

It's About Access

by SHERALYN ROMAN

News and our ability to access it, whether that's through social media; an actual news website, through Instagram, or through the printed page, is absolutely fundamental to democracy. Sources of news may not always be perfect and depending on the publication, may even sometimes skew a little to the left or a little to the right, but unfettered access is key. In a perfect world news is unbiased and delivered to your front door, your inbox or your facebook/twitter page, as frequently as you are willing to pay for its delivery (or to refresh your news feed!).

What's happening now however, is that access to your favourite news source is being restricted.

It seems that those who have a great deal of money to pay for the delivery of the news, actually don't want to pay for it at all and the end result is being felt by Canadians across the country. Without unfettered access to news ? however you choose to access it ? misinformation will fester in its place and that's not just problematic but could be downright dangerous.

Bill C-18 passed after a final vote in the Senate just last week.

The Bill ?compels certain tech companies to pay for news content? shared on their platforms. In prompt reaction to the passing of the legislation, Meta (formerly facebook) immediately blocked news sharing options for Canadians across both facebook and Instagram platforms. The consequences of these actions range from the innocuous ? blocking my ability to share the columns I personally have written on my own facebook page with my own followers ? to the ridiculous, where residents of regions under evacuation orders who were trying to escape raging wildfires were unable to access life-saving instructions about where to go and safe routes to get there. Such consequences might have been unintended but should not have been unanticipated when statistics tell us that an average of 60 per cent or more of adults are getting their news almost exclusively from social media platforms.

Perhaps predictably, rather than focussing on the Zuckerbergs of the world, rich people who COULD pay for access but refuse to, right now Canadians are fighting amongst themselves about who is at fault and why. The convoy crowd immediately blamed Trudeau with Pierre Poilievre himself tweeting out messaging about how Trudeau is ?deliberately getting in the way of what people can see and share online,? followed by a personal promise to ?repeal Trudeau's censorship laws and bring home free speech? if he's elected Prime Minister.

Yes, this is about free speech but that shouldn't be confused with the rights of news creators to not have their work distributed free of charge.

News has value and Canadian journalists have a right to be paid for their work as do the publishers who provide a platform for that work. If big tech makes money from sharing news content then so too should the news platforms who not only originally created it but bore the costs of that creation too. What Poilievre and others like him refuse to acknowledge is that this Bill is about preserving access to reliable local news, to Canadian content that might otherwise disappear into the ether, and that according to Jamie Irving, chair of News Media Canada, levels the ?playing field,? as it seeks to ?address a significant market power imbalance between publishers and platforms, and to restore fairness and ensure the sustainability of the Canadian news media ecosystem.? Without it, it's entirely possible our local news sources slowly become extinct and the already slippery slope of the ?Americanization? of Canada becomes complete.

Social media is, in and of itself, already a slippery slope but since it does play such a significant role in our lives, ensuring the credibility of the content we consume is paramount. Providing unfettered access to Canadian content is crucial and if it takes the passage of law to make sure that happens, so be it. We need to stop arguing about whether Trudeau is to blame and turn our attention to the real problem ? why a wealthy American has blocked your ability to consume the news of your choice on the platform you prefer. That's not just undemocratic ? it's downright dangerous. Freedom of the press? Hardly.