Digital Threats to Democracy

Wasan Island Retreat • August 16-19, 2019

Luminate
Building stronger societies

PPF
PUBLIC POLICY FORUM
FORUM DES POLITIQUES PUBLIQUES

McConnell

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Location

Wasan Island is located on Lake Rosseau in the Muskoka Lakes in Northern Ontario. The island is owned and operated by the German Breuninger Foundation. From summer to fall, dozens of Canadian and international groups come together on the island for gatherings of all kinds.

Land Acknowledgement

Wasan Island is located on the traditional territory of the Anishinabe, which is covered by the Robinson Huron Treaty of 1850 and the William Treaty of 1923. Three nations are represented in this area: the Anishinabe (Ojibway), Mohawk and Pottawatomi. There are several neighbouring First Nations communities whose ancestors live(d) in the area amongst which are the Rama (Mnjikaning), Wahta, and Wasauksing (Parry Island).

Background and Purpose

From August 16-19 2019, McConnell, Luminate and the Public Policy Forum convened a group of experts and stakeholders from the field of civic digital literacy and mis/disinformation prevention to discuss "digital threats to our democracy".

Together, we explored ways to deepen digitally enabled civic engagement and strengthen our collective capacity to respond to these digital threats.

Why this gathering?

Over the last decade, the proliferation of digital media has transformed our public sphere and reshaped the nature of our public debate. The rise of a new online political culture and the consolidation of the dominant digital platforms have shifted how we engage in democratic processes. While these platforms provide increased space for more diverse views and greater freedom of expression, there is a sense of powerlessness amongst people and governments in the face of tech giants. In Canada and across the world, mis and disinformation are contributing to polarizing societies, weakening our information systems and delegitimizing sectors and institutions. As a result, there is a perception by the public that trust in news stories, information and democratic institutions has declined. This is problematic, as healthy information systems are as vital to community wellbeing as a healthy water supply or access to healthcare.

Tackling these issues urgently requires systemic strategies and programs at the policy and grassroots level.

Participant List

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Michael Adams	President, **Environics Institute**
Nasma Ahmed	Director, **Digital Justice Lab**
Lisa Attygalle	Consulting Director of Community Engagement, **Tamarack Institute**
Chris Beall	Director of the Digital Citizen Initiative, **Canadian Heritage**
Stina Brown	Independent Facilitator, **Stina Brown**
Michael Caulfield	Director, Digital Polarization Initiative **Washington State University Vancouver**
Joan Donovan	Director of the Technology and Social Change Research Project, **Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy** - **Harvard Kennedy School**
Ed Greenspon	President & CEO, **Public Policy Forum**
Ana Sofia Hibon	Assistant to the President, **McConnell Foundation**
Stephen Huddart	President & CEO, **McConnell Foundation**
Sally Lerhman	Founder, **The Trust Project**
Avi Lewis	Strategic Director, **LEAP**
Chad Lubelsky	Program Director, **McConnell Foundation**
Stephanie MacLellan	Digital Democracy Fellow, **Public Policy Forum**
Dimitri Pavlounis	Digital Literacy Project Manager, **CIVIX**
Damaso Reyes	Director of Partnerships, **News Literacy Project** – @damasoreyes
John Sands	Director of Learning and Impact, **John S. and James L. Knight Foundation**
Ben Scott	Director of Policy and Advocacy, **Luminate**
Craig Silverman	Media Editor, **BuzzFeed News**
Patti Sonntag	Director, **Concordia Institute for Investigative Journalism**
Farida Vis	Director, **Visual Social Media Lab at Manchester Metropolitan University**
Claire Wardle	US Director, **First Draft**
Janet Webber	Executive Director, **Simon Fraser University's Public Square**

Lines of Inquiry

Some of the questions we brought to the convening:

- **How can the public be better equipped to defend itself against digital threats accelerated by new media?**

- How can we advance systemic strategies for digital civic literacy at the policy and grassroots levels?

- What are promising practices for creating and disseminating civic engagement programs so individuals have the necessary tools and skills to combat misinformation?

- How has the rise of online political culture and the consolidation of the dominant digital platforms reconfigured our relationship with civic engagement and how can citizens and institutions be better equipped for these changes?

- **What are some opportunities and key considerations for funders to help strengthen civic capacity?**

Term definition

The group started off by identifying terms that were particularly germane to Digital Threats to Democracy. Working definitions are in Appendix 2. These include:

- Media
- Journalism
- The Public
- Democracy
- Digital Media Literacy
- Digital Platforms
- Surveillance capitalism
- Digital commons

Mapping mental models

How does change happen and what keeps things the way they are?

In order to work better together, we identified **pre-existing "mental models"** (or how we make sense of the world around us). This grounded our conversations and helped us understand our perspectives and world-views. Participants then explored some of the mental models that they've encountered through their work. While **these are not necessarily reflective of wide-held Canadian beliefs**, the group flagged these themes as factors that can stand in the way of healthy information systems.

Some of the mental models identified were:

1. The Architecture of Misinformation

Structural issues such as inadequately governed and under-regulated digital media platforms can contribute to an increasing distrust in traditional media and can enable partisan exploitation of social media for political ends. Platform abuse creates fear among Canadians that their data can be used to distort outcomes. It was also noted that income inequality can raise anxiety and distrust in democratic institutions and processes, and increase susceptibility to misinformation.

2. Digital Platforms and the Offline Impacts of Radicalization

In recent years, we have witnessed a rise of virality and an amplification of extremes: harassment of marginalized groups, mass shootings, election interference, and the normalization of fringe thinking. Freedom of expression, open access to information online and a lack of regulation and accountability create the conditions for platform and data abuse. On the other hand, they also create the opportunity for organizing mass movements like the Arab Spring, #metoo and pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong.

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3. Technology as "neutral"

Technology is frequently painted and conceived as "neutral" by both users and creators; yet, it often isn't. This tension is exacerbated by a belief in Canada that "democracy is a given", that capitalism is inherently good for democracy, and that, by association, any technology that is created within a capitalist system will be good for democracy.

4. "The Internet as a Public Sphere"

There is a belief that the market where the Internet operates is democratic and that participatory democracy exists online. Yet platforms can hinder citizens' political engagement by blocking their participation or exposing them to unmanageable amounts of information. How can platforms support meaningful engagement between citizens and politicians?

5. Amplification of hate speech

Political hate speech spread on social media and online events such as "build the wall" and "send them back" have become a part of our public conversation. What is the role of regulators and lawmakers, architects of algorithms, journalists and content moderators in directing, amplifying and/or shaping the internet as the public sphere?

Leveraging Power Structures

Who holds the controls in the system?
Some key considerations from our discussion:

1 Power redistribution: We need a strategic and coordinated approach to sharing power equitably. How do we bring in traditionally marginalized groups and individuals whose work is highly relevant but currently out of our networks of reach? What is our role in facilitating and enabling their participation?

2 Knowledge as power: Different actors in the system hold different types of power, expertise and access. Cross-sector knowledge transfer strengthens the work of researchers, policy makers, and civil society organizers, therefore a concerted effort needs to be made to support and ensure knowledge mobilization.

3 Trust as power: Certain institutions anchored in community –such as universities and colleges– are often perceived as "neutral" and maintain a high level of public trust. How can some of the post-secondary sector's strengths and assets be better used for more and better digital civic engagement and capacity-building?

4 Regulatory power: Through regulatory pathways such as taxation and royalties, the Canadian government can assert more control over tech companies.

Deep dives:
Digital Citizen Engagement

At the beginning of Day 3, we explored the state of digital citizen engagement and opportunities for action. Below are some of the **key takeaways** and questions for reflection.

1 **System resiliency:** We are working in interlocking systems and solutions, including misinformation preparedness policy (see Canadian Heritage's **Digital Citizen Initiative**), inclusive journalism, transparency in journalism, responsible platform behaviour, and more. A balance of quick responses and system resiliency building is key.

2 **Digital justice:** Little work in Canada is focused on equity, racial dynamics and white supremacy in the digital space. Funders can advocate for equity-seeking groups to be at the centre of this conversation.

3 **Canada's strategic position:** Canada has often been the testing ground for dominant digital platforms before entry into larger markets. In addition, Canadian media are showing an increased willingness to collaborate. These enabling factors place Canada in a strong strategic position to lead and experiment with policy that will serve our collective interests in equity and democracy.

Deep dives:
Mis- and Disinformation

Below are some of the key takeaways and questions for reflection.

1 **A life cycle approach to media manipulation campaigns:** This approach tracks the manner in which some groups very strategically plant misinformation across information systems in order to increase its chances of promulgation across industry, media, political influencers, and civil society.

2 **Disinformation Wire:** As conversations about politics move into closed spaces, misinformation spreads faster than we can contain it. In addition, journalists can unintentionally add to the problem by amplifying misinformation through "competition". What is a "disinformation wire" for this age of disinformation that will not give additional oxygen to these rumors?

3 **Cross-sector capacity building:** What communication channels are needed to efficiently transfer new and existing knowledge from academia and research to public servants, educators, economists, and other professions? Best practices are out there, they just aren't in the hands of those who need them.

4 **Equity, Extremism and Misinformation:** While partisan politics in Canada have not experienced the level of extremism that other countries have, platforms give hyperpartisan people the means to amplify their messages. This, alongside platform incentives, exacerbates the twin phenomena of filter bubbles and echo chambers. The rise of partisanship and platforms drives people apart and puts marginalized groups disproportionately at risk of being targeted with misinformation and online hate.

5 **Scenario planning:** Privacy breaches and misuse of data by powerful institutions have caused strong public reactions in recent years (e.g. **FaceApp scandal**). These events could be key opportunities for concerted action, yet their momentum has not been leveraged for effective response strategies.

Moving the Field Forward

The last part of the retreat focused on next steps and opportunities for collaboration. The group proposed to:

1 **Strengthen institutional collaboration** through a collective of institutions that would be equipped to address disinformation, monitoring and exposure in the short and long term: This would foster a more informed society and a stronger democracy. The Canadian federal election is an example of a key moment where this type of collective would ensure communication across silos.

2 **Advance a policy and regulation agenda** that leverages the knowledge of researchers, community organizers and the media sector. The energy in this space must move from community organizing, activism, communications and research into a comprehensive policy agenda. Policy makers and actors with power have a special responsibility to uphold regulatory frameworks that ensure space for innovation, democratization and civic empowerment.

3 **Mobilize and activate communities** to continuously create healthy digital spaces and increase trust by leveraging existing community institutions. Involve the "public" as designers and actors, not just as consumers or recipients. The group noted showcasing policies prior to implementation can add value.

4 **Enrich and scale existing and nascent digital media literacy education efforts.** Specifically, secure the adoption of **Open Educational Resources** through a combination of policy, production, implementation, and assessment efforts in order to reach a goal of universal school-age digital media literacy in ten years.

Key Considerations for Funders

Below are key takeaways and considerations on the role of funders:

1   Addressing the digital threats to our institutions requires **imaginative, future-focused and concerted action across sectors.** Philanthropy is well-suited to support these kinds of responses. The concern is that reactive responses can increase polarization.

2   Deep expertise about the digital threats to democracy and effective strategies to address these exist. However, experts often do not hold decision-making power. Besides providing financial support, philanthropic funders can support strategic policy making by **elevating expert civil society voices.** Funders can act as a "neutral broker".

3   Funders can create funding mechanisms that match and support researchers and organizations on the ground. Ideally these include **support for longitudinal tracking and impact assessment.**

4   There needs to be continued conversations about **the role for funders in rebalancing power,** which is currently upended by big platforms and tech giants.

5   When supporting technological approaches, funders must **ensure that technology is integrated with community priorities,** and that it considers its impacts on society.

6   Using their unique vantage point, funders can think about how well-trusted institutions within communities — such as universities and colleges — can be leveraged to support digital media literacy, strengthen civic engagement and increase community wellbeing.

Closing reflections and commitments

At the end of our time together, participants reflected on the retreat's learnings, and made different commitments regarding next steps. A comprehensive compilation of next steps and individual commitments outlined during our time together was distributed to participants following the retreat. Below are some of our closing reflections, commitments and questions.

- **Working with unknowns:** We will communicate the threats to the October 2019 Canadian federal election while acknowledging that we'll sometimes have information we can't act on.

- **Relationship building:** We will build positive relationships with journalists, platforms and the public.

- **Inclusion:** We commit to engaging in participatory processes around digital threats to democracy and extending information beyond this group and the usual suspects.

- **Community engagement:** Civil society must be brought into these conversations. We need to invest in storytelling to make digital threats to democracy real for a broader set of communities. Academics, experts, and funders in this field have to learn about and ally with social movements if they want to build the power necessary to win real change.

- **Cross-sector work:** There is a real willingness between actors in different sectors (including the education space) to work together. How do we keep up the momentum?

- **Policy making:** Platform transparency must be required and enforced via policy. Policy advocacy is essential to make change, but few of us are working on it.

- **On power structures:** What are some open, evidence-based, persuasion vehicles for introducing measures in the political spheres, platforms and markets where power resides in order for platforms to take aboard the public interest?

Next steps

Below are the next steps from the three host organizations:

1. The McConnell Foundation will:

- Continue facilitating conversations amongst this group and in our networks, including the **Journalism Funders Affinity group** which McConnell convenes every few months. This group's objective is to discuss ways forward in supporting a healthier media landscape that supports **a healthy democracy and the wellbeing of communities** across Canada. A few of its members participated in a Public Interest Journalism and Democracy retreat in June 2019. The report can be found **here**.

- Continue exploring how we might support work in this space through **granting, research, convening and impact investment.**

- Continue growing and connecting the network of organizations and individuals participating in this work.

2. The Public Policy Forum will:

- Continue conducting and sharing research regarding digital threats to our democracy in a timely manner with this group and beyond. **The Digital Democracy Project**, a joint initiative led by PPF and the Max Bell School of Public Policy at McGill University can be found **here**.

Next steps continued

3. Luminate will:

- Continue funding projects in Canada and around the world that advance research on disinformation, policy-making to contest and reduce its influence, and public education to change norms and attitudes towards digital information consumption and democracy.

- Actively **engage with researchers and policy advocates** in Canada to connect them with their peers in other countries and to spread best practices, innovative ideas, and debate about common challenges.

- Continue to **push on the platforms to make more data available** to assess the social impact of algorithmic curation of information markets and to push on governments to require these audits.

- Continue to refine a model (recently implemented in Canada) of **monitoring, detecting and exposure of disinformation** and digital media market patterns in election periods.

Appendix

Appendix 1: A word from our facilitator Stina Brown

Approach to the Design of the Gathering: This was an invitation-only retreat, with a pre-gathering survey conducted in order to invite participants to begin reflecting and considering their priorities. Our meeting design was flexible and we prioritized the topics and areas of focus that had the most energy or curiosity. There were some predetermined outcomes, and some emergent.

As we moved through the days' dialogues, we held a sense of discovery and trust with participants sharing ownership in the process. Participants described the gathering as an open and caring road to develop trust and as having a non-competitive mood and wellness as an explicit intention.

Other culture-setting aspects:

- We named having an "appreciative approach" or "asset-mindset" from the start. This kept us "out of the weeds" of focusing on the problems facing the field.
- We agreed to leave technology (including phones) outside the session space.

Appendix 2: Term Definition

The group identified terms that they felt were important in the conversation around Digital Threats to Democracy. These working definitions were a "starting point" to our conversations:

- **Media:** the material artifacts of communication
- **Journalism:** the act of collecting, verifying and disseminating information in the public interest
- **The Public:** an individual who is able to participate in society in a democratic way and feels influence over and included in democratic processes". We purposefully chose "public" and not "citizens
- **Democracy:** the ability for the public to have a say in how it is governed, not just during elections but throughout the year. A healthy democracy requires transparent and effective knowledge transfer from democratic institutions to the public, in order to have an informed and engaged citizenry.
- **Digital Media Literacy:** the sets of knowledge and skills that enable us to critically interpret, understand and create information. This includes the structures and context through which information is created and distributed.
- **Digital Platforms:** digital vehicles for data which allow for transfer of information to and from users.
- **Surveillance capitalism:** the rise of platform monopolies that monetize algorithms of envy and division as their business model. What's actually happening while the majority of people spend a majority of time staring at devices
- **Digital commons:** a universally accessible space and public service for framing, informing and enabling of efforts to advance the public good. Digital commons are governed by an assertion of collective democratic rights and supporting of a shared narrative.