

This issue snapshot is excerpted from [Unmasking the Future](#) (2021), a scan of major current socio-economic trends and developments, at local, provincial, national and international scales, authored by James Stauch of the Institute for Community Prosperity, commissioned by the Calgary Foundation.



NOT OK, **BOOMER**:

## Polarization or an Epidemic of Gullibility?

*"Americans need to call on Boomers, in their next act onstage, to behave like grown-ups. And there is no better way for them to do this than to guide young people to lives of greater meaning, effectiveness, and purpose."*

Eric Liu

*"Falsehood flies, and truth comes limping after it."*

Jonathon Swift

The admittedly ageist meme "OK, Boomer" rose to prominence in late 2019, first on TikTok, then in the UK parliament to mock attitudes presumed to be associated with people born in the two decades following World War II. The phrase knowingly exploits the irony of baby boomers critiquing younger generations for being idealist and utopian, but also expresses an exhaustion with having to "inherit ever-amplifying problems in an ever-diminishing window of time", according to one British parliamentarian who used the term in the House of Commons.

It turns out that the baby boom generation is shaping up to be the most reactionary, conspiracy-loving, civically disruptive generation since the days when national socialism and Bolshevism were mainstream. And this is directly tied to uncritical dependence on social media. The internet-fueled "outrage-ification" of Americans and an increasing number of Canadians, skews disproportionately to an older demographic. During the 2016 election, users over 65 shared more fake news than any other age group and seven times more than users between 18 and 29.<sup>260</sup> According to Briony Swire-Thompson, a

senior research scientist at Northeastern University who specializes in social media networks, “older adults consume more misinformation and are more likely to share misinformation.”<sup>261</sup>

But one might reasonably ask “Doesn’t millennials’ and Gen Zers’ dependence on social media suggest that THEY would be the most duped and susceptible to conspiracy theories?” Certainly, there are pernicious affects on young brains, and the rising incidence of youth mental health issues are increasingly tied to social media, in particular its “vainification” pressures. But it also turns out these younger generations also have more digital literacy and skills that bring a critical, skeptical eye to what they digest. Their media ecosystem has always been heterogeneous and littered with garbage, so they can sift better and are less likely to take social media posts at face value. The boomer generation, in contrast, grew up with curated, reliable news feeds generated by professional journalists. They didn’t need to be as critical in their media digestion habits, and that lack of a skeptical muscle has ported over to social media. Although older adults have more knowledge about history and politics, they are less able to discern news from sponsored content, to detect altered images (including deep fakes) or to distinguish fact from polemic opinion.<sup>262</sup> More worrying, a recent study found that the boomer generation was displaying signs of cognitive decline earlier than previous generations.<sup>263</sup>

Confirmation bias is also rampant in the human-social media interface, which exposes society to irrational levels of risk-taking. As philosopher Mark Kingwell cautions “the person who would not dream of running a red light at a lonely intersection in the middle of the night will refuse to wear a mask out of some half-baked theory of epidemiology that they [read] yesterday on Twitter.”<sup>264</sup> Facebook has been a particularly pernicious force in amplifying ‘fake news’ and conspiracy theories (including the

***“Each generation has inspected the world around us, declared what wasn’t good enough, employed cultural change through media, education, collective action and a few hard-hitting jokes in order to move the goalposts on what is politically possible.”***

Chlöe Swarbrick<sup>271</sup>

Trumped-up blizzard of fabrications about US election fraud). Leveraging this, the Trump campaign spent more than 50% of its campaign budget on Facebook ads. While 7 of 10 adults use the platform, its use has been declining among teens.<sup>265</sup>

With Facebook catching up to Twitter and Youtube in flagging or banning fake news stories conspiracy traffickers (think, Alex Jones or Steve Bannon), new censorship-free platforms are emerging. We might applaud the measures of the tech giants to stamp out such civically mendacious voices, but, like ill-weeds, such voices manage to find fertile ground in new platforms: Parler, launched in 2018, was the first of these platforms to blow past a million users. Co-founder, hedge fund manager, former principal investor in the now-defunct Cambridge Analytica, and – yes, boomer – Robert Mercer has largely financed the development of the platform. Parler doubled its subscriber base to 10 million in November alone, and is helping coningle and unite mainstream conservatives with white supremacists, QAnon supporters, Boogalooers, and other extremist odds and sods.<sup>266</sup> As a result, older right-of-centre Americans (and many Canadians) are moved less by debates over public policy, or even ideology, and more taken by fantastical storytelling. Democracy is so dull and boring by comparison. So is science, as we see spikes in “vaccine-hesitancy”, which used to be present more commonly on the left, but of late has been much more attached to the political right<sup>267</sup> (as we’re now seeing in Alberta).<sup>268</sup> And while Democrats may have won the 2020 battle, they may be losing the war.

The answers to the pernicious effects of social media are not simple. Perhaps most disturbing is the notion that older adults are simply more trusting, a pro-social human trait, yet social media has preyed on this as a vulnerability. Certainly, we can take steps to promote empathy and civic dialogue, especially at a hyperlocal level. But polarization not just of political opinion but of entire language spheres makes this a tall order. On the other side of the spectrum, many contemporary social justice activists give no quarter to nuance, to language they deem old fashioned, or to discomfort in general. As Loretta Ross, a self-described radical Black feminist, urges in an article calling out “call out culture” and “doom scrolling”, also noting that some of that online activity is actually bot-generated, “I think we actually sabotage our own happiness with this unrestrained anger. And I have to honestly ask: Why are you making choices to make the world crueller than it needs to be and calling that being ‘woke’?”<sup>269</sup> Like a 21<sup>st</sup> century version of the echo chambers described in Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia*, where the many factions in the Spanish Civil War each preferred ideological purity over discourse on the common good, the proving of one’s commitment to social justice, as Ross describes it, “has become something of a varsity sport.” Ross’s timely remedy? It’s time for a *call-in* culture to flourish:

***“You can’t be responsible for someone else’s inability to grow. So take comfort in the fact that you offered a new perspective of information and you did so with love and respect, and then you walk away. We have a saying in the movement: Some people you can work with and some people you can work around. But the thing that I want to emphasize is that the calling-in practice means you always keep a seat at the table for them if they come back.”***<sup>270</sup>