People in Canada can't see this content
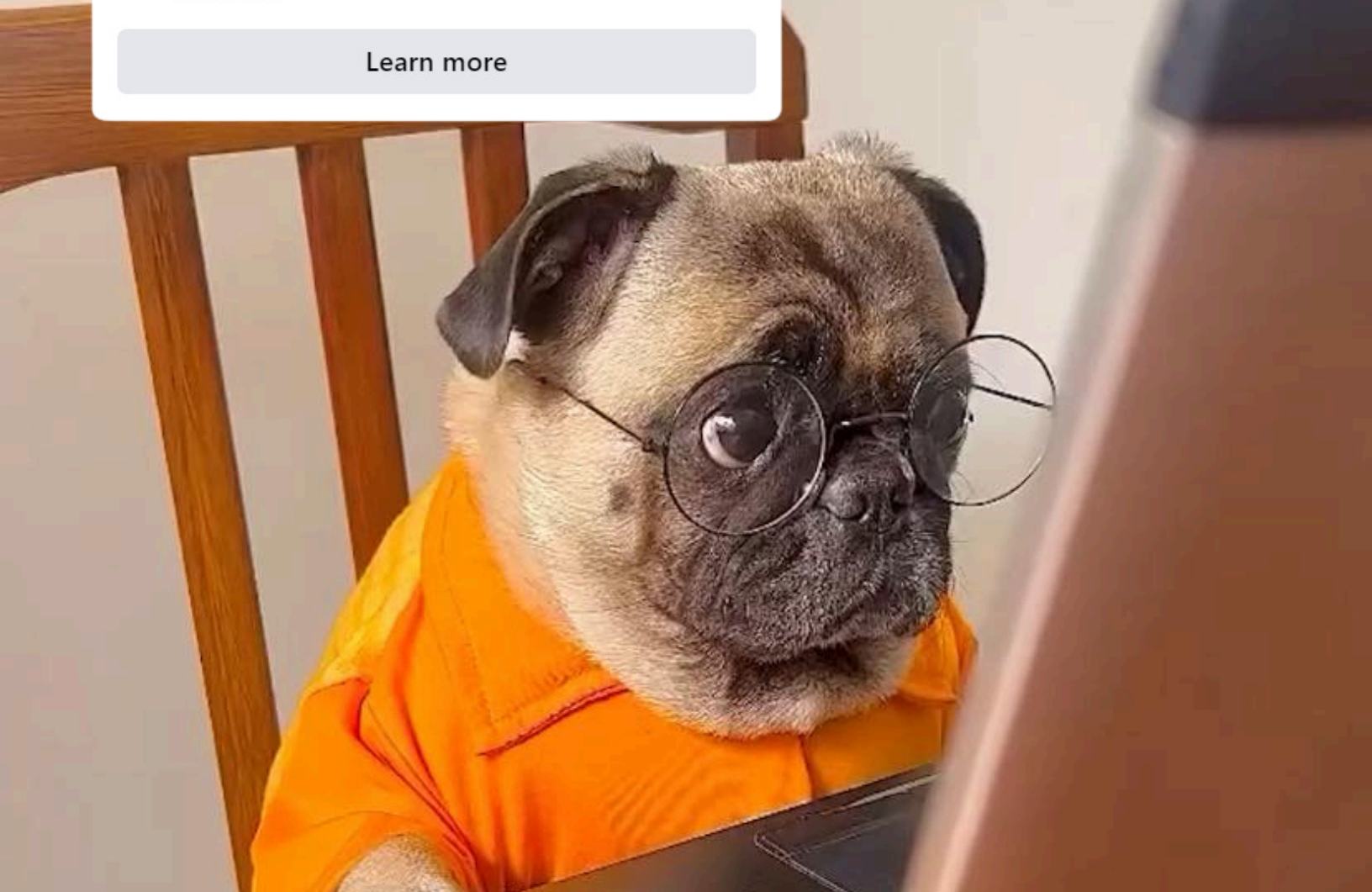
In response to Canadian government legislation, news content can't be viewed in Canada.

Learn more

Information Ecosystem Brief

Old News, New Reality: A Year of Meta's News Ban in Canada

August 2024

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As Canada marks one year since Meta's unprecedented decision to block news access on Facebook and Instagram for Canadian users, the Media Ecosystem Observatory offers a data-driven examination of the ban's impact on Canadians and Canadian news media. Using survey and social media data, we evaluate the extent to which the ban has shaped the character of online news in Canada and changed the behaviour of news producers and consumers.

Un an après la décision sans précédent prise par Meta de bloquer les nouvelles sur Facebook et Instagram pour les utilisateurs Canadiens, l'Observatoire de l'écosystème médiatique publie un rapport de son impact sur les Canadiens et les médias d'information canadiens. À l'aide de sondages et de données provenant des réseaux sociaux, nous évaluons la mesure dans laquelle l'interdiction a façonné le paysage de l'information en ligne au pays et modifié le comportement de ceux qui produisent et consomment l'information.

Key takeaways:

- **Almost half of news media engagement has disappeared** - Canadian news outlets have lost 85% of their engagement on Facebook and Instagram. This loss has not been compensated by increases on other social media platforms, resulting in an overall decrease of 43% in engagement.
- **Almost one third of local news outlets are now inactive** - The ban has reshaped the media landscape in Canada, with 212 or approximately 30% of local news outlets in Canada previously active on social media now inactive.
- **Three quarters of the Canadian public is unaware of the ban** - Only 22% of Canadians know that news is banned on Facebook and Instagram. Even among users of the platforms and those who say they get news from the platform, a majority do not know about the ban.
- **News is still being shared on Facebook and Instagram** - Despite the ban, news organization content is still available on Meta platforms through work-around strategies like screengrabs, with 36% of Canadian users reporting encountering news or links to news on Facebook or Instagram. This arguably should make Meta subject to the requirements of the Online News Act.
- **Less news is being consumed by Canadians** - Overall, Canadians are simply seeing less news online - an estimated reduction of 11 million views per day across Instagram and Facebook - due to the ban. Canadians continue to learn about politics and current events through Facebook and Instagram, but through a more biased and less factual lens than before and many Canadians do not even realize the shift has occurred. They do not appear to be seeking news elsewhere.

Principaux résultats du blocage des nouvelles par Meta :

- **Chute de près de la moitié de l'engagement avec les médias –** Les médias canadiens ont perdu 85% de leur engagement sur Facebook et Instagram. Cette perte n'a pas été compensée par des augmentations sur d'autres plateformes de médias sociaux, ce qui se traduit par une baisse globale de 43 % de l'engagement.
- **Près du tiers des médias locaux sont désormais inactifs** – Le blocage a refaçonné le paysage médiatique au Canada : 212 médias locaux, soit environ 30 % de ceux qui étaient auparavant actifs sur les médias sociaux, sont désormais inactifs.
- **Trois quarts des Canadiens ne sont pas au courant du blocage** – Seuls 22 % des Canadiens savent que les nouvelles sont bloquées sur Facebook et Instagram. Même parmi les utilisateurs de ces plateformes et ceux qui disent y trouver des nouvelles, la majorité ignore l'existence du blocage.
- **Les nouvelles sont toujours partagées sur Facebook et Instagram** – Malgré le blocage, le contenu des médias d'information est toujours disponible sur les plateformes Meta grâce à des stratégies de contournement telles que les captures d'écran, 36 % des utilisateurs canadiens déclarant avoir trouvé des nouvelles ou des liens vers des nouvelles sur Facebook ou Instagram. On pourrait donc affirmer que Meta devrait être assujetti aux exigences de la Loi sur les nouvelles en ligne.
- **Les Canadiens consomment moins de nouvelles** – Dans l'ensemble, les Canadiens voient tout simplement moins de nouvelles en ligne en raison du blocage – une réduction estimée à 11 millions de vues par jour sur Instagram et Facebook. Les Canadiens continuent de s'informer sur la politique et l'actualité via Facebook et Instagram, mais à travers un prisme plus biaisé et moins factuel qu'auparavant, et beaucoup d'entre eux ne se rendent même pas compte du changement qui s'est opéré. Ils ne semblent pas chercher à s'informer ailleurs.

Context

In June 2023, the Canadian government passed the Online News Act, requiring large "digital news intermediaries" to negotiate with and compensate Canadian news organizations. Also known as Bill C-18 or *An Act respecting online communications platforms that make news content available to persons in Canada*, the Act outlines a bargaining framework for digital platform companies and news publishers and affirms the importance of enhancing "fairness in the Canadian digital news marketplace."

Currently, only Google and Meta (the parent company of social media platforms Instagram and Facebook) are subject to the Act. Both companies, predictably, pushed back against the legislation, calling it a "link tax" and arguing that it "puts at risk the free flow of information online." Both companies also threatened to end the availability of news content on their services for Canadian users. While Google negotiated a separate agreement with the Canadian government, Meta followed through: on August 9, 2023, the news (from both Canadian and International sources) disappeared from Facebook and Instagram for users in Canada.

Meta's decision immediately sparked outcry – some of it directed at the company itself, while the rest was directed at the Liberal government for passing the Act in the first place. Within weeks of the ban, the CBC, the Canadian Association of Broadcasters, and News Media Canada swiftly filed an antitrust complaint against Meta, accusing it of abusing its "already dominant position" by blocking news content. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau called on Meta to reverse the ban and allow Canadians to see news content in the wake of one of the deadliest wildfire seasons in Canadian history. In the months following the ban, many news outlets saw a major decline in revenue and readership, weakening an already vulnerable news industry.

On the first anniversary of the end of news availability for Facebook and Instagram users in Canada, we reflect upon the effects on the Canadian information ecosystem. The decision to block Canadian users from seeing news on two of our most prevalent social media platforms evidently shifted the flow of information online and the relationship between the news, social media, and Canadians. Over the past twelve months, we have closely monitored the effects of Meta's news ban, particularly on Canadian news organizations and how Canadians engage with news and political content online. The following brief expands upon that research and provides **the first comprehensive report on what happened in Canada following Meta's news ban.**[1]

Question

This Information Ecosystem Brief aims to answer the question: **What happened when Meta banned news for Canadian users?** We evaluate two dimensions to provide a data-informed analysis of how the Canadian information ecosystem has been impacted by Meta's actions.

First, we ask: how have Canadian news organizations been impacted by the ban? We evaluate their activity, visibility, and engagement with their content across the five major social media platforms used in Canada for news: Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and X/Twitter.

Second, we ask: how has the ban impacted Canadians and their relationship to news and social media? We evaluate their continued use of Meta platforms as well as their awareness of the ban.

Analysis

How did the blocking of news affect Canadian news organizations?

Prior to the ban, many Canadian news organizations, particularly local-level outlets, heavily relied on Facebook (and Instagram to a lesser degree) to promote their content and stay connected to their readership. Many did not have social media profiles on any other platform due to the difficulty of establishing an audience on a new platform and the major costs required to create audiovisual content for major platforms like YouTube and TikTok.

The news ban was fully implemented across Facebook and Instagram by August 9, 2023. The effects of the ban were quickly and severely felt by Canadian news organizations, which experienced a sharp decrease in online engagement.

Figure 1 compares activity of and engagement with Canadian news outlets across the five major social media platforms used by Canadians to get news: Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and X/Twitter. Panel A shows

that, of the 770 news outlets active on social media in June 2023, only 555 were still posting in 2024 on any platform. Following the ban, 215 Canadian news organizations (almost one quarter of all outlets) have gone dark on social media and no longer maintain an active presence on any platform. Of these, 212 (98%) are local news organizations: 30% of the 713 Canadian local news outlets who were previously active on social media are no longer able to share their content and build their readership online.

Even though many news outlets are still active on other platforms (such as TikTok, X, and YouTube) and have maintained international audiences on Facebook and Instagram, the ban has severely reduced the amount of engagement received by Canadian news organizations. Panel B shows that Canadian news organizations have lost 42.6% of their online engagement since the ban across their social media footprint since the ban. This represents approximately 11 million fewer views per day (5 million for Facebook and 6 million for Instagram).[2]

Figure 1: Activity of and engagement with Canadian news outlets across Canadian social media platforms before and after the Meta news ban
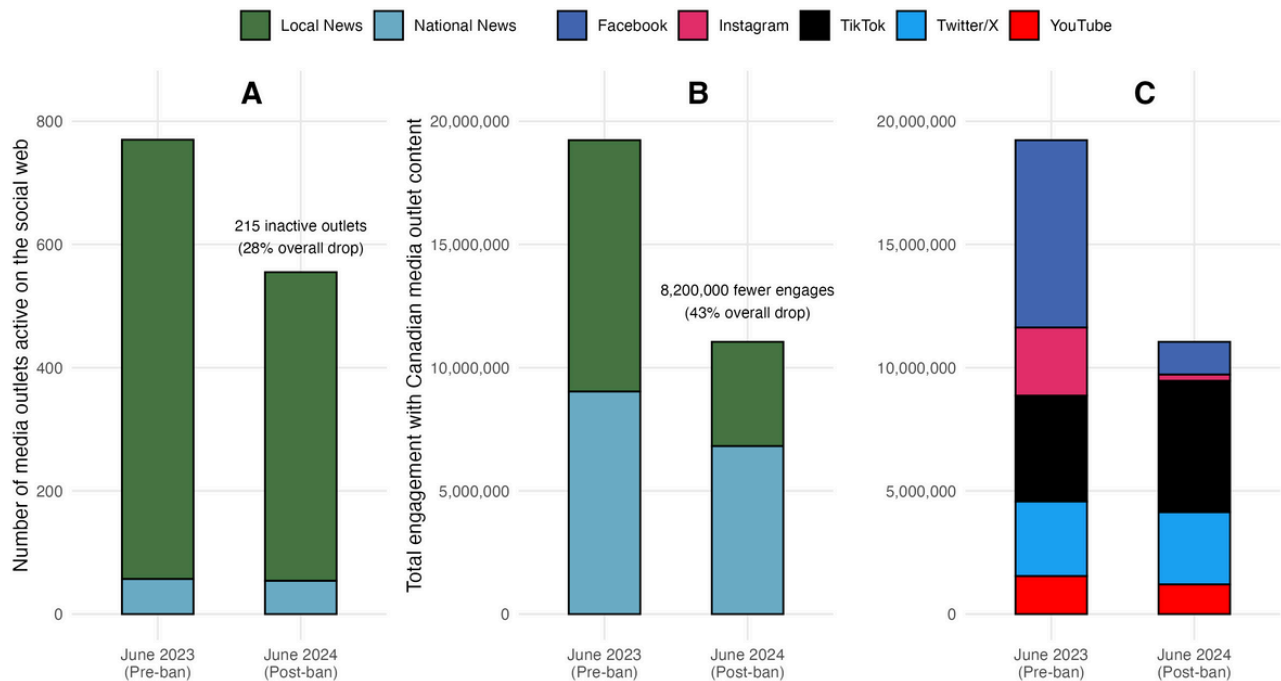
Stacked bar charts based on 185,148 posts by 773 Canadian news outlets in June 2023 and 2024 across Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Twitter/X.

Panel C shows that Canadian news organizations have thus far been unable to make up the loss on other platforms. Across the other three, non-Meta platforms, engagement (likes, comments, shares) has increased by 600,000 per month, primarily driven by a 24% increase in TikTok engagement, with consistent Twitter/X engagement year-over-year, and a 22% decrease in YouTube engagement. Even accounting for this slight increase, engagement with Canadian news organizations has sunk dramatically as a result of the ban, with a total net loss of 8.2 million engagements per month. The ban has effectively severed a key connection between the news industry and Canadian public.

How did the ban affect Canadians?

Prior to the ban, millions of Canadians relied on news from Facebook and Instagram, with these two platforms being the number 1 and number 3 choices for Canadians (YouTube is number 2) who are increasingly saying that they rely primarily upon social media to become informed. However, a year after the ban, a majority of Canadians are still saying that they use Facebook and Instagram for news.

Figure 2 Panel A uses survey data taken from July 2024 that shows self-reported usage of Meta platforms remains high, with 86% of Canadians using either Facebook or Instagram monthly. Panel B highlights that 70% of Facebook users and 65% of Instagram users say they continue to use that platform to read, watch, listen to, or share the news - astonishing figures given that news content is blocked on those platforms. Moreover, Panel C shows that only half of those who use the platform for news are even aware that content from news organizations has been banned (more generally, only 35% of platform users and 22% of all Canadians know about the ban). A super-majority of Canadians as well as a majority of Meta-platform users in Canada, and even those who self-report using the platform for news, simply do not know a news ban is in effect.

Given this lack of awareness, it is not surprising that Canadians have not changed their behavior to substitute for the loss of news content on Facebook and Instagram. Using an analysis of social media engagement with Canadian news organizations and politicians across platforms over time, we tested to see if Canadians were engaging with alternative sources of news on Facebook and Instagram (e.g. Canadian politicians) or Canadian news content on other platforms (e.g. TikTok, Twitter, and YouTube). We found no evidence of any substitution: Canadian Facebook and Instagram users continued to engage with the platforms as they usually had, and the accounts of Canadian politicians and news organizations on other platforms saw similar levels of engagement as

Figure 2: Use of Meta platforms by Canadians and awareness of the news ban
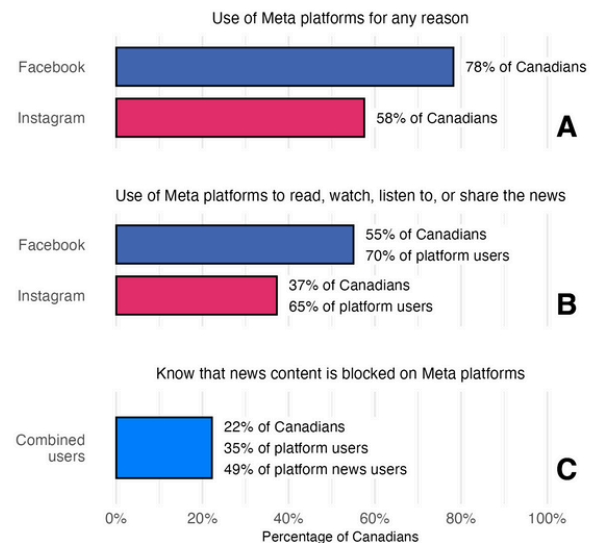
Bar charts based on survey responses from 1,463 Canadian adults collected from July 24 to July 30, 2024 using a commercial survey provider. The margin of error for a comparable probability-based sample of the same size is +/-2.6%, 19 times out of 20.

before the ban. Canadians are simply consuming less information directly from news organizations that produce original reporting.

However, a puzzle remains: 36% of Meta-platform users in Canada report seeing content from news organizations or news links on the platforms in the past six months. In our investigation, we identified a significant number of work-arounds to the blocking of news content and links to news websites, meaning that Canadian news organization content continues to be shared on Meta platforms. Some highly motivated news-sharers in Canada continue to share links to news websites on Facebook, by, for example, altering the URLs slightly (e.g., by adding a slash or hyphen) and telling other users how to fix it in their browser's search bar. Others share links to posts by news outlets on other platforms: for example, a news outlet may still be posting articles on X (formerly Twitter), so a Facebook user will share the link to the post on X, allowing other users to follow the trail of URLs to the news article itself.

Although impossible to know for certain, the most common strategy may be the sharing of screen-grabs of news organization content. After the ban took effect, we began observing Facebook Groups that had previously frequently shared links to Canadian news organizations. These Groups focused specifically on Canadian politics and relied upon the sharing of news links to foster discussion and debate, but managed to maintain a consistent level of activity even after the ban. Given that

news had previously been a major driver of engagement with these Groups, we investigated.

Rather than a massive surge in misinformed discussion and sensationalist videos, we found a decent (but smaller) volume of news content. In particular, however, the sharing of screenshots of news articles has exploded. As shown in Figure 3, the volume of screenshots of Canadian news articles tripled in the four months immediately following the ban, generating such a large amount of engagement that, although there are fewer posts containing screenshots than there were posts with news links prior to the ban, engagement with news screenshots matched the previous engagement generated by news links.[3]

News content is thus still circulating among Canadian users on Facebook and Instagram, although it is dramatically less present than the volume of news available before the ban. Although most Canadians are not aware of the ban, over half of Canadians still use Facebook or Instagram for news and are severely impacted by the reduced visibility of news content online.

Some highly-motivated Canadians seek news outside of social media platforms through other means, either via news subscriptions, digital news websites, or television and radio, and are likely not severely impacted by the ban. However, active news seekers are the minority. The average Canadian does not frequently consume news, particularly about politics (in fact, 40% actively avoid it) and will likely only become aware of current events by being incidentally exposed to content about it online.[4] Much of this incidental exposure to news is facilitated by social media, such as through friends and family discussing politics online or algorithmic feeds pushing trending content whenever a major event happens. This news exposure has been dramatically reduced due to the Meta news ban.

Figure 3: Continued use of Canadian news outlet content by political discussion groups on Facebook
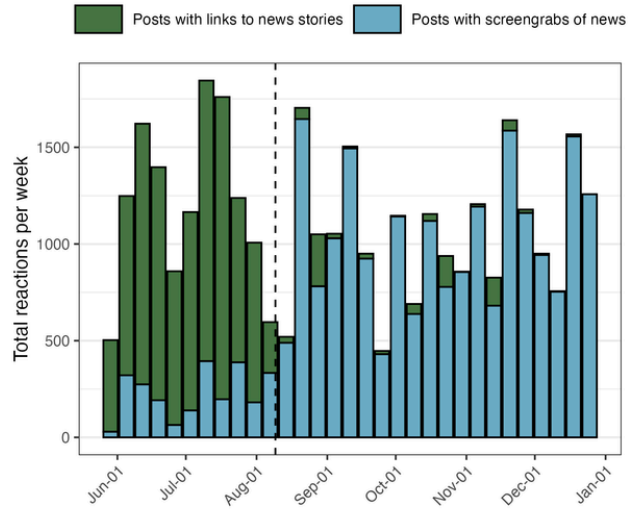
Stacked bar chart based on all posts (3,882) by 40 highly active Canadian politically- oriented Facebook groups from January 1, 2023 to December, 31 2023.

Conclusion

Meta blocked Canadians from seeing the news on its platforms one year ago, delivering a major blow to an already-struggling news industry – and democracy.

Since August 9, 2023, Canadian news outlets have seen a steep decline in online engagement, severely affecting their ability to connect with and grow their readership, source ad revenue, and inform the Canadian population. The ban has succeeded in severely reducing the visibility of Canadian news online.

Meanwhile, Canadians are increasingly relying on social media to provide them with the news but may not be aware of the extent to which platform decisions shape the information they receive and indeed continue to treat Meta's platforms as a reliable source for news. But with reliable news less present, these platforms are simply not as trustworthy as they used to be. Many Canadians do not even realize that a shift has occurred.

Canadian politicians have continued to rely on Meta products to reach their audiences. Discussion about politics and current events persists among users of Facebook and Instagram, but with significantly less credible and accurate news content to inform the conversation. With reports of AI-generated content flooding social media, an unbiased fact-interest media is more critical than ever. This inattentiveness and disinterest of Canadians and especially politicians is a disservice to Canadian democracy. We simply cannot rely on entities like Meta to act in the best interests of Canadians and help support an informed and engaged democracy.

A healthy news industry is a critical part of any democracy: people need access to accurate, diverse, trustworthy information that is presented without political bias. Due to the ban, the Canadian information ecosystem is less able to facilitate that access and many Canadians are simply unaware.

Endnotes

[1] We refer to Meta's decision to end news availability for users of their platforms in Canada as "Meta's news ban" or "the ban" because Meta's decision to block the visibility of news content effectively banned Canadian users from viewing or engaging with news on both platforms.

[2] This is an estimate based on the Supplementary Information from Nyhan et al. (2023) and Guess et al. (2023), two studies that were part of a research collaboration with Meta. They are the only publicly available method of producing the average view-to-engagement rate of Facebook and Instagram users in the United States. For Facebook, this ratio is 18 views per engagement (reaction, comment, share). For Instagram, it is 57 views per engagement (like, comment, share).

[3] Media Ecosystem Observatory. "When journalism is turned off: Preliminary findings on the effects of Meta's news ban in Canada." April 2024.

[4] Media Ecosystem Observatory. "State of the Canadian Information Ecosystem." November 2023.

Contributors

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Methodology

Social media data in this report covers May 26 to June 19 in 2023 and 2024. All media organizations were identified manually by a team of research assistants, with each of their social media handles across Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, X/Twitter collected as well. All data was collected at least 72 hours after post-time to ensure comparable engagement metrics. All data collected from Meta platforms for this Brief was through the CrowdTangle API. Meta is closing CrowdTangle access on August 14 which will make this research much more challenging.

Survey responses from 1,463 Canadian adults collected from July 24 to July 30, 2024 using a commercial survey provider. The margin of error for a comparable probability-based random sample of the same size is +/-2.6%, 19 times out of 20. Specific questions used in this analysis are:

- How often do you use each of the social media apps and websites listed below (for any reason)? (Never, Once or twice a month, Several times a month, One or twice a week, Several times a week, Once or twice a day, Several times a day)

- When you use each of these social media apps, how often do you read, watch, listen to, or share the news, specifically? (Never, Once or twice a month, Several times a month, One or twice a week, Several times a week, Once or twice a day, Several times a day)

- Can people in Canada see content posted by news organizations (not including those focused on sports and entertainment) on the following platforms? (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, X (formerly Twitter))

- In the past six months, have you seen content from news organizations or links to news content (not including sports and entertainment) on Facebook and/or Instagram? (Yes, No)

- In your view, why don't you see content from news outlets on Facebook and/or Instagram? (I am not interested in news content, I didn't pay attention to any news, I didn't subscribe to or look for any news accounts, News content has been restricted on this platform, Other (please specify)