METRO VANCOUVER

SOCIAL MEDIA PRESENCE IN A POST-TRUTH WORLD

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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TERMS OF REFERENCE

This report was developed in partnership with the UBC Sustainability Scholars Program, Project 2017-19 Metro Vancouver's Social Media Presence in a Post-Fact World.[1]

The project was sponsored by Gord Inglis, Division Manager, Multimedia Services, External Relations at Metro Vancouver and completed by Lois Evans, UBC Sustainability Scholar and PhD Candidate at the UBC School of Library, Archival and Information Studies.

The project supports Metro Vancouver's strategic direction for public education §3.4 "Continue to expand the range of media, conventional and social, to communicate key messages and the value of Metro Vancouver services."[2]

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[1] UBC Sustainability, "UBC Sustainability Scholars Program," The University of British Columbia, 2017.
[2] Metro Vancouver, "Board Strategic Plan 2015 to 2018" (Burnaby, BC: Metro Vancouver, 2015), 18, http://www.metrovancouver.org/about/strategic-directions/Pages/default.aspx.

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The Facts Infrastructure: A Response to Post-Truth

Since 2010, Metro Vancouver has been dedicated to the Sustainable Framework, making an "unshakeable commitment to the well-being of current and future generations and the health of our planet"[3] in the delivery of core services, meeting planning and regulatory responsibilities, and as a political forum for its membership of 23 local governments. Based on this and other efforts, Metro Vancouver is an important participant in the regional *facts infrastructure,* defined as "systems to ensure that people are provided with accurate information that is based on independently verifiable sources, rather than on opinion or hearsay."[4] Just as the physical infrastructure is dependent on institutions, functions, materials, and people for construction, maintenance, and improvements, so too is the facts infrastructure. The facts infrastructure is not something new but rather a new way of conceptualizing information delivery in the post-truth context.

Post-truth was the Oxford Dictionaries' word-of-the-year in 2016 and is defined as "relating to or based on claims founded on opinion or emotion rather than on verifiable facts"[5] and is increasingly tied to social media. While fake news involving propaganda and misinformation dates to the sensationalist journalism of the late 1800s, social media's "always on" connectivity allows erroneous information to circulate at rapid rates, extended by distribution channels that favour algorithm-based populism over traditionally trusted sources.[6] *Climate change denial* is just one example of a post-truth claim, but one that is highly relevant to Metro Vancouver. While 97 percent of the scientific community agrees that global warming is real and is related to human behaviour, many conservatives continue to deny climate change and attempt to block policy and regulation directed towards reducing energy consumption and addressing other causative factors.[7]

Leveraging a partnership with the UBC Sustainability Scholars Program, the "Metro Vancouver's Social Media Presence in a Post-Fact World" project responds to the post-truth context by examining how well Metro Vancouver's social media content is received by its audiences and

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[3] Metro Vancouver, "Metro Vancouver Sustainability Framework" (Burnaby, BC: Metro Vancouver, 2008).

[4] Lois Evans, Patricia C. Franks, and Hsuanwei Michelle Chen, "Characterizing Canadian and U.S. Local Governments' Online Presence: The Facts Infrastructure as Institutions, Functions, Materials, and People" (2017 International Workshop on Maintaining the Facts Infrastructure, Stockholm, 2017).

[5] Luciana Duranti and Richard Pearce-Moses, "InterPARES Terminology Project," InterPARES Trust, 2017, http://arstweb.clayton.edu/interlex/.

[6] Luciana Duranti, "Entrusting Facts to Archival Theory: Documentary Truth in a Networked Environment," in *Maintaining the Facts Infrastructure in the Era of Post-Truth Politics* (International Workshop, Stockholm, 2017).

[7] Jonathan Michael Feldman, "Climate Change, Discursive Power and Social Movement Design: A Case of Post-Truth Politics from Above and Below," in *Maintaining the Facts Infrastructure in the Era of Post-Truth Politics* (International Workshop, Stockholm, 2017).

how much trust citizens place in Metro Vancouver's messaging—and what can be done to support and extend the existing facts infrastructure based on these findings.

Social Media Challenges in a Regional Context

Metro Vancouver and its 23 Members are active on the top four social media platforms: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram. In general, the size of local governments' social media audiences reflects their populations: large cities maintain multiple accounts on several platforms while villages have accounts on one or two platforms at most. Within the region, Metro Vancouver has the fifth-largest Facebook following, the second-largest Twitter audience, the second-largest number of YouTube subscribers (and the most views), and recently launched an Instagram account that has about 100 followers. Social media is used by Metro Vancouver to increase public awareness, gain support for programs, solicit ideas and feedback, and increase social capital.[8]

Despite the expectation that social media platforms support two-way engagement, there is a growing realization that social media platforms are controlled by algorithms that determine who sees what content. Although many studies have faulted government organizations for their one-way use of social media, platforms such as Facebook are designed in such a way that organizations can post to their own accounts and respond to comments but do not have any control over who sees their "organic" or unpaid messages, resulting in pressures to use Facebook's paid advertising services to increase reach and follower growth. Although Twitter has 1.3 billion users, only 500 million have sent even a single tweet and many Twitter users follow conversations much in the same way that they would tune into a television or radio broadcast. Beyond technical factors and social behaviours, there is growing awareness that the algorithms used by platforms result in selective exposure where users are largely exposed to content that reflect their pre-existing interests and biases—the terms *echo chamber* and *filter bubble* are used to describe this growing reality.

Increasingly, social media has been tarnished by the persistence of fake news and *bot* activity. Despite partnering with third-party fact checking organizations and adding a feature allowing users to flag suspect content, Facebook's role in the 2016 US presidential election has received ongoing scrutiny. Although Facebook's premier position seems unassailable, the company may be vulnerable to competing platforms if they do not address the fake news issue—however, this represents a hard financial choice for the company, given the profitability of viral campaigns where incremental amounts are earned for every view or click. Similarly, an unknown proportion of tweets on Twitter are published by the 23 million *bot* accounts (i.e., automated computer programs) that exist to actively spread misinformation. Although bots are

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[8] Mark Kershaw, "Metro Vancouver: Engaging Our Community through Social Media" (Sustainable Communities Conference, Victoria, BC, 2011).

relatively easy to identify and disable, Twitter's response has been quite limited, again due to monetization.

While social media engagement represents a marketing metric used to gauge users' capacity as consumers, civic engagement as practiced by local governments encompasses "individual or collective behavior aimed at resolving social problems in the community"[9] including a variety of political and non-political activities such as voting, attending community meetings, contributing ideas to social causes, contacting public officials, attending protests, signing petitions, and writing articles concerning community matters. In responding to the post-truth context, Metro Vancouver's social media team seeks to reassert these traditional values by crafting campaigns and posts that are of value to public audiences and by being circumspect in responding to comments, providing the occasional corrections but avoiding extended debates. Although paid content is used as a strategy to extend the reach of campaigns and to grow Metro Vancouver's organic audience, the organization seeks to follow ethical norms for advertising, ensuring messages are factual and informational as well as widely seen. By creating a trustworthy, ethical presence on social media, Metro Vancouver supports the regional facts infrastructure and safeguards the goals of the Sustainable Framework on these increasingly active channels. In examining the responses to three Facebook campaigns, this study identified a need for a more formalized performance measurement system, and suggested Metro Vancouver respond to audience comments more frequently and earlier in the posting cycle to better support the regional facts infrastructure and provide audiences with accurate information that overcomes the effects of misinformation, disinformation, alternative facts, and fake news.

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[9] Annie Marie Warren, Ainin Sulaiman, and Noor Ismawati Jaafar, "Social Media Effects on Fostering Online Civic Engagement and Building Citizen Trust and Trust in Institutions," *Government Information Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (April 2014): 291–301.