



# Debunking the “Mass Grave Hoax”: A Report on Media Coverage and Residential School Denialism in Canada

By Reid Gerbrandt and Sean Carleton



## **Content warning**

**This report relates to Indian Residential Schools and its content may be disturbing or triggering for readers.**

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## Photo Credits & Captions

### Cover page

*A rock with the message “Every Child Matters” painted on it sits at a memorial outside the former Kamloops Indian Residential School, in Kamloops, B.C., on Thursday, July 15, 2021. THE CANADIAN PRESS/Darryl Dyck*

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*Cutouts of orange t-shirts are hung on a fence outside the former Kamloops Indian Residential School, in Kamloops, B.C., on Thursday, July 15, 2021. THE CANADIAN PRESS/Darryl Dyck*

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*People attend the second annual Orange Shirt Day Survivors Walk and Pow Wow on National Day for Truth and Reconciliation in Winnipeg, Friday, September 30, 2022. THE CANADIAN PRESS/John Woods*

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## Introduction

In the two years since the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation's 2021 announcement about the location of 215 potential unmarked graves at the former Kamloops Indian Residential School, a number of priests, pundits, and politicians have downplayed and questioned the validity of the findings. Some have declared the news of potential unmarked graves at many former residential school sites across Canada to be a “huge lie” (Zoledziowski, 2021). Others insist that mainstream media, the federal government, and First Nations have conspired to create a “hoax” by misrepresenting the news of potential unmarked burials sites as a “mass grave” to shock and guilt Canadians into caring about Indigenous Peoples and reconciliation (*The Canadian Mass Grave Hoax*, 2021). Erroneous accounts of “mass graves,” which one pundit claims were reported “almost universally,” are said to be directly responsible for church burnings in the summer of 2021 and for sending Canadians into “paroxysms of shame, guilt and rage” (Glavin, 2022; *The Canadian Mass Grave Hoax*, 2021). Despite church and state archival records already confirming the deaths of more than 4000 Indigenous children at residential schools (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015), many people – in Canada and internationally – are accepting and promoting the “mass grave hoax” narrative, with some even suggesting that the whole thing is a “fake news story” (*The Canadian Mass Grave Hoax*, 2021; Kennedy, 2022; *Kamloops: The Buried Truth*, 2022; Sky News Australia; Walsh, 2023).

Given the growing popularity of the “mass grave hoax” narrative, especially on the far-right in Canada and the United States, and recent calls for

Canadians to take responsibility for countering such harmful misinformation (Office of the Special Interlocutor, 2023), we – as academic researchers – decided to investigate the claims of a media conspiracy and fact-check them against the evidence of what was actually reported in Canada. What did Canadian journalists report in the immediate aftermath of the Kamloops announcement? To answer this question, we conducted a study that analyzed 386 news articles across 5 Canadian mainstream media outlets (CBC, *National Post*, *Globe and Mail*, *Toronto Star*, and *The Canadian Press*) released between May 27 and October 15, 2021. This report outlines our findings and recommendations.

## Key Findings

Overall, our major finding is that a foundational claim of the “mass grave hoax” narrative – that all mainstream media reported the findings as “mass graves” – is not supported by the evidence. The “mass grave hoax” is more myth than truth. Myths, however, are not pure fiction; they often contain a kernel of truth that is exaggerated or misrepresented (Francis, 1997; Starblanket and Hunt, 2020). This selective representation of evidence is commonly referred to by experts as cherry-picking (Lester, 2023), and it is easy to see how the “mass grave hoax” narrative utilizes this strategy.

Of the 386 articles examined in this study, the majority, 251 (65%), reported accurately on stories related to the location of potential unmarked graves in Canada between May 27 and October 15, 2021. It is true that a minority, 135 articles (35%), contained some level of inaccurate reporting; however, many of the detected inaccuracies were corrected over

time as is common practice in the journalism industry. Moreover, of the 135 articles containing inaccuracies, only 25 – just 6.5% of total articles – referred to the findings as “mass graves,” with most of the articles appearing in a short window of time and some actually using the term correctly in the hypothetical sense (e.g. mass graves that may be found). That means that 93.5% of articles released in the spring, summer, and fall of 2021 did not report the findings as being “mass graves,” as some suggest was “almost universally” done (Glavin, 2022).

We thus conclude that the “mass grave hoax” narrative hinges on a misrepresentation of how Canadian journalists actually reported on the identification of potential unmarked graves at

former residential school sites during the spring, summer, and fall of 2021. Those spreading the hoax narrative are engaging – intentionally or unintentionally – in a strategy of cherry-picking, of suppressing or distorting evidence to confirm a preconceived position (i.e. the existence of a “mass grave hoax”). Based on our findings, we recommend that the “mass grave hoax” narrative be understood as an expression of residential school denialism. Denialist discourse, in this case taking the form of the “mass grave hoax” narrative, attempts to minimize or distort basic facts about residential schooling and its legacy to shake public confidence in truth and reconciliation and protect the colonial status quo against a reckoning related to Canada’s genocidal treatment of Indigenous Peoples (Justice and Carleton, 2021).



*Cutouts of orange t-shirts are hung on a fence outside the former Kamloops Indian Residential School, in Kamloops, B.C., on Thursday, July 15, 2021. THE CANADIAN PRESS/Darryl Dyck*

Indigenous communities have identified this discourse as “dangerous” and a key barrier to meaningful reconciliation (Office of the Special Interlocutor, 2023).

## Methodology

To determine the media narrative in Canada, we selected 5 mainstream media outlets for analysis: CBC, *National Post*, *The Globe and Mail*, *Toronto Star*, and The Canadian Press. We examined articles published between May 27 to October 15, 2021. These dates were chosen to correspond to the news cycle between the May 27 announcement by the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation and October 15, which is two weeks after the first National Day for Truth and Reconciliation on September 30, 2021. News coverage of the ongoing searches at many former residential school sites across Canada continues, but focusing on the media narrative from the spring, summer, and fall of 2021 is necessary to investigate the foundation of the “mass grave hoax” narrative, which is the extent of “mass grave” media errors during that initial news cycle.

What followed was a search for relevant news articles posted on the selected media outlets’ websites as well as the online ProQuest database portal through the University of Manitoba library. To identify articles relevant to the study, we used a word search that included key phrases such as “mass graves,” “unmarked graves,” “residential schools,” “Kamloops residential school” and “Cowessess residential school.” The next step was an extensive media and historical discourse analysis of the articles that appeared in the search engines.

Methods of historical discourse analysis are important to this study because the results can challenge the false reality that some people or groups try to create in order to maintain a desired status quo (Reisigl and Wodak, 2001; Jørgensen and Philips, 2002). In the case of potential unmarked graves at former residential schools, some people argue that media, government, and First Nations are purposefully misreporting the issue for political or ideological reasons. An

analysis of the articles collected disproves such a notion, demonstrating — with evidence — how the language used by some journalists was mostly correct in the majority of articles. In terms of the minority of articles that contained inaccuracies, analysis suggests that these can be understood as limited factual errors, which are a normal part of the journalism industry and not, as is suggested by some, a cover-up designed to destroy Canada and justify an attack on Christianity (*The Canadian Mass Grave Hoax*, 2021; Walsh, 2023).

It is important to first acknowledge the journalistic process and explain how and why media errors sometime occur. According to journalism scholar Dan Berkowitz, even when news stories on events such as disasters break, a “good journalist” must cover the story quickly but correctly, knowing how to identify and present the proper information (Berkowitz, 2005: 211). Even though journalism, unlike other professions, does not have a “predetermined” approach, a good journalist will know the proper processes for handling such cases and taking care not to introduce error (ibid.: 211). That said, factual errors by journalists and media outlets are not uncommon, especially in the rush to report on a developing story outside of a reporter’s area of expertise. CBC editor in chief Brodie Fenlon acknowledged as much: “Though we try hard, we make mistakes and on occasion, fail to live up to our high standards” (Fenlon, 2023).

The danger is that media errors, while a normal part of the journalistic process, can easily be cherry-picked by those looking to create conspiracy theories to understand — or distort — major events. Media scholars have used the immediate aftermath of the 2012 mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in the United States as an example of how media mistakes can fuel misinformation and disinformation. In the Sandy Hook case, insufficient information from public officials along with the initial haste to report on a developing story led to factual errors in some of the initial media accounts of the shooting (Berkowitz and Liu, 2016). As more details surfaced, these errors were quickly corrected. When conspiracy theorists tried to spin the errors as proof of a government plot

to introduce stricter gun laws and regulations, journalists quickly came to the media's defense: "It wasn't a conspiracy at Sandy Hook Elementary; it was honest human error. Law enforcement sources told journalists things that turned out to be inaccurate... The mistakes were corrected" (Hiaasen, 2013). While ideally avoided, errors need to be understood as part of the journalism industry, as should the efforts made by journalists to correct inaccuracies over time to get the story right and properly inform the public.

In terms of investigating the claims of a "mass grave hoax" relating to residential schools in Canada, our analysis of collected articles involved two stages. The first was to determine if an article was relevant to the study. Not all articles had potential unmarked graves as the central issue of the story. However, if an article only mentioned potential unmarked graves in passing, and even if it was about certain issues concerning Indigenous Peoples, these pieces were removed from the sample. To be considered relevant, the articles had to focus on the discovery of possible unmarked graves or the reckoning that was taking place across Canada during that period, and they had to mention potential unmarked graves consistently. Adjacent topics included the toppling of statues of prominent figures connected to residential schooling; discussions of Canada Day 2021; church burnings and vandalism taking place across Canada; and the first National Day for Truth and Reconciliation.

The second part of the analysis was to determine how the articles reported on the location of potential graves at residential school sites. Our questions included: did journalists refer to the findings as "mass graves" where "bodies were discovered" or "unmarked graves" with "potential remains?" How did journalists describe ground-penetrating radar (GPR) and its purposes? Were articles accurate when reporting on the announcements made by the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation or by the Cowessess First Nation in May and June 2021? The articles were initially grouped as "accurate articles" and "articles containing inaccuracies," followed by a further examination of the articles containing

inaccuracies to better determine what errors journalists made and the extent of the mistakes.

In total, the sample size of relevant articles published between May 27 and October 15, 2021 was 386: CBC (97); *National Post* (71); *The Globe and Mail* (70); *Toronto Star* (69); The Canadian Press (79). One important note about the sample is that The Canadian Press, unlike other media outlets, has no business to consumer mandate. The Canadian Press distributes articles and press releases to Canadian media outlets, including the other four outlets in this study. Outlets that subscribe to The Canadian Press are granted licence rights to their content. This gives The Canadian Press a distinct advantage, as their stories can reach a wide range of Canadians, regardless of which media outlet people normally get their news from. Given the potential for these stories to be seen by and influence readers across the different outlets, we chose to include The Canadian Press in the study.

## Position Statement

As non-Indigenous scholars, it is important to acknowledge our position in this research (Kovach, 2021). We do not represent or speak for Indigenous Peoples. We are both white, male, Canadian academics at the University of Manitoba with expertise in genocide studies and residential school history respectively. In taking the calls of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada seriously, we understand that reconciliation is not an Indigenous burden but a Canadian responsibility (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Moreover, we acknowledge the call made by Kimberly Murray, the independent special interlocutor for missing children and unmarked graves and burial sites associated with Indian Residential Schools, for non-Indigenous peoples to take responsibility for identifying and confronting residential school denialism to support IRS Survivors and truth and reconciliation efforts (Office of the Special Interlocutor, 2023). As such, we are engaging in this research to help Canadians understand the truth about media coverage of the ongoing searches for potential unmarked graves at former

residential school sites across Canada as part of the process of putting truth before reconciliation. We also acknowledge our position as learners in relation to the searches being undertaken by many First Nations. For example, in a social media post one author (Carleton) mistakenly referred to the Cowessess announcement in June 2021 as being about an “unmarked mass grave.” The post was deleted after understanding Chief Cadmus Delorme’s clarification that what was located was a large number of potential unmarked graves. Based on this experience, Carleton has worked to help Canadians avoid further inaccuracies and to see how denialists cherry-pick and misrepresent mistakes to introduce disinformation and generate backlash that negatively affects Indigenous Peoples (Sinclair and Carleton, 2023).

## Results

Overall, the major finding of our research is that the foundation of the “mass grave hoax” narrative in Canada is not supported by the evidence. Of the 386 articles examined, the majority, 251 (65%) reported correctly on news related to the location of potential unmarked graves in Canada between May 27 and October 15, 2021. It is true that some articles, 135 articles (35%), contained some level of inaccuracy. The breakdown of articles containing inaccuracies posted by each media outlet is as follows: CBC: 21 (21.6% of all CBC articles, 5.4% of all articles studied); *National Post*: 24 (33.8% of all *Post* articles, 6.2% of all articles studied); *The Globe and Mail*: 34 (48.6% of all *Globe* articles, 8.8% of all articles studied); *Toronto Star*: 45 (65.7% of all *Star* articles, 11.6% of all articles studied); The Canadian Press: 11 (13.9% of all Press articles, 2.8% of all articles studied). It is important to further examine the mistakes some journalists made for two reasons. First, revealing that journalists made some errors in their reports but not to the extent claimed by those insisting there is a “mass grave hoax” debunks conspiratorial talking points suggesting that the media, governments, and First Nations are deliberately lying to mislead the Canadian public. Second, such an analysis can assist journalists in reporting on this ongoing news story to avoid

contributing to public confusion and fueling residential school denialism.

## “The Mass Grave Hoax”

Writers advancing the “mass grave hoax” narrative argue that mainstream media “almost universally” reported the news of First Nations locating potential unmarked graves as the discovery of “mass graves” (Glavin, 2022). The findings from this research, however, disprove this claim. Of the 135 articles that contained inaccuracies, only 25 referred to the discoveries as “mass graves.” When compared to the 386 total articles examined for this study, this number represents just 6.5%. Put another way, the vast majority of articles, 93.5%, did not report on the discoveries as being “mass graves.” Moreover, only 3 articles were found to include the words “mass grave” in the title (Levitz, 2021; Yousif, 2021; Elghawaby, 2021). These numbers do not add up to a universal error, nor do they constitute evidence of a cover-up or conspiracy to mislead the public.

Per media outlet, the breakdown of articles that included the words “mass graves” are as follows: CBC (8); *National Post* (1); *Globe and Mail* (6); *Toronto Star* (9); The Canadian Press (1). Of the 25 articles that describe the findings as “mass graves,” 13 consisted of journalists quoting other people calling these discoveries “mass graves,” not the authors themselves. This represents 52% of the articles that included the words “mass graves.” This was not the case for the *National Post*, as the 1 article that used “mass grave” was by the reporter (Ivison, 2021). In the *Globe and Mail*, 4 of its 6 articles used quotes that referred to potential unmarked graves as “mass graves.” Of the 25 articles, 3 used the phrase “mass graves” outside the context of the Kamloops announcement. 1 mentioned that Indigenous leaders asked Ottawa to create laws that prohibited the destruction of, or interfering with, “mass graves” (Kirkup and Hager, 2021a), which still could be located in Canada at the sites of former residential schools. Another article suggested that every former school site needs to be searched for “mass graves” (White et al., 2021).



The *Toronto Star*, CBC, and The Canadian Press also released articles that quoted people using the words “mass graves.” In one *Toronto Star* article, the author used a quote from Mississauga mayor Bonnie Crombie referring to the findings as “mass graves” (Moon, 2021). Similarly, of the 8 CBC articles that used the words “mass graves,” 7 used quotes from interviewees. In the one Canadian Press article that referred to the Kamloops findings as “mass graves,” the author had quoted someone but followed up by describing the Marieval findings as “what are believed to be 751 unmarked graves” (McCarten, 2021).

While some of these authors did correctly refer to the discoveries as potential unmarked graves, they still included errors, such as the words “mass graves,” that could cause potential confusion. The Canadian public might not understand the difference between an “unmarked grave” and a “mass grave,” so when both show up in the same article without context and clarification, it is understandable if some people have further questions. However, to conclude that mainstream media in Canada “almost universally” referred to these discoveries as “mass graves” is incorrect (Glavin, 2022). Further, additional analysis shows that initial mistakes made by journalists were mostly corrected in future reports by reporters and Indigenous communities.

## Additional Inaccuracies

There is overlap between the articles discussed in this section and the previous section because some of the articles that included the words “mass graves” contained additional inaccuracies. In total, additional inaccuracies were found in 120 (31.1%) of the total articles studied. When analyzing only the articles that included this group of errors, including those using the words “mass graves,” this represents 88.9% of the 135 articles. This shows that these errors were more common than the “mass grave” error that people have used to create the “mass grave hoax” narrative.

Three common errors were identified in our analysis. The first was reports suggesting that Indigenous Nations had recovered bodies from

the former residential school sites, with a particular error in phraseology being that the “remains of 215 children were discovered” from the Kamloops site (Davis, 2021). This error was found in all 120 (31.1%) articles that contained errors other than the words “mass graves.” This is incorrect; none of the sites were exhumed in 2021, so all of the anomalies detected at that point had not been confirmed to be remains. Instead, they are potential unmarked burials, and First Nations are in the process of determining next steps based on community consultation.

The second common error was that the Tk’emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation, and specifically Kukpi7 (Chief) Rosanne Casimir, announced that they had discovered 215 bodies at the former Kamloops site. For example, one *Globe and Mail* article stated: “Kukpi7 (Chief) Rosanne Casimir said last week that preliminary findings of a search with ground-penetrating radar discovered the remains of 215 children at the site of the Kamloops Indian Residential School” (Kirkup and Hager, 2021b). This same phraseology was found in 37 articles, 9.6% of all articles, and 27.4% of the articles that contain inaccuracies. This is an error because the Nation announced that preliminary findings of a GPR survey detected what they believed to be the remains of an estimated 215 children, confirming prior community knowledge. It is true that the initial Tk’emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation press release stated that, “with the help of a ground penetrating radar specialist, the stark truth of the preliminary findings came to light – the confirmation of the remains of 215 children who were students at [sic] the Kamloops Indian Residential School” (Tk’emlúps, 2021). However, this same report also stated that the search was “still developing” (ibid.), and early media reports did indicate that a few days after the May 27 announcement the Nation “clarified their statement to say the survey had identified what is believed to be unmarked burial sites” (CBC, 2021b).

The third error we identified is that ground-penetrating radar (GPR) “uncovered remains” or “showed the remains” underneath the earth (Platt, 2021). This error was found in 22 articles, 5.7% of all articles, and represents 16.3% of the articles that contain inaccuracies. These articles

gave the wrong impression of how GPR works. GPR is a technology that detects anomalies and soil disturbances, or “turned soil” as some experts describe it, but does not provide an image of organic matter (Gollum, 2021). One of the lead experts that uses this technology to help Indigenous communities with their searches, Kisha Supernant, explained that Nations need to be careful about relying solely on GPR results: “At best, ground-penetrating radar can find anomalies in the ground that look grave shaped, based on interpretations of results from scans. In some cases, such as in unmarked sections of historic cemeteries, these are likely to be graves. In other cases it is less clear. In all cases, further investigation is warranted” (Supernant, 2022).

These three additional inaccuracies can be further broken down and examined by media outlet. An important note here is that the total error percentages presented below by outlet includes articles that included the “mass grave” error.

For the CBC, 15 articles were found to include additional errors. This represents 71.4% of the total CBC articles that contained inaccuracies, 15.5% of total CBC articles, and 3.9% of all articles studied. The most common error this outlet made was stating that 215 bodies or remains had been “discovered” at the former Kamloops site (Dickson, 2021). This was found in all 15 articles that contained additional errors. Another common error was that the Tk’emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation announced that “the bodies of the 215 children were discovered” (CBC, 2021a). This was found in 13 articles (61.9% CBC errors, 13.4% CBC articles, 3.4% total articles). A third common error, was that GPR “uncovered the remains of 215 children” (Hampshire, 2021). This error was detected in 5 articles (23.8% CBC errors, 5.15% CBC articles, 1.3% total articles).

While the *National Post* had a slightly smaller sample size, its numbers indicate more errors were made overall. Errors other than using the words “mass graves” were found in 23 other articles, representing 95.8% of *Post* errors, 32.4% of the total *Post* articles, and 6.2% of all articles studied. The most common error these articles made was using statements such as “the

discovery of the remains of 215 children, buried in unmarked graves at the Kamloops residential school” (Kheiriddin, 2021). Like the CBC, this was found in all 23 articles that contained additional errors. The second was that “ground-penetrating radar showed the remains of an estimated 215 children” (Tumilty, 2021b). This was detected in 3 articles (12.5% *Post* errors, 4.2% total *Post* articles, 0.8% all articles studied). The third error was that the “Tk’emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation announced... that ground penetrating radar had [un]covered the remains” of 215 children (Tumilty, 2021a). This was found in 3 articles (14.3% *Post* errors, 4.2% of total *Post* articles, 0.8% all articles studied).

*The Globe and Mail* was close to an even split of articles that contained no errors and those containing inaccuracies of some kind. The 34 articles that got some aspects of the reporting incorrect, which includes 6 articles that referred to unmarked graves as “mass graves,” represents 48.6% of total *Globe* articles examined. However, this number only represents 8.8% of all articles analyzed in this study. In total, 30 articles contained inaccuracies other than using the words “mass graves,” representing 88.2% of *Globe* errors, 42.85% of total *Globe* articles, and 7.8% of all articles studied. Once again, the most common error was referring to “the discovery of 215 children’s remains” (Woo and Jones, 2021). This was found in all 30 articles that contained additional errors. The second was that the “Tk’emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation announced that the bodies of 215 children were found in unmarked graves” (Walsh, 2021). This was included in 8 articles (23.5% *Globe* errors, 11.4% total *Globe* articles, 2.1% all articles studied). The least common error was that “ground-penetrating radar had revealed the remains of 215 children” (Kirkup, 2021), which was found in 4 articles (11.8% *Globe* errors, 5.7% total *Globe* articles, 1% all articles studied).

The *Toronto Star* was the only media outlet that posted more articles containing inaccuracies than not. The 45 articles that contained errors represents 65.2% of all *Star* articles studied. Inaccurate articles that did not include the “mass grave” error amounted to 41, representing 91.1%

of all *Star* errors, 59.4% of total *Star* articles, and 10.6% of all articles studied. The most common error was that reporters called this the “discovery of 215 children’s remains in an unmarked burial site” (Quan, 2021). This was found in all 41 articles mentioned above. One article for this group went beyond the initial Kamloops discovery and stated that the “graves of more than 1,300 children who died at residential schools have been recovered” (Levitz, 2021b). The second most common error was statements such as: “announcement by the Tk’emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation that the remains of 215 children had been found” (McKeen, 2021b), which was found in 10 articles (22.2% *Star* errors, 14.5% total *Star* articles, 2.6% all articles studied). The error of “ground-penetrating radar technology had been able to confirm the remains of the [215] children” (McKeen, 2021a) was found in 5 articles (11.1% *Star* errors, 7.2% total *Star* articles, 1.3% all articles studied).

The Canadian Press published more accurate articles than articles containing inaccuracies. 11 articles from this outlet were found to contain additional errors, including 1 article that used the words “mass graves.” The most common error was declaring that the remains of 215 children were discovered (Alhmidi, 2021). This was found in all 11 Press articles that contained errors. The second most common error was that GPR “allowed for a true accounting of the missing children” (Germano, 2021). This error was found in 5 articles (45.45% Press errors, 6.3% all Press articles, and 1.3% all articles studied). The third most common error was that the Tk’emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation had located the remains of more than 200 children (Owen, 2021). This was found in 3 articles (27.3% Press errors, 3.8% all Press articles, and 0.8% all articles studied).

## Mistakes over Time

It is important to note that many of the errors across the 5 outlets were clustered around a small range of dates and then became more sporadic over time. 112 of the 135 articles across the 5 media outlets that contained inaccuracies were published between May 27 and June 30, 2021. This represents 83% of total media errors and 29%

of all articles that were used for this study. The remaining 23 articles that included inaccuracies were released between July 1 and October 15, 2021. This represents 17% of all errors and 5.95% of all articles that were studied.

The outlet that topped the list was the *Toronto Star*, which posted 35 articles between May 27 and June 30 that contained inaccuracies. This represents 77.8% of *Star* errors, 50.7% of the total *Star* articles, and 9.1% of all the articles that were studied. In contrast, the remaining 10 articles were released after July 1. This represents 22.2% of the *Star* errors, 14.5% of the total *Star* articles used, and 2.6% of all articles used for this study.

*The Globe and Mail* is second, posting 30 articles that contained inaccuracies between May 27 and June 30. This represents 88.2% of the *Globe* errors, 42.85% of the total *Globe* articles, and 7.8% of all articles studied. The remaining 4 of the outlet’s articles containing inaccuracies were released after July 1, representing 11.8% of the *Globe* errors, 5.7% of the total *Globe* articles, and 1% of all articles studied.

The *National Post*, which posted almost all of its inaccurate articles between May 27 and June 30, is third. They released 19 articles containing inaccuracies during this period, representing 79.2% of *Post* errors, 26.8% of total *Post* articles, and 4.9% of all articles studied. The remaining 5 were released after July 1, which represents 20.8% of *Post* errors, 7% of the total *Post* articles, and 1.3% of all articles studied.

The CBC posted 18 articles that contained inaccuracies of some kind between May 27 and June 30. This represents 85.7% of CBC errors, 18.55% of the total CBC articles, and 4.7% of all articles studied. Only 3 inaccurate articles were released after July 1, representing 14.3% of CBC errors, 3.1% of the total CBC articles, and 0.8% of all articles studied.

Almost all of the articles released by The Canadian Press containing inaccuracies were released between May 27 and June 30. During this period, the outlet released 10 articles, representing 90.9% of Press errors, 12.65% of all Press articles, and

2.6% of all articles studied. Only 1 inaccurate article was released between July 1 and October 15, representing 9.1% of Press errors, 1.3% of all Press articles, and 0.3% of all articles studied. One final set of statistics concerns how many articles that included the words “mass graves” were found between May 27 and June 30, 2021. Of the 25 articles that included the words “mass graves,” 19 (76% of “mass graves” articles) were published during that initial time period. However, this number represents only 17% of the 112 articles containing inaccuracies released between May 27 and June 30. This is important because some cite the “mass grave” error as being almost universal in the immediate weeks after the Kamloops announcement. Though one writer confirmed that, “In the following weeks, while the term ‘mass graves’ generally gave way to ‘unmarked graves...’” their article gives the impression that this was the main error made immediately following the announcement (Glavin, 2022). This claim is not supported by the evidence.

The statistics examined in this section are also important because they show that a change occurred around the end of June 2021 that resulted in fewer articles with inaccuracies overall, confirming the idea that journalists correct inaccuracies over time as part of their professional practice and as more information becomes available.

## Media Accuracy

Despite the inaccuracies discussed in the previous section, it is important to underscore the finding that 251 articles, or 65%, were accurate in their reporting on the news of potential unmarked graves at former residential school sites. This challenges the notion that there was a universal “mass grave hoax” pushed by mainstream media, the federal government, and First Nations to mislead the public. The breakdown for the extent that each outlet had accurate reportage is: CBC (76; 78.35% of CBC articles, 30.3% of all accurate articles, 19.7% all articles studied); The Canadian Press (68; 86.1% of all Press articles, 27.1% of all accurate articles, 17.6% of all articles

studied); *National Post* (47; 66.2% of *Post* articles, 18.7% of all accurate articles, 12.2% all articles studied); *The Globe and Mail* (36; 51.4% of all *Globe* articles, 14.3% of all accurate articles, 9.3% all articles studied); *Toronto Star* (24; 34.3% of all *Star* articles, 9.6% of all accurate articles, 6.2% all articles studied). While the percentages vary, 4 out of 5 media outlets posted more accurate articles than articles containing inaccuracies. It is true that the *Toronto Star* posted more articles containing inaccuracies (65.2%) than accurate articles. However, 1 media outlet does not represent all media, and the preceding analysis shows how even the errors made by the *Star* do not confirm the existence of a “mass grave hoax.”

There are several ways to examine accurate reporting and the results are a testament to the hard work that many journalists put into their reports about potential unmarked graves at former residential schools. One way to examine accurate reporting is to look back at the cluster of articles containing inaccuracies that were posted between May 27 and June 30. Along with the 112 articles containing inaccuracies that were published during that timeframe, 136 accurate ones were also posted. Taken together, this represents 248 articles. While 45.2% contained inaccuracies of some kind, 54.8% were accurate, meaning that a majority of journalists were giving correct reports on the news of potential unmarked graves in the initial period. To put this in context, the remaining 138 of 386 articles were posted between July 1 and October 15. 115 (83.3%) of these articles were accurate while just 23 (16.7%) were inaccurate. This demonstrates that reporting on this story improved over time. We can also re-examine the articles containing the words “mass grave” posted between May 27 and June 30. Along with representing 17% of articles containing inaccuracies released during this period, the 20 articles that made the “mass grave” error represent only 7.7% of the 248 articles released during this period.

Concerning the “mass graves” error and the 3 other common inaccuracies, these 251 articles did their job in avoiding such inaccuracies during a confusing time. For example, with the “mass grave” label, 4 of the 5 media outlets contained

articles that clarified this mistake, such as making the correction themselves, or quoting Indigenous leaders confirming that what was discovered were possible or potential unmarked graves and not mass graves (Eneas, 2021; Blackwell, 2021; Pruden, 2021b; Kennedy and Boyd, 2021).

In the case of the GPR inaccuracies, all 5 outlets posted articles that properly explained what GPR is, how the technology was used to detect anomalies, and confirming that it does not provide pictures of actual remains (Gollom, 2021; Dawson, 2021; Pruden, 2021a; Boyd and McKeen, 2021; Raptis, 2021). What is particularly significant about the article by Dawson, which appears in the *National Post*, is that it quotes GPR experts who give more confidence that the anomalies located could likely be confirmed as graves. Experts who have used this technology to locate burials for other projects know when anomaly patterns are the shape of a grave, and they found similar patterns when investigating the former Kamloops site. This can be coupled with the *Globe and Mail* article which quotes Sarah Beaulieu, who stated that we need to identify findings as “probable unmarked graves.” However, she notes that she is confident that the anomalies are graves because of the similar patterns she saw in other unmarked grave searches. The journalists note Beaulieu’s explanation: “She pointed out the indicators that led her to conclude that disruptions picked up in the radar were, in fact, the graves of children – their placement, size, depth and other features” (Pruden and Hager, 2021).

In the case of inaccuracies about discovering or digging up bodies at former residential school sites, all 5 media outlets included articles that correctly used the Tk’emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation’s clarified statements of “potential unmarked graves of 215 children” instead of “confirmed remains of 215 children.” These media statements include “as many as 215 children could be buried on the site” (Tasker, 2021), “... 215 children whose remains are believed to be buried at the former Kamloops Residential School” (Bula, 2021), “the discovery of up to 215 unmarked graves of children who died while attending the Kamloops Indian Residential School” (Hopper, 2021), “as many as 215 children were buried

in unmarked graves (Levitz, 2021b) and “The Tk’emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation announced last week that ground-penetrating radar had located what are believed to be the unmarked graves of 215 children” (Wright, 2021).

It is also worth noting that some journalists who wrote articles that initially contained inaccuracies corrected their narratives when writing subsequent articles on the same subject. One example comes from The Canadian Press, which posted an article on May 31 where the author stated that GPR searches “uncovered the remains of 215 children on the site of the former Kamloops Indian Residential School” (Peterson 2021a). The author made a similar error on June 1 when they stated that “215 children whose remains were recently discovered on the grounds of a former residential school in Kamloops, B.C.” (Peterson, 2021b). However, by June 22 the same author published an article where they stated that “what are believed to be the remains of 215 children” were identified at the Kamloops site (Peterson, 2021c). Moreover, they authored or co-authored two more articles that also had accurate reporting (see Peterson, 2021d; Peterson and Malone, 2021). This type of correction shows that journalists revised their reporting over time as they and the public became more knowledgeable about the work Indigenous Nations were undertaking. This challenges the claims that no media outlets have attempted to correct inaccuracies they made in earlier reports. As the weeks and months passed, the gap between accurate articles and articles containing inaccuracies grew, with a higher percentage of accurate articles being published after July 1, 2021.

## Analysis

In light of the evidence presented above, we argue that the “mass grave hoax” narrative is not simply reasonable skepticism but rather should be understood as an expression of residential school denialism. According to Daniel Heath Justice and Sean Carleton, residential school denialism is not the denial of the residential school system’s existence; nor do denialists, for the most part, deny that abuses happened in the schools. Instead, residential school denialism, like climate change denialism or science denialism, cherry-

picks evidence and distorts basic facts and the overall legacy of the Indian Residential School System (IRSS) in order to alleviate settler guilt and block important truth and reconciliation efforts (Justice and Carleton, 2021; Cyca, 2023). Denialists believe, or at least they purport to believe, that they are asking reasonable questions and conducting rigorous reporting in order to provide the public with the real “truth” about residential schooling. Yet, in regards to news of possible unmarked graves at former residential school sites, what their version of “truth” amounts to is 5 identifiable denialist talking points that will now be identified and challenged below.

### Denialist Talking Point #1: Mass Grave Errors

The first talking point is that most, if not all, media reports about Kamloops stated that a “mass grave of children’s bodies was discovered at the site” (Glavin, 2022; *The Canadian Mass Grave Hoax*, 2021). Some pundits admit that this reporting did not last forever, but they contend that the use of the words “mass graves” was how mainstream media “almost universally reported on the issue” (Glavin, 2022). In the case of *The Canadian Mass Grave Hoax* documentary, the film presents a theory that the media purposefully misquoted the discovery in order to create a mass hoax. Yet, this report shows that only 6.5% of articles studied included the words “mass grave,” and many of those instances were quotes from other people and not the words chosen by journalists or Indigenous Peoples. Moreover, some instances were about the need to check for possible “mass graves,” which may still be located. 93.5% of articles released between May 27 and October 15, 2021 did not contain the words “mass grave.” The “mass grave hoax” narrative thus rests on a misrepresentation of the evidence collected.

### Denialist Talking Point #2: Remains Found

The second talking point is the assertion that all

mainstream media reported that the potential unmarked graves definitively contain the remains of children. Some focus on this inaccuracy in particular, stating that media consistently misquoted Indigenous Nations concerning the confirmation of likely or probable burials, not actual remains or bodies of children (Glavin, 2022). *The Canadian Mass Grave Hoax* documentary also erroneously states that all media believed the bodies of 751 children were found in unmarked graves at the former Marieval site in June 2021. Again, our report reveals that while 35% of the total articles studied contained some inaccuracies, including mistakenly reporting that “remains had been discovered,” these can be understood as part of the journalistic process when reporting on breaking news and not evidence of a conspiracy or cover-up. As new details were made available, and the public became more knowledgeable about the story, journalists quickly corrected most inaccuracies in their reporting to help Canadians understand the story of potential unmarked graves at former residential school sites.

### Denialist Talking Point #3: Indigenous Cover-Up

Denialists target journalists, but they also criticize Indigenous Nations who they argue are purposefully spreading misinformation in their announcements. Some denialists contend that Indigenous Nations did not correct the “mass grave” narrative or the fact that bodies were not discovered at residential school sites on purpose to create a false rage to justify attacks on churches and Christianity (*The Canadian Mass Grave Hoax*, 2021). Drea Humphreys of *Rebel News* also suggests that the Tk’emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation was attempting a cover-up at the Kamloops site. In Humphreys’s view, if there were remains at the site, the RCMP would be conducting an investigation on the grounds, and there was no police presence (*Kamloops: The Buried Truth*, 2022). Also, Humphreys and her team believed Kukpi7 (Chief) Rosanne Casimir was creating a cover-up when they (discretely) caught her on camera stating that no excavation on the site has begun and they are not sure when

it will begin (ibid.). Our report shows that only 25 articles, or 6.5%, included the words “mass grave” and just 13 quoted people, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, using those words. As others have pointed out, this does not prove the existence of a wide-spread conspiracy between media, government, and First Nations to create a cover-up (Walker-Williams, 2023).

## Denialist Talking Point #4: Misrepresenting GPR

The fourth talking point revolves around denialists discrediting GPR technology. *The Canadian Mass Grave Hoax*, for example, focused on the fact that Indigenous Nations and media were only using this technology to locate possible unmarked graves. Also, because GPR detects anomalies, it does not prove that there are bodies underground, nor does it show how these individuals died. *Kamloops: The Buried Truth* argues that the child’s rib bone found at the Kamloops site is not human because the coroner said 95% of discovered bones people report are usually animal bones. The filmmakers emphasize this point by showing pictures of animal and human bones that look identical to one another, claiming this is proof that no children are buried on the grounds. Humphreys does not acknowledge the other methods that Indigenous Nations are using to locate and search potential burial sites. This report shows that some reports contained inaccurate or confusing understandings of the GPR technology and what it is capable of uncovering, but it also revealed how many journalists reported on the many nuances of the technology and how it was being used by search teams as one tool among many.

## Denialist Talking Point #5: Truth-Seekers

Denialists often present themselves as the only “true” reporters that are attempting to challenge the “mass grave hoax.” They position themselves as truth-seekers in opposition to “advocacy-journalism startups” and cast themselves instead as proponents of “traditional journalism,” thus

making them more believable (Glavin, 2022). This “advocacy journalism” consists of relying on testimony from Survivors or Indigenous Knowledge keepers, which leads to a “careless conflation of horrific, verifiable crimes with second – and third – hand accounts of childhood horror stories” (ibid.). This type of media reporting is not truth: “Truth is not what you get when established and reputable news organizations treat the accounts of genuinely traumatized survivors of criminal acts with no more gravitas than hearsay accounts, often anonymously told, that stretch credulity to the breaking point” (ibid.). This report shows how many of those promoting the “mass grave hoax” narrative are not truth-seekers, but rather truth distorters; they are cherry-picking and misrepresenting evidence to bolster backlash claims as a way of attacking and undermining Survivor testimony and shaking public trust in the truth and reconciliation process.

## Conclusion

This report debunks the “mass grave hoax.” The claims of a conspiracy or cover-up being deliberately orchestrated by mainstream media, government, and First Nations is not supported by the evidence. It is true that some media outlets published articles that contained inaccuracies about the news of potential unmarked graves at former residential school sites. This included incorrectly identifying the findings as “mass graves” in a limited number of cases. However, the “mass grave” error was not reported “almost universally” (Glavin, 2022); with only 25 of 386 articles, or just 6.5%, using this phraseology and not all of them incorrectly (e.g. in the case of possible mass graves). In total, 35% of articles contained some level of inaccuracy, but the majority of articles, 65%, accurately reported on the news of potential unmarked graves being identified at former residential schools across Canada. Our research shows that the foundation of the “mass grave hoax” narrative – that all mainstream media made errors in reporting on the findings as “mass graves” – is not supported by the evidence.

This research is important for two reasons.

First, it gives credit to Indigenous Nations and to the journalists who have reported on potential unmarked graves at former residential school sites and helped Canadians understand this important story. While some mistakes were made, and reportage errors need to be addressed as the story continues to develop, that is all they were: errors. Errors that journalists make but correct in subsequent reporting, as we showed was largely the case concerning news of potential unmarked graves in Canada, is part of the journalism industry. Understood in context, the evidence presented in this report debunks the claims of a media-led conspiracy to create a fake news story about residential schools to attack Christianity and destroy Canada.

Second, this research shows how detailed analysis can be an effective tool in confronting the growing threat of residential school denialism and other kinds of misinformation and disinformation, as many Indigenous communities have called for (Office of the Special Interlocutor, 2023). Instead of ridicule and outrage – which can give denialists a larger platform – what is needed is deep and reasoned analysis of their discourse to show why they are wrong. This is the strategy of disempowering and discrediting residential school denialism advocated by TRC Chair Murray Sinclair (CBC News, 2017). We recommend that more research of this kind be undertaken to help Canadians learn how to identify and confront residential school denialism and support meaningful reconciliation. As the

*People attend the second annual Orange Shirt Day Survivors Walk and Pow Wow on National Day for Truth and Reconciliation in Winnipeg, Friday, September 30, 2022. THE CANADIAN PRESS/John Woods*





Truth and Reconciliation Commission made clear in its final report, without truth there can be no genuine reconciliation (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

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## Appendix A: News Articles Examined Organized by Date Published

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