

**Social Media Use for Political Engagement in the Metis Settlements of Alberta**

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## **Abstract**

Given the evolution of social media and the significance that it has gained in political discourse in Canada, the United States and other western democracies, I became interested to know whether social media was also being used this way within Indigenous communities, and specifically the Metis Settlements of Alberta. The eight Settlements are remote communities and scattered throughout northern Alberta. As the communications director for the Metis Settlements General Council, I wanted to work with the elected leaders of these communities to understand if the members and leaders of these communities are using social media to talk about community issues and politics, and if they are, how leaders can use the technology to better engage with their constituents and stakeholders in the Settlements. My review of literature on this topic indicated that more and more research on how various demographics, organizations, governments, and corporations are using social media in political contexts exists, but very little is available on how Indigenous communities in Canada generally, and the Metis Settlements specifically, are doing so. In focusing on this knowledge gap, my research will provide insight into how geographically remote communities in Canada can use social media technology to overcome challenges and to improve communication internally and externally about politics and community governance.

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	i
Disclaimer.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	6
Methodology.....	6
Discussion: Theoretical Framework.....	10
Indigenous Communities.....	15
The Metis Settlements.....	16
Social Media’s Impact on Political and Community Discourse.....	21
Conclusion and Next Steps.....	25
Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology.....	27
The Matter of History.....	28
The Survey of Settlement Members.....	29
The Leadership’s Perspective.....	31
Coding Scheme.....	33
Chapter 4: Findings.....	35
Historical Approaches to Settlement Engagement.....	35
Digital and Online Alternatives in the Metis Settlements.....	41
Results of the Online Survey.....	43
Discussion: Putting it all Together.....	48

Chapter 5: Conclusion.....	60
Limitations.....	61
Future Research.....	61
Next Steps.....	62
References.....	63

# **Social Media Use for Political Engagement in the Metis Settlements of Alberta**

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

The digital revolution is arguably reimagining the concept of the “public square” and its role in democratic nations. In recent years, the evolution of social media has had a profound impact on political discourse at all levels. This is evident in how Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign leveraged social media networks to identify and motivate volunteers and voters (de Zúñiga, Jung & Valenzuela, 2012, P. 319). Or, how Trump used Twitter and other platforms to take hold of a narrative that resonated with his base (Bulman, 2016). Neighbourhood Facebook pages have been created as forums to discuss neighbourhood issues, like the page that exists for my neighbourhood in Edmonton, Alberta (Secord Community Connects, 2018). Municipalities produce and promote issue-based videos on YouTube to reach new audiences, like the City of Edmonton has done on climate change (City of Edmonton Channel, YouTube, 2017). Provincial and federal politicians use social media to promote themselves, their parties, and to interact with “the people” regularly, like Member of Parliament for Calgary-Nosehill, Michelle Rempel, when she hosts regular conversations using Facebook Live (Michelle Rempel, Facebook, 2018).

Anecdotally, it is easy to see that social media has had positive impacts and negative impacts on the nature of discourse, particularly in the political sphere. Politicians are more accessible to their constituents, commentators and people with an interest in politics have broader options for discussion and dissemination of opinions, and there is an endless library of information available at our fingertips. On the other side of this coin, the anonymity of social media has emboldened people with negative intentions to act out and abuse others online, social

media is a pipeline for the uninterrupted distribution of “fake news” and misinformation, and there are endless spaces online for debate to degenerate into raging arguments and coordination of the “mob mentality.” It is impossible to yet know where this will take the democratic nations who are most affected by this technology but, suffice to say, it is changing the game.

Although the ultimate outcomes cannot yet be predicted, when observing social media engagement in politics at a macro level – as in people engaging on a political or governance issue at a national or sub-national level – the technology has clearly had an effect. As such, a great deal of attention has become focused on analyzing things like Obama’s 2008, and Trump’s 2016, presidential campaigns. However, there appears to be less research focused on the impacts of social media use for political discourse in small rural communities. With some notable exceptions, such as Molyneaux, O’Donnell et al.’s article “Social Media in Remote First Nations Communities” from 2014, or the research project being conducted by McMaster University in partnership with Elections Canada, the Centre for Indigenous Governance and other First Nations and Academic partners, there seems to be limited research on this subject as it relates to rural and remote Indigenous communities. Given the evolution of social media and the significance that it has gained in political discourse in Canada, the United States and other western democracies, I became interested to know whether social media had also become a tool within rural and remote Indigenous communities, and specifically the Metis Settlements of Alberta<sup>1</sup>. The eight Settlements are scattered throughout Northern Alberta. Included below is a map showing their location.

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<sup>1</sup> Note that the Metis Settlements General Council does not use the accent on the “e” in Metis. Therefore, I do not accent the “e” in Metis in this paper.





Figure 1.0 – Metis Settlements of Alberta Map from Nick Walker, 2017, <https://www.canadiangeographic.ca/article/exploring-albertas-eight-metis-settlements>

My research links to my personal experience working with the Metis Settlements as their Director of Communications, which fostered my desire to understand if the members and elected leaders of these communities are using social media to talk about community issues and politics, and if they are, how leaders can use the technology to better engage with their constituents and stakeholders about politics in the Settlements. Anecdotally, my experience with the eight Settlements and with the members of the Metis Settlements, illustrates how they are actively engaged in community politics and issues. Despite the large geographic distances between communities, they appear to emphasize strong member participation in decision-making; put

another way, members make a concerted effort to know what their leaders are doing and often leaders will not make decisions in the communities without consulting directly with their membership.

An interesting tension exists between the participatory nature of Settlement politics and governance, and the remote locations of the Settlements and the large size of the Settlements' land base, which create a significant challenge in terms of direct community engagement. As financial resources in the Settlements have grown limited, the methods of communication and engagement historically used – paper newsletters sent by household delivery, public meetings requiring members to drive significant distances, and Settlement leaders touring the Settlements – were becoming less viable. I began to consider whether digital communications tools, like social media, might present a low-cost, effective channel to support the Settlements' approach to communicating – members to members, leaders to members, members to leaders, and beyond the community to external stakeholders. As I considered this question, it gave me cause to ask another, more preliminary question: has there been much uptake of social media in the Settlements for political discourse?

In order to make most effective use of my limited time and resources for this study, I developed three key research questions (RQ) for consideration:

**RQ1:** How have Metis Settlement members historically engaged in community and political discourse?

**RQ2:** Are Metis Settlement members and leaders adopting social media as a tool for discourse about community politics and community issues? If so, how?

**RQ3:** How can the leadership of the Metis Settlements use social media to better engage and communicate with Metis Settlement members about community politics and issues?

I will answer these questions by evaluating historical information about Settlement governance, politics and public communication, surveying members of the Metis Settlements about their media habits, including social media, and by conducting a focus group with elected leaders of the Metis Settlements General Council. Access to the Internet and the adoption of social media have real potential to benefit elected leaders in geographically remote communities with limited resources to enhance and amplify their message to their citizens and the outside world. These technologies, however, also have the potential to become a negative force depending on how they are used. It is my goal to develop a more thorough understanding of how social media is being used for political discourse in the Metis Settlements so that I can develop a detailed analysis and thoughtful discussion about how Settlement leadership can leverage its potential. Ultimately, I believe that social media represents an opportunity for the elected leadership of Metis Settlements to enhance their member engagement and inform their decision-making.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Literature Review Methodology

As I considered the questions posed in my introduction and my work with the Metis Settlements, there were a number of assumptions that I made based on experience that were anecdotal. My literature review was an opportunity to test my assumptions with reference to existing research. I used my literature review to understand what work has already been done on the subject and where gaps exist that could potentially be addressed by my research. In order to effectively guide my review, I developed two questions to create a distinction between “historical” and “modern” approaches to political discourse. For my purposes, I define historical approaches as those pre-dating the widespread adoption of social media in 2008, and I define modern approaches as those that take place in the period after the introduction of social media. I define community-level political discourse as a conversation, discussion, or engagement amongst stakeholders about social or governance issues located within an established physical community. With these concepts generally defined, it allowed for the creation of a baseline and metrics to assess social media’s impact on political discourse. The questions are:

**Lit Review Question One (LRQ1):** How have members of rural and remote Indigenous communities generally, and the Metis Settlements of Alberta specifically, historically advanced discussions about governance and politics internally, and with external stakeholders (i.e. Government of Canada, provinces, etc.)?

**Lit Review Question Two (LRQ2):** Has research been conducted to assess the impact of social media on political and community engagement generally, and in the Metis Settlements specifically?

To answer these questions, I developed a systematic search protocol to frame my search through libraries and databases for relevant material. Given that this literature review is meant to provide

the reader with a clear understanding of the historical governance and political structures of rural and remote Indigenous communities and how their members engage in discourse on these subjects, and, the effects of social media on that discourse, the search timeline is broad. Using my definitions of ‘historical’ and ‘modern’, I categorized the information I found into a pre-social media period (prior to 2007) and a post-social media period (after 2007). Material on Indigenous governance, politics, and culture straddles decades, starting in the 1980s. Most of the literature on social media and its impact on public engagement, politics, and social movements is limited to 2007 onwards. While I included some literature on general communication principles from before 2007, the majority of my sources are from 2010 forward. There has been a significant uptick in research on the impacts of social media in various forums following the 2008 U.S. presidential election – a significant event widely noted as the first large-scale political campaign to significantly feature and leverage social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube (Smith, 2009).

Given that I have access to a robust archive of material because of my role as Director of Communications with the Metis Settlements General Council, I began my work with a search in the organization’s archive room for literature from the pre-social media era. This initial exploratory search was guided by little more than my gut instinct based on my capstone research question. I grabbed anything I could find related to Settlement governance, Metis culture, efforts to lobby various orders of government, reports on community engagements on various topics. This initial “scattershot” approach allowed me to pull from a broad cross-section of material related to “Indigenous” and “Metis” communities and culture, to inform my more systematic literature review search process. It is important to note that it is not my intention to make any

kind of value judgements on cultures or traditions. My purpose is to better understand, through literature and community documents, how the culture has influenced the development of communication and engagement processes as a matter of context for my research.

The review of these initial materials informed the creation of two lists of key terms that would form the basis of a more structured library and database search, using Boolean Logic. One list focused specifically on Indigenous subject matter. For example: “Indigenous Peoples of Canada”; “Indigenous Government in Canada”; “Metis Peoples of Canada”; “Metis Government in Canada”; “Metis Culture”; “Metis Politics”; “Indigenous Politics”; “Indigenous Communities”; “Metis Communities”. The second list focused on social media and engagement content. For example: “Social Media”; “Social Media and Politics”; “Social Media and Elections”; “Social Media Platforms”; “Social Media and Community Engagement”; “Social Media and Political Participation”. I would use these lists independently and combine terms from each list and conduct searches. For example: “Indigenous Communities and Social Media”; “Social Media and Metis Politics”; “Social Media and Metis Communities”. These searches returned a great deal of information that I then began reviewing, at a high level, to pick out key data points that appeared relevant to my research question.

My search was primarily conducted through the University of Alberta’s Library portal with some additional material coming from Google Scholar. Additionally, some of my literature came from the Metis Settlements General Council archive collection.<sup>2</sup> I organized the approximately 70

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<sup>2</sup> MSGC’s archive is not organized in a systematic way. It is a room full of records, papers, reports, books and some video and audio items. This presented a minor challenge in terms of efficiency in my search of the archive but ultimately the time invested bore fruit.

sources that I collected – peer reviewed articles, books, non-peer reviewed sources – into a chart identifying the most relevant to least relevant pieces. Initially I had attempted to assign a number value to the literature, on a 10-point scale, with 1 being highly relevant to 10 being non-relevant.

This became too complicated and confused my review. Based on feedback on this tool from classmates in my COMM 509 class. I opted to simplify my classification process to colour coding. Green is for high-value, yellow for some-value, and red for low-value. I found that this made my “at-a-glance” approach much more functional. Labelled figure 2.0, I have included a screenshot to demonstrate how I organized my spreadsheet:

A	B	C	D	E
Thematic Area	Title	Author	Date Published	Citation (APA)
General Context/Background	Social Media's Significance Oversold Amid Electio	Basen, I	2015	Basen, I. (2015, Oc
	Social Media	Clarke, A	2010	Clarke, A. (2010).S
	Social Media: A Critical Introduction	Fuchs, C	2014	Fuchs, C. (2014). S
	Social Media: Culture and Identity	Langmia, K., Tyree, T.M.	2017	Langmia, K., & Tyn
	Civic Engagement and Social Media: Political Part	Uldam, J., & Vestergaard, A.	2015	Uldam, J., & Veste
	Governance as Social and Political Communicatio	Bang, Henrik P.	2003	Bang, Henrik P. Gc
	On the Dark Side of Strategic Communication	Dulek, Robert E. & Sydow, Kim	2015	Dulek, Robert E.
Political/Social Engagement	Political Communication and the Epistemic Vi	Bohman, J.	2007	Bohman, J. (200
	Social media use and participation: a meta-a	Boulianne, S.	2015	Boulianne, S. (2f
	<i>Social Media and Social Movements: the tran</i>	Coban, B	2016	Coban, B. (Ed.).
	Populism and social media: how politicians s	Engesser, S. E. N.	2016	Engesser S, E. N
	Social Media in Politics: The Ultimate Voter E	Harris, L. & Harrison, P	2015	Harris, L. & Har

(Figure 2.0: Organization of Source Material)

I made value determinations of the literature on three primary criteria: academic rigor; connection to my research topic; and, the age of the source. Age was a somewhat fluid criterion because of the distinction I established between pre-and-post-social media eras. An older document was potentially high-value related to Metis communities and establishing the approach to political discourse in the historical approach, but low-value related to social media and social media research in the modern approach. It was important that I kept this distinction in mind when searching terms on both lists independently, but it worked well. Take, for example, the following sources, both of which I classified as “green.” Source one, Amanda Clarke’s

background paper for the Library of Parliament in Canada, “Social Media: Political Uses and Implications for Representative Democracy” (2010) because it speaks directly to the potential role for social media in political discourse, is less than ten years old, and demonstrates rigor based on its sourcing and the institution for which it was written. Source two, *The Government and Politics of the Alberta Metis Settlements*, a book by T. C. Pocklington published in 1991, is a direct overview of the history, government, and politics of the Metis Settlements pre-social media. It was published by the Canadian Plains Research Centre in Saskatchewan and provides a snapshot view of how the Settlements and their members conceived of their communities before the internet and social media. Both sources are highly relevant notwithstanding the two decades between them, and in fact characterize some of the distinctions that I am interested in with regards to differences of pre/post social media.

### **Discussion: Theoretical Framework**

Anecdotally, in my work with the Metis Settlements, I have observed how important the inclusion of Settlement members is in the decision-making process. I often attend community meetings where I have watched the active engagement by leaders with members and the in-depth discussions members of the Settlements have with each other and their leaders. My inference, based on my observations as the Director of Communications for the Metis Settlements General Council, is that great value is placed on participation by community members. In this way, I believe the process of decision-making in the Metis Settlements could almost be described as “hyper-democratic.” By this, I mean that Settlement members seem to view their responsibility to the community’s governance as going beyond voting in a general



election. They appear to have a deeper stake in the decision making. This may be because of the communal nature of the Settlements. For example, Settlement members collectively “own” the land that comprises the Settlements. Leaders view the members’ assent to a decision as necessary to making that decision. This is how I define “hyper-democratic” in the context of this study.

The individual members of the community seem to be strongly interwoven into the existence and functioning of the community. As an outsider to these communities, I recognize that this observation is limited and want to note that I recognize it may reflect a misrepresentation of the lived experiences of community members. Therefore, I stress that this observation is in no way indicative of a fixed representation of these groups. Instead, I introduce it as a personal observation that informed some of my thinking about broader questions of social media use for political discourse in rural and remote Indigenous communities. I also situate this observation in my thinking about how discussions unfold related to the management of the communities by the elected leaders that I work for. This is consistent with my definition of community-level political discourse described in the introduction of my literature review. It also reflects the exploratory nature of my research.

In thinking through the problem of how social media is used for political discourse in this setting, I required a theoretical framework to serve as a normative yardstick for my analysis. Originally, I had considered constructivism exclusively as a guidepost, but after further consideration and feedback I decided to explore literature on deliberative democracy as an additional area to inform my research. Constructivism, at its core, is about how individuals make

sense of the world around them and how elements like individual values are constructed, as well as how personal relationships influence this process (Delia, 2014). In considering the way community members form and interact with their community, it is necessary to understand how the relationship between the individual and the community develops and functions. What are a community member's responsibilities to the community and what are the community's responsibilities to the community member? The implication of this question is that a divide exists between the social and personal development of the individual and the fulfillment of the needs of the community (Ellis, Sauer & Fisher, 2006). From this perspective, being active in the community, and the practice of engaging in the deliberations and discussions about the community, are vital to determining how one fits into the bigger picture and how one conceives of their role in the process. Fosnot notes that this kind of learning "should be viewed as both a process of active individual construction and a process of enculturation into the...practices of the wider society" (Cobb in Fosnot, 2005, p.39).

Here, it is important to understand that in the context of my research, I conceive of two "wider societies." The first is the individual Metis Settlements. Each individual Metis Settlement is unique, with its own nuances and norms. They are the small "w" wider society. The Settlements then fit into the larger Metis Settlements of Alberta community, the large "W" Wider society. The aggregate community has common processes and norms that influence the Settlements while the individual Settlements influence the broader Metis Settlements of Alberta. Enculturation of the individual into the traditions, norms, and values of a particular community is an ongoing and evolving act of learning that is "an interpretive, recursive, nonlinear building process by active learners interacting with their surroundings – the physical and social world"

(Fosnot & Perry in Fosnot, 2005, p.9). The community, defined for my purposes as the land-based Metis Settlements, is the product of evolution over time. Its structure and how it functions are a construction of the members who exist within it, but the members who exist within it are also a product of their interactions within the community. It is a circular and symbiotic process: in order to understand how a community – a social and political entity – has traditionally governed itself and discussed its priorities, it is necessary to consider these elements of constructivist theory.

In working through the literature, I found that this argument is not sufficient in itself. Understanding how a community – the entity and the individuals – develop provides important context that assists with framing the broader issue, which is understanding how deliberation and discourse on community-level political issues in geographically remote communities may be enhanced with technology. In the case of the Metis Settlements, a democratic structure has been developed with rules and morays for participation as a community member. Thus, I include deliberative democracy as a theory with value in shedding light on the processes of community governance and the act of engaging in discourse and decision-making. As Edwards notes, “the normative focus of deliberation is policy-related, dealing with matters about how society should be organized and governed” (Edwards, 2016, p.5). The focus of my research is precisely this; evaluating the processes of deliberation and decision-making with regards to community and political discourse in rural and remote Metis settlements. At its most basic core, deliberative democracy:

...affirms the need to justify decisions made by citizens and their representatives. Both are expected to justify the laws that they would impose on one another. In a democracy, leaders should therefore give reasons for their decisions, and respond to the reasons that citizens give in return. But not all issues, all the time, require deliberation. Deliberative democracy makes room for many other forms of decision-making (including bargaining among groups,

and secret operations ordered by executives), as long as the use of these forms themselves is justified at some point in a deliberative process (Gutman & Thompson, 2004, p.3).

Direct democracy, where each community member is directly involved in decision-making, and, representative democracy, where community members elect representatives to make decisions on their behalf, both fit into the deliberative democratic framework. Edwards (2016) references Habermas' conception of deliberation as taking place in the public sphere where transparency, participation, and "intersubjectivity" prevail, enhancing outcomes (p.5). He further states that, "there should be equal access and status for all those entitled to participate, arguments should lead to a rational consensus...and participants should set aside their own interests in favour of the common good" (Edwards, 2016, p.5). These elements help establish a framework to assess deliberation. As important as these conditions are however, they are only part of the process. Deliberation, "...can only be effective if there is a means by which the content and results of debates are communicated to policymakers" and stakeholders and have an effect (Edwards, 2016, p.5). This is extremely useful in considering hybrid structures that include electing representatives but also opportunities for direct decision making, which I will demonstrate later in the discussion is consistent with Metis Settlement governance structures.

A challenge that exists with the deliberative model is that specific Indigenous communities, like each of the individual Settlements, tend to have a more homogenous population because of their shared history, size, and geographic location. These individual communities are then a part of the aggregate Indigenous community, within which there are hundreds of unique First Nations, Metis, and Inuit cultures. In the case of the Metis Settlements, Kikino Metis Settlement has its own membership who have similar lived experiences and backgrounds within that community. In this way, Kikino Metis Settlement's population could be

considered relatively homogenous. Kikino is also a part of the larger collective of the eight Metis Settlements and the larger collective benefits from the diversity that the eight individual Settlements offer.

Each community then, while sharing the broad common core values of the larger collective, such as stewardship of the land, also has unique individual elements. For example, Kikino Metis Settlement, located just south of Lac la Biche, Alberta, is different from Paddle Prairie Metis Settlement, located two hours north of Peace River, Alberta. J. Bohman (2007) notes “deliberating in heterogeneous groups improves [the quality of decisions] by making deliberators less susceptible to cognitive errors and biases” (p. 349). By creating a digital space where members from Settlement X can engage in discussion with members from Settlement Y, both Settlements may gain additional perspectives and experiences relevant to their deliberations and decision making. Therefore, it is in this conceptualization of “homogeneity” and “heterogeneity” that the introduction of communication technologies has the potential to inform the diversity of discussion and opinion during the deliberative decision-making process that multiple Settlements engage in about political and community issues of concern. It may introduce a further diversity of perspectives by way of interactions and communications across digital platforms at both the local Settlement level and the regional Metis Settlements General Council level. Increased opportunity for engagement facilitated by social media technology may provide additional opportunities for members located in diverse and disperse rural and remote communities to present their perspectives to their leadership.

Approaching my research using elements of both theories will facilitate a more thorough analysis of the research questions posited. Constructivist elements related specifically to how individuals gain knowledge and develop an awareness of the world around them, as well as the influence of community on the individual and the individual on the community are valuable. It helps frame the motivations behind decision-making and provides context for how cultural norms and traditions evolve, influencing discourse about the community. Deliberative democratic elements will provide metrics against which community decision-making and discourse can be assessed. Particularly given the hybrid nature of the governance model in the Metis Settlements, which I will discuss next.

### **Indigenous Communities**

In order to answer LRQ1, it is important to look at general themes found in research on approaches to Indigenous governance and politics. The term “Indigenous” is the currently accepted term employed as an umbrella covering multiple ethnic communities across the country (Vowel, 2016). There are some generalizations that can be made across all subsets of Indigenous peoples and communities but there are many unique features that distinguish them as well. Therefore, it is important to understand what the term is referencing, and further, to narrow the scope of the discussion to be manageable given the limitations of this format. In his book, *The Inconvenient Indian* (2012), Thomas King discusses the challenges presented by the terminology used in discussions about Indigenous peoples. While Indigenous is the vogue term currently, it is interchangeable with “Aboriginal” and “Native” (King, 2012). The term “Indian” also continues to exist in discussions about Indigenous peoples, generally used to describe First Nations people in

Canada but also used as a broad umbrella term (King, 2012). Indigenous is used in reference to peoples or communities that are First Nations (of which there are hundreds within Canada with distinct features and cultures), Inuit, and Metis (Sawchuk, 1998). Additional labels used to classify Indigenous peoples are the terms “Status” and “Non-Status” which reference whether an individual of Indigenous heritage has registered with the Government of Canada to reclaim their Indigenous rights (Status) or not (Non-Status) (Sawchuk, 1998). This myriad of terms and the large number of different and unique Indigenous communities within Canada makes evaluating “Indigenous” communities too complex a task for the scope of my research given time and resource limitations. Given my access to the Metis Settlements as Director of Communications for the Metis Settlements General Council and the need to limit the scope of my research, I chose to focus on the Metis Settlements.

### **The Metis Settlements**

Given this challenge and given my access to and knowledge of the Metis Settlements, I chose to look specifically at the Metis Settlements and their approach to governance, politics, community-level discourse, and decision-making. Primarily, I am interested in understanding how Metis Settlement members have engaged in political discourse and made decisions regarding how the community functions. The unique circumstances of the Metis Settlements mean that there is a broad and diverse array of issues that could and should be considered central to the functioning and governance of the Settlements. The migration of the Metis from Eastern to Western Canada began well before Alberta was an established province and the communities that now constitute the eight Metis Settlements also existed pre-1905 (Brezecki, 2005). A formal

relationship began in 1938 with the establishment of the *Metis Betterment Act* by the Government of Alberta. The primary purpose of the Act was to set lands aside for the Metis to settle (Bell, 1994). The Ewing Commission – established in 1935 to investigate the Metis issue – found that “as the Metis were the original inhabitants of these great unsettled areas and are dependent on wildlife and fish for their livelihood” (Brezecki, 2005, p.10), they should be given the opportunity to establish colonies and practice their traditional way of life. The *Metis Betterment Act* established twelve original Metis Colonies but in 1960 the Government of Alberta rescinded four of the Colonies, effectively taking away Metis land and displacing Metis community members (Bell, 1994, p.7). Determined to prevent any government from taking away Metis land again, the remaining eight communities – Buffalo Lake, East Prairie, Elizabeth, Fishing Lake, Gift Lake, Kikino, Paddle Prairie, and Peavine – decided to “unite politically and legally for the purpose of protecting their collective interests” (Brezecki, 2005, p.12). The Alberta Federation of Metis Settlements (AFMS) was established in 1975 with a purpose – protect the land – and a mission – advance the cause of the Metis Settlements with all orders of government in Canada.

The AFMS worked throughout the 1980s to lay the groundwork with Alberta for the negotiation of a new formal relationship that would move the Settlements towards greater autonomy. In 1989, the AFMS and the Government of Alberta signed the *Metis Settlements Accord* that committed Alberta to a \$310 million cash settlement for the rescinded Colonies (*Metis Settlements Accord, 1989*). It also led to the implementation of a suite of legislation designed to further protect the remaining eight Settlements, established a revised local governance structure, and created the Metis Settlements General Council (MSGC) as the central



governing body (*Metis Settlements Act, 1991*). The MSGC was meant to work on matters related to the collective interests of the Settlements. Each Settlement would have a local governing council with five Councillors elected by eligible community members, with one Councillor serving as chairperson, selected by the council (Pocklington, 1991). The local elections would align with municipal elections across Alberta and the authorities of the Settlement councils were similar to municipalities but also included responsibility for managing and maintaining their Settlements membership list. The General Council would be comprised of the eight local councils – forty Councillors – forming the assembly, with the chairperson from each Settlement serving on the MSGC Board of Directors (Pocklington, 1991). The assembly would be responsible for appointing four executive officers that would oversee the operation of the MSGC (Pocklington, 1991). This model, established in 1991, remains in place today. The 1.25 million acres of land that comprises the Settlements is held in common, with MSGC holding fee simple title (*Metis Settlements Act, 1991*). This is indicative of a cultural hallmark, which is the communal management and stewardship of land and assets.

Settlement politics are layered and complex because there are many issues constantly at play. Fundamentally, there are four levels of political discourse at play: local Settlement governance; regional governance among Settlements via the MSGC; partnership with Alberta; and, the establishment of a government-to-government relationship with Canada. At the local and regional levels – which are my focus – the councils have the authority to oversee the day-to-day management of the Settlement, but the entire community is involved by way of regular community meetings. In some Settlements, this takes place once a month, in others, it occurs more frequently. Typically, it was in these meetings where members would engage in discussions

about community governance and vote on resolutions. For example, the annual operating budget required a notice period for Settlement members to review it and then the members would vote on whether to pass a bylaw to implement the budget. The AFMS/MSGC would also use community meetings as opportunities to engage the local membership on issues of collective interest. The feedback would often be incorporated into positioning documents for talks with Alberta or with Canada. For example, the *Metis Settlements Accord* was toured through the Settlements for community input before the final agreement was accepted and implemented. Commissioned reports would also be taken to the communities for input.

In 1982, the then-Alberta Federation of Metis Settlements developed a document titled *Metisism: A Canadian Identity* (1982). The document is a statement on Aboriginal Rights in the Canadian Constitution and identifies five key areas for consideration: Land and Resources; Distinct Political Status; Social Development; Cultural Development; and, Economic Development (Ghostkeeper, 1982). In the Letter of Transmittal included at the beginning of the document, President of the AFMS, Elmer Ghostkeeper, notes that the document “results from the agreement of April 29, 1982, between the Government of Alberta and the Alberta Federation of Metis Settlement Associations enabling [the Federation] to undertake research and consultation [with Settlement members]” (Ghostkeeper, 1982, p.v) for constitutional talks in 1982. Direct community engagements, by way of community meetings in the Settlements, were the primary form of consulting with Settlement members and the primary forum for engagement in political and community discourse. It also demonstrates how cultural identity and politics intertwine. There is a deep and spiritual tie to the land (Brezecki, 2005). It is part of the identity of the Metis

Settlements and it is part of the traditional way of life passed down. This is why protection of the land re-emerges again and again as a political priority.

Recalling the previous discussion on deliberative democracy, the historical Settlement approach to public discourse appears to be reflective of the hallmarks of that theory. The Settlement approach is a hybrid structure as well. They employ representative democracy, with members electing officials to make decisions on their behalf, supplemented by direct democracy, with members voting for and providing input on key community decisions. The community meetings form the basis of the deliberation and either a vote occurs in that very meeting, or elected representatives are given directives or held accountable for decisions that they may have taken. Those who are entitled to participate do; during community meetings outcomes of decisions are clearly communicated to policymakers and stakeholders, and the decisions made have an effect on community governance. There are also markers of constructivism at play as well. Members are learning through participation, they are fulfilling their responsibility to the community by engaging in the meetings, and the community fulfills its responsibility to the individuals by consulting the members. The one caveat relates to participation levels. It is unknown precisely how many members, as a percentage of the total eligible community, would engage in the meetings. On balance, notwithstanding this caveat, this provides an answer to LRQ1.

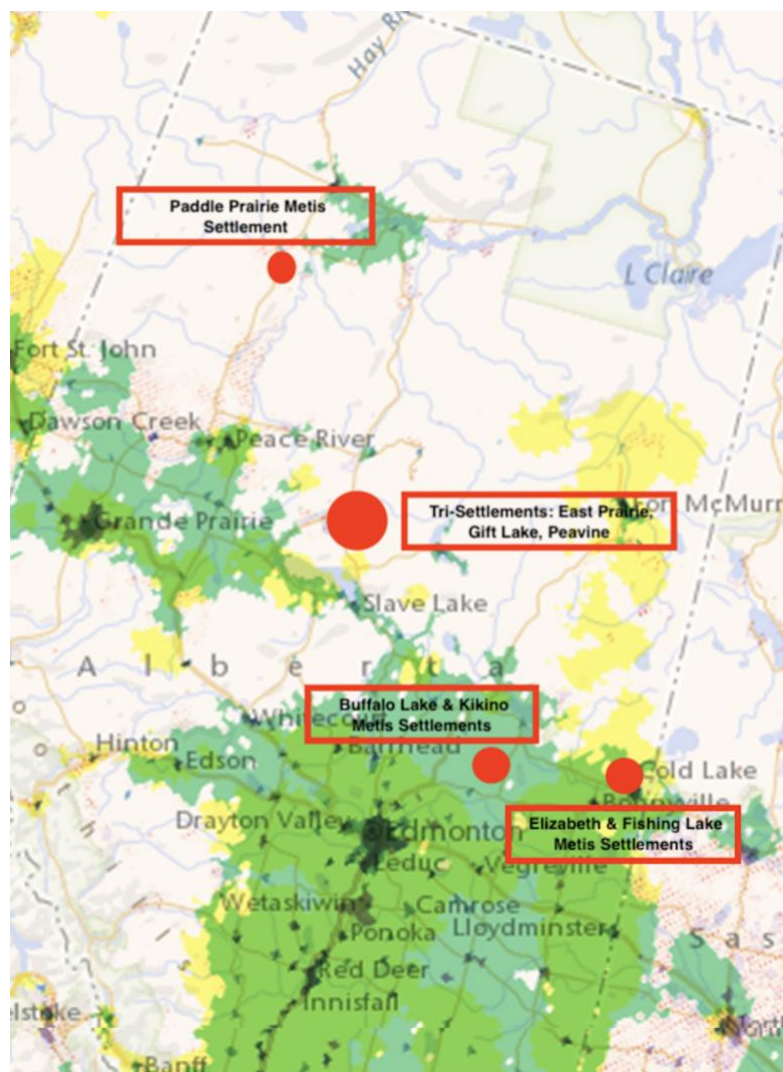
### **Social Media's Impact on Political and Community Discourse**

Looking at the literature on social media and its various effects on politics, civic and community engagement, cultural identity, and individual participation, I found that there was a

good cross-section of information on a number of demographics. The demographic that was notably missing was Indigenous communities. There are some media articles about how social media has helped Indigenous protest movements, like Idle No More, gain traction and build awareness (Donkin, 2013). While it is not directly related to my research, there is an important point raised in the article: “Idle No More and its rise have been driven by social media, a place where anyone — no matter how physically isolated they are — can participate in discussion and follow news if they have an Internet connection or smartphone” (Donkin, 2013). The remote and/or rural nature of many Indigenous communities, the Metis Settlements included, presents serious organizational challenges to connecting members or organizing action, which can be a political priority in a community.

The capacity – in terms of time, human resources, and financial resources – to connect eight Settlements spread out across Northern Alberta or to bring community members into Edmonton for meetings is a constant challenge in small, rural or remote Indigenous communities (Adams in Adams, Dahl & Peach, 2013). Adams notes, “building organizational capacity pertains to improving an organization’s ability to serve the needs of its members or those it represents” (Adams in Adams, Dahl & Peach, 2013, p.470). Social media has the potential to build the capacity for Indigenous communities to engage a broader and more diverse cross-section of people and organizations. Take the example of Twitter, where Twitter streams “can attract diverse players...and include contributors and followers from afar and in the midst of the action” (Segeberg & Bennett, 2011, p.201). Access to the Internet and free web-based social media applications can provide low-cost alternatives to communities seeking to connect members. There is a caveat to this however. It assumes that affordable and consistent access to the Internet

is available in one's community. As is the case for many rural or remote communities in Canada, including Indigenous communities and the Metis Settlements, Internet connectivity is not a given. Digital divides still exist in many places across rural Canada. To get a visual sense of this divide in the Metis Settlements, below is a map created by the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) and sourced from Cybera. The map shows in green areas where broadband Internet access is available. I have added red dots where Settlements or clusters of Settlements are roughly located based on the labelled Figure 1.0:



(Fig 3.0 CRTC Broadband Internet Service Coverage in Alberta. Source: Cybera)

The four eastern Settlements – Buffalo Lake, Elizabeth, Fishing Lake, and Kikino – are situated in areas where higher-speed Internet is more reliably available. The four western Settlements – East Prairie, Gift Lake, Paddle Prairie, and Peavine – are geographically situated in areas with far less reliable Internet access, and what access they do have is not broadband, high-speed Internet. This creates barriers to ensuring all eight Settlements receive the same, consistent information through online means. This is not isolated to the Metis Settlements either. Cybera notes that the CRTC reported that Alberta has lower download and upload speeds than the national average (Cybera, 2016).

Considering this from the perspective of deliberative democracy, and using the Metis Settlements as an example, social media platforms have the potential to increase the participation of members in a decision-making scenario. The MSGC Assembly meets in Edmonton. The 40 councillors receive reimbursements for travel to attend the meetings but it is prohibitive for community members to attend notwithstanding the meetings are public. The MSGC could establish a live stream of the proceedings on Facebook or Twitter, allowing members to provide input via the social media platform. Recently, MSGC signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Canada and used Twitter to live stream the event. It connected the Assembly in Edmonton, community members in the Settlements, and



(Figure 4.0: Metis Settlements General Council Twitter page, @MSGC\_Alberta)

other interested Stakeholders to the proceedings in Ottawa, something that had never been done before.

My research will seek to further elucidate the subject of social media's impact on political and community discourse in the Metis Settlements. To reiterate the point made in Bohman (2007) about deliberative democracy, my work is informed by his understanding that the diversity of deliberators improves decision making because it limits errors and the influence of biases. In the instance of the Metis Settlements, this concept takes the form of increasing participation in decision making beyond a single Settlement and social media could allow perspectives from other Settlements to trickle in as ideas or discussions about issues unfold online. This, from my perspective, introduces an element of "diversity" into the base of "deliberators" – in this case members from other Settlements with different backgrounds, occupations, and experiences that may offer new insights into discussions in individual Settlements. For example, a discussion on a Facebook forum might have a member of Paddle Prairie comment on a post from a member of Elizabeth Metis Settlement about an issue up for debate in Elizabeth. That Paddle Prairie member may have experiences or insights that the Elizabeth member had not considered. This is the context in which I apply the concept discussed by Bohman. Clarke (2010) notes that this fosters greater pluralism in political discourse because "social media gives anyone with Internet access an opportunity to disseminate their ideas...ensuring that [single sources] no longer monopolize information channels. In turn, new issues and ideas that might otherwise be ignored...can receive public attention" (p.4). It allows leaders and stakeholders to engage and be engaged directly. However, if social media is deployed without a thoughtful strategy it can have the opposite of

the intended outcome (Harris & Harrigan, 2015). This perspective suggests that social media can have a positive impact on political participation.

In her meta-data analysis of research on social media use and civic participation, Boulianne (2015) states that “the metadata suggest a positive relationship between social media use and participation in civic and political life” (p.534) further noting, “more than 80% of the coefficients [she studied] are positive” (p.534). The study also suggests that the linkage between social media and increased political participation may not be a complete picture and that questions remain about whether social media’s effects are “causal and transformative” (Boulianne, 2015, p.534). In assessing the effects of social media on the 2008 U.S. Presidential and the 2010 British elections, Harris & Harrigan (2015) found that social media could be a double-edged sword related to political discourse and decision-making, suggesting that if social media is utilized in a thoughtful and strategic way, it can have significant value in engaging voters. Conversely, it can do significant damage to political discourse and campaigning if it is poorly utilized (Harris & Harrigan, 2015). Nickesia Gordon, in Langmia & Tyree (2016) echoes this cautious optimism, noting that the “ubiquity of social media as well as the multitudes of users that interface with them often lull [users] into assuming that posting, tweeting, or sharing equals connection with an audience” (p.164). The notion that simply because information is available, the intended audience has seen or actioned that information, should not be taken for granted (Gordon in Langmia & Tyree, 2016). Ultimately, it is safe to say that there is a real appreciation for the potential that social media presents in the social and political engagement space but that is not as simple as hitting “post.”



It is also important to note that social media can be manipulated and used for less than noble ends. One need only look at the 2016 Presidential Election in the United States for an example of how social media can be used to spread falsehoods, smears, and misinformation, with the Trump campaign bypassing mainstream media to disseminate “fake news” or innuendo (Silver, 2017). Consider the rise and spread of populism, an ideology “which pits a virtuous and homogenous *people* against a set of *elites* and dangerous ‘*others*’ who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the *sovereign* people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice” (Engesser, Ernst, Esser & Büchel, 2017, p.1111). In such settings it is not unrealistic that a bad actor would use social media to bypass other forms of engagement and use social media to directly connect with members in their own community or others (Engesser, Ernst, Esser & Büchel, 2017). As with all things, there are a multitude of potential impacts related to the continued entrenchment of social media in social and political discourse, some that likely have not yet been anticipated, and further research will need to be cognizant of this fact.

### **Conclusion and Next Steps**

The process of developing my literature review was an enlightening one. While my search for information produced a significant number of results, it was eye opening to review all of it and develop it into a coherent narrative. Out of this review, I have drawn several conclusions. First, there is a plethora of information about Canadian Indigenous communities and the impact of social media on social and political discourse, but there is very little that marries the two subjects. And there is zero that looks at social media usage of any kind in the Metis Settlements. There is a clear gap in the literature that my capstone research may fill. Second, that there are

substantial contributions to the research about the influence and impacts of social media on civic and political participation and that this research clearly provides elements that can be incorporated into my capstone to evaluate the Metis Settlements. Third, constructivism and deliberative democracy are effective theoretical frameworks to draw on in my analysis of social media and political discourse in the Metis Settlements. Constructivism is helpful in understanding identity politics and the evolution of culture, while deliberative democracy offers insight into what could be classified as effective decision-making about public issues. Given that identity and culture in the Settlements is so intertwined with politics and conversations about the communities, both frameworks provide value to my research.

Ultimately, my literature review has defined concepts about social media and political discourse, like the dangers of populism, the potential causation between social media participation and increased civic participation, and the value that social media offers to enhancing organizational capacity, that can be used to assess my data as I collect it. Using constructivism and deliberative democracy, I can see the values and pitfalls of the traditional approach to community engagement in the Metis Settlements, develop a baseline about effective engagement against which to compare how things have changed since social media became available. I have established clear parameters about how community discourse has unfolded in the past, I can make predictions based on the research done to date on social media generally, and now I can begin to develop a working theory about how social media has impacted community and political discourse in the Metis Settlements.

### Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

In order to target my research so that it would provide answers to the three research questions posited in the introduction of this paper, I had to assess what kinds of information I needed to collect and evaluate. The questions are:

**RQ1:** How have Metis Settlement members traditionally engaged in community and political discourse?

**RQ2:** Are Metis Settlement members and leaders adopting social media as a tool for discourse about community politics and community issues? If so, how?

**RQ3:** How can the leadership of the Metis Settlements use social media to better engage and communicate with Metis Settlement members about community politics and issues?

The questions themselves helped me to establish three categories of material that would be pulled together in my findings to provide a robust analysis of the outcomes. The first research question asks how the Metis Settlements have historically engaged in discourse about politics and community issues. It follows that a review of historical information like meeting transcripts, pieces of legislation, research studies conducted about the Settlements, and other relevant material, would be necessary. The second research question is focused on the present, whether or not Settlement members were incorporating new technology, like social media, into their lives. This also seeks to know how and if their uptake of this technology is impacting political and community discussions in the community. Put more simply, are Settlement members and leaders using social media to talk community politics and community issues. Answering this question would require some type of survey of Settlement members. Finally, the third research question asks how Metis Settlement leadership can utilize social media to improve their engagement with their members and stakeholders. To understand this question, some direct discussion with a

sample of Settlement leaders would be necessary to gain insight about their perspectives on what they view their responsibilities as leaders are related to communicating with, and seeking feedback from, Settlement members. Given my thinking on these questions, my research design and methodology followed the direction set by my consideration of the three research questions. Therefore, I employed a participatory engagement process that used approach that used multiple methods to collect data.

### **The Matter of History**

First, in order to understand how, historically, Metis Settlement members and leaders engaged in discourse about community issues and decision-making, I did a historical analysis. I drew upon a variety of sources, such as legislation, policy, meeting transcripts, and other sources, to learn about Metis Settlement politics and governance, and, how members and leaders communicated with one another about these topics. My goal was to understand the topic by assessing how Settlement members and leaders engaged with each other to discuss community issues, make governance decisions, and address Settlement politics, and, how their approaches have developed and evolved over time. The outcome in relation to this paper would be to provide context for my investigation regarding social media use in the Metis Settlements. In short, I had to know what was done in the past, and what worked in the past, to determine if social media has impacted how these discussions are done now and how it can be employed as a tool by members and leaders as it becomes more prevalent in the Metis Settlements. My literature review was an opportunity to look at historical practices and learn about how Settlement members and leaders have engaged in political and community discourse in the past. The

literature review chapter goes into detail on my approach to the history but recall that I reviewed archival material at the Metis Settlements General Council, established a set of terms to search out additional information, and organized more than 70 sources of material into a tool to assess their relevance. The process was rigorous and valuable in establishing what I have termed as the “historical” period, prior to social media’s mainstream emergence in 2007.

### **The Survey of Settlement Members**

To assess how members of the Settlements are using social media to engage in community and political discussions, I first needed to get a clear understanding of whether Settlement members were actively using social media. Given that the Settlements occupy more than a million hectares scattered throughout Northern Alberta, the most efficient and effective way to do this was by way of an online survey. To motivate participation from Settlement members, I established a budget of \$300 (these funds were graciously provided by the Metis Settlements General Council) to purchase three \$100 Wal-Mart gift cards that were then randomly awarded to survey participants. In order to award the gift cards, survey participants did have to provide their name and contact information. Therefore, opting in to the draw was voluntary and participants had the choice to either complete the survey anonymously or participate in the draw and identify themselves. It was made very clear to participants that should they choose to opt in to the draw, any information that they provided to identify themselves would not be made public and would be destroyed once the gift cards were awarded. I developed the following nine survey questions to include in the survey:

- 1) Are you a member of a Metis Settlement?
- 2) Which social media tools do you use? (Select all that apply)

- a. Facebook
  - b. Twitter
  - c. Instagram
  - d. Snapchat
  - e. YouTube
  - f. LinkedIn
  - g. Periscope
  - h. Google+
- 3) Of the social media tools listed above, which do you use most often?
- a. Facebook
  - b. Twitter
  - c. Instagram
  - d. Snapchat
  - e. YouTube
  - f. LinkedIn
  - g. Periscope
  - h. Google+
- 4) Do you use your social media applications to post information you want to share, or to see what others are posting?
- a. I use it mostly to post information
  - b. I use it mostly to see what others posting or discussing
  - c. I would say 50/50
  - d. Not sure
- 5) How often do you use social media to obtain information about community events, issues, or governance matters?
- a. Often
  - b. Sometimes
  - c. Not often
  - d. Never
- 6) Do you believe that Settlement leaders should use social media to provide information to, or to talk with, Settlement members?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. Not Sure
- 7) Do you, or people you know use social media to talk about community issues and/or to communicate with members of other Settlements?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. Not sure
- 8) Do you, or people you know follow Indigenous organizations, businesses, or media outlets (APTN, CBC Indigenous, etc.) on social media?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. Not sure
- 9) How much of your local, provincial, national or international news do you get using a social media application?
- a. All of it
  - b. Some of it
  - c. A little bit
  - d. None

The online survey was introduced into a Metis Settlements social network called “Metis Settlement Voices” with the permission of the network administrator. The survey questionnaire

was deployed using Google Forms. A benefit of using this application for the online survey is that it organizes and provides a breakdown of the responses, giving me a percentage-based snapshot of how participants were answering the questions. I was then able to take these percentages and use them to establish a baseline for understanding how, what platforms, and in what ways Settlement members are using social media. Given that there are roughly 5,000 Settlement Members (*Metis Settlements Census, 2015*), I determined a reasonable sample size would be approximately 30 responses. I received more than double that number with 61 unique responses. While in the context of my study, this was an excellent outcome, it is important to note that the sample size is relatively small. It is also important to note that the results may have been somewhat biased given that the survey was online and introduced to members through a Metis Settlements closed Facebook group. The individuals who respond to such a survey are Internet literate and Facebook users already.

### **The Leadership's Perspective**

The third research question that I posited sought to determine how leaders within the Metis Settlements can leverage social media to enhance their engagement with Settlement members and stakeholders. It was therefore vital to hear directly from a sample of elected leadership who had experience and insights to share on the topic. To do this, I determined that a facilitated focus group / group interview session with three elected Executive members (President, Vice President, Treasurer) of the Metis Settlements General Council was the most viable option. The MSGC is the central governing authority of the eight Metis Settlements in Alberta and is based in Edmonton. When considering who to interview for this perspective, it

was important to ensure that the data would be credible and relevant. Golafshani (2003) discusses how the concepts of reliability and validity – often central to quantitative research – translate into qualitative research. He notes that the purpose of a qualitative study is to generate understanding whereas a quantitative study's purpose is to explain things. He states that "the difference in purposes of evaluating quality of studies...is one of the reasons the concept of reliability is irrelevant in qualitative research" (p.601). Rather, the credibility of the interview participants and the ability to sufficiently assess the truth, or at least their concept of truth, in the statements that they are making (Golafshani, 2003, p.601). From my perspective, the credibility of the MSGC Executive in speaking to issues of organizational communication and Settlement governance was more than sufficient. The session lasted approximately one hour. Of note, the focus of my research relates to communication channels and not content, and therefore, the following questions relate to that topic:

- 1) How has the Metis Settlements General Council communicated with members of the eight Metis Settlements about political and/or governance issues in the past? What tools, mediums, and/or methods has the organization employed?
- 2) What are some of the barriers or challenges that exist that prevent or impede MSGC's ability to communicate to Settlement leadership and members?
- 3) What kind of feedback do you receive from Settlement leaders or members about the methods/channels/tools you currently use to communicate with them?
- 4) Are any of you currently using social media, either for personal or professional purposes? How do you use social media? What kinds of information do you view or share on social media?
- 5) Are you aware of any social media options that you think would improve MSGC's ability to communicate with Settlement leaders and members about politics and/or governance? If so, which one(s) and why?

The Executive are identified in my findings. Given the relatively small nature of the organization and their roles as public officials, I could not guarantee their anonymity and therefore, I ensured that I obtained their consent to identify them in my research prior to conducting the session and made it clear that their responses would not be anonymous. The discussion was semi-structured



to collect a range of information about the participants' perspectives on social media as a tool for political discussions in the Metis Settlements and the political communication priorities of the organization that could be achieved with social media. I took notes throughout the discussion, and I gained permission to make an audio recording and transcription of the discussion for research purposes.

### **Coding Scheme**

Once all of the relevant data was collected, I did a thorough review of my notes and collected documents and conducted an analysis of the information. In order to guide this work, I utilized relevant literature on developing effective coding schemes. My primary goal was to ensure that I thoroughly reviewed my focus group discussion – which was effectively a semi-structured group interview – to capture significant or important details. The primary piece of literature on coding that I relied on was Campbell, Quincy et al.'s "Coding In-depth Semi-Structured Interviews: Problems of Unitization and Intercoder Reliability and Agreement" (2013). I developed criteria for coding the information that originally included too many terms and that I feared would impact the quality of my coding. As Campbell, Quincy et al. note, there is a fairly delicate balance required to ensure an effective framework without oversimplifying the scheme to such a point that is ineffective (2013, p.301). Given that my research is exploratory and that the group interview is relatively brief (conducted over the course of an hour), I chose to use "units of meaning" rather than blocks of text. This approach has its pros and cons. On the one hand, I wanted to ensure that the intent of the focus group participants' statements was accurately captured, which units of meaning can assist with (Campbell, Quincy, et al., 2013, p.302). On the

other hand, determining the precise units introduces an element of subjectivity from the researcher's own biases as to what is or is not relevant (Campbell, Quincy, et al., 2013, p.302). On this issue, Campbell, Quincy et al., suggest that, "in exploratory research...the meaning unit may be the appropriate unit of analysis because it is less likely to decontextualize what the [respondents are] saying" (2013, p.302). As context is important to me for the purposes of my research, I chose this approach to maintain the integrity of meaning while attempting to be aware of the subjectivity challenges in order to mitigate their impact. I then organized the information into thematic areas that emerged inductively from the coding process. I grounded my analysis of this data in the theoretical framework of deliberative democracy to help provide context and relevance to the information gathered. The framework I used for coding, is as follows:

<b>Coding Term</b>	<b>Description</b>
Channel	The method used to share information in the Settlements.
Forum	The type of community activity where community issues/politics is discussed.
Meeting	Members coming together with elected officials to discuss issues, resulting in decisions.
Social Media	Common digital platforms used by in and outside of the Settlements.
Infrastructure	The physical hardware required to access online content and social media applications.
Governance	The process for making decisions in the Settlements about community and politics.
Politics	Engaging in activities/discussions meant to influence or result in decisions or outcomes.
Engagement	Connecting individuals to Councils, organizations, information, concepts or ideas.
Discourse	Discussions about ideas, concepts, messages related to community issues or politics.

## **Chapter 4: Findings**

Before I delve into the results of my online survey of Settlement members, and the focus group with the Metis Settlements General Council ('MSGC') Executives, it is important to revisit the question of how Settlement members and leaders have traditionally historically engaged with and on issues of community governance and politics. This is necessary for several reasons. First, it helps contextualize my data in terms of how community discussions have been approached before new technology was introduced into the equation. Second, it will help determine what type of platforms, what social media channels, are likely to be most effectively leveraged based on how well current approaches can be translated into the digital space. Finally, it allows for the development of hypotheses, based on theory, to help guide the discussion and recommendations. Reiterating and building upon some of my discussion from the literature is important now because of the nature of my research topic. Throughout this process, it has become increasingly clear that research focused on the Metis Settlements, including research about communications or communications technology, is limited. As a result, given the scope and limitations of this capstone project, I am presenting exploratory findings. There is a real opportunity to do follow up research and I provide some discussion about those next steps in my concluding chapter.

### **Historical Approaches to Settlement Engagement in Political and Community Discourse**

As a result of my professional relationship with the Metis Settlements General Council, I have been perched in a unique position to observe how rural Indigenous communities like the Metis Settlements, function as social and political units. There are two layers of governance

within the Settlements that adds additional to complexity to governance and to political decision making. As a result, leadership within the Settlements communicating and engaging with Settlement members, and vice versa, and, amplifying messaging and engaging with stakeholders outside of the Settlements, can be complicated. Further, before communications technology – like email, live streaming, social media platforms, and the Internet – became prevalent in our society, bringing leadership together for decision-making, and Settlement members together for engagement and feedback was slow and costly. My focus group with three of the MSGC Executive officers confirmed the technical governance structure of the organization and the eight Settlements but it also provided further details about how leadership and members interacted prior to the digital revolution in the late-1990s and 2000s. The president of the MSGC, Gerald Cunningham, has been active in Settlement politics since the very early days of the implementation of the *Metis Settlements Accord* in the early 1990s (Cunningham, G., 2018). He served on the administrative staff of the transition commission that was established to oversee the implementation of the Accord and the *Metis Settlements Act (1990)* during the 1990s (Cunningham, G., 2018). Since leaving the commission, Mr. Cunningham has held several local elected roles, as well as roles on the Executive of the Metis Settlements General Council. He was Vice President of MSGC from 2004-2007, President from 2007-2010, Chairman of East Prairie Metis Settlement from 2010-2016, and he was elected president of MSGC for a second time in April 2016.

Mr. Cunningham, when asked about how member engagement and community discussions took place, stated that leadership relied heavily on conducting community tours and information meetings. The MSGC Executives would plan to travel to the eight Metis Settlements

and the tours would focus on a particular theme, like recognition of Metis Rights, or, on a particular issue, like the negotiation of the *Metis Settlements Accord* (Cunningham, G., 2018). Going even further back, to the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, Settlement members would hitch up their wagons to their horses and travel out to their neighbours' quarter sections to discuss a particular community issue or governance decision that required attention (Cunningham, G., 2018). During the days surrounding the passage of the *Metis Betterment Act* in 1938, the Big Five – a label used to describe the five Metis who organized the effort to lobby the Government of Alberta for a Metis homeland, resulting in the *MBA (1938)* – would travel to churches and community halls throughout traditional territory to rally support to the cause and to seek feedback from stakeholders (Brezecki, 2005). And equally important, receiving some manner of approval, even if it was a simple nod from a local leader, for proposals, policy, or legislation being proposed on behalf of those stakeholders (Cunningham, G., 2018). As illustrated through this history, right from the very beginning, community participation in decision-making was central to the governance of the Metis Settlements and continues to be central today. Leaders would travel to the members to get their input and approval, which often requires some form of community meeting and discussion.

Another important way that public/political/community info was disseminated was through print media. The MSGC Treasurer, Sherry Cunningham (no relation to Gerald Cunningham), also talked about newsletters as a primary means for providing updates and information to the Settlement members. She noted that the Metis Settlements General Council produced its own newsletter called *The Messenger* and used that publication to provide information about ongoing initiatives affecting all eight Settlements, to highlight successes and

stories of “average” Settlement members “like Sheldon Souray, the famous NHL star who actually is from the Fishing Lake Metis Settlement and whose story has inspired Settlement youth to join community sports teams and activities” (Cunningham, S., 2018). In addition to MSGC’s newsletter, the Executives talked about how Settlement administrations also produced their own local newsletters as well. Ms. Cunningham, referencing her home community of Peavine Settlement, said that “when they had money to spend during the height of the Accord days [in the late-1990s and early-2000s] Peavine had dedicated staff members whose responsibility it was to produce the community newsletter and then deliver it to each house in the community. Given the size of Peavine, that was a lot of driving” (Cunningham, S., 2018). Times have changed. The resources do not exist anymore to have dedicated staff and to hand-deliver newsletters. Settlements do not have the cash-flow that they once did, and physical communication remains expensive in rural communities. This becomes a barrier locally, and to MSGC, in transmitting narratives.

During my discussion with the Executive, a distinction began to emerge that is important to acknowledge. Just as there are two levels of governance within the Settlements – local and central – there are two corresponding levels of engagement and communication. The Metis Settlements General Council is doing work on behalf of the collective of eight Settlements and they need input, feedback from, and in turn, need to respond and inform, the Settlement members and Councils. The eight Settlements are focused on local governance and therefore have local issues and concerns that they must address. Gerald Cunningham talked about this distinction and noted that “communication from the Executives at MSGC to the local Councils is actually not bad, there are no excuses because there are weekly and monthly Board meetings

and all-council assemblies. We work hard to provide information to the councils as we receive it through emails and these meetings. There is a disconnect with members though because councils are given so much information, it is difficult to know what they then communicate to members” (Cunningham, G., 2018). From the MSGC’s perspective, being situated in Edmonton and so far removed from Settlement members presents a significant challenge engaging them, and, getting them to engage with information that is transmitted. Further, as MSGC Vice President Darren Calliou drew my attention to, access to affordable, reliable Internet in the Settlements is not a given. So, the affordability related to physically delivering regular updates to members’ households, or, travelling to each of the eight Settlements for meetings, cannot be entirely overcome with a digital solution because access that we take for granted in cities like Edmonton, cannot be so taken in the Settlements. Mr. Calliou also pointed out that even if the Internet reliability was not an issue, many members of the communities are elders and cannot or do not understand how to access the Internet, websites, or social media tools. Suffice to say, any approach to communication with stakeholders must be multi-layered and multi-modal in order to reflect this.

To summarize this section, it is clear that there is great respect for, and meaning found within, maintaining traditional modes of engagement about political and community issues. The communities still hold monthly general meetings, to which all members are invited to attend, to speak to issues at, and to submit agenda items to be included for discussion. And, regular tours of the Metis Settlements by the MSGC Executives are not something that will be abandoned in the near future. The Settlements have a tradition of active democratic engagement and member

participation that stems from their heritage as community-centric, some might go as far as to say communitarian, Indigenous communities.

To understand this kind of engagement within the communities, we can look at some of the fundamental elements of constructivism. Constructivism is about how individuals conceive of themselves and develop their core values, how they are situated within the societal construct, and how their relationships with each other influence the community (Delia, 2014). Settlement members view their individual selves as parts of the larger whole and the communities do not work if members do not take their responsibilities to each other seriously. (Calliou, 2018) Given this, I assert that any approach to enhancing communication amongst members and leaders will have to consider these values and leverage them in order to have an effect. This assertion is also consistent with Prahalad and Krishnan's (2008) concept of value co-creation. That is, as social media opens the door to increased participation by individuals, both organizations and their users will jointly create value for each other. They note, "customers [Settlement members] play an active role in co-creating value, and firms leverage a broader resource base to deliver value" (Prahalad, C. K., & Krishnan, M. S., 2008, p.27). The participatory nature of Settlement discourse must be translated into attempts to integrate social media into a communications approach.

My research findings are also informed by theories of deliberative democracy. Creating opportunities for members to engage in open discourse about issues, whether locally, or more broadly amongst all eight Settlements, will satisfy the participatory nature of Settlement functioning. In the Metis Settlements, often decisions are not made without that support. Whereas the City of Edmonton, for example, might make decisions without buy-in or



consultation, Settlement governments, and MSGC, often do not come to resolution before the members have weighed in and given clear direction. This type of engagement “is about understanding the behavior, needs, and skills of individual customers [Settlement members]” and using that information to build authentic connection and legitimate value to information dissemination (Prahalad, C. K., & Krishnan, M. S., 2008, p.27). The member receives vital information relevant to their individual perspective, and MSGC gains valuable insight into the motivations and priorities of the member. Both parties gain a benefit which then builds value in the interaction that will lead to further interaction. This is a practical example of central themes of deliberative democratic theory. As Gutman & Thompson (2004) note, there is a “need to justify decisions made by citizens and their representatives. Both are expected to justify the laws that they would impose on one another. In a democracy, leaders should therefore give reasons for their decisions, and respond to the reasons that citizens give in return” (p.3). Following this thinking, any engagement with Settlement members needs to provide rationale for decisions, or information that members can consider in coming to decisions. This is why community meetings have been a primary, and effective, means of engaging in community related discourse. The question becomes, can an equally effective channel or forum be provided more cost effectively with technology?

### **Digital and Online Alternatives in the Metis Settlements in Political and Community Discourse**

Before a determination is made regarding how useful technology might be as a tool in transmitting messaging and facilitating dialogue in the Metis Settlements, I needed to investigate

whether members and leaders saw technology like social media as useful. The MSGC Executives all noted throughout the discussion that the organization has had difficulty developing an integrated communications strategy that they have consistently adhered to. And, they each referenced their level of engagement with social media. President Gerald Cunningham talked about his foray into the Twitterverse where he has created a personal Twitter handle, @GeraldCunning17, that he uses to engage with provincial politicians, Settlement members, and current events. He admits that his usage is not consistent, and he is at times “stumped” about how he could better use the application to boost his profile or reach more members. Treasurer Sherry Cunningham also noted that she has a personal Twitter handle, but that she keeps it set to private. She uses it to “snoop around” to see what other people are posting but that she does not want to make it public due to what she perceives as the negative elements of social media. When I followed up on what those negatives are, she said “online bullying, people using wrong information to attack elected officials, and using everything anyone says against them” (Cunningham, S., 2018). Vice President Darren Calliou said that he simply stays off of everything, limiting anyone’s ability to take his words out of context or for him to be attacked. He stated that he “messes with it personally, just to stay in touch with family and friends but social media just isn’t my thing. It seems more trouble than it’s worth” (Calliou, 2018). They all agreed that they have somewhat of a conundrum on their hands because, on the one hand, not everyone is online or understands how things like Twitter or Facebook work, so the organization cannot rely too heavily on technology because many people would miss updates. On the other hand, the costs and time commitments associated with ongoing Settlement tours, newsletter production and

distribution, and the immense geography of physically reach all Settlement members, requires efficient and economical alternatives.

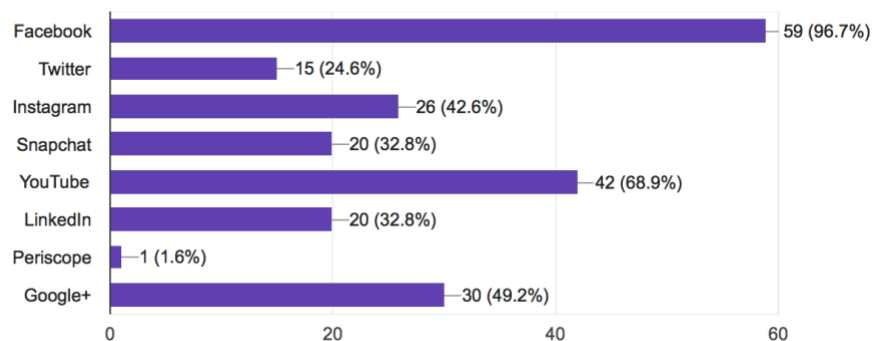
### Results of the Online Survey

To assess what the general thinking amongst Settlement members may be regarding social media, I developed and distributed an online survey to gain feedback and assess attitudes amongst members. A review of the results serves to provide some direction as community leaders tackle the noted conundrum. Below, I have detailed the findings. Of note: I received 61 responses to the survey, which is more than double the number of responses, 30, that I estimated would be received. The first question asked was “Are you a member of a Metis Settlement?” and 59 out of 61 respondents said “yes” with 2 indicating “no.” Given that 96.7% of respondents answered in the affirmative, I determined that it would be acceptable to generalize the results as “from Settlement members” and do not feel the two non-member respondents will have meaningfully skewed the data.

The figures below provide the results of the online survey:

#### Which social media tools do you use?

61 responses

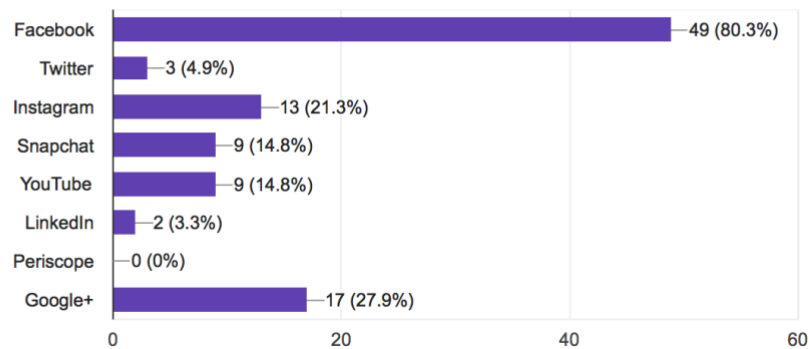


(Fig 5.0)

Overwhelmingly, respondents utilize Facebook (almost 100% of respondents), followed by YouTube and Instagram. Google+ also rates high, higher than Instagram in fact, but I am concerned that there may have been some confusion here. Respondents may have conflated Google+, the social network, and Google, the search engine. Twitter has the second lowest uptake at 24.6 % which is meaningful in terms of determining which social media channels to use. MSGC focuses heavily on using Twitter (Cunningham, G., 2018). There are clearly more desirable channels in terms of maximizing the reach of messaging.

### Which social media tool do you use most often?

61 responses

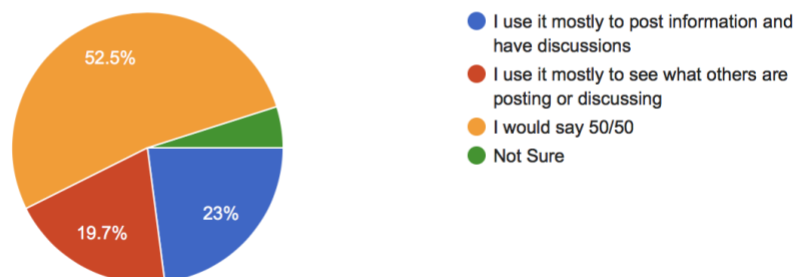


(Fig 6.0)

Again, based on responses, Facebook is the most often used social media platform amongst respondents. This is encouraging given the multi-modality of Facebook. Post, blog posts, discussion forums, videos, and live-streaming can all be accomplished with the platform. This may streamline the management of multiple content types.

Do you use your social media to post information you want to share, or to see what others are posting?

61 responses

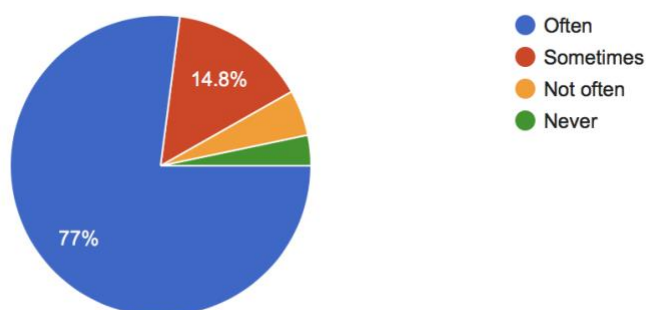


(Fig 7.0)

A majority of respondents are using social media both to share and to engage (52.5 %). When added together, those who both post and consume information, those who engage in discussions (23 %), and those who only consume content (19.7 %), almost all respondents engage with social media in a way that can be leveraged in an engagement strategy.

How often do you use social media to obtain information about community events, issues, or governance?

61 responses

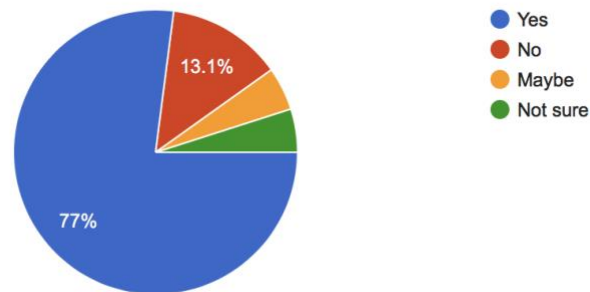


(Fig 8.0)

An overwhelming 77 % of respondents rely upon or use social media to seek out information about their local communities and governance. One can infer from these numbers that consistent updating using a relevant social media channel will amplify the reach of a messaging and promote engagement with the transmitted content.

**Do you believe that Settlement leaders should use social media to provide information to, or to talk with, Settlement members?**

61 responses

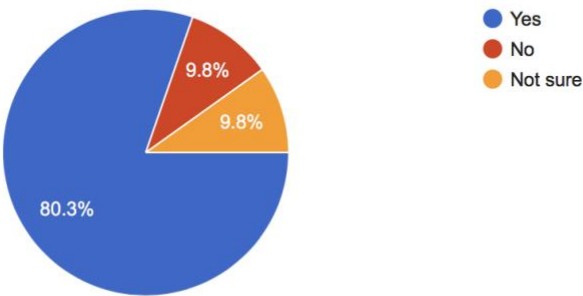


(Fig 9.0)

Once again, an overwhelming 77 % of respondents believe that Settlement leaders should be using social media as tool to engage with the Settlement membership. A small percentage (13.1 %) do not believe that they should do so. These individuals may then be better served by traditional engagement channels, such as the regular newsletter.

Do you, or people you know use social media to talk about community issues and/or to communicate with members of other Settlements?

61 responses

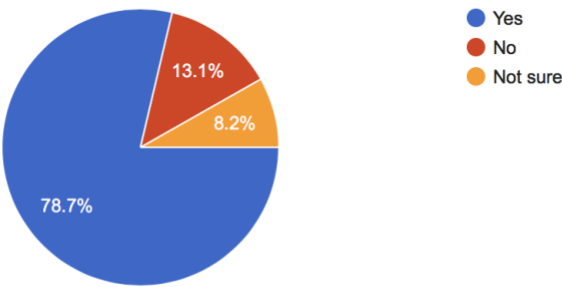


(Fig 10.0)

More than 80 % of respondents are not just consuming governance or political information about the Settlements from social media, but they are actively engaging in discussion about these issues. This discussion also goes beyond the local community. They are engaging with Settlement members from other communities.

Do you, or people you know follow Indigenous organizations, businesses, or media outlets (Metis National Council, APTN, CBC Indigenous, etc.) on social media?

61 responses

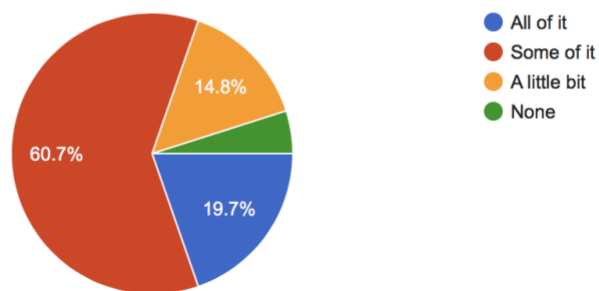


(Fig 11.0)

Respondents also indicated that they are not limiting their information consumption to Settlement specific content. Almost 80 % of respondents indicated that they follow other Indigenous advocacy and media organizations.

How much of your local, provincial, national or international news do you get using a social media application?

61 responses



(Fig 12.0)

Individuals generally are getting more and more of their news from online sources. Respondents are no different, with more than 80 % indicating they get some or all of their news via a social media application.

### **Discussion: Putting it all Together**

The Metis Settlements of Alberta face a unique challenge. There are eight rural communities that are scattered throughout Northern Alberta. When observed individually, they face many of the challenges other rural and remote communities face in the modern era with regards to communication and access to information. They do not always have access to reliable and economical Internet; Their resources – financial and human – are limited, which can make consistent engagement with members challenging; and, breaking through the white noise of



seeming limitless information and content floating around the web and on social media, can appear an overwhelming task. So, given everything that has been presented in this paper so far, what can be done – by Settlement members and leaders – to enhance communication and engagement in the Settlements? Is there an opportunity for these two groups to leverage opportunities created by social media to improve their ability to engage each other on issue related to the communities and politics, participate in discussions with leaders gaining insights and feedback, and members receiving information about decision-making or relevant developments to their lives? If so, can this be done in a way that recognizes how such interactions and discussions have taken place historically?

*Research Question 1: “How have Metis Settlement members historically engaged in community and political discourse?”*

Based on the literature review and my focus group discussion with the three Metis Settlements General Council Executives, we have a general answer to the first research question posited in the introduction of this paper. I asked, “How have Metis Settlement members historically engaged in community and political discourse?” We can state that Settlement members and leaders have typically used direct community engagement as the primary tool for engaging members. At the Metis Settlements General Council level, the Board of Directors and the all-Council Assemblies are the forums in which elected leaders hold discussions about community governance and political issues, and they are the forums where decisions about policy development and implementation, government relations, and economic development occur. The MSGC Executive do community tours to present, receive feedback on, and get

instructions from Settlement members on initiatives that they are undertaking. The organization provides updates on their work through a quarterly newsletter called *The Messenger*. The newsletter, however, is a one-way channel with limited opportunity for members to provide comments back, and, it is not delivered to households. Members must travel to their Settlement Administration office to pick up a copy. Therefore, it is difficult to know what kind of circulation the newsletter actually receives.

Settlements themselves have monthly general meetings with their public and these meetings serve as a forum to raise issues and have discussion as a community. Otherwise, local councils have regular council meetings and they meet ad hoc with members who wish to meet. Community events also become a forum for leaders to interact with the public and address member concerns. And, friends and neighbours may informally connect to discuss community issues or politics. Ultimately, community input and buy-in is necessary for decision-making. In this way, the entire structure, at both levels is participatory and directly democratic. Members also elect their representatives, so the structure is also a representative democracy. In this way, the model is a unique hybrid that has developed over time and that frames the way each stakeholder – members and leaders – conceive of the communities, and the way they conceive of themselves as community members.

*Research Question 2: “Are Metis Settlement members and leaders adopting social media as a tool for discourse about community politics and community issues? If so, how?”*

We also now have a working answer to the second research question that I posited. The outcome of the online survey is clear regarding social media adoption and usage. Based on the

results, we can infer that a majority of Settlement members are using multiple social media platforms. We can also state that Facebook is predominantly the channel of choice, with YouTube and Instagram also generating a significant amount of usage. We know that most respondents are posting and consuming information on social media, that an overwhelming majority are actively using social media to obtain information about community events, issues, and governance, and that Settlement leaders should be using social media tools to inform and engage with Settlement members. We also learned that members are actively discussing Settlement issues on social media and with members of Settlements outside of their own, that they are consuming Indigenous-specific news content and following Indigenous organizations for updates, and that more than 80 % are getting some or all of their local, provincial, national or international news using social media. It is reasonable to conclude, based on the survey results, that a significant number of Settlement members are adopting social media as a tool to engage in discussions and consume information related to Settlement politics and issues. Based on the discussion with the three Executive members, some leaders, to varying extents, are also starting to use social media to engage with their members (Cunningham, G., 2018). Therefore, it is also reasonable to conclude that social media, and specifically Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram, have the potential to be powerful channels with which to communicate to Settlement members, and from which to facilitate discourse about community priorities.

*Research Question 3: “How can the leadership of the Metis Settlements use social media to better engage and communicate with Metis Settlement members about community politics and issues?”*

Considering the above, we have some context now with which to evaluate which social media channels might provide the most effective opportunities for member engagement. Let us consider for the purposes of this discussion that “leadership of the Metis Settlements” refers specifically to the Executive of the Metis Settlements General Council as the focus group with the three Executives provided insight into the central organizations needs and perceptions of social media. There may be strategies that have transferability to the individual Settlements, but that is a consideration for follow up to these exploratory findings. Let us also consider five key “attributes” of social media as proposed by Hart (2011) and recounted in Falkheimer and Heide: “authenticity, transparency, emphasis on a decentralization of authority, rapid and consistent release of information, and engagement of users in a collaborative effort” (2015, p.342). The benefit of social media, if incorporated effectively into a communications and engagement strategy, is that it leverages these attributes, building value for both stakeholders and organizations.

The theory of deliberative democracy, as noted in my literature review, suggests that a broader cross-section of participants in a deliberation or a discussion that must result in an outcome generally improves the quality of the discussion and, because it limits mistakes and the impact of pre-existing biases (Bohman, 2007). Essentially, greater heterogeneity in political discourse can lead to better outcomes. Social media acts as a portal into an almost infinite number of spaces where these kinds of discussions can take place, as long as they have an Internet connection (Clarke, 2010). There is greater opportunity to distribute ideas, to receive feedback on those ideas, with the ability to ensure that no one source of information dominates the available channels. This provides the potential for new information and priorities to emerge

from the discussion, receiving attention that might not otherwise have been received (Clarke, 2010, p.4). Social media allows leaders to engage and be engaged directly, becoming a digital “public square” that compliments the physical public square inherent in the community meetings.

This is consistent with Hart’s five attributes found in Falkheimer (2015) discussed above. Authenticity and transparency are fostered by genuine opportunities for members and leaders to engage with one another directly. The ability to engage a broader spectrum of members creates the impression of decentralizing decision-making and authority. Information is more regularly distributed to members, and the ongoing digital discussion generates a sense of collaboration between actors, this enhancing the sense of investment in outcomes. To do this well, however, requires a thoughtful and consistent approach to leveraging social media. It cannot be casual or ad hoc. Harris and Harrigan (2015) note that if social media is used without consistency, a considered plan, and thoughtful implementation, it can serve to muddy the waters and result in the opposite of the intended outcome by undermining all five attributes. Put another way, “if organizations [are going to] take full advantage of social media, they would have to engage in genuine two-way communication with different stakeholders and not use social media as an additional venue for one-way information delivery” (Falkheimer & Heide, 2015, p.342).

The importance of the five attributes and deliberation are inherent in the historical approach to communication and engagement in the Settlements. What is required now is the effective translation of these elements into a digital strategy given the barriers and challenges

already discussed. With this in mind and considering the participatory nature of Settlement discourse on politics and community issues, we must also consider what would serve as the most effective social media application for this kind of engagement. To date, the Metis Settlements General Council has primarily used its own website as a platform to present a digital version of its newsletter *The Messenger*, and Twitter as Internet based information and engagement tools. While there has been uptake from some Settlement members on Twitter (an exact count is difficult to ascertain), there has been little else developed (Cunningham, S., 2018).

Twitter served as a pilot experiment conducted by MSGC in December of 2017 when the organization successfully broadcast its first “live-stream” using Twitter’s integration with Periscope – a video streaming application. MSGC leadership travelled to Ottawa to sign an historic Memorandum of Understanding with the Government of Canada and provided instructions to the Settlements and the main office in Edmonton on how to access the live-stream (Cunningham, G., 2018). Though the process was somewhat convoluted and there were some difficulties, to the Executives’ knowledge, it was the first time in the organization’s history where such an event was broadcast to all eight Settlements live and simultaneously. The feedback on this event was generally positive, with criticism mostly surrounding the lack of user-friendliness to access the stream if one did not have a Twitter account. Since there was no detailed communications plan at MSGC integrating this tool into a broader strategy, it was a one-off event with no follow-up. A subsequent YouTube video referenced the signing and explained to members what a Memorandum of Understanding and several YouTube updates have now appeared on an MSGC YouTube channel. Again, because a more detailed strategy was not

developed, the channel content is somewhat inconsistent which has resulted in a significant drop in views and negative feedback (Calliou, D, 2018).

These cases provide practical examples of the potential negative impact that social media use can have if it is implemented without considered planning. At the same time, they also provide an example of how key attributes of social media channels can be effectively leveraged to create value for members and leaders. The live stream of the signing was real-time and created an authentic window into how leaders approach governance. This window also added a layer of transparency to the process of negotiating and signing an important governance agreement with partners. Authenticity and transparency are two attributes of social media, as described in Falkheimer (2015) that were leveraged by using a communications channel effectively. The live stream was also enhanced by the choice of channel, Twitter, because it resulted in the rapid distribution of key information to members about their communities and it engaged users simultaneously. This is consistent with the release of information and collaboration attributes. Four of Hart's five social media attributes can be identified as present in the MSGC live stream. While the follow-up may not have been as consistent as it should have been, the test of a new channel was ultimately effective.

The MSGC leadership have made it clear that they are open to building a more robust social media presence. President Cunningham and Treasurer Cunningham both discussed their awareness of a Facebook group that is specifically for Settlement members, is closed to the public, and moderated by volunteers. The group is moderated by volunteer administrators and has become an open forum for members to discuss issues, post information, and provide support

to one another (Cunningham, G., 2018). Mr. Cunningham himself participates in the group and says that the benefits seem to outweigh the negatives, but that there are negatives. He indicated that a great deal of misinformation, or information out of context, tends to make its way into the group, and that at times, the tone of discussion has become negative. He spends time, in his capacity as President, reading posts and discussions, and trying to provide context or perspective, and answer questions, as they come up. Treasurer Cunningham, however, does not feel it is necessarily worth the trouble. She noted an incident in the group “where elected officials were being personally attacked and threatened by members” (Cunningham, S., 2018). She added, “why bother opening yourself up to that kind of attack when all you’re trying to do is keep members informed and do your job” (Cunningham, S., 2018). She did acknowledge that if MSGC were to consider establishing its own page where comments and discussions could be strictly monitored to ensure that they remained respectful, she would be open to trying it.

Based on comments from these Executives and the results of my online survey, developing an MSGC Facebook page is a social media option that fits with how members want to engage with information, provides a forum for discussion, and informs them of developments at the head office. President Cunningham wants to continue to utilize Twitter as a broader channel to reach stakeholders both in the Settlement and beyond. He believes with a more detailed plan, YouTube can provide an alternative information channel for members who are more visual and prefer video content to dense written content. All three of these options can be integrated into a single strategy and given Facebook’s multi-modality – its ability to incorporate video content and tweets into a user’s page – the platform could become a single point of contact with multiple streams of information.



## **Why Facebook?**

Given that the MSGC's social media usage has been fairly limited until now, my recommendation would be to begin developing a strategy that includes social media slowly. If most of the Settlement members that the organization is trying to reach are already using Facebook as their primary social media tool, it does not make sense for MSGC to adopt an application that would also then require them to entice users to adopt. Rather, go where the crowd already is. This would not only make the development of their Facebook presence more manageable, it is a more efficient use of their limited resources with many potential benefits.

The Queensland Government in Australia published a webpage on their own site designed to provide information and advice to businesses (Business Queensland, 2016). Included on this page is a sub-page that provides insight into the benefits of adopting Facebook as a business. Much of what is there applies to the MSGC scenario as well. The site notes that Facebook is a low-cost marketing strategy, allowing users to engage in marketing activities that might otherwise be very expensive for a fraction of the cost (Benefits of Facebook for Business, 2016). The MSGC Executives note in the focus group that their limited resources and the cost of outreach have become a barrier to their engagement with members. While they are not necessarily marketing a product to members, they are presenting ideas and could leverage this function to amplify their message to Settlement members.

The Queensland webpage also confirms that Facebook has the functionality to share pictures, videos, and live-stream as an organization, allowing members to get a glimpse into how MSGC functions, receive visual updates, and potentially view live-streamed assembly and board

meetings (Benefits of Facebook for Business, 2016). The ability to provide support or information to members following the implementation of a decision or an initiative can be managed using Facebook as well. The webpage describes this as customer support but is also applicable to MSGC stakeholders. Settlement members would have the ability to provide feedback, begin and participate in issue-based discussions on MSGC posts, and share their content to the Facebook page or share MSGC content from the page with others. MSGC would also have the ability to monitor, moderate, and collect data about the people engaging with their page and content (Benefits of Facebook for Business, 2016). A Facebook page in this context encourages participation, which is consistent with the historical approach to community-based discussion on issues and politics. If that kind of participatory engagement is already an approach favoured by the target audience, it should be leveraged to encourage greater participation.

Facebook as a platform is also conducive to leveraging central tenets of the theory of deliberative democracy outlined in my literature review. It is a digital public sphere, which is consistent with Habermas' view that deliberations should be done publicly and transparently (Edwards, 2015, p.5). It facilitates direct two-way engagement between Settlement members and Settlement leaders, rapid dissemination of relevant information, and space for real-time discussion that may allow new information and ideas to emerge (Clarke, 2010). It also creates a channel through which leaders and members can justify their decisions or positions to one another (Gutman & Thompson, 2004, p.3). For this reason, I assert that developing a communications strategy that includes a social media plan predicated on utilizing the strengths of Facebook as a tool, leveraging the predispositions to engagement and discussion found in Settlement politics and community building – predispositions that are consistent with the five

attributes of social media – the Metis Settlements General Council can use social media to enhance how they engage with Settlement members on community issues and politics.

I make that assertion with the following qualification. In order to mitigate any of the potentially negative outcomes associated with social media usage, it is necessary for MSGC to develop a thoughtful and detailed strategy to manage their Facebook page. If the organization does not map out content and create a schedule for updates and posting that is consistently followed, the outcomes may not be as intended. Monitoring, for example, is necessary to ensure that inappropriate content or aggressive behavior does not manifest on the public forum. Furthermore, without consistency, the credibility of the organization, based on their social media presence, could be undermined. This echoes the caution provided by Harris & Harrigan (2015) in which they liken social media to a double-edged sword if poorly managed. Social media can be a breeding ground for negative populism and manipulation, even when it is effectively managed, but more so if it is neglected (Engesser, Ernst, Esser & Büchel, 2017, p.1109). Finally, as Nickesia Gordon lamented in Langmia & Tyree (2016), the easy-to-use nature of a social media application like Facebook, combined with its omnipresence and seeming limitless user base, can lead organizations to feel a false sense of accomplishment. Simply posting or sharing can be regarded as equivalent to making meaningful connections. Making information available to an audience is not the same as connecting with an audience; there are no guarantees that anyone has engaged with your posts in a meaningful way (Gordon in Langmia & Tyree, 2016, p.164). As I noted in the literature view section, a social media strategy is not as simple as hitting “post” and walking away.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

Given the information that I have presented in this paper, it would be difficult to conclude that social media does not represent a real opportunity for the Metis Settlements and the Metis Settlements General Council in their efforts to enhance the way they engage their members. As I have noted that the Settlements have a multi-layered and complex structure in terms of community, governance, and politics. At the core, the Settlements function on direct engagement and active participation by members in community issues and decision-making. I call this a participatory engagement model. Members do not just reside in the Settlements, they have a responsibility to steward the communities and participate in the processes that allow them to function. The traditional approaches to consultation and engagement in the Settlements – community meetings, leadership tours to present and solicit feedback on issues, and reporting on actions or decisions through newsletters – are still very much a part of Settlement life and are unlikely to be completely replaced or withdrawn. What has become apparent, however, is that the costs associated with these methods are not necessarily sustainable and therefore they must be augmented with cost-effective and efficient alternatives. This is where social media has a role to play. Elders or “non-technologically inclined” individuals must remain a part of the process and can still be consulted and informed using traditional methods. With technology, a wider net spanning all eight Settlements can be cast, resulting in greater diversity of opinions, of feedback, and ultimately, of discourse. Integrating social media with the use of other communications tools, in a thoughtful and carefully planned way, makes sense.

## **Limitations**

Settlement members are clearly using social media. The results of my online survey support this assertion. Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram are the most widely used channels, with Facebook being used by more than 90 % of respondents. These results are compelling but must also be considered in the context of potential weaknesses with this approach. First, the survey was conducted online. Therefore, anyone choosing to participate would already have some basic level of technological savvy and be using the Internet. Second, in order to reach a broad cross-section of potential participants from all eight Settlements given the limited time and resources inherent in the scope of this capstone paper, the link to the survey was posted in the “Metis Voices” Facebook group. There are over 800 Settlement members included in this group (Cunningham, G., 2018) and roughly 7.1 % responded to my online survey. These respondents, however, are already using Facebook and this may have biased the results in favour of Facebook as the preferred social media application. Finally, as it was an online survey delivered through a Facebook group, the results may overrepresent social media users, leading to the inference that more members are using social media than actually are. Due to limited resources, I was not able to travel to each Settlement to conduct an in-person survey or interviews and, as a result, feedback from non-Internet, non-Facebook users is not represented in my data.

## **Future Research**

Notwithstanding these considerations, I assert that the data, although preliminary and exploratory in nature, is a promising start that provides direction for both further research and next steps for the Metis Settlements General Council. Future research on this topic should

evaluate the barriers created by a lack of reliable Internet infrastructure. In the focus group with the three MSGC Executives, each noted that many Settlements have “spotty” or unreliable access to consistent Internet, let alone high-speed internet. This could impede activities such as the ability to access live-streaming video, which consumes a lot of data capacity and requires a stable internet connection. Future research should also provide some discussion and analysis of the situations on the ground in each of the eight Settlements, with regards to social media use in political and community discourse. It would be valuable to conduct an in-person survey and interviews to compare against my results, determining whether there was an overrepresentation of social media users and biases to Facebook usage in my results.

### **Next Steps**

In terms of next steps for the Metis Settlements General Council, I recommend that they review the results presented in this paper and use them as a guidepost to determine an effective approach to integrating social media channels into their strategic communications. Based on the data presented here, there is a compelling case for the development of a plan to incorporate Facebook as a channel into their broader communications strategy. A detailed communications plan should be developed to guide how the Facebook channel is deployed and maintained, with policies in place to govern usage. The leadership at MSGC must also be clear about the potential risks associated with social media and their planning should incorporate strategies to mitigate those risks. Regular monitoring, rules for posting, and possibly a code of conduct that must be agreed to in order to participate in discussions or activities on the MSGC Facebook page would be a good first step in this process.

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