
Assessing the Potential of New Social Media

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The Internet and social media are almost universally assumed to be essential to election campaigns and the work of parliamentarians, as well as being centrally important to how individual Canadians engage with politics. Indeed, it is regularly assumed that new information and communications technologies have transformed politics in ways that enhance the quality of democracy by connecting and engaging citizens with political processes that are more transparent and interactive than in the past. This article offers a partial assessment of the impact of the Internet, social networking and related information and communications technologies on politics, campaigning and parliamentarians. The perspective offered is rooted in a desire to avoid unfounded enthusiasm and unsubstantiated assumptions about the extent to which potentially interactive information and communications technologies have actually transformed politics.

Thirty years ago before widespread access to high speed Internet, user-friendly e-mail programs, political weblogs, and social networking sites, the political theorist Benjamin Barber speculated that new information technologies had the potential to strengthen democracy by increasing public access to information that would enhance civic awareness and facilitating participatory dialogue and deliberation across great distances.¹ During the 1990s, as popular access to new information and communications technologies and the Internet became increasingly common, optimistic democrats believed we were on the cusp of a new era social and political democratization. Cyber-utopians believed computer-based information sharing and interaction would transform democratic politics.

Daniel Weitzner characterized the Internet as “a vast new forum for political discourse and activism which allows genuine interaction between voters and elected representatives.”² In an era that was marked by deep frustration with formal politics and corporate dominated news media, there was hope that a new, more democratic civic ideal would result from computer-assisted exchanges of political news and information. Analysts speculated about the capacity of virtual communities of political engaged Internet citizens—netizens—to identify and deliberate

on the issues of the day. Howard Rheingold even predicted that networked “cybercommunities” would give citizens the leverage needed to challenge the political and economic elite’s control of powerful communications media.³ The faithful believed this new age of supposedly egalitarian news and information dissemination would allow for the emergence of what Lawrence Grossman called an “electronic republic” in which Internet-based public dialogue and a more reflexive process of public opinion formation would alter the behaviour of politicians, empower citizens and deepen democracy.⁴

In terms of electoral politics, political scientists have equated the potential impact of the Internet—particularly since the emergence of the social media associated with the interactivity of Web 2.0—with the rise of television broadcasting in the mid 20th century. Brad Walchuk, for example, argues that not only will social media allow “parties to connect to voters and spread their word in entirely new ways,” but it also allows for interactive two-way communications.⁵ Reflecting on the interactive nature of social media, Canadian parliamentarians such as Carolyn Bennett have voiced their optimism about the possibility of harnessing social media to produce a more inclusive and dynamic public sphere and allow for the sort of responsive political relationships that enhance the efficacy of citizens and encourage political involvement.⁶

Of course, in more recent years, observers have offered more sober assessments of the impact that social

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media and new information technologies will have on democratic politics.⁷ Carty, Cross and Young, for example, contend that while the capacity of television to reach mass audiences had a primarily positive and nationalizing effect on Canadian party politics, the Internet allows for increasingly targeted private political messages that are more fragmented and less transparent.⁸ Still, in many circles, expectation continue to run high with regard to the positive potential for doing politics differently in the age of Internet-based social networking. Optimists remain confident that low-cost information production, egalitarian public conversations in cyberspace, new opportunities for political action, and interactive relationships between citizens and politicians will transform democracy.

The Initial Embrace

Canadian political parties were not early adopters of new information and communication technologies. All of the major parties had their own websites by 1997, but in the 1997 and 2000 elections those websites were little more than electronic brochures providing basic information on the leader, party policy, and how to get involved or make financial donations. The sophistication of these websites gradually increased, and in the 2004 election visitors had access to multi-media platforms that offered videos and regularly updated information on campaign activities. Still, while local campaigns and the media could use the parties' websites to stay in touch with the messaging and activities of the national campaign, beyond some simple online surveys, there were limited features aimed at creatively engaging voters.⁹ The websites did not offer access to blogs or other creative interactive features; they were primarily unidirectional computer-based platforms for the mass dissemination of basic information and video content.

Surprisingly, little had changed by the time of the 2006 general election. Even though Facebook was established in 2004, YouTube in 2005, and Twitter in 2006, Canada's major parties failed to take advantage of social networking sites. Parties displayed minimal interest in making Canadian party websites more interactive. Tamara Small, a leading academic analyst of online campaigning, has described the parties' 2006 websites as Internet-base lawn signs that inform, but do not engage. The goal, it seems, was to disseminate information to the general public and respond to the demands of journalists who expected more and more efficient media relations.¹⁰ Canadians interested in basic information on the leaders and party policy had convenient and speedy access the parties' web-based campaign materials, but no more than a tiny fraction of Canadians actually visited party websites.

It was not until 2007 that we saw the first indications that Canadian political parties were beginning to engage with the possibilities of the networking, content sharing, interactivity and collaboration associated with Web 2.0. The major parties established YouTube channels and set up Facebook accounts, and high profile and tech-savvy politicians began to join Twitter. Stephen Harper and Stéphane Dion were first out of the gate with Twitter accounts in July 2007, but dozens of others soon followed. It seemed, to some, that Canadian politics was finally entering the era of interactive social networking. But, while Barack Obama embraced social networking in highly innovative ways on route to his success in the 2008 American election, Internet politics in the 2008 Canadian general election was considerably less transformational. There were innovations, including partisan Facebook pages, broadcasting over YouTube, and even some traffic on Twitter. And, to voters unfamiliar with the potential of online campaigning, the uploading of TV ads and campaign videos to YouTube and Facebook likely seemed innovative. But, viewership was limited, Facebook remained generally underutilized, and the use of Twitter did not result in anything like the interaction witnessed between Americans and Barack Obama. Reflecting on the 2008 election, Tamara Small argued that the

Internet has not contributed to a greater participatory ethos for Canadian parties. Interaction and collaboration between parties and the electorate remain rare. Parties continue to use the Internet (whether through their official websites or social networking sites) mainly to provide information to voters.¹¹

Little changed in the 2011 general election. Post-election analysis suggests, for example, that the party leaders' Facebook pages were used primarily to inform visitors about campaign activities. Michael Ignatieff's Facebook page was the most interactive. It allowed visitors to leave comments on discussion boards and Liberal supporters could make use of an application that would send a notice about their voting intentions to their own Facebook friends. But, Stephen Harper's Facebook page served essentially as a means of broadcasting basic information about the campaign.¹² Innovation and interactivity were limited. Of course, the online platforms offered by the parties were not the only opportunity for Canadians to engage with the election. With an increasing number of Canadians spending more time online and making use of Twitter, Facebook, weblogs, and dedicated websites, voters had more opportunity than ever before to engage in Internet-based discussions of the campaign. But, in the context of a general election appealing to eligible voters

from coast to coast, participation in online discussions involved a subgroup of Canadians who were “small in number overall and were most likely already committed partisans or voters who were more likely to cast ballots whether the technology existed or not.”¹³

It is clear that Canada’s political parties have embraced the Internet and social media; the online world is now an important part of politics and national election campaigns. Still, there is little to no evidence that the embrace of new information and communications technologies by parties and politicians has produced the sort of democratic transformation predicted by the cyber-optimists. There is also limited evidence that the embrace of online campaigning has contributed to the sort of widespread fragmentation and targeting of campaign messages predicted by Carty, Cross and Young.¹⁴ Parties continue to reach out to voters by broadcasting their messages; indeed, the Internet is often used to influence journalists in the hopes of reaching the public through the mass media. Even Twitter is regularly employed as a tool for influencing stories as they develop in the context of the 24-hour news cycle. Thus, Canada’s first Internet era campaigns remained national in focus. Rather than targeted and private political messages that evade the mass media, online campaigning has reinforced the role of traditional news media. The Internet has allowed the public direct access to TV ads, campaign videos and information, but this has only strengthened the capacity of the parties’ national campaigns to control campaign communications.¹⁵

Targeting and Narrowcasting

Despite the fact that campaigning on and through the Internet and social networking sites has not yet resulted in extensive use of targeted campaign messages and the fragmentation of national campaigns, there is some evidence that parties are now in the process of enhancing their capacity to engage in sophisticated targeting and “microtargeting” of political messages. While there has been less research into this sort of use of online and computer-based technology, it is increasingly clear the Internet, social networking, and other new communications technologies allow campaigns to deliver messages that are “narrowcasted” to specific audiences. In recent years Canadian political parties—particularly the Conservative Party—have been utilizing the Internet and new information and communications technologies to take advantage of niche issues that are important to targeted groups of voters. It may be the case that we are now at a turning point in online campaigning, a moment marked by the simultaneous use of websites, Twitter and Facebook in ways that are transparent, centralizing, national in

focus, and supportive of the traditional news media’s role, along side the use of voter-tracking software, issue-based e-mail lists, Facebook ads, and other techniques that are purposefully targeted and less visible to the media and the public at large.

While the 2011 “robocalls scandal” focused the public’s attention on the potential use of computerized voters lists and automated dialing in highly inappropriate efforts at widespread voter suppression, it is clear that such techniques can be used in a range of different ways. Sophisticated demographic targeting and voter profiling creates opportunities for campaigns to call, e-mail, or message swing voters who, particularly in an era of declining voter turnout, can determine the outcome in close elections. In the United State, parties have used a combination of computerized voters lists, online “mining” for individualized consumer data and personal demographic information, the tracking of discussions on Twitter, demographic and opinion profiling through in-house polling, among other techniques, to create individual profiles of nearly 175 million voters.¹⁶ Canadian parties have yet to attain the same level of sophistication, but even a decade ago the former Conservative strategist and academic, Tom Flanagan, wrote about the emergence of the “database party.”¹⁷ Today, all of Canada’s major parties have centralized databases—like the now well-know Constituent Information Management System (CIMS) of the Conservative Party—that contain information on millions of voters. Information on voter’s opinions, demographic profile, and voting intentions, is fed into these databases from a variety of source. With this data available, it is only a matter of time before parties move more aggressively into using new communications technologies for targeting campaign messages.

While it may be too soon to predict the impact targeting will have on politics and campaigning once it is being used more extensively. It is clear that the fact that targeted message are delivered “under the radar,” creates opportunities to send political messages on niche issues, even when those messages are not necessarily consistent with national campaign themes or the public image of a party. Thus, while Canadian parties have tended to use the Internet, social media and new communications technologies in ways that are centralizing and nationalizing, the partial fragmentation of Canadian general elections remains a possibility. Indeed, this possibility was put on display recently when Citizenship and Immigration Minister Jason Kenney’s office extracted e-mail addresses from an online petition supporting gay refugee claims, and then used those e-mail addresses to send out a message

trumpeting his government's support of gay and lesbian Iranians making claims for status as refugees in Canada. The message was not intended for the national media, just for the recipients of the targeted e-mails. The story only came to light after a few people raised questions about the source of the e-mail distribution list that was used by the minister's office.

The Utility of Twitter

It is not only national campaign strategists and party leaders who are engaging the public via the Internet and social media. Since 2009 there has been an explosion in the number of political candidates and parliamentarians who have signed on to Twitter and established Facebook pages. A curious nonpartisan website, known as poliTwitter, tracks the use of social networking sites by Canadian politicians.¹⁸ The statistics are fascinating. Approximately 80% of federal parliamentarians are signed on to Twitter, and 75% have Facebook accounts. This participation rate is, particularly in the case of Twitter, considerably higher than the participation rate for the overall Canadian population. Approximately 83% of Canadians are on the Internet and 63% of those make use of Facebook, but fewer than 20% of Canadian Internet users also use Twitter.¹⁹ Clearly, establishing a presence on Facebook and Twitter is now assumed to be something of an essential requirement of political life.

Of course, the value of having a Facebook page or being active on Twitter depends on the number of "fans" and "followers" parliamentarians have. Not surprisingly, the party leaders have the most fans of their Facebook pages—Stephen Harper and Justin Trudeau both have approximately 90,000 Facebook fans. But the vast majority of MPs have 1,000 or fewer fans. Similarly, whereas Harper's Twitter account is followed by over 330,000 individuals, and Trudeau's by more than 220,000, the typical MP is followed by 1,000 to 5,000, and many by fewer than 500. Moreover, a surprising number of those followers are fellow parliamentarians, journalists, businesses or organizations, and individuals from outside the MP's constituency.

In political circles there is a high degree of awareness of the chatter on Twitter. But, what is Twitter actually being used for? In 2010, Tamara Small observed that Twitter is most often used to broadcast official party information, to offer "spin" on current events, or to share a little of one's personal life.²⁰ With the exception of a small number of extremely enthusiastic users of Twitter, including Elizabeth May, Tony Clement and Denis Coderre, MPs do not take full advantage of the interactive potential of Twitter—few actively retweet or reply to tweets. More emphasis is placed on simply establishing a presence in the "Twitterverse," than on

interacting with citizens. The assumption seems to be that social media allow politicians to circumvent the structures of the traditional media and reach voters directly. But, interestingly, beyond the small number of people who directly receive the tweets (many of those being politically engaged citizens whose political commitments are firmly established and already know a lot about the politicians they follow on Twitter), very few people will ever be impacted by a politician's active tweeting. Indeed, an interesting study of the impact of candidates' engagement in the online social media sphere during the 2012 American elections, found that a candidate's personal twitter activity actually had very limited impact on the number of overall mentions of the Candidate on Twitter. The sense that one is increasing their profile is larger than the reality. There may, however, be a silver lining for some. The American study suggests that active tweeting may correlate with how likely it is that politicians will be mentioned in popular traditional media.²¹ Perhaps the political Twitterverse is a fairly insular community of politicians, politically engaged citizens, and journalists who are, increasingly, taking cues from the politicians' tweets.

There are some important lessons for parliamentarians who assume that social media, including Twitter, are effective tools for raising their personal profiles and staying in touch with the views of their constituents. The benefit of all the time spent tweeting may actually be quite limited, and the sense of being in touch with one's constituents may be inaccurate. A recent study from the Pew Research Center encourages caution before reading too much into the views and opinions one encounters on Twitter. It seems that reactions to political events and policy debates on Twitter do not align with public opinion as measured by scientifically conducted public opinion polling. Because the "narrow sliver of the public" represented in discussions on Twitter is not demographically representative of the general public, one must be cautious about reading too much into what they learn by listening to the voices in the Twitterverse.²²

Political Blogs, Citizen Engagement, and Democracy

A strong democracy requires engaged citizen—not merely citizens who are willing to follow formal politics and vote, but citizens who engage with issues and interact with fellow citizens as well as with politicians. Part of the reason some democrats are enthusiastic about the Internet, social media and other new communications technologies is their potential to enrich and enliven the "public sphere" and facilitate free and informed public deliberation. A vibrant public sphere offers social spaces for citizens to share information and viewpoints in social processes that shape the shared understandings that define the underlying text of civic life. A democratic

public sphere is home to the civic conversations that allow a broad range of citizens to realize their capacity to influence the norms and values that dominate contemporary politics. It is not surprising, therefore, that the issue of the Internet's capacity to enliven deliberative democracy is typically framed in terms of its potential to transform the public sphere. Optimists have argued that, as a forum for social communication, cyberspace transforms the public sphere by revolutionizing the "constellation of communicative spaces" in which information and ideas circulate, possible collective futures are debated, and political wills are expressed.²³ Communication in cyberspace via websites, listservs, weblogs and social media transcends physical space and creates opportunities for alternative news sources that challenge the hegemony of territorially bound public life mediated by traditional mass media institutions.²⁴

There is no doubt that the Internet has allowed groups of like-minded citizens to come together on issues that concern them. Public interest groups, social movement organizations, faith communities, and loose knit groups of citizens responding to current events and issues have all made use of the Internet and social media to build a sense of community and, sometimes, to pressure government for action. These processes have done a lot to assist groups in overcoming the spatial and temporal challenges of social and political organizing, and this has been positive for democracy. Unfortunately, the vast majority of citizens are not significantly more politically engaged or better informed than prior to the explosion of news and information on the Internet or the possibility of social networking. There are important examples of the public sphere being politically enlivened by new communications technologies. But the social reach of these developments is fairly limited, and many observers doubt that many of those politicized through the Internet and social media would not have been politicized in its absence. Instead, Pippa Norris argues what we see with the rise of the new communications technologies is a "reinforcement effect." Citizens who were already politically engaged now use the Internet to seek out additional information and connect with others who are equally politicized, while the politically disengaged majority of citizens remain disengaged.²⁵ The virtual public sphere of cyberspace has given those who participate in public discussions and debates an additional venue for their civic engagement, and the result is that info rich citizens are made info super rich, while the info poor remain as they were.²⁶

In terms of citizen engagement with partisan and parliamentary politics, the political "blogosphere" (that is, the sum total of political blogs and their interactions) is a useful entry point into examining the impact of

the Internet on the quality of democracy. Political blogs would seem to be an ideal venue for innovative political discussions that highlight the independent views of citizens. Unlike the mainstream mass media, citizens are freer and more equal in their capacity to participate in the blogosphere. The fact that blogs have become increasingly interactive—with opportunities to leave comments and link to one another—should allow for political dialogue and debate. Moreover, to the extent that visitors get information and ideas from political blogs, they can challenge the mainstream mass media's capacity to define the focus of public debate.

Unfortunately, most analysis suggests the character of the blogosphere is less free, equal, and independent of the mainstream media and political hierarchies than optimists hoped it would be. Tanni Haas' research on American blogs suggests that, in addition to being populated by an unrepresentative slice of primarily male, privileged and politically active citizens, the political blogosphere is dominated by subject matter, information and opinion that reproduces rather than departs from the discourse of mainstream news media: "the primary contribution of politically-oriented weblog writers consists in linking to and commenting on pre-existing, Internet-based mainstream news reporting and commentary."²⁷

There are hundreds of active Canadian political bloggers. But, like the mainstream media, there is a clear hierarchy that allows a select group of influential bloggers to set the agenda for most others. Furthermore, many of the top bloggers are either journalists employed by major news organizations, political professionals with ties to the party leaders, or long-term political activists with deep roots in partisan politics. Moreover, a recent study of the Canadian political blogosphere examined the blogrolls that are used to recommend other blogs to readers and mapped the hyperlinks that connect blogs to one another. The study's authors concluded that Canadian political bloggers exist in highly partisan deliberative enclaves. Rather than facilitating an open exchange of ideas and encouraging useful disagreement and debate on issues of the day, "the Web is overdetermined as a 'friendly link' economy."²⁸ While often interesting, political weblogs tend to contribute to the thickening of preexisting relationships and affinities rather than generating new ideas or fostering democratic deliberation. Political blogs play a useful role in that they inform and engage readers. But, their impact on deepening democracy is limited.

Conclusion

It would be wrong to deny that the Internet and social media have had a significant impact on the conduct of election campaigns, the work of parliamentarians, or the ways in which voters engage

with politics. There is, however, good reason to be cautious about overstating the extent of that impact and, even more importantly, assuming that new communications technologies are making politics more interactive, engaging and democratic. The initial enthusiasm of the cyber-optimists was, in many ways, misplaced. Election campaigns do not engage voters in particularly interactive and responsive ways, the rush to embrace Twitter has had a greater impact on message broadcasting and the traditional news media than it has on citizens, and the political blogosphere has transformed the world of those who are already politically engaged more than it has drawn citizens into politics or expose them to new information and viewpoints. Moreover, looking to the future, the most significant changes on horizon have to do with voter profiling and narrowcasting of targeted messages—a development that may actually be somewhat concerning from a democratic perspective. There is, in other words, good reason to remain cautious and skeptical in our assessment of the impact of new social media and communications technologies on Canadian politics.

Notes

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