



THE NEW INFORMATION POWER-BROKERS

GATEKEEPING IN HYBRID DIGITAL MEDIA

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Key Findings

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 new media startup, 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.

There are significant knowledge gaps in how Canadians navigate a fractured and hybrid media environment where competing players, platforms, practices and publics are vying to provide relevance, meaning and interpretation of news, which ultimately affects the ideas, choices and behaviour of citizens. Such knowledge 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, where they share the news 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 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

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sustainability are doubtful, given competition for revenue and audiences from established media and digital giants such as Google and Facebook. Moreover, non-media players such as businesses are competing for audiences, extending corporate influence through sponsored content (also known as branded journalism) or creating direct media channels online.

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. In the US, the #BlackLivesMatter movement is credited with raising the profile of racial problems in policing.

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 CEO Mark Zuckerberg has become the new media baron, running the most influential and powerful publisher in the world. 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 reinforce human tendency towards elective affinity. The technological priorities for platforms further shape the types of news that gain prominence. For example, Facebook's current emphasis on live and immersive video prioritizes visual affective experiences designed to trigger an emotional reaction, rather than deliver factual information.

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 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

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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 and, as a result, be more likely to be widely shared.

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. In addition to providing training on assessing information that can help Canadians be better consumers of news, media literacy initiatives would benefit from a focus on skills to enable people to be better producers, filters and distributors of news.

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.