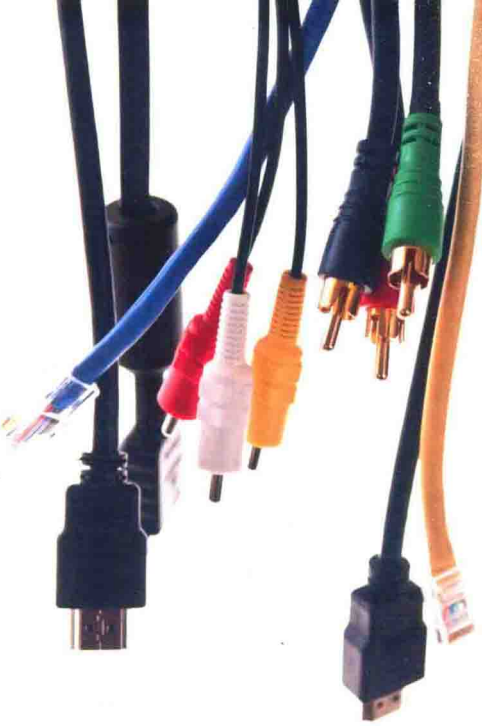

HOW CANADIANS COMMUNICATE IV

MEDIA AND POLITICS

EDITED BY DAVID TARAS AND CHRISTOPHER WADDELL

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How Canadians Communicate IV

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The Past and Future of Political Communication in Canada

An Introduction

In June 1980, in the wake of the Québec referendum on sovereignty and the 1979 and 1980 federal elections, the Reader's Digest Foundation and what was then Erindale College of the University of Toronto co-sponsored a conference on politics and the media.[1] The Erindale conference brought together prominent party strategists and organizers, journalists, and scholars. Participants spoke about the power of television images, the presidentialization of Canadian politics, the concentration of media ownership, the failure of leaders to address policies in a serious way during elections, the sheer nastiness and negativity of political attacks, the power of the media to set the agenda and frame issues during elections, and the need for politicians to fit into those very media frames if they wished to be covered at all. None of these concerns have vanished with time. If anything, they have hardened into place, making them even more pervasive and intractable.

Yet even as so much has remained the same, so much has changed. When the conference "How Canadians Communicate Politically: The Next Generation" was convened in Calgary and Banff in late October 2009, the media and political terrains had been dramatically transformed. The revolution in web-based technology that had begun in the mid-1990s had hit the country with devastating force. As online media depleted the newspaper industry, TV networks, and local radio stations of a sizable portion of their audiences and advertising, the old lions of the traditional media lost some of their bite. The stark reality today is that every medium is merging with

every other medium, every medium is becoming every other medium, and all media are merging on the Internet. Most critically, a new generation of digital natives, those who have grown up with web-based media, is no longer subject to a top-down, command-and-control media system in which messages flow in only one direction. Audiences now have the capacity to create their own islands of information from the endless sea of media choices that surround them, as well as to produce and circulate their own videos, photos, opinions, and products, and to attract their own advertising.

And the country has also changed. The Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the absorption of more immigrants from more countries than any other society in history, the growth of global cities, and connectivity have all produced a profoundly different society. Furthermore, years of constitutional battles and another much more desperately fought referendum in Québec in 1995 have culminated in both frustration and exhaustion. Living on the edge of a precipice could not be sustained indefinitely, even in Québec. The country has also grown proud of its accomplishments. Canada's banking system withstood the most punishing effects of the financial meltdown that ravaged the world financial system in 2008 and 2009; multicultural experiments that appear to be failing in other societies, such as France, the United Kingdom, and Germany, are succeeding in Canada; and arts and culture are burgeoning.

The "How Canadians Communicate Politically" conference, organized by Athabasca University and the Alberta Global Forum (then based at the University of Calgary and now at Mount Royal University), brought together distinguished scholars from across Canada with the intention of examining what the next generation of political communication would look like. We asked contributors to view politics and communication through a much different and more expansive lens than was the case with the 1980 Erindale conference. While much of this volume deals with media and politics in the conventional sense—examining such topics as the interplay among journalists and politicians, the future of news, and the effectiveness of negative campaigning in both online and TV advertising—we also look at politics through the frames of popular culture and everyday life: biographies, off-road politics in rural Alberta, Québec film, hotline radio, music, and Aboriginal art. The noted Swedish scholar Peter Dahlgren has observed that changes in popular culture both reflect and condition political change.[2] Once a trend or idea becomes firmly implanted within a culture, it is only a matter of time before

it permeates and affects public policy. While some of these essays deal with aspects of popular culture, our search was wider—we wanted to see how politics takes shape and change occurs in places that are beyond the prescribed battlegrounds of politicians and political parties.

The 2009 conference included a session about Alberta politics, or what might be called the Alberta political mystery. The province remains the only jurisdiction in North America, and arguably Europe as well, where a single party, the Progressive Conservatives, so dominate the political landscape that elections have become non-events, with little campaigning, debate, discussion, or voter turnout. Though other provinces may have traditional leanings, the party in power typically shifts with some regularity. In almost every American state, the governorships and senate seats change hands with the political tides. In Alberta, the tides of political change never seem to arrive. One could argue that the media in the province are just as unchanging. Yet, as Roger Epp points out, beneath the surface, political battles rage, ideas are tested, and meeting places are formed. Alvin Finkel, however, contends that power in Alberta is not only self-perpetuating but brutally imposed.

This book focuses on three changes that have taken place in the nature of political communication since the Erindale conference more than thirty years ago. First, we have moved from a media landscape dominated by the traditional media to one where Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and smart phones play an increasingly important role. The future of the news industry cannot be taken for granted. Newspapers have been corroded by a steady drop in both readership and advertising. They employ fewer journalists, paying them far less than they used to, and younger readers have fled in droves. In 1980, the conventional over-the-air networks—CBC, Radio-Canada, CTV, Global, and TVA—had the capacity to set the political agenda because they had the power to attract mass audiences. While the national news shows of the main networks are still a main stage for Canadian political life, much of the action has moved from centre stage to the sidelines of cable TV, where there are a myriad of all-news channels, each with small but stable audiences. As Marcus Prior demonstrates in *Post-Broadcast Democracy*, a book that some scholars regard as a modern classic despite its relatively recent arrival, the more entertainment options available to viewers, the more likely they are to avoid news entirely, and as a consequence, the less likely they are to vote.[3]

A second change since the Erindale conference is in the nature of political life in Canada. On one hand, the party system has remained surprisingly resilient: the same three parties—the Conservatives, the New Democrats, and the Liberals—that dominated in 1980 still dominate the political landscape today, with a variety of insurgent parties such as the Créditistes, the Reform Party and then the Canadian Alliance, the Bloc Québécois, and the Greens falling more or less by the wayside. On the other hand, the rhythms of political life are now very different: a never-ending 24-hour news cycle, changes in party financing laws that demand non-stop solicitations, the development of databases that allow for the microtargeting of both supporters and swing voters, and cybercampaigns that are fought daily on party websites, Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and YouTube have meant that political parties now wage permanent campaigns. Simply put, the political cycle never stops. Parties have also learned more definitively than ever before that negative campaigning works. The need to define and therefore place question marks in voters' minds about opponents consumes Question Period, appearances by the "talking heads" that parties designate to appear on cable news channels, and the ad campaigns that are waged before and during campaigns.

Just as there are questions about the future of news, there are questions about the future of politics and whether the new political style limits debate, makes tolerance for and compromises with opponents more difficult, and delegitimizes politics as a whole. These questions are vigorously debated in this book, with contributors lined up on different sides of the arguments.

A third change in the nature of political communication is the result of changes in Canadian society. While today's digital natives are more global, multicultural, and tolerant and have a greater command of technology than previous generations, they are also "peek-a-boo" citizens, engaged at some moments, completely disengaged at others. Despite the galvanizing power of social media, fewer people under thirty join civic organizations or political parties, volunteer in their communities, donate money to causes, or vote in elections than was the case for people in the same age group in previous generations. They also know much less about the country in which they live and consume much less news. In fact, the ability of citizens generally to recall important dates in history or the names of even recent prime ministers, as well as their knowledge of basic documents such as the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, is disturbingly low.[4] Digital natives in particular view historical

Canada as a distant and, to some degree, foreign land that is barely recognizable and, for the most part, irrelevant to their lives. How to draw digital natives more fully into the Canadian political spectacle remains one of the country's great challenges.

I: THE CHANGING WORLD OF MEDIA AND POLITICS

The first part of this book open with an article by Florian Sauvageau, a former newspaper editor, TV host, and university professor who served as director of Université Laval's Centre d'étude sur les médias and recently produced a documentary on the future of news. At first glance, Sauvageau's article reads like an obituary for the news industry. While he is reluctant to administer the last rites, Sauvageau chronicles the decline of newspapers and, along with them, much of the "reliable news" on which a society depends; readers are led to conclude that even if newspapers survive in some form, they will be mere shadows of what they once were. As Sauvageau states: "Not all print newspapers will die, but they are all stricken." There are simply too many problems to overcome. Younger readers are vanishing. Classified and other ads are migrating to web-based media, where they can target younger and more specialized audiences, and to social media sites, which allow users to reach buyers and sellers without paying the costs of advertising. Newspaper websites capture only a portion of the revenue (around 20 percent, by some estimates) that print versions generate, and digital culture has created different news habits. As Sauvageau points out, consumers have become accustomed to munching on news "snacks," short bursts of information and headline news, rather than the larger and more nutritious meals provided by newspapers. The expectation among young consumers in particular is that news has to be immediate, interactive, and, most important of all—free. In fact, a survey conducted for the Canadian Media Research Consortium in 2011 found that an overwhelming 81 percent of those surveyed would refuse to pay if their favourite online news sites erected a pay wall. If their usual news sources started charging for content, they would simply go to sites where they could get their news for free.[5]

According to Sauvageau, the problem for society is that newspapers are still the main producers of news. They have the largest staffs and the most resources, and produce almost all of the investigative reporting. He quotes an American study that found that 95 percent of the news stories discussed

or quoted in blogs, social media, and websites came from traditional news sources—mostly newspapers. As Sauvageau explains: "If the other media didn't have newspapers to draw on, their news menu would often be meagre indeed. If newspapers stopped publishing, radio hosts who comment on the news would have trouble finding topics, and bloggers would have precious few events to discuss. In large part, newspapers set the public affairs agenda. If the crisis gripping newspapers worsens, it will affect all media and therefore the news system that nourishes democratic life." Simply put, if newspapers die, the whole news industry won't be far behind.

Sauvageau describes various solutions to the problem—apps on mobile phones, for example, may give newspapers a second life, and in France, the government has come to the rescue by providing subsidies. In a few cases, wealthy moguls eager for prestige and power have saved newspapers from the brink, and there are innovative schemes for turning newspaper companies into charitable non-profit institutions, as is now the case with Québec's most influential newspaper, *Le Devoir*. But ultimately, he concludes that reliable news needs to rest on reliable foundations and, in the end, people have to be willing to pay for news.

The most devastating and pessimistic critique of the changing media landscape and its effects on Canadian political culture in this book is by Elly Alboim, a long-time Ottawa bureau chief for CBC television news, a professor at Carleton University, and a principal in the Earnscliffe Strategy Group in Ottawa. Alboim believes that news organizations have lost the capacity to be a "more effective link in the process of governance" and that they feel "no real attachment to or support for current institutions." Any pride in having a broader "civic mandate" has been lost in the drive to entertain audiences: when politics is covered, for instance, stories are invariably about conflict and scandal, failures and fiascos. Compromise—the life's breath of effective politics—is treated as a sign of weakness. The message to citizens is that governments are mostly ineffective and that all politics must be viewed with suspicion. In Alboim's words, media coverage is "a priori adversarial, proceeding from a presumption of manipulative practice and venal motive."

This has created an immensely destructive feedback loop. Political leaders fear being caught in the undertow of negative media coverage for whatever actions or positions they take. Rather than engage the public in discussion, the easier course is to fit the "media narrative" with attention-grabbing pictures

and snappy sound bites that convey the image but not the substance of actions and policies. The lesson learned through bitter experience is that issues are to be managed, controversies suppressed, and ideas or policy initiatives rarely if ever discussed in detail. It's hardly surprising that the end product is a disengaged public. The process is circular. The public's cynicism and disinterest feeds back into and justifies media narratives that view politics with suspicion—which prompts political leaders to avoid clashes with the media and therefore serious engagement with the public.

Some observers hoped that web-based media would bring greater interaction and debate. If anything, according to Alboim, web-based media may have accelerated the "decoupling" process by allowing users to live in their own media bubbles. Alboim's worry is that "if you don't know what you don't know and are unwilling to delegate others to tell you, you begin to narrow your universe to one driven by your preconceived interests. Governments can exacerbate the problem when they determine that it is not in their interest to devote extraordinary efforts to engage the disengaged." Not everyone would agree with the portrait that Alboim draws of a closed circle in which disengagement is constantly reinforced. The distracted nature of Ottawa political reporting is not the only measure of the media's engagement in politics. In fact, one could argue that the exact opposite phenomenon is occurring—that we live in a time of political excess and hyper-partisanship, rather than the opposite. Quebecor, for instance, which dominates the Québec media landscape and owns the Sun newspaper chain and the Sun News Network, is consumed by politics. In the case of Quebecor, what is extraordinary is not the absence of politics but the naked aggression with which ideas and passions are promoted. It's also hard to argue that the media has turned its back on politics when both national newspapers, the *Globe and Mail* and the *National Post*, regional giants such as the *Toronto Star* and *La Presse*, and chains such as Postmedia take strong editorial positions, often openly displaying their politics on their front pages. At the very least, the theory of media disengagement from politics needs much greater examination.

Alboim's assertions about citizen disconnectedness on the Internet can also be disputed. Some scholars would argue that, in some ways, citizens are more connected than ever before—they are just connecting differently. One of the most contentious issues, however, is whether web-based media suppress debate and dangerously divide publics by creating media ghettos. Leading

observers such as Robert Putnam, Cass Sunstein, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Joseph Cappella, and Eli Pariser have made the case that users increasingly dwell in their own self-contained media ghettos that shield them from facts or opinions with which they disagree.[6] For instance, Jamieson and Cappella found in their 2008 study that right-wing conservatives in the United States tended to watch Fox News, read the Wall Street Journal, and listen to Rush Limbaugh. They were unlikely to venture much beyond this ideologically secure gated community and were cut off from views they found uncomfortable or inconvenient. The same closed media circle has developed among liberals in the United States, who might read the *New York Times*, watch CNBC, and read blogs such as *Talking Points Memo*. In the Canadian context, presumably viewers of the Sun News Network will also listen to talk show hosts like Charles Adler, read the *National Post*, and follow Tory bloggers.

The problem is exacerbated by the fact that the algorithms that direct search engines provide users with information based on their previous searches. As Eli Pariser points out, "There is no standard Google anymore."[7] When conducting searches, people with conservative views will be directed to different websites than people with liberal views.

But it's not clear that all of the evidence supports the "ghettoization" thesis. Marcus Prior, for instance, refutes the claim that people are becoming the equivalent of political shut-ins. His data show that people who are consumed by politics tend to go to multiple sources; they follow the journalistic action wherever it leads.[8] Researcher Cliff Lampe also found that people on social media sites were better able than others to articulate opposing viewpoints, especially as their circle of online friends widened. So it may be too soon to make sweeping judgments.[9]

The only non-Canadian scholar to speak at the "How Canadians Communicate Politically" conference was Richard Davis of Brigham Young University, a former chair of the political communication section of the American Political Science Association and a leading expert on the effects of web-based media on American politics. In his chapter on blogs, Davis argues that the blogosphere is shaped like a pyramid: a few influential bloggers dwell at the top of the pyramid and command a great deal of the traffic while the vast majority of bloggers get little, if any, attention. A-list bloggers are read by policy-makers and journalists, and are part of the opinion-making and agenda-setting elite. Most of the others write for themselves and a spoonful