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PRESS RELEASE: New research identifies a "news desert" in the Nova Scotian media ecosystem, calls for governmental support of regional journalism.

MacEachen Institute for Public Policy and Governance

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Halifax – 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. A new report from the MacEachen Institute of Public Policy and Governance explores the Nova Scotia media ecosystem with a case study investigating mainstream media coverage and online discussions around three 2025 wildfires.

The report highlights how a shrinking and centralized media environment is leaving space for a social media ecosystem which encourages increasingly polarizing discussions around government policy and Nova Scotian identity, contributing to political radicalization. Key findings include:

- A "news desert" and homogonous and centralized mainstream news ecosystem: A small number of journalists accounted for the majority of wildfire-related coverage across news outlets. Only ten authors accounted for 50.6% of all content in the mainstream sample, and articles focused on 'big picture' concerns rather than local narratives.
- A need for connection: Social media fills the gap left by mainstream media. Readers turned to social media to fill in the perceived omissions in the news coming from official sources.
- Tone and narrative polarization: While social media discussions were richer and more nuanced than those in the mainstream media, popular discourse was emotionally charged, and the narratives stigmatized vulnerable populations.
- Polarizing pipelines: Social media is a prime vector for easy communication but is also a hotspot for the spread of misinformation and radicalization.

The MacEachen Institute makes numerous policy recommendations in the light of continuing and worsening climate emergencies, including:

- Improved communication from officials and improved options for participatory governance;
- The diversification of voices in Nova Scotian news ecosystems;
- Developing a preventative system to combat the increasing harms of online radicalization.

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“While there may be some efficiencies in centralized newsrooms, what we’ve seen here are some of the unintended consequences of gutting local news media. Nova Scotians want to know what is happening in their own communities, and boiler-plate releases coming from a wire service or reporters in another province aren’t filling that need. People turn elsewhere, which gives bad actors, blame politics, and misinformation a chance to enter the system. If we want to reverse that trend, we need to rebuild trust in our institutions and fix those gaps in communication,” said MacEachen Institute Project Coordinator and paper co-author Dr. Hilary Doda.

“Our information systems should bring us closer together, not become another force pulling us apart. This project is the first of its kind in Atlantic Canada to examine how digital information environments shape public discourse. Nova Scotia is not immune to content-driven polarization and radicalization affecting democracies worldwide. As climate disasters become more frequent, we must confront how social media and news deserts can fragment communities and license stigmatizing discourse. While no form of informational communication is inherently "bad", understanding the corrosive potential of our information ecosystem is a crucial first step toward building a healthier, more resilient, and more democratic informational landscape for all Nova Scotians,” – said paper co-author, Marley Price

"Places like Nova Scotia are going to have digital media environments that are dissimilar to central or more urban Canada. Atlantic Canada is made up of media environments that are comparatively more homogenous, which could mean they're more susceptible to manipulation. That's why we need more research like this, that maps these digital media ecosystems and investigates how they're strained by news events like wildfires," – MacEachen Institute Research Fellow and Project Advisor, Alex MacIsaac

Read the full report here.

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