

Verified-as-Canadian Content? Bill C-11 and the Platform Infrastructure of the Verified Badge System

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On October 27, 2022, Elon Musk became the new owner and CEO of Twitter. By October 30, 2022, Musk tweeted that the verified badge, known as the “blue check” (despite it being a white checkmark on a blue background), [was being “revamped.”](#) It would now become a paid-for-feature of Twitter’s existing subscription product, Twitter Blue. The change would require current blue-check holders to pay USD \$7.99 a month (the price negotiated down from USD \$19 by Stephen King on Musk’s Twitter thread) to keep their blue check. For everyone else, a subscription to Twitter Blue could *buy* you that blue check without undergoing the same verification process that had been required of the legacy blue-check holders. When the new feature launched on November 5, 2022, [there was a rapid increase of impersonations](#) with newly paid-for blue checks posed as companies like Eli Lilly, McDonalds, Nintendo, and American Girl. Since then there have been even bigger changes to the system; [Twitter began winding down its legacy verification program on April 1, 2023](#), and is now charging all users for the service, including [major organizations](#).

Prior to Twitter’s fiasco, platform companies had increasingly used tools like verification to distinguish between official and unofficial sources. The online adult video platform, Pornhub, announced they had removed all verified videos, [limiting uploads to verified users only](#), following an investigative opinion piece by *The New York Times*’s Nicolas Kristof that [followed the lives of sexual abuse victims](#) whose videos were uploaded to the site.

Other platforms use “verification” to distinguish between sources, often framing these efforts within concerns about safety and trustworthiness. For instance, [Airbnb announced in 2019 that it would verify all of its listings](#), including the accuracy of photographs, addresses, and other information posted by hosts about themselves and their properties. In 2020, [Tinder rolled out a blue checkmark verification system](#) to deter catfishing, asking users to take selfies in real time and match poses in sample images. Prior to its takeover by Elon Musk, Twitter [opened a draft of their new verification system to public comment](#).

Recognizing that they have offered verification as a service to brands and organizations, other platforms are also moving in the direction of Twitter and charging this as security infrastructure. For instance, [Meta recently unveiled Meta Verified](#), a subscription bundle on Instagram and Facebook that authenticates creators’ accounts with government ID, proactive account protection, access to account support, and increased visibility and reach. Though this sort of pay-to-play arrangement does not benefit creators (or perhaps anyone), it does demonstrate that verification is becoming a type of infrastructure that platforms now offer.

In the current debate about Bill C-11, the *Online Streaming Act*, the verified badge system is one example of a tool that platforms can use to balance the needs and interests of Canadians with the realities of platforms where commercial and user-generated content converge. Verification has

not yet been featured in these discussions. However, the verified badge system – currently in flux at so many different platforms – may offer a way to differentiate between the different sources of content – official and unofficial, commercial and non-commercial content, Canadian and not Canadian – that converge over online platforms.

Verified Canadian Content?

The term **verification** has had multiple and varied meanings within platform governance. Emily van der Nagel defined verification as “[the confirmation that an account is linked with a particular person.](#)” She draws on [Craig Robertson](#) to argue that verification “draws on official personal information.” The longstanding internet debate regarding pseudonymity and anonymity online sees verification as synonymous with “[real names.](#)”

Verification has also come to signify status and notability. Though not all users are eligible to be “verified” (in the blue checkmark sense), those who are verified often have to provide official government identification. In one sense, this is a form of “identity confirmation” of the more famous users of platforms. Some policies – such as those implemented in 2014 by both [Instagram](#) and [YouTube](#) – were created to [address the identity concerns of their high-status members.](#)

But platforms have also viewed verification as one solution to the broader problem of trustworthiness or credibility online, often framed narrowly within the lens of mis- and disinformation. In some cases, verification is used to mediate and highlight credible and authoritative information—as was the case with Twitter during the early stages of COVID-19 [or content from platform-approved](#) sources (the case with Pornhub). In all of these senses, verification signals a broader shift in content moderation away from *content* and toward *sources*.

Within the Canadian context, there is an open question as to whether the verified badge might solve some of the issues around what constitutes *Canadian content* within spaces where both traditional media and user-generated media co-exist. When it comes to Bill C-11, the *Online Streaming Act*, there has been considerable back-and-forth on whether the law will apply to digital creators. Many creators and tech platforms, as well as experts such as [Michael Geist](#) and [Dwayne Winseck](#), have argued against the inclusion of user-generated content within the Bill. However, the Canadian Heritage Minister [Pablo Rodriguez rejected a Senate amendment to narrowly tailor the Bill](#) and scope the regulation of social media services to “the distribution of commercial programs” over services like Netflix. This means that C-11 will (unless it is changed) apply to TikToks, YouTube videos, and other user-generated content. How the CRTC establishes the requirements for regulating this type of content is still to be determined.

When it comes to distinguishing Canadian content, platforms like YouTube have said that *their* focus is “[protecting the livelihood of digital Canadian creators.](#)” They have said that implementing C-11 will introduce new concerns for those creators, who may be downranked if their content is surfaced to users *because it is Canadian*, and not because it is *relevant*. There is evidence [that within an algorithmic model \(rather than, for instance, a subscription model\)](#) this may be the case. Although algorithms do take location into account – such as through geolocation, or recommending content your friends and family like, which might also be Canadian – recommendation algorithms are optimized mostly for predicting engagement.

Still, as the verified badge system demonstrates, particularly in Twitter and Meta's recent changes, the verified badge could *both* differentiate between types of content or sources *and* offer a route [to increase visibility and reach](#). Although the CRTC will need to decide what constitutes "Canadian content" for creators and other user-generated content, it may be useful to explore what a "verified Canadian badge" may look like, how users can self-select into these programs, and how that infrastructure could be used to direct resources – both attention and otherwise – to Canadian creators.