

## Project Description

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### **From hand washing graphics to Tiger King tweets: Public information about the novel coronavirus circulating as memes in Canada**

What does “Killing in the Name” by Rage Against the Machine, “Africa” by Toto and “Country Roads” by John Denver have in common? The choruses all take 20 seconds to sing, making them good replacements to singing the Alphabet song to remind yourself that you have washed your hands long enough. Lyrics to these songs accompanied by visual instructions on proper hand washing now circulate on social media as memes. This project expands on existing research about political memes in Canada to study the public information shared about the novel coronavirus through memes on social media.

Alongside memes that promote proper handwashing via song lyrics, memes are also being used to politicize the pandemic as well as spread disinformation and downplay the severity of COVID-19. For example, memes have accompanied conspiracy claims about 5G causing the coronavirus, leading to [telecommunications providers having to better secure their infrastructure from attacks by conspiracy theorists who believe these claims](#).

Our rapid response project seeks to extend our investigation of memes in the 2019 Federal Election to monitor the circulation of memes in Canada about COVID-19. Funding would support a graduate student to expand a list of known meme aggregators in Canada, monitor these sites to develop a sample of memes related to COVID-19 for analysis.

We have an established research program that can be readily adapted to the current pandemic. During the last election, our project relied on manual and automated data collection to archive 1200 partisan memes. In tandem with publishing in traditional academic venues, we also launched the [Great Canadian Encyclopedia of Political Memes](#) to collect and share analysis with the public.

The proposal will support research between May and August 2020 to:

1. Develop a list of hashtags, subreddits, and Facebook Pages creating and/or sharing COVID-19 and collect a sample of memes;
2. Analyze framing, visual rhetorics and accuracy of memes building on [emerging research on misinformation and disinformation studies of COVID-19](#);
3. Track the circulation of memes across social media in Canada (eg. #cdnpoli on Twitter; meme groups on Facebook; political subreddits) using automated image cluster analysis;
4. Describe how different political groups portray the pandemic through memes, highlighting how different political affiliations portray COVID 19 to their followers;
5. Publish 4 monthly blog posts exploring the information about COVID-19 being shared on social media in Canada to be expanded into Encyclopedia entries.

These goals are immediately feasible as [the project has existing ethics approval](#), an established methodology to track memes, and support from a Department of Heritage Grant.

The project will have novel scholarly and public impacts. Memes remain an understudied object of political communication. The field of political communication furthermore is undergoing a visual turn. Methods to study memes make contributions to the larger field. Finally, the project contributes to responsible, fact-based analysis of memes to help journalists in Canada cover and mitigate disinformation circulating about the virus.