
Canadian Politics in 140 Characters: Party Politics in the Twitterverse

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Digital technology has had profound impacts on political communication. This article focuses on one digital technology – Twitter. It is part of a broader technology trend called Web 2.0 which harnesses the Web in a more interactive and collaborative manner. Many authors have argued that Web 2.0 is closely related to e-democracy and stress the importance of enhancing the role of internet users. E-democracy strives to involve cyber-citizens in the political process, new Web 2.0 applications can augment their impact on the democratic system. This paper argues that though many Canadian politicians are using Twitter, it is mostly used to broadcast official party information. Their use of Twitter so far shows little evidence of embracing the characteristics of Web 2.0.

Created in 2006, Twitter is a hybrid of social networking and microblogging. “Microblogging applications share a set of similar characteristics: (1) short text messages, (2) instantaneous message delivery, and (3) subscriptions to receive updates.”¹ Worldwide, Twitter is the premier microblogging site. In February 2008, Nielsen News reported that Twitter had almost 500,000 users; within a year that number had increased 1382%.² However, only a very small proportion of Twitter users are Canadian. An Ipsos-Reid survey reported, “26% of online Canadians are aware of Twitter. Of those, 6% reported using the social networking tool.”³ Sysomos Inc similar found that only 5.69% of worldwide users are from Canada.⁴ This said, Canada has the third largest Twitter population according to the study.

Like other social networking sites, a user establishes an account. Twitter allows subscribers to write a 140-character status update called a “tweet.” Tweets can be posted by instant or text message, cell phone, third-party applications including Facebook, email or the web. Originally, Twitter was conceived as a mobile status update service to one question: What

are you doing? In November 2009, Twitter changed the official question to “What’s happening?” There are two types of relationships on Twitter: “following” and “followers.” Following someone on Twitter describes the list of people whose updates an individual follows, while follower describes the list of people receiving and reading an individual’s tweets. Being followed and following can allow a reciprocal relationship between Twitter users. But unlike other social networking sites reciprocity is not required. One does not have to be a subscriber of Twitter to access someone else’s page. By following others, however, their tweets are delivered directly to your own page.

Methodology

This analysis is an illustration of ‘supply’ Internet research. Supply research, employs some form of content analysis to determine the structure and content of sites. This is opposed to ‘demand’ research, which examines how Internet users respond to such Web sites. Demand research typically employs survey data. Therefore, in order to assess how Canadian politicians twitter and the extent to which this use contributes to the creation of a virtual community, a content analysis on the Twitter accounts of parties and/or leaders with seats in the federal Parliament or provincial legislatures was conducted in July 2009. Twitter accounts were located using both the internal Twitter search engine and Google. Each page was then coded based on a scheme derived from previous studies and

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Table 1 Definitions and Methodology	
Category	Description
Followers	The number of followers
Time on Twitter	The length of time online in days from the first tweet to July 31, 2009
Tweets	The number of tweets from the first tweet to July 31, 2009
Tweets per day	The average number of tweets per day, calculated by dividing the total number of tweets by the number of days online
For individual tweets, the last twenty-five tweets dating back from July 31, 2009 were coded, excluding any @replies. Each tweet was classified into one or where appropriate several of the following categories:	
Conversations	A message sent from one person to another over Twitter; distinguished by the “@reply”
Events	Tweets providing information about future political events
Hashtag	Tweets that include a hashtag; distinguished by the ‘hash’ symbol (#) preceding the tag
Political	Tweets about policy or political issues including criticism of other parties that is not official party communication
Personal	Tweets about matters unrelated to politics
Party	Tweets about party or government related activities including policy announcements, press releases and other documents
Retweet	The re-posting of someone else’s tweet; distinguished by the formulation: ‘RT@user’
Reporting news	Tweets about current events and news
Status update	Tweets about what one has done, is currently doing and is going to do
Other	Tweets that do not fit in any other category

researcher interest. The codebook was pre-tested and refined. The content analysis focussed on the overall Twitter account and individual tweets of every party and/or leader with a seat in the federal Parliament or the provincial legislatures. Each Twitter account was coded for the following categories: A total of 729 items were read and coded.

Canadian Party Politics in the Twitterverse

Based on the content analysis Table 2 shows the accounts belonging to a Canadian legislative party in July 2009. During the analysis period, a total of 30 political parties had a seat in a provincial legislature or the federal parliament. The Saskatchewan NDP was the first legislative party with a Twitter page. Its first tweet is dated August 7, 2008. During the 2008 election campaign Canadian parties used Twitter. Prior to the writ dropping, Stephen Harper established a Twitter

account, making him the first federal leader to do so. Within 10 days, the other four party leaders established accounts. Most provincial party Twitter sites emerged in 2009. There are 27 Twitter accounts associated with a legislative party – both political parties *and* party leaders use Twitter.

The finding that parties and leaders have separate online presences is not new in Internet politics. Voerman and Boogers describe this as the “personalization of politics online”.⁵ In the 2003 Dutch election, Dutch party leaders operated Web sites different from the official party site. Voerman and Boogers concluded that leaders’ sites sought to win voter sympathy by allowing them to share a little personal life of the party’s leading man or women. In Canada, party leaders have never established Web sites separate from the official party site. This said, leaders tend to dominate party Web sites in terms of images and content. Personalization is also evident in the use of social networking sites. During the 2008 federal election, several major parties had two Facebook pages: one for the national party and one for the party leader. “Friends” of leaders were privy to some personalized information, such as that the Prime Minister is writing a book on the early history of professional hockey. James Stanyer argues that personalization is now a key feature of contemporary political communication systems. He writes

The arrival of the electronic media in particular has provided the public with a regular flow of images of these main political actors as well as information. Leading politicians in the US and Britain have not only become recognizable performers but also ‘intimate’ strangers over the twentieth century, their private lives have slowly come to be considered acceptable subject of journalistic revelation and self disclosure.⁶

Given this growing trend in political communication, it is possible that the use of Twitter by leaders will be personalized and intimate, and will differ from the tweets of the political parties they represent.

Twittering varies across the Canada. In only five jurisdictions do all legislative parties and or leaders twitter. With the exception of Nova Scotia, twittering is all but absent in Atlantic Canada. The digital divide provides a potential explanation. The term digital divide refers to a gap between those with access to digital technologies and those with very limited or no access. There are income, education and racial divides within many countries. Despite Canada’s high rate of Internet penetration, a number of divides exist. The regional and linguistic divides are relevant here. According to Zamaria and Fletcher regional differences in Internet use are startling. Research from the 2007 Canadian Internet Project shows that while 78% of Canadians

Table 2
Canadian Political Parties & Leader Twitter Accounts
by Jurisdictions in July 2009

Jurisdiction	Political Parties	Party Account	Leader Account
Canada	CPC Liberal NDP BQ	x liberal_party x x	pmharper M_Ignatieff Jacklayton GillesDuceppe
AB	PC Liberal NDP	mypcmla caucus albertaliberals x	premierstelmach davidswann bmasonNDP
BC	NDP Liberal	bcdnp bcliberalparty	carolejames g_campbell
MB	NDP Liberal PC	x x x	x DrJonGerrard x
NB	Liberal PC	x x	x x
NL	Liberal PC NDP	x x x	x x x
NS	NDP Liberal PC	NSNDP x nspc	x StephenMcNeil x
ON	NDP Liberal PC	OntarioNDP x x	andreaorwath x timhudak
PE	Liberal PC	x x	x x
QC	PQL PQ ADQ QS	x x ADQ_Parlement QuebecSolidaire	x x x FrancoiseDavid
SK	SP SP NDP	SaskParty skcaucus Sask_NDP	x x x
Total	30	13	14

use the Internet, it varies across the regions; “While British Columbia, Alberta, the Prairie provinces and Ontario share robust levels of Internet penetration between 82% and 84%, Quebec and the Atlantic provinces have considerably fewer current users, 67% and 72% respectively.”⁷ In Atlantic Canada, Zamaria and Fletcher point to a lag in technical infrastructure and deployment and the difficulty in providing Internet access in a large rural territory to explain lower penetration rates. Additionally, language explains Internet penetration in Québec. In 2002, the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages reported that there is a digital divide between Francophones and Anglophones. This divide continues; 77% of Francophones compared to 85% of Anglophones used the Internet in 2007. There appears to be a relationship between Internet penetration rates and the willingness or necessity of a politician to use Twitter.

Twitter is a popular social networking site. Some Twitter celebrities have more than 4 million followers. “As the number of followers is so visible, Twitter is disposed to give rise to a new, highly objectifiable dimension of public reputation”.⁸ During the 2008 presidential campaign, more than 123,000 people followed Barack Obama, making his page the number one Twitter page for much of 2008. For politicians being followed is crucial; “The effectiveness of using Twitter to communicate information is partially dependent on the number of “followers” that have subscribed to an individual Twitter stream”.⁹ Have Canadians responded to twittering politicians? The total number of people listed as a “follower” of a legislative party or leader is just over 58,000. The average number of followers is 2,154.

There is a substantial difference in the number of people who follow a party leader versus the party as a whole. Eighty-six percent followed a party leader compared to 13% following a party. Compare the followers of the Liberal Party of Canada and their leader Michael Ignatieff. Ignatieff has more than 8000 more followers than the party he leads. This holds in other cases where a party and their leader both have accounts. This speaks to the importance of party leaders within Canadian politics. As Cross notes “Leaders dominate election campaigns, exercise considerable influence over the parties’ parliamentary agendas, and fill important parliamentary positions including those of premier and prime minister”.¹⁰

What Are Parties and Leaders Twittering About?

In determining how Canadian party communicators use Twitter, the first question is how often do they use the technology. Microblogging by nature encourages frequent posting. Since a tweet is only 140 characters, microblogging sites lowers users’ requirement of time and thought investment for content generation. This should make it easier for people to update frequently. Despite this, research shows that this is not the case. In their study of a random sample of 300,000 Twitter users in May 2009, Heil and Piskorski found that the “typical Twitter user contributes very rarely”.¹¹ Among Twitter users, the median number of lifetime tweets per user is one. This translates into over half of Twitter users tweeting less than once every 74 days”.¹² Sysomos reports that 85% of Twitter users tweet less than once per day.

This study came to similar conclusions on how often parties and leaders use Twitter. We used “tweets per day” to assess frequency. On average, Canadian parties and leaders update once a day (1.02). There is a considerable range in how often parties and leaders

Table 3
Use of Twitter by MPs, MLAs and Political Parties
as of July 2009

Name	Followers	Following	Total Tweets	Tweets per day
pmharper	16,802	13,410	175	0.9
M_Ignatieff	10,617	5,142	67	0.5
jacklayton	9,193	9,587	281	2.1
g_campbell	4,089	3,798	183	1.2
liberal_party	2,181	2,164	138	0.7
GillesDuceppe	2,121	1,907	196	1.5
carolejames	1,692	1,947	79	0.5
premierstelmach	1,386	1,210	138	0.7
bcndp	1,385	1,402	135	0.6
QuebecSolidaire	1,333	1,207	1,383	5.2
bcliberalparty	1,160	1,372	187	1.2
timhudak	976	354	613	2.7
FrancoiseDavid	705	688	52	0.3
andreaorwath	687	449	124	0.5
davidswann	683	1,519	105	0.5
OntarioNDP	678	390	73	0.5
NSNDP	521	663	113	0.5
StephenMcNeil	370	169	79	0.5
albertaliberals	253	182	191	1.3
mypcmla	250	132	156	0.9
Sask_NDP	245	10	181	0.9
bmasonNDP	244	63	30	0.3
ADQ_Parlement	230	238	223	2.0
nspc	148	107	58	0.4
SaskParty	112	0	23	0.2
DrJonGerrard	56	15	135	0.6
skcaucus	43	0	76	0.5
Total	58,160	48,125		
Average			192	1.0

twittered. In general, most parties and leaders tweeted infrequently; 70% of the parties and leaders tweeted less than once per day.

What are party communicators twittering about? The tweets of political parties were focussed on official party communication. Almost 50% of party tweets were of this nature. A random selection of tweets is illustrative:

Sask_NDP: #ndp Caucus News: NDP Urges Talks on Federal Visa Rules <http://bit.ly/4pLPXE>

liberal_party: Exclusive! 2nd Quarter Fundraising numbers are in: \$3.9M! More than 4 times last year's. So far this year: \$5.7M #LPC23

mypcmla: Province strengthens mental health

and addiction programs with \$11.8 million in funding this year. Read more: <http://tiny.cc/vNC2R#ableg1>

Tweets are often titles of press releases as in the case of the Sask_NDP or announcements in the case of the federal Liberals. Links to official documents and online videos were common. The final example is interesting; mypcmla is the Twitter account of the caucus of the Alberta Progressive Conservatives, all mypcmla tweets are about government business. This conflation between the caucus and the government, certainly calls into question the divide between partisan and government communication. Due to the focus on twittering official party communication, Twitter varies little from the official party site. Rather it appears that when the Web site is updated, so too is Twitter.

Personalization was evident in the use of Twitter in Canada. Leaders essentially tweet about themselves. Indeed, sixty-three percent of tweets by party leaders were personalized. Party leaders mainly use Twitter in the manner that the site was first conceived. That is, leader tweets generally answer the question: "What are you doing?" Status updates are the most prominent form of leader tweets. More than 50% of tweet by party leaders were personal tweets. For instance,

carolejames: On my way to the Comox Valley campaign office to meet NDP candidate Leslie McNabb-first stop of a whirlwind tour of the island #bcelection.

g_campbell: Saw first hand the #kelownafire. Incredible work by firefighters, pilots & volunteers. Because of them, people's spirits up.

Party leaders mostly tweeted about their job as leader. As the examples show, the tweets focus on what the leader did or was going to do, where the leader had been or was going to be. In this sense, status updates give followers an opportunity to see what politicians do on a daily basis. According to Stanyer, one aspect of personalized politics is self-disclosure; politicians are revealing aspects of their personal lives including information about their families. The following tweet by the Prime Minister is an example of self-disclosure:

pmharper: Celebrating my 50th birthday with Rachel and a crowd of 50 pink flamingos on the lawn of 24 Sussex. Twitpic: <http://www.twitpic.com/4a4bz>

The tweet is linked to a photo of Mr. Harper with his daughter, Rachel. This type of self-disclosure is not common on Twitter. Even though party leaders tweet about themselves; the tweets are very much about their activities as leader. Indeed, a small proportion of leader tweets, 7% were coded as personal. Only occasionally do leaders speak about their lives outside

of party politics. Research by Glassman *et al.* on the US Congress found similar results; less than 5% of tweets by congressional members were personal in nature. Party-business and political commentary also figures little in the tweets of party leaders. Only 17% of leader tweets are about official party communication. Even in instances where a party only had one Twitter account (i.e. Tim Hudak), the leader accounts are personalized. There was a clear separation between leader and party Twitter accounts.

Both parties and leaders rarely made off-the-cuff statements about policy, political issues or other parties in their tweets. Overall less than 10 percent of the entire content analysis was coded as political. Much of the political twittering came from the leader of the Alberta New Democrats, Brian Mason. On June 2, 2009, Mr. Mason tweeted from the floor of the Alberta Legislature during the debate and vote on the controversial Bill 44, which gave parents the option of pulling their children out of class when lessons on sex, religion or sexual orientation are taught. Party and leader tweets are generally about official party communications or status updates about official duties of the leader.

One thing that should be evident from the aforementioned party and leader examples is the use of the hyperlink or URL. Hyperlinks featured prominently in the tweets of Canadian politicians. Almost 50% of all the tweets coded included an URL. Compressing sites, such as tinyurl.com, are used to shorten URLs to ensure that links can fit into the 140 characters. Tweets linked to party or government Web sites, Facebook, photos, videos, blogs and media stories.

There are several benefits of hyperlinking for a politician. First, microblogging is brief by definition; therefore, by posting a link, a politician can say more than 140 characters. For instance, the ADQ tweet:

ADQ Parlement: «Arrêt des négociations entre Québec et les techniciens ambulanciers paramédics: Une autre crise signée YvesBolduc» <http://bit.ly/ynCRU>

links to a press release on the ADQ home page. With 303 word and 1,939 characters, the press release provides substantially more information than the original tweet. Second, URLs allow politicians to leverage existing online content. The virtual world of a Canadian political party is extensive. Since 2000, a party Web site is standard. However with the growth of social networking, it is commonplace for parties to operate a Facebook page and YouTube channel in addition to a Twitter account. Indeed, previous research

indicates that some federal parties have accounts with up to 10 different social networking sites. Another example comes from Michael Ignatieff:

M_Ignatieff: Happy Canada Day everyone. Watch my video message here: <http://bit.ly/MjsW2> links to the Liberal leader's personal YouTube channel called IggyTube.

The final benefit is reinforcement of the tweet. In examining the American political blogosphere, Richard Davis found that bloggers reinforce their points by "employing sources that bolster [the] bloggers position and undermine those of the opposition". On blogs this occurs through linking to other blogs, websites or media outlets. Clearly a microblog can also used in this way. For instance, during the 2009 Nova Scotia election, the NDP posted tweets with link to media stories favourable to the party, such as,

NSNDP: The @chronicleherald says "NDP tends to balance labour, economy" [#NSselection.](http://bit.ly/TruUnion)"

Rather than appearing simply political, appealing to neutral authorities gives credence to the tweets. By making extensive use of URLs, Canadian politicians are getting more out of Twitter.

Hashtags are an important feature of Twitter that are also evident in the aforementioned examples. A hashtag is a term assigned to a tweet that organize discussion around specific topics or events and aides in searching. A #(hash symbol) before a word creates a tag. Hashtags can be beneficial, as they allow party communicators to extend their messages beyond followers. Indeed, one does not have to be a Twitter user to follow the conversation because hashtags are visible to anyone. Hashtags are searchable through Twitter, Google and trending sites such as What the Hashtag?! Moreover, they allow party communicators to contribute to a conversation about different topics, political or otherwise.

Despite these benefits, only 36% of tweets were coded as having a hashtag, however, most party communicators used a hashtag at some point. Only 30% of the accounts examined never used a hashtag. For some account, it was ritualistic; every tweet by Stephen McNeil and Ed Stelmach included a hashtag. Others used them as needed. Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff used the #lpc (Liberal Party of Canada) tag to designate party tweets, but other tweets such as his status updates were not tagged. Overall, of those that make use of hashtags, they occurred 56% of the time.

There were three main categories of hashtags used by party communicators found in this analysis. First, some hashtags were "partisan," that is, the hashtag

was related to a specific political party. For example, Tim Hudak use the Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario hashtag (#pcpo) in just about every tweet, along with the #roft (Right of Twitter). Indeed, prominent conservative blogger Stephen Taylor encouraged right-wing Canadians to use #roft in all tweets in order to create a right-wing online community. The second category of hashtags used on party and leader Twitter pages can be designated as “political.” Political tags were added to tweets with a particular political topics or events that were relevant to various party actors. For instance, both Nova Scotia Liberal Leader Stephen McNeil and the Nova Scotia NDP used #nselection (Nova Scotia election) during the campaign. All Albertan parties occasionally used the hashtag #ableg (Alberta Legislature). This meant that those that search or visited these tags were able to get updates from the various party communicators in addition from other using the tag. The final category is not related to politics at all. One example of this would be when BC NDP leader Carole James tweeted a cheer for the hockey team the Vancouver Canucks, she added the tag #Canucks to her tweet. In all cases, the hashtags allowed party communicators to extend their messages beyond just their followers.

Embracing Web 2.0?

Do parties and leaders engage in other ways with their followers? Key words in conceptualizing Web 2.0 are interaction, collaboration, co-production, and active contribution. As O’Reilly put there is an “implicit ‘architecture of participation’”¹³ in Web 2.0. This section examines whether parties and leaders embrace Web 2.0 in their use of Twitter.

Two features of Twitter, @ replies and retweets, will be used to assess Web 2.0. Although Twitter does not allow for instantaneous communications, scholars suggest Twitter can be interactive. @replies allows one user to respond publically to a question or comment from one of their followers. Like hashtags, @replies were not originally part of the Twitter application. Early users began using the format @+username+message as a way to designate a message as a reply. Later Twitter built @ replies into the application. The Nova Scotia Progressive Conservative provides an example:

nspc: @thedingler if the premier retired, he’d have told the party. We’ll be sure to keep everyone posted. He will be a regular MLA for a while.

Here the nspc is responding to a question from thedingler on whether the Premier will retire.

A study by Honeycutt and Hearing examined conversationality on Twitter. They conclude that

Twitter is a “noisy environment” where “successful exchanges can and do take place.”¹⁴

Similar to forwarding e-mail, a retweet is a re-posting of the tweets of another user. According to Boyd and colleagues, retweeting contributes to a conversational ecology in which conversations are composed of a public interplay of voices. They go on to note “Retweeting brings new people into a particular thread, inviting them to engage without directly addressing them”.¹⁵ For example,

RT @davidswann: <http://twitpic.com/c10fg> - Having fun at a CMHA kids day camp! #YEG #ablib.

Here, the Alberta Liberals are retweeting a status update of their leader David Swan. Retweeting demonstrates that a politician is reading the posts of others and sharing them with their own Twitter followers.

Since @replies are not tweets, they were not counted as one of the 25 tweets. Rather, any @reply that occurred within the 25 tweets was coded. Of 729 items coded, only 54 of them were identified as an @reply, that is 7.4%. Almost a quarter of those came from a single party, the ADQ. One interpretation of this would be that Canadians were uninterested in interacting with parties or leaders, thereby not making use of the function. Since the comments of others do not appear on the public timeline, it is difficult to rule this out as a possibility.

A second, more probable, interpretation is that most parties and leaders had disabled the @replies setting. Retweeting by Canadian party communicators is also rare. Only 51 tweets (7.5%) were coded as a retweet. Given that two accounts, Ontario NDP and Alberta Liberals, constituted 56% of those demonstrates how rarely a party or leader participated in this activity. Worse yet, the retweets of the Alberta Liberal were all from the party leader or Liberal MLAs. Indeed, 63% never retweeted. This lack of retweeting not only demonstrates a lack of interactivity, but also a failure of reciprocity and generosity. Despite the fact, that Canada’s party leaders are following thousands of people, the lack of retweeting calls into question what they are doing with this relationship. Retweeting depends on following and reading the tweets of others and then sharing those tweets.

Should we be surprised by these findings? Perhaps not. Studies of Canadian political actors consistently show a flouting of characteristic of interactivity. Kernaghan¹⁶ maintains that while the use of e-mail and online polls by Canadian parliamentarians has increased, there has been little change in the use of

online chats, discussion forums and electronic town hall meetings on MP web sites. Regardless of the platform, Web sites, blogs, Facebook, or Twitter, Canadian politicians avoid online interaction with citizens. Despite the fact that participation should be implicit in the architecture of Web 2.0 sites, Canadian parties and leaders do not use Twitter in this way.

Conclusion

There is very little scholarly work on Twitter and politics. This research is a first attempt at providing a systematic understanding of Twitter politics in the Canadian context. Although Twitter is supposed to be a social network, it is being used by Canadian parties and leaders as a broadcasting channel. Broadcasting occurs when information follows in one direction from a single sender to the audience. For political parties, they broadcast the message of the day, whether it is a press release or a policy statement. For leaders, they broadcast their status.

While this certainly may not meet the democratic expectation of Web 2.0, does this mean there is no value for party communicators? As noted, the Internet is thought to have democratic characteristics, especially when compared to mass technologies such as radio or television. One criticism of Internet politics has been the notion that the Internet is a “pull technology; “Unlike television or radio, it is extremely difficult for [political] organisations to push their messages onto an unsuspecting and passive audience”.¹⁷ However, with the rise of social networking sites, the Internet can be a push technology like television and radio. Once an individual chooses to follow a Canadian party or leader, political information can now be pushed on him or her. For a party communicator this is extremely beneficial, a captive and interested audience. Thus if Twitter is meant to answer the question “What’s happening?” perhaps Canadian politicians are meeting the expectations of their followers.

Notes

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