In the first few days of September 2009, it seemed clear that Canadians would soon be voting in a federal election for the fourth time in five years. Opposition leader Michael Ignatieff’s bellicose statement “Mr. Harper, your time is up” upon emerging from a September 1 Liberal caucus meeting in Sudbury seemed to make an election inevitable.¹

Certainly that was what the national media wanted. Since the Harper Conservatives were first elected in a minority in January 2006, the default question for political reporters seeking a story has always been, When is the next election? They framed every issue around that question, and, time after time, coverage pumped up the prospect of a vote only to have an event deflate it just as quickly. This time, though, they thought it would be different.

Media planning for the campaign was in full swing, but it was a very different sort of planning since the media in 2009 was in the midst of a recession and an existential crisis. A dramatic fall in advertising across print and television; declining audiences and circulation; and the rising influence of the Internet as an alternative for readers, listeners, and viewers had placed a financial squeeze on news organizations so serious that, for example, by October, CanWest Global would file for bankruptcy protection for its TV operations, with its newspapers following before year-end. In the face of such
losses, rumours circulated that some news organizations would not spend the money to cover the NDP’s campaign, focusing only on the Liberals and Conservatives—a major departure from past campaign coverage of the three “major” parties that, had it happened, would certainly have generated controversy about the role of the media in election campaigns.

Within days of Ignatieff’s announcement, however, opinion polls showed Liberal support sliding in response to the Liberal leader’s suggestion that he would force an election. Suddenly, the public had woken up and realized that there might actually be yet another vote. Their reaction was a resounding “No way!” accompanied by a sense that politicians and the national media had somehow lost touch with reality in thinking that anyone outside that group wanted yet another chance to vote. The reaction caught the Liberals off guard, and the media was equally surprised that its beating of the election drums for weeks had apparently gone completely unnoticed by the public. It was an example of the gulf that has emerged between Canadians on one side and the politicians and the media in Ottawa on the other as the media have come to identify more closely with the politicians than with the public. The public’s waning attachment to and interest in politics had become clear a year earlier when only 59 percent of eligible voters cast ballots in the 2008 election—the lowest turnout in a federal election in Canadian history. A vote in 2009 seemed sure to break that record.

The split between the public and the media had been more than a quarter century in coming. A series of decisions over the years by news organizations to reduce coverage of politics and public policy was followed by the elimination of bureaus in Ottawa and cuts to reporting staff. By 2009, there were almost no reporters in the parliamentary press gallery representing individual news organizations from across the country. It had become a gallery comprising almost exclusively reporters for national news organizations.

It wasn’t like that through much of the 1980s. In those days, the parliamentary press gallery included reporters from individual newspapers across the country, from several radio and TV networks, and even from individual television stations. By the end of that decade, though, closures and cutbacks had started that would shrink political coverage. English-language radio as a medium for reporting on national politics, with the exception of CBC and Broadcast News (the broadcast arm of the Canadian Press), essentially died with the closure of all-news national radio network CKO and Newsradio
network operations in Ottawa. That was followed, in the early 1990s, by the shrinkage and then closure of the Standard Broadcasting radio news bureau in Ottawa. There was a similar decline in the number of francophone radio reporters in Ottawa over the same period.

Similar cuts had not yet happened in television, but they were coming later in the 1990s. In 1988, the year before CBC’s all-news channel, Newsworld, went on the air, CBC Television News had sixteen reporters in its Ottawa bureau, including two who exclusively provided reports to supper-hour newscasts in eastern Canada and another two doing the same for supper-hour newscasts in the west. (By comparison, in 2011, CBC Television News had only five reporters in its Ottawa bureau who had to file for supper-hour newscasts across the country, the flagship newscast *The National*, and the network's all-news channel.)

The early 1990s was an era of print retreat in coverage of national politics and public policy as a series of newspapers from major centres shut down the Ottawa bureaus they had maintained through more than a decade. The list of closed bureaus included the *Hamilton Spectator*, *Windsor Star*, *London Free Press*, *Regina Leader-Post*, and *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*. By the middle of the decade, these newspapers were all covering national politics and public policy with reporters working from their home newsrooms. This was supplemented by national news service coverage from Ottawa provided by news services such as Southam News and Canadian Press.

There were changes there as well, most noticeably at Canadian Press. An Ottawa CP bureau of approximately thirty in 1990 (from a high of thirty-four in the mid-1980s) was cut in half to about fifteen by 1997. Some of that has subsequently been rebuilt, but even so, CP is today producing fewer stories and covering fewer issues than it covered in the 1980s.

Declining numbers tell only part of the story. Just as important is the changing nature of the coverage provided by the remaining reporters and news organizations. National news services do not have the ability to inject local examples or context into national political stories. They look for stories with national appeal and cover them with broad brush strokes so that readers all across the country can understand the stories. Reporters working for these organizations are writing for a national, not a regional or local audience. They are not looking for the specific stories or issues that may have an impact primarily in one city—in Hamilton, Windsor, London, Regina, or Saskatoon.
The national news services do not pay much attention to individual members of Parliament, but the activities of local MPs had been a prime concern for reporters for the individual papers. When newspapers shut their bureaus, the direct link between individual MPs and coverage in their communities was broken. But closing bureaus did save money. One national story for all the papers in a newspaper chain replaced separate stories done by each paper’s reporter, uniquely tailored to the community the newspaper served. One size would fit all regardless of the resulting compromises in content.

In addition to cost savings, there was some logic to the decision by news organizations to reduce political coverage. By the time the Charlottetown referendum was defeated in 1992, the country had been tearing itself apart for the preceding twenty-five years through almost non-stop crises and battles that too often pitted region against region, increasingly alienating the public from politics in the process. It started with the original FLQ crisis of the 1960s, followed by the rise of the Parti Québécois and its election as the governing party of Québec in 1976; two oil price shocks and inflation in the 1970s; the 1980 Québec referendum; the National Energy Program in October 1980; more inflation, unemployment, and deficit upon deficit in the 1980s; free trade negotiations with the United States starting in 1985; the Meech Lake Accord in 1987; the free trade election in 1988; the contentious collapse of the Meech Lake Accord in 1990; the rise of the Bloc Québécois and the Reform Party after Meech’s failure; and the 1992 Charlottetown referendum campaign.

It was no surprise that the 1993 election produced a five-party Parliament. National politics had fractured along regional lines to such a degree that by sweeping a province, the Bloc Québécois became the Official Opposition in the House of Commons. That election also produced a Liberal majority government led by Jean Chrétien, who was determined to lower the country’s political temperature by staying out of the spotlight, avoiding anything dramatic, and concentrating on fixing problems as they emerged. His comment on the constitutional paralysis created by the debate about the Meech Lake Accord, made as he announced his bid for the Liberal leadership in January 1990, perfectly captured his approach to government: “‘Don’t get excited. We’re stuck in the snow,’ he told a crowd of about 1,000 at Ottawa’s Chateau Laurier hotel. ‘We Canadians know what to do when we’re stuck in the snow. You don’t get excited, you don’t spin your wheels. You just go forward, backward, forward, backward, and eventually you’re back on the road.’” It was an
attitude that almost led to defeat for the federalist side in the 1995 Québec referendum. Despite that close call and the decision in 1995 to cut federal spending dramatically to try to balance the federal budget, Chrétien generally stuck to his low-key approach and enough Canadians agreed with that approach to re-elect him with majorities in 1997 and 2000. For news organizations, Chrétien’s invisibility was the perfect cover to reduce coverage. Canadians weren’t interested in politics and public policy, news managers explained as they closed Ottawa bureaus in the midst of an early 1990s recession during which advertising revenues fell and costs had to be cut to try to maintain profit margins.

It is difficult to reach definitive conclusions about the impact of the loss of Ottawa reporters in the communities their newspapers served. As noted earlier, without a reporter in Ottawa, there is less coverage of local MPs in those newspapers. With less coverage, it seems reasonable to assume, fewer people in those communities would know the name of their MP or what he or she does. It seems equally logical to assume that lack of knowledge and information may translate into less interest in voting, if for no other reason than that without coverage, it is harder to make a connection between individual MPs and their impact on the decisions made collectively by a government in Ottawa.

In fact, a fall in voter turnout is exactly what happened, as demonstrated by election results in six Ontario communities over the seven federal elections from 1979 through 2000. Newspapers in three of those communities—Windsor, Hamilton, and London—had their own reporters in the parliamentary press gallery in Ottawa through the 1980s but withdrew their reporters and closed their bureaus in the period between 1993 and 1996. Newspapers in the other three communities—Niagara Falls, St. Catharines, and Sault Ste. Marie—did not have their own reporters in Ottawa at any point in this period. As table 5.1 highlights, voter turnout in the three communities with newspapers that shut their Ottawa bureaus fell more quickly than the provincial average in the elections after their bureaus closed. The three communities whose newspapers had never had Ottawa bureaus did not see the same sort of decline in voter turnout throughout the 1990s.

People decide not to vote for many reasons. It is impossible to be definitive, but declining coverage of national politics appears likely as one explanation. An analogy helps to demonstrate the link. 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? Almost certainly not, so the same principle should apply, at least to some degree, in the relationship between how politics is covered and interest in voting.

Table 5.1 Voter turnout in Ontario communities, 1979–2000

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<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>69.3</td>
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<td>75.3</td>
<td>69.6</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>61.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ontario</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>71.8</td>
<td>75.8</td>
<td>74.6</td>
<td>67.7</td>
<td>65.6</td>
<td>58</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communities with reporters in Ottawa until mid-1990s</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Hamilton average</td>
<td>77.3</td>
<td>71.5</td>
<td>77.0</td>
<td>73.8</td>
<td>66.1</td>
<td>62.4</td>
<td>54.2</td>
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<td>London average</td>
<td>74.7</td>
<td>68.7</td>
<td>73.7</td>
<td>73.7</td>
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<td>62.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Windsor average</td>
<td>72.0</td>
<td>68.0</td>
<td>68.7</td>
<td>72.3</td>
<td>62.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communities with no reporters in Ottawa</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>St. Catharines</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>68.4</td>
<td>65.5</td>
<td>60</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sault Ste. Marie</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>71.6</td>
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<td>63.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Niagara Falls</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>68.8</td>
<td>63.6</td>
<td>57.1</td>
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SOURCE: Compiled on the basis of Elections Canada data.

The trend toward reduced political coverage from Ottawa and cost cutting by newspapers was not universal, as is illustrated by a newspaper war that broke out in the second half of the 1990s. That war between the Globe and Mail and its new national challenger, the National Post, saw the two national newspapers significantly increase staff and spending on covering Parliament, national politics, and public policy. They focused on stories that were national in scope and wrote them from a national perspective. As a result, the stories in the Globe and Mail and National Post, just like those written by Canadian Press and Southam News, were unlikely to contain the local references about national issues that might make a connection for those living in the communities that had lost their reporters in Ottawa.

Shrinking television coverage matched the closing of newspaper bureaus during the 1990s. CBC implemented a series of budget cuts that reduced the
size of its bureau, significantly ending the ability to do specific stories for eastern or western supper-hour audiences. Stations such as CJOH in Ottawa, CFTO in Toronto, and BCTV in Vancouver all eliminated their reporters in the press gallery. As with newspapers, national TV news bureaus for CBC, CTV, and Global would turn out standardized stories for all supper-hour newscasts, no longer with any local or regional distinctiveness.

Television coverage of politics and elections also changed in the 1990s in response to the proliferation of political parties on the national scene. Beginning in the 1970s, TV networks covered campaigns by putting a five-person crew (reporter, producer, camera, sound, and editor) on the national tours of the leaders of the major political parties—the Liberals, the Progressive Conservatives, and the New Democrats. Using that model for the 1997 campaign meant that five networks—CBC, CTV, Global, Radio-Canada, and TVA—would have to put five people on each of five tours (including the Bloc Québécois and Reform Party) for a month and a half, a very expensive proposition.

Instead, the networks decided to pool coverage. Each network would cover one leader with a five-person team—two cameras, a producer, an editor, and a sound person. Everything shot by each pool crew would be shared by all five networks. The pool crew would also shoot stand-ups for each network that chose to have a reporter on that leader’s tour, and everything including pictures and reporters’ scripts would be fed to the appropriate network’s newsroom to be assembled as stories. Even without a reporter on a leader’s tour, each network would be guaranteed basic coverage—video and clips every day from each of the five leaders’ tours. Each network would decide what additional coverage, if any, it wanted to provide its audiences.

For CBC, it was an opportunity to try a different approach to covering a campaign. Instead of putting reporters on leaders’ planes, the network placed a campaign reporter in each of the country’s six regions: the reporters saw leaders as they arrived in each region and only joined the leaders’ tours for the final few days. Supplementing that, CBC’s all-news channel, Newsworld, offered each of the five parties a fifteen-minute window each weekday morning during the campaign for a candidate (CBC hoped it would be leaders) to speak for five minutes live on any subject and then respond to ten minutes of questions from any reporters who chose to come to the mini–news conferences at CBC stations across the country.
Pooling the coverage of leaders’ tours worked and quickly became standard operating procedure for the networks for all subsequent elections. It would have happened again had there been an election in 2009. In 2000, CTV Newsnet joined Newsworld in jointly presenting the morning news conferences for all five parties on their all-news channels, but that innovation died after that election. Similarly, CBC’s decision to stay away from leaders’ tours lasted only through the 1997 campaign. Three years later the public broadcaster’s reporters were back on the leaders’ planes but were filing using pool crews. By that point, major changes were underway in the ownership of the media, which also played a role in shaping and further changing coverage of politics and public policy.

The Liberal government, in the late 1990s, eliminated restrictions that had prevented the same organization from owning newspapers and TV stations in the same market. That produced further concentration of ownership in pursuit of the latest media management fad—convergence. In 2000, TV network CanWest Global paid $3.2 billion to buy the National Post and the former Southam newspaper chain from Conrad Black and Hollinger Inc. That same year, CanWest became a national television network, buying a series of TV stations owned by Western International Communications. In 2007, CanWest added a series of specialty channels to its existing holdings in a $2.3 billion purchase from Alliance Atlantis. In 2000, Bell Canada Enterprises (BCE) bought the country’s largest private television network, CTV, and a series of specialty channels for $2.3 billion and then joined with the Thomson family to create Bell Globemedia, bringing together CTV and the Globe and Mail; this was followed by further expansion as a provider of satellite TV service, as well as mobile phone and Internet service. Cable TV, mobile phone, and Internet service provider Rogers Inc. added specialty channels to its community TV broadcasting activities. The Toronto Star tried unsuccessfully to get a TV broadcasting license for southern Ontario after buying the Hamilton Spectator in 1999 and the Kitchener-Waterloo Record in 1998. After BCE decided in 2005 that its convergence strategy had been the conglomerate’s latest expensive mistake, it sold a 20 percent interest in what was renamed ctvglobemedia to Torstar. (Five years later, in 2010, BCE became the sole owner of CTV and its specialty channels as ctvglobemedia split up, with the Thomson family taking 85 percent interest in the Globe and Mail.)
The belief in the first years of the decade that the media’s future lay in convergence drove this frantic debt-driven consolidation. Mergers and conglomerates made sense, convergence proponents argued, when a news organization could take the work of the same group of reporters and put it in their newspapers, on their TV stations, and on the Internet, supported by advertising sold on all platforms. The key for media owners was that this could be accomplished with fewer journalists than if each media organization was separate. The same reporters could work for print, television or radio, and online. That allowed news organizations to cut the overall number of reporters they employed, in the belief that fewer reporters producing the same amount of content as before layoffs and placed across a broader spectrum of media, all supported by advertising, would increase profits. It was an accountant’s view of the world that assumed that the same person could file for broadcast and print, frequently even on the same day.

It took no account of two key points. First, all reporters are not alike and most cannot transcend the medium in which they have been trained to work. Some similar skills are required to do television, print, radio, or online, but just as many skills are different. A few can manage the adjustments required to work in each medium, but as many or more simply cannot do it. It is difficult enough to change media on different days. Asking someone to file for print, television, and online all on the same day leaves little or no time for reporting and produces simplistic stories that may contain the minimum in terms of facts but virtually nothing in the way of the background or context that is essential for understanding what any story means.

Second, journalists and newsrooms are inherently competitive. They compete not just within but also across media. Newspapers compete with television, radio competes with print and TV, and everyone is competing with everyone else on the Web to get stories first and to do a better job than anyone else. Advocates of convergence within the management of news conglomerates did not understand this. They naïvely believed that suddenly sharing a common parent would, for instance, make reporters at the Globe and Mail willing to give up their exclusive stories to their new best friends at CTV so that the television network could run the Globe story on CTV National News the night before it appeared in the next morning’s Globe and Mail. That concept produced tremendous newsroom resistance, but it didn’t stop conglomerates from cutting staff in the confident belief that ultimately, it would work.
Convergence was a management theory that dealt a blow to the coverage of Parliament, politics, and public policy, but it had a much broader negative impact across the Canadian media landscape. In newspaper and TV newsrooms across the country, conglomerates shared content across their media outlets and eliminated local distinctiveness in standardizing the look and presentation of newspapers and TV newscasts across all members of their conglomerates. That allowed for further cuts in staff in both newspaper and TV newsrooms. For instance, multiple movie reviewers at different newspapers could be replaced by one reviewer writing for the entire chain, saving the conglomerate a lot of salaries.

After losing reporters, yet having to produce as much or more copy, news managers responded by consolidating and ultimately eliminating beat reporter positions, turning those specialists into general assignment reporters covering a different issue every day. Part of that cutback included eliminating reporters and coverage at provincial legislatures across the country. The parliamentary press gallery in Ottawa wasn’t the only one to shrink. Provincial galleries also lost members as newspapers, radio, and TV broadcasters pulled out or cut back, closing bureaus or consolidating so that one reporter now provided provincial political news to all the newspapers or stations in a chain.

The shrinkage of provincial press galleries was another step in the general reduction in the coverage of politics and public policy across the media in Canada, but it had another, more subtle impact as well. Provincial press galleries served as training grounds for political reporters, who would then go on to cover national politics in Ottawa or work overseas. It was a place to learn the ropes in either print or broadcast, and to build political and bureaucratic contacts that would remain important if you moved to the national scene. It also gave reporters a first-hand understanding of how politics and public policy affect communities and the public since provincial governments and legislatures, with their focus on social issues such as health care and education, are closer to the public than the legislators in the House of Commons. The loss of that training ground meant that reporters in future would be assigned to Ottawa with little background or political reporting experience.

In newsrooms on Parliament Hill, the elimination of beat reporters also meant that everyone was now a general assignment reporter expected to file every day on whatever was happening. Individual reporters no longer had the time to do beat research, talk to contacts in a beat area, go to a Commons
committee meeting, or read background documents. As a result, reporters would no longer meet or talk to the expert contacts they needed to check rumours and to interpret stories. They lost the ability to break stories since they were not talking to the range of people involved in an issue who can each provide a piece of a puzzle that contributes to a news story. With fewer contacts of their own, reporters are much more vulnerable to political parties, communications staff for ministers, and the legions of lobbyists and private sector communications people each pushing their own employer’s point of view.

The result was a slow stripping away of the knowledge, history, experience, and context required by political reporters to provide coverage of complex issues. Now a reporter on Parliament Hill might be covering Canadian defence policy concerning Afghanistan one day, Canada’s position on climate change the next day, and the federal deficit the day after that. There was no time to watch developments in Parliament and its committees, and within the political parties. Part of that time crunch came from the growing power of the Internet, which had become a larger and larger element of every news organization’s coverage strategy although it was not making money for any of them. Reporters now faced several, if not hourly, deadlines, with the same person sometimes filing for websites, print, and all-news channels in the same day, whereas in the past, they had had only one deadline a day. They now first had to file for the Web and then work on their stories for newscast or newspaper deadlines later in the day.

That pressure to produce stories on issues they often knew little about or had only been covering for weeks rather than years left parliamentary reporters increasingly vulnerable to two external forces that undermined their reporting. One is the vagaries of instant research produced through Internet searches, which has become the way research is conducted for many stories. An assignment in the morning is followed by an Internet search and a rush out the door clutching the top half dozen stories about the issue found on the Web. There is often no time to check sources or confirm material found in those stories. As a result, any errors are repeated, sometimes turning fiction into fact. There is no time for an independent assessment of the issues involved in a story, which is needed to reach defensible conclusions for an audience. It is much easier and faster to recycle the framework and interpretation of the issue found in the previous stories taken off the Web.
It is also easier and faster to rely on comments from the legions of communications people working for government, corporations, and non-governmental organizations who are readily available—either in person, on the phone, or, increasingly, through email exchanges—than to look for new or different voices to comment. These insiders have become a mainstay for reporters who need people who will say something, or anything, to fill out stories written against numerous and tight deadlines. The Harper government’s rigid control of communications and frequent refusal to comment since 2006 is all the more shortsighted and hard to fathom, considering the ease with which it could get its message out consistently merely by talking regularly to reporters who are facing deadline pressures and are desperate for quotes.

These changes in working conditions and demands placed on reporters led to deterioration in the nature and quality of the coverage of politics, Parliament, and public policy that they provide to Canadians. When a reporter doesn’t have the time, knowledge, or background to deal with the complexity of an issue, there are still two ways he or she can tell the story—by focusing on conflict or personality. Assisted by new technology, these two approaches have become the staple of political reporting and that has helped to alienate the public from politics and public policy.

By the time Paul Martin called a federal election on May 23, 2004, the transformation of the parliamentary press gallery was almost complete. Reporters from individual TV stations across the country had long since disappeared, as had virtually all the reporters from individual newspapers. Even the major metropolitan dailies like the Vancouver Sun and the Edmonton Journal no longer had their own reporters on Parliament Hill. The former Southam chain purchased by Conrad Black in the late 1990s had been bought by CanWest Global, which was trying to integrate the newspapers with its TV network. The National Post remained in business but had been cut and constrained in an attempt to reduce losses. What had started seven years earlier as a battle between two national newspapers had by 2004 been won by the Globe and Mail although the Post showed no signs of disappearing despite its print and broadcast competitors regularly predicting its demise. CBC TV had cut its supper-hour newscasts to half an hour and replaced the other half hour with a common national program—Canada Now—produced from Vancouver and seen coast to coast in time zones across the country, and usually containing one common national story from Ottawa. CBC Newsworld and CTV Newsnet
continued their competition for all-news viewers while CBC Radio and Canadian Press’s Broadcast News remained the only English-language radio voices watching politics and government from the press gallery. National news organizations now produced all the stories coming from Ottawa, focusing on national issues with no mandate or interest in reporting on individual MPs and their activities. While the *Toronto Star* remained an exception in terms of a single newspaper with an Ottawa bureau, its readership area was larger in terms of number of MPs and population than every province except Ontario and Québec, so it could hardly be considered a local paper.

Not only are readers, listeners, and viewers denied the coverage of issues in Ottawa in a way that incorporates its effect on their communities; information does not flow the other way either. No information comes to the national news bureaus from newsrooms across the country as happened when newspapers and TV stations had their own reporters in Ottawa and their editors, to help shape coverage, would daily tell their Ottawa-based reporters what was important in their own communities. Decisions about what is and is not covered in Ottawa are now made without any perspective from those a long way from Parliament Hill. The isolation of the parliamentary press gallery is compounded by the fact that with the abandonment of provincial political coverage as well, few parliamentary reporters have a provincial grounding to fall back on in assessing what is worth covering in Ottawa and what it means. The key determinant now is how the issue plays among the insiders in Ottawa and what they consider important. The result is the narrow focus on what is going to trigger the next election and when it will happen.

Technology, specifically the BlackBerry as the dominant means of instant information and reaction, has played a critical role here—not in broadening political communication among Canadians but in isolating the media from Canadians in an Ottawa-insider bubble in which the political parties and their focus on strategies and tactics is the dominant theme.

The BlackBerry first appeared in national political reporting in the 2000 election, a year after Research in Motion (RIM) released the first generation of what was then primarily a two-way pager. For that campaign, CBC struck a deal with RIM to provide BlackBerrys for about sixteen key reporters, field producers, and campaign coverage managers in exchange for an assessment of how the device performed under the pressures of a campaign. The first generation BlackBerry was a small email device with a keyboard and a green and
grey screen that could display a few lines of text at a time. Its coverage range rarely extended beyond major cities, yet it was still a huge advance in managing a team of reporters and producers scattered across the country. It could send a message not just to one person but to as many as were included in the address line: all recipients would get the same message at the same time. Most important, everyone would get it immediately. There was no need to connect a computer to a telephone line to receive it. Whatever was sent could be instantly translated into scripts or adjustments to campaign coverage—inspiring a question to a leader, inserting a fact or a comment someone else had made into a script or live talk with an anchor, or allowing a reporter to put a background question to the campaign team travelling on one of the tours and then circulate the answer to everyone involved in the coverage.

The BlackBerry improved the network’s reporting. It kept the coverage team aware of what was happening all across the country on all the leaders’ campaigns and in the newsroom, where overall campaign coverage was managed and directed. CBC did not publicize the email addresses of those with BlackBerrys since senior campaign managers had no interest in external interference in dealing with their reporters. It was a device for internal communication and campaign management only. It worked extremely well and the reporters and producers were reluctant to surrender their BlackBerrys at the end of the campaign.

They did not have to wait long for a replacement that could do even more in communication terms. In 2002, RIM introduced a second-generation BlackBerry with an upgraded instant messaging capability as well as email, a calendar, the ability to add contacts, and other business tools. It was still short of current smart phone models but was a major advancement on the original BlackBerry and an instant hit among the media.

By the time of the 2004 election, standard equipment for parliamentary and campaign reporters from all news organizations included BlackBerrys, but they were being used differently than they had been used by CBC in the 2000 campaign. Communication with editors in the newsroom and between reporters and producers working for the same organization was still important. However, reporters had given their addresses to all the political parties. Opening up their BlackBerry systems to the parties’ media message control managers and communications assistants was a fateful decision since it meant that collectively, the media had handed over its communications tool to the
political parties, who had both the people and incentive to figure out how to use instant communications to their partisan advantage. A device originally used for internal communication within news organizations had become a way for the parties to shape their messages and attacks on their competitors by bombarding reporters with emails at any time of the day or night.

There was a positive side to it for reporters. The pressure to file regularly for the Web required reporters to come up with something new several times a day to update their stories by at least creating the illusion that something new had happened as each campaign day went on. The answer was the “reaction” story—building a new top to a story based on a reaction to almost anything: a campaign development, an announcement from a leader, a misstep from a candidate, a damaging revelation about a candidate’s past, or an external news event. All that was needed was how a leader, a party, or a candidate reacted to a particular issue or event, and a new story could be filed. The BlackBerry was the perfect tool to distribute the initial news story and then gather the reaction, and reporters were not the only ones who figured that out. The parties quickly realized the ease with which reporters who lacked context and background in many campaign issues could be manipulated and hooked on BlackBerry journalism. Their campaign offices were only too happy to bombard reporters with BlackBerry messages containing background, comments, and news releases, particularly focusing on trying to persuade reporters of the hypocrisy of their opponents by pulling past quotations from parties and their leaders that contradicted current statements and policy positions.

This all came together in the 2004 campaign. An analysis of coverage of recent election campaigns demonstrates that the media focus relatively little time and attention on policies. Campaign coverage is overwhelmingly about leaders, strategy, and tactics, and increasingly about public opinion polling results, particularly in the last four campaigns through 2011, where the nightly tracking polls have dominated opinion poll coverage. Personality and conflict also dominate election campaigns, replicating the content of much of the media coverage of politics and public policy leading up to the campaign. Partisan blogs also assumed a greater importance in these four campaigns, not among the general public but within the media, which followed them closely and reported on their content when they deemed it significant. All of this is ideal material to be distributed, debated, and chewed over endlessly through BlackBerry messages, instantly spreading news and rumours across
a broad cross-section of reporters and back and forth between party media managers and journalists. Adding to that is the media’s fascination with and considerable coverage of the inner workings of campaigns and party “war rooms” (despite no evidence that the interest is shared by the public). That appears to be a result of the continuing influence on the media, even more than a decade after it was released, of the film *The War Room* about the 1992 Clinton presidential campaigns—in part, because its focus on strategy and tactics added credence to the sort of coverage the Canadian media already provided on its elections.

Capturing and holding the media’s attention is vitally important for all the political parties in every campaign. If they can persuade the media of the importance of their messages, they might prevent negative coverage or a focus on specific issues, or a comparison of party positions on those issues. It is always better to give the media the message and help them run with it than to have to respond to unexpected and disruptive stories that might emerge if the media are not kept occupied. The parties discovered that the BlackBerry was the perfect vehicle to do that. Ideally, it supplemented the degree to which parties already managed the media agenda by having reporters on leaders’ tours, moving them around the country in a bubble, and feeding them daily announcements and stories isolated from voters and what was happening in the campaigns in individual communities. Cutbacks by news organizations meant that they devoted fewer reporters and less coverage to the campaign with each election, but they still staffed the leaders’ planes, giving the parties the upper hand in shaping media coverage, which they skillfully exploited, supplemented by BlackBerrys.

The 2004 election produced a minority government, the first in Ottawa since 1979, and the uncertainty surrounding its lifespan meant no let-up on the media’s focus on strategy, tactics, and opinion polling. Who was up, who was down, and who would force the next election and when continued to be the dominant themes for reporting from Ottawa. Through two subsequent elections, each of which produced a Conservative minority, that emphasis did not change. Nor did it change in the 2011 campaign as the story was again whether the Conservatives would get the majority that, this time, leader Stephen Harper explicitly requested from voters on an almost daily basis.

What has continued to change is the technology. As Blackberrys have become more sophisticated, with new generations that include Web browsers,
social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter have emerged and been incorporated into the parties’ efforts to control the media and shape the media’s coverage of politics and Parliament to their advantage, even as blogs have faded in significance. Some regard the 2011 election as the first social media campaign, but despite that label, there is little evidence that social media have either captured the attention of or engaged the general public. As social media analyst Mark Blevis wrote in the Ottawa Citizen on March 29, 2011, “anecdotally, the political discussion on Twitter is still taking place within an echo chamber. That is, most of the political discussion involves journalists, pundits, interest groups, the politically engaged, and—yes—even politicians. The average Canadian? Not so much.” That conclusion was largely reinforced by his analysis of Twitter activity during the campaign. While there was a daily average of about sixteen thousand tweets related to the campaign, generally little more than one-third each day was new content. Almost half involved someone resending (retweeting) what someone else had sent without modification, while only between 10 and 15 percent of the tweets were commenting on someone else’s message.

Toronto digital communications consultant Meghan Warby makes a similar point in her analysis of the impact of social media on the campaign. Writing during the campaign on the Globe and Mail website, she noted:

Political parties are using digital channels primarily as new funnels, within which they pour talking points from speeches, sound bites from media appearances, cut-and-pasted bullets from press releases and after-the-fact event updates. This isn’t unacceptable—more dangerously for our democracy, it’s uninteresting. . . .

. . . In the same way that advertisers and public-relations industries flaunt circulation numbers and “impressions,” digital data needs to be taken with a grain of salt. Too often, frequency and “output” is confused with actual conversations and interaction between candidates and citizens.6

For all the enthusiastic talk about the revolution in communications that social media would bring, media coverage of the 2011 federal election was not noticeably different from that of the 2004, 2006, and 2008 elections. There remained virtually no contact or communication between the journalists writing about the election and the public. The media’s emphasis remained firmly
on strategy and tactics, personality and conflict. The parties created an alternate reality with the media as willing accomplices through joint participation on Blackberrys and other smart phones, exchanging information, rumours, and gossip that mean little to those outside Ottawa. Frequently, they result in stories about party strategy, insider political personalities, conflicts within parties, and other largely trivial issues within an environment in which how quickly or cleverly someone “reacts,” regardless of what is said, becomes, in the media’s eyes, a key determinant of competence. Interestingly, in the 2011 election, some media outlets actually told their audiences the source of these stories. For example, when Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff was caught off guard when reporters in Québec on April 6 asked him about apparently racist comments by one of his Québec candidates, CBC, CTV, and Global all stated that the candidate’s comments had been given to the media by the NDP. The next day, when another Liberal candidate in Alberta, a former judge, got into hot water over past comments suggesting that not all sexual assaults should be treated equally by the courts, Global told its viewers that the comments had been given to the network by the Conservatives. The party gave the reporters the tip timed to a “tough on crime” appearance by leader Stephen Harper in the Toronto area riding of Cabinet Minister Julian Fantino, a former chief of the Toronto Police Service and the Ontario Provincial Police. Details about the comments, and then the chase for reaction, dominated BlackBerry and Twitter activity for reporters that day, resulting in Ignatieff firing his Québec candidate while retaining the Alberta candidate.

These are some of the many examples of how the political parties and the media have created a world in Ottawa in which voters have become outsiders and cannot relate to what is being reported. Too much political coverage means nothing to them and has no impact on their lives. As a result, Canadians tune out until something happens, such as the prospect of an unwanted election that temporarily forces them to pay attention and respond.

Instead of the reality check that used to be produced by newsrooms across the country telling their Ottawa reporters what did and did not play at home, the parliamentary press gallery now relies on news aggregators such as nationalnewswatch.com—a site that collects headlines and story links from across the country—for a sense of how Canadians think. Aggregators, though, simply provide lists, not a sense of what is important or why in communities from coast to coast. There are no conversations between reporters
and editors scattered across the country to provide feedback about what has been reported and to highlight what needs to be covered.

The narrow personality- and conflict-driven media coverage was piled on top of a political environment through the 2011 election campaign of hyper-partisanship, total unwillingness to recognize that anyone else with a different perspective has a valid point of view, and immediately jumping to the worst and most sinister and derogatory conclusions about anyone’s comments or actions—all reinforced by media coverage. This kind of coverage produces a world that people across the country can’t comprehend. Canadians don’t act that way when they deal with their neighbours, when they are out in the grocery store or riding a bus to work. They do not see any of it as relevant, so increasingly, they ignore it and the national political media as well.

Decisions to cut back on reporting staff, close bureaus, and replace reporters from local newspapers and TV stations with national news bureaus and national network reporters have broken the link between the public and the media that has been at the core of political communication. As a result, the media now plays a shrinking role in informing Canadians about politics and public policy. It has replaced its traditional role with an inward-looking, narrowly focused coverage that concentrates on the issues defined by the parties through their joint sharing with the media of technological tools and their ability to engage reporters in concentrating on the artificial world they have collectively created. Instead of using technology to bridge the communications gap between voters in their communities and the media, the media has used it to turn its back on the public, forging closer links with the people reporters cover rather than with the people who used to read, watch, and listen to their reporting.

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