

Good morning.

I thought I would begin this morning with a story from a process of working across differences that our SFU Centre for Dialogue hosted earlier this month in Vancouver. The goal of this two-day deliberative dialogue was to bring randomly selected citizens from BC and the Yukon to develop recommendations on Canada's energy future.

I've facilitated many deliberative dialogues over the last ten years and I can say that the narratives that emerged in Vancouver were unlike anything I had ever heard before. For the first time, I witnessed a third of the room self-identify as climate skeptics or deniers. I heard the term "fake news" and "Canada first" being raised time and time again. And I felt fear and resentment, particularly from white men in the room, about immigrants stealing their jobs or concern that the federal government was wasting tax-payers money on overseas aid at the expense of those in need at home.

In short, I heard the narratives that have become the rallying call for Donald Trump, being reiterated by Canadians.

Yes, it's true we live in a "hyper-connected world where information moves across the globe in seconds and citizens have multi-modal opportunities to share their perspectives and voice". But we also live in a world where that very information technology that connects us is being used to fractionalize our communities, create fear and division, treat people who are different culturally, economically or socially as 'other' and drive wedges between us.

There are many ways that technology has shifted since I started at SFU. I remember starting our first group page on this new social media platform called Facebook in the mid 2000s. We hosted an online dialogue there on the new realities facing Canada in the world. It was a vibrant and thoughtful discussion and our group pages swelled to over 5,000 Canadians in short order.

Well, those were the early days – Facebook cancelled those pages and focused their energies on individuals. A big part of their business model was selling Facebook users to marketers and over the years they have excelled at micro-targeting (so much so that they are now the focus of a recent search warrant from the investigation of Russian interference in the US election).

Micro-targeting isn't new. It's been a cost-effective strategy of marketers and communicators for years. It uses consumer data and demographics to identify the interests of specific individuals or very small groups of like-minded individuals and influence their thoughts or actions. An important goal of a micro-targeting initiative is to know the target audience so well that messages get delivered through the target's preferred communication channel – the right message, to the right audience, many times...

But micro-targeting has taken on a shift in our new multi-modal world. According to computer modeling by the University of Cambridge and Stanford University<sup>1</sup>, by mining Facebook Likes, a computer model can now predict a person's personality more accurately than most of their friends and family. According to the study "Given enough Likes to analyze, only a person's spouse rivalled the computer for accuracy of broad psychological traits".

The science of "psychometrics" has become a major tool being used by politicians, companies and governments to curate content to specific audiences. This content can be real or "fake" and appears in our newsfeeds or delivered to us through targeted ads or posts by "fake Facebook account holders".

Yes fake facebook friends...how many of you received a friend invite from someone you didn't know and when you scrolled down to look at their profile, all that was available was their profile picture and their cover photo. In countries like Macedonia<sup>2</sup>, computer savvy young men have figured out how to raise their incomes by creating artificial Facebook profiles. They use these fake profiles to populate fake fan groups and to drive traffic to artificial websites that they have been created to carry fake news (Veles, Macedonia, alone is home to 100 pro Trump websites). The numbers of fans appear huge and can, through a bandwagon effect, catch the attention and support of real Facebook users.

[A 2015 study by three US based universities<sup>3</sup>](#) suggested that "more than 60% of Facebook users are entirely unaware of any curation on Facebook at all, believing instead that every single story from their friends and followed pages appeared in their news feed".

According to Emily Taylor, chief executive of Oxford Information Labs and editor of the Journal of Cyber Policy we have a "deeper, scarier, more insidious problem" with our democracy. "We now exist in these curated environments, where we never see anything outside our own bubble ... and we don't realize how curated they are."

My hope is what I am saying, isn't news to you. You understand the complexity of our new information age and the way in which it is both a means of diverse expression and a means of creating wedges between us.

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<sup>1</sup> Jan. 15 Proceedings of the National Academic of Sciences of the USA – PNAS

<sup>2</sup> Wired Magazine 2.15.17; Guardian <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/aug/24/facebook-clickbait-political-news-sites-us-election-trump>

<sup>3</sup> "I always assumed that I wasn't really that close to [her]": Reasoning about invisible algorithms in the news feed"<sup>3</sup> Motahhare Eslami, Aimee Rickman, Kristen Vaccaro, Amirhossein Aleyasen, Andy Vuong Karrie Karahalios, Kevin Hamilton, Christian Sandvig, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, California State University, Fresno, University of Michigan

So what does this have to do with our institutions and our cities?

In Canada, 80% of our population now lives in cities. Cities are the spaces where for example, new immigrants and refugees settle, where the poor and the rich seek health care or social services, where most of our resources are consumed, where we house our government buildings and where trade is conducted. It is also the home of our civic commons – the community centres, libraries, hospitals, schools, parks, universities, recreational centres and public spaces where we come together as citizens intentionally or not to access programs, services or simply to meet people.

In 2012, the Vancouver Foundation conducted an important study<sup>4</sup> called the Connections and Engagement Report that revealed that all is not well in our cities – or at least not in this city. That people living in and around Metro Vancouver felt isolated and disconnected from their community.

This study ushered in a new perspective on community giving and created opportunities and possibilities for groups and individuals to advance community connectedness and fortify “belonging” especially among people who felt isolated. Community Foundations of Canada made belonging a key feature of their vital signs reporting and demonstrated how a focus on belonging through volunteering, culture and sports can increase people’s sense of community and connectedness.

This “belonging” movement which has been led nationally by groups like Community Foundations of Canada, Planned Lifetime Advocacy and Tamarack are important anecdotes to the sense of disconnection that has emerged in our communities.

But as innovative leaders in this space, you know and I know, it’s not enough – because what is hitting us is serious. It is intentional and it is targeted in a laser sharp way at us, as individuals and communities. And the social and democratic institutions that we have built and fostered are being eroded – explicitly and implicitly.

Let’s take a moment, briefly to take stock of our democratic institutions. I’m going to be drawing on consultations that Dr. Daniel Savas and I have been conducting over the last eight weeks about the state of our democracy in Canada. Here are 10 trends we and others are seeing:<sup>5</sup>

- 1. Democracies rely on strong human rights legislation to protect their citizens, yet racist and authoritarian “populist” movements are on the rise in western democratic nations.**

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<sup>4</sup> [Connections & Engagement Report: A Survey of metro Vancouver June 2012](#) Vancouver Foundation

<sup>5</sup> Revitalizing our Democracy, A Concept Paper (unpublished and in progress) Daniel Savas, Shauna Sylvester, Simon Fraser University

In Canada, the United States, and Europe we are experiencing upsurges in racist and authoritarian discourse. It is often nourished by political leaders seeking to address local constituencies who are uncomfortable with growing cultural diversity, immigration, fears of religious extremism with its terror-related incidents and economic dislocation brought on by globalization. This provides fodder for marginal elements in society (e.g. white nationalists, neo-Nazis, and other alt-right and alt-left groups) who are ready to exploit these sensitivities and push for radical policy alternatives often with violent repercussions.

**2. Greater numbers of Canadians feel like they are falling behind economically and feel like the political system isn't serving them.**

Economic globalization, spurred on by technological advancements, has significantly changed the nature of work and created income disparities within Canada. Many Canadians are facing economic displacement, retraining requirements, or simply longer periods of un- and under-employment. Growing inequality and a shrinking of the middle class feeds a "rich get richer, poor get poorer" narrative that poses unique policy challenges for our governments. As Canadians struggle to maintain their standard of living, frustration turns to pessimism that governments are unable to address.

**3. Our perceptions of ourselves as a democratic nation are evolving**

Among the defining characteristics of a nation state are its people and its territory. With globalization and the increase in migration, our notions of ourselves as a nation are changing. While Canada may have a clear territorial identity over which it exercises its control, the same may not be said of its people. Canadian governments are increasingly challenged to manage a population who have multiple allegiances, who are transnational in their businesses and their connections, and who are pluralistic in their world view. Our immigration, our connectivity through the internet, our trade across borders have created an openness in our country, and offered opportunities that can be leveraged for the betterment of all. But, this also presents challenges for advancing a common vision of our democratic nation that embraces diversity and the wealth it can contribute.

**4. There is a sense of growing polarization fueled by political advocates using advanced information technology that fractionalizes the Canadian electorate.**

I noted earlier that there is an increasing move in social media (intentionally or by self-selection) to "silo" individuals into like-minded groups or 'echo chambers'. This weakens our ability as citizens to have meaningful discussions where a diversity of perspectives on issues is available or desired. This contributes to a greater polarization of debates and a disrespect of differing viewpoints which makes it difficult for people to consider the interests of the broader Canadian community as a whole.

**5. Declining participation rates in electoral processes, notably among youth, reflect a diminishing faith in government institutions and processes to adequately meet the needs of citizens or represent the diverse voices in Canada.**

Increasingly, Canadians believe their democratic institutions are not living up to expectations when it comes to reflecting or representing the diversity of values, voices and perspectives that contribute to the Canadian socio-economic and political fabric. This includes their general dissatisfaction with the electoral system, policies that fail to deliver promised outcomes, “processes of governing” that suggest meaningful consultation but deliver one-way communication, and a prevalence of negative partisanship that thrives on personal attacks over substantive policy dialogue. What results is a further decline in trust in democratic institutions and a heightened sense of alienation from those same institutions.

While this is not a novel 21<sup>st</sup> century trend, there is currently a sense of urgency to address the concerns, one tied to increased polarization of debates and a negative tone of public debates on issues affecting all Canadians (e.g. energy and the environment, immigration and refugees, inequality, etc).

#### **6. Insufficient civic education efforts mean many Canadians are ill-prepared or trained in the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.**

Governments seem uncommitted to investing enough in efforts to educate Canadians on what it means to live in a democracy. The risk, particularly for young Canadians and newcomers to the country, is not establishing solid foundations in what makes a democracy work, and in the importance of taking part in act(s) of citizenship. We know that democracy is messy and imperfect – it relies on the art of accommodation and compromise rather than purity of ideas, black and white thinking, or clear and simple solutions. Without civic education and an ongoing investment in democracy between elections, we undermine a belief in democracy and reinforces the perception that government and participation in democratic acts don’t matter.

#### **7. Support systems for settlement of new immigrants and refugees are not resourced and designed adequately to integrate diverse communities fully into the Canadian society.**

Often, settlement support systems fall short in providing immigrants and refugees alike the assistance (e.g. language training, socio-cultural sensitivity, job finding skills etc.) they need to contribute effectively and productively as they would like to their new country. This means they often remain isolated in ghettoized communities, economically disadvantaged, and easy targets for discrimination, unfairly blamed for taking dollars and jobs from other Canadians and for a breakdown in social cohesion.

#### **8. Our notions of federalism are evolving**

Canada is a country that was founded by two nations: French and English. It is also a country that was created on the lands of indigenous peoples and it has been populated and developed by immigrants and refugees. Since 1867, our notions of federalism have been evolving. The balance of power between provinces and the federal government have been shifting and the voices of indigenous peoples have been getting stronger and more organized. With 80% of Canadians now living in urban centres, cities have also become important actors in our democracy but have not been formally recognized as a legitimate level of government with the power to tax or drive policy independent of provincial governments.

## **9. Governments can't do it alone**

Government is changing, as are our processes for decision-making in government. Today, many non-state actors (e.g. business, civil society organizations, young people, philanthropists) do not wait for government to act; they are leaders in advancing their own versions of social and economic change. Government capacity for research and policy is eroding and the locus for federal decision-making is increasingly being centered out of the Privy Council Office, the Prime Minister's Office and the Ministry of Finance.

Against this backdrop, it's difficult to see the role of where the citizen's voice fits into our democracy.

With government shrinking and the manner in which policy making is shifting, new democratic processes need to be created to ensure that citizens' have a voice, and that it's heard and listened to. Although there is lip service being made to citizen engagement processes, governments remain quite reticent to integrate more citizen participation in their decisions through structural and functional changes to the way they operate. This feeds the overall narrative that the democratic voice of Canadian citizens is either not relevant or not respected, and contributes to the alienation Canadians feel towards their governments.

## **10. The Indian Act continues to disenfranchise and marginalize indigenous peoples from the political and governance process in Canada.**

By all measures, the socio-economic reality for Canada's indigenous peoples continues to remain far below standards of other Canadians. Efforts at reconciliation to atone for colonialism and the impact of Indian Residential Schools on many individuals are just beginning. Land claims and treaty negotiations remain largely unresolved, back-logged and stagnant, to the frustration of indigenous peoples and other Canadians. Political representation of indigenous voices in Canadian institutions is scant at best, leaving their interests and needs to potentially fall to the bottom of the government priority lists. Some indigenous peoples feel very much on the "outside looking in" on a democratic system that barely recognizes their right to exist as separate peoples or nations with rights. Key challenges exist to include indigenous peoples in the fabric of Canadian democracy when, in many cases, this involves the resolution and recognition of historical grievances, and a desire to address issues on a nation-to-nation basis.

When we look at these 10 trends, it becomes a bit overwhelming. But I know that the people in this room are leaders who are solutions oriented. Where others see barriers, you see opportunity.

So how do we "navigate the cultural, relational and economic shifts that are rocking the foundations of our ways of being, our institutions and our cities"?

As practitioners, we need to find that combination of policy levers, education, research, and engagement processes that will fortify our democratic culture. And I don't mean this is a mild,

polite, way. What we do must be strong enough to stand up to white supremacy, it must challenge sexism and present alternatives to violence. But most of all, it must address the underlying symptoms that give rise to these extremist views – by addressing isolation, disconnection, economic inequality, information fragmentation and distrust in public institutions.

But how do we do this?

I know that in this room, there are literally dozens of strategies that each of you employ in your own work – and it's time to daylight those strategies and identify what works, when and how in building both the relationship between and among people in our communities (our associational democracy) and the relationship between people and their government (representational democracy).

1. First, I think we need to take an **ecosystem approach**. I believe now, more than ever, we need to create a collaborative framework where all of us, who are involved in fortifying the social capital within our communities or working for democratic development, come together. Through our collaboration we will create resiliency. The SFU Centre for Dialogue has embarked on a process with many of our academic colleagues, NGO, government and private sector partners. Revitalizing our Democracy is in its early stages of design – but I invite you to be a part of its development.
2. We need to **innovate in our engagement work** – try new approaches, embrace risk and potential failure and share our learnings. Participedia is a great new online tool that can help us keep track of what is and isn't working.
3. We need to **build a civic commons strategy**. Mary Rowe, a well known Canadian urbanist has written a great paper on building a strategy that protects and enhances those few spaces remaining that we have as communities to come together in association with one another. There is a powerful opportunity here to build integration and connection among these assets so that it creates a physical fabric for our democratic engagement.
4. In addition to connecting our civic assets, there is also the simple idea of **activating and growing our public spaces** – whether those are the parks, beaches or corners where people can physically rest, eat or socialize with one another. **SFU Public Square** and the **Downtown Business Improvement Association** embarked on a major citizen led consultation on **Reimagining Downtown Vancouver** that has led to a new vision for the city that includes redesigned alleyways, vibrant public gathering places, more walkable neighbourhoods, city perches where chairs, games or animated discussions are hosted,

more festivals and guerilla style pop-up events. If you are interested in innovative ways to engage citizens in the city using arts, design thinking or cutting edged engagements – check out SFU Public Square’s website.

4. While it has been exciting to see our federal government issue mandate letters that puts citizens’ engagement into operation of government, it is also potentially concerning if that engagement isn’t authentic and meaningful. So often, citizens are brought into comment on government policies after they have been drafted.

**Educating and training municipal, provincial and federal government officials about how to engage citizens is critical.** And groups like the Local Government Leadership Academy, Samara, Public Policy Forum, the Centre for Dialogue, IAP2 and Tamarack are doing just that. And in turn, government engagement leaders are asking us as scholars and practitioners to tell them what works, when and how so that they can adopt the tools and practices that will strengthen public decision-making.

5. In the same way that alt-right or alt-left groups are using sophisticated information technology tools to drive wedges among us, we need to look at transforming our social media into a place of public good and public benefit. **Civix**, a charitable organization founded by Taylor Gunn focused on youth civic engagement has entered into a partnership this years with Google to develop and deliver NewsWise — a program that will teach students how to suss out and filter so-called fake news and misinformation online.

If the Fortun (check spelling) community of lone wolf programmers isolated in their parents bedrooms was the core of Steven Bannon and Donald Trump’s online army of fear mongers, then perhaps mothers can be the first wave in the online counter-offensive. **Social Currents**, founded by Delyse Sylvester (my older and wiser sister) has started to use information technology tools to create online communities of belonging and purpose that address isolation and build narratives of caring and love for the natural environment that counter the divisive and polarizing impacts of microtargeting. One of the first manifestations of this community is the Facebook group that was just launched by a group of blogging moms called the **Whole Family Happiness Project**.

6. I want to end by circling back to the deliberative dialogues I mentioned at the opening of my talk. **SFU Centre for Dialogue** has embarked on a Pan-Canadian citizen engagement process to define Canada’s energy future. This process brings randomly selected citizens together to learn, share and co-design recommendations to transition Canada to a low-carbon economy while preserving jobs and community well-being. We’ve been hosting these kinds of dialogues for years – whether they are focused on solving the parking situation in Deep Cove, designing the use of the Delbrook Lands in the District of North Vancouver or creating a new narrative for Canada in the World.

And there is a moment in these dialogues when you think that it is impossible for the participants to move beyond their sometimes racist, homophobic, uninformed or parochial views – that no matter how long you spend talking, the divisions will remain. Yet, in all of my years of working in deliberative dialogue, there does come a point in the process when the acrimony dissolves and the bridges across difference emerge. When people are given evidence based information, an opportunity to learn without judgment, a safe space to exchange views through dialogue rather than debate and creative tools to tap different forms of expression and experience, it is possible for citizens to come together and overcome their divisions.

I've never felt so aligned and alive as a practitioner in this field as when I'm supporting a group of people as they co-design and develop a future that meets their social, economic, ecological and cultural aspirations. And while I am not naïve to the incredible forces that are working to divide us, my optimism is renewed time and time again through the art of hosting, the practice of deep listening and the convening of respectful dialogue.