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E-ttack Politics: Negativity, the Internet, and Canadian Political Parties

One of the biggest digital technology stories from the 2008 American election was Barack Obama’s use of social media sites. More than two million people “friended” Obama on Facebook. His Twitter page was one of the highest ranked pages for much of the election year. And the campaign also raised more than half a billion dollars online. Prominent political commentator and blogger Arianna Huffington believes that “were it not for the internet, Barack Obama would not be president.” One big digital technology story in the 2008 Canadian election was the “pooping puffin,” a graphic of a puffin pooping on the shoulder of the Liberal Party leader Stéphane Dion that was added to the Conservative Party’s Not a Leader website during the first week of the campaign. The “pooping puffin” caused considerable embarrassment for the normally gaffe-free Conservatives. The faux pas received significant media attention; according to Globe and Mail writer Jane Taber, it “distracted federal political leaders … from their policy pronouncements and forced Stephen Harper to make a rare apology to his main rival.” Like the 1993 Chrétien face ads, the “pooping puffin” demonstrates what happens when negativity crosses the line.

The juxtaposition of the digital technology stories in these two elections is informative. Democracy and the Internet seem to be inextricably
linked—resulting in terms like *e-democracy*, *e-engagement*, and *netroots*. If Obama’s significant online grassroots mobilization is considered evidence of the potentiality of *e-democracy* in the United States, then what does the “pooping puffin” tell us about Canadian digital politics? In this chapter, I argue that it tells us a lot. Academic research has consistently shown that regardless of the platform—whether it is websites, blogs or social networking sites—and regardless of venue, whether legislative or electoral politics, Canadian parties have not embraced *e-democracy*. The “pooping puffin” is emblematic of a trend in how Canadian parties actually use digital technology: the rise of attack, or perhaps e-attack, websites. Indeed, two attack websites, Ignatieff Me! and Cheque Republic, were launched in 2009.

In this chapter, I explore online negativity in Canadian politics. To date, there is little academic literature on this topic, especially in the Canadian context. Therefore, I attempt to shed light on how Canadian parties use the Internet to go negative. Before examining how Canadian parties engage in virtual mudslinging, I begin with a discussion of how Canadian parties have thus far used the Internet. This is followed by an exploration of the concept of negative advertising, both offline and online. Online negativity in Canada is the subject of the subsequent sections, in which I detail the use of attack sites in Canada, with special attention to Ignatieff Me! and Cheque Republic, and then present an analysis of how Canadian parties use the Internet for negativity, identifying five characteristics that define Canadian attack sites. The final section situates attack sites within the Canadian party literature by exploring the concept of the permanent campaign.

**HOW CANADIAN PARTIES USE THE INTERNET**

Canadian political parties, candidates, and politicians have been online for more than a decade. Without a doubt, the strategic value of digital technologies has increased during that time. The websites of Canada’s parties have become technologically sophisticated and integrated with their overall election strategies. Scholarly understanding of Canadian parties’ use of Internet politics was greatly enhanced after the 2004 federal election, when several studies by scholars and organizations were published. Two main conclusions can be drawn from these studies: first, party sites are used to perform
traditional campaign activities, and second, Canadian parties have not embraced e-democracy.

The Internet is an efficient and cost-effective tool for parties to communicate, fundraise, and organize traditional campaign activities. Party sites serve as a depository for campaign information for both voters and journalists, and also allow people to quickly join the party, volunteer, or donate. Campaign emails focus on the same traditional campaign activities: information dissemination and calls for volunteers and donations. As I have argued elsewhere, even with the rise of Web 2.0, in the most recent election Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube merely provided the parties with other online venues in which to post the same press releases, photos, and online videos. Far from being transformative to party politics, scholars conclude that the Internet is merely “supplementary” to offline campaign activities.

In one of the earliest published works on digital politics in Canada, Darin Barney writes that Canadian “parties have been very reluctant to pursue with vigour and creativity the potentials that ICTs [information and communication technologies] present for the mediation of more routine, deliberative, participatory exercises.” Through interactive features such as email, discussion boards, blogs, instant messaging, and social networking, the Internet provides direct and instantaneous communication with others. In the world of politics, this means that whereas in the traditional media, public officials speak and citizens listen (or read), the Internet holds the potential for both public officials and citizens to speak and listen. Despite increasing use of interactive features such as blogs and meetups in the 2004 American election, Kenneth Kernaghan found interactivity to be uncommon in the Canadian election that year. On the basis of interviews, my colleagues and I concluded that Canadian parties avoided interactive features because they “feared that online discussions could knock them off message by raising controversial issues or tarnish their image bringing attention to the ‘crazies’ that might invade or be planted in party chat rooms.” Social networking sites did force some parties to open up in the 2008 election. With the exception of the Conservative Party, supporters were able to comment on the Facebook sites and YouTube channels of the other parties. Despite Barack Obama’s effective use of social networking sites like Facebook, in Canadian elections “the engagement between the parties and supporters remained the same. Supporters could make comments on
videos or other campaign issues, other users may respond, but the campaigns were still silent.” Darin Barney’s statement remains true today.

Some suggest that the Internet has the capacity to revolutionize and rein-vigorate democratic politics by enhancing public participation and efficacy. For instance, Joe Trippi, the former Howard Dean campaign manager and self-proclaimed cyberoptimist, believes that the Internet is “the best tool we have ever created” to help achieve full participation in democracy.” Sarah Bentivegna believes that this is because the Internet “is seen to possess what may broadly be termed ‘democratic’ potentials untraceable in the traditional media.” Canadian parties’ use of the Internet appears to defy early expectations about e-democracy. This is not surprising, however, given that Canadian parties are elite-driven organizations: there are very few opportunities for citizens to participate in the internal affairs of political parties. This lack of democracy offline extends into cyberspace. It will become evident that Canadian attack sites fit into this broader use of the Internet by Canadian political parties. Advertising, both positive and negative, has long been a part of Canadian party politics, and it has now moved online. Online negative advertising is another example of using the technology for traditional activities.

NEGATIVE ADVERTISING: DEFINITION AND DEBATES

Negativity has long been a feature of Canadian politics, as is illustrated by the infamous “Mr. Sage” ads from the 1935 federal election. This series of dramatized ads featured Mr. Sage chatting with his friend Bill or his wife, making “allegations of fraud, intimidation, lies, blackmail” by the Mackenzie King Liberals. It was later revealed that the Conservative party had sponsored the ads.

There is no universally accepted definition of negative advertising. In the words of David Mark, “Negative campaigning, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder.” That is, what one person might see as mudslinging and attack, another might see as legitimate and informative criticism. Lynda Kaid offers a clear definition: “Most would agree that they basically are opponent-focused, rather than candidate-focused. That is, negative ads concentrate on what is wrong with the opponent, either personally or in terms of issue or policy stances.” Negativity can be contrasted with positive advertising,
which emphasizes a candidate’s own strengths and merits. Buell and Sigelman identify some strategies used in negative advertisements: “Fear arousal is one method, and it is used to paint a grim future if the other side wins. Other methods are ridicule and humor at the opponent’s expense, guilt by association or pejorative labelling, apposition (unfavorable comparison with the sponsoring candidate) and accusing the opposition of lying or being inconsistent.”

There is much debate about the effects of negative advertising. On one hand, in both the popular and academic literature, negative advertisements are seen as the “electronic equivalent of the plague.” That is, negativity is seen to have a deleterious affect on democracy. The demobilization hypothesis, for instance, suggests that exposure to negative advertising suppresses voting. Experimental studies by Ansolabehere and Iyengar support this thesis. Critics also suggest that negative advertising is manipulative because it appeals to emotion rather than rationality. Negativity may affect not only voters but also the ad creators. According to Stanley Cunningham, going negative has a number of “unintended consequences.” First, the ad can “boomerang”: that is, it “produces more negative feelings against the sponsor than against the target.” Next, rather than generating negative feelings toward the target, an ad may inspire positive ones. Cunningham calls this “victim syndrome.” Finally, in the case of “double impairment,” negativity may generate feelings toward both the target and the sponsor of the advertisement.

However, as noted by Buell and Sigelman, “for all of the aspiration cast on negative campaigning and despite the many ailments of the body politic attributed to it, many a scholar has acknowledged its valuable contribution to free elections.” For instance, in his book *In Defense of Negativity*, John Geer argues that “the practice of democracy requires negativity.” Negativity promotes opposition and accountability, both of which are necessary in a robust democracy. Geer argues that the mass media, rather than being watchdogs, tend to focus their coverage of campaigns on the horse race. As such, candidates must be critical of one another; otherwise, campaign discourse would be superficial at best. Others suggest that negative ads actually increase the quality of information: Darrell West, for example, points out that negative ads are more likely to have policy-oriented content than positive ads because “campaigners need a real reason to attack.” Geer concurs, arguing, “For a negative appeal to be effective, the sponsor of that appeal must marshal more evidence, on average, than positive appeals.”
In the literature, political advertising, negative or positive, is often considered synonymous with television advertisements, but more recent definitions of political advertising are broader, reflecting the growing importance of the Internet in politics. Holtz-Bacha and Kaid define political advertising as “any controlled message communicated through any channel designed to promote the political interest of individuals, parties, groups, governments, or other organizations.”

Online political advertising came to prominence in the 2004 American presidential election. Based on that campaign, Kaid identifies five types of online political advertising:

1. Websites
2. Blog ads
3. Ads from other channels
4. Web ads developed for fundraising
5. Original ads

Consistent with cyberoptimistic views, conventional wisdom initially suggested that online appeals are positive in nature. For instance, in his study of websites in the 1996 American election, Robert Klotz found that “the most notable characteristic of web campaigning that supports positive normative assessments of the medium is the low degree of negative campaigning.” While this may have been true of the “embryonic era” of online politics, Klotz later changed his assessment, noting that online negativity has become accepted practice in recent campaigns. The 2000 American election featured many hard-hitting online attacks, says Darrell West. He points to the alternative sites GoreWillSayAnything.com, developed by the Republican National Committee, and the Democratic National Committee’s IKnowWhatYouDidinTexas.com. Andrew Chadwick suggests that by the 2002 mid-term election, online negativity had become an “entrenched feature” of Internet politics in the United States.

In the 2004 American election, notes David Mark, “many of the nastiest commercials moved away from television to the Internet.” For instance, the George W. Bush campaign ad “Unprincipled,” which linked Democratic nominee John Kerry to special interest donations, was web-exclusive: that is, it never aired on television. The ad was sent to six million Bush supporters by
email. “Unprincipled” also received significant media coverage. Two aspects of this are noteworthy. First, at about a minute in length, “Unprincipled” was significantly longer than most political ads. Second, this ad, like others that followed, did not have the standard “stand by your ad” provision required by American electoral law. Though the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (2002) requires political advertisements on television and radio to include some sort of statement like “I’m George Bush, and I approve this message,” this requirement does not apply to online advertising. According to Mark, this allows online ads to be “more hard-hitting than those featured on television.”

The 2008 American election cycle also featured online negativity. Two anonymous emails claimed that Barack Obama was Muslim. One was titled “Can a good Muslim become a good American?” Both emails were widely circulated during the campaign. These emails show that online negativity is no longer the purview of official parties and candidates. Indeed, I have argued elsewhere that “one of the most intriguing aspects of original online political advertising is the level of amateurism. Not only are political parties and candidates creating online content, but so too are independent groups and individuals.” Clearly, negative advertising has diversified in the Internet age.

CANADIAN ATTACK SITES: PAST AND PRESENT

Two attack websites, Ignatieff Me! and Cheque Republic, were launched in Canada in 2009. These sites are the most recent in a long line of attack sites: negativity has been a feature of online Canadian party politics for many years. One thing that should be noted, though, is that attack sites have thus far been the purview of only two parties, the Conservatives and Liberals. The NDP, the Bloc Québécois, and the Green Party have not developed such sites.

StephenHarperSaid.ca, developed by the Liberal Party, was the first federal attack site. Prior to the 2004 election, five Liberal TV ads aired targeting the newly selected Harper. With the viewers’ curiosity piqued, the ads end by encouraging viewers to log on to StephenHarperSaid.ca, which provided complete quotations and further context. Within days, the Conservative Party responded by launching TeamMartinSaid.ca, which focused on quotations of Paul Martin and members of his caucus. The infamous Not a Leader website appeared in tandem with a series of TV ads aired on Super Bowl Sunday, 2008. These Conservative ads and website were aimed entirely at Liberal leader
Stéphane Dion. Using the image of the now famous “Dion shrug” and the tagline “Stéphane Dion: Not a leader, not worth the risk,” the purpose was to frame Dion as an ineffective leader. As Ira Basen points out, “Their coffers brimming with cash, their opponents broke and divided and already weakened by the corruption frame imposed on them by the sponsorship scandal, the Conservatives saw a small window of opportunity to fill the vacuum and hang an unflattering frame around Dion’s neck.”

The Not a Leader website included features such as a create-your-own-Dion ad; an excuse generator, which allowed users to send emails to friends providing Dion-esque excuses of why you did not do something; and a blog written by Kyoto, Dion’s dog. The site (which no longer exists) was pared down after the “pooping puffin” incident during the election. Again in 2008, the Conservatives launched another multimedia attack on Dion titled “The Dion Tax Trick.” The radio ads and the website WillYouBeTricked.ca targeted Dion’s carbon tax policy. The Liberals attacked back with the site Scandalpedia during the 2008 election. Using a Wikipedia-like format, the site chronicled the scandals of the governing Conservatives, including the “Chuck Cadman Affair” and the “In-and-Out Scam.” According to the press release, “unlike the Conservatives who have launched websites and attack ads that contain character assassinations and outright fabrications, Scandalpedia is fact-based and is fully sourced.”

Given the success of Not a Leader, the attack site Ignatieff Me! can be considered another attempt by the Conservatives to frame a Liberal leader. Like StephenHarperSaid.ca, Not a Leader, and WillYouBeTricked.ca, the Ignatieff Me! site was part of a broader multimedia attack plan launched in March 2009. The “Just Visiting” TV ads and Ignatieff Me! website portrayed Michael Ignatieff as an elitist who cares little for Canada and returned only because he wanted to be prime minister. Indeed, the tagline of the website, which was designed to look like a magazine cover, was “It’s not about you. It’s just about him.” The website had five major sections:

- **Watch Me!**—Featured the four “Just Visiting” television ads, all of which could be shared by email.
- **Read Me!**—Featured four “magazine” stories: “Just Visiting (The Michael Ignatieff Story),” “Canada & Me!,” “Economy and Me!,” and “Flip Flops and Me!” Throughout the stories, there
were hyperlinks that opened a pop-up window providing greater context (video or text) and a citation.

- **Make Me! Your Cover**—Users could make their own Me! magazine cover, choosing between seven different headlines such as “I am horribly arrogant and sure of myself” or “If I do not win, I imagine I will ask Harvard to let me back.” The resulting cover could be sent to a friend by email, posted on Facebook, or uploaded to the user’s desktop.

- **Share Me!**—Users could send Ignatieff Me! to a friend by email or add an Ignatieff Me! app to their Facebook site.

- **Subscribe to Me!**—Users could subscribe “to receive all the latest news about Michael Ignatieff.”

- **News All About Me!**—Five articles about Ignatieff and policy.

The Liberal party launched the attack site Cheque Republic in October 2009 directed at the so-called cheques-gate scandal. The origin of the scandal lies in Conservative MP Gerald Keddy presenting a $300,000 cheque from the Infrastructure Canada fund to a local riding project. Prominently featured on Keddy’s oversized novelty cheque was the Conservative Party logo, which contravenes rules of the Federal Identity Program. The prime minister’s office responded that the mistake was Keddy’s and that this was not an action sanctioned by the government. However, stories of numerous other MPs and numerous novelty cheques began to emerge. In some cases, the fake cheque had the MP’s signature while others sported the MP’s photograph. The Liberals filed sixty individual complaints to the ethics commissioner, including complaints against twelve cabinet ministers and the prime minister.

According to the Liberals, the website’s purpose was to use “humour to draw people’s attention to a serious problem.” Depicting the leader of the Cheque Republic, the site’s logo featured a framed photo of the prime minister wearing a crown. The main visuals on the home page were one hundred thumbnails of photos featuring Conservative MPs presenting Conservative-logo novelty cheques for Government of Canada–related projects. The site had four main sections:

- **Get the facts**—Provided a chronology of the cheques-gate scandal. In addition to the text written by the Liberals, this
page included a link to a Liberal report titled *The Status of Infrastructure Stimulus Spending in Canada* and links to media stories (print and video) on the topic.

- **What they’re saying**—Highlighted public condemnation by some Conservative supporters and MPs and by the mass media (YouTube videos and quotations) of the misuse of tax dollars.
- **Cut your own cheque**—Users could “Be a Tory MP for a day” by sending a Conservative novelty cheque to their friends by email.
- **Blog**—Features Liberal press releases in a blog-like format.

Every page of the site offered the option to share the page on various social networking sites or by email. Users could also join the Liberals’ Facebook page or donate to the party.

**Analyzing Canadian Attack Sites**

The previous examination of the ways in which parties have used the Internet to go negative suggests five characteristics that define attack sites in Canada: (1) the use of an alternative website to the official party site, (2) extensive evidence to support the attack, (3) the ability of attack sites to be reactive to current and changing events, (4) the cost-effectiveness of attack sites and (5) viral smear—that is, allowing supporters to engage in and spread the mudslinging.

**Alternative Sites**

The first thing that should be evident about online negativity in Canada is the use of the alternative website. From StephenHarperSaid.ca to Cheque Republic, the main vehicle for negativity is not the official home page but a secondary website. This is similar to the negative sites used in the United States in 2004. In general, the official party websites of Canadian parties are self-regarding, providing biographic information about the party leader, press releases, speeches, multimedia content, policy statements, donation forms, and information about the party organization. The official site is positive in its orientation, emphasizing the attributes and policies of the party.
Thus, attack politics takes place elsewhere on the Web. Unlike American online advertising, these Canadian negative sites do carry a “stand by your ad” authorization statement, in extremely small font at the bottom of the page. This said, there is very little mention of the party sponsor on these pages. In fact, the only mention of the Conservative Party on Ignatieff Me! is the authorization statement. The use of the alternative site allows parties to use their official websites to tout positive messages and to distance their brand from the mudslinging.

More broadly, these attack sites fit into a “virtual omnipresence” of Canadian political parties. In addition to official party sites and attack sites, Canadian parties operate social networking, social bookmarking, social news, news aggregators, and image-sharing sites. There have even been some non-attack alternative sites like the Liberal’s This Is Dion and the NDP’s Orange Room. The presence of Canadian parties in cyberspace is vast.

Evidence

According to Stephen Brooks, “television advertising by Canadian political parties relies mainly on spot ads whose duration is typically 15–30 seconds. . . . It is, of course, simply not possible to explore the real complexities of issues in 30 seconds or less, and parties do not try.” Certainly this cannot be said of online negativity. Rather, sites such as Ignatieff Me! and Cheque Republic are rich with information and detailed evidence that support the main premise.

Using opponents’ words against them is a common strategy in negative television advertisement. This strategy also figures very prominently on Ignatieff Me! and Cheque Republic. For instance, the video on the very first page of Ignatieff Me! shows Ignatieff saying, “You have to choose what kind of America you want, right? You have to decide. It’s your country, just as much as it is mine.” The video is used as evidence that Ignatieff thinks of himself as an American, that he is merely a political interloper who is “just visiting.” Many of the hyperlinks in the “Read Me!” stories are quotations made by Ignatieff himself. Cheque Republic also uses the strategies of presenting plenty of evidence and using the Conservatives’ words against them. As noted, the home page features one hundred thumbnail photographs of Conservative MPs presenting large novelty cheques. Additionally, the site links to a Flickr gallery of more than two hundred photos of Conservative MPs holding novelty cheques. Quotes from three Conservative MPs condemning the actions
are also presented as evidence. The strategy of using opponents’ words and actions against them is long-standing in online attack politics. Indeed, it was the very premise of the first online attack sites, StephenHarperSaid.ca and TeamMartinSaid.ca.

Another common type of evidence is an appeal to authority, or what Richard Davis calls “reinforcement.” In examining American blogs, Davis notes that bloggers reinforce their points by “employing sources that bolster [the] bloggers’ positions and undermine those of the opposition.”45 On blogs, this occurs through linking to other blogs, websites, or media outlets. This idea of reinforcement appears on Canadian attack websites as a source of evidence: the comments of journalists, media outlets, and other commentators in the form of excerpts, videos, or links are commonplace. The “What They’re Saying” section of Cheque Republic, for instance, provides numerous quotations and links to journalists and political commentators, such as Andrew Coyne and Chantal Hébert, who condemn the cheque scandal. Ignatieff Me! uses the same strategy: the “Read Me!” stories contain not only incriminating statements made by Ignatieff but also reinforcing statements. For instance, a quotation from University of Toronto professor Stephen Clarkson, “He told people 15 years ago that he thought about coming back to become prime minister,” is provided as evidence that Ignatieff just wanted to be prime minister for his own sake.

Both the Ignatieff Me! and Cheque Republic attack sites are based on extensive evidence, showing that considerable research went into their development. By using the target’s own words and actions, and outside sources, the sponsoring party can emphasize that “we are not making this up, this is not just our opinion, this is merely the facts.” They can argue that this is not simply partisan politics but legitimate information that people should know.

Reactivity
According to Lynda Kaid, online advertising has several advantages: “First, of course, Web ads are much quicker to produce and distribute than their television counterparts. A second and related advantage is the speed of response and rebuttal made possible by direct access to the Web for immediate distribution.”46 Canadian attack websites have clearly taken advantage of these benefits. Many attack sites were set up very quickly in order to react to very particular situations. Cheque Republic, for instance, was developed
in reaction to the emerging cheques-gate scandal. TeamMartinSaid.ca was established in response to another attack website. There is little to suggest that the site was part of a long-term advertising strategy of the Conservatives. Rather, it served as a counter to the Liberal’s attack site. As the Conservatives noted in the statement introducing the site: “We can play ‘tit-for-tat’ all campaign if Paul Martin really wants.” It is not just negative sites that can be used in this capacity (though they usually are). During the 2008 election, the Liberals launched their This Is Dion site in an attempt to undo the damage of Not a Leader and to reframe Dion by showing another side of the Liberal leader. The ease of production and low cost makes it easier for parties to react to political events through sites such as these than through high-quality advertising.

In a related way, online ads are not static like TV and radio ads are. New information can constantly be added to the site. For instance, the Liberals reminded visitors to check back often because they would be “posting new material on ChequeRepublic.ca daily—because every day we learn something new about life in Stephen Harper’s Cheque Republic!” Photos of Conservative MPs, blog entries, and links to reinforcing stories were added regularly during the height of the scandal. Attack strategies may also be amended, as in the case of the “pooping puffin.” This certainly would be more difficult and expensive for TV and radio ads.

**Cost-Effectiveness**

Advertising is usually the most expensive part of election campaigns: parties spend roughly half of their campaign budget on advertising. With respect to cost, the Internet differs from other channels of political communication; “online advertising” can be a cost-effective means to get out a message. The Internet is cost-effective in terms of both technical hardware and production and transmission. In contrast to television or radio, where what one pays for advertising is often related to the potential reach, “the costs associated with the Web do not increase with the number of people reached.” Moreover, Canadian election law does not consider the Internet to be a form of advertising. Therefore, online advertising is not counted as an election expense. Section 319 of the *Canada Election Act* exempts “the transmission by an individual, on a non-commercial basis on what is commonly known as the Internet, of his or her personal political views.” This means that Canadian
A banner ad on a media website or on Facebook that is purchased by an individual or a party is considered advertising and is therefore subject to spending limits. Websites (both official and attack) are exempt from federal election law, as are blogs, social networking sites, and YouTube videos. The Internet as a tool for political advertising, both positive and negative, is therefore very economical for Canadian parties.

It should be recognized, however, that attack websites are not necessarily inexpensive. As we have seen, many sites have been part of a larger multimedia attack strategy. The sites StephenHarperSaid.ca, Not a Leader, and WillYouBeTricked.ca were all released in conjunction with television or radio commercials. When the Not a Leader ads were launched in 2007, the Conservative website announced that the ads aired on “network television and specialty channels including a prized spot during the Canadian broadcast of the Superbowl [sic].” Clearly, this attack campaign was not cheap, although the Liberal party may not be what cyberoptimists had in mind when they suggested that the Internet would aid the resource poor by levelling the playing field for political competition. Compared to the Conservatives, the Liberals do have significant financial challenges as a result of the changes to Canada’s party financing regime in 2004: as noted by Flanagan and Jansen, “The reduction of the party to a minority situation in 2004, and then to the opposition benches in 2005 hurt their fundraising capacity. . . . The major reason why the Liberals have not been able to adapt to the new reality is that they were reliant on corporate fundraising prior to 2004.” Whereas the Conservatives have launched three consecutive multimedia attacks, the Liberals have been limited to Web-exclusive attacks. Viewed in light of the Liberal financial woes, Scandalpedia and Cheque Republic did appear to have allowed the Liberals to play on a level field with the Conservatives—a field of mudslinging.

Viral Smear
Another feature of online negativity in Canada is viral smear, which was prominent for both Ignatieff Me! and Cheque Republic. Each site encouraged visitors to share the smear with friends by email and social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. In addition to Make Me! Your Cover, the Facebook app allowed users to post Ignatieff Me! magazine covers and TV ads to their Facebook profile. This had the effect of exposing the Conservatives’
message to all of the people on users’ “friends” lists. The “Share” link on Cheque Republic allowed users to quickly email the page to a friend or post the page on social networking or social bookmarking sites. In addition to exposing new people to the messages of a site, viral marketing also allows for citizen involvement in politics.

The use of viral marketing techniques such as “send to a friend” can be very useful for campaigners for two reasons. First, if users are encouraged to send the item to a friend, someone who may not be as familiar or invested with the campaign, then the original receiver becomes a channel through which candidates may reach untapped citizens. The recipient of a forwarded candidate communication will most likely open the email message and read it because it was sent from someone that person knows: that is, it is not initially interpreted as spam. Thus, email messages may overcome selective exposure, similar to the numerous findings about televised political ads.

Second, in discussions about the democratic potential of technology, the Internet usually comes out on top when compared to television. However, in terms of reach, the Internet has some serious limitations. The Internet is a pull communication in that audiences to websites are self-selected. That is, the audiences of broadcast media are passive; the Internet requires active participation of the user. Users are therefore likely to look only at the information that interests them on a website. In the case of the attack sites discussed in this chapter, a person would have to be interested in politics and be aware of the existence of the site in the first place. Furthermore, the Canadian audience for the Internet is small, at least in terms of political use. Research by the Canadian Internet Project shows that in 2007 only 21 percent of Internet users reported visiting the website of a Canadian political party or individual politician. A CBC/Environics pre-election survey provides similar data, with only 28 percent of Canadians using Internet sources frequently for political information. Therefore, providing opportunities for people to share the smear is crucial because it can make up for what a website lacks in reach.

ONLINE NEGATIVE ADVERTISING AND THE PERMANENT CAMPAIGN

In this volume, Tom Flanagan argues that Canadian politics has evolved into a permanent campaign. The notion of the permanent campaign—a term coined by Sidney Blumenthal—comes from American politics. According
to this thesis, there is little difference between the writ and non-writ period. Campaign techniques that once defined elections—such as polling, advertising media management, and fundraising—are now increasingly a feature of everyday politics. Flanagan and Jansen point to two factors in the development of the permanent campaign in Canada: (1) frequent minority government requires that parties “remain campaign ready,” and (2) the Conservatives have increased their pre-writ spending in order “to make legal use of resources now available to them.”58 Prior to the 2008 election, the Conservatives made extensive use of non-writ television and radio advertising. More recently, the Liberals and the NDP have also released ads in the non-writ period. For instance, in 2010, the Liberals launched ads targeting Harper’s decision to prorogue Parliament until after the Winter Olympics.

The Internet also contributes to the permanent campaign. Political websites, social networking sites, blogs, and email create a permanent presence 24/7. In the United States, the permanent campaign extends in both directions—“beginning earlier and lasting longer.”59 Hopefuls use the Web to “test the waters” for possible presidential bids.60 Even when candidates lose, many maintain their websites. For instance, the website of Democratic senator and presidential nominee John Kerry (www.johnkerry.com), begun as his senate re-election site in 2002, morphed into his presidential site in 2004. The site still exists in 2011. According to Foot and Schneider, “The infrastructure [of the Internet] enables the organization to engage in the same practices that its electoral incarnations had established, and to build on the databases cataloguing transactional relationships previously established with voters, supporters, contributors, journalists and other political actors.”61 The rise of attack websites in Canada can be viewed in light of the permanent campaign. With the exception of Scandalpedia, every negative site since 2004 has been launched outside of the election period. The Internet now plays a role in both the writ and non-writ periods.62 As noted earlier, Canada’s parties can be found all over cyberspace; this virtual omnipresence allows parties to connect with citizens outside of election periods. The growing use of attack websites by Canadian parties further supports Flanagan’s contention that the permanent campaign is now characteristic of Canadian politics.
CONCLUSIONS

The editors of this volume ask, How do Canadians communicate? This chapter has examined how Canadian political parties communicate on the Internet. Earlier, I suggested that two main conclusions could be drawn from how Canadian parties use the Internet during elections. First, parties use the Internet to perform traditional campaign activities, and second, they have not embraced e-democracy. Much of the literature on Canadian parties and the Internet focuses on the writ period. This chapter differs by providing one of the few assessments of parties’ use of online technology during the non-writ period. Nevertheless, the trend of attack sites is consistent with the two conclusions noted above.

David Taras points out that “advertising has always been a part of Canadian politics.”63 In The Newsmakers, he demonstrates that parties have used the press (both partisan and commercial), posters, pamphlets, radio, and television to sell their messages to the Canadian electorate. Given the importance of the Internet to Canadian society and to politics, it should not be surprising that this “traditional” communication strategy of Canadian parties has moved online. What is, perhaps, surprising is the negative tone of online political advertising. As noted, with very little exception, negativity has defined online political advertising by Canadian parties. Like American politics, there is evidence that the Internet might become the venue for the dirtiest of attacks.

Andrew Chadwick defines e-democracy as “efforts to broaden political participation by enabling citizens to connect with one another and with their representatives via new information and communication technologies.”64 At best, a liberal interpretation of viral smear could be considered e-democracy. Some features of attack sites do encourage citizens to connect with other citizens. Moreover, if we take David Mark’s defense of negativity seriously, then viral smear could have some democratic value. This said, attack websites, like official party sites, are not deliberative or participatory spaces. Rather, like official party sites, they are unidirectional. It is difficult, therefore, to reconcile Canadian attack sites with Chadwick’s definition of e-democracy.

NOTES

3 Tamara A. Small, “Still Waiting for an Internet Prime Minister,” in Elections, ed. Heather MacIvor (Toronto: Emond Montgomery, 2010), 190.
4 Ibid.
6 Darin Barney, Communication Technology (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2005), 140.
7 Kernaghan, “Moving Beyond Politics as Usual?” 215.
13 See William Cross, Political Parties (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2004).
17 Emmett Buell and Lee Sigelman, Attack Politics (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2008), 12.
21 Buell and Sigelman, Attack Politics, 7.
“Horse race coverage” refers to a focus by the media on how parties and/or candidates are faring in the polls.

West, *Air Wars*, 71.


West, *Air Wars*, 62.


Ibid., 220.


Kaid, “Political Web Wars,” 69.


Michael Cornfield, Politics Moves Online: Campaigning and the Internet (New York: Century Foundation Press, 2003), 414.


Charles Zamaria and Fred Fletcher, Canada Online! The Internet, Media and Emerging Technologies: Uses, Attitudes, Trends and International Comparisons 2007 (Toronto: Canadian Internet Project, 2008), 226.


Flanagan and Jansen, “Election Campaigns,” 207.


Foot and Schneider, Web Campaigning, 204.

See Small, “Still Waiting.”


Chadwick, Internet Politics, 84.