Disinformation and Exclusion

How **disinformation** is excluding **diverse voices** from **online public discourse**

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Democracy is in a period of fragility, with online disinformation pitting people against each other. Beyond causing polarization, disinformation can confuse, frustrate, and discourage citizens from participating in public discourse. In order to counter and prevent disengagement, we need to understand how Canadians feel they are being impacted, who is excluded or disengaging online, and effective ways to address these issues.

In April 2019 and August 2019, the Institute for Canadian Citizenship and Leger ran two national surveys, polling over 1,500 Canadians about the impact of false and malicious information online on public discourse, inclusion, and engagement. The Institute for Canadian Citizenship and Leger present this Discussion Guide for Canadians to continue this important conversation.
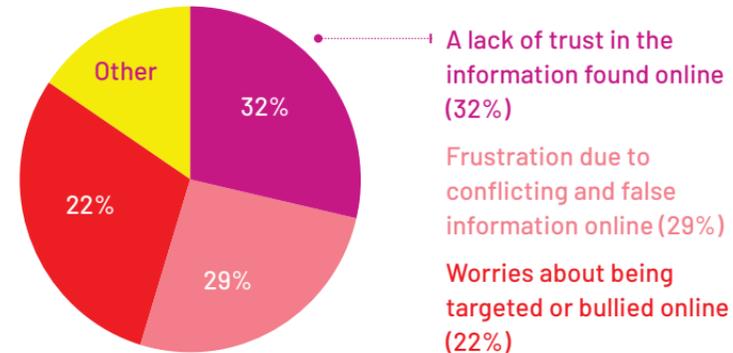
Here is **what we learned.**

What **We Learned**

3 in 4 Canadians have felt discouraged from sharing their opinions online.

The top reasons cited are:

Other
32%
22%
29%

- **A lack of trust in the information found online (32%)**
- Frustration due to conflicting and false information online (29%)
- Worries about being targeted or bullied online (22%)

Discussion

What inaccurate narratives are formed online, given that many Canadians feel discouraged from sharing their opinions?

As online platforms become increasingly important spaces for public dialogue, how can we build more inclusive online spaces to hear from a diverse range of voices?

Other **Takeaways**

→ Feelings of discouragement are more likely among **Canadians who self-identify as visible minorities** and among those concerned that the spread of false information online is **causing Canadians to be less compassionate**.

→ **Younger Canadians** are more likely than older Canadians to be **discouraged** because of factors related to insecurities, including:

1. being targeted or bullied;
2. feeling ignored, and;
3. appearing uninformed.

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What **We Learned**

6 in 10 Canadians

are concerned or very concerned that the spread of false information is causing Canadians to be less compassionate.

32% say they've tried to correct false information online.

22% have considered attempting to do so.

Discussion

How can we motivate more Canadians to shift from concern to action in order to counter false and hateful information online?

What actions can individuals take?

What are the limits of individual action?

Other **Takeaways**

→ Only **1 in 10 Canadians** have changed their online habits as a result of **feeling targeted or bullied online**. However, those who have seen false or misleading information online about "people like them," are much more likely than those who have not to have changed their online habits in response (21 per cent vs 9 per cent).

→ 35 per cent of **millennials** report that they have felt **targeted or bullied online**. The younger the age of respondents, the more likely they were to report feeling targeted online.

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What **We Learned**

73%
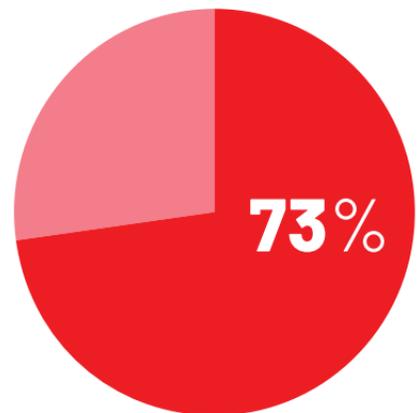
of Canadians
report to have seen false or misleading information spread online about "people like them."

Discussion

How are people affected by seeing misrepresentations of their communities or others online?

How does this impact levels of engagement and civic participation, online and offline?

Other **Takeaways**

→ **Canadians who self-identify as visible minorities** are more likely than those who do not to have often seen **false or misleading information spread online about people "like them,"** as well as to report that they have felt **targeted or bullied online**.

→ **Canadians who self-identify as visible minorities** are also about twice as likely as those who do not to **frequently try to correct false information online**.

80% of **Canadians who self-identify as visible minorities** have **seen false or misleading information spread online about "people like them"**.

**30**% have **felt targeted or bullied online** vs. 22% respectively.

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What **We Learned**

Canadians are divided on whether they think that social media and online platforms provide a meaningful space to engage on important issues.

52% do not. 38% do.

Neither

52%

38%
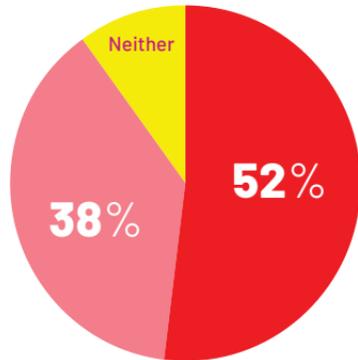
Of those who do not, most think that social media and online spaces are too anonymous and negative. Of those who do, most think that social media and online spaces are meaningful for engagement because of their accessibility to a wide range of people.

Discussion

How can we respond to issues of online anonymity and negativity, while capitalizing on the wider accessibility to a diverse range of people?

How should we balance the benefits of online and offline spaces to engage on important political and social debates and decision-making?

Other **Takeaways**

1. Despite seeing false information spread online about "people like them" more often, **respondents who self-identify as visible minorities** are much more likely (52 per cent) to believe that **social media and online platforms** provide a meaningful space to engage on important issues than those who do not self-identify as visible minorities (35 per cent).

52% of **Canadians who self-identify as visible minorities** believe that social media and online platforms provide a meaningful space to engage on important issues

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What **We Learned**

Canadians believe that the **top three factors responsible for the spread** of false information are:

62% **Social media platforms**, due to algorithms and a lack of content monitoring or removal

52% **Extremist online content**, due to the deliberate spread of lies or a genuine belief in false information

46% **Mainstream media**, due to a lack of responsible fact-checking

Discussion

What roles can policy and regulation; economic models and incentives; civil society collaboration; and individual action play in tackling disinformation?
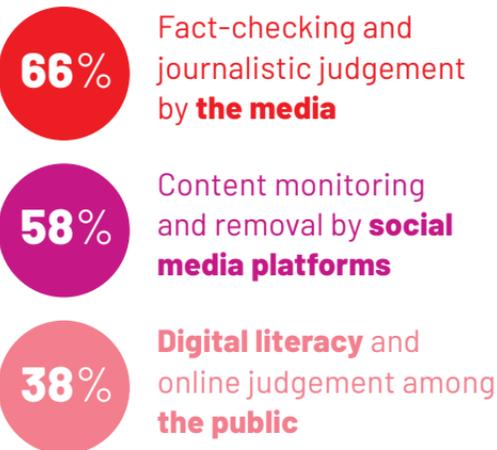
What might contribute to the disparity between younger and older Canadians' perceptions on who is responsible for the spread of false information online?

Other **Takeaways**

→ **Canadians 65+** are more likely than other age groups to believe that **politicians are to blame** for the spread of false information through their campaigns, statements, and speeches.

→ Regionally, **Quebecers** (34 per cent) are less likely to **blame politicians** than the **rest of Canada** (42 per cent), with Ontarians and Albertans significantly more likely to suggest this than Quebecers.

→ **Millennials** are more likely to believe that **the media** is responsible for the spread of false information, due to a lack of **responsible fact-checking**. 56 per cent of **Canadians aged 18–34** chose this answer, which is 10 points higher than those aged 35–54, and 19 points higher than seniors (65+).

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What **We Learned**

Canadians believe that the **top three most effective ways to stop the spread of false information** are:

66% Fact-checking and journalistic judgement by **the media**

58% Content monitoring and removal by **social media platforms**

38% **Digital literacy** and online judgement among **the public**

Discussion

How can digital literacy and online judgment be improved among the public?

Other **Takeaways**

→ **Canadians aged 45+** are more likely to point to **content monitoring and removal by social media platforms** as an effective way to stop the spread of false information.

→ In comparison, **younger Canadians** are more likely to point to **improved digital literacy and online judgement among the public** (51 per cent).

→ More than twice as many **Canadians** (58 per cent) think that **content monitoring and removal by social media** platforms is an effective way for stopping the spread of false information compared to those that say **policies, regulation, and funding by government** (26 per cent).

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Everyone can play a role in countering disinformation. Share this **Discussion Guide** with your community, colleagues, and friends, and connect with us to continue the conversation.

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