

Divergent Narratives: The 2025 Nova Scotia Wildfires, the Media Ecosystem, and the Court of Public Opinion

October 2026

Purpose of this briefing

In the summer of 2025, Nova Scotia experienced a series of wildfires that devastated ecosystems, communities, and businesses. One year later, media conversations about these events have provided material for a rich case study.

This project analyses the influence of and differences between digital media ecosystems, with respect to civic engagement, knowledge production, and the narratives around emergency responses and public health crises.

This briefing makes recommendations to contribute an Atlantic Canadian perspective to growing studies on climate disaster management, information/communication networks, and online discourse.

About the MacEachen Institute

The MacEachen Institute for Public Policy and Governance is a nationally focused, non-partisan, interdisciplinary centre that supports progressive public policy and citizen engagement.

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Recommendations

- ◆ The Government of Nova Scotia should proactively ensure that all emergency management information released to the province is timely, accurate, accessible, and engages meaningfully with Nova Scotian communities.
- ◆ The Government of Nova Scotia should reconsider the dissolution of Communications Nova Scotia (CNS).
- ◆ Elected officials should consider multiple avenues through which they can remain accessible to constituents for information and advocacy.
- ◆ Nova Scotian news ecosystems must build out trusted communication networks and diversify voices.
- ◆ The Government of Nova Scotia must support the diversification and expansion of regional journalism.
- ◆ Journalists must support Nova Scotians' need for local, diverse coverage, including topics discussed on social media.
- ◆ Marginalized voices and experiences must be amplified across all levels of wildfire mitigation and emergency management.
- ◆ Digital pipelines to radicalization must be acknowledged as a growing threat to Nova Scotia, and a better preventative system must be built to combat their harms.
- ◆ Policy leaders should recognize the potential pathways to radicalization that can emerge within Nova Scotia's information ecosystem and incorporate this consideration into long-term strategies.

Key Observations

- ◆ The structures of digital media ecosystems influence public understanding of events. Users form narratives of climate disasters in differing ways based on their platforms of choice, which in turn influence political attitudes, the amplification or attenuation of differing information, and civic behaviour.
- ◆ Nova Scotia's mainstream news ecosystem is homogenous and centralized, with a small number of journalists accounting for the majority of wildfire-related articles across news outlets. Reporting from centralized newsrooms was less responsive to specific regional concerns.
- ◆ Social media fills the gap left by mainstream media. Discussions on platforms such as Reddit and YouTube supplement the lack of diversity in traditional news spheres, but the speed and efficacy of social network communication often result in the unregulated amplification of harmful blame narratives and misinformation.
- ◆ Nova Scotians rely on digital information networks for crucial information, access to resources, and human communication. The current ecosystem is fragmented and ineffective for official communication regarding wildfire mitigation protocols and emergency management efforts.
- ◆ Government officials, public policy professionals, and journalists must engage more extensively with the existing media ecosystem to provide more timely and useful information regarding the mitigation of and official responses to wildfires. Regular and informative updates will improve the public's trust in official communications.
- ◆ Climate change is a salient consideration in any discussion of long-term policymaking in natural resources, emergency management, and financial planning. Climate change will continue to exacerbate the dry and flammable conditions of Nova Scotia's forests; considering this ongoing crisis, it is crucial for Nova Scotia to put evidence-based strategies in place to ensure the health and safety of the province.¹

Introduction / Overview

In the summer of 2025, Nova Scotia experienced a series of wildfires that devastated ecosystems, homes, and businesses. Dozens of Nova Scotian communities were evacuated, thousands of acres of forest were burned, and businesses, schools, and institutions across the province are still recovering from the economic, political, and environmental shock. One year later, the 2025 Nova Scotia wildfires have provided material for a rich case study, analyzing the patterns and effects of online discourse, disaster narratives, and the digital media ecosystem of Atlantic Canada.

This study focuses on mainstream media reporting and online discussions of three wildfires occurring between July and September 2025: Bayers Lake, Long Lake, and Lake George. While social media discourse has received significant academic attention over the past two decades, little consideration has been paid to engagement patterns in Atlantic Canada. By exploring digital communication structures within a Nova Scotian context, we hope to distinguish the differing informational roles of traditional news and social media and identify a path forward for sustainable and productive risk communication.

Background

Literature

Studies in previous decades have explored the subjects of media ecosystems and democracy,² climate emergency risk management,³ extremist studies,⁴ and social psychology.⁵ We root this case study in the Nova Scotian information ecosystem, using a lens drawn from Kasperson et al.'s (1988) social amplification of risk framework (SARF).⁶ This conceptual framework informs how digital communication networks and sociopolitical factors combine to amplify or attenuate information surrounding emergency events, jointly influencing perceptions of risk. Social media is a salient consideration within SARF, as its unregulated, accelerated, and globalized informational exchange greatly influences interpersonal networks.⁷ Ultimately, the sociotechnological architecture of information ecosystems influences civic knowledge production as much as the information itself.⁸

Limitations and Considerations

This study has several limitations. First, social media data collection through the Communalytic platform is limited to publicly accessible data; significant conversations may have occurred on other platforms or in private groups to which we did not have access. Second, we could not evaluate posts and comments that may have been deleted by users, post owners or moderators prior to our analysis. Third, we were limited by the boundaries of informed coding; the linear, contextual nature of comment threads made it so that deleted comments formed barriers to fully accurate coding of themes and sentiment. Finally, qualitative analysis of informal social media commentary is by its very nature subjective and may have been influenced by the perceptions and positionalities of the researchers.⁹

Individuals become susceptible to the so-called 'radicalization pipeline'—the systemic migration from normative, mainstream beliefs towards fringe ideologies, extremism, and potentially violent behaviours—when they feel isolated or alienated from their communities.¹⁰ By stigmatizing or calling negative attention to the radicalization pipeline, we risk estranging vulnerable users.¹¹ Additionally, studies have criticized social science, Canadian, and radicalization studies for projecting rigid top-down policy solutions instead of bottom-up methods that prioritize community participation.¹² In this briefing note we adopt a holistic, community-based approach.

Finally, this case study focuses on the immediate reactions to the emergencies in mainstream and social media. Notable subsequent socio-political events, such as the 'woods ban' enacted by the Houston government and ensuing SCNS Charter challenge, are beyond the scope of this study.¹³

Findings

Our study examines media and social media reactions to the three largest wildfires in Nova Scotia that occurred between August-October of 2025 (see *Methods* in Appendix for complete methodology).¹⁴ Analysis comparing mainstream and social media responses over the late summer and early autumn revealed the following patterns.

1. Perceived lack of timeliness and relevant content in updates from official sources.

On social media, users frequently shared news coverage when official news updates were not directly posted or readily available through formal channels. Criticism, requests for clarification from other users, and expressions of general confusion were commonplace. Analysis shows that the mainstream media lagged behind social media in wildfire reporting, likely due to the extra requirements for factual reporting compared to informal social media discussion. While the mainstream media showed a more consistent reporting schedule, social media tended to respond immediately to perceived changes, then allow the conversations to trail away or be superseded by new topics (fig. 1).

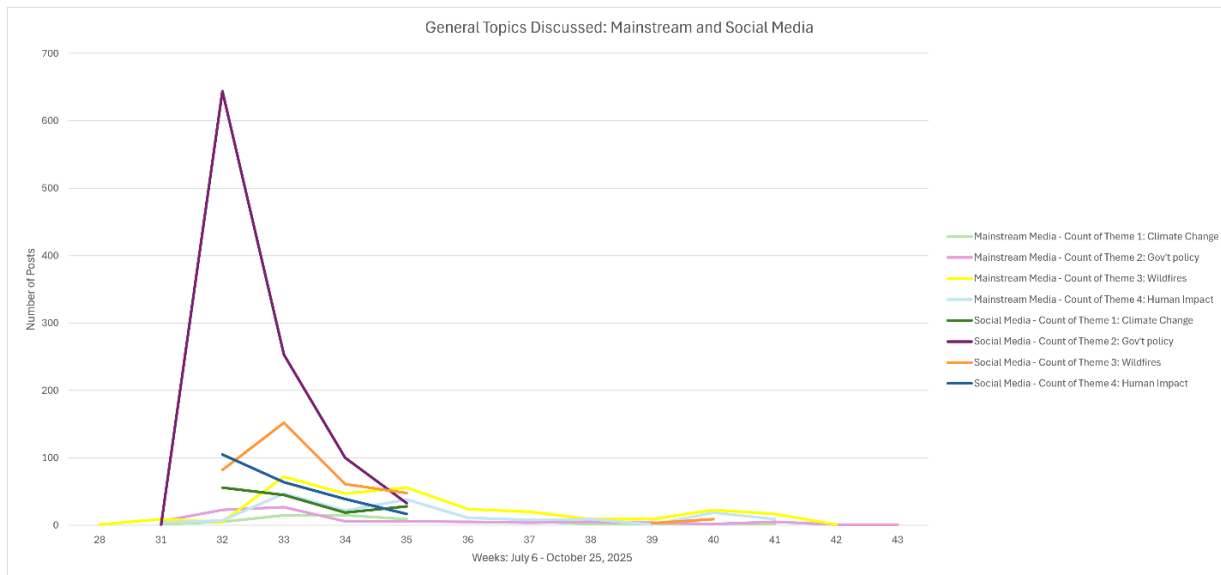


Figure 1: Topics discussed over time, comparison between mainstream and social media

The provincial government released 23 formal updates regarding the wildfires between May 2, 2025, and October 15, 2025, with the majority of these news releases (15) concentrated between August 13 and September 26, 2025 (weeks 34-39 on figure 1). These releases updated residents of impacted communities on the status of evacuation orders, financial support, and burn bans.¹⁵ What is interesting to note is that the volume of social media posts on the topic of the wildfires seems to drop as regular government news releases and mainstream media coverage continue (fig. 2).

One possible explanation (one which requires more exploration across multiple events and with larger sample sizes) is that as official communications prove to be regular and informative, and mainstream media carries those updates to a broader audience, the perceived need to seek out facts-based information on social media decreases. Research examining the province's COVID-19 response found that Nova Scotians were most responsive to emergency orders when government communication was consistent, trustworthy, and transparent, suggesting multiple benefits to regular communication from official sources.¹⁶

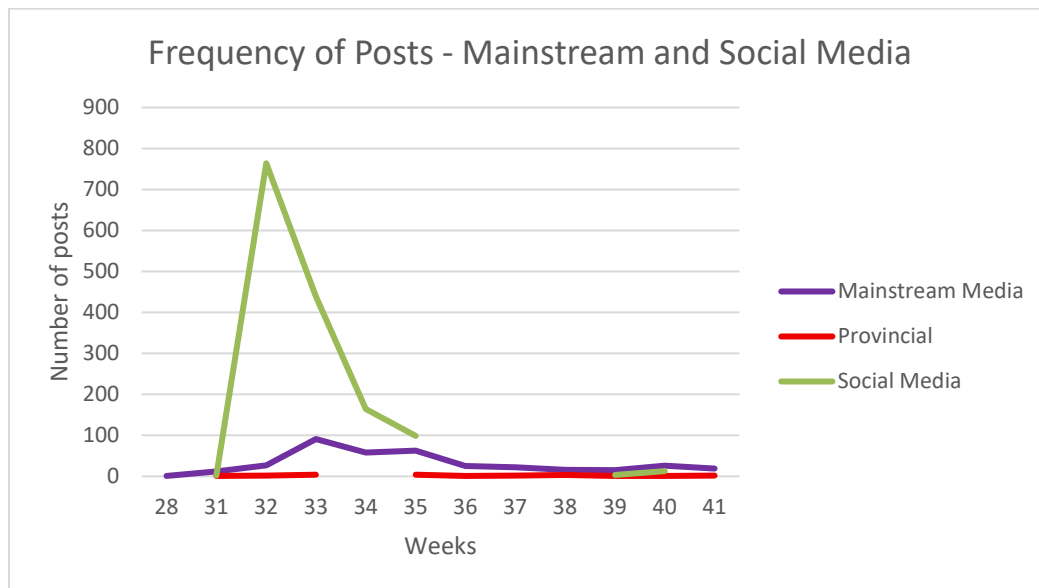


Figure 2: Frequency of posts in mainstream and social media over time, compared to official provincial government news releases.

2. Author and content consolidation: A small number of professional voices reported on the wildfires in mainstream media and topic coverage was limited, while divergent topics in social media expose a ‘news desert’ in mainstream coverage.

A small number of professional voices covered the wildfire incidents in Nova Scotia for mainstream media outlets. As Table 1 illustrates, the most prolific 10 authors (measured by number of authored news pieces), accounted for 50.6% of all content in the mainstream sample. Authorship in the social media discussions surveyed was much more dispersed, with the top 10 Reddit and YouTube users accounting for only 15% and 8.2% of sampled discussions, respectively.

Table 1: Contributor concentration by platform

	Unique authors	% posts by a unique author	% content by Top 1 voice	% content by Top 5 voices	% content by Top 10 voices
Reddit	637	59%	1.97%	11%	15%
YouTube	414	85%	1.2%	4.9%	8.2%
Mainstream Media	89	27%	8.18%	33.02%	50.6%

Mainstream media coverage treated the wildfires as a ‘big picture’ event, presenting facts about fire sizes, locations, and growth rates (i.e., “West Dalhousie, N.S., wildfire grows to 1101 hectares”); and human impact stories, sharing emergency response statuses, evacuations, and “fluff pieces” (i.e., “Nova Scotia offers up to \$3,000 to wildfire evacuees in Kings County”). While regional media outlets such as the Annapolis Valley Register or Chronicle Herald covered more localized topics than the national/international mainstream sources surveyed, mainstream coverage overall was concentrated around these two general subjects. Article titles were often identical or highly similar across the dataset, frequently employing consistent stylistic devices and language.

While mainstream coverage centred the ‘big picture’ news, social media amplified underdiscussed, localized topics—primarily, discussions about government policy. More than two thirds of all social media posts discussed government policy, while less than one third of mainstream media posts did the same (fig. 3).

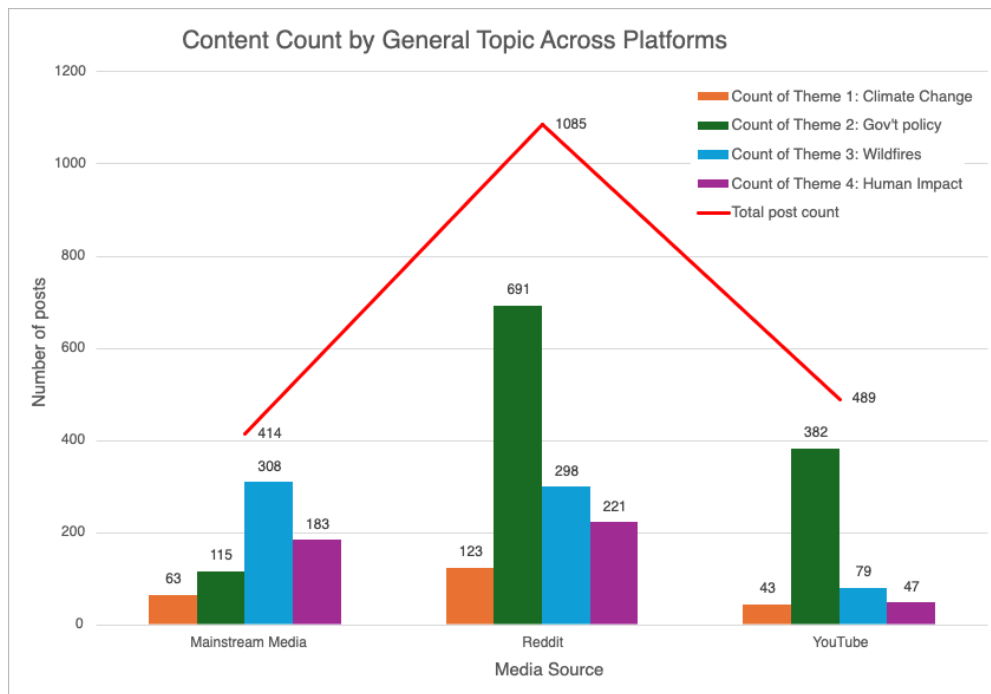


Figure 3: Major topics coverage across platforms

Under the umbrella topic of ‘government policy,’ the subject of the woods ban appeared frequently across social media platforms. Following the government press release on August 5, 2025, mainstream news sources made little mention of the emerging controversy and debate. Official coverage was primarily neutral in tone and overlooked the growing volume of discussion coming from regional online communities. While a few commentary/investigative pieces (15 articles, or 3.6% of sample) were published, mainstream conglomerates showed little engagement with community voices. Social media hosted more diverse, opinionated discussions, with users vigorously debating various pros and cons to the woods ban (fig. 4).

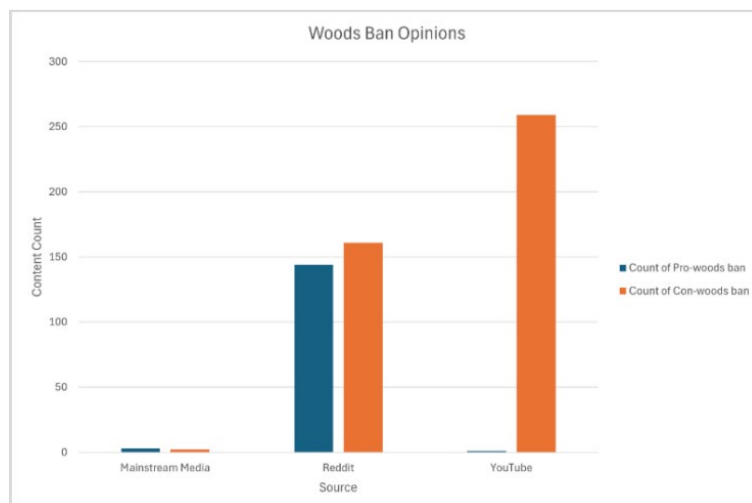


Figure 4: Woods ban opinions across platforms

Analysis revealed that mainstream authorship was concentrated in a small handful of journalists, and event coverage consisted primarily of boilerplate articles that lacked substantive local relevance. Social media discussions acted as a counterbalance, providing faster and more diverse content with higher community relevance. These observations point to the existence of a “news desert,” wherein the decline of local news coverage creates a lack of access to journalistic information about local issues.¹⁷ News deserts, created as a result of the increasing consolidation of regional newsrooms and acquisitions by centralized conglomerates, threaten diversity in reporting, community connection, and journalism’s function in the democratic process. Consolidation and centralization of newsrooms also leads to further audience loss, as news-seekers lose interest in mainstream coverage and get in the habit of looking to social media for relevant local information.¹⁸

3. Tone and narrative polarization: While social media discussions were richer and more nuanced, popular discourse was affectively charged, and emergent narratives were stigmatizing and polarizing.

Our sentiment analysis revealed that the general tone of mainstream media leaned neutral-negative (fig. 5). Articles showing negative sentiment often framed wildfire events as threatening or destructive, employing language like “disaster,” “fight,” and “out-of-control.” Overt opinion framing tended to be minimal other than the linguistic choices, however, and narratives rarely strayed from generalist topics. The dominant sentiments on social media platforms were neutral-negative and sarcastic/insulting, with a much higher ratio of negative to positive commentary. Mainstream media did not display much partisan leaning in coverage, but a large divide emerged between and within social media platforms (table 2).

Table 2: Partisan framing by social media platform

	Reddit	YouTube
Left-populist framing	44%	3%
Right-populist framing	10%	45%
Neutral	46%	52%

The tone of the comments made by top posters on each social media site did not dramatically differ from the overall tone of the posts and comments surveyed, suggesting the absence of an “influencer effect,” or attempt by specific posters to sway the overall tone of the discourse taking place on these sites around this subject.¹⁹

Social media discussions covered a variety of sub-topics overlooked in mainstream media, primarily centering on the contention surrounding the woods ban. Reflecting similar trends observed during the COVID-19 pandemic, several narratives emerged in response to the dominant framing of the wildfire events, often suggesting that marginalized groups were responsible for or contributed to the crisis.²⁰

The largest counternarrative to appear was that the Nova Scotia government was not acting reasonably in enacting a ban on entering wooded areas. Users on Reddit (33%) and YouTube

(90.7%) spoke of government policies with a negative and/or insulting tone, describing the restrictions as flawed, unclear, or authoritative, and criticizing government actors as oppressive or deceptive.

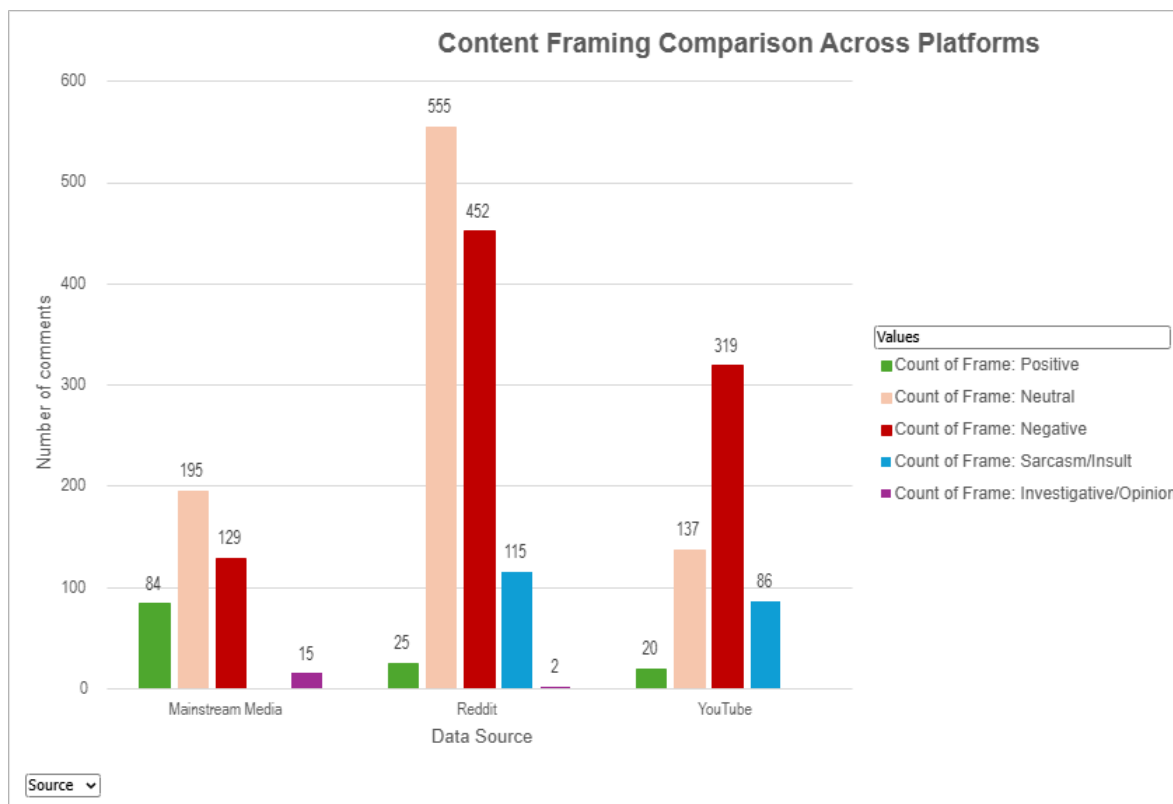


Figure 5: Content tone comparison across platforms

The second most common thread was seen on both social media platforms surveyed, where users targeted marginalized communities with scapegoating narratives. On Reddit, the unhoused community received the most blame; we logged negative sentiment in approximately 26% of all comments discussing homelessness. These comments included allegations that nearby encampments bore responsibility for the fires, and that Nova Scotia’s firefighting resource scarcity was due to money being spent on social welfare. YouTube users were more reactionary. Comments on that platform blamed Indigenous people for starting the wildfires, and, in comparing the woods ban to the COVID-19 pandemic, employed anti-Chinese narratives to express their frustration about perceived government overreach. Negative framing was logged in 100% of all comments discussing racial minorities on YouTube.

These scapegoating narratives are consistent with natural disaster studies establishing that, during emergency events, in order to make sense of social upheaval and validate in-group identity, individuals tend to direct their anger or fear either upwards at government, or downwards at minorities.²¹

In addition to—and at times trumping—larger scapegoat narratives, we observed that users constructed situation-specific in-and out-group divisions to stigmatize or value-select Nova Scotian social groups. Nova Scotian identities were divided into two homogenous camps, which we coded as “Bad Nova Scotians” and “Good Nova Scotians.” These opposing frames appear to have been applied by users in terms of ideological differences, with one’s political stance on the

woods ban being an important determinant. Importantly, these divisions were not fixed. Inclusion or exclusion from these categories was an active process that varied both between individual users and platforms. Descriptions of stigmatized identities across both camps, however, were universally vitriolic (fig. 6).

According to the categories which emerged on Reddit, *Good Nova Scotians* were left-leaning populists who observed the woods ban. They were valued by Redditors as responsible, obedient community members who kept the province safe from wildfire danger. *Bad Nova Scotians* were right-leaning populists who were contra-woods ban. They were stigmatized as irresponsible, selfish individuals who put the province in danger by resisting governmental authority, committing acts of arson, or spreading conspiracy theories. Redditors blamed Bad Nova Scotians for exacerbating wildfire conditions, and for the implementation of the woods ban itself. As one user wrote, “these morons won't ever get it through their oppositional/defiant brains that they are the exact reason we have to have these bans. These people are why we can't have nice things.”²²

On YouTube, however, these assigned identities were reversed. Bad Nova Scotians, while still defined by views that were right-populist and contra-woods ban, were valued by YouTubers as patriotic free thinkers defending Canadian rights and freedoms. Left-populist, pro-woods ban Good Nova Scotians were stigmatized as soft-minded groupthinkers. Good Nova Scotians were blamed for ignorantly enabling a perceived creep of democratic backslide across Canada, empowering a type of regional and national politics which users considered to be an authoritarian regime. As one YouTube user wrote, “the Liberal chicken dance sheeple voted for more of this type of JackBoot policy.”

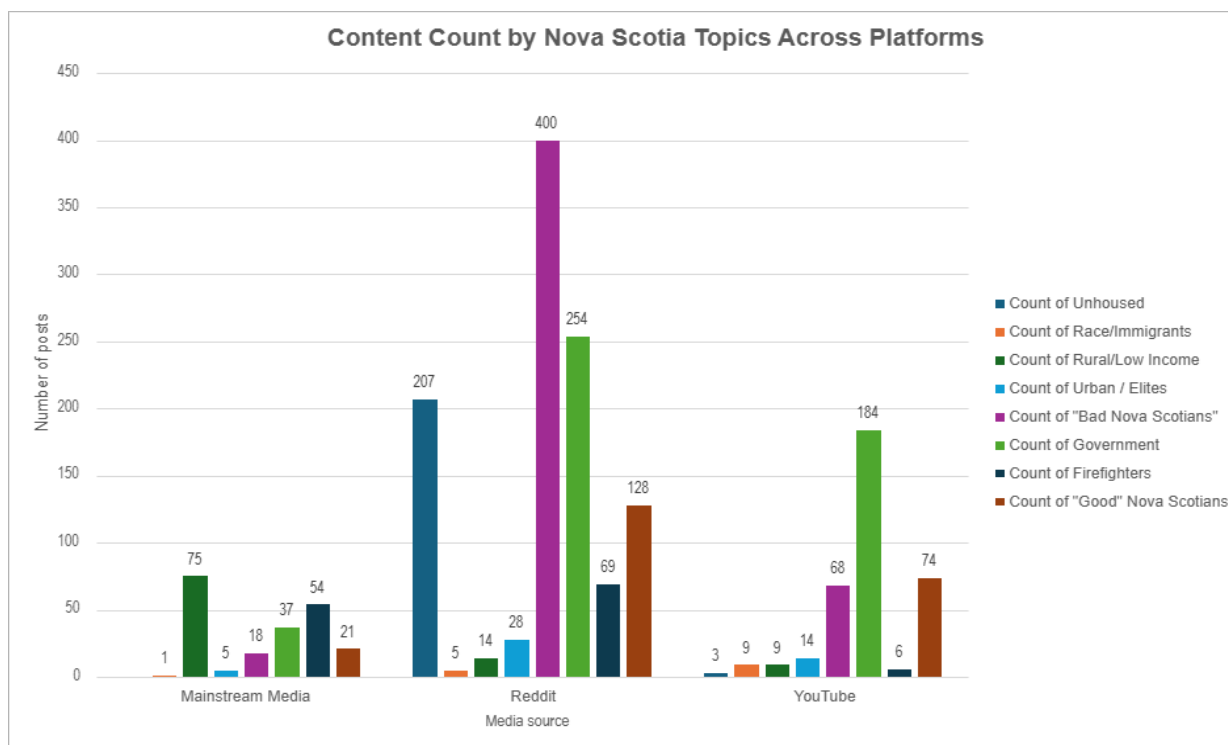


Figure 6: Content count by Nova Scotia topics across platforms

The search for explanations and the drive to form a cohesive social identity are natural, formative reactions to distressing life events, and social friction through public inquiry is a necessary element of functioning democracies.²³ Online reactions seen in this case study, however, do not indicate a simple civil disagreement; our observations are consistent with findings from a growing body of research examining social media's corrosive pressures on society. Recent studies have shown that partisan divisions, when combined with emotionally charged rhetoric, exacerbate affective polarization: the intensification of disdainful, distrustful, or hyperpartisan attitudes between opposing social groups.²⁴ Wildfire discourse on social media carried strong affective undertones and polarizing narratives, quickly transforming the subject of wildfires into a political wedge issue.

We identify the woods ban as a critical discursive fracture point. The 2025 wildfires were distinctive in the magnitude of regional shock and environmental damage created, and the resulting stigmatizing narratives and high rates of affective polarization mark an alarming departure from the traditional view of Nova Scotia as a province typified by community cohesion and regional collectivism.

4. Polarizing pipelines: Social media is a prime vector for easy communication, but it is also a hotspot for the spread of misinformation and radicalization.

In 2025, more than half of Canadians used social media as a main outlet for news consumption.²⁵ Social psychologists have found that people turn to social media to alleviate stress and connect with others, with activity being especially pronounced during emergency events.²⁶ Despite its benefits as a communication vector, however, social media has a host of deeply socially erosive features.

First, platforms are unregulated and have limited public oversight. Private platforms and agents are motivated by user-engagement-driven profit. This business model incentivizes social media algorithms to deliberately amplify emotionally heightened, socially divisive content for increased user activity.²⁷ This algorithm-driven content exposure has resulted in heightened dissemination of misinformation and has been causally linked to increased affective polarization.²⁸

Second, consumption of negative algorithm-driven content pushes vulnerable users down pipelines to radicalization through closed-group informational echo chambers (especially on non-moderated platforms like YouTube).²⁹

Third, these systems-level features coerce a psychological feedback loop, wherein social media's attention-based profit motive engineers heightened user engagement; user activity results in increased emotional distress and habitual reliance on the platforms for human connection; in-person community ties become severed as users engage with caustic algorithm-driven content; users experience perceived social isolation and self-soothe through social media; and the cycle continues.³⁰

In our social media subsets, we identified potential misinformation³¹ in 23% of all YouTube comments and 2% of all Reddit comments.³² Comments containing misinformation on YouTube were distributed relatively evenly across all videos in our dataset, which ranged from alt-right pundit videos to reputable national news broadcasts. Misinformation narratives were rarely benign. Users spread climate change denialism, conspiracy theories about government-ordered arson, and comparisons of Canadian administrations to both Nazi and Soviet authoritarian

regimes. In many cases, this misinformation fed into partisan divisions, resulting in inflammatory and disruptive dialogue. For example, one user wrote, “I live in Nova Scotia, right next to where the last wildfire happened. I’ve been saying that Climate Lockdowns were coming since the Covid lockdowns. We have an extremely authoritarian government and a low IQ sheep population.” Social media facilitates the process of digital radicalization by encouraging and exacerbating the spread of misinformation, affective polarization, and antisocial behaviour. Given the presence of each of these elements in our study, we have identified a potential pipeline to radicalization in the Nova Scotian information ecosystem. We draw from Bélanger et al.’s 3N model of radicalization to map it here³³:

1. **Need:** Wildfires occur and a state of emergency is quickly determined by the province, with adverse social effects: Nova Scotians experience high emotional distress due to the immediacy and volatility of the emergency. They seek information, whether for threat monitoring and preparedness, community connection, self-soothing, or simply to satisfy the psychological need for rational explanations.
2. **Network:** Mainstream media provides information on the wildfires as events unfold, which individuals consume directly or through social media channels. The homogenous tone and boilerplate content seem impersonal and detached, and many news-seekers do not find the information or narratives they want to engage with, at the time they are looking. Instead, they engage directly with social media (e.g., Reddit), finding information and nuanced community discussions that touch on more regionally relevant topics.
3. **Narrative:** Information on social media platforms is emotionally charged, and scapegoating, anti-government narratives infuse discussions. Algorithmic content recommendations may reinforce partisan division by repeatedly exposing users to in-group narratives that frame out-group members as the source of their grievances. These narratives reinforce the belief that only members of the in-group can validate an individual’s experiences, creating a feedback loop in which group acceptance becomes evidence of being “right.” This dynamic further isolates the individual from their offline community.

Algorithms may push susceptible individuals away from moderated discussions (e.g., top regional subreddits), expose them to increasingly divisive content, and potentially push them toward online spaces with more lax content moderation (i.e., YouTube). Within these less-moderated environments, inflammatory rhetoric, algorithmically recommended emotive content, and misinformation transform local grievances (opposition to the woods ban, frustration surrounding wildfire management) into broader narratives of political or social disaffection. Individuals may come to perceive Canadian society as being in decline, political institutions as fundamentally untrustworthy, and out-group members as inherently oppositional and even threatening.

This theoretical pipeline demonstrates how absences in mainstream media, filled by social media, can facilitate the progression from a distressing community event to conspiracy, bigotry, and extremism. Platform affordances and algorithmic systems promote dispute and misinformation. Informational visibility, interpretation, and perceived credibility are shaped by the technological and social environments through which information circulates. As such, information found through social media is never truly neutral.

Conclusion

This case study indicates that the current state of the Nova Scotian information ecosystem has the potential to increase political polarization, reduce civic trust, and become a pipeline to radicalization. The trigger for the problems is, in part, the centralization and delocalization of material available in the mainstream media, and lack of timely and trustworthy informational updates from authorities. We see a growing need by users for engagement on a wider range of topics and in more detail than is being provided through the mainstream media. Social media is a highly effective vector for informational transmission but can also be a deeply harmful vehicle for social fragmentation.

Further research could compare other emergency events across Canada (i.e., the 2022 Canada convoy protest, wildfire events in Western Canada), the influence of regional or national identity-building in online discourse, and the potential for differing user patterns cross-regionally. There is space here for research to examine the journalistic ecosystem of Atlantic Canada, including the presence of “alternative news media”—mainstream news coverage on social media platforms—and exploration of radicalization pathways from a Canadian regional politics perspective.³⁴

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Improved communication from officials and improved options for participatory governance.

Government: **The Government of Nova Scotia should proactively ensure that all emergency management information released to the province is timely, accurate, accessible, and engages meaningfully with Nova Scotian communities.** Public communication is one of the most direct and sustained points of contact between the provincial government and Nova Scotians and should therefore be treated as an essential component of emergency management.

One path forward is to **reconsider the dissolution of Communications Nova Scotia (CNS)**. Dissolved in February 2025, CNS’ mandate was to “ensure that government communications are timely, accurate, effective, factual and respectful, objective and non-partisan.”³⁵ During the pandemic, CNS played a key role in effectively transmitting important information (i.e., vaccination clinics, breakouts), and prioritizing marginalized groups.³⁶ Following the dissolution, lacking a centralized information dispensary, official news emerged from different government bodies and secondary platforms, cross-fertilizing information and creating confusion. Reinstating Communications Nova Scotia as a trusted and reliable public institution could strike a balance between the timeliness and accuracy of emergency management information releases.

The Mass Casualty Commission has indicated that a long-term, community-based preparedness plan is imperative for harm prevention, disaster mitigation, and post-event recovery.³⁷ Public communication should therefore prioritize not only the rapid dissemination of accurate information during an emergency, but also the development of long-term relationships and preparedness before an event occurs.³⁸ During emergency events, improved communications include increased public education climate disaster response plans, improved website resources, and the establishment of emergency operation centres and hotlines. After events, the

timely release of long-term follow up reports with comprehensive statistical analyses and justifications for official decisions would increase transparency and accountability.

Elected officials: **Elected officials should consider multiple avenues through which they can remain accessible to constituents for information and advocacy.** Many of the narratives surrounding the 2025 wildfires reflected a desire among Nova Scotians to participate in decision-making, express concerns, and have their experiences acknowledged by government.

First, elected officials should maintain an active and accessible presence across social media platforms, to strengthen communication and trust between government and community. An increasing number of elected officials are seeing the value of engaging with their constituents on social media, as a venue where civilians go to confirm information, communicate news, or ask questions. In one effective example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, American Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and federal NDP leader Jagmeet Singh used the streaming platform Twitch to livestream *Among Us* gameplay, using the platform to communicate information about COVID emergency measures.³⁹ During his tenure on Halifax Regional Council (2012-2024), Councillor Wayne Mason made regular posts to social media platforms such as Reddit, with offers to answer questions from constituents and contextualize the council's decision-making.⁴⁰

While unconventional, such approaches demonstrate the potential for elected officials to meet communities within the information environments they already use. The quick spread of information on social media and capacity for near-instant responses can allow residents to seek clarification during rapidly developing events.

Second, this engagement should extend beyond social media. Where safe and feasible, elected officials should facilitate regular in-person opportunities for community engagement, including town halls, emergency preparedness meetings, and community volunteer sessions. Wildfires are a form of individual and community trauma; not only would these forums provide opportunities for residents to ask questions, express concerns, and seek clarification directly from government representatives, but they would also give spaces for communities to support each other and strengthen connections.⁴¹ Recommendations following the 2020 Mass Casualty event recognize that effective emergency management is not a technological or administrative process, but an **ongoing relationship between governments and the communities they serve**. Participatory governance should therefore be prioritized by elected officials as a component of effective wildfire mitigation and emergency management.⁴² Communities that feel heard and informed are better positioned to respond effectively when emergencies occur.

Recommendation 2: Build out trusted communication networks and diversify voices in Nova Scotian news ecosystems.

Government: **The Government of Nova Scotia must support the diversification and expansion of regional journalism.** Our findings suggest that topic coverage in mainstream media in the summer of 2025 did not reflect the diversity of community experiences, nor the social nuances around the wildfires themselves. A lack of representative regional journalistic wildfire coverage created an information vacuum that social media platforms subsequently filled, with socially destructive consequences. By forcing a choice between a centralized, homogenous, legacy media source and highly decentralized social media environments that can

be polarizing and present information that is difficult to verify, Nova Scotians are faced with a fragmented digital information ecosystem.

Investing in regional journalism would create a more holistic, evidenced view of emergency events. Strengthening mainstream media networks could reduce the increase in asociality emerging from social media by ensuring that Nova Scotians have regular access to credible, diverse, and locally grounded alternatives. Greater diversity—in authorship and topic—of mainstream media could support government emergency communications. During an unfolding emergency, local journalists and media organizations are able to devote greater attention to community experiences than government communications bodies may have the capacity to address.

A more robust regional media ecosystem could serve as an intermediary between government and communities by amplifying emergency information, centering community perspectives, and providing independent verification of information/misinformation circulating online.

Journalists: **Journalists must support Nova Scotians' need for local, diverse coverage, including topics discussed on social media.** By omitting local or controversial topics from coverage in mainstream news, mainstream media perpetuates a news desert which is subsequently overcorrected for by unregulated, unmoderated communication vectors. While news deserts can in some cases be an opening for community conversations and demonstrated “news resiliency,”⁴³ reliance on social media to correct for the absence of official communications increases the amount of unreliable information circulating in the ecosystem. Social media platforms are generally subject to limited editorial oversight beyond volunteer moderation, and users are not bound by institutional standards of credibility or accuracy.

Reporting on local topics directly relevant to communities allows for greater engagement in regulated, trustworthy news, and ideally leads to respectful, evidence-based discussions. This should include the verification of emergent online narratives and the debunking of misinformation or scapegoating strategies as they appear. In a changing media ecosystem, local reporting acts as a major safeguard for democratic institutions at both municipal and regional levels. Localized, diverse coverage should also include relationship-building with local communities and audiences, especially indigenous peoples and other marginalized communities.

Government and Journalists: **Marginalized voices and experiences must be amplified across all levels of wildfire mitigation and emergency management.** Indigenous perspectives were notably absent from conversations across the dataset, with only one mention each on Reddit and YouTube. This gap is telling. Indigenous communities hold generations of fire stewardship knowledge that can inform prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery.⁴⁴ Government and journalists must integrate understanding of traditional land and resource management and its modern technologies (i.e., the Mainland Mi'kmaq Alert System, the Mi'kmaq Forestry Initiative, the Unama'ki Emergency Alert System) into their work, to amplify both Indigenous perspectives and sustainable land stewardship practices.⁴⁵

Unhoused communities, African Nova Scotians, newcomers to Canada, people with disabilities, and other marginalized groups were similarly underrepresented, and at times stigmatized, across both mainstream and social media. To develop truly representative emergency

communications, government officials and journalists should proactively seek out and amplify the perspectives of communities that are historically underrepresented in public discourse.

Recommendation 3: The pipeline to radicalization must be acknowledged as a growing issue, and a better preventative system must be built to combat its harms.

Policy leaders: **Policy leaders should recognize the potential pathways to radicalization that can emerge within Nova Scotia's information ecosystem and incorporate this consideration into long-term strategies.** The path from mainstream to social media platforms encourages misinformation and harmful blame narratives. Emergency narratives move between mainstream and social media platforms, where they are amplified, reframed, and become increasingly separated from official information. This pipeline may lead to the normalization of bigotry and hate speech, with more severe outcomes including hate crimes, stochastic violence, or acts of violence, especially against marginalized groups.

The Mass Casualty Report has suggested that, while the likelihood of radicalization and extremist violence is statistically low, they are still threats. Pipelines can create conditions in which any individual can become increasingly receptive to radicalizing narratives.⁴⁶ Additionally, as gaps in mainstream news encourage social media use, the convergence of social and technological factors on social media erodes social cohesion. In our case study, we have seen how social media undermines centralized institutions of expertise, diversity is transformed into antagonism, and public discourse becomes fragmentation.⁴⁷

Policy leaders should therefore recognize this information-to-radicalization pipeline as a legitimate public safety concern and develop a long-term harm mitigation strategy. This strategy should avoid treating radicalization as rare extremist activity or view incidents as isolated expressions of criminality but instead consider the broader information environments in which harmful narratives develop and spread.

Existing research on radicalization prevention impresses the importance of community-based approaches, particularly for news-seeking community members vulnerable to the pipeline process. These strategies have been effective when incorporated into multi-level governance frameworks involving government, NGOs, grassroots organizations, and civil society.⁴⁸ Strengthening community connection can serve both a restorative and preventative function, helping communities recover from traumatic events while creating supportive pathways for individuals who may otherwise become radicalized. A long-term prevention strategy should not be reactionary but invest in strengthening social infrastructure that makes communities resilient to radicalization in the first place.

Nova Scotians: **Nova Scotians should move beyond passive consumption of emergency event-related information and engage actively in their communities.** Community resilience is built through everyday small engagements (open and honest discussions of climate change, wildfires, fears and anxieties, practical mitigation measures) with friends, families, and neighbours. Nova Scotians must feel empowered to communicate directly with public officials and elected representatives, to raise questions and concerns, and advocate for themselves and their communities. Prior to, during, and following wildfire events, volunteering with local organizations or neighbourhood coalitions or contributing to shelters and donation drives are among many ways to meaningfully participate in community.

Appendix

Methodology

We adopted a mixed-methods approach to examine wildfire narratives in mainstream news and on social media platforms. Material discussing wildfires was collected from 2025 and early 2026, with the material between mid-August and late October 2025 deemed the most relevant for this pilot case study.

The mainstream media sample included both national and regional media sources and consisted of 426 unique news articles gathered through *Google News* and keyword searches within each news source's online database. The social media sample was drawn from publicly available posts, collected through Communalystic software. We drew from two online platforms, Reddit and YouTube. Mainstream media and social media datasets were coded qualitatively using Excel, through a reiterative inductive approach that informed our formal codebook.

We coded the mainstream dataset by gathering descriptive statistics (author name, wire attribution, date) and coding themes from the article title. Communalystic auto-generated descriptive statistics for the social media dataset. The Reddit forums themselves, r/NovaScotia, r/Halifax, and r/Canada, were the largest subreddits to discuss the wildfires, and we selected only high-engagement content from each subreddit for our sample. We filtered the Reddit population by calculating an engagement metric: score / upvote ratio (both determined by Communalystic data scrape, then filtering by submissions, replies, and comments with a metric of $\leq \pm 10$). We only included YouTube videos with a high view count ($< 10,000$), found through a keyword search on a guest browser. Comments were filtered out if they had fewer than 5 likes.

Content was coded for the presence of general/specific themes, positive or negative tone, partisan framing, type and format of content, and presence of misinformation.

Table 3: Number of posts surveyed

	Posts/comments/articles	Unique authors
Reddit	1085	637
YouTube	489	414
Mainstream Media	414	89

Table 4: Event timeline of the 2025 wildfires (June-Aug)

Event	Date
Musquodoboit Harbour fire & evacuation	June 22, 2025
Woods ban in effect (Annapolis Valley)	August 5, 2025
Woods ban in effect (Cape Breton, Richmond, Victoria, Inverness, Guysborough, Antigonish, Halifax)	August 5, 2025
Susie Lake fire & evacuation, Halifax	August 12, 2025
Long Lake Fire & evacuation	August 13, 2025

Susie Lake fire declared extinguished	August 14, 2025
Helicopter crash & pilot injury, Long Lake fire	August 15, 2025
Woods ban lifted (Cape Breton, Richmond, Victoria, Inverness, Guysborough, Antigonish, Halifax)	August 29, 2025
Long Lake Fire held	September 8, 2025
Long Lake Fire declared extinguished	September 27, 2025
Lake George Fire & evacuation, Kings County	September 28, 2025
Lake George fire declared extinguished	October 8, 2025
Woods ban lifted (Annapolis Valley)	October 15, 2025

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¹ Abatzoglou et al., “Climate Change Has Increased the Odds of Extreme Regional Forest Fire Years Globally.”; Wotton et al., “Potential Climate Change Impacts on Fire Intensity and Key Wildfire Suppression Thresholds in Canada.”

² Lorenz-Spreen et al., “A Systematic Review of Worldwide Causal and Correlational Evidence on Digital Media and Democracy.”; Rathje et al., “Out-Group Animosity Drives Engagement on Social Media.”

³ Dickinson et al., “Catching Fire?”; Skurka et al., “Pathways of Influence in Emotional Appeals.”; Stallings, *Promoting Risk*.

⁴ Bélanger et al., “Radicalization Leading to Violence.”; Hemmingsen, *The Danish Approach to Countering and Preventing Extremism and Radicalization*.

⁵ Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*; Shaver, *The Attribution of Blame*.

⁶ Kasperson et al., “The Social Amplification of Risk.”; Kasperson et al., “The Social Amplification of Risk Framework.”

⁷ Kubin and Von Sikorski, “The Role of (Social) Media in Political Polarization.”; Rathje et al., “Out-Group Animosity Drives Engagement on Social Media.”; Cooper, “The Good, the Bad and the Other.”

⁸ Dickinson et al., “Catching Fire?” Kasperson et al., “The Social Amplification of Risk Framework,” 1371-2; Stallings, *Promoting Risk*; Prell et al., “Competing Structure, Competing Views.”; Schulte and Miller, “Wildfire Risk and Climate Change.”

⁹ Haraway, “Situated Knowledges.”

¹⁰ Kruglanski et al., “Terrorism and Conspiracy Theories.”; Ribeiro et al., “Auditing Radicalization Pathways on YouTube.”

¹¹ Hemmingsen, *The Danish Approach to Countering and Preventing Extremism and Radicalization*.

¹² Constant and Ducharme, *Liberalism and Hegemony*, 176–200; Crescenzi and Rodríguez-Pose, “Reconciling Top-Down and Bottom-Up Development Policies.”

¹³ In drafting our policy recommendations, we referred to the *Mass Casualty Commission* reports (2021) and Nova Scotian COVID-19 public health responses as examples of responses to similar health and public safety emergencies. See particularly *Volume 4: Community*; Steenbeek et al., “Nova Scotia Strong.”

¹⁴ Note that Nova Scotia has not released any official statistics regarding the 2025 wildfires as of August 11, 2026. “Nova Scotia Wildfire Statistics - Government of Nova Scotia.”

¹⁵ Government of Nova Scotia News Releases. Search results, keyword “wildfire.” Accessed October 1, 2026. https://news.novascotia.ca/search/all?field_topics=225

¹⁶ Steenbeek et al., “Nova Scotia Strong.”

¹⁷ *Local News Matters: Rethinking CBC/Radio-Canada’s Role in a Changing Media Landscape*, 12. Samara Centre for Democracy, “2025 Federal Election Report 3.”

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- ¹⁸ Godfrey, *What's Left of Nova Scotia's Postmedia Newsrooms?*, *How Canadian News Deserts Lead to Misinformation | The Current.*; Saba, "Local News Coverage in Canada in Steep Decline, Inviting Misinformation."
- ¹⁹ Given the data available it is impossible to check for so-called "sock puppet accounts," wherein posts are made by the same person under multiple usernames in order to make a particular viewpoint seem more popular. The possibility of sock puppet activity cannot be entirely discounted.
- ²⁰ Chen, "Crises, Scapegoating, and Anti-Chinese Racism."
- ²¹ Tekin et al., "Justifying Violence and Hostility through Discourse."; Olson, "Toward a Politics of Disaster," 270–71.
- ²² For privacy reasons, usernames have been omitted from this writeup. For information on specific quotes, please contact mipp@dal.ca.
- ²³ Kasperson et al., "The Social Amplification of Risk Framework," 1369; Proulx and Inzlicht, "The Five 'A's of Meaning Maintenance."; Winkler, "Identity Work and Emotions."
- ²⁴ Kim, *How Language Use on Facebook Drives Affective Polarization*; Törnberg, "How Digital Media Drive Affective Polarization through Partisan Sorting."
- ²⁵ Government of Canada, "The Daily — Study." Notably, while the Meta news ban does not impact Canadian news consumption on Reddit or YouTube, a Pew Research Center study determined that both platforms are 'news giants' frequented across all social media platforms (Atske, "Social Media and News Fact Sheet.")
- ²⁶ Brandtner and Brand, "Fleeing through the Mind's Eye."; Niles et al., "Social Media Usage Patterns during Natural Hazards."; Riehm et al., "Associations Between Time Spent Using Social Media and Internalizing and Externalizing Problems Among US Youth."
- ²⁷ Crockett, "Moral Outrage in the Digital Age."; González-Bailón and Lelkes, "Do Social Media Undermine Social Cohesion?"
- ²⁸ Burton, "When Misinformation Migrates."; Kim, *How Language Use on Facebook Drives Affective Polarization.*; Thorson and Wells, "Curated Flows."; Törnberg, "How Digital Media Drive Affective Polarization through Partisan Sorting."
- ²⁹ Cinelli et al., "The Echo Chamber Effect on Social Media."; Karas, "Red Pill Stories."; Kasperson et al. 185, 1988.; Thorson and Wells, "Curated Flows."
- ³⁰ Primack et al., "Social Media Use and Perceived Social Isolation Among Young Adults in the U.S."; Sahu et al., "Problematic Social Media Use and Anxiety."
- ³¹ Defined in our codebook as information that is inaccurate, extremist, sensationalist, junk, conspiratorial or otherwise disruptive.
- ³² Misinformation was flagged in one mainstream article.
- ³³ Bélanger et al., "Radicalization Leading to Violence." – note that we invert *Network* and *Narrative*.
- ³⁴ Zhu et al., "Locate Alternative Media in the Digital News Ecosystem."
- ³⁵ Nova Scotia Archives, "Communications Nova Scotia."
- ³⁶ *Accountability Report 2021-22.*
- ³⁷ King's College London, "Understanding Behaviour during Crises."
- ³⁸ *Volume 4: Community*, 237
- ³⁹ CBC, "Jagmeet Singh and AOC Crew up to Find Impostors in Hit Game Among Us."
- ⁴⁰ <https://www.reddit.com/user/wayemason/>
- ⁴¹ *Volume 4: Community*, 179.
- ⁴² *Volume 6: Implementation.*
- ⁴³ Collier, "A Community Resilience Approach to Understanding News Deserts and Their Residents."
- ⁴⁴ Indigenous Leadership Initiative, "Myths and Facts about Indigenous Cultural Fire."
- ⁴⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1K7wnacrod/>; <https://acadiafirstnation.ca/news/723-acadia-sign-up-sheet/file.html:%20>; *Mi'kmaw Forestry Initiative – The Confederacy of Mainland Mi'kmaq.*
- ⁴⁶ Bélanger et al., "Radicalization Leading to Violence."; Kruglanski et al., "Terrorism and Conspiracy Theories."; Shaw, "Social Media, Extremism, and Radicalization."
- ⁴⁷ Castelló et al., "Social Media Is a Threat for Democracy! A Political Perspective for Analysing and Diminishing Harm."
- ⁴⁸ Bélanger et al., "Radicalization Leading to Violence."; Hemmingsen, *The Danish Approach to Countering and Preventing Extremism and Radicalization.*

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