In June 1980, in the wake of the Québec referendum on sovereignty and the 1979 and 1980 federal elections, the Reader’s Digest Foundation and what was then Erindale College of the University of Toronto co-sponsored a conference on politics and the media.¹ The Erindale conference brought together prominent party strategists and organizers, journalists, and scholars. Participants spoke about the power of television images, the presidentialization of Canadian politics, the concentration of media ownership, the failure of leaders to address policies in a serious way during elections, the sheer nastiness and negativity of political attacks, the power of the media to set the agenda and frame issues during elections, and the need for politicians to fit into those very media frames if they wished to be covered at all. None of these concerns have vanished with time. If anything, they have hardened into place, making them even more pervasive and intractable.

Yet even as so much has remained the same, so much has changed. When the conference “How Canadians Communicate Politically: The Next Generation” was convened in Calgary and Banff in late October 2009, the media and political terrains had been dramatically transformed. The revolution in web-based technology that had begun in the mid-1990s had hit the country with devastating force. As online media depleted the newspaper industry, TV networks, and local radio stations of a sizable portion of their audiences and advertising, the old lions of the traditional media lost some of their bite. The stark reality today is that every medium is merging with
every other medium, every medium is becoming every other medium, and all media are merging on the Internet. Most critically, a new generation of digital natives, those who have grown up with web-based media, is no longer subject to a top-down, command-and-control media system in which messages flow in only one direction. Audiences now have the capacity to create their own islands of information from the endless sea of media choices that surround them, as well as to produce and circulate their own videos, photos, opinions, and products, and to attract their own advertising.

And the country has also changed. The Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the absorption of more immigrants from more countries than any other society in history, the growth of global cities, and connectivity have all produced a profoundly different society. Furthermore, years of constitutional battles and another much more desperately fought referendum in Québec in 1995 have culminated in both frustration and exhaustion. Living on the edge of a precipice could not be sustained indefinitely, even in Québec. The country has also grown proud of its accomplishments. Canada’s banking system withstood the most punishing effects of the financial meltdown that ravaged the world financial system in 2008 and 2009; multicultural experiments that appear to be failing in other societies, such as France, the United Kingdom, and Germany, are succeeding in Canada; and arts and culture are burgeoning.

The “How Canadians Communicate Politically” conference, organized by Athabasca University and the Alberta Global Forum (then based at the University of Calgary and now at Mount Royal University), brought together distinguished scholars from across Canada with the intention of examining what the next generation of political communication would look like. We asked contributors to view politics and communication through a much different and more expansive lens than was the case with the 1980 Erindale conference. While much of this volume deals with media and politics in the conventional sense—examining such topics as the interplay among journalists and politicians, the future of news, and the effectiveness of negative campaigning in both online and TV advertising—we also look at politics through the frames of popular culture and everyday life: biographies, off-road politics in rural Alberta, Québec film, hotline radio, music, and Aboriginal art. The noted Swedish scholar Peter Dahlgren has observed that changes in popular culture both reflect and condition political change.2 Once a trend or idea becomes firmly implanted within a culture, it is only a matter of time before
it permeates and affects public policy. While some of these essays deal with aspects of popular culture, our search was wider—we wanted to see how politics takes shape and change occurs in places that are beyond the prescribed battlegrounds of politicians and political parties.

The 2009 conference included a session about Alberta politics, or what might be called the Alberta political mystery. The province remains the only jurisdiction in North America, and arguably Europe as well, where a single party, the Progressive Conservatives, so dominate the political landscape that elections have become non-events, with little campaigning, debate, discussion, or voter turnout. Though other provinces may have traditional leanings, the party in power typically shifts with some regularity. In almost every American state, the governorships and senate seats change hands with the political tides. In Alberta, the tides of political change never seem to arrive. One could argue that the media in the province are just as unchanging. Yet, as Roger Epp points out, beneath the surface, political battles rage, ideas are tested, and meeting places are formed. Alvin Finkel, however, contends that power in Alberta is not only self-perpetuating but brutally imposed.

This book focuses on three changes that have taken place in the nature of political communication since the Erindale conference more than thirty years ago. First, we have moved from a media landscape dominated by the traditional media to one where Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and smart phones play an increasingly important role. The future of the news industry cannot be taken for granted. Newspapers have been corroded by a steady drop in both readership and advertising. They employ fewer journalists, paying them far less than they used to, and younger readers have fled in droves. In 1980, the conventional over-the-air networks—CBC, Radio-Canada, CTV, Global, and TVA—had the capacity to set the political agenda because they had the power to attract mass audiences. While the national news shows of the main networks are still a main stage for Canadian political life, much of the action has moved from centre stage to the sidelines of cable TV, where there are a myriad of all-news channels, each with small but stable audiences. As Marcus Prior demonstrates in *Post-Broadcast Democracy*, a book that some scholars regard as a modern classic despite its relatively recent arrival, the more entertainment options available to viewers, the more likely they are to avoid news entirely, and as a consequence, the less likely they are to vote.³
A second change since the Erindale conference is in the nature of political life in Canada. On one hand, the party system has remained surprisingly resilient: the same three parties—the Conservatives, the New Democrats, and the Liberals—that dominated in 1980 still dominate the political landscape today, with a variety of insurgent parties such as the Créditistes, the Reform Party and then the Canadian Alliance, the Bloc Québécois, and the Greens falling more or less by the wayside. On the other hand, the rhythms of political life are now very different: a never-ending 24-hour news cycle, changes in party financing laws that demand non-stop solicitations, the development of databases that allow for the microtargeting of both supporters and swing voters, and cybercampaigns that are fought daily on party websites, Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and YouTube have meant that political parties now wage permanent campaigns. Simply put, the political cycle never stops. Parties have also learned more definitively than ever before that negative campaigning works. The need to define and therefore place question marks in voters’ minds about opponents consumes Question Period, appearances by the “talking heads” that parties designate to appear on cable news channels, and the ad campaigns that are waged before and during campaigns.

Just as there are questions about the future of news, there are questions about the future of politics and whether the new political style limits debate, makes tolerance for and compromises with opponents more difficult, and delegitimizes politics as a whole. These questions are vigorously debated in this book, with contributors lined up on different sides of the arguments.

A third change in the nature of political communication is the result of changes in Canadian society. While today’s digital natives are more global, multicultural, and tolerant and have a greater command of technology than previous generations, they are also “peek-a-boo” citizens, engaged at some moments, completely disengaged at others. Despite the galvanizing power of social media, fewer people under thirty join civic organizations or political parties, volunteer in their communities, donate money to causes, or vote in elections than was the case for people in the same age group in previous generations. They also know much less about the country in which they live and consume much less news. In fact, the ability of citizens generally to recall important dates in history or the names of even recent prime ministers, as well as their knowledge of basic documents such as the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, is disturbingly low. Digital natives in particular view historical
Canada as a distant and, to some degree, foreign land that is barely recognizable and, for the most part, irrelevant to their lives. How to draw digital natives more fully into the Canadian political spectacle remains one of the country’s great challenges.

I: THE CHANGING WORLD OF MEDIA AND POLITICS

The first part of this book open with an article by Florian Sauvageau, a former newspaper editor, TV host, and university professor who served as director of Université Laval’s Centre d’étude sur les médias and recently produced a documentary on the future of news. At first glance, Sauvageau’s article reads like an obituary for the news industry. While he is reluctant to administer the last rites, Sauvageau chronicles the decline of newspapers and, along with them, much of the “reliable news” on which a society depends; readers are led to conclude that even if newspapers survive in some form, they will be mere shadows of what they once were. As Sauvageau states: “Not all print newspapers will die, but they are all stricken.” There are simply too many problems to overcome. Younger readers are vanishing. Classified and other ads are migrating to web-based media, where they can target younger and more specialized audiences, and to social media sites, which allow users to reach buyers and sellers without paying the costs of advertising. Newspaper websites capture only a portion of the revenue (around 20 percent, by some estimates) that print versions generate, and digital culture has created different news habits. As Sauvageau points out, consumers have become accustomed to munching on news “snacks,” short bursts of information and headline news, rather than the larger and more nutritious meals provided by newspapers. The expectation among young consumers in particular is that news has to be immediate, interactive, and, most important of all—free. In fact, a survey conducted for the Canadian Media Research Consortium in 2011 found that an overwhelming 81 percent of those surveyed would refuse to pay if their favourite online news sites erected a pay wall. If their usual news sources started charging for content, they would simply go to sites where they could get their news for free.5

According to Sauvageau, the problem for society is that newspapers are still the main producers of news. They have the largest staffs and the most resources, and produce almost all of the investigative reporting. He quotes an American study that found that 95 percent of the news stories discussed
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or quoted in blogs, social media, and websites came from traditional news sources—mostly newspapers. As Sauvageau explains: “If the other media didn’t have newspapers to draw on, their news menu would often be meagre indeed. If newspapers stopped publishing, radio hosts who comment on the news would have trouble finding topics, and bloggers would have precious few events to discuss. In large part, newspapers set the public affairs agenda. If the crisis gripping newspapers worsens, it will affect all media and therefore the news system that nourishes democratic life.” Simply put, if newspapers die, the whole news industry won’t be far behind.

Sauvageau describes various solutions to the problem—apps on mobile phones, for example, may give newspapers a second life, and in France, the government has come to the rescue by providing subsidies. In a few cases, wealthy moguls eager for prestige and power have saved newspapers from the brink, and there are innovative schemes for turning newspaper companies into charitable non-profit institutions, as is now the case with Québec’s most influential newspaper, Le Devoir. But ultimately, he concludes that reliable news needs to rest on reliable foundations and, in the end, people have to be willing to pay for news.

The most devastating and pessimistic critique of the changing media landscape and its effects on Canadian political culture in this book is by Elly Alboim, a long-time Ottawa bureau chief for CBC television news, a professor at Carleton University, and a principal in the Earnscliffe Strategy Group in Ottawa. Alboim believes that news organizations have lost the capacity to be a “more effective link in the process of governance” and that they feel “no real attachment to or support for current institutions.” Any pride in having a broader “civic mandate” has been lost in the drive to entertain audiences: when politics is covered, for instance, stories are invariably about conflict and scandal, failures and fiascos. Compromise—the life’s breath of effective politics—is treated as a sign of weakness. The message to citizens is that governments are mostly ineffective and that all politics must be viewed with suspicion. In Alboim’s words, media coverage is “a priori adversarial, proceeding from a presumption of manipulative practice and venal motive.”

This has created an immensely destructive feedback loop. Political leaders fear being caught in the undertow of negative media coverage for whatever actions or positions they take. Rather than engage the public in discussion, the easier course is to fit the “media narrative” with attention-grabbing pictures
and snappy sound bites that convey the image but not the substance of actions and policies. The lesson learned through bitter experience is that issues are to be managed, controversies suppressed, and ideas or policy initiatives rarely if ever discussed in detail. It’s hardly surprising that the end product is a disengaged public. The process is circular. The public’s cynicism and disinterest feeds back into and justifies media narratives that view politics with suspicion—which prompts political leaders to avoid clashes with the media and therefore serious engagement with the public.

Some observers hoped that web-based media would bring greater interaction and debate. If anything, according to Alboim, web-based media may have accelerated the “decoupling” process by allowing users to live in their own media bubbles. Alboim’s worry is that “if you don’t know what you don’t know and are unwilling to delegate others to tell you, you begin to narrow your universe to one driven by your preconceived interests. Governments can exacerbate the problem when they determine that it is not in their interest to devote extraordinary efforts to engage the disengaged.” Not everyone would agree with the portrait that Alboim draws of a closed circle in which disengagement is constantly reinforced. The distracted nature of Ottawa political reporting is not the only measure of the media’s engagement in politics. In fact, one could argue that the exact opposite phenomenon is occurring—that we live in a time of political excess and hyper-partisanship, rather than the opposite. Quebecor, for instance, which dominates the Québec media landscape and owns the Sun newspaper chain and the Sun News Network, is consumed by politics. In the case of Quebecor, what is extraordinary is not the absence of politics but the naked aggression with which ideas and passions are promoted. It’s also hard to argue that the media has turned its back on politics when both national newspapers, the Globe and Mail and the National Post, regional giants such as the Toronto Star and La Presse, and chains such as Postmedia take strong editorial positions, often openly displaying their politics on their front pages. At the very least, the theory of media disengagement from politics needs much greater examination.

Alboim’s assertions about citizen disconnectedness on the Internet can also be disputed. Some scholars would argue that, in some ways, citizens are more connected than ever before—they are just connecting differently. One of the most contentious issues, however, is whether web-based media suppress debate and dangerously divide publics by creating media ghettos. Leading
observers such as Robert Putnam, Cass Sunstein, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Joseph Cappella, and Eli Pariser have made the case that users increasingly dwell in their own self-contained media ghettos that shield them from facts or opinions with which they disagree. For instance, Jamieson and Cappella found in their 2008 study that right-wing conservatives in the United States tended to watch Fox News, read the Wall Street Journal, and listen to Rush Limbaugh. They were unlikely to venture much beyond this ideologically secure gated community and were cut off from views they found uncomfortable or inconvenient. The same closed media circle has developed among liberals in the United States, who might read the New York Times, watch CNBC, and read blogs such as Talking Points Memo. In the Canadian context, presumably viewers of the Sun News Network will also listen to talk show hosts like Charles Adler, read the National Post, and follow Tory bloggers.

The problem is exacerbated by the fact that the algorithms that direct search engines provide users with information based on their previous searches. As Eli Pariser points out, “There is no standard Google anymore.” When conducting searches, people with conservative views will be directed to different websites than people with liberal views.

But it’s not clear that all of the evidence supports the “ghettoization” thesis. Marcus Prior, for instance, refutes the claim that people are becoming the equivalent of political shut-ins. His data show that people who are consumed by politics tend to go to multiple sources; they follow the journalistic action wherever it leads. Researchers Cliff Lampe also found that people on social media sites were better able than others to articulate opposing viewpoints, especially as their circle of online friends widened. So it may be too soon to make sweeping judgments.

The only non-Canadian scholar to speak at the “How Canadians Communicate Politically” conference was Richard Davis of Brigham Young University, a former chair of the political communication section of the American Political Science Association and a leading expert on the effects of web-based media on American politics. In his chapter on blogs, Davis argues that the blogosphere is shaped like a pyramid: a few influential bloggers dwell at the top of the pyramid and command a great deal of the traffic while the vast majority of bloggers get little, if any, attention. A-list bloggers are read by policy-makers and journalists, and are part of the opinion-making and agenda-setting elite. Most of the others write for themselves and a spoonful
of friends or fans. While the blogosphere is vast, the readership for political blogs is small (only one in twenty Americans who are online regularly read blogs) and confined to a predominantly male, white, well-educated, and higher-income group. To some degree, media ghettos are built hierarchically and are based more on social class than on political or ideological views.

One is tempted to extrapolate from blogs to other parts of the Internet, including social media such as Facebook and Twitter. These are remarkable tools for those who are already active in politics, allowing them to follow politicians and journalists, organize, become informed about events, publish, and swap and redact materials as never before. But web-based media are unlikely to mobilize people who take little interest in politics to suddenly take an interest; rather, they allow the attentive to become more attentive, leaving the vast majority to remain on the sidelines, where they prefer to be. In fact, a survey conducted at the beginning of the 2011 election campaign found that only a small minority, 4 percent of those between eighteen and thirty-four, used social media to discuss political issues on a daily basis. Surprisingly, the percentage of older and middle-aged voters who turned to social media for political debate and information was substantially higher.10

Election campaigns are the largest canvas on which the relationship among media, politics, and publics is played out. Elections are for political journalists what the Olympics are for athletes. They test what news organizations are made of. Christopher Waddell and David Taras review the 2011 election campaign with an eye toward how the rituals of campaigning and campaign coverage might be reformed. Despite much hype about the power of social media to engage young people, voter turnout, especially among digital natives, remained low. This may have been due to an absence of galvanizing issues and big ideas. Party policies seemed little more than a hodge-podge of micro-promises aimed at mobilizing distinct categories of swing voters. Critical questions such as the future of health care, how governments would cut spending in order to balance budgets, the state of the country’s cities, and the shrinking market for good jobs were avoided by the parties as if they were political kryptonite. It’s hard not to conclude that by allowing political leaders to sidestep the major issues facing the country, journalists had become “enablers”—allowing these practices to take place while pretending not to notice.
Journalists covered the photo ops and daily messaging from the leaders’
tours, and they were obsessed with the horse race in much the same way that
journalists were in 1980. In this regard, not much has changed, and there is
little indication that it will. Waddell and Taras conclude that both media and
party election scripts have become strangely disconnected from the country
and need to be rewritten in critical ways.

Waddell picks up the theme of disconnection again in the next chapter.
A former national editor for the Globe and Mail and Ottawa bureau chief for
CBC Television News before becoming director of the School for Journalism
and Communication at Carleton University, Waddell believes that we are wit-
nessing the “death of political journalism.” In his view, political journalism
did not die suddenly as the result of a single blow but succumbed to a series of
blows over the last twenty years. First, there were decisions by local newspa-
paper and owners to eliminate their Ottawa bureaus due to financial pressures.
This severed a vital lifeline between the Ottawa press gallery, local commu-
nities, and their MPs. Waddell uses the following analogy: “Would as many
people go to an Ottawa Senators hockey game, a Toronto Blue Jays baseball
game, or a Calgary Stampeders football game if all the local radio, television,
and print media in those communities simply stopped covering the sport with
their own reporters, instead using occasional stories written by wire services
such as Canadian Press?” The effects on the political system as a whole were
quite substantial. Because they seldom made news, MPs became almost invis-
ible in their communities. Their lack of local influence was refracted back to
Ottawa, where MPs with little recognition and hence little leverage in their
communities became increasingly powerless and ineffective.

But additional blows would follow. To save costs, Ottawa bureaus elimi-
nated reporting jobs, dispensing almost entirely with specialized reporters—
such as those who covered courts, foreign affairs, or the environment—in
favour of general assignment reporters, who, the assumption went, could
cover any story. The problem was that reporters without the time needed to
develop expertise and contacts of their own fell prey to quick and easy jour-
nalistic practices, relying on Google and on party spin merchants for infor-
mation and focusing on conflict and personalities. At the same time, news
organizations were also slimming down the complement of reporters in pro-
vincial legislative press galleries. Young reporters once cut their teeth cov-
ering provincial politics, gaining valuable experience and local connections,
before being called up to the big leagues of the Ottawa press gallery, but that
career ladder has been all but removed.

To Waddell, the final blow is the rise of “BlackBerry journalism.” The
very devices that are meant to connect journalists to the pulse of the country
have had the opposite effect—they have allowed journalists to construct an
“alternate reality” based on Ottawa insider politics. Through BlackBerrys and
other smart phones, as well as social media such as Twitter, reporters and
party operatives trade information and gossip, discuss party strategies, and
constantly react to each other. But as Waddell concludes: “Instead of using
technology to bridge the communications gap between voters in their com-
nonities and the media, the media has used it to turn its back on the public,
foraging closer links with the people reporters cover rather than with the
people who used to read, watch, and listen to their reporting.”

It’s interesting to view Waddell’s argument against the backdrop of Davis’s
discussion about blogs and other web-based media. While there is great
euphoria about the connected society and the ability of web-based media to
mobilize and involve young people, in particular, into the nexus of politics,
the evidence is that these media are being used to narrow rather than widen
the gates of public connectedness. Hierarchies, A-lists, insider baseball, gated
communities, and a press gallery that’s been “Berry’d alive” have become met-
aphors for increased worry about how web-based and mobile media are being
used. Waddell’s article echoes a theme raised by Alboim: that the media’s
neglect of politics has produced a self-fulfilling prophecy. The less priority
news organizations give to political reporting, the less the public becomes
interested in politics, the less pressure there is on media organizations to
cover politics well. The cycle feeds endlessly on itself as the bar is continually
lowered.

Another development that has altered the relationship between media and
politics in the last thirty years is the notion of the “permanent campaign.”
At the time of the 1980 Erindale conference, political campaigns took place
exclusively during elections. After an election, the music more or less stopped
until the next one was called. Today, campaigns are perpetual, with politi-
cal parties always in motion. While the phrase “permanent campaign” was
first coined by Sidney Blumenthal in 1980, the notion was refined by Norman
Ornstein and Thomas Mann in a book published by the American Enterprise
Institute and the Brookings Institution in 2000.” The term was meant to apply
to American politics. Saturation polling and the ability to track the popularity of political leaders on a daily basis, the advent of cable TV channels and the 24-hour news cycle, and the huge fundraising quarries that had to be mined for campaign costs, including TV ads in particular, had risen not only dramatically but exponentially. Add in a short two-year election cycle for those in the House of Representatives, and campaigning never ceases.

Tom Flanagan, a former chief of staff to Stephen Harper and national campaign director for the Conservative Party, and a noted scholar, believes that the permanent campaign not only has taken hold but has come to dominate Canadian politics. In Flanagan’s view, “the arms race” never stops. What did change were the minority governments that governed the country from 2004 to 2011, along with party fundraising laws that curtailed how much could be given by corporations and unions. From 2004 to 2011, when these subsidies were abolished, parties benefited from quarterly allowances that they received from government coffers, the amount being determined by the number of votes that the parties had received during the previous election. Having inherited extensive voter ID lists from the populist Reform and Canadian Alliance parties, the Tories were also able to create a “direct voter contact” machine that churned out money 365 days a year. These fundraising lists also became the basis for their formidable campaign contact and get-out-the-vote efforts. The Liberals failed to develop the same machinery and, as a result, lacked much of the artillery that was critical to the Tories’ success.

The principal innovation however, was that the Conservatives used their fundraising advantage to launch a series of pre-writ ad campaigns. The strategy was to use these ads to define Stephen Harper before he could be defined by his opponents and to define his opponents before they could define themselves. It also needs to be pointed out that the Conservatives had received a lesson from the school of hard knocks courtesy of the Chrétien Liberals, who used negative ads against the Reform and Canadian Alliance parties with devastating results. Not mentioned by Flanagan is an ad that aired before the 2011 election showing Harper in the prime minister’s office working late at night on his economic plan. The message was that Harper was the dependable man, minding the store when everyone else had gone home. But the Conservative attack ads directed first against Liberal leader Stéphane Dion and then against his successor, Michael Ignatieff, were both personal and brutal. In fact, one could argue that Ignatieff, who had been away from Canada for thirty-four
years before returning to enter politics, never recovered from the downpour of ads that claimed that the Liberal leader was “just visiting” and “just in it for himself.” The conventional wisdom in politics is that no attack should go unanswered for very long. Arguably, without the money needed to respond quickly to these attack ads, Dion and Ignatieff were never able to undo the damage that had been done to their images.

Numbers speak volumes. According to one estimate the Conservatives spent more than $50 million in research and advertising between 2008 and 2011. In the week prior to the federal budget that was presented just before the Tories were defeated in the House of Commons and that precipitated the 2011 election, the Conservatives ran 1,600 ads compared to just 131 for the Liberals.

Jonathan Rose of Queen’s University agrees with Flanagan that the permanent campaign has become the “new normal.” He worries that party policy-making has been taken over by strategists, pollsters, advertisers, and PR specialists to such a degree that political parties have become little more than props in a stage show managed by others. As Rose warns, they have become the tools of PR and advertising agencies: “Party members serve as a backdrop for PR firms in communicating their arguments about how best to sell the party. The purpose of the party organization is now to be a network for the dissemination of ideas that have been focus-group tested and marketed, and appropriately branded.” The increasing disconnect between voters and civic life is at least partially linked to the emptying of political parties and to the fact that calculated and manufactured messages are now so blatantly false and manipulative that voters tend to view everything with suspicion.

Rose also agrees with Flanagan that TV ads have become weapons of choice in the political battlefield. They allow parties to bypass the media’s filter and target specific groups of voters by advertising on certain shows or specialty channels, and their effects can be magnified through sheer repetition. Echoing a debate that has recently been joined by Ted Brader and John Geer in the United States, Rose asks whether attack ads have become destructive to the political process. First, there can be no doubt about their effectiveness. Their messages tend to be remembered longer by voters than those of other ads: once questions about opponents have been placed in the voter’s mind, they are difficult to erase. But according to Rose, recent studies also show that attack ads can have a positive effect: they tend to focus on policies and provide
voters with real information, and they are more truthful than so-called positive ads. They are also likely to generate debate or controversy. Those who are attacked either have to disable these political explosives by responding quickly to them with facts of their own or risk suffering serious and perhaps even fatal damage.

Some analysts, however, question the value of negative ads. They believe that negative TV spots suppress voter turnout by making politics seem venal and nasty. They also note that ads can elevate false charges, appeal to fears and emotions rather than reason, and create a highly contrived and perhaps false view of the choices available to voters. Attack ads routinely depict opponents as looking foolish or sketchy, take odd or unintended remarks out of context, and dredge up unsavoury business deals or personal relationships from the distant past. Some countries are so wary of their power that they ban them entirely. Others regulate what can and cannot be shown or limit attack ads to discrete corners of the TV schedule. Canadian election law imposes no rules or limits about what can be shown or said. The notion is that the public can be trusted to discern truth from falsehood. If ads are seen as too negative or hard-hitting, or if they don't ring true, they will backfire on those who produced them.

Tamara Small of the University of Guelph, one of the leading experts in the country on online campaigning, believes that web-based media have contributed to the permanent campaign. Party websites are continually updated; some leaders tweet their followers, including reporters, almost daily and sometimes several times each day; the blogosphere is constantly massaged and monitored; and, as Small notes in her chapter, specialized websites are created as issues and needs develop.

Party websites are the very opposite of the open spaces that idealists envision. They are based entirely on one-way, top-down communication because parties fear losing control of their message by giving a platform to people with controversial views or those who want to hijack sites, turning them into platforms for issues that parties wish to avoid. Parties are so protective of their sites that, as Small points out, they set up new and different sites for negative messaging. While the main party sites are part of a party’s public face and have a pristine and official look, attack sites are for mudslinging, delivering bloody noses, and mocking opponents. In the rough-edged back alleys of the Internet, political parties descend to new lows.
The remaining two articles in this section, Alvin Finkel’s description of Alberta politics and Robert Bergen’s analysis of the ways in which the Canadian military’s media policy has evolved in wartime situations from Kosovo to Libya, are case studies in how governments have managed issues in ways that suppress public engagement.

Alberta may be the pre-eminent example of a government’s ability to dominate and dictate debate and discussion. Finkel believes that the Progressive Conservatives’ long rule in Alberta is the result of a confluence of factors: charismatic leaders such as Peter Lougheed and Ralph Klein, the perceived need for strong provincial governments that can defend the province against encroachments by Ottawa, the prosperity created by a burgeoning oil and gas industry, and the Conservatives’ use of communication strategies that co-opted much of the media. Although Finkel’s chapter doesn’t deal with wider media theories, his analysis fits with the notion of “indexing” that has become popular in the communications literature. Scholars such as Daniel Hallin and Lance Bennett and his colleagues believe that media reporting mirrors the debates that take place among political elites. When a consensus existed—as was the case in Alberta during the energy wars that the province waged against Ottawa in the early 1980s or when the main political parties supported dramatic budget cuts during the early to mid-1990s—government public relations strategies were remarkably successful. When this consensus broke down—as was the case with the failure of government interventions in the economy under Premier Don Getty or during the controversial royalty review initiated by Ed Stelmach—media strategies failed. In fact, press criticism during Klein’s last years in power, and for most of Stelmach’s reign, was often quite stinging. The key question, perhaps, is how the Conservatives remained in power even when their media strategies seemed to collapse. Finkel’s analysis suggests that the answer lies in a largely compliant society that accepts Conservative ideologies and a press that gives the opposition little coverage and hence little credibility.

Robert Bergen’s description of the media strategies employed by the Canadian Forces is an indication of the adept ability that governments possess in avoiding real engagement with the media and the public on critical issues. In Bergen’s view, questions about war and peace—including the very reasons for Canadians being in Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Libya—were deflected by what the military saw as the need to protect operational security. Bergen, a
former reporter who has been assigned to war zones, contends that the camouflage of operational security has prevented Canadians from knowing very much about what their military has done on overseas missions over the last fifteen years. His detailed analysis of military briefings during the Libya campaign of 2011 raises key questions about the limits of the “operational security” argument in a democracy. If very little can be revealed about the nature of Canadian involvements and the public is continually kept in the dark, then how can these missions be considered legitimate? On the other hand, Bergen understands the need to safeguard the troops and their families. The question is where to draw the line. Interestingly, he argues that the explosion of web-based media has made little dent in the ability of the Canadian Forces to use the media to create a single and unchallenged view of Canada’s involvement in recent wars.

The themes that emerge in this first section on the changing world of media and politics are disconnection, dysfunction, and crisis. Sauvageau, Alboim, Small, Waddell, and Taras all believe that institutions and/or certain practices are in need of reform and rethinking. Flanagan believes that the instruments and rules of power have changed and that those best able to adapt to the new rules will survive. He doesn’t make judgments about whether the rules are fair or in the public interest. In Rose’s view, the negativity that many see also has a positive side: issues are discussed and exchanges take place. Finkel and Bergen believe that governments still have an extraordinary capacity to set the media agenda and, under the right conditions, to suppress debate and controversy.

The contrast between this section and the one that follows couldn’t be greater. The next section is about creative engagement, activity, and involvement. When it comes to the spontaneous combustion of popular culture and grassroots activism, there is far more reason for optimism.

II: CITIZENS AND POLITICS IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Historian David Marshall’s exploration of Canadian biography provides us with an extraordinary vantage point on Canadian political history and identity. The advantage of biography is that, as Marshall argues, “biography makes debates concrete because people can more readily identify with individuals and personalities than with abstract concepts.” Yet Canadian biography has
changed dramatically over the last century. Where biographies were once largely hero literature that celebrated the deeds of powerful people and thus reinforced the institutions that they represented, today's biographies expose personal flaws and magnify the errors and injustices that their subjects committed. And where biographies once focused only on the public aspects of public lives, revealing little about personal passions or demons, today's biographers take great delight in ripping away the protective masks worn by their subjects. The result is that some of the very best writing about Canada comes in biographies.

Marshall compares the recently published Extraordinary Canadians series of biographies edited by John Ralston Saul with the Makers of Canada series published over a hundred years earlier. The Great Man theory of history has clearly been overthrown since the new series includes those who lost battles—such as the Cree Chief, Big Bear; Louis Riel; and Gabriel Dumont—as well as those who fought for social change, such as Nellie McClung and Norman Bethune, but who never saw the promised land that they fought for. The new pantheon includes artists, athletes, writers, and a sports hero, Rocket Richard.

One effect of biography is that it reorders public memory. While political leaders such as Mackenzie King, John Diefenbaker, and René Lévesque may have triumphed on the political battlefield, their reputations have not survived their biographers’ scalpels. Others, such as R. B. Bennett, have been resurrected, and the legacies of John A. Macdonald and Wilfrid Laurier have been resignified by recent biographies. David Marshall’s pantheon of great works includes David Hackett Fischer’s biography of Samuel de Champlain, in which Fischer lays out both a theory of Canada and a guide for political leadership. John English’s magisterial biographies of Lester Pearson and Pierre Trudeau do the same, although the private lives and political styles of the two men couldn’t have been more different.

The next chapter in this section is by Roger Epp, a political scientist at the University of Alberta. Although the article deals with grassroots politics in Alberta, the questions that he addresses resonate throughout the entire book. The most salient issue that Epp raises is how, in the absence of central meeting places and an “adequate deliberative forum,” citizens can come together to test ideas and weigh solutions to problems. The “political deskilling” that Epp sees occurring in Alberta is occurring elsewhere in the country, except that in Alberta politics, the situation is more extreme. In a
rural Alberta now pockmarked by transmission lines, oil and gas wells, and giant feedlots, Epp argues that a culture of “negotiating and acting together” has taken hold. The “off-road politics” of Alberta, just as much, perhaps, as the off-road politics of the Web, has produced conflicts that are typically “eruptive and short-lived” and “may generate no more than an inchoate proto-politics.” But it is politics nonetheless—meaningful, authentic, and practical. As Epp observes, without these informal openings for dialogue and debate, democracy is “managed.”

Teaching a class on recent Québec films at the predominantly anglophone University of Calgary, Dominique Perron finds that the old certainties about Québec identity—and, indeed, about Québec’s relationship to the rest of Canada—can no longer be taken for granted. Her classes are made up of students who have come from all over the world, from global Canada, with the result that the “elements of recent Canada-Québec relations are almost completely alien to them. They might know certain facts, but they are culturally, as well as generationally, disengaged emotionally from these conflicts between the solitudes.” Surprisingly, many of her students didn’t view these Québec films within a Canadian context at all. Students relocated the films, fitting them into a global context. Even movies about Rocket Richard and an Inuit hunter were renegotiated so that comparisons were made with Asian or Latin American situations.

These reactions caused Perron to reflect on the transformations occurring within Québec itself. The animosity and distrust produced by generations of conflict with English Canada have given way to what can be described as a “Canadianization through globalization.” The emergence of Montreal as a global city in terms of both the economy and immigration has had the effect of connecting it to Canada. There is now a cohort of highly educated, mobile, cosmopolitan Québécsers whose lives and experiences are interchangeable with elites in English Canada. While they strongly identify with Québec, this technocratic group “does not consider the territory of Québec as a limitation on its goals and visions.” Perron is also persuaded by Jocelyn Letourneau’s thesis that there remains another Québec—a Québec that is rural, dependent on the vagaries of primary industries, more insular and traditional, and far more nationalistic.

In the wake of Québec’s wholehearted embrace of Jack Layton and the NDP, and the evisceration of the sovereigntist Bloc Québécois during the 2011
federal election, there was much speculation in English Canada about the
death of separatism in Québec. More than a few pundits eagerly declared vic-
tory. The reality, as Perron’s discussion about the reception of Québec films
by English-speaking students suggests, is far more complex. While there may
be increasing interaction and comfort on some levels, the chill of isolation
and mutual indifference remains. After all, it took enrolling in a class for
English-speaking students to be exposed to Québec films. Although this old
married couple may not be near divorce, which was certainly the issue when
the Erindale conference took place in 1980, it’s not clear how well English-
speaking Canada and Québec know each other.

Shannon Sampert analyzes a very different aspect of media culture in
her article on Canadian talk radio. Sampert, who teaches at the University
of Winnipeg, focuses on Charles Adler’s national radio show (Adler is also
a host on Sun TV), comparing it to the spectacle of professional wrestling.
Like wrestling, talk radio “has clearly defined heroes and villains, pageantry,
outrageous posturing, and high drama, and it attracts fans much in the same
way that wrestling does.” Her main point, however, is that just as wrestling is
a “morality play,” Adler’s show “adjudicates issues of morality.” He rails against
the injustices of daily life, airs popular grievances, and promotes his show as
the only place where you can hear the truth. The “truth,” according to Adler
and his listeners, is that liberals, feminists, and special interest groups have
transformed work, schools, and the broader culture in ways that are absurd
and destructive to Canadian values. Adler’s role is to hold “those in authority
accountable.” The show is a conservative counterattack, a space for venting
anger against institutional and social forces that listeners often find incompre-
hsensible and overwhelming.

Sampert points out that Adler is part of a long line of talk show personali-
ties stretching back to such original characters as Jack Webster and Rafe Mair
in Vancouver, Ron Collister and Dave Rutherford in Alberta, Ed Needham in
Toronto, Lowell Green in Ottawa, and Andre Arthur in Québec City, to name
but a few of Canada’s radio stars. While some observers see talk radio as a
media dinosaur, one of the last meeting places for an older and more conserv-
ative male audience at a time when younger listeners are increasingly going
elsewhere, Sampert argues that Adler is still “an agenda setter, selecting and
framing central issues of the day for other political and journalistic elites.” In
other words, one ignores talk radio at one’s own peril.
The relationship between the majority of Canadians and First Nations peoples is haunted by a problem of “knowing.” Nature guide and artist Troy Patenaude describes how this gap is being closed, at least to some degree, by the widespread acceptance of Aboriginal art. While it’s important to point out that the art of the Inuit is very different from Haida art or the art produced by Native artists on the prairies, the special power of Aboriginal art, according to Patenaude, is that it is rooted in “storywork.” Through storywork, artists tell stories that are rooted in the natural and the spiritual worlds, and participants are invited to share that knowledge. In this way, “contemporary Canadian Aboriginal artists are sustaining an age-old tradition of communicating with other generations, species, entities, and cultures through forms of art, or story, from the ground up.” Their works are intensely political because they integrate other Canadians into Native cultures and world views while naturalizing Canadians with their own environment in doing so. Patenaude quotes George Melynk, a leading interpreter of Canadian culture, as saying that there is now a “métisization of art” that has allowed Canadians to see their history and place in the world differently.

While the article examines the storywork of a number of path-breaking Aboriginal artists including Norval Morriseau, Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, and Joanne Cardinal Schubert, Patenaude believes that the work of Haida artist Bill Reid deserves special reverence. Reid’s majestic sculpture The Spirit of Haida Gwaii, whose image adorns the back of Canada’s twenty-dollar bill, has come to symbolize Canada itself. A boat is occupied by thirteen mythical creatures, each representing an aspect of life on Haida Gwaii off of British Columbia’s west coast, formerly the Queen Charlotte Islands. Those who view the sculpture are asked to respect the individuality and special place of each of the characters. In one sense, the sculpture is a metaphor for Canada, but in another, it brings us all “into a profound relationship with Haida Gwaii: its people, land and ecosystems.”

There is, however, an ironic twist. The centrality now given to Aboriginal art also coincides with the increasing marginalization of Native peoples in Canadian life. Canada’s symbolic terrain is shockingly different from the Canada that really exists. The level of neglect and destitution, as well as the violence on many First Nations reserves, is deeply disturbing. Large numbers of the homeless who wander city streets are Aboriginal, and levels of education, housing, and sanitation on reserves are often abysmal. While the
majority of Canadians have been invited through storywork to enter the world of Aboriginal peoples, one could argue that everyday life holds few such encounters.

The same cannot be said about the music that is part of the everyday experience of most Canadians. While Richard Sutherland of Mount Royal University reminds us that music is overwhelmingly about entertainment and typically divorced from politics in Canada, the reasons behind this divorce tell us much about the country. Because music is “a marker of identity,” Canadian music, much like the country itself, is divided by regional and linguistic identities. Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, Québec, and even Alberta, with its deep country-and-western sensibility, all have musical traditions that reflect distinct styles and passions. Not unexpectedly, the sharpest distinction is between Québec and English-speaking Canada. In Québec, popular music and politics have long nurtured each other. *Chanson* created by artists such as Felix Leclerc and Raymond Lévesque expressed the emotions and patriotism behind the sovereignty movement and became anthems sung at mass rallies. As Sutherland points out, in the rest of Canada, groups such as the Guess Who, Blue Rodeo, the Tragically Hip, or the Rheostatics often refer to Canada in their lyrics, but the message is almost never about politics. In the case of popular artists such as Bryan Adams, Sarah McLachlan, Alanis Morissette, Jean-Pierre Ferland, or Leonard Cohen, their songs “register as Canadian (at least with Canadians)—not because they offer a distinctly Canadian musical style or contain lyrical references to Canadian places or people,” but simply because audiences know that they are Canadian. While Canadian politicians use music in their appearances and campaign ads, music almost never uses them.

**THE CHALLENGES AHEAD**

A final essay by Christopher Waddell summarizes one of the main dilemmas posed in the book: our capacity to access information and connect with each other has increased to such an extraordinary degree that in some ways, we now have less information and are less involved than in previous decades. According to Waddell, the 2011 federal election campaign was “a campaign in which everyone talked about new technology, the digital revolution, social media, and interactivity, but virtually no one used it to communicate with voters.” Moreover, at the same time that the digital revolution has produced
massive amounts of information about every imaginable topic, interest, or passion, the Harper government has eliminated the long census form and made access to information far more difficult, and rarely speaks candidly about issues or decisions. Waddell hopes that by 2015, the year in which the next federal election will likely be fought, our political gyroscopes will have changed—that, by 2015, Canadians will have become more involved in community and civic life, information that is so vital to people’s lives and to public debate will no longer be hidden, and political parties and journalists will have broken out of the deep ruts they now find themselves in. If we fail to meet this challenge, then 2015 will look much like 2011.

One of the major changes to take place since the 1980 Erindale conference is the shrinking of our great public spaces. Much of this volume will chronicle the diminished space that Canadians have in which to communicate with each other, to deliberate, and to be informed about politics. The transition from mass media to Me-media has meant that the news organizations that the country once depended on to produce news—the old lions of the Canadian newspaper industry and the evening newscasts of the main television networks—are in retreat. While we must be careful about suggesting that we are anywhere close to holding a deathbed, candlelight vigil, traditional news media’s ability to assemble a mass audience, to conduct “shoe leather” investigative journalism, and to offer journalists viable careers is evaporating. It is less clear if web-based media provide comparable meeting places. Despite the kinetic power of social media and their extraordinary ability to mobilize, inform, and create, the audience for politics appears to be sporadic, elusive, and, to some degree, highly ghettoized. While Twitter and Facebook are magnificent tools for engaging those who are already mobilized, they do little to engage a mass public. In fact, if we accept Marcus Prior’s contention that the vast cornucopia of entertainment now available through web-based media and on cable TV has made it more likely that large numbers of people will avoid news entirely, then the break between large numbers of citizens and the political system may be extremely difficult to bridge.

A second loss of space has occurred as a result of the changing nature of politics. Election campaigns were as cutthroat and negative thirty years ago as they are today; politics has, after all, always been brutal and personal. But only recently has the campaign season become permanent. The combination of negative politics and the permanent campaign has created a new toxic
mix. Two surveys taken during the 2011 federal election campaign show that many Canadians are deeply frustrated by the negative attacks that characterize so much of Canadian politics. An Angus Reid/Toronto Star poll taken at mid-campaign found that over 60 percent of those surveyed believed that Canadian democracy was in crisis, and almost 80 percent, an astonishingly high number, thought that politicians were less honest than in the past. Most expressed a mix of emotions—mistrust, cynicism, and alienation—and none of the parties were seen as a satisfactory choice by a majority of those who were asked. Another Angus Reid poll, conducted after the leaders’ debates, found that a majority of those who were shown clips of the debates online were “annoyed” by what they saw. Respondents reacted with irritation when the leaders attacked each other but responded positively when the leaders discussed their policies. In other words, people were genuinely interested in learning about issues rather than listening to contrived messages and spitball attacks.

It’s difficult not to conclude that the never-ending maelstrom of negative politics that has become one of the earmarks of the permanent campaign has produced a cancerous by-product—a strong distaste among voters for the political system. While scholars have focused their attention on why younger voters in particular have turned their backs on politics, the reality may be that the political system has turned its back on Canadians. The question is also whether news organizations have added to the problem by highlighting conflict and personalities instead of changing the media script so that political leaders have to address the major issues facing the country. That health care, the future of cities, the environment, or job growth could be almost entirely ignored during the 2011 election is an example of how both politics and journalism have become smaller. Interestingly, this narrowing of the arteries has taken place at the same time that web-based media was expected by many observers to produce the opposite effect—to widen discussions and reinvigorate the public square. The result, at least so far, has been to turn politics inward.

When it comes to grassroots politics and some aspects of popular culture, the country seems much more vital. While Canadian culture has always been a minority culture in Canada because of the overpowering presence of the US entertainment industry, Canadian literature, music, drama, film, and art are filling more and more of our psychic landscape. Although most of grassroots politics and popular culture has little to do with formal politics, the “storywork” of artists, writers, and filmmakers is often intensely political. Their
work has entered the bloodstream of national discussion, and has altered perceptions and consciousness. Québec films, Aboriginal art, political biographies, and the off-road politics of rural protest are also part of politics.

NOTES

7 Pariser, The Filter Bubble, 2.
8 Prior, Post-Broadcast Democracy, 271–74.


18 See Henry Milner, The Internet Generation: Engaged Citizens or Political Dropouts (Boston: Tufts University Press, 2010).