

A waste of time



By Nate Smelle

Over the past few months anyone who follows Bancroft This Week on Facebook will have noticed that the more than a decade of local history previously archived there has disappeared. For those still wondering why we are no longer posting our content online, I encourage you to become familiar with the Online News Act [Bill C-18]. According to the Government of Canada, this federal statute was established to make the Canadian digital news market more sustainable by ensuring that dominant platforms compensate news businesses when their content is made available on their services. Highlighting the fact that most Canadians now get their news online, the federal government's website, www.canada.ca acknowledges that in 2022, 80 per cent of the \$14-billion in online advertising revenues generated in Canada were collected by two platforms: Meta and Google. Upon receiving royal assent on June 22, the Act created a bargaining framework to ensure that dominant platforms such as Meta and Google would compensate news businesses fairly. Despite the Trudeau government's good intentions aiming to make the Canadian news media more sustainable, the Online News Act has failed to keep in check the greed of those at the helm of these mega-rich social media giants. In turn, as of Aug. 1 Meta and Google began blocking news agencies in Canada, such as Bancroft This Week, from sharing information with Canadians. With this online blockade coming at a critical moment, as tens of thousands of Canadians were being forced to evacuate their homes due to an unprecedented and deadly wildfire season, these corporations revealed their disregard for human life by opting to pour gasoline on the flames instead of allowing potentially life-saving information to reach those fleeing the fires. Since this pivotal moment in the unfolding history of media in Canada, every one of us online has had to reassess our usage of social media and adjust how we consume information. To some extent, before the blockade we could conveniently login to our Facebook account and scroll through a readily available abundance of news reports by accredited media outlets. As great as what some might consider to be the "good old days" of social media in Canada sound, the reality is that the most accurate news – the real facts – were relatively hidden amidst a never-ending feed of cute cat photos, clever memes, pictures from "friends" vacations, and an oversupply of hate-inspired disinformation and conspiracy theories. Searching for a public health press release on Facebook during the COVID-19 pandemic in the winter of 2022, I felt the rage inside of me ignite when I realized that for some reason I had wasted a solid 20 minutes of valuable time reading what appeared to be a credible "news" report which falsely claimed that our Prime Minister was secretly the son of the revolutionary Cuban leader Fidel Castro. Thankfully, now, courtesy of the insatiable greed of the money-hungry monsters of social media attempting to consume our time, energy, and cash by convincing us that the "Truth" can only be found on their platform, we no longer need to waste our time falling into such dead-ended rabbit holes when we are seeking the true nature of things. When asked to share his thoughts on the influence of social media on society, the Italian medieval historian and philosopher, Umberto Eco responded, "Social media gives legions of idiots the right to speak when they once only spoke at a bar after a glass of wine, without harming the community" but now they have the same right to speak as a Nobel Prize winner. It's the invasion of the idiots. In other words: As essential as our right to free speech is within a healthy society, it is at least equally as important that we do not allow individuals and organizations to maliciously misinform the public for their own personal gain. While

applying for this position back in 2012, I, as someone who considered himself to be anti-social media, was told that if I wanted the job I would have to establish a social media presence in order to manage our newspaper's various accounts. Although I shared Eco's views at the time, I decided to roll the dice and create my own profile. Looking back on the past decade, I feel sick to my stomach whenever I think of how much precious time I have personally wasted on social media. Don't get me wrong, as a source of entertainment and means of connecting one-on-one social media has much to offer. However, in terms of its potential as a tool for public education, and its ability to provide us with accurate information, it is severely and dangerously inadequate. The best way for us to avoid the perils of social media addiction in my opinion is to be honest with ourselves regarding what it is that we truly value about our time online. The next time you find yourself scrolling through social media without a specific purpose ask yourself two simple questions: Why am I here? And, what am I gaining from this experience?