

DEMOCRACY, TECHNOLOGY, AND COMMUNICATION IN CANADA

The 2000 Canadian general election, understood at the time to be the country's first "Internet election," also featured the lowest voter turnout in the history of these contests at the federal level. Just 61 percent of registered voters turned out to cast ballots – when measured against the entire voting-age population, this figure drops to 55 percent (Johnston 2001, 13). Significantly, these numbers are less a blip than the continuation of a trend that has seen voter turnout in Canada drop precipitously and consistently from 75 percent of registered voters in the 1988 election to 71 percent in 1993, to 67 percent in 1997, and finally to the millennial level of 61 percent. This downward trajectory in this most basic form of political participation has occurred during the same period of time that formidable new information and communication technologies have come to occupy the Canadian political landscape and fairly saturate the Canadian political imagination. In its 1999 speech from the throne, the government of Canada articulated its goal "to be known around the world as the government most connected to its citizens" (Canada 1999); two years later it declared that it had "helped to make Canada one of the most connected countries in the world" (Canada 2001). This was no idle boast, as Canada does indeed rank highly among industrialized

nations on most measures of Internet connectivity. It is also the case that, as political scientist Richard Johnston (2000, 13) has observed, recent electoral history “puts Canada near the bottom of the industrialized world turnout league tables ... No other G7 country besides the US has turnout as low as Canada’s.”

Admittedly, voter turnout is neither the only nor, arguably, even the best measure of the health of a democracy, and many factors combine to determine its level at any given time. The suggestion here is certainly not that the explosive growth of new information and communication technologies directly correlates with the decline in voter turnout in recent Canadian elections. That being said, the fact of their coincidence is provocative. One of our deepest liberal democratic intuitions is that generalized advance in our ability to gather and share information, and to communicate with one another, invigorates democratic participation. This intuition has received forceful expression in relation to the computerized and networked information and communication technologies (ICTs) that mediate an increasing array of social, political, and economic activity in Canada. Information and communication, we believe, are foundational to democracy, and therefore technologies that facilitate these contribute positively to democracy’s achievement and enhancement. How could a technology such as the Internet, which provides widespread instant access to increasing volumes of politically relevant information, and which enables direct, undistorted communication among citizens (and rulers) be anything other than complementary to informed, democratic deliberation and self-government?

The coincidence of the rise of the Internet and a historic decline in voter turnout does not invalidate the hypothesis that ICTs will enhance democracy in Canada. It does, however, raise the possibility that recent technological advances in information and communication capacity are not unambiguously or automatically beneficial to Canadian democracy, nor capable of overcoming other factors that may contribute to its current condition. Indeed, one of the nasty little facts of the coincident growth of mass democracy and mass media in the twenty-first century is that despite a dramatic trajectory of tech-

nological expansion in information and communication capacity, democratic participation has not improved significantly in quantitative or qualitative terms. As Bruce Bimber has written, documenting the absence of statistical evidence linking Internet use to increased political engagement (in its various forms) in the United States:

Opportunities to become better informed have apparently expanded historically, as the informational context of politics has grown richer and become better endowed with media and ready access to political communication. Yet none of the major developments in communication in the twentieth century produced any aggregate gain in citizen participation. Neither telephones, radio, nor television exerted a net positive effect on participation, despite the fact that they apparently reduced information costs and improved citizens' access to information (Bimber 2001, 57).

While we must be sensitive to the technical attributes that distinguish new from previous mass media, we must also acknowledge the ways in which they may be the same. Similarly, we must be as open to the possibility that politics mediated by new technologies will aggravate the disconnection between information/communication and democratic engagement as we are to our intuition that they will mediate a democratic renaissance.

This suggests that the relationship between ICTs and Canadian democracy is more of a problem to be explored than a foregone conclusion. It is a problem that exists at a very basic philosophical level, a problem that has manifested itself historically in Canada, and a problem that surfaces in particular ways in the contemporary context of new ICTs. For many reasons that will become evident through the course of this investigation, the problem of democracy, technology, and communication crystallizes broader dynamics and questions of democratic citizenship, identity, power, and the public good. In this sense, democratic questions about technology and communication are something of a crucible, especially in the Canadian context.

This exploration of the relationship between ICTs and democracy in Canada will be framed by the three criteria set out for the Canadian Democratic Audit: public participation, inclusiveness, and responsiveness. Public participation is the sine qua non of democratic politics and government. Though participation can take many forms and be enacted in a variety of venues, the degree to which citizens take part in various processes of political expression, decision making, and governance is an indispensable measure of democratic legitimacy. Participation is an important concept for assessing the politics of ICTs in several respects. Have political processes surrounding the development and regulation of these technologies been participatory or not? Do ICTs provide means for improving or expanding political participation in Canada? And do ICTs enhance, or undermine, the socioeconomic equality that supports effective political participation?

Inclusiveness is the second Audit criterion, and it too is related to the core democratic principle of equality. Exclusivity, or privilege, is anathema to a democracy, wherein political participation must be at least available to, and at best undertaken by, as many citizens as possible without prejudice. A political order that formally or practically excludes significant segments of its citizenry from effective participation will be far less democratic than one that provides for inclusion of as many people as possible in the political process. This criterion is especially important in Canada, whose population exhibits multiple diversities that often correspond to systemic forms of disadvantage and exclusion. Here again, special questions are raised about ICTs. Has decision making surrounding their development and regulation included the diversity of views and interests of relevant constituencies in Canada? Do ICTs provide a means of effectively including a greater diversity of Canadians in political life? And have these technologies contributed to, or undermined, the socioeconomic basis of inclusion and political equality in Canada?

The third Audit criterion is responsiveness. It measures the degree to which various elements of the political system actually address, and are affected by, the needs, priorities, and preferences expressed

by citizens in their participatory activities. In democratic polities, a diverse range of citizens participate not simply to lend the appearance of legitimacy to processes that may not *really* take their views into account; they participate so that political outcomes will reflect, at least to some degree, their duly expressed interests. In representative systems such as Canada's, the responsiveness of political agencies and institutions is a crucial measure of the democratic acceptability of a given regime. As with the criteria of participation and inclusiveness, ICTs have a special bearing on the question of responsiveness, and vice-versa. Has the development of ICT policy in Canada been sufficiently responsive to the diversity of interests at stake in it? Has the relationship between ICTs and globalization enhanced or diminished the capacity of Canadian governments to be responsive to their citizens? And has the use of ICTs by a variety of political actors made Canadian political institutions more responsive to public participation?

Taken together, the three criteria of participation, inclusiveness, and responsiveness focus the investigation that follows on three central questions:

- ✦ To what extent has the development of digital communication technology in Canada been subjected to democratic political judgment and control?
- ✦ What effect is the increasing mediation of political communication by digital technologies having on the practices of democratic politics in Canada?
- ✦ How do digital technologies affect the distribution of power in Canadian society?

These questions derive from an understanding that communication technology occupies a complex position in the universe of Canadian democracy. Communication and its mediating technologies are at once an object and an instrument of democratic practice in Canada. They also affect the material context in which democratic politics and citizenship take place. To concentrate on one of these questions to the

exclusion of the others would be to tell only part of the story. I will return to consider the rationale that supports these questions later in this chapter. At this point, some added reflection is in order on the conception of democracy driving this investigation.

Democracy

Politics admits of many definitions, practices, and expressions. Nevertheless, at its core, politics involves collective judgment by citizens regarding common goods, and the engagement of authoritative collective action toward the realization of those goods. Insofar as it reflects this combination of judgment and action, the ultimate practice of politics is often specified as governing or government. (These terms are derived from the ancient Greek *kubernetes*, or “steersman,” since to steer, one must form a judgment as to where the ship should go and take action to guide it there.) Politics, then, is not about strictly individual determinations of right and wrong conduct in personal affairs (the province of ethics), nor does it comprise simply those individual calculations of purely private self-interest that tend to guide economic behaviour in markets. Despite the many forms its constituent practices can take, genuine politics always has a public, collective character, it always involves judgment and action, and it always pursues goods identified as common.

Democracy is a particular manner of constituting the various practices of judgment and action that together make up politics. That is to say, democracy is a form of self-government. It casts the net of citizenship broadly, extending rights to participate in collective judgment (whether direct, delegated, or representative) on the basis of principles of equality, and deriving authority for sovereign acts from majoritarian consent. Within those parameters, existing democratic practices take many institutional and noninstitutional forms, which vary in the quality and degree of participation, deliberation, represen-

tation, inclusiveness, and legitimacy they embody. What unites these various practices as democratic is that each subjects matters pertaining to the common welfare to some manner of political judgment by citizens regarded as equals, and each maintains a discernible link between these judgments and the authoritative actions of government.

The stipulations set out above certainly allow for minimalist constructions of liberal democracy. For example, democracy can mean little more than periodic elections in which citizens who are formally equal express their private preferences by voting: a registration of consent that subsequently legitimizes the actions of a government. On its better days, however, democracy typically involves somewhat more. Even in representative democracies in which the main political activity for most citizens is voting in periodic elections, citizenship ought to exist as much between elections as it does during them, in the ongoing ability of people to contribute to common decision making in a meaningful manner. The word “meaningful” here means that, in a democracy, civic participation must be obviously connected to outcomes and it must be more than merely symbolic. Furthermore, even in liberal democracies that emphasize opportunity as the pivot upon which equality turns, there ought to be some recognition that not all people are equally *able* to take advantage of the citizenship opportunities afforded by their constitution. Thus, a robust democracy will seek out ways to equalize participatory ability so that it matches opportunity. Finally, while it is certainly possible for a democracy to serve as nothing more than a means of registering and aggregating private self-interest, a more substantial democracy will make the effort to orient its politics around civic deliberation on the common good, slippery though it may be. To adopt the language of one of democracy’s great thinkers, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, democracy does not reside primarily in the combination of individual particular wills into the will-of-all, but rather in public-spirited generation of the general will.

Together, these stipulations give added substance to the criteria of participation, inclusiveness, and responsiveness used throughout this

book. They construct an understanding of democracy that is neither radical nor foreign to the Canadian experience. Canadians understand their society to be democratic, and by that I think we can assume they mean more than that they get to vote occasionally. They probably mean that theirs is a political system in which *inclusiveness*, *public participation*, and *responsiveness* – the benchmarks of the Canadian Democratic Audit – are legitimate demands that citizens can reasonably expect will be met. This does not mean that Canadian democracy is perfectly or even sufficiently inclusive, participatory, and responsive. Rather, Canada is a democracy to the extent that serious deficits of inclusiveness, participation, and responsiveness are widely understood by its citizens to be illegitimate and intolerable. Far from containing a utopian standard that prejudicially disqualifies Canada as a democracy, this formulation arguably captures the kind of democracy Canada and Canadians imagine themselves as striving to be. The underlying question of this study is whether and to what extent our current encounter with ICTs contributes to meeting this goal.

These technologies, however, are not the only factor involved in securing a democratic political order on the terms outlined above. Indeed, the impact of ICTs on democracy can really be understood only in light of, or in relation to, a number of other conditions necessary to sustain a democracy. As I will discuss in further detail in Chapter 5, these conditions include not just a democratic constitution that distributes effective political power equally, but also an economy in which the material resources crucial to citizenship are distributed relatively equally, a culture in which the habits of citizenship are the norm rather than the exception, and a public sphere in which politics are conspicuous by their presence, rather than by their absence. Inclusive, participatory, responsive democracies require all of these conditions, whether or not technology is part of the picture. As I will argue in Chapter 5, however, when technology *is* part of the picture it has a significant impact upon the possibility of these conditions being met, and this has been especially true of ICTs in the contemporary period.

Technology

Canada is not only a democratic society. It is also an unambiguously technological society. Since at least the Second World War, Canada's commitment to democratic politics has been matched by a resolute commitment to the development of technology as a means to secure its material economic well-being. Statements from the government of Canada regarding "the challenge and the urgency" of constructing the "Information Highway" are but the latest manifestation of this enduring technological conviction (Industry Canada 1996, 3). But Canada's democratic convictions may be at odds with its technological commitments on a fundamental level, as a technological society may not be able to either support or withstand the sort of decision making and action described above as democratic, and still remain a technological society.

The tension between technology and democracy has three aspects. The first is that the complexity of technological issues can undermine the possibility of either intensive or extensive democratic consideration. Democracies do not demand expertise of their citizens as a condition of participation, but technological complexity can make demands that exceed the capacities of most citizens, thus reducing the efficacy of citizenship.

Second, even if the majority of citizens had the capacity to engage with complicated technological issues, their deliberations would most certainly undermine the conditions in which technology develops and is optimized. Democratic decision making tends to be slow, ponderous, risk averse, prone to reversals, lacking in clarity, easily seduced by superficial imaginings, and often irrational: qualities inimical to technological enterprise. It might not be to the material advantage of a technological society to subject technical determinations to genuine democratic consideration on a routine basis.

Third, modern technology tends to be universal rather than local, a quality that has been raised to high relief by new ICTs and their relationship to the phenomenon known as globalization. Technologies,

especially those whose operation transcends national boundaries, challenge the applicability and enforceability of democratic political decisions and actions organized at the national level. Canadians have experienced this problem for a long time, especially in regard to communication technologies and policies: technologies that tend to transcend constraints of territorial space as a matter of their very design versus policies that are confined in their application to the territory over which the Canadian state is sovereign. Put simply, the democratic political authority of the Canadian state over broadcasting stops at the country's southern border, but radio signals originating from south of that border know no such constraint. Similarly, with regard to a technology such as the Internet, it could be argued that the wishes of the Canadian state – democratically derived or otherwise – are irrelevant to the terms under which this technology will be developed as a global phenomenon, and that Canada's only choice is whether or not it wishes to be part of the world connected by this technology. In this case, for a society committed to technological development as a condition of its material progress, the choice is self-evident.

This suggests that a society that imagines itself as democratic has to be willing to pay the price of restraint, regression, and inefficiency in technological matters. It also raises the possibility that a society devoted to technological progress as a condition of its material prosperity may not be able to maintain a commitment to democracy that is anything more than rhetorical when it comes to technological matters. Technology recommends technocracy – rule by experts – over democracy. And technological matters are regularly given over specifically to experts intimate with the imperatives of science, management, and the market, regimes whose ends and practices are rarely accused of being particularly democratic and which typically shield technological issues from potentially obtrusive democratic consideration. Precisely this tendency prompted Ursula Franklin (1999, 121) to observe, radically, that in Canada “we now have nothing but a bunch of managers who run the country to make it safe for technology.” There seems to be something deeply depoliticizing and fundamentally undemocratic about technology.

But that is not the whole story. Although democratic political deliberation can sometimes slow down technological innovation, technology is also irreducibly political. Far from being mere instruments or tools that accomplish their direct ends and nothing else, technologies also condition priorities, define possibilities, set limits on practices, constitute infrastructures and environments, and mediate relationships between individuals and between people and the natural world. As the American political theorist Langdon Winner (1995, 67) has written, when it comes to technology “the central issues concern how the members of society manage their common affairs and seek the common good. Because technological things so often become central features in widely shared arrangements and conditions of life in contemporary society, there is an urgent need to think of them in a political light.” In a similar vein, Franklin (1999, 120) characterizes questions concerning technology specifically as questions of “governance.” For example, grain elevators are not simply instruments for handling grain. They also organize communities economically and spatially, and provide the material infrastructure for an entire way of living on the Canadian prairies. Their “progressive” replacement by high-throughput grain terminals is, consequently, radically restructuring communities and ways of living that grew up around the previous technology. The decision to replace the old elevators with the new terminals did not clearly emerge from an inclusive democratic political process that genuinely engaged and responded to the participation of those citizens whose lives are most affected by this technological change. Nevertheless, a technological moment such as this cannot be said to be without politics simply because its political aspect has been obscured by a perceived technological imperative. Technologies, in this sense, have a legislative character, insofar as they enable or encourage certain common practices and prohibit or discourage others. Technologies represent decisions about how we will and will not live together. Therefore no satisfactory meaning of the word “political” can exclude technologies and their effects.

Thus, technologies are political because they constitute widely shared social arrangements that frame a broad range of human

social, political, and economic priorities and practices, and because they are artifacts in which power is embedded and through which power is exercised. Consequently, moments of technological change especially have the potential to be moments of intense democratic political contest, moments of deliberation over the character and needs of the common interest relative to the technology in question. These moments can also be sacrificed to the logic of depoliticization that is embedded in the technological spirit, which is often called forth by those who stand to benefit from insulating issues of technology from democratic political scrutiny. The history of the deployment of technologies of mass communication in Canada, and policy making surrounding this deployment, is replete with examples of this dynamic.

The political questions surrounding communication technology and policy in Canada have remained relatively consistent since at least the advent of the telegraph. They include questions about the following:

- ✦ the role of the state relative to the market in the distribution of communication resources
- ✦ the priority of either national-cultural or commercial-industrial objectives, and the tension between them
- ✦ the democratic imperative to ensure universal access to communication services throughout the country and the means to achieve it
- ✦ the liberal imperative of free expression in communication
- ✦ the structure of ownership and regulation in Canadian communication industries, including the possibility of state ownership
- ✦ the need to stimulate and secure domestic production and consumption of cultural content
- ✦ the role of public consultation in communication policy making
- ✦ the importance of separating control over carriage infrastructure (i.e., the pipes) from control over content (i.e., what goes through the pipes).

What is interesting about these enduring questions of Canadian communication policy historically is that, just as they begin to reach a point of settlement in relation to one communication medium, a technological change reopens them. Just when the politics surrounding the telegraph, for example, appeared to subside into normalization, the advent of the telephone repoliticized all the same old questions. It is also interesting to note the historical regularity with which technologically determinist arguments and rhetoric surface during times of technological change in communication – arguments and rhetoric often aimed at obscuring and depoliticizing the deeply political and highly contingent character of policy in this area. This strategy extrapolates from particular characteristics of the technology to specific policy choices that are presented as necessary outgrowths of the technology itself and, therefore, non-negotiable. This tactic is most often employed by those interests that have a great deal to gain in a particular configuration of technological change and a great deal to lose in political, and especially democratic, consideration of possible options.

A stark example is the “systems integrity” arguments used by telephone companies in the early and middle decades of the twentieth century to justify structuring the telephone industry in Canada as a natural monopoly. They argued that the technology involved in the successful construction and maintenance of a high-quality telephony system simply required that the system be controlled from end to end by a single entity, and ruled out other options from political consideration. The degree to which this technologically determinist argument became policy orthodoxy is suggested in *Instant world*, the 1971 report of a federal task force on telecommunications, which conceded that telephone companies had presented “powerful technical arguments for complete control of the public networks, including terminal devices and attached equipment. To maintain a high quality of service to all users, they must be able to guard against the technical pollution of the network from other signal sources” (DOC 1971, 156).

As we will see, there is no shortage of contemporary claims regarding the necessary connection between various technical aspects of

new digital information and communication technologies and particular policy outcomes that are presented as non-negotiable. Interestingly, many of these – such as the suggestion that the technical properties of digital communication technologies demand competition and minimal regulation if they are to develop to their fullest potential in Canada – contradict the substance of earlier technologically determinist arguments such as those entailed in the “systems integrity/natural monopoly” thesis. This would seem to indicate that such arguments at times of technological change are themselves deeply strategic and political, and that the extent to which they are accepted by policy makers reflects the distribution of political power in Canada more than it does any inherent technological necessity. Curiously, the surfacing of technologically determinist rhetoric in moments of technological change can be read as evidence of the essentially political character of those moments.

This is not to say that technologies do not constrain and condition political options. A strong tradition in the philosophy of technology – to which Canadians such as George Grant (1998) have made enduring contributions – asserts that something in the essence of technology prescribes a particular way of being in the world, a particular way of relating to our environment and to those with whom we share it, to the exclusion of other ways. In a society where technology is ubiquitous and technological progress is an overwhelming collective social project, certain ways of living recommend themselves, persuasively, at the expense of others. It is to this quality that Canadian political economist and theorist of communication Harold Innis (1995, xxvii) referred when he suggested that communication technologies do more than enable us to communicate, and emphasized “the importance of communication in determining ‘things to which we attend.’” Innis’s concern was primarily with how *all* communication technologies reorient the human experience of space and time, and consequently reorganize human priorities and practices. Different communication technologies accomplish this in different ways, but the fact that each of them alters our natural experience of space and time can be said to belong to

their essence as technologies. A great deal distinguishes a telephone from an automobile and both of these from a pile-driver; indeed, among communication technologies alone, a great deal distinguishes a telephone from a radio and both of these from the Internet. Still, despite these distinctions, all of these devices share a quality as technologies, a quality that makes the world we inhabit a technological one that is very different than a nontechnological world might be (assuming that we can conceive of such a thing). One need only try to imagine what life would be like in a world *without* technology to appreciate that there is something about technology in general that, despite the specificities of particular technological instruments, shapes our world, our practices, and our attention.

This observation returns us to the tension between technology and politics in general, and between technology and democratic politics in particular. On the one hand I have argued that technologies, and moments of technological change, are deeply political and open to contestation. On the other hand, I have suggested that technology in general, and specific technologies in particular, have essential characteristics that act to condition and limit available political options. Can both of these claims be true? Part of the answer lies in recognizing that a number of elements combine to produce any technological outcome or effect, and that varying degrees of political intervention are possible relative to these elements. Certainly, that which belongs to the essence of technology does not readily admit of political intervention, democratic or otherwise. But the practical outcome of a specific technology in the world is not wholly determined by its essence as a technology. A host of other factors – including design, situation, and use – also contribute to specific technological outcomes, and these typically exhibit considerable contingency, potentially leaving room for political determination.

Design refers to the technical configuration and orientation of a device's operation and application. Technological instruments are designed to do certain things in certain ways, and design choices can have serious political consequences. Referring specifically to the

evolving design of the Internet and related technologies, American legal scholar Lawrence Lessig (1999, x, 3) has written that code builds “architectures of control” and so “code is law.” In this sense, the effects of design are always political, and so too are the choices that precede design decisions, whether those privileged to make them recognize their political character or not.

Appreciation of the politics inherent in technological design immediately raises the question of democracy: if decisions about the design of technologies are political, then, in a democratic society, should they not be subjected to democratic deliberation? The answer is yes, but as Andrew Feenberg relates in the following passage, democratic participation at the fundamental level of design is far from the norm in modern technological societies:

Technology is power in modern societies, a greater power in many domains than the political system itself. The masters of technical systems, corporate and military leaders, physicians and engineers, have far more control over patterns of urban growth, the design of dwellings and transportation systems, the selection of innovations, our experience as employees, patients and consumers, than all the electoral institutions of our society put together. But, if this is true, technology should be considered as a new kind of legislation, not so very different from other public decisions. The technical codes that shape our lives reflect particular social interests to which we have delegated the power to decide where and how we live, what kinds of food we eat, how we communicate, are entertained, healed and so on ... But if technology is so powerful, why don't we apply the same democratic standards to it we apply to other political institutions? By those standards, the design process as it now exists is clearly illegitimate (Feenberg 1999, 131).

The democratic imperative attached to matters of technological design, and the failure of modern technological societies to observe

that imperative, could not be expressed with greater force or clarity. Democratic intervention in technological design typically conjures images of excessive bureaucracy, inefficiency, and irrationality, each of which is presented as anathema to effective design and technological innovation. Democratic engagement with issues of technological design does not necessarily have to embody these negative qualities. Yet such charges have been used quite effectively to exclude citizens from participation in technological decision making, other than as isolated consumers choosing to buy or sell long after crucial design decisions have already been made. Canada's experience with the development of digital ICTs has been no exception in this regard. Questions of design have been readily referred to the expertise of scientists, engineers, and corporate executives, and evidence of democratic participation, inclusiveness, and responsiveness is conspicuous by its absence. Were the democratic audit of new ICTs in Canada confined to the matter of their design, its findings would be brief and unequivocally damning.

That being said, technological outcomes are not wholly determined by design. All technological instruments and practices are situated in complex social, political, and economic environments that strongly condition their possible elaborations in human practice. Whether the outcome of our encounter with ICTs is substantially democratic or not will depend to a great degree upon its social, political, and economic context. Of course, a great deal of contingency is at play in this respect. A democratic audit of these technologies and their prospects has to take these material conditions and contingencies into account, so much of the analysis that follows will be devoted in one way or another to this task. Subsequent chapters will, for example, pay close attention to the policy framework and economic conditions under which these technologies have been developed in the Canadian context, in an attempt to locate evidence of democratic success or failure.

Finally, a substantial portion of any technological outcome is constructed socially through the actual everyday uses to which institutions and people put a given technological device. The essence of

technology challenges, but does not negate, human freedom; technological design favours, but does not determine, potential applications; and material situation conditions, but does not enforce absolutely, possible elaborations. Even George Grant (1986, 21), who clearly prioritizes the essential elements of technology, concedes that “the computer does not impose upon us the ways in which it will be used.” Technological outcomes are linked crucially to use, and use admits a significant range of possibilities, many of which were not contemplated by design and some of which involve “democratic rationalizations” of technologies that were not intended for democratic use, or which are situated in conditions that are not otherwise democratic (Feenberg 1999, 12). Consequently, a democratic audit of new ICTs must also attend to the manner in which these instruments are actually used by political actors and institutions in the Canadian context, in order to determine whether these uses either reflect or encourage a democratic practice that is more, or less, participatory, responsive, and inclusive.

Communication and Democracy in Canada

In specifying the distinctly political nature of human beings, Aristotle singled out our capacity to communicate. A human being, he argued, “is by nature a political animal” precisely because human beings are unique in their capacity to communicate with each other about common issues “of good and evil, the just and the unjust” (Aristotle 1995, 1253a2-7). Politics, especially democratic politics, is impossible without communication. Deliberating citizens share information and communicate their opinions and reasons with one another; citizens communicate with elected and appointed representatives who, in turn, communicate with constituents; governing authorities, whether administrative or legislative, solicit information from subjects and communicate with them in various forms of service and command.

In mass societies, the bulk of significant political communication is mediated by technology. It is not just that democratic politics cannot exist without communication: contemporary democracies such as Canada could not function without communication technologies. They play an indispensable role in advanced political systems analogous to the role of transportation technologies such as railroads, highways, and airplanes in advanced economies. For this reason, the stakes in issues surrounding these technologies are very high. We all know how intense the politics of roads and railways can be, and indeed have been in Canadian history, a fact that attests to the centrality of these technologies to economic life. The centrality of ICTs to democratic political life has generated a similar history of intensive political contestation in Canada. To raise but one example, the history of state broadcasting in Canada cannot be understood outside its origins in an epic political confrontation between the Canadian Radio League and the Canadian Association of Broadcasters, one result of which was the firm establishment of mass communication as a public interest issue in Canada (Raboy 1990, 17-47). The collective amnesia that typically accompanies moments of technological change notwithstanding, contemporary debates surrounding the development and character of new ICTs are best understood as a continuation of this history of politicization.

As suggested earlier in this chapter, ICTs have a complex relationship with democratic politics in Canada. In the first place, these technologies serve as a crucial infrastructure for an increasing array of political activities in Canada. This fact requires that an audit of the democratic character of this new environment of political communication attend to the question of whether these technologies are, or are likely to be, successful in mediating democratic politics according to some of the standards set out in the foregoing discussion. That is to say, we must investigate *the effect that increasing mediation of political communication by digital technologies is having on the practices of democratic politics in Canada*, including the practices of government, political parties, and citizens.

Second, these technologies also play an increasingly central role in the social, political, and economic lives of Canadians – our shared arrangements for living together – even for those who opt out of using them routinely. In one way or another, we all live in the world as it is built by and around new ICTs. Therefore we must inquire into *the manner in which these technologies affect the distribution of power in Canada*. We must also understand the elaboration of these technologies as itself a public issue of the highest significance, and recognize that a society that fails to subject this matter to adequate democratic consideration undermines its own claims to being a democracy. As such, we must also inquire into *the extent to which the rapid and massive development of digital information and communication technology in Canada has been subjected to democratic judgment and control*. Together, these inquiries yield a provisional conclusion as to the inclusive, participatory, and responsive nature of this aspect of contemporary Canadian democracy.

It is tempting to begin this investigation with the obvious question of how Canadian citizens and institutions are using ICTs in their political activities. The meaning and significance of these activities, however, can be understood only in the context of how ICTs have been treated as an object of citizenship, and the role they have played in restructuring the political possibilities of the Canadian state. So discussion of the political uses of ICTs will be deferred until Chapter 4. Chapter 2 assesses the democratic character of recent policy making surrounding new information and communication technologies in Canada. The aim here is to assess the participatory, inclusive, and responsive qualities of policy making in this field. Chapter 3 examines the relationship between new ICTs and national culture and sovereignty in Canada. Issues of technology, culture, international capital, and national sovereignty walk hand in hand through the history of communication policy making, scholarship, and activism in Canada. These issues have gained prominence once again in light of the intimate relationship between digital communication technology and globalization. The question addressed in this chapter is whether these

dynamics bode well, or ill, for the prospect of an inclusive, participatory, and responsive Canadian democracy.

This provides important context for Chapter 4, which examines the uses to which ICTs have been put by democratic actors in Canada, with specific focus on government, political parties, advocacy groups and social movements, and citizens. Here the intent is to gauge whether digital mediation enhances or undermines the practice of democratic citizenship, according to the criteria of participation, inclusiveness, and responsiveness. Under the heading “Digital Divides,” Chapter 5 also provides context for the prospects of democratic uses of ICTs, by examining the role these technologies have played in establishing the material setting in which democratic citizenship might be practised. Specific attention will be paid here to the relationship between ICTs and the distribution of power in Canada, and to the possibility of the latter’s democratization. This chapter examines the digital divide in Canada, the political economy of ICTs, and the role of these technologies in the democratic public sphere. Chapter 6 offers some concluding reflections on the central themes of this portion of the Canadian Democratic Audit.