

**Practicum Report: The Courts of Nova Scotia**

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**\*\*Please note that I would like to remain anonymous if this report is published online\*\***

## **The Placement**

For my NGO's and Government services practicum, I was placed at the Courts of Nova Scotia on Upper Water Street in Halifax, NS. Specifically, my placement was with the Communications department with Jennifer Stairs, who is the Director of Communications, as well as the Acting Executive Director for the Courts of Nova Scotia.

The executive office oversees planning, policy and advisor support to the Nova Scotia judiciary, which also includes publishing different resources online for the public. These vary, but some examples would be the publication of case decisions online (on the website and via social media), resources for the community, and updates on important events. Jennifer primarily acts as a liaison between the media, the public, and the courts (via courts.ns.ca). She manages the Courts of Nova Scotia twitter page and website and is also in charge of education opportunities for law students, which typically includes mock trials and visits to the courthouse with their camps programs. After my placement with her, the education section could also extend to this practicum opportunity.

I initially heard about this practicum through the program co-ordinator of the Law, Justice, and Society program, Dr. Margaret Denike. She had been seeking out other opportunities for the practicum placement, and when I heard about the possibility of taking a placement at the courts, I was really excited. After Jennifer had confirmed my placing in December 2022, we had our first meeting just before the holiday season began. In that meeting, I met the rest of the staff in the office, talked about potential research projects, and had the chance to tell them a little bit about myself and my interests in law. I found out I would be getting a court-issued computer to work with, and that my work would largely be asynchronous, unless I was required to come in to have a check-in with my boss, or to see some legal action play out in Court. The moment I knew this would be an opportunity like no other was when Jennifer asked me what *I* wanted from this practicum, and to tell her if there was anything at all I wanted to do but typically couldn't (as a pre-law student, it is rare that you get the opportunity to speak with judges, lawyers, and the like, much less get a first-hand view at the action inside a courtroom). At this point, she sent me my proposed research project and an NDA for certain details of my research, and I was ready to start when the January term began.

The first week of my practicum involved an orientation at the Courts, where Jen took me for a tour around the Judiciary, showing me the judge's library, how prisoners are transported to

their various trial courtrooms (and I even saw the basement prison holding from afar). I met a few of the office workers in different departments, and I got my computer, which was mine to use for the semester. Because this practicum is asynchronous, having the computer allowed me to have a closer means of communication with a wider group of people compared to my school e-mail – for example, I had to have an account to Judicom, the primary communications account for the judges at the Courts. We sorted out a rough schedule for my weekly research, with the agreement that I could create and maintain my own hours, so long as I worked according to the required number of hours to gain the class credit, and a “Pass” grade (The Practicum is graded on a scale of pass/fail). And so began my research project.

### **The Research Project**

My research project for the Judiciary was very topical. Back in October of 2022, Twitter was bought by Elon Musk. After the ensuing chaos, which included twitter executives like the general council, legal and policy executive and the Chief Financial Officer (CFO) leaving almost immediately after Musk bought his shares, some concerns were raised by the legal communities using the platform. These concerns were confirmed when twitter began laying off a significant chunk of their employees, and began re-instating previously suspended accounts, like those belonging to Andrew Tate and Kanye West. Consequently, there was a rise in bigoted and violent far-right rhetoric on the site, without any kind of consequence or preventative action on the part of new twitter executives. The Communications department at the Courts of Nova Scotia also noted concerns with the paid blue checkmark program (which has since been retracted), because it allowed accounts that were seen as trusted or verified to belong to just about anyone, which, according to my research, has a greater likelihood that the public will trust accounts paying for the blue check who may not have the interests of their followers at heart.

Part of the reason why this twitter upheaval is so important to the Courts of Nova Scotia is because they were the first court system in the country to start sharing information via social media. Specifically, they were the first to combine the communication and procedural aspects of the legal practice. Thanks to the courts in 2014, live tweeting on recess breaks, updating the public on the ongoing trials, publishing the online dockets (since trials are open to the public), and tweeting the verdict of a case are all commonplace for journalists. Because of their level of

involvement with the intersections of the courts and communications, it was important that I research other social media platforms and come back to them with suggestions.

I was told to research and compare Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Mastodon to see which one (if any) provided better or the same opportunities for growth in communications, in alignment with the mission and goals of the Courts of Nova Scotia. I started by looking at each platform's statistics, specifically who was on the platform and how they were using it. From there, I was able to narrow down what the most effective platforms were. Once I did that, I moved on to the justification. This part of the project was really interesting – I got to look at the demographics of the Court's twitter account, who they were following, and what their presence on the platform was like. I also did some research into the privacy policies as well as the terms and conditions of each platform to see if they had anything specific that banned topics of concern such as hate speech, misinformation, and disinformation. For example, while Mastodon is a great platform that uses several different servers (making it easier for the servers to ban people if they're disrespecting others), but those servers make it difficult to control the platform if individuals aren't under control of the same server as the original content uploader. From this preliminary bit of research, I was able to make a preliminary recommendation that Facebook and Instagram would be the best platforms if the communications branch decided to extend their reach or remove themselves from twitter entirely. Once I checked in with Jennifer and given her this information, I was able to narrow my focus to the comparisons between platforms based on the needs of the Courts. From that, I was able to make my conclusions, which was the same as my initial finding – that is, Facebook and Instagram are the best options for a new social media platform with the courts. The best part about this entire project is that I get to present my findings to the communications team, as well as the Chief Justice (and any other judges in the meeting). I was really excited about this, partly because I'll be the 'expert' on this project when I present it and I will have the opportunity to answer any questions or clarify my conclusions. Additionally, my report will be used as a resource for the upcoming communications meeting in Ottawa, ON at the end of April, which will have court communications staff from across the country (including from the Supreme Court of Canada). By 'resource', I mean that the Courts of Nova Scotia will have supplemental information from me, if they choose to use it. Either way, the possibility of my work playing a role in that weekend is rewarding.

### The Experience

While the report was certainly the main priority for my time with the Courts, the experience was incredible. As somebody whose goal is to be a lawyer (and even a judge), this practicum was everything I had hoped. Jennifer is well connected with the various judges, and at the beginning of my practicum, she sent out an email to the judges to see if any of them would be willing to sit down with me to talk about the practice of law. I was expecting a ‘yes’ from one or two judges, maximum. Instead, five judges were willing to speak with me, including the Chief Justice of Nova Scotia and the Nova Scotia Court of Appeal, Chief Justice Wood. While all my conversations with the judges took place off the record, they were all so different, and each conversation re-enforced my passion for law and legal practice.

In my conversation with Chief Justice Wood, we talked about issues such as the importance of legal writing being more accessible to the public (which often means less jargon – each decision posted by the court *should* be written as though it was for a non-expert in the field, much like a lot of the research papers you write in your undergrad! We also talked about jury instructions, recommendations for law schools, my areas of legal interest (for me, this is criminal law, civil litigation, corporate law, and appeals!), and how I could make the most of law school, and this practicum. Each time I spoke with a judge, I was really intimidated – after all, you need to be the best of the best to be appointed to the bench. Despite my nervousness, I learned so much from every interaction, and welcomed, as though they had a genuine interest in learning about my legal interests so that they could give the most information on those topics. The journalism classes I took for my minor really helped me sort through the hundreds of questions I had flying around my head to pick the ones that were most important for that specific judge. For example, with Chief Justice Wood, I wanted to know about his experience as the Chief Justice for the Court of Appeal, and the responsibilities that come with such an important title. I also had the absolute pleasure of speaking with Justice Chipman and Justice Farrar during the Sandeson trial, which concerned a medical student appealing his 1<sup>st</sup> degree murder conviction. Justice Farrar presided over the first hearing in 2020, which was appealed. I spoke with him in passing about the Sandeon case, but the bulk of our conversation was focused on the kind of law I wanted to practice and how I could set myself up for success. Initially, I was supposed to spend the day with him at the Dartmouth Courthouse on Mellor Ave., but with the Sandeson trial

happening in the courtroom next to him, he insisted that I spend my day watching that trial instead of his (which was under a publication ban). He introduced me to Justice Chipman, who was presiding over the Sandeson trial. It is difficult to articulate how phenomenal that day was. Between each court session, I spoke with Justice Chipman, the court reporters, and Justice Farrar about what was happening inside the courtroom. I witnessed firsthand Mr. Sandeson, sitting a mere 20 or so meters away from me, directly in my eyeline. I got a 'tour' of the evidence table and tech equipment they use in trials (picture 6 gigantic TV screens around the courtroom, that can be seen at every angle), and I even got to walk into the courtroom through the same door as the court staff. My day at the Sandeson trial was filled with furious notetaking as I sat in the courtroom, listening to the Justices interact with one another, and asking every question I could, while I had the opportunity. Thanks to Jen, my experience was everything I hoped and more. While this is taking place after my practicum concludes, I have also set up a time to speak with Justice Ann Derrek, who is a Justice at the Court of Appeal of Nova Scotia. I'm really excited about this conversation in particular because a research area of my honours thesis, which I completed this year, has to do with a similar area of research as her. I am extraordinarily grateful for the opportunity to speak with somebody who has been such a force in the legal community.

My experience with this practicum has been overwhelmingly positive. Even though my research took place remotely, Jennifer's kindness, both in her demeanour and in the opportunities, she organized for me contributed to the success of my placement. I think this placement is engaging and is certainly ideal for somebody who is invested in a legal career. Overall, this placement really gives you what you seek from it – if I had more time in my schedule, I would have gone to hearings once a week! From the building tours, conversations with Justices, and an inside look at how the law works in practice, combined with a research project that will make a legitimate difference (used as a resource or not), I cannot recommend the Courts of Nova Scotia enough for your placement.