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Government of Canada Gouvernement du Canada
 Privy Council Office Bureau du Conseil privé

Ottawa, Canada
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MEMORANDUM FOR MINISTER OF PUBLIC SAFETY, DEMOCRATIC
 INSTITUTIONS AND INTERGOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS

**NOVEMBER 2023 REPORT:
THE CANADIAN INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM**

(For your information)

SUMMARY

- This note provides you with a summary of the recent report by the Media Ecosystem Observatory as the lead of the Canadian Digital Media Research Network (CDMRN). The report (**TAB A**) was published at the CDMRN's launch event in late November, 2023.
- The report provides baseline information regarding the state of the Canadian information ecosystem. It is based on survey data as well as data collected from four of the main social media platforms using an innovative data collection approach.
- While still preliminary, the findings provide a case for the Government to support access to reliable news sources, foster media literacy, and promote civic engagement.
- This note also provides you with an update on the work of the CDMRN since its funding was announced in March 2023, and expectations for its future work.

Background

- In June 2023, you announced the details of the \$5.5 million investment in the Canadian Digital Media Research Network (CDMRN), to strengthen Canadians' information resilience by researching how the quality of information, including disinformation narratives, impacts Canadians' attitudes and behaviours. The CDMRN is rooted in five pillars of operation: ongoing data collection; data stewardship; analytical capacity; knowledge mobilization; and incident response.
- The initiative is administered by the Media Ecosystem Observatory (MEO), a research initiative co-led by McGill University and the University of Toronto. In addition to MEO, the CDMRN currently

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includes nine partner organizations representing Canada's most prominent researchers studying the information ecosystem and disinformation.

- The CDMRN partners gathered during a launch event in late November, where the MEO released its first comprehensive report on the state of the Canadian information ecosystem as part of the CDMRN's initiative (**TAB A**).

Methodological innovations

- To understand the Canadian information ecosystem, MEO combines two sources of data: traditional surveys (large national surveys and targeted surveys during critical periods), as well as social media data.
- In line with the CDMRN's mandate for data collection and stewardship, MEO developed a tool to map out activity baseline across four major platforms: Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. The tool tracks the few thousand most politically influential individuals and organizations across the four platforms (other platforms are being added).
- The tool innovates by tracking those influencers across multiple platforms through a range of possible connections, while research to date on social media activities has primarily focused on using a unique platform. Because the Canadian ecosystem is very concentrated and a limited number of influencers attract the most attention, this provides a solid picture of Canadian political discourse online.

Findings

- Some of the key findings from establishing a baseline of the state of the Canadian information ecosystem include:
 - There is disproportionality in the online discourse; a small number of Canadian creators captured at least half of all views on Canadian YouTube and TikTok.
 - Canadians are inattentive to politics (40% reported avoiding political news). Canadians in 2023 showed reduced political knowledge compared to 2018, even for those who consumed news on social media and through traditional outlets.
 - News consumption and attitudes have been generally stable in the last five years. However, there is a significant decline in media trust over the last five years and an increase in use of social media for news. Those who use social media for news tend to be less trusting of traditional media and are less likely to participate in politics.

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- The online discourse among provincial and federal politicians is geographically fragmented and not highly segregated on partisan lines.
 - A vast majority of Canadians believe that false information threatens democracy (69.5%) and fuels polarisation (65.6%). Almost half of Canadians believe false information was a severe problem during the last federal election in 2021 (46.6%).
 - Canadians believe that both social media platforms and the Government have a role to play in addressing this challenge: 53.2% of Canadians think that the government should monitor and limit exposure to false information and publicly criticize organisations that spread it.
- o The report also contains four case studies conducted by MEO in the last year:
 - **Meta ban on news:** with the Online News Act (Bill C-18) coming into force, Meta implemented a ban of Canadian news on its platforms (i.e., Facebook and Instagram) on August 9, 2023. Prior to the ban, half of Canadians reported getting their news through Facebook, and official pages of Canadian news outlets on the platform had generated between 5 and 9 million views per day. Blocking access triggered an estimated 89.3% loss of engagement. It is noteworthy that one quarter of local news outlets lost almost their entire online presence as they only had activities on Facebook. Despite this, there was no change in the activity levels of Canadians on Facebook nor on other platforms.
 - **Language division in the information ecosystem:** the report found that linguistic differences (English / French) contribute to distinct awareness and subsystems of the Canadian information ecosystem.
 - **2023 Canadian wildfires:** prior attitudes on climate change (whether man-made or due to other reasons) informs how people perceive the impact of the 2023 wildfire season (i.e., whether it impacted them personally or not). Also, climate skeptics are generally far less likely to consult traditional media sources than those who believe climate change is occurring due to human activity. Skeptics tend to get more news from social media like YouTube.
 - **June 2023 by-elections:** Canadians in the four ridings where by-elections were held reported seeing substantially more misinformation than the general population. Many raised their concern about the allegations of foreign intervention in the electoral process as a subject of misinformation. However, most Canadians are at least somewhat confident that Elections Canada is safe from outside interference and are generally satisfied with democracy.

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Interestingly, levels of trust and satisfaction with democracy were higher in the four ridings than within the general population, suggesting that exposure to democratic processes may increase confidence in electoral institutions.

PCO Comment

Policy implications of the findings

- Conclusions from the report provide some insight into the importance of Government actions with respect to digital literacy, supporting the news industry, and increasing civic engagement.
- The overall finding of the report is that low levels of news consumption and reduced political knowledge renders Canadians vulnerable to foreign information manipulation attempts. As the report shows, people with higher political knowledge are more likely to identify the falsehoods of conspiracy theories. This supports the need for continued Government support for digital literacy, including through Canadian Heritage's Digital Citizen Initiative.
- The findings about news consumption, including those specific to Meta's ban of Canadian news, highlight the continued challenges of the news industry to adapt its business model to the digital environment. The *Online News Act* has seen some success with Alphabet (Google) agreeing to negotiate an agreement, but the situation with Facebook has had huge consequences for media outlets, in particular for small, local ones. The fact that this decision did not result in reduced engagement with the platform indicates that there is no incentive for Meta to revert its decision.
- Additionally interesting is that Canadians in by-election ridings expressed higher levels of trust and satisfaction with democracy than the general population. While the findings might be preliminary, they provide support to increasing opportunities for civic engagement.

Future work of the Canadian Digital Media Research Network

- This constitutes the first comprehensive report published under the auspices of the CDMRN since the funding was announced in March 2023, and presents the methodology for future data collection.
- The CDMRN has additionally made progress against its five pillars of work:
 - **Ongoing data collection:** the MEO has created a tool and process to collect data from four key social media platforms from thousands of the most politically influential Canadian individual and

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organizations. The tool allows to visualize, analyze, and establish a baseline for the state of the Canadian information ecosystem.

- **Data stewardship:** data collected is made available through a secure, user-friendly, web-based platform, which will soon be made available to all research partners. In the meantime, MEO has been sharing data upon request with partners.
 - **Analytical capacity:** MEO is making progress on further developing the analytical tools that will allow to identify significant events and shifts in the information ecosystem.
 - **Knowledge mobilization:** the recent report is a first step in making information about the state of the Canadian information ecosystem public. The CDMRN partners are working on subject-specific projects and more reporting is expected in the coming months. For instance, the data supports DisinfoWatch's DISINFODIGEST.
 - **Incident response:** before implementing an incident response mechanism, progress is first needed to be achieved on the data collection, stewardship, and analytical capacity pillars. This is why this was expected to be established in the second year of operations.
- o I have recently requested from the CDRMN representatives an update on their plan to implement its incident response capacity. As a result, representatives of the CDMRN will be engaging with PCO-DI in early February on three immediate priorities: (1) a public facing monthly product on the state of the Canadian media ecosystem; (2) the incident response protocol; and (3) a potential approach for briefing officials and others on the CDMRN's work and findings.



2024-01-19

Paul MacKinnon
Deputy Secretary to the
Cabinet (Governance)

Attachment (1)

 Stinson/Sutherland

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