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Final Thoughts: How Will Canadians Communicate About Politics and the Media in 2015?

The start of the second decade of the twenty-first century feels like the end of an era in political communication in Canada. As noted in chapter 4, the 2011 federal election and the series of provincial elections that autumn were the last gasp of an old system that remained stubbornly oblivious to the digital revolution seething around it. That digital world is transforming how Canadians communicate about politics, but much of the electoral apparatus remained stuck in the past, doing things the way it had long done them while the world was changing around it.

By 2015, when Canadians next vote in another federal election, communications and the political environment will have changed yet again. If politicians, parties, and the electoral system haven’t moved forward by then, the extent of public indifference that already greets politics and elections in Canada may reach levels that will undermine the credibility and continuing authority of both the system itself and its players.

The classic 1988 campaign is a benchmark against which all subsequent federal elections have been compared; it was fought over fifty-seven days with passion about free trade with the United States, an issue that all sides agreed would change the nature of Canada. It may be more than a coincidence that the 1988 campaign was also the last federal election before the arrival of all-news television in Canada, with its minuscule attention span and its reduction of every issue to the lowest common denominator.
If 1988 was a high point, then 2011 may in future be looked upon as a low one. It was a campaign in which everyone talked about new technology, the digital revolution, social media, and interactivity, but virtually no one used it to communicate with voters. Parties and politicians remained stuck in their ways, adopting new technology but using it for the same old purposes—to broadcast their messages to the public, not to engage in debate that could lead them or their views to be challenged.

Despite all the noise, made chiefly by the media, about the power of social media to engage voters (and particularly young people) in discussion and debate about issues affecting their communities and country, social media had virtually no impact on voter turnout. The number of people voting in almost every election held in 2011 continued an apparently inexorable decline. In some provincial campaigns, such as Ontario, turnout fell below 50 percent for the first time. The all-time low came in Alberta in 2008, when barely 40 percent went to the polls.

Yet outside of Canada, communication largely led by young people using the tools of the digital revolution is contributing to a substantial revolution. It helped overthrow autocratic and dictatorial regimes in the Middle East. In the United States in the fall of 2011, the same tools and strategy were used in the Occupy Wall Street campaign, which spread around the world to protest economic inequities, corporate greed, and the lack of criminal and financial accountability borne by the financial services sector for the economic collapse that began in 2008. Regardless of the long-term success of this movement, it produced a new form of protest that is likely to become more popular, thanks to the tools of digital communication. It remains impossible to predict, though, around which issues such digital activism might emerge, what form such future digital involvement will take, what impact it will have, and which, if any, of the existing political actors will be the beneficiaries and the victims.

Certainly, both the digital revolutionaries of the Arab Spring and the regimes they were organizing to overthrow recognize that information—even as simple as cell phone numbers to call out protestors—is the lifeblood of communication. Who controls information and how it is controlled usually determines the winner in any struggle for public support and legitimacy. The irony is that digitization means that a tsunami of general, and often worthless, information now at the fingertips of Canadians threatens to drown them. At the same time, information that should be publicly gathered and available,
and that the public needs for national political communication and debate as citizens is increasingly being restricted and denied to them.

Examples of such denial and restriction are easy to find. They go far beyond those noted in chapter 10, Robert Bergen’s essay on the Department of National Defence’s widespread use of “operational security” to prevent the release to Canadians of information about the activities of their military in Afghanistan or Libya. The Conservative government, in 2010, eliminated the mandatory long-form census, claiming it was too intrusive and thereby interrupting all longitudinal statistical databases on economic, social, and cultural issues upon which policy debate and decisions rely. That database of information is also essential to ensure that government responds most efficiently to public requests for action on a broad range of social and economic concerns. As two more examples, scientists working for the federal government now cannot speak publicly about their research and discoveries even after they are published, and the broader civil service is constrained from providing factual information or explaining government policies in response to requests from the public or the media.

The centrally mandated sclerosis that is rapidly consigning the federal access-to-information process to irrelevance is a prime example of the challenges facing informed political communication in the years ahead. As the Information Commissioner of Canada, Suzanne Legault, noted in her 2010–11 annual report:

Over the past decade, there has been a steady decline in two important measures of access to government information. In terms of timeliness, slightly more than half of all access requests made to federal institutions are now completed within the 30-day limit set by the Access to Information Act. In terms of disclosure, fewer than one fifth of all requests currently result in all information being released. Far from reflecting the presumption of disclosure inherent in the Access to Information Act, the exercise of discretion in determining which information to disclose has been skewed toward greater protection of information. For example, the percentage of exemptions claimed for national security has increased threefold since 2002–2003.¹

Newspapers Canada, the group representing Canada’s daily newspapers, reached a similar conclusion in its 2011 annual audit of federal, provincial,
and municipal compliance with freedom-of-information legislation. The federal government performed the worst in terms of releasing documents in response to access requests. The audit found that 55 percent of requests for release of specific federal information were denied in whole or in part.

Even such promising developments for the expansion of political communication as the move to open data—releasing information collected by governments to allow for independent analysis and assessment that can assess the quality of decisions made by government using that data—risks being undermined in its infancy at the federal level. As the 2011 Newspapers Canada study also noted: “The federal government recently launched an open data initiative to give citizens access to federal databases online. But the word appears not to have reached access coordinators in federal departments and agencies, who continue to respond to requests for electronic records by releasing unreadable image files [or paper printouts]. As data becomes increasingly important as a way of holding governments accountable, Ottawa seems stuck in the 20th century.” Fortunately, the situation is much better at the provincial and municipal levels, where more information is generally available more quickly and where there is much more enthusiasm and support for open data releases to those interested in designing applications to analyze it. This raises the prospect that political communication in Canada will increasingly focus around issues at the provincial and municipal levels. National debates and discussions about policy options will be replaced by more local ones, further breaking down the ability to confront issues nationally and, by resolving them, develop and strengthen national identity.

In his essay, David Marshall notes the important role that political biography has played in the development of that Canadian identity. Yet such biographies are also under threat, thanks to governments’ conscious failure to create or retain records that have been the lifeblood of historians’ work. The digital revolution is in part to blame, as is the desire to avoid access-to-information rules. From the point of view of politicians and bureaucrats, if it doesn’t exist, it can’t be released.

As Robert Marleau, then the Information Commissioner of Canada, warned in a 2008 report:

It is of particular concern that standards for information management seem to be poorly applied across the federal government. Outmoded, inconsistent or
inefficient records management practices and systems tend to slow down the process of finding and retrieving records. This year’s process also uncovered irregularities and inconsistencies between the information that institutions provided the OIC [Office of the Information Commissioner of Canada] and data collected by TBS [Treasury Board Secretariat].

Clearly, the federal government has not succeeded in addressing the challenge that the modern digital information environment presents. There is now an urgent need for leadership and government-wide action in this area, including developing and maintaining state of the art information management practices and resources.4

Despite that admonition and similar ones from previous information commissioners, there has been little action. The situation continues to deteriorate. Poor records management, coupled with the widespread and deliberate refusal to maintain records, thereby ensuring that they cannot be retrieved under access to information laws, risks crippling the archival process. If the trend continues, documents that should be available to future generations will not be, which will fundamentally undermines the ability of scholars to reconstruct events. As an issue, this lacks the drama and immediacy of a revolution or an election, and its impact may not even be noticed by 2015. However, it produces a slow but steady deterioration in the long-term quality of information available to Canadians, their ability to understand how and why decisions were made, and the government’s awareness of the impact of the options it considers before choosing a course of action.

It is hard to escape the conclusion that, at the federal level at least, a government hopelessly enamoured with “talking points” as the anodyne response to every question really isn’t interested in talking at all, in the hope that government will be neither talked to nor talked about. That poses its own risks for the future.

In the end, the success of the tactic of message management and control may be determined by the news media, the institutions that are supposed to hold governments and political actors to account. Here, though, the prospects are also mixed. The news media, the conduits through which much of Canadian political communication has traditionally coursed, and the journalists who work for those news organizations face an equally trying future looking beyond 2011. Both are only slowly coming to grips with three concurrent
pressures that are fundamentally reshaping their perceptions of themselves, their roles and responsibilities, and those of Canadians, as well as their understanding of what the media are and should do.

First, news organizations have spent a decade trying to adapt to the speed and interactivity of the Internet as former barriers between print, radio, and television have broken down. Supplementing these traditional media is a new online medium that combines text, audio, video, and still photography and that requires new skills in storytelling. Television, radio, newspapers, and magazines are all changing and adapting as they simultaneously face demands to accelerate their news gathering and reporting to the speed of newswires. The old days of once-a-day deadlines are long gone, and with them a loss of accuracy, reflection, and perspective.

Second, the participatory component of the Internet has also overrun the traditional media’s longtime role as gatekeeper and filter in determining what news Canadians will receive and when they will get it. It has been difficult for them to adjust to that loss of status and influence and to figure out how and if to compete in the world of rumours and opinion spawned by blogs and a world where anyone can instantly spread information to a broad audience through social media such as Twitter and Facebook.

These two challenges are complicated by a third: the impact of recession and a stumbling economy since late 2008 that has steadily reduced revenue from advertising in newspapers and over-the-air television. Hopes that advertising could be profitably shifted to the Internet have been largely dashed. While advertising has gravitated online, it produces much less revenue for the media than it did in print or on the air.

These three forces will continue to shape the media for years to come. Rather than succumbing, some organizations are starting to respond. Past attempts to charge readers and viewers for access to news websites have failed completely, but the arrival of new technology in the form of tablets such as the iPad offer the media the potential to finally start generating income from digital subscriptions. The Globe and Mail—as well as international publications such as the Wall Street Journal, New York Times, and Financial Times—are now doing this successfully with tablet editions of their newspapers. The Montreal Gazette and Victoria Times-Colonist (members of the Postmedia newspaper chain) were also experimenting with charging readers for access to online content in the fall of 2011. In some cases, intermediaries such as
Apple, Facebook, Amazon, and so on may take a cut: how much revenue will ultimately go to the news organization remains to be seen.

No one yet knows what combination of price and access over what period of time will work with consumers. It is highly likely that one size won't fit all. Each news organization will have to adopt its own pay model based on the characteristics of its audience. Although it is early to make predictions, a likely result is continuing pressure to move away from mass readership and mass audiences. Theme-based television may have pointed the way, with its narrow focus in content and audience. The former print media seems likely to emulate this approach through the push toward pay models and pay walls for access to online information from traditional news sources. It is too early to tell whether this stratification will be organized around an audience's income level (targeting wealthy consumers who can afford the hardware and the subscriptions); its narrow interests in specific content; the age of prospective readers, listeners, and viewers; or on the geographic location of consumers of news.

All of this rapid and ongoing change suggests a continued fracturing of mass discussion about political issues and public policies into piecemeal debates among smaller groups concerned about their own issues, receiving political messages tailored specifically for them and relying on the narrowly targeted media designed with their interests in mind. The outcome driven by the digital revolution may be a further decline in the breadth and extent of national debate and discussion that engages Canadians across all socio-economic and geographic levels, in contrast to the free trade debate in 1988.

Other developments seem likely to reinforce such trends. The so-called cord-cutting movement is growing—that is, subscribers deciding to abandon their cable or satellite TV service and replace it with the Internet. This trend is already well established among young people and students, many of whom simply find it too expensive to pay a monthly fee for both cable and Internet. Having only Internet still allows them to watch TV when they want to, not when broadcasters deliver it to them. It also allows them to maintain what is most valuable to them—their ability to communicate with their friends using social media sites, which, in turn, further fracture publics into smaller and smaller groups.

Another trend worth watching is the growing use of satire to inform young audiences about political issues and to encourage them to participate
in the political process. Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert in the United States are matched by Rick Mercer and *This Hour Has 22 Minutes* in Canada. The satirists have all recently moved beyond television to become faces of larger movements such as Stewart and Colbert’s “Rally to Restore Sanity” in Washington in the fall of 2010. Mercer’s campaign in 2011 to persuade young people to vote in the federal election included appearances at various university campuses, although his efforts had limited effect.

In fact, the links between young people and political satire are becoming stronger as the *Toronto Star* began a partnership in 2011 to print, market, and distribute a Canadian version of the US satirical newspaper *The Onion* in southern Ontario, with a goal of distributing 50,000 copies a week aimed at those eighteen to thirty-four years of age. *The Onion* already distributes 450,000 copies a week in fourteen cities in the United States. Although this may further fracture mass audiences for politics, it might paradoxically engage an age group that currently pays little or no attention to public policy, political debate, and participation.

Into this mix comes social media, with all of its as-yet unrealized potential in Canada as a catalyst for political communication and involvement. Will today’s popular social networking sites and those of the future be used by increasingly smaller groups of people with narrowing interests to talk among themselves, primarily to reinforce their preconceived notions or prejudices? Or might social media be the way in which Canadians cross the self-imposed boundaries of their interests to engage in broader communication and organization around political, cultural, social, and economic causes that span the spectrum of political partisanship.

In simple terms, can social media become the political organizers and organizations of the future by bringing together different pieces to create wholes? That would certainly pose a threat to the continuation of the current political parties and to those who derive power and influence from their roles therein as gatekeepers that restrict the entry of both people and ideas into the political and public policy process. Just as the public no longer accepts the media playing that role and instead has created its own media, ignoring and undermining the institutional media along the way, the digital revolution creates the conditions and provides the tools for encouraging the same revolution in political communication. How quickly that occurs and how fundamentally it changes Canada’s political system, the participants in that system,
and the engagement of the broader public in political communication will be the story of the decade just beginning.

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