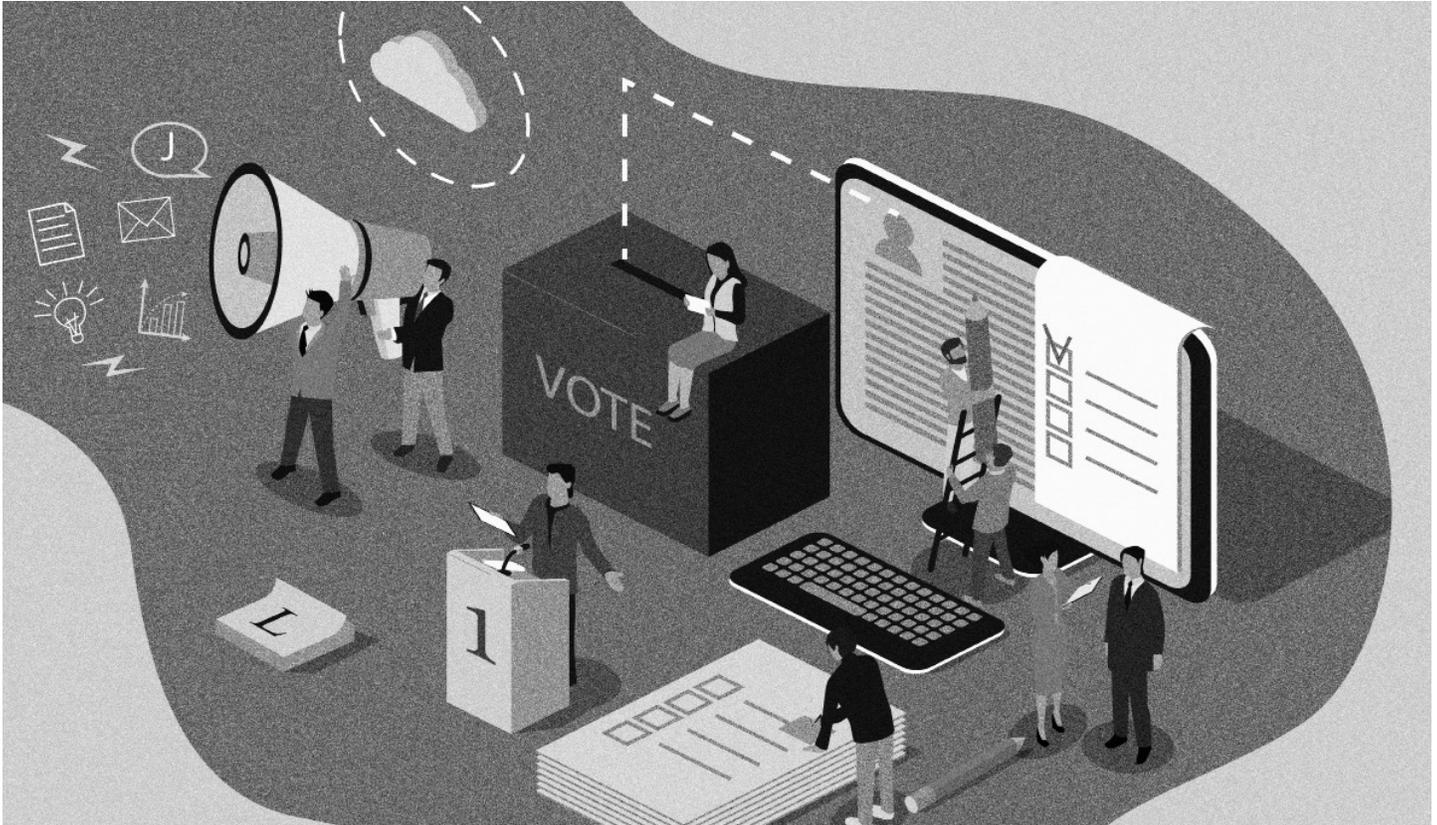# DEMOCRACY AND INFORMATION



As citizens living in a democracy, we have a responsibility to stay informed about the issues that matter to us and to society. This is true all the time, but especially when we must make a meaningful choice at the ballot box.

The introduction of the internet and the rise of social media have been significant for news and information, and complicated for citizens.

Where traditional news organizations were once the gatekeepers of information and the only ones with the resources to disseminate it — printing presses and TV stations are costly to purchase and operate — now anyone, anywhere can be a publisher.

This is widely viewed as the democratization of information, a development that can bring new voices into public discourse and offer tools that can lead to positive social change. The reality is more complex.

When news came only from traditional or legacy media — newspapers, TV, and radio — there was always a human who stood between audiences and information, a person or process that filtered the stories or content, checked facts and packaged stories for public consumption.

Where people were once the gatekeepers who decided what news audiences saw, on social media that job belongs to computer programs.

Social media algorithms work in such a way that we are more likely to see content that is similar to what we already like or agree with. Our social media feeds never give the whole picture.

Since people have become such heavy adopters of social media, they now rely on these sites (such as Facebook or Snapchat) for news. The problem is that social media platforms never intended to be news organizations, and there are consequences for informed citizenship when people rely on friends and algorithms to find out about what is happening in the world.

Informed citizenship involves seeking out news and information from a variety of sources, comparing perspectives and keeping up with new developments. This takes effort and strategy, particularly when there is so much information available online.

## GUIDING QUESTIONS

How do algorithms determine what I see online? Why should we be critical consumers of online information? What are the opportunities and challenges associated with the internet and social media for democracy?

## PURPOSE

In this lesson, students are assigned one of two social media news feeds that centre on a controversial issue: the proposed construction of a new solar panel factory adjacent to their school. One feed is dominated by posts favouring the factory, while the other skews heavily toward the side of the factory's opponents. After reviewing their assigned feeds, students vote on whether the proposed solar development should proceed. A debrief discussion follows about how what they read may have informed the vote and how the information we are exposed to may affect our decisions.

Afterwards, students learn about how the internet has changed the way we consume and share information, and they evaluate the opportunities and challenges for citizens and democracies.

## LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of the lesson, I can…

- Analyze how news and information can influence our opinion on people, events and issues;
- Describe how algorithms determine what I see online;
- Evaluate the opportunities and challenges of the internet and social media for citizens and democracy;
- Describe strategies for being responsible consumers of information.

## INTRODUCTION

Start with an opening conversation about sources of information.

In pairs or small groups, ask students to consider how they would become informed to vote in the following scenarios.

a. Your school council election
b. A federal election

Discussion questions:
- What actions would you take to learn about the options?
- Which sources of information would you rely on and why?
- Do you think it is important to make an informed decision? Why or why not?

## ACTIVITIES

1. Complete the 'Feed for Thought' activity found at www.newsliteracy.ca (website developed by CIVIX). The activity can be completed with online scrollable news feeds or paper-based versions.

a) **Introduce the scenario**. A solar panel company has submitted a proposal to build a factory next to the school, and community members will vote through a referendum to decide whether or not the development should proceed. Students at the school will also have the opportunity to vote and express their choice.

Before voting, you will become acquainted with the issue and players by reading through a social media feed that has a mix of articles from news outlets, and posts from community members and friends.

b) **Read the Feeds**. Without informing students of the two options, provide half the class with the "pro" feed, and the other half with the "anti" feed. If you are using the online version, it will automatically distribute the two feeds. Give students 10 minutes to review the information.

c) **Vote**. Have students vote on whether the factory should be built by raising their hands or by using paper ballots (Activity: Sample Ballots). Tabulate the results and announce them to the class.

d) **Debrief.** Through a whole class discussion, ask students why they voted the way they did and what information shaped their decision.

Over the course of the discussion, it should become obvious that some students were provided different information than others. At an appropriate point in the discussion, share the fact that there were two different feeds.

Debrief on the activity. Key questions:
- How did you feel about the results of the vote before you knew there were two feeds? Were you surprised by the outcome? Why or why not?
- How might two people end up with such different news feeds?
- What are the positive and negative consequences of people consuming different facts and perspectives?

2. Watch the NewsWise video 'Behind the Screens – Who decides what I see online?' and/or the "Democracy and Information" Slide Deck to review the concepts of algorithms and filter bubbles, and the impact of internet and social media on democracy.

## CONCLUSION

In pairs or small groups, ask students to respond to the following questions. Afterwards, discuss the responses as a class.

- Why is it important to think critically about the internet and social media?
- What are the opportunities and challenges of the internet and social media for democracy? (This can be completed with a T-Chart.)
- How can we break out of our filter bubbles? What are some online ideas? What are some offline ideas?

## ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING

Ask students to fill out the *3-2-1 Exit Card* (Activity: 3-2-1 Exit Card).

- What are three things you learned?
- What are two actions you may take based on what you learned?
- What is one question you still have?

## EXTENSIONS

Ask students to explore some of the themes in the lesson by completing an online investigation (Activity: Online Investigation).

During the activity, students should make notes under the comment section about what they learn through each activity.

- Find out what Google knows about you. For example, find three YouTube videos you watched in January of this year. Select 'Filter by Date'. (https://myactivity.google.com/)
- Find an ad online that has been targeting you. Why are you seeing it? Dismiss it, and click the 'why am I seeing this' to learn more.
- Find the 'Terms of Service' for Snapchat – what rights do you give Snapchat when you post a 'Story' that is viewable by 'Everyone'?
- Look into buying a Facebook or Instagram ad. What segment of the population do you want to reach?
- Find a conspiracy theory on YouTube (e.g., Flat earth theory, fake moon landings, 9/11 cover up). How many views does it have?
- Go to google.com and type in "What is". Make note of the options that appear below. Select one option. Now type is "What is" again. How did the list of options change?
- Look at the social media channel of a mainstream news organization (i.e., *Globe and Mail*, *CBC,* a local/ regional newspaper). Compare what appears there with the homepage of its website.