Social media goes mainstream — warts and all

Pervasive, powerful, uplifting yet undermining, the various platforms have become effective tools for politicians, despite the noise and abuse. Part two of a multi-story series looks at the current state of social media's normalized role in political discourse

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

Albertans who vibe with Janis Irwin see her regularly on mainstream TV, the perfect place to learn all about her everyday life, her thoughts on public policy, the events she attends and the causes she supports.

Right?

Wrong.

That's not how things work for Irwin's audience, even though some news consumers may not even realize it. The NDP's deputy whip in the Alberta legislature, Irwin reaches some 72,000 followers on Instagram, more than 46,000 on TikTok and more than 6,000 on Facebook.

Like many of those followers, the former teacher and school administrator from rural Alberta has a deeply ingrained digital life. Social media is part of who she is and how she connects with people, whether they're voters, allies, foes, friends and family, the LGBTQ-plus community, some blend of the aforementioned, or some other subset of humanity entirely.

Members of the public often tell her they've seen her on TV. "The reality is, I'm not on TV all that much," says Irwin, who curates her own social media and writes her own posts.

"People see me on whatever platforms they're on," explains Irwin, the NDP's housing critic and the member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood. "And that's kind of equated with regular media for a lot of folks."

A queer woman on the elder end of the millennial demographic, Irwin makes her social media accounts a mix of her personal and public personas. It's an approach that's not for everyone in public office and one she's unlikely to recommend to new members of the assembly.

But she maintains that her authentic and relatable voice is something that, so far, she doesn't want to give up. "Maybe a few staff members look at my posts sometimes and shake their heads, but it is what it is."

Like most modern public figures, Irwin knows social media needs to be among her messaging tools. After all, 60-plus per cent of the global population use various platforms to connect with their real-world and virtual friends and communities.

Profitable and persuasive

Indeed, social media and similar platforms are nearly inescapable in today's media landscape. Still popular are old-timers like YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Snapchat, Reddit and the former Twitter (now called X). Also out there are relative newcomers like TikTok (almost 10 years old) and the even younger Bluesky, which was launched as a friendly and thoughtful option.

Meta alone, the publicly traded company that owns Facebook and Instagram, recorded revenues of US $164.5-billion in 2024, up nearly 22 per cent from the year before. Nearly $135-billion of that was in advertising revenue.

Even after expenses are considered, Meta is an extremely rich company, with net income in 2024 of more than US $62-billion.

Alphabet Inc., the company that owns Google and YouTube, is also publicly traded. Its statements show revenue of more than US $350-billion in 2024 and net income of more than $100-billion.

Clearly, people love their social media. Roughly eight in 10 Canadians are users, studies say, with an average daily time spent on social media across the population of about two hours a day. That's significantly lower than the global average of about 140 minutes a day. But also worth noting is that young people are generally on social media way more often than older people.

A study referenced by the Canadian Paediatric Society, for example, suggests 20 per cent of high school students in Ontario and Alberta spend five or more hours a day on social media.

Why such love? Experts and studies have identified some of the reasons for society's social media infatuation.

Personalized algorithms validate users and reinforce belief systems through the content pumped into their feeds. These often limit competing ideas and, in some cases, push users towards extremism. Dopamine hits keep users coming back for likes and comments, and content moderation by tech owners or through government regulation are both, at best, works in progress.

Trolls will be trolls

Irfan Chaudhry, a lecturer with MacEwan University in Edmonton and its former director of human rights, diversity and equity, says bad behaviour on the Internet is probably here to stay.

"Unfortunately, some actors enjoy trolling on social media. They feel there's an element of power that maybe they don't perceive in the off-line world," he says. "So I don't think that's something we can regulate away. You're always going to have bad actors in some of these contexts."

Hate exists in the real world, and the internet plays a role in triggering it. But it also helps generate support for tolerance, Chaudhry notes.

In Ajax, Ont., a Muslim woman wearing a hijab was studying in a public library earlier this year when a stranger poured a fluid, likely an accelerant, on her hijab. But the assailant's lighter didn't work.

"You're seeing a lot of things like that when you talk about the impact of social media, but I also think the awareness of the impact is also more amplified on social media."

Chaudhry thinks big players have taken positive steps in self-regulation, as well as some notable steps backwards.

The purchase of Twitter by Musk has made X "a really bad space for everyone, regardless of their political stripes, to engage on, just because it's less moderated now."

Living with threats

Janis Irwin certainly noticed. Gradually over the last decade or so, she's built a following on multiple platforms in her provincial and public roles. But she rarely posts on X anymore.

Before her election in 2019, Irwin worked in government and later for Rachel Notley, who was then the leader of the NDP and the premier. In 2015 she'd sought a federal seat, finishing second to the Conservatives in Edmonton Griesbach.

Irwin copes with attacks by blocking accounts and deleting comments. She chooses not to engage with trolls, who probably can't be won over to her point of view anyway.

To the sergeant-at-arms of the legislature, Irwin regularly reports threats she receives on-line, over the phone, in e-mail messages or via the regular post.

The Alberta legislature doesn't release threat data, and under freedom of information and privacy legislation its staff can't be compelled to do so. But threats and abusive communications against Notley did become a matter of public record while she was premier.

Notley was, in fact, the most threatened premier in Alberta's history during her time at the helm. She received 412 harassing communications, Alberta Justice reported in 2016, and 16 of them were investigated by law enforcement. In the last half of 2015 there were 19 security incidents registered against her.

Another popular target is Naheed Nenshi, the NDP's current leader. Nenshi has been heralded for his ground-breaking use of social media and innovative marketing to reach voters, especially young ones, and his approach is widely credited with making him the first Muslim mayor of a major Canadian city. Nenshi held the top elected position with the City of Calgary from 2010 to 2021.

Back when he was first elected, Twitter held the promise of becoming a platform to engage in constructive discourse, Nenshi wrote in Politico in 2021. But things changed.

"Today, social media is an anti-social battleground for unfiltered, post-truth put-downs and provocations," he noted in his Politico piece. "Whether I post about politics or a lost puppy, I can count on receiving vitriolic, racist and personal attacks."

Like Nenshi, Irwin deals with the good, the bad and the ugly of social media. The on-line world "can certainly be overwhelming and disheartening at times," she notes.

"But you know, there's a need for hope and queer joy, as we call it. So finding hope and joy wherever you can is necessary."

For some, that's on-line. For others, it's out in the real world at community events. Or perhaps it's a mix of both.

Maintaining mental health is "tough for a lot of people these days," she says. "So just doing what we can to build community: that's what's important to me."

Next time: More about the statistical story of social media and how the experts interpret existing research and data.

Photo contributed

Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood MLA Janis Irwin handles her own social media.