

## **Canadian parties in transition**

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# The Internet and Political Communication in Canadian Party Politics: The View from 2004<sup>1</sup>

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Political parties are, in a manner of speaking, communication technologies. They are artificial instruments that mediate the flow of information between the party's leadership and its audience, the electorate. Information flows through parties in both directions: parties gather useful information about the electorate and communicate this to their leadership for strategic consideration; they also disseminate the messages of leadership to the electorate for its consideration, by a variety of means. Or, at least, they used to do these things. Already in 1979, John Meisel (1985) recognized that the communicative function of political parties had been more or less usurped by two other communication technologies. The role parties had once played in disseminating the political messages of their leadership (through, for example, local party meetings, events, and campaigns) had been replaced by the medium of television, through which messages, either as news filtered by journalists and editors or in the form of advertisements and televised national events, could be broadcast directly to an audience of millions simultaneously from a central source. In this way, television "requires parties to centralize their informational activities" (Meisel and Mendelsohn 2001: 170). Similarly, the mediating role party members once played in gathering information and communicating it to leadership was overtaken by mass opinion polling, typically facilitated by electronic technology. This led Meisel to conclude, long before the advent of the Internet, that "the party organization is no longer needed as an essential information network" (Meisel 1985: 106).

Changes in communication technology have long been associated with changes in the operation and orientation of Canadian political parties (Carty 1988: 15-30; Carty, Cross, and Young 2000: 178-210). Digital information

and communication technologies (ICTs) have become part of the dynamic identified by Meisel, whereby the communicative function of parties, or perhaps more specifically of party memberships and local organizations, has been significantly reduced. Parties still need members and local organizations for a variety of reasons, but not primarily for information gathering and dissemination, and not as media of political communication between the party and the broader electorate. Local party members still provide a means of communication, but these functions are increasingly served by sophisticated technologies deployed by relatively centralized strategic leadership within the parties. Television, of course, remains the most important technology of mass political communication in Canadian party politics, both during and between elections. However, the strategic value of ICTs has escalated in recent years, and they have become an important tool in the communicative practices of Canadian political parties.

#### TECHNOLOGY USE BY CANADIAN POLITICAL PARTIES

The use of digital technology by contemporary political parties in Canada falls into three categories: internal administration and mobilization, publication, and data gathering and analysis.

Like other large organizations, political parties require considerable internal communication for purposes of coordination and management. The fact that their membership is geographically dispersed, sporadically engaged, and seldom gathered in one location at the same time presents challenges for this sort of communication. The ability of ICTs to mediate asynchronous communication across great distances at great speeds and relatively low cost, delivering party information directly to members in their homes or workplaces, has made them very useful to party administrators. Membership databases, electronic mail and mailing lists, automated telephone dialing and messaging systems, and party websites combine to make ICTs an efficient and cost-effective complement to traditional paper and postal correspondence (Alexander 2001: 465; Kippen 2000: 11, 25-27). These facilities become especially important during election campaigns, when the need to coordinate strategy, manage logistics, distribute current information to party workers, solicit donations, and mobilize supporters to participate in events (and to vote) becomes paramount. Parties have also gradually begun to experiment with various combinations of television, telephone, and networked computer technology to enable their members to participate more directly in partisan events and processes, including things like electronic town hall meetings, telephone polls, policy discussion groups, and, perhaps most significantly, the selection of party leaders (Cross 1998; Barney 1996; Courtney 2004: 121-22).

Parties have also come to recognize the utility of the World Wide Web as an instrument of mass multimedia publication. By 1997, each of Canada's major federal parties had established a web presence and has steadily increased the content and sophistication of their sites through the 2000 and 2004 elections to the present (DeRabbie 1998; Kippen 2000; Attalah and Burton 2001; Small 2004). Visitors to the websites of Canada's major parties can expect to find some variation on the following:

- leader biography
- transcripts of leader's speeches
- press releases and news bulletins (current and archived)
- multimedia resources (images, graphics, audio, and video)
- roster of party MPs/candidates (often highlighting cabinet members or critics, with links to individual biographies or websites)
- party constitution
- party history
- list of party officers
- party policies, platform, and issue papers
- membership information
- online donation/volunteer forms
- contact information (including links to constituency associations)
- calendar of events/leader's itinerary
- subscription to electronic mailing list/newsletter
- online feedback forms
- online polls/surveys
- links to provincial party organizations
- links to basic government information

Websites of individual candidates contain similar sorts of information, with an emphasis on local issues, events, and resources. Like all other elements of party machinery, the importance of party websites is elevated during (and just before) election campaigns. During these periods, membership recruitment, fundraising, and volunteer activities experience a spike, and, more importantly, elections see the party engaged very actively in the dissemination of information to its activists, the press, and voters.

This dissemination occurs via several means, but official websites offer parties considerable utility for campaign communication. At a fraction of the cost of an equivalent amount of paid television, radio, and print advertising, parties can deliver extensive detailed campaign information to journalists and voters via their websites, 24 hours a day, reacting quickly to issues, crises, and opportunities as they develop (Kippen 2000: 20-23). Using their

websites, parties can communicate directly with voters without the filtering, framing, and interpretation that is the price of delivery through mass media outlets (Alexander 2001: 470). Centralizing information dissemination through the party website (or even via electronic mailing lists) also allows campaign strategists and communication directors to exercise a high degree of control over the content and shape of campaign messages. It is also conceivable, however, that voters are not really the primary target of parties' efforts at electronic information dissemination.

In a recent study of candidates' websites in the 2004 Conservative party leadership contest that preceded the election, Jonathan Rose and Tamara Small concluded that the primary audience for these sites was the mainstream mass media and that citizen engagement was a secondary concern (Rose and Small 2004). Canadian parties have also begun to experiment with online advertising, buying space for click-through banner ads on mainstream media and political sites and, in some cases, employing the novel technique of "buying" key words on popular Internet search engine sites that, when entered into the engine's search field, trigger an ad for the party to be displayed alongside the results of the search (Attallah and Burton 2001: 228-29; Alexander 2001: 463). Still, parties remain unsure as to whether sophisticated online information dissemination techniques and strategies are worth the investment. The fact remains that party websites and online ads reach a relatively small audience of politically engaged professionals and citizens, and it is far from clear that their content has any decisive impact on voter preferences. It is perhaps for this reason that television—news coverage, leadership debates, and advertising—remains the most significant medium for the mass dissemination of partisan information during election campaigns (Attallah and Burton 2001: 215).

However, networked computerized information and communication technologies have been unambiguously beneficial to parties as instruments of data gathering and processing. Electronic databases allow for the storage, search, and retrieval of massive volumes of complex information, and increasingly powerful computers enable increasingly sophisticated processing and modelling of this information. When asked about important partisan uses of digital technology in a recent survey, federal parliamentarians who identified database management (72.7 per cent) and voter targeting (64.6 per cent) exceeded those who identified online campaigning (48.5 per cent) and online fundraising (28.8 per cent) by a considerable margin (Kernaghan, Riehle, and Lo 2003: 11). Similar views were expressed at a special session on political parties and new technologies at the 2003 Crossing Boundaries conference in Ottawa (Crossing Boundaries National Council 2003). Here, strategists from the New Democratic, Liberal, and Canadian Alliance parties

spent considerable time highlighting the utility of ICTs for profiling and tracking voter preferences; they were less animated by the possibility that these technologies might provide new means for numbers of voters to participate more deliberately and dialogically in party politics. Predictably, during the 2004 election campaign, “not one major party operated a discussion forum on their Web site,” limiting themselves instead to only the thinnest interactive applications, such as automated links for e-mail “feedback” (Small 2005: 21).

It should come as no surprise that parties have seized on these technologies in an effort to craft campaign appeals aimed at the political tastes of particular regions, demographics, and even individual voters (Carty, Cross, and Young 2000: 208-09; DeRabbie 1998). Combining data from Elections Canada’s permanent electronic voters list—established in 1993 and described as “the single most important technological innovation in Canadian politics this century” (Kippen 2000: 10)—with constituency information gathered by the party and databases purchased from commercial sources, strategists are able to generate a multiplicity of specific appeals targeted at narrow categories of identifiable groups and individuals, whose responses can subsequently be tracked and incorporated into further campaign refinements (Cross 2004: 110, 117). At the most advanced level, parties seek “to ultimately create an individualized profile of each voter” (Cross 2004: 119). In short, new technologies and techniques of database management and data mining have made it possible for parties to “customize, customize, customize” their campaigns (Alexander 2001: 467). Local party operatives still play a role in this process, but it is a role in which they are more or less reduced to appendages of the machine. As Cross (2004: 120-21) describes it:

When party volunteers canvass voters during the course of a campaign and ask what issues they are interested in, voter responses are now routinely marked on bar code scan sheets and entered into the data files ... This practice will become more and more sophisticated as local volunteers get used to its operation and continue to collect more data from election to election ... However, it is [also] easy to foresee, and indeed some campaign operatives suggest, that these canvassing efforts might be better run by experienced campaign professionals from a single central location ... The central campaign can then use these data to direct personalized messages to voters through direct mail and centralized phone banks.

Perhaps this partially explains why party membership rates in Canada are so low—16 per cent of Canadians claim to have belonged to a party at some time in their life (Howe and Northrup 2000)—and declining. After all, what could be the incentive to participate in a political party when the substance

of this participation—pitching commodities, scanning barcodes, and surreptitiously gathering customer information for distant processing—resemble so closely the job descriptions of telemarketers and retail clerks, and even these diminished activities are on the verge of being automated and centralized out of existence?

#### EVALUATING PARTIES' USE OF ICTS

Has the use of ICTs by Canadian political parties made them, or the democracy they serve, more responsive, inclusive, and participatory? This question can only be answered in light of an assessment of the democratic character of recent party activities more generally. As Carty, Cross, and Young have documented (2000: 107-29), stimulated by the populist challenge posed by the rise of the Reform/Alliance Party, contemporary Canadian political parties have gestured in the direction of democratization. However, the democratic significance of these gestures—which have taken forms ranging from minor experiments with electronically mediated participation in party policy forums to direct election of leaders by party members—is debatable. It has been suggested, for example, that the Reform/Alliance Party's forays into "teledemocracy" actually undermined deliberative public-spirited democracy by using plebiscitary instruments to minimize the effectiveness of organized interests and by appealing directly to individuals and their privately registered opinions (Barney 1996; Barney and Laycock 1999). And it is not at all clear that the move from delegated to direct election of party leaders has been an unambiguous democratic gain, as the expenditure of power, resources, and influence once applied to delegate selection contests has now been transferred to the recruitment of masses of new members whose sole involvement in the party is the minimalist act of voting for the machine that recruited them. As Leonard Preyra has observed, "parties have created new leadership selection processes that *appear* to make leadership selection more inclusive, empowering, transparent and accountable. However, at the operational level a huge chasm in expectations and outcomes remains" (Preyra 2001: 455; emphasis added).

Evidence reported in the recently completed *Canadian Democratic Audit* suggests that, notwithstanding whatever uses they may be making of new technologies, Canadian political parties consistently fall short of expectations as democratic organizations (Cross 2004). Whether in their capacity as membership organizations, venues for policy development, means of candidate and leadership selection, or as campaign organizations, the major parties fail to provide significant opportunities for meaningful political participation by everyday citizens. Very few party members are routinely active in party affairs, many do not participate at all, and those who do are

primarily engaged in low-intensity activity. This probably reflects the fact that so few Canadians perceive participation in parties to be an effective means of influencing public or party policy (Cross 2004: 26-27).

The *Audit* also documents what can only be described as the massive failure of political parties as venues for individual participation in the development and debate of public policy, particularly by extra-parliamentary members (Cross 2004: 34-40). In terms of the selection of candidates for office, while this process often appears to provide citizens with a unique opportunity to participate in political life, Cross (2004: 51) concludes that, “in practice candidate nomination processes actually pose substantial barriers to participation and ... relatively few voters get involved.” He documents a process characterized by the frenzy to enlist new members pledged to a particular candidate and to herd them to nomination meetings; in which consideration of a candidate’s policy positions plays almost no role; in which “only a minuscule proportion of general election voters participate”; and which yields candidates that are systematically unrepresentative of the demographics of the Canadian population (Cross 2004: 56, 51-68). Leadership selection processes typically feature quantitatively—but not necessarily qualitatively—higher levels of participation but, as Cross (2004: 91) points out, “it is an inescapable fact that only a fraction of any party’s electoral supporters participate in these contests.” It should be kept in mind that this assessment pertains even in those cases mentioned above where parties enlist ICTs to facilitate direct rather than delegated leadership selection by party members.

Under these circumstances, one would have to place extraordinary faith in the revolutionary claims made on behalf of ICTs to believe that their use by parties will somehow result in making these into fundamentally more democratic political organizations. In fact, the parties’ specific efforts with ICTs have been less than transformative. The use of electronic communication media such as e-mail to coordinate administration and to facilitate mobilization, recruitment, and fundraising undoubtedly have made parties more efficient in terms of internal communication. Similarly, parties’ use of the web to publicize party and campaign material probably means that more people, both inside and outside the party, have better access to unmediated partisan information than was previously the case. However, administrative efficiency and effective publicity do not necessarily make for more inclusive, participatory, and responsive democratic processes. Indeed, parties have been very reluctant to pursue with vigour and creativity the potential that ICTs present for the mediation of more routine, deliberative, participatory exercises explicitly connected to party policy, either among their own memberships or more widely. Where parties have been quick to seize upon the potential of these technologies is in their usefulness for sophisticated gathering, storage,



and processing of data about voters and their preferences in an effort to craft campaign strategies that are at once highly centralized and highly customized. Some might argue that such practices enable parties to be more precisely responsive to the particular preferences of citizens. This may be true, but only if we accept that the techniques of customer-relations management — rather than the norms of inclusive deliberative dialogue between party members, voters, and party elites — provide an adequate framework for political communication between parties and citizens. Perhaps it has been a long time since parties have systematically practiced anything approaching the standard implied by these norms, but this fact should not lead us to dignify data mining, or the use of the web to provide access to interactive electronic brochures, with a name they don't really deserve.

The 2004 election illustrates the situation quite vividly. Initial research on the campaign found that

Canadian sites reflect a top-down command-and-control campaign model. The information flow is largely unidirectional—from the party to the public/supporters ... They offer no substantive means through which party grassroots can organize, mobilize, share practices, download key campaign tools, and coordinate outreach. Canadian sites resemble electronic lawn signs—they inform but don't engage. (Hillwatch 2004: 1-2)

Subsequent research has moderated this assessment, but only somewhat. In her comprehensive work on the Internet and the 2004 election campaign, Small (2004) finds that parties have increased their efforts to provide visitors to their websites with more substantive information and greater opportunities for engagement. Upon closer inspection, however, it appears that significant 2004 additions to the typical features listed above were confined to more frequent updates of campaign events and media coverage, electronic newsletters, and viral e-mail campaigns that encouraged recipients to forward party messages to their friends. Small laments the absence of features such as daily online polls and weblogs, but it is not clear whether the quality of voter engagement would necessarily be enhanced by their presence. In fact, the major parties seem to have studiously avoided using digital technology for more dialogic purposes. As Small (2005: 21) points out, in the 2004 federal election campaign “not one major party operated a discussion forum on their website.” An experiment revealed that while parties often *appear* to be inviting dialogue and interaction via their websites—via features such as links requesting “feedback” or directing visitors to “contact us”—appearances can be deceiving (Small 2005: 26). During the second week of the campaign, Small sent an e-mail to nine political parties requesting information

about the party's position on same-sex marriage. Two minor parties—the Greens and the Canadian Action Party—responded during the campaign; the Conservative Party was alone among the major parties in replying, but even it did not respond until August 6, over a month after election day. This experiment suggests that one of the Internet's primary utilities for political parties is the opportunity it affords for parties to talk the talk of democratic participation and openness online without necessarily having to walk the walk.

Interestingly, minor parties have been somewhat more adventurous than major parties in their use of ICTs to mediate political participation. The Green Party, for example, used its website to allow visitors to evaluate its platform planks in order to reopen discussion on unpopular items; it also featured a "Living Platform" function, which enabled users to post commentary on party policy and also to engage in discussion with other visitors both within and outside the party (Small 2004: 329). Indeed, Small finds that, on the whole, "minor parties were more likely to have discussion forums on their sites than major parties," suggesting that "minor parties are more open to using the Internet for interactive dialogue" (Small 2005: 21). The reason for this is likely motivational. While mainstream parties are typically motivated in their use of digital technology by the pursuit of efficiencies in the delivery of money, media attention, and votes, marginal parties are often driven by broader political motivations that entail widening the scope of political contestation and debate. It should come as no surprise, then, that minor parties have been more energetic in capitalizing on the opportunities the Internet affords for mediating this kind of activity. Still, the Internet has not really managed to level the playing field for marginal parties. As Small's research shows, while the web activity of minor parties equals or better that of major parties in terms of information dissemination and interactivity, when it comes to fundraising and effective delivery (presentation, freshness, responsiveness, visibility), minor and marginal parties (with the notable exception of the Greens) consistently lag behind their mainstream rivals. There is thus little support for the hypothesis that the Internet is a level playing field in relation to traditional mass media or that this medium will somehow exert an independent equalizing effect on party competition in Canadian election campaigns. As Small concludes, the dynamics of the Internet in this respect are best described as normalizing rather than equalizing.

It is tempting to conclude that, both in terms of the characteristic democratic practices of major political parties and the dominant position these parties enjoy in the mediascape, politics on and through the Internet in Canada are "politics as usual" (Small 2005). However, the possibility must be considered that the growing role played by ICTs in Canadian party politics may be contributing to a general decline in their democratic character,

perhaps to a level even below that of “politics as usual.” In the run-up to the 2004 election, the Liberal Party directed Canadians to visit the website [StephenHarperSaid.ca](#) to read quotations of compromising statements uttered by the Conservative leader, whose party responded in kind with [TeamMartinSaid.ca](#). These sites, comprising what one observer described as a “war of words online” (Small 2004: 314) set a tone for the campaign that was reminiscent of the mock playground battles enjoyed by Canadian children. During the campaign itself, party strategists wielding hand-held computers connected to wireless networks communicated with a similarly equipped press corps in rapid-fire efforts to seize the campaign agenda, undermine their adversaries, drive media coverage, and respond instantly to similar tactics employed by opposing campaigns. Digital messages containing accusations, revelations, rebukes, and compromising quotations, images, and video clips circulated from party researchers to hundreds of reporters across the country in an instant. And, all the while, party agents were hitting the doorsteps, telephone lines, and databases of the nation, collecting intelligence to be processed via the parties’ various vote-maximizing algorithms. Quickly, the contest assumed the rhythm of firing a volley, ducking to avoid one, and then firing again, with partisans wielding ICTs as they would weapons on a battlefield. Of course, for a couple of decades now, parties have been calling their strategic headquarters “war rooms.” But this was a political campaign, not a military one; an election, not a war. War, not to put too fine a point on it, is a symptom of democracy’s failure, not its defining event, as we generally assume elections to be.

One could think of several ways in which ICTs might be deployed to elevate the democratic character of elections rather than debasing them as some sort of militarist spectacle. Sadly, this may be too much to expect of political parties under contemporary political, economic, cultural, and technological conditions in Canada. Genuine democratic politics takes more imagination, and more courage, than war games, and new weapons are no surrogate for these virtues. Indeed, with our hands on new weapons we are easily seduced into believing there is no need for imagination and courage and that better technology will deliver the goods. In a way, the Internet has made it possible for parties to be more efficient at doing a bad job of mediating democratic political communication in Canada; and parties, via studied neglect, have done a disservice to the broader political possibilities of the Internet, reducing it to yet another means by which democratic energy can be sucked out of the political system. From a democratic point of view, the Internet may be the worst thing to have happened to political parties in recent memory, and the parties might be the worst thing to have happened to politics on the Internet. On the other hand, perhaps they deserve each other.

## Note

1. Portions of this chapter are adapted from Darin Barney, *Communication Technology: The Canadian Democratic Audit* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2005). Used with permission.

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