

Noisy, nasty and intolerant

Lies, bad behaviour on social media threaten democracy — or do they?

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

Trolls, bullies, robots and other bad actors regularly flood social media with abusive comments and content.

In fact some days it seems that cyberspace is just one hate-filled conspiracy theory after another, followed by a string of libelous comments interspersed with a sprinkling of mean-spirited memes.

Common targets include women and vulnerable, racialized or marginalized populations.

Often considered fair game, however, are those in public positions and others with messaging they're compelled or obligated to share in the messy, noisy town square of our times.

"Whether I post about politics or a lost puppy, I can count on receiving vitriolic, racist and personal attacks," former Calgary mayor and current Alberta NDP leader Naheed Nenshi once quipped in a Politico article he penned.

Indeed, those MLAs who interact with the masses on-line sometimes cope with witnessing their names attached to expletive-laced descriptors, often within ideological or hate-filled rants. And it happens regardless of where they sit in the house.

Brooks Arcand-Paul, the NDP's Indigenous relations critic, has been called a cunt and a pile of excrement. Ghoul, grifter and a person "mentally and vertically challenged" have been attached to Adriana LaGrange, the UCP's minister of primary and preventative health services.

Janis Irwin, the NDP's housing critic, has been called a nutjob, a narcissist and



Irfan Chaudhry

a groomer. That last one is a term for a pedophile who prepares and tricks children into having sex with adults.

Despite that environment, a lot of politicians choose to post and scroll with the rest of us.

After all, it's a nearly essential way of reaching voters, gaining support, gathering feedback and explaining policy.

Democracy, in other words, relies upon it.

A Tweet Too Far?

Yet ironically, many experts, pundits and everyday citizens think on-line anger, hate and lies have gone so far that social media threatens the foundations of the very democracies it supposedly upholds.

Or maybe politicians just need thicker skins, goes one line of thinking. After all, elected representatives in every era have dealt with mockery, going back to the times of Dickens and Swift and even earlier. Modern cartoonists regularly skewer elected officials.

The medium may change with the times. But accepting derision always goes with the territory.

The argument is most pointed after politicians and government agencies choose to block specific commenters or turn off comments entirely.

In a December 2017 article in an on-line magazine called *The Conversation*, two York University adjunct professors in administrative law called blocking commenters "a troubling trend (that) has serious implications for freedom of expression."



Wrote Justin Safayeni and Andrea Gonsalves of the Toronto university: "This is the paradox of social media as a tool for political dissent: exercising freedom of expression is easier than ever before, but so is censorship."

The duo acknowledged that there are limits to what should be said.

"Social media can certainly be a breeding ground for racism, harassment, defamation and other vile speech that does little to contribute to the marketplace of ideas."

That means officials or government agencies "might properly block such communications without breaching" Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the article says.

But what if abuse drives politicians out of office, stops potential candidates from seeking election in the first place, or stops citizens from even entering that esteemed marketplace of ideas?

Anecdotal examples of exactly that effect abound. If they do represent a statistically significant trend, democracy will suffer, many social media watchers believe.

Says Irfan Chaudhry, a hate crime researcher and MacEwan University lecturer in Edmonton: "We lose a lot, if we're only having a homogenous group put their hands up to lead in public service."

He continues: "And those who are in office sometimes choose to stay off or not engage in social media. So we lose in that way, too, because they miss out on an opportunity to engage with constituents."

If the number of Alberta legislature members active on social media has been compiled, it hasn't been widely circulated.

But assuming MLAs are like the rest of the world, most are at least somewhat connected to the larger conversation via social media.

The noisy and the many

A commonly accepted estimate is that 4.8-billion people world-wide use social media, which is close to 60 per cent of the population. In an aggregated 2024 report on

social media's popularity, On-line Business Canada pegged Alberta's usage at 57 per cent.

Literally billions of posts are made world-wide each day across major platforms. One estimate for X — that's the place that used to be called Twitter — is 500-million posts a day.

Over on TikTok, 34-million videos drop each day, according to the digital agency Social Shepherd.

Instagram users, meanwhile, are impressing followers with depictions of their awesome lives at a rate of 1.3-billion photos and videos images a day, say several companies that collect and analyze social media data.

Using the numbers from those three platforms alone, that's a staggering 21,000 posts per second.

More numbers in the noise

An organization sussing out trends of abuse within all that noise is the Samara Centre for Democracy, founded in 2007. Samara bills itself as Canada's leading non-partisan organization focused on strengthening and protecting Canadian democracy.

A registered charity that believes in responsive institutions and an engaged public, Samara has lately been using a machine learning robot called SAMBot to measure on-line abuse on X during elections.

In 2023, during Alberta's provincial general election, SAMBot found that four per cent of tweets within the accounts it tracked were abusive.

"Four per cent being abusive may seem low, but it's important to remember that the kind of abuse we're capable of monitoring does not fully encompass the forms of on-line harms common on social media," says Alex MacIsaac, senior research co-ordinator with Samara.

SAMBot tracked 188 accounts, including seven official party accounts and 181 candidate accounts. Candidates from nine political parties were represented, as well as four independents.

During the tracking period SAMBot monitored 300,861 tweets, of which 12,502 were abusive. Tracked candidates were mentioned 387,792 times, and of those mentions, 15,376 contained abusive content.

Also of note, says MacIsaac, is that the percentages don't account for the comparative reach of various tweets wasn't tracked. "It's possible that some or many of these abusive tweets received far more or less engagement than your average neutral or constructive tweet."

And so-called power users skewer tweet numbers away from being a reliable measure of public opinion. Of the tweets collected over 17 days leading up to the election, 12 per cent originated from just 50 accounts.

Of the top 20 candidates who received abusive tweets, eight were first-timers.

Astroturfing was an issue, too. That's when posts are part of a campaign to present one viewpoint, often through fake or artificially generated engagement.

In its SAMBot report on the election, Samara concluded that the "negative, harmful and manipulative" tweets amounted to threats to democracy.

"They increasingly make politics less accessible to ordinary citizens and frustrate attempts to foster productive and pro-democratic dialogue."

Canada's Library of Parliament says that abuse directed at politicians on social media is now common during federal elections. In 2019 researchers classified nearly 40 per cent of tweets directed at candidates as uncivil and 16 per cent as abusive, reported the library's official blog, HillNotes.

The blog is tasked with highlighting documents and research to identify findings and trends significant to Parliament's future.

Tweets directed at candidates in the 2021 federal election were "insulting, hostile or rude" 20 per cent of the time, HillNotes said. Of those, 37 per cent were likely to include profanities or threatening language.

In 2021, Samara's CEO Sabreena Delhon wrote: "At its best, social media is a powerful tool to improve our democracy, providing a way to hold politicians to account, share information and express ideas as well as disagreement. For those seeking office, social media has become a vital tool to manage and execute campaigns — a way to connect with constituents, demonstrate authenticity and convey positions."

But the destructive power of social media is a major Samara concern, she said.

Social media has been "weaponized to deliver abuse and incite violence," Delhon said, with malicious users of social media creating divisions, diminishing equity in politics, and spreading disinformation — defined as information known to be false and designed to mislead.

"It's time for a digital democracy detox. On-line toxicity in political spaces is sending a signal about the strength of our democracy," Delhon concluded.

"This is a major problem of our era and solving it requires approaching voter engagement and election campaigns in new ways."

Next time: Is it fair or reasonable to connect mean-spirited chatter to actual violence, property damage and threats? And what ever happened to federal regulation of social media?



Alex MacIsaac



Sabreena Delhon