

Clowning Around in Journalism: Exploring Local Journalistic Practices Defined by yyc.clowns

Sheroog Kubur

Abstract

Traditional legacy media have found themselves between a rock and a hard place – struggling to find their foothold with younger audiences and at the same time, forced to adapt to the demands of the industry minimizing the presence of local journalism. While social media has proven itself to be a means of connecting journalists to audiences, it is still unclear who is truly seeking out these journalists. The dominant perspectives on how social media could help address the challenges journalism faces today have been primarily preoccupied with how social media is used by traditional legacy media to connect with audiences. This study instead turns to social media environments where the people are seeking to connect to their local news through a well-known social media page in Calgary, yyc.clowns (now known as yycwave). The Instagram page has sustained a large following since 2019 and experimented with several types of content but has consistently remained a source of news for its large following, providing coverage and reporting on major stories of interest within Calgary. Through a discourse analysis of six news posts made by the account, this study seeks to answer how yyc.clowns defines the practices of local journalism, situating it as a viable source of news for its followers. This project consists of a video essay exploring the findings alongside a written literature review and discussion. The Instagram page acts as a liaison between its audience and legacy media, borrowing directly from legacy media news sources to deliver timely coverage of local topics of interest. This opens up the horizon for understanding how these popular social media accounts act as intermediaries allowing audiences that may not engage with legacy media to still receive news of relatively high quality.

Keywords

Local journalism, discourse analysis, citizen journalism, social media, Instagram

[Watch the Video Essay Here](#)



UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY
Department of Communication,
Media and Film

ISSN 2817-2051

© The Author(s). 2024 Open Access This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made. The Creative Commons Public Domain Dedication waiver (<http://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/>) applies to the data made available in this article, unless otherwise stated.

Introduction

Journalism is still alive and well, despite the decline of the professional journalistic sphere. However, there seems to be a disconnect between professional journalism and news reporting, namely due to the economic crisis of journalism (Splichal & Dahlgren, 2016; Meyers & Davidson, 2016). These pressures spawned a form of news reporting that is both initiated by citizens and appeals to its audiences. The Instagram page *yyc.clowns* has developed a sizable following since it started posting in October of 2019, currently sitting at 69 thousand followers, just slightly more than the official Instagram page for CBC Calgary (CBC Calgary, n.d.) and almost 40 thousand more than CTV Calgary (CTV Calgary, n.d.). The page brands itself as the “#1 Calgary news and entertainment page,” and since 2019, has taken on a different look and quality, offering news updates and coverage of local news while maintaining steady engagement for these posts (YYC Clowns, n.d.; Social Blade, 2023). The news coverage is combined with entertaining memes and commentary about mundane life in Calgary. The transformation of *yyc.clowns* from a local meme forum to a culturally significant source of Calgary news warrants some investigation.

This research aims to uncover how *yyc.clowns* defines the practices of local journalism in Calgary. It plans to investigate this question by exploring the practices of *yyc.clowns* as they relate to journalistic practices and comparing them to traditional journalistic practices. From there, it will evaluate these practices to uncover how local journalism is practiced in Calgary in a way that appeals to a large audience.

Literature Review

A major theme in the literature surrounding journalistic practices and social media is the issue of journalistic control. Journalistic control embodies multiple dimensions; however, it can be best understood as the ways in which journalists are trusted as the primary mediators in interpreting social realities (Meyers & Davidson, 2016). Many of the issues raised regarding social media and citizen journalism are predicated on the professional journalist losing some degree of control and authority in news reporting.

The relevant literature concerning citizens and professionals directs its attention to the tensions that exist between citizen and professional journalism. The literature frequently cites the idea that ‘anyone can be a journalist,’ and seeks to uncover the differences between these

different forms of journalistic practices as they relate to news coverage (Greenwood & Thomas, 2015; Larson & Linder, 2018; Paulussen & D'heer, 2013). These discussions are frequently situated in the context of the economic crisis that journalism faces, namely the lack of adequate and reliable funding combined with an increased desire for trustworthy news coverage (Splichal & Dahlgren, 2016; Meyers & Davidson, 2016). The economic crisis of journalism also contributes to its de-professionalization, where journalism no longer fits in the parameters of what constitutes a profession (Splichal & Dahlgren, 2016). As journalism relies on a professional authority to do its job properly (Meyers & Davidson, 2016), without this professional authority, there is a risk of news reporting being outsourced elsewhere. This authority is consequently threatened because of the deterioration of the journalistic profession and the increase in alternative news sites to fill in these gaps (Paulussen & D'heer, 2013).

Evolving from citizen journalism news sites, there is a lengthy discussion into how professional journalists use social media and how this can be reconciled with deteriorating journalistic authority. Studies unpack how journalists interact with social media in particular, exploring both the affordances of social media sites in addressing some of the issues in journalism and how the journalist can use social media to regain some professional authority (Hermida & Mellado, 2020) in addition to how social media threatens professional authority (Ferrucci, 2018). Alfred Hermida and Claudia Mellado's 2020 study into social media logic coinciding with journalistic practices strongly displays a trend in these studies by highlighting how Instagram and Twitter can effectively be used in accordance with news values. This is further contextualized by Jonathan Hendrickx's 2023 study into social journalism, in which he attempts to understand how news values are implemented in a social media context by journalists attempting to appeal to a younger audience. Both of these studies exemplify the trend of how journalists interact with social media and their audiences effectively and identify opportunities for professional journalists to further utilize these tools.

A newer line of thinking considers how journalistic practices are shaped both by the journalist and the audience. Relevant literature suggests that journalists interact more with their audiences and more intentionally, relying on the audience to show them what they desire to be covered (Hendrickx, 2023). Michael Karlsson and Christer Clerwall's 2018 study unpacks how journalistic norms and practices are socially constructed and illustrates how the audience's perception of these norms and practices takes form today. This research is reflected in

discussions of social media and journalists, where journalists can respond to audience engagement with news coverage by allowing that engagement to inform news coverage (Hendrickx, 2023; Hermida & Mellado, 2020). This highlights a changing conception of journalistic practices as they relate to both the audience and social media. However, there is no discussion of how these factors contribute to a potential re-professionalization of journalism.

Much of the literature on the subject focuses on professional journalists and their reaction to the evolving practices. Despite some literature privileging the audience's perception of journalism, there is little discussion of the interaction between citizen journalists and their audiences. The position of the professional journalist is inflated in much of the research, often framing the understanding of social media and citizen journalism through the context of professional journalism. This sidelines citizen journalism that either does not adhere to traditional journalistic practices or dismisses where the audience seeks out news reporting. Additionally, there is a tendency in research to only address citizen journalism that exhibits isomorphism, or how it closely resembles professional journalism. The goal of this research is to address these gaps by privileging citizen journalism that defines its own practices without the limitations of professional journalism. This type of citizen journalism is worthy of being studied because it reflects a return to a form of journalism beyond institutional and professional constraints.

This contributes to the understanding of the professionalization of journalism because, while journalism as a profession may be threatened, the practice of journalism is alive and well. The de-professionalization of journalism may constitute a return to the professional ideology of journalism and these practices may be a return to the public service purpose of journalism.

There is also a significant gap in investigating how Instagram is used as a journalistic tool. While much of the research focuses on how Twitter is used by journalists, a report by Statista showed that, as of June 2023, Instagram is the third most popular social media platform in Canada, beaten only by YouTube and Facebook (Statista, 2023). Theoretically, Twitter holds affordances that are more adaptable to the news values (Hermida and Mellado, 2020), but Instagram remains more popular among Canadian social media users. This research addresses this gap because *yyc.clowns* is an Instagram native account and presents its information through a visual medium, something that is often overlooked in journalism research.

Methodology

This research was conducted using a discourse and rhetorical analysis of the first five news posts made by yyc.clowns during November (see Appendix A, B, C, D, E). The news posts were discerned from the entertainment content through the formatting of the post, which shifted during the undertaking of the research. News posts were marked by the format of appearing as a screenshot of a post from X, with a focus on a clear headline and a photo accompanying the post with a caption explaining the context of the post.

The posts were chosen based on timeliness alone rather than perceived newsworthiness. The trends analyzed were present in all reporting, although they were strongly exemplified by criminal reporting (see Appendix B, C, D). One area for further potential research would be looking closer into the posts that do not focus on criminal reporting and their presentation of the news and potentially the engagement around such posts.

The process for conducting the study involved doing background research into the standards and practices of existing news organizations. First, I observed trends in existing organizations that operate on a local level and found their journalistic standards and practices, which were often available on their respective website (CBC, 2023; Global News, 2023). While these were not any different from mainstream journalistic standards, reading through each of those guiding ethics helped orient me to a Canadian, specifically Calgarian, context.

Those guiding principles were then used to orient the analysis of the content on the yyc.clowns page. The change in the content's format made it relatively easier to break down the elements of each post and what yyc.clowns considered to be essential, especially when it came to condensing the longer news stories into digestible content for Instagram. The content was analysed by breaking down each key element of the post to understand how it adhered to existing journalistic practices and the ways the page implemented these practices. This was a more effective process than answering a series of predetermined guiding questions because the captions were often taken word-for-word from other sources, which meant that the captions behaved primarily as the primary news element of the post.

The context of the posts was most relevant around the major story that yyc.clowns reported on: the shooting in mid-November. The context was supplemented by examining the statistics relating to followers lost and gained compiled for social media accounts, collected

through *Social Blade*. This platform provides insights into how the public is engaging with a given Instagram page en masse as opposed to through comments or likes.

A limitation of this method is that it does not scrutinize the quality of reporting as much as it examines what is reported and the reach of the content. Additionally, it operates on the assumption that yyc.clowns is producing original content, which is disproven. This assumption meant that throughout the study, some presumed overlapping values between yyc.clowns and legacy media later needed to be re-evaluated. However, given the scope of the research, the methodology is sufficient for understanding how journalism is practiced by yyc.clowns.

Discussion

The key takeaway of the project was that, in terms of disseminating news, news organizations have options. It seems that there is no shortage of accurate reporting and, from a democratic perspective of making sure citizens are informed, an Instagram page like this is a viable option for citizens to get their news. This is no solution for systemic issues in journalism and would likely cause more issues, but it challenges the notion that young people simply are not getting news. Clearly, yyc.clowns sees value in disseminating news and their audience engages with them, so there is a source of local news that audiences turn to.

The biggest challenge while working on the project was the constant changes in the Instagram page itself. In between the time of submitting the proposal and conducting research for the project, yyc.clowns changed their post format to favour screenshots of tweets from their original red translucent banner with a headline, and shortly after the research was completed, they changed their name to match what could be considered their sister page in Edmonton, yegwave. While these changes were not detrimental to the study, it was difficult to keep up with the updates and try to figure out how these might factor into their organizational identity. The biggest shift was changing their branding from “Calgary’s #1 News & Entertainment page” to “Calgary’s #1 Culture and Entertainment page.” Reorienting themselves to be culture and entertainment-based after the research was contingent on them calling themselves a news page raised questions about whether it could be considered this a source of news, seeing as they seemingly no longer wish to associate with that title.

The idea of yyc.clowns being an effective distribution mechanism is supported by the research. The process of compartmentalizing the different stages of production and distribution

of journalism was something that came up quite often while working on the project, which further challenged the pre-existing business model of traditional news media. This project highlighted that centering news organizations in the context of distribution hinders the potential of reaching wider audiences. Previously, it was assumed that advertisers were tasked with delivering audiences to news organizations, but perhaps that is only true for a specific part of the internet. In a world where more and more people are turning to social media platforms to get the bulk of their information, it follows that social media platforms would develop their own ecosystem relating to distribution and audience relations.

This process follows other cultural industries, where compartmentalizing different phases of production could cause a disconnect between producers and consumers, or readers and journalists. On one hand, leaving the distribution of news in the hands of public figures within their own communities means that journalism is made more widely available to all. On the other hand, this creates a wider divide between a journalist and their audience.

At the same time, the existing model of distributing news to audiences is not functional, as we can see by the fact that local journalism is not local. All of the legacy media studied were local branches of national media organizations. This Instagram page was purely local, starting roughly around 2018 and maintaining relevance since. The development of a purely local news distribution channel means that the page is curating the local news for their local audience, sifting out the national in favour of things that directly affect and concern community members that may not get as much airtime.

There is a palpable hesitancy to support the idea, however, the page seems to have its own internal standards that were not publicized but were closely followed. Despite the intellectual property theft, the information on the page was accurate either because it came directly from accurate reporting or because that was the reputation it created for itself. Thinking back to the page's origins, there was always this culture of hands-off distribution of content without contributing anything — it delivered desired subject material to its audience on a silver platter without interjecting, and that is how the page always operated.

References

- Alexander, J. C. (2016). *The crisis of journalism reconsidered : democratic culture, professional codes, digital future*. In J. Alexander, E. Breese & M. Luengo (Eds.). *The crisis of journalism reconsidered: democratic culture, professional codes, digital future*. Cambridge.
- CBC. (2023). *Journalistic Standards and Practices*. CBC/Radio-Canada.
<https://cbc.radio-canada.ca/en/vision/governance/journalistic-standards-and-practices>.
- CBC Calgary [@cbccalgary]. (n.d.). *Posts*. [Instagram profile]. Retrieved October 20, 2023, from <https://www.instagram.com/cbccalgary/>.
- CTV Calgary [@ctv_calgary]. (n.d.). *Posts*. [Instagram profile]. Retrieved October 20, 2023, from https://www.instagram.com/ctv_calgary/.
- Ferrucci, P. (2018). Networked: Social media's impact on news production in digital newsrooms. *Newspaper Research Journal*, 39(1), 6–17. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0739532918761069>.
- Global News. *Journalistic Principles and Practices*. Global News.
<https://globalnews.ca/pages/principles-practices/#:~:text=Global%20News%20Journalistic%20Principles%20and%20Practices&text=We%20will%20resist%20attempts%20at,news%20without%20distortion%20or%20misrepresentation>.
- Greenwood, K., & Thomas, R. J. (2015). Locating The Journalism in Citizen Photojournalism: The use and content of citizen-generated imagery. *Digital Journalism*, 3(4), 615–633. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2015.1034528>.
- Heintz, L. (November 14, 2023). *Teenage brothers charged in fatal Marlborough park shooting*. City News.
<https://calgary.citynews.ca/2023/11/14/calgary-marlborough-park-fatal-arrests/#:~:text=Calgary%20police%20say%20the%20truck,30A%20Avenue%20SE%20in%20Dover>.
- Hendrickx, J. (2023). The Rise of Social Journalism: An Explorative Case Study of a Youth-oriented Instagram News Account. *Journalism Practice*, 17(8), 1810–1825. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2021.2012500>.
- Hermida, A., & Mellado, C. (2020). Dimensions of Social Media Logics: Mapping Forms of Journalistic Norms and Practices on Twitter and Instagram. *Digital Journalism*, 8(7), 864–884. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2020.1805779>.

- Karlsson, M., & Clerwall, C. (2019). Cornerstones in Journalism: According to citizens. *Journalism Studies*, 20(8), 1184–1199. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2018.1499436>.
- Krause, D. (October 26, 2023). *40,000 Calgary households could be at risk of homelessness: UCalgary report*. LiveWire Calgary. <https://livewirecalgary.com/2023/10/26/40000-calgary-households-could-be-at-risk-of-homelessness-ucalgary-report/>.
- Krause, D. (November 21, 2023). *'I apologize unreservedly': CPS drops charges against teen brothers accused in Marlborough shooting death*. LiveWire Calgary. <https://livewirecalgary.com/2023/11/21/chief-neufeld-apology-marlborough-shooting-charges-2023/>.
- Larson, R. P., & Lindner, A. M. (2018). Professionalization through attrition? An event history analysis of mortalities in citizen journalism. *Information, Communication & Society*, 21(5), 746–760. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2018.1428655>.
- Meyers, O., & Davidson, R. (2016). Conceptualizing Journalistic Careers: Between Interpretive Community and Tribes of Professionalism. *Sociology Compass*, 10(6), 419–431. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12376>.
- Nielsen, R. K., & Sarah, A. G. (2022). Platform Power. In *The Power of Platforms*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190908850.003.0005>.
- Paulussen, S., & D'heer, E. (2013). Using Citizens For Community Journalism: Findings from a hyperlocal media project. *Journalism Practice*, 7(5), 588–603. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2012.756667>
- Peters, C. & Broersma, M. (2013) Between networks and 'hierarchies of credibility': navigating journalistic practice in a sea of user-generated content. *Rethinking Journalism* (pp. 113–125). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203102688-15>.
- RTDNA. (June 11, 2015). *Ethics*. Radio Television Digital News Association. <https://www.rtdna.org/ethics>
- Social Blade. *YYC CLOWN's Instagram Monthly Stats (Social Blade Instagram)*. (November, 2023). Retrieved November 30, 2023 from <https://socialblade.com/instagram/user/yyc.clowns/monthly>.

Splichal, S., & Dahlgren, P. (2016). Journalism between de-professionalisation and democratisation. *European Journal of Communication*, 31(1), 5–18.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323115614196>.

Statista. (2023). *Social network usage by brand in Canada as of June 2023*.

<https://www.statista.com/forecasts/998543/social-network-usage-by-brand-in-canada>.

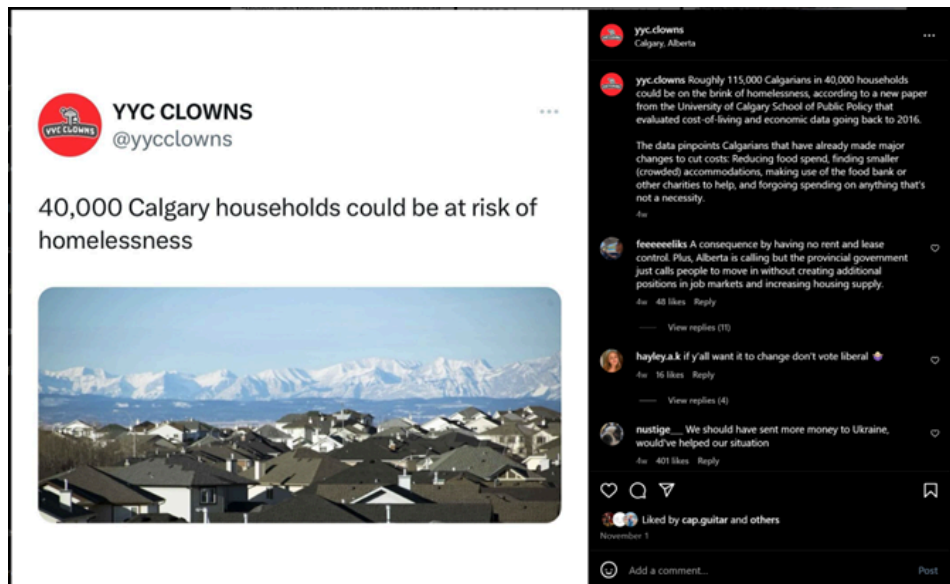
Tran, L. & White, R. (November 13, 2023). *1 dead, 2 injured in daylight parking lot at Calgary's Trans Canada Centre*. Global News.

<https://globalnews.ca/news/10089354/1-dead-2-severely-injured-shooting-calgary-trans-canada-centre/>.

YYC Clowns [@yyc.clowns]. (n.d.). *Posts*. [Instagram profile]. Retrieved November 30, 2023, from <https://www.instagram.com/yyc.clowns/>.

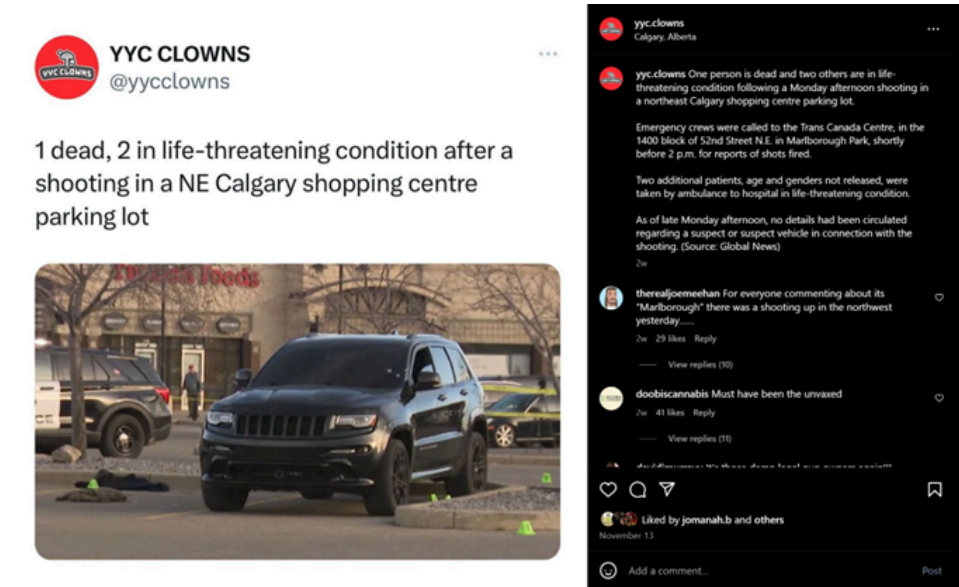
Appendix A

Screenshot of post from yyc.clowns concerning the number of houseless people in Calgary, dated November 1, 2023.



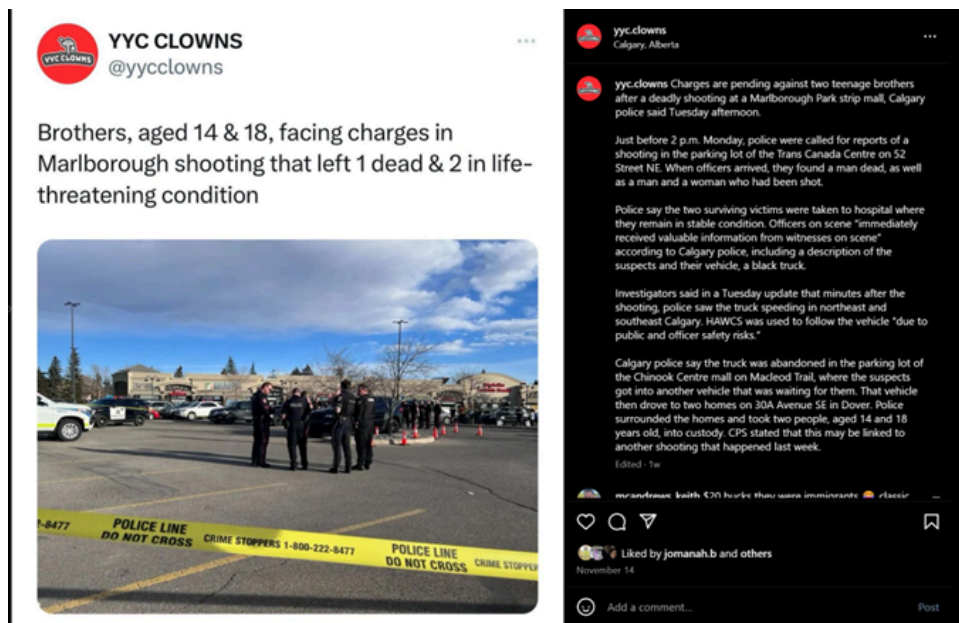
Appendix B

Screenshot from yyc.clowns reporting on shooting in northeast Calgary, dated November 13, 2023.



Appendix C

Screenshot from yyc.clowns reporting on arrest of two young men following a shooting in northeast Calgary, dated November 14, 2023.

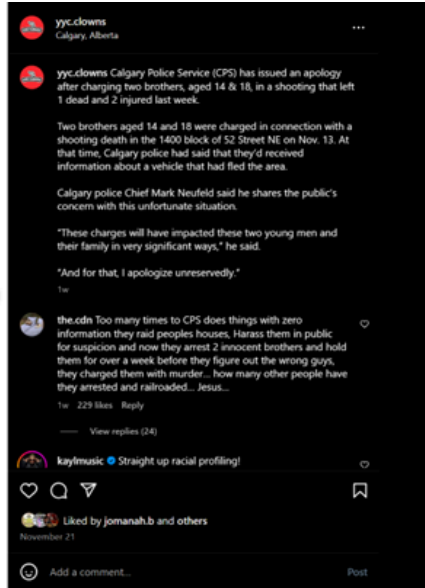


Appendix D

Screenshot from yyc.clowns reporting on the apology issued by Calgary Police Services following the wrongful arrest of two young men, dated November 21, 2023.



CPS has apologized after wrongfully charging two brothers, aged 14 & 18, in a fatal shooting that took place last week



Appendix E

Screenshot from yyc.clowns following a cyclist being caught in a hit-and-run, dated November 23, 2023.



Cyclist hit by car and left in life-threatening condition after riding against traffic and swinging a broom at vehicles

