

HOW IS CANADIAN MEDIA'S PLATFORM DEPENDENCE EVOLVING? A CLOSER LOOK AT THE ONLINE NEWS ACT'S EFFECTS

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Abstract

Between 1999 and 2019, Canadian regulators had opted for a laissez-faire policy facing the surge of digital platforms (Edge, 2020). For 20 years, digital platforms indeed flourished in the maple country without respecting the national regulatory framework, regional and minority languages (French or indigenous languages) or the existing legal regime (Saulnier, 2024). The logic promoted by governments was that all forms of regulation would raise the tax burden. However, since 2020, lawmakers have decided to join an international movement (stretching from Europe to Australia) to regulate the Internet giants (the GAFAM) (Birch, 2021).

In July 2023, Canadian legislators indeed passed Bill C-18 (Online news act), which aims to force “digital news intermediaries” to compensate the media for the use of their content (Flew & al., 2023). Under the bill, inspired by the Australian model (News Media Bargaining Code), major platforms such as Meta and Google would have to compensate news media for the use of journalistic content on their platforms. Almost immediately after the law was adopted, Meta (Facebook, Instagram) announced that it was removing journalistic content from its platform, thwarting the regulators' calculations, and prioritizing entertainment content. Google later agreed to pay \$100 million a year to an independent fund for five years.

From a perspective inspired by the political economy of communication and platform studies, this paper examines how the power relations between platforms and news media have changed in Canada since the adoption of the online news act. We will particularly focused on the concept of platform dependency: according to Poell, Nieborg and Duffy (2021), digital producers are platform-dependent when they rely on platforms to create, distribute, market and monetize their content and services.

In the months following the bill's adoption, Canadian and Quebec journalistic organizations denounced Meta and its contestation of the bill in their public speeches. According to recent studies, these actions convinced a third of Canadians to change their

information habits, notably by returning to mainstream media websites (Brin and Charlton, 2024). On the other hand, several researchers, including Dwayne Winseck (2022), also criticized the regulators for their lack of vision in the very creation of the bill, which did not tackle the root of the problem in their view (monopolistic control of advertising market, cross-market consolidation, personal data harvesting). But while we know a lot about how the journalistic profession and experts reacted, we still know very little about how platforms adapted to Canadian regulations.

In the specific case of Meta, it is well documented that the platform has strongly encouraged media to post content on its platform in order to build user loyalty (Mattelart, 2020; Sebbah & al., 2020). The platform (like Google) courted the media throughout the 2010s, setting up research groups, training courses and even media grants (Rebillard and Smyrniaios, 2019). Some researchers speak of “editorial dissolution” (or “infrastructural capture or integration”) to express the media's submission to platform diktats during this period (Lamoureux & Roy, 2024; Whittaker, 2019). But the withdrawal of content on Meta's platforms could represent a turning point in the relationship of dependence between platforms and the media (Flew & al., 2023; Meese, 2023).

Our main research question is: How would it be possible to map the evolution of platform dependency in Quebec and Canadian media? How has Bill C-18 and the removal of journalistic content from Meta changed the platform-dependency relationship of Canadian media? Is it a generalized withdrawal from platforms, or simply a mutation of dependency, with other platforms taking over (Tik Tok, LinkedIn)?

From a mixed (quantitative and qualitative) perspective, we began by monitoring and analyzing the grey literature produced by the major platforms before and after the adoption of Bill C-18. We were particularly interested in the Canadian and Franco-Canadian versions of the Meta Journalism Project, Microsoft Democracy forward program and Google news initiative websites. These websites contain hundreds of articles (as well as tools and training courses) that allow us to see the evolution of the platforms' media strategy.

Although this research, part of a larger grant on the algorithmic regulation of culture in Canada (SSHRC, 2023-2027) is still ongoing, our preliminary results allow us to detect three changes in the platform-dependent relationship of Canadian media: firstly, a seeming withdrawal of Meta from the world of information, focusing on artificial intelligence; a co-opting of journalistic discourse on democracy by Google and Microsoft; finally, a valorization of the platforms' internal tools serving the production and retrieval of information, rather than news distribution. Our preliminary analyses

show that far from abandoning the media in the face of regulatory threats, Google and Microsoft have instead co-opted their democratic discourse, while offering dozens of tools to combat fake news and monitor climate change. Inspired by Zuboff (2022), our argument is that this co-optation ultimately provokes an “epistemic capture” of journalism by the Web giants, which goes further than their mere economic and infrastructural capture. As for Meta, it has seemingly abandoned the media, even though “Meta AI” seems to meet many of journalists' needs, particularly in terms of data analysis and visualization.

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Keywords

platform, media, journalism, platform dependence, press, canadian media.