

Off to the polls... again!

by SHERALYN ROMAN

Canadian nationalism is at an all-time high and that's a good thing. The reasons for it being so, perhaps not so much. Facing an existential threat; certainly to our economy, and perhaps even to our very sovereignty, we have responded by rallying around the flag, our once quiet nationalism now on loud and proud display. Yay Canadians. But what else is now required of us during this time of crisis? First, as citizens of a free and democratic nation we absolutely **MUST** take our responsibility to vote seriously, and actually get out and vote. Just as important, as we prepare to head to the polls again, arguably choosing the most important prime minister to serve in modern times, we must practice discernment. In our increasingly online world, media literacy has never been more important.

From the time of the first mechanized printing press, by Johannes Gutenberg in the 1400s, until the more recent evolution of Mark Zuckerberg's social media tool (first used in 2004 as "The Facebook" and now known as Meta) the news, to some degree, has likely been shaped and influenced by the people producing it.

It wasn't until Marshall McLuhan, however, that we had a more formal understanding of this concept. McLuhan, a Canadian communications theorist, is known for the phrase "the medium is the message," which argues the medium through which information is communicated has just as much, if not more value (and/or perceived influence) than the message itself. I know I've talked about McLuhan's work in the past, but today I'll go one step further, and suggest a deeper understanding of his concept, applied to the influence of social media on the electoral process, has never been more important.

Media literacy requires us to be discerning consumers. It requires more from each and every one of us: to be savvy fact-checkers, to review the sources of the information that come across our social media feeds, and to question everything; from sensationalist click-bait headlines, to the veracity of photos purportedly showing unlikely scenarios while claiming them to be true.

Such examples range from the easily dismissed "news" showing the Statue of Liberty being overwhelmed by a tidal wave, to the more reprehensible, when real persons are photoshopped into questionable (even pornographic or otherwise horrific) situations.

As we consume the news during this election cycle, before you hit "share," check the source of the news you are sharing. Is it a reputable news organization with a long history of providing verifiable content or is it something your uncle heard while perusing Facebook Marketplace for a used lawn tractor. Are the sources independent and willing to be quoted or are they anonymous? Is the information easily verifiable by a multitude of other independent sources?

Are you sharing a link that you have actually opened, and read, or just from scrolling through content, "liking" and "sharing" without a thought as to its origin? Are you sharing a link from a known satirical publication? If so, you might want to explicitly state it because undoubtedly, somewhere along the line someone will misunderstand the satire as real. Perhaps the easiest litmus test of all is this: if it seems "too good to be true," or "too crazy to be credible," you are probably correct and if that's the case, stop the spread of misinformation by not sharing it further.

Now more than ever we need to be prepared to have some difficult conversations with our friends, our neighbours and even our families. Most of us avoid topics like religion or politics as too contentious, but as we have seen over and over again, not talking about, not seeking clarification, and not verifying information during a high-stakes political campaign can have very serious, long-term, real-world consequences. Think about and question who owns the source of media you are sharing and how might their goals influence the message. We can easily point fingers south of the border, but there are some here too. Reader beware.

Now more than ever we must be careful not to fall into the trap of so-called media outlets ramping up the level of fake news being seen across some networks. Already some Canadian law enforcement agencies are warning of a coordinated misinformation campaign against at least one of the candidates in this election and the allegations are outrageous. Yet what IS known, AND

verifiable, is that one candidate continually refuses to obtain their national security clearance. Why?

Now more than ever we need leaders with experience, who are known on the world stage and dare I say it, maybe even have a degree of business acumen that may just come in handy when dealing with our current, and primary, trading partner.

We need leadership that is able to protect the best interests of all Canadians by obtaining the required security clearance to be able to effectively lead the nation.

Sure, we also need leaders who remind us of our responsibilities to one another, to the environment or climate change and leaders who remind us that programs like national pharmacare or dental care are part of what makes us Canadian.

This is the beauty of democracy: you get to decide which of these options is most important to you and vote accordingly. But now, more than ever, this race is also a potential choice between our future as a sovereign nation or 'to the victor goes the spoils.' That means it might be time to rethink everything, even your own long-standing political affiliations. Canada needs us, and each and every one of us can, and must, play a pivotal role in ensuring the future of our country.

Consume information wisely. Share information wisely. Vote!