Commentary

The Internet and Canadian Politics: Journey into the Absurd

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On November 5, 2013, a video surfaced online of former Toronto mayor Rob Ford telling a reporter, “Yes, I have smoked crack cocaine” (CBC News, 2013a). All at once, a surging interest in Canadian politics was born. Over the next several months, more videos of political content containing Rob Ford emerged, including one where he fails to throw a football, one where he bumps his head on the television camera, and one where he runs through the Toronto council room, barreling over a fellow councillor like a bowling pin (CBC News, 2013b). All of this political news landed Rob Ford a guest appearance on late-night talk show Jimmy Kimmel Live in which Kimmel glowingly praised Ford for having “tripped, bumped, danced, argued, and smoked his way into our national consciousness.” INTO THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF BOTH THE CANADIAN AND AMERICAN POPULACE FORD HAD ENTERED INDEED, AND AS KIMMEL ACKNOWLEDGED TO HIS AU DIENCE, CANADIAN POLITICS HAD NEVER BEEN LESS “BORING” (JIMMY KIMMEL LIVE, 2014). NORTH AMERICANS, IT SEEMED, WERE SUDDENLY STRANGELY UNITED IN THEIR ENGAGEMENT WITH CANADIAN POLITICS. THIS NEWFOUND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT WAS EXEMPLIFIED SIX MONTHS LATER WHEN A CLIP FROM A SEPTEMBER 23, 2014, EPISODE OF THE CBC POLITICAL TALK SHOW POWER & POLITICS,

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of all things, went viral. In the video, NDP MP Paul Dewar, exasperated by Conservative MP Paul Calandra’s surreal refusal to answer Evan Solomon’s question, shakes his head and drops it into his palms (CBC News, 2014). This was the viral moment. A CBC news blog subsequently announced that we had witnessed Paul Dewar “winning the Internet” (Ore, 2014, para. 1), for which achievement Dewar soon found himself screen-capped, quoted, and turned into a gif. He was also photoshopped into Edvard Munch’s *The Scream* (Bob H, 2014; see Image 1). Clearly something was happening here, a seeming expansion of the number of people interested in Canadian political discourse on the internet. But what was the cause? Was the internet somehow fuelling this growth of political passion? In this world of too many stressors, alternatives, and distractions, was the internet the answer, the key, the Holy Grail that would finally encourage political engagement and attract the Canadian public to their politics in a way heretofore unknown in this country? Is this what we were witnessing?

Some think so. The technology certainly allows for it. As Barack Obama’s team intuited in 2008, the internet has the ability to reach, inform, and engage an ever-growing number of electors, connecting them with the world and with each other immediately, a state of affairs unique in human history. As of 2012, 83 percent of Canadians had access to the internet and could therefore be exposed daily to news articles, videos, blogs, tweets, Facebook posts, and memes surrounding the latest political news (Statistics Canada, 2013). Unlike the newspaper readers of yore, these internet users can respond to this content in real time, offer opinions, correct errors, engage in debates, and even pressure government to alter policy. They also have a potentially worldwide audience. The prevalence of political blogs alone seems to suggest the existence of a politically engaged public (Small, 2011). Some have also argued that social media tools such as Twitter allow for “democratic activism” (p. 873) and that online audiences have moved “beyond passive viewing of web content to actually contributing to the content” (p. 876). One site that contributes regularly, and that received millions of hits upon its initial launch, is *Shit Harper Did* (Reilly, 2011), a site that critiques Stephen Harper and his government through the production of satirical videos and posts. The online political engagement we see everywhere, then, admittedly seems promising, and one may be forgiven for being unduly optimistic.

The statistics up to this point, however, tell a different story. With the internet’s far-reaching interactive capabilities, social networking sites like Twitter, already a global phenomenon by 2009 (Kazeniac, 2009), political blogs, readily accessible online talking heads, and the 24-hour instantly updated online news websites, we ought to have expected greater political participation; but this never materialized. Since the onset of the internet, not only has there been no significant increase in voting in Canada, but voter turnout has actually gone down. Voting was highest in 1958, at 79.4 percent, when there was no internet. In recent federal elections, the turnout has been 67 percent (1997), 60.9 percent (2000), 64.7 percent (2004), 58.8 percent (2008), and 61.1 percent (2011) (Elections Canada, 2013). Before the 2011 election, although 70,000 youth signed a pledge to vote in the “I Will Vote” Campaign, this did not translate into real-world Canadian youth votes (Reilly, 2011, p. 510). The *Globe and Mail* called the 2011 election “Canada’s first social media election,” and then asked, “But will people vote?” (Curry, 2011). The
answer, it turned out, was no. If one were cynical, one might conclude from these findings that the Internet has in fact had an adverse effect on voter turnout. At best, there seems no correlation between increased engagement online and voter participation.

This need not be a mystery to us. Much cultural theory of the past few decades has prepared us to understand why online engagement is not a valid measure of real-world engagement, and we can begin with Marshall McLuhan’s primary insight, that the medium is the message. The political content people receive or send online is not undisturbed by the parameters of the medium itself, and the unfortunate truth seems to be that the internet alters and shapes the nature and quality of the messages to such an extent that by the time political content arrives at its online audience, most of it has been degraded by the particular characteristics of that medium so drastically that it functions almost exclusively as satire.

McLuhan saw the medium of television as a return to primordial feelings and tribal emotions, emotions he felt “centuries of literacy had divorced us from” (quoted in Jackson, Nielsen, & Hsu, 2011, p. 17). McLuhan’s assessment is even truer of the internet, which if anything has exacerbated our divorce from literacy. With its ad-filled and colourful windows opening and closing and overlapping before us, the internet is not a contemplative or intellectual medium. It is an emotional one. Neil Postman, the media theorist, took McLuhan’s return to tribal emotion and focused particularly on amusement and pleasure. All media content, Postman argued, is delivered in the form of entertainment. Although Postman was also discussing television, his theory can just as easily be applied to the internet. Television offers viewers a “variety of subject matter, requiring minimal skills to comprehend” and “largely aimed at emotional gratification” (Postman, 1986, p. 86). This is, as Postman pointed out, an inevitable by-product of our liberal, free market democracy. Television shows have to be emotionally appealing to successfully sell to mass audiences and make the company profit. If they fail to make sufficient profit, they fold. Websites, similarly, need hits to gain advertising dollars. The name of the game, even on news sites, is to attract attention and keep it there. Thousands of virtual pages are competing for that attention for their very survival, and the creators of Internet content learned from the producers of television before them that in order to compete, “short and simple messages are preferable to long and complex ones” and “drama is to be preferred over exposition” (Postman, 1986, p. 131). So, even when serious topics are discussed, like Ukraine or ISIS or the alleged destruction of democracy under Harper’s watch, the messages are reduced online to the level of a snappy headline or a pun or a sensational video, anything to attract a Web surfer immediately and get that hit. This is not cynicism. This is the economic reality of any profit-driven medium.

The nature of online information, by necessity quick and catchy and sensational, has clear negative repercussions on the psychology of the regular internet user, but the profit motive on the part of the information creators is not the only culprit here. There is something inherent in the way we interact with the internet, in the structure of our interface with the information and the medium itself, that carries with it severe psychological implications, and perhaps insurmountable obstacles to serious political engagement. As internet usage has increased over the past 15 years, our average attention
span has gone down, from 12 seconds in 2000 to 8.25 seconds in 2015, literally less than the attention span of a goldfish (Weinreich, Obendorf, Herder, & Mayer, 2008). More options are available faster, and a plethora of visually and audibly stimulating information, rather than becoming available after, say, a commercial break, is a mouse click away. Consequently, we have come to expect our emotional needs to be gratified instantly. Any webpage that fails to grab our attention within several seconds gets closed. A 2008 study found that, out of 59,573 webpage views, only 4 percent lasted longer than 10 minutes, and 17 percent lasted less than 4 seconds (Weinreich et al., 2008).

With all this information lasting for so little time within our field of attention, how are we meant to understand, or even categorize, much of it? Think of the way we use the internet: we can do office work, read the news, check last night’s game highlights, stream Transformers 3, pay bills, watch ISIS beheading videos, and laugh at cats playing with string all at the same time. As information and entertainment fill up the same windows, occupying the same visual space, I would argue that distinctions between the two are almost eliminated. Our ability to tell crucial information from amusing distractions is weakened, just as that crucial information, in the unending quest for advertising dollars, gets communicated to us more and more in the form of an amusing distraction. The process is entropic. From the perception of an internet user, breaking news, jokes, political blogs, experts, amateurs, mass death, movie reviews, and cats all take on the same register, the same addictive, diverting, and yet ultimately empty grey internet-stuff.

On the internet, just as on television before it, “all political discourse takes the form of a jest” (Postman, 1986, p. 141). For an example of this, one need only look to the tweet, apparently a legitimate medium through which the Canadian government communicates governmental positions. John Baird, former minister of Foreign Affairs, regularly condemned terrorist attacks on Twitter, his denunciations instantly popping up in people’s Twitter feeds right above denunciations of Miley Cyrus’ twerking. Once a message is communicated in a tweet, and that tweet is passed along and received in the Twitter feeds of perhaps millions of Canadians, the subject is necessarily decontextualized and trivialized, losing the majority of its content, its seriousness, and its significance. The focus becomes the content of the tweet, the 140 characters themselves, rather than the broader issue behind it. Given, therefore, the mindset of an average Web surfer, exposed to all these snippets and incomplete pieces of decontextualized information, without the time, focus, or tools to sift through the relative quality, validity, and import of the various messages—and with, in any case, the primary goal of the internet experience being amusement and entertainment above all else—what level of political engagement can we expect? How far-reaching can these online politically tinged dialogues really be?

Since online political activity leading up to the 2011 election did not translate into increased voter participation, we should be wary of assuming that it will in future elections. When Canadians share animated gifs of Paul Dewar’s face-palm or clips of Rob Ford hitting his head on a television camera, or laugh knowingly at videos on sites like Shit Harper Did, what sphere of activity are they participating in? What goes viral online, and what brings our politicians all the way to American late-night talk shows, are the
things that are the most outrageous. The popularity of the Rob Ford story had nothing to do with his politics, having been divorced from that context. Rob Ford's mad dash through the council chamber was related to his possible connection to the murder of Anthony Smith, a man who had been photographed with Ford, but it was not the mayor's possible involvement in a murder that got attention on the internet. It was merely the slapstick value of the video. Later, when MP Paul Dewar grew frustrated with Paul Calandra's refusal to answer a simple question, he made a face-palm. An editorial by Mitchell, O'Brien, Sampert, and Samyn (2014) in the *Winnipeg Free Press* misinterpreted the viral success of the Dewar face-palm as evidence of a shared exaltation among Canadians that a politician had finally communicated his frustration with undemocratic Conservative behaviour; but this is unlikely to have been the reason the face-palm went viral beyond those already interested in politics. It went viral because it was funny, and unexpected. Dewar and Calandra were taking part in a much wider and theoretically serious discussion regarding Canada's involvement in the war against ISIS, but these newly “engaged” Canadians were not embedded in that context. The face-palm did not open a nuanced national discussion among internet users about the Canadian government’s policies toward ISIS. It opened a national discussion about face-palms, and how funny they are, and the clever ways to make them funnier. The only context all these new political junkies were working in was comedy—not intelligent political discourse or important issues, but rather the bizarre, the amusing, the ridiculous, the absurd. Web surfers love the incongruity between our expectations of a politician's behaviour and the reality. They love the juxtaposition between the supposed seriousness of political discourse and the word “shit.” We can only wonder whether *Shit Harper Did* would have been as popular had it been named *Grievances Regarding Policy Decisions of the Canadian Government*. This increased e-democracy, we may need to acknowledge, may never have been a form of real democratic activism, but simply more signs of the rampant passive consumption that characterizes modernity.

The influential cultural critic Jean Baudrillard knew that the “basic structure” of present society is one of “consumption, and not production” (quoted in Jackson et al., 2011, pp. 17–18), and he therefore would likely have predicted that the online consumption of political blogs, petitions, and viral videos would have no effect on real-world voter participation. What may appear online to be political engagement, Baudrillard would call the consumption of spectacle, and he would see these online participants not as producers of political action but as consuming spectators. They consume blogs and the attention and dialogue stemming from those blogs, and they consume viral videos and satirical posts and tweets and articles and the latest political news in every virtual form, but they are all the while merely consuming. So, of course, when time comes to stop consuming and begin to produce real political results, to enter the real world and actively fight for a real political goal, we may fairly expect all this apparent engagement to go nowhere. In sum, the viral sharing of these videos and the apparent rise of visitors to political websites, I fear we will discover in upcoming federal elections, may have been accomplished not for the sake of politics at all, but for the sake of what these people came to the internet for in the first place—the consumption of amusement.
Is there a prescription for de-amusement, for serious, participatory, active, engaged democratic citizenry? Real-world involvement and active citizenry require first having the basic consciousness that one is, in fact, a citizen. It further requires an understanding of one’s class and one’s part in the socio-economic system, as well as a desire to better one’s situation. It seems that people are having too much fun on the internet to realize these things. It appears we need the “class consciousness” of which Marx spoke, topped with a humanist ethic and some old-school Athenian-style citizen pride. Perhaps we need to cut ties with that which divorces us from reality and literacy—with our televisions, our cellphones, and the internet, all of which may have inadvertently done damage to people’s sense of citizenship and responsibility and invest instead in some real-world in-person dialogue with our fellow citizens about the issues that affect us. If we were to drop the message board and bring back the agora, that might be a start.

References


