“Amusing Ourselves to Death?”: Social Media, Political Satire, and the 2011 Election

Ian Reilly
University of Guelph

With the 2011 election firmly behind us, there is good reason to review the social media practices and practitioners that garnered media attention during what became an historic election. In the wake of the federal election—what Twitter users inventively called #elxn41—it is useful to preface this discussion with a brief overview of the results. As The Current’s Anna Maria Tremonti observed in her post-election coverage on CBC Radio, Canada is “experiencing a seismic shift in federal politics,” evinced in the decisive reconfiguration of the contemporary political landscape. For our purposes here, a post-election snapshot of this landscape should prepare the way for the discussion at hand:

- Stephen Harper wins a majority government (with 39.62% of the popular vote).
- The NDP takes more than 100 seats—an unprecedented 58 seats in Québec—and secures the title of official opposition for the very first time.
- Michael Ignatieff takes the Liberals to a crushing defeat and resigns.
- The Bloc Québécois wins a combined four seats; Gilles Duceppe announces that he, too, is stepping down as party leader.
- Elizabeth May becomes the first Green Party member to be elected to the House of Commons.
- A record number of women are elected to public office (76 women in total).
- Voter turnout is 61.4% (or 14.7 million voters), a slight increase from 59.1% in the 2008 election.

For all the drama and excitement that federal elections generate in the public sphere, it is becoming increasingly crucial to examine the wide range and variety of social media deployed throughout election cycles. In doing so, we are better equipped to take the temperature of Canadian civic culture, while assessing the significance these online practices have for political life in Canada. In a social media environment awash with passionate youth voting mobs (“The Yes Women”), devoted anti-Harper hipsters (“Enough Harper”), astute Star Wars modders, enraged senior citizens (“Ottawa Raging...
Grannies”), embattled fashionistas (“Canadian Political Makeovers”), and disgruntled girlfriends (“It’s Over Steve!!”), the Canadian public sphere is arguably alive and well, offering candid (and at times) compelling critiques of electoral politics and governance. In addition, social media has emerged as a dominant platform through which everyday citizens have come to share, organize, and communicate their ideas, often in the form of serious political critique and/or irreverent satirical comment. Although social media platforms make these endeavours accessible to increasingly large groups of online users, what remains to be seen is the extent to which these practices alter public opinion and/or re-frame the rules of civic engagement. In what follows, I examine some of these examples to shed light on the strengths and limitations of these kinds of political activism. While the examples discussed below offer important alternative frames through which to critically evaluate government and leadership, and while the social media practices that emerged during the election offer a useful window into the future of civic engagement and political participation in this country, it remains to be seen whether these vehicles of political critique will live up to the democratic promise and potential so often ascribed to them.

“Canada’s first social media election”

In what has been coined Canada’s “first social media election,” the Canadian electorate encountered a dizzying array of social media content. To highlight some of potential uses of social media within the context of electoral politics, and to get a better sense of how social media were engaged during the election, I examine some key examples of civically engaged projects that captured the popular imagination. One of the most compelling stories that emerged during the election campaign revolved around the so-called “youth vote.” Following a dismal turnout on the part of the 18-24 year old demographic in the 2008 election (roughly 37% of voters casting a ballot), a series of vote mobs, staged in large part by university students across the country, produced a momentary shift in public perception toward young voters. Vote mobs began to spring up after Rick Mercer challenged the more than three million young, eligible voters “to do the unexpected and vote.” As Mercer put it, the federal parties made public their plans “to target the ethnic vote, the women’s vote, the blue collar vote, the corporate vote. If there were more than five paraplegic lesbian Inuit women in Labrador,” Mercer quipped, “they would be a target.” What Mercer made explicit in his rant was that virtually every voter demographic in the country had been accounted for, save the youth vote. Emboldened by Mercer’s message (and perhaps keen to deflate the myth of a disengaged and apathetic young electorate), a group of some three hundred students at the University of Guelph took their non-partisan rally to the streets to tell a then-campaigning Stephen Harper that they would be voting in the upcoming election. As one student banner exclaimed, “Surprise! We are voting!” In what began as an isolated happening at the University of Guelph, vote mobs soon swept across the country, spawning over 35 independently organized vote mobs on university campuses.

Vote mobs

Within the context of the election, vote mobs served as a rallying cry for the all-but-forgotten 18-24 year-old demographic, providing a powerful forum for young people to ex-
press their political selves, all the while engaging their peers via the lingua franca of their generation: YouTube videos. A Carleton University video, for example, deploys a range of tactics to solicit interest from its viewership: election snippets from CBC commentators Rick Mercer and George Stroumboulopoulos, brightly coloured neon signs, Canadian flags, aerial shots of the city and campus, quick-cut editing, bilingual testimony, random dancing, and a lot of exuberant running around—all set to the music of Kanye West, Snap, and Bruno Mars. In orchestrating these and other stunts, students were afforded the opportunity to voice what issues they would vote for: workers’ rights, queer rights, lower tuition fees, aboriginal self-government, sustainable agriculture, arts funding, healthcare, and the Canada pension plan, among others. The Carleton video’s thesis was loud and clear: “We’ve got the power,” echoing the overarching sentiment of many of the vote mob videos. At the time of writing, the University of Guelph vote mob videos alone have attracted more than 40,000 views respectively on YouTube. But because videos are often shared across integrated Web 2.0 platforms like blogs, mobile phone applications, and social networking sites, it is clear that these videos were seen and re-circulated by an even larger number of people on the Web and in the cloud.

One of the most pressing questions to emerge from the rise of vote mobs during the election concerned the relationship between cultural production and civic action. As the Toronto Star’s Sarah Millar posed, “Will vote mobs translate into actual votes?” While questions of this kind continue to incite much debate/discussion, if not a certain degree of polarization, vote mobs did two things particularly well: (1) they signalled that the younger demographic could rise to the occasion to express its willingness to participate in the electoral process; and (2) they leveraged the power of social media to make possible both virtual and real-time collaboration, providing a template for groups to adopt and adapt in future endeavours. Together, the output of student-produced content online and the embodied presence of young people expressing their politics in a public forum suggest that these emerging forms of civic praxis may hold future promise in the reinvigoration of the young electorate. Vote mobs aside, a second area of cultural production would raise similar questions regarding the relationship between social praxis and political action, this time in the guise of satirical content. For the purposes of this essay, I limit my discussion to the most dominant manifestations of satirical comment that flourished during the election: the anti-Harper critique.

**Political satire and/as anti-Harper critique**

During the election campaign, critique of the Harper Conservatives took many forms in the realm of popular culture: Star Wars geeks criticizing imperial-sounding Harper rhetoric, senior citizens singing in parodic registers (“Ottawa Raging Grannies”), fashionistas declaiming inauthentic populist wardrobe choices (“Canadian Political Makeovers”), girlfriends breaking up with an out-of-touch prime minister (“It’s Over Steve!!”), and hipsters harping on Harper’s disastrous record in Parliament (“What Did I Miss?”). Of course, the brunt of these and other critiques materialized most consistently in the form of online parody and satire in what amounted to a loosely knit set of narratives that sought to discredit Harper’s bid for re-election. Though a consensus on the subject is rarely achieved, most scholars would agree that satire is either a form of criticism that subscribes to the highest moral order, or that it is a base form of...
invective that cultivates destructive, even nihilistic, tendencies; in short, a constructive presence and/or a destructive force. To appreciate these two polarizing views in greater detail, compare Jonathan Swift’s perspective with that of satire scholar Robert C. Elliott. Swift, one of the great practitioners of the form, champions satire’s “public spirit,” that is, its “virtue to mend the world ... [and] to make mankind better.” Elliott (1961), on the other hand, one of the most astute scholarly observers of satire, explains that satire embodies a number of destructive properties:

satire, we say, may be cutting, blistering, biting, killing, stinging, stabbing, scorching, searing, burning, withering, flaying, annihilating; satires are sharp, barbed, poisonous, malignant, deadly, vitriolic, and so on. (p. 281)

Despite the polarizing nature of these two competing perspectives on satire, what remains clear is that criticism forms, in large part, the kernel of satire’s broader project. More to the point, the humour deployed in these examples worked diligently toward inciting “criticism and reflection about prevailing systems of power” (Gray et al., 2009, p. 10). As Linda Hutcheon (1994) reminds us, irony (and by extension, satire) can be used to reinforce authority and/or to serve subversive/oppositional ends. What is unclear, therefore, is the degree to which these satirical texts alienated prospective voters, reinforced the status quo, or occasioned a shift in public perception. To address this question more fully, I turn to two of the most cited, discussed, and debated pieces of satire to surface during the election: Shit Harper Did and Harper Government 3.

Shit Harper did

*Shit Harper Did*, a website that received over a million hits within hours of its initial launch, is devoted exclusively to demystifying Stephen Harper’s record in office. While the project’s overarching critique is skewed in favour of left-of-centre politics, the site balances satirical and parodic inflection with the veracity of print and online articles. Upon first entering the site, the user is greeted by a series of pronouncements, statements, and aphorisms designed to enlighten the reader on Harper’s failed policies and actions. The setup is decidedly simple: *Shit Harper Did* (SHD) splices together satirical critique with factual comment. Two brief examples should suffice. First, this election-specific example of Harper government tactics:

If you get a friend request from ‘Ben Dingprivacylaws’, don’t accept. It’s Harper. On April 3rd, 2011 Harper had his people lurk a teenager’s Facebook page and then kick her out of an event because she had posed for a photo with the Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff [sic]. This should come as no surprise from Harper—he tried and failed (4 times!) to create a law that would allow the government to obtain your personal information from an [I]nternet provider—without a warrant.

A second example from the website decries Harper cuts to women’s advocacy groups:

Stephen Harper thinks women talk too much. Since 2006, Harper has cut funding for women’s advocacy by 43 per cent, shut 12 out of 16 Status of Women offices in Canada and eliminated funding of legal voices for women and minority groups, including the National Association of Women and the Law and the Courts Challenges Program.
In total, the site includes twenty-seven statements that shed light on the “shit Harper did.” These two examples, chosen at random, might have just as easily been replaced with attacks on Harper cuts to national childcare, its censoring of Environment Canada scientists, and Canada’s shift from “Peacekeeper” to “Torture-Giver.”

Of particular interest here is the fact that each example on the site is accompanied by a news article that explains the phenomenon in greater detail, adding a degree of veracity and integrity to the satirist’s muted barbs. This practice of conjoining satire and journalism is a hallmark of contemporary popular culture, one that is best encapsulated in the fake news genre. Indeed, the site’s ultimate strength is that it puts forward a compelling mix of subdued satirical commentary and impressionistic journalism. The website would also serve as a jumping-off point for several other successful SHD web-based platforms—YouTube videos, Twitter feeds, Facebook pages (all the usual social media suspects)—but it would also boast links to the other four major federal parties, citing in bold block lettering: “There are better options this election.”

A similar sentiment was conveyed in its YouTube video campaign where it repeated the simple catchphrase, “Anything but Harper.” Despite the playful nature of these texts, both humour and satire can be divisive agents in the expression of ideas. As Greg Elmer (2011) reminds us, “the foul language in some of the (anti-Harper) videos” may be offensive to some voters, thereby potentially reinforcing voter “support for a party with more traditional conservative values” (quoted in Harris, 2011). As a number of YouTube comments to the SHD videos illustrate, not everyone viewing these materials aligned themselves with the creators’ intended message(s). Viewer comments were decidedly critical of SHD’s larger political agenda, particularly those that trickled in after the election; responses to the videos were at once playful (“Shit Harper Did: Won 2 minorities and then a majority”), arrogant (“Here’s your support you hipster shit talkers. Conservative MAJORITY :D”), and self-reflexive (“This video makes me ashamed to be part of this generation. I’m not even a Conservative, and these people are why this country is [xxxxed], not Harper”). Indeed, many of the comments pointed to the election results as proof of just how out of touch these so-called hipsters actually were.

Harper Government 3

Critics of the Harper Government also took to other forms of amateur production to express their disapproval of Conservative policies, from fake Twitter accounts (@laytonsmustache, @ThePMSaidSo) to digitally rendered comics. Of these, amateur video garnered significant attention from both viewers and critics alike; of particular note were videos that depict CGI characters speaking in robotic monotone voices, often carrying out some kind of debate or disagreement. This formula proved too good to resist for one online video maker (“ABrainification”) who adapted the form for political purposes. Closely modeled on another massively popular Xtranormal video critiquing the iPhone 4 (13 million views and counting), the scene is constructed as a back-and-forth exchange between two CGI characters that are clearly at odds with one another. The first character (a keen observer and critic of Harper Government policies) is forced to confront the blind ignorance of his interlocutor (a committed Harper supporter) without any hope of reforming her views. In terms of establishing a preliminary frame, the
text carries out two overlapping functions: to expound upon a number of Harper policy failures and leadership blind spots, and to simultaneously dramatize and channel the fears of prospective voters not in favour of a Harper majority government.

*Harper Government 3* begins with the protagonist posing a simple question to his (soon-to-be antagonistic) companion: “So, how are you going to vote in the election?” Without pause, his naïve-, earnest-, and resolute-sounding (comic) foil replies: “I want a Harper Government 3. I need a Harper Government 3.” In what follows, the protagonist enumerates with deft precision a laundry list of the current government’s wrongdoings, only to inspire in his counterpart a chorus of “I want a Harper Government 3” refrains. The protagonist (stepping in as the creator’s mouthpiece) presents a number of arguments meant to criticize Harper’s leadership, drawing from diverse issues such as the economy, women’s rights, atomic energy, federal taxation, Senate reform, and so on. His first rhetorical flourish addresses the kinds of contradictions that have arguably informed Harper’s political platform: “The last time Harper campaigned he said that he supported women’s rights and as soon as he was elected he abolished the Pan-Canadian childcare program, dropped federal pay equity law, and dismantled the law commission of Canada.” The viewer also learns that Harper fought hard against political floor-crossing until after the election when he put forward former (floor-crossing) Liberal David Emerson into his Cabinet; the protagonist explains how Harper campaigned on integrity and accountability, but the Commissioner he appointed dismissed over two hundred cases brought before her without a single prosecution; add to this the fact that he previously vowed not to impose any new taxes on income trust, only to do so after he was elected, and one gets a strong sense of Harper’s agenda. “Isn't that strange?” the protagonist asks. The video’s overriding theme is explicit: Harper’s rhetoric does not match his record.

The discussion is deliberately skewed in favour of having the audience identify with the protagonist because the Harper supporter is comically one-dimensional, not to mention willfully ignorant of Conservative initiatives and policies. When confronted with factual information outlining Harper’s record, his companion repeatedly adopts a stern refrain: “I don't care. Give me a Harper Government 3.” Income splitting, fitness tax credits, and a stable economy all prove pivotal points of interest for the embattled Conservative supporter. In presenting these government policies each in turn, the author takes full license to pick away at the contradictions embedded in Harper’s campaign promises. With regards to the economy, he argues that Harper is “spending your money like a drunk [xxxxing] sailor,” intent on doubling the national deficit and deregulating the banking system. As the exchange continues, the protagonist’s sense of dejection and frustration deepens as he is unable to win any concessions from his interlocutor.

Importantly, this amateur production simultaneously functions as political commentary and satirical critique. We observe an informed but politically slanted critique of a campaigning government, presented in comedic fashion. The comedic charge comes from the protagonist’s growing sense of dismay, driven in large part by his companion’s total disregard for factual information and common sense. The humour ultimately works because everyday citizens have arguably encountered headstrong figures
of this kind, achieving little success in expanding their audience’s broader political worldview. But, in the end, the comedy in this piece is effective only to a point, as it devolves into tedious swearing and self-righteous indignation. The author may very well present a compelling dystopian vision of things to come under a majority Harper government, but the means through which he articulates his position is potentially alienating to his imagined audience; as the YouTube comments make clear, a Conservative base is quick to dismiss the video on the grounds of excessive Left-wing ideology; a Liberal base may also take issue not necessarily with the critique itself, but with the use of unnecessary foul language and one-sided argumentation. As enjoyable as this video may have been to a cross-section of anti-Conservative voters, the video retains some of the same divisive characteristics that inform the *Shit Harper Did* content before it: an irreverent, sarcastic, and at times self-righteous account of the political climate of Canadian politics. Together these examples give us some reason to pause and reconsider some of the implicit shortcomings of satire within the context of electoral politics.

The limits of parody and satire

Canada’s first social media election provides some inkling as to how satirical comment may flourish in the years ahead. The federal election was marked by a growing array of satirical content produced by amateur producers looking to circulate its critiques to larger, mostly online, audiences. Much in the spirit of political satire, a large number of these texts amounted to polemical criticism and invective directed toward a Harper government seeking re-election. As satire scholar Matthew Hodgart (1969) explains, “true satire demands a high degree both of commitment to and involvement with the painful problems of the world, and simultaneously a high degree of abstraction from the world” (p. 11). By this account, the satirists described in this essay perform the role admirably, pointing to a number of problems (both real and imagined) that may result from a Conservative majority. In presenting these examples, I have sought to illustrate a double bind in satire’s larger critical project: namely, that as a “high form of ‘play’” satirical texts simultaneously offer us “the recognition of our responsibilities and the irresponsible joy of make-believe” (Hodgart, 1969, p. 11). This double bind illuminates the tangible shortcomings of satire within the province of political commentary (especially during an election campaign), in that it remains unclear what aspects of the critique are readily absorbed by viewers, readers, and commentators—the serious or the playful, the sincere or the irreverent.

“At a time when no elected officials seem capable of addressing the mendacious lunacy of those in power, the job is left to satire” (p. 343), write Geoff Pevere and Greig Dymond (1999) on the timeliness and relevance of satirical discourse in Canadian public life. Given satire’s continued significance in the (mediated) public sphere, two important questions still dominate the frame: first, to what extent do the satirical texts circulating across popular culture actually harm or hinder the producer’s intended political outcomes?; and second, to what degree does the leveraging of social media and creative praxis (evident across these examples) speak to the future of political critique in this country? Regarding the question of satire’s broader impact on institutional politics, we are left with more questions than answers in that there are no clear and concise measures and/or predictors available to gauge cause-and-effect outcomes. We are
in no better position to assess the effectiveness of any of these campaigns, save for establishing the high number of views and comments these intersecting campaigns generated. The same might be said of social media’s impact on the federal election. What is clear in this relatively early stage in the elaboration of election-style social media praxis is that Canadian scholars should continue to scrutinize future developments in political expression online, as these manifestations will carry even greater weight as the production and circulation of these kinds of content reach levels of ubiquity and popularity heretofore unknown.

For all the brilliantly executed social media practices that emerged during the 2011 election, and for all the cogent satirical and parodic projects that captured the popular imagination, there is very little concrete evidence to suggest that these platforms, tools, and tactics are changing the hearts and minds of Canadians. As one online activist has suggested vis-à-vis the efficacy of social media,

More than 70,000 youth had pledged to vote as part of the “I Will Vote” campaign, but efforts to boost the youth vote with social media and vote mobs were insufficient to prevent a Conservative majority. The outcome of the 2011 election indicates that while Canadian youth like online campaigns, they are not interested in doing much to manage climate change, even an action as simple as voting. (Matthews, 2011)

Elsewhere, Greg Elmer has argued that the success of anti-Harper themed satirical content is limited at best. These materials, Elmer (2011) suggests, underlined two things during the campaign: “a reflection of Harper’s continued health in the polls, and the creative community’s historical lack of support for his policies.” And yet this wide array of creative, innovative, and critical political praxis should not be so readily dismissed. Social media campaigns put democratic politics on the table in highly engaging and entertaining ways; the youth vote, for a time, was mobilized and energized by the vote mobs that blanketed university campuses; satirical content flourished to provide playfully serious critiques of the power elite. There is reason to believe that the unprecedented shifts that shook the foundations of federal politics this election may be attributed in part to the growing use(s) of social media and to the growing dissemination of satirical and critical comment online. With Harper’s Conservatives winning a majority, however, champions of satire and social media are left to ponder the haunting possibility that Neil Postman (1985) may be right: that where social media, satire, and Canadian politics are concerned, we are quite possibly “amusing ourselves to death.”

Note
1. The phrase “amusing ourselves to death” was first coined by Neil Postman, 1985.

References


