

Should feds regulate social media?

Links to real-world outcomes — positive, negative and sometimes deadly — are hard to ignore. But the case for protections from bad actors is complicated and nuanced

GEORGE LEE

THE MACLEOD GAZETTE
LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE

Editor's Note: Following is the fourth and final story in a series on social media roles, effects and strategies in politics and public life, especially at the provincial level in Alberta.

Thanks to its routine deployment of abusive content, social media casts a menacing shadow across the digital landscape.

If you posted that sentiment within an attention-grabbing meme or a pithy joke, much of your scrolling audience would likely nod in agreement. Some would even slap you a heart or a thumbs-up — hello dopamine.

Who knows? You might even land some love from your local member of Alberta's legislative assembly. Politicians of every level and stripe, after all, regularly deal with the negative side of social media.

But watch your rate of likes tumble as soon as you sprinkle in some nuance. Because when it comes to their relationship status with social media, Canadians tick the "it's complicated" box.

Case in point: government regulation.

Back in March 2024, two-thirds of a Leger poll's respondents supported a federal plan to make social media platforms safer. But when asked about balancing the proposed law with adequate free speech protections, about half the respondents didn't trust the feds to get it right.

And the results indicated that a significant minority — 43 per cent — in one province, Alberta, thought the government's plan would fail in two critical areas: making the platforms safer and making the removal of sensitive content easier.

Popularity of the federal Liberals and Justin Trudeau hovered around 25 per cent in March 2024. And the poll of 1,527 Canadians aged 18 or older was not wholly random, drawing on participants from a pre-existing panel.

Regardless, at least one Canadian organization has seen enough to take a stand in favour of government regulation. A non-profit founded in 2007, the non-partisan Samara Centre for Democracy studies the prevalence of abusive on-line language against candidates in elections in Canada. It considers the trends alarming, and it's expanding the scope of its research.

Alex MacIsaac, Samara's senior research co-ordinator, says regulation won't solve all Canada's social media problems. But laws are needed.

"Broadly in Canada, we don't have regulations that work to curb on-line harms," says MacIsaac. Canadian policy-makers "face the challenge of attempting to regulate a host of foreign firms that are among the largest and most powerful in the world."

Irfan Chaudhry, a hate speech researcher in Edmonton, hasn't given up on social media's ability to regulate itself and moderate content.

"The protection of users of social media is a lot better than it was, through things like verified and legitimate users," Chaudhry says. "Politicians and even municipalities have safeguards in place now. When they post something they know is going to be contentious, they have the power to turn off comments and block specific users."

Chaudhry acknowledges that the former Twitter, now called X, has stepped backwards, calling it "a bad space for everyone" because of reduced moderation.

The social media environment is far from perfect, the MacEwan University lecturer says. Politicians who use social media to engage with their constituents "receive a high volume of volatility." And that's especially true for female, racialized and left-leaning politicians.

Chaudhry finds it troubling that some platforms are shifting away from effective moderation.

"We don't accept a lack of moderation off-line, so I'm not sure why we accept it on-line. We spend a lot of our lives engaging in on-line spaces. So there's a bit of a disconnect that these platforms have with their responsibilities."

Says MacIsaac of Samara: "We believe that through regulation and investment in domestic digital public infrastructure, we can have safer, productive, collaborative and pro-social on-line environments that support democracy and civic engagement rather than work against them."

This act, that act, that other act

Included in any conversation about social media regulation in Canada are several pieces of federal legislation. And looming large are Donald Trump, tariffs and Mark Carney's mission to strike a trade deal with the U.S.

The law most applicable was heading towards approval at the time of the Leger poll. The Online Harms Act — or more correctly Bill C-63, because it never was enacted — dug deep into regulating social media.

The far-reaching law would have demanded accountability, action and transparency. It would have created a digital safety bureaucracy with an ombudsperson, an office and a commission. It would have promoted on-line safety, defined harmful content and strived to protect children and other vulnerable people.

But Bill C-63 died with the dissolution of Parliament before the last federal election. And now the new prime minister is focused on other matters.

Two existing laws regulating cyberspace — the Online News Act and the Online Streaming Act — could fall victim to trade negotiations. After all, the fledgling three per cent digital services tax has already disappeared under Carney's dealings with Trump.

Whatever direction the government chooses, fears persist that more regulation would mess with legitimate messaging and diminish the on-line experience.

More critically, the Canadian Civil Liberties Association framed Bill C-63 as a constitutional threat because of its provisions surrounding hate speech, hate motivation and maximum sentences.

The CCLA warned in its testimony before a House of Commons standing committee that the bill would result in a "chilling effect on free speech and an unwarranted increase in plea bargaining from innocent and vulnerable defendants."

Indeed, many social media users and researchers view the platforms as indispensable tools in a modern democracy. And society may well adapt to social media over time.

Alex MacIsaac of Samara qualifies his support this way: "Social media, as a concept, has immense power to connect, share knowledge, inform, and give voice to



and reach many who otherwise wouldn't have access to a platform. The problems we're experiencing with digital platforms aren't the concept or technology of social media. The problems are execution and incentives."

Chaudhry, the lecturer and researcher, says that "better literacy on how to use the platform" is emerging, particularly in younger Canadians.

"We've adapted in the past," he says, pointing to how people act when they talk on the phone and how the technology evolved for blocking and identifying callers.

"I think what makes it a challenge right now is the scope and volume and size of the various social media platforms," says Chaudhry. "And people do have an appetite to engage on unregulated platforms."

A double-edged sword

These negative and positive facets of social media are what one meta-analysis calls a "dual-use dilemma." The peer-reviewed paper says it's an "inescapable fact that technologies can be used for both noble and malicious aims."

The authors from Germany's Max Planck Institute for Human Development, writing in *Nature Human Behaviour* in November 2022, compared the impact of the digital space today with that of an older technology in the 20th century: the radio.

Nazis used radio to spread hateful propaganda during the Second World War. But the BBC used it to support the Resistance by sharing tactical information, wrote the authors of *A Systematic Review of Worldwide Causal and Correlational Evidence on Digital Media*.

Five decades later in Rwanda? Same technology, different genocide.

Radio messaging incited Hutus to massacre the Tutsi minority, the researchers wrote. But in the genocide's aftermath, a radio soap opera reduced intergroup prejudice.

"Digital media appears to be another double-edged sword," says the paper.

It can empower citizens, like it did during the Arab Spring and the #MeToo movement. But it can also be "instrumental in inciting destructive behaviours and tendencies such as polarization and populism, as well as fatal events such as the attack on the United States Capitol in January 2021."

The study, which relied on 496 research

articles, acknowledged the complicated nature of drawing conclusions from mountains of social sciences data. Real-world evidence isn't as straightforward as what you'd eyeball in petri dishes during carefully controlled studies in the lab.

But the analysis found "grounds for concern," the authors wrote. "Alongside the positive effects of digital media for democracy, there is clear evidence of serious threats," their conclusion says.

"Considering the importance of these corrosive and potentially difficult-to-reverse effects for democracy, a better understanding of the diverging effects of digital media in different political contexts... is urgently needed."

Another European perspective — from an Albertan

Thomas Lukaszuk, the person behind the anti-separation initiative called Forever Canadian, says: "Am I pessimistic? I'm not pessimistic. But I am extremely aware of what's going on."

His take on tyranny is deeply personal. "I was a kid who woke up at the age of 11 and went outside when martial law began in Poland, and we had tanks and armoured vehicles out there, and I had machine guns aimed at me. I lived through people dying in the streets and getting tear-gassed by police. That is what being scared is, that is what being worried is."

The former deputy premier, an active participant in on-line platforms and discussions, does not dismiss this moment and its power to undermine democracy.

In his heart Lukaszuk holds stories passed along by his grandparents and great grandparents, as they reflected on two world wars from the European perspective.

"What we're seeing right now is a reoccurrence of 1932 and '33. It's a build-up of nationalism, a build-up of fascism, a build-up of populism. And much like Germans and Italians and others during that time used the propaganda and technology available to them, that is what's happening now," Lukaszuk says.

It's a dangerous trend leveraged by social media. The actors and their stage may be different, but "frankly, the language and the mechanics are exactly the same."



Irfan Chaudhry



Alex MacIsaac



Thomas Lukaszuk