

Political Communication in Canada.....

Meet the Press and Tweet the Rest

..... Edited by
Alex Marland, Thierry Giasson,
and Tamara A. Small



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Communication, Strategy, and Politics

THIERRY GIASSON AND ALEX MARLAND, SERIES EDITORS

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..... Preface

This book is a follow-up, of sorts, to *Political Marketing in Canada* (Marland, Giasson, and Lees-Marshment 2012), which argued that the main reason that Canadian political elites use market intelligence such as opinion polling and focus group data is to inform their communication decisions. In *Political Communication in Canada*, we explore ways that changes in communication technology and media behaviour are affecting Canadian politics. This includes the communication between political parties, politicians, public servants, interest groups, the media, and Canadian citizens in the digital age.

In the preface to *Political Marketing in Canada*, Conservative Party marketer Patrick Muttart is noted as emphasizing that political parties manage earned media, paid media, direct voter contact, local matters, and social media simultaneously during an election campaign. This requires the use of centralizing tools. The Conservatives use their Constituency Information Management System (CIMS) computer software to organize information about electors, while within the Government of Canada they introduced the Message Event Proposal (MEP) to coordinate thematic messaging. As the news cycle speeds up, and as the line between an election campaign and inter-election period blurs, this media management is now constant. Brad Lavigne, who was the New Democratic Party's director of strategic communications during Jack Layton's tenure and the NDP campaign director in 2011, advises that communication management has taken on greater importance in politics for the following reasons:

- 1 An increasingly persuadable electorate: as voters become less entrenched in traditional voter behaviour (based on family, geography, religious, or class), Lavigne says, they are increasingly open to switching their party preference and therefore susceptible to political communication;

- 2 The constant campaign: the accelerated number of elections in short succession (four federal elections between 2004 and 2011), along with the introduction of the “permanent campaign” has forced political parties to be constantly engaged, allowing for expertise and new tools to develop; and,
- 3 Platform proliferation: The explosion of media platforms with which political parties can get their message out, including twenty-four-hour Canadian cable news channels, all-news radio, online news websites, and social media, has created a seemingly limitless marketplace for political parties to communicate with an ever-increasing persuadable audience (Lavigne 2013).

The strategic approach of such experienced practitioners is rooted in truisms of political science and of political communication. As partisanship declines the number of floating voters is increasing; the proximity of an election moves parties into campaign mode; and persuasive messaging is constantly communicated through a multitude of media. What this means for Canadian democracy is that campaigners’ intensifying attitude to political communication is persisting after the election and into governance. Data are being used to inform the targeting of segments of floating voters. Narrow messages reach select citizens via specialized media. The mediation function of political journalists is bypassed, and people who support other parties are left out. A subtext is that despite the engagement opportunities of Web 2.0, the priority remains on getting the party line out. Hence the subtitle of this book, *Meet the Press and Tweet the Rest* – though even personal interactions between politicians and the press are in flux and are increasingly mediated by digital media. To date, Canada’s major parties have decided that the benefits of interactive political dialogue are not worth the risk of losing control of the message.

We believe that this changing communications environment merits study. This book was organized by two of the editors of *Political Marketing in Canada* and one of the chapter authors. It brings together a variety of scholars, including some who had previously researched political marketing and others whose area of expertise is political communication. A project such as this represents a collective effort. It was a pleasure to work with authors who were so responsive to feedback, who delivered material within stated timelines, and who were themselves good communicators. The editors would like to thank Memorial University research assistants Lori-Ann Campbell,

Kayla Carroll, Michael Penney, and Matthew Yong, who provided capable and timely copyediting of the draft manuscript. We appreciate the professionalism exhibited by staff at UBC Press, in particular Megan Brand, David Drummond, Valerie Nair, and Judy Phillips. A special thanks to senior editor Emily Andrew who, in addition to providing capable and timely support, has encouraged the development of the Communication, Strategy, and Politics series. We would also like to thank the three anonymous reviewers who, through UBC Press, provided helpful feedback on an earlier draft of the manuscript.

The editors wish to acknowledge financial assistance that has made this book possible. *Political Communication in Canada* has been published with the help of a grant from the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, through the Award to Scholarly Publications Program, using funds provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. A financial award was granted from Memorial University of Newfoundland's Publications Subvention Program, through the Office of Research Services. Finally, the Centre for the Study of Democratic Citizenship provided funding that supported a workshop on political communication that was coordinated by the editors at the 2012 Canadian Political Science Association annual conference, held at the University of Alberta. A number of contributors presented their work there, which featured a discussion panel of political communication scholar David Taras of Mount Royal University and Dimitri Soudas, a former director of communications in Stephen Harper's Prime Minister's Office.

Political Marketing in Canada was well received as a volume that has raised awareness of the growing practice of marketing in Canadian politics. It is our hope that *Political Communication in Canada: Meet the Press and Tweet the Rest* contributes to scholars', students', and practitioners' interest and understanding of the use of communication in the Canadian political realm.

Alex Marland
Lead Editor

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The Triangulation of Canadian Political Communication

..... *Tamara A. Small, Thierry Giasson, and Alex Marland*

“Just a man and his pen.” This is how a *Maclean’s* article described Canada’s prime minister in 2011 (Wherry 2011). Whereas US president Barack Obama fought to keep his BlackBerry when taking office, Prime Minister Stephen Harper has apparently never owned a smartphone. The implication is that in an era of email, texting, and video calling, the most powerful elected official in Canada continues to opt for a pen and paper. This anecdote seems at odds with the personal experience of many Canadians for whom life without access to the Internet, let alone a smartphone, has become unthinkable. Digital technology has infiltrated daily life in so many ways. It has changed personal communication, business and commerce, education, and, as this book will show, Canadian politics.

Although Canadian political communication tends to be a technological laggard compared with the United States, it nevertheless evolves over time. Without technology, politicians are confined to personal communication, such as delivering local speeches and meeting electors on their doorsteps. With technology, politicians can communicate with larger audiences, using rapid transportation and mass communication. As discussed in this book’s predecessor, *Political Marketing in Canada* (Marland, Giasson, and Lees-Marshment 2012) and elsewhere (Flanagan 2007; also Chapter 14 in this book), computer-assisted research enables parties to use data to segment the electorate, to target messages using narrow appeals, and to make market-based decisions about selecting specialized media. In theory, political marketers avail of new technology to respond to public opinion in a manner that enhances democracy because the general public’s concerns are prioritized over those of political elites. But in practice, political elites tend to use opinion data and marketing to inform decisions that prioritize their own interests. Political communication is more straightforward. It is concerned with mediated and unmediated interactions between political elites

and citizens. The digital era has been a transformative period for communication because the Internet has empowered the masses to join a cadre of political and media elites as content creators and as information disseminators. However, like the paper and pen, even in the new media environment, the tried-and-true methods of communicating politically – whether through press conferences, direct mail, television advertising, or even door knocking – still matter. Moreover, regardless of the medium, the prevalence of partisanship can supersede idealistic notions of democratic discourse, much as it did in past centuries.

It is here that *Political Communication in Canada* is positioned: at the intersection of politics operating in a traditional media environment that is adapting to significant technological change. This book explores the range of political communication activities used by Canadian political institutions, the mass media, and citizens. Some chapters focus on the current state of traditional communication activities, including advertising and media management; others explore newer digital technologies, such as blogging and Twitter, as well as strategic considerations such as political branding and personality politics. By looking at political communication in the entirety of its process and from the perspective of a variety of actors, *Political Communication in Canada* fills a current knowledge gap in Canadian scholarly literature. It begins here by providing a conceptual foundation that includes defining political communication, exploring how political communication changes, and summarizing the key research themes.

What Is Political Communication?

The essence of politics is talk or interaction (Denton Jr. 2009, xiii). Regardless of the mode, whether a speech at a political rally, a televised debate between leaders, door-to-door canvassing, a media interview, or a Twitter post by an MP, communication provides a link between those in power and citizens, and among citizens. In all of these cases, political actors are talking about politics with the intention to inform, persuade, promote, and even influence their audience's behaviour.

Broadly defined, political communication can be thought of as the “role of communication in the political process” (Chaffee 1975, 15). It can take place in a variety of forms (formal or informal), in a variety of venues (public and private), and through a variety of mediums (mediated or unmediated content). It includes the production and generation of messages by

political actors, the transmission of political messages through direct and indirect channels, and the reception of political messages. There is a tendency to explore political communication as a process that flows out from political institutions, downward from institutions to citizens (Lilleker 2006). We, however, see it as a triangular process that includes political institutions and actors, the news media, and, importantly, citizens. Every act of political communication produced by parties, interest groups, or the media is geared toward citizens, to inform them, to influence them. It is the interactions between these three groups that matter in political communication. Within politics, communication flows move in many directions: downward from governing authorities to citizens; horizontally between political actors, including news media; and upward from citizens and groups to the political institutions (Norris 2001).

As discussed, the world of political communication is changing as political actors adapt to technological innovations. Scholars have divided the history of political communication into various stages or eras (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999; Farrell and Webb 2000; Norris 2000; Gibson and Römmele 2001). In the first stage, political communication was organized around direct, face-to-face communications such as canvassing, meetings, and rallies. For instance, Prime Minister John A. Macdonald instituted the first “campaign picnic” as a method of political communication in the election of 1878, with the goal of presenting himself as an approachable man rather than a distant politician (Nolan 1981). Nolan notes that, in addition to the campaign picnic, political communication in early campaigns revolved around newspapers and public meetings and then later the campaign train and radio. The ferocity of the partisan press was such that it was not uncommon for Macdonald to strategize about buying newspapers in communities where his party and the government needed to shore up support (Levine 1993).

The advent of broadcast media, notably television, brought forth a new era of political communication. Whereas partisan and commercial interests prevailed in the press, the creation of a public broadcaster, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC)/Société Radio-Canada (SRC), in the 1930s sought to offer mediated balance and a Canadian perspective. Not only did radio and television enlarge the audience, but the emergence of the latter in the 1950s brought new dimensions to politics, including a predisposition toward the visual, the dramatic, and mass appeal (Taras 1990). How well

political actors can perform on and manipulate television has become just as important as what is being said. At the same time, the press has evolved to become less partisan, which has led to political actors competing for media attention across various mediums. As a result of these factors, media management, polling, and professionalization became the innovative tools of the trade for political actors during the era.

There is general agreement that a new political communication age has recently developed. This is characterized by factors such as a multiplicity of channels and technologies, and a 24/7 information environment. Television remains important, but a few main channels no longer dominate. Cable and satellite technology have extended the options available to viewers, which results in audience fragmentation. Digital technologies, including the Internet, mobile technologies and related applications, have furthered this fragmentation. Farrell and Webb (2000) suggest that these new direct modes of communication are increasingly given more weight by political actors. This diversification of both information and audience has implications for political communication. The once powerful news media continues to be a trusted source of information for most Canadians (CMRC 2011c) but is facing increased competition from specialty channels, alternative news outlets, blogs, and social media (e.g., Kozolanka, Mazepa, and Skinner 2012). For political actors, it is easier to communicate and yet more difficult to get political messages out to a diffuse audience within a diversified media environment. Blumler and Kavanagh (1999, 213) describe this new media system as a “hydra-headed beast” with “many mouths ... which are continually clamoring to be fed.” As such, professionalization, political marketing, and targeted communications are necessary tools for getting political messages to citizens more effectively. Moreover, citizens have access to new media in a way they did not in the previous era, and are able to communicate with elites and share information with each other in ways not previously possible.

Although it is clear that political communication has changed, each new era does not completely displace the previous one. Television advertising has not replaced print or radio ads, and the Internet has replaced none of these. Rather, the growing number of new media platforms and specialty outlets increases the variety of contact points with target audiences. The need to integrate various communications is perhaps shown best in the 2012 US presidential election, where despite being crowned the “Internet president,” Barack Obama had a considerable ground campaign in the battleground

states where door-to-door and telephone canvassing were critically important (Gabriel 2012). No country has completely transitioned into a post-television stage, but a new communication context is emerging in many advanced industrial countries, including in Canada. And if politics takes place through communications, it is important that we understand how this new context shapes and changes Canadian politics and democracy.

The Study of Political Communication in Canada

As a field of study, political communication is interdisciplinary, bringing together a diversity of methodological and theoretical approaches. It is as old as politics itself, though academic interest is more recent (Lilleker 2006), especially in Canada. Indeed, political communication studies have evolved significantly in the last two decades, and interest in teaching and researching this field is therefore both constant and growing. In recent years, special panels and workshops have been organized at Canadian communication and political science associations' annual meetings dealing with topics such as news media, Web 2.0, and political communication. Across Canada, research teams are dedicating significant attention to the study of aspects of political communication, such as the Canadian Election Study, the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada, the Montreal-based Centre for the Study of Democratic Citizenship, the Groupe de recherche en communication politique (Université Laval), the Infoscape Research Lab (Ryerson University), the Canadian Media Research Consortium (University of British Columbia), and the Canada Research Chair in Electoral Studies (Université de Montréal).

The bulk of Canadian political communication research finds its roots in liberal democratic theory. As a reflection of the scholarly and public interest in political communication, Canadian scholars have been publishing numerous edited collections (e.g., Romanow et al. 1999; A.-M. Gingras 2003; Taras, Pannekoek, and Bakardjieva 2007; Sampert and Trimble 2010; Kozolanka, Mazepa, and Skinner 2012) and monographs (e.g., Nesbitt-Larking 2001; Taras 2001; Soroka 2002; Miljan and Cooper 2003; Gidengil et al. 2004; A.-M. Gingras 2009; Fleras 2011; Taras and Waddell 2012a) dealing with the association of politics, media coverage, and citizenship in Canada. These scholars tend to look at the instrumentalization of communication for electoral purposes, the functions of news media in Canadian democracy, the rational use of political information by voters, and the

impact of political communication messages on attitude formation or levels of political participation.

This book continues in the liberal democratic tradition, though many scholars, including Canadians, look at political communication objects through critical lenses. Within the political economy approach, research explores how the structures of ownership and control of media organization, advertising, and legal regulations shape the production of news (see, for example, Taras 2001; Skinner, Compton, and Gasher 2005; A.-M. Gingras 2009). Elite theorists, for instance, argue that media owners collaborate with the corporate and governing elites in news production in order to maintain class dominance. As we will see in the discussion of the news media, this research explores blind spots in the media toward gender, minorities, inequality, poverty, and labour (Hackett 2005). Other scholars, interested in reflecting on the societal, political, and democratic implications of hegemonic discourses, myths, or representations, look at the transformations in communication activities by parties, citizens, and organizations through culturalist theories. Inspired by cultural studies and French political sociology, they study how political communication practices and technologies convey and reinforce social norms and order as ideological tools from dominant political structures (see, for example, Howard 2006; Proulx and Kwok Choon 2011; Proulx 2012). These important reflections highlight how communication activities and technologies can be used by actors to limit democratic practices, such as voting or accessing information, and how they attenuate the private sphere but also the way civil society can harness political communication for resistance purposes to discrimination or alienation.

With a few notable exceptions (Gidengil et al. 2004; Taras, Pannekoek, and Bakardjieva 2007; Taras and Waddell 2012a), published works in Canada have mostly looked at the intersection of partisan politics and traditional media coverage, often in an electoral context. Yet political communication as a field of study and practice is broader than this. For instance, there seems to be somewhat more limited empirical research dedicated to the reception aspects in Canada, and less is known about how Internet technologies are used. By providing readers with an analysis of the three constituents of political communication, and by focusing on the ways that recent technological and societal transformations have modified how and by whom it is produced and disseminated, this book represents a body of knowledge that builds on international and Canadian scholarly literature of this evolving era of communicating the political.

The Triangulation of Political Communication: Conceptual Nuances and Distinctions

Before we can analyze political communication in Canada, we need to establish conceptual nuances by exploring the key activities of the three constituents of political institutions, the news media, and Canadian citizens. Although an exhaustive literature review is not possible here, this section highlights some key research themes in these three areas, with special attention paid to contributions by Canadian scholarship.

COMMUNICATION BY CANADIAN POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

Political institutions, including political parties and leaders, the public service, parliamentarians, the judiciary, interest groups, and non-governmental organizations, are important political communicators. Such actors communicate their activities in order to gain legitimacy and compliance of citizens (Lilleker 2006). We suggest that communication by these political actors in Canada has several characteristics.

First and foremost, the communication of Canadian political institutions is marked by the intensity of partisanship. The pressure to conform, the salience of rewards, and the fear of sanctions act as a communications glue. This cohesion (e.g., Chris Kam 2001) ensures that public remarks are consistent with a political organization's official position, which is commonly referred to as being "on message." It is rare for individuals to publicly state a position that is at odds with that of a designated spokesperson; therefore, many partisans avoid interacting with the media until they can repeat what the spokesperson communicated.

This message discipline seems to have reached new heights with the Conservative Party under the leadership of Stephen Harper. As some of the chapters in this book describe, Harper's team has sanctioned reduced interactions with the Canadian Parliamentary Press Gallery in favour of communicating with small media outlets; has restricted MPs' and public servants' media availability; has replaced Liberal red on government websites with Tory blue; and has micromanaged departmental communications through the introduction of Message Event Proposal forms demanded by central agencies (see also Kozolanka 2009, 2012). Such communication centralization ensures message consistency and helps the governing party influence the public agenda as the media environment intensifies and becomes more fractured. However, it raises questions about the nature and extent of democratic discourse in this country.

Second, there are temporal dimensions that affect communication in Canadian politics. Even in a 24/7 media world, the news cycle continues to be organized around the evening television news, though there is increasing pressure to report news as it happens. The amount of media attention paid to politics is related to the parliamentary cycle; for instance, during the budget period there is intense national public interest as compared with the summer months, when the legislature is not in session. The most concentrated period of political communication occurs during an election campaign, when choosing a party and leader to head the national (or provincial) government is at the top of the public agenda. Predictable variations in communication occur during periods of public celebration, mourning, and days of rest, but what tend to be unpredictable are the timing and nature of a crisis. Canada's political communicators attempt to structure their decisions around these ebbs and flows.

Third, regional dimensions result in variations in communications strategies and tactics. Mass communication is obviously an essential political tool in a country with a geography that is as vast as Canada's. But what is communicated from one part of the country may not resonate uniformly within that jurisdiction, let alone across the entire nation. Canadians have different value systems, which often depend on whether they reside in urban, suburban, or rural areas. Most significant are the variances between provinces and regions, which each have their own political culture, institutions, and media systems (e.g., Ornstein, Stevenson, and Williams 1980). In terms of political campaigns, Carty, Cross, and Young (2000) suggest that regionally targeted advertising is a necessity because of the need to maximize finite campaign resources. Parties need to spend money efficiently, which means targeting their communication in clusters of electoral districts where the outcome is in question, and paying less attention to areas where the election result is predictable. Political parties also have a history of communicating different or even conflicting messages in different regions, especially in Quebec (e.g., Neatby 1973), though the rapidity of information flows is curtailing this practice.

Fourth, political communication in Canada operates in a bilingual sphere that is increasingly multilingual. Section 16 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms directs that the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the federal government, including the public service, are required to communicate in both official languages (Canada 2012a). Furthermore, campaign advertising, party documents, and many online materials tend to

be produced in English and French. However, it is the increasing number of allophones – Canadians whose native language is neither English nor French – that is spurring change in how political institutions communicate. According to census data, the proportion of Canadians whose mother tongue is French is comparable to the growing number of allophones, most of whom live in metropolitan areas (Canada 2011). Among those speaking a non-official language, Chinese, including Cantonese and Mandarin, is today by far the most common language, followed by Italian, German, Punjabi, Arabic, Tagalog (Filipino), Portuguese, and Polish, among others, such as mother tongues spoken by Aboriginal peoples. Political communicators are increasingly reaching out to these citizens in their own language and via specialty media outlets. This includes the federal government, for section 27 of the Charter provides for “the preservation and enhancement of the multicultural heritage of Canadians,” as well as political parties. For instance, the federal New Democratic Party (NDP) has produced election campaign materials in Chinese languages, Korean, and Punjabi (Whitehorn 2006). The Government of Canada spends hundreds of thousands of dollars annually to monitor so-called ethnic media (CBC News 2012b), and 4.2 percent of its 2010-11 advertising budget was on community media that serve ethnic minority communities (calculated from Canada 2012b).

Fifth, rules of the game affect political communication in Canada, as they do with the practice of political marketing (Dufresne and Marland 2012). This is especially true during elections, which in Canada are heavily regulated, if poorly enforced. The official campaign period is subject to the provisions of the Canada Elections Act, which limits fundraising and spending, subsidizes both through rebates, and provides free broadcast time in the name of levelling the playing field for election communication. Outside of elections or leadership contests, however, few rules apply, and political actors are constrained foremost by their financial situation and the barometers of good taste.

Sixth, advertising has a prominent place in Canadian political communication, not only because of its persuasive ability but also because of its sponsor’s capacity to control the message and reach target audiences. The Canadian Code of Advertising Standards promotes principles such as truthfulness and message accuracy. Its non-binding provisions apply to governments and government departments, as well as to Crown corporations; however, the code exempts political and election advertising lest it impinge on “the free expression of public opinion or ideas” (Advertising Standards

Canada 2012). Whereas political institutions are normally subject to journalistic interpretation, advertising allows them to frame themselves, their issues, and their opponents in their own ways directly to citizens. There is, however, a significant need for resources to have this level of control. Advertising takes time to create and requires specialist expertise, there are a multitude of media platforms to choose from, and above all, it is expensive. To illustrate, in 2012, the price of a single full-page colour ad in *Macleans* was \$38,940 (*Macleans* 2012), and from 2006 to 2011, the Government of Canada spent an average of \$94 million annually on advertising campaigns, including those about the H1N1 flu pandemic, the health and safety of children, elder abuse, credit card regulations, economic stimulus spending, and tax credits (Canada 2012b). Although Internet spending had grown to 15 percent of all government advertising expenditures by 2010-11, 72 percent was on traditional broadcast and print media, with TV spots commanding nearly half of all monies spent (*ibid.*).

Government and political party advertising invite scrutiny. With government advertising, the concern is that cabinet is responsible for government strategy and expenditures, including steering the direction of communication. Critics fear that a governing party will use public resources to create partisan propaganda in an effort to set the public agenda and build support for their political priorities (e.g., Ellul 1965). As well, advertising agencies that help a political party win an election campaign may have a quid pro quo expectation that they will receive lucrative government advertising contracts in return. In Canada, there is a long-standing history of what Rose (2000, 89) refers to as the “symbiotic relationship” between wealthy parties and advertising professionals. One of the biggest political scandals in Canadian history involved ad agencies affiliated with the Liberal Party of Canada obtaining public funds by submitting inflated or fake invoices that were paid by the Liberal government (Kozolanka 2006). Rose (2000) has also found that government advertising campaigns can be controversial because they are used to support policy agendas. Recently the Conservative administration has been accused of financing government advertising that conveys its party’s values and priorities, such as Canadian Forces recruitment, the economic action plan, and the War of 1812 campaign (e.g., Kozolanka 2012). Fortunately, transparency and rules are improving. Advertising contracts are routinely put out to public tender; the federal government issues annual reports on advertising expenditures; and businesses

are no longer allowed to donate to federal parties. Still, there is no federal advertising review board to ensure the suitability of government advertising as there is in Ontario (see Office of the Auditor General of Ontario 2012a).

With respect to advertising paid for by political parties, the Canadian literature often focuses on the use of attack or negative ads. That these are often called “American-style” ads implies that Canadian political culture is different and that it imports political communication tactics, including negativity (Rose 2004). Rather than communicate information about a candidate’s strengths and merits, negative ads emphasize what is wrong with opponents personally and with their policies, often in a sinister tone (e.g., Kaid 2000). Negative ads have figured significantly in Canadian election campaigns, with the most notorious case being the 1993 “face” attack ad that brought public attention to Liberal leader Jean Chrétien’s partial facial paralysis (Romanow et al. 1999; O’Shaughnessy and Henneberg 2002). The intensity of partisan advertising in the minority government era from 2004 to 2011 demonstrates that although party operatives learned from the 1993 incident not to attack personal appearances, they nevertheless continue to communicate negative messages. For instance, the Conservative Party was relentless in its inter-election advertising that critiqued Liberal leaders, and over half (58 percent) of television spots in the 2008 general election were negative (Rose 2012). This too invites debate on the implications for the quality of democratic discourse in Canada. On one hand, negative ads are said to be responsible for suppressing elector turnout and, as in 1993, they can anger the electorate (Cunningham 1999). Yet others maintain that democracy “requires negativity” by promoting key democratic values such as opposition and accountability (Geer 2006, 6). Regardless, the ongoing and growing expense of political communication has the parties looking for competitive advantages in fundraising, in audience targeting, and in achieving earned media coverage – without losing control of the message.

Finally, Canadian political institutions have adapted to the growing prevalence of online media, but their preference for one-way communication with citizens has persisted. The federal e-government strategy has been successful in terms of service delivery (Longford 2002), and parliamentarians see information communication technologies as a benefit to their roles as representatives (Kernaghan 2007). However, scholars question whether this has contributed to a more participatory ethos (see Roy 2006). Parliamentarians are overloaded by email, and they tend to avoid interactive

technologies such as online chats or blogs (Kernaghan 2007; Small 2008a). During federal election campaigns, there has been minimal online interaction between citizens and political parties (Small 2004, 2008b, 2010b; Francoli, Greenberg, and Waddell 2012). In political circles, the Internet tends to be used for traditional campaign purposes, including for communication, fundraising, and organizing, rather than for two-way dialogue. In all cases, Canadian political institutions have expended considerable money and effort on their online presences, and use them to provide information and services to citizens. However, much of this continues to be one-way communication, with little evidence of a paradigmatic shift in their communication activities because of the Internet.

CANADIAN POLITICAL NEWS MEDIA

Nestled between political institutions and Canadian citizens is the news media. The democratic importance of the media can be seen in the constitutional entrenchment of press freedoms in section 2 of the Charter. In terms of political communication, the media perform two key public service roles: educators and watchdogs (Fletcher 1981). Much of what citizens know about politics comes from the mass media. Most Canadians will never speak directly to a political leader, attend a political event, or read the text of a statute. It is through the news media that citizens engage with politics and come to form opinions about it. The media is also the watchdog of the political system. Through organizations such as the press gallery and investigative journalism, the media ensure the legitimacy of the Canadian political system by holding political actors to account for their actions and behaviours. Reporters and journalists, therefore, provide a necessary link between citizens and political elites. These are among the reasons that the news media is considered an “essential pillar of democracy” (Siegel 1993, 18).

Hackett (2001) identifies five enduring characteristics of the Canadian media. First, as noted, through section 2 of the Charter, the Canadian media is independent from the state. Second, unlike Europe, the Canadian media is non-partisan, though this does not necessarily mean unbiased. As mentioned, this was not always the case, for newspapers were once vehicles of partisan propaganda, with most major centres having two papers, each of which represented one of the two main parties (Taras 1990; Levine 1993). Social and technological changes led to a commercial press, where objectivity, rather than partisanship, became the mass appeal of the news

organization. Subsequently, the partisan press died out by the 1960s (Taras 1990). However, in the new communication environment, the consumption of information communicated in a printed format is on the decline and newspaper circulation in Canada is sliding (Androich 2011). Third, the Canadian media reflects the bilingual diversity of Canada. Fletcher (1998) points out that French- and English-language media operate in separate worlds. French- and English-language public affairs reporting share relatively little in common. Moreover, as noted, the news media is increasingly reflecting Canada's multilingual diversity. Fourth, much of the Canadian media is privately owned, and because of legal restrictions, these owners are predominately Canadian. As private businesses, the media seeks to make a profit, and related to this is the concentration of media ownership. According to Nesbitt-Larking (2001), Canada has one of the highest concentrations of media ownership among capitalist countries. As of 2012, eight corporations owned the majority of Canada's media (Theckedath and Thomas 2012), which raises concerns about media concentration and points to the important role of public broadcasting and the Internet.¹ The fifth characteristic of the Canadian media is the presence of the CBC/SRC, which was created to protect Canadian culture from American influence. Its role as a broadcaster is morphing as technology and media economics change. One of the CBC's current priorities is "to make significant investments in its online and digital platforms to bring programming and services to more Canadians in new ways" (CBC Radio-Canada 2013). Unlike its Canadian media competitors, which are increasingly restricting access to their online content through metered paywalls and subscriber-only services, the CBC has a growing array of unlocked online content. Yet the CBC is itself under financial pressure, and its ability to communicate Canadian political information on radio and TV is constrained by serious budgetary issues (Friends of Canadian Broadcasting 2011). Taken together, these five characteristics shape the operation of the mass media in Canada, which in turn shapes political communication in this country.

How Canadians get their news is evolving in the new media environment. A 2011 survey found that over 80 percent of Canadians felt that mainstream media were reliable sources of information; by comparison, about 40 percent trusted government information and 25 percent felt that social media was trustworthy (CMRC 2011c). Source credibility is a significant reason the majority of Canadians preferred to get their news from mainstream

media platforms (38 percent TV, 23 percent newspapers, 8 percent radio), compared with 31 percent who preferred the Internet (CMRC 2011b). However, the survey found significant perception differences among Canadians aged eighteen to thirty-four, who placed more credibility on social media than did older Canadians. Moreover, those who use social network sites often do so to gather news, and thus it is estimated that over 10 million Canadians enjoy a “personalized news stream” (CMRC 2011d). Further, more than half (52 percent) of Canadians said that the Internet was a source of the most interesting news and information, compared with 27 percent citing television, 15 percent newspapers, and 6 percent stating radio (CMRC 2011b). This presents a significant challenge for organizations seeking to present news gathered by professionals given that only 4 percent of Canadians were willing to pay for news online (CMRC 2011a). Television may remain the main source of news for Canadians, but information that is available for free online has become a serious competitor.

Another aspect of this freebie culture is the popularity of free newspapers such as *Metro* or *24 Hours* (Sauvageau 2012, 32). Found in large cities worldwide, free newspapers are primarily targeted at commuters. There were twenty-nine free dailies printed in Canada in 2012, including in Toronto, Vancouver, Montreal, and Calgary (Baluja 2012). The Toronto versions of these papers reach about a quarter of a million people each day. Sauvageau (2012) suggests that free newspapers are very popular among younger people, which seems at odds with predictions of the demise of the newspaper industry. Nevertheless, free dailies, along with free online media, contribute to substantial financial problems for traditional media organizations in Canada and elsewhere.

Given the importance of the fourth estate in democracy, Canadian scholars have given considerable attention to the news media and their political role. Media frames are an important research theme. According to Gitlin (1980, 7), media frames are “persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual.” These are interpretative cues used by journalists that give meaning to issues. In the game frame, also known as the horserace or strategy frame, campaigns are conceived as strategic races between political actors. This is common in Canada, as the media focus on who is ahead and who is behind in the polls, rather than on the substance of the issues (Taras 2001, 148; Giasson 2012; also Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994).

Related to the issue of horserace framing is polling. Central to the “who’s in front” or “who’s falling behind” narratives, polls have become a permanent fixture of media coverage. Indeed, Turcotte (2012) estimates that a new poll was released every three days between the end of the 2008 federal election and the signing of the writ in 2011, and sixty-seven polls were released during the campaign itself. The media commissions many of these polls and are often formally attached with polling companies. For instance, during the 2011 election, Ipsos conducted polls for Postmedia News and Global National, while CBC worked with Environics. Since polls often become newsworthy, pollsters work with and for the media to enhance their own corporate reputation (Adams 2010).

Often subject to criticism, election polls have recently come under fire for their inability to predict election outcomes and thus their purported lack of accuracy. In recent provincial elections in Alberta and British Columbia, pollsters predicted landslide victories for the opposition, when in fact the governing parties were re-elected. In British Columbia in 2013, many polls released immediately prior to Election Day indicated that the NDP enjoyed a lead of eight or nine points over the Liberals. On election night, however, the Liberals earned a five-point victory over the NDP and won five more seats than they had in the previous election. As with the 2012 Alberta election, pollsters were lambasted by the media and in social media (*Huffington Post BC* 2013). The polling industry defended their results but nevertheless acknowledged that the industry is facing challenges because of evolving communications technology. Some methodological concerns for pollsters include the emergence of Internet polling and political weighting of declining turnout (Pickup et al. 2011). Some believe that the reputation of the polling industry has been damaged by these recent missteps (Grenier 2013; A. Reid 2013). Reaching electors by telephone is also a challenge, given that most cell-phone numbers are unlisted and a growing proportion of the population is opting not to have a landline.

Another trend in political coverage is related to tone. Scholars have found that the tone of political media reports in Canada has become increasingly negative over the past four decades (Nevitte et al. 2000, 24). For instance, Trimble and Sampert (2004, 55) found that there were more positive than negative remarks about political actors in 1962 and 1974, but by the 1979 federal election, the media’s tone began to change, with negativity in the media prevailing over positive coverage in the 1980, 1984, 1993, and 2000 elections. Such findings support a position that media coverage is

no longer deferential to elites and that journalists are acting as government watchdogs. Yet they can also be used to support arguments that media reports are slanted and excessively anti-establishment.

The potential for media slants leads to the study of norms and assumptions that are found in editorial decisions about news selection, emphasis, and framing. In an all-encompassing analysis, *The Media Gaze* (Fleras 2011) found differences in the media representation of gays and lesbians, women, youth, Aboriginal people, radicalized minorities, and religion. A wider body of gender-mediation research has examined the limited news coverage of female politicians, the lack of neutral coverage, and stereotyping (F.-P. Gingras 1995; Robinson and Saint-Jean 1995; Trimble and Everitt 2010; Lalancette and Lemarier-Saulnier 2013). Since politics has been and is still dominated by men, it is often framed in a masculine narrative (e.g., sporting and war metaphors), though overt gender stereotyping is on the decline in Canada (Gidengil and Everitt 2003). Everitt and Camp's (2009a, 2009b) exploration of the depiction of gay and lesbian politicians found that the Canadian media tend to accentuate the "otherness" of homosexuals even when it is of little relevance. Stereotypes and misrepresentations have also been found by Abu-Laban and Trimble (2010), who studied the media's treatment of Muslim Canadians. The prevalence of discriminatory discourses is so systemic and pervasive that Fleras (2011, 4) reasons it "should be cause for concern, a commitment to action, and a catalyst for change."

These trends have several democratic implications. Media attention to political strategy tends to occur at the expense of reporting on political issues. The prevalence of the strategic frame may leave some voters politically illiterate (Gidengil et al. 2004, 66-67). Political parties target their communications to segments of the electorate, and campaign learning is confined to the well informed. Framing may influence voters by encouraging them "to link their vote decisions more closely to their ratings of leaders, and less closely to their evaluation of parties and issues" (Mendelsohn 1993, 165). Unequal and negative coverage of parties calls into question the fairness of reporting. Finally, slanted coverage offers one explanation for why qualified minorities and women might avoid public life. Moreover, it might affect citizens' evaluations of the viability and credibility of such candidates (Norris 1997a).

POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND CANADIAN CITIZENS

Citizens are the third group of actors that influence, and are influenced by,

the political communication process. The traditional way of thinking about citizens is that they are the recipients of information from political institutions. This approach has informed most research, namely that on the effects of communication activities. Yet many citizens are also now producers of political content. The wide dissemination of the Internet, coupled with the recent developments in online social media, has generated significant interest within the research community on how citizens use these tools to express political opinions. We look at both of these angles in turn.

Influenced by remnants of persuasion theories from the 1940s, research on effects of political communication has been a staple of scientific literature, going back to the 1960s. Three core political impacts of the media have been studied: agenda setting, priming, and framing. The first refers to the capacity of the media to shape citizens' political priorities. In a now infamous quote, Bernard Cohen (1963, 13) first summarized agenda setting as the power the press has in telling people what to think about rather than what to think. This proposition expresses how levels of coverage from the news media could attract citizens' attention to certain political issues and not to others (see also McCombs and Shaw 1972; Iyengar and Kinder 1987). In Canada, Soroka (2002) applied an integrated agenda-setting framework to better understand how the media's agenda, the policy agenda, and the public's agenda interact. A key conclusion was that although the media often set the public agenda, in some cases it is the public that affects the media.

The priming effect of the media is presented as a consequence of agenda-setting effects. Iyengar and Kinder (1987) demonstrated how the news media can shape audiences' political priorities and how a single issue that dominates the media can become the determining factor in voters' evaluation of candidates. In the Canadian context, Mendelsohn (1994, 1996) discovered that high exposure to news coverage of the 1988 federal election primed leadership and leaders' trustworthiness as determining factors for Canadian voters, with partisanship becoming less important in voting decisions. These conclusions were upheld by Gidengil and her collaborators (2002), who found that higher exposure to news coverage increased the impact of leadership in the 1993 and 1997 federal elections and, in 1988, of the free trade issue, which completely dominated the news agenda.

The third media effect presented in the political communication literature is framing. Iyengar (1991) demonstrates how frames of political issues will bring viewers to cast different forms of responsibility on policy makers. Thematic frames usually bring audiences to place some form of responsibility

on governments, parties, and political actors. Conversely, episodic coverage is said to limit the capacity of citizens to attach political responsibility to the covered issue. Similarly, other research has indicated that positive and negative coverage of political parties during elections may be associated with movements in voting intentions. In their analysis of the electoral impact of media exposure on the 1997 federal elections, Dobrzynska and her collaborators (2003) found that positive coverage had a political benefit on vote intentions during the campaign, but that the effect did not last until Election Day. Other research has found that framing may affect leaders' evaluations as well (Cappella and Jamieson 1997, 84-85), especially female politicians, who are said to suffer from the dominant strategic framing in electoral news (see, for example, Norris 1997a, 160; Trimble 2005; Bashevkin 2009b, 29; Goodyear-Grant 2009, 161). Thus, when the media frames campaigns, politicians, and issues in certain ways, they provide political cues, social definitions, and information for citizens to make sense of politics and make electoral decisions.

Another considerable portion of the literature dedicated to effects investigates the impact of political communication on political participation and the vitality of democratic life. The media malaise theory argues that contemporary political coverage in news media offers a truncated and negative view of the political process and stimulates citizens' political cynicism, declining trust, and engagement. Despite its popularity, this theory has many opponents who believe a clear empirical demonstration of the association between media exposure and democratic malaise has yet to be provided (Newton 1999; Norris 2000; de Vreese 2005; de Vreese and Elenbaas 2008; Adriaansen, Van Praag, and de Vreese 2010). In Canada, Nadeau and Giasson's (2005) meta-analysis of the media malaise phenomenon came to the conclusion that current Canadian research had not yet presented a strong enough demonstration of the validity of the hypothesis.

A more recent area of research explores how Internet use modifies the communication process. As citizens become active producers of political information, political institutions and the media are forced to react more efficiently to public demands expressed online. One area of scholarship looks at new forms of online participation where citizens use the Internet to engage, debate, mobilize, and act politically (Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal 2008; Coleman and Blumler 2009; Pole 2010; Giasson, Raynauld, and Darisse 2011). Scholars surveying political Internet users have identified five broad

categories of actions, namely information gathering, use of e-government services, the discussion of politics online, conventional participation (donating to parties, emailing a representative, joining a party, voting online), and non-conventional participation (boycotts, online protests, activism for social movements). For instance, because of several recent, high-profile grassroots movements, such as Occupy, the Arab Spring, and #IdleNOMore, there is a growing body of literature exploring the role that digital technologies are playing in such grassroots mobilization (see Gerbaudo 2012). Another area of study focuses on citizens' information production process, especially in relation to grassroots journalism (Gillmor 2006; Nip 2006). Many political bloggers consider themselves as independent journalists or claim that they blog as a way to monitor or counterbalance biases in the political coverage of conventional news media (Koop and Jansen 2009; Pole 2010).

Finally, another broad portion of the literature looks at the potential of the Internet to stimulate citizenship and democracy in postindustrial societies (e.g., Coleman and Blumler 2009). From its inception, the digital politics literature has hypothesized about a positive relationship between online political activity and democratic citizenship. Cyber-optimists posit what's known as the mobilization hypothesis: that the Internet creates opportunities for the politically disenfranchised and marginalized, including young people and minorities. Cyber-skeptics claim that the digital divide, parties' ideological commitments, and normalizing principles represent constant barriers to real access to online resources and tools. This reinforcement theory states that technologies are used by citizens who are already politically sophisticated, interested, and active offline (R. Davis 1999; Bimber 2003). In Canada, Roy and Power (2012) found limited support in the 2011 federal election for a thesis that the Internet had become a means of mobilizing Canadians who are otherwise politically disengaged. Their data showed some evidence of a reinforcing effect; those most apt to be politically active offline were complementing this activity with online activities. Thus, once again, we are faced with the changing nature of Canadian political communication that is at an intersection of bridging "old" and "new" media.

The Structure of *Political Communication in Canada*

Political Communication in Canada brings together knowledge, viewpoints, and evidence from senior scholars, as well as from new voices in Canadian political communication research. An empirically driven book, featuring

innovative case studies, it draws on various methodological approaches and theoretical perspectives. Following a common framework, each chapter is guided by three overarching questions:

- 1 What tactics, tools, or channels are used by political institutions, by the media, and by citizens in Canada to disseminate information?
- 2 To what extent is the new political communication environment resulting in a more informed, engaged, and/or cynical citizenry in Canada?
- 3 What are the corresponding implications of the new political communication environment for Canadian democracy?

Taken together, these chapters provide an assessment of the full range of political communication activities used in Canada, while taking into account the new stage of political communication. They are organized within sections that refer to a component of the political communication triangular process. Part 1 focuses on political communication by Canadian political institutions. Here, chapters are dedicated to the activities of governments, political parties, and interest groups in their attempt to inform, promote, and persuade Canadians. Older techniques such as advertising and media management, and new ones like political branding and social media, are examined. Part 2 takes a look at the Canadian political news media. The chapters explore media from the perspectives of how politics is communicated and how political journalism is practised. Part 3 turns to political communication and Canadian citizens. Consistent with the aforementioned angles of research, the chapters focus on media effects and new forms of online participation by citizens, as well as on political communication from advocacy groups.

Understanding political communication is also important for understanding democracy. Canada, as in other advanced industrial countries, is said to be facing a crisis of democracy, as evidenced by fluctuating participation and interest in politics. Turnout in the 2008 election (58.8 percent of registered voters) was the lowest recorded in Canadian history, and the downward trend was only slightly abated in the 2011 election. There has been a corresponding long-term decline in feelings of efficacy among citizens (Teixeira 1987; Koop 2012). Levels of internal efficacy (citizens' feelings that they can change politics) has remained steady, but levels of external efficacy (citizens' feelings that institutions are responsive to them) have declined. Finally, many citizens also report a lack of interest in politics, despite the

increasing availability of political information (e.g., Gidengil et al. 2004). The implication is that uninterested citizens are not typically seeking political information, which in turn might produce information, participation, and interest representation gaps within the citizenry. Thus, the most informed citizens take part in the political system and have their interests represented by institutions, but the values, needs, and aspirations of the least interested, least informed, and least engaged may not be heeded by decision makers.

Political Marketing in Canada provided insights on the degree to which political elites' use of opinion research can hinder and help democracy. In *Political Communication in Canada*, we build on this knowledge by exploring the communication activities of political institutions, the mass media, and citizens. To what extent do political institutions and the news media encourage or discourage citizen participation? Do they provide citizens with enough and suitable information by which to make political decisions? To what extent are digital technologies providing new venues for citizens to engage with political institutions and the media? Does the evolving Canadian communication environment allow for novel types of political action for citizens? These are among the questions raised in this book as we seek to understand the implications of political communication for Canadian democracy in a transformed communication environment.

NOTES

- 1 The eight media corporations were Astral, Bell Media, Postmedia Network, Quebecor Media, Rogers Communications, Shaw Communications, Telus Communications, and Torstar.