**Communications Coordination by a Parliamentary Caucus Research Bureau:
MPs Parroting Government Messages on Twitter**

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Introduction

A structural design flaw with the parliamentary system is the entwinement of the executive branch of government with the legislative branch that is supposed to hold it to account.[1] Since the mid-20th century, political power has been accruing in the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) in Ottawa,[2] and a chorus of practitioners and observers of Canadian parliamentary politics have been voicing concern about the eroding influence and independence of Members of Parliament.[3] Increasingly, Canada's prime minister and senior political staff exert control over a caucus whose work as lawmakers competes with a torrent of constituency casework and who operate in a political environment where being critical of government policy is portrayed as being offside with a weak leader. Whereas open dissent is tolerated and even celebrated in other liberal democracies, in Canada the hint of rebellion from an independent-minded caucus member creates a media storm that fuels the leadership's interest in ensuring that all MPs publicly repeat key messages.

Canada is known for its strict party discipline.[4] For researchers of the Parliament of Canada, tabulating roll call votes on bills and motions has long been the standard proxy for party discipline and, by extension, for parliamentary group cohesion.[5] But in today's digital mediascape we need to also consider how the leadership fosters message discipline across all public forums, including on social media. Elsewhere, I have argued that Canada's MPs now have a third role in addition to legislator and caseworker: that of a brand ambassador who champions centralized messaging.[6] Others, including the Samara Centre for Democracy and political journalists, have made similar observations about MPs becoming scripted messengers.[7] Evidence is building that backbenchers on the government side of the House in particular have evolved from the trope of trained seals into party robots who are susceptible to becoming party mouthpieces. Message coordination among government-side MPs grew during the Prime Ministership of Stephen Harper,[8] and it has been further institutionalized under the government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau which emphasizes social media management.[9] Take for example the CBC News report in 2019 about two Liberal MPs posting almost verbatim heartfelt messages on social media after

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[1] For example Rhodes, Wanna and Weller (2009). But see also Dowding (2013).
[2] For example Savoie (1999); White (2005). But see Brodie (2018).
[3] de Clercy (2018); Docherty (1997); Godbout (2020); Koop, Bastedo and Blidook (2018); Loat and MacMillan (2014); Morden (2020); Mazereeuw (2021); Rathgeber (2014).
[4] Garner and Letki (2005); Kornberg (1996); Lemco (1988); Longley (1998); Malloy (2006).
[5] Chartash et al. (2020); Godbout (2020); Kam (2009); Overby, Tatalovich and Studlar (1998).
[6] Marland (2016); Marland (2019); Marland (2020); Marland and Wagner (2020).
[7] Loat and MacMillan (2014); Morden (2020); Thomas and Morden (2019).
[8] Among many sources, see for example Martin (2010); Marland (2016).
[9] Lalancette and Raynauld (2020).

International Women's Day to proclaim Trudeau as a strong feminist,[10] and later another Liberal MP alleging that she was denied being re-nominated as the party's candidate because she refused to participate in the online cheerleading.[11]

To what extent do MPs on the government side of the House parrot government messaging? I set about to investigate this further with the help of the James R. Mallory Research Grant for the Study of Parliament. The following research builds on findings presented in Chapter 8 in *Whipped: Party Discipline in Canada* (UBC Press, 2020) which discusses how caucus research bureaus provide MPs and their staff with messages for social media. Caucus research bureaus—officially known as national caucus research offices—are offices of political staff whose salaries are paid by Parliament using funds "under the direction" of participating MPs.[12] These parliamentary bureaus were created in the late 1960s in order to provide MPs with research support.[13] The bureaus employ political staff who report to a MP designated by the parliamentary group leader, although in practice they report to the leader's office as opposed to the caucus. In addition to offering assistance for private members' bills and other legislative supports, much of these bureaus' focus is on political communication, such as creating templates for householder newsletters or engaging in rapid response about what is said during Question Period. In *Whipped*, I explain that under the Trudeau government that the Liberal Research Bureau (LRB) acts as a message factory that distributes a stream of emails to coordinate messaging with MPs, taking to another level what the Conservative Caucus Research Bureau practiced under Harper. The LRB's text and static images can potentially be shared with a network of supporters to likewise repeat the message of the day, promote a government program or spending announcement, and so forth. A "please share" email encapsulates key messages about a topic that the government wants to proactively communicate, whereas a "daily issues briefing" email identifies topical issues in the news, identifies key messages, and asks MPs and their staff to redirect enquiries to a designated spokesperson. MPs and staff are encouraged to rephrase this messaging so that it appears to be authentic. They are also supplied with digital templates, dubbed "social media shareables." A "plug and play" template is a supplied graphic that has a designated area for the recipient to insert their own photograph (see Figure 8.2 in Whipped).[14] The LRB's efforts fulfil MPs' interest in content that can be easily posted on social media and assists them with raising public awareness of government news. But the use of a caucus research bureau to coordinate messaging also helps the

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[10] Simpson (2019).
[11] Fife and Leblanc (2019).
[12] Board of Internal Economy (2021), 69(1).
[13] Black (1972); Marland (2020), 204-210; Wilson (2020).
[14] Marland (2020), 215.

Prime Minister's Office (PMO), ministers' offices and the LRB to monitor and exert control over what individual MPs say (i.e., the executive branch holding power over the legislative branch). In opposition, bureaus also produce communications products and talking points however they have fewer resources and have their own parliamentary agenda to support.

Researching message repetition and consistency, along with the dampening of legislator's individualism, is a challenging exercise. Detecting the parroting of messages is difficult because politicians and their staff are motivated to avoid detection, in part because if they are caught they are mocked by critics and labelled as party sycophants. In this paper, I focus on a single aspect by setting out to identify examples of how social media shareables are used by Liberal MPs. This research reveals what is hidden in plain sight, and does not seek to confirm whether such templates are supplied by the caucus research bureau, by a minister's office or even if it originated with an MP's staffer. It is concerned only with visually documenting message coordination among government-side MPs, and not with opposition MPs, to further illustrate that government-side backbenchers have slipped into becoming government cheerleaders instead of openly holding the government to account.

Government-Side MPs' Use of Social Media Shareables

The following is not quite the research report that I imagined writing when I was awarded the Mallory Grant in November 2019, just four months before the coronavirus (COVID-19) disease was declared a global pandemic. I had planned to hire students to review Hansard Debates, election platforms and government-side MPs' tweets in order to discern repetition of messaging. With the onset of the pandemic, this was hampered by difficulties locating qualified students who were available to work, the abrupt change in what MPs were talking about and disruption to my work schedule. This meant that we had to look at older tweets and scuttle plans to collect data surrounding the 2020 federal budget that would end up being delayed for more than a year.

Using the Mallory Grant funds, I hired a research assistant to collect and save tweets from MPs in order to detect the existence or absence of identical phrasing and supplied messages. Vicinitas, a Twitter analytics website, allowed us to retrieve up to 3200 tweets from a specified account and save them in an Excel spreadsheet.[15] We looked at the coding process used by other scholars who have studied Twitter to determine that non-political tweets, such as an MP remarking on beautiful scenery in the constituency, needed to be deleted so that only political tweets, such as those remarking on government policy or federal programs, remained.[16] In early 2020, we began with a pre-test to sort out the best methodological

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[15] See https://www.vicinitas.io/free-tools/download-user-tweets
[16] For example, Russell et al. (2015).

route and understand the digital terrain. For this preliminary investigation, English-language[17] tweets were collected for a sample of eight Liberal MPs from Monday, January 27, to Friday, January 31, 2020 when the House of Commons was sitting. Vicinitas assigned each tweet a unique ID. The screen name, text and the day/time were recorded, as were the number of favourites, retweets, URLs, hashtags and mentions. The research assistant spent about 12 minutes per MP for this process, which included eliminating non-political tweets.

To identify centralized coordination, we need to look for parroting (saying the same thing in a coordinated fashion) rather than amplification (e.g., retweeting and retweets with comment). To what extent is the social media content that appears to be authored by politicians in fact messaging that was supplied by a central source? A researcher could look at all of the government's news releases on Day X and examine Liberal MP tweets on Day X, Y and Z to see if they mention the topic and if so to what extent are they parroting. Keeping the focus on news releases is defined, objective and replicable research. I planned on collecting Liberal MPs' tweets immediately surrounding the upcoming federal budget, scheduled to be delivered on March 30, 2020. Given that the government strives to focus all public attention on budget-related news during budget week, we should anticipate a higher number of tweets posted during budget week that would contain text in government news releases listed on the daily news section of the Government of Canada website. Examining these tweets would differentiate between amplification and parroting. Amplification would be automated and simple to classify; but identifying parroting would involve considerable manual labour and invoke researcher judgment (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Flowchart for Coding of MPs' Tweets to Detect Parroting

Credit: Ahmed Hassan

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[17] Only English content was examined due to the student research assistants' lack of familiarity with French.

Then, on March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared a global pandemic. Our plans to collect data had to adapt. In place of the concentrated parroting that we expected to surround the 2020 federal budget—which ended up being postponed until April 2021—now MPs were uniformly talking about COVID-19. Figure 2 illustrates the challenge of differentiating between central coordination and authentic commentary during a global health crisis.

Figure 2: Liberal MP Ryan Turnbull (Whitby) Retweeting Liberal MP Sven Spengemann (Mississauga--Lakeshore) on March 26, 2020

Source: Twitter account of MP Ryan Turnbull (@TurnbullWhitby)

This meant that we would have to turn to historical tweets. Monday, January 6, 2020 (the last day of Christmas for some observers) was selected as a pre-test to compare Liberal MPs' tweets with government news releases. The Liberal Party website listed 152 active Twitter accounts out of 157 Liberal MPs at the time.[18] Using the Twitter advanced search feature, the research assistant manually inspected those MPs' tweets from January 6 to 8. We can infer that the Liberal Research Bureau was inactive during this time, as were most political staff generally, as this was the first normal work week after the Christmas and New Year's holiday period – and as a result just 85 Liberal MPs (56% of those with a Twitter account) tweeted at least once during that three day period. Of the 178 political tweets that were captured, just four tweets referred to information from the government's news releases, all of which were on

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[18] See https://liberal.ca/your-liberal-mps/

different topics. We observed some thematic trends, such as climate change, but most of the posts concerned Christmas celebrations and localized matters.

The study timeframe establishes that early January is a dormant time for Canadian MPs' Twitter activity as compared to when Parliament is sitting and government news is rolling out, and that message coordination was not apparent. Many MPs shut their Parliament Hill office and their constituency offices for Christmas, and those staff who returned to work would be busy going through a backlog of correspondence that piled up. The political staff involved in generating social media shareables were likely still off work or just initiating their planning meetings and, in any event, they did not have much news to promote to an audience that was enjoying a post-holiday season glow. We should expect to see much more going on when Parliament is sitting and government operations are in full swing, particularly when the House is sitting. The pre-test also confirmed that identifying parroting is difficult because MPs and their staff reword supplied content whereas amplification simply reposts it. In the absence of text compare software that can accurately detect rephrasing the only option is manual review of thousands of individual tweets.

We pivoted to examining Government of Canada news releases and English-language Liberal MPs' tweets for Sunday, February 2 to Friday, February 7, 2020. Parliament was sitting that week, and the broader public environment was not yet consumed with news about the pandemic.[19] We planned to concentrate on text because documenting photos, memes or other visuals would be labour intensive, particularly as visual comparisons would be required. Our objective was to detect information from government news releases appearing in Liberal MPs' tweets. Speaker Anthony Rota was excluded on the assumption that his account would err on the side of political neutrality and distance from the Liberal government.

Initially, it was difficult and laborious to identify parroting. Many tweets featured content that was similar to government news releases, but it was often hard to discern what might have been coordinated. During the studied week in February, 840 tweets were collected from 124 Liberal MPs who posted content in English, of whom 27 MPs did not post any original content (16 MPs only retweeted and/or replied, while 11 MPs had no Twitter activity). Of the 97 Liberal MPs who posted English content, more than half of them (56 MPs) parroted information from a government news release at least once, with more than a tenth of tweets from these Liberal MPs (95 of 840 tweets) containing information from a government news release issued that week. The volume of parroting was highest on Monday and declined

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[19] There were some news reports about Canadians being quarantined who returned from Wuhan, China, where the novel coronavirus outbreak is believed to have originated. At that stage there were just four identified cases of COVID-19 in Canada (Blanchfield 2020).

each day throughout the week. Four topics were most often repeated: climate change (31 tweets), job opportunities created (28 tweets), the North American Free Trade Agreement (25 tweets) and dairy farmers (19 tweets).

On February 3, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was apparently the Liberal government's message of the day. Some tweets from Liberal MPs used identical images (Figure 3) which appear to constitute an example of the social media shareables supplied by the Liberal Research Bureau – and while it is possible these particular images were crafted by a minister's office they still constitute evidence of communications coordination. Other MPs posted their own content about the new NAFTA (Figure 4). A sign that this was coordinated is the appearance of the message that "#NAFTA safeguards more than $2 billion a day," or some such variation.

Figure 3: Liberal MPs' Use of Plug 'n Play Social Media Shareables: New NAFTA (Feb. 3, 2020)

Source: Twitter accounts of Minister Catherine McKenna (@cathmckenna), MP Darren Fisher (@DarrenFisherNS), Minister Ahmed Hussen (@HonAhmedHussen), Minister Melanie Joly (@melaniejoly), MP Arif Virani (@viraniarif)

Figure 4: Liberal MPs Celebrating Good News: New NAFTA (Feb. 3, 2020)

Source: Twitter accounts of MP Hedy Fry (@HedyFry), MP Jennifer O'Connell (@JenOConnell), MP Vance Badawey (@VBadawey)

That day, Liberal MPs also promoted research about plastic pollution (Figure 5). The use of static images appears to have had less uptake than the "plug and play" template that enables and MP or staffer to insert a photograph of the MP. The inclusion of the Canada wordmark in the bottom right corner raises a question about whether these were created by the LRB (which should not be using the government wordmark), by a minister's office or by a federal department.

Figure 5: Liberal MPs' Use of Social Media Shareables: Plastic Pollution (Feb. 6, 2020)

Source: Twitter accounts of MP Bob Bratina (@BobBratina), MP Julie Dabrusin (@juliedabrusin), MP Sean Casey (@SeanCaseyLPC)

Throughout the week, some Liberals tweeted about an internship program for youth to work in Liberal MPs' offices, ministers' offices, the PMO and the LRB (Figure 6). In at least one case, an MP used identical text as Prime Minister Trudeau's account did (Figure 7).

Figure 6: Liberal MPs' Use of Social Media Shareables: Summer Internship (Feb. 4-6, 2020)

Source: Twitter accounts of Minister Filomena Tassi (@FilomenaTassi), MP Hedy Fry (@HedyFry), Minister Mary Ng (@mary_ng), MP Neil Ellis (@NeilREllis), MP Salma Zahid (@SalmaZahid15)

Figure 7: PM Trudeau's Social Media Shareable: Summer Internship (Feb. 2 and 4, 2020)

Source: Twitter accounts of PM Justin Trudeau (@JustinTrudeau), MP Karen McCrimman (@karenmccrimmon)

Climate change was the main topic parroted from February 2 to 7, 2020. On February 6, some Liberal MPs tweeted social media sharables about the government's carbon tax (Figure 8). Other MPs tweeted about climate change to drive home the government's message, but eschewed supplied social media content and opted to promote news stories (Figure 9).

Figure 8: Liberal MPs' Use of Social Media Shareables: Climate Change (Feb. 6, 2020)
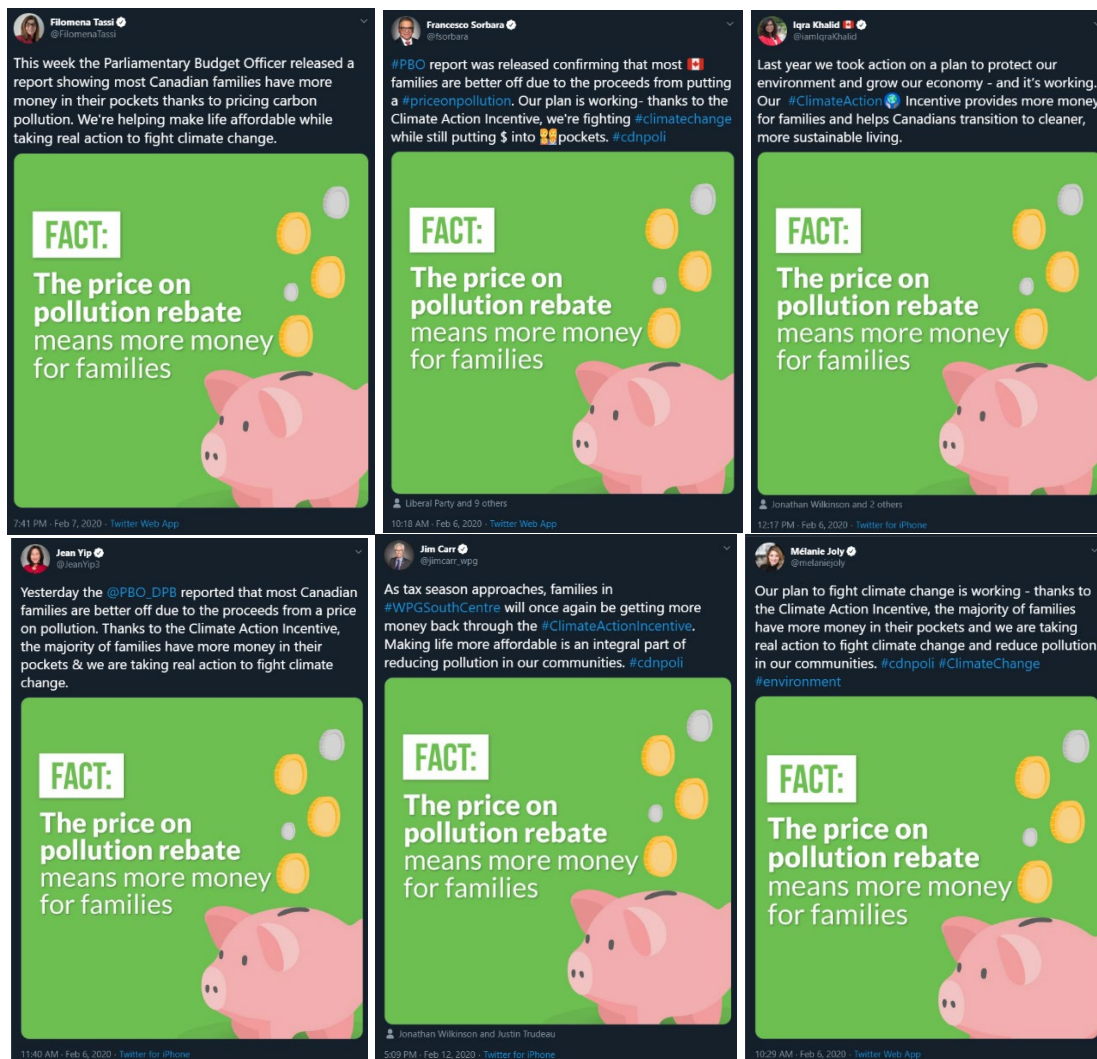
Source: Twitter accounts of Minister Filomena Tassi (@FilomenaTassi), Francesco Sorbara (@fsorbara), Iqra Khalid (@iamIqraKhalid), Jean Yip (@JeanYip3), MP Jim Carr (@jimcarr_wpg), Minister Mélanie Joly (@melaniejoly)

Figure 9: Liberal MPs Tweeting Good News Stories: Climate Change (Feb. 6, 2020)

Source: Twitter accounts of Minister Diane Lebouthillier (@DiLebouthillier), MP Iqra Khalid (@iamlqraKhalid), Minister Jonathan Wilkinson (@Jonathan@WNV)

Another government news item that was parroted during the studied week was the Labour Force Survey demonstrating that jobs had been created in the previous month. Several Liberal MPs used a gif that the Liberal Research Bureau likely supplied (Figure 10). Other MPs harnessed content possibly authored by the Liberal Party (Figure 11) or else promoted a news story on the topic (Figure 12).

**Figure 10: Liberal MPs' Use of Social Media Shareables: Labour Force Survey (Feb. 7, 2020)**

Source: Twitter accounts of Minister Carla Qualtrough (@CQualtro), MP Francesco Sorbara (@fsorbara), MP Judy Sgro (@JudySgroMP), MP Kamal Khera (KamalKheraLib), MP Mark Holland (@markhollandlib), Minister Patty Hajdu (@PattyHajdu), MP Randeep Sarai (@randeepssarai), MP Salma Zahid (@SalmaZahid15), Minister Seamus O'Regan (@SeamusORegan), Tony Van Bymen (@TonyVanBymen)

Figure 12: Liberal MPs Celebrating Positive News: Labour Force Survey (Feb. 7, 2020)

Source: Twitter accounts of MP Jennifer O'Connell (@JenOConnell_), MP Terry Duguid (@TerryDuguid)

Figure 11: Liberal MPs Tweeting Good News Stories: Labour Force Survey (Feb. 7, 2020)
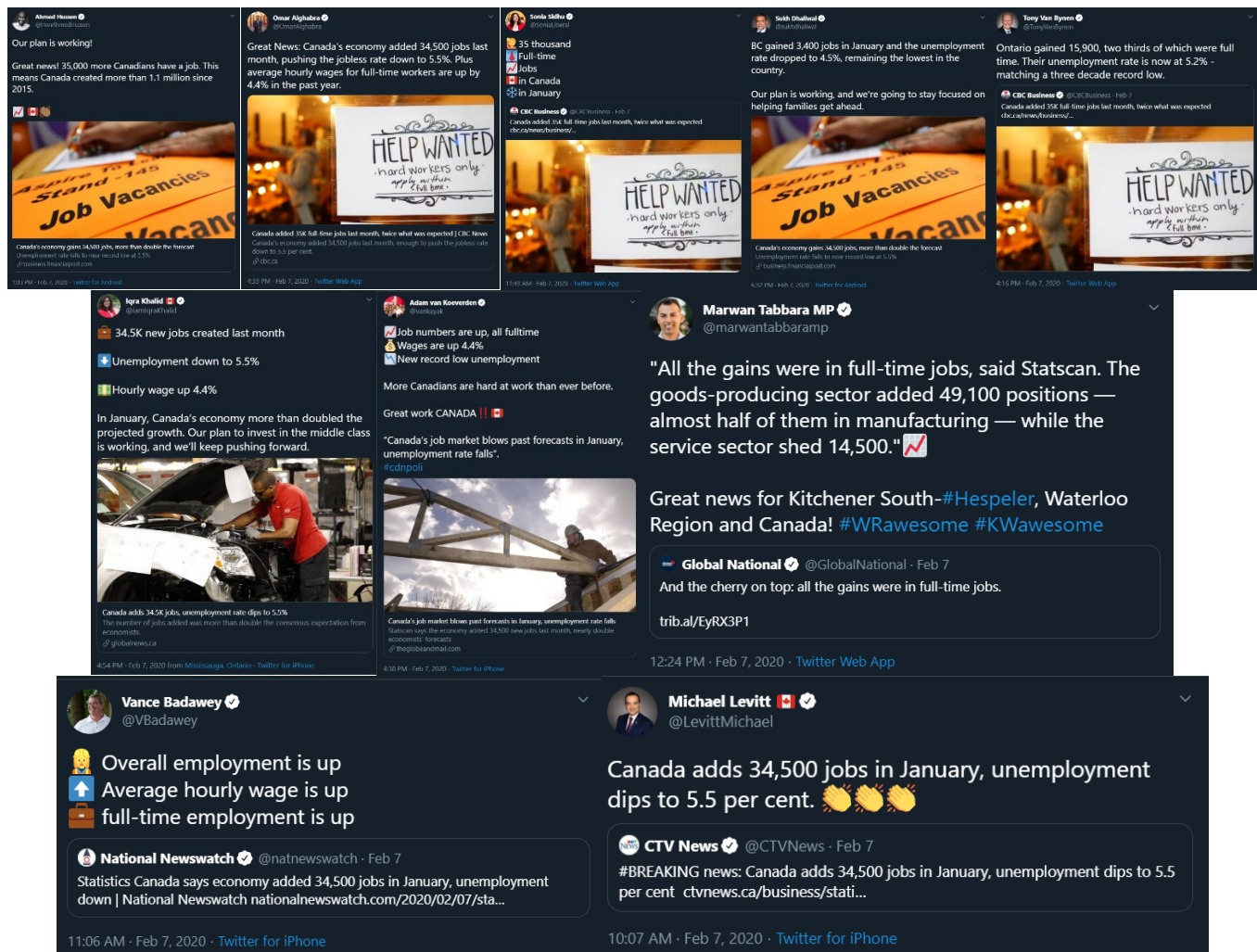
Source: Twitter accounts of Minister Ahmed Hussen (@HonAhmedHussen), MP Omar Alghabra (@OmarAlghabra), MP Sonia Sidhu (@SoniaLiberal), MP Sukh Dhaliwal (@sukhdaliwal), MP Tony Van Bynen (@TonyVanBynen), MP Iqra Khalid (@iamIqraKhalid), MP Adam van Koeverden (@vankayak), MP Marwan Tabbara (@marwantabbaramp), MP Vance Badawey (@VBadawey), MP Michael Levitt (@LevittMichael)

Discussion and Future Research

Governments need to get their messages out to parliamentarians, journalists, stakeholders and the public. Social media is an excellent vehicle for communicating information because of its negligible expense compared with advertising, instant nature and the ability for users to share content with others. It is also an established practice that caucus research bureaus provide offices of Members of Parliament with coordinated content and professionally designed materials, including letters to the editor, talking points for media interviews, print advertising mock-ups, speaking notes and newsletter templates. Generating these materials require personnel to generate the content, translate it and professionally design it. At issue is whether public funds appropriated to the House of Commons should be used for this quasi-partisan purpose, and to what extent it contributes to individual MPs—particularly government-side

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backbenchers—losing their authenticity, independence and agency to question government decisions. Is it reasonable that a parliamentary "research" office routinely creates social media content for government-side MPs to publicize the government? It is up to the Board of Internal Economy to decide. That committee of MPs, chaired by the Speaker, makes regulations about how MPs use House of Commons funds "for the carrying out of parliamentary functions."[20] It would seem that the Board is implicitly satisfied that the communications activities of the governing party's caucus research bureau, as well as those of opposition bureaus, meet the standard of performing a "parliamentary function" given that the Board defines that term to mean "the duties and activities that relate to the position of Member, wherever performed and whether or not performed in a partisan manner, namely, participation in activities relating to the proceedings and work of the House of Commons and activities undertaken in representing his or her constituency or constituents."[21]

Future research could look for scripting and parroting in the Hansard record of parliamentary debates. This could build on two other attempts at locating message coordination that I pursued with the help of the Mallory Grant. First, I engaged some other scholars and hired a student to look at Elections Canada donation records for MPs to see if we could establish a correlation between a history of personal donations to a party (including donations prior to winning the party nomination) and the MP's party loyalty. We investigated cross-referencing this with each MP's voting records and the MP's remarks in the House of Commons on a random sample of bills and motions. Donations and voting would be a proxy for strength of party allegiance. This avenue proved unwieldy due to the volume of cases, and was abandoned. Second, in collaboration with Feodor Snagovsky (University of Alberta), the Mallory Grant supported the hiring of multiple students to collect householders generated during the pandemic to look for message parroting. Those findings will be submitted to an academic journal soon.

In the early 1990s, the Canadian Study of Parliament group sponsored a panel that discussed whether party discipline should be loosened.[22] Decades later, party discipline has morphed into message discipline. This exploratory study has shown how government-side MPs avail of messaging and graphics that are (likely) supplied by a caucus research bureau that reports to the prime minister and from a body whose original remit was to provide MPs with research support. In addition to increasing our comprehension about party cohesion and message discipline in Canada, avenues have been identified for further research about the work of political staff, particularly those who are funded by the legislative branch and who work in tandem with the executive branch.

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[20] 52.6(1) in Parliament of Canada Act (1985),
[21] See "Interpretation" in Internal Board of Economy (2021).
[22] Glauser (1993).

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