Fears over crippling shortages of truck drivers has the opposition calling on the federal transport minister for clarity on how vaccine mandates will impact Canada's shipping industry” (Passifiume 2022). A Jan. 15th panel discussion on the Canadian network CTV began thusly:

> Will a new vaccine mandate on cross-border truckers that came into effect yesterday lead to a sudden spike in consumer prices? Does the government have a plan to deal with shortages? We'll speak with the minister of intergovernmental affairs, Dominic Leblanc, about that, and about a health care system already overloaded (Rinaldo, 2022a).

On January 13th, the CBC posted a fairly typical article about the upcoming vaccine requirement for cross border truckers, but added a more personal angle from “unvaccinated truck driver” Brigitte Belton, who is quoted, “I lose my truck, I lose my house, I lose my car. I basically will have absolutely nothing left” (Zimonjic, 2022). The author balances this quote by closing with one from a vaccinated truck driver who says “the mandate is the right thing to do. It's a matter of public health, period … And so we need to do our part … as citizens, to do what's right for everybody else.”

Both quotes are presented as vox pop, without follow up. Brigitte Belton, presented as a representative voice of the people, was in fact an organizer of the trucker convoy and a long term, activist anti-vaccine and anti-mask political activist. (She would eventually be required to testify to a Federal inquiry into the Convoy events.) There is no mention of Belton’s associations with other convoy organizers working on a January protest – she had posted a flyer for the convoy to her TikTok on January 1 – nor her longstanding anti-mask

and -vaccination proclivities or her sympathies with the MAGA movement. Her claims about being in danger of losing everything were not fact-checked. In the developing narrative, the covid crisis and supply chain problems were being associated with what appeared to be grass roots frustration, not so much with the pandemic, but with government restrictions. And the balancing with a single quote from a vaccinated trucker risked creating an impression of a roughly 50/50 split in opinion, whereas available evidence suggested it was a small minority of truckers who objected to vaccines at the time. For an ordinary reader, a sense of deep upset with the restrictions is communicated, but no sense that this narrative had been actively cultivated over the preceding months by Belton and those in her circle who had broader political goals in mind.

It was in this context of trucking-related concerns blanketing the news that, on January 14th, a then-obscure activist called Tamara Lich, former Canadian Yellow Vest organizer, Wexit activist, and opponent of climate change accords and environmental policies, created a GoFundMe page and named it "FreedomConvoy 2022," opening the door to a move from the label "convoy to end mandates" towards the vaguer but high energy label of "freedom convoy" (Osman & Fraser, 2022).

Online fundraising provides a key narrative hinge to 21st century journalistic political storytelling infrastructures. Remarkable or unexpected online fundraising events have become a new kind of news peg, not least because the numbers appear objective and are made readily available online and thus instantly accessible to reporters.[3] From a journalist's point of view, reporting online fundraising numbers is a no-brainer. And if the numbers rise dramatically, they provide journalists with a reason to follow the story, and intentionally or not, thereby grant the entire phenomenon legitimacy.

Three days later, on January 17th, the CBC did report about a slow roll trucker protest against vaccine mandates in Manitoba. Again, in vox pop style, the piece quoted several truckers denouncing the mandates (e.g., calling the mandates "fascist") without any follow up, and showed no awareness of the planned protest in Ottawa, concluding with a summary centred around the complexity of the supply chain issues (CBC, 2022a).

Focused media attention on the Convoy began to spread on January 20th, when the conservative *The National Post* (which is distributed widely on its American owned parent, *Postmedia*), ran a short but link-rich piece by a newly hired multimedia editor. "A group of truckers," the piece stated, "is planning to drive across the country to protest a federal

[3] This is why most US readers receive countless fundraising messages from politicians that clamour about approaching fundraising deadlines: the deadlines exist for the purpose of required reporting to election officials, but reporters read them and use fluctuations in fundraising as measures of newsworthiness and electability (See, e.g. Streeter & Teachout, 2007, pp. 84–85).

vaccine mandate in Canada's capital." While including links to the group's newly established GoFundMe site, the article does not mention the organizers' wider conspiracy theories or radical views but uncritically embraces their narrative about the negative economic effects of vaccine mandates on small businesses, implicitly tying the protests with general concerns about the pandemic and supply chains that had dominated news in the previous two weeks. The lead quote, for example, is "I know a lot of drivers who are impacted by [mandates]. It has basically removed them from the workforce." GoFundMe organizer Tamara Lich is quoted saying, "Small businesses are being destroyed, homes are being destroyed, and people are being mistreated and denied fundamental necessities to survive" (Greenberg, 2022). The treatment was vox pop. None of these claims were fact checked or balanced. Lich's political background is not mentioned. Appearing amidst a constant flurry of Covid-19 related news, Greenberg's article, circulated through the Postmedia Breaking News wire service, would be reproduced throughout Canadian media over the next 48 hours, and even more frequently linked in the then-common "Covid-19 Updates" sections of news outlets. This is when news coverage of the Convoy exploded.

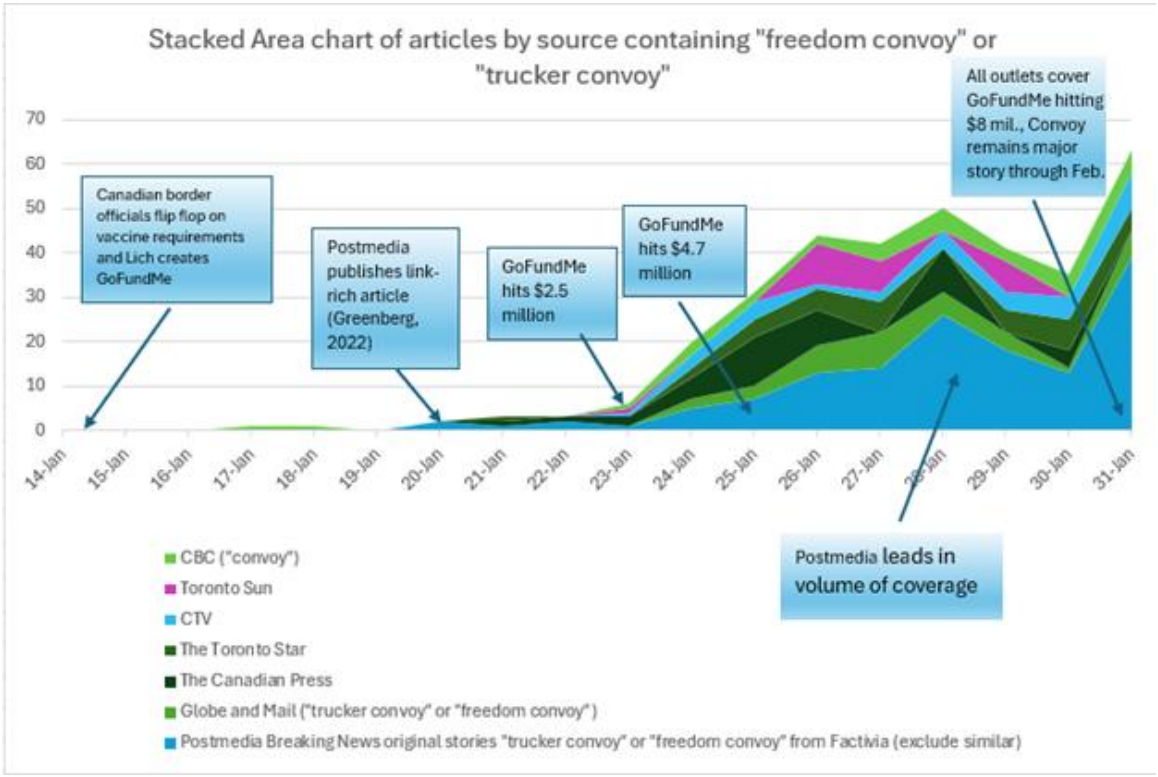


Figure 1 A stacked area chart of the number of stories referencing the Convoy from representative Canadian news outlets, showing the explosion of coverage after Jan. 20th. [4]

[4] Searches were for articles that referred to "freedom convoy" or "trucker convoy," with the exception of the CBC, for which we used "convoy" so as to capture some early mentions. Postmedia was searched using Factiva, using the "exclude similar" qualifier, because Postmedia updates articles throughout the day, which

From January 20th on, the story unfolded under growing media attention, with the number of stories rising day by day for the rest of the month. By January 23rd, routine competitive pressures made the story irresistible for editors and journalists, while the rapid pace of events left little room for in-depth investigation. The dramatically rising GoFundme numbers created an easy news peg and encouraged a sense that the Convoy, whatever it was about, deserved coverage (which in turn drove more attention, and likely thus more donors, towards the site). The Convoy became a regular feature on nightly television news, with images of trucks and protestors accompanying stories related to the pandemic, inflation, and border policies.[5]

None of this growing coverage was based on any evidence that the popularity of the views of the Convoy participants had changed since the previous month, when a similar convoy effort was entirely ignored. From the point of view of journalists and their editors at the time, what had changed was that other outlets were covering it, and a narrative about frustrations with covid had become attached to the story, while the right wing radicalism was eclipsed. While it would only take a week or two for editors to start running stories noting the far right background of the organizers, by that time the story was huge and trucks were blocking the streets of Ottawa; the narrative of "freedom" from mandates and popular frustration with covid restrictions was already flowing in an established narrative stream.

All of this validation created what White calls branding, where "freedom" is narrated more as an attitude than a political principle. A CTV broadcast on Jan. 27th is illustrative of the news media's role in the branding:

> SOLOMON: Yeah, and, Lisa, it's interesting, Fox News in the US has talked about this, Donald Trump Junior has talked about this, Elon Musk just about an hour ago tweeted out about Canadian truckers. Like it's an interesting thing who's jumping on. What does that tell you, Lisa?

floods news feeds without adding much new content. CBC and The Globe and Mail are not represented in NexisUni or Factiva; data for them are from their website archives.

[5] For example, a Jan. 26th CBC article focused on food supply chain issues included, without comment in the story, an image of a truck with a "freedom" banner draped over its hood, which linked to a broadcast story about the convoy from a few days earlier. The image was captioned, in small print, "As a convoy of protesters heads toward Ottawa, the COVID-19 vaccine mandate for cross-border truck drivers has been blamed for empty grocery store shelves. But experts say there are numerous factors, including extreme weather, contributing to reduced supply" (Evans, 2022).

> RAITT: Well, I think what strikes me the most is how much money this convoy has raised. And I think that gets everybody's attention, that it's a winner when it comes to fund-raising, so maybe the PPC [sic] is looking at that as something that's going to be beneficial to them. If they're involved in this, are they going to tap into the same pool of donations? (Solomon, 2022b).

The movement is narrativized in terms of money raised, attention from famous names, and strategies: the stuff of branding, not of substantial political discussion.

On Jan. 26, 2022, as a "Freedom Convoy" headed towards Ottawa, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau told reporters that some of the protestors represented a "fringe minority" with "unacceptable views" (Gilmore 2022). His statement was arguably accurate, as far as it went, but it was also a triumph for the Convoy, having an effect similar to Hillary Clinton's "deplorables" comment during the 2016 election in the U.S. Energized by the attention, the online memes and jokes flew instantly, further expanding the Convoy's visibility, and the number of protestors headed towards Ottawa continued to swell. Three days later Conservative Party of Canada (CPC) MP Pierre Poilievre would film a video from a highway overpass, honking trucks passing underneath, proclaiming "[t]he protest is not just for truckers, but for the 60 per cent of Canadians who say they worry they can't afford food. . . . the people who want to stand and speak for their freedoms . . . all those that our government and our media have insulted and left behind" (Poilievre 2022). Three days after that, centrist Erin O'Toole would be voted out as CPC leader, Poilievre would emerge as front runner to replace him, and *Maclean's* magazine would announce that "the firewall against U.S. conservatism has collapsed" (Wells 2022).[6]

Political analyst Stephanie Carvin's observed that "The biggest misconception about this, even within Canada, is that extremists have infiltrated the movement. . . this was an extremist movement that got mainstream attention." This point was, and still is, too often ignored (Fisher, 2022). Glossing the contradictory currents of an emerging protest as a "freedom convoy" that was responding to cross border trucker vaccine mandates may have seemed close enough given the information reporters had at hand. But that gloss, coupled with approaching the movement as if it were a brand rather than a political group,

[6] As party leader, Poilievre would go on to lead in the national polls by record large margins for almost two years, until Donald Trump, in a case of very bad timing, threatened Canada with tariffs and worse on the eve of a federal election (*Wikipedia* 2026, "Opinion polling for the 2025 Canadian federal election").

in turn gave right wing populists both exposure and a safe label with which to appeal to large numbers of Canadians who might not have otherwise been predisposed to join them.

From technology to institutions and affect (and back). What the Trump attack on Canada says about how narratives work.

Discussion

All three cases share a confluence that left msm both fascinated and confused. No point looking for ideological consistency. What's consistent is "Boiling mad" i.e. grievance, emotional attachment to, and a pattern of trolling the mainstream media while falling back on the

Tufekci, how technology does and does not matter. The internet did break the near-monopoly that traditional journalism exercised via the centralized newspaper and broadcast TV industries. Analogies with Gitlin, protest, spectacularization; the '60s counterculture and elite failures.

One thing that's new is that trolling is now normalized, and the "just sayin'" character of the discourse allows for a studied indifference to the validity of claims. What matters is that they work, that they own the libs, etc. This will continue as long as traditional journalists address through balancing and other efforts to remain neutral;

Conclusion

Right wing populism emerges on the public stage, not simply from some "elsewhere" such as isolated online enclaves or deep structures like economic inequality, but also from rearrangements of the stage itself. Right wing populism is made as much of stories as it is of particular groups of people or beliefs.

All cases share a surprise, exploitation of a crisis by hard right, over-coverage from the msm, focus on grievance for its own sake, fundamentalist "real people" and ideals while actual principles are incoherent and slippery, than policy : Tea Party, sudden emergence

From a bird's eye view, none of this is necessary. [somewhat similar political campaign techniques can, and have, been used by more left wing politicians with some success: Howard Dean, Barack Obama, Bernie Sanders, and more. It's possible to publicly make the case that the pandemic proved the need for more funding for medical care – New Zealand.]

[Once they've emerged, can it be reversed? NYT belated using word "lies" for Trump, Canadian journalists catching up to right wing backgrounds, to no avail. Media and elites were always too smug, self contained, indifferent to those outside the inner circles of power; that needs to change, too. But Lula's reelection by a don't feed the trolls strategy, maybe can be.

Journalists: before facts can be communicated, they need to be narrated, story choice or framing that serves the communication of truth and supports democracy needs to become part of journalistic training and routines (and need not involve abandoning ideals of objectivity or neutrality)