Reframing Campaigning: Communications, The Media and Elections in Canada

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Abstract

This article is a critical assessment of Canadian perspectives on the role of the media in electoral behaviour, notably on the roles media play in setting or responding to the agenda in the heat of election campaigns. Research into the role of the media in election campaigns has been conducted within the broadly behaviouralist tradition of political scientific research. The article begins with a brief contextualization of the behaviouralist research tradition in Canada. Within the specific context of Canadian history and its social structure, the introduction explains how the very questions that Canadians have posed regarding media/campaign interactions have been undertaken in a range of research traditions that problematize fields of causality with greater complexity than is possible in the largely positivist behaviouralist paradigm. Three such research traditions are those of "Culture, Ideology, and Discourse," "Political Economy/Technology," and "Legal-Institutional Analyses." The second section of the article highlights important Canadian methodological and empirical contributions to behaviouralism. The general importance of campaign effects, the impact of leader-centred media priming, the methodological innovation of the rolling cross-section sample design, and advances in agenda setting research are identified in this section. The third section of the article, on Culture, Ideology, and Discourse, illustrates general patterns of contrast between the Canadian and American political cultures through an exploration of the comparative role of negative and attack advertisements in election campaigns. The section details instances of how the limits established in the Canadian political culture influence media decisions and how the discourses of media coverage reflect cultural realities. The fourth section of the article illustrates how facets of the Political Economy of Canada exert an impact on media/ campaign interactions. This section explores the media/campaign interaction from both sides. First, the changing impact of campaign financing/campaign spending on media reportage is assessed, and then the implications of shifting patterns of media ownership on campaign coverage is considered. Do either set of changing relations affect the shaping of the media agenda? Finally, the political economy of the new

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Information and Communications Technologies is investigated in the context of the Toronto School of Communication. The fifth and final section of the article undertakes the task of situating media/campaign interactions within the Legal-Institutional regulatory context of the Canadian state. The impact of the Canada Elections Act and other legislation is undertaken around matters such as freedom of expression, access to information, advertising, spending, and public support for political parties and candidates.

Introduction

The origins of this article are situated in a recent invitation to speak on the role of the media in Canadian election campaigns.[1] A review of the available literature revealed some useful generalizations and impressive Canadian contributions toward the impact of the media upon election outcomes. In expanding upon what has already been contributed below, it is evident that the political behavior tradition has had most to say regarding the topic. The broader traditions of political communications - that have had a great deal to contribute toward our understanding of political practice more broadly conceived - have only infrequently been brought to bear specifically on the media-campaign focus. The purpose of this article is to begin to elaborate upon the role of the media in campaigns from a range of research traditions within the field of communications. In so doing, both existing empirical data and potential opportunities for future research are specified and elaborated.

Political Behaviour and Political Practice

The *Oxford Handbook of Political Behavior* is an up-to-date, comprehensive and authoritative survey of the field of political behavior. (Dalton and Klingemann, 2007a) Its pages provide details of research grounded within the broadly behaviouralist research paradigm, including political participation, political trust, elite and mass beliefs, political communication and electoral behaviour. The handbook references a considerable body of research, a substantial majority of which has its origins in the core challenges of American democracy, first theorized in the Columbia and Michigan schools. Not all of the volume strictly follows the behaviouralist paradigm, however, and the European contributions in particular derive their frameworks from a broader range of theoretical perspectives.

Canadian contributions to behaviouralist research in campaign and electoral behavior are well established in the *Oxford Handbook* and beyond. Canadians have been engaged in Canadian, American, and comparative research within the behaviouralist paradigm since the 1960s. A great deal is gained using behaviouralist methodologies, notably in the empirical and quantitative exactitude of survey research and controlled experiments. With acceptable levels of validity and reliability, along with tightly controlled research designs and protocols, a large quantity of useful comparative data can be collected and analyzed. However, even the most advanced multivariate analyses may be inadequate to the tasks of unearthing media complexity in political practices such as campaigning, in which the course of events can be turned around as a consequence of an entirely novel, unanticipated, trivial, or apparently irrelevant development.

Given the largely American origins of behaviouralism, a survey of the principal behaviouralist research interests of Canadian scholarship in campaign/electoral behavior permits us to

undertake an enquiry into the extent to which such research projects are "miniature replicas" of projects already undertaken in the USA or have somehow been adapted to researching Canadian specificity, exploring distinctly Canadian research *problematiques*. (Smiley, 1974) However, the question of Canadian specificity in electoral behavior goes beyond the matter of how far the behaviouralist paradigm might be adapted to fit Canadian circumstances, even though this remains an important matter. Theoretically, the behaviouralist tradition carries with it assumptions of scientific method and generalizability that privilege positivistic theories of knowledge. As we shall see in the case of the Canadian media in political campaigns, a historical, structural, and socially contextualized reading of Canadian culture, economy, and institutional forms does not merely generate distinctive *findings* regarding electoral behavior in Canada, but shapes the very *questions* that need to be addressed and the *theories* that are required to explore them. In order to develop an adequate appraisal of the media in election campaigns, we need to broaden and deepen our analyses and to look at the role of the media anthropologically - in a thick descriptive and more localized context - so that the nuances and the shades of the role of the media in the reproduction of social relations can be appreciated more profoundly.

The media are just *one* set of actors in the cast of characters that interact and communicate among each other throughout the drama of an election campaign. On occasion, the media play the lead role and direct the drama. On other occasions, they are bit part actors merely adding small elements to a narrative constructed elsewhere. They may also play the part of the chorus, amplifying and echoing what has happened elsewhere. The media also occasionally play the role of crude buffoon or acerbic fool in meaningful acts of subversion and inversion.[2] We might also draw the social psychological distinction between role and person. In this respect we can regard the media, on the one hand, from the perspective of role incumbents – simply speaking their assigned parts. On the other hand, we can regard the media as authors – as actors who have written their own scripts in the drama. The media can so play their roles that they transform them into something quite distinct. They can even become authors of their own destiny and that of others.

The principal point here is that the media cannot be placed in any pre-given way as independent or dependent variables into the equation of an election campaign. While valiant in its attempts to fix the singular role of the media and aspects of the media in election outcomes, the largely positivist field of political behaviour research has been unable to deliver many major robust and generalizable conclusions so far, despite the decades of surveys and experiments. In writing of media cause and effect, Vincent Mosco stresses "the ubiquity of social change, multiple determination, mutual constitution, and non-reductionism," (1996: 8) and in conceptualizing relations among media products, media producers, and audiences, says:

Use of the term 'causality' channels thinking into identifying how a thing, viewed as a singular entity (or things viewed as a set of entities), acts directly to transform the state of another thing or things, also seen as a singular whole or wholes. The term makes it considerably more difficult to think about how things work their component parts into one another. (1996: 137)

Lorimer, Gasher, and Skinner regard the media as: "one element in a larger set of institutions, technologies, and discourses that provide the means through which people live their lives." (Lorimer, Gasher, and Skinner, 2008: 128) With respect to the analysis of the effects of political advertising in election campaigns, MacDermid echoes this line of reasoning in his discovery that the attainment of a research design: "free from experimental effects and in a true election

environment is still distant and probably nonexistent." (MacDermid in Nesbitt-Larking and Rose, 2004: 287) For these reasons, it is increasingly necessary to frame the analysis of media and campaigns within the broader context of political communications. An adequate political communications of campaigning in contemporary Canada is based upon an awareness of the multiplicity and complexity of media, channels, agencies, genres, platforms for communication, and audiences in which global space and local time have imploded and in which so-called consequences are scarcely ahead of their causes. These contemporary realities of Canadian campaigning are vividly and breathtakingly evoked by Sampert and Trimble (2010: vii) in their sketch of the first morning of the 2008 federal election campaign.

Not only are we prompted to problematize contemporary space in order to ground a political communications of campaigning, but we are further served by returning in time to the eclectic origins of Canadian political theory, notably communications theory. (Babe, 2000) While these early Canadian contributions were deficient in many respects and lacking in systematicity, they nonetheless identify the three core and interdependent bases of political communications in: culture/ideology, economy/technology, and state/regulation. The specificity of a Canadian approach to the media and elections can be grounded in the important foundational work of Macpherson (1974), Cairns (1975), and Smiley (1974) in delineating certain distinctively Canadian traditions in social research. On the basis of these thick-descriptive historically and culturally embedded frameworks of understanding, we begin to understand Canadian distinctiveness and therefore the specific limitations and possibilities open to the media in Canadian election campaigns in reflecting, monitoring, commenting upon, shaping, and reshaping the discourses and practices of the federal election period.

In order to elaborate upon these ideas, the article begins with a summation of certain core Canadian findings on media and elections in the political behavior tradition. Both the value and the limitations of these Canadian contributions is highlighted. Following this section on the behaviouralist tradition, I turn my attention to three bases of the study of political practices from studies in political communications that serve to enlighten our appreciation of power and representation in Canadian elections: culture, ideology, and discourse; political economy and technology; and the legal-institutional analysis of the state and regulation.

The Behaviouralist Tradition in Canadian Electoral Research

The behaviouralist approach has achieved great success in Canadian political science. Most of the funded political scientific research into political behaviour, political choice, and election studies that has taken place in Canada fits well within the basic research paradigm. Behavioralism has generated certain important findings in the field of Canadian media and campaigns, and at least two innovations have made a contribution to international developments within the paradigm. First, among the earliest and most successful uses of the rolling cross-section design for tracking the emergence of opinion throughout a campaign period was the *Canadian National Election Study* of 1988, conducted by Johnston and his colleagues. (Johnston et al., 1992; Johnston and Brady, 2002) The rolling cross-section design permits a methodologically sound way to assess the impact of campaign events upon a sample of voters through the daily coverage of campaign events, media coverage, and survey responses. Second, research on agenda-setting has been substantially advanced by the work of Stuart Soroka, who skillfully combines content analysis with multivariate statistical analysis to demonstrate under

what circumstances the media, the public, and the government act as agenda setters. (Soroka, 2002).

Over the past twenty years, Canadian scholarship on media effects during campaigns has adapted variations on the rolling cross-section campaign survey. In his research on the 1988 federal election, Mendelsohn (1994, 1996) argues that the media primed respondents to cast their ballots on the basis of leader characteristics rather than on the basis of partisanship or attitudes toward the key issue of the campaign, free trade. Mendelsohn's research reveals strong correlations between exposure to the leader-centred media and a propensity to vote on the basis of leadership factors. Such leader-centred priming by the media is also reported for the 1993 and 1997 election campaigns by Gidengil and her colleagues (2002). These scholars uncover a distinctively Canadian pattern of results in which leader-dominated campaigns and corresponding media coverage in Canada in combination with the intensification of campaign effects brought about by the comparatively short length of the Canadian campaign generate leader-centred voting patterns in Canada.

Irrespective of the plausibility of these particular findings, the behaviouralist tradition has been increasingly under scrutiny from within. Among the best-known American scholars of media effects is Diana Mutz. In her book, *Impersonal Influence* (Mutz, 1998), Mutz demonstrates how media shape perceptions of political trends and developments, which in turn shape political attitudes. However, in her subsequent work on political psychology and choice, she articulates the limitations of research grounded in measures of individual self-assessment on political choices. She comments that we are easily misled by people's capacity "to rationalize their emotions and choices. In addition, it is disturbing to lose the comfort of believing that there is an accessible, transparent logic to individuals' political choices." (Mutz, 2007: 92) In a more general sense, this echoes the acknowledgement of Dalton and Klingemann that the development of the behavioural tradition and the accumulation of greater bodies of empirical findings "produces a real irony: even though we have greater scientific knowledge, our ability to predict and explain political behavior may actually be decreasing in some areas….we have gained greater certainty about the uncertainty of voter decisions." (Dalton and Klingemann, 2007b: 19) In summarizing the behaviouralist literature on media effects on trust in European political campaigns, Semetko (2007: 129) describes mixed findings in which the media are alternately found, on the one hand, to demobilize and diminish trust, and, on the other hand, to stimulate mobilization and trust. Semetko says that negative news in the media: "may contribute to cynicism, but negative information tends to be more easily remembered and thus more effective at enhancing citizens' overall information levels." (Semetko, 2007: 135) It is clear to these contemporary scholars that the complexities of situated campaign behaviour evade empirical capture once and for all.

Given the challenges of behaviouralist research articulated in American and European scholarship, it is of little surprise that even the most sophisticated of Canadian research projects run up against challenges of correctly modelling causality. Mendelsohn and Nadeau (1999) are able to correlate voting intentions for the Progressive Conservative party in the 1993 election with the daily balance of positive and negative TV news coverage of PC leader Kim Campbell throughout the campaign. However, given the catastrophic nature of the Progressive Conservative campaign and the powerful effects of discursive shifts occurring throughout the political landscape, it is difficult to sustain the authors' claim of a specific media cause and voting intention outcome. The authors concede this point to some extent when they say:

"unfortunately, it is not possible with the data at hand to disentangle the effect of shifting news conventions during the various phases of the campaign from changes in real-world cues…the changes in the behavior of the media, the candidates, and the voters all reinforce one another." (Mendelsohn and Nadeau, 1999: 73) Such doubts receive further empirical support in Dobrzynska et al.'s (2003) coverage of media valence and voting outcomes in the 1997 federal election. Dobrzynska et al. reveal patterns of change in voter intention that are only temporary and therefore exert no lasting media impact. They conclude: "our combination of two different empirical tests suggests that the media may affect the evolution of voting intentions during the course of an election but that there is still no clear evidence that they had a direct impact on voting choice." (Dobrzynska et al., 2003: 39-40)

Culture, Ideology, Discourse and Canadian Electoral Research

While the inclination of behaviouralist scholars is to specify better models or to identify additional data – often through a narrowing of focus - those in the broader approaches of cultural studies, political economy, and legal-institutional approaches are more inclined to follow the lead of Richard LaPiere, who concluded in 1934 that it is often better to make an educated and informed qualitative generalization about something important than to have acquired precise quantitative data regarding something that is trivial. (LaPiere, 1934) While these alternative methodologies may lack the exactitude of quantitative studies, they tap into elements of the Canadian experience that deeply inform what we can say about the role of media in election campaigns.

Of their nature, cultures, ideologies, and the discourses that surround them emerge and condition political practices over the longer term and so there seems to be little to say regarding the *specific* impact of political cultures, ideologies, and discourses throughout the media during election campaigns. And yet, there are some useful points that can be made in these regards and the overall approach suggests the possibility of future research.

First, research in the tradition of the early agenda-setting work of McCombs and his colleagues has not been prominent in Canada. McCombs and his colleagues studied a conservative and a liberal newspaper in the 1968 and 1972 American elections in order to assess the extent to which voters' rankings of issues accorded with those of the newspapers they read. (McCombs and Shaw, 1972, 1993) In the Canadian context, Soroka notes: "there is a good deal of similarity among Canadian newspapers where issue salience is concerned." (Soroka, 2002: 43) There appears to be a striking degree of uniformity across the issue coverage of Canadian newspapers and this finding is confirmed by Soroka's analysis of the 2004 and 2006 federal elections. (Soroka and Andrew, 2010: 117) While certain moderate biases are detectable in the tone of coverage, notably in opinion and commentary sections of the newspapers (Soroka and Andrew, 2010: 120), ideological bias as revealed in agenda setting is not readily apparent.

Second, despite scattered complaints made over the course of past elections by partisans of media bias, there has been little sustained evidence of this and systematic empirical analysis has shown the Canadian media to be generally fair and balanced both in terms of exposure and tone of coverage. (Pammett and Dornan, 2004, 2006, 2009) As we shall see, larger challenges facing the Canadian media are those of cultural irrelevance and bland ideological indifference. The media serve neither to promote not to protect. Of greater promise are those contrasts that emerge when the Canadian political culture is assessed against American political culture. While

Canadian political culture shares much in common with American political culture, its differences are sufficient to generate interesting contrasts between the respective roles of the media in election campaigns. As in so many respects, the Canadian political culture occupies a space somewhere between the USA and Western Europe. In comparison with the USA, Canadian political culture has been more communitarian, ascriptive, elitist, law-abiding, and cautious. (Lipset, 1990; Wiseman, 2007) Despite globalization, culture shifts, postmodern forces toward cultural fragmentation, and commonalities across national boundaries, the distinctions appear to continue to exert an impact. (Grabb and Curtis, 2005)

Such differences are apparent in the respective discourses of political advertising. While American-style campaigning and political advertising has become widespread in Canada, it has never occupied the secure and central cultural role that it has in the USA. English Canadian political culture shares a language, but also manifests a resistance to the glibness and superficial slickness of political advertisements. (Nesbitt-Larking and Rose, 2004: 285-287) Relatively speaking, Canadian citizens are more likely to value reflective judgment, slow deliberation, and social responsibility. These qualities are antithetical to much of what is acceptable in the USA. American political advertisements occupy a more homogeneous cultural space in which political debate can be more of a matter of market choice. In the Canadian context, however, the parliamentary traditions of responsible government, in conjunction with the relentless quest for political identity, render political debate altogether more philosophical and ideological. This is why Canadian political advertisements are more party centred than their American counterparts. (Fletcher and MacDermid, 1998) It also explains why the negativity in Canadian advertisements is normally contrastive and substantive, rather than being personally vindictive and mean-spirited.

On the rare occasions when particular political advertisements have emerged that run counter to the political culture during the course of an election campaign, the media have tended to respond to the broader and diffuse political culture to give them direction. Of course, those targeted in the attack advertisements have also played a role in protesting and mobilizing discontent. The most notable instance of this occurred in the 1993 federal election campaign, where the Progressive Conservative campaign of Kim Campbell launched an advertisement in which Liberal leader Jean Chrétien's lined and twisted face featured prominently. A woman's voice-over expressed embarrassment at the prospect of having Chrétien as Prime Minister. While the advertisement had done well in focus groups, almost as soon as it went to air it began to attract criticism for being personally vindictive and an unfair attack on an unavoidable – if minor - deformity. Within a day or so, Kim Campbell ordered the advertisement removed. However, the damage had been done and the media continued to play clips from the advertisement, amplifying what was widely perceived as the mean-spiritedness of the Progressive Conservative campaign. A minor echo of this occurred in 1997, when the Reform Party produced a composite poster of four Quebec politicians with red lines drawn through their faces. The effective message was "no more political leaders from Quebec." Two of the depicted politicians reflected the mood of the majority, referring to the depictions as "bigoted" (Jean Charest) and "divisive." (Jean Chrétien) Again, the media reported upon these developments and amplified them, but did not act independently.

A recent series of attack advertisements has introduced certain new elements into Canadian campaigning and suggest new strands for future research. From its election as a minority government in 2006 until the 2008 federal election campaign, the Harper Conservative

government ran periodic mini advertising campaigns portraying former Liberal leader Stephane Dion as weak and in the words of the advertisement, "not a leader." Public reaction to the advertisements was mixed, but muted for the most part. A combination of the success of the Conservatives in their construction of Mr. Dion and his own failure to offer the public any reason to doubt such a portrayal gradually cost him his credibility as a leader. What is interesting is that the media appears to have remained silent on both the nature of the advertisements and their timing. This series of relentless attack advertisements defined Stephane Dion before he had a chance to define himself and reflected a new American-style permanent campaign strategy on the part of the Harper Conservatives. While it remains to be properly analyzed, it seems apparent that there was little critical commentary on the advertising campaign, either outside or inside the official campaign period. It is curious that the media chose not to comment on the meta-tactics of the Conservative campaign or to present a robust case that the social construction of Dion as a wimp was a deliberate attempt to weaken his credibility and his policy perspectives in the eyes of the public. Most importantly, it appears that most Canadian media implicitly or explicitly agreed with the claims of the Conservatives and thereby served to normalize and amplify their case. Only when a Conservative staffer altered one of the advertisements for an on-line campaign by depicting a bird flying over Dion and defecating on him was there any attempt to hold back on this line of attack. As in 1993, the offending advertisement was quickly removed and an apology given. However, on this occasion the incident appears to have exerted little impact on the campaign. As of the time of writing (May, 2009) the Harper Conservatives have just released a series of attack advertisements designed to weaken the credibility of the new leader of the Liberal party, Michael Ignatieff. As with the Dion advertisements, an academic assessment of their effectiveness has yet to be undertaken and it remains to be seen what impact – if any – they will exert.

The issue of attack advertisements and the complicity of the Canadian media raise serious questions regarding media treatment of a series of Canadian political leaders over the past few decades. It is clear from studies of the 1979 election campaign that Conservative leader, Joe Clark, was systematically ridiculed throughout the media for being a "wimp." The media later came to regret their own excesses and experienced a sense of collective guilt that they perhaps had contributed in some way to the lack of success of his short-lived government. In the 2000 election, the media treatment accorded Canadian Alliance leader Stockwell Day had echoes of the 1979 campaign treatment of Joe Clark. On this occasion, however, the majority verdict was that an inexperienced Day and his team were principally to blame for the blunders. A recent instance of media controversy that was able to take the pulse of the political culture in English Canada was the decision of the media to exclude Green Party leader Elizabeth May from the leaders debates in the 2008 election. The consortium of Canadian TV broadcasters had made the decision with reference to their best interpretation of their own guidelines on who should be invited to participate. In the first place, an invitation was not issued to Ms. May, whose party held no seats in the House of Commons. There was a large-scale and viral campaign among mostly younger and more progressive citizens to have Ms. May included. In the end, the other parties relented and she took part in both the English and the French-language debates. Again, the media reacted and relented.

The extent to which American campaign practices have influenced Canada is mixed. While there has been since the late 1950s, direct and overt influence with respect to the employment of American campaign professionals in Canada and the adoption of professional campaign techniques adopted in the USA, the specificities of Canada's political culture, political economy

and institutional forms set limits to the transferability of American campaigning. (Nesbitt-Larking and Rose, 2004) With respect to the Americanization of the campaign process, the media can be regarded as willing partners, as innocent victims, as socially-responsible organs of resistance, or as some combination of these qualities. For the most part, the media appear not to have offered a great deal of autonomous resistance. As explained below in the section on the political economy of the media, media buyouts, consolidations and convergences have both centralized and impoverished the editorial quality across the professional media in Canada. Such economic developments weaken the editorial discretion and critical capacity of the media, who become less able and willing to act as a critical fourth estate and more tempted to swallow wholesale the messages of highly-funded professional party campaigns. Almost by default, the real action has shifted to the Internet and to the blogosphere. (Brown, 2010; Longford and Patten, 2010)

What role will the Canadian media play as campaign advertising becomes increasingly negative and personal attack advertisements increase? How far can they – or should they – counter the emerging reality of the earlier and earlier struggle of campaign teams, such as the Harper Conservatives, to define themselves or their opponents – in order to fill the perceptual vacuum and destroy an opponent before they can define themselves? (Shea and Burton, 2006: 25) How do the media discern pseudo-events or resist the seductions of free editorial material of high news value? (Jamieson and Campbell, 2001: 139) In the event of further developments in the Americanization of Canadian campaigns, it is possible that partisan bids to win "earned media" and to take the greatest advantage of free media will increase. As they do so, the professional media will need to develop strategies of resistance, which are very difficult when party campaign professionals generate slick "uneditable, dramatic, concise, and synoptic" editorial material with such strong news value and high production value. (Jamieson and Campbell, 2001: 134). Reporting on the federal election of 2006, Waddell and Dornan express deep concern regarding an overdependence on the part of major Canadian newspapers on unnamed sources, some of which turned out to be highly partisan and unreliable. (Waddell and Dornan, 2006: 243) There is a likelihood that as they professionalize and modernize, political campaigns in Canada are going to get further into voter targeting, pandering, narrowcasting, segmenting, tailoring messages, slick political marketing, deliberate and sustained priming, and the over-personalization of politics. As they do so, the media need to stay abreast if they want to play any role in moderating, ameliorating, or presenting an alternative point of view. To the extent that the media – notably the public media - fall behind, the public is left to its own devices in order to sift through the rhetoric and the rallying cries.

Political Economy, Technology, and Canadian Electoral Research

As with research into culture, ideology, and discourse, most of the work in political economy has been concerned with the *longue durée* and little of it has been addressed directly to campaigns and the media. Despite this, there are at least three important questions that might be addressed. Firstly, given changes in the political economy of campaign financing and strategies on campaign spending, what role do the media play in reflecting, reporting, or critically examining emerging party practices? There is no neutral role for the media here. Second, how far have changes in patterns of media ownership affected the willingness and the capacity of the media to engage in critical investigative journalism throughout campaigns? Finally, how might the early insights of the Toronto School of Communication be applied to sensitize us to the role of the new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in Canadian political campaigns

of the early 21st century? While these questions are important and potentially revealing, they have received relatively little attention in Canadian campaign research and might well form the basis of some interesting projects in the future. The following section exemplifies a range of issues and perspectives of potential interest.

With respect to the first issue, the Chrétien Liberal government of 2003 introduced seismic changes to the funding of Canadian political parties in the passage of Bill C-24, *An Act to Amend the Canada Elections Act and the Income Tax Act (Political Financing).* At a stroke, the act introduced stringent new $5000 per year spending limits for personal campaign donations; limited donations from businesses of unions to $1000 per year in total; created transparency for anyone donating in excess of $200 a year by publishing their names and addresses; and prohibited any donations from non-Canadian sources. Recognizing the financial shortfall for the major parties induced by these dramatic changes, the Act also introduced a substantial measure of public financing to bolster the large tax incentives already in place to encourage individual contributions. Any party gaining more than 2 per cent of the vote nationally or in excess of five per cent in the ridings in which they ran would be given $1.75 on an annual basis for each vote they gained. This Act was to have a substantial impact on the way in which parties raise money and it was further modified by the Conservative Party of Mr. Harper, who reduced the individual limits from $5000 to $1000 in 2006. Controversially, in November 2008, he attempted to introduce legislation that would have ended any public funding of political parties. That single act contributed to the near downfall of the Conservative government and – indirectly – to the reshaping of the Conservative budget for 2009. The dramatic changes brought about by these new financial regulations have altered the political landscape for parties and hitherto major corporate and wealthy donors. They suggest important research agenda for political economists, in exploring how the changes in party financing have affected corporate and elite influence in federal politics. Among the more important questions are: How far has the necessity to rely upon larger numbers of small donors influenced both internal party democracy and the construction of the party platform?; Are we able to detect any trends toward party democratization?; and what mechanisms have hitherto large donors adopted to assure continued influence? The media have had the opportunity to reflect and comment on the impact of these changes throughout the elections of 2006 and 2008. While the role of the media remains to be fully investigated, there seems to have been little curiosity on the part of the press in how the new party contribution changes have affected campaigning.

While they continue to be relevant, Canada's principal regulatory agencies have confronted the growing challenges of media regulation in a global world of increasingly transferable digital data in which media hardware or platforms are of decreasing relevance. Within this context, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) has abandoned any attempt to control the Internet, and new state strategies are increasingly focused upon branding and marketing Canada to the world rather than attempting to prevent the world from permeating Canada. Recent decisions in media ownership patterns are of particular importance in this regard. Following decades of refusal to permit cross-media ownership, the CRTC has recently granted a number of large corporations permission to merge into cross-media convergences, each with interests in television, radio, specialty channels, telecommunications, newspapers, magazines, and other related ventures. Prominent examples are *CanWest Global Communications Corporation*, *Quebecor* and *Bell Globemedia*.

These media convergences have been created to facilitate new synergies in the production and distribution of media content. Following standard business models, the emphasis has been upon rationalizing, downsizing, flatlining, and outsourcing. Such moves immediately raise serious questions regarding the adequacy with which the media have been able to sustain serious and informed journalism throughout election campaigns. Canadian media scholars, such as Taras (1999) and Winter (2005) have been critically aware of the impact of the corporate model on the diversity of investigative journalism in Canada. These scholars raise serious questions that are linked to patterns of changing media ownership and the consequent capacity/willingness to comment. The media report on relations between economy and state regulation, but they are also part of that relationship. How do they ensure that their reportage and editorial commentaries are balanced to include the voices of those disadvantaged by media buyouts? There is Canadian empirical evidence in the 2006 election campaign that cuts to editorial staffs reduced coverage of campaign news and increased the quanta of opinion and editorial material throughout the election period. (Waddell and Dornan, 2006: 231) Jim MacKenzie of the University of Regina and Romayne Smith Fullerton and Mary Doyle of the University of Western Ontario furnish evidence that cuts to newsroom staffs result in serious and substantial declines in editorial content. (Mackenzie in Roberts, 1996; Fullerton and Doyle, 2007) Of particular importance to the electoral process is the sense in which both local candidates and local issues have received reduced attention in the growth of media conglomerates, thus accentuating the centralization of political power in the political elites and diminishing the visibility and the legitimacy of both parliament and the local party, and thereby weakening Canadian democracy. As political party media capabilities grow in sophistication and their capillaries infiltrate the farthest reaches of the polity, so the need for robust, independent, and well-funded media increase in importance. Convergences, conglomerations, and consolidations are grounded in business models that are indifferent to the public purpose. Such developments are of great concern to a vulnerable electorate in the heat of an election campaign.

The principal contribution of the Toronto School of Communications is to sensitize us to regarding social structures, discourses, and practices through the way in which media technologies shape and condition our experiences. Ahead of his time by three decades, Marshall McLuhan (1966) understood the emerging nature of the new ICTs. Today, the ubiquity of the personal video camera and other recording devices in conjunction with the availability of the Internet for the almost instant dissemination of images and sounds, conditions and sets limits to what candidates and activists can do during the course of a campaign. Canadian campaigns have so far avoided the American drama of highly edited video clips of politicians and controversial activists praising each other. Such clips of Obama, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, Rashid Khalidi, and William C. Ayers, became part of an unsuccessful bid on behalf of the McCain-Palin campaign to stitch together an anti-American or pro-terrorist narrative against Barack Obama in 2008. It is uncertain how much cultural resonance such attempts would have in a Canadian campaign, but it is clear that the technology is there to undertake such attacks.

The end of the regulatory tyranny of limited bandwidth, associated with the early years of radio and television, has resulted in the decline of the major broadcasters throughout the world, including Canada. Corresponding to this has been a decline in the viewership of the standard broadcast news program, and the rise of infotainment, docudrama, faction, reality TV, and late-night spoof news shows. What counts as news is taking place increasingly in these forums and less in the traditional news broadcasts that are, in turn, struggling to stay hip and relevant. A recent example of the consequences of this was prompted by the Canadian Alliance Party, led

by Stockwell Day, in the 2000 federal election campaign. The Alliance included an item in its platform that would have given three per cent of the Canadian electorate the right to call for a Referendum on any issue. Comedian Rick Mercer used the web site for his popular comedy show started mid-campaign to start an on-line petition to have Stockwell Day's first name changed to "Doris." Within a few weeks, sufficient numbers of amused fans and others were attracted and the threshold passed. The Canadian Alliance subsequently and quietly dropped the referendum idea. The Day episode stresses the increasing importance of the Internet and its capacity to subvert elite messages in election campaigns. While the Internet has not yet become a meaningful forum for deliberative democracy and while most activists remain marginalized on the Internet, its crude egalitarianism and populist potential has already become apparent, even if largely among those activists who are already engaged.

From its initial boost in American Senator Dianne Feinstein's 1996 campaign, (Howard, 2006: 9) the use of the Internet has expanded exponentially in both the USA and Canada to become a highly integrated part of recent campaigns. As McLuhan theorized, initial uses of new media simply appropriated and replicated the old style of political campaigning, with the Internet as an extension of the billboard or the party platform. Gradually, however, the Internet has come to be used as a vehicle for the flow of information and the exchange of views. Following McLuhan, we can ask ourselves what the Internet enhances, obsolesces, retrieves, and reverses. (McLuhan and McLuhan, 1992) Put briefly, the Internet *enhances* the possibility of complex webs of interpersonal communication and the sharing of ideas across traditional national boundaries, along with the shaping of new virtual communities. In this way, the global village is constructed beyond linear space and time and there are new dangers/possibilities of retribalization. The Internet *obsolesces* newspaper and bandwidth broadcasting, replacing them with hypertexts and infinite channels of narrowcasting. The Internet *retrieves* the local and the personal and the particularistic in human communication, even as it radically strips such characteristics from the fixity of time and place and bodily existence. This accentuates the dangers/opportunities of socio-psychological hybridity. Finally, the Internet *reverses* into the hyperreal carnival of unmanageable and unmanaged digital data that defeats its own promise by overwhelming our senses and our capacity to discriminate.

How far has the Internet realized its potential in the course of contemporary political campaigns? We can list the actual/potential campaign uses of the Internet in an approximately additive way, rather like a Guttman Scale, with the easiest and most conventional uses listed first and the more challenging and transformative uses listed later:

1. A platform to replicate traditional party political and candidate information, found in flyers, platforms, videos, policy statements, speeches, and letters;

2. A service facility for sending out e government information on government functions and public services;

3. An on-line easy-to-access tool for citizens to complete government documents;

4. A multidimensional communicational tool through e mails, texting, twittering, and other modes of contact;

5. A place of government record to enhance greater transparency in government decision-making;

6. A cyber universe of diverse and various political ideas, ideals, and information – including marginal and alternative ideas;

7. A facility for people of like mind to share visions and missions through social networking sites and blogs;

8. A platform for fund-raising of a democratic nature;

9. A site for political mobilization, agitation, the planning of demonstrations and flash mobs.

10. A forum for deliberation and direct democracy – for developing public policy.

11. A tool for direct democracy and e voting;

The egalitarian form of political blogging has emerged as a major element of political life both in and out of campaigns. The traditional media are now linked to the blogosphere, have their own blogs, and are the object of commentary from others in the blogosphere. The consequences of this in campaign terms have included the following: (1) an acceleration of information flow; (2) a blurring of the boundaries between fact and opinion; (3) the proliferation of wide-ranging commentaries on political persons or objects, mostly unoriginal, but startlingly diverse and frank; (4) the evolution of a sense of crude legitimacy of sorts in the sense of a rapid recording of the viral views of those in the blogosphere. Rather slower to develop in Canada than in the USA is the use of the Internet as a tool of political mobilization and as a fundraising vehicle. However, these functions are also increasingly in play. Of great interest is the use of social networking sites, such as *Facebook*, to construct political campaigns in real time, and of the use of *YouTube* to disseminate compelling audio-visual imagery of a political nature with very little budget. With respect to fundraising and community animation, the campaigns of Howard Dean and Barack Obama have constructed new campaign practices that will both circumvent the traditional media and become more mainstream and anticipated in the months and years to come in Canada and beyond.

Legal-Institutional Perspectives on Canadian Electoral Research

Media and campaign interactions take place within a set of state structures established in law and regulation. The role of the media in election campaigns is shaped by such criteria. The *Canada Elections Act* establishes a series of regulations governing the media in federal election campaigns. Among the more important, section 320 makes it mandatory for the Official Agent of a candidate or party to authorize any election advertising, and Section 321 prohibits any party advertising through government documents. Reflecting over a decade of controversial debate, deliberation, and litigation, section 328 prohibits the release of new opinion polls on polling day. Attempting to balance the freedom of Canadian citizens to access polling information with the concern that polls might unduly influence the average voter, the Canadian courts and Parliament came down on the side of the free dissemination of poll findings, regarding restrictions as unnecessary and patronizing among a sophisticated electorate. Under the law, the release of new polls is only banned on election day itself. The most important consequence of this provision is the ban entrance and exit polls.

Throughout the 1980s, academics such as Fred Fletcher, Guy Lachapelle, and David Taras railed against the poverty of popular media reportage of opinion polls and the consequent biases in the impressions given of their interpretations. (Nesbitt-Larking, 2007: 294-295) Following the *Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing* (the Lortie Commission), which reported in 1992, legislation was introduced to demand a greater degree of social responsibility on the part of the media in how they reported polls. Section 326 responds to claims made during the hearings of the Lortie Commission that the media had been irresponsible in reporting unscientifically conducted polls, with misleading consequences. The Act now stipulates that a wide range of methodological and other relevant polling information be included with any published presentation of polling data. While the Act seems to have made a difference, (Durand 2002, 2005) there remain some serious doubts as to the extent to which its details have been implemented. (Ferguson and de Clercy, 2005) Sections 330 and 331 effectively limit foreign influence and interference in Canadian election campaigns. A certain amount of free time broadcasting for political parties is made available under the legislation, (section 345) as well as a guaranteed block of paid prime-time broadcasting opportunities. (section 335) The Act designates a Broadcasting Arbitrator (sections 332-334) that calculates formulae to determine how much free and paid time each party is permitted. While there are no limits on the amount of paid broadcast time a party can purchase, a broadcaster must make additional time available in proportion to the formula should they wish to purchase it.

Under Section 347 of the *Canada Elections Act* The Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) issues regular circulars to Canadian broadcasters establishing certain conditions that they must follow during elections. (CRTC, 2009) Political parties, candidates, and issues must receive "equitable" treatment. This concept is open to interpretation, but the practice has been to allocate air time proportionate to the approximate electoral strength of the party as measured by seats already held or proportion of the vote garnered in the previous election. The discourse employed by the CRTC in its guidelines employs language such as "equitable," "reasonable," and "similar opportunities." These are sensitizing terms governed by the cultural norms of community standards within the Canadian context. Exactly what they mean is open to contestation, but the decision of the Canadian broadcasters to exclude Elizabeth May from the leaders' debates in the 2008 federal election, discussed earlier, revealed the limits of these meanings.

A highly contentious area of election behavior has been the matter of "third party advertising." This simply means advertising purchased to influence the outcome of an election during the election campaign itself that has not been purchased by a political party or its candidates. Following the *Election Expenses Act* of 1974, a complete ban on third-party spending lasted until 1984, when the ban on third-party spending was struck down, following a Charter appeal. There followed a period of financial free for all. The 1988 federal election was fought on the principal issue of Free Trade and whether to enter into a Canada-US Free Trade agreement. Throughout the campaign, business special interest groups spent large sums of money to buy advertising in favour of free trade. There was a perception that unrestricted third-party spending by richly-endowed lobby groups helped to "buy" the election for the pro-free trade Mulroney Progressive Conservative Party. The Lortie Commission recommended a compromise position of limits upon third-party spending. Limits were set in place in new election legislation, but their constitutionality was tested by Stephen Harper in 2000 as president of the National Citizens'

Coalition, a right-wing interest group. Harper and his colleagues argued the case against any limits on third-party spending in the name of freedom of speech. The Supreme Court of Canada upheld the right of the government to impose reasonable third-party spending limits in 2004. The consensus of the Canadian state was to restrict spending in the name of electoral fairness, especially since political parties and candidates are covered by spending limits. Following much deliberation, the Act now stipulates national and constituency spending limits for third parties (section 350) as well as requiring disclosure for third parties (sections 353 and 356)

Further legal and constitutional criteria shape the role of the media in election campaigns. Constitutional guarantees of fundamental legal and political freedoms, laws and regulations on defamation, restrictions on hate speech, federal security of information, access to information, privacy legislation, and matters that are considered *sub judice* are operative at all times, but can take on particular importance during the course of an election campaign when the political stakes are high. In the course of the 2006 federal election campaign, an unexpected intrusion was the decision by the RCMP to launch a criminal investigation into a senior member of the Liberal Party of Canada, Finance Minister Ralph Goodale. Following an initial complaint, the RCMP decided to launch the investigation even though they also stated that they had no evidence of any criminal activity. The media had little choice but to report the events, which took place within three weeks of the vote, and even though they attempted to be fair and even-handed, the very linkage in the minds of the voters between a senior politician and a criminal investigation must have been unwelcome for the Liberal Party.

While perhaps mundane in certain respects, what is possible in the conduct of media campaigns is established within the framework of laws and regulations that shape who can do and say what, under what circumstances, and to what extent. As central campaign actors, the media, parties, leaders, and activists – and their various interactions - are all shaped by such parameters.

Conclusion

Having explored a diversity of Canadian theories on the role of the media in electoral behavior, it is apparent that while each of them has contributed in certain ways, there remains a great deal that might be done. The tradition of research into electoral behavior is primarily situated in the behaviouralist paradigm. Canadian contributions to behaviouralist theory and the accumulated empirical findings have been noteworthy. Of particular interest is the propensity of the media to prime leadership qualities in Canadian election campaigns. Despite these contributions, a deeper exploration of Canadian history and structure generates questions whose investigation benefits from a broader range of theories, those of culture, ideology, and discourse; political economy and technology; and the legal-institutional approach.

Of their nature, both cultural/ideological studies and political economy approaches are broad and diffuse, depending as they do on constructivist or critical realist epistemologies. Understandably, neither has had a great deal to say regarding election campaigns as such. The focus of political choice under such circumstances is too narrow. However, both can be adapted and reveal certain insights. With respect to ideology, it is interesting to note that there is little evidence of media ideological agenda-setting exerting an impact in Canadian elections. We can detect distinctions between Canada and the USA in political advertising campaigns that reflect a broad Canadian political culture. Canadian advertisements tend to be party centred and less

personally negative than their American counterparts. The media are revealed to have rarely played a leadership role in campaigns, and have usually followed and reacted, at most amplifying and echoing information and insights from the campaign players. The Canadian media have shown remarkably little curiosity regarding the broader impact of changes to campaign finance regulations, and there is a concern that corporate concentration and convergence has led to a deterioration in news coverage and critical/investigative journalism. The emerging world of new ICTs and their capacity to change the role of the media in election campaigns has been noted. Investigation of ICTs will necessitate a renewed analysis of media, communications, and politics in campaign periods and beyond.

Of less immediate interest is the manner in which the relationship between the media and election behavior in Canada is modified through the principal laws and regulations that govern the conduct of all major actors in the campaign period. There are strict guidelines governing what the media can and cannot do with respect to the reporting of polls, granting air time to candidates and parties, and other matters. As with many other facets of Canadian politics and society, the rather bland and routine characteristics of laws, regulations, and accepted guidelines for conduct exert a profound impact, despite often being underestimated and overlooked. As Skocpol noted, it is indeed time to bring "the state back in." (Skocpol, 1985)

When it comes to the analysis of the role of the media in election campaigns, it is evident that while the political behaviour tradition has generated some important findings in the Canadian perspective, a broader approach, employing a range of other theories available in Canadian political communications is most fruitful. Theories of culture/ideology, political economy/technology, and state regulation might appear to be only tangentially related to the heat of the campaign period. In fact, as we have seen, such theoretical perspectives open up election analysis to a broader range of perspectives and a deeper framework for critical enquiry. In so doing, they not only provide richer answers to long-standing questions already on the research agenda, they introduce a series of new questions and in so doing reframe our investigations of election campaigns.

Endnotes

[1] Mexico-Canada Seminar on Media and Democracy. *Universidad Iberoamericana*, Mexico City, 16-17 February, 2009

[2] My thanks to Michael Howlett for suggesting this role of the media.

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