British Columbia's
Office of the Human Rights Commissioner

Inquiry into hate in the pandemic: Hearing transcript

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Presenting organizations: Caroline Orr Bueno, University of Maryland, National Observer

BCOHRC[1] attendees: Human Rights Commissioner Kasari Govender, Sarah Khan, Barb Ryeburn, Carly Hyman

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Transcript prepared by National Captioning Canada

Introductory comments from Human Rights Commissioner Kasari Govender not included in transcript

Caroline Orr Bueno: Thank you so much for having me. I'm very happy to be here. It's an honour to have been asked. So, I will just start out by saying that I am hoping today will be a somewhat casual conversation. I do have some slides. If it's okay with you, I'm going to end up bouncing back and forth enough that unless you really want to see them as I go, I'll give them to you at the end. I think it'll be easier for me. I tend to just kind of talk through them and bounce around as they come into my head. But I will start just by introducing myself and giving you a little bit of background on what work I'm doing now, and what work I've done in Canada, and how I ended up doing that work in Canada in the first place. So, my name is Caroline Orr Bueno. Sometimes I still go by my maiden name because I got married during the pandemic when everything was closed. So the name change thing has been a slow rollout because a lot of the offices that were necessary to actually formally change my name when I got married were not open, so.

[Chuckles]

[1] BC's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner

It is formally changed, but I still go by both.

[Chuckles]

So, I am currently working as a Postdoctoral Research Associate at the University of Maryland. I got my PHD in Social and Behavioural Sciences from Virginia Commonwealth University. I finished that in December of 2020 and then started it at University of Maryland in August. I study broadly what is labeled cognitive security, which covers a sort of a broad range of issues, including misinformation, disinformation, malign influence online. Those are kind of my big focuses. It also covers the resilience side of things, so how do we build up our defences against mis- and disinformation? And, you know, both as individuals, as organizations, as societies. And because of the areas where disinformation and misinformation tend to thrive online, I also end up doing a lot of work related to extremism and hate activity, because there is such a huge overlap between those topics.

And so that's what I'm largely going to focus on today is sort of where does disinformation come into play in fueling online hate? And, you know, what have I seen, and what does the research say about that in Canada, you know, specifically during the pandemic, and there has certainly been some very interesting research on that. And I have also done some interesting research.

So, my tie into Canada started in 2016. And I initially got started doing research and some writing on Canada's far-right movement because I was looking at sort of what at the time were being labeled Free Speech rallies out in Portland and some of the Northwest United States. And I noticed an interesting trend of reporters and staff from a Canadian news outlet that you guys are probably familiar with called Rebel News, and they were coming down to, again, the US. It was mainly California, but I believe Oregon and Washington as well, if I recall correctly. And there were these-- for a time, they were weekly rallies, which often ended up sort of spilling over into basically just brawls on the street. And I found it, you know, kind of peculiar that a lot of the coverage of these events was coming from Canada, from, again, Rebel. And so, I started looking into it a little bit, and over time, it became obvious. And then actually one of my future colleagues at National Observer got a statement from the head of Rebel Media, Ezra Levant, who said that his reporters don't just report the news, they participate in it. And that was, to me, one of the most accurate depictions of what I was seeing, because these reporters were going down wearing, like, you know, helmets and those, like, body armour type stuff and sort of, you know, getting in the middle of all of this. And this was right when groups like the Proud Boys were really starting to form. And so that essentially was my introduction to, you know, far-right activity and disinformation in Canada via the US.

And, you know, I just-- over time, I never stopped looking into it and writing about it and researching it because the connections just kept growing basically over, you know, over the past six years. There were just more and more both in the US and Canada. Our far-right movements were thriving, and I was seeing, I don't know if there were actually more connections, or if I was just seeing them more.

And then I started working for National Observer in, um, 2018 or early 2019, and I ended up helping to lead what was called the Democracy and Integrity Reporting Project, which was specifically focused on disinformation. And again, a lot of that ended up, you know, covering far-

right activity because of that crossover, although it wasn't entirely that. And so, during that time, I got to focus, you know, a lot more on Canada because I was working for a Canadian newspaper. So all of the coverage I was doing was in Canada. And so that was when I was finishing my PhD. And so that kind of brings me to now, and I still do a little bit of freelancing when I have time. I'll throw an article up every once in a while, although I haven't in a while, just because my research at University of Maryland keeps me quite busy.

But I have still been following the far-right movement, and, again, the role of disinformation in Canada, quite closely, particularly related most recently to the convoy, because that was, to me, it was a very interesting event, and I'll talk about that a little more in a minute. But it really tied together a lot of the things I had seen over the past six years. You could sort of draw a line, you know, connecting these events and these groups that I had been studying and, you know, had come to, you know, know so well from watching, you know, all of these events and sort of the iterations of this movement over the past six years. And the convoy was really, you know, again, I can sort of see it going from this free speech movement to the yellow vest movement, to the anti-lockdown, anti-vaccine movement, and then into, you know, the convoy, and I would expect that at some point in the future we will see, you know, them evolve into something else as current events change. Usually, they sort of take on a different banner or cover.

And so that is my background, that is my connection to Canada. And so, what I'm going to talk about today is sort of the area where my research as an academic crosses over with my work as a journalist and, again, specifically as it relates to, you know, what we've seen in Canada over the past couple of years. Let's see, that covers that way.

One really quick note as I am talking, I just wanted to make the distinction from the outside of about a couple terms that I will use. Probably the big two ones to distinguish are misinformation versus disinformation, and you've probably heard this before, but it's always good to put the disclaimer in there. Misinformation generally refers to false or misleading information that is spread unintentionally, that, you know, people don't know it's false. It's the kind of thing that in a crisis like the coronavirus pandemic, you know, it happens somewhat frequently and, you know, does not necessarily have any sort of malign intent. Disinformation, on the other hand, is with the intent and, you know, that's what we associate with these more coordinated disinformation campaigns. Particularly, you know, what sort of brought that into public consciousness was the foreign interference in in the US election in 2016, but there are certainly, you know, domestic disinformation campaigns.

And so today, a lot of what I'm going to talk about will be disinformation is the more intentional, you know, with malign intent spread of false information, misleading information, conspiracy theories, and as I talk about that, I think it's probably best to conceptualize that as not necessarily an individual thing. Like, that individual has no malign intent or that individual, but more as the collective organized campaign of, you know, a broad disinformation movement that is, you know, often in this context, aimed at maligning a group of people, or an institution or a government.

One other term that I will probably use is information laundering, and by that, I mean sort of the cycle that information goes through often in disinformation campaigns, where it, you know, sort of starts as one thing and gets filtered through various layers of social media and media and pundits and kind of comes out the other end as something different. So, a good example of this is you'll

often see kind of a sort of concepts or conspiracy theories floated on, like, fringe social media sites and that'll be the first place you see them. And then they'll trickle into maybe some fringe websites, and then they'll trickle on to websites like Rebel News that are a little bit, you know, closer to mainstream. And depending on sort of how they do and how much, you know, traction they get and if people are responding to them, they'll keep going, and eventually end up, you know, on the news, or in the newspaper that you read. So that's what I refer to as information laundering is that cycle of taking something and kind of pushing it into the mainstream and reshaping it as it hops from one platform to the next.

I'm sure you are all quite familiar with the statistics on hate incidents in Canada, so I'm not going to run through all of them with you. I just wanted to note, getting started, that there is some evidence that there is under reporting by quite a large degree. The degree to which it is under reported is not entirely clear, but Anti-Hate Canada reported that it may be underreported by as much as 100 times based on a comparison of self-reported hate crimes versus police reported hate crimes. And this would be in 2019-2020, the self-reported hate crimes total 223,000 compared to 2,600 police reported. And I won't get into this because that's not necessarily my area of specialty, but there are clearly a variety of reasons why that would be.

And in the online context, I can say that one reason people often don't report online hate incidents is because they don't think it counts. They think that it's online, and it's not as serious as an offline incident. And the other issue with online hate incidents is that it can often be hard to tell who is doing it. You know, anonymity provides a shield, and so it can be quite hard to report on a crime if you don't know who to report.

And also wanted to note, because I think this is important in the Canadian context, that the prevalence of online hate specifically is highest among women and young people broadly. And this, again, goes to 2019-2020. I highlight the aspect of women in particular because Canada is kind of situated in a unique place in that it is home of a movement called Men Going Their Own Way, which is kind of a misogynistic movement associated with very, very terribly anti-women views that have been associated with intimate partner violence, dating violence, sexual violence, and Canada is the home of that movement, and has some of the highest numbers of participants in online, you know, forums and channels in that movement. And there is some cross over between this movement, the far-right movement, the yellow vest movement, and now what would be, like, the anti-vaccine convoy movement.

So that's a theme, that kind of cross over between these various movements, because in reality to a large degree, they're not distinct movements. So, getting to the pandemic and the connection to disinformation and hate incidents. So we know that the disinformation and misinformation, so both intentional, unintentional, false information, misleading information increase during times of crisis. There are a variety of reasons for that. The rapid pace of news and information coming out, they need for information and quickly both to satisfy the public interest and also to keep emergency response and public officials up to date. Limited access to reliable first-hand information often in crises. You can't get to the scene, and you can't necessarily get reporters to the scene and often the people who are on the scene are witnesses to an emergency, and may not, because of the effects cognitively and emotionally, may not be the best people to be relaying reliable information, but are often the only people to rely on. So that clearly leads to an environment where misunderstandings and misinformation can thrive.

And then we get into a category of factors that cross over with why crises tend to lay the foundation for both disinformation and hate incidents. So those are things like uncertainty, mistrust, and fear. Crises, including the pandemic, are often emotionally charged events. We are often looking for somebody to blame, to take control, or perceive control back of the situation. It presents a chance for some partisan opportunism to blame other, you know, across the political aisle, and it presents an opportunity for bad actors like scammers, frauds, and hostile foreign actors who may be looking for vulnerabilities. Crisis environments are also very conducive to conspiracy theories. As you may have noticed over the past couple of years, conspiracy theories are very closely associated with dehumanization and hate. They're sort of the entire logic of conspiracy theories is founded on this ever-expanding circle of conspirators who are, you know, blamed for events like the pandemic. And we have seen historically that the so-called conspirators who are targeted by conspiracy theories often become the victims of hate and violence as a result of that dehumanization.

So, looking at sort of the types of online hate and extremist activity that we have seen in Canada during the pandemic, I kind of broke it down broadly into three main types, doesn't necessarily cover everything, but I think these are the three large categories.

The first being conspiracy theories. That is probably the broadest category, and those have typically been used to blame the pandemic and its consequences on the usual targets of, in this case, far-right groups. And so those targets have included Jews, immigrants, and racial and ethnic minorities. Of course, particularly, people of Asian descent have borne the brunt of a lot of this. And conspiracy theories have also been used to promote anti-government sentiment, and that's where you see a tie into the anti-lockdown movement and the anti-vaccine movement that, in a lot of ways, they have been used to promote a broader anti-government movement, and I'll get into that a little bit more because I think that's something that is quite important to understand the dynamics of is sort of how the anti-vaccine movement and some of this backlash to the government's response to COVID, how that movement has been used to draw a pretty large coalition of people towards the anti-government, and in some cases, you know, extremist viewpoints, who otherwise probably would not have been drawn towards that. So that's one category is the conspiracy theories.

A second category is anti-immigrant sentiment and xenophobia. That clearly has a lot of crossover with conspiracy theories, because a lot of conspiracy theories are xenophobic and do promote anti-immigrant sentiment. In Canada, a lot of the anti-immigrant sentiment you see sort of emanating from and closely tying to online groups and accounts associated with the People's Party. There was a lot of that in the lead up to last Fall's election, as well as the 2019 Federal election, and you have again seen that very much linked up with some of the COVID conspiracy theories that, you know, one of the proposed solutions to what they have identified as problems is to sort of become isolationist, shut down the borders and stop, you know, either stop immigration or greatly reduce it.

And then a third category is what would be called accelerationism, which you are probably familiar with now after the convoy and the arrest of the members of Diagolon, I can't say that word.

[Chuckles]

Diagolon, who were arrested for and charged for plotting to shoot police officers. They were at the bridge with all of the guns. And so, accelerationism is basically a belief that, or a desire, to hasten what they believe is an inevitable collapse of society. Depending on the group and the people, it can be explicitly what they see is a coming race war. Other accelerationists see it more broadly as a, like, a coming civil war, and the pandemic is sort of presented, unfortunately, quite a good opportunity for some of these groups, because the at times apocalyptic scenarios associated with the pandemic are exactly what, you know, they say is inevitable, and what they kind of would like to see happen. So these are people who online basically promote chaos and disorder and very much aligned with anti-government views.

And some of the groups, The Base, Atomwaffen, Diagolon, those all have quite extensive ties to Canada, including the, forget if he was army or something else, but he… ..2019, Patrick Matthew, who went missing. I can't remember if he was active duty, I believe he was active duty. He went missing from the Canadian—I think he was army and ended up crossing over the border into the US and was on the run for several weeks and was found then and arrested in the US. So there are some quite extensive—again, the accelerationist movement tends to be among the most violent of the movements, and they have very much thrived during the pandemic unfortunately, again, because of the circumstances, it has aligned with a lot of their ideology, and they are using this basically to destabilize as much as they can. To destabilize government and society to hasten what they believe is an eventual inevitable collapse of our current social systems, which also ties into one of the dominant conspiracy theories about the pandemic, which is called the Great Reset, which essentially says that the pandemic is either not real.

Some say it's not real, some say that, you know, maybe it's real, but that the measures in response to it are unnecessary, and they're not actually for public health but that they're for social and economic control, and that there is some nefarious group of actors behind all of this who are essentially trying to establish a New World Order, which again, goes into a whole other category of conspiracy theories. But you can sort of start to see there how, you know, these usually separate groups of actors would be able to find common interest and coalesce online, based on shared, you know, shared interests, shared ideology, in some of these conspiracy theories that have really taken off during the pandemic. We have seen a relatively significant increase in extremist and hate-related online activity both in Canada and globally during the pandemic. The Institute for Strategic Dialogue produced a report in 2021 looking at just over 3,000,000 messages from 2,400 right-wing extremist groups, channels, and accounts online. And they found that the pandemic was the single most widely discussed topic among these far-right online groups and communities. 38.8% of all of their messages during this time period were about the pandemic and some of the main themes in those messages were things like manufacturing conspiracy theories, inciting anger against the government and authority figures, and blaming certain groups, including immigrants, Muslims, and Asians.

[Clears throat]

They also found, and this is something that I have also myself observed in some of the work I have done, that in 2020 and 2021, the uptick in extremist and hate activity online appeared to be linked directly to the Government's response to the pandemic and sort of capitalizing on some of the, you know, legitimate mistrust and grievances with the way that at times, you know, certain messaging and certain government figures were handling things. You know, people were upset

about it. And so, then these far-right groups stepped in and took that as an opportunity to, you know, really pounce on those grievances and against your people towards and more broad anti-government views. And, you know, it at times, even attempting to recruit people into, you know, extremist groups and extremist movements online. Another element of this extremist activity during the pandemic is that it has been, in Canada, it has been heavily influenced by US activity. So there's a huge overlap between what we see in the US and what goes on in Canada. And the Institute for Strategic Dialogue actually found that Canadian extremists discuss US events more than Canadian events. So, you know, that was to me quite a striking finding. And it's, again, goes back to what I was talking about at the beginning with Rebel Media being in California, and sort of the ties between the US and Canada there that, I think in many ways, the Canadian far-right movement at this point does to some extent model itself after the US, unfortunately, because we have seen a pretty successful far-right movement in the past several years in the US. I think that it provides a bit of a model for Canada.

A few other things to note about some of this pandemic related far-right and extremist activity, there have been some incidents involving the PPC back in in the summer and fall that have been of concern as somebody who follows this and studies this stuff pretty closely. I'll give you a few examples of this. So one PCC candidate, Mark Emery, suggested that the Prime Minister deserves to be executed like Mussolini. And another PPC candidate tweeted a picture of a dozen bodies hanging in Nuremberg, Germany following the Nuremberg trials, and implied that the bodies belonged to members of the media who lied and misled people right along with medical doctors and nurses who participated in medical experiments. Those kinds of tweets were not uncommon, unfortunately, in the lead up to this past election, and some of that had to do with the tone set by Bernier, who called the public health measures tyrannical and Orwellian, and was a founding member of the end of the lockdown caucus, which organized, you know, quite a few of the anti-lockdown and anti-vaccine protests that we saw leading up again to the election, and that eventually did transition into the convoy that we just saw.

Broadly speaking in terms of who is behind, or what movements are behind this increase in far-right activity and extremist and hate-related activity during the pandemic, I kind of have four broad movements that are behind much of this. First, again, is anti-government. And so, this would include, like, Sovereign Citizens and Freeman on the Land movements, as well as militias, like, the 3 Percenters who are active in both Canada and the United States. The second major contributor would be the broad category of white nationalist, white supremacist, and Neo Nazis. So these would include groups like the Canada First movement and the Canadian Nationalist Party, and they are typically the ones who you would see really trying to subvert the mainstream conservative movement and push in anti-immigrant policies, and they are often the ones who you would see most explicitly making anti-immigrant comments. And in fact, often were doing exactly that at some of these rallies and anti-vaccine and anti- lockdown protests.

Sarah Khan: Sorry for the interruption. We're hoping to move into questions fairly soon.

Caroline Orr Bueno: All right.

Sarah Khan: We have a number of questions, and we have another presentation starting fairly soon after this one.

Caroline Orr Bueno: All right.

Sarah Khan: Sorry again for the interruption.

Caroline Orr Bueno: No, it's okay, thank you.

Sarah Khan: It's such an interesting presentation.

Caroline Orr Bueno: I will then—I'm close to the end, so we won't have to speed it up too much. I will jump to this because I think this is important. Sort of the links between the anti-vaccine movement and the hate and extremism, both in Canada and globally. The rise of the modern anti-vaccine movement has frequently coincided with surges in nativist and anti-immigrant attitudes as well as waves of far-right populism. We've seen that in Canada, we've seen that in many countries in Europe. In Canada, the anti-vaccine movement does have direct ties to far-right groups, both within Canada and in the US, including in the US, some that have been associated with acts of violence and terror, including the January 6th insurrection. There are also some ties between the organizers and leaders of Canada's anti-vaccine movement, and some of the insiders from the previous presidential administration in the US. And I'll note one more thing and then I'll let you, you know, ask whatever questions you would like, and hopefully I can answer them.

But there, I think one important thing to note here about sort of when we see these debates and arguments going on with the anti-vaccine movement, a lot of what we're seeing is actually an argument over morals. It's not-- it is about vaccines, but it's not about vaccines. And there's a whole field of research on what's called Moral Foundations Theory. It's basically, in the context of vaccines, it basically explains that people's views on vaccines are driven by these underlying very deeply held and enduring moral values, so these would be things like individualism versus collectivism. And, um, really sort of broad beliefs and values about for which there's no-- if you're looking at the two sides a bit, they're so different that you're not considering the same set of factors. So, for example, when it comes to vaccines, somebody on one end of one of these moral dimensions might be thinking about, you know, "I want to get vaccinated because it's the socially responsible thing to do. I want to protect my neighbours. I want to care for my neighbours." Whereas somebody on the other end of the spectrum would be thinking, "I don't like the idea of mandates, because that's a step towards tyranny and, you know, I think it's my duty to stand up to that and to, you know, not let the Government get one foot in the door." And so, it's not that the one person is saying they don't keep care about their neighbours, or that the other person is saying they don't care about tyranny, they're looking at two entirely different sets of facts and there's six different moral dimensions. And it's the same basic idea for all of them.

And the reason I think that's so important here is because number one, it explains to some degree, the degree of energy and emotion. And, you know, how and why the anti-vaccine movement can quite quickly become a violent movement, because they're not just out there for vaccines and arguing about vaccines, it's really these very deep convictions and moral values that tie together a lot of different areas of life. And that's the second reason that I think it's important to emphasize that because this also explains what I was talking about at the beginning, that sort of movement from the, you know, the free speech, to the yellow vest, to the anti-vaccine, to the convoy, because the issue changes, but the underlying moral dimensions and moral argument is

still there. It just kind of takes on a different face. And, you know, I think that's an important thing to, you know, to consider as we're seeing this play out because this likely will, you know, transition into something else, and I think it can also help us a little bit figure out how to respond to some of this, because again, if you're trying to present an argument back to somebody, you know, you want to understand what factors they're considering and, you know, what is important to them, because often it may be, you know, almost literally an entirely different reality than the way somebody on the other end of that spectrum is experiencing things. So I will stop talking and let you ask a couple of questions now.

Commissioner Kasari Govender: Thank you so much for that presentation. It was incredibly interesting. We don't have much time left for questions, so I will just maybe pose one or two, and Sarah might have something urgent. Otherwise, I'm wondering if you are considering putting in any written submissions, and if you'll be open to us sending you any questions afterwards. So I'll leave that with you to consider. I'm wondering what recommendations you might have to address online hate, and whether there are some specifics-- you've talked a lot about the, you know, kind of as you've just talked about, the moral foundations, the bigger picture of what's happening here, which has been so helpful. And I wonder if you can drill that down to what does that mean when we're looking at addressing online hate? How does that translate to the recommendation side?

Caroline Orr Bueno: Well, it's hard and, you know, I go back and forth a little bit. Now I do think there is something to be said for removing some of these groups, and some of this content from mainstream platforms. However, there is a flip side to that which is that when you ban groups and content from the mainstream platforms where it's easy to track them, they tend to go to private chats and private groups where it's a lot harder to track them. And so, on the one hand, there's less eyes on them which is good, you know, it's fewer people seeing potentially harmful content. But on the other hand, it also means that there are fewer researchers and, you know, just there's not as much of an opportunity to know what they're doing and, you know, where sort of, you know, where they might be going next and what they might be planning. Yeah, I do think one area that is understudied in part because the data are not necessarily available always to study is the role of algorithms and what I kind of call, like, the black box, which is, you know, just all of these factors that we know are there. But again, it's up to tech and social media companies to tell us, you know, what is in that black box and to provide the data so that we can actually understand, you know, why an algorithm is, you know, promoting certain content to certain people. Like, there was a-- I did a report on a Pinterest thing where, basically, if you looked-- it took, like, one click into, like, Trump content, and it started spinning out all of this, like, anti-Trudeau conspiracy theory stuff about, you know, Fidel Castro and just very bizarre and it didn't take, you know, it was like a one-two-step thing. And so, you know, I guess that's kind of a two-parting answer and that number one, I do think the issue of algorithms and promoting, you know, very divisive and often hateful content. And then also the issue of just providing more access to researchers. I mean, you know, we are very, very much limited by, you know, the limitations that social media and tech companies set for us and, you know, we don't know what we don't know.

Commissioner Kasari Govender: Thank you. I will hold my other questions in the interest of time. Sarah, did you have anything urgent at this point?

Sarah Khan: Well, I will hold those at this time given the time we're at.

Caroline Orr Bueno: And absolutely send-- you know, if you have questions written, please definitely send them to me, and I would be happy to answer them.

Commissioner Kasari Govender: Thank you so much.

Sarah Khan: Wonderful.

Caroline Orr Bueno: Absolutely.

Commissioner Kasari Govender: Really grateful for that, and grateful for you again to make the time to be here. I know we learned a lot from what you've said. So with that, I'll just pass it over to Barb for some wrap-up comments.

Barb Ryeburn: Thank you. Yes, I'd also like to thank you so much for participating today and for considering submitting a written submission with answers to some of our questions. And just to let you know that if it's possible, the deadline for those written submissions is March 31st. Also, I saw that you are willing to have parts of—the video of this session posted. So before we do post it, we will let you know it is ready in case you would like to review it first. And with that, I'd just like to thank you again so very much for joining us today.

Caroline Orr Bueno: Thank you so much for having me.

Barb Ryeburn: Take care.

Sarah Khan: I just had one other point. I'm just wondering if you might be willing to share your PowerPoint with us after the session.

Caroline Orr Bueno: Yes, right. Who should I e-mail that to, Barb?

Sarah Khan: Yes.

Barb Ryeburn: Sure.

Sarah Khan: Okay, great.

Caroline Orr Bueno: Will do.

Barb Ryeburn: Thank you so much.

Sarah Khan: Thank you so much.

Commissioner Kasari Govender: Thank you so much.

Caroline Orr Bueno: You're welcome, thank you.

Barb Ryeburn: Take care.

Commissioner Kasari Govender: Bye.

Caroline Orr Bueno: Bye.

Barb Ryeburn: Bye.