

SOCIAL MEDIA: HISTORY REPEATING?

In 2024, Statistics Canada reported that 62% of Canadians aged 15-24 most commonly used social media to get their news. On the flip side, for Canadians 65 and older, 64% tended to rely on traditional legacy media sources such as television.

Social media's dominance as a source of news for young people does not necessarily mean that people trust what they find on social media. The Edelman 2023 Trust Barometer reported that across all ages, only 21% of Canadians trusted the news they found on social media.

While everyone has their own reasons to trust or distrust various news sources, the one thing we can agree upon is that the nature of how we consume news has changed dramatically in recent years.

During the 20th century, news was largely a one-way flow. A handful of television channels, radio stations, and newspapers reported the news. For the most part, the reporters at these legacy media outlets kept high standards. We could be reasonably confident that news on the CBC, CJME, or in the Saskatoon *StarPhoenix*, for example, was accurate even if at times it was not perfect.

The number of news sources expanded with the rise of the internet. Legacy media and its stable of professional reporters are still around, providing news with an expectation that they uphold high journalistic standards. However, these legacy outlets now share our attention with a fresh batch of media sources.

Some newer online news sources look a lot like legacy media. In fact, many of them are the products of legacy media. For example, news platforms such as paNOW sprouted from established and respected radio newsrooms in the province. Like their radio predecessors, these new platforms are expected to uphold high journalistic standards.

Other media outlets are less interested in high journalistic standards. Their priority is putting a partisan slant on the news. Partisan media is something similar to the newspapers of the 18th century. They offer limited views of current events, driven more by their ideological view of the world than their desire to convey all sides of an issue.

Unfortunately, some partisan outlets pair their highly-ideological takes on the news with inflammatory language. This approach stirs up emotions just as much as it conveys facts. At their worst, some partisan news sites tip into outright misinformation.

Of course, legacy and new media outlets are not our only source of news. Anybody with internet access can sign up for a social media account, be it on X, Reddit, Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, or others. There are 5 billion social media users worldwide, who spend an average of 2.5 hours a day online. Being on social media enables individuals to share news stories and comment on the news. Add to that, individuals can report news as they see it breaking around them.

Social media's impact on news creation, distribution, and consumption can be seen in the results of the 2023 "Best of" competition by Regina's *Prairie Dog Magazine*. Every year, *Prairie Dog* asks readers to vote for their favourite everything, from hair stylists to politicians. The 2023 winner for Best Online News in Regina was Just Bins. Just Bins is not a newsroom, but instead a disposal company that has a very active and sometimes controversial presence on social media. Coming in second to Just Bins on the *Prairie Dog* survey was CBC Saskatchewan. CTV Regina came in third.

Today, virtually anyone can instantaneously comment on or create news and immediately share it with the entire world. This is nothing short of a revolution.

To be sure, we all could share, comment, and even create news in the past. For example, people often clipped articles or passed around entire newspapers to share with and discuss with their friends. And some enterprising individuals even set up their own newsletters.



SOCIAL MEDIA: HISTORY REPEATING?... CONTINUED

However, in the past spreading news and opinions far and wide was an expensive and ambitious undertaking. A television or radio station could only be established with a licence from the government, and required dozens of staff members and millions of dollars in equipment. Newspapers and magazines were easier to set up, but still required considerable resources to print and distribute.

Because today anyone with an internet connection can create and distribute news, entertainment, and information, at virtually no cost, a side-effect is growing skepticism with what we read. Some of this skepticism is understandable. With so many people creating so much information—often without any training in journalism or supervision of editors—not all of what we see is reliable. Sometimes people are quick to pass judgment, before all the facts are in. Other times, people may selectively post only a misleading clip. Add to that, some people may have a vested interest in misinforming others. And often, people just make honest mistakes.

With so much information to choose from, how do we determine what is trustworthy and what is not?

Curiously, the quandary this question poses is not new. In some ways, the rise of new media and the challenges it creates are an echo of previous historical changes in media. To illustrate this, consider how the invention of the printing press radically changed society.

LOOKING BACK: THE PRINTING PRESS AND THE PAMPHLET

Six hundred years ago, the invention of the printing press had a similar impact on creating and sharing information as the invention of the internet had at the dawn of this century.

The printing press, which arrived in the mid-1400s, replaced expensive and slow practices like hand-copying books. It is believed that before the printing press, the biggest book collection in Europe was the University of Paris library. It had 300 books.

It was not just books that were being printed in unprecedented quantities. Waves of pamphlets began to spread across Europe. These pamphlets were short, often unsigned, and usually written in everyday language. They contained everything from news, to ideas about how we should organise society, to completely crackpot theories.

The philosopher Erasmus worried that the popularity of pamphlets undermined learning. Books and formal education offered the chance for in-depth exploration of an issue. By contrast, pamphlets were criticised for being too brief. They could not thoughtfully convey and explain ideas.

Perhaps the most famous pamphlet of the printing press revolution was Martin Luther's "95 Theses," a sheet of religious reforms. Luther was not paid to write "95 Theses," and nobody reviewed what Luther wrote for accuracy or fairness. Nevertheless, his ideas quickly caught on.

He nailed a copy to a church door in Wittenburg, Germany on October 31, 1517. Barely two weeks later copies reached London, where printers began reproducing it. Luther's pamphlet spawned a revolution in religious thought in Europe known as the Protestant Reformation.

The rise of mass printing also gave rise to new forums for discussing ideas and current events. In London, a coffeehouse culture developed in the 1600s. For the price of a cup of coffee, people could gather to learn about and discuss issues. Pamphlets and newspapers were provided for free, and the coffeehouse provided a physical space to engage with other people.

Social decorum was expected at coffeehouses. Unlike taverns, many that were full of rowdy ale-drinkers, coffeehouses were polite and respectful places. Social class was left at the door, and travellers from afar were welcome.



The rise of the printing press, the pamphleteering it inspired, and the development of London's coffeehouse culture suggest that even if history does not repeat, it can echo. The development of the internet has created new ways of conveying and distributing information, and has created space for online discussions.

These similarities, however, must also be thought about with awareness of timelines. Changes brought about by the printing press took centuries. The internet's impact on societal change has come about in a matter of a few decades.

Discuss

1.
 - a) How was the creation and distribution of Martin Luther's "95 Theses" similar to and different from the ways we create and share information today?
 - b) How was London's coffeehouse culture similar to and different from the ways we discuss information today?
2. In the 20th century, the vast majority of people received their news from the same sources. People would gather around the television or share newspapers to learn about current events. Today, people may gather in "bubbles" and "echo chambers," where the information they receive looks vastly different than the information that others view.
 - a) How can we diversify the viewpoints we consume?
 - b) Does social media encourage us to find common ground, or pit us against each other?
3. Think about a typical online posting of a news story, be it on Reddit, X, Facebook, or the like. The posting is usually followed by a long thread of comments on the story.
 - a) What value is offered by these long threads of comments?
 - b) Are these long discussion threads always valuable information? What are the downsides of these threads?



THE UN-REALITY OF SOCIAL MEDIA

In 2017, Facebook reported that the average person scrolls through 90 metres of social media feeds every day. To put this in perspective, this is about three times the height of a typical wooden grain elevator in Saskatchewan. In fact, Saskatchewan's tallest building, the Nutrien Tower in Saskatoon, is only 88 metres in height.

Unfortunately, scrolling through a Nutrien Tower worth of social media does not provide a realistic insight into public opinion. In fact, simply relying upon social media to gain insight into society is, on the whole, a bad idea.

Several studies have shown that social media conversations about politics and governance are dominated by a small and vocal minority. This small minority, about 10% of users, generate 80 to 90% of the posts about politics and governance.

What makes these motivated users so harmful to our social fabric is that they generally are the most ideologically extreme members of society. Their posts tend towards the enraging or the fantastical. On the whole, such views do not reflect the vast majority of society.

Social media algorithms make matters worse, promoting divisive content that triggers our emotions. They do this because such posts generate the most engagement, thus keeping people online longer.

Meanwhile, higher engagement levels with outrageous content reinforces the poster, who see their extreme views being validated.

At the same time, these algorithms crowd out the few moderate views that appear on social media.

The end result? A distorted perception of real life. This misperception of society leads more people to feelings of negativity, hostility, and political polarisation.

The overwhelming majority of people are moderate, kind and decent. However, there is a good chance you could walk away with a much more negative perception of society after a session of looking at politics, governance, and law-making through the lens of social media.

So the next time you're inclined to look at social media, perhaps take a walk around your community instead. Check out some local events. Talk with the people around you. And look up at the tallest building in your town or city, to remind yourself of just how much time we waste "doomscrolling" on social media.

