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Social Media's Role in Canadian Public Policy

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Last week I [posted](#) about an astroturf social media campaign that had been unmasked in advance of the introduction of a new bill for Copyright reform in Canada. Purporting to be "a coalition of artists, creators, employees" an organization going by the name of CopyrightCanada started making heavy use of social networking to promote their pro-copyright agenda. The copyright lobby isn't the only party making extensive use of social media in the copyright debate here in Canada, however - just about everyone is. In fact, social media is playing such a central role in the public debate leading up to the introduction of the bill, that people are starting to wonder if this isn't the first time in Canadian history that a public policy debate will take shape largely through social media.

Arguably, it all started when the government announced a two-month period of public consultations on the "digital economy" (which includes access to information, infrastructure ownership and copyright, among other issues). Right from the beginning, the government leveraged the social media scene, with the Minister of Industry creating a YouTube video to announce the consultations while a number of Members of Parliament made extensive use of Facebook and Twitter to make announcements and engage the public. Citizens have been encouraged to follow the government updates via Twitter and RSS and an online forum was created where anyone can submit, comment and vote on input from all interested parties.

The government isn't the only player on the social media field in the debate, however. Opponents to the bill have been quick to take advantage of the government's offer and have made equally extensive use of social media to sound their opposition. Blogs, Twitter, Facebook and YouTube have played out as the primary channels of communication for interested Canadians, who dissect the bill in blogs and on YouTube and are directly engaging MPs on Facebook and Twitter.

The debate ratcheted up around the time that the CopyrightCanada social media network was exposed as a corporate astroturf campaign and a pro-copyright MP referred to Canadians who opposed the bill as radical extremists. The same MP then began blocking users posting dissenting comments to his Twitter account and has used social media to make thinly veiled attacks on key members of the opposition movement, such as Michael Geist, a Canadian law professor who holds the Canadian Research Chair in Internet and E-Commerce Law.

Significantly, the mainstream media focus is on the online debates (and attacks), showing just how central social media has become to the policy debate. Journalists have interviewed bloggers and reported extensively on Twitter updates posted by MPs and opposition alike. Newspaper articles dissecting the bill have served as launchpads for vigorous (and sometimes rancorous) online debate through Twitter and Facebook. Far from a supporting role, social media has taken on a central position in the public policy debate, proving its versatility once again.



Nathan Griffiths
Justmeans News Writer

Nathan is a Justmeans staff writer with over a decade's experience in IT. What excites me most about technology are the innovative and unexpected uses people find for it. The ways in which social media is being harnessed to connect people and drive change all over the world is fascinating to me and I'm excited about the opportunity to chart these developments and share in their discovery with other...

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