



THE NEW INFORMATION POWER-BROKERS

GATEKEEPING IN HYBRID DIGITAL MEDIA

Alfred Hermida



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA



Social Sciences and Humanities
Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en
sciences humaines du Canada

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Key messages

The tectonic shifts in the information architecture of 21st century media are transforming how, when, where and from whom Canadians get the news and information they depend on to make informed decisions. The media landscape is being rewritten through the interaction of four forces - players, platforms, practices and publics - that are reconfiguring the mechanisms and pathways for news. The rise of new gatekeepers, the persistence of existing gatekeepers and the digital technologies facilitating, shaping and enhancing social communication practices each deserve detailed scrutiny as these forces are competing to determine how the news is socially constructed.

The shifts in how Canadians get their news and information are important for policy makers, business leaders, social movements and the broader society. News, defined as noteworthy, relevant and timely information about the world around us, is a vital element in the functioning of Western liberal democracies that depend on an informed citizenry. This knowledge synthesis proposes a framework to understand the information architecture for news through identifying and unpacking four gatekeeping forces that assess, validate and disseminate news to Canadians:

- 1) **Players:** Institutional media players are sharing the media space with digital media startups, corporate interests and engaged activists that have access to the means to produce, distribute and amplify their own perspectives on the news.
- 2) **Platforms:** Digital sites and services provide a dynamic infrastructure for public interaction and expression, structuring the social life of users by managing forms of participation, and filtering and prioritizing information.
- 3) **Practices:** News as an everyday habit, taking place on multiple devices throughout the day, coming from multiple sources and in multiple formats, at times on social media platforms that favour emotion, empathy and experience over evidence.
- 4) **Publics:** Audiences as secondary gatekeepers who assign the relevance and importance of news and information through social and conversational interactions online.

News operates in a contested, chaotic and circular information architecture where new and old gatekeeping forces compete to provide meaning for Canadians. The structures for news can be pathways for a healthier democracy with a greater plurality of voices. Or they can be avenues for a more polarized society fuelled by fear and prejudice. How an event or issue gets reported as “the news” is the result of multiple interactions by multiple actors, shaping public perception and understanding of society.

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There are significant knowledge gaps in how Canadians navigate a fractured and hybrid media environment that existing norms, practices and policies are ill equipped to address. New and old players, platforms, practices and publics are competing to provide relevance, meaning and interpretation of news, which ultimately affects the ideas, choices and behaviour of citizens. An understanding of the interplay of these forces is essential to inform the role and relevance of established regulatory bodies such as the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission and to shape future policies designed to foster a vibrant and diverse media ecosystem in Canada.

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Executive summary

Established media sources have long served as filters that assess, validate and disseminate trustworthy and relevant information to Canadians. For the past 200 years, the news industry has been the main gatekeeper of information, deciding “all the news that’s fit to print.” Today, the news media operate in a complex and hybrid media ecosystem, which they share with celebrities, citizens and computer code. The rise of new gatekeepers, the persistence of existing gatekeepers and the digital technologies facilitating, shaping and enhancing social communication practices deserve detailed scrutiny as these forces are competing to determine how news stories are told, filtered and prioritized for the public.

Prominent media institutions such as *The Globe and Mail* and CBC remain relevant to the lives of millions of Canadians. But established news outlets are sharing the media space with Facebook, Twitter and Snapchat. On digital platforms, journalists are competing for attention with content from businesses, activists, citizens and algorithms. The result is a hybrid media space where older and newer gatekeepers interact and influence each other, at times in unexpected and surprising ways. Understanding how events and issues become the news in a hybrid media space is of particular significance for young adults who are joining the workforce, voting for the first time and will be the leaders of tomorrow in Canada. These informed citizens are far more likely to rely on the gatekeeping functions of social media platforms and social circles to sift through the abundance of news and information that characterizes our contemporary media environment.

How the news becomes the news is a pressing question in Canada given the pressures on the established media that millions of Canadians have historically relied on for accurate, informed and relevant information, and the rise of new entrants as sources for news and information. Over the past decade, Canadian news outlets have been hit with plummeting advertising revenues and have cut thousands of jobs. With predictions of few to no remaining daily newspapers by 2025, with online offerings failing to match the scope of existing newspapers, the Heritage Ministry is conducting a multifaceted review on the effects of news industry disruption, exploring the impact of the internet on subjects ranging from advertising regulation to fact-checking.

There is an imperative for policies that are aligned with existing and emergent media spaces where Canadians swim in a blend of facts, comment, experience and emotion. Policy initiatives need to be cognizant of the nature of a hybrid media environment where a combination and recombination of factors influence and shape how information is

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disseminated and how knowledge is created. The emergent gatekeeping environment can be mapped out to four elements that intersect and interact in continual complex, contextual and contested processes:

1) **Players:** Digital technologies have enabled new entrants into the news ecosystem in the shape of for-profit and non-profit news start-ups. These have been both homegrown and offshoots of US operations, from *The National Observer* and Discourse Media to *Huffington Post Canada* and *Buzzfeed Canada*. However, evidence from Europe suggests that the prospects for long-term sustainability are doubtful, given competition for revenue and audiences from established media and digital giants such as Google and Facebook.

Alongside these players are crowdsourced, issue-based protest movements enabled by the networked and connected information architectures of the internet. The connective infrastructures of social media have enabled ad hoc publics to mobilize around an issue, amplify counter-narratives and reimagine group identities. The hashtag – for example #OccupyWallStreet, #IdleNoMore and #BlackLivesMatter – has emerged as a key mechanism for like-minded individuals to coalesce around an issue in the news. They emerge as players to contest mainstream media narratives and collectively articulate their concerns.

2) **Platforms:** Platforms are digital sites and services that provide a continually evolving and dynamic infrastructure for public interaction and expression. They structure and construct the social life of users by managing forms of participation and filtering and prioritizing information. Platforms such as Google and Facebook view themselves as technology, rather than media, companies, yet they are key infrastructures for the circulation and consumption of facts, rumours, experiences and opinions.

Facebook has become the world's most influential and powerful platform. Through its algorithms, Facebook makes editorial decisions on access, inclusion, visibility and popularity, blending a news cocktail tailored to individual tastes. Homophily and virality are privileged over diversity and truth as social media algorithms reinforce the human tendency towards elective affinity, mirroring a person's beliefs and values. The technological priorities for platforms further shape the types of news that gain prominence.

3) **Practices:** The way Canadians get the news is reshaping how events and issues gain the most attention. Their consumption of news is not simply a purposeful activity performed at fixed times of the day in pursuit of information. News is an everyday, ambient and, at times, accidental, experience, facilitated by 24-hour news services, social media and smartphones. It means there is less of an imperative to seek out the news as

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audiences bump into news on social media or mobile devices while doing other things. The trend is particularly prevalent among younger audiences whose news practices are aligned with an always-on, connected and mobile lifestyle.

News as a pervasive and persistent social practice impacts the reception and interpretation of news. The growth of the mobile as the primary device for news signals the importance of temporal and spatial considerations for consumption, for example, the idea of checking the news for five minutes while waiting for the next bus. The near real-time circulation and consumption of news fuels a culture of instantaneity that impacts how an event or issue is perceived and understood. Social media such as Twitter encourage and reinforce an instant response to the news, rather than reflexivity. They privilege affective news that will provoke emotion.

4) **Publics:** Networked, digital technologies are enhancing the ability of news users to reframe the news and shape news flows through the selection, filtering and dissemination of what matters to them. This process has been facilitated by widespread use of social media sharing tools on news websites. Citizens can take on the role of secondary gatekeepers who can upgrade or downgrade the relevance and importance of information through social and conversational interactions online. Users are not just choosing news for themselves but also for their social circles and beyond. Decisions on what to share are not based solely on an exchange of information. For users, sharing is a form of social connection and self-representation. Furthermore, some will share a story if it fits their view of the world, regardless of whether it is accurate.

Implications

Canadians appear to be in a golden age of news, where they have unlimited choice from a smorgasbord of sources, organizations and platforms. But it also means there is greater pressure on citizens to evaluate and filter a wealth of news and information for accuracy and credibility, and understand the multiple, complex and inter-related pathways through which the news reaches them. Specific areas include:

1) Research: There is scope for further study of how Canadians access the news along the lines of the work of the Pew Research Center on news practices in the U.S. Knowing more about the activities shaping flows of information would contribute to an understanding of how knowledge related to current events is created, understood and interpreted by the public.

2) Education: Effective participation in the knowledge economy requires Canadians who can create, manage, interrogate and make sense of digital information. As a result, there is

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a need to rethink media literacy as a framework to effectively participate in media, and for policies that foster media infrastructures and information policies that enable Canadians meaningfully to engage with the news. In addition, media literacy initiatives would benefit from a focus on skills to enable people to develop broader skills related to the evaluation, selection, production and dissemination of news and information.

3) Regulation: The platforms that have emerged as spaces for the sharing and consumption of news are largely U.S.-based and do not define themselves as media companies. The role of the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) is open for debate, for example given the increasing use by Canadian media outlets of video and live video on Facebook.

4) Policy: As the infrastructures of journalism are reconfigured, current approaches to supporting and promoting Canadian media are debatable. There is a need for media policies aligned with existing and emergent media spaces where a combination and recombination of factors influence and shape how information is disseminated and how knowledge is created.

Context

It is two decades since the web guru and Grateful Dead lyricist John Perry Barlow issued his 844-word proclamation declaring the internet as a world where everyone would have a voice. Now, in 2017, millions are sharing more of their experiences, perspectives and insights with more people than ever before using the technologies of social media. The networked and open architectures of digital media have, seemingly, created a media space without gatekeepers controlling information flows. The reality is the opposite.

The inconvenient truth about digital media is that gatekeeping is prevalent as it is reconfigured, crowdsourced and algorithmified in a digital age. Gatekeeping remains relevant as a complex, contextual and contested process through which competing institutions, technologies and publics are vying to provide relevance, meaning and interpretation of news, which ultimately affects the ideas, choices and behaviour of citizens.

Gatekeeping has been a central theoretical framework to consider how events and issues become news since the publication of David Manning White's seminal 1950 paper on the individualized selections of a single professional editor. The concept has its roots in a media environment marked by a limited supply of news, concentrated media ownership, and routinized journalistic practices that homogenized the news choices of media. The journalist as a gatekeeper has become a core premise in communications research, through the choices made in choosing, writing, editing and positioning information presented as news to the public. These decisions construct a social reality as represented by the news media, signaling to audiences what is important and relevant.

Implications

How the news becomes the news is a pressing question in Canada given the pressures on the established media that millions of Canadians have historically relied on for accurate, informed and relevant information, and the rise of new entrants as sources for news and information. Over the past decade, Canadian news outlets have faced plummeting revenue and cut media jobs nationwide. The Canadian Media Guild (CMG) reports 10,000 media sector jobs lost across the country between 2008 and 2013. The print sector has been hardest hit, accounting for two-thirds of these defunct positions, corresponding to a steep decline in newspaper subscriptions and subsequent devaluation of advertising space. Budgetary cuts have affected journalists working in conventional editorial positions as well as printers, technicians, and distribution workers.

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As the nation's largest news outlets seek to adapt to digitization, publications such as the *Toronto Star* and the *Globe and Mail* have turned to outsourcing their design and editing departments. Independent publications such as *The Tyee* have kept going through a diverse business model, but other organizations, such as the Canadian Centre for Investigative Journalism, have permanently ceased operations. In 2016, the Heritage Ministry started a multifaceted review on the effects of news industry disruption, exploring the impact of the internet on subjects ranging from advertising regulation to fact-checking. The endeavour aims to bolster Canada's struggling media industry, which Heritage Minister Mélanie Joly considers central to a functioning democracy.

Recent events in the U.S. highlight some of the issues arising from a weakened journalism sector. According to the Pew Research Center, 2015 was the worst year for the US newspaper sector since the 2008 market crash and subsequent recession. Weekly newspaper circulation suffered its greatest decline since 2010, down by 7 per cent across print and digital. Advances in digital subscriptions failed to make up for a decline in advertising revenues of nearly 8 per cent year on year. Perhaps more significantly, Pew has warned that newspapers may not be able to rely on a core audience for print for much longer in order to ease the transition to a digital era. As a consequence, newsrooms across Middle America have been hollowed out, with 20,000 fewer positions than 20 years ago. Research suggests that the health of local journalism goes hand in hand with the state of civic engagement. It is hard to say that the state of local media directly affects levels of civic engagement. But studies in Denver, Seattle and New Jersey have indicated that civic engagement tends to drop following the closure of a city daily.

The waning authority of newspapers, traditionally the main provider of local and regional news, has risen to the fore following the election of Donald Trump as president. Pew found that no more than 3 per cent of Americans named local and national print outlets as the most helpful source for election news during the contentious 2016 presidential campaign. Surprisingly, news websites fared little better with only 13 per cent of Americans viewing them as helpful sources of election news. The results may reflect the fact that most of the new digital news startups in the U.S., such as BuzzFeed, VICE Media and Vox Media, are concentrated along the Democrat-leaning east and west coasts.

Instead, Pew found that cable news and social media were cited as the two most helpful sources of election news. The demagoguery of a politician such as Donald Trump is well suited to these mediums as they provide fertile ground for emotion. Trump's heated rhetoric helped to increase viewership for cable news for the first time in three years and, with it, rising revenues. Cable news channels and social media reinforce the tendency of people to gravitate towards information that mirrors and reinforces their political beliefs.

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Paradoxically, the rise of digital media has lowered the costs of media production and distribution so that Canadians can access more content from more sources in more ways than ever before. Citizens are not limited by geography to the perspectives of a small handful of print and broadcast outlets. A plethora of perspectives are within easy reach online. News has become pervasive, persistent and perpetual rather than a discrete activity related to specific times of the day, such as tuning into the evening newscast. Audiences get their news from old and new media, from news outlets and social media, in print and on mobile, selected by journalists and friends. Just as news consumers move seamlessly from source and device, the content they encounter mixes facts, commentary, experience and emotion.

Research by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism highlights the distributed nature of news discovery with people coming across the news online by going directly to a news website, finding content via search and stumbling across information on social media. With the development and growth of social media over the past decade, news and information has become ever more pervasive in everyday experiences. The novel element is how digital technologies have transformed news habits. News-seeking behaviour was commonly a purposeful activity tied to specific times of the day, with people deciding when to read the newspaper or tune in to a news broadcast. There is now much greater incidental, and at times accidental, exposure to the news, fueled by 24-hour news services, social media and smartphones.

Social media spaces, largely created as private, corporate enterprises, have turned into places for the dissemination, circulation and interpretation of news and information. They have become networked public spaces for Canadians to disseminate, discuss and critique to the news. Sharing the news is not a new phenomenon. But networked digital technologies create an infrastructure to host, organize and incentivize forms of social discovery and interaction. In particular, social media creates an environment for the news to be both more personalized and individualized while at the same time more collaborative and collective.

The behemoth of social media is Facebook, with an estimated 19 million users in Canada by 2016, accounting for just over half the country's population. Just five years earlier, 25 per cent of Canadians online were already getting some of their news and information daily from family, friends and acquaintances they follow on social networks. Since then, Facebook has become an increasingly important source for news. By 2016, nearly half of Americans reported finding out about via Facebook. As a result, this platform creates the conditions under which much of today's public discourse happen. Platforms such as

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Facebook set the standards for communication, connection and creation, automating interactions at scale using secret, proprietary algorithms.

Overall, there are signs of a significant shift in how citizens learn about the world around them. The minority of those who follow the news closely will continue to seek it out on mainstream and social media. Those with a passing interest in the news may be moving away from even casual news-seeking activities. The shift in news habits is particularly notable among young adults who are joining the workforce, voting for the first time and are the leaders of tomorrow in Canada.

While high profile networks such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter are the most popular sources for news overall, young adults are also turning to other services such as Instagram, Snapchat and Tumblr. These informed citizens are far more likely to rely on the gatekeeping functions of social media platforms and social circles to sift through the abundance of news and information that characterizes our contemporary media environment. The challenge for Canadian journalists, business leaders, policy makers and audiences is knowing how gatekeeping occurs when decisions on what becomes news are shaped not just by journalists and institutional elites.

Findings

The emergent gatekeeping environment can be mapped out to four elements that intersect and interact in continual complex, contextual and contested processes. The interactions between these four elements combine to form a new ecosystem for the creation, production and dissemination of news and information to Canadians, serving as the backdrop to how citizens understand the world around them.

Players:

Digital technologies have enabled new entrants into the news ecosystem in the shape of for-profit and non-profit news startups. These have been both homegrown and offshoots of US operations, from *The National Observer* and Discourse Media to *Huffington Post Canada* and *Buzzfeed Canada*, with a mixed track record of success. One high profile community-based initiative, OpenFile, shut down in 2012 after almost three years. Despite being lauded by the media as an innovative way to report on local communities, the project struggled to both find an audience and a sustainable business model. Evidence from Europe suggests that prospects for long-term sustainability are doubtful, given competition for revenue and audiences from established media and digital giants such as Google and Facebook. A Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism study of nine news startups in Europe offers little hope for similar Canadian initiatives.

The rise of new digital startups in Canada may not be enough to make up for the poor, overall health of the legacy media, from print to television to radio, that Canadians have traditionally relied on for meaningful, civic-minded journalism. A key question facing legacy media is whether they have enough time to shift away from an advertising-based funding model to more diversified revenue streams that tend to depend to a large extent on a core of loyal subscribers willing to pay more and more for the news.

A 2016 report for the Public Policy Forum described the health of legacy media in Canada as dismal. It noted that some legacy media have tried to embrace the potential of digital media for new forms of storytelling and new revenue streams, but concluded that most of these initiatives had largely failed. Looking ahead, industry trends point to a consolidation of major, well-resourced media outlets mostly operating at a national level as key sources of news and information for Canadians, alongside a decline in city and regional media.

Legacy and new digital startups are only one part of the new ecosystem of journalism. Alongside media players are crowdsourced, issue-based protest movements enabled by the networked and connected information architectures of the internet. The connective

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infrastructures of social media have enabled ad hoc publics to mobilize around an issue, amplify counter-narratives and reimagine group identities.

These technologies have transformed the relationship between established media and the public, challenging the notion of the journalist as the gatekeeper of news and information. Instead social media, fostered by the spread of mobile phones and ubiquitous connectivity, enables individuals to coalesce around an issue and bypass the news media. Unlike media gatekeeping based on the institutional power of a news organization, the power to elevate certain voices and issues on social media is far more fluid and transitory. It ebbs and flows depending on the actions of the crowd.

Events and issues that are ignored, dismissed or marginalized by established media can gain new life through social media. The hashtag – for example #OccupyWallStreet, #IdleNoMore and #BlackLivesMatter - has emerged as a key mechanism for like-minded individuals to come together around an issue in the news. The hashtag is an example of a technological affordance appropriated by individuals to express a collective identity, raise awareness of a cause and articulate a shared but personalized narrative.

Through the collective actions of thousands of individuals, certain voices can rise to the fore and emerge as players to contest institutional elites such as politicians, business leaders and law enforcement. Social media creates a ready-made infrastructure for individuals to connect and unite around a common issue, highlighting certain perspectives and voices through practices of listening and broadcasting. Unlike media gatekeeping, networked gatekeeping presents a new framework for assessing and understanding the ebb and flow of actors and issues.

Case study: #Idlenomore

In the winter of 2012-2013, the indigenous-led Idle No More movement grew to encompass environmentalists and opponents of the Conservative government of Stephen Harper. The protest marches were mirrored by vibrant exchanges on social media using the #Idlenomore hashtag. Canadian media relied heavily on politicians, police and experts as sources in their coverage of the movement. However, on social media, people were listening to a different set of voices. On Twitter, the most prominent sources for news, information and commentary were Idle No More activists and well-known Aboriginal voices. Perhaps more significantly, the #Idlenomore crowdsourced elite was made up of a large proportion of Indigenous individuals who are usually absent from mainstream media representations. The contrast between the actors quoted in mainstream media and the actors who were crowdsourced to prominence on the #Idlenomore hashtag, raised questions about how far media reporting provided an accurate representation of the views and activities of the movement.

Case study: #BlackLivesMatter:

In the US, the #BlackLivesMatter movement is credited with raising the profile of racial problems in policing. Activists created the Twitter hashtag in July 2013 following the acquittal of George Zimmerman over the shooting death in Florida of unarmed black teenager Trayvon Martin. The hashtag garnered national attention during the Ferguson protests in the summer of 2014. A study by the Center for Media and Social Impact found that eyewitness reports, photos, video and commentary challenged mainstream news media coverage of Ferguson from protesters themselves. They articulated a counter-narrative, calling for supported justice for the victims and denouncing police brutality. Protesters and supporters used Twitter for politically charged sentiment and anti-institutional information that, in a pre-internet age, would have depended solely on traditional media sources for widespread dissemination. The rise of the Black Lives Matter movement was not exclusively due to the use of social media. But #BlackLivesMatter fuelled the circulation of alternative perspectives and drew attention to issues of systemic racial injustice so much so that the Pew Research Center noted a significant increase in the number of Americans who agreed that racial issues required social change.

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Case study: Feminist activism

Feminist activists have used various hashtags as a central collective hub to circulate and collect feminist stories and resources. In India, #boardthebus was used in 2014 as part of a campaign to raise awareness of violence against women on the streets and buses. In the same year, the Everyday Sexism project used #everydaysexism to highlight the pervasive nature of sexism by documenting stories of women's experiences of being sexually harassed. Such efforts tend to be rooted in a frustration with the dominant narratives replicated by the mainstream media and can be the product of an individual. In 2013, Hilary Bowman-Smart, a Melbourne-based student at the time, started #safetytipsforladies to parody advice given to women to minimize the chances of being raped. Thousands joined in, using humour to push back against a dominant narrative of victim-blaming. Among the mock advice was a suggestion to don chain mail and to go to bed in a sleeping bag.

Platforms

Platforms are digital sites and services that provide a continually evolving and dynamic infrastructure for public interaction and expression. They structure and construct the social life of users by managing forms of participation and filtering and prioritizing information. Platforms such as Google and Facebook view themselves as technology, rather than media, companies, yet they are key infrastructures for the circulation and consumption of facts, rumours, experiences and opinions.

Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg has become the new media baron, running the most influential and powerful publishing platform in the world. By 2016, more than 2.3 billion people globally were using social media, accessing platforms via mobile devices. Facebook continued to dominate social media, with more than 1.5 billion active accounts, and 85 per cent of people using the service on mobile. Other platforms owned by Facebook, such as WhatsApp and Instagram, are used by hundreds of millions of people. Canada has 21 million active social media users, accounting for 58 per cent of the population, with four in five people using social media via mobile. Facebook is by far the most popular service, with 19 million users. For millions of Canadians, Facebook has become part of their daily media habit, accounting for nearly half of all social media activity.

Social media, and above all Facebook, have developed into sources for news and information. Most media organizations are active on social media as they attempt to tap into the power of social recommendation and discovery. However, third party platforms

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like Facebook are both a blessing and a curse to the news industry. These platforms offer opportunities to galvanize dedicated readers to recommend and amplify news content and to go beyond existing audiences and reach casual news consumers. At the same time, media organizations are giving up control over the distribution of their material, as well as some of their gatekeeping power to decide what is most important and relevant to Canadians.

Case study: Facebook Live

Facebook announced a platform for live video streaming in April 2016, promoting it as a benefit to media organizations. According to media reports, Facebook entered into deals with around 140 media organizations such as the *New York Times* and the BBC, to provide live video, reportedly paying publishers some US\$50m. There is little information about similar deals with Canadian media outlets, though the *Globe and Mail*, *Maclean's*, CBC and some *Postmedia* newspapers have offered video on Facebook Live. CBC has said it receives a set financial incentive from Facebook each time participating accounts reach a combined monthly target for video streamed live. It said Facebook had no editorial oversight over the content. The precarity of such arrangements was highlighted in January 2017, when media reports suggested Facebook was abandoning its emphasis on live video and was not renewing its deals with the media. The power of platforms like Facebook as intermediaries between news outlets and the audience is a policy issue that goes to the core of journalism as a public good.

Technology companies such as Facebook, Google and Twitter have emerged as central intermediaries for news, even though news is far from their primary mission. There are questions over the duties and responsibilities of these platforms to the public interest, such as supporting the information needs of a well-functioning democracy, given their vital role in the dissemination, circulation and amplification of news and information. In Europe, the Council of Europe has described social networking services as having a public service value. However these services are mostly U.S. based corporate entities with a commercial, rather than public service, imperative.

At the heart of these tensions is the opacity of proprietary algorithms that assign relevance, value and prominence of knowledge in ways that inform public life. Through its algorithms, Facebook makes editorial decisions on access, inclusion, visibility and popularity through its algorithms, blending a news cocktail tailored to individual tastes. Homophily and virality are privileged over diversity and truth as social media algorithms

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reinforce the human tendency towards elective affinity. The technological priorities for platforms further shape the types of news that gain prominence. For example, Facebook's recent emphasis on live and immersive video prioritizes visual affective experiences designed to trigger an emotional reaction, rather than deliver factual information.

The issue has received increased attention following the election of Donald Trump in the U.S. and the debate over so-called "fake news" on Facebook. Current approaches to the issue are based on fact-checking and labelling some stories as "disputed." This is a start but the issue goes far beyond fact-checking. There are critical questions to ask about how far news routines and practices developed over the 20th century are suited to serving the public good in the media ecosystem of the 21st century detailed in this knowledge synthesis.

Practices

The way Canadians get the news is reshaping how events and issues gain the most attention. Their consumption of news is not simply a purposeful activity performed at fixed times of the day in pursuit of information. News is an everyday, ambient and, at times, accidental, experience, facilitated by 24-hour news services, social media and smartphones. It means there is less of an imperative to seek out the news as audiences bump into news on social media or mobile devices while doing other things. The trend is particularly prevalent among younger audiences whose news practices are aligned with an always-on, connected and mobile lifestyle.

News as a pervasive and persistent social practice impacts the reception and interpretation of news. The growth of the mobile as the primary device for news signals the importance of temporal and spatial considerations for consumption, for example, the idea of checking the news for five minutes while waiting for the next bus. For a large number of people, the mobile phone has become not just the primary way to go online – it has become the only way. For example, just over half of all Facebook users only ever use their mobiles to access the platform.

In its annual Digital News Report for 2016, the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism highlighted the growth of news accessed via mobile phones. It starts as soon as people wake up now that mobile devices routinely show up in the bedroom. For many, the smartphone is the first thing they pick up in the morning, competing with radio, TV and print to be the first to deliver the news of the day. In the UK, mobile/tablets have surpassed computers as the main device for news, with younger groups most at ease with

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using the smartphone for news. It is startling to note that the BBC now sees 70 per cent of its online audience coming from mobiles.

There is no doubt of the rise of the mobile phone becoming the main entry point for digital news, with implications for both established and newer media outlets. The increasing practice of accessing news on the go seems to be weakening the identity of news brands. According to the Reuters Institute, people getting their news on mobile are more likely to get to it via social media, rather than directly from the news publisher. These nascent pathways for news undermine the traditional gatekeeping power of the media. Moreover, the arrival and gradual growth of new mobile news aggregators, such as Apple News, further distances the news from the brand. According to the Reuters Institute report, news brands are only noticed about a quarter of the time by people in countries like Japan and South Korea as aggregated news on mobile is widespread.

Mobile devices, social media and ubiquitous connectivity have contributed to a shift in news practices over the past decade. The combination of these three factors make it much easier for news to reach people with little or no effort. The idea that “if the news is important, it will find me” surfaced as social media started to take hold around 2008/2009. By 2010, Pew was reporting that half of Americans were getting some of their news on sites like Facebook. By 2015, the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism noted how Facebook had become a key space where people “bumped” into the news, above all for casual news consumers.

The shift in behaviour, from news seeking to news stumbling, has unexpected consequences. Traditionally, the news becomes the news because it is current and topical. On social, something becomes news when it is widely shared and starts appearing on news feeds, so that thousands “bump” into it. In some cases, it can mean that news stories can gain new life online, regardless of whether the information is still relevant, timely or current.

Publics

Networked, digital technologies are enhancing the ability of news users to reframe the news and shape news flows through the selection, filtering and dissemination of what matters to them. Over the past decade, social media has developed into spaces where the traditional separation between material from journalists is blended with reaction, commentary and interpretation from citizens. As gatekeepers, journalists would select what was newsworthy based on a well-established and shared set of values with the aim of selecting the news and information most relevant, interesting or entertaining for the

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public. Citizens are now taking on the role of secondary gatekeepers who can upgrade or downgrade the relevance and importance of information through social and conversational interactions online. Users are not just choosing news for themselves but also for their social circles and beyond. As secondary gatekeepers, Canadians are able to help to shape which news stories are more broadly seen and which languish in obscurity.

The choices of the public as secondary gatekeepers are shaped by a number of factors. For users, sharing is a form of social connection and self-representation. Way before Facebook, people used the communication tools and spaces available at the time to connect with others and form and nurture relationships through the exchange of news and information. Behaviour on social media is intertwined with expressions of identity and the self. The spreading of news, information and commentary through social networks are symbolic declarations of the self, signaling to others how we would like to be seen.

Similarly, people do not simply share content based on an assessment of its veracity. At times, they will recommend information that is not necessarily true but instead is amusing or entertaining. This is analogous to what happens in everyday conversation, made up of personal anecdotes, gossip or far-fetched stories which are too good to be true. The result can be publics that privilege the sensational over the important and the witty over the earnest.

The circulation of news and information on social media is shaped by human tendencies to seek out information that supports individual beliefs and avoid news that challenges them. Processes of selective exposure and cognitive dissonance are reinforced by the algorithms of platforms like Facebook that seek to tailor news feeds to individual likes and preferences. Social media tends to reinforce homophily, the tendency to associate with others with similar characteristics and interests, as it makes it simpler for like individuals to find each other.

Media organizations have contributed to the rise of social discovery, recommendation and transmission of the news through the widespread adoption of social media sharing tools on websites. Social sharing allows individuals to bypass the choices of editors and instead choose to highlight what they deem important and worthy. A study of U.S. newspaper websites showed all of the 138 dailies in the sample offered multiple gatekeeping mechanisms for readers online. Most featured lists of the most read stories which highlight the choices of readers compared to the editorial choices for the home page. Also common were options to email a story or share it on Facebook. Indeed, such sharing functionality has become commonplace on news websites.

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While journalists retain significant power as gatekeepers in choosing what issues to cover and how to present them, the public takes on a secondary role in the dissemination and amplification of the news. The result is that readers can choose to pay attention to news items that did not make it to a website's home page. What journalists consider newsworthy and important may not necessarily align with the public, potentially revealing a different set of editorial priorities and influencing the newsroom's agenda. An exploratory study from the Netherlands suggested that the stories and issues in the most viewed lists tended to receive more subsequent attention by journalists. The interplay between the visible choices by audiences and subsequent newsroom decisions is a growing area of research.

The evidence so far suggests that public and journalists apply different sets of criteria in deciding what is important. For example, the near real-time circulation and consumption of news fuels a culture of instantaneity that impacts how an event or issue is perceived and understood. News becomes news as people post and repost a mix of facts, drama and feelings about an event or issue. News is judged through values of instantaneity, solidarity and intensity, as well as more traditional journalistic news values of impact, proximity and currency. This has been described as affective news that blends evidence, subjective experience and emotion, quite different from established journalistic practices of separating the facts from opinion and commentary. The news is collaboratively constructed through these exchanges of news and information on social media, outside of the formal structures of the news media, shaping what becomes news or how a particular story is understood.

For journalists and others, one of the challenges then is how to evaluate the choices made by publics. Tweets and Facebook likes are not necessarily representative of public opinion but highlight the concerns of an engaged group of individuals. Activity on social media needs to be contextualized. It is important to consider the impact of the psychological phenomenon of informational social influence on news sharing. Some people may be taking cues from how to behave from the actions of others and follow their lead. At other times, sharing might be shaped by normative social influence. Some may choose not to participate in a particular discussion on social media as their views are not in line with the majority and thus do not want to be ostracized online. These factors are important for media and policy makers trying to interpret public opinion via social media as they are potentially ignoring a significant group who hold views that may seem less acceptable, such as support for Brexit or Trump. Further research is needed to understand how these human tendencies play out on social media, how they shape gatekeeping decisions and how they influence how audiences make sense of news and information on social media.

Knowledge mobilization plan

Book

The central outcome of this project will be a trade book targeted for publication in fall 2018, written in a journalistic style and grounded in academic inquiry. Blending storytelling with academic research, the book will provide Canadians with a compelling and informed perspective on how sweeping changes in digital media are affecting the information they receive. Upon publication, I will embark on a series of promotional activities as I did following publication of my 2014 book, *Tell Everyone: Why We Share and Why It Matters* (DoubleDay Canada). *Tell Everyone* was one of the outcomes of a 2011 SSHRC Knowledge Synthesis grant and received the National Business Book Award in 2015. I have a pre-existing relationship with PenguinRandomHouse Canada which has expressed interest in my new book.

Publications

In order to disseminate results across the academy, industry and the public, my focus is on the publication of journalistic articles accessible to a broad audience. The research for this study was applied in an article for the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election Campaign Report, published in November 2016 by the Centre for Politics and Media Research and the Centre for the Study of Journalism, Culture and Community at Bournemouth University in the UK. The article was also published in *The Conversation* and republished by Salon.com: http://www.salon.com/2016/11/20/trump-supporters-became-the-media-by-privileging-emotions-over-facts_partner/

I aim to publish an additional three similar articles over 2017 linked to news events and related to the subject matter of this knowledge synthesis.

Teaching

The results of this knowledge synthesis have been integrated into a graduate-level course I teach at the University of British Columbia Graduate School of Journalism. The course, *Decoding Social Media*, is a problem-based, experiential learning course that brings together journalism and business students to work on applied projects for media partners. I will also disseminate findings through guest lectures in other courses at UBC, such as the first-year undergraduate Journalism 100 course and in continuing education classes on media literacy.

Conclusion and recommendations

Canadians appear to be in a golden age of news, where they have unlimited choice from a smorgasbord of sources, organizations and platforms. But it also means there is greater pressure on citizens to evaluate and filter a wealth of news and information for accuracy and credibility, and understand the multiple, complex and inter-related pathways through which the news reaches them. Novel approaches are necessary to enable Canadians to take in different perspectives in a complex, complicated and, at times all-consuming, information environment.

This knowledge synthesis seeks to contribute to mapping the contours of an emergent networked, hybrid media environment and the interaction of four forces that are impacting news and public life. Alongside traditional gatekeepers are new platforms, practices and publics competing to determine how the news is socially constructed. How an event or issue gets reported as “the news” is the result of multiple interactions by multiple forces operating in a broader societal context.

There is still much unknown about the media landscape of the 21st century and its impact on how Canadians get the news and information that is vital to democratic life. The following recommendations are a starting point for further development and elaboration:

1) Research: There is a significant knowledge gap in how Canadians access the news. There is no comparable institution to the Pew Research Center or the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism that is devoted to researching and understanding the news habits of Canadians. Such a gap potentially undermines the ability to develop media policies that address the needs of Canadians. Knowing more about the activities shaping flows of information would contribute to an understanding of how knowledge related to current events is created, understood and interpreted by the public.

2) Education: Effective participation in the knowledge economy requires Canadians who can create, manage, interrogate and make sense of digital information. Media literacy initiatives designed at helping Canadians be smarter consumers of news would benefit from a focus on skills to enable people to be better producers, filters and distributors of news. However, there are questions over how far standard approaches to media literacy are effective given the dramatic changes in the media environment. Further research is needed to determine how Canadians can be supported effectively to engage with the news in order to make informed decisions.

3) Regulation: The platforms that have emerged as spaces for the sharing and consumption of news are largely U.S.-based and do not define themselves as media

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companies. The role of the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) is open for debate, for example given the increasing use by Canadian media outlets of video on Facebook. The mission of the CRTC is to ensure the needs and interests of Canada are reflected by the country's communication services. How that mandate is interpreted and applied in a digital era is a central issue for policy makers. This question extends behind media regulation to debates over the appropriate levels of taxation for these social media platforms and questions over media concentration given the overwhelming dominance of Facebook in Canada and beyond. There are also additional issues over the provision of affordable and competitive mobile services due to the rise of smartphones as a key device for accessing news and information.

4) Policy: Concerns over the state of Canada's media landscape were raised in a 2013 Open Society report that pointed out the lack of a clear national agenda and set of goals for a digital future, compared to the European Union and the U.S. As the infrastructures of journalism are reconfigured, current approaches to supporting and promoting Canadian media through subsidies and tax breaks are debatable. There is a need for media policies aligned with existing and emergent media spaces where a combination and recombination of factors influence and shape how information is disseminated and how knowledge is created. There is scope to reimagine how policies could seek to promote and support media innovation in the public interest and to reconsider the role of the national public service broadcaster, the CBC, as an incubator for novel and experimental initiatives in the public interest.

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