

Quebec Election Misinformation Project: Executive Summary

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The Quebec Election Misinformation Project aimed to identify and evaluate the spread and consequences of misinformation circulating during the 2022 Quebec provincial election. The Project also examined citizens' perceptions and media coverage of misinformation. To do so, the Project monitored social media activity related to the election using both automated and manual methods. This data collection was combined with a representative pre- and post-election survey of the Quebec population that allows for the assessment of exposure to true and false news as well as citizens' perceptions of the information environment and the integrity of the election.

Main findings

1. Misinformation remained concentrated in specific communities

While there was a relatively large amount of misinformation circulated during the campaign and after the election, particularly in relation to COVID-19 and the integrity of the electoral process, this misinformation tended to come from a small group of individuals online and had little reach or influence outside of that community. - This community is characterized by a high level of distrust of government and the media and tends to engage in conspiratorial thinking, making its members particularly susceptible to believing and spreading misinformation on a range of topics, including electoral integrity, COVID-19 and climate change. This misinformation often has an international dimension, drawing on narratives circulating in other countries. - This community, organized around certain well-known leaders, has grown and mobilized in the context of the pandemic, allowing misinformation to spread quickly and widely within the network. Some individuals exposed only to content from this community, volume permitting, may find themselves locked in echo chambers. - Except for a widely publicized factually incorrect statement by the outgoing Minister of Immigration, the average Quebecer had relatively little exposure to misinformation that circulated during the campaign.

2. Misinformation had relatively little impact on the election

Our examination of misinformation during the campaign and its spread provides no reason to believe that misinformation had a significant impact on the outcome of the election. - Quebecers are more likely to believe that they were exposed to misinformation during the 2022 provincial election than Canadians and Quebecers during the 2021 federal election. However, only a minority of Quebecers consider misinformation to have been a serious problem during the election. - Some segments of the population have a higher level of distrust in the electoral process, including those who continue to believe that Donald Trump was the winner of the 2020 U.S. presidential election. While the level of distrust is significantly higher among Quebec Conservative Party supporters, belief in the election fraud narrative remains a minority view within the party. This distrust is often exacerbated by a lack of knowledge about the electoral process. - A strong majority of citizens, comparable to that observed in previous elections, continue to have confidence in the integrity of the election.

3. There is uncertainty and confusion about what constitutes misinformation

There appears to be some confusion among citizens about what constitutes misinformation, the extent to which they are exposed to it, and where it comes from. - Almost half of Quebecers surveyed find it difficult to distinguish misinformation from factual information and are unsure whether or not they were exposed to misinformation during the campaign. - Citizens who believe they were exposed to misinformation have very different understandings of what it is. Citizens' partisan preferences play a role which parties they accuse of spreading misinformation. Some citizens see misinformation as coming primarily from the mainstream media and official statements and policies on COVID-19.

4. The information environment in Quebec is becoming more fragmented

While a majority of Quebecers continue to trust in and be exposed to content from mainstream French-language media, we observe that trusted sources for political information are becoming more diverse. - Some segments of the population believe that the traditional media propagate misinformation or ideologically biased content and are more likely to turn to alternative online sources of information. - While there used to be a generational divide regarding whether or not individuals used social media, the divide is now about which platforms are being used. TikTok was an important source of political information and misinformation during the election, especially among the younger generation. - In general, misinformation was spread across all social media platforms during the campaign. This includes both traditional platforms like Facebook and Twitter and alternative platforms with less content moderation, such as Telegram, Rumble and Odysee. Some conspiratorial figures, eager to reach audiences across platforms, made a habit of sharing the same messages on a range of platforms.

Recommendations

1. Better educate citizens about the electoral process

We find that citizens have a low level of knowledge about the electoral process, such as how votes are counted, which can increase their susceptibility to false information circulating online and decrease their overall confidence in the integrity of the election. We recommend that Élections Québec and other civil society organizations involved in civic education strengthen their efforts to educate citizens about how Québec elections work.

2. Avoid wording that suggest that election results are being released before the polls close

On election night, some media organizations created pages or published articles whose wording suggested that the media organization knew the election results before the polls closed. This fueled speculation that the election was “fixed”, and that the outcome was known in advance. We encourage media outlets to refrain from publishing anything that might be interpreted as if they are aware of the results before the polls close.

3. Respond seriously to the growing distrust of political, media and scientific institutions

We find that some segments of the electorate are particularly distrustful of the traditional media, going so far as to identify them as a major source of misinformation. This distrust, coupled with distrust of political institutions and scientists, makes some individuals more likely to seek information primarily through alternative sources (which do not necessarily adhere to the same principles of journalistic or scientific integrity) and to believe and spread false information. Any serious, long-term response to the issue of misinformation will need to address the sources of this distrust as well as avoid fueling it.

4. Demand greater transparency and accountability from social media platforms

Although social media platforms have become more proactive in combating and limiting the spread of misinformation since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, their algorithms continue to promote divisive or misinformative content, which tends to generate more interactions. A greater level of transparency by the platforms regarding their operations, as well as a greater level of responsibility regarding their effects on society, is necessary. This accountability could be achieved through the application of a “Duty to Act Responsibly”, as proposed by the Canadian Commission on Democratic Expression. True transparency and accountability also requires better access to data for researchers to independently assess the inner working of platforms (processes, algorithms, targeting, etc.) and evaluate its societal and political impacts. Greater access to content removed from platforms, whether because it was shared as a story or reported, would also be beneficial to researching misinformation and harm online.

5. Develop shared data infrastructures

Studying the information environment and the misinformation that circulates within it requires an enormous amount of data. Current infrastructures are largely inadequate and inefficient. Most researchers collect new databases for each new project, and data are generally not collected with reusability in mind. Developing shared data infrastructures and approaches to better track conversations across platforms would help make information environment research much more effective and accessible to the broader scientific community and improve our understanding of its characteristics and effects. These shared data infrastructures would necessarily involve inter-university, but also international, initiatives.