

Defriending Canada: Natural Disasters and Facebook's Information Scrub

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Australia experienced this in February 2021. Facebook had gotten nastily stroppy, wishing to dictate public policy to the Commonwealth government. To teach Canberra mandarins a lesson, it literally unfriended the entire country, scrubbing all news platforms of content and making any posted links through the platform inaccessible. It mattered not that the content involved the tawdry details of celebrity love affairs gone wrong or advice on how to respond to a cyclone. The users of an entire country had been cancelled. For a time, a blissful blackhole had appeared at the centre of Australia's information scape.

Facebook's parent company Meta had one fundamental problem. The Australian government had proposed a bargaining code that would distribute income from news shared on digital platforms with its providers. The measure was designed to rescue an ailing sector from demise, and ironically served to aid the likes of Rupert Murdoch and such media moguls struggling to keep dying empires afloat. Digital giants such as Facebook and Google were told to swallow a regulatory regime that would force them into income sharing agreements that they deemed illogical and much against the spirit of the internet.

Meta eventually came over to the view that "refriending" Australia was in its best interests. The then treasurer Josh Frydenberg had convinced them that the much detested code could work. In truth, Frydenberg had merely caved in, more or less easing off on most of the demands, such as a full disclosure of algorithms on sharing material. Independent agreements with news outlets were rapidly reached. Everyone came out of it a villain, except small, independent news outlets deemed irrelevant in the negotiations. They were the true victims.

Canada's [Online News Act](#) proposed something similar in regulating "digital news intermediaries to enhance fairness in the Canadian digital news marketplace and contribute to sustainability." Mimicking the Australian model, digital platforms and news businesses could "enter into agreements respecting news content that is made available by digital

news intermediaries.”

In reaching such agreements, factors such as the “significant bargaining power imbalance between [the digital news intermediary] operator and news businesses” would be taken into account. The Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission was also vested with powers to “impose, for contraventions of the enactment, administrative monetary penalties on certain individuals and entities and conditions on the participation of news businesses in the bargaining process.”

The digital platforms, in turn, took issue: why should they have to pay media outlets for doing their job, having offered them a gratis platform in the first place? Arguments from the Australian example were re-run. Meta, as it [outlined in a statement](#), had “made it clear to the Canadian government that the legislation misrepresents the value news outlets receive when choosing to use our platforms. The legislation is based on the incorrect premise that Meta benefits unfairly from news content shared on our platforms, when the reverse is true.”

In June, Meta [announced](#) that it had “begun the process of ending news availability in Canada” as part of its moves to comply with the Act. It was a statement of general smug finality, indicative of the company’s own self-belief as an exclusive platform for news. For media outlets, this meant that links and content posted by news publishers and broadcasters in the country would no longer be available for those in Canada. Content posted by international news publishers and broadcasters outside Canada would also not be viewable by those within the country.

It did not take long for the consequences of such a policy to bear bitter fruit. As summer fires raged in Canada, forcing tens of thousands from their homes and threatening cities such as Yellowknife, the capital of the Northwest Territories, information was meagre on measures and responses from the authorities. “Right now, in an emergency situation where up to date local information is more important than ever, Facebook is putting corporate profits ahead of peoples safety,” the indignant Canadian **Prime Minister Justin Trudeau** [huffed](#) at a news conference in Cornwall, Prince Edward Island.

Trudeau thought it “inconceivable that a company like Facebook is choosing to put corporate profits of insuring that local news organizations can get up to date information to Canadians.” British Columbia **Premier David Eby** [also found it](#) “astonishing that we are at this stage of the crisis and the owners of Facebook and Instagram have not come forward and said ‘We’re trying to make a point with the federal government, but it’s more important that people are safe’.” These men obviously know little about the workings of this dark entity.

Meta, in response, [claimed](#) that those in Canada could still use Instagram and Facebook “to connect with their communities and access reputable information, including content from official government agencies, emergency services and non-governmental organizations.”

The obvious question here was why Trudeau was placing such astonishing reliance on a private corporation’s information sharing services, one with no allegiance to the Canadian government, let alone the citizenry, to do so. The onus should have been on national and local broadcasting outlets to inform the population of the disasters. As always, governments gravitate in low fashion for the cheapest alternative. The payment of peanuts results in a

monkey return.

In Australia, for instance, the initial ban imposed by Facebook led to an upsurge of interest in the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, which has its own set of digital sharing tools. It became clear that an information environment without Facebook offered healthier alternatives – without the creepy world of surveillance capitalism.

The Australian and Canadian examples serve as salient lessons to those in government who forget their duties to the public. If you get into the bed of a sociopathic, petulant founder who could only conceive of dating girls through digital networks, using such skin-crawling argot as “the poke”, you are asking for trouble. Even more to the point, you are asking for some share of the blame in forfeiting your duties. Surely it would be more prudent for governments to establish their own information channels in times of crisis, invest in public broadcasters and improve their services to areas of a country, however remote?

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