Spelling Errors and Social Media Outrage:
On the Conservative Party of Canada's Error-Ridden Pamphlet

T. Andi Sweet
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The age of social media permanently changed the way voters engage with elections. At the centre of this change, a Conservative Party of Canada mailer riddled with errors became the focus of a debate: were the errors the result of an ineffectual copyeditor, or were they something else? In looking at the 2021 Election as a whole, it becomes clear that spelling errors in the doorknocker were not only intentional but part of a larger strategy built to stew outrage and further stoke divide between Canada's political parties.

During the lead-up to the 2021 Canadian federal election, the Conservative Party of Canada released a door-knocking pamphlet in Ontario that included an overview of their campaign platform.[1] Social media was quick to point out that the document was laden with spelling errors, including "Canada Mental Health Acton Plan," "enactng," "Ant-Corrupton law," "Otawa," "essental," and "creatng." Per The Daily Hive, a spokesperson for the party claimed a printing glitch caused the errors in Guelph,[2] but the explanation was not enough to keep Twitter from reveling in the mistakes. Commentary included jokes about fired copy editors[3] and corruption running rampant in anthills.[4] Some users were quick to point out the errors may have

1. Alex Arsenych, "An Erin O'Toole Flyer Had Some Awkward Spelling Mistakes & You Bet The Internet Noticed," *Narcity Toronto*, August 27, 2021, https://www.narcity.com/toronto/erin-otoole-misspelled-flyers-get-the-internets-attention.

2. Daily Hive Staff, "Spelling mistakes in Erin O'Toole's campaign card make the internet laugh," *DH News*, Daily Hive, August 26, 2021, https://dailyhive.com/vancouver/erin-otoole-spelling-mistakes.

3. Claudius Maximus (@Cfarden), "There is no 'I' in team, but there is in 'essential', 'anti corruption' and 'fired copy editor'," Twitter, August 25, 2021, https://twitter.com/Cfarden/status/1430539051937927173.

4. Lisa G (@graciemoo), "I'm just here for the ant corruption. There's an army of them in my back yard that need to be stopped," Twitter, August 25, 2021, https://twitter.com/Cfarden/status/1430539051937927173.

been intentional, with @MsAmyMacPherson tying the mailer to the Conservative Party's social media team, Topham Guerin.[5] Upon looking at Topham Guerin's digital tactics, it becomes immediately apparent that this mailer was part of a strategy of incendiary communications meant to stir conversation and increase engagement with the CPC's content.

Topham Guerin is a digital agency founded by Sean Topham and Ben Guerin of New Zealand. Per their website's "About" page, Topham Guerin "sets out to prove that digital [can] be done differently,"[6] framing the company as existing in opposition to traditional social media marketing firms. Their About page includes testimonials: the Australia Broadcast Corporation says they are a "social media firehose ... designed to corral the faithful and convert the fence-sitters."[7] One negative testimonial from celebrity chef Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall reveals far more about how Topham Guerin see themselves: "Let's be clear, Topham and Guerin are the *bad guys*[8] [emphasis added]." Ben Guerin spoke on the "Using Social Media Effectively" panel at the 2019 Friedman Conference to reflect on the strategy they used on the Australian Liberal Party's winning campaign in 2019.[9] The strategy is the same one used with the CPC in the 2021

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5. MacPherson, Amy (@MsAmyMacPherson), "#CDNpoli #Elxn 44 Saw everyone amplifying the Conservative Party doorknockers & having a good laugh at spelling errors ... Tried to warn you. O'Toole hired Topham Guerin & they practice the #DarkArts. *See photo for résumé* ! See link for tactic origin ! > archive.is/ekrjo," Twitter, text/photo, August 25, 2021, https://twitter.com/MsAmyMacPherson/status/1430441671016210432.

6. "About," Topham Guerin, accessed November 9, 2021, https://www.tophamguerin.com/about.

7. "About."

8. "About."

9. Latika Bourke, "How the Liberals beat Labor at its own game," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, May 26, 2019, https://www.smh.com.au/federal-election-2019/how-the-liberals-beat-labor-at-its-own-game-20190523-p51qki.html.

election. On the panel, Guerin stated that an effective social media campaign needs to "surprise, shock, and arouse,"[10] with anger being the most critical arousal emotion. Low-quality memes are more effective than high-quality professional ads because of three factors Guerin cites: volume, variety, and speed.[11] "Crappy" (Guerin's words) memes can be thrown together in minutes and make it easy to create a wide variety of images that all carry the same messages. These "crappy" memes can then spread rapidly: supporters will share for the message; detractors will share to deride the quality of the meme and spread it to new audiences. The less refined the meme, the more effective per Topham Guerin's strategy: a pro-Tory meme created during their work with Boris Johnson in the UK received mass publicity due to its use of the cyber-notorious font Comic Sans. This mockery of the meme ensured the Tory message within reached a much wider audience than a "good" meme would have.[12] While anger focused on the Comic Sans meme would have been focused on the artistic choices, Topham Guerin's strategy during the leader's debate caused a different form of outrage. During the debate, Topham Guerin transformed the Tory Party's official Twitter account into "factcheckUK," posing as a neutral, third-party fact-checker along the lines of Politifact or services offered by CNN and the BBC.[13] The Twitter

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10. "Friedman 19 // Using Social Media Effectively," Australian Taxpayers' Alliance, 50:13, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0QeHsjnGcpg.

11. "Friedman 19 // Using Social Media Effectively."

12. Jim Waterson, "Tories hire Facebook propaganda pair to run online election campaign," *The Guardian*, October 23, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/oct/23/tories-hire-facebook-propaganda-pair-to-run-online-election-campaign.

13. Tom Hoggins, "What's really behind the Tories' 'deceitful' Twitter fact check ploy — and did it actually work?" *The Telegraph*, November 20, 2019, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/2019/11/20/really-behind-tories-deceitful-twitter-fact-check-ploy-did/

feed, posting only positive tweets about the Tories and negative tweets about the opposition, was quickly criticized as a "dystopian" and transparent attempt at manipulating the audience.[14] News articles from popular websites such as The Guardian,[15] Time,[16] the BBC,[17] and CNN[18] discussed the Twitter conversation about the rebrand, and the Conservative party was able to relish their success. Nobody was talking about their opposition or the actual content of the debate, but all eyes were on Boris Johnson.

This shock, overwhelm, and anger strategy is not exclusive to Topham Guerin and likely not one they invented. Russian bots have been using similar techniques since the 2016 presidential election at the latest.[19] This technique is referred to as a "firehose of falsehood"[20]—notably identical to how the Australia Broadcast Corporation described Topham Guerin. The

14. Hoggins, "What's really behind the Tories' 'deceitful' Twitter fact check plot."

15. Jim Waterson, "Tories pretend to be factchecking service during leaders' debate," *The Guardian*, November 19, 2019. https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/nov/19/tories-tweet-anti-labour-posts-under-factcheckuk-brand.

16. Billy Perrigo, "Boris Johnson's Conservatives Rebranded a Party Twitter Account as 'factcheckUK.' Twitter Wasn't Happy," *Time*, November 29, 2019, https://time.com/5733786/conservative-fact-check-twitter/.

17. Dave Lee, "Election debate: Conservatives criticized for renaming Twitter profile 'factcheckUK'," *BBC News*, November 20, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-50482637.

18. Vasco Cotovia & Hadas Gold, "UK Conservatives criticized for 'misleading' Twitter change," *CNN*, November 19, 2019, https://www.cnn.com/2019/11/19/world/conservative-party-fact-check-twitter-intl/index.html.

19. Charles E. Ziegler, "International dimensions of electoral processes: Russia, the USA, and the 2016 elections," *Int Polit* 55 (2016): 559.

20. Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, "The Russian 'Firehose of Falsehood' Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It," *RAND Corporation* (2016): 1, https://doi.org/10.7249/PE198.

Russian strategy is rapid, continuous, and inconsistent.[21] Multiple seemingly unrelated sources

share similar messages to play on cognitive distortions that a single message is more persuasive

if it comes from multiple sources, regardless of the truth of the message.[22] Cognitive distortions,

patterns of disruptive, inaccurate thoughts or beliefs, affect a person's ability to process

information.[23] They are then ripe for exploitation by propagandists and marketing companies. By

creating memes designed to be shared by people across the aisle, *even when that meme is being*

shared to mock, Topham Guerin's strategy ensures that their message will spread to wider

audiences. Even if the information was shared to mock it, the cognitive distortion known as the

"sleeper effect" suggests that repeated exposure to complete falsehoods leads to the original

message sinking without any criticisms or commentary from the original.[24] Without the context

of that criticism, any recipient of the meme is at risk of accepting the original message as truth.

The red-pen-ready pamphlet is not a meme. It is designed to be delivered to houses

directly and has hole in the top to hang on doorknobs if constituents were not home when the

doorknockers went through their neighbourhood. The litany of spelling errors across the

document serve as a siren song to post the image online, giving the physical mailer a second life

as free digital marketing. Without those typos, the pamphlet would have served its purpose once

the constituent read it. The investment in designing, printing, and distributing the pamphlet now

recoups a small bit of the CPC's digital marketing budget, but the power of the pamphlet does

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21. Paul and Matthews, "The Russian 'Firehose of Falsehood' Propaganda Model," 1.

22. Paul and Matthews, "The Russian 'Firehose of Falsehood' Propaganda Model," 2-3.

23. Courtney E. Ackerman, "Cognitive Distortions: When Your Brain Lies to You (+ PDF Worksheets)," *Positive Psychology*, October 10, 2020, https://positivepsychology.com/cognitive-distortions/.

24. Paul and Matthews, "The Russian 'Firehose of Falsehood' Propaganda Model," 6.

not end there. In a move out of Topham Guerin's playbook, every tweet spent mocking the pamphlet is one more tweet that ensures the Conservative Party's platform spreads to new and different audiences. Now, those audiences are discussing the pamphlet instead of just scrolling past it. Ben Guerin recommends that parties share 250 or more memes *per week* at the height of a campaign,[25] and so the pamphlet becomes one more piece of the puzzle to ensure that the Conservative Party's campaign is ever-present on the newsfeed.

Topham Guerin uses Comic Sans fonts, poorly photoshopped Game of Thrones Memes, and derivative, simplistic imagery designed to infuriate viewers with their "crappiness."[26] To use spelling as a weapon, though, taps into something more insidious. Memes are designed to be scrolled past; their content needs to be digestible in the blink of an eye. The pamphlet's errors require careful analysis, and one Twitter user, @Aho2ToMan, points out the efficacy of this technique:

> I am guilty of sending it to friends. When they told me they spent so
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> much time looking for the spelling mistake that now they know the
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> CPC point better than ever I realised (sic) what I had done.[27]

Mocking the spelling requires reading the pamphlet in full and digesting the information, forcing the content on an audience that may have never opened the Conservative Party campaign's website to read the platform themselves. Mocking spelling errors also opens the Party up to a particular type of criticism: a criticism focused on incompetency, lack of intelligence, and lack of

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25. "Friedman 19 // Using Social Media Effectively."

26. "Friedman 19 // Using Social Media Effectively."

27. Tomio Time (@Aho2Man), Twitter, August 26, 2021, https://twitter.com/Aho2ToMan/status/1430940595909009409.

education. It only takes a handful of tweets for conversation around the "stupidity" of the

Conservative party to turn into a discussion around the "stupidity" of Conservative voters. One

user was quick to compare Conservative voters to people who fall for "Nigerian Prince" type

scams;[28] another said this would appeal to "uneducated voters."[29] Part of the Conservative

Party's broader, multi-decade strategy is to cast themselves as the working-class party who

understands the needs of the "average" voter.[30] This contrasts with the image cultivated by Justin

Trudeau, leader of the Liberal Party and the primary opponent of the Conservatives. Trudeau is a

handsome, "metropolitan liberal elite[31]," whose quaffed hair and good looks stand in sharp

contrast to the down-to-earth, working man marketed to by the Conservative Party. Doug Ford,

premier of Ontario and the Ontario Progressive Conservative party leader, has described the

liberal elite as "people who look down on average common folk and think they're smarter[32] [than

ordinary Canadians]." A 2019 CBC poll found that 80% of Canadians believed their country was

28. Angie Kannanwill, (@nowsOURtime), "Maybe they're trying to do like the email scammers and purposefully put spelling mistakes to better identify targets," Twitter, August 25, 2021, https://twitter.com/nowsOURtime/status/1430554363152449544?s=20.

29. Alice Poodle, (@atheist_poodle), "This is a subliminal appeal to the uneducated, and the anti-education people," Twitter, August 25, 2021, https://twitter.com/atheist_poodle/status/1430626745468833796?s=20.

30. Alex Marland, "The brand image of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in international context," *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* (2018), 141.

31. Marland, "The brand image of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in international context," 141.

32. Alan Freeman, "The brother of infamous Toronto mayor Rob Ford is running for office — and he sounds a lot like Trump," *The Washington Post*, April 29, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/the-brother-of-infamous-toronto-mayor-rob-ford-is-running-for-office--and-he-sounds-a-lot-like-trump/2018/04/28/acff99ba-382d-11e8-af3c-2123715f78df_story.html.

"divided between ordinary people and elites."[33] In attempts to levy this belief, Conservative politicians have attacked Trudeau as a "trust fund millionaire"[34] to try and remind voters that *he* is the elite and *they* are the ordinary people. To prove it, they set traps that invite Liberal voters to mock and deride their intelligence, alienating Conservative and would-be Conservative voters away from the Liberal Party.

The Party of the common man, the working man, locks their advertising strategy into a digital fire hydrant and unleashes it on a crowd of unsuspecting voters. Their strategy makes people angry and invites them to start conversations explicitly intended to mock them. By filling their pamphlet full of spelling errors, the Conservative Party invites intentional criticism by making themselves look uneducated, incompetent, and stupid, and Twitter users are happy to turn any error into a viral spectacle. Now, Conservative voters and voters on the fence see firsthand what Conservative pundits have been telling them for years: the Liberal party and the people who would vote for them do not care about them. Trudeau and his ilk think that Conservative voters are stupid and uninformed. The Liberal party they support would never care about the average voter who might use the wrong "your" in their Facebook posts or who had to work instead of study at university. The campaign has become something personal (or, as Ben Guerin would put it, *relevant* and *salient*),[35] and the firehose has effectively cleared the dissidents from the streets. Amongst all this mockery of "ant-corrupton" and the suits in

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33. Mark Gollom, "Canadians say country split between ordinary folks and elites. But what is an elite?" *CBC News,* July 1, 2019. https://www.cbc.ca/news/elites-canadians-politics-word-negative-1.5182816.

34. Dean Bennett, "Jason Kenney called Justin Trudeau an 'empty trust-fund millionaire' and he's not taking it back." *National Post*, May 17, 2018, https://nationalpost.com/news/politics/united-conservative-leader-criticized-after-calling-trudeau-empty-clueless.

35. "Friedman 19 // Using Social Media Effectively."

"Otawa," there is no room to discuss the Conservative Party's promises and what they may or may not mean for voters.

The Conservative Party doorknocker and its litany of spelling errors fit perfectly into the CPC's larger social media strategy of producing quick, viral content designed to ignite division between the parties and ingratiate their platform to potential voters of all stripes. Upon analyzing the previous political campaigns hosted by Topham Guerin and looking at the relationship between the Conservative Party of Canada and the "average voter," it becomes clear that the spelling errors were an intentional choice to try and control the digital conversation. While the Conservative Party of Canada did not win the 2021 Canadian election, the Australian Labour Party and the English Tory party won their elections using the same techniques. With at most four years before the next federal election, it will be critical for Canadians to become aware of the manipulative social media tactics used during the last election if there is any chance of the next election being open and honest.

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