

The ideal cancel culture would be quitting social media

Elon Musk's plan to spend \$44 billion acquiring Twitter probably doesn't involve making it better, at least not in terms of mitigating the harms of social media. If he succeeds in making it a private company, it would be subject to rules of his own making, his and his alone.

We don't know exactly what that might mean, but we are already well aware of the predominantly negative impact of social media, especially its use as a tool of misinformation and divisiveness. The technology can be and is the enemy of facts, and the opposite of considered thought.

That may be why Chris Licht, who next month takes over as head of CNN, has vowed to forego his Twitter account.

"May 2 will be my first official day in the office at CNN & my last day on Twitter," he tweeted last week. "Twitter can be a great journalistic tool, but it can also skew what's really important in the world. I'm logging off & looking forward to working with the incredible team at CNN."

The technology has its positive uses, but is largely employed for non-productive purposes, whether that's mindless, ill-considered abdication of personal privacy or outright falsehoods for profit and/or political gain.

Such is the technological prison that we've built for ourselves, allowing companies and the authorities to invade our lives despite their ill intentions ... and gleefully joining in by not making even the simplest attempts at protecting our privacy.

At a time when governments are increasingly bent on taking away our privacy and other rights, we're often our own worst



STEVE KANNON
Editor's
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enemies when it comes to exposing ourselves to the world, literally, in many cases.

For young people in particular, the tendency to post the details of their lives on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and other social media sites comes with a host of perils.

Even young people are starting to become aware of that. While social media, such as Facebook and Instagram, are popular for sharing photos and other aspects of people's lives, many users are worried that their postings could have an impact on their job prospects. Such young social media users think that something they posted could come back to haunt them.

A form of "day-after

remorse" seems to be evident. An increasing number of users say that they have removed or taken down a photo or other social media posting because they feared it could lead to repercussions with an employer.

But just because you delete something you've posted, that doesn't mean it's gone. Chances are it's been captured by archiving sites and will live on, perhaps longer than you do.

Internet sites like Facebook exist to harvest information, sell it to advertisers and target you with personalized ads. Tracking is the norm, as is collecting as many details as possible of what each of us does online. There's nothing neutral about most of it: this is not just a sociology study, though, of course, it's that too.

Leaving aside the issue of why exactly people feel

compelled to post the up-to-the-second minutia of their lives, there's a danger of what you post being used against you.

There's an obvious peril to posting about illicit acts – not uncommon, if not bright – but a less obvious risk comes with not-criminal-but-damning posts sought out by prospective employers. In fact, people going in for interviews are now sometimes asked for Facebook login names and passwords right on the spot so that the interviewers can poke around their online lives.

Already a dubious phenomenon, the ironically named social media sites – led by the likes of Facebook, Twitter and a thousand variants of Instagram and Pinterest – has descended into little more than partisan flame wars, blatant marketing and outright propaganda.

Coupled with the

undermining of privacy – embraced by governments not the least bit eager to protect their citizens – the sorry state of affairs should leave no one upset if they all suddenly went away tomorrow. Such would be a reason to rejoice, in fact.

There's very little social about such sites, at least in the conventional human sense of the word. The occasional use is one thing – though the sites, along with the ubiquitous Google, are mining data, joined by the likes of the NSA – but there are many people, many of them young, who spend too much time and think too little of the consequences.

More than just too much information, poor judgment and bullying, such time spent online has societal implications.

The tech companies are developing increasingly sophisticated tools for

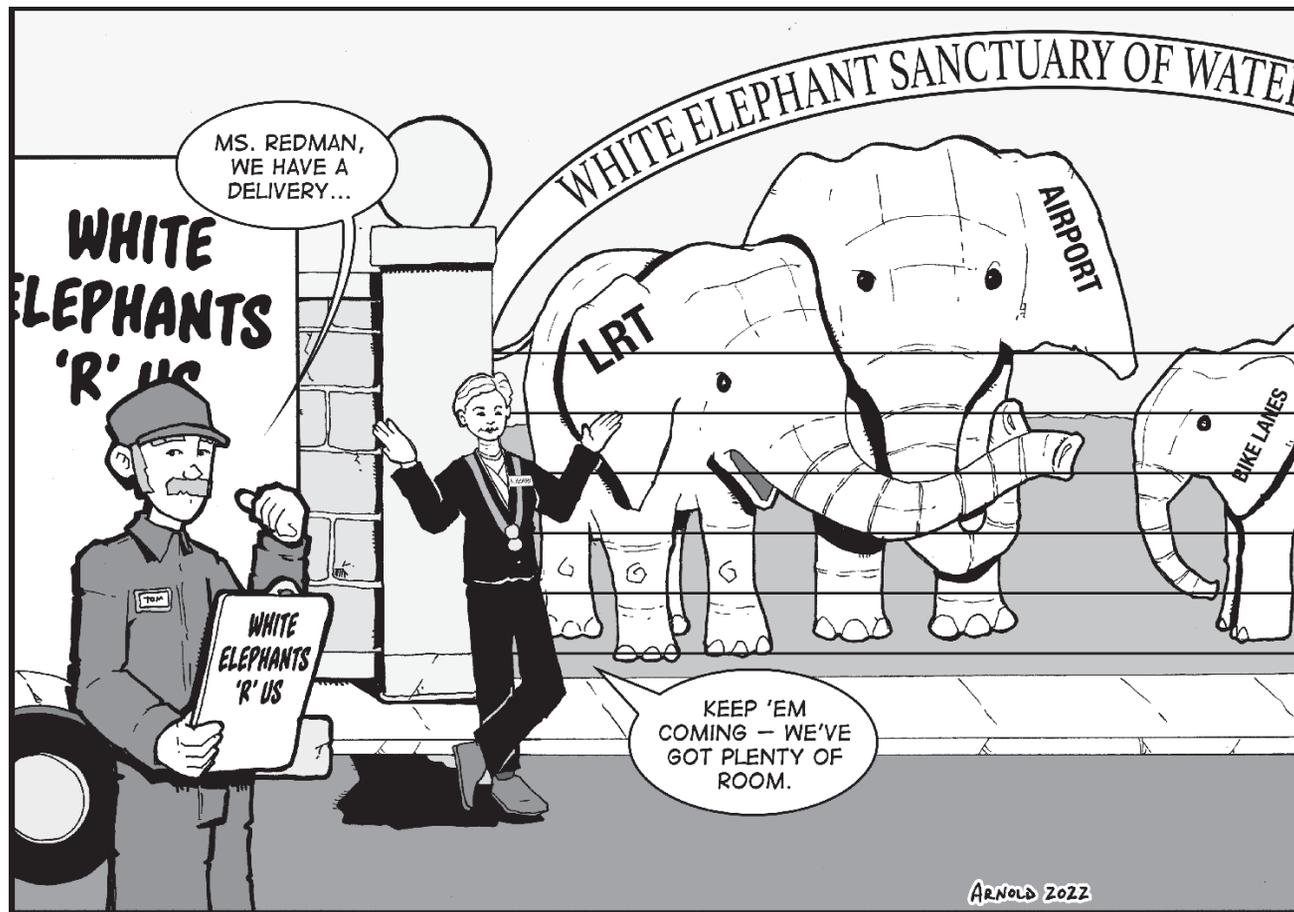
gathering up large swathes of online data – the things you post and like on Facebook, for instance – in order to both predict your behaviour and to sway it. This goes beyond targeted advertising, which is itself somewhat problematic.

Even those who helped develop social media sites and software are warning of the perils of technology, particularly the tendency to addiction – intentionally programmed – and the loss of privacy. While such revelations are useful, they're often followed by positing "solutions" that involve yet more technology, rather than actual solutions, such as laws forbidding data mining, collection of personal data and demanding rapid expiration of personal information, under penalty of civil and criminal charges.

That, however, is beyond the pale, as governments are the leading violators of your privacy.

At this point, expecting governments and tech conglomerates to fix the problems they've created by intent is like putting the Big Bad Wolf in charge of building houses for the Three Little Pigs. The proposed "remedies" for the ills of social media – taking spa day breaks from your smartphone to counter addiction or installing additional apps to tweak the phones security – are really just defences of the status quo.

Beyond selling us stuff and feeding us more click bait, the real dangers lie in using the data as part of a propaganda effort. There are plenty of people looking to use and abuse your personal information, in both the public and private sectors. There's no need to make it any easier for them. Or to worry if Musk loses some or all of his \$44 billion.



Adhering to an "if you build it they will come" philosophy, the region pays no mind to taxpayers' wallets.

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Frittering at the edges while missing the mark on what's important

FEW WOULD TAKE ISSUE WITH the creation of a new trailway – take the regional government's 'market trail' that was officially opened last week, for instance. They might balk, however, at the almost \$3 million price tag – and growing – associated with the 1.5-kilometre link between the St. Jacobs Farmers' Market and the Northfield Drive area of Waterloo.

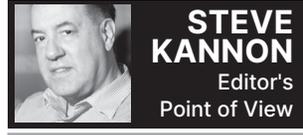
In a related move, the Region of Waterloo also approved the latest iteration of its official plan – ostensibly the overarching growth strategy, but subject to frequent changes and legal challenges – that focuses on reducing sprawl and promoting what it calls active transportation (walking, cycling) and public transit.

Not coincidentally, it touts projects such as the market trail as promoting active transportation. That's true ... in theory. For the most part, trails and bike lanes are recreation, not transportation. And the numbers are fairly inconsequential.

We go for a walk. Or go for a bike ride. It's not about getting around under our own steam rather than getting behind the wheel. Getting from A to B is what the car is for.

Walking and cycling are much more ideal ways of getting around from an environmental standpoint. They also have the bonus of providing us with more exercise. In Woolwich Township, the many trails encourage people to hike recreationally. Pathways and connections to larger trail networks are increasingly common in subdivisions. It is indeed easy to get out and go for a walk in a comfortable and safe setting.

That kind of infrastructure does make the area



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more walkable, and providing it is relatively easy. Where things get trickier is when it comes to seeing walking or cycling as an alternative to driving. We are hooked on the automobile. Getting us to give them up is going to take a lot more work than simply improving the trail system.

Advocates for on-road bike lanes argue that adding to the inventory would get more people out using them, pointing to surveys that show safety concerns are why people don't cycle more often. Of course, the real reasons why we don't cycle more often are similar to why we don't walk more often, exercise regularly, eat healthier foods and spend less time in front of a video screen of some sort: we

don't want to. But few of us will come out and say that, making endless excuses to ourselves. We're certainly going to answer questions in a way that puts our sedentary lifestyles in the best light.

So, where cycling is concerned, it's safety and lack of bike lanes/trails that keep us out of the saddle, rather than copping to things we don't even want to admit to ourselves.

Responsible governance would preclude making policy decisions based on wishful thinking, but ...

Still, more walking would be a good idea. It's an easy, no-cost form of exercise. Better still if we could or would incorporate it into the transportation portion of our days, but that's still not possible for most of us ... at least when we're not in weekend mode or on vacation.

For decades now, we've

had a model of suburban sprawl – low-density living that relies on roads to connect our homes to shops and workplaces. In the region, it's pretty difficult to get around without a car. The transit system is not particularly well used – an epic understatement – especially outside of the main transit corridors, which means pretty much the bulk of the area. The townships are beyond the pale.

As for transit, it's fast and convenient – and sometimes even inexpensive – in other parts of the world. Why not here? Never mind the geographical distances, car culture and premium placed on our time ... we'll plow ahead in a small, makeshift way, spending much in return for little.

Still, the region is pressing forward with its ill-considered transit and active transportation schemes.

More highrise buildings are being erected.

Tens of millions are being poured into downtown redevelopment.

This is all driven by an optimism that these moves will bring change. Positive change, as opposed to what's happened generally.

Hopefully, that is the case. Happening, walkable, livable cities would be ideal.

All of this is predicated on ever-more growth, despite the fact constant growth – the Ponzi scheme that is our economy – is not sustainable. It also depends on separating taxpayers from even more of their money, despite spending that outstrips economic growth (there's that word again) and people's incomes. Most troubling, it depends on people changing their behaviours in large enough numbers to make any of it work.

The ideal of so-called compact communities puts me in mind of Europe, where densities are higher and people live within an easy walk or bike ride of most of the amenities of daily living. Because most communities developed before the advent of the automobile, they're very much people-centric as opposed to the car-centered towns and cities of North America.

People actually do walk and cycle as a means of transportation, not just recreation. Public transit is convenient and well used. In short, the antithesis of how we do things here. Living there, you can quite easily do without a car.

Of course, vehicles are more expensive, gas prices astronomical and parking spaces limited, putting a real damper on the kind of automobile enthusiasm seen in North America.

Still, when I picture the kind of community, I see the old towns of Dublin or Paris or Munich: striking architecture, walled courtyards, narrow winding streets, local shops offering fresh-baked bread, quaint cafés and small walk-up office buildings with brass plates announcing the names of doctors, lawyers and architects.

Trouble is, that ideal isn't likely to translate here, the land of vinyl siding, asphalt and big-box retail.

In all the talk of more human-scale communities, there's no mention of aesthetics. For me, that's the make-it-or-break-it part of the equation: our ugly built environments foster neither pride of place nor a desire to be out on foot, interacting with the place where we live something to enjoy in its own right. It's going to take a monumental effort

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The rainbow, it seems, has been put to more than one use, not all of them cause for political concern.

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Sunshine list is supposed to make us irate enough to demand change

There's nothing like the annual sunshine list to get us all hot under the collar ... unless we're one of those lucky enough to be on it.

The annual list of those public sector employees making more than \$100,000 continues to grow by leaps and bounds. It now includes some 244,000 workers, up 19 per cent from 205,000 in 2020.

Beyond pushing more people into the top five per cent of wage earners (well, earning is a bit of stretch, to many minds), such pay now eats up some 55 per cent of all program spending.

We spend more, and get less as a rule, all the while paying the non-productive part of the economy at twice the rate of what the average taxpayer makes.

Unchecked spending, particularly on salaries, benefits and pensions, has driven up taxes and contributed to the souring of public opinion beyond what lying and corrupt politicians have historically been able to do all on their own.

Even politicians, never eager to act in the public interest except to save their skins, are taking note. It's the impetus behind talk of restraint, though that's gone out the door at the federal and municipal levels, with even the Ford government at Queen's Park being criticized for failing to follow through on much-needed reforms. We're moving away from any kind of accountability from government.

"Many Ontario taxpayers have seen their pay cut or businesses closed, but meanwhile government employees were busy getting raises," says Jay Goldberg, Ontario director of the Canadian Taxpayers Federation. "As we've seen



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throughout the pandemic, we're clearly not all in this together."

The organization is calling on the province to reel in the bureaucracy given that the sunshine list showed the number of government employees making \$100,000 or more grew by 38,536.

Ontario's debt exceeds \$440 billion, with this year's deficit projected to be \$13.1 billion.

"Ontario is the most indebted sub-national government in the entire world," said Goldberg. "It's time for the government to start acting like it and that means reducing the size and cost of the bureaucracy."

While governments expanded and salaries increased through the

pandemic, the belt-tightening most of us endured leaves us in no mood to accept that others aren't sharing in the hardships. That goes double for those people paid from the ever-increasing taxes taken from our diminishing paycheques.

Various forums, blogs and news sites are filled with vitriol aimed at civil service employees. Talk of inflated wages, generous benefits, casual working conditions and job security fuel countless rants. While many exaggerate the situation, there's no arguing there is a growing income gap between public employees and the average taxpayer. When times are tough, the simmering dissatisfaction with that unsustainable situation is bound to boil over. The anger is building up a good head of steam.

The annual sunshine list

is fuel on the fire.

There's been an upward trend since reporting such salaries was made mandatory beginning in 1996. The idea was to show the public how many government employees were pulling in large dollars, even as their unions cried poor in the face of the tougher fiscal policies. We were meant to be ticked off by the long inventory of names.

Back then, there were 4,319 names on the list. Today it's grown by a factor of 56.

Perusing the list, few Ontarians would have trouble with the salaries paid to doctors, researchers and similar professionals. There are more than raised eyebrows however over bus drivers, utility workers, janitors, firefighters, educators and the like raking in money far in excess of what the average taxpayer makes. Facing

ever-increasing electricity bills – again, much higher costs for no additional benefit – we're rightly ticked off to see workers from Ontario Power Generation walking on sunshine. That includes the highest figure on the list, OPG's chief executive Kenneth Hartwick, who was paid \$1,628,246. (We no longer receive updates about the thousands more at Hydro One thanks to former premier Kathleen Wynne's decision to sell off part of the public asset in order to help cover up her fiscal mismanagement.)

Inclusion on the list puts government employees in the top five per cent of all earners in the province.

Once seen as a place where job security came with lower wages, public service now means higher-than-average pay, benefits and working conditions. As the public

sector grows, it becomes an even bigger burden.

Salary figures indicate a growing gap between civil service wages and the average earning of private sector employees. The discrepancy is likely to increase, as average industry wages will remain stagnant or decline dramatically in some industries as layoffs take hold. Even though the recession is officially over, unemployment remains high and private-sector wages depressed.

The gap and resultant drag on society is well documented in recent studies, as others pile on to show the negatives of the public sector.

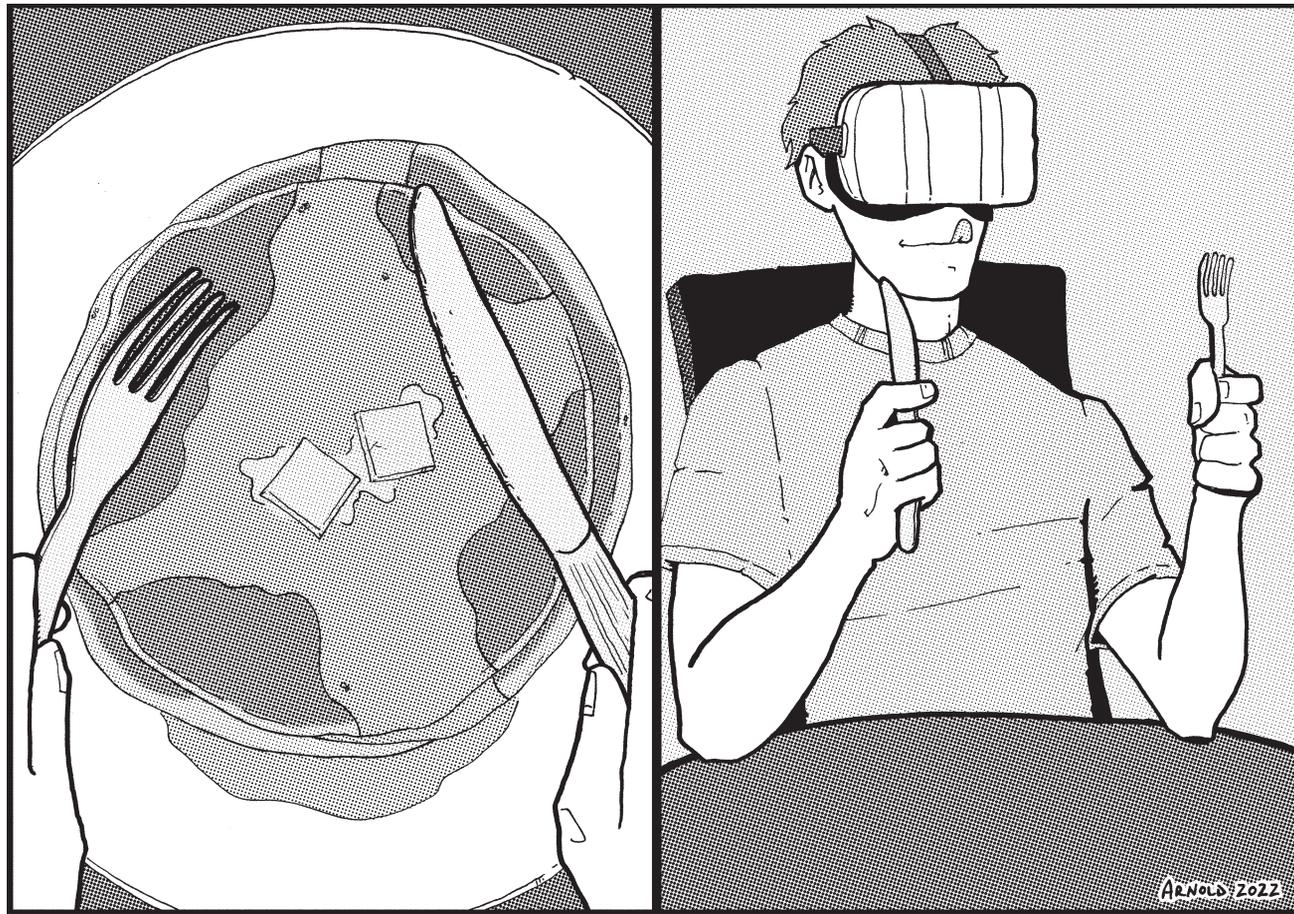
The combined size of the federal, provincial, and municipal governments increased in all but two provinces over the 2007 to 2019 period relative to the sizes of their economies, finds a new study released by the right-leaning Fraser Institute

"The size of government increased in eight of ten provinces and the country as a whole going into the pandemic," said Alex Whalen, policy analyst at the Fraser Institute and co-author of *The Size of Government in Canada* in 2019.

The study measures federal, provincial, and local government spending in each province as a share of the economy (GDP) from 2007 to 2019, the most recent year of comparable data. Both 2007 and 2019 preceded a recession and thus provide an opportunity to compare like-years.

It finds that government size grew in every province except Saskatchewan and Prince Edward Island during that period. In 2019, the size of government relative to the economy as a whole across

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With the EMSF going virtual again, some experiences will have to await the return of in-person activities.

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