



David Rozado and Aaron Wudrick

# NORTHERN AWAKENING

How social justice and woke language have infiltrated Canadian news media

March 2023



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## Executive summary | *sommaire*

**In recent years, traditional news media** has undergone a great transition. At the same time, criticism of news media has increased with most surveys showing that it is suffering from declining public trust. The reasons for this decline are hotly contested, but one common critique has been that the focus of many news media outlets has changed in recent years. This paper undertakes a quantitative analysis to test this critique by looking at changes in the language used by news media in Canada.

In American news media, mentions of terms that signify distinct forms of prejudice have risen dramatically since 2010. This paper undertakes a similar analysis of Canadian news media, using data from 14 major Canadian news outlets for the period of 2000 to 2021. We find a similar rise in the prevalence of social-justice language in both English and French media from outlets across the political spectrum.

These increases in the prominence of prejudice themes in news media present something of a paradox because they conflict with the well-documented decline in self-reported explicit prejudicial attitudes among the American public over the past six decades.

What is driving this phenomenon? The news media might simply be reflecting rising levels of prejudice in society. But evidence about whether prejudice is increasing in recent years is contradictory, with some authors arguing that it is indeed rising, some academics arguing that prejudice has not decreased but merely become less overt, and others rejecting this hypothesis.

The potential role of the news media in driving public opinion through its agenda-setting effect is another possibility that cannot be discounted. Increasing prominence in the news media of topics such as terrorism or crime has been shown to precede increasing public preoccupation with those topics, irrespective of the actual levels of crime or terrorism.

In this study, we analysed over 6 million news and opinion articles from 14 of the most popular news media outlets in Canada (nine English and five French). Our analysis shows that terms displaying the starkest increase in prominence between 2010 and 2021 are those relating to gender-identity prejudice, which saw a staggering 2285 percent increase. In contrast, terms referring to sexual orientation prejudice have actually decreased in prevalence since their peak around 2011. Terms referring to other prejudice types, such

as sexism or Islamophobia, peaked close to the middle of the decade. Others, like racism or transphobia, seem to have peaked later in the decade. Notably, references to anti-Semitism are the only ones that do not display a clear upwards trend in the 21st century.

The paper suggests six possible catalysts to explain the post-2010 explosion in the Canadian news media's use of terms relating to prejudice. First, Canada's news media may simply be mirroring news media trends in America, though this hypothesis is not fully consistent with the underlying data. Second, societal prejudice may have increased in recent years and media coverage is simply reflecting this reality. However, it is difficult to establish cause and effect. Third, the trends documented here could be symptomatic of increasing public and institutional sensitivity to prejudice.

Of course, these media trends may result from a fourth possible factor, an increasing ideological skew among news media professionals, with some evidence showing that news media professionals are becoming increasingly and disproportionately left-leaning. Fifth, the patterns in Canadian news media discourse this paper codifies could also be partially explained as cultural shifts. Finally, the reported trends may arise from the existence of financial incentives for news media to use highly emotional language in order to maximize digital "click-throughs."

It is clear that the impact on public opinion of a higher prevalence in the news media of terms that signify prejudice warrants further exploration. [MLI](#)

**Les médias d'information traditionnels** subissent ces dernières années une profonde transformation. Parallèlement, ils soulèvent de plus en plus de critiques tandis que la majorité des enquêtes signalent le déclin de la confiance du public à leur égard. Si les raisons de ce déclin suscitent de vifs débats, la critique la plus courante souligne le changement d'orientation de nombreux diffuseurs. L'analyse quantitative présentée dans ce document vise à vérifier la légitimité de cette critique en examinant l'évolution du langage observée dans les médias d'information au Canada.

Dans les médias américains, l'emploi de termes liés à des types particuliers de préjugés a augmenté de façon spectaculaire depuis 2010. Ce document présente une analyse analogue pour les médias canadiens, sur la base des données provenant de 14 grands diffuseurs entre 2000 et 2021. L'analyse révèle une augmentation similaire de la prévalence des concepts de justice sociale, et ce, tant dans les médias anglophones que francophones de tous les horizons politiques.

Cette présence accrue de thèmes relatifs aux préjugés dans les médias est quelque peu paradoxale en ce sens qu'elle va à l'encontre du déclin bien documenté des attitudes explicitement préjudiciables déclarées par le public américain au cours des six dernières décennies.

Comment alors expliquer ce phénomène? Les médias pourraient tout simplement rendre compte des niveaux croissants de préjugés dans la société. Sauf que les preuves

sont contradictoires, à savoir si les niveaux s'élèvent ces dernières années – certains auteurs soutiennent qu'ils sont effectivement en hausse; des universitaires affirment qu'ils n'ont pas diminué, mais sont simplement devenus moins apparents; d'autres rejettent cette hypothèse.

Une autre possibilité ne saurait être écartée quant au rôle que pourraient jouer les médias sur l'opinion publique en élaborant leur programmation. La hausse du temps d'antenne accordé à des sujets comme le terrorisme ou la criminalité précède manifestement l'intérêt grandissant du public à leur égard, indépendamment des niveaux réels de criminalité ou de terrorisme.

Cette étude permet d'analyser plus de 6 millions d'articles d'actualité et d'opinion provenant de 14 des médias d'information les plus populaires au Canada (neuf de langue anglaise et cinq de langue française). Elle révèle que ce sont les termes liés aux préjugés fondés sur l'identité de genre qui ont vu leur prévalence le plus augmenter de 2010 à 2021 – soit de 2 285 pour cent, ce qui est énorme. En revanche, la prévalence des termes liés à l'orientation sexuelle a diminué après un sommet en 2011; celle des termes liés à d'autres types de préjugés, comme le sexisme ou l'hostilité à l'Islam, a atteint un sommet vers le milieu de la décennie; pour d'autres encore, comme le racisme ou la transphobie, la prévalence semble avoir atteint un sommet vers la fin de la décennie. Fait notable, les références à l'antisémitisme sont les seules à ne pas afficher une nette tendance à la hausse au XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle.

Ce document propose six catalyseurs d'accélération possibles de la prévalence des termes liés aux préjugés dans les médias d'information canadiens après 2010. Tout d'abord, les médias canadiens pourraient simplement faire écho aux tendances en Amérique, bien que cette hypothèse ne soit pas entièrement cohérente avec les données sous-jacentes. Il est aussi possible que les préjugés sociétaux circulent davantage ces dernières années et que la couverture médiatique ne fait que traduire cette réalité. Toutefois, il est difficile d'établir une relation de cause à effet. Ajoutons comme troisième catalyseur des tendances observées, une sensibilité croissante du public et des institutions aux préjugés.

Bien sûr, ces tendances médiatiques pourraient résulter d'un quatrième facteur possible, à savoir un biais idéologique croissant chez les professionnels de l'information, certains éléments démontrant le positionnement grandissant et disproportionné de ces derniers à gauche de l'échiquier politique. Comme cinquième facteur, les changements culturels pourraient aussi quelque peu influencer sur les caractéristiques du discours médiatique codifiées dans ce document. Enfin, les tendances observées pourraient s'expliquer par les incitations financières qu'offre aux médias le recours à un langage hautement émotif afin de maximiser les « clics » numériques.

Il est clair que l'impact sur l'opinion publique d'une plus grande prévalence dans les médias des termes liés à des préjugés mérite une analyse exhaustive. [MLI](#)

## Introduction

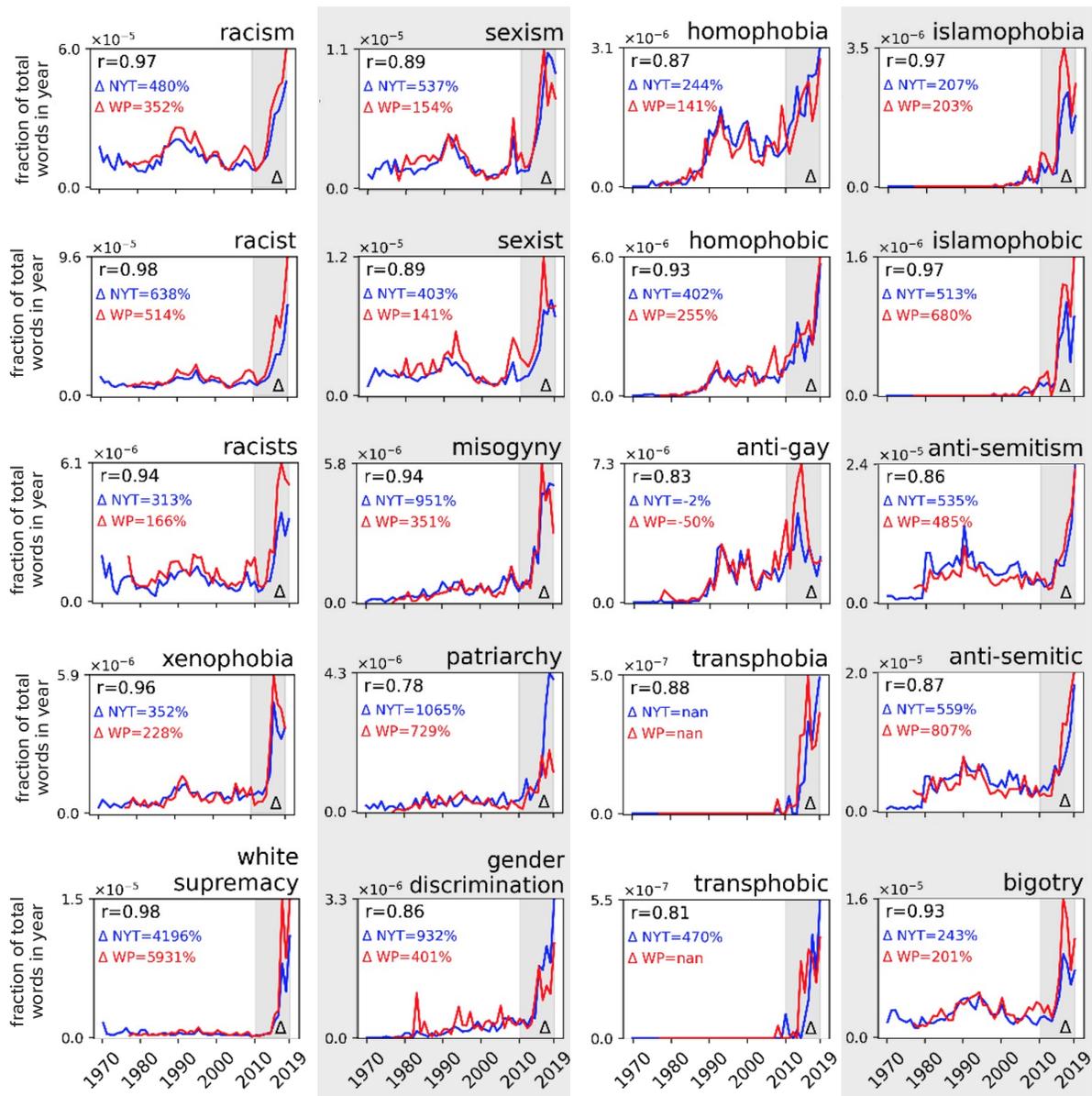
**Traditional news media is undergoing** a great transition. The shift of content to digital platforms, and perhaps more importantly the accompanying migration of advertising dollars with it, has challenged the economic viability of many news outlets. The rise of independent and “alternative” news has led to a more crowded field of competitors.

Criticism of news media has also increased, with most surveys showing a decline in public trust. The reasons for this decline are hotly contested, but one common critique has been that the focus of many news media outlets has changed in recent years. This paper will undertake a quantitative analysis to test this critique, by looking at changes in the language used by news media in Canada.

Mentions of terms that signify distinct forms of prejudice have risen dramatically in American news media since 2010 (Rozado, Al-Gharbi, and Halberstadt 2021). Within the span of just 10 years, terms such as “racist,” “sexist” or “homophobic” have risen in prevalence in the *New York Times* by 638 percent, 403 percent and 402 percent, respectively (Figure 1). Similar dramatic increases are also observable in the *Washington Post* and other popular news media outlets regardless of their ideological leanings (Rozado, Al-Gharbi, and Halberstadt 2021). Other authors have previously referred to this – the increased prominence of prejudice mentions in news media content and related changes in public perceptions about prejudice severity in society – as the “Great Awakening” (Yglesias 2019). Research has also established similar trends in both British and Spanish news media (Rozado and Goodwin 2022; Rozado 2022a).

Our paper will undertake a similar analysis of Canadian news media, using data from 14 major Canadian news outlets for the period between 2000 and 2021. We find a similar rise in the prevalence of social-justice language in both English and French media, from outlets across the political spectrum.

**FIGURE 1: FREQUENCY OF WORDS DENOTING PREJUDICE IN THE NEW YORK TIMES AND THE WASHINGTON POST**



— New York Times      — Washington Post

r = Pearson correlation between New York Times and Washington Post

Δ = NYT: New York Times percentage in frequency 2010-2019

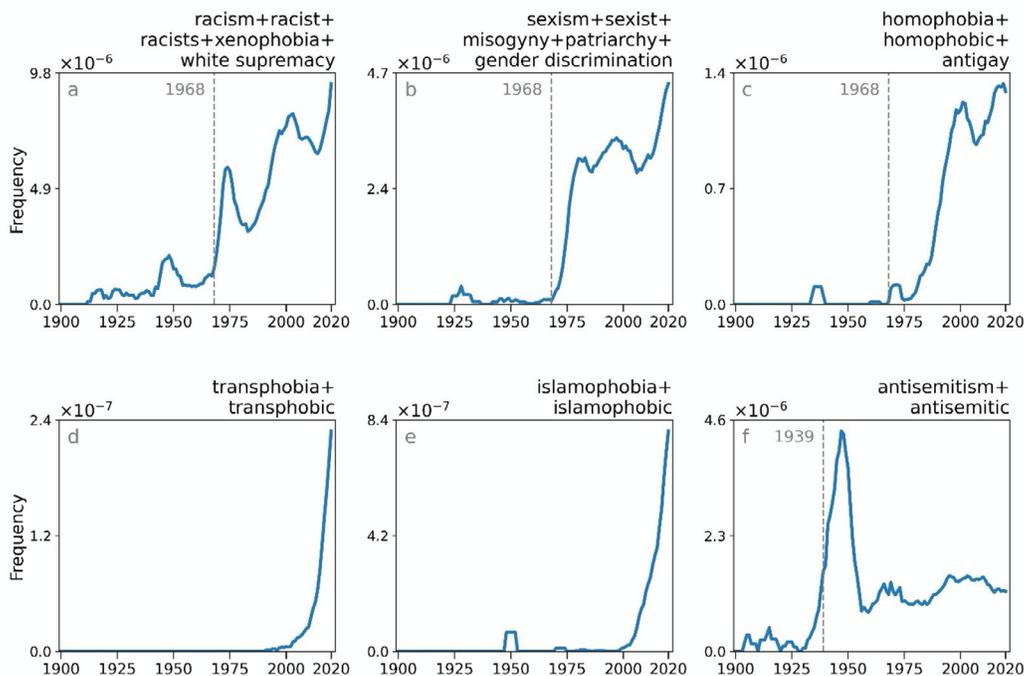
Δ = WP: Washington Post percentage in frequency 2010-2019

**Note:** Yearly usage frequency of prejudice denoting terms in the New York Times and the Washington Post news and opinion articles. The Pearson correlation coefficient, *r*, between the time series from each outlet and the percentage change in frequency usage, for each outlet between 2010 and 2019 are shown in the upper left corner of each plot.

This phenomenon has been quantified in previous research done in the United States and the United Kingdom that showed how the increasing prevalence in news media content of prejudice themes preceded Donald Trump’s announcement of his candidacy for the Republican presidential nomination in mid-2015. However, it is conceivable that the polarizing presidency that followed contributed to a reinforcement or exacerbation of an already existing trend (Rozado, Al-Gharbi, and Halberstadt 2021).

The soaring mentions of terms that denote prejudice in news media content is not limited to American news outlets. A growing interest on the topic of prejudice in academic/scientific publications has also been documented. Although in academia, the increase has been more gradual and spans a longer timeframe (Figure 2) (Rozado 2022b; Rozado 2022c).

**FIGURE 2: YEARLY FREQUENCY OF TERMS DENOTING PREJUDICE IN ACADEMIC PAPERS (1900-2020)**



**Raw data source:** Semantic Scholar Open Research Corpus

**Smoothing function:** 5-year rolling mean

**Note:** Aggregate prevalence of sets of terms denoting different prejudice types in academic abstracts from the Semantic Scholar Open Research Corpus (SSORC).

When contrasted with the well-documented decline in self-reported explicit prejudicial attitudes among the American public over the past six decades (Charlesworth and Banaji 2019), these increases in the prominence of prejudice themes in news media and academic content present something of a paradox, with some academics arguing that the explanation is that prejudice has not decreased but merely become less overt (Bonilla-Silva 2006). Relatedly, public opinion surveys about subjective perceptions of prejudice severity in American society reveal a concomitant rise of preoccupation with prejudice among the general public in parallel with the rising prominence of this topic in US news media (Rozado, Al-Gharbi, and Halberstadt 2021).

A natural follow-up question is to wonder what is driving this phenomenon. On the one hand, news media might simply be reflecting rising levels of prejudice in society. This could be potentially linked to increasing levels of societal polarization around identity issues (King's College London 2021; Centre for Policy Studies 2021; Hobolt, Leeper, and Tilley 2021; Mason, 2018). However, evidence about whether prejudice is increasing in recent years is contradictory, with some authors arguing that it is indeed rising (Bonilla-Silva 2017; Mangan 2021; Elenwo, Hendrix-Dicken, Lin, et al. 2023), and others rejecting this hypothesis (Charlesworth and Banaji 2019; Hopkins and Washington 2020; Krysan and Moberg 2016; Gao 2015; Meagher and Shu 2019).

The potential role of news media in driving public opinion through its *agenda-setting* effect is another possibility that cannot be discounted (McCombs 2005; McCombs and Valenzuela 2021). Increasing prominence in the news media of topics such as terrorism or crime has been shown to precede increasing public preoccupation with those topics, irrespective of the actual levels of crime or terrorism (Callanan 2012; Lowry, Nio, and Leitner 2003; Smith, Stohl, and al-Gharbi 2019).

In this report, we ask the question of whether the increasing prominence of prejudice themes and related social justice rhetoric that we have characterized previously in American, British and Spanish news media are also present in Canadian news media. Since our study is observational in nature, we can't make causal claims about what is driving the phenomena analysed. But by characterizing and describing the trends quantitatively, we hope to contribute to a better understanding of just how much Canadian news media content has changed when it comes to language denoting prejudice and social justice.

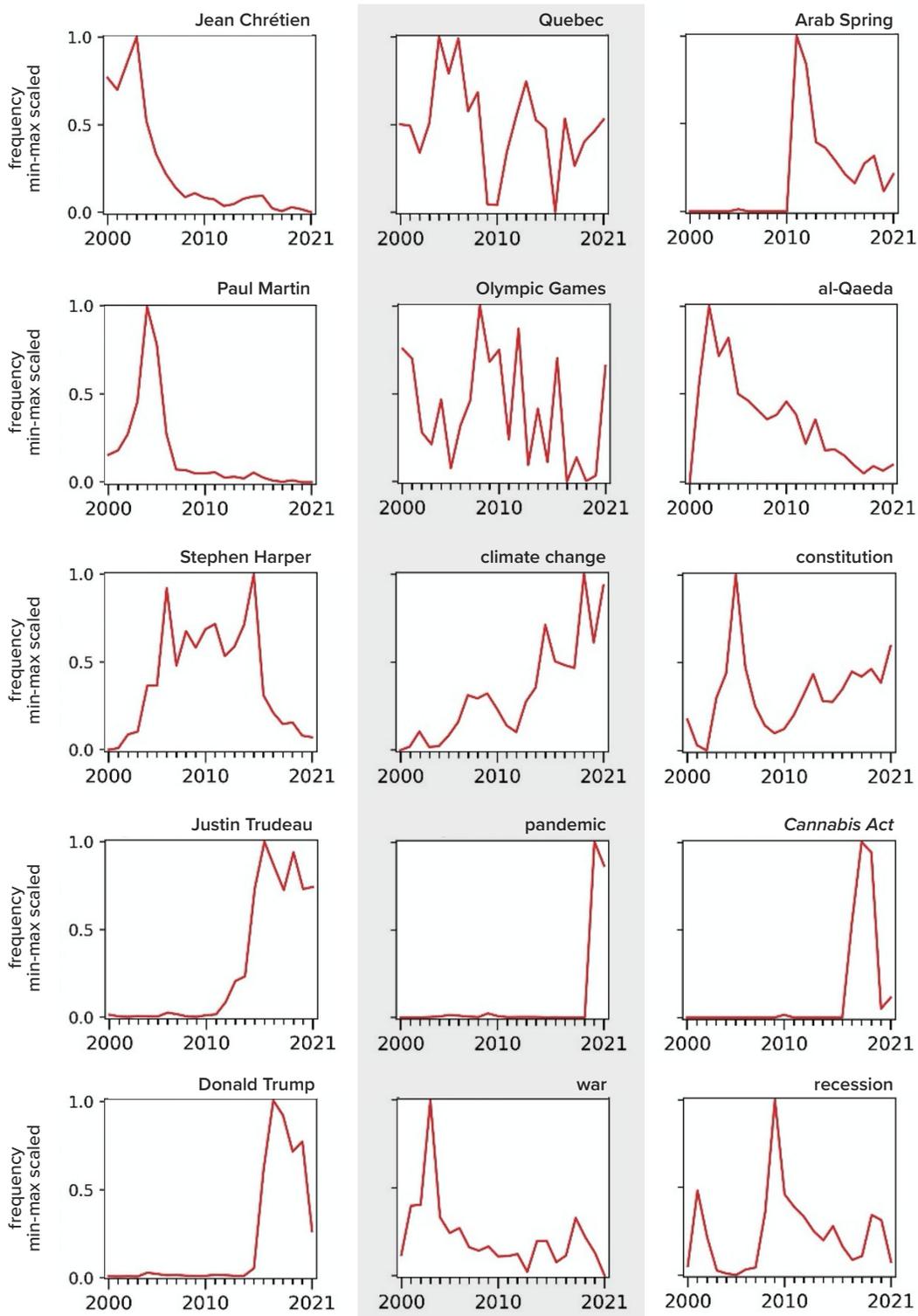
## Methods

We analysed over 6 million news and opinion articles from 14 of the most popular news media outlets in Canada (nine English and five French). Our method has been described extensively in previous works where it was shown to accurately capture historical events and social trends (Rozado, Al-Gharbi, and Halberstadt 2021; Rozado 2020; Rozado 2022a; Rozado 2021). Here, we briefly mention how yearly relative frequencies of a target term in each news outlet were estimated – by dividing the number of yearly occurrences of the target term in all sample articles from the outlet by the total number of all words in all sample articles from the outlet in that year. Since different media outlets publish varying amounts of content, these relative frequencies help provide a common reference.

Despite the potential for occasional noisy outliers in any big data analysis, overall, we are confident that our frequency metrics are representative of word prevalence in Canadian written news media content. For readers who are unfamiliar with our method, Figure 3 provides a visual demonstration of the “min-max” scaled yearly frequencies of some illustrative terms in the *Globe and Mail* during the past 20 years. Min-max scaling is a common method to normalize time series. The technique rescales the range of the data to a range between 0 and 1 using the formula where  $x$  is the original relative frequency time series for a given word and  $x'$  is its normalized min-max scaled representation. Min-max scaling of relative frequencies allows for comparison of minimum and maximum temporal prevalence across terms in the corpus irrespective of their absolute frequency counts or relative frequencies.

Figure 3 shows how our method accurately captures the *Globe and Mail* coverage of key events over time, and political figures in the Canadian context. For example, the first row shows how coverage of Canadian prime ministers rises and falls at the expected points in time. The temporal sensitivity of the method gives us confidence in our data, analysis, and findings.

**FIGURE 3: THE GLOBE AND MAIL 2000-2021 WORD USAGE FREQUENCY**



$$(\text{min-max scaled } y' = \frac{y - \min(y)}{\max(y) - \min(y)})$$

**Note:** Min-max scaled yearly frequencies of illustrative terms in the Globe and Mail newspaper.

## Mentions of prejudice in Canadian news media

**We begin our analysis by** plotting the average frequency with which Canadian news media referred to different types of prejudice over the 2000–2021 time interval (Figure 4). Substantial increases in the prevalence of terms that signify prejudice with respect to ethnicity, gender or gender identity are apparent in the figure. The prominence of terms referring to ethnic prejudice has increased on average by over 400 percent from 2010 to 2021 in Canadian news media. Similarly, terms referring to gender prejudice have increased by 155 percent over the same period but seem to have peaked around 2016 and have decreased moderately since then.

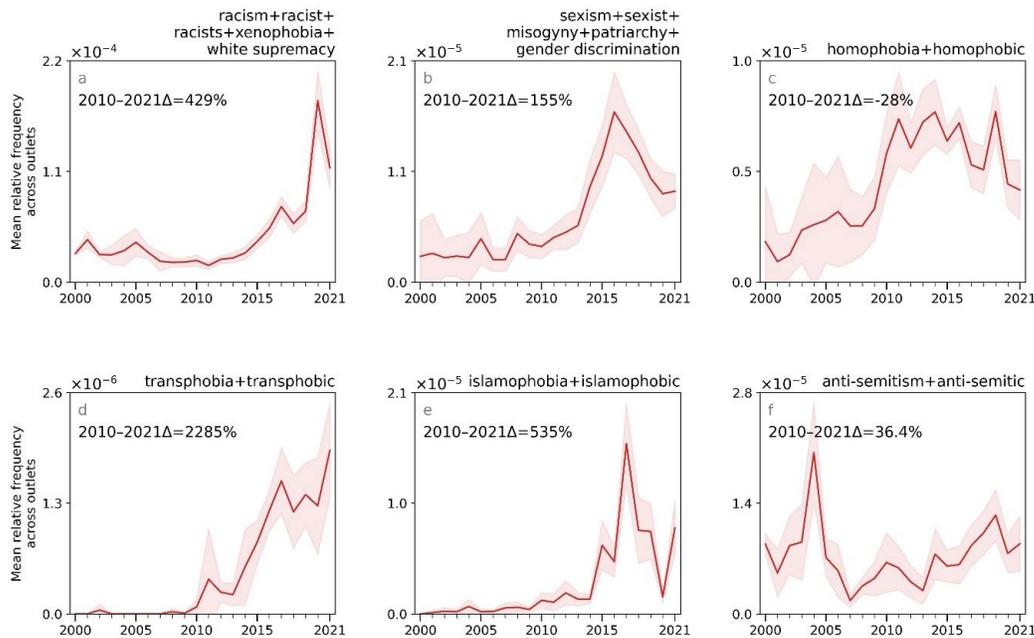
Among our chosen set of prejudice signifying terms, the ones displaying the starkest increase in prominence between 2010 and 2021 are those relating to gender-identity prejudice, which saw a staggering 2285 percent increase. In contrast, terms referring to sexual orientation prejudice have actually *decreased* in prevalence since their peak around 2011. Terms referring to other prejudice types, such as sexism or Islamophobia, peaked close to the middle of the decade. Others, like racism or transphobia, seem to have peaked later in the decade. Notably, references to anti-Semitism are the only ones that do not display a clear upwards trend in the 21st century.



*The prominence of terms referring to ethnic prejudice has increased on average by over 400 percent.*

Figure 4 aggregates several terms signifying prejudice under different clusters of prejudice type (i.e., gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc.). While this method provides a picture of *overall* prevalence by prejudice type, such visualization obscures *specific term dynamics*, since within a cluster of terms, the temporal dynamics of high-frequency terms can mask low-frequency terms used to describe the same or similar phenomena. For example, while words

**FIGURE 4: CANADIAN NEWS MEDIA\* AVERAGE YEARLY PREVALENCE OF WORDS DENOTING PREJUDICE; JANUARY 1, 2000 - DECEMBER 31, 2021**



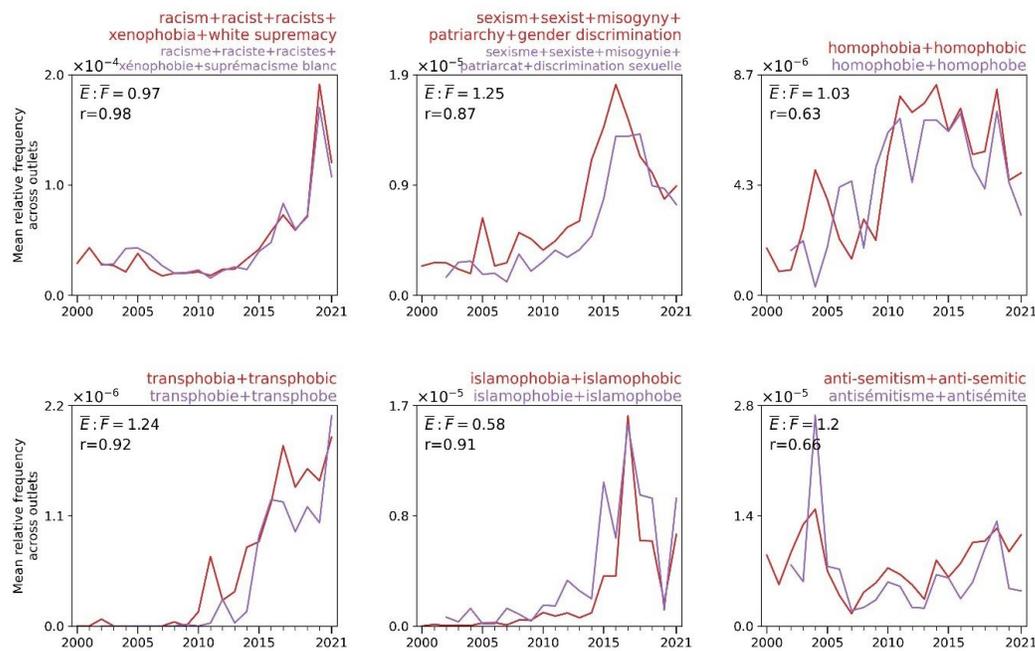
\* The *Toronto Star*, the *National Post*, the *Globe and Mail*, *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation*, *Vancouver Sun*, *Ottawa Citizen*, *Montreal Gazette*, *Calgary Herald*, *Toronto Sun*, *Le Devoir*, *La Presse*, *le Journal de Québec*, *le Journal de Montréal*, *Radio-Canada*

**Note:** Average prevalence of prejudice-denoting terms in popular Canadian news media outlets. The shaded areas around the mean trends display the 95 percent confidence intervals. The 2010 to 2021 average percentage change across outlets is shown on the upper-left corner of each subplot. The analysis of Canadian news outlets with French content used the corresponding terms translations

such as “racism” or “racist” have increased by 656 percent and 249 percent, respectively, in Canadian news media from 2010 to 2021, a less frequent word such as “xenophobia” has decreased by 52 percent. In contrast, the other term in the ethnic prejudice set “white supremacy” has increased particularly acutely (by 8001 percent) between 2010 and 2021.

We next attempt to compare whether there is a difference in the frequency with which terms denoting prejudice appear in English- and French-Canadian news media. Figure 5 shows how the prominence of the ethnic prejudice topic is very similar in both types of outlets. There appear to be only a few notable differences between French and English content in Canadian news media with respect to the topic of prejudice.

**FIGURE 5: CANADIAN NEWS MEDIA AGGREGATE YEARLY PREVALENCE OF WORDS DENOTING PREJUDICE BY LANGUAGE OF CONTENT; JANUARY 1, 2000 - DECEMBER 31, 2021**



**English content:** The *Toronto Star*, the *National Post*, the *Globe and Mail*, *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation*, *Vancouver Sun*, *Ottawa Citizen*, *Montreal Gazette*, *Calgary Herald*, *Toronto Sun*

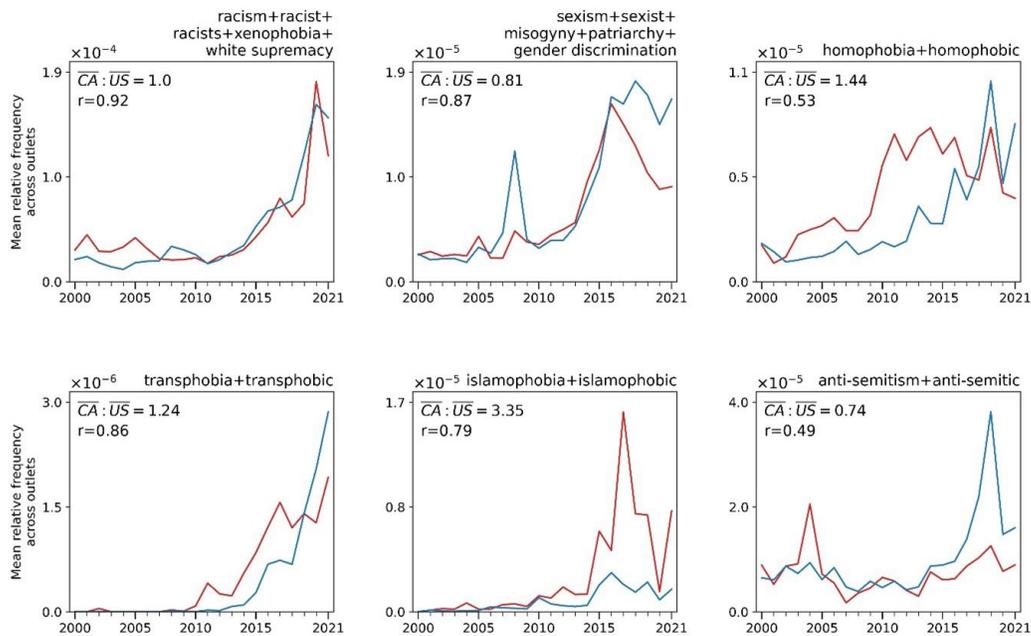
**French content:** *Le Devoir*, *La Presse*, *Le Journal de Québec*, *Le Journal de Montréal*, *Radio-Canada*

**Note:** Average prevalence of prejudice-denoting terms in popular Canadian news media outlets sorted by outlet's language. The ratio of average frequency in English content (red) to average frequency in French content (purple) is shown on the top left of each plot. The Pearson correlation coefficient,  $r$ , between both time series is also shown in the upper-left corner of each subplot.

The prominence of terms referring to gender prejudice appears to have started to increase first in English-news media, with French-news media following shortly afterwards. The prominence of terms denoting gender prejudice, gender identity prejudice and anti-Semitism appear to be slightly higher in English media. In contrast, the prominence of terms referring to Islamophobia appears to be larger in French content. Overall, however, the temporal dynamics between French and English content are very similar.

Next, we compare the prominence of the prejudice term types studied in both Canadian and American news media (Figure 6). The prevalence of terms denoting ethnic prejudice is fairly similar in news media content from

**FIGURE 6: CANADA AND US NEWS MEDIA AGGREGATE YEARLY PREVALENCE OF WORDS DENOTING PREJUDICE; JANUARY 1, 2000 - DECEMBER 31, 2021**

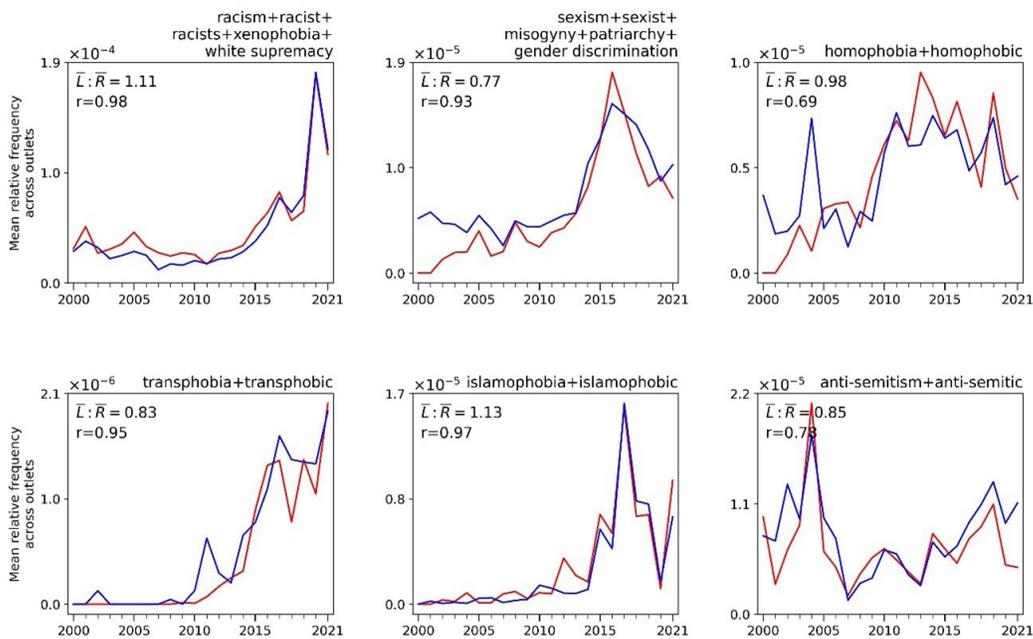


- **Canadian news media:** *The Toronto Star, the National Post, the Globe and Mail, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Vancouver Sun, Ottawa Citizen, Montreal Gazette, Calgary Herald, Toronto Sun, Le Devoir, La Presse, Le Journal de Québec, Le Journal de Montréal, Radio-Canada*
- **US news media:** *New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, NBC News, Bloomberg, CBS, Wall Street Journal, New York Post, Fox News*

**Note:** Average prevalence of prejudice-denoting terms in popular Canadian (red) and US (blue) news media outlets. The ratio of average frequency in Canadian news media to average frequency in US news media content is shown on the top left of each plot. The Pearson correlation coefficient,  $r$ , between both time series is also shown in the upper-left corner of each subplot.

both countries. The prominence of terms that signify prejudice against Islamic religious faith, sexual orientation and gender identity has been historically larger in Canadian news media in comparison to their American counterparts. In recent years, however, American news media has emphasized terms denoting gender prejudice, anti-Semitism, sexual orientation prejudice, and gender identity prejudice more than Canadian news media. The temporal dynamics with which news media from both countries use these terms is highly correlated for most prejudice types. Terms referring to sexual orientation prejudice and anti-Semitism display the lesser degree of coupling between news media from both countries.

**FIGURE 7: CANADIAN NEWS MEDIA AGGREGATE YEARLY PREVALENCE OF WORDS DENOTING PREJUDICE BY IDEOLOGICAL ORIENTATION OF OUTLETS; JANUARY 1, 2000 - DECEMBER 31, 2021**



- **Left-leaning:** *Toronto Star, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Le Devoir, La Presse, Radio-Canada,*
- **Right-leaning:** *National Post, Globe and Mail, Vancouver Sun, Ottawa Citizen, Montreal Gazette, Calgary Herald, Toronto Sun, Le devoir, Le Journal de Québec, Le Journal de Montréal*

**Note:** Average prevalence of prejudice-denoting terms in left-leaning (red) and right-leaning (blue) Canadian news media outlets. The ratio of average frequency in left-leaning news media to average frequency in right-leaning news media content is shown on the top left of each plot. The Pearson correlation coefficient,  $r$ , between both time series is also shown in the upper-left corner of each subplot.

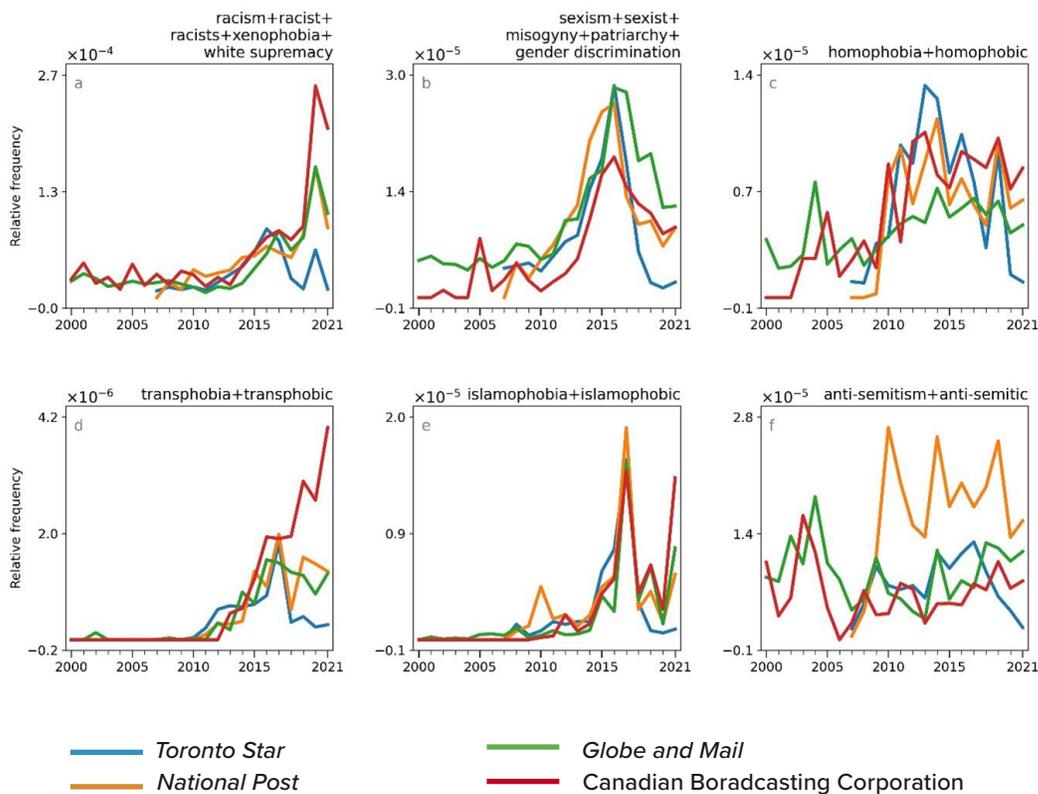
One of the most striking differences between American and Canadian news media is the prominence of terms relating to Islamophobia, which has historically been three times larger in Canadian news media than in their American counterparts (Figure 6). In contrast, in recent years the terms relating to anti-Semitism have been much more prominent in American news media than in Canadian news media.

We ask next whether there is a difference in the prominence of prejudice between left-leaning and right-leaning Canadian news media (Figure 7). Terms signifying prejudice appear relatively similar between right-leaning and

left-leaning Canadian news media. This is in stark contrast with previous analysis of US and UK news media where the frequency of these terms in both countries tends to be larger in left-leaning news media (Rozado and Goodwin 2022). This may suggest substantial differences between ideologically-aligned Canadian news media and equivalently aligned media from the US and UK, with right- and left-leaning Canadian news media being more similar in the prominence with which they highlight the topic of prejudice than their American and British counterparts. Another possibility is simply that Canadian media outlets have a narrower ideological range.

We conclude this section by providing the frequency dynamics for a reduced set of news media organizations we selected due to their prominent position in the Canadian news media landscape. Figure 8 shows the frequency over time with which specific individual news outlets, specifically the *Toronto Star*,

**FIGURE 8: YEARLY PREVALENCE OF WORDS DENOTING PREJUDICE IN INDIVIDUAL CANADIAN NEWS MEDIA OUTLETS; JANUARY 1, 2000 - DECEMBER 31, 2021**

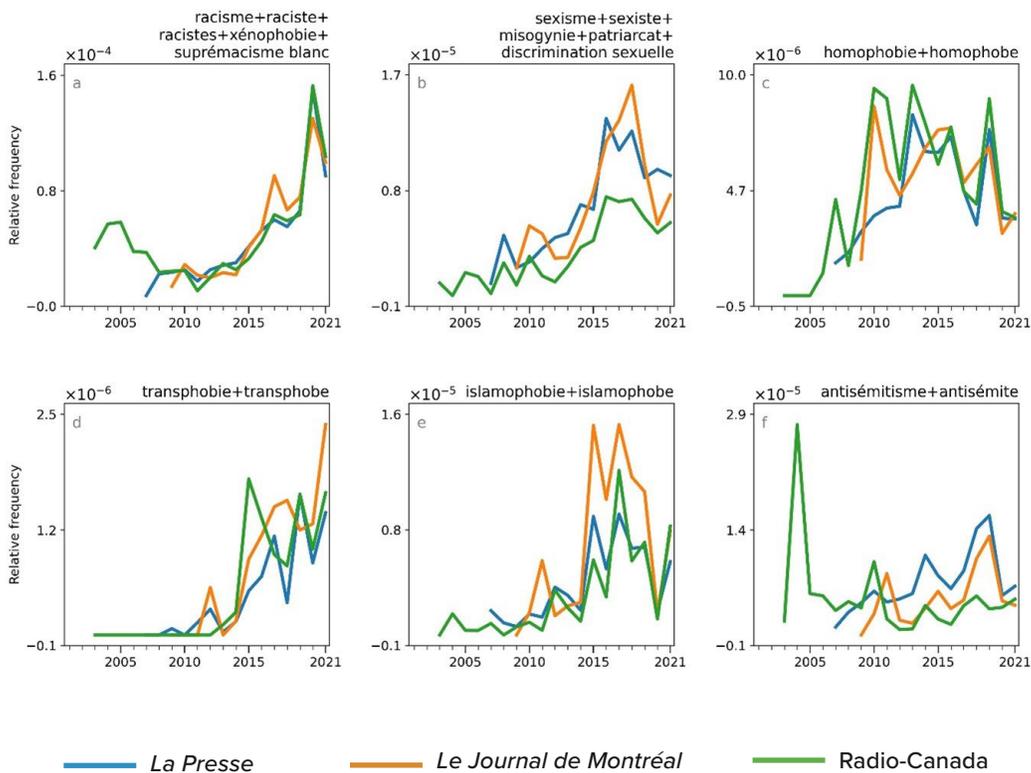


**Note:** Prevalence of prejudice-denoting terms in individual Canadian news media outlets with English content.

*CBC, Globe and Mail, and National Post*, use terms denoting prejudice. The figure shows that in recent years, the terms relating to racism are more prominent in the *CBC*, similarly prominent in the *Globe and Mail* and *National Post*, and least prominent in the *Toronto Star*. Terms relating to gender prejudice are particularly prominent in the *Globe and Mail*, while the terms relating to anti-Semitism are most prevalent in the *National Post*. The topic of gender identity prejudice is particularly salient in the *CBC*.

Figure 9 displays the frequency over time with which the most prominent Canadian outlets with French content use terms denoting prejudice. The figure shows that terms relating to gender prejudice are least prominent in Radio-Canada while terms relating to Islamophobia are particularly salient in *Le Journal de Montréal*.

**FIGURE 9: YEARLY PREVALENCE OF WORDS DENOTING PREJUDICE IN INDIVIDUAL CANADIAN NEWS MEDIA OUTLETS; JANUARY 1, 2000 - DECEMBER 31, 2021**



**Note:** Prevalence of prejudice-denoting terms in individual Canadian news media outlets with French content.

## Social justice rhetoric in Canadian news media

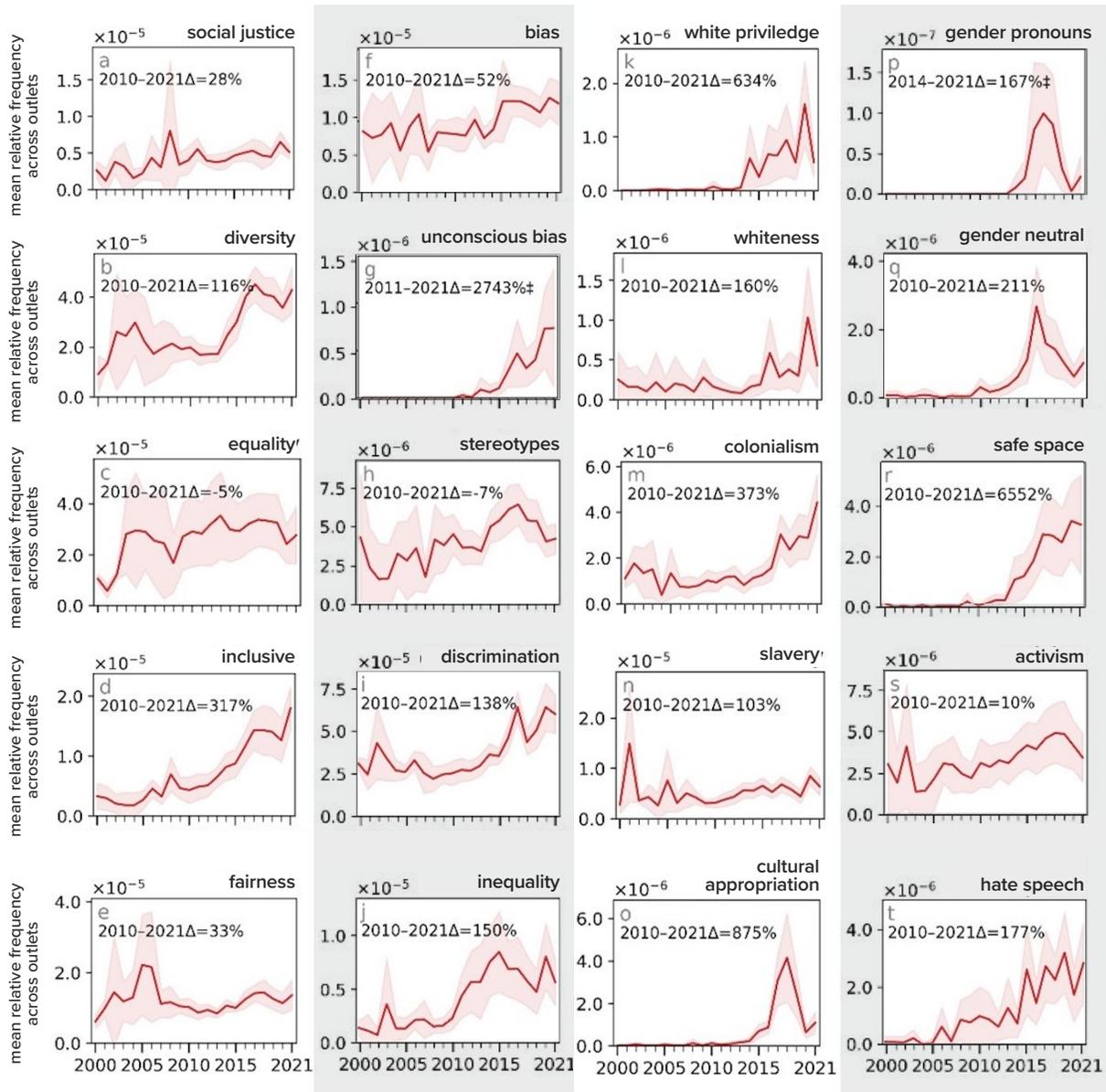
**Figure 10 shows the usage** dynamics in Canadian news media of a set of terms often associated with social justice discourse. Several terms display substantial increases between 2010 and 2021: “white privilege” (634 percent), “cultural appropriation” (875 percent), “unconscious bias” (2743 percent) and “safe space” (6552 percent). Others, however, show only moderate or negligible increases, or even a decrease in prevalence: “fairness” (33 percent), “social justice” (28 percent), “stereotypes” (-7 percent), and “equality” (-5 percent).

When comparing the prevalence of social justice terminology between Canadian and American news media, the correlation between the frequency of use over time from both countries is moderate to high (Figure 11). There is considerable variation in the prevalence of individual terms, however, with some terms being substantially more prevalent in American news media, particularly in recent years (“social justice,” “inequality,” “bias,” “whiteness,” “slavery,” “activism,” “gender pronouns,” or “hate speech”) and others being slightly more prominent in Canadian news media (“equality,” “fairness,” “discrimination,” “colonialism,” “safe space,” or “cultural appropriation”). There is a widespread uptick in recent years in the usage of many of these terms by American news media which is not as apparent or as marked in Canadian news media.

## Discussion

**In this report, we have** documented a substantial increase in the use of terms that signify prejudice in the written content of Canada’s news media between 2010 and 2021. As noted, the beginning of this trend predates Donald Trump’s emergence in American politics. Terms relating to several types of prejudice (i.e., sexism, homophobia, or Islamophobia) appear to have peaked prior to 2021 in Canadian news media and have even declined slightly over the last few years. Most of the trends reported here for Canadian news media are reminiscent of

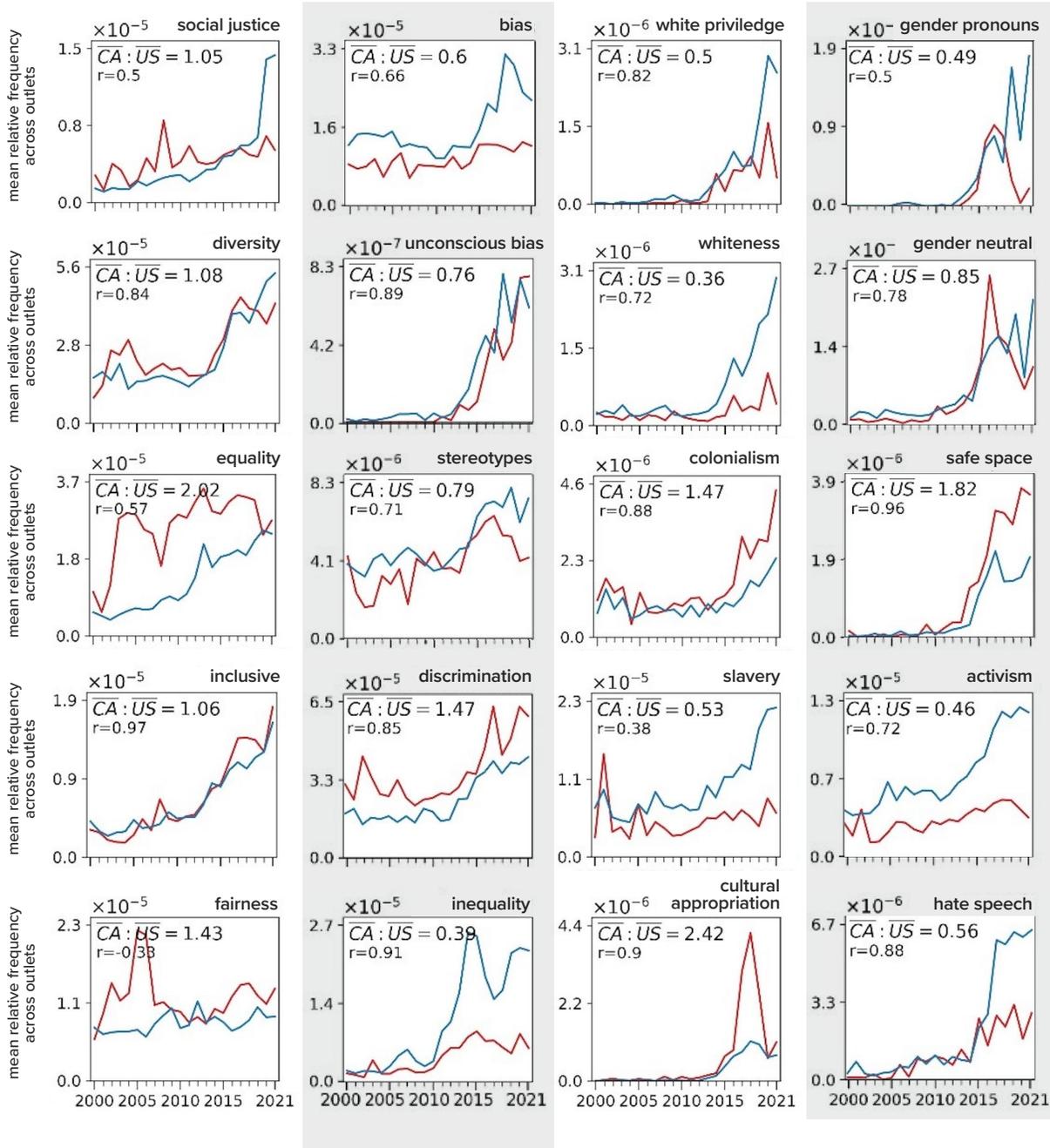
**FIGURE 10: CANADIAN NEWS MEDIA\* YEARLY PREVALENCE OF WORDS ASSOCIATED WITH SOCIAL JUSTICE DISCOURSE; JANUARY 1, 2000 - DECEMBER 31, 2021**



\* The Toronto Star, the National Post, the Globe and Mail, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Vancouver Sun, Ottawa Citizen, Montreal Gazette, Calgary Herald, Toronto Sun, Le Devoir, La Presse, le Journal de Québec, le Journal de Montréal, Radio-Canada

**Note:** Average prevalence in Canadian news media of terms often associated with social justice discourse. The shaded areas display the 95 percent confidence interval around the means. The 2010 to 2021 percentage increase in prevalence of every term is shown on the upper-left corner of each subplot. The † symbols next to some subplot percentage changes denote that no instances of the term were found in the year 2010 so the year with the earliest appearance of the term is used instead.

**FIGURE 11: CANADIAN VS US NEWS MEDIA AGGREGATE YEARLY PREVALENCE OF WORDS ASSOCIATED WITH SOCIAL JUSTICE DISCOURSE; JANUARY 1, 2000 - DECEMBER 31, 2021**



**Canadian news media:** The Toronto Star, the National Post, the Globe and Mail, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Vancouver Sun, Ottawa Citizen, Montreal Gazette, Calgary Herald, Toronto Sun, Le Devoir, La Presse, Le Journal de Québec, Le Journal de Montréal, Radio-Canada

**US news media:** New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, NBC News, Bloomberg, CBS, Wall Street Journal, New York Post, Fox News

**Note:** Average prevalence of terms often associated with social justice discourse across Canadian (red) and US (blue) news media. The ratio of average frequency in Canadian news media content to US content is shown on the top left of each plot. The Pearson correlation coefficient, *r*, between both time series is also shown in the upper-left corner of each subplot.

similar dynamics in American news media (as well as Spanish and British news media). There are, however, important differences worth noting.

The prevalence of terms relating to sexual orientation and gender identity prejudice rose earlier in Canadian news media than in American news media. If the prevalence of a term is a reliable metric, Canada's news media is much more focused on Islamophobia than American news media. In contrast, in recent years, American news media has become much more focused on anti-Semitism than Canadian news media. Similarly, the prevalence of terms relating to gender prejudice peaked in the Canadian news media around 2016 and has declined ever since. This is not the case in the US news media where the prevalence of such terms remains elevated. Despite the very different demographic makeup and history of the two countries, the prevalence of terms denoting ethnic prejudice is very similar in their respective news media.

A question that naturally emerges from this report is: what are the underlying reasons behind the post-2010 explosion in the Canadian news media's use of terms relating to prejudice? We suggest six possible catalysts.

First, Canada's news media may simply be mirroring news media trends in America because of the dominant cultural influence of the United States. This hypothesis is not fully consistent with the underlying data since, for many types of prejudice terms, trends in the Canadian news media actually *predated* similar trends in American news media. Figure 6 provides some illustrative examples of trends in terms relating to sexual orientation and gender identity prejudice.

Second, perhaps societal prejudice has increased in recent years and media coverage is simply reflecting this reality. Public opinion surveys in the US have shown increased public *concern* about prejudice since 2010. If such perceptions are correct, this phenomenon would have reversed a decades-long trend of decreasing self-reported expressions of overt prejudice in the US (Charlesworth and Banaji 2019). It is admittedly difficult to establish cause and effect: whether the media is just reflecting existing societal trends or is itself actively setting the agenda of public concern on the topic.

Third, another possible explanation of the trends observed here is increasing public and institutional sensitivity to prejudice. Where in previous times societies might have been unwilling or incapable of recognizing prejudice as such, modern societies are likely more adept at detecting and denouncing prejudice. A psychological phenomenon (Levari, Gilbert, Wilson, et al. 2018) that has been described as "concept creep," or the gradual expansion of the mean-

ing of harm-related concepts by a process of semantic inflation whereby such concepts come to refer to an increasingly wide range of behaviours, could have played a role in this process (Haslam 2016).

Fourth, these media trends may result from an increasing ideological skew among news media professionals. For example, it is well documented that left-leaning individuals are more attuned and preoccupied with the phenomena of prejudice than right-leaning individuals (Neal 2017; Jones 2019; Horowitz, Parker, and Stepler 2017). A recent study quantified the ideological bias of journalists in 17 western countries. In all the studied countries with the exception of Slovenia, the average journalist from each country displayed a clear skew to the left in comparison with the country's average voter (Kirkegaard, Pallesen, Elgaard, and Carl 2021). There is some evidence that this skew is becoming more acute over time.

“*Left-leaning individuals are more attuned and preoccupied with the phenomena of prejudice than right-leaning individuals.*”

According to a report by the Reuters Institute at Oxford University, 53 percent of British journalists identified as being left of the political centre while only 23 percent identified themselves as being to the right of the political centre (Thurman, Cornia, and Kunert 2016). Critically, this disparity is even more acute among young journalists, among which 56 percent self-identified as left-of-center and just 18 percent as right-of-centre. A similar study from the United States quantified that in the year 2013, only 7 percent of American journalists self-identified as conservative. The same study documented that there was a 4:1 Democrat to Republican ratio among journalists (Weaver, Willnat, and Wilhoit 2019). This disparity has become more acute in recent years; the imbalance in 1982 was only 2:1. Hence, if news media professionals are becoming even more disproportionately left-leaning, this could also explain the increasing prominence of the concept of prejudice

in news media content since left-leaning individuals perceive the severity of prejudice in society as more acute than their right-leaning counterparts. Surveys of Canadian journalists along similar lines would help shed more light on this possibility.

Fifth, the patterns in Canadian news media discourse this paper codifies could also be partially explained as cultural shifts, which have purportedly increased the incentives for individuals and groups to appeal to an identity of victimhood in situations of social conflict to elicit sympathy and/or to offer public expressions of moral grandstanding as a means of gaining social prestige (Campbell and Manning 2014; Fassin and Rechtman 2009; Leong 2021; Lukanoff and Haidt 2018; Tosi and Warmke 2016). As with the theory of increasing societal prejudice, changes in media coverage could be explained as simply reflecting this underlying cultural shift.

Lastly, the reported trends may arise from the existence of financial incentives for news media to use highly emotional language in order to maximize digital “click-throughs.” This is because the negative sentiment and emotionality of text has been shown to influence how viral it becomes (Hasell 2021; Berger and Milkman 2012). Text that conveys the emotion of anger, for instance, is shared more profusely through social media (Berger and Milkman 2012; Rathje, Van Bavel, and van der Linden 2020). Each additional moral or emotional word increases the virality of tweets by 20 percent on average (Brady, Wills, Jost, et al. 2017). The fact that user engagement can be greatly heightened when reporters use negative emotional language creates an incentive for news media outlets to favour this kind of language (Hansen, Arvidsson, Nielsen, et al. 2011). In fact, the fraction of news media content conveying negative sentiment and negative emotion appears to be increasing in the first two decades of the 21st century (Rozado, Hughes, and Halberstadt 2022). This could partially explain the sharp increase in the use of terminology that signifies prejudice; as it carries a high negative emotional payload.

In this report, we have attempted to quantify chronologically the prominence of terms that signify prejudice and terms that are often associated with social justice discourse. While our methodology has been extensively validated in the previous literature (Rozado, Al-Gharbi, and Halberstadt 2021; Rozado 2020; Rozado 2021; Rozado 2022a, 33; Rozado and Kaufmann 2022; Rozado and Goodwin 2022), it does have limitations. The primary one is that the relative frequencies of terms in a large corpus of text lacks

critical information about the context in which those terms are being used. It is conceivable, and even likely, that in some instances those terms are being used in situations in which the content might be questioning the prominence or existence of prejudice itself, as in “prejudice has decreased in recent years” or “Canada is not a xxx-ist country.” Regardless, our preliminary qualitative analysis of Canadian news media content suggests that most often, the terms studied in this work are employed to assert and denounce the existence of different types of prejudice.

## Conclusion

**We have characterized the increasing** prominence of terms that signify prejudice and some terms often associated with social justice discourse in Canadian news media since at least 2010. These patterns are reminiscent of similar trends also happening in American, British, and Spanish news media. While the similarities are substantial, there are also some notable differences.

The high prevalence of prejudice-signifying terms in Canadian news media appears to have peaked prior to 2021 for several types of prejudice, while the prominence of this topic remains elevated in the United States up to 2021. Also, Canadian news media pioneered the increasing use of such terminology and did so prior to their American counterparts for several types of prejudice. Canadian news media is also much more focused on Islamophobia than US news media. In contrast, US news media is much more focused on anti-Semitism than Canadian news media. We found no substantial differences between right- and left-leaning Canadian news media in the prominence of the topic of prejudice in their content. This is in stark contrast to American and British news media where the topic of prejudice tends to be more prominent in left-leaning publications. There are also no substantial differences between English- and French-Canadian news media in the prominence of the prejudice topic in their content.

Perhaps the main question arising from this report is whether the Canadian news media’s increasing focus on the topic of prejudice reflects an uptick

in prejudicial attitudes in Canadian society between 2010 and 2020, or if, instead, news media content does not reflect social attitudes but instead primes them. Previous work has shown that a higher prevalence of crime or terrorism mentions in the news media precedes increasing public concern about crime or terrorism irrespective of the underlying levels of such threats. The impact on public opinion of a higher prevalence in the news media of terms that signify prejudice warrants further exploration.

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