There is a formidable literature within political science on the role that “critical” elections have played in both ratifying societal changes and setting the political table in ways that are fundamentally and irrevocably different from the past. The 2011 election qualifies as a critical election in every way. Indeed, it overturned most of the old assumptions and relationships in Canadian politics and, arguably, those of the media as well.

Having won a strong majority government after three previous elections in which he had increased his party’s seat total each time, the 2011 campaign confirmed Stephen Harper as one of the most successful political leaders in Canadian history. By any measure, his rise from leader of the western-based Canadian Alliance Party, to his takeover of the Progressive Conservatives, to his emergence as opposition leader and then prime minister has been breathtaking. To achieve his goal, he used the instruments of political power and bent them to his will in ways that demonstrated both long-term strategic thinking and raw political toughness. The Conservatives’ fundraising juggernaut; their devastating pre-writ ad campaigns that were so damaging to Liberal leaders Stéphane Dion and Michael Ignatieff; Harper’s use of a Senate stacked with Tory appointments to block legislation from the House of
Commons; his tight, almost manic, control over his caucus; and his deft management of the news media and government communications are just some examples of how he shaped the instruments of power to his own purposes. What is most surprising, however, is that the Conservatives won despite glaring liabilities: a ballooning deficit; a more recent policy of budgetary secrecy that left Canadians wondering how much was being spent on jets, prisons, and the G8 and G20 summits in Ontario; charges by Elections Canada over alleged improprieties during the 2006 election; and an ideological disconnect between the party and a majority of Canadians on many social issues.

Harper’s Conservatives won a strong majority by altering the chessboard of Canadian politics. According to one of the contributors to this volume, Tom Flanagan, Harper was unable to duplicate the uncomfortable and ultimately combustible alliance that had brought Brian Mulroney to power—a combination of western populists, traditional Conservatives, and Québec nationalists. When this proved too difficult and dangerous, Harper pivoted toward a new strategy: that of bringing together social conservatives based mainly in western Canada and in suburban Ontario; traditional Tories, many from the old Progressive Conservative wing of the party; and the burgeoning Chinese and South Asian communities of Vancouver and Toronto, as well as Jewish voters. The end result was that after years of making slow gains in the suburban 905 area code region surrounding Toronto, the Tories cut a wide swath through north Metro Toronto in 2011, breaking what had once been an impregnable Liberal stronghold. But the Conservative victory left a startling gap. Except for a slender thread of five MPs, the Conservatives were obliterated in Québec. For the first time in history, a majority government did not have significant representation from one of Canada’s two main language groups. It remains to be seen whether what amounts to an anglophone-only government will be seen as legitimate in Québec.

But the Conservatives’ victory would not have been possible had it not been for the collapse of the Liberals, and collapse is not too small a word. Having held power for sixty-nine years in the twentieth century, the party had become the country’s “natural governing party.” They were now reduced to the lowest number of seats in the forty-one elections since Canada was founded in 1867. Most of the MPs who survived the electoral hurricane of 2011 were veteran politicians who managed to barely hold on to what had previously been safe seats. With one or two exceptions such as Justin Trudeau and
Dominique Leblanc, the successor generation was wiped out. While hindsight is always 20/20, it is tempting to argue that had Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff embraced the idea of a coalition with the NDP, not only would the Liberals have been the senior partner but Jack Layton might have been effectively sidelined. What is clear is that much like the famous Monty Python character who still thinks he's going to win the battle even as his limbs are being chopped off, the Liberals have been left with little to fight with. Once the great meeting place for English- and French-language elites and the party of national unity for most of the twentieth century, the Liberals have been reduced to a handful of mostly anglophone ridings in Québec. The party also lost support in immigrant and minority communities, a relationship that was once seen as unbreakable. It had also been the party of Bay Street—the party of top business leaders such as C. D. Howe, Walter Gordon, John Manley, and Paul Martin—but a sharp turn to the left had drained much of that support. With the termination of annual subsidies to political parties announced in the 2011 budget and the sharp reduction in parliamentary funding that comes with third-party status, they are now deeply wounded.

Perhaps the most dramatic change was the explosion of support for Jack Layton and the NDP in Québec. Much of this stratospheric rise was based on personality politics. Layton's courage in battling cancer and the pain of a recent hip surgery, and his likeability (he was, after all, the leader who most people said that they wanted to have a beer with), were important factors in his rise. Layton's fine performance during the French-language leader's debate and, later, on a popular TV show, Tout le monde en parle, proved to be decisive turning points. But most critical was the NDP's embrace of progressive social programs and its willingness to give Québec greater powers, including giving Québec's language legislation primacy in federal workplaces in the province and reopening the constitution to obtain Québec's signature. These were positions that reflected much of what the Bloc Québécois had stood for. The NDP's strongest card was the disenchantment of Québec voters with the other parties. The Harper government had become exceedingly unpopular in Québec, and the Liberal party had been unable to win a majority among francophone voters since the “night of the long knives” in 1981, when Trudeau outmaneuvered Premier René Lévesque, moving ahead with the repatriation of the constitution and creating the Charter of Rights and Freedoms without Québec's approval. Voters had also soured on what they saw as the tired and
unproductive politics of the Bloc Québécois. While an official NDP presence was virtually non-existent in most Québec ridings, a wave of popularity for “Le Bon Jack” carried a wave of surprised and, in many cases, totally inexperienced candidates into the House of Commons. The “orange crush” that was sweeping Québec was soon felt in English-speaking Canada as close to 300,000 voters left the Liberals to vote for the NDP in the closing days of the campaign.

Not only did the 2011 federal election redraw the political map in dramatic ways; it also raised questions about how elections are fought in Canada. The election followed the same script that has been in place since at least the 1970s: the media covered the leaders as they hopscotched across the country; the media’s reliance on polls had become compulsive and addictive, making the horse race the focus of almost all coverage; there were only two leaders’ debates, one in English and one in French; and negative attack ads had become the weapons of choice for the political parties. While news organizations and political parties had constructed a system that seemed to fit their needs, the question is whether these practices and assumptions still serve Canadians well or whether they are outdated, increasingly disconnected from any larger realities, and harmful to democracy. We believe that both the parties and the news media have created a kind of alternate universe whose values and objectives need to be rethought in fundamental ways.

At least two concerns emerged out of the 2011 election. First, political leaders, with the aide of journalists, were able to sidestep any real discussion of the issues facing the country. Whether it was health care, the future of cities, how the deficit was going to be reduced, immigration, environmental policies, or the jobs crisis facing young people, leaders were free to spin their political cloths without having to supply details or even defend their positions. Second, the increasing disengagement that Elly Alboim discusses in his article continued to be evident in this campaign. Voter turnout, at just over 61 percent, was close to a record low. Polls also found that the vast majority of Canadians viewed politicians with a combination of mistrust, suspicion, and alienation, and found none of the parties satisfying. These two concerns are undoubtedly linked: arguably, in the absence of a discussion by political leaders of the issues that touch their lives and the courage to tackle them, voters become increasingly cynical and disengaged.
While there was much hoopla in the media about the magic of social media and pundits gushed about the 2011 election being the Twitter campaign, only a very small percentage of those under thirty used social media to follow the election, and voter turnout among younger Canadians remained modest.

One of the oldest election rituals is the leader’s tour. The tour was originally devised so that voters could see and hear the leaders first hand. Campaigning meant meeting as many people as possible. At the same time, the leaders were supposed to experience and learn about the country in order to understand its problems. Clearly, these original intentions have long been twisted out of shape. Harper’s tightly controlled appearances, where he repeated the same message about the dangers of a Liberal–NDP coalition endlessly in front of cheering supporters and took only five questions a day from reporters, amounted to a moving film set, with cities, streets, and voters used as props. With journalists unable to penetrate the tour’s “bubble” and Harper shielded from ordinary citizens, the tour served journalists, who needed colourful pictures and announcements to report on, and the Tories, who knew that their images and messages would make it onto the evening news. The other parties practiced the same rituals—Ignatieff poorly, but Layton with a sophisticated mastery of visual politics, using his cane as a campaign symbol, wearing a Canadiens hockey uniform while serving beer to hockey fans, and strumming a guitar at thirty thousand feet. The fact that very few of Layton’s policies had been properly costed didn’t seem to interest reporters on the campaign trail.

A second concern is the media’s continuing obsession with the horse race—with who’s ahead, who’s behind, and who’s gaining and why. These are easy stories to report. They allow news organizations to appear neutral and authoritative and absolve them of the responsibility to probe deeper, explore issues more thoroughly, and describe the consequences of party positions for the country. Polls are particularly irresistible because they create headlines and allow news organizations both to create and to control the news. In 2011, however, there was a fly in the ointment. None of the major polling organizations predicted a Conservative majority. For a variety of reasons that we will discuss later in this chapter, the polling industry is going through a crisis of identity and accuracy. This raises the question of how news organizations can make the horse race the main “peg” of their election coverage if they encounter increasing difficulty knowing where the horses really are in the race.
The conventional wisdom going into the 2011 election was that leaders’ debates count for very little because leaders repeat the same mantras that they use on the campaign trail and have little opportunity to confront each other directly. Debates were also seen as boring television with audiences largely disappearing after the first fifteen minutes or half an hour. Most important, studies show that unless something surprising occurs, debates tend to reinforce the choices that voters have already made. Hence, few votes change hands. While polls taken immediately after the 2011 English-language debate showed no clear winner, journalists speculated that Harper won because he didn’t lose and Ignatieff lost because he had to win big and didn’t. Surveys taken after the French debate indicated that Bloc Québécois leader Gilles Duceppe had scored a resounding victory and that NDP leader Jack Layton had finished third. Nothing could have been further from the truth. The debates had what Robin Sears called a “delayed time-bomb effect”—with Jack Layton the clear winner.5 Given the importance that debates can have in altering public perceptions, it’s surprising that debate formats, as well as the decision about who participates in them, are still left to a consortium of broadcasters rather than to a neutral commission. One also has to wonder why we don’t have more debates or why we don’t have debates among finance, defence, or environment critics so that policy positions can be more fully aired.

In the wake of the 2011 election, analysts claimed that the Conservative attack ads that aired in several bursts prior to the election had been so successful in defining Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff that he couldn’t recover. There is much discussion in this book about how negative ads, both on TV and online, have become the new normal. They reach voters directly, bypassing journalist’s interpretation and framing; they can be repeated until the repetition itself has an effect; and if voters see them as true, they are likely to be exceedingly sticky, difficult to get off. But the airwaves are not equally available to all parties. The Tories had a sizable spending advantage in the pre-writ period and used it with devastating force. There are also, as discussed in the introduction to this volume, questions about the nature of campaign ads. Outrageous claims are sometimes believed and the images conveyed in ads are contrived and often not true. The question of whether these ads and the attack culture that they reflect and perpetuate are healthy for the political system is discussed by Jonathan Rose later in this volume.
In campaign lore, much credence is given to the importance of parties having a strong “ground game.” Winning supposedly depends on developing databases that help parties identify their voters and on having the machinery needed to get them to the polls. Yet in Québec, the NDP won with virtually no ground game at all. Attending all-candidates meetings, mounting sign campaigns, developing sophisticated databases, and motivating volunteers seemed to be largely irrelevant. The old saying credited to American congressman Tip O’Neill that all politics is local seemed to be reversed. Very little politics is local.

This article will probe more deeply into the communication structures and practices of Canadian elections, including polls, the leader’s tour, debates, and the effects of web-based media. (Campaign ads are discussed in Jonathan Rose’s contribution to this volume so we have chosen not to deal with ads in our review of the election.) In each case, we will ask whether it’s time to rethink the old rules so that the major challenges facing the country are not ignored by both politicians and the media, and the cycle of disengagement discussed so often in this book can be broken.

The Leader’s Tour

As it has been for decades, the leader’s tour in 2011 was the focus of each party’s national campaign, and as has also occurred for decades, the media tagged along with Stephen Harper, Michael Ignatieff, and Jack Layton as they criss-crossed the country for thirty-six days. Following the leaders this time was more expensive than ever for news organizations (at least $45,000 per seat on each leader’s tour, not including hotels, per diems, and food costs). That meant, as in every campaign since 1997, that TV networks pooled their coverage. One crew was on each leader’s plane providing identical video to CBC, Radio-Canada, TVA, Global, and CTV of the day’s events, the leaders’ speeches, scrums, and anything else interesting that happened. TV and print reporters jumped on and off tours, and despite 2010 rumours that media cost-cutting would mean that some media would only cover the NDP sporadically, that didn’t happen. In retrospect, that was a wise decision.

The first week proved a good example of how each party campaigned. Stephen Harper visited fourteen cities, Michael Ignatieff thirteen, and Jack Layton twelve, but it was where they went that was telling. After the
traditional Ottawa kickoff on Saturday morning, March 26, Harper went
directly to Québec City and finished that day in Brampton for the first of many
visits to the Greater Toronto Area. The rest of the week he was in Montreal,
each of the Atlantic provinces, Winnipeg, Edmonton, Regina, and Vancouver
Island. Each visit was to a constituency that the campaign had identified as
one Conservatives needed to win to turn Harper’s daily stump request for “a
strong, stable, majority national government” into a reality. That approach
continued right to the campaign’s last day, which held a coast-to-coast blast
that dropped Harper into selected spots such as the London North Centre
riding, which the Conservatives took from the Liberals, before finishing late
at night in Calgary.

Liberal ambitions were less lofty as Ignatieff initially concentrated on
southern Ontario and the Montreal region, with quick visits to Winnipeg and
Vancouver. Even this early in the campaign, the Liberals appeared to be using
a defensive strategy, trying to hold the seats Liberals had won in 2008 and
maybe take some from the NDP rather than going after Conservative-held rid-
ings. Ignatieff’s tour became much more defensive as the campaign unfolded,
and polls showed the Liberals being in more and more trouble. Unlike past
elections with a national wrap-up to the tour, the Liberals spent the last five
days only in southern Ontario and Toronto in an increasingly desperate yet
failing effort to hold seats that had been Liberal for decades.

On day one, the NDP headed to Edmonton from Ottawa to try (as it turned
out, successfully) to keep the only non-Conservative seat in Alberta. Like the
other leaders, Layton spent a lot of time in Toronto and southern Ontario, but
in that first week, he was also in Regina, Vancouver, northern Ontario, Québec
City, and Montreal. Even before the campaign had started, the NDP had plas-
tered downtown Montreal with billboards featuring Jack Layton, suggesting
that the party thought gains could be made in Québec, which turned out to
be correct. He finished the campaign’s last days going from coast to coast, met
by large crowds of enthusiastic supporters, giving television great images of
campaign momentum, creating a sharp visual contrast to the Liberals’ last
days on the campaign trail, and giving viewers an accurate preview of the
election-night fates of the two parties. Layton began May 1 in Montreal, then
took his campaign bus down Highway 401 to Toronto, stopping in Kingston
for an event where police had to close streets as the crowd was so large.
Bloc Québécois leader Gilles Duceppe initially didn’t venture beyond Montreal and Québec City. Even when he moved into other regions of the province, reporters started noticing and reporting that crowds were small and events were listless. It was a campaign without direction or focus, which showed in the party’s election day decimation. It also received only sporadic coverage outside Québec.

There was no national train tour like the one in 2008 for Green Party leader Elizabeth May. She spent most of the campaign in her Saanich–Gulf Islands riding determined to win the Green Party’s first seat, which she did. However, she still had the distinction of being the first national party leader to visit Calgary when she stopped there on April 19—three weeks into the campaign. That was another sign of how selectively the tours made stops. It was no surprise on election night when Conservatives in the Calgary area racked up margins of victory of more than thirty thousand. That’s why the leaders hadn’t wasted time with campaign visits.

Campaign days on all tours were similar, with leaders visiting locales that would highlight whatever issue the party wanted to address that day to give broadcast journalists and photographers audio and visuals, hopefully persuasive ones, for that day’s stories. The leaders scrunched daily (although Harper’s dictate that he would take only five media questions a day became a story in itself). All three leaders of the main parties usually had daily rallies that almost always featured the leader surrounded by an audience, usually of partisans, with the leader patrolling the stage like a TV host, speaking and answering questions extemporaneously.

Although a spring 2011 election had been widely anticipated, none of the parties had much new to say to voters. The Conservatives spent the first half of the campaign reannouncing spending plans first revealed in the March 22 budget that helped trigger their defeat in the Commons three days later. The Liberals released their platform in Ottawa on Sunday morning, April 3, but much of it was repackaged promises from previous campaigns, including child care and support for post-secondary students and for low-income seniors. Reporters on Layton’s tour noted correctly that the NDP was largely reannouncing proposals from its 2008 campaign.

For a media culture that believes that if something has been reported previously there is no need to report it again in depth, the lack of anything “new” from the leaders created space for other issues to dominate daily coverage.
of leaders. The parties assisted that process on occasion by feeding reporters with negative stories about their opponents.\textsuperscript{7}

As Harper daily mixed his calls for a majority with the threat that otherwise the other three parties would form a coalition to take power by defeating a Conservative minority, the other leaders had to respond, but other issues, not always ones the parties wanted covered, captured daily attention as well. They included the restriction on the media during the Conservative campaign and the equally rigid control of who could get into Conservative rallies and who was thrown out; a Conservative attempt to stop an advance poll at the University of Guelph; the past fraud convictions of a former Harper senior advisor; questionable comments made by Liberal candidates that led to demands for Ignatieff to respond; a leaked tentative Auditor-General report suggesting that the Conservatives had illegally spent money allocated to the 2010 G8 and G20 summits on a series of unrelated pork-barrel projects throughout the riding of Industry Minister Tony Clement; an email from Conservative organizers inviting supporters to dress in ethnic costumes to attend a Harper Toronto-area rally; the possible release of a report about how Canadians treated Afghan detainees; and the fate of Helena Guergis, who was seeking re-election in Ontario after Harper had fired her from a junior ministry in his cabinet.

Most of these stories came and went within a day or two, but the supposed importance and significance of each individually along with their cumulative negative impact on the Conservatives was heightened by the world of instant communications. The latest details, comments, and reaction dominated minute-by-minute discussion on social networks such as Twitter and were used extensively by journalists. That created the impression that there was much more engagement and interest in the issues among the public beyond the media covering the campaign than turned out to be the case. While most of these stories from the tours placed the Conservatives in a bad light (as the governing party, they were already the focus of daily attacks from the opposition parties), none of the criticisms seemed to count on election day.

So what happened? Why did reporters’ stories from the tours have so little impact? Former Globe and Mail columnist and reporter Hugh Winsor offered an explanation by citing a post-election study done by Toronto communications consultants Ensight Canada:\textsuperscript{8}
One of the themes in the election coverage was how the prime minister seemed to be “Teflon coated” because none of the various scandals or dictatorial heavy-handedness seemed to stick because the polls didn’t show his support was declining.

As the Ensight post-election focus groups showed, there was an explanation for the phenomenon but the media did not search for it or find it during the campaign. Journalists didn’t talk to enough people to learn that electors were dismissing all of this flurry as political games.9

Voters were tired of the infighting and nastiness in Parliament, which had increased with the series of minority governments, and they were also worried about their own financial circumstances and the state of the Canadian economy. This being so, they proved reluctant to change governments. Harper’s daily responses to concerns about stability and the economy received little sustained coverage from reporters on the tours. As Winsor suggests, voters didn’t find the stories from the tours important and so paid no attention.

This raises the obvious question of why the media should spend so much reporter time and energy on the tours at all. Journalists travelling with a leader are in a bubble that, as much as possible, is controlled by their party minders. Then they rush off to file their stories or to move to the next location and event. The travel time under party control was even more pronounced in 2011 as the tours each descended on a narrower range of communities than in the past, often great distances apart. As the campaign revealed, because leaders were more selective in their visits, the media missed opportunities to speak to non-partisan voters. Had they been interviewing voters on the ground rather than travelling with leaders, readers, listeners, and viewers would have had more insight into public attitudes about the parties and their policies, and the May 2 result might not have been so surprising.

Had news organizations allocated the people and money spent on the tours to coverage on the ground, journalists might have answered many questions never adequately addressed in their coverage. These include:

- Were the Conservative pre-election ads against Ignatieff as effective as has been claimed, and if so, with whom and why?
What grains of truth did voters see in the ads?

- What was it about the Conservative pitch on the economy and a majority government that struck home with voters? What were their concerns about the economy?
- How important was the Conservative budget and its myriad small tax breaks for specific groups in getting support for Harper in the campaign?
- How were the Conservatives doing on the ground in those ridings noted by the media at the campaign’s outset as ones that the party needed to win? What happened in the ridings the Liberals thought they could take from an NDP campaign that most agreed was initially lacklustre? Why couldn’t the Liberals exploit that?
- What NDP policies proved most attractive to voters, or did they even know what they were? Why did policies apparently not matter when voters decided to support Jack Layton?
- What weaknesses did the Bloc Québécois have that no media outlets identified prior to the leaders’ debates, and why was the NDP the mass alternative for Bloc voters?
- What were the messages that Conservatives, led by Jason Kenney, delivered to immigrant communities, and how positively were they received?
- Why was Ontario largely a holdout in what pollsters and the media described as an NDP surge in the campaign's final week?
- Were socially liberal, fiscally conservative Liberals, primarily in Ontario, frightened enough by the prospect of a strong NDP result and possible victory in the campaign's final week that they abandoned their party and voted Conservative?
- Why—despite all the media noise about engagement of young people, vote mobs, social media, and so on—was turnout among young people little changed from their very limited level of interest in 2008?

None of these can be answered from the leaders’ tours, yet the answers aren’t that hard to find, and collectively, they determined the election’s outcome.
Of course, the media shouldn't abandon covering the leaders as they campaign. What leaders have to say is important, but so is how communities and voters react to the presence and policies of leaders. To find that out, reporters need to be on the ground in locations before a leader arrives and after he or she goes, not pulling out of town as part of the leader's entourage. At one point, travelling with leaders was essential: otherwise reporters couldn't feed their stories back to their newsrooms. The parties set up filing rooms daily, including phone lines, and stopped tours at local TV stations to let reporters feed stories and pictures by satellite. Television edit suites weighing several hundred pounds were transported in several large boxes and had to be set up and dismantled each time a reporter wanted to do a story. The digital world has changed all that. Today an edit suite can be a laptop and reporters are in constant touch with editors by cellphone.

So the infrastructure rationale for the need to be on a leader's tour no longer exists. Reporters can report from anywhere simply and easily. As this election demonstrated, neither is there any editorial rationale for being on leaders' tours. If journalists are not on the tour, each news organization can still decide to send reporters to some, but not necessarily all, events that leaders stage during a campaign. That lets reporters get a better sense of what's happening by being outside the cocoon and experiencing a campaign as the public experiences it, not in the prefabricated travelling circus created by the parties.

The May 2 results surprised almost everyone by producing a comfortable majority Conservative government. The four years before the next vote now gives news organizations the time to plan future coverage that finally acknowledges how communications and technology have changed in the past thirty years. It is long past time to abandon travelling with the leaders. Giving up that safety blanket of having daily party-designed images and an accompanying “story” served up for reporters forces news organizations and journalists to think harder about how and what to cover. Some will succeed and some will struggle, but news organizations facing challenges from social media, citizen journalists, and anyone with a camera, a computer, and a cell-phone need to break away from the old ways and the conformity that once again characterized election coverage in 2011. For those with the imagination and willingness to do it differently in 2015, there are both risks and rewards.
The leaders’ debates are the only time during the campaign when Canadians see and judge the party leaders for themselves unhindered by the filter of media reporting. In news reports, a leader’s words are relegated to short sound bites, clips that reporters choose because they fit their narratives but that may be out of context with what the leaders are trying to say. In fact, sound bites are now so abbreviated that one rarely hears leaders expressing a full thought or even completing a sentence. In debates, leaders are given the oxygen supply that is so vital to campaigns—direct access to the Canadian public. It is also the time during the campaign when leaders are the most vulnerable and exposed. They are forced out of the protected bubble of scripted appearances, cheering supporters, and carefully orchestrated photo ops and face the other leaders and the public directly. Their actions or policies can be challenged or ridiculed, and under pressure, they can appear shaken or may say the wrong things in the wrong way. The debates provide a level playing field in which leaders are measured against their opponents in a kind of comparison shopping that doesn’t occur at other times in the campaign. Intangibles such as the ability to project confidence or composure, to hit just the right tone in terms of authority and folksiness, or the instinctive capacity to reach across the screen and connect with viewers—to have, in effect, a high TV IQ—can be decisive.

The 2011 English-language debate was watched by 3.85 million viewers, with as many as 10.65 million people watching some part of the debate. This was a record number of viewers, an increase of 26 percent from the 2008 debate and a million more viewers than had watched the English-language debate in 2000. Although exact numbers were not readily available, the audience for the French-language debate probably exceeded the 1.4 million viewers who watched the debate in 2008, a huge audience in Québec. These audience numbers rival or surpass virtually anything else broadcast on Canadian TV: top entertainment shows, the Grey Cup, and even the hockey playoffs. Because debates are a major TV event, they are one of the few times when Canadians gather together to watch politics and talk about political issues. Studies show that debates provide a learning experience for most voters. Viewers inevitably learn something about either the leaders or party positions that they did not know before, and debates often bring issues to the forefront that were previously ignored or underreported.
Surprisingly, then, leaders’ debates are not an officially acknowledged part of Canadian elections. They are not governed by set rules or scheduled at set times, and they do not have a set number of participants. Nor are they run by a neutral body. They are controlled by a consortium of the major broadcasters—CBC, CTV, Radio-Canada, Global, and TVA—who, every time an election takes place, negotiate with the political parties about the rules that will govern the debates in that campaign. As a result, formats and participants change with each election. In 2008, Green Party leader Elizabeth May was initially excluded by the consortium after the Conservatives and the NDP refused to participate if she was included. After a public protest, the parties and the broadcasters backed down and she was allowed to participate. In 2011, she was denied entry into the inner circle because the party had no seats in the House of Commons despite winning almost 7 percent of the vote in 2008 and receiving per-vote subsidies from the federal government like the other parties in the debate. In some debates, a panel of journalists has posed questions. In others, questions have come from selected citizens. In 2011, a handful of people were chosen to ask questions from more than four thousand who had applied. They were videotaped in their own communities, and one or two became local stars, at least for a day or two.

Whether leaders stand behind podiums or sit around a table, whether they have a chance to respond to each other, whether they are paired off into smaller one-on-one debates, or whether all four or five leaders are expected to join in a rough-and-tumble exchange—all of these details of a debate are negotiated among the parties and the networks every time an election occurs. Most crucially, because prime time shows are the principal moneymakers for the TV networks, the consortium has been reluctant to cut any further into prime time schedules than they have to or to provide time for multiple debates. The agreed-upon tradition is a single English-language debate and a single French-language debate. In 2011, the French-language debate was rescheduled so as not to conflict with a Montreal Canadiens–Boston Bruins playoff game.

The conventional literature suggests that in most circumstances, debates merely reinforce the preconceptions that voters already have. Kathleen Hall Jamieson describes the research findings with regard to American debates: “Since exposure to extended forms of communication reinforces existing predispositions, those who favored the front-runner are likely to judge the
person the winner. Those favoring the person behind in the polls are likely to feel that their candidate has ‘won’ as well. In practice, this means that the process is rigged to favor a supposed ‘victory’ by the person ahead in the polls before the debate even airs.” Votes can shift, however, if debates reveal something new or unexpected, if leaders are being seen or evaluated for the first time so that preconceptions haven’t formed, or if a leader gives a stellar performance or commits a fundamental error.

Leaders come to the debates heavily armed. They usually take time off from the campaign trail to prepare and hold rehearsals, and they are surrounded by teams of advisors who work on opening and closing statements, witty comebacks, and “memorable” lines. In some cases, party election scripts have been focus-group tested so that leaders know which words or narratives will be most effective. The goal is to get the better of the other leaders in one or two high-voltage exchanges that will be replayed in the highlight packages that appear on TV newscasts. Sometimes, there are rare but decisive moments that capture a mood or that signify an entire campaign. Perhaps the classic American example is when Ronald Reagan asked Americans in 1980, “Are you better off today than you were four years ago?” The question reminded voters that Jimmy Carter’s presidency had been marred by domestic and foreign policy failures and that voting for Reagan was a safer choice. Another good example was the stern lecture that Brian Mulroney delivered about patronage appointments to Prime Minister John Turner during the 1984 English-language debate: “Sir, you had an option. You could have said no.” Equally devastating was Bloc Québécois leader Lucien Bouchard’s pummelling of Prime Minister Kim Campbell during the 1992 debate when he asked her repeatedly whether she knew the size of the government’s deficit: she didn’t. During the 2000 debate, Canadian Alliance leader Stockwell Day held up a sign that said “No 2-Tier Health Care.” Aside from appearing silly, the gesture reminded voters that Day had changed policies and perhaps couldn’t be trusted. His wounds were largely self-inflicted.

But usually victories and defeats are more difficult to read, and it often takes time for words and gestures to sink in. During the 2000 English-language debate, the opposition leaders took turns attacking Prime Minister Jean Chrétien for being arrogant and dictatorial, and were so anxious to score points that they gave him few opportunities to speak. Chrétien had no glittering moments, but his dignity and folksy charm seemed to refute what the
other leaders were saying. The 2011 debates were particularly difficult to read. At least one poll taken after the French-language debate showed that Bloc Québécois leader Gilles Duceppe had won an overwhelming victory, with NDP leader Jack Layton finishing third behind Stephen Harper. This poll, like so many others during the campaign, couldn’t have been further off the mark. It was “Le Bon Jack” who had made the biggest impression and for whom support began to climb almost immediately after the debate while support for Duceppe quickly plummeted.

In the 2011 English-language debate, Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff’s most formidable opponent may have been the high expectations placed on him by the media. With Maclean’s having declared Ignatieff the winner of the campaign’s opening rounds and with reporters also sensing that his fortunes were turning, the Liberals appeared to have considerable momentum going into the debate. But as the insurgent, Ignatieff not only had to win but win big. He wasn’t helped by the luck of the draw that positioned Stephen Harper off to one side so that it seemed that the prime minister was facing the very coalition that he had been warning voters about and that placed Layton between Harper and Ignatieff so that he appeared to be Ignatieff’s equal. But Ignatieff also made two fundamental errors. Rather than focus on jobs and economic management issues, he directed his attacks against what he saw as Harper’s abuse of Parliament, forgetting, perhaps, that most Canadians blamed all of the parties, not just the Conservatives, for creating the deadlock and frenzied partisanship that had gripped Parliament. This gave Jack Layton his moment. The knife thrust was quickly administered: if Ignatieff cared so much about Parliament, then why, Layton asked, did he have the poorest attendance record of anyone in the House of Commons? “You know,” Layton intoned, “most Canadians, if they don’t show up for work, they don’t get a promotion.” Ignatieff couldn’t muster a response.

The Liberal leader also spent so much time attacking Harper that he never got around to telling voters, many of whom were probably tuning into the election for the first time, what he would do if the Liberals formed a government. He made virtually no mention in the whole two-hour debate of any of the main selling points in the Liberal platform. In contrast, Harper hammered away incessantly, staring right into the camera, about the need for a Conservative majority to ensure continued economic growth. To some degree, Ignatieff rectified the situation in the French-language debate, which
took place the following evening, when he referred to his proposed policies at some length. But the damage had been done. After the debates, the Liberal train never got back on track.

Even before the debates ended, party operatives via Twitter began spinning reporters. They pointed to key moments, gaffes made by the other leaders, or the importance of exchanges on issues that they saw as important. The parties understand that winning the media’s coverage of the debate may be as important as winning the debate itself. Journalists have the power not only to select the exchanges that will make it onto TV newscasts, exchanges that are likely to be repeated again and again, but to point out mistakes or gaffes that leaders make. Perhaps the classic example is the first debate between Al Gore and George W. Bush during the 2000 US presidential election. While polls showed that Al Gore had easily defeated Bush, media reporting focused on two instances in which Gore seemed to inflate or invent stories, and his “know-it-all” demeanour was lampooned on late night talk shows. Gore’s clear victory was “reinterpreted” as a defeat by journalists. Strangely, Bush’s erroneous claim that Gore was outspending his campaign received little attention from reporters.

Reporters know that declaring winners and losers can be dangerous territory. Conscious of their professional integrity, Canadian reporters and pundits tend to be exceedingly cautious. Even so, a small army of pundits, including Robert Fife and Craig Oliver of CTV and CBC At Issue panelists Andrew Coyne and Chantal Hébert, were quick to point out that Ignatieff had not performed well.

In the aftermath of the 2011 debates, Globe and Mail writer Tabatha Southey wrote a column titled “Why Did They Can My Favourite Election Show After Only Two Episodes?” Southey argued that given the mammoth audiences for the debates and the amount of discussion about politics that they generate, there should be four ninety-minute bilingual debates using simultaneous translation. A case can also be made for additional debates among party critics on subjects such as economic policy, the environment, or foreign policy. These additional debates could adopt different formats and would ensure that important issues that might otherwise be ignored by the parties and journalists could be aired more fully. More debates would also minimize the all-or-nothing risk that comes with just one encounter. Southey also thought that the questions asked by ordinary voters during the 2011 debates had not been
particularly effective. As she put it, “I’m not convinced that anxious-looking people standing outside wearing parkas have any particular monopoly on curiosity or moral authority. Without specific questions on policy and vital follow-up questions, a debate is going to be pretty superficial.”

While extending the debate season within the campaign might make a great deal of sense in terms of engaging Canadians, it’s not clear that such changes would be supported by the political parties or by the TV networks. Presumably, parties that are in the lead or feel that they have the advantage will be reluctant to give their opponents additional openings. Debates can create new and unpredictable dynamics that can disrupt even the best-planned campaigns. And while— theoretically, at least—it’s the people of Canada rather than the TV networks who own the airwaves, broadcasters will resist any further incursions into their prime-time schedules. With control over the debates now resting with the broadcasting consortium, reforms are unlikely to come any time soon. A first step would be to give power over the leaders’ debates to an independent body, perhaps somewhat similar to the Commission on Presidential Debates in the United States. That commission’s authority is accepted by all parties in the electoral process and organizes three presidential debates and one vice-presidential debate during every presidential election. While many politicians and journalists lament the increasing disengagement of so many Canadians from public affairs, when it comes to debates, they have been unwilling to give up control or think imaginatively about the one event that attracts the most voter attention during the campaign.

THE ADDICTION TO POLLS

Six weeks before the start of the 2011 federal election, a prescient story by Canadian Press reporter Joan Bryden predicted that a hooked media would overdose on polls during the upcoming campaign, turning small changes in party support into dramatic events. “You should really consider what is the basis for your addiction and maybe enter a ten-step program” was the recommendation in the story to news organizations from Carleton University Communications professor and pollster André Turcotte. He was equally harsh on polling firms for a predicted flood of the market, adding, “I think pollsters should reflect on what this does to our industry. It cheapens it.”

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Bryden’s prediction was a safe bet, given the way the media had covered campaigns in the previous decade. Not surprisingly, though, Turcotte’s advice was ignored completely by both pollsters and the media. The 2011 election established a new high-water mark in the volume of polls, the range of methodologies and polling techniques employed, the extent of contradictory poll results, voter confusion, and the media’s focus on horse-race numbers to the exclusion of everything else.

In mid-campaign, Bryden returned to the same theme, referring to the blunt critique of Allan Gregg, perhaps Canada’s best-known pollster: “As far as Gregg is concerned, the election campaign has magnified problems with political polling: methodological issues that are skewing the results of both telephone and online surveys; commercial pressures that are prompting pollsters to overhype their surveys; and an unholy alliance with journalists who routinely misconstrue data and ignore margins of error.”15 The media had arrived at this point through the usual means. As in past campaigns, news organizations in 2011 aligned themselves with individual polling firms. For example, the Globe and Mail and CTV worked with Nanos Research, while Global Television relied on Ipsos Reid. Working with a specific firm gives the news organization first call on daily poll results, particularly since nightly tracking polls now dominate campaign polling activity. For pollsters, the media visibility that comes with the partnerships and frequent interviews helps establish their credibility, which in turn they exploit to win commercial business based on their political polling “success.” That success is measured in only one way—how close the polling firm comes in its last reported result to the actual results on election night.

The risks in this symbiotic relationship between media and pollsters have been evident and appropriately criticized for some time, but addictions are hard to break. On the one hand, the pollsters need the exposure, particularly now that their current business model based on telephone polling has virtually collapsed in the face of answering machines, telemarketer fatigue by homeowners, and cellphones. Its chosen replacement, online polling, remains fraught with methodological challenges and doubts about its accuracy. On the other hand, the media needs a storyline and polls provide it since they are simple to follow and they now have the added benefit of potentially changing every day. Having struck a deal with one polling company, each news organization then has a vested interest in authenticating that partner’s results,
sometimes to the exclusion of all others. So polls drive stories, and little time or effort is spent looking for stories that may challenge or undercut how poll results frame the campaign.

In 2011, other developments pushed these trends to new heights, damaging the credibility of both the media and pollsters. The growing switch to online polling dramatically reduced entry costs for anyone who wanted to use political polls to establish a market research business. New pollsters popped up, each choosing its own methodologies and all lobbing results into the open media maw.16 Frequently during this campaign, as in the past, news organizations and bloggers lumped a handful of different company results together for comparison, ignoring differences in methodologies, margins of errors, sample sizes, dates at which the surveys were taken, and the track record of the individual polling firms. This became easy to present to audiences as news because the media bought in to Stephen Harper’s contention from the campaign’s opening day that this election was solely about whether the electorate would give his Conservative party the “strong, stable, majority national government” that was the centrepiece of his every campaign appearance. If that is the campaign’s overriding issue, polls are important, but the media attention was on more than just poll results.

The simplicity of computer modelling, a proliferation of pollsters, and a media seeing the election in unidimensional terms was fertile ground for the blossoming of seat projections, translating individual poll results into a virtual House of Commons on an almost daily basis to answer the majority-minority question.17 Such projections gained some attention in previous campaigns, but 2011 was a new peak, with pollsters, media outlets, and even individuals with their own websites all playing the game from the first day of campaigning. For example, the daily Nanos tracking poll reported by the Globe and Mail included not only vote share percentages but also seat projections that moved up and down with vote share and a leadership index designed to highlight how the public rated the party leaders. A popular privately run website, ThreeHundredEight.com, aggregated all poll results and produced daily seat projections throughout the campaign, shifting each party’s seat numbers by as little as one or two seats daily while predicting to the tenth of a percentage point the share of the overall vote each party would receive.18 That site became a popular spot for campaign reporters to get their daily poll fix.
News organizations reported the shifts in voting intention and seat projection as fact or near fact, not pausing to explain why changes took place from day to day (probably because they couldn’t do it). The result was as predicted in the Canadian Press pre-election story. As Jennifer Espey, David Herle, and Alex Swann noted in a post-election analysis in *Policy Options*, “Public opinion research turned the election into just another sporting event during the NHL playoffs.” It also undermined the credibility of the polling firm–news organization partnerships to the point where, as Espey, Herle, and Swann comment, “while the ‘horse race’ or daily standing of the parties in the election was a focus of media coverage, a secondary story was the discrepancy between polls. Polls published in the third week of April had a nine-point discrepancy among the Conservative vote numbers of one polling firm and the Conservative numbers of another, leading media commentators to begin questioning the methodologies of the various polling firms.” Some of that questioning took place on blogs and other new media sites, independent of mainstream news organizations. The result was an undermining of media credibility for publishing such widely divergent polling results as well as the forcing of pollsters to be on the defensive.

That was not a surprise to anyone who had followed the degree to which strategy, tactics and leaders’ images now dominate media election coverage. The media viewed, packaged, and reported the 2011 campaign to Canadians through the lens of daily poll fluctuations accompanied by seat projections. That began on the campaign’s opening day and picked up steam with poll results on the winners and losers in the two leaders’ debates, and polling results were part of stories in almost every nightly newscast on the major English-language TV networks. CBC, Global, and CTV all referred to poll results in the campaign’s final days as their coverage focused on whether the Liberals or New Democrats would be the Official Opposition to a Conservative minority or majority.

Who is to blame for the media covering the campaign like a sporting event? David Herle, a pollster himself, and his colleagues point one finger at Herle’s own industry:

Public opinion research didn’t just allow that dynamic, it created it. The election turned from what do we want government to do to who is going to win the game. By focusing solely on vote intention and impressions of the leaders,
it limited the electorate's input to the grand narrative to who they liked and didn't like. It was a long, drawn out reality show. And following the main story—the running scoreboard—the pundits critiqued the performance of the leaders and the campaign tactics. In any competition, the most tantalizing unknown is who will win. When we have a tool that gives us daily updates on this unknown, the entire election becomes focused on the latest standings in the contest and what happened yesterday to cause that. The electorate's role is reduced to picking a winner.21

While polling captured—and, as it was reported, probably helped amplify—the extent to which Québécois switched allegiances to the NDP from the Bloc Québécois, the presence and size of the Conservative majority surprised virtually everyone. Although individual polling companies compare their final vote-share polling numbers with actual results to highlight how close each came to predicting the outcome, no one is talking much about their collective failures on the minority-majority question.

The pollsters’ ultimate inability to answer the majority-minority question also undermines the whole approach to the campaign taken by the media. Their devotion to polling and the accompanying instant analysis of ups and downs, all of which can be easily digested and regurgitated on the new media platforms that are available to today’s journalists, left the media with lots of egg on their collective face. As former Globe and Mail reporter and columnist Hugh Winsor noted in iPolitics after the campaign, “The media largely abandoned some of the basic journalistic mainstays of the past, like getting out and talking to many ordinary voters or extensively crunching policy options. Instead large amounts of journalistic resources were invested in blogging, Twittering and polling all in pursuit of immediacy.” As he wisely added, “While the polls had been showing for months that jobs and the economy was a top-of-mind concern, there was little media investigation of how that was being translated into voting intention. If there had been, linked to an exploration of the ‘strong, stable, majority government’ mantra, there would have been far less ‘surprise’ when the votes were tallied.”22

That majority government now provides the media and pollsters with a four-year window in which to develop a new approach to polling and campaign coverage that better serves Canadians and helps them with vote choices. There are encouraging early signs that some pollsters want to learn from what
went wrong. Frank Graves of Ekos Research underestimated Conservative vote share by almost six percentage points and concludes that one failure was his attempt to include cellphone users in his overall telephone sample, which distorted the results since he discovered that cellphone users (disproportionately young people) were much less likely to be Conservative supporters. For the longer term, Graves raises an alarm about what happens when this group of the politically disinterested age and become the mainstream yet “have systematically opted out of the electoral process. This may be a far greater challenge to polling and democracy than the somewhat suspect polling sweepstakes of who came closest to the final vote outcome.”

Graves also notes something that has seemed obvious but unacknowledged by the polling industry for several campaigns: that sampling the general public is problematic when only 60 percent of them are voting. As his post-campaign research discovered: “The incidence of Conservative supporters is higher in the population of actual voters than it is in the population of all voters. These patterns also apply in weaker terms to those of lower socioeconomic status who were both less likely to vote and less likely to support the Conservatives and weaker still to women.” Espey, Herle, and Swann concur, suggesting that the failure to identify and poll only those who were intending to vote was a critical methodological flaw exposed by 2011 polling results. McGill political scientists Stuart Sirocco, Fred Cutler, Dietland Stolle, and Patrick Fournier highlighted another flaw in 2011 media polling after reviewing some of the initial results from the 2011 Canadian Election Survey. They noted that “the place to look for clues to Conservative success is among non-partisans. Fifty-six percent of them described the Conservatives as the party best able to manage the economy, while the NDP and Liberals attracted only 20 percent each on this score. This gives the Conservatives a huge advantage on what is typically an influential issue in nonpartisans’ decisions.” Yet in media coverage, there was little or no attempt to probe the attitudes of non-partisans to determine whether they could be crucial in producing the Conservative majority.

Highlighting all these errors is essential to preventing a repeat in 2015. The four-year hiatus also allows the media to rethink how, why, and where they should be using public-opinion polling in covering future campaigns. The focus on vote intention in polling might be a result of a series of minority
Parliaments, but even so, that is a conscious decision by the media to avoid asking about a broader range of issues.

News organizations would be wise to recall why they got into polling in the first place and chart a course back in that direction. Polls were one of several tools to help editors shape news coverage. Asking questions helped identify what issues reporters should pursue, highlighted the contrasts in what concerned Canadians in different regions of a very diverse country, and tested public reaction to party policy proposals. News organizations have abandoned all of that. Espey, Hurle, and Swann reject the suggestion that the media focuses on vote choice due to the lack of money to fund larger surveys about public attitudes to issues. They note: “The sheer survey space given to decided vote intention, leaning vote intention, second-choice vote intention, commitment of vote intention, enthusiasm for vote intention, likelihood of changing vote, past vote choice and strategic vote intention makes it clear that organizations are making conscious choices to focus solely on the daily party standings and likely winner.”

The 2011 election demonstrated conclusively that it is past time to change how the media use polls in campaign coverage. Polling should be one element in coverage, not the core and foundation of how media report elections. Reporters, as Hugh Winsor suggests, do need to get out and talk to voters. That element of coverage has disappeared and the public has suffered as a result. As Espey, Hurle, and Swann suggest, “Public opinion research can be an effective, powerful way for the electorate to contribute to the narrative of the campaign by allowing the public to define the issues of importance and thus requiring that parties respond as to how those issues might be resolved.” The media is the perfect intermediary in overseeing that process, but that requires a change of attitude and approach, and a willingness to take risks.

**Social Media**

Facebook and similar social media existed in the 2008 election, but it was early days for these new means of instant communication between individuals and to the broader world. By 2011, all that had changed. Facebook had been joined by Twitter and other social media sites and tools that were in much more widespread use, allowing individuals to talk with their friends, to promote what they liked and didn't like to that circle and beyond, and to...
broadcast their lives and impressions of whatever caught their interest. In the world of political communication, these are tools with obvious potential. Initial impressions, though, suggest that not much of that potential was realized in the 2011 campaign.

These new social media gave journalists and political junkies new tools with which to follow election campaigns closely and offer their instant comments on what is happening. That led to debate among the media about whether this was the first social media election. The evidence, while not easy to gather, suggests that, despite mainstream media enthusiasm for Twitter and other social media tools, the answer is no. Social media did not figure prominently in the campaign or its outcome. Available data supports such a conclusion on four grounds—the limited number of people who are active social media participants, the narrow range of issues those people highlighted during the campaign, the lack of impact on the issues they raised, and the paucity of uses that were found for social media during the campaign. Social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and their successors, as well as YouTube and other video-sharing sites may figure more prominently in the 2015 campaign, but that will depend on introducing more imaginative uses for social media than was the case in 2011.

This time, most of the campaign media attention focused on Twitter, the 140-character instant-messaging system that allows individuals to distribute their thoughts to lists of their followers and more broadly to whoever wants to read them. To judge Twitter’s impact on the 2011 election requires a sense of who was using it, how they were using it, and what they were saying. Ottawa social media consultant Mark Blevis watched Twitter for Canadian Press and blogged about Twitter statistics throughout the campaign. He found, on average, that there were about 16,000 election-related tweets every day of the campaign, rising to almost 25,000 daily during the week of the debates and roughly 18,000 a day during the campaign’s last week. That may sound like a lot, but almost 24 million Canadians were eligible to vote and 14,720,580 did cast ballots. In that context, 16,000 comments a day is not much, nor is it very influential, particularly if those tweeters are spread across the country’s 308 constituencies.

Perhaps a good comparison is with Sun TV, the much-hyped all-news specialty channel that came on the air in mid-campaign on April 18. Although its prime-time programming had almost 40,000 viewers on its first day, by late
April, less than 20,000 per hour were watching in the evening and sometimes as few as 4,000 during the day. While Twitter was the campaign’s media darling with 16,000 tweets a day, the same media described Sun TV with its up to 20,000 viewers as having almost no impact in a world where nightly main channel TV newscasts in Canada get up to 1.2 million viewers. But comparing tweeters with TV viewers is not completely fair. On the one hand, tweeters are active whereas television viewers are passive, so those who tweet, one could argue, are more engaged in the campaign than those who simply watch. On the other hand, although tweets are broadcast to others, Blevis’s research discovered that many of the most active tweeters had under a thousand followers, so the breadth of the retweeting network may not be that significant. As well, many tweeters tweet a lot, so the 16,000 average number of tweets a day during the campaign means that considerably less than 16,000 individuals were actually generating content.

What is clear, though, is that the media covering the campaign have chosen Twitter as the logical next step in the media’s turning inwards, a phenomenon described by contributor Christopher Waddell elsewhere in this book. Among insiders, tweets largely replaced BlackBerry messages in this campaign; although shorter and more to the point, they still largely dealt with issues of interest to those campaign insiders and political junkies who were primarily following the campaign’s micro-moves without stepping back to put things in any overall electoral context. Within the media, a clear group of leading campaign tweeters included Andrew Coyne from Maclean’s, David Akin from Sun Media, CBC’s Rosemary Barton and Kady O’Malley, and Susan Delacourt from the Toronto Star. They dominated tweeting and, to some degree, set the media agenda and established the framework for viewing individual issues—a form of electronic pack journalism. Sometimes, tweeting helped in a collective research exercise, spreading specific details about a policy or issue. Much of it, though, was impressionistic rather than substantive, focusing on the same perspectives of horse race, strategy, and tactics, as well as the themes of conflict and personality that, sadly, has dominated media coverage of politics and public policy in recent years. While commentary often passed back and forth among the group (and a surprising degree, for reporters, of their own opinion was mixed into their tweets), little back-and-forth tweeting occurred with those outside their circle and with the broader collective of other journalists who followed the leading tweeters. While the
media used Twitter to communicate among themselves, however, they didn’t use it to bring the Canadian public into the discussion. It was also used by reporters to get instant responses (in 140 characters or less) from politicians or their spokespeople on individual issues or to try to goad them into commenting when no one would reply to emails or phone messages—again, a 2011 extension of the insider network described by Waddell.

More generally, there are the questions about the content being produced by election tweeters. Mark Blevis found that early on election day, half of the tweets were original content while 39 percent were simply retweets of comments from others and only 11 percent were replies to comments filed by someone else. By 10:45 a.m. on that day, he had already recorded 15,701 tweets from 11,512 different Canadian Twitter profiles.31 The ratio of original content to retweets to replies was fairly constant throughout the campaign, although on the heaviest day of tweeting—April 13, the day after the English-language debate and also the day of the French-language debate—there was more action and more conversation. There were 30,712 election tweets that day, with about 10 percent in French; 53 percent of 11,814 debate-related tweets contained original content.32 In other words, those using Twitter were writing down their thoughts, others were retransmitting those thoughts more broadly, but not many were actually engaging in back-and-forth conversations. It seems that, for most people involved in the campaign, Twitter was more one-way broadcasting, even for reporters, than two-way communication with those outside the campaign.

What were tweeters commenting on? In week four, Blevis identified the top five issues for tweets as taxes; Harper’s limit of five questions a day from the media; a possible coalition among the Liberals, NDP, and Bloc; the Conservative Party’s use of Facebook to screen those who wanted to come to its rallies; and health care. As Blevis noted: “Each of coalition, Facebook screening, taxes and Harper’s question limit has held the weekly pole position only once. Taxes held the number two spot two weeks in a row. G8 has only been in the top five once. Elizabeth May’s exclusion from the debates earned her the number four position in the first week. The launch of the Liberal platform held down the number four spot during week two.”33 Blevis didn’t measure positive or negative sentiment on the issues mentioned in the tweets he captured, but an informal sampling suggests that few tweets were supporting these policies. Most were attacking or ridiculing them. In this election, Twitter
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seemed to be used for attacking policies much more than for defending or promoting them, although there is no obvious reason why this form of social media works better to frame issues negatively than to frame them positively. The major subjects for tweeters closely paralleled the issues and stories that came daily from the leaders’ tours, where each day is almost a self-contained unit and the next day, everyone moves on to something else. Those issues may captivate and engage hard-core campaign watchers, but the great mass of voters perceive a campaign differently. Nor, in this campaign, were the issues that dominated the tweetosphere the issues upon which Canadians made their vote choices. Had the apparent sentiment of tweets accurately reflected the opinion of the electorate, the Conservatives would likely be sitting on the opposition benches looking across the floor at a coalition government.

Some candidates jumped on the tweeting bandwagon while others, including Conservatives Tony Clement and James Moore, had been active tweeters for some time although they toned down their tweeting during the campaign. Probably the most memorable example of political tweeting came from the prime minister (although it is difficult to believe he was tweeting it himself) challenging Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff to a one-on-one debate. Ignatieff accepted almost immediately, tweeting back “any time, any place.” That forced the Conservative leader to back down in response to reporters’ questions about when the debate would take place. It was embarrassing, but it did Harper no lasting damage. It was a good lesson, though, for all politicians to think before tweeting.

Some hoped that the power and breadth of social media would finally undermine the anachronistic laws, enforced by Elections Canada, that establish media blackouts on election results until polls close in that region. Parliament has not changed the law, although it was not in force during the 2004 election. It had, at the time, been overturned by a lower court, and the decision was waiting to be heard by the Supreme Court of Canada, which ultimately endorsed the constitutionality of the blackout. Thus, in 2011 (as in the 2006 and 2008 elections), the results in Atlantic Canada—where polls closed at 7:00 p.m. EDT in Newfoundland and 7:30 p.m. EDT in the Maritimes—could not be broadcast until polls closed at 9:30 p.m. EDT everywhere west of New Brunswick to the BC border or until 10:00 p.m. in BC. An attempt to organize a protest by tweeting Atlantic results under the Twitter hashtag #tweettheresults largely fizzled. Few complied, and those who were watching
for results found the site taken over by people tweeting everything from local soccer scores to the results of exams or pregnancy tests.

Facebook didn’t attract nearly the same amount of media attention as Twitter, perhaps because parties and candidates used it mostly like any other one-way means of communication. Candidate and party Facebook sites were used primarily to distribute messages to voters but generated almost no debate and interaction with them about policies even though Facebook has much more potential than Twitter as a campaign tool. In urban communities, where people hardly know their neighbours and may be afraid to offend them by engaging in political discussion, Facebook can bring like-minded people together. A campaign organizer can then ask them to organize a local event or spread the word more widely for a candidate or party. Social media can also be a fundraising tool, yet there is little evidence of it being used for that in Canada.

Both the Liberals and New Democrats tried to be a bit more imaginative. For the NDP, Jack Layton’s Facebook page became a way to circulate photos and videos from campaign stops while also promoting the leader’s upcoming events. The NDP also developed an iPhone application that listed upcoming events, with pictures and links to other campaign documents, allowing supporters to follow Layton’s tour on a daily basis. The Green Party introduced a similar app but neither the Conservatives nor Liberals tried anything like this. The Liberals, though, linked Ignatieff’s Facebook page with discussion groups and also offered readers the chance to ask questions, which few seemed interested in doing. The Facebook sites for Stephen Harper and Gilles Duceppe were unimaginative static sites displaying information.

Facebook was, however, effective for parties as a free means of distributing and highlighting party election advertising. A party would post new ads on its Facebook and websites, which were picked up and redistributed by others on Facebook, and the media then wrote about them, giving the ads even more publicity and visibility—all without the party paying a cent to buy time or space on television, radio, or websites. In the 2011 campaign, Facebook was even used as the basis for a clever Liberal ad—only online—that ridiculed the Conservatives for trolling through Facebook sites to find evidence of what Conservatives viewed as Liberal connections in order to evict two young people from a Harper rally in London, Ontario.
Social media did demonstrate some potential for independent organizing through vote mobs, a student phenomenon whereby a message would spread to organize a spontaneous demonstration—in this case, to encourage young people to vote. Comedian Rick Mercer was front and centre in this campaign and campus groups organized many vote mobs with the imaginative video results easily found on YouTube. For some, vote mobs became the way to participate in the campaign and would not have happened without social media, used both to call the mob together and to share the video of their experience. That, in turn, encouraged copycat mobs on campuses across the country. In the end, though, since voter turnout among young people changed little from the low levels of previous campaigns, the exercise may have been mostly a way to get outside for a break for students otherwise closeted and studying for final exams.

What was surprising was how little YouTube was used in the campaign as a stage for political satire. While some efforts were made, nothing caught on like the hilarious 2008 video Culture en péril, produced by Québec musician Michel Rivard. It ridiculed both federal bureaucrats for their lack of French and the Conservative government’s cuts to culture and the arts. Some suggest that it played a significant role in giving the Bloc Québécois an issue around which to rally Québécois in that campaign. In a 2011 campaign that, in general, lacked humour and satire, this was an obvious opportunity lost. In a world of cellphone videos and the increasing ease of uploading material to sites such as YouTube, online video offers great potential for public comment and satirical interventions in the future.

The possibilities for social media to drive political communication and influence decision-makers are huge, but, as the 2011 election demonstrated, they remain little realized to date. Candidates, political parties, the media, and even social media devotees all seem most interested in using the technology as a new, instantaneous way to tell people what they think or what they should think. In the election, it was sometimes used to offer live tweeting play-by-play of speeches or events such as the leaders’ debates. It is not clear, though, that such stenography, with no context or analysis, serves any broad purpose in enhancing the public’s understanding of events or positions taken by politicians and parties.

To date, social media sites have been used very infrequently as a collective tool to develop policy, gather responses and critiques, or build networks for
advocacy, or for supporting existing political parties or candidates. Equally important, the media don’t know how to treat or interpret what they find on social media sites. Stories note when issues emerge on Twitter or the number of friends someone has on Facebook, or they quote the content of tweets from individuals but rarely with any context or indication of why certain tweets are chosen over others. Do the choices reflect anything more than the biases of whoever is making those choices? This is just one of the questions that news organizations need to consider as they prepare their coverage approach for the next campaign. All the players in the 2011 election realized that social media are important, but none of them had a clear strategy for how to deal with them or how to use social media to their advantage. This new technology has potential that they can’t continue to ignore.

CONCLUSIONS

Journalism professor Jay Rosen once wrote that the primary mission of the communications media and, indeed, of journalism should be to “make politics ‘go well’ so that it produces a discussion in which the polity learns more about itself, its current problems, its real divisions, its place in time, its prospects for the future.” If this is the standard by which media coverage of the 2011 federal election should be judged, than there are reasons for concern.

Disturbing trends were present and noted in the past few elections but reached disquieting new heights in 2011. There was little coverage of the major issues facing the country or of the prospective solutions offered by the parties, voter turnout remained low, and the media was fixated on campaign rituals that are increasingly dysfunctional and out of date. In all of the media routines and assumptions addressed in this chapter, there was a large and increasing gap between media performance and the needs of the public. Breaking old habits and seeking new solutions will be difficult. News organizations and political parties are enmeshed in a tangled web of relationships that feed off of each other and have become deeply ingrained in the political culture. But unless the media-political system as a whole is rethought and reimagined, it will become increasingly disengaged from the citizens on which it ultimately depends for its survival.

The first issue that we addressed was the media’s obsession with the horse race. While the horse race is likely to remain an essential element of coverage
because there will always be a fascination with the drama of the race, it is clear that polls now take up an extraordinary amount of journalistic space and that they have displaced other kinds of reporting such as examining party positions on issues or talking to voters. The original intention behind the use of polls was to gauge the public mood not only about the leaders and the parties but also about the issues facing the country. The results helped journalists organize coverage and bring voters’ concerns to the forefront of campaign reporting. That objective seems to have been almost entirely lost. To a certain degree, polls have become the political equivalent of junk bonds: some are reliable and others are shaky and problematic, yet all are treated equally by the media. The polling industry was deeply shaken by the results of the 2011 election and will have to deal with methodological problems that are not necessarily easy to solve. News organizations need to ask whether they should risk not only damaging their own reputations but also losing contact with Main Street Canada by continuing to rely on what has become an addiction.

The leaders’ tours have also reached a point where they now appear to be rusted out vestiges from the past that no longer serve the country well. While it is crucial for leaders to travel across the country to address supporters and meet voters, the tours have become a kind of rolling movie set with leaders going from photo op to photo op, unveiling policies that are sometimes of little importance or are rehashed policies presented for the second or third time, and often being shielded from unexpected or uncomfortable meetings with voters. The problem is that reporters risk becoming actors in a play written and produced by the political parties. After all, TV reports that invariably showed Stephen Harper being cheered by supporters as he warned about the supposed dangers of a coalition demonstrated that little thinking went into how the tour would be covered. The dilemma for news organizations is that if they don’t cover the leaders’ tours, they are likely to miss critical moments, but if do, they may miss the larger picture. As we have demonstrated, the list of issues not covered and the questions not answered is painfully and unacceptably long. The problem is compounded by the expense required to place reporters on planes and buses. Having invested so much in the tours, news organizations felt compelled to use the stories that reporters produced. But the costs of being used as a prop by the parties may be even higher.

The leaders’ televised debates provided the one opportunity during the campaign for leaders to step out from the protective cover of their campaigns
to face the other leaders and the public directly. While this is the time of greatest exposure, and hence danger, for the leaders, debates also provide voters with a unique opportunity to learn about the parties and the issues. While debates sometimes have little impact, in 2011, they were pivotal in the campaign. Ignatieff’s failure in the English-language debate and Layton’s triumph in the French debate changed the course of the campaign, literally rewriting the election script. The inevitable question is why there aren’t both more and different kinds of debates. While both the broadcast consortium and the political parties are likely to resist making changes, journalists can do a great deal to push for changes. Moving responsibility for organizing debates to a neutral body would be a first step in rethinking the role that debates might play in elections.

While there was a great deal of media buzz during the 2011 election about the power of social media, hype seemed to trump a more realistic assessment about the limits of their influence. In fact, part of the backdrop in recent campaigns is the degree to which journalists have become enthralled by the latest media technology so that 2000 was the first Web election; 2004, the great blog election; 2008, the YouTube election; and 2011, the Twitter election. While Twitter and Facebook are extraordinary tools for involving those who are already involved, online activity during the election was confined to a relatively small host of already active citizens. This means that reporters have to be cautious in leaping to conclusions about a citizen revolution in cyberspace, and particularly in assessing the potential of social media as a tool for mobilizing young voters. In using social media as a stand-in for the electorate, reporters can misjudge the moods of the wider public, which is made up of many people who normally take little interest in politics. Christopher Waddell also reminds us in his chapter, “Berried Alive,” that web-based media can narrow rather than expand the information and perspectives available to journalists. Reporters become so preoccupied with the latest tweets from politicians and from each other that they lose sight of what’s taking place beyond their own gated media community. Despite these cautions, the opportunities for social media in particular to transform the next generation of Canadian politics is extraordinary.

If Canada continues on the path of increased citizen disengagement from politics—with lower levels of voting, joining, volunteering, donating to causes, and basic knowledge about Canadian history and political institutions—then
the loss to the country could be considerable. But so also is the potential loss to journalism. Without engaged citizens, audiences for TV news shows and certainly for newspapers will dry up, with enormous consequences for the survival of the traditional media. While a rethinking of the media’s role in how elections are fought in Canada is critical for the health of the political system, it’s also critical for the future of Canadian journalism. The greatest casualty of inaction may be journalism itself.

NOTES


3 It should be noted that the Conservatives won several seats in Acadian New Brunswick.


7 For example, CBC, CTV, and Global all cited the NDP as the source for an April 6 story about alleged racist comments made in the past by a Liberal candidate in Québec that led the party to dump him. The next day, Global pinpointed the Conservatives for having distributed to the media some controversial past comments of a Liberal candidate and former Alberta judge, who had suggested that not all sexual assaults should be treated equally by the courts. That was timed to put Ignatieff on the defensive as Harper visited the Toronto-area riding of a cabinet minister and former police chief, Julian Fantino, to talk about the need to be tough on crime. In another example, on April 24, CTV reported that the Liberals had made available a 500-page binder of damaging Harper quotations from his career in politics, supposedly compiled by Conservatives.


11 Ibid., 161.


The website ThreeHundredEight.com identified forty-eight national polls released in the twenty-seven days between April 5 and election eve, May 1. Winsor, “Media, Polls in the Election.”

For example, seven polls were published in the final weekend of the campaign using interviews and online surveys done during the preceding four days. In 2008, five polls were published on the final weekend. Jennifer Espey, David Herle, and Alex Swann, “The Blurred Snapshot of the Election Polls,” *Policy Options* 32 (June–July 2011): 86–90.


Ibid., 87.

Ibid., 89.

Winsor, “Media, Polls in the Election.”


Ibid., 13.


Ibid., 89.


“Sun News Drawing as Little as 4,000 Viewers During Some Time Slots,” Canadian Press, April 27, 2011.


Mark Blevis, “15,701 Election Tweets by 11,512 Unique Canadian Tweeteers,” *Mark Blevis*

