

Dead Internet Theory & AI-Driven Media Manipulation in Canada

Research brief on bot activity, AI-generated content, foreign interference, AI literacy gaps, and echo chamber dynamics in Canadian political discourse.

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Research Brief — Tom (Lead Investigator, NFNM)

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1. DEAD INTERNET THEORY — Origins, Evidence, Academic Treatment

Origins

- Emerged on fringe forums (4chan, Wizardchan) in the mid-2010s
- Core claim: the majority of internet content and activity is generated by bots and AI, not humans
- Gained mainstream attention after ChatGPT's public debut in November 2022
- [HIGH confidence — multiple independent sources confirm timeline]

Key Evidence as of 2026

Bot traffic surpassed human traffic in 2024:

- Imperva's 2025 Bad Bot Report: automated traffic accounted for 51% of all web traffic in 2024 — first

time in a decade bots surpassed humans

- Bad bots alone accounted for 32% of all traffic, increasing for the fifth consecutive year
- Travel industry worst hit: 48% of travel site traffic was bad bots
- Account takeover attacks increased 40% year-over-year
- Source: [Imperva 2025 Bad Bot Report](#)
- [HIGH confidence — Imperva/Thales is an authoritative cybersecurity source]

AI-generated content volume:

- Analytics firm Graphite found AI-generated articles surpassed human-written content for the first time in late 2024
- Estimated 57.1% of written online content is now AI-generated in some form
- AI-generated reviews growing 80% month-over-month since June 2023
- Source: [Decrypt](#)
- [MEDIUM confidence — single source for the 57.1% figure]

Platform-specific bot rates:

- X/Twitter: Internet 2.0 study using 5th Column AI tool estimated ~64% of accounts are likely bots
- During 2024 Super Bowl, fake traffic on X surged to ~76%
- Facebook and TikTok showed much lower bot rates (2.01% and 2.56% respectively in that comparison)
- [MEDIUM confidence — methodology of Internet 2.0 study not fully verified]

Academic Papers and Credible Journalism

1. "The Dead Internet Theory: A Survey on Artificial Interactions and the Future of Social Media" (February 2025) — Muzumdar et al., arXiv paper surveying the theory's implications for social media. [arXiv:2502.00007](#)
2. "Baudrillard and the Dead Internet Theory" (2025) — Springer Nature, Philosophy & Technology journal. Revisits Baudrillard's framework in context of AI. [Springer](#)
3. "Artificial influencers and the dead internet theory" (2023) — Springer Nature, AI & Society journal. [Springer](#)
4. "The Dead Internet Theory: Investigating the Rise of AI-Generated Content and Bot Dominance in Cyberspace" (2024) — ResearchGate. [ResearchGate](#)
5. "The 'Dead Internet Theory' and the rise of synthetic politics" — The Loop (ECPR). Connects the theory to political manipulation. [The Loop](#)

6. Roland Leikauf (2025) described the theory as "pseudoscientific" in academic framing, but Yoshija Walter (2024) in AI & Society's "Curmudgeon Corner" argued the once-speculative theory is now directly observable.
 7. UNSW Newsroom (2024): "The 'dead internet theory' makes eerie claims about an AI-run web — the truth is more sinister." [UNSW](#)
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2. BOT ACTIVITY ON CANADIAN POLITICAL FACEBOOK/SOCIAL MEDIA

Spamouflage Campaign (2023-2025) — China-Linked

- August-September 2023: Bot network left thousands of comments in English and French on Facebook and X accounts of Canadian MPs
- Targeted dozens of MPs across all parties, including the PM, Opposition Leader, and Cabinet members
- Posted claims that a critic of the CCP had accused MPs of criminal/ethical violations
- Included likely deepfake videos with AI-generated content
- Detected by Canada's Rapid Response Mechanism (RRM)
- Connected to the PRC-linked "Spamouflage" network by threat intelligence experts
- 2024 escalation: Campaign restarted August 31, 2024, "much larger" and affecting more GoC accounts
- Indicators: AI-generated profile images, obvious audio/video distortions, grammatical errors suggesting machine translation
- Source: [Government of Canada — RRM Canada, Global Affairs 2024 update](#)
- [HIGH confidence — Canadian government official reporting]

Kirkland Lake Bot Incident (Summer 2024)

- After Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre held an event in Kirkland Lake, Ontario, X was flooded with similarly worded posts of support
- Accounts used repetitive language; many listed locations outside Canada despite appearing to be Northern Ontarians
- NDP requested Elections Canada investigate the bot network

- Canadian Digital Media Research Network found no evidence of Conservative Party involvement — assessed as likely "an amateur X user experimenting with a bot pipeline"
- Source: [DFRLab](#), [Globe and Mail](#)
- [HIGH confidence — multiple credible sources]

2025 Federal Election Bot Activity

- DFRLab identified highly active bot-like X accounts amplifying political content in spam-like manner, frequently replying to posts from federal parties and leaders
- After Mark Carney became PM, a China-linked network pivoted to spreading contrasting narratives against Carney
- Five accounts disseminated more than 28,000 posts during the Liberal leadership campaign (Feb-March 2025), mostly anti-Carney
- 195 potentially fake social media accounts identified circulating Carney-Epstein disinformation (per Media Ecosystem Observatory)
- Source: [DFRLab](#), [DFRLab election summary](#)
- [HIGH confidence — DFRLab is an authoritative digital forensics source]

Canadian Centre for Cyber Security — 2025 Assessment

- PRC, Russia, and Iran "will very likely" use AI-enabled tools to interfere with Canada's democratic process
- Hostile foreign actors used AI to target 27% of elections worldwide (2023-2024)
- Of 151 global elections (2023-2024): 60 AI-generated synthetic disinformation campaigns and 34 known/likely AI-enabled social botnets
- CSE tracked 102 cases of AI-driven interference across 41 global elections — up from just ONE case in the prior two years
- Assessment: "very unlikely" AI will fundamentally undermine election integrity — but the trend is exponential
- Source: [CCCS 2025 Update](#), [CBC](#)
- [HIGH confidence — Canadian government official intelligence assessment]

Alberta Election Concentration (2023)

- In the 2023 Alberta election, just 200 users published 12% of all tweets sent to candidates and political parties

- Demonstrates extreme concentration of online political discourse
 - [MEDIUM confidence — single source]
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3. AI-GENERATED CONTENT IN CANADIAN MEDIA

LCN (Local Canadian News) — Fake News Site (2025)

- CTV News discovered a fake site called "LCN" that on May 12, 2025, published a story remarkably similar to a CTV article about a two-year-old girl needing a kidney donor
- Used the same photo but changed headline, names, and places
- CTV attempts to contact LCN failed: emails bounced, journalist byline appeared fabricated
- Source: [CP24/CTV](#)
- [HIGH confidence — first-party reporting by CTV]

Surrey Speak — AI Local News Site (2026)

- The Tyee investigated "Surrey Speak," an AI-generated local news site in Surrey, BC
- Concerns that such sites compete with real news outlets for advertising revenue, tightening financial squeeze on legitimate journalism
- Source: [The Tyee](#)
- [MEDIUM confidence — single investigative report]

Pink Slime Journalism — Global Scale

- As of April 2024, NewsGuard identified 1,197 pink slime news sources
- By June 2024, pink slime sites outnumbered legitimate online local news sites
- Pink slime: fake partisan operations masquerading as independent local news, using AI-generated or outsourced low-quality content
- Yale study (2025): people often trust fake local news sites more than real ones
- Source: [Yale ISPS](#), [Wikipedia — Pink-slime journalism](#)
- [HIGH confidence — multiple authoritative sources]

Deepfake Scams During 2025 Election

- Canadian Digital Media Research Network identified seven deepfakes of Mark Carney mimicking CBC/CTV news interviews
- These directed users to scam investment websites
- One deepfake ad cost \$300-\$399 USD (~\$500 CAD), received 5,000-6,000 impressions
- Scams invited Canadians to invest ~\$350 on fraudulent platforms falsely endorsed by the government or party leaders
- AI-generated image of Carney with Jeffrey Epstein in a pool went viral — fact-checked by Snopes, University at Buffalo
- Source: [CDMRN](#), [Snopes](#), [NewsGuard](#)
- [HIGH confidence — multiple fact-checkers and research organizations]

AI Chatbots as News Sources

- Reuters Institute: 6% of Canadians used AI chatbots as a news source in 2024
 - Results: 18% of AI responses lacked legitimate news sources, only 37% included complete valid URLs
 - Summaries accurate in only 47% of cases; 45% only partially correct
 - Source: [TechXplore](#)
 - [HIGH confidence — Reuters Institute is authoritative]
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4. AI ASTROTURFING — Canada

Alto High-Speed Rail Opposition (Alt-NO)

- Assessment: Appears to be genuinely organic grassroots opposition, NOT manufactured astroturf
- Alt-NO is a committee of citizens, residents, businesspeople, landowners and farmers opposing the Alto high-speed rail corridor
- Non-partisan; concerns center on land expropriation, farm impacts, environmental damage
- Has met with Ontario Federation of Agriculture, National Farmer's Union, South Frontenac groups

- Facebook serves as an "informal consultation layer beneath the formal one" (Jesse Hirsh, Metaviews)
- Hirsh describes the dynamic: "A landowner in rural Eastern Ontario no longer feels isolated. Within hours, their concern becomes collective. Screenshots circulate. Claims harden."
- Hirsh notes misinformation patterns but frames them as natural outcomes of information gaps, NOT coordinated inauthentic behavior: "Where information is partial, imagination fills the gap"
- No evidence of bot activity, coordinated inauthenticity, or external manipulation found in any source
- Related groups: "Concerned Citizens Against the Alto Southern Route," "Save South Frontenac"
- Sources: [Metaviews/Jesse Hirsh](#), [The Review](#), [CBC](#)
- [HIGH confidence — multiple independent sources; no contradicting evidence of astroturfing]

Broader AI Astroturfing Capability

- A single bad actor can now deploy thousands of AI personas that adapt tone, learn what resonates with communities, and create the illusion of independent consensus
- Generative-AI makes astroturfing easier to conduct and much harder to detect
- Taiwan, India, Indonesia, and the US all dealt with AI-generated deepfakes and fake outlets during 2024 campaigns
- No specific documented cases of AI-powered astroturfing of Canadian grassroots movements found — but the capability exists and is growing
- Source: [Globe and Mail](#), [StudyFinds](#)
- [MEDIUM confidence — capability is documented but Canadian-specific cases are limited]

Canada Proud / Right-Wing Facebook Astroturfing (Documented, Non-AI)

- Canada's National Observer (2022) investigation: "right-wing operatives masquerading as local grassroots groups on Facebook"
- Squamish Voices: anonymous Facebook page that spent \$15,900+ on targeted ads attacking Squamish Mayor Karen Elliott and council
- Linked to Canada Proud, a right-wing political influence group founded by Jeff Ballingall (2019)
- At least a half-dozen other supposedly grassroots Facebook pages linked to the same network
- This is traditional (non-AI) astroturfing, but demonstrates the playbook that AI could supercharge
- Source: [Canada's National Observer](#)
- [HIGH confidence — investigative journalism with documented ad spending]

5. AI LITERACY GAP — Canada

KPMG / University of Melbourne Global Study (2025)

- Most comprehensive global AI literacy study: 48,000+ people across 47 countries, including 1,025 Canadians (surveyed Nov 2024 - Jan 2025)
- Canada ranked 44th out of 47 countries in AI training and literacy
- Canada ranked 28th among 30 advanced economies (IMF classification)
- Canada ranked 42nd out of 47 on trust in AI systems; 25th of 30 advanced economies

Key gaps:

Metric	Canada	Global Average
Moderate/high AI knowledge	38%	52%
Received AI training	24%	39%
Can use AI effectively	47%	60%
Willing to trust AI information	34%	46%
Approve/accept AI use	50%	72%
Believe AI risks outweigh benefits	46%	32%

- Nearly 3 in 10 employed Canadians use AI at work, but 44% of those have received no formal training
- Source: [KPMG Canada](#), [BNN Bloomberg](#)
- [HIGH confidence — major firm, large sample, peer-reviewed methodology]

OECD AI Skills Paper (February 2025)

- OECD Paper No. 35: "AI Skills and Capabilities in Canada"
- Documents skills gaps in Canadian workforce relative to AI adoption needs
- Source: [OECD](#)
- [HIGH confidence — OECD is authoritative]

The Perception Gap

- Most Canadians understand AI as "chatbots" — the KPMG data shows only 38% claim moderate or high AI knowledge

- Meanwhile AI is generating 57% of online written content, running 51% of web traffic, and being weaponized in election interference
 - The gap between what Canadians think AI is (a chatbot helper) and what it actually does (generates the majority of content they consume) is the core vulnerability
 - This gap is worse in Canada than almost any other developed nation
 - [MEDIUM confidence — inference from combining multiple data points]
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6. ECHO CHAMBER RESEARCH — Canadian Political Discourse

Canadian Municipal-Level Research

Squamish, BC Case Study (2022)

- Anonymous Facebook page "Squamish Voices" spent \$15,900+ targeting the mayor and council
- Effect on participation: a councillor reported being unable to recruit candidates because "they look at what's happening in social media and they're like, that's not for me"
- Demonstrates how echo chambers in small communities can suppress democratic participation
- Source: [CBC](#), [National Observer](#)
- [HIGH confidence — multiple sources]

Ottawa Municipal Election (2010)

- Raynauld and Greenberg (2014): "Tweet, Click, Vote: Twitter and the 2010 Ottawa Municipal Election"
- One of the few Canadian municipal-level academic studies on social media and politics
- [MEDIUM confidence — dated but relevant as Canadian municipal precedent]

Broader Echo Chamber Research

Systematic review findings:

- Nearly a third of studies identify **polarization** as a direct effect of echo chambers
- Between 5-10% of people in online spaces occupy echo chambers and/or experience increased polarization
- When people preferentially connect with like-minded others, they create feedback loops that intensify existing views
- Source: [Springer — Systematic Review](#), [Cambridge University Press](#)
- [HIGH confidence — peer-reviewed systematic reviews]

Rural vs. Urban dynamics:

- Rural residents tend to have more racially/ethnically homogeneous networks

- Urban networks are typically more diverse
- Shared social media use between parents and young adults in rural areas can constrain network diversity and tolerance
- For parents staying in rural areas, shared social media use contributed to contact with diverse groups (complex effect)
- Source: [Taylor & Francis](#)
- [MEDIUM confidence — single study, but peer-reviewed]

Canadian Polarization — Current State

Media Ecosystem Observatory / McGill (2025)

- Information environment shaped by influencers, digital manipulation, polarization, and weakened platform governance
- Influencers, not traditional media, commanded disproportionate attention in 2025 election
- Meta's news ban and X's reduced news visibility accelerated the shift
- Taylor Owen (Director, Centre for Media, Technology and Democracy): Canada's online media environment is "more fragile and susceptible to manipulation than ever before"
- Source: [MEO](#), [CDMRN](#)
- [HIGH confidence — authoritative Canadian research institution]

UBC Research (2025)

- "Canada isn't deeply polarized yet. Here's what new research reveals"
- Suggests Canada has not yet reached US-level polarization but the trajectory is concerning
- Source: [UBC Magazine](#)
- [MEDIUM confidence — single source but credible institution]

Small Population Echo Chamber Dynamics (Township Level)

- No academic studies found specifically examining echo chambers at the Canadian township level
- However, the Squamish case demonstrates the mechanism: in small populations, a single anonymous Facebook page with modest ad spending (\$15,900) can dominate local political discourse
- In communities of 1,000-5,000 people, the threshold for manufacturing a perceived consensus is extremely low
- The smaller the population, the fewer accounts needed to create the illusion of majority opinion
- [LOW confidence on township-specific claims — inference from broader patterns, no direct studies found]

KEY SOURCES INDEX

Canadian Government

- Canadian Centre for Cyber Security — 2025 Update
- RRM Canada — Spamouflage 2023
- RRM Canada — Spamouflage 2024
- Elections Canada — Social Media and Democratic Processes

Canadian Research Institutions

- Media Ecosystem Observatory (McGill/UofT)
- Canadian Digital Media Research Network
- Centre for Media, Technology and Democracy — McGill
- CAAD Briefing Note — Bot Activity

Journalism and Surveys

- Canadian Journalism Foundation — Digital Deception Survey 2025
- KPMG — Canada AI Literacy 2025
- OECD — AI Skills in Canada 2025

Digital Forensics

- DFRLab — Bot Activity in 2025 Election
- DFRLab — Social Media and 2025 Election
- Imperva — 2025 Bad Bot Report

Academic Papers

- Dead Internet Theory Survey — arXiv 2025
- Baudrillard and Dead Internet Theory — Springer 2025
- Political Bots: Disrupting Canada's Democracy — Canadian Journal of Communication
- Deepfakes in the 2025 Canadian Election — arXiv
- Online Astroturfing — SAGE Journals 2024

- Echo Chambers Systematic Review — Springer 2025

Investigative Journalism

- The Tye — Surrey AI News Site
- CP24/CTV — AI News Sites
- National Observer — Canada Proud Astroturfing
- Jesse Hirsh / Metaviews — Alto and Facebook NIMBYism

Research compiled 2026-04-05. All sources publicly accessible at time of access. Confidence levels assigned per NFNM OSINT methodology.

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